The Aetiology of Myth

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1 Introduction

Aetiology is a fundamental aspect of mythology, since one of the most universal functions of myths is to bind the world of the present, so puzzling and challenging to (archaic) mankind, to the more 'ideal' world of the gods who created the cosmos somewhere in the mythical past. Aetiology is the Bifröst or 'rainbow bridge' connecting now and then, man and god, question and answer. Its function is to create continuity between categorically different entities. In this chapter, I will focus on a rationalist attempt to eliminate the differences between those entities and thus erase the need for any bridge to cross them. The rationalist in question is the fourth century mythographer Palaephatus, 'the teller of old tales'.

Throughout his work, Palaephatus presents himself as a researcher into origins, but his project goes beyond the collecting and retelling of traditional stories. Instead of such 'standard' mythographical practice, Palaephatus creates an 'anti-mythography' that denies supernatural beings and mythical events. Instead of presenting the remote, mythical past as something fundamentally different and extraordinary, it is Palaephatus's aim to normalize it, erasing all traces of the supernatural and thus drawing it as close as possible to his normal, contemporary experience. Below, I will explore the tension between the rhetoric of discontinuity inherent in mythographical discourse and the historical continuity which Palaephatus proposes for his own project. As we will find that human speech, according to Palaephatus, is usually to blame for creating a misleading view on the past, I will also discuss the role of speech in his work.

2 Aetiological Myths

What do we generally mean by aetiological myths? Such myths mostly deal with gods, monsters or heroes who in some distant past performed a certain deed, the result of which has shaped a particular aspect of the world and/or its inhabitants as we see them today. Somehow, these otherworldly characters left

a mark or a sign that can still be recognized at later times, providing the link that enables the “process of binding the volatile present to the traditionally and divinely sanctioned regularity of the past”.¹ This mark can manifest itself in the sphere of mankind, offering an otherworldly origin to customs, cults, rituals, institutions, and so on.² Alternatively, the original event manifests itself as a more palpable sign or mark, usually in the landscape: caves, mountains, rivers, cliffs, groves, etc.³

These aetiological events are usually situated in a mytho-historical period that is considered to be different from the contemporary one: still in flux and not yet fixed.⁴ It is a world coming into existence, characterized, among other things, by its huge potential for creation.⁵ One example of this mythological phase is the widespread notion of a Golden Age for humans; it is a world where work is unnecessary because food is generated *sponte sua*, and aging and disease are unknown.⁶ Everything is born from the ground without any human so much as asking for it. This view of the early world in flux is present in mythologies around the world, and also features prominently in Greek mythology. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod gives us a clear picture of this strange and nascent world (that is slowly finding its definite form in the *Catalogue of Women* and is finally settled in the *Works and Days*, set in the here and now).⁷ We should note that the poet is careful to present the age of gods and heroes as distant and

1 Kirk 1970, 258.

2 An example is the story of the first sacrifice at Mecone in Hesiod's *Theogony* (535–560), which explains to the Greeks why they perform sacrifices as they do.

3 For instance: the fire-shooting monster Typhoeus was buried under a mountain which since then has been known as Etna (Pind. *Ol.* 4.6–7, perhaps inspired by Hes. *Th.* 859–867). There are in fact numerous myths about colossal enemies of the Olympians being transformed into volcanoes by burying them under rocks, mountains or even entire islands (Alcyoneus, for instance, lies buried beneath Vesuvius, Polybotes beneath the volcanic island Nisyros, and Enceladus beneath Etna as well).

4 See e.g. Bascom 1965 on the primal nature of the world in which myths take place. The gods and monsters operate in our world, but it has not yet taken the form by which we recognize it as ours.

5 For instance, after his castration some blood of Uranus falls on the ground, and immediately an entire race of giants and other creatures is born (Hes. *Th.* 178–187).

6 See e.g. Eliade's chapter on ‘Sacred Time and Myths’ (Eliade 1959, 68–113) and especially his discussion of the “prestige of the beginnings” in *Myth and Reality* (Eliade 1963, 21–53) for examples. See Hes. *Op.* 109–126 for the first description of this blessed era.

7 Hesiodic authorship for the *Catalogue* is disputed (and rather unlikely); nonetheless, the poem fits squarely between the *Theogony* and *Works and Days* as far as their overall view of cosmogony is concerned. See e.g. Strauss Clay 2005, 26 on the *Catalogue* as “a perfect complement to heroic epic” and Haubold 2005, 96 on the poem as “suspended between two stages of world history”.

categorically different than our present Iron Age. Homer, too, sees the world of the heroes as one that is irretrievably gone; we are often reminded of the inferiority of present people when compared to the characters of the heroic age. The period of heavenly bliss is gone; the most we humans can aspire to is a good mixed with evil.⁸

Generally speaking, aetiology is firmly wedded to origin myths, traditional stories that typically tell us of the three stages of creation: theogony, cosmogony and anthropogony.⁹ These tales of birth, creation and epiphany are especially suited to aetiology because they are situated in a time that is ancient enough to 'fit the requirement' of being categorically different, and because they present the crucial moment of 'generation' – the primal burst that defines the nature of whatever it is that is created, and at the same time provides the 'knob' to which aetiological tales could be attached. Some mythologists would even go so far as to claim that the only 'real' myths are creation myths.¹⁰ For the present chapter, however, it will suffice to say that creation myths are central to mythology and crucial for aetiology.

