

Between mythography and historiography: Diodorus' *Universal Library*¹

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Between 60 and 30 BC, Diodorus Siculus composed his *Universal Library*² and attempted to 'give a full account of all the events that have been handed down to memory and took place in the known regions of the inhabited world' (1.9.1).³ He began with the legends of both Greeks and barbarians and covered the affairs of the known world 'down to the beginning of the war between the Romans and the Celts' (1.4.5–7), i.e. until 60 BC.

Gods and heroes are therefore included in Diodorus' history. This inclusion is made possible because, as opposed to 'the celestial gods who always existed' (1.2.10), 'others, as they say, first lived on earth as mortals and were granted immortality only after their death because of their cleverness and their benevolence to mankind' (1.13.1). Indeed, these gods belong by right to human history. Accordingly, there is no reason to distinguish between 'le temps des dieux' and 'le temps des hommes' in Diodorus' *Universal Library*.⁴ For him, as for his contemporary Varro,⁵ it is only the criterion of knowledge that determines a distinction between various periods. First, there was a totally unknown time (Varro: ἄδηλον) that left no memory; second, an ancient time which is only dimly known through the myths of both Greeks and barbarians (Varro: μυθικόν); and third, a 'historical' period (Varro: ἱστορικόν) beginning with the Trojan War, for which a chronology has been established by Apollodorus. This explains why Diodorus explicitly set apart the first six books in which he recorded 'the events and legends prior to the Trojan War'; for, as he said, 'in these we have not fixed the dates with any precision'.⁶

When he deals with mythology, Diodorus is aware of the difficulties experienced by the historian, as demonstrated by the preface to book IV. First, 'the antiquity of the events recorded makes them hard to find out and causes much embarrassment to the historians' (4.1.1). Again 'the dates reported cannot be checked accurately and as a consequence this "history" is held

1 It is a great pleasure and an honour to contribute to the volume for Øivind Andersen, a dear friend and a well-known scholar. Given the broadness of his expertise, which also includes historiography, I hope he will have some interest in a paper devoted to the status of mythography in Diodorus' *Universal Library*.

2 On Diodorus' handling of the genre of 'universal history', see Sulimani 2011, 21–55.

3 Translations are by Oldfather 1935.

4 Vidal-Naquet 1981.

5 Quoted by Censorinus, *DN* 1.1.2.

6 *Diod. Sic.* 40.8.

in contempt by the readers' (4.1.1). Moreover, 'the number and variety of the heroes, demigods and men whose genealogy is traced make the account difficult to follow' (4.1.1). Last but not least, 'there is no consensus among the written sources relating the ancient deeds and legends' (4.1.1). This is the reason why the Hellenistic historians 'avoided the history of fabulous times' (4.1.3).

Beginning his narrative on the labours of Heracles, Diodorus also draws attention to another set of problems: 'because of the antiquity and the lack of plausibility of the facts which are related about this hero, the historian is compelled either to omit his greatest exploits and clean up in some way his glory or, by telling the whole story, to make it unbelievable' (4.8.2). As opposed to Plutarch who, in his *Life of Theseus*, chose to 'clean up the mythical through reason, and compel it to submit to us and take on the appearance of history' (Plut. *Vit. Thes.* 1.5.), Diodorus decided to give up plausibility and criticized those who apply the false 'principle of current things'⁷ to Heracles:

some readers set up an unfair standard requiring in the accounts of ancient myths the same exactness as in the events of our own time and, using their own experience as a norm, estimate the might of Heracles by the weakness of the men of today so that they refuse any credibility to the account of these deeds because of their excessive magnitude. (4.8.3)

Reading these lines, one is tempted to think that Diodorus turned his back on critical historiography and that his purpose and method were the same as those of the first historians who wrote before the Peloponnesian War, according to Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his treatise *On Thucydides* 5:

Keeping in view one single and unvarying object, that of bringing to the common knowledge of all whatever records or traditions were to be found among the natives of the individual nationalities or states ... and to deliver these just as they received them without adding thereto or subtracting therefrom, including the legends which had been believed for many generations and dramatic tales which seem to men of the present time to have a large measure of silliness.

Actually, Diodorus' handling of mythology is more complex: if he relates some myths without comment, he also often happens to 'historicize' and rationalize them. I propose in this paper to account for this complexity, first explaining *why* Diodorus chose to include myths in his universal history, and then examining *how* he did it.

⁷ Veyne 1988, 47.

1. *Why Diodorus tells myths*

An initial answer to this question has been suggested to me by a recent paper of K. Clarke, 'Universal Perspectives in Historiography'.⁸ By going further back into the past, Diodorus wants first to demonstrate the superiority of his work over all the other universal histories, as he says in his preface to book I: 'Although the profit which history affords to its readers lies in its embracing a vast number and variety of circumstances ... only a few writers have undertaken, beginning with the earliest times and coming down to their own days, to record the events connected with all peoples' (1.3.2), as well as in his preface to book IV:

For instance Ephorus of Cyme, the pupil of Isocrates, when he undertook to write his universal history, passed over the ancient myths and began his history with a narrative of the events which took place after the return of the Heraclidae. Likewise Callisthenes and Theopompus who were contemporaries of Ephorus avoided the history of fabulous times. (4.1.3–4)

Diodorus also aims to establish in this way the continuity and unity of human history by demonstrating the links between the most ancient past and the present. While separating clearly the most ancient past (books I–VI) from the historical past which begins with the Trojan War (books VII–XL), he illuminates the existence of a continuum with a series of prolepses and etiologies in the mythological books, as well as analepses in the historical books.

