GLOBAL EDITION

Classical Myth

EIGHTH EDITION

Barry B. Powell

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CLASSICAL MYTH

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BARRY B. POWELL

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

with translations
by Herbert M. Howe

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Authorized adaptation from the United States edition, entitled Classical Myth, 8th edition, ISBN 978-0-321-96704-6, by Barry B. Powell, published by Pearson Education © 2015.

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ISBN 10: 1-292-06614-8
ISBN 13: 978-1-292-06614-1

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
14 13 12 11 10

Typeset in New Baskerville Std-Roman by S4Carlisle Publishing Services.

Printed and bound by CTPS China in China.

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PREFACE

> What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb?
>
> FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872

The category "classical myth" exists more in the minds of contemporary teachers than it did in the ancient world itself, but it nonetheless serves a useful pedagogical purpose. For some time now, courses bearing this or a similar title have been a vehicle for introducing college students to the cultures of the ancient Greeks and Romans, hence to the roots of Western civilization. By studying the myths of the ancients primarily through the literary works in which they are preserved, students are exposed to important classical authors, as well as to stories and figures that have sustained interest and kindled imaginations throughout the history of Western culture, and continue to do so today.

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION

In this Eighth Edition, I have made many improvements to the book—rearranged some material, corrected expressions, streamlined it somewhat, and added maps and illustrations—all changes based on suggestions from instructors who have used the earlier editions in their classes. I have added the addresses of links to modern online translations of complete ancient texts, so that the interested reader can easily expand knowledge of a given topic without having to purchase auxiliary texts. I added new images throughout to give the book a different look, and also updated the bibliography. But the central goals remain unchanged. The first seven editions were unique among texts on classical myth in their *contextual approach*, which emphasizes the context in which ancient stories were told. In the eighth edition I have continued my efforts to place the myths in their anthropological, historical, religious, sociological, and economic contexts.

The present text began as a modern introduction to classical myth at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, a comprehensive and flexible resource for a college-level course that would reflect the best recent scholarship in the field. The fact that the first seven editions have been used in many such courses throughout the United States and in Canada, and in Australia, New Zealand, and even Taiwan, by instructors with different academic backgrounds teaching in a wide variety of educational settings, has deeply gratified my sense that a book of this type was needed. In many ways I see it as a summary of my own intellectual career, because I remember when and usually where I first brushed up against the many figures of myth, when they first became important to me. In this respect this book is more personal than it reflects any objective standard of "what is classical myth," and in many ways my purpose is to share with the reader my own excitement at the discovery of our classical past.

The first seven editions emphasized the historical development of classical myth and I have maintained that approach here. Only when we see how myth changes over time, yet somehow remains the same, can we grasp its essence. It is important to remember that the versions of myth I present in the text represent only one version of the many disparate, often contradictory, stories that the Greeks told about their gods and heroes. For this reason, at the end of each chapter I cite ancient sources for the myths, which will lead the student to disparate accounts. A complete inventory is, of course, far beyond the scope of this text, but these suggestions can serve as a starting point for those wishing to explore the mythical background more fully.

Many original Greek and Latin sources (which can be complex) are also listed in Edward Tripp's *Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology* and in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd ed., Oxford, UK, 1996), or simply do a Google search on the Internet, whose resources for learning are astounding. There are numerous sites (Google "classical myth") that give ancient sources for even minor figures in myth. Most useful perhaps is the New Zealand website http://www.theoi.com that has articles on most Greek myths and outstanding illustrations. You can always Google a name or a place to receive an abundance of information and hundreds of images, too. The computerization of knowledge and its dissemination on the Internet is a profound advance in culture, and students of myth are as much the beneficiaries as anyone. The entries in Wikipedia are also often excellent, containing illustrations, bibliographies, and links to related material.

Many of the passages from ancient literary works quoted here are from well-known sources, but I have not hesitated to present lesser-known passages when that seemed appropriate. Whenever possible I have used Greek sources rather than Latin, but I have included numerous selections from Ovid's highly influential Latin retelling of the Greek myths (and other Latin writers) when the myth is found in no other ancient literary source. The complete text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* will form a natural, although not necessary, adjunct to this text, as will complete translations of Greek tragedies (many of these texts can be found at the links cited in the text). Pearson Education has made possible the purchase of these and other auxiliary Penguin titles at a much-reduced cost, shrink-wrapped with this text, if the instructor prefers hardcopy to online resources. (Instructors: Please contact your local Pearson Education representative if you wish to order such a packet.)

Like the first seven editions, the eighth stresses the importance of interpretation in the study of myth, although without relying on a single perspective. No one approach to interpretation can be adequate to the enormous range and complexity of classical myth. I briefly introduce the subject of interpretation in Chapter 1, and throughout the text I offer interpretive comments on individual myths—a basis, I am sure, for objection as much as agreement! I postpone an in-depth examination of myth interpretation to the last chapter, "Theories of Myth Interpretation," when the student will be familiar with various examples of myth. Many instructors may prefer to introduce this topic earlier, of course, and the chapter can be read at any time without loss of coherence.

The eighth edition remains committed to the principle that when we study classical myth, we also study the roots of Western culture. Ancient works of art play a valuable role in helping students visualize mythical figures and events as the ancients themselves did, and therefore I have included many illustrations from classical sources—more than two hundred reproductions of vase paintings, sculptural works, architectural monuments, and other works of art from the ancient and modern worlds, several new to this edition. In general the maps on the front and back covers have all the important places mentioned in the myths, but for this edition I have included new maps in the chapters that focus on places important in that chapter. When a place is found on a map within a chapter, I put that name in SMALL CAPS when it first appears.

As in the first seven editions, chapters also include "Perspective" boxes that examine the uses of classical myth in the medieval, Renaissance, or modern periods. Many of the Perspectives incorporate excerpts from or reproductions of literary and artistic works. My intent is to help students see how stories and figures from classical myth were appropriated and interpreted at later stages of history, including the modern period, often for purposes very different from those found in the ancient world itself.

The study of classical myth inevitably presents students with hundreds of new and unfamiliar names. To assist students with pronunciation, I have provided an English pronunciation guide the first time each difficult name appears in the text.

The pronunciation guides are repeated in the Index. I have also used **bold** letters to highlight names of greatest importance, those that one really ought to know to claim competence in the topic. These names are repeated in a list of important terms at the end of each chapter, with page numbers where the term first appears. I leave names of lesser importance in ordinary type, although in many cases I give pronunciations for these as well. In the Index I have included a capsule identification for important names, so the Index also serves as a glossary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book grew out of a course in classical myth offered for many decades without interruption at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The course, one of the first of its kind, began in the 1930s with the labors of Walter "Ray" Agard, whom the famous educator Alexander Meiklejohn brought to Madison from Amherst in 1927 to teach in the Meiklejohn Experimental College. Ray passed it on to **Herbert M. Howe**, who did most of the translations for the book, and Herb to me. Herb died in 2010 at age 98, a superb, even magical, teacher and a world-class swimmer, and I have dedicated this book to him. My long friendship with Herb was always a treasure. The course continues to be taught today as one of the most popular in the undergraduate curriculum.

I want to express my gratitude to my editor Joe Terry, who with great cheer and energy has helped to craft this new edition. Many others have helped, and I am grateful to them, especially **William Aylward**, whose advice has proved invaluable and who has contributed important material to the chapters on Roman myth. William teaches the course today. I also want to thank Dale Grote for his continued superb labors on the Web site, which has so greatly enhanced the value of the text. Other reviewers involved in the Eighth Edition are: Matthew Dillon, Loyola Marymount University; Timothy McNiven, The Ohio State University; Martha Payne, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis; Glenn Snyder, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis; Mel Storm, Emporia State University; and Lisa Trentin, University of Toronto Mississauga.

I am responsible for the translations from Akkadian, Egyptian, and modern Greek. In our translations we have sought a modern idiom, unrhymed, with a regular beat in the poetic lines. The translator can only try to re-create in modern language thoughts and manners distant from our own. In the preparation of my own English versions of Mesopotamian and Egyptian literary texts, I owe a general indebtedness to the following translations: James B. Pritchard, editor, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ, 1969); A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1949); Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, CT, 1976); Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (New York, 1961) and *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago, 1963); and Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, UK, 1989). I thank Frederick W. Schwink for his translation of the Hittite "Kingship in Heaven." I also thank Random House for permission to quote "Musée des Beaux Arts" from

The Collected Poems of W. H. Auden (2007); Simon & Schuster to quote "Leda and the Swan" from *W. B. Yeats's Collected Poems* (1996); and New Directions Publishing Corporation to quote "Adonis" from *Collected Poems 1912–1944* by H. D. (1986). We also wish to thank the museums, libraries, galleries, and other collections that have kindly allowed reproduction of items in their collections and have provided the necessary photographs. Photographs from these and other sources are gratefully acknowledged in the text.

I welcome comments on this edition from instructors and students who have used it, as these will help plan improvements for future editions. I can be contacted at the e-mail address below.

—B. B. P.

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Pearson wishes to thank the following people for their work on the content of the Global Edition:

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS MYTH?

> The longer I occupy myself with questions of ancient mythology, the more diffident I become of success in dealing with them, and I am apt to think that we who spend our years in searching for solutions to these insoluble problems are like Sisyphus perpetually rolling his stone uphill only to see it revolve again into the valley.
>
> SIR JAMES G. FRAZER (1854–1941),
> author of *The Golden Bough*

THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE ended more than fifteen hundred years ago, but the stories of classical gods and goddesses, of Greek and Roman warriors and leaders, live on in their ancient vigor. Zeus, Venus, Helen, Odysseus, Achilles, Aeneas—these familiar names stood in the background as later Western art and literature advanced, and they stand there still today. They were bequeathed to us in the writings of the Greeks and Romans, but their names and stories are much older than the written word. They go back before the introduction of writing, an era when classical myth first took shape.

Later chapters examine specific myths that have come down to us from the Greeks and Romans, but in this chapter we limit ourselves to examine some preliminary questions essential to a clear understanding of classical myth. We discuss the definition of myth and the three main types of myth: *divine myth, legend,* and *folktale.* We also look briefly at some aspects of the study of myth.

WHAT IS A MYTH?

Human beings have told stories from time immemorial, for stories are a natural product of spoken language, an outgrowth of the imaginative power that clearly separates us from our animal cousins. The story is a universal ingredient of human culture, bringing relief from the tedium of everyday labor and reminding listeners of their own values, beliefs, and origins.

This book is concerned with a certain type of story known as *myth*. The term *myth* is hard to define, in part because of the enormous variety of stories gathered from many cultures by ethnographers, anthropologists, and literary historians. Originally, the Greek word *mythos* simply meant "authoritative speech," "story," or "plot," but later writers used the term *myth* in more restricted ways. Some recent authorities, exasperated by the complexity of the phenomena, deny that the term *myth* expresses a coherent concept at all. A definition widely agreed on is that myth is *a traditional story with collective importance*. We can accept this definition, but we must consider carefully what it means.

To say that a myth is a story is to say, first, that it has a plot, a narrative structure consisting of a beginning, middle, and end. In the beginning of a typical story, we are introduced to characters in a certain situation, usually one involving conflict with other characters, with misfortune, or with themselves. The word *character* comes from a Greek word meaning "a certain mental imprint": Hamlet cannot make up his mind, Macbeth is ambitious, King Lear is blind to the character of others. Character is the sum of the choices one makes. In myths, the characters may be gods, goddesses, or other supernatural beings, but they may also be human beings or even animals that speak and act in the manner of human beings.

In the middle of a typical story, the situation grows more complex, and tension and conflict develop. In the end, the tension is somehow resolved. Today we might find an example of this basic structure in the plot common to ten thousand novels and feature films: Girl meets boy (the beginning), girl loses boy (the middle), girl finds boy (the end). Plot is an essential feature of myth. Without a beginning, middle, and end, there can be no story and hence no myth. In casual speech we sometimes say that the Greek god Zeus, for example, is a myth. However, strictly speaking, Zeus is not a myth, but a character in myth, in the plotted stories that tell of his exploits. Belief in the existence of a particular god, the observance of a ritual in a god's honor, and religious symbols are not myths.

Another element of myth is setting. The setting is the time and place in which the action of the story unfolds. Myths are never set in the present or the recent past; the action always takes place in the distant past or in a shadowy time altogether outside human chronology. The setting of myths may be in an actual city, such as Athens or Thebes, or some other location familiar to the audience. In other myths, the setting is an obscure place: the underworld, which no one in the real world ever visited; Mount Olympus, which really exists but in myth is the home of the gods; or Crete of a very long time ago.

Thus, like all other stories, myths have plot, characters, and setting. However, a myth is not just any story, but a certain kind of story that we describe as traditional.

Our word *traditional* comes from the Latin *trado,* "hand over," and a traditional story is one that has been "handed over" orally from one storyteller to another without the intervention of writing. In societies that do not use writing, stories must be handed over verbally, so traditional tales are the vehicle for transmitting one generation's thought to another. In this way traditional tales maintain contact with the past (about which little really is known) and pass inherited wisdom on to the future. They explain a society to itself, promulgating its concerns and values.

From this function derives myth's "collective importance"—myths hold meaning for the group, not just the individual. They describe patterns of behavior that serve as models for members of a society, especially in times of crisis. For example, in Homer's *Iliad* (written down in the eighth century BC), Achilles tries to persuade King Priam of Troy to eat at a time when Priam is heartbroken for his dead son Hector, killed by Achilles. Achilles tells the story of Niobê, a Theban princess: Although Artemis and Apollo had killed her seven sons and seven daughters, still she ate, and so should Priam. Four hundred years later, when the philosopher Socrates was on trial for his life, he defended his insistence on telling the truth in spite of threats against him by recalling the example of Achilles, who was ashamed to live as a coward and chose to die bravely before the walls of Troy.

Because they are traditional, myths are also anonymous. In contrast to such modern forms of storytelling as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace,* J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings,* J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* or George Lucas's film series *Star Wars,* myths never have identifiable authors. Literary works based on myth may have authors, but not the myths themselves. The Greek dramatist Sophocles wrote a play about Oedipus the king, but the *myth* of Oedipus existed long before, and no one can say who created it.

This anonymity helps us to understand why the Greeks, following the lead of the philosopher Plato, eventually came to contrast *mythos,* "story" or "myth," with *logos,* "account." The teller of a *logos* takes responsibility for the truth of what is said. A *logos* is a reasoned explanation of something that emphasizes a continuing causal sequence, as in the proofs of plane geometry. We still use the suffix -*logy* to indicate a reasoned inquiry into a topic, as in anthropo*logy,* "study of human beings"; bio*logy,* "study of life forms"; or even mytho*logy,* "study of myth" (although *mythology* often is used as a synonym for *myth*). By contrast, the teller of a *mythos* does not claim personal responsibility for what is said. After all, the teller did not invent the story, but only passed it on.

During oral transmission, a traditional tale is subject to constant change. Different narrators of a story have different motives and emphasize or embroider on different aspects. The story of Niobê could easily illustrate the dangers of self-assertion (Niobê bragged that she had more children than the mother of Apollo and Artemis), but Achilles uses the story to prove that eating food can lessen grief. Homer describes Achilles' anguished choice between a short, glorious life and a long, inglorious one, but never presents the choice as between courage and cowardice. In the written works in which Greek myths have been preserved, we often find strikingly different versions of the same myth. The poets Homer and Sophocles both report that Oedipus, king of Thebes, killed his father and married his mother, but in Homer's account Oedipus continues to rule after the truth comes out, whereas in

Sophocles' play he pokes pins in his eyes and leaves the city, a wretched wanderer. Neither is the "true" version of the myth, of which the other is a variant. The myth of Oedipus contains *all* the variants.

A retelling of every variant of every Greek myth would require a book of enormous length, or a very ambitious Web site, and would present its own false picture of the tradition. After all, it is not the multiplicity of versions that attracts our attention, but the best-known variants, often those of some great literary work. For example, Sophocles' version of the myth of Oedipus is far better known than is Homer's passing reference. Virtually every group of humankind has its store of traditional narrative, but in this book we limit ourselves to the myths of Greece and Rome, only occasionally referring to earlier and parallel traditions.

TYPES OF MYTH

Modern scholars like to distinguish between several types of myth based on the nature of the principal characters and the function that the story fulfilled for the listener and the teller. **Divine myths** (sometimes called "true myths" or "myths proper") are stories in which supernatural beings are the main actors. Such stories generally explain why the world, or some aspect of it, is the way it is. **Legends** (or sagas) are stories of the great deeds of human heroes or heroines. Legends narrate the events of the human past. The word comes from the Latin *legenda,* "things that should be read," that is, originally, morally uplifting stories about Christian saints. **Folktales** are stories whose actors are ordinary people or animals. Folktales entertain the audience and teach or justify customary patterns of behavior.

The more we learn about myth, the more we discover how difficult it can be to separate one type from another. For example, stories that appear to be legends often incorporate elements of folktales or explain the nature of things, as do divine myths. Such distinctions are nonetheless valuable because they allow us to isolate and study various aspects of myth. Let us look more closely at each type.

Divine Myth

The supernatural beings who are the principal characters in divine myth are depicted as superior to humans in power and splendor. Sometimes they take on human or animal shapes at will. They control awesome forces of nature: thunder, storm, rain, fire, earthquake, or fecundity. When these beings appear in their own form, they can be enormous and of stunning beauty or ugliness. Conflicts among them can take place on an immense scale and involve whole continents, high mountains, and vast seas.

Sometimes the supernatural characters in divine myth are little more than personified abstractions without clearly defined personalities. In Greek myth, for example, Nikê (**nī**-kē) "victory" is just the abstract concept (Figure 1.1).

In other cases, the supernatural beings are gods, goddesses, or demons with well-developed and distinctive personalities of their own. Zeus, the sky-god in Greek myth,

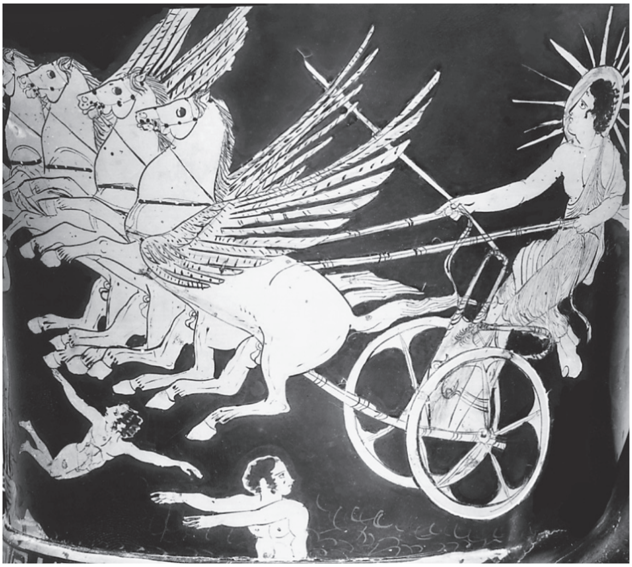

FIGURE 1.1 Stars descend before Sun. The stars, represented as boys, leap into the sea before the approach of Helius in his horse-drawn chariot (the nimbus around his head is one origin of the medieval halo around the heads of saints), on an Attic wine bowl, c. 435 BC. As the goddess Nikê personifies an event, the stars and Helius personify natural forces. (© Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, New York)

is much more than a personification of the sky; he is depicted as a powerful father, an often unfaithful husband, and the upholder of justice in human communities.

