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Making myths recognisable

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Making Myths Recognisable

People living in ancient Greece and Rome knew many myths. Some they heard while still children sitting at their mother's knee, some they learned from teachers as they grew older, some they listened to in public recitations at religious festivals or saw enacted in the theatre; only a very few did they read in books, and those not much before the end of the 5th century BC. Storytelling was largely an oral affair and each teller was free to vary and embellish the basic story as he or she saw fit.

But telling a story in words is very different from conveying it through images. Words can make clear at once who is doing what to whom and why. Images do not. Artists had to find other ways to ensure that their audience knew which myth they were illustrating and what characters were participating – in short, that the message they sent would be correctly received. Five main devices were employed to this end.

Labelling by Inscription

The simplest and most obvious method was to use inscriptions. Just as a verbal storyteller could begin by naming his subject and thus avoid confusion, so an artist could inscribe his work. We have already seen how inscriptions could clarify the subject on a Greek vase (Fig. 2) where



6. Hector and Andromache; Helen and Paris. Chalcidian black-figure krater, c. 540–530 BC, by the Inscription Painter. Martin von Wagner Museum, Würzburg.

the tragic victim of a human sacrifice could be identified as Polyxena because her name was written beside her.

The use of inscriptions could also lend poignancy to an otherwise uninteresting image, for instance, a Greek vase (Fig. 6) which shows a quiet scene, two couples to the left, a horseman with a second horse to the right. The vase is decorated in what is called the black-figure technique, the same technique as was used for the Polyxena vase (Fig. 2) and for Figure 5. The figures were painted on the unfired vase with a slip that turned black in the course of a three-stage firing process. Internal markings – eyes, hair, clothing, the manes of the horses, the feathers on the bird's wings, the legs of the youth sitting on the horse and other similar details – were incised into the wet slip. White slip made of a slightly different clay was often added, particularly for the flesh of women or to decorate something like a dress, a piece of armour or a shield. It did not adhere as well as the slip that turned black and has often flaked off. A purplish-red slip was also sometimes used to vary the otherwise austere colour scheme.

At first glance not much seems to be happening in Figure 6, but the fact that the artist has labelled the two men and the two women calls to mind one of the most moving books in the *Iliad*, Homer's epic poem dealing with the Trojan War. Greeks and Trojans, Homer recounted,

daily fought brutally outside the city walls, but occasionally the Trojans could dart inside to seize a brief moment with their families.

Hector, the Trojans' champion, is one of the most appealing heroes in the *Iliad*: a brave warrior, a tender husband and a loving father. In book 6 of the *Iliad*, Homer tells how he breaks off from the fighting in order to go into the city and ask his mother to make an offering to the goddess Athena. While there, he takes the opportunity to meet his wife, Andromache. He finds her standing on the walls anxiously looking out over the field of battle, and with her is their little son. Though they are full of foreboding, the love between Hector and Andromache is touchingly revealed.

On the vase (Fig. 6) Hector is shown in the very centre, armed with shield and spear and wearing a crested helmet. His name is written in front of him. He stands face to face with Andromache (her name inscribed behind her). The vase painter has caught something of the mood of trust and mutual affection portrayed in the Homeric epic. He conveys it by the way the two look directly into one another's eyes and the way Andromache, though modestly veiled, holds her cloak open to receive her husband.

In another book of the *Iliad* the Trojan prince Paris, younger brother of Hector, also takes a breather from the fighting. He wants to see Helen, the beautiful queen whom he abducted from Greece. Helen was the actual cause of the war, for the Greeks' whole purpose in besieging Troy was to recover her. Helen was at first charmed by Paris, but after years of living in Troy, she tired of him and began to long for her old home. The vase painter (Fig. 6) shows Paris (his name inscribed in front of him) holding a bow and eagerly addressing her, but Helen (at the far left, her name written behind her) wraps herself in her cloak and turns her head away from him. The contrasting relationships of the two couples, so vividly expressed in the poetry of the epic, is sensitively captured by the painter of the vase. But if we did not have the names inscribed, it would hardly be possible to relate the image to its probable Homeric inspiration.

The youth to the right, riding one horse and holding another, has the name Kebriones inscribed beside him. Kebriones was one of Hector's brothers, who, according to the *Iliad*, acted as his charioteer in an emergency. His presence here holding a spare horse ready for Hector hints at the war with its grim fighting which forms the background to this brief encounter of armed men with their besieged womenfolk.

Inscriptions are specific and (usually) unmistakable, but if they are unavailable, a second way of identifying particular figures is by means of attributes – special equipment carried or worn by individual gods or heroes.