Aetiological myths thus explain a particular aspect of the contemporaneous world, be it a quality of the landscape, a custom, the shape or color of an animal, the human condition, anything. In fact, the adjective 'aetiological' has in terms of mythology sometimes been understood as the equivalent of 'explanatory'.¹¹ Obviously, this should not be understood in strictly cognitive terms: aetiologies provide more than just 'explanations' in an intellectual sense. For instance, a Norse myth telling how Heimdall slept with three couples on earth and thus fathered three types of men not only explains where rulers, warriors and laborers come from, but also validates and justifies political and economic differences between individuals.¹² Aetiologies also provide a shared identity and a future perspective for all who by telling a tale and listening to it underwrite its value; any foundation myth will serve as an example.

8 The *locus classicus* is Homer's image of Zeus having two jars in his palace, one filled with good and the other with evil; he either gives individuals something from both jars, or only from the jar of evil (*Il.* 24.566–574); see also Vernant's classic analysis of the myth of Prometheus in Hesiod (Vernant 1974, ch. 8).

9 See Schipper 2011, 4.

10 See e.g. Eliade 1963, 18–21.

11 See e.g. the introduction to Leeming 2005, 126: "Myth has always had an explanatory or etiological aspect".

12 The so-called 'charter' myth, a term coined by Malinowski 1926.

3 Palaephatus's Project

Let us now turn to Palaephatus, a fourth century mythographer known for collecting and investigating myths – not necessarily aetiological ones – about heroes and monsters.¹³ Palaephatus is dedicated to a particular rationalizing approach to myth, different from the well-known practice of the allegorists. His two-fold aim is to a) reduce myths to a historical core and b) find out how the (demonstrably incorrect) myth came into existence (i.e. to find the *aition* of the myth, so to speak). In the *Περὶ ἀπίστων* (*On Unbelievable Tales*) that has come down to us, Palaephatus treats some fifty myths that way, though perhaps the original work was considerably larger. Throughout his work, Palaephatus purports to be focused on target A, and in his foreword he claims to be interested in reconstructing the historical truth; nevertheless, it is clear to any reader that target B is on the front of his mind, as his work is mainly concerned with the origin and explanations of the myths that are under discussion. That much is obvious from the fact that Palaephatus (despite the claim, made in the foreword, of having investigated the stories by interviewing local wise men and surveying the actual locations of the tales) does not discuss any external material. All he works with are the myths themselves, and hence, his two aims are intertwined. So, whereas aetiological myths in general often focus on a certain feature of the landscape and contain stories that tell us how geographical peculiarities were formed, Palaephatus views Greek mythology itself as a kind of landscape and searches for the origins of the myths themselves (see also Inger Kuin's chapter in this volume).

An example of Palaephatus's treatment of myths is Palaeph. 29, on Pelops and Hippodameia:

Περὶ Πέλοπος καὶ τῶν ἵππων.

Φασὶν ὅτι Πέλοψ ἦλθεν ἔχων ἵππους ὑποπτέρους εἰς Πίσαν μνηστευσόμενος Ἴπποδάμειαν τὴν Οἰνομάου θυγατέρα. ἐγὼ δὲ τὰ αὐτὰ λέγω ἅπερ καὶ περὶ τοῦ Πηγάσου. ἐπεὶ Οἰνόμαος, εἰ ἥδει ὑποπτέρους ὄντας τοὺς ἵππους τοῦ Πέλοπος, οὐκ ἂν δὴ τὴν θυγατέρα αὐτοῦ ἔδωκεν ἐπὶ το ἄρμα αὐτοῦ ἀναβιβάσαι. ῥητέον οὖν ὅτι Πέλοψ ἦλθεν ἔχων πλοῖον, ἐπεγέγραπτο δὲ ἐπὶ τῆς σκηνῆς “Ἴπποι ὑπόπτεροι”, ἀρπάσας δὲ τὴν κόρην ὥχετο φεύγων. ἔλεγον δὲ οἱ ἄνθρωποι ὡς ἀρπάσας τὴν Οἰνομάου θυγατέρα ἐπὶ τῶν Ἴππων ὑποπτέρων ὥχετο φεύγων. καὶ ὁ μῦθος προσανεπλάσθη.

13 See Stern 1996, 1–24 or Koning (forthcoming) for an introduction to Palaephatus and his work.

The Horses of Pelops

The story is that Pelops came to the city of Pisa with winged horses to woo Hippodameia, the daughter of Oenomaus.

Here I would say the same thing which I did about Pegasus. If Oenomaus had known that Pelops' horses were winged, he would never have allowed Pelops to put Hippodameia onto his chariot. What we must say is the following: that Pelops came to Pisa with a ship; that the words 'Winged Horses' were written across the cabin on its deck; and that Pelops abducted Hippodameia and fled.

The people said: 'Pelops carried off Oenomaus' daughter on his Winged Horses and took to flight.' Thus the myth was fashioned.¹⁴

Palaephatus's *modus operandi* is clear. The Greeks tell a myth about a creature that cannot exist, and he provides a rational explanation that reconstructs reality in a way that is in accord with the principles at work in the world as we know it (principles we would nowadays refer to as laws of biology and physics). Moreover, the rationalization also explains why the myth was created that way.

Generally speaking, Palaephatus discerns three ways in which a myth can be explained. All three hinge on misunderstanding,¹⁵ and feature misunderstood (1) appellations, (2) situations and (3) expressions, or, to use Palaephatus's own terms, misunderstood 'names' (ὀνόματα), 'deeds' (ἔργα) and 'words' (λόγοι);¹⁶ we will come back to these terms again below.

4 History and Continuity

In order to understand Palaephatus's reconstruction of the past, we need to focus on his view of time and development. As the mythographer states in

14 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Palaephatus are taken from Stern 1996; the Greek text is from Festa's Teubner edition (1902). Italics are mine.

