

# Chapter One

## THE KNIFE DID IT

### *Definitions and Characteristics for the Study of Myth*

This chapter introduces definitions and concepts necessary for the exploration of Greek myth. Myth is not easy to define, and there is no definition which would receive universal approval, but an approximate definition is presented in Section I. Section II continues with a few characteristics of Greek myth not covered by the definition, including time in Greek myth, and the interconnected web of stories which make up the mythic tradition. Section III asks if the Greek themselves had a concept of Greek Myth. Sections IV and V introduce an important distinction between Panhellenic myths – myths which were widely known throughout the Greek world – and local myths – myths which were of primary interest to those resident in a particular city or region of Greece. Section IV uses the myth of the abduction of Persephone as an example of Panhellenic myth, and Section V presents the story of the Athenian festival of the Bouphonia as an example of local myth.

#### I. WHAT IS A MYTH?

It is easy to give examples of Greek myths – the Abduction of Persephone, for instance, or the Labors of Herakles – but surprisingly difficult to say exactly what a Greek myth is. Scholars generally agree that myth is a slippery category. According to G. S. Kirk, “There is no one definition of myth” (1970: 7). Walter Burkert asks, “What is myth?”, and he answers, “A simple definition will not do” (1979: 1). Eric Csapo warns that “Definition is never the innocent first step in a process of empirical discovery . . .; it is rather always the final precipitate of an already elaborate theory”, and he continues, “If I begin with a discussion of the problems of defining myth, it is to urge suspicion” (2005: 1). Despite these warnings, it seems appropriate to attempt a provisional definition, so that the reader will have an idea of what will count as a Greek myth in this book, and then to indicate some of the problems such a definition may raise.

As an approximate definition, then, *a myth is a traditional story that speaks to important issues in the culture in which it is told*. This definition is not perfect, as further discussion will show, but it marks off at least a central area that everyone would consider myth. This definition should not be used too rigidly, however; the edges of the category are fuzzy, and myths that are atypical by this definition should not be excluded from consideration.

According to this definition a myth is a story, that is, a connected account of a series of events and actions, a narrative. Thus a character is not a myth: Herakles, for example, is not a mythic character until he takes part in some mythic story. Some theorists of myth, particularly the psychologist Carl Jung and his followers, have been particularly interested in so-called archetypal characters, such as the Hero or the Divine Child. According to the definition of myth used here, these archetypal characters are not in themselves myths, and they are part of the study of myth only insofar as they can be found in the kinds of stories called myths.

There are, however, a few myths that do not seem to be narratives, strictly speaking. One of the most important is the Myth of the Five Ages in Hesiod's *Works and Days*. According to this myth, the world has gone through a succession of Ages: the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, the Age of Heroes, and the Iron Age. There are no characters here and really no events, just a series of descriptions. This account, as well as some parts of Hesiod's *Theogony* that are not narrative, have been called myths for so long that it would seem perverse not to include them in the category. Nonetheless, they are not typical of myth simply because they are not stories, and it is worthwhile making some kind of distinction, whether they are included or not.

Myths, according to the proposed definition, are traditional, that is, they are told and retold, and they can change in the process of retelling. There is no such thing as the only correct version of a myth. In this regard, myth is fundamentally different from most other kinds of literature (if we can count myth as a kind of literature at all). Most literary scholarship depends on a particular text by a particular author. Scholars studying Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* will want to have exactly the words that Austen wrote, and their interpretations will work from this text. Sometimes there is no single correct literary text, if, say, the writer wrote more than one version (as there are two versions of many of the novels of Henry James) or because the text was produced in more than one version (as many of the plays of Shakespeare were printed in more than one version). But still the ideal of a single correct text lies behind most literary scholarship.

The study of myth, on the other hand, is based on the idea, stated clearly by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, that a myth consists of all of its versions. Rather than trying to prune away variant texts to get at the single correct version, scholars collect as many versions of a myth as possible in order to find the range of differences the tradition provides. Sometimes the variations seem unimportant – for example, according to Homer, the mother and wife of Oedipus was named Epikaste, while Sophocles calls her Jokasta – but sometimes they are fundamental. According to some stories, including Euripides' play *Helen*, Helen of Troy never went to Troy at all, but stayed in Egypt, where Menelaos found her after the war. (Variants of myth will be discussed further in Chapter Five.)