1.1. Prolepses and etiologies in books I–VI

Diodorus often mentions in books I–VI events which will happen later on and will be related in books VII–XIV. When, in book IV, he narrates how 'Tlepolemus, the son of Heracles, divided Rhodes into three parts and founded there three cities', he also reminds the reader that 'in later times he took part with Agamemnon in the war against Troy' (4.58.8). The foundation of Alesia gives him the opportunity to remind his readers that this city 'remained free from the days of Heracles and was never sacked until our own time' (4.19.2), when it was taken by storm by Caesar.

Diodorus systematically uses etiology: many cities, peoples, and places got their present names from ancient heroes. In book IV for example, after Iolaos' victory over the natives in Sardinia, we read 'the plain is called to this day Iolaeium' (4.29.5) and 'he gave his name to the folk of the colony he founded

⁸ Clarke 1999.

there' (4.30.2). This link between the mythical past and the present often relies on fanciful or approximate etymologies: Alesia is supposed to be a derivative of ἄλη 'the "wandering" of Heracles on his campaign' (4.19.1) and the name of the harbour Caietes, which is said to be a distortion of the name Aietes, Medea's father, becomes a token of the return voyage of the Argonauts by way of Italy (4.56.6).

The mythical past left material traces also in physical geography, flora, and fauna. The pillars of Heracles were set up by the hero (4.18.2). The breed of Diomedes' horses, which were once captured by Heracles, continued down to the reign of Alexander (4.15.4). Conversely, not a single wild beast is to be found in Crete since it was freed by Heracles of the wild beasts which infested it (4.17.3).

Some existing cults are also linked to ancient myths. The triennial festival held by the Greeks in honour of Dionysus is explained by his journey to India, which lasted three years (3.65.8), and the sacrifices of the Rhodians, performed without fire, reproduce the behaviour of their founders, the Heliadae, who forgot to light fire under the victims (5.56.6–7).

1.2. Analepses and mythical digressions in books VII–XL

Memories of the mythical past explain some historical events in books VII–XL. The ancient prestige of Thebes, 'a city widely known both for its achievements and for the myths that had been handed down about it' (19.53.2) is the reason why Cassander undertook to re-establish it after it was destroyed by Alexander (19.51.1–8). Conversely, the destruction of Orchomenus by the Thebans in 364/3 BC is explained not only by the help given at this time by the knights of Orchomenus to the Theban refugees who attempted to change the constitution of Thebes to aristocracy, but also by the tribute Thebes paid to the Myniae in the heroic age (15.79.5).

As C. P. Jones demonstrated in his book *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World*, the mythical past played a major part in contemporary diplomacy. His book actually begins with an example borrowed from Diodorus (17. 96.1–2).⁹ The Indians called Sibians, descendants of the soldiers who came with Heracles to the rock of Aornus, welcomed Alexander who was also descended from Heracles (17.96.2 'they met the king, renewed their ties of kinship, and welcomed him enthusiastically in every way, as being their relatives, and brought him magnificent gifts'). Alexander himself used the same argument to win over the Thessalians 'by reminding them of his ancient relationship to them through Heracles' (17.4.1).

⁹ Jones 1999.

The mythical past also surfaces in the ‘historical’ books in a series of digressions linked to placenames. For instance, the march of the Persian commander Memnon of Rhodes across Mount Ida and the encampment of Alexander near the Caucasus are used as a pretext to allude to the judgment of Paris and the Idaean Dactyls, and Prometheus’ punishment respectively (17.7.3–5, 83.1).

1.3. A tentative explanation

This proliferation of mythical stories in Diodorus’ *Universal Library*, and more generally in Hellenistic historiography, may first be explained by a change in the tastes and interests of the readers. As E. Gabba has pointed out:¹⁰

The mythical and legendary phases of Greek prehistory and proto-history with their store of divine and heroic genealogies, which had been eliminated by Thucydides’ history, recovered a role and function in works of history, as demonstrated by the fragments of the Athidographers, Timaeus, Theopompus, the criticisms of Ctesias or Ephorus expressed by Plutarch or Strabo and the *πραγματικὴ ἱστορία* of Polybius, which is the exception that proves the rule.

Diodorus himself explicitly acknowledges his taste for the unusual at the beginning of book IV: ‘In the three preceding books we have recorded the fabulous deeds among other nations and what their histories relate about the gods ... speaking generally we have described everything which was worthy of mention and marvellous to relate’ (4.1.5). This is also demonstrated by the large number of occurrences (346 in total) of this word-family in his work. The historian’s taste for the unusual is also the reason why he decides to report the courage of the Libyan Amazons, which ‘presupposes an amazing pre-eminence when compared with the nature of the women of our days’ (3.52.4) and did not omit the story of Zeus changing the colour of the bees, precisely ‘because it is most astonishing of all’ (5.70.5).