Identification through Attributes

The hero Herakles was immensely popular and appears in countless images. Sometimes he is shown as young and beardless, at other times



7. Weary Herakles (Hercules Farnese). Roman marble copy (or adaptation) of a Greek statue made by Lysippos in the 4th century BC. Museo Nazionale, Naples.



8. Herakles riding in a chariot driven by Nike and drawn by centaurs. Attic red-figure oinochoe, c. 410–400 BC, by the Nikias Painter, Louvre, Paris. Copyright R. M. N.

as mature and bearded, but almost always he is shown with a lion skin and a club. Occasionally he also carries or uses a bow.

A huge and powerful statue (Fig. 7), which once decorated an impressive Roman imperial bath complex, depicts the weary hero leaning on his characteristic club, over which he has draped his lion skin. The Romans much admired Greek sculpture and often had copies made of particularly celebrated works. The Greek works were usually made of bronze and have since disappeared. Roman copies were frequently made of marble, and many of them have lasted better. The original model for this statue was probably a bronze made by the famous 4th-century BC sculptor Lysippos. He sympathetically showed the muscular hero in a very human light, tired out by his seemingly endless labours. Herakles' right hand is behind his back, and in it he holds the golden apples of the Hesperides. Obtaining these apples was the last of the many gruelling tasks imposed on the hero, and the toll it has taken on him is indicated by his obvious exhaustion.

Herakles was admired, but he could also be the butt of jokes. Comic portrayals of the hero exist in literature and also in art. On a Greek vase of the 5th century BC (Fig. 8) he is caricatured as a fierce-looking brute, but nevertheless he is still easily recognisable, as he is wearing his lion skin, carrying his club and is even equipped with his bow. He stands in a chariot driven by Nike, the goddess of victory,

recognisable by her wings and long robe, but here also teasingly mocked, caricatured as a snub-nosed urchin driving a chariot pulled by a team of grumpy centaurs, mythical creatures that are part man and part horse.

This vase is painted in the red-figure technique, as was Figure 3. Whereas the black-figure technique was in vogue in the 6th century BC, red-figure developed about 530 BC and was favoured in the 5th and 4th centuries BC despite the fact that it was in some ways more awkward for the vase painter. Instead of painting the figures in slip that turned black, the painter left the figures in the natural reddish colour of the clay and blacked in the background instead. He therefore had to think about his image indirectly, that is, to remember that the figures were the part of the vase that he was *not* painting. But there were compensations: instead of having to incise internal markings with a sharp tool, he could now draw them in black with a fluid brush. This made for a whole new range of possibilities and led to the development of much more naturalistic images.

Characterisation by Means of a Strangely Formed Adversary

A third way of specifying a myth is by portraying a hero confronting a unique and peculiar adversary. Almost any sort of unnatural creature can serve, whether a many-bodied snake, a human-headed bird or a bull-headed man.

Only one bull-headed man is known to mythology, the unfortunate Minotaur. The product of mismating between the queen of Crete and a very attractive bull, he was considered something of a disgrace to the royal family and so was sequestered in the centre of a labyrinth designed, according to the myth, especially to accommodate him. His uncouth appetite for girls and boys from Athens eventually led to his demise, as the youthful hero Theseus once accompanied the doomed young people who were intended as Minotaur fodder and killed the beast instead.

On a Greek black-figure cup (Fig. 9) the impending end of the Minotaur is illustrated as Theseus, to the left, holds the monster by one horn and prepares to run him through with his sword. The Minotaur, with his bull's head and hairy body indicated by many small incisions, looks more frightened than frightening, grasping Theseus' sword with



9. Theseus and the Minotaur. Attic black-figure cup, c. 550–540 BC, signed by Archikles and Glaukytes. Antikensammlungen, Munich.

one hand in an effort to turn the blow aside, but at the same time prudently trying to escape.

As the Minotaur is unique in his form and is known to have been dispatched by Theseus, the names that are inscribed around the figures are not necessary for the understanding of the story, but the letters do serve to fill up spaces which might otherwise seem rather empty.

Clues Provided by Normal Elements Abnormally Combined

A fourth way to ensure that a myth is unmistakable is to portray a strikingly unusual situation. The elements need not in themselves be anything other than everyday, but the way they are put together must have something special about it. Thus sheep are perfectly familiar animals and men may have nothing odd about them, but to see a man *riding* a sheep is enough to give a hint that a myth is being represented, and to see a man riding *upside-down* beneath a sheep, as on Figure 10, makes it clear that something quite out of the ordinary is going on.

