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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS IN  
GREEK MYTHS AND LEGENDS.  
SOME CONSIDERATIONS

*Introduction* ★

We are still living in a world of different mythologies, which imprint their stamp on communication between people and nations at various levels, therefore we must constantly pose to ourselves the question of what are the proportions of fiction and reality behind them, when and why they were created and what purposes and ideologies they serve. Their existence in the present-day world simultaneously proves that there is no straight-line progression from myth to reason, clearly indicating that there never was<sup>1</sup>. Among the Greeks before Herodotus and Thucydides, and afterwards, too, timeless mythical stories replaced history, indeed, they must have known very little of their history before the sixth century BC, and facts were mixed up with fiction<sup>2</sup>. Most of the people were not interested in historical truth in our sense of the word, based on the sum of the concrete events in time and space. Mythical-legendary stories fulfilled the task of making them understand the world in which they were living, and, since they regarded these tales as containing true facts, they believed in them. No matter in what a contradictory way, mythical heroes were at all stages of Greek and Roman history related to the current political situation. Thus in the fifth and fourth centuries BC even Theseus, a legendary king of Athens, could have been re-

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★ I would very much like to thank Kai Brodersen for his valuable comments on my paper.

1. STADTER 2004, p. 31 ff.

2. FINLEY 1986, p. 11 ff. (*Myth, Memory and History*).

garded as a founder of Athenian democracy<sup>3</sup>! Much of what is mythical could<sup>4</sup> and can be interpreted as history – although with utmost caution. Thinking in terms of myths has always decisively influenced real life, and myths indisputably contain historical dimensions (concrete names, institutions, facts, and objects). The earliest deliberations of the Greeks about their past are expressed in mythical-legendary and genealogical stories, and they are preserved in both Homer's epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (eighth century BC), as well as in Hesiod (ca. 700 BC) and in the Cyclic epics. Even the works of Hecataeus and Herodotus still contain a great amount of mythological lore<sup>5</sup>. J. G. Frazer, who devoted most of his research to analyzing and comparing mythological narratives of various kinds, distinguished three main elements in mythological stories: myths proper, fairy tales, and legends; the latter were created from blurred memories of real people in the past, of real facts and events that may have happened in real places<sup>6</sup>. There are several definitions of a myth: according to a short and comprehensive statement, «myth is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance», «a traditional tale applied»<sup>7</sup>, or – expressed in a pertinent simplified way – «myths are traditional tales relevant to society»<sup>8</sup>. Tales were an elementary way of communicating, therefore they were constantly changing, although their primary purpose was often to explain phenomena in the society. Mythological and legendary stories are on the whole so closely interrelated that often they cannot be neatly distinguished, and thus their value for historical research is lessened<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, they were created within a certain historical context, reflecting contacts between peoples and countries at various levels. However, it is most difficult to interpret these contacts correctly, since their historical nucleus is so distorted.

How unresolved still is the so-called “Homeric question”, has recently been shown in more than one instance<sup>10</sup>. What are the facts and what is invention in the Homeric poems, and who was Homer if he ev-

3. HEFTNER 2003.

4. FOX 20022.

5. CHAMOUX 2001.

6. FRAZER 1921, in the introduction. Cfr. his monumental *The Golden Bough*, 12 vols., London 1907–1915.

7. BURKERT 1979, p. 23.

8. BREMMER 1987, p. 7.

9. HAMPL 1975.

10. E.g. ULF (ed.) 2003; MONTANARI 2006.

er existed, are all questions, which could not be answered unequivocally in antiquity, and are still discussed in various ways, resulting in different modern opinions. Dim memories of the Mycenaean age do survive in the poems, intertwined with allusions to the Dark Age and also to the contemporary period, but even the interpretation of the famous “historical” piece of the *Iliad*, the catalogue of ships, is unclear. Again, it only reflects the distorted reality, since it was a typical means of epic and oral poetry that was liable to be adapted in the course of transmission; it served, on the one hand, to represent all the Greeks taking part in the Trojan War, and – on the other – to concentrate on the deeds of Achilles<sup>11</sup>. The Homeric poems were the products of a creative mind, and this was quite clear even to Strabo, the great advocate of their historical background (... *he [Homer] also added a mythical element, thus conserving the creative quality of poetry*)<sup>12</sup>. There were scholars in antiquity who disputed the credibility of the Homeric poems, such as Eratosthenes, and scholars who defended Homer, attempting to explain data in the *Iliad* and even in *Odyssey* in the scientific way. Indeed, even among the mythographers there were always critics who explained myths in a rational way, such as Palaephatus (fourth century BC)<sup>13</sup>. Clearly, it is not possible to reconstruct history from the Greek (and Latin) poetry: Troy existed, but not the Homeric Troy<sup>14</sup>. To seek for Homer’s Troy in the manner of H. Schliemann, or for the “Minoan” Knossos, thus named by Sir Arthur Evans, can well be termed “modern mythology”<sup>15</sup>.