Diodorus’ integration of myths into his *Universal Library* can also be explained by the purpose he assigns to history in the prologues of books I and IV, which is often recalled in his narrative. According to him, universal history is useful to all men because it gives to its readers ‘the most excellent kind of experience’ (1.1.1.) and uses the mistakes and the successes of others as examples. By portraying the evil as well as the noble deeds of men of the past, by praising the good and conferring on them immortal glory (1.1.5, 1.2.2, 23.15.1, 31.15.1, 37.4.1) and degrading the bad (1.1.5), the historian urges men to virtue and deters them from vice, as did the epic poets before him

¹⁰ Gabba 1981, 53.

who also provided examples to follow and avoid, as T. P. Wiseman pointed out.¹¹ This is why Diodorus twice uses metaphors for history which are usually applied to poetry: history has ‘the most divine voice’ (1.2.3) and ‘celebrates forever in her songs (καθύμνησεν¹²) all the past heroes with the appropriate praises’ (4.1.4). At 4.1.4 he states: ‘We expensed all the care within our power to the ancient history. For very great and most numerous deeds have been performed by the heroes and demi-gods and by many good men likewise.’

This moral aim also explains why Diodorus does not hesitate to add a more edifying version to the traditional story. In book V he prefaces the traditional story of Zeus’ accession to power with another one: ‘some say that he [Zeus] succeeded to the kingship ... not by overcoming his father with violence, but in the manner prescribed by custom and justly, having been judged worthy of that honour’ (5.70.1).

According to Diodorus, myths not only provide examples, they also demonstrate their effectiveness. The last Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, and Heracles, son of Alcmena, both emulated their prior namesakes.¹³ In the same way, Jason emulated the campaigns of Perseus (4.40.2) and Theseus the labours of Heracles (4.59.1).

2. *How Diodorus relates myths*

2.1. *The place of myths*

In a history that goes from the earliest times to the beginning of the war between the Romans and the Celts, the ‘organization of the work’ (οικονομία) is critical. Actually, Diodorus often points out in books I to VI, which are devoted to the most ancient times (i.e. to the events prior to the Trojan War), that he is aiming at due proportion in his account.¹⁴ Yet he has omitted nothing from the myths concerning Heracles:

On the one hand, he often acknowledges that he has ‘dwelt overlong’ (πεπλεονάκαμεν) on some topics in order to be thorough (1.90.4, 4.49.4), to give the gods their due (4.83.7), or to delight the lovers of reading (2.54.7). On the other hand, he points out that he will deal briefly (συντόμως)¹⁵ with the myth told by the Indians about Dionysus, the extraordinary island discovered in the Ocean by Jambulus, and other stories. He sometimes justifies the omission of many among the myths told about Medea, ‘considering it unnecessary and

¹¹ Wiseman 1979, 144.

¹² This verb is used elsewhere for poets (Diod. Sic. 11.11.6) and choruses (Diod. Sic. 17.50.6).

¹³ Diod. Sic. 3.74.1: Dionysus and 5.76.2: Heracles.

¹⁴ Diod. Sic. 1.9.1, 1.9.4, 1.29.6, 4.5.4, 4.68.6, 6.1.3: στοχαζόμενοι τῆς συμμετρίας.

¹⁵ Diod. Sic. 2.38.3, 2.55.1, 3.62.3, 5.6.1, 6.1.3.

long to tell all of them' (4.56.2) and will be content to add those items that have been passed over concerning the history of the Argonauts (4.56.2).

2.2. *The organization of Diodorus' mythological books*

After reading the preface to book I one may conclude that these books are exclusively concerned with mythology, which is wrong. Actually the first three books about the deeds and the legends of the barbarians, beginning with the Egyptians, combine ethnography and history with mythology in the manner of local historiography. Book V, which is devoted to the islands, is structured in the same way. Only in book IV can one find mythology pure and simple, that is 'the stories told among the Greeks concerning the most renowned heroes and demi-gods of the ancient times' (4.1.5). As for book VI, given that we have only fragments or summaries, it is difficult to assess precisely the organization of its content. Moreover, some myths are set out in various parts of his work, as demonstrated for instance by J. Fabre-Serris in relation to Dionysus.¹⁶

To better understand the way in which Diodorus deals with myths, it is worth comparing the structure of book IV with the three complete books of pseudo-Apollodorus' Library. The mythographer systematically arranges his work according to genealogies. In book I he includes Ouranus and the gods (1.1–6.3), Prometheus, his son Deucalion (7.1–2), and his descendants down to Jason and the Argonauts (7.2–9.28). In Book II he covers the family of Inachus from Belus down to the Heraclidae. In book III he follows the family of Agenor (1–7), Pelasgus (8–9), Atlas and his daughters (10–12.6), Asopus (12.6–13) and Cecrops down to Theseus (14–16).

The structure of Diodorus' book IV is more complex. It does not follow any chronological or genealogical order, but rather moves from one topic to another by free association, and the propriety of the transitions is more asserted than demonstrated. It begins with Dionysus (4.1.6–5.4) for chronological as well as logical reasons: 'we shall begin with Dionysus because he not only belongs to a very ancient time but also conferred very great benefactions upon the race of men' (4.1.6). There follows an appendix devoted to the gods associated with him: Priapus (4.6.1–4), Hermaphroditus (4.6.5) and the Muses (4.7.1–4). He then turns to Heracles (4.7.4–39.4), who is followed by the Argonauts (4.40.1 'since Heracles joined them in their campaign, it may be appropriate to speak of them in this connection'). Then he introduces a digression which is devoted to the sons of Helios, Aietes and Perses and their daughters Hecate, Circe, and Medea (4.45.1–46.5). He gives a detailed account of the Golden

¹⁶ Fabre-Serris 2006.

