Bibliography of Classical Folklore Scholarship: Myths, Legends, and Popular Beliefs of Ancient Greece and Rome

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Introduction

Ancient Greek and Roman literature contains rich troves of folklore and popular beliefs, many of which have counterparts in modern contemporary legends. For a number of reasons, today's folklorists are generally unaware that valuable primary source material from antiquity exists in English translation (for a wide selection of Greek and Latin literature in translation, see the Loeb Classical Library volumes in any good library). Classical scholars have published numerous studies of legends, myths and folklore from antiquity, yet their work remains generally unknown to folklore scholars. And for their part, most classicists have no idea that analogues of what they consider to be tales confined to the ancient Greco-Roman world still circulate today.

Both disciplines would reap benefits if they renewed their acquaintance. (The estrangement between classics and folklore since the 1920s is discussed in William Hansen's insightful essay of 1997, "Mythology and Folktales Typology: Chronicle of a Failed Scholarly Revolution," in Journal of Folklore Research 34; see also the interview in Folklore Forum 29 [1998]:91–108, esp. 101–3).

The lack of communication between classicists and folklorists is manifested in the dearth of classical examples in folklore motif indexes and reflected in the lack of classical scholarship in the most up-to-date folklore bibliographies. In Contemporary Legend: A Folklore Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1993), for example, Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith annotated 1,116 publications from ten countries and in eight languages, drawing together international legends from a "very wide range of material ... in many different sorts of communication-modes and over a surprisingly long time-span." The compilers expressed surprise that analogues of :modern contemporary legends existed "as long ago" as the sixteenth century (p. xvii).
As a classical folklorist, I was dismayed to find only three entries representing legends from antiquity in the Contemporary Legend Bibliography. Those three—Raymond Himelick’s 1946 note on the "Poisoned Dress" in ancient Greek legend, Bill Ellis’s 1983 article on the ancient Roman roots of the "Blood Libel" legend, and my 1991 note on classical Greek parallels of a Gulf War legend—were published in folklore journals, which accounts for their inclusion. When I contacted Bennett and Smith about classical folklore’s regrettably low profile, they, encouraged me to gather this list of classical legend publications of interest to the folklore/contemporary legend community. This bibliography of classical folklore scholarship is not intended to be exhaustive, of course, but it does demonstrate the wide variety of sources and commentaries available on ancient myth and popular lore. I hope that this list will encourage a new and creative dialogue between those who study legends and beliefs that were current in the ancient world and those who investigate recurrent legends of the present day.

Traditionally, most ancient folk material has appeared in publications directed toward antiquarians. In 1994, however, John Miles Foley noted a "burgeoning of scholarly activity in ancient Greek studies" with "direct relevance for folklorists" in his review essay of six exemplary classical books for the Journal of American Folklore. A small group of scholars who define themselves as classical folklorists are making an effort to communicate with colleagues in folklore by publishing their findings in folklore-oriented journals as well as classical venues. Classical folklore goes by many aliases: popular literature, oral tales, folk tale, myth, novel, paradoxography, and recurrent, international, or migratory legends. The problem of clear terminology—whether "contemporary" can refer to tales that circulated in past societies—is unresolved. The difficulty of identifying a recognised field of classical legend studies is compounded by the negative perceptions of "popular folklore" among traditional classicists and ancient historians, many of whom would be surprised to find themselves cited here. The lack of a motif or theme index for classical mythology and folklore is another serious drawback to comparative study of ancient material. I can report, however, that in June 1999 an international group of classical scholars, folklorists, and others such as art historians, met at the Norwegian Institute at Greece to discuss the creation of a
Motif Index of Classical Antiquity, modelled on motif indexes published by folklorists.

This annotated bibliography was compiled in consultation with classical folklorists and scholars of ancient literature, religion, magic and history. The list of more than 150 publications embraces a broad range of classical legend methodologies and material. (A few highly recommended entries that I have not seen appear without annotation.) I concentrate on recent works in English, but pioneers, old standards, and unique texts (such as Calame, Hartland, Jedrkiewicz, Oesterley, Rose) are included, along with previous bibliographies (Carnes, McCartney, Perry, Scobie). A few classical legend studies have been reviewed in folklore journals (for example, Carnes, Wiseman, Hansen, Gantz, Gardner, Reece) and the Journal of Folklore Research devoted an issue to classical folklore in 1983 (vol. 23:2/3). Some new translations and commentaries of ancient writings are veritable treasuries of ancient popular beliefs (Hansen, Stem, Temple). For non-classicists who want to work with classical lore, the previously mentioned Loeb volumes, and the encyclopaedic works by Gantz and Rose are indispensable. (I also recommend the 1993 Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 2 vols, and the Oxford Classical Dictionary, 3rd edn.) William Hansen's book in progress on more than one hundred international oral tales with parallels in ancient Greek and Roman literature will be a landmark in classical folklore (see later).