15 The central role played by misunderstanding reminds us of Müller's 'disease' or 'forgetfulness' of language (cf. Müller 1867), a now obsolete theory that explains myths as the explanations, cast in narrative, of misunderstood expressions of a primal people by their uncomprehending successors. The vocabulary of this Ur-people was limited, mostly used to describe heavenly phenomena, and its expressions were often used metaphorically. Palaephatus, too, believes in the 'corruptive' power of words, and also puts the difference between literal and figurative speech to use in this theory. Unlike Müller, Palaephatus allows for expressions other than meteorological ones, and does not need generations to pass for the 'disease' to kick in: the act of misunderstanding follows directly after an expression or event.

16 See Koning (forthcoming).

the foreword, much of his method is based on a (presumably misunderstood) philosophical axiom that ‘that which is, has been, and will be’:¹⁷

ὅσα δὲ εἶδη καὶ μορφαὶ εἰσι λεγόμεναι καὶ γενόμεναι τότε, αἱ νῦν οὐκ εἰσὶ, τὰ τοιαῦτα οὐκ ἐγένοντο. εἰ γὰρ <τί> ποτε καὶ ἄλλοτε ἐγένετο, καὶ νῦν τε γίνεται καὶ αὖθις ἔσται. αἰεὶ δὲ ἔγωγε ἐπαινῶ τοὺς συγγραφέας Μέλισσον καὶ Λαμίσκον τὸν Σάμιον ἐν ἀρχῇ λέγοντας “ἔστιν ἃ ἐγένετο, καὶ νῦν ἔσται”.

As for the many forms and monstrous shapes which have been described as once having existed, but which now do not exist – these, I believe, did not exist in the past either. For anything which ever existed in the past exists now in the present and will exist hereafter. The writers Melissus and Lamiscus of Samos meet with my approval when in the beginning of their works they say this: “What came into being still exists and will exist hereafter.”

According to this line of reasoning, a creature like a sphinx or minotaur cannot have existed in the past, because it does not exist today. This “model of biological and historical stasis”¹⁸ appears, at least to modern readers, as a limited conception of development, since it denies evolution.¹⁹ The origins of this particular idea have interested scholars, and, since the *Suda* states that Palaephatus was a student of Aristotle, some point to the Aristotelian notion of the fixity of species. This is an interesting question in itself, but somewhat beyond the scope of the present chapter. What interests me here, is Palaephatus’s obvious notion that there can be no past that is different from our world in terms of biology and physics. This notion accords well with his general negation of the commonly held mythological view of the early days of the universe, briefly described in the introduction, during which well-known, empirically confirmed regularities of nature were not or not wholly in place, and all kinds of supposedly impossible matters did occur: superhuman feats,

17 Scholars disagree on the exact citation (I follow Diels and most others in excluding ἐν ἀρχῇ [‘in the beginning’] from the citation. Melissus is an Eleatic philosopher whose words are probably misrepresented here (see the discussion in Hawes 2014, 43sq.). Lamiscus is unknown.

18 Hawes 2014, 44.

19 See Santoni 1998 for a general discussion of theoretical assumptions in Palaephatus’s poem. Trachsel 2005 attempts to isolate peripatetic traces in Palaephatus’s work. Zucker 2016 is, in my view, rightly sceptical about the influence of Aristotle.

impossible hybrid creatures, and so on. Palaephatus assumes a 'historical continuum' which effaces any break between the age of heroes and the present one.²⁰ As Hawes explains:

Although the Greek past was conceived as a chronologically continuous entity stretching from the theogony to the present (...), events on this timeline were not homogeneous. The existence of a heroic past implies a breach between those earlier inhabitants of Greece whose superhuman deeds are celebrated and the recent period of more limited achievements. The Greek myths belonged to a world empirically different from the present (...). Rationalization, by contrast, requires an unchanging universe. It projects contemporary norms of possibility onto the past so that human experience through time is homogeneous.²¹

In spite of this Palaephatus does allow a modest kind of evolution in terms of culture, technology and thought. He mentions a couple of times that in earlier days (the days in which myths originated) human life was considerably less complicated. Apparently, this period was characterized by the necessity of physical labour, especially in terms of working the ground. This notion is present, for instance, in Palaeph. 7:

Περὶ τῶν Διομήδους ἵππων.

Περὶ τῶν Διομήδους ἵππων φασὶν ὅτι ἀνδροφάγοι ἦσαν, γελοίως· τὸ γὰρ ζῶον τοῦτο μᾶλλον χόρτῳ καὶ κριθῇ ἤδεται ἢ κρέασιν ἀνθρωπίνους. τὸ δ' ἀληθὲς ὧδε ἔχει. τῶν παλαιῶν ἀνθρώπων ὄντων αὐτουργῶν, καὶ τὴν τροφήν καὶ τὴν περιουσίαν οὕτως κτωμένων, ἅτε τὴν γῆν ἐργαζομένων, ἵπποτροφεῖν τις ἐπελάβετο, καὶ μέχρι τούτου ἵπποις ἤδετο, ἕως οὗ τὰ αὐτοῦ ἀπώλεσε καὶ πάντα πωλὼν κατανάλωσεν εἰς τὴν τῶν ἵππων τροφήν. οἱ οὖν φίλοι ἀνδροφάγους τοὺς ἵππους ὠνόμασαν. ὧν γενομένων προήχθη ὁ μῦθος.

The Horses of Diomedes

They say that Diomedes' horses ate men. Ridiculous! Horses enjoy barley and oats rather than human flesh.

Here is the truth: *men of long ago made their living with their own hands, and it was by tilling the ground that they acquired food and abundant resources.* But a certain Diomedes became preoccupied with the breeding of horses. His delight in them reached the point that he lost his

20 Stern 1999, 217.

21 Hawes 2014, 43.

property: he sold everything he had and squandered it on the raising of his horses. So his friends called the horses ‘man-eaters’ – and that is how the myth began.