Fleece (4.47.1–6) ‘in order that nothing which belongs to the history we have undertaken may remain unknown’ (4.46.5) before resuming the story of the Argonauts (4.48.1–56.8). From 4.57.1 to 58.6, the story of the Argonauts and Heracles’ deeds are appropriately followed by a narrative on the deeds of Heracles’ sons. The transition between Heracles and his descendants and Theseus (4.59–62.4) is justified by their likeness (‘since Theseus emulated the labours of Heracles’, 4.59.1). Then Diodorus decides to relate the rape of Helen and the wooing of Persephone by Peirithous (4.63.1–5), ‘for these deeds are interwoven with the affairs of Theseus’ (4.63.1). But there is no justification whatsoever for the introduction of the stories of the Seven against Thebes and the Epigonoï (4.64.1–67.6), Salmoneus, Tyro and their descendants down to Nestor (4.68.1), the Lapiths and the Centaurs (4.69.1–70.4), Asclepius and his descendants (4.71.1–4), or the story of the daughters of Asopos and the sons who were born to Aiaceus (4.72.1–7). These stories are often introduced by the same formula: ‘now we shall endeavour to set forth the facts about’ (4.68.1, 71.1, 73.1, 84.1). But at 4.73.1 Diodorus goes back to earlier times in order to tell the stories of Pelops, his father Tantalus, and Oenomaus (73.1).¹⁷ Since Tantalus was driven out by Ilus, son of Tros, his story is followed by the tale of Ilus and his ancestors (4.75.1–76.5). But the ending of book IV and the stories of Daedalus, the Minotaur and the expedition of Minos into Sicily (4.76.1–79.7), the myth of the mothers (4.80), Aristaeus (4.81–82), Eryx (4.83), Daphnis (4.84), and Orion (4.85) can be explained by geography, since Sicily is the setting of all these legends.

With few exceptions, in this book Diodorus keeps to his distinction between the most ancient history and the truly historical times that begin with the Trojan War. The story of the Heraclidae ends with Tlepolemus who ‘later on took part with Agamemnon in the war against Troy’ (4.58.8). The same goes for the descendants of Salmoneus and Tyro, a line that ends with Nestor (4.68.6), the Asclepiads (Podaleirios and Machaon 4.71.4), the descendants of Aiaceus (Achilles and Ajax 4.72.7), and the lineage of the Trojan kings (Memnon and Hector 4.75.4). The two exceptions are linked with Sicily and its cults, with the arrival of Merion after the end of the Trojan War (4.79.6), and with Aeneas’ visit to Eryx (4.83.4).

¹⁷ ‘To do so we must revert to earlier times and give in summary the whole story from the beginning.’

2.3. *The narrative of myths*

As he points out in his preface to book IV, Diodorus is well aware of the existence of various versions of myths. But as opposed to Hecataeus, who was selective and only reported ‘what seemed to him true’,¹⁸ Diodorus, like Strabo and Pausanias after him, often gives many versions of the same story and leaves his reader the choice: ‘As it is not easy to set forth the precise truth on such matters, the disagreement among historians must be considered worthy of record, in order that the reader may be able to decide upon the truth without prejudice’ (1.56.6). This is the reason why, as he says at 3.62.1, ‘after having made mention [at 1.23.7] of the birth of Dionysus and of his deeds as they are preserved in the local histories of that country [Egypt], we consider as appropriate in this place to add the myths about this god which are current among the Greeks’, even if there is no agreement among sources. He begins with ‘those authors who use the phenomena of nature to explain this god and call the fruit of the vine Dionysus’ (3.62.3). He then quotes ‘the mythographers who represent the god as having a human form’ (3.61.3). After stating ‘the accounts of the birth of Dionysus that are generally agreed upon by ancient writers’ (3.66.1), Diodorus echoes the rival claims of Greek cities and Libyan Nysa to the birthplace of Dionysus (3.66), and ‘in order not to omit anything which history records about Dionysus’ (3.66.5) he presents in summary what is said by the Libyans and those Greek historians whose writings are in accord with these.

2.3.1. *Registering diversity*

Diodorus sometimes contents himself with registering that ‘generally the ancient myths do not give a simple and consistent story’ (4.44.5), be it about the names of the gods (1.25.1), the location of their tombs (1.27.3–6), the origins of the cities (2.56.3–4), the identity of their eponymous hero (4.55.2–3), or their first inhabitants (5.6.1).

Faced with this multiplicity, Diodorus adopts various strategies. At the beginning of book I he states his principle: ‘Concerning the myths which are told about each of the immortals, we shall refrain from setting forth the most part in detail ... yet whatever on these subjects we may consider as relevant to the several parts of our history we shall present in a summary fashion’ (1.6.1). But he does not always stand by it.

