

If you asked the man in the street to define "mythology", the commonest answer would probably be that it is a primitive form of science. In the old days people had no explanation for natural phenomena such as the weather, the cycle of the seasons, or the movements of the heavenly bodies. Consequently they made up fanciful stories to explain them; their curiosity was satisfied and their fears allayed.

Certainly it is true that many myths belong in this category. In Greek mythology, for example, lightning bolts are Zeus' personal weapons, which he hurls like fiery javelins at his enemies. In ordinary Greek of the classical period one did not say "it is raining" but "Zeus is raining"; an old farmer's prayer runs "rain, rain, dear Zeus". An earthquake is the activity of Poseidon, god of the sea, pounding away at the roots of the earth. Why did the sun always rise in the East? Because each night Helios the sun god, after descending beneath the western horizon, climbed exhausted into a magic bowl which conveyed him under the world as he slept and around to the East again in the stream of Ocean. What prevents the sky from crashing down to earth? Why, the giant Atlas ("the enduring one") holds it up for all time as a punishment for his rebellion against Zeus. (There is in fact a high mountain in north-western Africa bearing this name.)

These pseudo-scientific explanations, however, account for only a very small part of Greek mythology. In fact, myth has a lot more to do than invent "just-so" stories. True, myths are often involved in explaining something; but there is more than lightning and sunrises to be explained; human beings, for example. Where do we come from? What is our purpose? Why do we behave like we do? Where do we go after death? These are questions that can't be answered simply. Myths that deal with them often do not attempt to give answers, but merely set out to explore the issues in the more modest hope of achieving some understanding.

It is a basic feature of the human being that s/he tends to explain what s/he is by looking at what s/he was; in other words, by studying history. The mythology of many societies often concerns itself with the past. In telling myths about "the way things used to be", people often reveal what they value most highly in their own, present-day society. They choose to remember what seems "significant", that is, what means something. The activity of the historian is not much different. Each succeeding generation has a different perspective on the past, seeing new things, placing new emphases, according to its own experiences and prejudices. Read what the great Roman historians have said about Rome - Tacitus, Edward Gibbon, Theodor Mommsen, Ronald Syme - and you will see that each reflects the attitudes and beliefs of his own day. No good historian will pretend that s/he can tell you "how things really were"; for what does "really" mean? The only difference between the historian and the mythmaker is that the latter is not burdened by ideas of scientific accuracy, of getting the facts straight; s/he has greater freedom to bring forward the imaginative world of values behind the so-called facts.

The Greeks were enthusiastic students of their own past. Consequently a very large part of their mythology deals with it, much more than other mythologies do. Their memory of events long ago has sometimes proved to be uncannily accurate. A famous example is the fall of Troy. At one time the stories of the Trojan War were thought to be mere pretty fictions. Then, about a hundred years ago, an eccentric German millionaire by the name of Heinrich Schliemann took his fortune and set out to find Troy. He found it, just where Homer said it was. Schliemann thus opened a whole new era of Greek studies and established his place in history as the father of modern archaeology. Actually, at Troy he had found a whole series of cities built on top of one another. One of the layers, plainly a city of great wealth and power, was destroyed by violent means about 1250 B.C. A thousand years later an ancient scholar sat down to work out the date of the Fall of Troy, carefully matching up the many intricate genealogies of Greek legend and working backwards from known fixed points. He arrived at a date of 1184 B.C. Ancient legend and modern archaeology are almost exactly in agreement.

But, you may say, these are legends, not myths. It is true that many societies have grand, heroic tales about their past, and that a kernel of historical fact underlies these stories. The term "legend" is usually applied in such cases. But I think a story becomes elevated from legend to myth when it has more than entertainment value and tries to say something important. To the Greeks, whose whole religion, literature and art sprang from their mythology, these tales meant a great deal. The heroes of old were seen as models. Their predicaments on the battlefield of Troy, as they struggled for immortal fame at the cost of their lives, always likely to meet their death at the hands of an angry god or grim and inexorable Fate, symbolized for future generations the relation of man to the gods and the world about him. The first great thinker to put these ideas down on paper was Homer; he was followed by a long succession of writers and philosophers. They could give no answers; but they stated the problems in such a way that we must still read them if we are at all interested in the questions.