Poets were free to invent, but what about Greek historians, what was their attitude towards myths? According to A. Momigliano, Greek historiography was often contradictory, that is, in terms of «the use of documents – that supreme sign of respectability for the professional historian; and the abuse of storytelling – that sure sign of illicit traffic with fiction»<sup>16</sup>. To what extent were Greek historians aware of fiction at all – at least some of them? Homer was regarded throughout antiquity as a great authority and a source of wisdom on various aspects of human activities, from medicine to military affairs and religious and moral behaviour. This was one of the reasons why his poems – in contrast to so

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11. DANEK 2004.

12. III 2.12 C 149.

13. BRODERSEN 2005.

14. MONTANARI 2006.

15. MOMIGLIANO 2006.

16. MOMIGLIANO 1990, p. 81.

much other classical literature – survived intact until the present<sup>17</sup>. He was occasionally criticized and it is interesting for a modern historian to see how a Greek historian handled the problem and what were his arguments in discussing it.

The legendary component, which is part of the epic tradition, cannot be preserved uncorrupted for more than some hundred and fifty to two hundred years<sup>18</sup>, while afterwards memory of historical events faded, facts and time become increasingly confused to the point of being hardly recognizable, and eventually they change into mythical-legendary narrative. Nonetheless, these stories may be used, with due caution and at least potentially, as a historical source. In Greek and Roman antiquity people in general believed in mythical-legendary stories<sup>19</sup> and their rationalized explanations because they were convinced that it was not possible to invent something seemingly historical *ex nihilo*, without any justification from the past events. However, it is most difficult to peel such data from the mythical-legendary component that might have historical background, since mythological stories, in particular those which accompanied early Greek colonizers, became exploited at an early date in terms of new political and economic contacts – and later of political ideologies – and were therefore constantly subject to various changes and adaptations. This process must have begun (long) before the first Mycenaean explorers and merchants, continued in the period of Greek colonization, and played an important role in the Hellenistic times, as well as in the Roman period.

### *Strabo's criticism of his predecessors*

Problems of how much fiction or how much reality is concealed behind the myths and legends, which represented one of the ways of communication between Greeks and non-Greeks, have always been disputed. They were discussed by historians, geographers, philosophers and other writers in antiquity, and Strabo devoted much of his first two books of *Geography* to the criticism of his predecessors, as well as to their criticism of Homer and of each other<sup>20</sup>. Much of it concerns their opin-

17. KIRK 1985, p. 42 ff.

18. CASSOLA 2000.

19. VEYNE 1983.

20. See in general on Strabo: DUECK 2000.

ions on mythological stories and their historical credibility, which presupposed contacts with even distant countries and communication on different levels. Homer indeed claimed to proclaim *real* and famous deeds of heroes in order to transmit them to the later generations. Thucydides called the first Greek historians – including Herodotus, although not naming him – logographers<sup>21</sup>, who were interested not in searching for historical truth but in producing a pleasant narrative. Some of these are enumerated by Dionysius of Halicarnassus and they testify to the flourishing of local histories<sup>22</sup>. However, Herodotus in his turn accused his predecessors of writing what was pleasant for their hearers, not the truth, implying that his own narrative was historically truthful. He was obliged to write what he had been told, but he did not need to believe it<sup>23</sup>. In a similar manner, Hecataeus of Miletus, too, was convinced of writing truthfully, since he insisted that he narrated the facts as he could best judge that they had actually happened, which was not an easy task, as he emphasized, «*since there are very many Greek stories which seem most ridiculous to me*»<sup>24</sup>. Knowledge at all levels progressed rapidly and the geographical and historical horizons of the Greeks broadened considerably with the great colonization from the mid-eighth century onwards, as well as with the accompanying exploration expeditions; indeed the first meaning of the word *historiê*, such as Herodotus used it, is “inquiry”, “investigation”.