The passage italicized by me has not attracted much attention by scholars. Since some of Palaephatus’s explanations hinge on inventions, he must assume that people were less developed, in a technological sense, in earlier times. But why does he focus on the hard work? I believe that part of the answer is caused by a need to explain the fact that even in the early stages of human life, people could devote themselves to breeding horses: a society needs a certain level of ‘abundance’ to allow for such economic diversity. But the focus on the necessity of working ‘with your own hands’, and on ‘tilling the ground’ also strengthens his denial of the mythological view of the primordial world. Obviously, in Palaephatus’s view, the earth has never been a ‘giver of goods’. The Hesiodic notion of *bios automatos*, that blissful characteristic of the Golden Age, is negated, and Palaephatus recognizes only the *condition humaine* described by Hesiod as the present one. It is a harsh view, which states that unending agricultural labour is the only way to ensure survival, and that only hard work can lead to material success. Palaephatus in passing corrects the Myth of the Ages and states that the Hesiodic Iron Age has always been the Age of mankind.

5 Against Utopia

I would like to explore this path a bit further. There are some other entries in the *Περὶ ἀπίστων* that focus on the earlier, simpler phase of humankind in terms of lack of wealth or money. Palaephatus mentions twice that in these earlier times, money had not been invented yet. In fact, some precious metals were not even known yet, especially silver and copper (necessary for coins), metals that are first brought to light by a character called Lynceus.²² I would suggest

22 See Palaeph. 9: ‘Lynceus. It is said that Lynceus could even see what was underground. The report is false; the truth is as follows. Lynceus was the first to mine for copper, silver and such metals. In his searching for these metals he would carry portable lamps underground, where he would leave them while he brought up sacks of copper and iron. People said: “Lynceus sees even what is under the earth; he goes down and brings up silver!” (Περὶ Λυγκέως. Λέγεται ὡς Λυγκεὺς καὶ τὰ ὑπὸ γῆν ἑώρα. τοῦτο δὲ ψευδές. τὸ δὲ ἀληθές ἔχει ὧδε. Λυγκεὺς πρῶτος ἤρξατο μεταλλεῦειν χαλκὸν καὶ ἄργυρον καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ ἐν δὲ τῇ μεταλλείᾳ λύχνους καταφέρων ὑπὸ τὴν γῆν, τοὺς μὲν κατελίμπανεν ἐπὶ τοῦ τόπου, αὐτὸς δὲ θυλάκους ἀνέφερε τοῦ χαλκοῦ καὶ τοῦ σιδήρου. ἔλεγον οὖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι “Λυγκεὺς καὶ τὰ ὑπὸ γῆν ὄρα καὶ καταδύνων ἄργύριον ἀναφέρει.”)

that the notion of the original absence of money is connected to another view on the early phases of human history that is impossible in Palaephatus's eyes: the belief in the existence of ancient super-civilizations that have broken down or been destroyed.

In order to fully understand this, we need to go back to Palaephatus's foreword. Apart from establishing his 'rule of continuity' (i.e. what is, has been and will be), in this passage he also comments on the relationship between deeds and words:

ἀνθρώπων γὰρ οἱ μὲν εὐπειθέστεροι πείθονται πᾶσι τοῖς λεγομένοις, ὥς ἀνομίλητοι σοφίας καὶ ἐπιστήμης, οἱ δὲ πυκνότεροι τὴν φύσιν καὶ πολυπράγματοι ἀπιστοῦσι τὸ παράπαν μὴδὲ γενέσθαι τι τούτων. ἐμοὶ δὲ δοκεῖ γενέσθαι πάντα τὰ λεγόμενα (οὐ γὰρ ὀνόματα μόνον ἐγένοντο, λόγος δὲ περὶ αὐτῶν οὐδεὶς ὑπῆρξεν· ἀλλὰ πρότερον ἐγένετο τὸ ἔργον, εἴθ' οὕτως ὁ λόγος ὁ περὶ αὐτῶν).

Now some people, who have no acquaintance with philosophy or science, are too credulous and believe everything that is said to them. Others, of a more subtle and inquisitive nature, totally disbelieve that any of these tales ever happened. My own belief is that there is a reality behind all stories. *For names alone without stories would hardly have arisen: first there must have been deeds and thereafter stories about them.*

Palaephatus seems extraordinarily keen on connecting occurrences with the 'words' (or 'stories', or 'expressions', λόγοι) that are used to describe them.²³ The two are often closely connected in his explanations of mythology.²⁴ Palaephatus's distinction between words and deeds has a philosophical ring to it. Anna Santoni believes that the mythographer is referring more or less generally to the practice of distinguishing between λόγοι and ἔργα as we also

23 It is worth noting that in this passage from the foreword, Palaephatus uses the term λόγος, which is mostly neutral; he uses μῦθος, 'myth', or its derivatives μυθώδης and μυθικός, for traditional narrative. See Hawes 2014, 51: "Within the *Peri Apiston*, traditional stories are inevitably labelled μῦθοι and their rationalized replacements typically called λόγοι", with n. 47. But this statement needs qualification; see below.

