CHAPTER 40

The Early History of Man and the Uses of Diodorus in Renaissance Scholarship: From Annius of Viterbo to Johannes Boemus

C. Philipp E. Nothaft

Introduction

When Diodorus of Sicily took up the stylus during the middle years of the first century BCE to write a whole “library” (Bibliotheke) of universal history in forty books, the gap between gods and men had become a narrow one. In a reality deeply shaped by the past conquests of Alexander the Great and the present wars of Julius Caesar, many had begun to think of historical change as a process bound up with the heroic exploits of powerful and charismatic generals, who covered vast stretches of land, founded and destroyed cities, and created conditions under which inventions, crafts, food crops, and other goods could flow at an unprecedented rate from one end of the known world to the other. Nations and city-states reacted to their dependence on the good will of this new class of Hellenistic kings by showering them with divine honors, which sometimes developed into fully fledged ruler cults. The learned approach to mythology that was most congenial to this dynamic atmosphere of hero worship is forever associated with the name of Euhemerus of Messene (fl. 300 BCE), for whom even the deities of the old pantheon had once been mere mortals, who received apotheosis on account of their military and political achievements.1

In Diodorus’s Bibliotheke, which is incidentally our most important source for Euhemerus’s life and ideas, this mythographic approach is expanded to include the deification of inventors, lawgivers, and pioneers of the arts and

---

sciences. Using the real-life campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar as his models, the Sicilian historian reimagined the careers of Egyptian, Greek, and Near Eastern gods and heroes such as Osiris, Semiramis, Dionysus, and Heracles, as extended itineraries of conquest and invention that covered most of the ecumene. He complemented this striking vision of early history with an anti-primitivist account of human origins, following a type of narrative that was also espoused by several other writers of his period (e.g. Vitruvius and Lucretius) as well as by some Greek predecessors leading back to Democritus. What these authors had in common was their tendency to bypass popular musings about a primordial Golden Age in favor of what Arthur Ferguson has called the “cave myth”—a slow evolutionary progress from harsh, animalistic beginnings. According to the version recounted by Diodorus (1.7.1–8.9), living beings first arose as a result of the sun’s heat acting on the primordial mud that had emerged from the water at the time when the elements separated. For the earliest period of their existence, humans were caught up in a beastlike state, marked by endless hardship and misery. Unable to collect food reserves, many perished from hunger and cold during the harsh winters. Eventually, the threat posed by wild animals forced them to unite in tribal groups and form permanent settlements. With necessity (χρεία) as their teacher, they slowly and gradually learned how to prepare for times of paucity, to find hiding places in caves, to use fire, and to invent various arts. Since humans had emerged independently of each other in different geographic regions, there was nothing mysterious about the existence of radically different cultures, languages, and ethnicities. For those who accepted Diodorus’s account, cultural diversity was indeed an outcome to be expected from the most basic facts about mankind’s origins.

Given the unorthodox and potentially explosive nature of the material codified in the early books of the Bibliothèque, it may be surprising to find that

---

