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A PLOUGHMAN'S SENSE OF THE PAST

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ABSTRACT. Burliga Bogdan, *A Ploughman's Sense of the Past*.

The article discusses the concept of the past in Hesiod's *Works & Days*. I argue that, contrary to traditional belief, Hesiod's second poem does not focus on myths, but on the social reality he knew from experience, about which he makes pessimistic remarks. Hesiod strengthens his argument by recounting a particularly striking story about the five generations of humanity, from the best to the worst. This story serves the poet as an illustration and confirmation of his gloomy observations about the moral condition of his fellow Greeks. However, I also argue that despite having only oral accounts of the past (myths) at his disposal, Hesiod – the performer of public songs – was aware of the existence of categories of the past and of past events, regardless of how oral reports had rearranged them. I cite his distinction between truth and falsehood when reporting past events as evidence for this; such a distinction appears in 'a confession' of the Muses (*Theog.* 27–28).

Keywords: Hesiod; violence; *logos*; myth; the past

Studying ancient history can often feel like getting lost in the fog. After all, no subject is free of controversy, whether due to a lack of information and evidence or the incomplete state of preserved data. Problems and dilemmas often arise from the nature of the preserved information itself.¹ Sooner or later, the ever-present hermeneutic question of how to interpret preserved information arises.

This broad category certainly includes the problem of the relationship between Greek mythology and history. What should be done with imaginary of the ancient Greeks, their countless, often bizarre, shocking and terrifying tales (λόγοι, μύθοι)?² How should they be interpreted? What was their meaning? These questions are not original, of course, but rather trite, going back at least to the end of the 6th century BC (e.g. the doubts of Xenophanes of Colophon

* Unless otherwise noted, all dates refer to BC.

¹ Bravo, Wipszycka 1988: 127.

² On the terms Fowler 2011; Saïd 2007: 77, see Diggle 2021: 950.

regarding the depiction of the gods in the *Iliad* and *Theogony*: Diels & Kranz, *FVS*, 21A1 = Diogenes Laertius, 9.18; Diels & Kranz, *FVS*, 21B15 = Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 5.109.3; cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math.* 9.193).³ They certainly date back to the beginning of the 5th century BC, with mythographers such as Hecataeus of Miletus questioning the reliability of myths,⁴ not to mention Aristotle's later issues with Hesiod's mythical thinking,⁵ as well as the subsequent Christian rejection of polytheistic religion and Greek mythology.⁶ Nevertheless, myths remain a major interpretive challenge,⁷ an 'enigma', as Veyne put it,⁸ for many past and present generations of scholars. Since satisfactory answers to doubts about mythical 'data' are difficult to find, simply posing questions about the meaning and usefulness of λόγοι is often doomed to failure. This short note will address this issue using Hesiod as a representative example. In fact, except for Homer, there is little choice as far as the early seventh century is concerned, provided that the narrative persona called 'Hesiod' in the poem was Hesiod, an αἰσιδός who was proficient in arranging hexameter poetry and was awarded a prize in Chalcis earlier in his life, and who inherited a landed estate from his father with his brother.⁹ However, the starting point and subject matter will not be the *Theogony*, as one might assume, but *Works & Days*. I consider this remarkable, unique document to be more important, indeed also crucial in addressing the issue of how the Greeks approached their stories of the past.

³Burkert 1981: 27; Brisson 2004: 9.

⁴*FGrH* 1F1a = Demetrius, *De elocut.* 12: Ἐκαταῖος Μιλήσιος ὧδε μυθεῖται· τάδε γράφω, ὥς μοι δοκεῖ ἀληθεῖα εἶναι· οἱ γὰρ Ἑλλήνων λόγοι πολλοί τε καὶ γελοῖοι, ὥς ἐμοὶ φαίνονται, εἰσίν.

⁵*Met.* 1000a11-21.

⁶There are many examples, including a comprehensive treatise by Theodoret of Cyrus with the ingeniously mischievous title Ἑλληνικῶν θεραπευτικῆ παθημάτων (*A Cure for Pagan Maladies*), written in the first half of the fifth century AD.

⁷Dowden 1992: 16.

⁸Veyne 1988: 3; see Pirenne-Delforge 2009.

⁹A brief *confessio status quaestionis* of my position is in order here. I essentially side with those who see a real person behind the narrator's experience – an approach that is sometimes called the 'autobiographical fallacy', which is a legacy of the 'romantic' approach to literature. The opposing, more sophisticated view assumes that we are dealing with a highly intellectual construction by a professional singer of considerable talent (as evidenced by the initial hymn to the Muses in *Theog.* 1–21). This singer invented the fictional figure of a farmer and gave him the name 'he who emits the voice': *Theog.* 22; cf. Nagy 1982: 49; generally Nünlist 2004), and added fictitious biographical details (cf. Griffith 1983; Lamberton 1988, ch. 1: 1–37; Stoddard 2004, ch. 1). However, even if we consider it to be merely an imaginative concept (the didactic and moralising nature of the instructions in *Works & Days* would suggest this, as would the figure of a shepherd grazing his herds: 23), the social relations described could not have been an idle fantasy. The poet – Hesiod or a skilled αἰσιδός posing as 'Hesiod' (Starr 1962: 271) – may have exaggerated when depicting these relations in such a depressive and apocalyptic manner, but inequality, social division and resentment (greed, envy and malice) were undoubtedly matters of fact – they were all too familiar to the poet's audience.

