Classical Mythology:
Golden Age and the Five Races

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Joachim Wtewael *The Golden Age* (1605)

Myths of the Ages: Sources

Greece:

Hesiod *Works and Days*	- c.700 BCE
Homeric Hymns	- 7th-6th c. BCE
Teleclides *Amphictyons*	- c.440 BCE
Plato *Timaeus* and *Critias*	- 355 BCE

Rome:

Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1	- 8 CE
Juvenal *Satire* 6	- c. 120 CE

Myth of the Golden Age

- universal myth?

- c.f. Judeo-Christian Eden

- common elements:

    - no work
    - no conflict
    - no technology
    - spontaneous production

Jan Brueghel the Elder.

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. 1615.

Image Source:
http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/microsites/b2r/object.asp?row=3&exhibs=FLEMB2R3&item=4

Myth of the Golden Age

- universal myth?
- c.f. Judeo-Christian Eden
- common elements:
    - no work
    - no conflict
    - no technology
    - spontaneous production
    - finite
- nostalgia and yearning for simplicity
- psychoanalytical theory- yearning for childhood
- R.Caldwell on Hesiod's *Works and Days*
- generalises myth vs cultural specifics

The Greek myth of Ages:
Hesiod *Works and Days*

Races of Gold, Silver, Bronze, Heroes & Iron

- Gold: no labour
- Silver: children for 100 years
- Bronze: violent, self-destructive
- Heroes: age of Theban and Trojan wars
- Iron: criminal, impious, constant labour = now

      - and it will get worse….

Stages of decline?

vs. Pierre Vidal-Naquet

      - pairs of ages: Gold/Silver; Bronze/Iron

Hans Collaert, *Aetas Ferrea* (*The Iron Age*)

16th century Dutch engraving likening the horrors of the Eighty Years' War to the Iron Age of Greek mythology

Image Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AetasFerrea.jpg

The Greek myth of Ages: Hesiod *Works and Days*

Races of Gold, Silver, Bronze, Heroes & Iron

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Stages of decline?

vs. Pierre Vidal-Naquet

Thomas Falkner - myth parallels stages of human life

Golden Age & Nostalgia

Myth as critique of present day?

- <u>lack</u> -- war, hunger, poverty, crime - pre-legal system

- no sailing & trade - c.f. Argo as first ship

- = end of Golden Age

- critiques complexity, technology, luxury

- earth protected from violence of agriculture

- pre-Olympian: Kronos as ruler of Golden Age

- Zeus/Jupiter inaugurates **Silver Age**

Jason and Argonauts on the Argo
(Greek red figure vase c.400 BCE)

Post Golden Age:
gods withdraw from humankind

Myth of Demeter and Persephone

Homeric Hymn to Demeter (see H. Foley)

- Persephone abducted by Hades

- Demeter withholds harvest

- Return of Persephone - aetiology of seasons?

- previously = perpetual food supply //Golden Age?

Attic red figure vase showing Hermes leading Persephone from the Underworld

Image Source: http://www.theoi.com/Gallery/T16.6.html

Post Golden Age: gods withdraw from humankind

- Golden Age: close proximity of humans and gods
- but: end of Bronze/Iron Age, gods leave - last to go = Astraea

Myth of Aphrodite and Anchises

Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite

⇒Aeneas

- end of semi-divinities, heroes

- c.f. Hesiod *WD*:

    -Race of Heroes inserted into Near Eastern myth

- Heroes of Theban and Trojan Wars

Bronze relief of Aphrodite and Anchises with Eros; Greek, c.320 BCE

Golden Age and parody:Greece

First of all, there was peace…
The earth produced nothing fearful, no diseases,
and everything you needed came of its own accord.
Every creek bed flowed with wine, barley loaves
would fight with wheat breads about the lips of men
begging them to gulp down the whitest loaves.
Fish would come into your house, grill themselves,
and then lie down on your tables…
Men of that time were fat, the stuff of giants.

Teleclides *Amphictyons* Fragment 1 (c.440 BCE)

Golden Age and parody: Rome

I believe that Modesty stayed on earth while Saturn was king
and was seen for a long time, while the cold cave offered up
a poor home, and enclosed fire, household god,
the flock and its masters in its shared protection,
when the mountainous wife strewed the woodland bed
with leaves and branches and the skins of neighbouring
wild beasts—not at all like modern sophisticated women…
but instead a woman who carried breasts full of milk for large babies,
often hairier than her acorn-belching husband.

Juvenal *Satires* 6.1-7, 9-10 (c.120 CE)

Utopia elsewhere? The Myth of Atlantis

- Atlantis = large island in
Atlantic Ocean
- Platonic invention
- Plato *Critias* & *Timaeus*
- written c.355 BCE

Utopia elsewhere? Plato's Myth of Atlantis

- tale told to Solon (6th c.) by Egyptian priests
- 9000 years earlier: Atlantis vs. Athens
- **Atlantis** = enormous island (*Timaeus* 24e)
- maritime empire (Africa, Italy) & huge navy - ambitions for rest of Mediterranean
- **Athens** = large <u>landlocked</u> acropolis

http://ledubai.com/atlantis-dubai

Plato's Atlantis: land of Golden Age plenty?

- fabulous wealth
- grain and exotic fruit
- domesticated and wild animals
- extensive mines with gold and *orichalcum* ('mountain copper')
- harbours, canals, huge navy - bring goods from rest of world
- land of the *apeiron* ('limitless')

- 'All this that hallowed island...produced in marvellous beauty and endless abundance' (Plato *Critias* 115a-b)

Plato's Athens: land of Golden Age simplicity?

- Athens of 9600 BCE = land-locked state
- one enclosure (like a large village)
- unified society: Guardians & peasants; 20,000 male and female warriors (like Plato's *Republic*)
- one spring: with inexhaustible water supply (*Critias* 112d)
- **no** mention of plenty or riches = primitivism
- pass on land to children 'in succession, unaltered, to others like themselves' (*Critias* 112c)

= never-changing - like Golden Race

Destruction of Atlantis

- War between Athens and Atlantis
- Athens saves Greece from invasion
- followed by destruction of Atlantis AND Athens:

'there were portentous earthquakes and floods, and one grievous day befell them when the whole body of warriors was swallowed up by the earth and the island of Atlantis in like manner was swallowed up by the sea and vanished (*Timaeus* 25c-d)

- Athens reborn (on coast)
- Atlantis remains beneath Ocean

Atlantis and Ancient Athens = Athens!

- Plato's 4th century BCE Athens = Atlantis
  - = maritime empire, large navy
  - rich, extensive mines
  - sacred to Poseidon - god of sea and earthquakes

- Plato's 4th century BCE Athens = Ancient Athens
  - defeated wealthy& powerful invading force in 5th c.
  - Atlantis// Persia
  - sacred to Athena and Hephaistos - gods of wisdom and craft

- 'Utopian' as mirror of reality
- Atlantis = one side of contemporary Athens

Conclusions

Golden Age and Utopian myths:

- 'explain' the present?

- gap between gods & humans

- potential for return?

- context significant

  - Hesiod (Boeotia?)

  - Plato (4th c. Athens)

  - Juvenal (2nd c. CE Rome)