The events of divine myth usually take place in a world before or outside the present order where time and space often have different meanings from those familiar to human beings. For example, one Greek myth explained how Zeus came to rule the world: He fought against the Titans, an earlier race of gods,* defeated them in a terrible battle, and established his empire on the ruin of theirs. It would be pointless to ask when these events occurred, even within the context of the story, because they are set in a time before human chronology has meaning. Moreover, many divine myths of the Greeks are set in a place far removed from the familiar world of human beings—on Mount Olympus, far away and unapproachable.

Understandably, many of the gods about whom traditional tales were told were both actors in the stories and objects of veneration in religious cult. Zeus is a character in Greek myth, but he was also a god for whom the Greeks built temples, carried out sacrifices, and celebrated festivals. Because of this double function of the gods, divine myth is easily confused with religion, but the two must be clearly distinguished. Myths are *traditional stories;* religion is *belief* and the course of action that follows from belief. Belief is best defined as "what you accept (with or without proof) as a basis for action." For example, the Greeks believed that Zeus caused the rain to fall. Therefore, they sacrificed animals in times of drought to persuade him to bring rain. Myths often justify a religious practice or a form of religious behavior,

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*The word *God* (capital *G*) should be limited to a single all-powerful being in any religion—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or other. A small *g* shows that you are talking about one of many divine powers. A *demigod* is the offspring of a god and a human; sometimes a demigod becomes a god at death. The word *deity* is a general term that can refer to God or gods.

but we can retell a myth, even a myth about divine beings, without engaging in religious behavior. The relationship between myth and religion is complicated, and we will have more to say about it later, but we must remember that myth is a traditional story with collective importance, whereas religion is a set of beliefs that motivates a course of action.

Divine myths served a function in ancient cultures analogous to that of theoretical science in our own: They explained why the world is the way it is. Many of these myths tell of the origin and destruction of grand things: the universe, the gods, and ourselves; the relations of gods with one another and with human beings; and the divine origin of such human economic and social institutions as the growing of crops, the cycle of the seasons, the making of wine, and prophecy and oracles. Many divine myths deal with limited matters, such as the origin of local customs and practices.

In more technical language, we can describe such explanatory myths as etiological, from the Greek word *aition,* "cause." A creation myth is an example of an **etiological tale** because it explains the causes that brought the world into existence. An etiological myth explained the origin of Mount Etna, a dangerous volcano in Sicily: Beneath it Zeus imprisoned the fire-breathing monster Typhoeus, who continued to spew forth smoke and lava. Another example is the myth of Persephonê, daughter of the wheat-goddess Demeter. Persephonê must spend four months of the year in the underworld, and Demeter refuses to let anything grow during those months—the hot, barren summer. The change of seasons is "explained," according to many, by the myth. The etiological tale expresses a conjecture about the cause of something that existed long before the explanation.

Both divine myth and modern science offer explanations of why the world is the way it is, but they do so in very different ways. Scientific explanations are based on impersonal general laws and statistical probabilities discovered, or at least verified, by repeatable quantitative experiments, whereas mythic explanations, expressed in traditional tales, assume that supernatural beings control the world through the exercise of personal will. Assigning human qualities, especially unpredictability, to the forces that stand behind the world is characteristic of the worldview we find in myth. Thunder is an expression of Zeus's anger, not the necessary result of impersonal physical forces. Greek myth could thus blame sudden and puzzling deaths on the will of the gods, as in the story of how, out of spite, the gods Artemis and Apollo struck down the fourteen children of Niobê. Modern scientists may be puzzled by death from cancer, but they do not blame such death on a divine and irrational agent. The modern world was born from the struggle of scientific thought against traditional explanations for why and how things happen in the world, a struggle by no means concluded today.

In Part II of this text we examine more closely the divine myths of the ancient Greeks.

Legend

If divine myth in oral cultures is analogous to science in modern, literate Western society, legend is analogous to history. Both legend and modern historical writing attempt to answer the question, "What happened in the human past?" Because the past explains and justifies the present, the telling of legends was an important activity in the cultural life of many ancient peoples, and never more so than among the ancient Greeks. In legends, the central characters are human beings, not gods and goddesses. Although supernatural beings often play a part, their roles are subordinate to those of the human characters. In the legend of Orestes, the god Apollo orders Orestes to kill his mother, but the emphasis of the story is on Orestes' carrying out the order and facing its terrible consequences.

The principal actors of legend are heroes and heroines. Drawn from the ranks of the nobility, they are kings and queens, princes and princesses, and other members of an aristocratic elite. They have extraordinary physical and personal qualities and are stronger, more beautiful, or more courageous than ordinary people. Most Greeks had no doubt that such legendary figures really lived, and members of important families regarded themselves as descended from them. Whereas divine myth is set in a different or previous world-order, legendary events belong to our own order, although they took place in the distant past, at the very beginning of human time when mighty heroes and heroines lived on earth, great cities were founded, difficult quests undertaken, fearful monsters slain, and momentous wars waged.

Most ancient Greeks, then, did not doubt that such events as the Trojan War really did occur, and they pointed out the tombs of legendary figures and the actual sites of their exploits. But the Greeks had no way to compare their traditions with historical reality. Today, armed with the insights of archaeology and techniques of historical investigation, modern scholars recognize that the oral transmitters of traditional tales had little respect for historical truth, or even any concept of it. Greek myth tells us more about the circumstances and concerns of its transmitters than it does about life in the distant past.

Still, legends can contain an element of historical truth. Modern scholars have long thought that Greek legend does reflect, however dimly, major events and power relations of a historical period now known to us through archaeological remains. Many or most of the figures in Greek legend probably did live at some time, most likely in the Mycenaean civilization of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1600–1150 BC). Their very names provide one bit of evidence. For example, the name of Menelaüs, the legendary husband of Helen of Troy, means something like "upholder of the people." This distinctive name is appropriate to the aristocracy that certainly existed during this period, and similar names appear in written documents of the time (the Linear B tablets, the writings of the Mycenaeans, discussed in Chapter 2).

Archaeology provides further evidence. Excavation has shown that many of the places associated with important legendary events were great centers of civilization during the Late Bronze Age. Troy, for example, was a settlement of considerable importance until it was destroyed about 1230 BC. Although we have no proof that it was destroyed by Greek warriors, as Greek legends assert, there remains a tantalizing correspondence between the legend and the archaeological evidence (Figure 1.2).

Like divine myths, some legends also served a specific etiological function. Thus, one Greek story explained why, at the spring wine festival, Athenians brought their own wine jugs, although at other festivals they drank from a communal bowl. According to the legend, the Mycenaean prince Orestes, who had killed his own mother to avenge her murder of his father, came to Athens at the time of the festival.

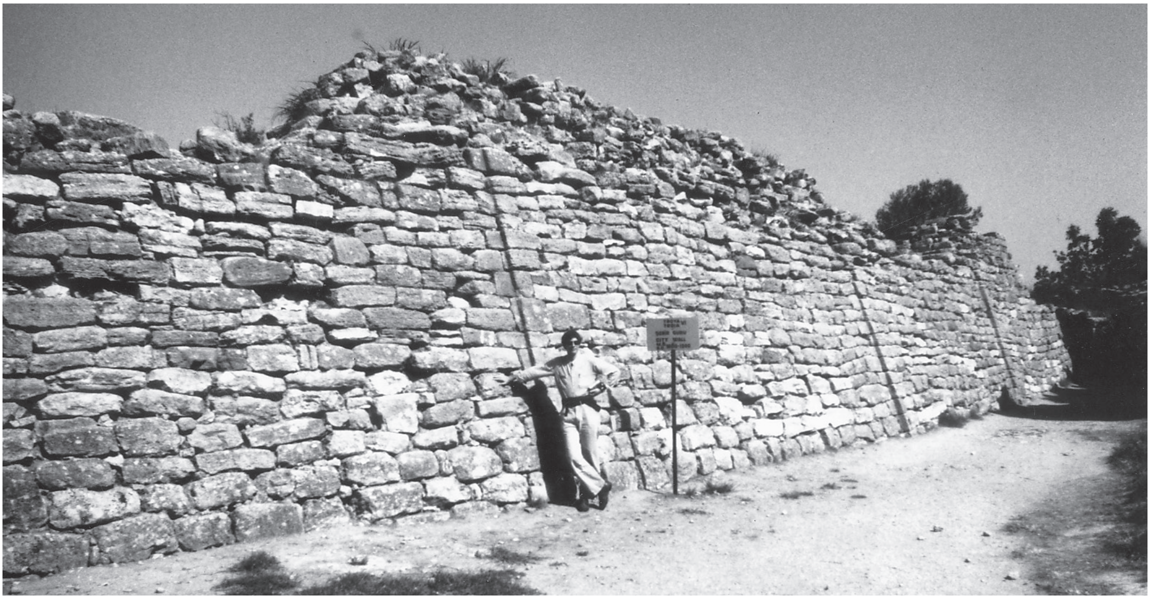


FIGURE 1.2 The author at the walls of Troy. The earliest settlement at Troy can be dated to about 3000 BC, but the citadel walls shown here belong to the sixth level of occupation (Troy VI), built around 1400 BC and destroyed around 1230 BC. Constructed of neatly cut blocks of limestone that slope inward, the citadel wall had at least four gateways, two of them protected by towers. Either Troy VI or its much poorer successor Troy VIIa, destroyed about 1180 BC, could have inspired Greek legends of the Trojan War. (Author's photo)

The king of Athens did not want to send Orestes away impolitely, but neither did he want the Athenian people to be polluted by sharing a bowl with a man who had murdered his mother, so the king had every man fill his cup from his own jug. In reality the use of separate jugs seems to have arisen from a fear of contagion from ghosts, thought to be abroad at this season. The practice had nothing at all to do with a visit from Orestes, and the story was invented well after the custom was established. Such is often true of etiologies in myth.

We examine the legends of the ancient Greeks and Romans in detail in Part III of this text, with further remarks on general patterns in heroic myth (Chapter 12).

Folktale

Folktale is more difficult to define than is divine myth or legend because of the variety of traditional stories grouped together under this heading. Some scholars describe folktales as any traditional story that is not a divine myth or legend. This category would encompass such familiar fairytales as "Cinderella" and

"Snow White," among the many German stories written down from oral sources in the early nineteenth century by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (see Perspective 1). Likewise, the beast fables attributed to the Greek writer Aesop (sixth century BC), such as "The Tortoise and the Hare," might also be considered folktales, as could a story such as "Sinbad the Sailor" from the *Arabian Nights* and most oral tales recorded in North America and Africa during the last two hundred years. In the "myths" of many cultures there is scarcely any divine myth or legend, but all is folktale.

Within this diversity we can still discern common traits. As in legend, the central characters in folktales are human beings, even though gods and spirits appear and play important roles. But in folktales the main characters usually are ordinary men, women, and children rather than kings and queens and others of exalted personal qualities or social status, hence the term *folktale,* a story about common people. Even in fables, a kind of folktale in which the characters are animals, the animals speak and act as though they were ordinary humans. (The fable is the only category of tale for which the Greeks had a specific word, *ainos,* from which comes our *enigma,* "like a fable").

Unlike legends, folktales do not pretend to tell us what happened in the human past. No one believes that Snow White, Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, or the American Indian trickster Crow really existed, as the Greeks believed that Achilles, Helen, and Orestes did. Often the main characters in folktales have low social status, at least at the beginning of the story, and are persecuted or victimized in some way by other characters. The folktale hero may be an outcast whose intelligence and virtue are not recognized by those in power. The hero often is the youngest child of three brothers or sisters, abused by siblings or by a wicked stepmother. Very often the end of the story brings a reversal of fortune, the happy ending for which folktales are well known. Initially taken to be stupid or ineffectual, the folktale hero triumphs over all obstacles and receives an appropriate reward. The trickster, who gets what he wants by unexpected means, is common in folktale.

Whereas divine myths explain why the world is the way it is and legends tell what happened in the human past, the primary function of folktales is to entertain, although they may also play an important role in teaching and justifying customary patterns of behavior. Folktales draw on such universal human experiences as the child's place in the hierarchy of the family. They appeal to such universal human instincts as the belief that good is eventually rewarded and evil punished. In modern literate culture, the novel and the feature film have functions analogous to that of the folktale in oral society. For this reason feature films almost without exception "end happily."

Although curiously few pure folktales have come down to us from the Greeks and Romans, this category of traditional tale is of central importance to the study of Greek myth. To understand why, we must take note of a distinctive aspect of the folktale: the regular appearance of identifiable **folktale types**, even in stories from cultures widely separated in space or time. Scholars recognize more than seven hundred folktale types in traditions around the globe. Sometimes a folktale type is named after a famous example. The "Cinderella type," for example, is any story in which an abused younger sister, assisted by a spirit, appears in fancy dress at a ball, disappears from the prince's admiring glance, then is recognized and marries the prince.

Folktale types are made up of smaller elements called **folktale motifs** that can be recombined in endless variety. A type may occasionally consist of a single motif, but folktales usually have several motifs, and we might think of folktale motifs as the cells that make up the body of a tale. A folktale type is thus a constellation of motifs that constitutes an independent story, that is, a story that makes sense in itself and does not depend on its relation to some larger story. Some motifs making up the "Cinderella type" would be "the abused younger sister," "the spirit helper," "the glass slipper as a token," and "marriage to the prince." Different types may share the same motifs. For example, in any number of folktales the hero grows up and goes off into the world to seek his fortune. This motif by itself could hardly define a type. What defines a type is a recurring constellation of motifs.

PERSPECTIVE 1

THE BROTHERS GRIMM

Everyone has heard of "Grimms' Fairy Tales" (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen,* "Child and House Tales"), a collection that reached its familiar form in an edition of 1857, but took fifty years to assemble. Already in the short first edition of 1812–1815, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm gathered together tales that represent virtually every folktale type found in Germanic countries. From the great work of the Grimm brothers come all later divisions of folktales into certain types and motifs.

Where did the Grimm brothers get these world-famous stories? Their sources were not printed documents. They claimed that their best storyteller was a "peasant woman" who told "genuine Hessian [west-central German] tales." We know, however, that this woman was a tailor's wife from a French Protestant family and that the Grimms' informants were never peasants, but in general educated women, sometimes of high social status. According to the romantic temper of the times, however, the Grimms wanted their stories to come from "the folk," thought to be a repository of uncorrupted truths.

In studying traditional tales, we always face the problem of the relation of our written version with a version that might have really appeared in an oral environment. The Grimms were scientists, yet saw no objection in refining and even re-creating whatever might have been their original source. For example, in the first edition of 1812–1815, "The Frog King" opens like this (in English translation):

> Once upon a time there was a king's daughter, who went out into a wood and sat down beside a cool spring. She had a golden ball, her favorite toy, which she threw up high and caught it again in the air and enjoyed herself in this way. (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen,* 1812–1815, 1:1)

In subsequent editions the scene kept growing until in the last edition of 1857, edited by Wilhelm Grimm, the story opens as follows:

> In ancient times, when wishing still did some good, there lived a king whose daughters were beautiful, but the youngest was so beautiful that the sun itself, which has seen so much, was astounded at her when he shone upon her. Nearby the castle of the king lay a huge dark wood, and in the wood under ancient Lindens was a spring. If the day were hot, the child of the king would go into the wood and sit down at the edge of the cool spring. And if she was bored, she took a golden ball, threw it in the air and caught it again. That was her favorite game. (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen, Ausgabe letzter Hand,* 1857, 1:29)

The words of the story, then, are those of the Grimm brothers, not of a "peasant" from the folk or even an educated and aristocratic informant. Wilhelm Grimm did not think of his embellishments of style as violating his mission to record German "Child and House Tales," because in his view the tale consisted of a constellation of motifs that remained the same in spite of the actual words used to tell it. Probably most myth tellers would agree.

Folktale motifs are not commonplace events, people, or incidents, but are always distinctive or unusual in some way. A "sister" is not a motif, but "an abused youngest sister of three" is. "The woman went to town" has no motifs, but "a hero put on his cap of invisibility, mounted his magic carpet, and flew to the Land Beyond the Sun" has four motifs: "the cap of invisibility," "the magic carpet," "the magic flight through the air," and "the wondrous land." Other common motifs are "the dragon that guards a spring" or "a magic object that protects against attack." Modern scholars have exhaustively described and organized the bewildering variety of folktale motifs, which number in the thousands, so that you can look up a given motif and find where else it occurs throughout world folklore.

A general folktale *type* often found in Greek myth is the quest. In the quest, the folktale hero, compelled to seek some special object, journeys to a strange, terrifying, or wonderful land. There he must face a powerful antagonist: a dragon, monster, ogre, or thoroughly wicked man. To overcome his antagonist, the hero needs the assistance of animals, ghosts, divine beings, or magical weapons or devices. The hero is often a clever trickster, whereas his adversary is brutish, stupid, and cruel. The adversary succeeds in imprisoning, enchanting, or even killing the hero, but at last, often through a trick, the hero escapes, overcomes the enemy, and dispatches him in some cruel or gruesome way. Taking the object he sought, the hero returns to his native land, where his reward is marriage to a princess, or a part of the kingdom, or a great treasure.

Many of these motifs appear in the Greek story of Perseus (see Chapter 14), who was sent on a dangerous journey by an evil king who wanted to marry Perseus' mother. Assisted by nymphs, the goddess Athena, and an array of magical objects, Perseus went to the ends of the earth and slew the deadly Gorgon. On his return journey, carrying the Gorgon's death-dealing head in a pouch, he killed a sea monster that threatened a young woman chained to a rock. He took the woman back to Greece, married her, and killed the wicked king. This story illustrates the way Greek myth can use folktale motifs to elaborate on what would otherwise be considered a legend. About Perseus, for example, we are also told that he was born in the town of Argos and brought up by a poor fisherman on the island of Seriphus, that he accidentally killed his grandfather Acrisius in the town of Larissa (up north in Thessaly), and that he moved to Tiryns and founded Mycenae, where his children later ruled. These are details appropriate to a widespread legend. The myth of Perseus, then, is neither pure legend nor pure folktale, but a mixture of the two.