Even a traditional story had to have a first telling, though its beginning may now be lost beyond recovery. A story is not traditional the first time it is told, or the second or the third,

and so a story is not a myth until it becomes accepted as a myth by the tradition, that is, by generations of tellings and retellings. In the process of telling and retelling, the original author loses control of the story, as elements are added or changed or deleted. It is almost possible to say that a myth is a story that has escaped from its author.

Of course some particular author may tell a traditional story, a myth, in a form that can be considered literature. Indeed, many of the important texts for the study of Greek myth are also works of literature, such as the Homeric epics or the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These texts can be studied as literature or as myth, and what scholars say about them will be somewhat different depending on which approach they take. This book will concentrate on these stories as myth, but it will not exclude literary analysis. Each approach illuminates the other. But some myths were never told in a literary form; these can be found in the writings of historians or philosophers or travel writers; a few we know only from visual sources, such as paintings on vases. A study of myth that is restricted to literary versions will omit some important stories.

According to the proposed definition, myth has a certain kind of importance for the society in which it is told. This part of the definition is certainly too vague to be useful as it stands. What kind of importance should a myth have? Probably every story told has some kind of importance. The point here is what kinds of stories are excluded. For instance, many jokes are traditional stories, but most scholars would not include jokes in the study of myth. Jokes clearly have a kind of cultural importance, but it is not the kind of importance that myths have. Fables, such as the fables attributed to Aesop, are traditional stories, and these often have a serious point, but again most scholars do not think of fables as myths. Folktales, such as Jack and the Beanstalk or Jack the Giant Killer, present a more difficult problem. Many myths, such as the story of Perseus or the story of the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*, have elements of folktales, and many of the methods and concepts used in the study of folktales can be very useful in the study of myths. Perhaps the best we can do is to say that myths were taken seriously in a way that folktales were not. The question of how Greek society thought about their myths will be a continuing topic throughout this book.

There is one item missing from my proposed definition which might have been expected, and that is the gods. In many cultures the myths, or the stories that scholars choose to call myths, largely or exclusively concern the gods, and some definitions of myth insist that mythical stories tell about the deeds of the gods. There are certainly Greek myths about the gods – the myth of divine succession in Hesiod, for example – but in many Greek myths the gods are secondary and in some they are merely mentioned along the way. In Sophocles' version of the story of Oedipus, the Oracle at Delphi plays a role, but otherwise the gods are absent. Many Greek myths concern the deeds and sufferings of mortal heroes rather than gods (though the word hero may have only a circular definition: a hero is the kind of character who plays a part in the myths; there is much more to be said about heroes, and I will return to the topic in Chapter Five).

One last point concerns the truth of myths. In ordinary English usage, the word "myth" is often applied to a story that is false, perhaps in order to counter a claim that the story is true. We often distinguish "myths" from the stories of religion or history that we claim are "true" stories. Clearly most people today would not think that Ikaros actually flew too close to the sun or that Persephone was abducted by Hades. It is also clear that not all Greeks believed all

the stories (see Chapter Twelve for discussion of ancient skepticism), and no Greek myth had the kind of claim to truth that “true” stories of religion or history have. But it is not generally useful to think of the Greek myths as “false” stories, since what matters most now, and what mattered most then, was something other than “truth” as it is understood in modern times. The myths were important stories, even for those who did not believe in them, because they provided fundamental ways of thinking about the world.

The result of this discussion is not a clear definition which precisely includes everything scholars want to call a myth and precisely excludes everything that they don’t, but a certain lack of precision is no fault, and perhaps even a virtue. There is a set of stories that are central to the idea of a myth, and then other stories which are less clearly myths but still interesting to discuss. And that rough definition of myth may be all that is necessary.

## II. FURTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF GREEK MYTH

In many cultures mythic stories seem to occur in a time disconnected from historical time, perhaps a time before history. Mircea Eliade, an important historian of religion, used the Latin phrase *in illo tempore* (“in that time”) to designate this mythic time, the time of origins. According to Eliade, the function of many myths and religious rituals is to bring about a kind of return to the experience of mythic time. Some Greek myths do indeed seem to occur in a time before history, or at least a time which is hard to bring into relationship with historical events. Some myths are connected to rituals in Greek religion, and these rituals may bring the participants into a kind of return of primordial events. In this sense, Greek myth can refer to events *in illo tempore*. But many Greek myths on the contrary seem to be closely linked to history, either through a chronological connection to historical events or through the effects of historical events on the shape of the mythic story, although the modern understanding of historical events may not match ancient Greek ideas. Some scholars would say that traditional stories with a basis in historical events are legends rather than myths. Such a distinction would exclude many stories that have traditionally been considered Greek myths: the stories of the Trojan War, for example. Some may distinguish myths and legends, but it is characteristic of ancient Greek culture that divine myths were not sharply divided from legends. (For more about myth and history see Chapter Ten.)