Anyone interested in the stories that circulated in ancient Greece and Rome, either in their historical and narrative context or in comparison with modern lore, will find here a fine array of primary and secondary sources under-utilised by most students of international or migratory legends. Studies that explicitly compare motifs and meanings of ancient and modern beliefs and tales (for example, Dodds, Dundes, Ellis, Felton, Hansen, Lawrence, Levine, Leavy, Mayor, Panofsky, Payne, Penzer, and Sobol) are of special interest to contemporary legend scholars. Classical folklorists have analysed the meaning of UFOs in ancient Rome, prototypical vampire tales, voodoo dolls, "Poison Dresses" in ancient Greek myths, a "Choking Doberman" urban legend in the late Roman empire, the earliest recorded ghost stories, Swan Maidens as "runaway brides," Greek epics in modern comics and science fiction, ancient "ouija boards," and rumours of flexible glass as an "Improved Product" legend in ancient Rome. I hope that these
examples will stimulate fellow folklorists to search out the ancient parallels of what may appear to be newly emergent urban legends, and invite them to delve into ancient folklore for its own sake.

I would like to thank Bob Daniel, Lowell Edmunds, Christopher Faraone, Debbie Felton, Bill Hansen, Stefano Jedrkiwicz, Sarah Iles Johnston, David Jordan, Larry Kim, Henrik Lassen, and Liz Locke for valuable suggestions.

The Bibliography


Bergman, Charles. Orion's Legacy: A Cultural History of Man as Hunter. New York: Penguin, 1997. Explores male hunting traditions since antiquity, using Orion (the great hunter of Greek myth) as the central metaphor. Drawing on narratives of legendary hunters from antiquity (Nimrod, Gilgamesh, Orion, Heracles), the Middle Ages, and modern times (Daniel Boone, Hemingway), Bergman shows how the experience and imagery of hunting permeates male sexuality and helps explain stalking, rape, and murder.


Braginston, Mary V. The Supernatural in Seneca's Tragedies. Menasha, WI: George Banta, 1933. Surveys ghosts and sensational occult phenomena on the Roman stage in the time of Nero (first century AD).


1,500 works, from traditional Aesopica to Sumerian animal tales and modern fabulists such as James Thurber. Carnes includes three indexes: the first contains names and topics; the second is keyed to the Greco–Roman fable texts found in Perry (see later); and the third covers tale–types.

Carrubba, Robert W. "Englebert Kaempfer and the Myth of the Scythian Lamb." Classical World 87 (1993):417. The fabled "vegetable–lamb" believed in the Middle Ages to grow in Central Asia is shown to have roots in classical Greek texts. Argues that tale of the fur–bearing plant was a garbled description of the unfamiliar cotton plant.


Daniel, Robert W. and Franco Maltomini. Papyrologica Coloniensia XVI. Vols 1–2, Supplementum Magicum. Opladen, 1990–2. English translations of one hundred magical papyri from ancient Egypt, with commentaries and full indexes. The subject index makes these
protective charms and magical spells accessible to folklorists interested in occult practices by ordinary people in antiquity.


Edmunds, Lowell. "Thucydides on Monosandalism." In Studies Presented to Sterling Dow. 71–5. Durham, NC: Duke University, 1984. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides reported that a party of Athenians made a daring escape across a Spartan blockade in 428 BC; each man had only his left foot shod. The historian's explanation, that this was to avoid slipping in the mud, has gone unquestioned by classicists, but Edmunds marshals evidence to show the religious significance of monosandalism: gods and mythical heroes are often depicted with only one sandal.


Felton, D. "The Motif of `Enigmatic Counsel' in Greek and Roman Texts." Phoenix, 1998. Examines the motif of Enigmatic Counsel (H599.5) in Greek, Roman, and rabbinic tales. The earliest motif occurs in the fifth-century BC historian Herodotus, when a Greek tyrant is advised to cut down prominent stalks of wheat. Later versions appeared in Livy, Ovid, the Midrash, and the Talmud. Felton argues that the motif was employed as political criticism of tyranny.