In general, we may describe much of Greek myth as legend strongly colored by folktale. The main characters in these stories often have names appropriate to men and women who might really have lived, members of a social elite whose stories are attached to prominent Greek towns. Yet their adventures are of a sort we expect to find in folktale. The distinctions we have drawn between types of myth are of great value in organizing our thinking about myth, but we should remember that our distinctions are the results of intellectual analysis; they were not recognized by the ancient Greeks themselves.

THE STUDY OF MYTH

The word *mythology* should mean "the study of myth" (by analogy with *biology, anthropology*), but in common usage *mythology* typically refers more loosely to the myths themselves, or to a particular group of myths, not to the study of myth. Such statements as "I like mythology" are therefore taken to mean "I like myths as such," and the myths of Greece and Rome are often called "classical mythology." To be clear, I avoid the ambiguous term *mythology* altogether, using instead *myth* or *myths,* on the one hand, and the *study of myth* on the other.

The study of myth is multifaceted. There are many different ways in which modern scholars approach the study of myth, but they can be grouped into four general categories:

- the recording and compiling of a given culture's myths
- the analysis of the role that specific myths play or played within the culture
- the study of how one culture's myths are related to those of other cultures
- assessment of the lasting human significance of specific myths or groups of myths

Let us first discuss the recording and compiling of a given culture's myths. The spread of alphabetic literacy in the modern world, and now communication by the Internet, has greatly reduced the degree to which myths serve as a guide to everyday life, but many cultures still maintain a vital oral tradition. One task undertaken by anthropologists and others who study such cultures is to record, in writing or by other means, the oral tales that are still passed on from generation to generation.

For ancient cultures like those of Greece and Rome, a direct recording of oral tales is of course no longer possible. We can only study the myths of these cultures that have been recorded already. Typically the ancient myths were recorded not by scholars studying the myths for their own sakes, but by men (almost never women) who had other goals. In addition, oral tales exist in many different variants; the variant recorded on one occasion could be very different from that recorded on another. As a result, the records that have come down to us are contradictory, confusing, and incomplete. Careful study and considerable experience are needed to move from existing records to a coherent picture of any one myth.

The principal source for the study of ancient myths is works of literature. A literary work can take the form of a narrative and thus have the same structure as an oral tale (beginning, middle, end; plot, character, setting). Literary works, encoded in writing, take their concepts of structure directly from oral tales. Therefore, the study of myth has much in common with the study of literature. However, the structural similarities between the original oral tale and the written work of literature in which it is recorded can be deceptive. The literary work typically is the creation of a single person whose name we often know, whereas myths are anonymous. While creating one's own version of a given myth, the author of the literary work introduces variations not present in the different oral retellings of the tale. Moreover, the author may not have taken the myth directly from the oral tradition at all, but may have worked from versions recorded in previous literary works. We know of many such instances in classical culture, so that often we are not sure whether we are dealing with the study of myths or with the study of literature.

Another valuable source of information about the myths of ancient peoples is the archaeological record. Painting, sculpture, and other nonliterary artifacts can provide valuable clues about variants not contained in the literary record and about who told particular myths, and where and when they told them and why they told them. The art of Greece and Rome is particularly useful for reconstructing ancient myth, but a picture is not by itself a story. At most a picture can represent a character or scene from myth. A major problem in the study of mythical representations in ancient art is determining whether such images were inspired by written or unwritten sources. In any event, we have a great number of mythical representations from ancient Greece and Rome, and much has been learned through study of them. For that reason, this book contains abundant illustrations from Greek pottery and other artifacts.

A second way in which scholars approach the study of myth is to examine the functions of specific myths in the context of a given society. In a society with a living oral tradition, myths are told by someone to someone on some occasion. Both the tellers of tales and their audience have a certain identity and status within the culture. They are male or female, wealthy or poor, powerful or not. To understand the myth fully, we need to know how it functioned for the people who took part in its retelling. We have already mentioned that myths can be etiological, offering an explanation for beliefs or existing practices. But a myth can function in other ways. Did it enhance the prestige of those who told the tale or heard it told? Did it justify the existing distribution of power and wealth or perhaps express a protest? Did it strike a chord in the universal desire to know the meaning of action and of human life? Just what was so interesting to the people who listened to this tale?

A third way in which scholars study myth is to trace relationships between the myths of one culture and those of others. We have already mentioned that many folktale motifs are found in the same or similar form in many different cultures around the world. We can also look at the way that specific myths have migrated from one culture to another but were transformed to suit the adopting culture's needs and traditions. The migration of myths from the ancient Near East to Greece, for example, is an event of extraordinary importance in the history of civilization.

Finally, some scholars involved in the study of myth are concerned with the assessment of myths. What is the deeper human significance of these old tales? Why have they fascinated so many for so long, even after the culture that produced them ceased to exist? Is there some sense in which deep truths reside in these fantastic tales?

Questions of the deeper meaning and truth of myth have played an important role dating back to antiquity. Some have sought to find philosophical or psychological truth in myth by moving beyond the obvious surface meaning to a hidden, less apparent meaning. But to say that this or that is the genuine meaning of a myth is always a matter for dispute. Although some interpretations can be more successful than others, it is never possible to offer conclusive proof. Still, good interpretations require sensitivity and insight, knowledge of the society that produced the myth, and knowledge of one's own mind, which likes to see what it wants, unaware of its own prejudgments. In studying the history of the interpretation of myth, we truly study more how people's prejudgments have changed than we study myth itself. For some scholars, nonetheless, the assessment of a myth's meaning is the most important aspect of their study, and in this book we offer many interpretations as a basis for discussion. Chapter 25 is devoted solely to an examination of the interpretation of myth and the many different theoretical frameworks.

CLASSICAL NAMES: PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING

The pronunciation of classical names can be one of the most frustrating aspects to our study of classical myth, and it is important that we have a sense of what the rules are.

Proper names of classical myth are mostly Greek in origin and were later transliterated into the Latin alphabet, which is somewhat different from the Greek. Latin presently broke up into the Romance languages (Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese). Each had its own peculiarities of spelling and pronunciation of originally Greek names. English is not a Romance language, but its speakers were members of the western Christian church, which—in its Roman Catholic branch—used Latin for its liturgy and for almost all its business down to the mid-twentieth century. In consequence, throughout Western Europe Latin was a universal second language for educated classes for about fifteen hundred years. For this reason the most familiar spellings of the proper names of classical myth are Latinized forms of Greek names, sometimes further altered in standard English. Because of their familiarity, these are the forms used (mostly) in this book. (The Index includes the Greek forms of names often encountered in translations.)

The value of the sounds of names in classical myth as pronounced in English, especially those of vowels, is a topic on which people agree to disagree. Certainly an ancient Greek would be astonished at the ordinary English pronunciation of his or her name. So one often hears the name of the Athenian playwright pronounced as *E*-schylus or *Ē*-schylus or sometimes *Ī*-schylus. Is the famous king of Thebes called *E*-dipus or *Ē*-dipus? Professional classicists may use any of these versions without embarrassment. Still, the correct pronunciation should be *Ē*-schylus and *Ē*-dipus, according to rule that the Latin diphthong *ae* and *oi* are equivalent to the English long *ē*.

Long vowels in the Index are to be pronounced according to the following key:

ā = p*ay*
ē = b*e*
ī = w*i*fe
ō = n*o*
ū = c*u*te

Consonants arouse less uncertainty and tend to follow rules governing the English pronunciation of all words Latinized from the original Greek, including, of course, classical names. Here are the rules:

- The letters *c* and *g* are "soft" before *e* and *i* sounds (not necessarily letters) and "hard" before *a, o,* and *u* sounds in words of Greek or Latin origin: for example, *c*enter, *C*aesar, *c*ivic, *c*ycle; *g*entle, Eu*g*ene, Ar*g*ive, but *c*ategory, *c*ooperate, *c*uneiform; *g*arrulous, *g*onad, *g*usto. Notice the requirement "in words of Greek or Latin origin": *get* and *give* are of Germanic origin and do not follow the rule.
- The Greek letter *chi* (*x*), written *ch,* represented a sound like *k* but pronounced back in the throat. In English it is pronounced like the "hard" *c* in "*c*ard," not like the *ch* of "*ch*icken."
- A final *e* must be pronounced as a separate syllable: Daph-*nē*, Cir-*cē*. To remind the reader of this rule, I place a circumflex over the *ê* in such syllables (except for the common Aphrodite): Daphnê, Circê. A final -*es* is also pronounced as a separate syllable with a long *ē* sound, as in Achill-*ēs.*

Another problem is accent—where to stress the word? Greek relied chiefly on pitch and quantity, whereas English depends on stress. Quantity is the length of time it takes to pronounce a syllable; pitch is the register of the voice. Because of the influence of Latin on Western culture, the English accent on proper names of Greek and Latin origin follows the rule that governs the pronunciation of Latin itself: *If the second-to-last syllable of the name is "long," it is accented; if it is not "long," the third-to-last syllable is accented.* How do you know whether a syllable is "long" or "short"? *If the second-to-last syllable is followed by two consonants, or if it contains a diphthong (*ae, oe, au, ei*), or if it contains a vowel originally long by nature, it is "long" and must be accented. Otherwise, the accent goes on the third syllable from the end.*

Hence Patroclus = pa-**trok**-lus (because the second-to-last syllable is followed by two consonants); Actaeon = ak-**tē**-on (because the second-to-last syllable contains the diphthong *ae;* all diphthongs are rendered as long vowels). Unfortunately, only by knowing Greek and Latin well can you know whether a vowel is long by nature. For example, the goddess Demeter is de-**mē**-ter because the *e* in the second-to-last syllable is long by nature, but you have to know Greek to know why.

A further complication arises from the fact that the combinations of vowels *ae, oe, au,* and *ei* are not always diphthongs (two vowels pronounced as one), but are sometimes pronounced separately. In these cases I place a dieresis (two superimposed dots) over the second vowel. The mother of Perseus was Danaë, pronounced **da**-na-ē (accent is on the third-to-last syllable because the *a* in the second-to-last syllable is short by nature).

These rules are useful but complex. For many it will be easiest simply to consult the pronunciation given after each name in the text and in the Index, where the syllable to be accented is printed in **bold** characters.

KEY NAMES AND TERMS

divine myth, 26
legend, 26
folktale, 26
etiological tale, 28
folktale types, 31
folktale motifs, 32

FURTHER READING CHAPTER 1

Aarne, Antti, and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography,* 2nd rev. ed., trans. and enlarged by Stith Thompson (Helsinki, 1961). The standard work on folktale types.

Grimms' Fairy Tales. Collection of eighteenth-century German folktales by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm; established, more than any other book, what we think of as a folktale. There are many editions, most on the Web at http://worldoftales.com/fairy_tales/Grimm_fairy_tales.html

Hansen, William F., *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (Ithaca, NY, 2002). Exhaustive study of world folklore found in classical myth.

Mayor, Adrienne, "Bibliography of Classical Folklore Scholarship: Myths, Legends, and Popular Beliefs of Ancient Greece and Rome," in *Folklore,* April 2000, on the Web at http://www.worldagesarchive.com/Reference_Links/Myth_Bibliograpgy.htm

Thompson, Stith, *The Folktale* (New York, 1946; reprinted Berkeley, CA, 1977). Still the standard survey of the nature and forms of the folktale, by the most distinguished modern scholar of the folktale, on the Web under http://books.google.com/books.

______, *Motif-index of Folk-literature,* 6 vols. (Bloomington, IN, 1993). The basic reference work for folktale motifs throughout the world. The index to the *Index,* the sixth volume, is 893 pages long! On the Web at http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/thompson/index.htm

For bibliographic items dealing explicitly with the interpretation of myth, see the list at the end of Chapter 25.

CHAPTER 2

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF CLASSICAL MYTH

> Is there anyone to whom you entrust a greater number of serious matters than your wife? And is there anyone with whom you have fewer conversations?
>
> SOCRATES TO CRITOBULOS, IN XENOPHON'S *Oikonomikos* 3.11–13

MYTHS REFLECT THE SOCIETY that produces them. In turn, they determine the nature of that society. They cannot be separated from the physical, social, and spiritual worlds in which a people live or from a people's history. In this chapter we consider the background of the Greeks (and, briefly, the Romans), the nature of their land, their origins and history, how they lived as groups and individuals, and something about their values—what they hoped to achieve in life and how they hoped to do it. Later, when we turn to Roman myth (Chapters 23, 24), we discuss that world in greater detail, which was rather different from that of the Greeks.

GREEK GEOGRAPHY

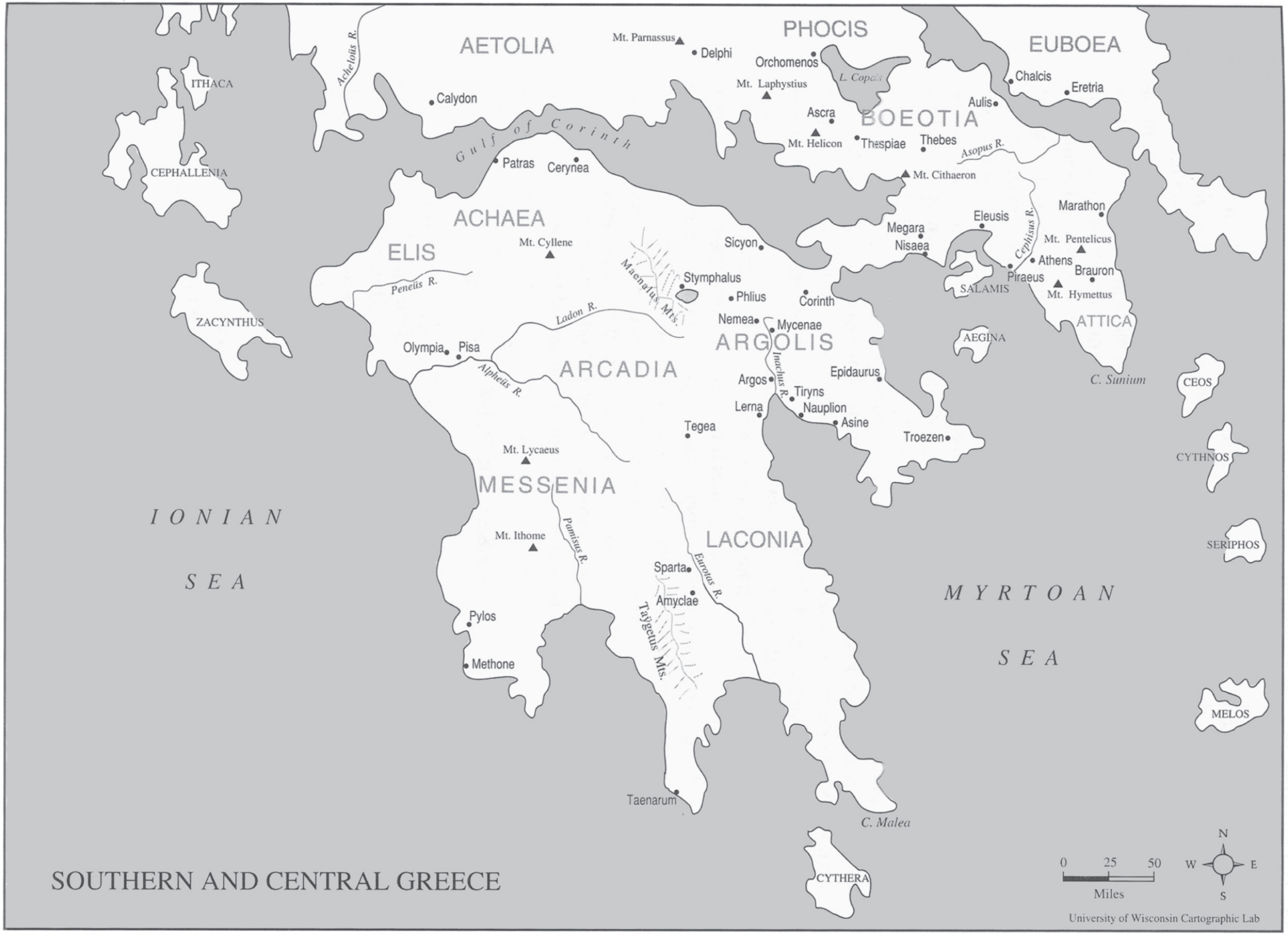
Greece was a poor country, then as now, barren and dry. Greece today supports eleven million people, two million fewer than in the greater Los Angeles area. Unlike the rich river valleys of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the rugged Balkan Peninsula, the south-easternmost extension of Europe, does not seem to be a likely setting for the ancient civilization it produced (see Map I, inside front cover). Its rivers are too small to be navigable, and they dry up in the blazing heat of the mostly rainless summers. High mountains dominate the Greek landscape and occupy about three-quarters of the land. The towering Pindus range runs down the center of the Balkan Peninsula, then continues into the sea, where peaks appear as dry, rocky islands. The Pindus is intersected by other ranges, which cut across the peninsula. Between these ranges lie a series of small, isolated plains, the only places in Greece suitable for agriculture. Here, in these pockets nestled between the mountains and the sea, Greek civilization developed.

To the northeast on the Balkan Peninsula lie the plains of Thessaly and Macedonia (see Map XV, inside back cover). To their south lies the plain of **Boeotia** (be-**osh**-a, "cow-land"), in which the principal settlement in ancient times was the city of Thebes. Southeast of Boeotia lies the plain of **Attica**, with Athens as its capital. Farther south, on the smaller peninsula known as the **Peloponnesus** (pel-o-pon-**nē**-sus; see Map II, Southern and Central Greece), connected to the mainland by a thread of land called the Isthmus, are other cultivable plains. Argolis in the Bronze Age had Tiryns and Mycenae (mī-**sē**-nē) as its principal settlements and later, in the Classical Period, the city of Argos. **Laconia**, also called Lacedaemon (la-se-**dēm**-on), is the territory around the town of Sparta. Messenia (mes-**sēn**-i-a) lies across high mountains to the west, with its important settlement of Pylos. North of that lies the plain of Elis, site of the Olympic Games. All of these places are important in Greek myth.

On these small plains the ancient Greeks grew wheat and barley, planted early in winter when the rainy season began, and harvested in May. The olive, whose small, compact gray leaves resist the ferocious summer sun, grew abundantly in the lowlands and provided a delightful light oil for cooking, cleansing and anointing the body, and burning in lamps. Even now Greek olive oil is the finest in the world. Wine grapes grew on vines planted on the slopes that surrounded the plains. Goats, sheep, and pigs were kept for wool, milk, cheese, leather, and meat, but cattle were few because of the lack of forage. Horses were also scarce and highly valued. They were a source of great prestige, the pride of the ruling class.

As cultivable land was limited in Greece, so were other resources. There was some gold in Thrace (far in the north), but none in Greece proper. There were a few deposits of silver (one of them, at Laurium in Attica, contributed to Athenian economic and military power). Most iron was imported, although important iron deposits in Laconia contributed to Spartan military supremacy. Greece imported copper from Cyprus. The source of tin, alloyed with copper to produce bronze, is unclear.