Greek myths tend to be connected to each other. A quick examination of one intricate web of interconnected stories makes this point clear. It is not important to remember all of the details of this web, but rather to get a general impression of how these various stories are tied together. This web begins with Niobe, who was the mother of many children (different versions of the story give her different numbers of children; according to Homer there were six boys and six girls). She was very proud of her children and she boasted that she was a better mother than the goddess Leto, who had only two children, Apollo and Artemis. In order to punish Niobe for her presumption, Apollo and Artemis killed all of her children. This story is found as early as Homer’s *Iliad*, and in one form or another it was widely told.

In some versions of the story Niobe is the daughter of Tantalos; her brother, then, was Pelops. According to some stories, Tantalos was a great friend of the gods, who allowed him to feast with them. In order to test them, he chopped up his son, Pelops, boiled the child and

served him up to the gods. All of the gods realized what they were being served, except for Demeter, who was perhaps distracted because of her grief over the abduction of Persephone; in any case, Demeter ate Pelops' shoulder. The gods put Pelops back together and replaced his shoulder with a piece of shining ivory. Tantalos was punished for this and other crimes; Odysseus sees him in the Land of the Dead. Pelops went on to marry Hippodameia and found the Olympic Games; he was the father of Thyestes and Atreus and thus the grandfather of Agamemnon and Menelaos.

Niobe, the daughter of Tantalos and sister of Pelops, was married to Amphion. Amphion and his twin brother Zethus were the children of Zeus and the mortal woman Antiope. The story of Antiope is somewhat complicated. She was the daughter of Nykteus, who in turn was the brother of Lykos, the king of Thebes. According to the ancient mythographer Apollodorus, Lykos ruled in Thebes after the death of Pentheus, who was killed by his mother, Agave. When Antiope became pregnant, her father Nykteus threatened her, and she ran away and married a mortal man named Epopeus. Meanwhile, Antiope's father Nykteus died, but Lykos waged a war against Epopeus, killed him, and took Antiope prisoner. On the way back to Thebes Antiope gave birth to the twins, Amphion and Zethus; she exposed them, but they were saved and brought up by a cowherd. Amphion was a great musician, perhaps the first mortal to play the lyre; Zethus was a hunter and herdsman.

Years later Antiope managed to escape; she happened to meet up with her sons, now grown up, and they took revenge against Lykos and his wife Dirke for their mistreatment of Antiope. Amphion and Zethus then built walls for the city of Thebes; according to some versions, while Zethus struggled to carry stones for the wall, Amphion was able to move them by the power of his music. In a lost play by Euripides, *Antiope*, the two sons debate about the merits of the active or the quiet life; Plato mentions this play in his dialogue *Gorgias* (485d; 506b).

The myth of Niobe is thus connected to the myth of Tantalos and the myth of Pelops, and through Pelops to the myths of Thyestes and Atreus and the myths of Agamemnon and Menelaos, as well as to the myth of Antiope and the myth of Amphion and Zethus. It would be easy to extend this web of stories even further. This kind of web is very characteristic of Greek myth, but it is not at all characteristic of fictional stories, such as novels, which are usually sealed off from each other: Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* is not related to Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* or Pip from *Great Expectations*.

### III. DID THE GREEKS HAVE GREEK MYTHS?

The definition proposed above, though imperfect, gives at least an approximate idea of what will count as Greek myth in this book. Does this category, rough as it is, correspond to any category in ancient Greek thought or culture? Did the Greeks have Greek myths? The answer is yes and no. A number of scholars have demonstrated that the word "muthos" in ancient Greek did not necessarily mean what the word "myth" means today.<sup>1</sup> A traditional story might be called a "muthos", but it might also be called an "epos" (the source of the modern word "epic") or even a "logos" (the source of the modern word "logic"). The Greeks did not

always clearly distinguish what scholars today call myth from other kinds of stories, including folklore and history and philosophical tales.

