

Story Time at the Library: Palaephatus and the Emergence of Highly Literate Mythology

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1 Introduction

Palaephatus' *On Unbelievable Tales* (Περὶ ἀπίστων) is an odd little mythographic treatise.* It creates historically plausible accounts out of the most fantastic of myths and does so with a sense of hermeneutic consistency and clarity rarely found elsewhere in ancient myth criticism. Palaephatus assumes that myths contain memories of actual events which became skewed over time. His role as an exegete, then, is to find the ambiguous word, phrase, or event which allowed such mistakes to take hold.

The best way to understand Palaephatus' approach is to see it in action. Here is one of the shorter entries (18):

It is said that the Hesperides were women who possessed golden apples (μῆλα) on an apple-tree guarded by a serpent and that these were the apples which Heracles set out to get. But here is the truth: Hesperus was a Milesian man who lived in Caria and had two daughters called "Hesperides." He had beautiful sheep with thick fleeces, the kind you still get in Miletus. Because of this, they were called "golden," since gold is the most beautiful metal and these were the most beautiful sheep. These sheep (πρόβατα) were called μῆλα. Heracles caught sight of them grazing on the coast. He herded them to his ship and loaded them onboard. [He killed] the shepherd, whose name was "Serpent." He then took them to his home. When this happened, Hesperus was no longer alive, but his daughters were; and so people said: "We saw the golden μῆλα, which Heracles took from the Hesperides, after he killed their guard, Serpent." And from this came the myth.

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Palaephatus gives us two variants of the same myth, one traditional, the other rationalized. Both hinge on how one understands particular elements of the story. In Palaephatus' reading, the "Hesperides" are daughters of Hesperus whose collective appellation derives from his in the conventional way, "Serpent" is a local man with an unfortunate name, the objects he guards are sheep, not apples ($\mu\eta\lambda\alpha$ could quite naturally indicate either), and these sheep are labeled "golden" as a metaphorical indication of their beauty. Palaephatus still gives us a story in which Heracles kills a serpent and steals the golden $\mu\eta\lambda\alpha$ of the Hesperides, but, through a series of ingenious substitutions, he asks us to re-consider the "true" meaning of these words.

Rationalistic techniques are eminently replicable, and Palaephatus capitalizes on this. *On Unbelievable Tales* is almost entirely taken up with examples of rationalization in action: we find out that Europa was abducted not by Zeus in the form of a bull but by a certain Cretan named "Bull" (15); Actaeon was bankrupted by lavishly maintaining a hunting pack and thus "destroyed by his own dogs" (6); Bellerophon travelled in a boat called "Pegasus" and killed the lion and snake that had taken up home on "Mt Chimaera" (28); Aeolus did not control the winds, but was a skilled weather forecaster (17).

This approach comes across as irredeemably banal; indeed, Palaephatus is easily caricatured as a mechanical and unimaginative critic of myth. His narrow-minded rationalism reduces the significance of myth to a single, blinkered criterion of historicist value. We might indeed wonder about how seriously we should actually take this text. Palaephatus' interpretations will fail to satisfy anyone looking for insightful commentary on Greek myth writ large, but they nonetheless tell an important story and it is precisely their stubborn repetitiousness and hermeneutic simplicity which makes them so important. Taking on myth after myth, Palaephatus transforms familiar stories into new, almost unrecognizable, ones. But these are not the only kinds of mythic transformation that he effects. Beyond the mechanics of Palaephatus' technique, we can discern new assumptions about the nature of myth at work, ones which reflect the systematizing aesthetic of the highly literate, scholarly environment of the late fourth century. Myths are, in Palaephatus' hands, purely narrative entities with can be manipulated, critiqued and transformed at will. Their connections to broader cultural phenomena—cult, local landscape, politics, poetic traditions—no longer seem relevant. The value of this text for us resides not in the validity of its interpretations, or even the sincerity of its author's intentions, but in its conceptual innovations. Palaephatus gives us a glimpse of the newly-formed habits which shaped a new way of making sense of myths as communal artifacts; within this unassuming little text we see a whole set of shifting cultural paradigms played out in miniature.

Palaephatus' categorical conception of myth as a separable object of study is almost unparalleled amongst extant sources; as such, it challenges established perceptions of the nature of such stories in antiquity. Almost all of our evidence for Greek myth depends on the survival of written accounts. And yet, in a striking and often-overlooked paradox, textual culture has often been treated as an anathema to the authentic experience of myth. Although Imperial and Hellenistic writers—like Plutarch, Pausanias, Apollodorus and Diodorus—are quarried for invaluable evidence of specific narrative forms and details, the particulars of the place of myth in these later cultural contexts have not proved similarly attractive. Studies of Greek myth have more commonly focused on the literature and culture of the archaic and classical periods, charting a well-trodden path from Homer to Plato. The most distinctive poetic products of these periods were performed publicly; texts from these periods seemingly capture such communal spectacles in written form. They thus provide a useful textual archive for the study of myth, which is nonetheless conceived primarily—albeit implicitly—as an oral phenomenon.

Structuralist approaches tended to uphold the latent power of orality as a vehicle for myth without interrogating the paradox of textual transmission.¹ More recently, a kind of poststructuralist position has emerged which emphatically highlights the gulf which separates our modern, textual sense of myth as a canonical genre from the more flexible conceptions of ancient writers. Marcel Detienne instituted this sea-change by radically attributing the creation of Greek mythology—defined as both “un ensemble d'énoncés discursifs” and “un discours *sur* les mythes”—to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship.² He describes ancient myth, by contrast, as supple, pluralistic and non-dogmatic, taking diverse forms and eliciting a range of attitudes. Myths are, for Detienne, most properly products of oral communication whose authenticity and power resides in their memorializing function. He contrasts these oral stories with the second-order “mythologies” created by mythographers, both ancient and modern.³ Claude Calame, taking a slightly different tack, makes

1 See Ong (1982: 164–165); Havelock (1986: 26). There is a more general critique in Bourdieu (1990). Thomas (1992: 21) traces this habitual distrust of writing to Lévi-Strauss.