The Greeks did have access to excellent deposits of limestone and clay. The best limestone was found on the island of **Euboea** (yū-**bē**-a), just east of the mainland not far from Athens, on several smaller islands, and in Thessaly. Under high pressure, limestone crystallizes into marble, a lovely, workable stone used by the Greeks for sculpture and for the finest temples, such as the Parthenon in Athens that celebrated the goddess Athena. Important deposits of marble also occur



ITHACA
CEPHALLENIA
ZACYNTHUS
Acheloüs R.
AETOLIA
Calydon
Mt. Parnassus
Delphi
PHOCIS
Orchomenos
L. Copais
Mt. Laphystius
EUBOEA
Chalcis
Eretria
Aulis
Ascra
BOEOTIA
Mt. Helicon
Thespiae
Thebes
Asopus R.
Mt. Cithaeron
Gulf of Corinth
Patras
Cerynea
ACHAEA
ELIS
Mt. Cyllene
Peneüs R.
Maenalus Mts.
Stymphalus
Sicyon
Phlius
Corinth
Megara
Nisaea
Eleusis
Cephisus R.
Marathon
Mt. Pentelicus
Athens
Brauron
Piraeus
SALAMIS
Mt. Hymettus
ATTICA
AEGINA
Ladon R.
Nemea
Mycenae
ARGOLIS
Olympia
Pisa
ARCADIA
Alpheüs R.
Argos
Inachus R.
Epidaurus
Tiryns
Nauplion
Lerna
Asine
Tegea
Troezen
C. Sunium
CEOS
CYTHNOS
Mt. Lycaeus
MESSENIA
IONIAN SEA
Mt. Ithome
Pamisus R.
LACONIA
Sparta
Eurotas R.
Amyclae
Taÿgetus Mts.
Pylos
Methone
SERIPHOS
MYRTOAN SEA
MELOS
Taenarum
C. Malea
CYTHERA
SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL GREECE
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University of Wisconsin Cartographic Lab

MAP II Southern and Central Greece

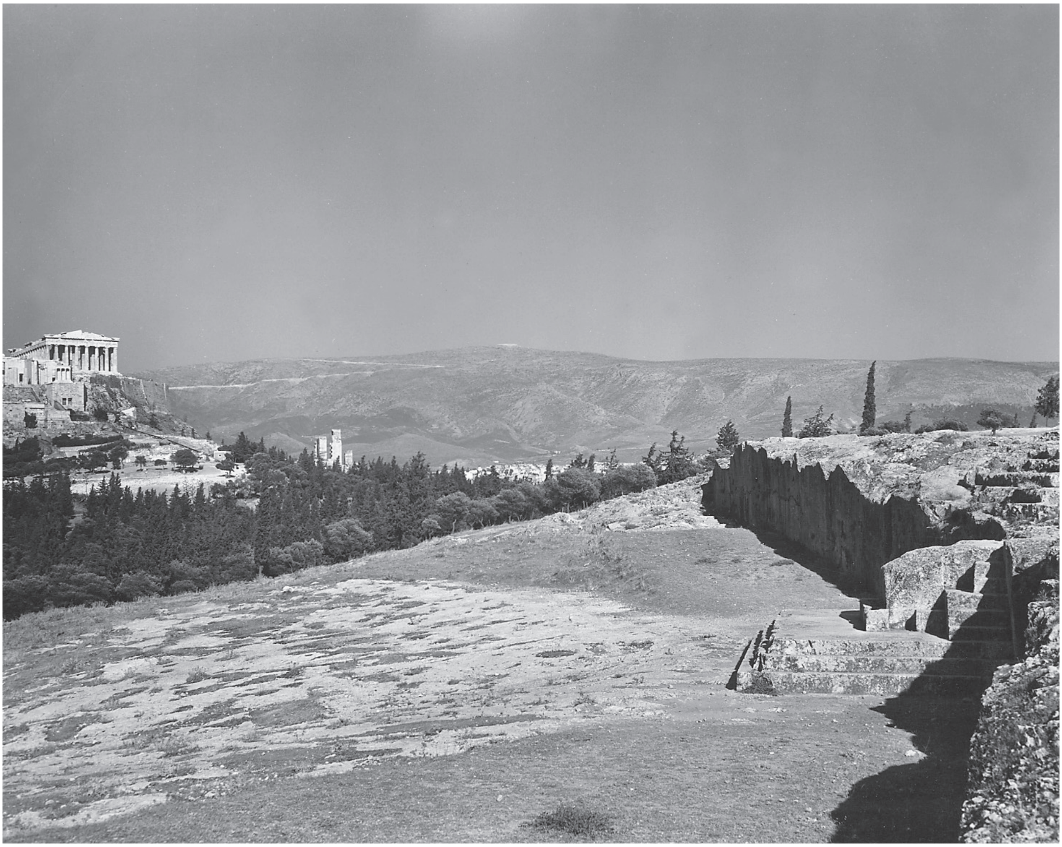

FIGURE 2.1 Athens from the west (see Map VIII, Chapter 16). To the left, the Parthenon, "temple to the virgin," stands on the summit of the Acropolis, a high limestone outcropping. The small temple to Nikê, "victory," and the elaborate entranceway to the Acropolis are just visible at the very edge of the photograph. Below the Parthenon lies the valley of the agora, where Socrates taught and Athenian business was conducted. The rise in the foreground leads to the steps of the Pnyx, a hillside (off the photo to the right) where the people of Athens met to decide issues of peace and war. In the hazy distance is Mount Pentelicon, where the marble for constructing the Parthenon was quarried. This photo was taken in the 1940s, before urban sprawl engulfed modern Athens. (University of Wisconsin–Madison Photo Archive)

on Mount Pentelicon very near Athens (Figure 2.1) and on the islands of Naxos and Paros.

The finest clay, especially that found near Athens and Corinth, provided material for pottery, which the Greeks produced in great abundance and variety. Once fired, ceramic material is breakable, but its fragments are virtually indestructible. Exquisitely decorated Greek pots have been found all over the Mediterranean world and especially in Etruscan graves in Italy. Such pots were often made expressly for use in burials, where they have been found in modern times. The pictures painted on these pots (many reproduced in this book) provide us with vivid illustrations of Greek myths and wonderfully illuminate many details of Greek social life.

But perhaps the greatest Greek natural resource was the sea. The **Aegean** (ē-**jē**-an) **Sea** between the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor (modern western Turkey) played a central role in the life of the ancient Greeks. Most of them lived near the sea and took from it the fish that were a staple of their diet, although Homeric heroes preferred to eat only flesh. The sea was an avenue of communication with the world beyond the mountains that enclosed the isolated Greek communities.

Because of the islands scattered across the Aegean Sea, a sailor is almost never out of sight of land, and the Greeks learned early to travel long distances in small open boats. Several large islands dominate the others. Crete, the southernmost Aegean island, had an especially important role in the early history of Greece, but Euboea, Rhodes, Chios, Samos, and Lesbos also stand out. There are two principal groups of islands: the **Cyclades** (**sik**-la-dēz, "circle islands"), placed in a rough circle around the tiny central island of Delos, which is sacred to Apollo and Artemis; and the Sporades, "scattered islands," which extend along the coast of Ionia, the western coast of Asia Minor. Curiously, the Ionian Sea and the Ionian Islands are to the west of Greece, far removed from Ionia itself.

The paucity of cultivable land and natural resources led the Greeks to trade with other nations. A mastery of the sea allowed them to transport goods to and from foreign lands. They exported wine, olive oil, and pottery and brought back the metals and other goods they needed, especially grain and prestige items of exquisite quality. Later, they established colonies across the sea, on the coasts of Asia Minor to the east, in Italy to the west, in southern France, around the Black Sea, and even in northern Africa.

The geography of the Balkan Peninsula influenced both the history and the myths of the Greeks. The extremely mountainous terrain discouraged communication by land and favored political independence. Throughout most of ancient Greek history, the various cities, raised on small isolated plains, remained autonomous political entities. Many Greek legends told of the great deeds of the founders and early rulers of these cities, and I have therefore organized by geography the many cycles of Greek legend. Myths also reflect the fact that the Greeks were the greatest seafaring people of the ancient world (together with the Semitic Phoenicians), as exemplified by the story of Odysseus, whose perilous sea journey home from the Trojan War lasted ten years.

GREEK HISTORY

Greece was occupied even in the Paleolithic (Old Stone) Age, before 7000 BC, but almost nothing is known of these early inhabitants. From the Neolithic (New Stone) Age, 6000–3000 BC, survive foundation stones of houses, pottery, stone tools, and graves. These peoples lived in settled communities and practiced a rudimentary agriculture. Our evidence becomes richer with the advent of the Bronze Age around 3000 BC, after which we divide the archaeological and historical record into the following periods:

Early/Middle Bronze Age	3000–1600 BC
Late Bronze Age (or Mycenaean Age)	1600–1150 BC
Dark Age	1150–800 BC
Archaic Period	800–480 BC
Classical Period	480–323 BC
Hellenistic Period	323–30 BC

These dates are associated with the appearance of civilization ("life in cities," in the presence of writing), c. 3000 BC; the ascendancy of mainland Greeks, c. 1600 BC (the Mycenaeans); the sack of cities and the international disruption of trade, c. 1150 BC; the invention of the Greek alphabet, the principal technology of modern Western civilization, c. 800 BC; the Persian attack and defeat at Marathon in 490 BC and at Salamis in 480 BC; the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC; and Rome's conquest of Cleopatra's Egypt in 30 BC. The dates are conventional, and to some extent arbitrary, but provide a useful framework for discussion. (See Chronology of the Ancient World at the end of the book, before the Index, for a detailed chronology of the times and people important to this book.)

The Early/Middle Bronze Age (3000–1600 BC): The Origin of the Greeks

We do not regard the inhabitants of the mainland during the Early Bronze Age as Greeks because their cultural traditions were very different from those of the people who eventually became known by that name. We know nothing of their race or the language they spoke. They seem to have been modest farmers who worshiped goddesses of fertility to increase the yield of their crops, a religion still vital among later Greeks and reflected prominently in some Greek myths.

We are far better informed about the inhabitants of the island of Crete, called Minoans after Minos, the legendary Cretan king, although again we know nothing of their ethnic affinities or language. From c. 2200 BC into the Mycenaean Age, c. 1450 BC, the Minoans built elaborate and wealthy palaces. The bull was important in their religious ritual, as was the double ax, or *labrys* (hence "labyrinth"), presumably the special tool by which bulls were sacrificed. They also worshiped a goddess of fertility. The Minoan palaces were not encircled by defensive walls, a fact that lends support to the remark by the Greek historian Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400 BC) that the mythical "kingdom of Minos" dominated the seas. Therefore they feared no enemies.

The people later called the Greeks belonged to a cultural and linguistic group known as the **Indo-Europeans**, whose original homeland apparently was in central Asia, perhaps east of the Caspian Sea. Beginning in the fourth millennium BC, the Indo-Europeans migrated in all directions into Europe and Asia, bringing with them their linguistic and cultural traditions. The exact date of their arrival in Greece cannot be established definitively, but the destruction of existing settlements around 2100 BC, at the transition from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age, suggests the arrival of a new people. From about the same time we find the first evidence in Greece of the domestic horse, an animal elsewhere associated with the Indo-Europeans.

Much of what little we know about the Indo-Europeans today is inferred by scholars from a reconstruction of the language they spoke, called proto-Indo-European. Although we have no written record or other direct evidence of this long-extinct hypothetical language, some of its vocabulary, and even some of its grammatical structure, can be deduced from the many ancient and modern languages descended from it. Every language spoken today in Europe (except Basque, Finnish, Hungarian, and Estonian) belongs to this family. Today more than 1.8 billion people, on every continent, speak or at least understand Indo-European languages. Europe's colonial expansion into the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia carried English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, and French into new lands, where today they continue to absorb and replace native languages. The spread of the Indo-European language family, now further assisted by the Internet, is one of the most remarkable events in the history of the human race.

According to the elusive evidence, Indo-European society may have been divided into three groups whose membership was determined by birth: kings and priests, warriors, and food producers. They had a highly developed family life, and they were devoted to war. Some think that some basic patterns in Greek myth go back to the Indo-Europeans.

The Greek language of later eras was not the tongue of the early Indo-European immigrants but developed over the centuries after their arrival. The basic vocabulary of Greek is derived from the hypothetical proto-Indo-European parent language, but many words—particularly those for places, plants, animals, and gods—seem to have been taken from the language of the earlier inhabitants, just as in America the names Manhattan, Chicago, and Wisconsin were taken from languages of pre-European inhabitants. There were also many Semitic words in Greek, reflecting the Greeks' enormous debt to earlier Semitic culture.

The Late Bronze Age (Mycenaean Age) (1600–1150 BC)

We have little archaeological evidence from the Early and Middle Bronze Age in Greece, but spectacular ruins and written documents survive from the **Late Bronze** or **Mycenaean Age**, named for the enormous stone citadel of Mycenae in the Peloponnesus (compare Figure 14.1). Greek-speaking Indo-Europeans took over the site about 1650 BC. Immensely wealthy tombs from about 1600 BC prove its richness and importance and provide a convenient date for the beginning of the Mycenaean Age.

In the Mycenaean Age, powerful kings ruled the Greeks. The kings and their retainers constituted a military and an aristocratic elite. They were lovers of war who used bronze weapons, rode to battle in horse-drawn chariots, and concentrated great wealth. Independent kings built impressive strongholds from which they supervised highly controlled and centralized, although local, economies. Their greatest centers of power, in addition to Mycenae and the nearby Tiryns, were

Thebes and Orchomenus in Boeotia, Athens in Attica, Pylos in Messenia, and a site near Sparta in Laconia. All these centers (except Orchomenus) figure prominently in Greek myth, and we encounter them repeatedly in the following chapters. Unlike the Minoan settlements, Mycenaean palaces were strongly fortified. The Mycenaean Greeks may have called themselves **Achaeans** (a-**kē**-anz), a word Homer uses to describe the men who attacked Troy.

In about 1450 BC the Minoan civilization was destroyed and the palaces burned, evidently by Mycenaeans from the mainland, who occupied and rebuilt the principal palace at Cnossus. The palace was destroyed again around 1400 BC by an unknown agency, never to be rebuilt. In the ruins we have found documents written in Greek in a nonalphabetic script called **Linear B**. Minoan art and religion made a deep impression on the Mycenaean Greeks and, through them, on subsequent European culture.

In 1952, English architect Michael Ventris deciphered Linear B script, the form of writing used by the Mycenaeans, one of the great intellectual achievements of the twentieth century. Ventris proved that the writing consisted of about eighty nonalphabetic signs, each of which stood for a syllable. In addition to the tablets found at Cnossus and other sites in Crete, documents in Linear B have also turned up at Pylos, Mycenae, Thebes, and elsewhere on the mainland, proving the cultural uniformity of the Mycenaeans. Linear B script, preserved on clay tablets, originated as a modification of the earlier, undeciphered Cretan Linear A writing, which may have preserved pieces of the Minoan language, evidently unrelated to Greek. Linear B script (and Linear A, mostly) was used only for keeping economic accounts. Although these records give us a great deal of information, the ambiguous Linear B script was not used for creating literature.

The coincidence between centers of power in Mycenaean times and important locations in cycles of Greek legend—the Mycenae of Agamemnon, the Tiryns of Heracles, and the Thebes of Oedipus—suggests that many Greek legends originated during the Mycenaean period. In the absence of some form of writing suitable for recording them, however, such tales could only be transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Sometimes non-Greek cities, Cnossus in Crete and Troy in Asia Minor, were provided with cycles of legend, but always as seen through Greek eyes. Of native traditions from Cnossus and Troy, we have no direct information.

There were nine levels of habitation at the site of Bronze Age Troy (see Figure 21.6). When Troy VI was destroyed by human hands about 1230 BC, the people then occupying the site were raising horses and using pottery similar to that found in Greece. Were there Greeks living at Troy at this time? A recent find in the ruins of a tiny bronze seal with Hittite writing on it suggests to some that the Trojans were Hittites, a powerful inland Indo-European people whose capital was near modern Ankara, Turkey, or at least the site was subject to the Hittites. In fact, we do not know who the Trojans were. By 1150 BC fire had destroyed most of the Mycenaean palaces on the mainland. Linear B writing, which supported the palace economies, disappeared forever. Greece sank into a **Dark Age** that lasted nearly four hundred years.

The Dark Age (1150–800 BC)

Later Greeks attributed the destruction of the Mycenaean world to an invasion by Greek-speaking peoples from northwest Greece whom they called the Dorians. The Dorians were equated with the Sons of Heracles in Greek legend, about whom important stories were told. They spoke a distinct dialect. Although modern scholars cannot confirm the Dorian invasion, the explanation seems plausible. Dorian Greeks, whether or not descendants of Heracles, apparently overthrew the Mycenaean Greeks, who earlier dominated Greece, except for remote and mountainous central Arcadia in the Peloponnesus. They then pushed across the Aegean to Crete and other nearby islands and to the southern strip of Asia Minor, where in classical times a Dorian dialect was spoken.

Of the mainland settlements, Athens alone withstood the invaders, according to tradition. Many Greeks from other regions migrated eastward and resettled the Aegean islands. Refugees from the Peloponnesus, passing through Athens and now called Ionians, took possession of the central islands of the Aegean and the central sector of the western coast of Asia Minor, henceforth known as **Ionia.** Its greatest center was at Miletus (see Map XV, inside back cover). Other refugees, the Aeolians, crossed from Thessaly in the north of mainland Greece to the island of Lesbos and to the northern portion of the coast of Asia Minor near Troy, henceforth called Aeolis. By 900 BC, the map of Greece had been completely redrawn.

Very few archaeological remains survive from the Dark Age, a time of profound social disorganization, depopulation, and impoverishment. Petty kings with only local authority replaced the great monarchs of the Mycenaean Age. Many settlements were split by tribal and family feuds and, in the Dorian areas, by a great gulf between masters and subjects. What civilization remained seems to have centered on the long island of Euboea, just east of the mainland, where recent excavations have revealed a spectacular grave from c. 1000 BC containing a warrior and his wife, with many rare and valuable objects, some gold. Euboean settlements were the only Greek towns to carry on direct trade with the Near East throughout the Dark Age, relations that were to play a central role in the revival of Greek culture. The Greek alphabet first appears on Euboea, where the poems of Homer and Hesiod may have been written down, inaugurating the Archaic Period.