This brings us to the issue of the status of myth, or 'the uses of mythology', as Dowden calls it.¹⁰

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Herodotus famously stated that Homer and Hesiod, who he believed lived 400 years earlier, in the second half of the 9th century, created a tale of how the gods were born (ἡλικίην τετρακοσίοισι ἔτεσι δοκέω μέο πρεσβυτέρους γενέσθαι¹¹). They 'created' (ποίησαντες) for the Greeks (Ἕλλησι) a tale of how the gods were born (θεογονία). They also provided an idea of what their gods were like (οὔτοι δέ εἰσι), attributing names (ἐπωνυμίας) to the gods (δόντες τοῖσι θεοῖσι). The poets also specified their skills (τέχνας διελόντες) and how they looked (εἶδεα αὐτῶν σημῆναντες), as well as attributing cults (τιμάς).¹² What *pater historiae* did not add, apparently as something obvious, is that the world of the gods presented in Hesiod's epic poetry is a world of chronic violence, conflict and war (the latter being the most brutal manifestation of the former¹³). The same is also true in the case of *Works & Days*. Here, the pervasive background and 'reality' is constituted by endemic ὕβρις leading to many cases of abuse in social relations.¹⁴ According to Hesiod, the 'ploughman' (431–445),¹⁵ such a condition could be explained by referring to the past, accessible only via *logoi* (431–445).

Historians and literary historians date the composition of Hesiod's poems to either the turn of the 8th–7th centuries or the first half of the 7th century.¹⁶

¹⁰ Dowden 1992.

¹¹ 2.53.8.

¹² See Lloyd's 2007: 274–275, comm. *ad loc.*; also Burkert 1981: 26; Hall 2013; Dowden 2011: 48.

¹³ See Vian 1968: 68.

¹⁴ So Richer 2005: 24, according to whom 'Chez Hésiode, qui considère surtout les tensions internes à une communauté, la violence guerrière n'est pas totalement absente'; also Palaima 2014: 11–12.

¹⁵ It is unknown whether Perses (or Hesiod himself) literally took part in ploughing arable land, but there were probably times when he did so (381–382; 388–393). Verse 441 refers to a forty-year-old ploughman (cf. 405: ἀροτῆρα'; also 489), who was presumably a servant (West 1978: 270 – 'a hired man'; cf. Homer, *Il.* 18.541–549). In any case, van Wees (2009: 448–450) has convincingly demonstrated that, given his estate and the people who assisted Hesiod with the tillage, he was not an 'ordinary' 'peasant'; rather, he was a substantial landowner, who owned servants (502; 597; 766–767) and slaves (470; 573), as well as hiring men to do the work. It is highly probable that, as Bravo (1977:10) suggests, he was an impoverished aristocrat. Significantly, the narrator warns (as Theognis later did) against marrying those whom he calls 'κακοί' (716: κακῶν; cf. 201: δειλῶ βροτῶ), while recommending avoiding disputes with those who are ἐσθλοί (716: ἐσθλῶν; also 214: ἐσθλός). See also the two 'categories' of the local population at 6–7. West (1997: 307) invokes the figure of a shepherd from the *Book of Amos*, in which the eponymous character condemns the greedy and corrupt rich, warning of God's wrath.

¹⁶ This is how the poems of Hesiod are now generally dated. According to modern estimations, the 'Orientalizing' period in Greek history, when the influence of Eastern cultures on Greece

A related question is what chronological relationship the works of Hesiod and Homer bear to each other.¹⁷ Thus, ‘the action’, so to speak, of Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι takes place, proverbially, ‘here and now’. It is ‘set in human time’,¹⁸ during the ‘so-called generation of people’ (τῆς δὲ ἀνθρωπίνης λεγομένης γενεῆς), as Herodotus would say (3.122), and concerns τὰ περὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους πράγματα – using Plato’s later phrase (*Legg.* 677e7). However, one is right in saying that Hesiod does not write the history of Ascrea or even of Boeotia, as history was later understood, in terms of γινόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων and ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμάστιά (Herodotus, 1.1),¹⁹ or as knowledge of particular events of the ‘what-who-did’ type (see Aristotle, *Poet.* 1451, 5–7 on τὰ γινόμενα and ἡ δ’ ἱστορία τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστον λέγει; cf. *Rhet.* 1360a35).²⁰ Therefore, reading Hesiod’s epic leads one to conclude that it ‘deals, as a modern scholar put it, with the struggles of everyday life’.²¹ Thus, although *Works & Days* does not provide a narrative story, it can be anachronistically called a kind of ‘historical commentary’ on social realities and relations in Boeotia at the time.²² What were they like?

Overall, the poem shows that, although running a farm is physically demanding, it can nevertheless guarantee a life of integrity. Thus, Hesiod provides an excellent insight into how hard life is and presents a unique and unusual picture that is invaluable to any modern reader interested in the everyday realities of a farmer’s existence at the time.²³ The longest didactic section of the

was exceptionally strong, occurred in the first half or beginning of the 7th century (Walcot 1966; Boardman 1980: 35–110; Murray 1980: 80–99, writes of the period from 750 to 650 BC; Burkert 1992; Osborne 1996: 167; Whitley 2001: 102–133). This is supported by the parallels between Hesiod’s stories and similar Eastern motifs (West 1978; West 1997: 276–333, on Hesiod, and ch. 12, pp. 586–630). The Hittite text of the Hurrian myth of Kumarbi is especially emphasised by Burkert (1979: 18–22; 1992; 1997: 278–280), Murray (1980: 87–88), Csapo (2005: 74–76) and West (1997: 278–280).