Knowledge about distant lands was always uncertain, since communication between them and the Greek world was limited to sporadic contacts only. To what extent could mythological-legendary stories be explained in terms of the earliest trading routes and ancient migrations of major and minor tribal groups extending into the Bronze Age and even further into the past? More probably the early contacts with far away countries, which are reflected in the stories, only concerned individual merchants, ore-seekers or other explorers. This kind of communication must have been so limited that it easily prompted accounts which varied from each other, including various fabulous details. This was the reason why mythical stories still held their legitimate place in the historical works of the classical period. However, some historians used them on purpose, for the sake of entertaining, even if – according to Strabo’s reproach – attempting to disguise their intention: «*For it is self-evident that*

21. THUC. I 21.

22. *De Thuc.* V 6–16; LANZILLOTTA 2004, p. 47 ff.

23. VII 152.3.

24. *FGrHist* 1, fr. 3 a.

they are weaving in myths intentionally, not through ignorance of facts, but through an intentional invention of the impossible, to gratify the taste for the marvellous and the entertaining. But they give the impression of doing this through ignorance, because by preference and with an air of plausibility they tell such tales about the unfamiliar and the unknown. Theopompus expressly acknowledges the practice when he says that he intends to narrate myths too in his *History* – a better way than that of Herodotus, Ctesias, Hellanicus, and the authors of the *Histories of India*<sup>25</sup>.

The mythical story about the Hyperboreans, a blessed northern race, dwelling beyond the mountains from where the northern wind blew, reflects early contacts with the regions in the far north, northeast or northwest; clearly, these regions were almost unknown at the time of the invention of the story. According to it, Apollo had stayed for a certain time with the Hyperboreans, returning to them every nineteen years from the spring equinox to the rise of the Pleiades. They were identified with the Scythians, Celts, or any other north-eastern people; however, with the increased knowledge of the northern regions their dwellings shifted ever more to the far north or far east. The precious gifts sent by the Hyperboreans through messengers to Apollo's sanctuary on Delos were wrapped in straw; they had first been brought to the Scythians, who delivered them to their neighbours – and they in turn to their neighbours – until the gifts reached the northern Adriatic. Herodotus reported the story as he heard it from the Delians<sup>26</sup>. The offerings were perhaps made of amber, hence the story may reflect the early trade in amber<sup>27</sup>; indeed, the journey of the messengers had always been connected with the *caput Adriae* and a major section of their route led through the coastal Illyrian regions to Dodona. This is one of the current present-day explanations; however, already Herodotus was sceptical about the existence of the Hyperboreans<sup>28</sup>. His rational explanation was in turn criticized by Strabo: «First, as for the statement of Herodotus that there are no Hyperboreans because there are also no Hypermotians. Eratosthenes says the argument presented is absurd ... However that may be, this charge should be laid against Herodotus, that he assumed that by "Hyperboreans" those peoples were meant in whose countries Boreas does not blow. For even if the poets do

25. I 2.35 C 43; translated by JONES 1949, Vol. I, pp. 157-159.

26. IV 32; other aspects of this story are discussed by ROMM 1989. See also LAZOVA 1996; BRIDGMAN 2005.

27. MASTROCIQUE 1991, pp. 41-45; WILKES 1992, pp. 102-103; CABANES 2002a, pp. 36-37.

28. IV 36.

speaking thus, rather mythically, those, at least, who expound the poets should give ear to sound doctrine, namely, that by "Hyperboreans" were meant merely the most northerly peoples. And as for limits, that of the northerly peoples is the north pole, while that of the southerly peoples is the equator; and the winds too have the same limits»<sup>29</sup>. Every generation, including ours, has made an attempt at explaining the reality behind the mythological stories in terms of the current knowledge.

Strabo, although aware of the mythical side of the Homeric poems, nonetheless firmly believed in their historicity, saying explicitly that «the poet always brought in his myths from some historical fact or other»<sup>30</sup>. In the next paragraph he observed: «The expedition of Odysseus, as it seems to me, since it actually had been made to Iberia, and since Homer had learned about it through inquiry, gave him an historical pretext; and so he also transferred the Odyssey, just as he had already transferred the Iliad, from the domain of historical fact to that of creative art, and to that of mythical invention so familiar to the poets». He further added: «The wanderings of Aeneas are a traditional fact, as also those of Antenor, and those of the Henetians; similarly, also, those of Diomedes, Menelaus, Odysseus, and several others. So then, the poet, informed through his inquiries of so many expeditions to the outermost parts of Iberia, and learning by hearsay about the wealth and the other good attributes of the country (for the Phoenicians were making these facts known) in fancy placed the abode of the blessed there ...»<sup>31</sup>.