Felton, D. "Folkloric Anomalies in a Scene from the `Mostellaria.'" Quaderni Urbanati di Cultura Classica, 1999. A haunted house tale in a Roman comic play by Plautus can be traced to Greek traditions of the third century BC. Felton, a classical folklorist, shows how
Plautus deviates from the expected narrative sequence for comic effect.


archaeological approaches; he sees the tale as "an echo" of earlier Near Eastern myths now lost.


Gardner, Jane F. Roman Myths. Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1993. Intended to introduce readers to Roman "reshapings" of traditional Greek myths to fit ancient Roman culture; also contemporary "urban legends" that circulated during the Roman republic and empire.


Hansen, William. "Verbal Folklore of Ancient Greece." Journal of Folklore Research 20 (1983): 97–9. This essay introduces the journal's special issue on classical folklore, including Hansen on the impact of nineteenth-century folkloristics on the classical discipline; Fontenrose on riddles, tasks, and predictions in ancient oracles; Russo on ancient Greek proverbs and folktales; and Hague on ancient wedding songs.


BC Greece, Hansen shows how context reveals the storytellers' motives.


Hansen, William. "The Stuck Couple in Ancient Greece." FOAFtale News 36 (January 1995):2–3. Compares a recent African news story about a man who cast a spell to magically bind his wife to her lover during sex to the ancient anecdote in Homer's Odyssey about the gods Aphrodite and Ares, who were trapped by the god Hephaestus, the wronged husband.


Hansen, William, ed. Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998. Argues that popular literature, a genre now associated with the printing press and tabloids, existed in classical antiquity, especially after the first century AD. Hansen, a classical folklorist, seeks to rescue such literature from marginalisation; this compilation includes romantic and comic novels, fables and wisdom literature, ancient jokes, and popular gravestone verses.

ancient Greek and Roman literature. The most extensive investigation ever undertaken of contemporary folklore in classical literature.

Hartland, E. S. Mythology and Folktales: Their Relation and Interpretation. London: David Nutt, 1900. Argues that folktales originated from a body of believed myths, and that their character of "playful fiction" was a later development.


in part from oral traditions of stories about unconventional "wise men." Aesopic fables evolved as literary and folkloric forms.

Jedrkiewicz, Stefano. "The Last Champion of Play-Wisdom: Aesop." In Itaca-Quaderns Catalans de Cultura Clasica 6, 7, 8 (1990–92):115–30. Argues that in the Hellenistic and Imperial period of Greco-Roman culture, the storyteller Aesop came to represent popular wisdom as opposed to established, "scientific" knowledge.

Jedrkiewicz, Stefano. Il convitato sullo sgabello: Plutarco, Esopo ed i Sette Savi. Rome: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1997. Studies examples of popular wisdom in Plutarch and Aesop, such as fable, proverb, and riddle, as ancillary wisdom necessary to practical knowledge in antiquity.


Johnston, Sarah Iles. Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1999. Studies ancient Greek ideas of the dead influencing the living (including ghost stories) and the living affecting the dead (e.g. through rituals). Topics include the
angry dead, professionals who mediate between the living and dead, and the demonisation of the dead.


Klotsche, Ernest Heinrich. "The Supernatural in the Tragedies of Euripides as Illustrated in Prayers, Curses, Oaths, Oracles, Prophecies, Dreams, and Visions." University Studies of the University of Nebraska 18 (1918):55–106. Magical and paranormal phenomena as portrayed on the Athenian stage in the fifth century BC.


Kronenberg, Andreas. "The Fountain of the Sun: A Tale Related by Herodotus, Pliny, and the Modern Teda." Man 55 (May 1955):74. A current legend about a boiling spring told by a tribe in Libya is identical to a story about the same oasis recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BC and the Roman natural historian Pliny in the first century AD.

Lassen, Henrik R. "The Idea of Narrative--The Theory and Practice of Analyzing Narrative Types, and Legends of Suppressed Inventions." PhD dissertation, Odense University, Denmark, 1998. Chapters 5 and 6 present a detailed tracing of the Improved Product tale type, beginning with examples from first-century AD Rome,
through medieval, and culminating in late twentieth-century versions.

Lassen, Henrik R. "The Improved Product: A Philological Investigation of a Contemporary Legend." Contemporary Legend 5 [1995]:1–37. Applies a diachronic approach to legends about impossible, or "too good to be true" inventions. The earliest examples of the Improved Product appeared in imperial Rome, in claims of flexible glass. The genre continues today in tales of perpetual light bulbs, ever sharp razors, cars that run without gas, disks that clean laundry without soap, etc.