He may sometimes refrain from bringing to his readers’ attention the existing contradictions between various accounts if these accounts are given

¹⁸ Hecataeus Fr. 1 Fowler: ὥς μοι δοκεῖ ἀληθῆα εἶναι.

in various parts of his work. In book III, for example, he relates the usual story of the death of Semele (3.64.3–4). But in book V he quotes a different version, which was given by the Naxians who transformed her death into an apotheosis (5.64.3–4).

When he reports some variants of the same myth side by side, the difference is usually limited to mere details. At 4.13.1, for instance, he offers three descriptions of the way in which Heracles was able to bring back the golden-horned doe, but stresses that ‘this labour was in any case accomplished without using violence or running into perils’.

At times he also gives two explanations of the same event and leaves the decision to the reader, as when he reports the setting up of the Pillars by Heracles: ‘On this question, however, it will be possible for every man to think as he may please’ (4.18.5).

It is interesting to note that Diodorus sometimes attempts to vindicate the existence of heterogeneous versions of the same myth. For instance, he explains the existence of various locations for the tombs of Isis and Osiris by relating the priests’ refusal to divulge the truth to the masses (1.27.6). He also accounts for some mythical transpositions: the long passage of time explains why the Libyan Amazons have been superseded by the Amazons of the Thermodon, who were more recent and better known (3.52.2) and why the latter Dionysus as well as the latter Heracles have inherited the life plan and the exploits of their homonymous predecessors (3.74.3).

2.3.2. *Choosing a version*

When Diodorus chooses among various mythical versions, he sometimes accounts for his choice by stressing that he has chosen to follow ‘those who give the more plausible account and are the most trustworthy’ (5.80.4). Actually Diodorus often gives weight to his choice by stressing the number or the reputation of his sources: for instance, at 4.7.1–2 he agrees that the Muses were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, since this is said by the majority of the mythographers and those who enjoy the greatest reputation, and he also agrees that the Muses were nine, based upon the authority of the most distinguished men such as Homer and Hesiod and others like them.

Some of his choices may clearly be explained by parochialism. In the dispute between the Egyptians, the Athenians, and the Sicilians over who was the first to be given the gift of corn by Demeter (5.69.1–3), it is obvious that the Sicilian Diodorus decides in favour of his countrymen by echoing their arguments at greater length than the others.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to look for systematic consistency in the

Library, as demonstrated by a comparison of Diodorus' narrative on some metamorphoses. At 5.23.3–5 he clearly rejects the myth of the metamorphosis of the sisters of Actaeon into poplars shedding tears of amber:

The creators of these fictitious tales are wrong and have been disproved by facts at later times and we must give ear to the accounts which are truthful. Actually the amber is gathered on the island we have mentioned [Basileia] and is brought by the natives to the opposite continent and it is conveyed to the regions known to us.

But the metamorphosis of Derceto at 2.4.3, which is introduced as 'a legend told by the most learned among the inhabitants of the region', is not followed by any negative comment. Diodorus even concludes the story of the metamorphosis of Actaeon by saying: 'we may well believe that, once he had been changed into the form of one of the animals he was wont to hunt, he was slain by the dogs which were accustomed to prey upon other wild beasts' (4.81.5).

2.3.3. Historicizing myths

As a historian Diodorus also attempts to validate myths. He often relies on existing monuments, a phenomenon which has been well analysed in connection with Livy by Emilio Gabba:

In the first two books of Livy legendary or historical events are in a certain sense validated by reference to monuments, in particular statues, still visible in the time of Livy or his sources. Such references were intended to guarantee the historicity or at least the credibility of the legend or event in question. It seems clear that these monuments were at first invested with fantastic meanings of different kinds but always related to legendary episodes. In a complete reversal of roles, the monuments then became documents which guaranteed the historicity or credibility of the legends or stories which had grown up.¹⁹

Existing cults and customs, as well as place names, may be used for the same purpose. Actually the first six books of Diodorus are replete with 'indications' (σημεῖα), 'proofs' (τεκμήρια), 'demonstrations' (ἀποδείξεις), or 'testimonies' (μαρτύρια) of this kind. Most instances are to be found in book I. The Egyptians draw on the existing tombs of Osiris and Isis located either at Memphis or on the border between Egypt and Ethiopia (1.22.1–2) to prove the existence of these gods. They also rely on existing rituals and cults to demonstrate that many Greek myths originated in Egypt: 'many other things of which mythology tells

¹⁹ Gabba 1981, 61.

are still to be found among the Egyptians, the name being still preserved and the customs actually being practiced' (1.97.1). For instance 'to prove that the discovery of the corn took place in Egypt, they offer the following ancient custom which they still observe' (1.14.2), i.e. they dedicate to Isis the first stalks of grain. They even combine various pieces of proof. To demonstrate e.g. that Athens was an Egyptian colony, they successively rely on vocabulary ('for the Athenians are the only Greeks who call the city *astu* a name brought over from the city called *Astu* in Egypt', 1.28.4), political organization (the Athenians like the Egyptians are divided into three categories, *eupatrids*, *geomoroi* and *demiourgoi*, 1.29.4), onomastics (Menestheus was the son of Petes, an Egyptian name, 1.28.6), religion ('their *Eumolpidai* were derived from the priests of Egypt and the *Kerykes* from the [Egyptian] *pastophoroi*', 1.29.4), and external appearance and manners (1.28.4). Yet Diodorus is not convinced, 'since they offer no precise proof whatsoever for these statements and no trustworthy historian testifies in their support' (1.29.6).