2 Detienne (1981: 15).

3 Esp. Detienne (1981: 238): “Faire appel, aujourd'hui ou demain, à ce que tout le monde s'accorde à appeler mythe, c'est avouer, avec plus ou moins de naïveté, une fidélité désuète à un modèle culturel apparu au XVIIIe siècle, quand l'ensemble des idées reçues sur les divinités du paganisme, entre Ovide et Apollodore, constituent le domaine de la *fable*, dont la connaissance érudite et savante s'appelle alors *mythologie*.”

myth proper a facet of creative performance, and particularly of poetic composition.⁴ Again, mythography, the paradigmatic product of a textual, canonical approach, is held up as an antithetical, corrupting influence which creates “skeletons” of these stories “lifted out of their many diverse forms of expression.”⁵

Like all categorizations, these definitions shape the material they describe ideologically.⁶ This approach has encouraged a new awareness of the diversity of ancient storytelling contexts. Nonetheless, it dismisses mythography as inferior to other forms of mythic engagement.⁷ Mythographic accounts become foils which can be conflated without discrimination or concern for the particular, evolving, cultural and intellectual trends which gave rise to them. Indeed, Detienne comes close to making ancient mythography an expression of Enlightenment sensibilities *avant la lettre*.⁸ In a famous formulation, he distinguishes between the ongoing “*exégèse*” of traditions which takes place within a living culture “de la bouche et de l’oreille” and “*interprétations*”, which are imposed onto it by literate observers.⁹ In this latter category, he describes the critiques of early prose writers whose “*histoires de la tribu*” reflect an intellectual position far removed from the material at hand. Detienne rightly signals the conceptual changes wrought by the introduction of literacy, and the distinctiveness of resulting mythographic activity. Nonetheless, the strict dichotomy he establishes between “internal” and “external” factors is unhelpful. Such anx-

4 E.g. Calame (2009: 4–5): “any story that we [...] apprehend as ‘mythical’ is by definition poetry” [p. 4]; “If we agree not to restrict the meaning of the word ‘literature’ to the etymological sense that links it with a culture of writing, but rather to grant it the wider meaning that associates it with poetic creation, the Greek ‘myths’ cannot be said to have had any existence if they are isolated from the forms of discourse and poetic composition that brought them to their public” [p. 5].

5 Calame (2009: 5).

6 For ideological “interestedness” in attempts to define myth, see esp. Munz (1973: 3–4); Lincoln (1999); Csapo (2005: 1–9). Momigliano (1982: 784–787) notes that by associating myth only with orality, and then defining myth in terms of orality, Detienne’s argument is essentially a circular one.

7 By contrast, mythography has emerged elsewhere as an object of study in its own right: e.g. Henrichs (1987: 242–277); Pellizer (1993: 283–303); Cameron (2004); Roldán (2006: 9–37); Fowler (2006: 35–46).

8 Roldán (2006: 11), discusses this attitude to mythography as found in the work of Calame and Detienne: “Así, entendida como ‘mitología escrita,’ la mitografía se insertaría en el gran debate de concepto y método de la mitología contemporánea, como ilustración postrera del impacto de la escritura en las formas culturales de la tradición oral.”

9 Detienne (1981: 131–133). Revisited in a less polemical manner in Detienne (2003: esp. 16).

ity about the status of textualized mythology makes writing an alien imposition, and consigns writers to operate beyond the boundaries of a narrow ideal of cultural authenticity.

We might say, broadly, that the adoption and development of writing was one aspect of an ongoing process which transformed the Greek cultural landscape from within. Its effects on myth were broad-ranging: thus, for example, Jan Bremmer argued recently that the circulation of texts containing religious and mythic material not only fueled new kinds of speculation on these traditions, but facilitated private modes of religious practice and storytelling which could exist and develop independent of the public mechanisms of the traditional *polis*.¹⁰ This essay is concerned in general with the mythographic genre, a tradition which can be traced from the early fifth century to late antiquity. Just as Greek literacy took various guises, so too did mythography develop various forms. Palaephatus' *On Unbelievable Tales* is a distinctive product of a particular environment. It reflects not merely the basic technological changes wrought by literacy, but the systemizing, highly literate aesthetic which emerged amongst the Peripatetics in fourth-century Athens. This new kind of community did not destroy the corporate significance of myth, but constituted it differently. The mythographic stylings of Palaephatus—however superficial they may seem—shift the remit of mythic phenomena and align them with a different set of referents “of collective importance.”¹¹

2 Literate Culture and Mythic Traditions

Literacy has long been seen as a precondition for the large-scale critique of mythic traditions.¹² The practical innovations offered by new technologies bring with them new ways of thinking. Put baldly, writing has the power to decontextualize stories to a previously impossible degree. All stories are shaped by the contexts of their performance. The momentary nature of oral storytelling encourages a naturally flexible and responsive body of traditions which evolve in step with their changing environments. Texts, by contrast, have the power to freeze such material in a single form. They allow, at least in principle, unmediated transmission, capturing a story crafted to meet the demands of one audience, to which its narrative logic is readily apparent, and enabling it

10 Bremmer (2010: 3–35).

11 Cf. Walter Burkert's justly famous formulation (Burkert [1979: 23]).

12 For an eloquent discussion, see Morgan (2000: 24–30).

to be disseminated *in that exact form*, to any number of other audiences. Such decontextualization changes the very nature of the mythic tradition. It creates the circumstances in which stories can be viewed from a number of previously unimagined vantage points.

Verbatim textual transmission encourages a standard of exactitude seldom operant, or even comprehensible, within fully-oral communities.¹³ By enabling systematic compilation and comparison, textualization brings into focus the prolific nature of myth, and its inherent contradictions. This situation is captured in the famous opening words of Hecataeus' *Genealogies* (fr. 1 Fowler):

τάδε γράφω, ὡς μοι δοκεῖ ἀληθέα εἶναι· οἱ γὰρ Ἑλλήνων λόγοι πολλοί τε καὶ γελοιοί, ὡς ἐμοὶ φαίνονται, εἰσὶν.