On the other hand, the Greeks did have a set of stories that were particularly appropriate to be told in tragedy, and almost every tragedy produced in Athens in the fifth century BCE told a story that would today be called a myth.<sup>2</sup> In addition, in the fifth century BCE the lyric poet Pindar wrote a series of poems celebrating victorious athletes, and almost all of these include references to one or more stories of myth; likewise the lyric poet Bacchylides. So it seems that the playwrights and the lyric poets recognized a set of stories that largely overlaps with the stories that today are considered Greek myths.

One should not assume, however, that the ancient Greeks thought about these stories the way they are thought about today. The myths played a role in ancient Greek society that may be quite different from the role they play in modern culture. These stories, then, were not myths in the modern sense of the word myth. One of the goals of this book is to explore some of the ways the Greeks used and thought about their myths.

#### IV. PANHELLENIC MYTH

The Panhellenic myths are those myths that were widely known in the ancient Greek world, such as the stories of the Trojan War, the Theban myths, the myths of the Athenian tragedies, and so on. Most of the stories told and discussed in introductory textbooks and also in popular accounts of Greek myth are Panhellenic, and these Panhellenic myths have also been the focus of much scholarly work. This scholarly interest in Panhellenic myth is parallel to scholarly study of the development of other Panhellenic institutions in the Archaic period, such as the Olympic Games, the Delphic Oracle, and Panhellenic epic.<sup>3</sup>

The story of the abduction of Persephone, for example, was very widely known in the ancient world, and indeed it is still widely known today. The primary source for this myth is the so-called “Homeric Hymn to Demeter”.

##### **The story of Persephone, as told in the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter”**

Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, is abducted by her uncle, Hades, who takes her to the Underworld to be his queen. Demeter realizes that Persephone has been kidnapped and goes in search of her. While on her travels she comes to the city of Eleusis, where (in the disguise of a mortal) she takes the job of nurse to Demophoön, the son of the King and Queen. She tries to make Demophoön immortal by placing him in a fire, but when the Queen sees her child in the fire she cries out. Demeter takes Demophoön out of the fire and explains that because of the Queen’s interference he will remain mortal; he will, however, receive the

honors of a hero. She orders that a temple be built outside the city for her and she says that she will establish the rituals to be carried out there.

Now Demeter, still grieving for Persephone, brings a famine on the earth; the human race is in danger of destruction, and no offerings can be made to the gods. Zeus sends various gods to Demeter to ask her to relieve the famine, but she refuses so long as Persephone is in the Underworld. Zeus finally sends a messenger to get Persephone back from Hades. Hades agrees, but he has tricked Persephone into eating a pomegranate seed, and therefore she must stay in the Underworld for one third of the year. Nonetheless Demeter is appeased, and plants begin to grow again. She returns to Eleusis and teaches the rituals to be carried out in her temple.

The Hymn itself was probably composed sometime between 650 and 550 BCE, but it has survived in a single damaged manuscript, discovered in Moscow in 1777, which was probably copied out in the early 1400s CE. This Hymn is one of 33 hymns attributed to Homer, but Homer was certainly not the author, as many even in the ancient world knew.

Even though only this single manuscript of the Hymn survives, other evidence shows that the story was widely known. Homer, who is perhaps the earliest of the Greek poets, does not tell the story, but he knows that Persephone is Queen of the Land of the Dead (*Odyssey* 10.534, 10.564, 11.633–35, etc.). Hesiod, the other poet of the earliest phase of Greek literature, has a brief but clear reference to the story: “And [Zeus] came to the bed of all-nourishing Demeter, and she bore white-armed Persephone whom Hades carried off from her mother; but wise Zeus gave her to him” (*Theogony* 912–14).

Euripides includes a version of the story in his play *Helen*, 1301–61; this version tells about the abduction, but it entirely omits the events of the middle section of the Hymn, the story of Demophoön and the foundation of the rituals at the temple in Eleusis. The Athenian orator Isocrates (436–338 BCE) mentions the abduction of Persephone in his famous speech the *Panegyrikos*, sections 28–29: because of the hospitality the people of Attica showed Demeter when she was searching for Persephone, the goddess first gave agriculture to the human race and also revealed the sacred mysteries. The story is also told in the so-called Orphic Hymns, a group of anonymous poems ascribed to the legendary poet Orpheus, who is supposed to predate Homer, but the earliest of these poems probably date from the sixth century BCE.