¹⁷As far as the issue of war is concerned, though Homer’s *Iliad* (which Simone Weil famously called ‘a poem of force’) is of less interest to us here, it may be interpreted as an evocative complement to Hesiod’s poems. Alternatively, the majority of scholars argue that it is Hesiod who ‘completes’ Homer’s earlier vision. The age-old question of dating the *Iliad* and Hesiod’s poems arises here; see West (1995: 203–219), Crielaard (1995), and Most (2006: xxiv) for details of the controversies, and Hall (2013) for more information. However, for the purposes of this discussion, it is irrelevant which poem was written first, as both describe – and the *Iliad* even celebrates – the phenomenon of violence and compulsion. In Homer, violence is manifested in war; in Hesiod, although we hear of war (14: πόλεμόν κακόν, δῆριν; 156: Ἄρης ἔργα τονόεντα), war is the result of the actions of the ‘evil’ Eris, so violence (134: ὕβριν; 146: ὕβριες; 214: ὕβρις γάρ τε κακῇ; 275: βίης) defines social relations; see Burliga 2024.

¹⁸Boedeker 2011: 126; see Vidal-Naquet 1986.

¹⁹Fowler 2015: 195; see Stewart 1970: 38.

²⁰Rosenmeyer 1957: 262 called Hesiod ‘a historian’; *contra* Stewart 1970: 43; see Osborne 1996: 147.

²¹Van Wees 1999: 448–450.

²²Raaflaub 1993: 60; van Wees 2009.

²³‘Quotidianalities’, as Tandy (2018: 44) put it.

work remains invaluable to scholars today because of the abundance of technical details about farming one's own plot of land (see especially 383–821).²⁴ Here, we find praise for hard soil cultivation and, incidentally, an unusually (for the early 7th century) detailed calendar of duties ('days': ἡμέραι, 822). Farming signifies constant toil and a struggle with nature, if you want to avoid the capricious Boreas (547–556) and the risks of seafaring (231–232). However, it also signifies an honestly obtained harvest and the possibility of increasing one's wealth and possessions (306–308, 313).²⁵ There is a great deal of detailed information that gives the impression of reading a 19th-century naturalistic literary piece, with Hesiod as an ancient predecessor of Émile Zola. However, I will leave this aspect of *Works & Days* here. The crucial question remains: why did Hesiod decide to describe it at all?

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Much has already been written about the origins of Hesiod's interest, if not obsession, with 'judges' (βασίλεις) and their legislative powers. The main reason (assuming that the poet did not invent the story and biographical details, such as σφραγίς, especially at lines 649–662) was the injustice inflicted on the poet by his brother,²⁶ who deprived him of his family fortune as a result of bribery in the judicial settlement of the matter. The poet spends much of his time instructing his brother and the powerful noblemen of the 'ruling elite' (202; 248–264)²⁷ on how to live justly, avoid wrongdoing and act honestly by avoiding ὕβρις (213; 238–239). The Boeotian ploughman's overarching goal is to make his brother aware of the necessity of righteous living and of maintaining the principles of justice in his relations with others, as well as of showing piety towards the gods. Thus, the plethora of details about the daily life of an impoverished landowner is part of the author's moral strategy: the admonitions and advice addressed to Perses are used to illustrate what a just life should entail.

As every reader of the poem will soon realise, the life of a landowner of an estate the size of Hesiod's is difficult not only because of the constant hard

²⁴ Hanson 1999: 93–94.

²⁵ Remarkably, the author discusses the necessity and practice of acquiring another person's estate or part of it (33–34; 341), thereby increasing one's own property and possessions. (341; cf. 24–26 on the beneficial nature of rivalry as a common social phenomenon; see van Wees 2009: 448, and 2022: 30–31, who rightly emphasises Hesiod's philosophy of getting rich (381: σοὶ δ' εἰ πλούτου θυμὸς ἐέλδεται ἐν φρεσὶ σῆσιν), by fair methods of course, as Xenophon would later advocate; also see Gagarin (1973) on Hesiod's emphasis on achieving economic prosperity.

²⁶ Direct, personal apostrophes to Perses at 10; 27; 213; 274; 286; 299; 306; 397; 633; 641; on injustice see - among many others - Loney 2024: 131; injustice as an impulse for writing: Stewart 1970: 45.