I write in this account what I consider to be true: for the Greeks' stories are many and laughable, or so it appears to me.

A series of rhetorical juxtapositions are bound up in this succinct formulation: in projecting his confident opinions over the babble of authorless traditions, Hecataeus elevates the superior singularity of written truth over the confusing, misguided activity of traditional storytelling with its tendency to multiply inaccuracies.¹⁴

This fragment suggestively articulates the difficulties of subsuming mythical traditions into the new genre of prose writing. It identifies a distinctive category of stories defined primarily by their problematic truth-value. But we should not overstate its implications. The early mythographers and historians grappled overtly with problems of narrative truth and certainty, but they did not develop a consistent strategy to deal with mythic phenomena, or indeed a secure way of categorizing narrative types. We find amongst their fragments a myriad of approaches to many different kinds of stories, ranging from conventional narration to subversive revision. Amongst the more radical are scattered attempts at rationalization: Hecataeus himself argued that Cerberus was not a hellish guard-dog but an enormous snake nicknamed the "Hound of Hades" because its venom was so poisonous (fr. 27a Fowler). Herodorus re-wrote the story of

13 See Finnegan (1977: esp. 139–140); Small (1997: 202–203).

14 See esp. Bertelli (1996: 67–68); Bertelli (2001: 83–84). For a broader discussion of this fragment as indicative of Hecataeus' literate mentality, see Fowler (2001: 101–103, 110–11). The early mythographers do not often feature in discussions of the Greeks' developing literate mentality, but they deserve further attention in this regard.

Prometheus: he was not punished by the gods with a liver-pecking eagle; rather, he was tied up by his subjects when he proved unable to control the river, "Eagle", which regularly flooded their land (fr. 30 Fowler). Herodotus concluded that the doves who were said to have founded Zeus' oracle at Dodona were actually two Egyptian women who spoke an incomprehensible language and were thus described as "twittering like birds" (2.57.1-2).

Such rationalizations produce new mythic variants crafted to satisfy a new kind of audience. They show up the conceptual distance which separated traditional mythic material, the stuff of poetry, from emerging ideals of narrative plausibility so central to the self-definition of prose writers. Textualization has an ossifying function in that it has the power to preserve specific narratives unchanged over time; but it is by no means a conservative force. Literate culture does not spell the end of mythic fluidity; stories continue to change and develop in response to shifting cultural demands. Hecataeus and his contemporaries certainly did not put a stop to the multiplicity of myth. Indeed, the opposite is true: in responding to the traditions of their own culture and shaping them in creative ways, they contributed to its proliferation and diversity.

Palaephatus is the most prominent proponent of ancient mythic rationalization. In many ways, he was the heir of these early prose writers. Nonetheless, the structure of his treatise signals a break from what had come before. *On Unbelievable Tales* comprises a preface, which sets out the rationale for rationalistic interpretation, and 45 separate entries, each recounting a single myth and then explaining how this story could narrate an utterly prosaic event. The most striking feature of this text is its consistency. Palaephatus' interpretative approach functions within a very narrow remit. Each entry displays the same, repetitive desire to find a historically-plausible story within the excesses of mythic fiction. Where earlier writers had adopted rationalizations as needed and tailored them to wider arguments, Palaephatus takes rationalization itself as his principle theme. His conception of the kinds of valid truths hidden in myths remains unrevised from start to finish, as does his confidence in the efficacy of his technique. His innovation, then, consists of transforming a practical way of dealing with unsuitable myths into something approaching a "science" of interpretation.

Our best evidence suggests that Palaephatus was writing in Athens in the 340s or 330s.¹⁵ Theon describes Palaephatus as a Peripatetic (*Progymnasmata*,

15 Scholarship on *On Unbelievable Tales* at the turn of last century was dominated by disputes regarding the authenticity of the extant text and the identity of its author. The latter issue is now largely resolved, but the former remains up for debate. Following Stern (1996: 1-5) I

p. 96 Spengel); the Suda goes further, making him a παιδικά (“favourite pupil” or, less euphemistically, “boyfriend”) of Aristotle himself (s.v. Παλαίφατος [2]). It is difficult to know how seriously we should take this scrap of gossip.¹⁶ What we can say is that, working in Athens at the time of the establishment of Aristotle’s Lyceum, Palaephatus was at the centre of a cultural revolution. The most distinctive features of *On Unbelievable Tales*—its philosophically-infused preface, its repetitious entries, its atomistic approach to myth, and its hermeneutic purity—are unparalleled in earlier texts. These unprecedented elements reflect, not the tradition of rationalistic interpretation as it had been practiced previously, but innovations made possible by a new intellectual climate.

The advent of literacy in Greece was not a singular process. Writing infiltrated oral activities in different ways; its impact cannot be reduced to a simple rubric. One striking expansion in the function and status of writing occurred in the late classical period with the emergence of a highly literate culture in Athens. The city was home to a growing book trade by the end of the fifth century and such textualized knowledge was increasingly apparent as a major cultural force in the fourth.¹⁷ The material fact of textualization is part of a broader cultural shift. Texts cannot properly communicate the untranscribable elements of performance; nonetheless they can inaugurate different ways of appreciating such material. Stripped of their musicality, and the accoutrements of visual spectacle, poetic texts served not merely as scripts to facilitate further performances, but as literary objects in their own rights. They came to be

consider the extant text to derive largely from Palaephatus’ original treatise. (For detailed argument, see Hawes [2014: 227–38]). The alternate position, that *On Unbelievable Tales* is a much later compilation which combines authentic Palaephatean material with inferior, apocryphal rationalizations, was first set out by Nicola Festa (e.g. Festa [1890: 65]; Festa [1902: xlvi–xlvii, li]) and has been revived recently.