Strabo emphasized that there was much ignorance among the early geographers – and even among the later writers such as Timosthenes and Eratosthenes – concerning Iberia, Celtica, Germany and Britain, as well as the countries of the Getae and the Bastarni; indeed they were even considerably ignorant of Italy, the Adriatic Sea, the Pontus, and the regions beyond them in the north<sup>32</sup>. If we may believe Strabo, Eratosthenes knew so astonishingly little about the northern Adriatic that he did not disbelieve any fabulous story about this area, no matter how incredible, although, on the other hand, he himself warned others from giving credence to mythical tales about the regions along the Euxine and the Adriatic<sup>33</sup>.

29. I 3.22 C 61–62; translated by JONES 1949, Vol. I, pp. 229–231.

30. III 2.12 C 149.

31. III 2.13 C 150; translated by JONES 1949, Vol II, pp. 53–55.

32. II 1.41 C 93.

33. I 3.2 C 47.

*To what extent were Greek myths known in the northern Adriatic regions?*

Communication between the Greek world and northern Adriatic areas did, certainly, exist, as is proven by trade resulting in imported Greek goods. How did the indigenous population of Histria, for example, understand the images on the Attic black-figure oinochoe, found in the rich tomb of the sixth century BC at Nesactium, the (sacral) centre of the Histri (*tav. I*)<sup>34</sup>. It is not impossible that the motif of a charioteer and a warrior (the depiction is unclear) on the four-horse chariot fighting another warrior on foot could represent a scene from the *Iliad*<sup>35</sup>. Were they familiar with Homer's epics? This oinochoe and other finds of Attic ware<sup>36</sup> possibly confirm it at least for the members of the indigenous upper class<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, the existence of composite – it may well be said “epic” – names in Illyricum, such as Liburnian Vescleves (“whose fame is good”) or Histrian Megaplinus (“whose strength is great”, in Greek Megasthénēs)<sup>38</sup>, does allow the tentative conclusion that these peoples, too, had their own oral poetry<sup>39</sup>. And further, grave goods in rich graves of the Caput Adriae and its hinterland, including the bronze Iron Age situlae with “images of life and myth” found in Histria, and most of all in Venetia and Slovenia (*fig. 1*)<sup>40</sup>, certainly testify to a great degree of acculturation of these regions, due to their Mediterranean contacts. Although the decorated situlae in Slovenia were produced under the strong Etruscan and Venetic influences, they nonetheless reflect – thanks to their distinct style and motifs – a high degree of independence from their models. The indigenous inhabitants had their own heroes and mythical ancestors, and it may be presumed that their specific artistic expressions were based on their own mythological lore, combined with what they had taken over from their neighbours thanks to the communication with the Etruscan and Greek speaking lands.

34. MIHOVIĆ 2001, p. 102, fig. 96.

35. Personal communication of Branko Kirigin. Helpful observations were kindly given to me by William Cavanagh, as well as by Amalia Avramidou, who also drew my attention to the Panathenaic amphora attributed to the Group of Vatican G 23; BEAZLEY 1971<sup>2</sup>, no. 176 (cf. also the Beazley Archive: <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/>), suggesting to search for similar chariot scenes by the Antimenes Painter.