²⁷ Meyer 1924: 21–22.

physical labour and activity required for farming, but also because of the constant competition. It also takes skilful dealing with people who generally want to harm and exploit others, as they are constantly engaged in competition.²⁸ Hesiod acknowledges that benevolent people exist (346–347; cf. 214–215; 225–227), but his relentless complaints about the rarity of fairness suggest that, in reality, honesty and kindness are rare among men,²⁹ both in peasant communities and in *poleis*. Hence, the pious ploughman of Aschera must constantly be on his guard and watch out for others.³⁰ Limited trust, even among relatives and next of kin, is highly advisable (370–371).³¹ So, while land management can offer prospects for an honest life for Hesiod, it cannot guarantee that one will ever achieve it. This is because the crux of his moral diagnosis is that economic inequality leads to omnipresent injustice,³² which permeates all areas of society and makes social relations either violent or inextricably linked to violence. The most spectacular evidence of such a state is the aforementioned enigmatic group of anonymous βασιλεῖς, ‘the ruling class’, whose power and prestige come from acquired wealth (land),³³ as πλούτῳ δ’ ἀρετὴ καὶ κῦδος ὀπηδεῖ (313). It is the dominant position of these ‘big men’,³⁴ coupled with their influence, that defines communal life, both in ἄστρῳ as in χώρᾳ. This creates unequal relations and corruption,³⁵ especially since these powerful, influential and sinister ‘kingly’ landlords have judicial power.³⁶ Inequalities are therefore inevitable, as the weak must succumb

²⁸ In ancient Greek culture, competition had an ambiguous status. Although Hesiod recognises the positive aspects of rivalry as a common social phenomenon, the boundary between good and bad *Eris* is fluid. Thus, the remark (25–26) that κεραμεὺς κεραμεῖ κοτέει καὶ τέκτονι τέκτων, καὶ πτωχὸς πτωχῷ φθονέει καὶ αἰοιδὸς αἰοιδῷ is highly ambiguous, and has already puzzled West 1978: 147, concerning ‘κοτέει’ and ‘φθονέει’), and the same is true of an early observation (23–24) that a neighbour envies their neighbour’s wealth. For more information, see Dalby 1998: 197 and van Wees (2011: 5–6).

²⁹ Even the mundane matter of borrowing tools from neighbours can be problematic. They may refuse, apparently out of jealousy and to humiliate the borrower (408).

³⁰ The ‘philosophy’ of gift exchange, a practice known from the *Iliad*, falls into this category (354–360); see Qviller 1981: 120.

³¹ Van Wees 2022: 30.

³² See Murray 1980: 68.

³³ As in the case of the Homeric landowner-βασιλεὺς: *Il.* 18.556.

³⁴ Regarding Sahlin’s famous term see Hall 2013: 129 and 133 on the category of ‘chieftains’; cf. Murray 1980: 40–41; Tandy 2018: 52–53.

³⁵ Hesiod called them, meaningfully, δωροφάγοι: 39, 221, 264.

³⁶ This reminds us of Homer’s remark about judges (θέμιστας), who deliver unjust verdicts on the agora (εἰν ἀγορῇ σκολιάς κρίνωσι, ἐκ δὲ δίκην ἐλάσωσι), and are driven by violence (βίη): *Il.* 16.386–388 (I owe this reference to van Wees 1992: 85; see also Janko 1995: 365–366, *ad loc.*, on ‘Hesiodic parallels’). Van Wees’ 1999 thesis that the efforts of archaic Greek elites to ensure economic benefits and secure obedience and respect among the weaker members of society resemble those of the modern Sicilian mafia in their ruthlessness is also convincing. In the case of Hesiod, this ‘mafia’-style elite rule can be seen when comparing the ‘rapacious landowners’ (van Wees 1999: 10), who realise a ‘predatory economy’ (van Wees 2022: 29) based on violent

while the strong prevail.³⁷ This is the world that Hesiod found and learned about and understood how it works and is trying to adapt to it. Interestingly, the social reality he describes changed little throughout the seventh century, a fact that is confirmed by later Greek poetry, especially that of Solon at the beginning of the sixth century.³⁸

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Thus far, I have intentionally postponed the issue of 'myth' in *Works & Days*, devoting considerable space to the 'down-to-earth' aspect of the poem, as well as to the poet's evaluation of *hic-et-nunc* realities (cf. 38: τὰ τ' ἐόντα). The reason is simple: Hesiod's primary concern is to regain, maintain and increase his inheritance. He lives a hard life, hence his lamentation of the injustice faced by the storyteller of Ascra at every turn, and his recurring complaints, appeals and warnings to evildoers about the punishing hand of Zeus (direct apostrophes at 248 and 263; see 261 on ἀτασθαλίας βασιλέων). Unfortunately, however, the poet knows that none of this will be effective: inequality will not disappear (191–193: κακῶν ρεκτῆρα καὶ ὕβριν/ἀνέρα τιμήσουσι· δίκη δ' ἐν χερσὶ καὶ αἰδῶς/οὐκ ἔσται), proud villains will remain arrogant (193: βλάψει δ' ὁ κακὸς τὸν ἀρείονα), the status of the economically subordinate will not change

coercion, with their idealised characteristics in *Theog.* 80–93. There, the *basileis* are 'alumni' of Zeus: 'venerable', reasonable, and even humble. They are (as ἵστωρ is in Homer's depiction of the shield for Achilles in the *Iliad*, 18.497–508), just judges who give redress to the wronged and mitigate disputes (225–227); see West 1978, van Wees 2009 and Rose 2012: 180–181. However, this raises the issue of the ambiguous status of Zeus ὑπὲρβρεμέτης in the poem. As is well known, Hesiod begins *Works & Days* by praising Zeus, the father of the gods, who upholds moral order and justice (239; see also 256, where Δίκη is the daughter of Zeus, Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα; also *Theog.* 902. He is already punishing the arrogant and overthrowing those who exalt themselves too much, allowing them to be humiliated and sending plagues and miseries upon them (242–247). Nevertheless, this initial praise of (hymn to) θεῶν βασιλεὺς should not obscure the fact that, in reality, things are different: although the narrator often appeals to Zeus's power (e.g. 267, regarding his all-seeing eye) and warns potential evildoers of possible punishments sent by him (*Theog.* 886), realness of injustices of various kinds in everyday communal circumstances is in sharp contrast to the poet's 'wishful' vision of what these relations should look like if the ethical postulate of living a just life were upheld.