16 Rationalistic approaches are evident among the fragments of the early Peripatetics: Dicaearchus interpreted Hesiod’s story of the golden age as relating to a period in which humans lived in accordance with nature (fr. 49 Wehrli); Theophrastus explained Prometheus’ gift of fire as the gift of philosophy (fr. 50 Wimmer); Clearchus argued that Helen was said to have been born from an “egg” as that was the original term for the upper part of a house (fr. 35 Wehrli) and that Cecrops was called “two-sexed” because he instituted marriage where previously children had not known who their fathers were (fr. 73). Palaephatus’ keen interest in biological science tallies well with Aristotelian speculations (see Santoni [2000: 41]; Li Causi [2005: 89–114]). Such a connection perhaps explains Palaephatus’ unusual name—presumably a pseudonym (“teller of old tales”)—given that Theophrastus was said to have been given his nickname by Aristotle (Diog. Laert. 5.38).

17 The most detailed study remains Thomas (1989).

valued for their formal qualities, those features of language and structure readily apparent to the eyes of the reader. As Andrew Ford argues, this re-casting of poetic function created the concept of a Greek "literature" by "putting the Greek heritage of song to use as isolated, fixed, and tangible works of verbal design."¹⁸ At the same time, literacy became an increasingly important facet of education, with *grammata* challenging the pre-eminent position of *musikē*.¹⁹ Traditional training in memorization and mimetic arts gave way to a text-based didactic process which valued content over the play of language, analysis over emotional engagement and critical assessment over performance.²⁰ Such changes signal not merely the advent of a new mode of textual appreciation, but a new way of thinking about cultural products *per se*. They provide the background against which we should understand Palaephatus' little handbook, with its unusual format and overwhelming concern for collating and interpreting material systematically.

The structure of *On Unbelievable Tales* is, by one measure, entirely logical. For the most part, each entry is separated from the next, each discusses one myth and one myth only, and each follows the same basic narrative pattern. And yet, this is the first extant text to treat myths in such a systematic, compartmentalized way, and its structure has puzzled scholars. Although Palaephatus sometimes notes that similarities between myths allow him to use similar interpretative techniques (e.g. 11, 14, 25, 29), he does not offer comments on the myriad of ways in which the myths themselves might be linked to each other. Beyond small "clusters" of myths which share some similar features, no clear, overarching principle dictates the order of the entries.²¹ Palaephatus' myths are not arranged genealogically, chronologically, or even by region. Myths featuring the same heroes are not grouped together consistently. Thus, some stories relating to Heracles do appear in a series (36–40), but others, like that of the apples of the Hesperides given above, are scattered throughout the work (7, 18, 24, 32, 44, 45). In presenting myths in this way, Palaephatus is thinking about them in a new way as independent cultural entities. He breaks up the mythic system, unified elsewhere by epic cycles, genealogical tables, thematic similarities, chronology and basic geography, into self-contained, isolated episodes. Palaephatus treats his myths as straightforward narrative artifacts. These are stories which rose to panhellenic prominence in epics and tragedies, and which

18 Ford (2003: 37).

19 Morgan (1998: 13–14); Morgan (1999: 46–61).

20 See Robb (1994: 220–222), who emphasizes the role of the Lyceum.

21 See Stern (1996: 22–24); Santoni (2000: 12–13).

played important roles as aetiologies for cult worship, explanatory devices for local landscape features, and as markers of communal identity. And yet Palaephatus almost entirely ignores these facets of the Greek mythical tradition. His myths are not merely isolated from one another, they are divorced from the specific contexts in which they functioned elsewhere.

The process of decontextualization necessitates a shift in making sense of myths. Palaephatus' text signals a new function for these stories, one caught up in a different way of categorizing them. The absence of an internal system of ordering for this collection is less puzzling when we compare the text not to its antecedents, but to much later surviving mythographies. The stories narrated by Conon in his *Diegeseis*, by Parthenius in his *Erotica Pathemata*, and by Antoninus Liberalis in his *Metamorphoses* are similarly separated from each other into individual entries, without a comprehensible system of internal arrangement.²² What ties these collections together is a pervading authorial interest in particular kinds of narratives. Parthenius' collection is dominated by tales of love, Antoninus Liberalis' by the theme of metamorphosis; even Conon, more eclectic by any measure, sticks to similar kinds of obscure stories, aetiologies and the like, tied to specific places. These collections create particular "mythologies" in Detienne's sense as they present corpora of stories shaped by a prevailing narrative attitude. There is indeed a unifying principle operant within Palaephatus' interpretative program: his myths belong together because they are all stories well-known from literary sources which violate empirically perceived norms of reality. This process of amalgamating myths into a "mythology" has a flattening effect. Palaephatus' myths come to resemble one another in very basic ways: the consistency of his hermeneutic style creates a kind of narrative homogeneity in that each myth is dealt with just like the next. Palaephatus' interest lies not in investigating the nature of myth, nor in creating a comprehensible historical account. Rather, it lies in the potential ambiguities offered by mythical language. In his hands, myths are boiled down to riddling accounts, offered up as fodder for interpretation. The result is a tidy, but oddly atomistic, text.

²² Indeed, like Palaephatus (3, 15), Conon strikingly separates the story of Cadmos (37) from that of his sister Europa (32): the traditional account which he gives of the latter is contradicted (without comment) by a rationalized version of the former (see Egan [197: 250-251]).

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3 A Guide for Readers

The characteristic tidiness of Palaephatus' approach is nowhere more apparent than in his uniform style of narration. The entries differ amongst themselves—some are very detailed, others much sketchier, and there is little verbatim repetition—but almost all accord with a basic pattern of narration, rejection, and replacement. The entry on Daedalus, in spite of its brevity, makes typical use of this Palaephatean structure (21):

Λέγεται περί Δαιδάλου ὡς ἀγάλματα κατεσκεύαζε δι' ἑαυτῶν πορευόμενα· ὅπερ ἔμοιγε ἀδύνατον εἶναι δοκεῖ, ἀνδριάντα δι' ἑαυτοῦ βαδίζειν. τὸ δὲ ἀληθὲς τοιοῦτον. οἱ τότε ἀνδριαντοποιοὶ καὶ ἀγαματοποιοὶ συμπεφυκότας ὁμοῦ τοὺς πόδας καὶ τὰς χεῖρας παρατεταμένας ἐποίουν. Δαίδαλος δὲ πρῶτος ἐποίησε διαβηκτότα τὸν ἕνα πόδα. διὰ τοῦτο δὴ οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἔλεγον “ὄδοιποροῦν τὸ ἀγαλμα τοῦτο εἰργάσατο Δαίδαλος, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ ἐστηκός,” ὡς καὶ νῦν λέγομεν “μαχόμενοί γε ἄνδρες γεγραμμένοι εἰσι” καὶ “τρέχοντες ἵπποι” καὶ “χειμαζομένη ναῦς.” οὕτω κάκεῖνον ἔλεγον ὄδοιποροῦντα ποιεῖν ἀγάλματα.