Post-classical Greek works which tell or refer to the story of the abduction include a Hymn to Demeter by the Hellenistic poet Callimachus, who was active in the third century BCE; the *Library of Greek History* written in the first century BCE by Diodorus Siculus (sections 5.3–8; 5.68–69.3); and the *Library of Greek Mythology*, which dates from the first or second century CE and is ascribed to Apollodorus, though we don’t really know who this person was. Pausanias, the travel writer who wrote a *Guide to Greece* in the second century CE, refers to the story several times; he specifically mentions the “Homeric Hymn to Demeter”, though his version of the Hymn seems to be somewhat different from the surviving version. He also mentions a version of the story by a poet named Pamphos, who is supposed to predate Homer (1.38.3 and 8.37.9), but no other information about this poet or his works is known. Then in the late fourth or early fifth century CE the Greek poet Nonnus included the story in his enormous epic poem, the *Dionysiaca*.

The story was also well known in the Latin world. (In the Latin versions, by and large, Latin names are used: Ceres for Demeter, Proserpina for Persephone, and Pluto or Dis for Hades.) Cicero mentions the story in his speech *Against Verres* (2.4:106–08) and also in *On the Nature of the Gods*. The Latin writer Hyginus told the story very briefly in his book of fables (*Fabulae* 146), and there are references to the story in Vergil’s *Georgics* 1.39, in Lucan’s epic poem *Civil War* (6.698–700 and 739–42) and in Statius’ epic the *Thebaid* (12.270). Ovid tells the story at some length twice, in the *Metamorphoses* (5.385–661) and in the *Fasti* (4.417–620). Much later, in the late fourth century CE, the Latin poet Claudian wrote three books of an unfinished epic about Persephone (*De raptu Proserpinae*).

In addition to these literary sources, there are also some visual representations of the story: a fifth-century BCE red-figure vase from Attica shows Hades pursuing Persephone; a fourth-century BCE red-figure vase from Apulia in southern Italy shows Hades and

Persephone in a chariot, while Demeter seems to be pursuing them, carrying a torch, as several other figures look on; a fourth-century krater shows Hades, accompanied by Hermes and Hekate, returning Persephone to the upper world; another red-figure krater shows Persephone rising out of the ground, illuminated by Hekate carrying torches, as Demeter and Hermes look on (see Figure 1.1); and a tomb at Vergina, in Macedonia, has a remarkable fresco from the fourth century BCE showing Hades in a chariot carrying off Persephone, who is clearly trying to get away, as one of her companions looks on in dismay.<sup>4</sup>

The story was also closely connected to the Eleusinian Mysteries, a cult which flourished for a thousand years, from the Archaic period until the late fourth century CE. Essential parts of the cult ritual were secret and have never been revealed, but all of the many thousands who were initiated into this cult must have known the story, which was probably recounted in some form during the rituals.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear from this list that the story of the abduction of Persephone was known in many places and over a long period, from Athens to Macedonia to southern Italy to Rome and Egypt, from Homer's time to late antiquity.



**Figure 1.1** Persephone rising out of the earth from the Underworld. Persephone Painter (ca. 440 BCE). Attic bell krater (bowl for mixing wine and water), obverse. H. 41 cm; D. of mouth 45.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA. Fletcher Fund, 1928. 28.57.23. Copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY

### Persephone in Western tradition

The story of Persephone has continued to fascinate writers and artists in the Western tradition. The Moscow manuscript of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* was discovered only in 1777, but the story was known from other sources, especially Ovid; both Edmund Spenser (“The Garden of Proserpina”, in *The Faerie Queen*, and John Milton (*Paradise Lost* 4.268–71) refer to it. Shakespeare mentions the abduction of Proserpina in *The Winter’s Tale* (IV.iv.116–18), and some critics have argued that the story provides an important theme of the play. In the nineteenth century Mary Shelley,

author of *Frankenstein*, wrote a verse play for children based on the myth, and poems based on the story were written by Alfred Lord Tennyson, George Meredith, and Algernon Swinburne. The myth has been very popular in the twentieth century. Twentieth-century poets who have written about Demeter and Persephone include Ezra Pound, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Margaret Atwood. The story has been particularly important for feminist writers and thinkers; see the section on Further Reading at the end of the chapter.