24 Some examples are: τούτου τοῦ πράγματος ἀληθινοῦ γενομένου ὁ μῦθος προσανεπλάσθη ('this was the real event from which the myth was fashioned', Palaeph. 3); τούτων γενομένων τὰ λοιπὰ ἐμυθεύθη ('the rest of the myth was fashioned from these events', Palaeph. 4); ὧν γενομένων ἐμυθολογήθη ἐκεῖνα ('afterward these events were turned into a myth', Palaeph. 5); ὧν γενομένων προήχθη ὁ μῦθος ('these were the events that led to the myth', Palaeph. 7 [own translation]); οὗ γενομένου γράφουσι τὴν ὕδραν ὄφιν καὶ τὸν μῦθον προσαναπλάττουσιν ('after this event people wrote that Hydra was a serpent and the myth was fashioned', Palaeph. 38 [Stern adapted]).

find it in sophistic thought, mainly as portrayed by Plato;²⁵ one can think of reference texts such as Plato's *Gorgias* (82B3 D.-K.), *Sophist* 260b–264b and especially *Cratylus* 384d–e. The linguistic conventionalism commonly associated with the sophists is supposedly taken even further by Palaephatus, who is taken to mean here that if there is a *logos* about something, that something must necessarily exist in the outside world we call reality. There are deeds first, and the stories follow after.²⁶

In a recent article, however, Van den Berg has argued convincingly that the Palaephatean distinction between words and deeds has a singular, specific Platonic intertext, namely the tale of Atlantis in the *Critias*. The main reason for focusing on this text is the inclusion of a third term, 'names', that complicates the basic opposition between λόγοι and ἔργα. *Critias* 109d–110a reads:

ὦν τὰ μὲν ὀνόματα σέσσωται, τὰ δὲ ἔργα διὰ τὰς τῶν παραλαμβανόντων φθοράς καὶ τὰ μήκη τῶν χρόνων ἡφανίσθη. τὸ γὰρ περιλειπόμενον αἰεὶ γένος, ὥσπερ καὶ πρόσθεν ἐρρήθη, κατελείπετο ὄρειον καὶ ἀγράμματον, τῶν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ δυναστῶν τὰ ὀνόματα ἀκηχοῦς μόνον καὶ βραχέα πρὸς αὐτοῖς τῶν ἔργων. τὰ μὲν οὖν ὀνόματα τοῖς ἐκγόνοις ἐτίθεντο ἀγαπῶντες, τὰς δὲ ἀρετὰς καὶ τοὺς νόμους τῶν ἔμπροσθεν οὐκ εἰδότες, εἰ μὴ σκοτεινὰς περὶ ἐκάστων τινὰς ἀκοάς, ἐν ἀπορίᾳ δὲ τῶν ἀναγκαίων ἐπὶ πολλὰς γενεὰς ὄντες αὐτοὶ καὶ παῖδες, πρὸς οἷς ἠπόρουσαν τὸν νοῦν ἔχοντες, τοῦτων περὶ καὶ τοὺς λόγους ποιοῦμενοι, τῶν ἐν τοῖς πρόσθεν καὶ πάλοι ποτὲ γεγονότων ἡμέλουν. μυθολογία γὰρ ἀναζητήσις τε τῶν παλαιῶν μετὰ σχολῆς ἅμ' ἐπὶ τὰς πόλεις ἔρχεσθον, ὅταν ἴδητόν τις ἢ τοῦ βίου τάνανγκαίᾳ κατεσκευασμένα, πρὶν δὲ οὐ. ταύτῃ δὴ τὰ τῶν παλαιῶν ὀνόματα ἄνευ τῶν ἔργων διασέσσωται.

25 See Santoni 1998 and Santoni 2000 23–26; and the critical note of Van den Berg 2017, 309sq., n. 5.

26 This supposedly Palaephatean notion is reminiscent of one of the most important questions in mythological studies, e.g. that on the priority of rite ('deed') or myth ('story'). Ritualists took their cue from W.R. Smith ("myth was derived from the ritual", Smith 1894, 18) and focused on the priority of rite: man acted first and later developed tales to provide context for that behaviour (although even Jane Harrison, the central figure of the Cambridge Ritualists, was prepared to concede that myth and rite could "arise *pari passu*" (Harrison 1912, 16). The other side is chosen by such figures as Usener, Gadamer and especially Blumenberg, who regarded myth as a fundamental tool for opposing the anxieties of primal man (a theory Blumenberg developed at length in his *Arbeit am Mythos*). Some scholars attempted to cross the divide; one example is Walter Burkert, who argued for a symbiotic relationship of rite and myth (see Burkert 1979, 57), downplaying the question of priority.

The names of these first inhabitants have been preserved, but their deeds have perished on account of the catastrophes that befell those who succeed them and the long passage of time intervening. Those of their race who survived these successive destructions were, as I said before, left as an illiterate mountain people who had only heard the tradition of the names of their rulers of their country and beyond these only little of their deeds. Now, they were pleased to give their descendants the names of these rulers, even though they were unaware of their ancestors' virtues and institutions – except for some dim legends concerning each of them. Then, for many generations, these survivors and their children lived in distress for their survival and gave thought to their needs; they made *logoi* about supplying these needs, and had no interest in the events of the distant past. For it is in the train of Leisure that Mythology and Inquiry into Ancient Things arrive in cities, once they have observed that in the case of some peoples the necessities of life have been secured, but not before. This is why the names of the ancients have been secured but not their deeds.²⁷

Plato's tale of Atlantis presents a picture of a rich, beautiful, wealthy, and developed ancient civilization that existed long ago but was annihilated because of a global catastrophe. Only the names of its long-lost people somehow survived, their deeds gone forever (although Plato does concede 'some dim legends' about them); the few survivors did not have the leisure to occupy themselves with old tales and made stories about more pressing concerns. According to Van den Berg, Palaephatus responds to this Platonic notion of surviving names and lost stories of great deeds by instead insisting on the "authentic character of mythological stories".²⁸ That only names survive, seems illogical: why should the survivors use names that have no meaning for them?