It is said of Daedalus that he created statues that walked on their own. I think it is impossible for a statue to move on its own. But the truth is something like this: in those days, sculptors carved the human figure with feet firmly together and arms fixed alongside the torso. But Daedalus was the first to make a statue with one foot striding forward. And because of this, people said “that statue that Daedalus made is not standing—it's walking!” just as now we say things like “he depicted men fighting” or “horses running” or “a ship caught in a storm.” They spoke about Daedalus in this way and described him as making walking statues.

Palaephatus begins by retelling the traditional myth. His formulation (“it is said”) and the concision of his treatment implies that the story is well-known. He then explains why the story should be rejected. In this example, he points out that a walking statue is impossible. Elsewhere he offers other grounds for rejection: myths are false, untrue, unbelievable, childish, silly, and ridiculous. Finally, he gives us the solution: Daedalus was a skilled sculptor who was *described* as creating moving statues because he was able to *depict* the human body in motion. Palaephatus supports his interpretation with an illustration of the ease with which the tenor of similar dead metaphors are understood quite naturally as referring to ordinary events in ordinary conversation.

This bipartite pattern of rejection and replacement turns into a kind of ring composition. We are left, at the end of the entry, with the words which describe

the prosaic event (“they described him as making walking statues”). These words map onto the impossible narrative with which Palaephatus began. And so the reader, now initiated so as to understand the correct metaphorical value of mythic language, can read the opening words of the entry (“Daedalus created statues that walked on their own”) with new insight. The very process of working through this kind of structure pragmatically illustrates the capacity for misunderstanding inherent in ambiguous language by reverse engineering the effects of such mistakes before the reader’s eyes. Thus, the process of Palaephatean interpretation is expounded through the language used to convey it.

The distinctive textual “topography” established by the formulaic Palaephatean structure also serves to orient the reader within the text.²³ *On Unbelievable Tales* does not develop an argument as such; there is little sense that Palaephatus transforms or nuances his use of rationalistic interpretation as his work progresses. Rather, the text has a cumulative effect. The efficacy of rationalization becomes apparent through the sheer weight of examples of its successful application. Repetition and narrative consistency thus “prove” the validity of Palaephatus’ approach. But without any sense of narrative or interpretative development, the basic linearity of the text is weakened. The reader can skim the text or read it attentively, he can track backwards and forwards or drop in and out, looking for myths of interest and passing over others. The ubiquitous Palaephatean structure supports such a reading style by organizing the material of each entry in an unambiguous manner. Once the reader understands the narrative pattern of the entries, he can pick out what he needs without difficulty or fear of misunderstanding.

4 Palaephatus on Oral Culture

In spite of the fact that the practicalities of reading shape even the most basic structures of his work, Palaephatus does not throw his lot in with literate technologies. In those few places where he specifically details the process of mythologization, he lays the blame on the exaggerations of prominent storytellers who had the clout to popularize particular stories. In the Preface he attributes the excesses of myth to “poets and writers (λογογράφοι)” who, “wanting to amaze people, falsified what had happened with more unbelievable and amazing accounts.” He returns to this theme a few times in the rest of the work:

²³ For textual topographies, see Wibier (2014).

poets converted the true account of the Minotaur into something mythic (ἐπι τὸ μυθώδες οἱ ποιηταὶ τὸν λόγον ἐξέτρεψαν—2); “mythographers” (μυθογράφοι) shaped the myth of Glaucus (26), and the myth of the Hydra arose after “people wrote” (γράφοῦσι) that it was a serpent. The most specific condemnation comes in the entry dedicated to Actaeon: “the poets made up these stories so that those who heard them would not commit offences against the divine” (6).

Nonetheless, explicit references to intentional falsification are rare. More commonly, Palaephatus makes myths the result of predictable misunderstandings, perpetuating the idea such stories are most distinctively a possession of the spoken word. He presents the traditional variants of the myths that he rationalizes as a body of popular, authorless stories, typically introducing them with impersonal verbs such as λέγεται, φασίν, ἱστοροῦσιν, εἴρηται. Similarly anonymous are Palaephatus’ guesses as to the original statements which gave rise to such myths. He typically introduces these with “and so people said ...” (ἔλεγον οὖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ...). Indeed, Palaephatus’ conception of the development of myth is contingent on the existence of an amorphous environment of oral transmission. The myths known in the present are directly linked, via a chain of chattering storytellers, to events of the distant past. Palaephatus’ rationalistic technique attributes to this tradition a kind of superlative continuity: it has the potential to transmit specific pieces of knowledge over great distances of time; and yet the dangers of linguistic misunderstanding and conceptual confusion are ever-present.

Somewhat paradoxically, oral storytellers also feature as revered experts on myth. In the Preface, Palaephatus describes how he supposedly collected the material that makes up *On Unbelievable Tales*:

ἐπελθὼν δὲ καὶ πλείστας χώρας ἐπυνθανόμην τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὡς ἀκούοιεν περὶ ἐκάστου αὐτῶν, συγγράφω δὲ ἅ ἐπυθόμην παρ’ αὐτῶν. καὶ τὰ χωρία αὐτὸς εἶδον ὡς ἕκαστον ἔχον, καὶ γέγραφα ταῦτα οὐχ οἷα ἦν λεγόμενα, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς ἐπελθὼν καὶ ἱστορήσας.

I visited a great many places and asked the elders what they had heard about each of these stories and I am writing up what I gleaned from them. I saw these places for myself, what each was like, and I have written these stories not as they were traditionally told, but according to what I learned about them after going there myself and making my inquiries.