Yet many similar pieces of evidence are endorsed elsewhere in Diodorus' work, or at least he does not openly question them. He refers in book I to certain proof of Dionysus' expedition in India given by the Indians: the existence of a city called Nysa and the ivy 'which is still to be found only in that region' (1.18.7). In book III he adds: 'Furthermore, there are pointed out among the Indians even to this day the place where the birth of the god came to pass, as well as cities that bear his name in the language of the natives, and many other notable testimonials to his birth among the Indians' (3.63.5). Diodorus is also aware that 'those inhabitants of Libya who dwell on the shore of the Ocean lay claim to the birthplace of the god, and point out that Nysa and all the stories which the myths record are found among themselves, and many proofs of this statement remain in the land down to this day' (3.66.4), given that 'many ancient Greek writers of myths and poets and not a few of the later historians agree with this account of the Libyans' (3.66.4). The same is true for some Greek cities:

The inhabitants of Teos advance as a proof that the god [Dionysus] was born among them the fact that, even to this day, at fixed times in their city, a fountain of wine, of unusually sweet fragrance, flows of its own accord from the earth. And as for the peoples of the other cities, they in some cases point out a plot of land which was sacred to him, in other cases shrines and sacred precincts which have been consecrated to him from ancient times. (3.66.2–3)

In book V Diodorus reports the Sicilian traditions about Demeter and Core, who made their first appearance on this island. Relying upon 'the best authorities among historians', he tells us that 'in the plain of Leontinoi the wheat men call "wild" grows even to this day' (5.2.4), points out the importance of their

cult in Sicily (5.2.5), locates the rape of Core in a meadow close to Enna and proves it by a lengthy description of this place – it is strikingly beautiful and, to one’s amazement, violets bloom throughout the entire year (5.3.3).

Diodorus is not the only one who uses this type of argument. In book IV, he quotes ‘many among the ancient historians as well as later ones, including Timaeus’ (5.56.3) who similarly demonstrated that the Argonauts, on their way back, made their course to the west. He points out that the Celts who dwell along the Ocean particularly venerate the Dioscuri (4.56.4), lists a series of place names, such as harbours called Argoön and Telamon, thus attesting that the Argonauts sailed about the Tyrrhenian sea (4.56.6), and he refers to objects such as the bronze tripod that was presented to Triton and inscribed with ancient characters which stood among the people of Euesperis in Libya until recent times (4.76.6).

It is not only through Diodorus’ attempt to argue the validity of some myths but also through the attention paid to chronology that Diodorus demonstrates that he remains a historian even when he deals with mythology. In book I his Egyptians rely on relative chronology to demonstrate that Heracles was an Egyptian by birth: it is generally accepted by the Greeks that the hero fought with the Olympians against the Giants, which is inconsistent with his late birth (one generation before the Trojan War) (1.24.2), since the Giants were born from the earth at the beginning of the world. Likewise, his primitive weapons, as well as his ridding the earth of its monsters, suggests that he lived when mankind first appeared on earth and not, as the Greeks say, one generation before the Trojan War (1.24.3).

2.3.4. Rationalizing myths

Following Christopher Pelling, I shall distinguish between two kinds of rationalization: ‘The first tries to make sense of legends by explaining how they come about ... it explains away a legend’, the second consists of ‘contextual explaining’: ‘the essence of the story remains, but it comes to make literal sense by being plausibly contextualized’.²⁰ Actually Diodorus makes use of both of these kinds of rationalization.

²⁰ Pelling 2002, 174–5.

2.3.4.1. *Explaining away mythical implausibilities*

I will begin with the second type of rationalization – that is, ‘an attempt to get rid of the corrosion of the legend and recover the hard core of history’.²¹ Like former historians, Hecataeus, Herodotus (in his preface), or Thucydides (in the ‘Archaeology’), Diodorus implicitly rationalizes the myth by omitting implausible details such as a divine mother or the miraculous transportation of a corpse. His Memnon is only ‘the son of Tithonus’ (2.22.1). His divine mother, Dawn, has disappeared. When he died, ‘the Ethiopians recovered his body, burnt the corpse, and took his bones back to Tithonus’ (2.22.4).

Sometimes Diodorus puts two versions of the story side by side, the mythical and the true one, without making his choice explicit. At 4.70.4, after quoting the writers who say that the Hippocentaurs were born from Centaurs having sex with mares, he mentions those who say that ‘they were called Hippocentaurs because they were the first to ride on horses and were then made into legendary beings combining two natures’.

More often, Diodorus clearly indicates his preference for the true, i.e. the plausible story by the way he introduces it. At 2.10.1–2 he gives two versions of Semiramis’ end: the first one, the apotheosis, is given in direct discourse (‘she at once disappeared, as if she were going to be translated to the gods, as the oracle had predicted’), whereas her metamorphosis into a dove is put in inverted commas and is ascribed to mythographers. Again he introduces with a mere *φασί* (‘they say’) the rationalized version of the death of Icarus: he fled from Crete in a boat and ‘disembarking carelessly he fell into the sea and perished’, whereas he introduces the marvellous story of his flight with ‘some writers of myth say’ and justifies his reporting of the legend by mentioning that he shares a taste for marvellous stories with his audience (‘even if this is a tale of marvels, nevertheless I have thought it best not to leave it unmentioned’ (4.77.6).