36. MIHOVIĆ 2002, p. 499 ff.; pp. 514–515.

37. I would like to thank Biba Teržan for helpful discussion on this matter.

38. KATIČIĆ 1976, p. 172.

39. KATIČIĆ 1984.

40. TERŽAN 1997; TURK 2005.

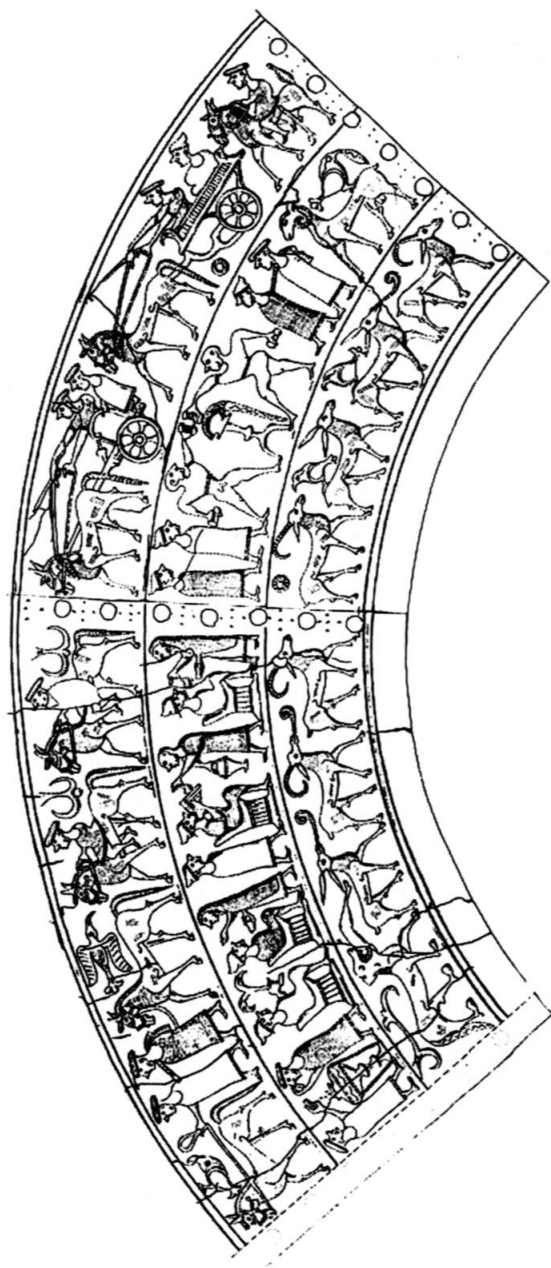


Fig. 1 - Drawing of the scenes depicted on the Vače situla (ca. 500 BC). From: TURK 2005, p. 35, fig. 52.

In the Roman period, however, many old mythological stories must have been forgotten – if they had ever been known at all – for Lucian of Samosata (second century AD) mentioned that the local inhabitants along the Padus River had never even heard anything about Phaeton and his sisters, mourning his death in the river, shedding tears of amber<sup>41</sup>.

*Stories of Greek and Trojan heroes, resulting in the archaiologia*

The mythical-legendary tradition related to a specific country culminated in its *archaiologia*. By this word Greek historians and geographers usually denoted the ancient history of a town or a region, which included myths concerning the foundation and origins of different places and customs related to the oldest known facts from the history of a country. Strabo, for example, did not have any doubts in accepting the legendary past as true history, and he stated it explicitly: «*As to Aeneas, Antenor, and the Eneians, and, in a word, the survivors of the Trojan War that wandered forth into the whole inhabited world – is it proper not to reckon them among the men of ancient times? For it came about that, on account of the length of the campaign, the Greeks of that time, and the barbarians as well, lost both what they had at home and what they had acquired by the campaign; and so, after the destruction of Troy, not only did the victors turn to piracy because of their poverty, but still more the vanquished who survived the war. And, indeed, it is said that a great many cities were founded by them along the whole sea-coast outside of Greece, and in some places in the interior also*»<sup>42</sup>. He mentioned again the wanderings of the two Trojan heroes, Aeneas and Antenor, as well as those of Diomedes, Menelaus, Odysseus and several others in the book on Iberia, when discussing why Homer had placed there the “abode of the blest” and the Elysian Plain<sup>43</sup>. In his opinion, Homer’s informants were the Phoenicians who knew the riches of the country and made these facts known. Trojan heroes were always related to countries and peoples who were potential adversaries of the Greeks, but who were – in terms of culture – not (much) inferior to them.

On the other hand, a historian of the second century AD, such as Appian of Alexandria, was sceptical about this earliest form of history since he always found several quite different versions of it available. He

41. *Electrum* II.

42. I 3.2 C 48.

43. III 2.13 C 150.

therefore contented himself with merely mentioning the most plausible one, leaving the earliest (mythical) history to the “ancient” historians with the words of dismissal: «*But I shall leave this subject to the antiquarians*»<sup>44</sup>. He preferred to devote his research to the recent past and contemporary history where adequate sources did not fail him. He was well aware of the amount of fiction involved in the legendary lore, on the basis of which antiquarians tentatively reconstructed the ancient history of a country.

The *archaiologia* of Italy and Rome was the coming of Aeneas and his various and complicated vicissitudes in Italy, which became increasingly important in Strabo's time. This Trojan myth was exploited by Caesar and in particular Augustus, since the Julian dynasty traced its origin from Aeneas<sup>45</sup>. Indeed, Aeneas had a place of honour in the decoration of the Augustan forum<sup>46</sup>. In the Roman period, myths were hardly less important than in the Greek world; they not only fulfilled their primary function of explaining the fundamental questions related to the divine and human existence, but they were also important for constructing identities. Consequently, they were transformed and adapted in the “Roman way”. The Trojan myth concerning the foundation of Rome, along with that of Romulus and the traditions related to Lavinium, having been known at least in the fifth century BC<sup>47</sup>, were thoroughly renewed under Augustus, who made use of them in the general restoration and revival of religion and cults at the beginning of the Empire. The relationship between myths and religion may have been different in Rome than it was in Greece, but they were intrinsically connected, since in one way or another myths conveniently served as exegesis of cult practices. Even if used for political purposes – which had always been a common practice – they no doubt served well the majority of the Romans in their concern with their identity on the one hand, and the basic order of things on the other<sup>48</sup>. Roman histories, including the important *Roman History* of Cassius Dio from the third century AD, started with the arrival of Aeneas in Italy.