Some of the ancient versions of this myth are quite short and therefore not very detailed, but some are extensive, and they are hardly identical. For example, in the *Homeric Hymn*, Zeus is responsible for the decision to marry Persephone off to Hades, but in Ovid’s version in the *Metamorphoses* (in which the Latin names for the gods were used), it is Venus who contrived the plan to make Dis fall in love with Proserpine; Jupiter had nothing to do with it. In some versions, the abduction occurred in Sicily, but in others it occurred near Athens.

According to the travel writer Pausanias, when Demeter was searching for Persephone, she was followed by Poseidon, who was intent on having sex with her. She turned herself into a mare, but Poseidon turned himself into a stallion and mated with her. Demeter bore him two children: one was a daughter whose name cannot be mentioned, and the other was a stallion named Areion (*Guide* 8.25.5). Some part of this story was known also to the second-century CE mythographer Apollodorus (3.6.8), but it is not widely told; it was probably part of a local tradition and therefore not Panhellenic.

Many versions of the myth either omit the episode of Demophoön or change it in some way. As noted above, Euripides leaves it out. Likewise the version in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; in his version of the story in the *Fasti* he does include this episode, but changes some of the details, and also changes the name of the baby, who is called Triptolemos. A person named Triptolemos is mentioned briefly near the end of the *Homeric Hymn*, at line 474, but there he is called one of the kings, and he is definitely not the child nursed by Demeter. In some versions a character named Triptolemos plays a very important role: after Demeter became reconciled to Zeus, she gave grain to Triptolemos and told him to instruct everyone in agriculture. This story is told by Apollodorus (*Library* 1.5.2), by Callimachus (*Hymn 6 to Demeter* 17ff.), by Diodorus Siculus (*Library of History* 5.68.1), by Hyginus (*Fabulae* 147, 277;

### Further explorations on Demeter

Demeter is best known in her role in the story of the abduction of Persephone, as narrated in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and in her connection to the Eleusinian Mysteries, but there were other stories about Demeter and other rituals in which she played an important role. There is especially rich evidence for Demeter in Pausanias’ *Guide*. Using the index to the *Guide*, write an essay about Demeter as she is portrayed there. Pay particular attention to events not mentioned in the *Homeric Hymn* and to Demeter’s role in cult outside of Eleusis.

*Astronomia* 2.14), and by Ovid (*Met.* 5.645–61). Pausanias mentions the story several times (*Guide* 1.14.2; 7.18.2; 8.4.1); he says that there was a shrine to Triptolemos in Eleusis (1.38.4) and he also mentions a threshing-floor and altar to Triptolemos (1.38.7). There are also many visual representations of Triptolemos with Demeter and Persephone, far more than representations of Hades and Persephone. The story of Triptolemos itself counts as a Panhellenic myth (see Figure 1.2).

Each of these versions deserves its own interpretation. For example, those versions in which Triptolemos plays a major role are concerned with the beginning of agriculture, whereas the *Homeric Hymn* clearly states that agriculture already existed before the story begins. According to Jenny Strauss Clay 1989, the *Homeric Hymn* shows the role of Demeter among the gods, since at the end of the story she has become the patron goddess of the Eleusinian Mysteries. In addition, the story of Demophoön in the *Homeric Hymn* can be interpreted as a demonstration of the distinction between human mortality and divine immortality.



**Figure 1.2** Triptolemos in his winged chariot setting out to teach agriculture, the gift of Demeter. Attributed to the Triptolemos Painter (5th century BCE). Attic red-figure stamnos. H. 53.5 cm. Louvre, Paris, France. Inv. G 187. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. Copyright © Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

## V. LOCAL MYTH

The story of the abduction of Persephone was Panhellenic because it was known very widely over the Greek world for a very long time. (Moreover, it was known to the Romans and it has continued to be retold and reinterpreted in modern times as well). Most of the famous myths – the myth of Oedipus, the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece, the myth of the Trojan War – were also Panhellenic, and these stories remain familiar today. But many other stories were not so widely known. These stories were interesting to the people who lived in a particular place but for one reason or another they were not so interesting to people elsewhere, and so they were not told throughout the Greek world, they were not passed on to the Roman writers, and they are not widely known today. Stories that were primarily of interest in only a small region are called *local* or *epichoric* myths (*epichoric* derives from the Greek “epi”, meaning “at” or “on”, and “chôra”, meaning “a place”). Local myths can be very interesting and important because they often preserve details of local rituals, customs, and beliefs which are not preserved in Panhellenic myths, which tended to include only those elements of the stories that appealed to a wide audience from many different places.