Sometimes Diodorus explicitly corrects the traditional myth and replaces it with a more plausible story: ‘Prometheus, son of Iapetus, did not steal the fire from the gods and gave it to mankind, as some mythographers say. The truth is that he was the discoverer of the firesticks from which it may be kindled’ (5.67.2). The same is true for Atlas, Aeolus and Hyperion. ‘They say that Atlas perfected the science of astrology and was the first to bring forth the doctrine of the sphere, and it was for this reason that they thought that the entire heaven was supported by him’ (3.60.3).

In book IV, after relating at length the 12 labours of Heracles according to tradition (4.11.3–28.4), Diodorus proposes a rationalized version:

Since he was admired for his courage and his skill as a general, he gathered

²¹ Bowersock 1994, 1.

a most powerful army and visited the entire inhabited world, conferring his benefactions upon the race of men, and it was in return for these that with general approval he was given immortality. But the poets, following their custom of giving a tale of wonder, have told the myth that Heracles, single-handed and without the aid of armed forces, performed the labours which are on the lips of all (4.53.7).

Like the 4th-century mythographer Palaephatus, who rewrote the story of Pelias' murder by transforming the sorceress into a clever woman who discovered a red-and-black plant-dye and the benefit of steam baths for men,²² Diodorus also rationalizes the killing of Pelias by Medea by replacing miracles with make-believe (4.51.1–52.2). To persuade Pelias that she was able to rejuvenate him, Medea disguised herself as an old woman and then washed her body to appear again as a maiden. Then she promised to transform an old ram into a lamb. But here also there is no miracle, for she drew out of the cauldron not a living lamb but 'an image of a lamb' (4.52.2).

Diodorus also uses the natural allegoresis to replace the myth (μῦθος) with the truth (ὁ ἀληθὴς λόγος). In book I he quotes the first Egyptians, who call the spirit Zeus (1.12.2), the fire Hephaistos (1.12.3), the earth Demeter (1.12.4), the wet element Oceanus (1.12.5–6), and the air Athena (1.12.7). 'Whereas the myths relate that Plutus was the son of Iasion and Demeter, the truth is that he is the wealth of corn given to Iasion because of Demeter's association with him at the time of the wedding of Harmonia' (5.49.4). He also substitutes a true explanation for the mythical origin of Rhodes, which supposedly resulted from the love of Helios for the Nymph: 'The truth is that the island which was originally muddy and soft was dried up by the sun and gave birth to living creatures' (5.56.3).

These interpretations are sometimes supported by 'etymology', i.e. the 'analysis of the original meaning of names [which] enables the Stoic philosopher to recover the beliefs about the world held by those who first gave the gods their present names',²³ a method which is best illustrated by Diodorus' interpretation of Athena in book I. At 1.12.7–8 the equation of Athena with the air is based first on some details of her myths: 'she is considered as the daughter of Zeus born from his head and conceived as a virgin because the air is by its nature uncorrupted and occupies the highest part of the universe. This is the reason why the myth tells that she was born from the head of Zeus', an interpretation that relies on the two meanings of the Greek verbs φθείρειν and διαφθείρειν 'to corrupt', but also 'to deflower a woman'. This allegoresis of Athena as the air is

²² See Stern 1996.

²³ Long 1992, 54. See also Most 1989.

also supported by her epithets which are proper to air: ‘she is called Tritogeneia “thrice born” because the nature of the air changes three times in the course of the year, in the spring, summer and winter’ and ‘she is called Glaucopis “blue eyed” not because she has blue eyes, as some Greeks have held – a silly explanation indeed – but because the air has a bluish appearance’ (1.12.8).

2.3.4.2. *Explaining the origin of myths*

Diodorus usually chooses to explain away the myths by telling us how they originated from some confusion between proper and common nouns, from a misunderstanding of homonyms, or from literal interpretation of metaphors. This is the case for the story of Heracles killing the eagle which was devouring Prometheus’ liver (1.19.1–4). Actually, Prometheus was governor of an Egyptian district flooded by a river, which was given the name ‘Eagle’ because of the violence of its water. Prometheus was about to commit suicide when Heracles speedily stopped the flood: ‘This is the reason why some Greek poets worked this fact into a myth’ (1.19.3).

Confusion between homonyms also accounts for other ‘monstrous myths invented by the Greeks’ (4.47.2). The stories about the cruelty of the Colchi, their fire-breathing bulls, and the sleepless dragon guarding the Golden Fleece all originated from a confusion of names: the soldiers stationed there, who were Taurians originating from the Thracian Chersonese, were made into fire-breathing bulls because they had killed foreigners. ‘Similarly the guardian of the sacred precinct, who was a man called Dracon, was transformed by the poets into the monstrous and fear-inspiring beast’ (4.47.3). There are many other instances of such an explanation relying on the confusion between names and common words or between homonyms: the χρυσᾶ μῆλα of the Hesperids were either golden apples or flocks of sheep that were called golden because of their beauty or because of the colour of their fleece which was like gold, and the δράκων who guarded them was not a monstrous dragon but a shepherd called Dracon (4.26.3); the golden fleece was not a ram’s (κρίος) fleece but rather the gilded skin of Phrixus’ slave, who was named Krios (4.47.6).