³⁷To some extent, Achilles' characterization of Agamemnon as a gift-hoarding, greedy ruler who preys (δημοβόρος) on his own subjects' property would be fitting here: *Il.* 1.231–232.

³⁸Other examples can be found in van Wees' valuable 2009 study. Hall (2013) aptly quotes Solon here (F1 West, *IEG*): how little the Hesiodic leaders differ from Solon's Athenians of the 6th century, who are devoted to profit (χρήμασι πειθόμενοι: v. 6), from city dwellers whose thoughts are godless (v. 7: ἄδικος νόος), and who are possessed of great pride (v. 8: ὕβριος μεγάλης) and given to unlawful acts (v. 11: ἀδικοῖς ἔργμασι πειθόμενοι), and only increase their wealth (πλουτ<έου>σιν)? Theognis of Megara's (late 6th century) assessment of the elite is similar, too: ὅταν ὑβρίζειν τοῖσι κακοῖσιν ἄδη/δῆμόν τε φθείρουσι δίκας τ' ἀδικοῖσι διδοῦσιν/οἰκείων κερδέων εἵνεκα καὶ κράτεος (1.44–45 West, *IEG*).

(cf. 6–7: ἀρίζηλον, ἀγήγορα vs. ἄδηλον, σκολιὸν), and the poor and inferior will still envy the rich and superior (22: πλούσιον).³⁹ In short, justice is just a dream. This is how Nemesis, the sister of Eris, operates, as described in the *Theog.* 226: πῆμα θνητοῖσι βροτοῖσι. This is why the famous lines in *Works & Days* (277–278) describe human relations and social organisation rather than ‘Darwinian’, violent relations in the animal world (201: κακοῦ δ’ οὐκ ἔσσεται ἀλκή). The storyteller’s world is admittedly not a world of open warfare,⁴⁰ but a world of ever-creeping conflict,⁴¹ which is constantly threatened by it.⁴²

If the above remarks on Hesiod’s diagnosis of the primacy of violence (indeed, it was his obsession) in his contemporary world are accurate, it is obvious why he invokes the two famous examples that are essential to my argument: both the Oriental λόγος of the five generations of mankind (106–201),⁴³ as the universal folktale (αἶνος) of the hawk and the nightingale (202–212).⁴⁴ Remarkably, the latter is addressed to landlords for their consideration (βασιλεῦσιν φρονέουσι).⁴⁵ These tales serve as an ‘explanation of why man’s lot is as hard as it is’, to quote a modern expert.⁴⁶ As their role in the poem is to provide an explanation for the present,⁴⁷ the stories are therefore aetiological in nature.⁴⁸ Thus, Hesiod’s use of *logoi* would fit Burkert’s modern definition of myth as ‘the tale applied’.⁴⁹ This

³⁹ Here, I agree with van Wees (2009: 446) that, by emphasising the role of hard physical toil, Hesiod is competing with the ‘leisure class’, which does not have to work. The poet’s ‘good envy’ is directed towards the leading landlords.

⁴⁰ Raaflaub 1993; Osborne 1996: 147; Hanson 1999: 93; on its importance, see Havelock 1972.

⁴¹ The connecting force is the ever-present Ἔρις – ‘Discord’ – the daughter of Νύξ (‘Darkness’, rather than ‘Night’): *Theog.* 123; 224–225: Νύξ ὅλοή [...] Ἐριν τέκε καρτερόθυμον). She is the mother of Ὑσμῖναι, Μάχαι, Φόνοι and Ἀνδροκτασίαι (*Theog.* 228; see Thalmann 2004), and sister of Nemesis. In the 5th century, Heraclitus, explaining the ubiquity of conflicts (τὸν πόλεμον ἐόντα ξυνόν – ‘war is in common’) writes that γινόμενα πάντα κατ’ ἔριν (‘all things come about by strife’: F80 Diels & Kranz, *FVS*; tr. Laks, Most 2016: 167). In the *Iliad* (4.440–441), Eris is presented as the sister and companion of Ares (Ἐρις ἄμοτον μεμανῖα, Ἄρεος ἀνδροφόνου κασιγνήτη ἐτάρη). The same is true in the Hesiodic *Shield*, where Eris is described as ‘wretched’ (v. 149) and as inspiring war (vv. 149–150). ‘Assaults’ (Προΐωξις) and ‘Counterattacks’ (Παλιώξις: 154), ‘Din of Battle’ (Ὀμαδός), ‘Killing’ (Φόνος) and ‘Slaughter’ (Ἀνδροκτασίη: 155).

⁴² See n. 17 (above), and Vian 1968 (generally). I have some objections to the thesis of absence of war in Hesiod, cf. 189 on waging wars and besieging cities.

⁴³ On Oriental origin see Walcott 1966; West 1978: 28 and 172–177; West: 1997: 306–319; Burkert 1992; generally Graf 1993: 86–95; see Most 1998: 104–127.