Leavy, Barbara Fass. In Search for the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender. New York: New York University Press, 1994. Study of the legendary "swan maiden," an otherworldly female who is obliged to marry a mortal man, keep his house, and bear his children, because he has appropriated something she owns. When she regains the item, she escapes to her supernatural domain. Comparing numerous versions, Leavy argues that the "runaway wife" theme resurfaces in popular culture as an outlet for feminist rage.

Leinweber discusses the development of beliefs about sorcerers and female vampires (lamiae) in Greek and Roman texts through Apuleius and shows how they prefigured modern witchcraft and vampire legends.


Littleton, C. Scott and Linda A. Malcor. From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail. New York: Garland, 1994. On the basis of linguistic, historical, literary, and archaeological evidence, the authors propose that the sword-hero lore at the core of medieval Arthurian legend originated among a group of Alan/Sarmatian soldiers from the Caucasus who settled in ancient Britain during the Roman occupation.


Mayor, Adrienne. "Ambiguous Guardians: The `Omen of the Wolves' (AD 402) and the `Choking Doberman' (1980s)." Journal of Folklore Research 29 (1992):255–68. Using a comparative and contextual approach, Mayor analyses a rumour that aroused fear during the collapse of the Roman empire. An encounter between the emperor and wolves was taken as a bad omen despite official reassurances, a familiar contemporary legend dynamic. The ancient Latin narrative parallels the modern urban legend of the "Choking Doberman."

Mayor, Adrienne. "Libation Titillation: Wine Goblets and Women's Breasts." Journal of Popular Culture 16 (April 1994):61–71. Traces the modern trope of comparing wine glasses to women's bosoms to the earliest known instance, recounted by Pliny in the first century AD, in which a bronze wine-cup was supposedly cast in the form of Helen of Troy's breast.

geological evidence for the classical griffin legend. Close readings of Greek and Roman descriptions suggest that the image of the griffin originated in ancient observations of dinosaur fossils by gold-mining nomads of central Asia in the seventh century BC.

Mayor, Adrienne. "Mad Honey!" Archaeology (November–December 1995):32–40. Legends and facts about toxic honey from classical antiquity to the present. Suggests that intoxicating nectar may have inspired the mantic states of maenads and the Delphic oracle in ancient Greece.


Mayor, Adrienne. "Fiery Finery." Archaeology (March–April 1997):55–8. Traces the Poison Garment motif in classical Greco-Roman literature. A specially treated combustible cloak was a lethal weapon of revenge in myth, drama, and history. Mayor argues that knowledge of volatile substances used in textiles and warfare influenced ancient narratives of flammable clothing.


Mayor, Adrienne and Michael Heaney. "What Were the Griffins? Who Were the Arimaspeans?" Folklore 104 (1993) and 40–66. Mayor argues that the classical Greco–Roman griffin legend was inspired by descriptions of beaked quadruped dinosaur fossils in gold deposits of Central Asia. Heaney marshals linguistic evidence for the continuity of the ancient Arimaspean legends of Scythia in the Almas (a Yeti–type figure) of modern Mongolia.


McCartney, Eugene S. "A Bibliography of Collections of Greek and Roman Folklore." Classical Weekly 40.13 (1947):99–101. An index of classical folklore studies and sources up to 1947, compiled by a classicist; particularly useful for its list of annotated editions of ancient authors "who preserved rich stores of folklore material." This list is supplemented by Crum; see earlier.


considers the sources and transmission of oral folk narratives in Asia and Africa collected by the fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus.

Nagy, Gregory. Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Applying comparative evidence of oral traditions to Homeric epic, Nagy traces the ways that oral poetry recreates ever new variations of the "same" stories until old tales are crystallised in written texts. Nagy argues that a song cannot be fixed as a final written text as long as the oral poetic tradition stays alive.


Pecere, Oronzo and Antonio Stramaglia, eds. La letteratura di consumo nel mondo Greco–Latino [Popular literature from Greco–Roman world]. Cassino, Italy: University degli Studi di Cassino, 1996. Papers from an international conference on ancient popular literature: two essays in English treat the Aesop romance (a comic biography) and survey ancient compilations of marvels, ancient predecessors of Ripley's Believe It or Not.


Perry, Ben E. Aesopica: A Series of Texts Relating to Aesop or Ascribed to Him. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1952. A valuable collection of the ancient evidence about Aesop the person and the Aesopic fable, including one text of every Greek or Latin fable in the Aesopic tradition, making this a virtual type–index of the Greco–Roman fable.


elements of the type–scene, e.g. "dog at the door," "identification," "feast," "guest–gifts," "departure libation."