His arrival was related both to the Tyrrhenian Sea and to the Adriatic; perhaps his alleged contacts with the Adriatic should be regarded as

44. *Illyr.* II 5; cfr. *Iber.* II 9.

45. ERSKINE 2004.

46. SPANNAGEL 1999, 86 ff.

47. FORSYTHE 2005, p. 93 ff.; p. 291.

48. SCHEID 2003.

earlier, when the sea had still been less known to the Greek explorers and merchants. Whether or not this was due to the Athenians of the fifth century and their exploring of the Adriatic, should remain a hypothesis, although his arrival in Italy is allegedly connected with the hilly place called *Athenaion* in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, near the port of Aphrodite – the goddess was his mother<sup>49</sup>! – or *Arx Minervae* in Virgil<sup>50</sup>. Interestingly, the first station of Aeneas' journey in the Adriatic could have been the "Port of Anchises", so named after his father, a harbour noted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus as having been situated to the north of Buthrotum<sup>51</sup>, and which should perhaps be located at Onchesmus (present-day Saranda in Albania); Dionysius merely says that in his time the port had another, "unclear", name. This place and the legend, connected with it, could possibly be related to the Euboean tradition, since the Euboeans were the first who are known to have settled Corcyra opposite this section of the Epirote coast<sup>52</sup>.

As noted by Strabo, the legends related to the early colonization mainly concerned the *nostoi* of various heroes, Greek and Trojan, and mainly referred to the regions along the sea coasts, those of the Adriatic or other Mediterranean coasts, or even coasts of other seas. Maritime routes used by travellers, explorers, merchants, and ultimately colonists had always been of extreme importance<sup>53</sup>, much more than had ever been the roads and paths of the interior. Even far-away ports, such as those of the northern Adriatic, were known to the Greeks at a relatively early date, although they may not have been well known. The interior of Illyria, on the other hand, remained for a long time *terra incognita*, and in this sense the mythical story of the Theban royal pair Cadmus and Harmonia should be regarded as being to some extent exceptional<sup>54</sup>. The Phoenician origin of Cadmus may have some historical background, although it cannot be defined. G. Zippel supposed that the monuments of Cadmus and Harmonia, allegedly their tombs, which had been exhibited to the end of antiquity in southern Illyria, represented some material trace of Phoenician culture<sup>55</sup>. Could it be that the Phoenician origin of Cadmus had indeed some factual basis after the discovery of approxi-

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49. I 51.3.

50. *Aen.* III 531; ROSSIGNOLI 2004, p. 205.

51. I 51.2.

52. BRACCESI 1979<sup>2</sup>, p. 98; ROSSIGNOLI 2004, pp. 206–207.

53. GAFFNEY et al. 2002; CABANES 2002b.

54. ŠAŠEL KOS 1993.

55. ZIPPEL 1877, p. 18 f.

mately one hundred cylindrical seals of agate and lapis lazuli, which was made during the 1963 archaeological season at the site of Cadmeia in Thebes in a context dated by Late Helladic III B pottery? They range from (pre)-Babylonian (ca. 2500-1600 B.C.), Mitannian from the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries, and Hittite from the fourteenth century, to Cypriote (1450-1250), Kassite, and one Mycenaean<sup>56</sup>. Contacts with the region of the Near East certainly existed, but they cannot be defined. The story of Cadmus and Harmonia among the Enchelei perhaps reflects influences due to sporadic contacts, maintained by individuals, or rather groups of individuals, and/or occasional migrations, which may have contributed impulse to the speedier development of indigenous cultures by having brought them into the orbit of the Greek world. Cadmus and Harmonia notably became the rulers of the Enchelei, who were the northern neighbours of the Chaones, thus living somewhere in the region north of Epirus extending to Lake Ohrid (Lychnidus Lacus).