Local informants thus serve as the guardians of a repository of authentic records about the past with the power to counter the mistakes and exaggerations current elsewhere. In claiming access to such knowledge, Palaephatus

invokes the well-established *topoi* of Herodotean fieldwork: travel, autopsy, and the interrogation of qualified epichoric sources. Yet evidence of this wide-ranging research is found nowhere in the rest of the text. Palaephatus' motivation in feigning such a basis for his treatise must, then, lie with the kind of credibility that he can achieve by doing so.

Ancient historians maintained the idea that oral knowledge was pre-eminently authoritative long after the emergence of a highly literate culture. Even in the second century, Polybius insisted that the use of written records should not challenge the primacy of autopsy and personal experience (12.25). The inherent credibility of epichoric sources provided a convenient peg on which to hang innovative rationalized manipulations. Herodotus bases his historicized narrative of retributive abductions on the testimony of Persians and Phoenicians (1.1–5). His rationalization of the founding of the Dodona oracle is inspired by Egyptian reports (2.54–57); and a detail from the early life of Cyrus—he did not have a canine nurse but was raised by a slave called Cyno (“dog”—1.95)—appears in an account which Herodotus attributes to trustworthy Persians (1.110). Philochorus attributed particular rationalizations of the Labyrinth, the Minotaur and the adventures of Theseus to “Cretans” (Plut. *Thes.* 16.1) (The idea that such accounts really did derive from local sources seemed so implausible to Felix Jacoby that he argued that this was a garbled reference to a *Cretica*, i.e. an account written *about* Crete).²⁴ Palaephatus likewise harnesses this idea to bolster the genealogy of his mythological revisions. By characterizing “true” mythic knowledge as arising out of spirited interrogation, he ascribes its origins to precisely that value of orality—its inherent “questionability”—which Plato finds lacking in purely textual transmission (*Phaedrus* 275d–e). As Plato points out, texts only appear to “speak.” They communicate knowledge reliably, but function remotely. Their technological advantage could thus be undercut: by offering only a single way of saying something and no recourse to clarification or emendation, textual transmission appeared to endanger the “back-and-forth” hammering of public debate. Anxiety about textualized knowledge colored the rhetorical vocabulary of the time and allowed no rival for the authenticating engagement offered by personal interaction. The habitual intertwining of myth with oral communication is not, then, a novelty of our own time.

Such a vision of oral storytelling cannot directly reflect the environment in which Palaephatus worked. The myths which he chooses to rationalize are far from obscure. When Palaephatus does reveal his sources, they are

24 Jacoby (1954: 231, 306).

unsurprisingly canonical. The only author he mentions by name outside of the Preface is Hesiod (a source for the story of Zethus and Amphion [41]).²⁵ Entry 35 also has a clear Hesiodic subtext. Palaephatus quotes lines from Homer to illustrate the form of the Chimaera (28 cf. *Il.* 6.181–182; also *Theog.* 323–324) and nods to Euripides in describing the story of Alcestis as a “tragic myth” (μῦθος τραγικώδης—40). Palaephatus’ choice of myths shows up the gulf between his rhetorical strategies and his actual practice. The Greek mythic system consists of a complex nexus of constantly evolving, competing variants and versions, some of which achieved greater prominence through works of panhellenic stature while others remained desperately obscure or relevant only to a single locality. Whereas later mythographers often took pleasure in hunting down and recording diverging variants and arcane details, Palaephatus sticks to the most standard ones. The conventionality of his accounts is striking.²⁶ It is difficult to stress just how unusual Palaephatus is amongst extant ancient writers in this regard. All of the myths featured in *On Unbelievable Tales* are known to us from the canonical genres of epic and tragedy.²⁷ In every case, Palaephatus narrates a version of the story which was well-known within the literary corpus, and sticks to conventional details.²⁸ There is only one instance in the extant treatise where he transmits a minor detail not attested elsewhere in antiquity.²⁹ These are popular stories, certainly, but they do not articulate the variety and flexibility of mythic knowledge more generally.

Palaephatus’ conception of the origin and dissemination of myth assumes, as we have seen, a substantial period of transmission. The predictable mistakes of storytellers, and the exaggerations of poets and other writers substantially transformed these accounts in an environment in which ambiguity and misunderstanding flourished outside of any external measure of narrative veracity.

25 There is, however, no independent evidence for this story in the Hesiodic corpus.

26 See Santoni (2000: 11–12).

27 The obvious exception is the corrupt and lacunose entry on Heracles (36), which is found in some codices and which has been taken as referring to an otherwise unknown story about the hero. For a recent attempt to connect it to the story of Philoctetes, see Lowe (2013: 355–357).

28 Even in those cases in which he is our earliest extant source for a particular mythical element (e.g. the metamorphoses of Atalanta and Actaeon, the fake “cow” which allowed Pasiphae to mate with the bull, the name “Minotaurus” for the offspring of this union, and the escape of Daedalus and Icarus from Crete) he is unlikely to be an innovator but rather must be following existing traditions (see Gantz [1993: 261, 274]).

29 This is his unparalleled description of Actaeon as an Arcadian (Ἀρκαίων ἦν ἀνήρ τὸ γένος Ἀρκάς—6). In all other accounts the hunter is closely associated with Thebes and the line of Cadmus.

And yet, the myths which result from this process in *On Unbelievable Tales* do not reflect the plurality which Hecataeus diagnosed as inherent in traditional storytelling. Palaephatus' rationalistic manipulations transform one particular form of a myth into another, equally specific, variant. His approach thus relies on there being a version of each myth recognizable as *the* account, not merely *an* account, of it. For instance, in rationalizing Heracles' theft of the apples of the Hesperides, Palaephatus chooses a version prominent in tragedy (e.g. Soph. *Trach.* 1099–1100, Eur. *HF* 394–399) but ignores a parallel variant, which had the hero take Atlas' place while *Atlas* raided the garden (e.g. Pherekydes fr. 17 Fowler). Palaephatus' explanation is so closely connected to the particular narrative details of a single variant that he produces a successful replacement only for that version. Recognition of the plurality and fluidity of storytelling practices would invalidate Palaephatus' manipulations and undercut the neatness of his approach.