As we have seen above, Palaephatus strongly believes in the survival of 'deeds' and 'stories' as well – together with 'names', they are the cause of the misunderstandings leading to myth. Plato's account in the *Critias* presents a highly developed civilization that was destroyed altogether, creating a 'break' in the timeline of human history, similar to the mythological one between the Heroic Age and the Iron Age. This kind of historical discontinuity, however, cannot be accepted by Palaephatus, whose reconstructive aims depend on

27 Pl. *Cri.* 109d2–110a7. I am following (with slight modifications) the translation in Van den Berg 2017 (which is the slightly adapted translation of Strauss Clay).

28 Van den Berg 2017, 313.

continuity of some kind. Therefore, he creates a small-scale history of gradual progress instead: that is his way of establishing a solid link between past and present. This is the reason, I suggest, why he focuses on the *similarity* of the world of then and now, not extolling former ages but instead lowering them to even below our own experiences. His early humans are neither heroes nor a technologically advanced super-species, but rather stupid people, poor people, people unaccustomed to wealth and precious metals.

It is tempting to believe that Palaephatus' denial of a bygone super-civilization is also targeting Euhemerus' vision of Panchaea (although it is unclear whether he knew Euhemerus' work).²⁹ Euhemerus' description of Panchaea is in fact closely related to Plato's account of Atlantis,³⁰ and both worlds are characterized by superior wealth and technology. This is exemplified by the following passage (taken from Diodorus, the main source for the lost work of Euhemerus):

ἀναθήματα δὲ χρυσᾶ καὶ ἀργυρᾶ πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα τοῖς θεοῖς ἀνάκειται, σεσωρευκός τοις χρόνοις τὸ πλῆθος τῶν καθιερωμένων ἀναθημάτων. τὰ τε θυρώματα τοῦ ναοῦ θαυμαστάς ἔχει τὰς κατασκευὰς ἐξ ἀργύρου καὶ χρυσοῦ καὶ ἐλέφαντος, ἔτι δὲ θύας δεδημιουργημένας. ἡ δὲ κλίνη τοῦ θεοῦ τὸ μὲν μήκος ὑπάρχει πηχῶν ἕξ, τὸ δὲ πλάτος τεττάρων, χρυσῇ δ' ὅλη καὶ τῇ κατὰ μέρος ἐργασίᾳ φιλοτέχνως κατασκευασμένη. παραπλήσιος δὲ καὶ ἡ τράπεζα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τῷ μεγέθει καὶ τῇ λοιπῇ πολυτελείᾳ παράκειται πλησίον τῆς κλίνης. κατὰ μέσην δὲ τὴν κλίνην ἔστηκε στήλη χρυσῇ μεγάλῃ, γράμματα ἔχουσα τὰ παρ' Αἰγυπτίοις ἱερὰ καλούμενα ...

There are many great dedications of gold and of silver which have been made to the gods, since time has amassed the multitude of such offerings. The doorways of the temple are objects of wonder in their construction, being worked in silver and gold and ivory and citrus-wood. And there is the couch of the god, which is six cubits long and four wide and is entirely of gold and skilfully constructed in every detail of its workmanship. Similar to it both in size and in costliness in general is the table of the

29 The rationalization of Palaephatus is often compared to the work of Euhemerus (see e.g. Stern 1996, 8). It is theoretically possible that Palaephatus knew of the ideas of Euhemerus as voiced by Euhemerus himself, Palaephatus flourishing around 340–330 (as is the *communis opinio*) and Euhemerus flourishing around 310–300 (idem).

30 See e.g. Clay and Purvis 1999, 45: "In stark contrast to the heavenly, dull, and austere city of Plato's *Republic*, lie two earthly, radiant, and wealthy islands at the 'sacred extremes' of the Greek world: Atlantis to the west and Panchaia to the east."

god which stands near the couch. And on the centre of the couch stands a large gold *stele* which carries letters which the Egyptians call sacred ...³¹

The materially rich world presented here is the exact opposite of Palaephatus's view of early human life as an age of poverty and backwardness.

6 The Power of Words

If we follow Van den Berg, one of the main tenets of Palaephatus's method is that the names, deeds and words that have given rise to myth are both ancient and traceable. There are no spectacular leaps of fancy or bursts of creative genius that create myths – rather, myths seem to stem from words or *logoi* in a more basic and banal way: a historical deed is described and the words are misunderstood.³² That is not to say that poetical fancy is wholly absent from Palaephatus. In his time, it was customary to blame poets for the creation of fanciful *logoi*. Especially in the historiographical tradition, we find the topos of stressing the truth-value of historiography and pointing to the fictional bent of the poets.³³ Palaephatus taps into this tradition in his foreword:

γενομένων δέ τινα οἱ ποιηταὶ καὶ λογογράφοι παρέτρεψαν εἰς τὸ ἀπιστότερον καὶ θαυμασιώτερον, τοῦ θαυμάζειν ἕνεκα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους. ἐγὼ δὲ γινώσκω ὅτι οὐ δύναται τὰ τοιαῦτα εἶναι οἷα καὶ λέγεται· τοῦτο δὲ καὶ δείληφα, ὅτι, εἰ μὴ ἐγένετο, οὐκ ἂν ἐλέγετο.

But the poets and early historians, in order to astonish people, have turned certain past events into unbelievable and wonderful tales. Now I know that such tales cannot be true, but at the same time I understand that there would not be stories if there were not real events behind them.

³¹ D.S. 5.46.5–7 (transl. C. Oldfather).