⁴⁴ On this, West 1978; Lincoln 1999. Add, however, that the speech of the hawk is called *mythos*, indicating that *logos* is a broader category; see Fowler 2011: 53.

⁴⁵ The fable is evidently a kind of an addition to the ‘iron generation’ story – both emphasize the primacy of strength and the stronger.

⁴⁶ Rowe 1983: 132–133; see Buxton 1999: 9–10.

⁴⁷ Dodds 1998.

⁴⁸ Fowler 2015: 198.

⁴⁹ Burkert 1979: 22–23; also 1993 and 2024: 617–618; see Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 217.

modern characterisation is particularly apt in the case of the poet's description of the fifth (and final) generation of men – the 'iron' generation (γένος σιδήρεον: 174–201) – in which he happens to live. Understandably, he regrets this,⁵⁰ and it is clearly the worst generation in moral terms.⁵¹ Here, listeners (or readers) experience a literary flashback: before learning what the ruthless and brutal realities of Boeotia are like, as well as how difficult land management is on the slopes of Mount Helicon, they are given a depressing description of the moral condition of the 'iron' generation. This generation is overwhelmed and corrupted by *hybris*, which surrounds the poet-narrator in the countryside and in the city of Thespieae.⁵² The narrator's distrust and disbelief in these people is reminiscent of the observation made by the American poet and translator A. E. Stallings, who reasonably calls the poet 'a misanthrope'.⁵³

The above brief remarks suffice to explain the explanatory function of 'myths' in *Works & Days*. But is it justifiable to dismiss the issue so easily? To some extent, yes. Obsessively preoccupied with the realities of everyday existence, Hesiod simply uses Oriental *logoi* instrumentally, as a means of understanding the present. His highly utilitarian approach to these stories is brilliantly summarised by the distinguished Greek scholar Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood.⁵⁴ Building on Burkert's definition quoted above, she concludes that we are dealing with a phenomenon when 'myths express important perceptions of the society that generated them'. These myths, she continues, 'contain insights which are (or can be reinterpreted so as to become) significant for our own age.' In this sense, she goes on to explain, myths are "'true" even today'.

As I mentioned above, Hesiod was not a historian. In ancient Greece, to be classified as a historian meant, as it does in today's academia, to be 'free' of myths and to understand that *logoi* are a separate kind of (rational) language. From this point of view, the 'myth and/or history' issue (see above, pp. 49–50) should not be analysed by taking Hesiod and epic poetry into consideration, since his testimony dates from as early as the first half of the 7th century. It is also mentioned that the poet was unaware of the category of 'myth', not only in the sense in which the term is used nowadays (which is obvious), but also in the sense in which it was understood by the Greeks themselves as early as the classical era.⁵⁵ While there is much to recommend this view, for my purposes, this is not particularly important. What seems to be striking is something else.

⁵⁰ I fail to understand Currie 2012: 49, who maintains that Hesiod's 'life thus quietly evokes that of the men of the golden race'.

⁵¹ Hall 2025: 11.

⁵² On *hybris* in Hesiod, see Fisher 1992: 185–200.

⁵³ Stallings 2018: x.

⁵⁴ Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 217.

⁵⁵ Many prominent scholars of the 'nature' of Greek mythology (see Kirk 1974) argue that Greek intellectuals only began to identify myth with invented and untrue stories related to gods

The topic of myth in the poem in question is far more intriguing because Greek stories, including those in *Works & Days*, essentially refer to *the past*. It is therefore the issue of the past that makes this poem devoted to farming such a fascinating document, rather than the somewhat artificial question of whether Hesiod distinguished a separate category of ‘myth’. I want to devote a few words to this problem.

Bearing in mind that, almost 200 years before Herodotus, Hesiod did not understand myth as a separate category (therefore he was not a historian) and in *Works & Days* used old stories pragmatically, to explain and understand why his present day was so far from an idyll, the way in which the Boeotian αἰοιδός perceives the past is intriguing. I would like to suggest here that the formula ‘τά πρό τ’ ἔοντα’, repeated twice in the *Theog.* (32, 38; cf. 100, on κλεῖα προτέρων ἀνθρώπων), and translated by Most (2006:5) as ‘what was before’, may be considered an equivalent of πάλαι in the *Iliad* (9.527).⁵⁶ This formula carries with it a more significant concept.

The fact that the narration in *Works & Days* recounts – with the help of the Muses, of course – stories of past events (τά πρό τ’ ἔοντα) that aimed to explain the existing state of affairs, has led some modern commentators to suggest that, for the ancient Greeks, myth was always ‘historical’ in the sense that it was a narrative about something that happened in the past. This is a refreshing and promising perspective as a subject for study, although in this last observation there is, of course, nothing original. This idea already appeared in Plato (*Crit.* 110a3-4), for whom ‘narrating tales’ (μυθολογία) is juxtaposed (if not identical)