Other myths originated from a metaphor taken literally. First the ‘true facts’ according to Diodorus: ‘they say that Lamia was a queen of surpassing beauty whose appearance became, with the passing of time, bestial on account of the savagery of her heart’ (20.41.3). After the death of her children she would put to death all the new-born babies unless she was drunk (20.41.3). Then the myth: ‘for that reason some have invented the myth that she threw her eyes into a flask, metaphorically turning the carelessness produced by the wine into the aforesaid measure, since it was wine that took away her sight’ (20.41.5).

Some myths originated from some material detail of the true story (4.47.4).

The mythical Phrixus was said to have been borne through the sky by a ram (κρίός) with a golden fleece together with his sister, Helle, who fell into the sea called Hellespont. Actually, 'he made his voyage upon a ship which bore the head of a ram upon his bow and Helle feeling seasick while leaning far over the side of the boat fell into the sea' (4.47.4).

The story of Proteus is rationalized by a combination of the methods that were used to explain away the myths of Aeolus and Ammon. According to Diodorus' Egyptians, the Odyssean Proteus was actually an Egyptian king called Cetes (1.62.2):

some traditions record that Proteus was experienced in the knowledge of the winds and that he would change his body sometimes into the form of different animals, sometimes into a tree or fire or something else, and it so happens that the account which the Egyptians give of Cetes is in agreement with this tradition'

since this king

from his close association with the astrologers had gained experience in such matters; and from a custom which has been passed down among the kings of Egypt has arisen the myth current among the Greeks about the way Proteus changed shape. For the kings of Egypt were used to wear upon their heads the forepart of a lion, or bull, or snake as symbols of their rule; at times also trees or fire [Ammon]. (1.62.3)

In book I, Egypt is twice said to be the source of Greek mythology: first at 1.9.6 'it is in Egypt where mythology places the origin of the gods', and second at 1.23.8: 'in general, they say, the Greeks appropriate to themselves the most renowned of Egyptian heroes and gods as well as the colonies sent out by them'. Actually the Egyptians say that some gods and heroes were transferred from Egypt to Greece: 'They say that Perseus was born in Egypt and that the origin of Isis was transferred to Argos by the Greeks, who invented the myth of Io metamorphosed into a heifer' (1.24.8). This is also true for the Greek myths of the underworld which imitate some Egyptian customs, since in Egypt the corpse, once embalmed, crosses a lake (1.92.2) called Acherusia [hence the Acheron] 'in a boat whose ferryman is called Charon by the Egyptians in their language' (1.92.2). So, 'Orpheus, they say, who in the old days travelled in Egypt and witnessed this custom, invented his mythical description of Hades, reproducing it in some respects but in others inventing on his own account' (1.92.3).

The best illustration of these transfers is the explanation given by Diodorus' Egyptians – i.e. Diodorus in the guise of an Egyptian – of the legend of

Dionysus. In the beginning (1.23.3–6), one is faced with an unfortunate accident: Semele, the daughter of Cadmus, who is said to be Egyptian instead of Phoenician, ‘was raped by someone, became pregnant, and after seven months gave birth to a child whose appearance, according to the Egyptians, was like Osiris’ (1.23.3). When Cadmus found out what had taken place, having at the same time the reply from an oracle commanding him to obey the laws of his fathers, he both gilded the infant and paid him the appropriate sacrifices, as if he were an epiphany of Osiris. ‘He attributed the fatherhood of the child to Zeus, both magnifying Osiris and averting slander from his raped daughter’ (1.23.6). This lie, motivated by self-interest, is followed by the decisive intervention of the poet Orpheus – also to be explained by personal motives:

At later times Orpheus, who was held in high regard among the Greeks for his singing, initiatory rites, and instructions on things divine, was entertained as a guest by the descendants of Cadmus and accorded unusual honours in Thebes. And since he had become conversant with the teachings of the Egyptians about the gods, he transferred the birth of the ancient Osiris to more recent times and, out of regard for the descendants of Cadmus, instituted a new initiation, according to which the initiates were told that Dionysus had been born from Semele and Zeus. (1.23.7)

The combination of the gullibility of the people, the reputation of Orpheus, and self-interest explains why the Greeks first welcome this myth:

the people observed these initiatory rites, partly because they were deceived through their ignorance (partly because they paid attention to the reliability of Orpheus and his reputation in such matters and most of all because they were glad to receive the god as a Greek. Later, after the writers of myths and poets had taken over this account of his ancestry, the theatres became filled with it and among following generations the belief in the story became strong and immutable. (1.23.7–8)

Conclusion

This interest in the origins of mythology makes Diodorus a forerunner of Fontenelle, whose treatise *On the Origin of Fables (Sur l’origine des fables, 1724)* has been called ‘the cornerstone of modern mythology’.²⁴ Moreover, his book, despite or maybe because of its discrepancies, helps us to better understand the complex reception of myths at the beginning of the Empire, the importance of which was demonstrated by my colleague Alan Cameron in his book *Greek Mythography in the Roman World (2004)*.

²⁴ Graf 1993, 14.

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