³² This simple route from *logos* to *mythos* should not be understood in the light of the ongoing discussion about the relation between Mythos (mythical, figurative language) and Logos (rational, scientific discourse) that is still relevant in the history of ideas. See Most 1999 for a useful attack on the traditional view of early thinking slowly liberating itself from Mythos in order to become rational and enlightened, embracing Logos. See Lincoln 1999, 207–216 for the science of mythology as myth, and Coupe 2009, 15 for the argument that in postmodern times “we have witnessed, not a retreat from myth, but a much more pervasive sense of myth”.

³³ See the scepticism of e.g. Th. (1.20–22); the rationalizing approach to myth is already visible in Herodotus and presumably predates him (see Stern 1996, 10–13).

There seems to be a programmatic tone about this, and there is a passage in the *Περὶ ἀπίστων* that goes even further in ascribing to poets a wilful purpose of creating a *dieu policier* (Palaeph. 6):³⁴

Φασὶν Ἀκταίωνα ὑπὸ τῶν ἰδίων κυνῶν καταβρωθῆναι. τοῦτο δὲ ψευδές· κύων γὰρ δεσπότην καὶ τροφέα μάλιστα φιλεῖ, ἄλλως τε καὶ αἱ θηρευτικαὶ πάντας ἀνθρώπους σαίνουσιν. ἔνιοι δὲ φασιν ὡς Ἄρτεμις μὲν <εἰς ἔλαφον μετέβαλεν> αὐτόν, ἔλαφον δὲ ἀνείλον αἱ κύνες. ἐμοὶ δὲ δοκεῖ Ἄρτεμιν μὲν δύνασθαι ὃ τι θέλοι ποιῆσαι· οὐ μέντοι ἐστὶν ἀληθὲς ἔλαφον ἐξ ἀνδρός ἢ ἐξ ἐλάφου ἄνδρα γενέσθαι· τοὺς δὲ μύθους τούτους συνέθεσαν οἱ ποιηταί, ἵνα οἱ ἀκροώμενοι μὴ ὑβρίζοιεν εἰς τὸ θεῖον.

They say that Actaeon was devoured by his own dogs. But the story is false, for a dog is most affectionate toward its master and provider, and hunting dogs in particular fawn on everyone. Some, however, say that Artemis changed Actaeon into a deer, and that it was this deer that the dogs killed. Now it seems to me that Artemis can do whatever she wants, yet it is not true that a man became a deer or a deer a man. *It is the poets who have made up such myths, so that people who hear them will not commit outrageous acts against divinity.*

If one looks further, however, poets are not particularly prominent in Palaephatus as the creators or composers of myth. Apart from the parts of the foreword and Palaeph. 6 quoted above, there is only one more occasion of poets being pointed out as the creators of myth (Palaeph. 2), and on one other occasion we find a particular type of professional authors, the mythographers, in this role (Palaeph. 26).³⁵ But far more often it is just people, witnessing some unprecedented event, who express it in words (*logoi*) and in this way create

34 The notion of a *dieu policier* goes back at least as far as the pseudo-Euripidean *Sisyphus* (TrGF I 43 Critias fr. 19); the idea is foreshadowed in Hesiod's account of the 'thrice ten thousand' guardians of Zeus, who 'watch over judgments and cruel deeds, clad in invisibility, walking everywhere upon the earth' (*Op.* 252–255, translation G.W. Most).

35 The explicit point made in the foreword should thus perhaps be interpreted more as a topos than a significant part of Palaephatus's view and method. The same holds for his claim of autopsy and inquiry, stated at the conclusion of the foreword: 'I visited many lands and inquired of the older people what knowledge they had about each of these tales, and I am here writing down what I learned from them. I myself saw the condition of each place, and in what follows I have written not merely what I was told, but after going myself and making inquiry.' (ἐπελθὼν δὲ καὶ πλείστας χώρας ἐπυνθανόμεν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὡς ἀκούοιεν περὶ ἐκάστου αὐτῶν, συγγράφω δὲ ἃ ἐπυνθόμην παρ' αὐτῶν. καὶ τὰ χωρία αὐτὸς

the mythical core or 'germ' of the tale; once again, we see misunderstanding as the key factor in the birth of myths.³⁶ It is mostly just 'they' or 'the people' who create the myth.³⁷

Generally speaking, mythographers rarely use direct speeches in their accounts.³⁸ Palaephatus in this sense surprises us, because there is hardly an item in his collection without some direct speech. This is partly because his rationalizations often depend on a direct verbal expression that in itself carries the core of the mythification. But there is also much direct speech that is not really necessary at all for explaining the myth.³⁹ In these cases, the reader can already understand what Palaephatus is driving at, but still he finds it necessary to include some direct speech, however brief. This apparently redundant use

εἶδον ὡς ἔστιν ἕκαστον ἔχον, καὶ γέγραφα ταῦτα οὐχ οἷα ἦν λεγόμενα, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ἐπελθὼν καὶ ἱστορήσας.)

36 Cf. Stern 1999, 221: "Myth with Palaephatus is always the result of misunderstanding, never of design".

37 Here, too, Palaephatus touches upon a significant theme in the history of the science of mythology: are myths by their very nature traditional, i.e. were they created at some undefinable point in history in ways largely untraceable by a collective, or were they made up by an individual? Most 1999, 36–40 has shown the important influence of Heyne on the development of the idea that myths come from a 'Volk', but early modern theorists like Frazer mostly think of (unknown) individuals as the creators of myth (see Csapo 2005, 51–57), a way of thinking that was targeted by ritualists who focused on the collective as the 'unit of worship'. Naturally, there are also theorists (like Jung) who believe that the aspect of tradition is not relevant to myth and who allow for modern myths to be created by contemporary authors (like J.R.R. Tolkien, on whose mythmaking in general see Chance 2004).