The Athenian story of the Bouphonia is an example of a local myth. Long ago, in the days of Erechtheus (a mythical early king of Athens), in the days when people gave only grain offerings to the gods, before people began to eat meat and perform animal sacrifice, a man named Sopatros (or perhaps Diomon) moved to Attica (perhaps from Crete). One day he had set out an offering of oil, honey, and grain, but an ox came up and ate his offering from the altar. Sopatros became angry; he picked up an axe and killed the offending animal. When his anger subsided, he realized that he had committed sacrilege by killing an animal at the altar. He secretly buried the ox and ran away to Crete.

A great drought now afflicted Athens and all of Attica and brought on a famine. The Athenians consulted the Oracle at Delphi; the response, like many oracular responses, is not entirely clear, or perhaps it has become somewhat garbled, but the gist seems to be that the fugitive should be found and the murderer should be punished and the dead ox in some way should be resurrected in the place it had been killed.

As the story continues, the Athenians found Sopatros, who decided that the guilt for the killing should be shared by having everyone take part in future sacrifices and by having everyone eat some of the meat. The Athenians then established a formal procedure, in which a number of oxen were paraded around an altar until one of them ate the grain placed there. The offending ox was killed, and the person who killed it ran away. A trial was then held to determine responsibility for the killing. All the participants in turn were absolved: the young girls who had brought the water for sharpening the axe and the knife, those who sharpened the axe and the knife, and so on. Finally, the axe (or perhaps the knife) was convicted and thrown into the sea. In addition, the skin of the ox was stuffed and placed in front of a plow, so that the victim was in a sense resurrected. This, more or less, is the story as it was told by Porphyry, a Greek philosopher of the third century CE in a book titled *On Abstinence*, an argument in favor of vegetarianism.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Sopatros and the ox may have been designed to explain a particular Athenian ritual, the “Bouphonia”, which means “the murder of the ox”. This ritual was performed on

the fourteenth of the month called Skirophorian, in the middle of the summer, and it seems to have taken more or less the form explained in the myth, a ritual sacrifice of an ox followed by a trial and the condemning of the knife. The travel writer Pausanias describes the sacrifice, which was evidently still being performed when he visited Athens in the second century CE (*Guide* 1.24.4 and 1.28.11). The comic playwright Aristophanes mentions the ritual very briefly in the *Clouds* (984–85), which was produced in the late fifth century BCE. There are a few other scattered references, and there are vase paintings which probably illustrate the ritual (one of these may be seen in Burkert 1983: plate 6). But this is not much compared to the wealth of sources for the story of the abduction of Persephone. There is no known ancient Greek literary treatment of the Bouphonia in any hymn or in any tragedy. Moreover, this story did not attract the attention of Ovid or any other Roman writer, and it has inspired no modern retellings.<sup>7</sup> This story was local rather than Panhellenic.

Some readers might wonder if this story really should count as a myth. One might argue, for instance, that this story is really a legend. But many Greek myths, including the very important stories of the Trojan War, are legends at least as much as this story. Or one might argue that there are no gods involved, except as the recipient of the sacrifice and the author of the oracle. But the role of the gods in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* is no greater, and that story is always counted as a myth. This story fulfills one of the typical roles of myth: it is a charter, that is, a story which explains the origin of some ritual or custom (just as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is at least in part a charter of the Eleusinian Mysteries). Thus this story makes a fundamental statement about the way human beings should relate to the gods. Before Sopatros, so the story says, people ate only grain and gave only grain offerings to the gods, but now people kill animals, give meat offerings to the gods, and eat meat. This story belongs to mythic time, the time of origins, and the myth and ritual are designed to repeat the events of that time.