Roller, Lynn. "The Legend of Midas." Classical Antiquity 2 (1983):299–313. Fascinating consideration of the historical and archaeological evidence for the Greco–Roman legend of Midas (of the golden touch and the ass's ears). Midas was a ruler of Phrygia (now Turkey) in the eighth century BC; Roller shows how the Midas traditions about greed and wealth served different purpose for Greek audiences over the centuries.

Romm, James. The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. Focuses on ancient Greek and Roman traditions about exotic cultures as a literary genre. Many classical "wonder–tales" about "barbarians" contain familiar folklore motifs and themes that survived into Renaissance Europe. Good source for contemporary legends that circulated among Greeks and Romans; the ancient writers also preserved fragments and hints of beliefs that circulated within Africa and Asia as retold by Mediterranean travellers.

Rose, H. J. Handbook of Greek Mythology. London: Methuen, 1928. Standard survey of ancient Greek myth and legend. Once revolutionary, Rose is sometimes contradictory and lacks historical accounts, comic tales, and fables, but the handbook is still a valuable tool.


Sifakis, G. M. "The Structure of Aristophanic Comedy." Journal of Hellenic Studies 112 (1992):123–39. The final section of this paper by a classicist compares the use of folklore in ancient Greek comedy to narrative strategies in European folk tales, especially in
the way ordinary characters are allowed to consummate "wishful thinking." Sifakis concludes, however, that distinctions between legend and myth are useless in pre-Christian cultures and denies that folk belief existed apart from religious myth in ancient Greece.


Stern, Jacob, trans, and comm. Palaephatus: On Unbelievable Tales. Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy–Carducci, 1996. First English translation of a fourth-century BC student of Aristotle who attempted to rationalise Greek myths of heroes and monsters; includes the original Greek text. Palaephatus sought kernels of truth in fantastic ancient tales of winged horses, dragons, Pandora's box, sea monsters, Amazons, the Sphinx, etc.

Stoneman, Richard, trans, and ed. Legends of Alexander the Great. London: J. M. Dent, 1994. A comprehensive collection of legends of late antiquity and the Middle Ages surrounding the historical figure of Alexander the Great, with notes and appendices. Legends include Alexander's battles with monsters, conversion to Judaism, voyage to heaven, etc.

Terpening, Ronnie H. Charon and the Crossing: Ancient, Medieval, and Renaissance Transformations of a Myth. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985. Traces the folk theme of an afterlife voyage by boat, using literary history, structuralism, and aesthetic criticism. The attributes of the ferryman Charon vary as the tradition was adapted over time.


Versnel, H. S. "Polycrates and His Ring." Studi Storico-Religiosi 1 (1977):17–46. Argues that previous comparative scholarship on the tale of valuables lost at sea which are later recovered inside fish, first recounted by Herodotus in the fifth century BC, neglects the ancient Greek context and meanings, which enhance the story's tragic impact.


Vitaliano, Dorothy B. Legends of the Earth: Their Geologic Origins. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973. Vitaliano, a geologist, invented the term "geomyth" for tales that attempt to explain volcanoes, earthquakes, disastrous floods, and other geological events. Discussions of the Greek myths of Deucalion's Deluge and Atlantis; many other international examples of geomyths are given.


Wiseman, T. P. Remus: A Roman Legend Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. A provocative explication of all the variants of Rome's foundation myth, in which the twins Romulus and Remus
were nursed by a wolf. Wiseman explains the political and psychological reasons for Romulus's murder of his twin Remus at the moment of the city's founding, and suggests that human sacrifice ritual lay behind the legend. This insightful book historicises the story's origin and development in a non-literate society.

Wittman, Richard G. "Flying Saucers or Shields." Classical Journal 63 (1968):221–6. Fascinating study of unusual celestial phenomena observed in ancient Rome. Wittman finds striking similarities between the sky-watching Romans and modern UFO believers. Fiery "columns" and "shields" correlate with today's cigar-shaped and saucer-like UFOs, but even more telling is the way both groups interpret their observations, as reflections of tension on earth and as portents for the future.

Biographical Note

Adrienne Mayor is an independent folklorist specialising in natural history and legend. Her articles have appeared in Archaeology, Folklore, Journal of American Folklore and Journal of Folklore Research. She is the author of The First Fossil Hunters: Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times (Princeton University Press, 2000).

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