The Archaic Period (800–480 BC)

About 800 BC, someone familiar with Phoenician writing, probably a Semite, invented the Greek alphabet by requiring that a rough indication of the vowel accompany each consonantal sign (Figure 2.2). Phoenician writing had signs only for consonants and could not be pronounced except by a native. It was an odd but purely phonetic syllabary (as was Linear B), with around only twenty-two signs. The Greek alphabet was the first writing that encoded an approximation of the actual sound of the human voice, hence a script potentially applicable to any human language. It is the most important invention in the history of culture after the

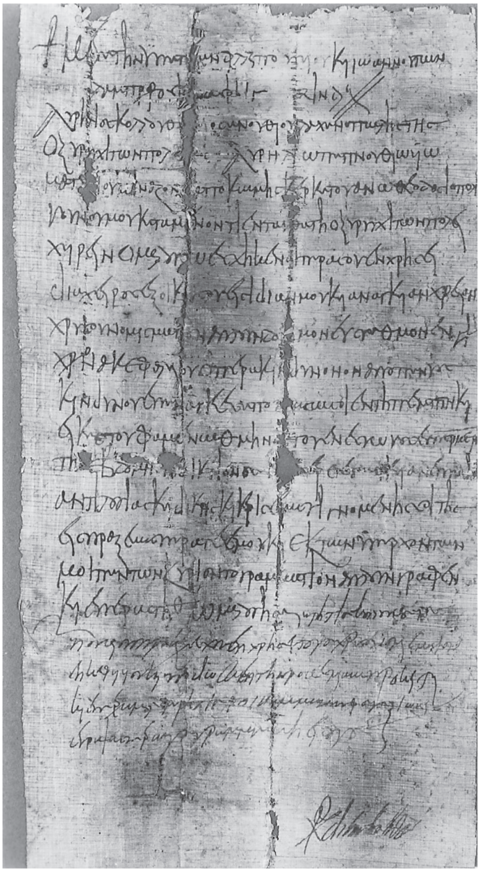

FIGURE 2.2 Greek papyrus with alphabetic writing. A contract for the loan of money with signature of the notary at the bottom, from the fifth century AD. All ancient Greek literature was recorded on papyrus, made of thin strips of the papyrus plant laid in two cross-grained layers and pounded together. When complete, the papyrus was rolled (hence our word *volume* from the Latin *volumen,* "a thing rolled"), making it difficult to look anything up. Tens of thousands of papyri have survived in the dry sands of Egypt, including most of what we possess of early lyric poets. A new poem by Sappho, preserved on papyrus, was published in 2005. (From "The Wisconsin Papyri," no. 76, vol. 1, no. 10, 468 AD. University of Wisconsin–Madison Photo Archive)

invention of writing itself and the basis for Western civilization. Except for minor changes, it was the same system of writing that appears on this page. In its Roman and related forms, the Greek alphabet is today found everywhere.

Within a generation, the revolutionary alphabetic technology had spread throughout the Greek people, changing everything. At the same time, under Euboean leadership, the Greeks sent out colonies to the west, to southern Italy and Sicily, where they built prosperous cities. The period of political and cultural revival that began with the invention of the alphabet marks the beginning of a new era in Greek history, the **Archaic Period** (800–480 BC).

The Archaic Period witnessed the emergence of the Greek ***polis***, the politically independent city-state. Unlike the villagers of earlier eras, who defined their position by family relations, the members of a *polis* owed their allegiance to a social group defined by geography. In the *polis* appeared for the first time the explicit concept of citizenship ("city-membership"), so important to the modern state.

Only men were citizens and could participate in political affairs; women lived in a separate world, as in Islamic societies today. Within the *polis,* the Greek citizen was in relentless competition with his neighbor. Greek cultural values depended on the spirit of male competition (unlike in Egypt, where cooperation was a high social value), and these values permeate the myths they told.

Another important development during the Archaic Period was the rebirth of commerce, which had ebbed throughout the Dark Age. The Greeks' dependence on the sea for commerce, transportation, and food was essential to the formation of their character and had a direct influence on their social structure. Greece was never socially stratified in the fashion of the heavily populated and extravagantly wealthy river monarchies along the Nile and in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Greeks' dependence on the sea further reduced class distinctions. The sudden dangerous storms of the Aegean threatened captain and crew alike. Claims to good birth and upbringing had no survival value. Seafaring encouraged extreme individualism and offered rich rewards to the skilled adventurer willing to take risks. Seafaring was practiced almost entirely by free citizens, and in the *Odyssey* the Greeks invented the world's first tale of danger and wonder on the high seas, a journey that came to symbolize the quest for knowledge itself.

In the sixth century BC commerce received an enormous stimulus from the introduction of coinage, universally accepted weights of portable, indestructible metal certified by civic authority. Before this time, money as we think of it did not exist. Coined money made possible capitalism and the enrichment of new social classes, many of humble birth, by commerce. The traditional aristocracy looked down on and bitterly opposed these upstarts, skillful only at accumulating wealth, and called them *kakoi,* the "bad men," while calling themselves *aristoi,* the "best men" (hence our "aristocrat"). Despite the scorn of the *aristoi,* economic and political power fell more and more into the hands of the *kakoi.*

Between 650 and 500 BC, many Greek city-states were ruled by strong men known as *tyrants,* who represented the interests of the commercial class against the traditional aristocracy. The word *tyrant* comes from a non-Greek language of Asia Minor and originally meant something like "ruler," but by the sixth century BC it referred to a leader who had taken power by "unconstitutional" (that is, nontraditional) means. In the eyes of their aristocratic opponents, the tyrants were arbitrary despots, but tyrants often did much to enhance the wealth and power of the cities they ruled. Rarely did a tyrant give up power voluntarily.

In cultural matters, however, the aristocracy clung to power. As the most literate citizens, its members were creators or sponsors of most Greek literature, art, and philosophy. They gave to *tyrant* the pejorative meaning it has today. When speaking of Greek culture, we refer, with few exceptions, to the literary monuments produced by and for the *aristoi,* the free male citizens descended from old families. About the *kakoi* and the poor, slaves, women, and other noncitizens, who were mostly illiterate, we have little direct information.

During the latter part of the Archaic Period, Greece was threatened by a powerful rival from the East. The Persians, an Indo-European people living on the Iranian plateau east of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), had developed into a dynamic warrior state under the leadership of Cyrus the Great (600?–529 BC). Conquering and absorbing first the Semitic states of Mesopotamia, then Egypt, and finally advancing into Anatolia (modern Turkey) and southern Russia, Persia became the greatest empire the world had seen. Soon Persia absorbed the Greek colonies on the western coast of Asia Minor.

The Classical Period (480–323 BC)

In 508 BC, in Athens, a remarkable development took place: the emergence of the world's first democracy ("rule by the people"; *demos* = "people"), an outgrowth of the centuries-long dispute between *kakoi* and *aristoi*. Under the leadership of one Clisthenes (**klīs**-the-nēz), the social and political basis of the Athenian *polis* was completely reorganized so as to place decision making in the hands of all adult male citizens, who may have numbered about twenty-five thousand out of a total resident population of perhaps 200,000 including women, minors, slaves, and noncitizen residents. Citizens lived both in the countryside and in the city. Henceforth, authority in government came not from inherited wealth and family prominence, but from one's ability to persuade the large, unruly assembly of citizens.

From this unique political climate emerged many of the forms of civilization familiar to Westerners today: rule by written law, reason supported by evidence as the basis for decisions, and the separation of religious and political institutions. In this environment arose historical writing, science, and philosophy. In Athens, ancient myths were recast as a new form of entertainment and instruction in the annual presentations of Athenian tragedy. Democracy made the ordinary citizen feel he had responsibility for his own destiny.

The Persian army discovered, to their sorrow, the explosive power of this new form of government when they invaded mainland Greece in 490 BC. In a tremendous battle near the village of Marathon, about twenty-five miles northeast from Athens, Athenian citizen-soldiers smashed the professional Persian army and drove the invaders into the sea. "This proved," wrote the fifth-century BC historian Herodotus, "if there were need of proof, how noble a thing is freedom" (*Histories* 5.78). An even greater Persian campaign launched ten years later, in 480 BC, had a foretaste of disaster in the bravery of the three hundred Spartans who fought to the last man at the pass of Thermopylae, then met with catastrophe, first in a naval battle off the island of Salamis near Athens and then on land (479 BC) near Plataea in Boeotia (Figure 2.3; Perspective 2).

This second stunning victory over the Persians, under Athenian leadership at sea and Spartan on land, is a convenient dividing point between the Archaic Age and the brief **Classical Period**. The unexpected victory fired the Greeks, and especially the Athenians, with an unprecedented self-confidence and eagerness to try out new forms of thought, social organization, and artistic expression. These amazing victories inspired the study by Herodotus (485–425 BC), who coined the word *history*, which means "inquiry." In this case he wished to inquire into the

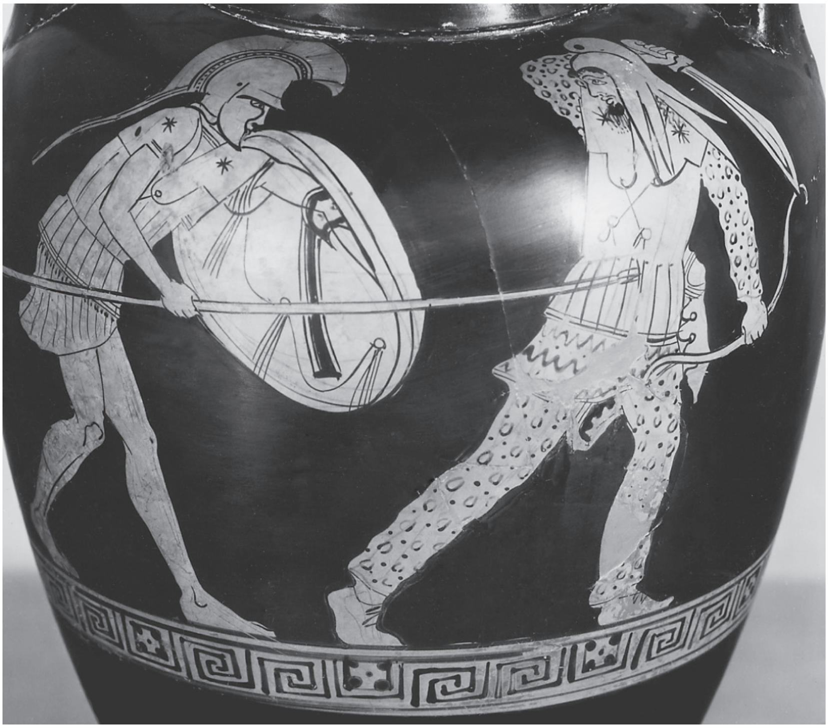

FIGURE 2.3 A Greek hoplite (heavy-armed soldier) drives his spear into a Persian enemy on this Attic water jug, c. 480–470 BC. Note the Greek's bronze helmet, linen cuirass (body protector), and bronze shield held by an arm strap and handgrip. In real life the hoplite also covered his feet and calves with bronze. The Persian, wearing long pants, a shirt, and a leather cap with tassels, is armored only with a linen cuirass. He carries a sword and a bow; a quiver of arrows rides on his hip. Later, Amazons were portrayed in the same garb and identified with the Persian enemy. The Athenian's love of freedom, as well as his superior armor, contributed to his military victory over the Persians in 490 and 480/479. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, New York)

causes of the Persian defeat. The popular modern marathon race was inspired by the Athenian victory of 490 BC. After the Persian defeat, a runner reportedly ran the twenty-five miles to Athens, announced the victory, then dropped dead from exhaustion.

During the Classical Period, the Golden Age of Greece, worked many of the most influential thinkers, artists, and politicians who ever lived: historians Herodotus and Thucydides; tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; comic dramatist Aristophanes; statesman Pericles; philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; Ictinus, architect of the Parthenon; sculptor Phidias; and orator Demosthenes, to name only the most prominent. All these men were residents of Athens (and most of them were born there), a testimony to the city's cultural supremacy fostered by

PERSPECTIVE 2

FRANK MILLER'S *300*

The 2007 American action film *300* grossed about $500 million. The film's opening was the twenty-fourth largest in box office history and the third biggest opening ever for an R-rated film. Adapted from a graphic novel by Frank Miller (b. 1967), it is a fictionalized retelling of the Battle of Thermopylae as reported by the Greek historian Herodotus (c. 485–425 BC). King Leonidas (Gerard Butler) leads three hundred Spartans into battle against the Persian king Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro) and his army of more than one million soldiers. The film is a shot-for-shot adaptation of the comic book using the "bluescreen" technique, whereby the actors stand before a blue screen later replaced with background footage. More than fifteen hundred special effects shots were incorporated into the film in this way.

Dilios, a Spartan soldier, narrates the story of Leonidas from childhood to his being crowned king of Sparta. A Persian messenger arrives at Sparta demanding submission to the Persian king Xerxes. Leonidas and his guards throw the messenger into a pit. Knowing a Persian attack will come soon, Leonidas visits the Ephors—ancient priests stricken with leprosy, whose blessing he needs before the Spartan council will authorize war. He proposes that they meet the immense army of Persians up north at Thermopylae ("hot gates"). The Ephors consult an oracle, who decrees that Sparta must not go to war during their religious festival. Two agents of Xerxes appear who bribe the corrupt Ephors with whores and gold.

Leonidas follows his plan anyway, setting out with only three hundred soldiers. He knows that he is on a suicide mission, but hopes his sacrifice will spur the council to action. On the way, other Greeks join the Spartans. At Thermopylae, they build a wall across the pass. Leonidas meets Ephialtes of Trachis, a hunchbacked Spartan in exile whose parents fled Sparta to spare him from infanticide. He asks to join the fight and warns Leonidas of a secret path by which the Persians could outflank them. Leonidas turns him down. Ephialtes cannot hold a shield properly, and he would compromise the Spartan phalanx.

The Persians arrive and demand surrender. Leonidas refuses. Advancing in a tightly knit phalanx, the Spartans use the narrow terrain to knock back the Persian army. Xerxes parleys with Leonidas, offering him wealth and power in exchange for surrender. Leonidas declines. Xerxes sends the feared Immortals, his elite troops, to attack the Spartans, but the Spartans finish them off. Xerxes then sends black powder bombs and giant war beasts at the Spartans (this is not in Herodotus!), but all attacks fail.

Angered by Leonidas' rejection, Ephialtes tells the Persians about the secret path. When they realize that Ephialtes has betrayed them, the Greek allies retreat. Leonidas orders Dilios to return to Sparta to tell the council what is about to happen.

In Sparta, the treacherous Spartan Theron demands that Gorgo, queen of Sparta (Leonidas' wife), have sex with him in exchange for persuading the Spartan council to send reinforcements. She complies, but Theron then argues just the opposite. Gorgo kills him, repeating his own words as he raped her: "This will not be over quickly!" Her dagger pierces his purse. Persian coins spill from his robe, revealing he is a traitor. At last the council agrees to unite against Persia.

Meanwhile at Thermopylae, the Persians use the goat path to outflank the Spartans. Leonidas hurls his spear at Xerxes, cutting the king on the cheek. Disturbed by his own mortality, Xerxes watches as all the Spartans are slaughtered by a massive barrage of arrows. Moments before his death, Leonidas pledges his love to Gorgo.

Concluding his tale before an audience of Spartans on the edge of the battlefield a year after Thermopylae, Dilios relates how the Persian army was long baffled by the bravery of a mere three hundred Spartans. Word of their valiant resistance spreads across Greece, inspiring the city-states to unite against the Persians. Now the Persians face ten thousand Spartans leading thirty thousand free Greeks. Dilios leads the Greeks in a successful charge against the Persian army in the Battle of Plataea and the film ends.

The film has been praised for its portrayal of the Spartans' heroic code, but decried for the portrayal of the Persians as a monstrous, barbaric, and demonic horde. Officials of the Iranian government, including then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, denounced the film: The film was banned in Iran. There is no doubt that *300* was meant to reflect on current political issues. Just prior to its release, the creator of *300,* Frank Miller, said, "For some reason, nobody seems to be talking about who we're up against and the sixth-century barbarism that they actually represent. These people saw off people's heads. They enslave women. They genitally mutilate their daughters. They do not behave by any cultural norms that are sensible to us. I'm speaking into a microphone that never could have been a product of their culture and I'm living in a city where three thousand of my neighbors were killed by thieves of airplanes they never could have built."

its radical democracy. From other cities during the Classical Period came the poet Pindar; Democritus, who fashioned the atomic theory of matter; and Hippocrates, "the father of medicine."

During the Classical Period the *polis* reached its greatest effectiveness but also showed its worst faults. Some of the tragedies of this era illuminate the violent tensions many citizens felt between ancient loyalty to the family and current loyalty to the political state. Still, the *polis* triumphed as the ideal of social life. In the fourth century BC, Aristotle described the *polis* as the perfect and natural fruit of a long social evolution. According to him, "man is by nature a political animal," that is, a being who reaches full potential only by living in a *polis.*

Although the proud and politically independent city-states struggled constantly and murderously against one another, the Greeks nonetheless maintained the sense of being a single people. They spoke a common language, used a common technology of writing, and called themselves Hellenes (**hel**-ēnz), implying a common descent from the legendary Hellên (**hel**-lēn) (not to be confused with Helen of Troy!). The term *Graioi,* "Greeks," comes from the Romans, who took it from a northwestern Greek tribe living in Epirus, the backward territory across the Ionian Sea that separates Italy from Greece. Greeks worshiped the same pantheon of gods and participated in all-Greek religious and athletic festivals, especially at Olympia. Such regional events as the annual Panathenaic ("all-Athenian") festival in Athens gave the Greeks a sense of ethnic community.

But political unity was beyond the reach of the freedom-loving Greeks. In the crisis of the Persian wars they combined briefly against the barbarian invader. Once the Persian threat receded, they settled into two loosely organized rival leagues, one led by Sparta, a military state ruled by an old-fashioned aristocracy, the other by democratic Athens (Figure 2.4). From 431 to 404 BC, these leagues fought each other in a ruinous conflict known as the **Peloponnesian War**. Greece never recovered.

The Classical Period saw the development of Greek philosophy and history as powerful intellectual rivals to traditional myth. Such physicians as Hippocrates and philosophers like Protagoras and later Plato and Aristotle challenged mythic accounts of the origin and nature of the universe, and the historian Thucydides rejected the conviction, heretofore universal, that gods determine the outcome of human events. The stories of gods and heroes were the common birthright of all Greeks and were celebrated in painting, sculpture, song, and drama, but they were given new meanings in the intellectual ferment of this extraordinary age.

The Hellenistic Period (323–30 BC)

The social and political system based on the *polis* was crippled in 338 BC when Philip II of Macedon, a region to the north of Greece (see Map XV, inside back cover), overran the Greek city-states and imposed his will on them. The Macedonian state was a monarchy and altogether unlike the Greek *polis.* Although Philip admired Greek intellectual culture and Greek economic enterprise, he had no patience with the endless squabbles conducted in the name of "freedom." When he was killed in 336 BC in a palace intrigue, his twenty-year-old son Alexander inherited the throne.