The kingdom of the Molossi in Epirus traced its descent from Achilles. A typical example of political appropriation of a myth is that of Pyrrhus of Epirus in the early Hellenistic period. When on behalf of the Tarentines he invaded Italy in 280 BC, he – as a descendant of Achilles and bearing the same name as Achilles' son Pyrrhus (Neoptolemus)<sup>57</sup> – was encouraged by them as being predestined to defeat Rome, since through the alleged foundation by Aeneas, Rome was then currently viewed as a second Troy<sup>58</sup>. Pyrrhus thus justified his military actions also in terms of political ideology. By the time of the historian Timaeus at the end of the fourth century BC, the story of Aeneas' foundation of Rome was well established. Indeed, the Trojan origin of Rome was not an isolated case in central Italy; several other places in Latium, notably Lavinium where Aeneas allegedly landed, were regarded as having been founded by Aeneas<sup>59</sup>. The Trojan myth was attached to Rome before anybody could have foreseen its spectacular rise to become the capital of a powerful state, which subdued much of the Greek speaking east, as well as other countries. To return to Pyrrhus: eventually he was not successful in the war against Rome and although he did not experience any decisive defeat in any of several more or less inconclusive battles<sup>60</sup>,

56. PORADA 1965; PORADA 1966.

57. ZIEGLER 1935, c. 2440 ff.

58. PAUS. I 12.1-2.

59. ERSKINE 2004, p. 103 ff.; FORSYTHE 2005, p. 58 and *passim*.

60. FORSYTHE 2005, pp. 349-358.

Rome actually defeated him and he had to withdraw from Italy. Tarentum eventually came under the Roman dominion and became Rome's ally in 270 BC. Pyrrhus' invasion and his claims of mythical descent contributed towards Rome's readily accepting the role of its Trojan descent when confronting the Greek world beyond the Adriatic in the third century BC. Aeneas was both an outstanding figure in Homer's epics, and an enemy of the Greeks; he was a thoroughly acceptable figure and featured conveniently in Roman foreign affairs. Myths and legends were increasingly being exploited politically. The cult of Diomedes, for example, flourished in the Adriatic particularly in the time of the Syracusan colonization<sup>61</sup>, while afterwards, with the Roman conquest, Trojan Antenor became politically more correct<sup>62</sup>. Antenor's legend, known to Sophocles (who wrote the *Antenoridae*), was perhaps originally related to the oldest Aegean-Anatolian sailings as far as the Adriatic in the late Mycenaean period<sup>63</sup>, and perhaps never totally forgotten. Eventually it played an important political role in Venetia, where even Aquileia was regarded a foundation of Antenor, and its inhabitants were called *Antenoridae*<sup>64</sup>.

### *The return journey of the Argonauts*

The Argonauts would have returned, according to the story narrated by Apollonius of Rhodes, from the Black Sea along the Danube to the Adriatic. Pliny the Elder was the first to claim explicitly that they had gone along the Savus (= Sava) and the Nauportus (= Ljubljana), but could not reach the Adriatic along the rivers, since no river flows from the Danube into this sea (fig. 2)<sup>65</sup>. This fact was well known before him, and the erroneous opinion about the two arms of the Danube was criticized e.g. by Diodorus<sup>66</sup> and Strabo<sup>67</sup>. Diodorus even explained that Istria had been named after a small local river Ister, bearing coincidentally the same name as the (lower course of the) Danube. However, neither

61. KIRIGIN-ČAČE 1998; COLONNA 1998.

62. KATIČIĆ 1988 (1995); BRACCESI 19972. See also BRACCESI 1984.

63. BRACCESI 19972. ŠAŠEL KOS 2004, pp. 497-498.

64. MORETTI 1980 (1990); BRACCESI 19972, pp. 119-121. See also BOFFO 2000, pp. 118-120.

65. N. h. III 128.

66. IV 56.7-8.

67. VII 5.9 C 317.

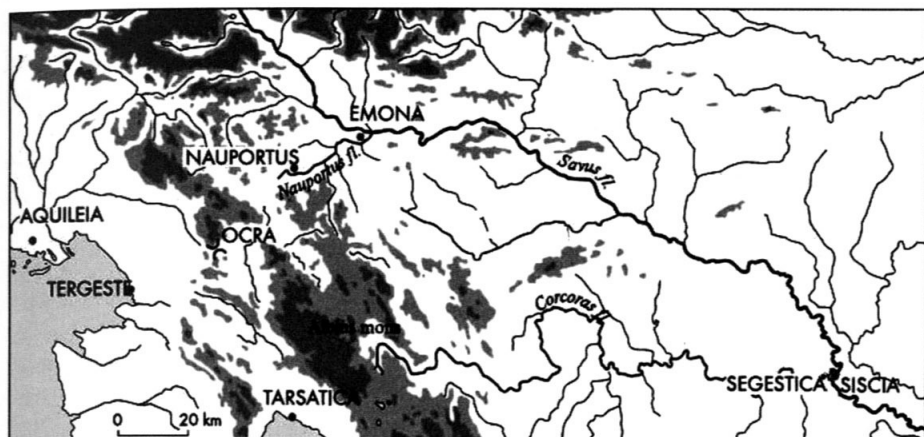


Fig. 2 - Return journey of the Argonauts along the Savus and Nauportus Rivers (computer graphics: Mateja Belak).