The man in this case is Odysseus, the long-suffering hero of Homer's *Odyssey*. He might be recognised by his traveller's hat (a *pilos*), which became something of a trademark, but his situation is actually very much more revealing. The reason for his peculiar position is the following.

When Odysseus and his companions strayed into the cave of the gigantic, one-eyed Cyclops Polyphemus, the cave was empty. They waited. When the huge owner returned with his flocks and meticulously closed the mouth of the cave with an enormous boulder, too large and too heavy

for any men to move, they began to be alarmed. Now they were trapped in the cave. Their alarm increased when the Cyclops discovered them and found them interesting – not just to talk to, but also to eat. He devoured two men before bed, and two more the next morning. He then took his flocks out to pasture, but secured the mouth of the cave with the enormous boulder, preventing the remainder of the men from escaping. Odysseus feared that the Cyclops' newly discovered taste for men's flesh was becoming something of a habit and tried to think up some way he could escape and save what was left of his companions. This did not prove easy. The main problem was the boulder at the mouth of the cave. The men could not move it themselves; only the huge Cyclops could shift it. Thus if Polyphemus were killed, the men would never manage to get out. Odysseus finally decided that the best thing would be to intoxicate the monster and then poke out his eye (the Cyclops had, after all, only one) and hope that eventually, even when blind, the Cyclops would remove the boulder himself to let his flocks out.

All went according to plan, but when the enraged and blinded Cyclops finally did move the boulder to let the hungry sheep out to pasture, he was understandably reluctant to allow the men who had injured him go free. He sat by the entrance of the cave running his fingers over the backs of the sheep and in between them to ensure that no men could escape. Odysseus had thought of that. He tied each man up *under* the bellies of three sheep grouped together and finally himself clung on under the belly of the biggest ram. And that, of course, is what is represented in the Roman statue (Fig. 10).

The image is extraordinarily unconvincing. Odysseus' back rests on a block of stone beneath him. This was necessary because in a marble statue the weight of the sheep's belly and Odysseus beneath it could not possibly be supported on the four slender legs of the sheep. Marble has little tensile strength and heavy horizontal elements need substantial vertical supports.

Odysseus' escape could, however, have been quite elegantly represented in three-dimensional form by a statue made of bronze. Bronze has great tensile strength, and so even slight supports are often sufficient to hold up quite complex and extended forms. A bronze sheep could easily stand on its four legs, even with a figure of Odysseus clinging to its belly, without needing further support. It is possible that an image in bronze inspired this clumsy adaptation suitable for execution in marble.



10. Odysseus escaping from Polyphemus' cave. Roman marble statue, 1st century AD. Palazzo Doria Pamfili, Rome. Photo Alinari.

When it was new, the marble statue was painted. This must have made it much livelier, clearly distinguishing man from sheep, clothing from naked flesh, and disguising the supporting block by coating it in a dark colour so that it would look as if Odysseus was actually clinging on to the sheep unsupported by anything below him. One can understand the temptation to create such a statue, as this single image concisely and unmistakably conveys the myth. Vase painters often produced variations on this theme, either depicting Odysseus in isolation (as here) or a whole series of men under sheep, occasionally escaping under the unseeing eye of the Cyclops.

Clarification through Context within a Mythological Cycle

Finally, a fifth way of ensuring that the illustration of a myth is unambiguous is by showing it in a context that makes its identity clear. For instance, both Herakles and Theseus had violent encounters with a monstrous bull, and both were portrayed capturing it. Sometimes it is difficult to tell which hero is intended, especially if there are no inscriptions or distinguishing attributes. The problem is solved, however, if the bull episode is represented in the context of other deeds of one or other of the heroes.

11. The deeds of Theseus. Attic red-figure cup, c. 440–430 BC, by the Codrus Painter. British Museum, London.



Theseus, whose bold slaying of the Minotaur we saw in Figure 9, also performed a number of other heroic deeds (Fig. 11). Though the son of an Athenian king, Theseus was born and grew up in the Peloponnese. When he reached maturity he went to Athens to meet his father. At the time most people made the journey from the Peloponnese to Athens by sea, as the land route was infested with bandits and wild animals. Theseus, however, to prove himself a hero and worthy to be acknowledged as the son of his royal father, chose to follow the land route and to clear it of the troublesome hazards.