Moved by legends of the Trojan War and seeing himself as a latter-day Achilles, Alexander attacked the enormous Persian empire, ostensibly to avenge the Persian invasions of 490 and 480 BC a century and a half earlier. In a series of brilliant battles, Alexander destroyed the Persian empire and occupied its vast territories. Alexander was by far the greatest field commander who ever lived. His ruthless and bloody conquests took him even beyond Persian domains into India. From 323 BC, when Alexander died of a fever in Babylon (or was poisoned by rivals) at age thirty-two, we date the **Hellenistic Period** of Greek history. *Hellenic* refers to anything Greek (from the legendary Hellên, founder of the Greek race); *Hellenistic* refers to the historical period that began with the death of Alexander the Great.

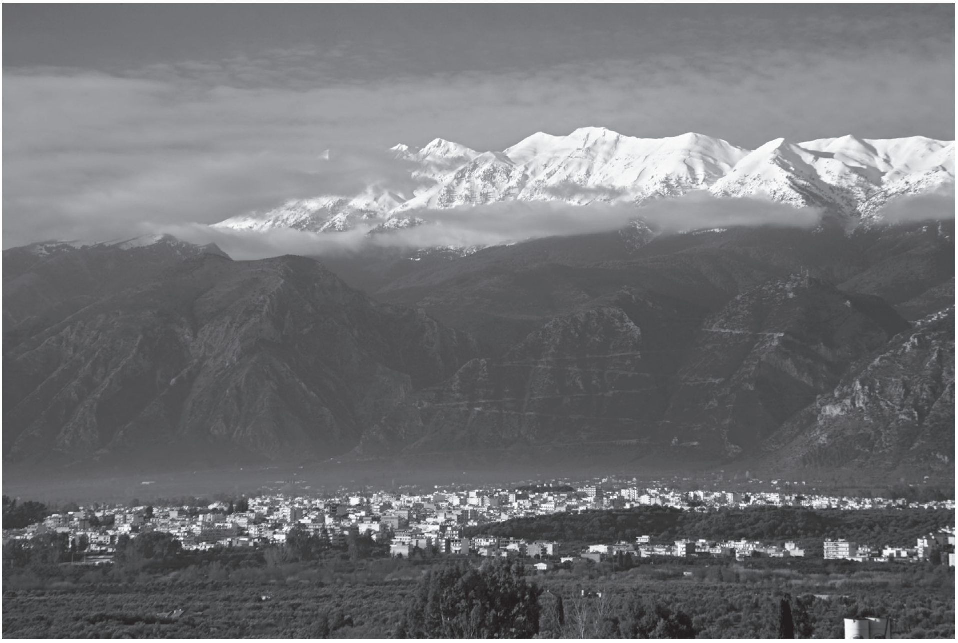

FIGURE 2.4 The modern village of Sparta in the plain beneath towering Mount Taygetus. Little remains of the ancient city, proving the wisdom of the Greek historian Thucydides, who remarked in his history of the Peloponnesian War (1.10.2), "If the Spartans should abandon their city, and leave behind their temples and the foundations of their permanent structures, no doubt after a considerable time had elapsed posterity would be very skeptical indeed about their power . . . since they do not live in a real city and do not have any rich or beautiful shrines and public buildings, but dwell in scattered villages in the ancient Greek style . . . On the other hand, if the same thing happened to Athens, the visible evidence would lead people to estimate the city's power at twice its true value." (Hercules Milas / Alamy)

After his death, Alexander's empire quickly broke up into separate and hostile kingdoms, but Greek culture became world culture. Everywhere throughout the ancient East—in Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt—cities were established on the Greek model, decorated in the Greek style, and ruled by Greeks and speakers of Greek. The cultural capital shifted from Athens to Alexandria, a city that Alexander himself had founded in the western delta of Egypt.

In 146 BC, Rome conquered the Greek mainland. Other centers of Hellenistic culture soon met a similar fate. We can date the end of the Hellenistic period to 30 BC, when Alexandria fell into Roman hands after the suicide of Cleopatra VII, the last ruling descendant of a general of Alexander (Ptolemy). But Roman society and culture were in many ways a continuation of Greek Hellenistic culture.

GREEK SOCIETY

Greek myths reflect the society in which they were transmitted, and to understand them we need to know something about the social life of ancient Greece. Unfortunately, our knowledge is limited. About conditions in the Bronze and Iron ages we have archaeological evidence, but no written information except the accounting documents in Linear B script. For the Archaic Period, we have the long poems of Homer and Hesiod, who probably lived in the eighth century BC, but almost nothing after them. We know more about Greek society in the Classical Period, largely because of the tragedies and other literary works from this era. Even here information is scanty. Almost all literary sources are Athenian, and almost all composed by aristocratic males. Most so-called descriptions of Greek social life, based on surviving evidence, are really descriptions of Athenian social life of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, where evidence is most abundant. Although Athens was in many ways a unique community in ancient Greece, in this section we nonetheless attempt to describe the general aspects of Greek society reflected in myth, especially those that seem to us most foreign and distant.

Males

Much of Greek social life revolved around the free males who were dominant in both the private and the public spheres. They held final authority over their wives and the other members of their households. They alone were obligated to fight in wars, and they alone were eligible to become citizens of the *polis.*

An education from early childhood prepared them for these roles. They not only learned to read and write but also to be athletic, in rigorous control of their appetites, and fearless in battle and the hunt. They grew up in a small, tightly knit, relentlessly competitive community in which everyone knew everyone's worth and there was no forgiveness for failure. An individual was celebrated for victories over his enemies in war and politics and for his wit and ability to entertain at the all-male *symposium,* "drinking party," the Greek male's principal form of social life and principal setting for the telling of Greek myths in the Archaic and Classical periods.

In the Classical Period, when a boy was born, his father was at least thirty years old. Between ages six and thirteen the boy received instruction from a *pedagogue* ("trainer of boys"), who taught him how to read, write, and memorize the poetry of Homer and other poets from written texts, which he could recite before his male friends. The boy still lived in the women's quarters of the house, but every day he exercised naked with his friends to harden his body against the day when, in defense of the *polis,* he would put on armor and stand against the enemy.

Isolated from the female sex, men in their twenties gathered at the exercise ground to admire the prepubescent boys and to court them through gifts and poetry, a practice called **pederasty**, "love for boys." Greek pederasty has no good modern counterparts, and no other facet of ancient Greek social life seems more odd, a measure of our enormous distance from the Greeks of the Classical Period. Teenage boys also attended the symposium as cupbearers, where such courtship could continue. If the boy accepted a suitor's attentions (he need not), he would submit to kissing and fondling and, eventually, to copulation from the front between the boy's thighs, or even anal penetration (Figure 2.5).

The boy was expected to derive little or no physical pleasure from his lover's attentions, in keeping with Greek moral education in self-control. In the many surviving pederastic illustrations on pots, the boy, always beardless, is never shown with an erection, whereas the man, always bearded, often has one. We learn of few instances of homosexual activity between adults (though Alexander had a male lover), a practice held up to savage ridicule by the Greek comic poet Aristophanes (c. 450–338 BC). Pederasty was an aspect of Greek preparation for manhood and war and was thought to refine the moral qualities of loyalty, respect, affection, and courage.

At age eighteen, when half the boys had lost their fathers in war, a male in Athens became a citizen, a "member of the city," able to vote in elections and speak in public. Between eighteen and twenty he was called an *ephebe* (**ef**-ēb), "one who has come of age," and in an initiatory rite of passage he spent time outside the city practicing military procedure and honing his hunting skills. In one ephebic festival dedicated to the hero Theseus, men dressed as women, a common practice in many tribal cultures to mark the transition from youth to full manhood. Apparently the purpose of the ritual was to identify with the female sex that had heretofore controlled the young boys, then, by disrobing, to break from women's ways forever. At this same time the boy prepared to leave the women's part of the house.

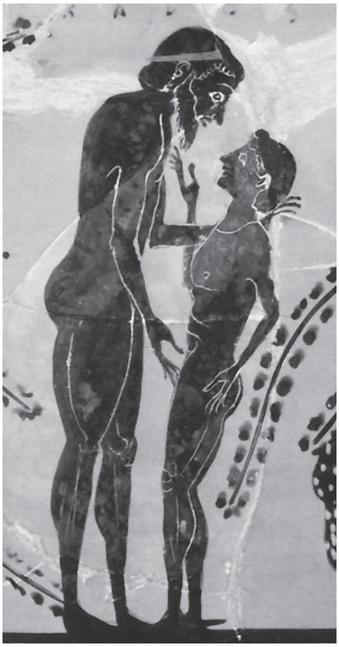

FIGURE 2.5 Pederastic scene on an Attic two-handled drinking cup from the sixth century BC. The mature man fondles the genitals of the boy, who reaches up affectionately to touch the man on the chin. The grapevines on either side refer to the wine drunk from the cup. Such erotic scenes, homosexual and heterosexual, are common on Greek pottery used in the symposium. No other artistic tradition, except that of Japan, rivals the Greek in the explicit portrayal of lovemaking. (Photograph © 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

When in his early twenties the young man sought out prepubescent boys for friendship and sexual pleasure, his marriage was still ten years away, and even when he married, pederastic attachments might continue. No longer a cupbearer at the symposium but an equal participant in it, the young citizen reclined to eat and drink on one of the seven or nine couches placed around the walls of the *andreion,* the "men's room," which had a separate entrance from that into the rest of the house. Here he competed in wit and poetry with his friends, many of whom he had grown up with.

The symposium is the setting for the famous dialogue of Plato (427–347 BC), the *Symposium,* where drunken companions attempt to define the nature of *eros,* "sexual desire." The topic is suitable because in addition to the handsome boys who served wine at the symposium, female courtesans called *hetairai,* "female companions," offered every kind of sexual service for pay. *Hetairai* also sang and danced and are often represented on Greek pottery designed to be used at the symposium. They seem often to have been foreign women or slaves and had no standing in respectable society (Figure 2.6).

War was of paramount concern for every Greek male, who could expect at some time, or many times, to face the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. Throughout his life he prepared for that moment. Warfare was constant and half of Greek males would die by the sword. In the Bronze and Dark Ages warfare seems to have been conducted between unorganized gangs from which some hero might emerge, an Achilles eager for glory and reputation, to challenge the best fighter from the other side; men fight this way in Homer's *Iliad.* In the Classical Period, by contrast, a citizen fought as a member of a team, for the glory of the *polis.*

Such warfare was conducted on open plains between opposing lines, as many as sixteen ranks deep, of heavily armed men called **hoplites** (see Figure 2.3; *hoplon* = "shield," "armor"). Each man had to pay for his own equipment, which was often artistic and beautifully made. The principal weapon was the thrusting spear, but a fighter also carried a one-edged sword for slashing in close encounters. Advancing in tight ranks called a phalanx, overheated in heavy armor with limited visibility, with little command structure but the instinct to prove one's worth in the eyes of one's companions, relying on training and a lifetime of discipline, the front line of one formation threw itself against the front line of the opposition. Fighters further back than the third or fourth row played no direct role at first except to push on the man in front, while himself being pushed from behind. As those in front fell, the back rows entered direct combat.

Eventually one of the formations broke up and the battle was over. A truce was called, the dead buried, and a trophy set up by the winning side at the place where the losing phalanx broke (*tropaion* = "place of turning," our "trophy"). In Homer the heroes go into battle in chariots, then jump down and fight on foot, but hoplite formations did not use chariots. Nor was cavalry—warriors mounted on individual horses—important in Greek warfare until the Hellenistic Period. Even then the lack of saddle and stirrup, introduced to Europe from China in the Middle Ages, and the small size of ancient horses limited the cavalry's effectiveness.

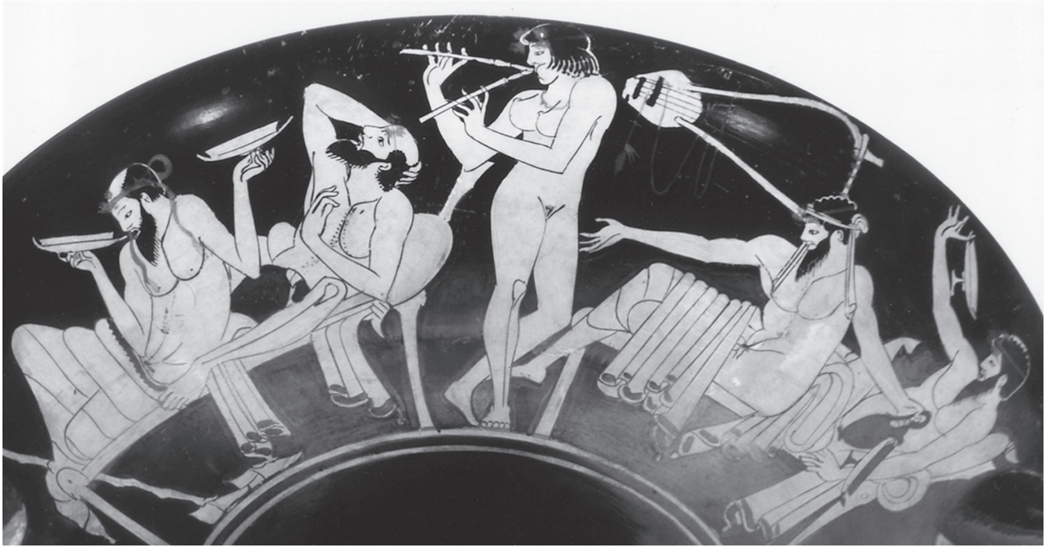

FIGURE 2.6 The symposium ("drinking party"). On a fifth-century BC Attic vase a nude *hetaira* entertains the male diners by playing on the double flute, really a kind of oboe. Her short hair identifies her as a slave. On the far right a diner plays the game of *kottabos;* the idea is to twirl the large, flat drinking cup called a *kylix* on the forefinger, then fling the dregs of the wine across the room to knock down a small statuette, usually of a satyr, perched atop a stand. The diner to his left reaches out to the *hetaira,* while on the far left two elderly men are deep in their cups. One holds two *kylikes.* This very scene is painted on the outside of a *kylix.* Note the lyre on the wall, used to accompany the poetry sung at the symposium. (Corpus Christi College. Reproduced by permission of the master and fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, UK)

Social institutions encouraged the cultivation and refinement of the warrior's spirit. In the *gymnasium* (from Greek *gymnos,* "naked"), the Greek male practiced nonlethal forms of war. Our tradition of athletics (from Greek *athlos,* "contest") began in Greece (Figure 2.7).

As sport to the Greek was practice for war, war was a kind of sport, and strict rules governed the behavior of the citizen hoplite armies. Competitive rules similar to those regulating Greek warfare extended off the battlefield into every realm of social life.

In the Archaic and Classical periods, a man divided his social relations into clear camps of friends and enemies. A man was measured by the richness of gifts to his friends and the thorough punishment given to his enemies. In Athenian tragedy, poets recast ancient myths to reflect contemporary concerns as they themselves competed vigorously for first prize under the critical gaze of their fellow citizens. In Athenian law courts, one sought not justice, but victory. The notion of "natural rights" to life or property or happiness or anything else, so prominent in our own thinking, simply did not exist.

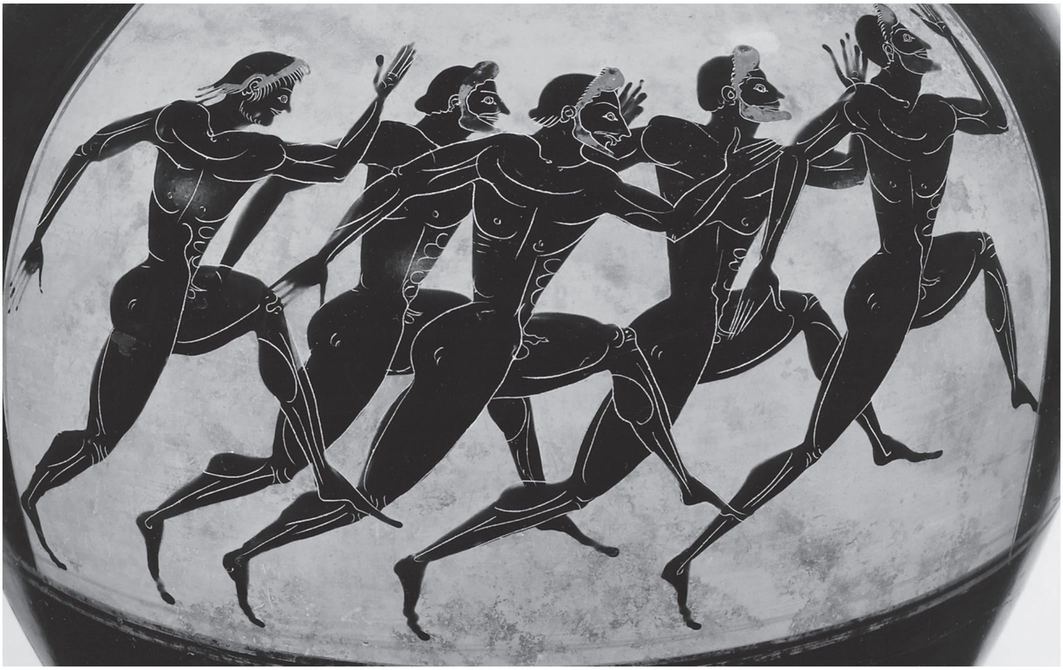

FIGURE 2.7 A footrace on an Athenian amphora (two-handled jar), c. 530 BC, offered as a prize for victory in the athletic games held every four years during the Panathenaic festival (cf. Figures 9.7, 9.8). Homer calls Achilles "swift-footed," as a successful warrior had to be. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, New York)

Females

Although our lack of sources hinders the study of all aspects of ancient Greek society, we find it particularly difficult to form an accurate picture of the lives of women. Males who composed almost all our literary sources may present a biased, unsympathetic, and contradictory picture. On the one hand, these sources suggest, the ideal Greek woman was tall, beautiful, submissive, fertile, chaste, and silent, virtually invisible to those outside the home. As the statesman Pericles told the widows of soldiers killed in battle, "Your reputation is great when you do not prove inferior to your own nature and when there is the least possible talk about you among men, whether in praise or in blame" (Thucydides 1.45.2). The sources also imply that women were likely to behave in ways that contrasted sharply with this ideal. Fired by an insatiable sexual appetite, the women depicted in literature often are ready to lie and scheme to achieve their selfish aims. It is difficult to distill the truth about women's lives from the sources that are available to us, but we can make at least some observations with a reasonable level of confidence.