On Unbelievable Tales attributes to mythic language both the transformative ambiguity of oral communication, and the conservative fixity of textualization. In presenting myths as produced by word-of-mouth, Palaephatus intuitively taps into a long tradition which made them a characteristic product of the communal mentality. But he treats these stories as stable, textualized objects, accessible in singular, linear forms, and it is exactly their fixed quality which provides the necessary "traction" for rationalization.

5 The New Mythology

To the modern reader, Palaephatus' attitude toward myth seems so self-explanatory that no comment is needed: myths are well-known stories from Greek literature characterized by their obvious fictionality. This confident, dogmatic conception underpins the straightforward efficacy of the rationalizing process. Again, Palaephatus' blinkered simplicity has repelled closer analysis. The seeming banality of his concept of myth veils an obvious observation: Palaephatus' definition of what a myth is accords neatly with popular uses of our word "myth" in English, but it *doesn't* fit easily alongside more prominent Greek examples.

Greek myth exists, as it were, as a network of interlinked stories, images and ideas shared at a communal level and recalled in specific ways. This network extends temporally: even when one has finished the story of the Trojan War, the questions "and what happened next?" or "but why was Hera so hostile to the Greeks?" can still be asked—and answered. It also extends thematically—one heroic narrative might bear comparison with another; one paradigm will

prompt the recollection of an opposing one. More than this, the mythic system interacts with broader cultural factors; myths existed to explain why a strangely-shaped hill was as it was, why sacrifices were conducted in particular ways, or why one region controlled, or claimed kinship with, another.

Mythical knowledge functioned, then, as an ever-expanding nexus of names, associations, versions and commentaries. But, of course, in practice, this conceptual encyclopedia was always sliced up in some way: storytelling, whether face-to-face or through the medium of writing, has innate limits and preferences. The demands of audience and narrator—and of context—meant that the mythic tradition remained a kind of intellectual mirage. Only particular segments of it were told—indeed, relevant—on any one occasion. Thus, for example, the practical realities of the Attic stage produced plots of particular kinds performed according to prevailing conventions. Tragedians fashioned self-contained narratives from the mythic “megatext” and shaped them into familiar, satisfying patterns.³⁰ The repertoire of tragedy—varied and inventive as it is—reflects the strictures of its staging; the technology available (chorus, actors, running time, dramatic protocol) thus conditioned the particular ways in which mythic knowledge was segmented in such contexts. The narration and transmission of myths in writing was shaped by different considerations and developed distinctive characteristics of its own. One of the consequences of literacy was the creation of complex, comprehensive genealogies calculated in ways which no one particular community would chose for itself. Literate genealogists were able to systemize, flesh out and transmit such material; moreover, in doing so, they created a kind of “genre” of genealogical knowledge ordered and narrated according to new estimations as to its value.³¹

These features of literate transmission—length, completeness, a tendency towards obscure accretions and logical modifications, and the collation of mythic knowledge for its own sake—are perhaps best exemplified more generally by the massive *Library* of Ps-Apollodorus. But literate habits also led mythographers in another direction. We have seen that other surviving Imperial mythographers adopted something quite different from the “joined up” narrative approach of Ps-Apollodorus and that evidence for this atomistic style is pushed back several centuries by the survival of Palaephatus’ text. This conceptual innovation, likewise, did not arise *ex nihilo*. It is implicated in the emergence of a new sense of mythology, one which creates a category of “myth” as

30 Segal (1983: 173–198); Burian (1997: 178–208).

31 See Thomas (1989: 103–105).

a separable, distinctive body of knowledge in its own right, while treating individual mythic accounts as an set of homogeneous, self-contained artifacts.

Following Detienne, it has become conventional to illustrate the absence of a prevailing concept of myth in antiquity by assembling catalogues of the vast range of phenomena described by ancient authors themselves as *μῦθοι* and by noting the correspondingly wide range of responses that this term could encompass. These linguistic approaches have been highly productive in that they have rightly brought greater complexity and richness to our conception of the ancient idea of myth. But they nonetheless tend to obscure those cases in which groups of stories *were* experienced and utilized as clusters of analogous narratives. Here, context, and habitual practice within that context, is key. So, for example, the decorative schemes of Greek temples featured only stories of gods and heroes. They depicted, then, elements of the mythical past exclusively. Likewise, the plots of Greek tragedies drew, with just a few exceptions, on story cycles set in the pre-historical period. So, long before Aristotle collated and analyzed the standard features of tragic *μῦθοι*, the particular narratives used by the tragedians were experienced as a circumscribed body of stories with similar characteristics and functions.

Palaephatus uses the term *μῦθος* to denote a traditional tale in need of rationalization. The kinds of stories that he chooses for such treatment belong, as we have seen, to a narrow group of familiar, literary narratives. The consistency of Palaephatus' categorical stance is unparalleled in earlier extant texts; *On Unbelievable Tales* shows us a Greek writer taking *μῦθοι* as his object of study and creating a narrative category paradigmatic of a particular facet of Greek storytelling. But the significance of Palaephatus' creation goes far beyond his linguistic choices or the hermeneutic accident by which his *μῦθοι* look a lot like our "myths." This treatise functions through exemplary practice rather than theoretical axioms. Palaephatus does not tell us what a *μῦθος* is, he shows us. Like temple sculptors and tragic poets, and indeed Imperial mythographers, Palaephatus projects his mythology in a pragmatic way, by grouping stories together.