and heroes from around the middle of the 5th century (e.g. Isocrates, or. 2, *Ad Nicoclem*, §§48–49; Plato, *Gorg.* 523a; *Resp.* 337a; Strabo, *Geogr.* 1.2.35; 11.5.3). Above all, these tales were seen as unverifiable, in opposition to ‘great achievements of men’ (Herodotean τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων: 1.1; or Thucydidean τὰ ἔργα τῶν πραχθέντων: 1.22.2; cf. Fowler 2011: 45; with Mojsik 2018: 32–35). But this critical attitude can already be discerned among poets as early as the first half of the 5th century. In his seventh Nemean Ode, Pindar expresses serious doubts about the Homeric tale of Odysseus, suggesting that ἡδυεπὴς Homer (v. 21) exaggerated the hero’s story. It is worth noting here Pindar’s view of songs and poetry (vv. 22–24) that ψεύδεσσι οἱ ποτανᾶ <τε> μηχανᾶ/σεμνὸν ἔπεστί τι σοφία/ δὲ κλέπτει παράγοισα μύθοις. However, it was not until the end of the fifth century that Thucydides (1.1.3) openly realised that the distant past (παλαιότερα; cf. 1.20.1: τὰ παλαιά) could not be learned in detail (σαφῶς μὲν εὑρεῖν διὰ χρόνου πληθὺς ἀδύνατα ἦν), or, to quote Plutarch’s later testimony (*Thes.* 1.1), events escape human cognition (τὰ διαφεύγοντα τὴν γνῶσιν). Full awareness of this came with the ‘birth’ of historiography and the critical mind, which also meant the rejection of what Thucydides called (1.22.4) τὸ μυθῶδες. Plutarch’s introduction to the same *The Life of Theseus* (1.2) also provides a useful summary. The biographer (and historian) knows that investigating the past is difficult; nevertheless, as he points out, it is not impossible to know it, since he ‘ran through’ (ἐμοὶ διελθόντι) the distant past (χρόνον) as it became accessible to him (ἐφικτόν) by means of probability-based reasoning (λόγῳ) and cognisable (βάσιμον) through learning about events ((καὶ ἱστορία πραγμάτων ἐχομένη).

⁵⁶In the speech of Phoenix, recalling the Calydonian boar hunt: μέμνημαι τόδε ἔργον ἐγὼ πάλαι οὐ τι νέον γε/ὥς ἦν.

with the 'search for the past' (ἀναζήτησις τῶν παλαιῶν). In line with this, Bury, in his Loeb edition, translates the phrase as 'legendary lore and the investigation of antiquity'. Waterfield, likewise, translates the phrase as 'storytelling and enquiring about the past'. Detienne also understood it this way earlier.⁵⁷ Besides Plato, this meaning also appears in Diodorus (4.1.1 and 3), who explicitly writes of τὰς μὲν παλαιὰς μυθολογίας, which Oldfather takes as 'the narratives of ancient mythology',⁵⁸ but which should be understood rather as 'narrating tales of times past'. So what is 'refreshing' here?

As mentioned, the formula τὰ πρό τ' ἔόντα is part of Hesiod's famous evocation of the words of the Muses with which they address the poet (*Theog.* 27–28).⁵⁹ What they tell him - as far as the subject of the past is concerned - is in fact invaluable,⁶⁰ namely, the mysterious deities admit to knowing how to speak untruths (ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν) or truths that are similar to the truth (ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα). However, if they so desire (cf. ἐθέλωμεν), they can sing about what actually happened (ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι).⁶¹ What are the implications of this distinction? What conclusions can be drawn from it?

There are many interpretations of this famous 'speech' of the Muses to the poet in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Regarding the issue of 'falsehood', Sourvinou-Inwood (see n. 54, above) is again relevant, as she believed that *logoi* could not have been 'true narrative accounts of past events [...] and should not be taken at face value or assumed to contain descriptions of past realities'. This remark seems to retain value with regard to the critics of myths in the 5th century. However, it is also evident that this observation can be applied to Hesiod himself. A proverbial navigation between Σκύλλα of truth, and Χάρυβδις of falsehood, when narrating tales reveals, in my opinion, the poet's deep uncertainty about what the past was like. It seems as though, for him, it was impossible to say anything for certain about it – so narrator suggests: the Muses can unveil the truth (ἀληθέα) or speak lies and fiction (ψεύδεα). Thus, during a poetry recitals (*agones*) in archaic times, there may have been, consternation about what the poet was singing about: was it, to quote the title of a classic German literary autobiography, *Dichtung* or *Wahrheit*?⁶²

Seen in this light, the problem of the Muses' 'truth' remains factually curious. The question is: what about the Hesiodic concept of ἀληθέα? This brings me to

⁵⁷ Bury 1929: 110; Waterfield 2008: 107; Detienne 1986: 88; also Graf 1993: 121.

⁵⁸ Oldfather 1935: 339; cf. 4.1.2: τὰς ἀρχαιοτάτας πράξεις τε καὶ μυθολογίας.

⁵⁹ Detienne 1996: 39; see Nünlist 2004: 25–30.

⁶⁰ On this passage as an example of 'poetical initiation', see Mojsik 2011: 225–228.

⁶¹ Their role in Hesiod is clearly similar to that attributed to them by Homer. According to Homer (*Il.* 2.485–486), the Muses are present, and as goddesses, they know everything (πάρεστέ τε ἵστε τε πάντα); cf. Detienne 1996: 45. Needless to say, singers can only learn of events by hearsay ('ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν'), but they know nothing for certain about them ('οὐδὲ τι ἴδμεν').