In the Classical Period, a little girl of good birth learned the values of modesty, obedience, and restraint in the care of a nurse as she grew up in the *gynaikeion,* "women's quarters," located in the back of the house or on an upper floor. In

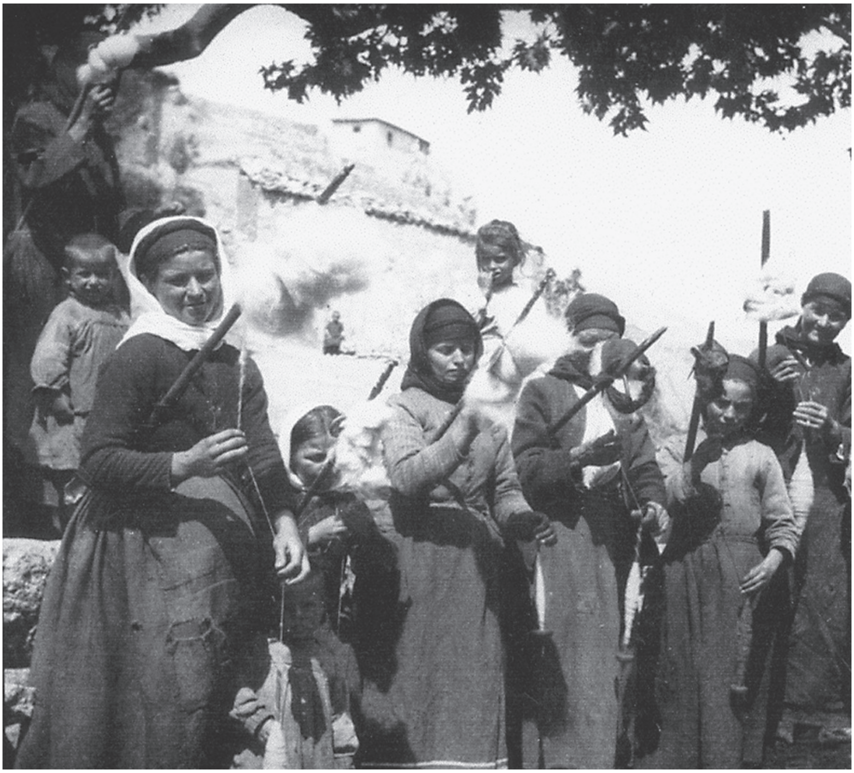

FIGURE 2.8 Greek village women, from about 1920, spinning wool. The women represent all age groups: on the far left, standing up by the tree, a woman whose face is obscured by the wool on her distaff, and a small child; then a woman and her young daughter, also spinning; then a teenage girl; then two older women flanking a prepubescent girl, all with distaffs; another girl stands behind at a higher level. The distaff, held under the right arm, supports a mass of wool, leaving the hands free. With their right hands, the women detach the wool while the left hand guides the thread to a spindle that spins like a top, dropping gradually to the ground as the thread lengthens. Then the spinner must stop and wind the thread around the spindle's shaft. Ancient spinning was done in precisely this fashion. Seven-tenths of the time needed to produce woven cloth is taken up by spinning, woman's archetypal activity until modern times. The women are dressed in dark colors and cover their heads. Their activity and dress are remarkably similar to those of women in ancient Greece. (University of Wisconsin–Madison Photo Archive)

the *gynaikeion* she also learned the female arts of spinning wool and making cloth, a woman's principal occupation throughout life, except for childbearing and care of the dead (Figure 2.8).

Only rarely did women learn to read and write. In the inner rooms of the *gynaikeion,* women met with other women friends and entertained one another with conversation and music. Although a single reference in Plato's *Republic* (2.376c) suggests that women told stories to their children, we have no direct evidence about the content of such stories. Indirect evidence suggests that they were fables like those of Aesop, or tales of the bogey-man variety. Greek myth, like Greek literary education, appears to have been the province of males, a fact of paramount importance in our attempts to understand it.

A Greek proverb noted that a woman knew two great moments in her life: her marriage and her death. Unlike other ancient peoples (except possibly the Etruscans), the Greeks were monogamous; that is, offspring from one wife at a time were the man's legitimate heirs. The origins of Greek monogamy are unknown, but no other social practice affected more deeply the way Greek men and women behaved toward one another.

Marriage was not based on mutual affection, but arranged between families on political and economic grounds. Even the Athenian *polis,* despite the institutions of democracy, was governed by its leading families. The family provided the woman with a dowry, which allowed the bride's family to retain some control even after marriage. In case of divorce, the husband was compelled to return the dowry intact. The bride may never have set eyes on her husband until the wedding day.

The groom was a mature adult, usually in his thirties, with wide experience of life and war; the bride was a girl in her teens, around fourteen years old, who offered her dolls in a temple as her last act before marriage. The husband had wide sexual experience, sometimes orgiastic, with women and boys; the bride was a *parthenos,* "virgin" (Figure 2.9).

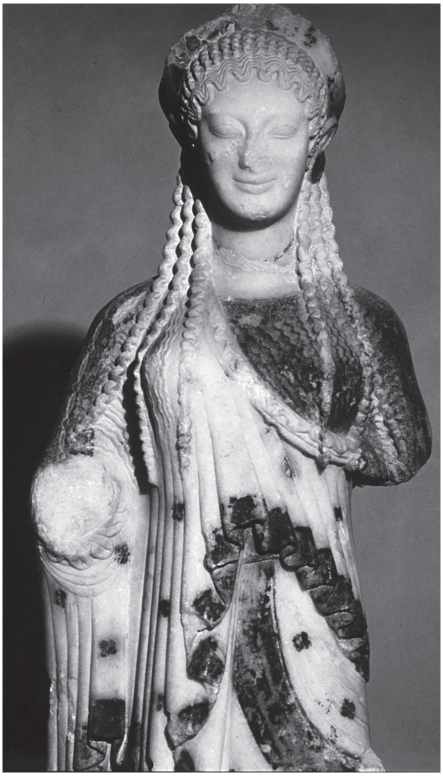

FIGURE 2.9 Statue of a *korê,* "maiden." Such statues stood on the Acropolis, where wealthy citizens dedicated them in honor of their daughters, presumably so that by magical sympathy the young women could stand in Athena's protection. The *korê*'s hair is made into elaborate tresses and falls over a linen dress called a *peplos*. The statues, made of marble, were brightly colored. Her "archaic smile" is characteristic of Greek statues from the late sixth century BC. Statues like this one have survived because when the Athenians cleaned up the Acropolis after the Persian sack of 480 BC they threw the broken statuary into a pit, where it has been found in modern times. (Acropolis Museum, Athens, Greece / Ancient Art and Architecture Collection Ltd. / The Bridgeman Art Library)

No respectable man would knowingly marry a young woman who had prior sexual experience, and a father could sell into slavery a daughter guilty of it, even if she were the victim of rape. For these reasons Greek girls were married off as soon as possible after first menstruation.

The period between first menstruation and marriage was one of great danger to the girl, her family, and society itself. As a ***parthenos***, the girl was thought to be wild and dangerous, like the goddess Artemis, to whom the *parthenos* was often compared and whose cult young girls served. Most heroines of Greek myth are *parthenoi,* in a momentary position of freedom to do immense harm or bring great advantage to her people. In marriage a woman could gain *sophrosynê,* "self-control." Tamed by the authority of her husband, in willing submission to the weighty demands of pleasing her husband sexually and bearing him children, a woman could overcome her natural weakness and live a modest and silent life away from the scrutiny of others.

The wedding, the high point of a girl's life, ordinarily was held at night, when the new bride moved out of her mother's *gynaikeion* into the house of her mother-in-law, where she first experienced intercourse, bore children, and lived until she died, often in childbirth at a young age. The myth of the abduction of Persephonê (Chapter 10) must reflect the male's perception of the young Greek girl's psychological experience on the wedding night. Terrified when snatched up by Lord Death as she played with her virgin friends, she soon accepted her changed condition in life.

The groom traveled to the bride's house in a cart, where he took her wrist in a special gesture implying a staged abduction (see Figure 6.2). At this moment she left behind the authority of her father and entered within the authority of her husband and her husband's mother. To the accompaniment of music, dance, song, and crackling torches the cart made its way to the house of the groom. A song, sometimes with sexual content, might be sung outside the marriage chamber (the famous poet Sappho wrote such songs in the seventh century BC). In the morning, the girl's friends visited her in the bridal chamber and brought gifts (Figure 2.10).

As a virgin, or *parthenos,* the Greek girl was called *korê* (an alternate name for Persephonê). After marriage and intercourse she was a *nymphê,* "bride" (hence our word *nymph*). Not until she bore her first child did she become *gynê,* "woman" (as in *gynecology*), when she assumed full authority over the *oikos,* "family," which included not only the female and young unmarried male members of the household, but also the slaves and domestic animals, the house itself, and its inner storeroom filled with storage vessels. (From *oikos* comes our word *eco*nomy, "management of the family," and *eco*logy, "study of the habitat.") In myth, women are closely associated with vessels, as they are with textiles. By her late teens a Greek woman was a mother and by age thirty-five a grandmother. By age fifty she could be a great-grandmother, if she lived that long, but few did.

A Greek wife did not even eat with her husband. Nonetheless, monogamy placed enormous power in her hands (about which we hear endless complaints in Greek myth). Monogamy also isolated her in a way unknown within the polygamous societies of the rest of the ancient world, in which women of the harem had constant companionship, although colored by intense rivalries. Increased prosperity heightened still more the isolation of Athenian women of the Classical Period, for

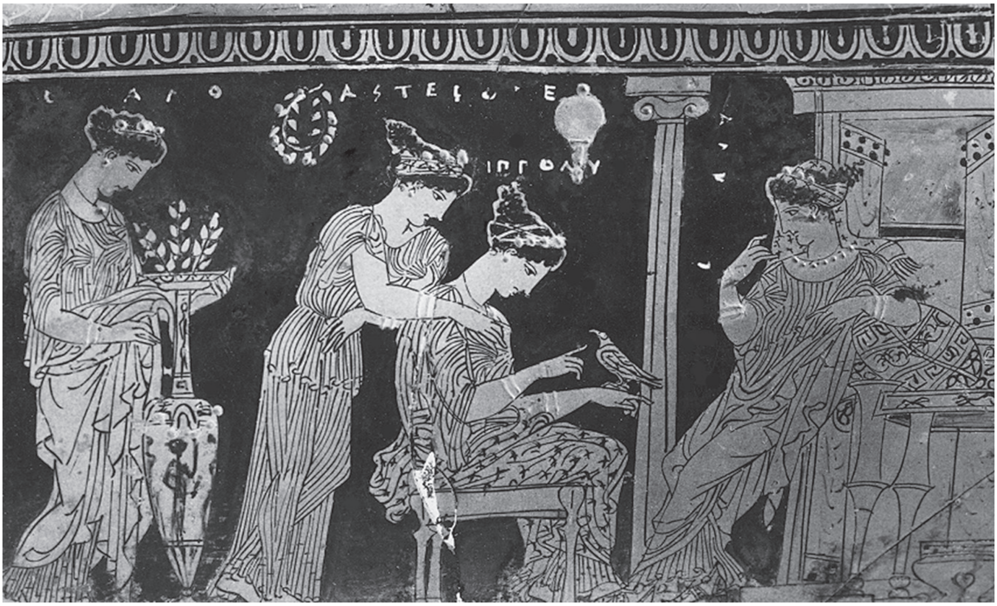

FIGURE 2.10 The day after the wedding, in the women's quarters, from a fifth-century BC Athenian red-figured *epinêtron,* an odd ceramic object with roughed upper surface to serve as a knee-cover for wool-working. On the right, the bride rests against a couch. Behind her, the double doors of the bridal chamber stand open. The pillar in front of her indicates that this is an interior view. Outside, friends of the bride bring gifts. One woman talks to a dove, the bird of Aphrodite. At the left, a woman arranges myrtle in a specially shaped wedding vase (*loutrophoros*). Their names are written above them. (© 2011 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

whom abundant slaves performed such menial but social work as gathering water and nursing children. Ordinarily a respectable woman went outdoors only during certain religious festivals, when she averted her eyes from the gaze of men and covered her head.

Several festivals were restricted to women alone, and close study of their symbols and rituals shows how in these festivals the fertility of the earth, and by extension the well-being of the community, was connected closely to the woman's ability to bring forth from her body new life. Childbirth was a moment of personal crisis because many women died from it, but also of enormous pollution, called ***miasma***, because of the blood and other fluids that accompany childbirth. No man would come close to a woman in labor.

Women's ability to purify the chamber and the child after birth extended to their care of the dead. Only women could touch a dead body to clean it for burial. After burial they tended the family graves, pouring offerings and tying ribbons around gravestones. Myths are filled with events surrounding birth and death and the special power of women to withstand and control the two crises through which every human being must pass.

Our evidence about family size from the Classical Period is poor, but in the Hellenistic Period an average Greek family consisted of three children, preferably two boys and one girl: one boy to die in the endless wars, another to carry on the family line, and one girl to assist in the formation of interfamilial alliances. Girls were disadvantageous because they required a dowry and did not carry on the family name. Additional children were often exposed, abandoned in the wild. Most died, but some were found and raised as slaves or prostitutes. There are famous foundlings in Greek myth, including Oedipus of Thebes and Paris of Troy.

Athenian women had probably fared somewhat better in the Archaic Period, when great families were in power, than in the Classical Period under the democracy, when citizenship became all-important. To be a citizen meant not to be a woman, slave, or foreigner. In affirmation of the solidarity of the group, Athenian males met together every year in a gigantic civic symposium, the festival of Dionysus, god of wine, where they witnessed the tragedies and lighthearted satyr plays, for which the chorus was dressed as sexually excited horsy creatures. Although no clear evidence shows whether women were present at the festival of Dionysus, their presence would have nullified the all-male esprit that the citizen festival affirmed and would have violated feminine modesty. For this reason most scholars think that only males were present in the audiences for Greek tragedy.

Although powerful women often appear in Greek plays, their fascination emerges directly from the shocking reversal of ordinary roles. In Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon,* the adulteress Clytemnestra ruled the city of Mycenae while her cuckold husband, Agamemnon, fought at Troy. On his return she murdered him. In Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* (lī-**sis**-tra-ta), the women of the Greek cities banded together, went on a sex strike, and took over Athens. To the male audience, this amusing reversal seemed as absurd as if the birds in the sky were to conquer the world—as in fact they do in another of Aristophanes' plays.

Although social tensions between Greek men and women were high and never resolved, the sexes were capable of genuine affection toward each other. Helen's infidelity, so the story went, caused the Trojan War, but Odysseus' longing for home and family led him to abandon an offer of immortal life with a nymph far more beautiful than his wife. Among the most touching works of Greek art are sculptured gravestones showing the deceased in loving company with husbands, wives, or children. In rare cases, women even participated in public life. Aspasia from the city of Miletus, friend and mistress of Pericles, was highly cultivated, knew powerful people, and is said to have advised Pericles on foreign policy.

Slavery

Without slaves, ancient civilizations could not have existed. Tribal societies kill captives taken in war or sometimes adopt the women and children, but the ancient Mediterranean civilizations of Greece and Rome were sufficiently wealthy to support vast numbers of slaves, on whom their economies depended. Slaves made up one-fourth or one-third of the workforce in classical Athens, and even men of modest means owned them. They made possible the leisure essential to Athenian

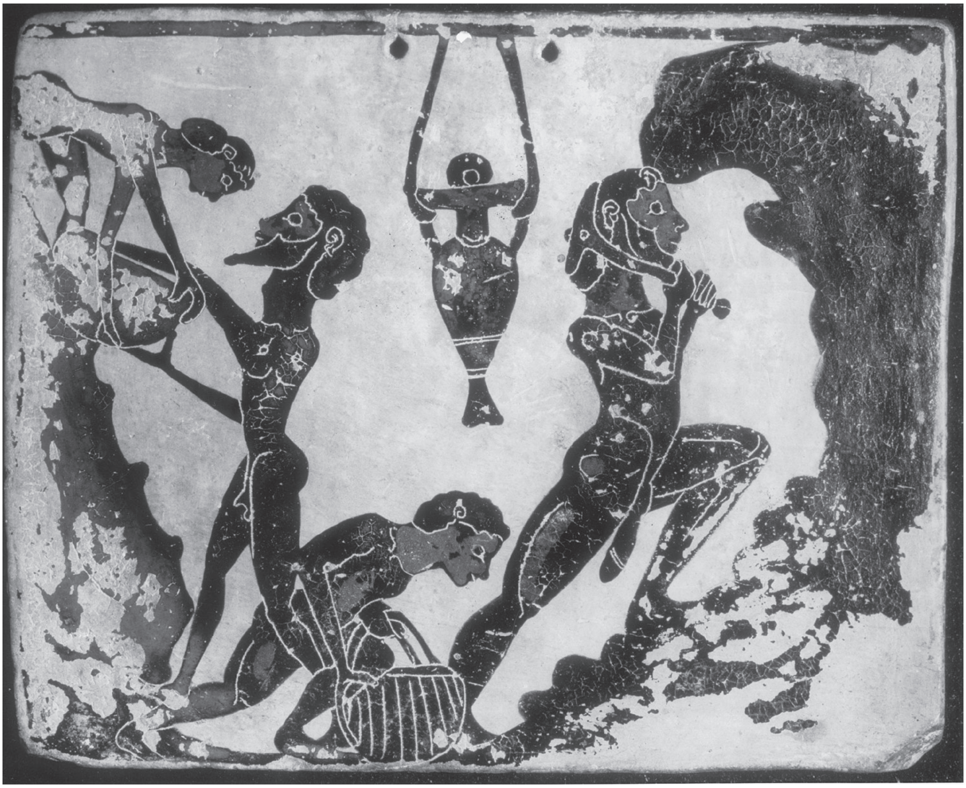

FIGURE 2.11 Miners digging clay for making pots on a sixth-century BC black-figured plaque from Corinth dedicated to Poseidon and his consort Amphitritê. Most miners in ancient Greece were slaves. The slaves in Greece were often captured in Thrace or farther north in the Danube region, or they came from Asia Minor, sold into Greece by slave-traders. A pot for drinking water hangs in the center of the plaque. (BPK, Berlin/Staatliche Museen)/Juergen Liepe / Art Resource, New York)

democracy, allowing the citizens to argue in the law courts, debate public policy in the assembly, fight their enemies on land and sea, and practice the arts of rhetoric, philosophy, history, and science (Figure 2.11).

Slaves were chattel property and had no enforceable rights. They could be killed or sexually used with impunity. In one of his adventures, Heracles is sold as a slave to a foreign queen to serve as her sexual playmate. Slaves had no legal families of their own. They served in the household, but male slaves also performed work outside it, doing the same tasks as free men, with whom they often worked side by side on farms and in factories. Most unfortunate were those who worked, in atrocious conditions, in the Athenian silver mines at Laurium. Slaves could receive salaries and often saved up enough money to purchase their freedom. In Roman civilization, freedmen—those born as slaves who had purchased their freedom—formed a powerful social caste and were highly influential in the governance of the Roman empire.