38 Fowler 2006, 40.

39 An example is Palaeph. 15 on Europa: 'Europa. They say that Europa, the daughter of Phoenix, was carried across the sea on the back of a bull from Tyre to Crete. But in my opinion neither a bull nor a horse would traverse so great an expanse of open water, nor would a girl climb upon the back of a wild bull. As for Zeus – if he wanted Europa to go to Crete, he would have found a better way for her to travel. Here is the truth. There was a man from Cnossus by the name of Taurus who was making war on the territory of Tyre. He ended up by carrying off from Tyre quite a number of girls, including the king's daughter, Europa. So people said: "Bull has gone off with Europa, the king's daughter." It was from this that the myth was fashioned.' (Περὶ Εὐρώπης. Φασὶν Εὐρώπην τὴν Φοίνικος ἐπὶ ταύρου ὀχουμένην διὰ τῆς θαλάσσης ἐκ Τύρου εἰς Κρήτην ἀφικέσθαι. ἐμοὶ δὲ οὐτ' ἂν ταῦρος οὐθ' ἵππος δοκεῖ τοσοῦτον πέλαγος διανύσαι [δύνασθαι], οὕτε κόρη ἐπὶ ταύρον ἄγριον ἀναβῆναι· ὃ τε Ζεὺς, εἰ ἐβούλετο Εὐρώπην εἰς Κρήτην ἐλθεῖν, εὐρεῖν ἂν αὐτῇ ἐτέραν πορείαν καλλίονα. τὸ δὲ ἀληθὲς ἔχει ᾧδε. ἀνὴρ Κνώσιος ὀνόματι Ταῦρος ἐπολέμει τὴν Τυρίαν χώραν. τελευτῶν οὖν ἐκ Τύρου ἤρπασεν ἄλλας τε πολλὰς κόρας καὶ δὴ καὶ τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως θυγατέρα Εὐρώπην. ἔλεγον οὖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι "Εὐρώπην τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως Ταῦρος ἔχων ᾤχετο." τούτων γενομένων προσανεπλάσθη ὁ μῦθος.) Another example is Palaeph. 10 (on Caeneus).

of direct speech is remarkable; there are numerous instances where the actual vocalization is, as far as the argument is concerned, completely unnecessary.⁴⁰

I suggest that the inclusion of direct speech, actual *logoi* once spoken in the history as reconstructed by Palaephatus, are vital to express the mythographer's conviction that words are always instrumental in creating a myth. Hawes' observation that the term *logos* is mostly neutral and can be viewed as the 'origin' out of which a myth can be created⁴¹ is correct, but it is striking that in almost all of Palaephatus's entries, the myth he is going to rationalize is also introduced by neutral terms such as φασίν ('they say', 24 times) and (a form of) *logos* (λόγος, λέγει, λέγεται, 16 times). He even sometimes uses a term used for writing 'history' (ιστορεῖται, Palaeph. 22 and ιστοροῦσιν, Palaeph. 30 and 41). Conversely, the term *mythos* is seldom used.⁴² This practice seems to underscore the equation between direct speech, the actual spoken *logos*, and the garbled, misunderstood version that we know as myth. Reflection on verbal expressions is central to Palaephatus's project: there is no other way that he can dismantle the 'otherworld' populated by heroes and monsters. The past and present world of humans is almost the same according to Palaephatus: there is a gradual but not a categorical difference. Only the power of human speech and imagination could cause the severe discontinuity of the mythological view of early human life.

7 Conclusion

In the history of aetiology, Palaephatus is an odd character. Usually, aetiology works against (and thus presupposes) discontinuity: it is the function of aetiology to create a bridge from the present to a valued and distinctly other past by highlighting (or, actually shaping) a link to that past. As was stated in the introduction, aetiology not only explains but also validates, rejuvenates and

⁴⁰ See e.g. Palaeph. 1 (on Centaurs), 5 (on the Teumesian Fox), 15 (on Europa), 19 (on Cottus and Briareos), 24 (on Geryon), 26 (on Glaucus, son of Minos), and 28 (on Bellerophon). In some other entries, it could be argued that the piece of direct speech makes at least one element explicit that was implicit before, but any audience would have already guessed that (see e.g. Palaeph. 29 on the Winged Horses, quoted in full above, and Palaeph. 33, on Orpheus).

⁴¹ See n. 23 above; she points to expressions like ἀπὸ δὴ ταύτης τῆς ιδέας καὶ τοῦ λόγου ὁ μῦθος ἀπίστως ἐπλάσθη (Palaeph. 1), that are obviously parallel to the link between 'events' and myths as exemplified in n. 24 above.

⁴² μυθεύεται in Palaeph. 2; μῦθος in Palaeph. 26, 33, and 40.

identifies. It makes the wondrous, desired past manifest itself in some way in the present. The bridge is always man-made and is constructed by words or images that require some leap of faith, some form of willingness to believe.

Palaephatus is a researcher of origins and causes, but it is the construction of myths themselves that is the object of his investigation. He denies a discontinuity between the past and the present and stresses their essential sameness. In his system, there is no need for a bridge that requires some form of imagination; rather, the bridge requires an undoing of this imagination. He regards human misunderstanding, as manifested in the ubiquitous power of *logos*, as a disruptive, perverting factor that obscures the past.

Interestingly, this particular method is quite powerful as a tool of explanation, and Palaephatus specifically appeals to the mental faculties of his audience. At the same time, however, he drains aetiology of its other, perhaps more interesting functions. Without imagination, without the wondrous, bizarre and beautiful otherworld, there is little room for rejuvenation, shared identity, or sense of belonging. Palaephatus's reconstructed past is so close to our present that it can tell us very little about ourselves.

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