Of course this myth is not an accurate historical account of the origins of animal sacrifice, which must have begun in a time long before the traditions can recount, most likely before the development of agriculture. The point of the story is not historical, but religious, and perhaps social and even psychological. According to some scholars, this myth attempts to deal with the guilt people might feel about killing the animal. First, the murder of the ox was not deliberate, but an act of passion, and the murderer was not even a native Athenian; in a sense the ox was really to blame, since it ate the grain that was consecrated to the gods; then the guilt is distributed to the whole community, and finally it is displaced onto objects, the knife and the axe.

This explanation seems plausible, up to a point, but there is perhaps some danger in reading too much into this myth and ritual. A modern analogue might be the annual ritual in which the President of the United States gives a pardon to one turkey on Thanksgiving Day. In the distant future scholars looking back at this ritual might suppose that everyone in the United States feels deeply guilty about killing and eating turkeys. Perhaps the ritual does reflect the awareness in our society that in order to eat meat we have to kill an animal, and no doubt some people do feel guilty, and some people don't eat meat, but I do not believe there is a widespread anxiety about eating meat throughout the United States.

Likewise, the myth and the ritual of the Bouphonia probably reflected the awareness among Athenians that they had to kill animals in order to eat meat, but I am not convinced

that most people in ancient Greece were terribly upset about it. As early as the time of Aristophanes, in the fifth century BCE, the ritual of the Bouphonia was regarded as old fashioned, and the evidence does not suggest that it was taken very seriously. Nonetheless, the ritual was performed in Athens every year from well before the fifth century BCE until at least the second century CE. It must have meant something to Athenians, if only as a tradition. Sacrifice was a frequent and important part of ancient Greek life, and there are several other charter myths about sacrifice. If we are trying to build up a picture of what ancient Greeks thought and did, then these myths have their place, along with many others that can be recovered sometimes only from obscure sources.

The Panhellenic myths show what the ancient Greeks in general thought about, and often these myths provide stories for the Western tradition to continue to think about. The study of Greek myth quite properly begins from the Panhellenic myths, but it should not stop there. But precisely because these Panhellenic myths had to appeal to a general Greek public from many times and places, they lost the detail and specificity found in the local myths, a kind of detail that reveals aspects of life and thought in the various Greek cities that are not found in the Panhellenic myths.

The distinction between the Panhellenic and the local, however, is a matter of degree. A myth may be more or less Panhellenic, and a Panhellenic myth may include local elements and variants. Presumably many Panhellenic myths began as local myths and only gradually attracted attention throughout Greece. Some local myths were known beyond the borders of their home cities or regions, without achieving a Panhellenic status. Most of the myths which became important in the later Western tradition were Panhellenic, but some Panhellenic myths were more or less forgotten, and a few local myths managed to attract the attention of later writers. None of these distinctions and correlations is absolute.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented some fundamental concepts necessary for the study of myth. A provisional definition was suggested – myths are narrative; they are traditional, and therefore they typically have variant forms rather than one correct text; they express ideas and problems which have a certain importance for the society in which they are told – and some of the limitations of this definition were noted. Some other typical characteristics of myth in general were discussed, though these may apply less strictly to Greek myth than to myth in other traditions: myths often concern the actions of gods, but in many Greek myths the gods are secondary or even absent; and many myths take place in a time outside of history, but many Greek myths are connected to the Greek sense of historical time. The stories of the Greek mythological tradition tend to be interwoven with one another in complex webs, which are often expressed as genealogical relationships. Although there is no specific word in ancient Greek which means what we mean by the word myth, there is some reason to believe that the ancient Greeks did have a special regard for the stories we call Greek myths. This chapter also made a distinction between Panhellenic myths – which were known very widely throughout Greece – and local myths – which were of primary interest to a particular locality; the Panhellenic myths more likely represent what was of general interest

to all Greeks, while the local myths often show a kind of specificity and detail of ritual and belief lost in the Panhellenic myths. All of these ideas and concepts will be continuing themes in later chapters. Chapter Two will explore the very important question of the relationship between Greek myth and Greek religion.

## FURTHER READING

For discussion of the problems involved in defining myth, see Kirk 1970, Bremmer 1988, Calame 2003, and Csapo 2005. Richardson 1974 is a scholarly commentary on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Foley 1994 has a translation of the Hymn with a short commentary and a collection of recent articles. See also the chapter on the Hymn in Clay 1989. Hayes 1994 discusses the use of the myth of Persephone in modern literature. On the Bouphonia, see Burkert 1983: 136–43, and Tyrell and Brown 1991.