Underlying Palaephatus' method is a process of abstraction which does not derive organically from uses of these myths elsewhere. The creation of a conception of mythology like that utilized by Palaephatus is part of the story of mythic decontextualization—or, rather, re-contextualization—brought about by texts. *On Unbelievable Tales* gives us an extreme illustration of myth being treated in this way, but it is not merely an isolated curiosity; it is a valuable record of a much broader conceptual and intellectual revolution. The archaic and classical mythographers—so often overlooked on account of their fragmentary survival—created for themselves a new branch of study. Self-

consciously aware of their status as writers, not merely performers, they produced massive texts in which myths were narrated and critiqued on their own terms. For the first time, these stories were not merely adjuncts of social, political or religious life.³² Something similar is apparent in the sophists' use of myth as a "conventional tool" for communication.³³

One product of the shift towards a highly literate culture was, as we have seen, the uncoupling of poetic content from aural effects and performance context. Relevant here is the elevation of the material of tragedy as an object of study in its own right. Aristotle's *Poetics* makes the most powerful and distinctive characteristics of tragedy those elements, like plot and characterization, which are readily conveyed in written form; he treats matters relating to the spectacle itself in a more perfunctory manner. This period also saw the production of compendia of the plots of tragedies which seem to be doing something similar. The origins of Hellenistic mythography are often traced to such works.³⁴ Unfortunately, little survives of them beyond some titles.³⁵ What we do have are later papyri of collections of narrative *hypotheses*.³⁶ These short prose summaries relate the plots of plays along with particular background details necessary for understanding them. The descriptions are largely sparse

32 See Fowler (2011: 61): "Contributing directly to this textualization [among the sophists], though not produced for such iconoclastic purposes, was the massive and easily overlooked work of the mythographers, whose substantial writings [...] functioned as compendious works of reference, written for circulation as written texts, and not employed, as myth in every other context was, as part of some religious or social occasion. The very existence of such a corpus demonstrates the use of myth as cultural capital, long before the Second Sophistic and even before the First."

33 Thus, Morgan (2000: 130): "Myth is accepted as a conventional tool and the sophists do not concern themselves with its truth value[...]. Parallel to this lack of concern with truth and a view of myth as a literary phenomenon is the breaking-up of the tradition into a series of isolated tableaux. Just as the written tradition may be mined for *gnomai*, so the mythological storehouse may be raided for attractive situations. The textualisation of myth renders it a form of convention, and it is employed by the sophists as such." Morgan goes on to note the close relationship between "the manipulation of myth and the manipulation of language" [130] in these writers, a telling parallel for Palaephatus' approach.

34 See Wendel (1935: 1353–1354); Pellizer (1993: 289); Fornaro (2000: 629); Fowler (2000: xxvii).

35 E.g. Asclepiades of Tragilus (Τραγωδούμενα), Philochorus (Περὶ τῶν Σοφοκλέους μύθων), Dicaearchus (ὑποθέσεις τῶν Ἐβριπίδου καὶ Σοφοκλέους μύθων), and Glaucus (Περὶ Αἰσχύλου μύθων).

36 For these, see Pfeiffer (1968: 195); van Rossum-Steenbeck (1998: 4–12); Cameron (2004: 57–58).

and straightforward. Little attention is given to poetic effect, dramatic structure, or aspects of performance. In them, then, we can see the material of tragedy valued above all for its narrative form and thus being converted into generalized mythic knowledge.³⁷ Such scholarly activity underlines the emergence of a new conception of mythical stories, one which dissolves their local specificities and creates something analogous to Alan Cameron's pragmatic definition of myth in a literary world: "a corpus of stories every educated person was expected to know".³⁸

This concept of myth as a shared cultural vocabulary foregrounds Palaephatus' treatise and partially explains its unusual structure. Scholarly interest in the plots of tragedies normalized the idea of the isolated narrative as a unit of organization. As independent entities in their own right, myths could exist without reference to other cultural phenomena. This objectification of myth established new strategies for communicating its significance. Nonetheless, old habits continued. We have seen that Palaephatus disengages his myths from the local contexts which had fostered them. And yet his rationalizations maintain a hollow fiction of connecting mythic events to local geography. In some cases, such as his relocation of the Hesperides to Miletus, the location is intended to bolster the plausibility of the story and undercut its fabulous resonances. The garden of the Hesperides was traditionally situated at the mythical extremes of the world. Palaephatus places these daughters of "the west" in the eastern Mediterranean. His choice of an Ionian island famous for the quality of its wool as their home lends credence to his idea that the μήλα were in fact sheep.³⁹ The specificity of aetiologies plays a similar role. Palaephatus claims that a ravine near Troy called "the Argive ambush" commemorates the place where the Greeks hid before their final assault (16). Elsewhere, he invents place-names as required: "Three-headed" (τρικάρηνος) Geryon is from "Tricarenia" (24) and the "hundred-handers" (οἱ ἑκατόγχειρες) Cottus and Briareos hail from "Hecatoncheiria", a village "in Chaonia, now called Orestias" (19). The first horse-riders, adept at hunting bulls, come from "Nephele", a village below Mt Pelion, and could thus plausibly be called "the Centaurs of Nephele" (1). With this supposed evidence, Palaephatus "casse le circuit fermé" of myth by introducing a seemingly new set of explanatory phenomena.⁴⁰ But his—traditional—gambit

37 Indeed, Cameron (2004: 58), notes that the relative abundance of tragic summaries in papyri finds testifies not to interest in tragedy *per se*, but to interest in myth.

38 Cameron (2004: xii).

39 See Santoni (2000: 126 n. 11).

40 Trachsel (2007: 168–169).

of pinning myths to local specificities in fact reveals the vast intellectual distance which typifies Palaephatus' approach. Even the geographic reality of Greece can be manipulated in this hermeneutic game.

On Unbelievable Tales articulates a distinctive understanding of the nature and function of myth. The underwhelming simplicity of Palaephatus' approach, his banal repetition, and hardheaded assumptions regarding the hermeneutic possibilities offered by these stories, lend his little treatise a particular significance in the story of Greek myth criticism. Very little of ancient mythography survives; Palaephatus' text, then, is key to charting the development of it in the scholarly circles of late-fourth century Athens. This text reveals a Greek writer adopting a consistent attitude to a clearly discrete body of stories. His sense of what myths are and what they do is conditioned implicitly by the textualized environment which he inhabits. Myths—elsewhere the stuff of poetic performance, of civic identity, and of cult—are transformed into a repertoire of stable, recognizable, useful narrative artifacts on which the interpreter can playfully exercise his exegetical expertise.

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