The centre of the red-figure cup (Fig. 11) shows Theseus' later triumph over the Minotaur, as he drags the dead body of the monster out of the labyrinth in which it had been confined. Circling round the centre are shown the various cruel men and beasts that confronted Theseus and the methods he used to defeat them. Whenever possible he inflicted their own crimes on the perpetrators. Thus (at the top) he wrestles with Kerkyon, whose practice had been to wrestle strangers to death. Next, reading clockwise, (at two o'clock) he adjusts Procrustes' anatomy to fit his bed more neatly by lopping off superfluous limbs with an axe; this had been Procrustes' own wicked procedure. Then (at four o'clock) he sends Skiron tumbling down a cliff to be devoured by

a turtle below; Skiron had previously required all travellers to wash his feet and then kicked them over the cliff – a tasty morsel for the turtle. Next (at eight o'clock, skipping six o'clock for the moment) he attaches Sinis to a tree temporarily bent over for the purpose, just as Sinis used to do to passersby; and finally (at ten o'clock) he kills the sow that had been attacking people and damaging crops in the neighbourhood of Krommyon.

After he reached Athens, Theseus volunteered to capture the bull that was devastating the area around Marathon (inserted at six o'clock), and for this act he employed a club, one rather thinner than that habitually used by Herakles, but still an attribute that might cause confusion between the heroes, were it not that this deed of Theseus' is firmly set within the context of his other deeds.

The ever-popular Herakles (Figs. 7 and 8) was also involved in numerous adventures. Twelve of them were assembled to decorate the twelve metopes (rectangular panels in the Doric order of architecture, see Fig. 66) over the porches of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia (Fig. 12). The first six of these labours took place in the northern Peloponnese, near Olympia itself. These required Herakles to kill the lion of Nemea, which was invulnerable to weapons (1); dispatch the many-headed hydra of Lerna, which had the awkward habit of growing two heads to replace any one that was severed (2); to kill, or at least drive away, the aggressive and savage birds that haunted Lake Stymphalus (3); to capture the Kerynitian hind that he had to chase for a full year (5); to bring the Erymanthian boar alive to Eurystheus (the king who ordered Herakles to perform these twelve labours) (7); and finally to clean out the filthy Augean stables in a single day (12). The next four labours took Herakles to the four corners of the world, to the south to capture the Cretan bull (4), to the east to obtain the Amazon's girdle (6), to the north to capture some man-eating horses (8), and to the west to rustle the cattle owned by triple-bodied Geryon (9). Finally, the last two labours took Herakles beyond the confines of mortality – to bring Cerberus, the guard dog of the Underworld, to Eurystheus (11), and to obtain the golden apples of immortality, the apples of the Hesperides (10) (cf. Fig. 7).

This group of labours, supposedly all ordered by King Eurystheus, eventually became canonic, appearing together in literature and as a set on Roman sarcophagi and mosaics. Before they were assembled at Olympia these adventures had very different histories. Some of them appeared early (like the hydra), others later – the labour of the Augean



1. Lion



2. Hydra



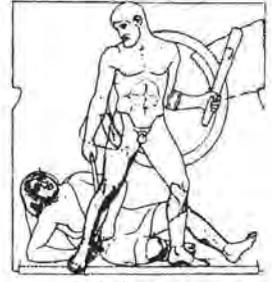
3. Birds



4. Bull



5. Hind



6. Amazon



7. Boar



8. Horses



9. Geryon



10. Apples



11. Cerberus



12. Stables

12. The labours of Herakles. Reconstruction drawing of the metopes over the porches of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, 465-457 BC.

stables makes its first preserved appearance here on the metopes at Olympia. Some were more popular than others, the killing of the Nemean lion being the most popular of all (see also Figs. 13, 14, and 15). As the lion was invulnerable, swords, arrows and spears had no effect on it. In the end Herakles, after a terrible struggle, strangled it with his bare hands and then skinned it with its own claws, which could cut through anything, even its otherwise invulnerable hide. Herakles thenceforth either carried or wore the lion's skin.

Some of Herakles' opponents are sufficiently distinctive to make them instantly recognisable, for instance the many-headed snake-like hydra and the triple-bodied Geryon. Others are frequently shown in a conventional schema – for instance, Herakles holding the boar aloft and threatening Eurystheus, who cowers in a large storage jar which he hopes will afford him protection, or Herakles kneeling on the back of the hind. Some have little that is distinctive about them but can be recognised because they are part of a series of illustrations of Herakles' labours. Thus although both Herakles and Theseus captured a bull (Figs. 11 and 12), no one but Theseus could be represented on Figure 11 in the context of those other unmistakably Thesean deeds, while it is certain that Herakles is the hero on the Olympia metopes. Distinguishing two heroes who both use a club and are both involved with capturing a bull is however not always so easy.

All the clues and devices enumerated in this chapter are helpful, but none can be relied on absolutely, as we shall see.