⁶² Although in verse 10 the narrator assures his brother that he can tell him (μυθησαίμην) what is truthful (ἐπίτημα), this refers to life wisdom throughout the whole poem.

the crux of my suggestion: regardless of whether the story presented was ‘true’, ‘close to the truth’ or ‘false’, Hesiod’s uncertainty alone indicates something that is difficult to overestimate, namely, that he and his audience logically assumed *a priori* that the past *really happened*, no matter how colourfully any singer, inspired by the Muses, depicted it. In my view, this is a somewhat neglected aspect of the famous initial poetic conversation in *Theogony*. It deserves much stronger emphasis, I believe. To reiterate: despite being constrained by oral performance (recitation) and a number of conditions that Jan Vansina generally refers to as ‘oral tradition’,⁶³ an archaic poet-singer nevertheless betrayed an awareness of the realness of the past, which *might have been* different to what he himself praised in a song. I suppose that the practice of singing and narrating the distant past spawned the conviction that what is praised and repeated does not necessarily represent $\psi\epsilon\upsilon\delta\epsilon\alpha$, but can represent $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\acute{\epsilon}\alpha$, which logically means that, although the truth of the past cannot be available in song, it has happened, so it must have existed *somehow*.⁶⁴

Thus, continuing this line of argument, we can observe the same way of thinking in Hesiod as in Pindar.⁶⁵ In a sense, Hesiod also precedes the ‘great moguls’ – Herodotus and Thucydides – who also had to rely on oral material but already had a critical approach to unverifiable tales.⁶⁶ Hesiod’s awareness of the past as it was did not make him a historian, but someone whom Rosenmeyer rightly called ‘a forerunner of historical perspective’.⁶⁷

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⁶³ Vansina 1985; see Thomas 1989: 3: ‘oral tradition in a wider sense provided most Greeks with a knowledge of their history’.

⁶⁴ This is the case with the tale of the five generations. As previously mentioned, the main reason Hesiod includes it in *Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι* is its instructive and explanatory nature, as well as its generalising meaning (cf. Fowler 2015: 196). Thus, to borrow Struck’s (2009: 26) term, it conveys ‘mythic truth’, as myths ‘contain nuggets of deep insight into the world and the human place in it’. However, there is no doubt that this myth contains an element of ‘historical’ understanding: a chronological scheme depicting the succession of generations from the ‘Golden Age’ to the narrator’s own times.

⁶⁵ The passage in Pindar’s *Nem.* 7 (see n. 55 above) remains, in fact, an outstanding example of early ‘historical’-like thinking. This can be seen alongside the work of early prose writers (*logographoi*), before historians (*syngrapheis*) began to question the poetic vision of the past. Note that the poet speaks of the ‘real’ adventures of the hero, implying that he is aware that they took place *differently* to how they are depicted in the song. However, this cannot be known, since the great achievements of times past can only be studied through *logoi* that are traditionally performed – thus poetically ornamented, exaggerated and distorted.

⁶⁶ See Rosenmeyer 1957. In the case of Thucydides, there is his splendid attempt to reconstruct the past without reaching – in part, however, let us note – to the myths, viz., in the times of Thucydides understood traditionally as tales of gods and heroes. This, of course, refers to the so-called ‘archaeology’, i.e., the most remote history of Greece (1.2– 19), see also 1.20.1, on $\tau\acute{\alpha}\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \omicron\upsilon\tilde{\nu}\ \pi\alpha\lambda\alpha\iota\acute{\alpha}\ \tau\omicron\iota\alpha\upsilon\tau\alpha\ \eta\tilde{\nu}\rho\omicron\nu$.

⁶⁷ Rosenmeyer 1957: 260.

In conclusion: as astonishing and intriguing as it is, Hesiod's poem about farming provides a bitter portrayal of life in central Greece at the beginning of the 7th century. It was a world dominated by *hybris*, which shaped people's characters and attitudes, and ultimately determined social relations. To illustrate this, the poet invokes stories from the past (myths), such as the tale of five generations of mankind and the fable of the hawk and the nightingale. For Hesiod, these stories are a tool for explaining why his present is so bleak. However, on this occasion, the Hesiodic narrator also offers rudimentary reflections on the past itself: despite the fact that bygone events could not be verified due to the traditional heroic tale form in which they were recounted, an undeniable achievement of the poet (and probably of many other singers of that period) was to conceive the past as an autonomous entity. Later, from the end of the 6th century onwards, this idea led to the criticism of 'myths', resulting in the rise of 'history'. But the first tentative step, as far as can be ascertained, was Hesiod's realisation that what is sung about the past is not necessarily true. This implies some authorial distance from the stories being told (and retold), while also revealing the writer's assumption that the past, or any past, really happened *in some way* that is not necessarily as oral *logoi* present it. Hesiod's experience as a singer must have been similar to that of many other *aoidoi*, who, by repeating songs about gods and heroes, 'revived' the past each time. This must therefore necessarily have been the subject of their reflections, and questions about whether the past looked as they sang about it must have arisen naturally. Many decades after Hesiod, growing doubts emerged among the Greeks regarding the reliability of their own *logoi*. Hecataeus of Miletus, along with other *λογοποιοί*, would revisit this topic. He would then be followed by *λογογράφος* Herodotus, who in turn would be carefully read by Thucydides, *ὁ συγγραφεύς*. These two towering thinkers of the 5th century were, and still are, rightly perceived as intellectual 'giants'. However, like any giant, they stood on the shoulders of their predecessors, including *Ἡσίοδος ὁ ποιητής*, as Thucydides called the poet (3.96.1).

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