he nor Strabo related these data to the Argonauts. According to Pliny, the earlier writers were deceived by the fact that the ship *Argo* had descended to the Adriatic on a river not far from Tergeste, although this river could no longer be identified. He added that more careful writers reported that the ship was portaged across the Alps. His criticism of earlier writers is anachronistic, since the sources of the Danube had only been discovered in the Augustan period, and geographic knowledge of the regions before the Augustan conquest was in general limited.

Apollonius' explanation of the return of the Argonauts via the northern Adriatic indicates that the Greeks of his time had been to some extent familiar with the northern Adriatic regions and its hinterland. However, archaeology does not confirm any contacts between this area and the regions on the Black Sea coast, which indeed helps explain the story. Had the northern Adriatic regions been well known, the story would not have been created, but even less so, had they been unknown. It is most interesting how the story changed through time; first Nauportus was related to the story of the Argonauts, since it was a more important prehistoric settlement than Emona. After its decline towards the end of the first century AD, Emona began to be regarded as the foundation of the Argonauts. This information can first be found in Zosimus, citing the poet Pisander from Laranda<sup>68</sup>; Zosimus had used as a source for this

68. V 29.1-3.

part of his historical narrative the *History* of Olympiiodorus (from the beginning of the fifth century AD). Pisander, the author of an epic on world history, flourished in the early third century AD; clearly, the tradition of Emona having been the foundation of Jason and his Argonauts was earlier, although it is not possible to establish when and at what occasion it arose. Greek myths and legends were continuously adapted to the current political situation.

Interestingly, the tendency to explain the story of the return of the Argonauts in a rational way obviously continued well into the sixteenth century. On the map of Carniola made by Wolfgang Lazius (1514–1565, physician and historian in Vienna, and personal physician of the emperor Ferdinand I), there is a note at Vrhnika (in German Oberlaibach, the ancient Nauportus) that the Argonauts would have gone beneath the earth there and would have navigated along the subterranean streams. The idea was given to him most probably by his friend and cartographer Augustin Hirschvogel, who was living between 1536 and 1543 (just before Lazius' first map was printed in 1545) in Ljubljana, which was traditionally related to the Argonauts. This coincided with the first serious exploration of certain karst phenomena and discovery of the great caves from which rivers flow, as well as with the progress of the cartography, when it became clear that hills and mountains prevent any surface river connection between the Ljubljana and the Adriatic<sup>69</sup>.

## Conclusion

It will never be possible to correctly distinguish various phases in the development of mythical-legendary stories. The origins of most of them no doubt reflect some kind of historical background referring to a more or less distant past, for the most part hopelessly distorted. Memory of earlier civilizations perpetuated through the oral tradition was no doubt their constituent part. However, as is well known, the oral tradition is most deceiving in transmitting historical facts. Individuals in search for ores and other raw materials, early travellers and explorers, early geographers and merchants, and – later – first colonists played an important role in the process of (re-)creating mythical-legendary stories, since the legendary component was created on the basis of their reports. The actual

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69. SHAW-MACQUEEN 1998.

facts, which had perhaps not been well understood already at the very beginning, became increasingly blurred and were eventually no longer recognizable.

A different, later, phase may be represented by the mixing up of legends and mythical stories – in accordance with their improvisatory character – which became transformed into a more or less coherent mythical tradition; this represented a distant past of a town or a country. At the same time – or later – traditional stories became on the one hand more and more rationalized, which coincided with ever increasing geographical and other knowledge, while on the other hand they were adapted in various ways to serve political purposes and newly created reality, and were consequently further transformed. As is well known, there is much fiction and little reality behind the Greek legends, but it is fascinating to study for what reasons they had been created and how and why they were subsequently transformed, and lastly, how the Greeks themselves understood and explained them. As has been stated by M. P. Nilsson in his important book on Greek religion, the historical basis is totally overgrown by the free inventions of mythological-legendary stories, within which it is impossible to recognize any historical details, if the corresponding historical narrative is lacking<sup>70</sup>.

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70. NILSSON 1967<sup>3</sup>, p. 25.

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