Religion

Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe that there is one God who made the world. He stands outside it, yet dwells in the human heart. He works for good in the world. His plan for humans is revealed through sacred writings, which specialists (priests, rabbis, and mullahs) interpret to the masses within buildings set aside for this purpose (churches, synagogues, and mosques). God demands of his followers love, faith, and adherence to a strict code of moral behavior, including sexual behavior. These religions once had, and to some extent still have, important social and political missions.

The Greeks, by contrast, had many gods, who did not make the world but dwelled within it. Zeus was their leader, but Void (Chaos), Earth (Gaea), Night (Nyx), and other gods existed before him and his brothers and sisters. They continued to exist even after Zeus, by force, achieved ascendancy. No Greek god was all-powerful; rather, each controlled a sphere of interest, which sometimes overlapped with that of other gods. The Greek gods had personalities like those of humans and struggled with one another for position and power. They did not love humans (although some had favorites) and did not ask to be loved by them. They did not impose codes of behavior. They expected respect and honor but could act contrary to human needs and desires. They did not reveal their will in writing. Their priests, having no writings to interpret, were required only to perform appropriate rituals. Because there were male and female gods, there were male and female priests to perform such rituals.

The appropriate ritual was always a form of sacrifice: the killing of an animal or many animals or the offering of foodstuffs. Although human sacrifice is often mentioned in Greek myths, it appears to have been highly uncommon during the historical period, and archaeology has produced only two clear examples from the Bronze Age (from Crete). The underlying logic of sacrifice was always the same: In order to gain the god's goodwill, destroy what you value most. That will place the god firmly in your debt.

Sacrifice was performed outside the god's house on an altar, usually to the east of the temple. The temple was not itself a place of worship. There was no official priestly organization with social or political missions. Priests and priestesses came from local families or were sometimes chosen by lot. When one wanted to know the god's will, one went to a seer or to an oracle. Religious activity—appropriate sacrifice—could help in this life, but had no effect on one's lot in the next world (the mysteries at Eleusis were a notable exception; see Chapter 10). Notions of guilt or sin, which arise from disobeying God's rules of universal application, were unknown. There were no such rules to obey.

The Greek gods were capricious and terrifying, not to be taken lightly. Yet the Athenian comedians made fun of them, and Greek intellectuals criticized them for the immoral behavior reported in Greek myths. A small minority of Greeks even questioned the existence of the gods and sought other than divine causes behind the phenomena of the world. The thinking of these radical intellectuals led to the proposition that gods do not fashion human misery or happiness, success in war or love, or anything else. Humans make their own world, a fundamental principle of what we think of as Western civilization.

Beliefs and Customs

Underlying many Greek myths is a way of thinking about the world that many today would reject, at least in principle. To comprehend these myths, we must make an effort to understand their worldview, one shared by all preliterate societies throughout the world.

One aspect of this view is a belief in magic. We have already mentioned, in our discussion of divine myth, the attribution of human qualities to natural forces. Although modern science rejects this notion, it was present in virtually all ancient societies and even now has wide appeal. Still today we speak of Mother Nature and Father Time. Modern science rejects the theory that we can manipulate the outside world by means of rituals and spells, but ancient peoples (and many modern ones) were certain that magic was effective. Myths talk endlessly about magical objects: amulets, a necklace that bears a curse, or such fanciful objects as a hat that makes the wearer invisible, sandals that enable one to fly, or a fruit that gives everlasting life.

Today we consider words to be unconnected to the objects or ideas that they represent (so that the same thought can be expressed in different languages), but magical practice assumes that words embody creative and effective power. If one commands emphatically that this or that take place, it will take place. Curses on the lips of the dying are extremely dangerous. The word or the name is the thing itself, its essence or soul (hence the biblical commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain").

Closely related to the belief in magic is the conviction that the world is inhabited by spirits, the ghosts of the dead (see Chapter 12). From the fear of ghosts comes the belief in blood guilt, which the Greeks called *miasma,* "pollution," the same word used to describe the pollution of childbirth. *Miasma* was thought to afflict a murderer because he was pursued by the spirit that lived in the spilled blood. For this reason murderers were very dangerous company. Their misfortune, certain to come, could afflict those around them. Fortunately, spirits and ghosts could be coerced by means of ritual or spells or persuaded by sacrifice or prayer.

We divide the human world sharply from the natural, but to the ancient Greeks such distinctions were not obvious. Animals may have human qualities, including the power of speech. For example, in Homer's *Iliad* the horses of Achilles speak to him at a critical moment, warning him of his impending death. A human may be born not of woman, but of something in the natural world. The handsome Adonis was born from a tree. Animals may raise humans, as in the story of the twins Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome; abandoned as infants, a wolf suckled them. Transformation of humans into animal or natural forms (rocks, trees, mountains, or stars) is common.

A famous story was told about **Narcissus** (nar-**sis**-sus), a youth of tremendous good looks. His parents wanted to know whether their son would have a long life. "Very long," a prophet replied, "if he does not look at his own face." When Narcissus was grown, he saw his face reflected in a spring. Reaching for the beautiful figure, he fell in and drowned (hence our term *narcissism,* meaning "self-love"). His body was changed into the flower that still bears his name.

Similarly, the supernatural world mixes easily with the human. A human being may be born of a god or spirit. Achilles' mother was Thetis, a sea nymph. Male gods commonly have intercourse with mortal women, who bear them mortal but superior human children. Far less often, goddesses have intercourse with mortal men.

The line between human and divine is just not firmly drawn. Although Heracles was born a mortal, he became a god at death. Dionysus and Zeus were both gods, but both had tombs where their spirits were honored as those of dead mortals.

We think of the world as a complex machine, governed by the laws of physical nature, through which we wander, dodging misfortune and doing the best we can. God may have made the world, but appears not to intervene directly in it (although in Christian doctrine God sent his only Son). However, the theory of natural law is a Greek invention of the fifth century BC. It did not exist when Greek myth was formed and probably was never accepted by most Greeks.

According to traditional Greek views, there are no chance events. Every event in the world is connected with every other, if only we could see how. At remote Dodona (do-**dō**-na) in northwestern Greece, servants of Zeus and his consort Dionê (di-**ō**-nē) could interpret the rustling of the wind in an oak to answer questions written on lead tablets; some of these tablets have survived. Especially important among the Etruscans and later the Romans was information drawn from examining the entrails of sacrificed animals and from observing the flight of birds (*augury,* hence our word *inauguration,* when omens are taken). Professional prophets and seers play a central role in Greek myth.

Dreams were another way to discover hints of the future, for in sleep the spirit is loosely attached to the body and in communication with the realms of Apollo, lord of prophecy. When Hecabê, queen of Troy, was pregnant, she dreamed that she gave birth to a bundle of sticks from which emerged fiery serpents that set fire to Troy. A Trojan seer explained that the child would bring destruction to the city. He ordered the baby exposed on the mountain. Rescued by a shepherd, the child grew up to be Paris, who caused the war that destroyed Troy.

Greek myths often refer to social mores that, although common in preliterate societies, differ sharply from those of classical Greek society itself. Cannibalism, human sacrifice, cattle rustling, wife-theft, and blood-vendetta as the ordinary response to homicide are prominent in Greek myth. For example, Thyestes, a prince of Mycenae, ate his own sons cooked in a stew. His nephew Agamemnon killed his own daughter, Iphigenia, to appease the goddess Artemis. One of Heracles' labors was to rustle the cattle of the monstrous Geryon. The Trojan War began when Paris abducted Helen, wife of Menelaüs. Orestes, son of Agamemnon, killed his mother to avenge her murder of his father. Such practices were not characteristic of Greek society in the Archaic and Classical periods. Cannibalism had long since disappeared in Greece, if it ever existed, and blood-vendetta and human sacrifice were quickly disappearing. Of course, a gory description of an outmoded or outrageous social practice is a good way for a storyteller to attract attention from a restless audience, as makers of modern horror films well understand.

GREECE AND ROME

Classical myth comprises not just the stories of the Greeks, but also Roman versions of those stories and some stories native to Rome. The Romans remade Greek culture in their own image, and they, not the Greeks, passed the classical tradition to modern Europe.

When Alexander "conquered the world" in 336–323 BC, he did not conquer Italy or any other region west of the Adriatic Sea. The western lands were still remote, although Greek cities had flourished in Italy and Sicily since the eighth century BC. But even in Alexander's day a small tribe of Indo-European speakers south of the Tiber River, living in and near the city of Rome and possessing a superior political and military organization, had begun a course of relentless expansion without parallel in human history.

Controlling perhaps a few hundred square miles in the sixth century BC, by the time of Christ the Romans governed virtually the entire Mediterranean world and large territories to the north, east, and south of the Mediterranean. Greece itself became a Roman province in 146 BC, as did Asia Minor in 133 BC and Syria in 63 BC. The **Roman Period** in ancient history, as distinguished from the Hellenistic Period, may conveniently be dated from 30 BC, when Egypt, the Hellenistic cultural center, fell into Roman hands. The Western Roman empire crumbled in the fifth century AD, but its Greek-speaking eastern part lasted until AD 1453, preserving virtually all the records we have of ancient Greece.

As Rome was in early times surrounded by hostile peoples speaking different languages, so it was isolated by geography. Greece is made up of innumerable islands, large and small, and, on the mainland, coastal pockets suited to seaborne commerce and international exchange with the East and its extraordinary cultures. Italy, by contrast, is a long boot-shaped peninsula, split down the middle by the rugged Apennine range that cuts off Italy from the East (see Map XII, Chapter 23). Seas to the east and west of the Italian peninsula are noted for their sudden storms, and the whole peninsula had few good harbors, only one on the coast facing Greece. To cross Italy from east to west, you had to go over high, bandit-ridden mountains. Traffic from north to south by land was slow and dangerous until the construction of the famous Roman military roads. The first, the Appian Way, was not built until 312 BC. We need not be surprised, then, that Italy remained so long on the periphery of ancient Mediterranean culture.

Italy was a melting pot of diverse peoples who spoke many languages. The Romans spoke Latin, an Indo-European language, but there were many other Indo-European dialects in Italy whose speakers could scarcely understand each other. North of Rome lived the powerful and influential **Etruscans** who, like the Greeks, resided in independent city-states. They spoke a language completely unrelated to Greek or Latin. The modern name of Tuscany is derived from the ancient name Etruria. Their origin is unknown, but some think they emigrated from Asia Minor sometime in the twelfth century BC. Although the culturally powerful Etruscans spoke a non–Indo-European tongue of unknown affiliation, they took over the Greek alphabet within decades of the alphabet's invention around 800 BC, from Greeks living near the Bay of Naples. The Etruscans gave this writing to the Romans, who gave it to us. With the alphabet came the riches of Greek culture, and above all Greek myth.

The Etruscans ruled the city of Rome during the sixth century BC, bequeathing a rich legacy to Roman society, government, and religion (although the name *Roma* appears to be Greek, meaning "strength"). The Roman gladiatorial games developed from Etruscan funeral games in which prisoners were killed in honor of the dead as a form of human sacrifice. The unique genius of the Roman people was to absorb cultural achievements from foreign peoples and yet remain Roman. In the fourth century AD they even took over the Christian church, of Jewish origin. Whereas other peoples made things of beauty, the Roman destiny was to rule efficiently and justly, as the Romans often explained to themselves.

In early times Rome was an oligarchy, ruled by a council of aristocrats, the Senate ("body of old men"). This period is called the *Republic* (from the Latin *res publica,* "public business"). The Republic broke down after a hundred years of civil war between competing factions within the oligarchy, and Augustus Caesar, the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar, defeated his rivals and took power about the time of Christ. Augustus, pretending that the Republic still existed, modestly called himself *princeps,* "first citizen" (the source of our *prince*) and *imperator,* "commander" (or "emperor"). Henceforth Rome was in reality a monarchy, ruled by one man.

Although the Romans had their own religious heritage, they seem to have had few traditional stories, as far as we know. They happily adopted Greek legends, which they learned mostly from Greek poets of the Hellenistic Period. No legend was more important than the story of Aeneas, a Trojan hero in Homer's *Iliad.* By accepting Aeneas as their actual progenitor, the founder of their race, the Romans aggressively laid claim to the rich and prestigious cultural tradition of Greece. Still, as we will see in Chapters 23 and 24, myth functioned rather differently among the Romans than it did among the Greeks.

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FURTHER READING CHAPTER 2

History and Archaeology

Chadwick, John, *The Mycenaean World* (Cambridge, UK, 1976). Overview with good illustrations. Chadwick collaborated with Michael Ventris, the decipherer of Linear B.

Drews, Robert, *The Coming of the Greeks* (Princeton, NJ, 1988). Discusses the arrival of the Indo-Europeans in the Aegean and the Near East.

Finley, M. I., *The Ancient Greeks* (New York, 1987). A readable summary by a leading historian.

Mallory, J. P., *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London, 1989). The best book on the topic.

Morris, I., and Barry B. Powell, *The Greeks: History, Culture, Society,* 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2008). Widely used text presenting general study of who the Greeks were, what they did, and why it is important, with many illustrations.

Murray, Oswyn, *Early Greece* (Stanford, CA, 1983). Shows how we can reconstruct Homer's own time from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Snodgrass, A. M., *Archaic Greece: The Age of Experiment* (Berkeley, CA, 1980). Analysis of the formative period of Greek classical civilization.

RELIGION

Burkert, Walter, *Greek Religion,* trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA, 1985). The standard comprehensive scientific description of Greek religion.

Mikalson, Jon D., *Ancient Greek Religion* (Oxford, UK, 2005). A fine introduction pitched to the beginning student.

Nilsson, Martin, *A History of Greek Religion,* 3rd ed. (New York, 1980). An English-language compressed version of his authoritative (and enormous) study in German; Nilsson was one of the great scholars of Greek religion.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Dover, K. J., *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA, 1978). Scientific treatment of a difficult topic.

Fantham, E., H. P. Foley, N. B. Kampen, and S. B. Pomeroy, *Women in the Classical World* (Oxford, UK, 1994). Superior review of artistic and literary evidence, clear and jargon-free.

Larson, Jennifer, *Greek Heroine Cults* (Madison, WI, 1995). Best book on the topic, with a catalogue of heroines.

Lefkowitz, Mary R., *Women in Greek Myth* (Baltimore, MD, 1990). The types of women in Greek tragedy and their relationship to real Greek women, by a leading scholar; good on the Amazons.

Peradotto, J., and J. P. Sullivan, eds., *Women in the Ancient World* (Albany, NY, 1987). Essays from a feminist perspective.

Pomeroy, Sarah, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York, 1975). A pioneering survey of the roles assigned to women in ancient Greece.

Stewart, Andrew, *Art, Desire and the Body in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, UK, 1997). Social, ideological, and sexual aspects to ancient Greek art.

SOCIETY

Golden, Mark, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, UK, 1998). Systematic review of the role of athletics in ancient Greece.

Vernant, Jean-Pierre, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1988). Opposing older notions, this leading French scholar exposes the realities of ancient slavery, blood sacrifice, ritualized warfare, ceremonial hunting, and ecstasy.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CLASSICAL MYTH

> Men imagine not only the forms of the gods but their ways of life to be like our own.
>
> ARISTOTLE,
> *Politics* 1252 BC

MYTH BEGINS IN THE primordial past. It is possible (although unprovable) that features of myth found in the Classical Period first appeared ten thousand or even a hundred thousand years ago, long before the Greeks and Romans existed. In thinking about the beginnings of classical myth, we can try to peer beyond our earliest written records to reconstruct myths, or religious beliefs, that may have been current in prehistoric times. Comparative material, archaeological and linguistic, offers some opportunity to do this, as does the study of how myth was transmitted before writing. In this chapter we review the earliest information we can infer about the history of myth, then review how myth developed through the historical periods in the pre-Hellenic cultures of the ancient Near East and in Greece and Rome themselves. Surprisingly, the Greeks seem to have owed little to the indigenous cultures of the southern Balkans that they occupied, and a great deal to the distant Mesopotamian culture. More and more, scholars view Greek culture as an offshoot of the Mesopotamian culture rather than as an independent development, in the same way that Roman culture is viewed as an offshoot of Greek culture.

THE BEGINNINGS OF GREEK MYTH

Conspicuous in the museums of southeast Europe and the Near East are figurines that have exaggerated sexual organs and plump buttocks and breasts. Such objects are the oldest freestanding sculptures in the world. Male figurines, often with an erect penis, are also found, but in far fewer numbers. Many wish to connect such figures with goddesses and gods of fertility known from the historical period and prominent in myth.

Figure 3.1 shows one of the best known of these small statues, several inches high and made c. 6500–5700 BC in Çatal Hüyük (**cha**-tal **hu**-yuk), in south central Turkey, the oldest known agricultural community in the world. While seated on a throne, a naked woman wearing a cap, with exaggerated breasts, is giving birth. The infant's head is just visible as it emerges. Leopards, on which she rests her hands, crouch on either side. Another type of European female figurine comes from the Aegean islands of the Cyclades (Figure 3.2), carved in local marble during the third millennium BC. Sharp angles intersect pleasingly with plane surfaces. Nose and breasts are reduced to protrusions, and the pubic triangle is large and marked with incisions and, once, paint. Although most such figures are small, this one is life-sized. Rediscovered in modern times, the Cycladic idols had a strong influence on European sculptors of the early twentieth century.

We have neither names to apply to these figurines, made before the introduction of writing, nor information about their purpose. Most examples in museums come from illicit excavations, or are modern fakes, but archaeologists have found some in graves of both men and women. We can guess that they had a magical power

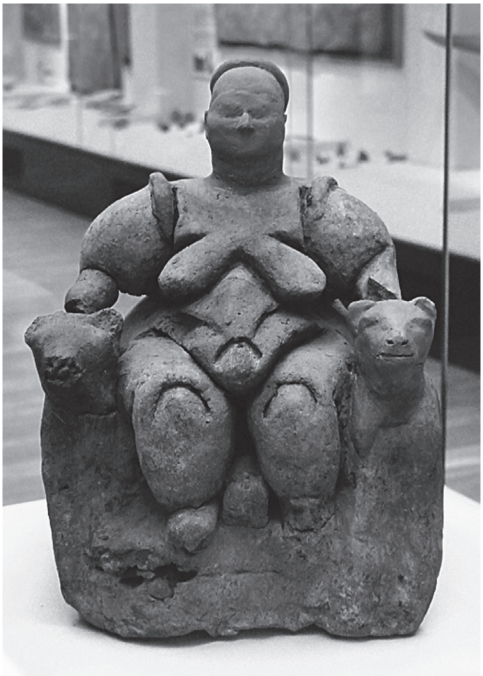

FIGURE 3.1 Goddess giving birth, statue from Çatal Hüyük, c. 6500–5700 BC, 16 inches high. The head is a restoration. (Museum of Anatolian Civilization, Ankara, Turkey; http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7d/Ankara_Muzeum_B19-36.jpg)