

Performing myths. Women's homes and men's *leschai*

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IN THE LAST thirty years, Greek mythology has had one of the best periods in the history of its analysis. It is sufficient to mention here the work of Walter Burkert, whose many studies pioneered a whole new approach to myth and ritual. Yet all this time the study of the performance of myth hardly received the attention it deserves. The only major treatment in this respect has been a characteristically informative and subtle chapter in Richard Buxton's *Imaginary Greece*, where he surveys the various occasions, ranging from the cradle to the grave, when the Greeks told myths, be it for fun or for education.¹ An especially valuable aspect of his discussion is the attention to gender, and in my contribution I would like to follow up his discussion and concentrate on two places where, according to him, myths were told in a gendered manner: women's homes (§ 1) and men's *leschai* (§ 2). Naturally, my analysis is much indebted to his insights, but it seems to me that in both respects we can make some progress, if not in the interpretation, at least in the offering of a few more passages to be taken into consideration.

1. *Women's homes*

Buxton rightly draws attention to the fact that children began to hear myths in the home. But they were not the only persons to do so. When in Euripides' *Ion* the chorus of Creusa's maid-servants enters the temple of Apollo in Delphi, they immediately recognise the scenes on the temple's twin façades: the battle of the gods against the Giants; Bellerophon; and the labours of Hercules. Regarding the latter, one of the girls remarks: 'I see him. And near him another raises the blazing torch! Is it he whose story I heard as I plied my loom, shield-bearing Iolaos, who took up shared labours with the son of Zeus and helped to endure them?' (194-200, tr. D. Kovacs, Loeb). The chorus even returns to this setting when it comments later in the play on a mother's exposure of her child by Apollo: 'Neither in story at my loom nor in song have I heard it told that children from the gods ever meant for mortals a share of blessing' (507ff., tr. Kovacs). Apparently, maid-servants told one another stories during weaving to counteract the monotony of

1 Buxton 1994:18-44.

their task.² The custom is also alluded to in his *Atalantai* (fr. 14 with KA *ad loc.*) by Epicharmus, who made fun of those working at the loom with linen by saying that they sang songs for Linos.³

The motif of weaving as a moment for story-telling is taken up by Ovid—perhaps from a Hellenistic source?—in his version of the myth of the Minyads. These maidens stayed at home when the other Theban women had left their houses in order to perform the sacred rites for Dionysus. One of the girls, ‘drawing the thread with deft thumb’ (*levi deducens pollice filum*) proposes to alleviate *opus manuum vario sermone* but, Ovid being the poet he was, she does not tell a *vulgaris fabula*, but the unusual myth of Dercetis (*Met.* 4.32-54). This talking ‘at the loom’ also recurs in Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, where women are represented as talking to each other about their fate while weaving (789f.). Less informative, unfortunately, are the references in the *Odyssey* to both Calypso (5.61f.) and Circe (10.221ff., alluded to in Verg. *Aen.* 7.11-4) singing ‘with sweet voice’ when tending their looms. Such songs must have been normal, since in Euripides’ *Hypsipyle* the eponymous heroine also sings: ‘the Muse does not want me here to play Lemnian songs of comfort on the woof, not here on the shuttle stretched on the loom’ (26-8 Diggle). Vergil also speaks of the farmer’s wife having *longum cantu solata laborem / arguto coniunx percurrit pectine telas* (*G.* 1.293-4), and the motif of song, story and gossip at the loom date from as far back as women have performed their repetitive tasks.⁴

We would of course like to know where exactly in the house women worked at the loom, but this is not totally clear. Probably, for much of the year this will have happened in the courtyard, but in winter the women probably moved to one of the rooms off the court in the area of the women’s quarters.⁵ In these quarters other females also told myths. When discussing education in his *Laws*, Plato writes about ‘the stories heard so often in earliest infancy, while still at the breast, from their mothers and nurses—stories, you may say, crooned over them, in sport and in earnest, like spells—and heard again in prayers offered over sacrifices’ (887D, tr. A.E. Taylor). In his last work he is more tolerant than in the earlier *Republic* where he, admittedly, allowed ‘nurses and mothers’ (377C) to continue telling at least some of the stories of their normal repertory, but stipulated that most of those had to go.⁶ In his younger years Plato used the term ‘old wives tales’ only in a belittling

2 I had already written my contribution before the appearance of S. West 2003, which partially covers the same ground. For wool working women see most recently Killet 1994:115-24, Larsson Lovén 1998, Vickers 1999, Kosmopoulou 2001:300-02, Stears 2001.

3 For Linos see most recently Schmidt 1995, Bremmer 1999.

4 Note also Theoc. 27.74; Verg. *G.* 4.435; Wille 1967:107f.

5 Jameson 1990:188.

manner as in the *Lysis* (205D), *Gorgias* (527A), *Theaetetus* (176B), and *Hippias Major* (286A) where the Spartans listening to Hippias are compared to children listening to old women—hardly a favourable comparison. It must be his abiding interest in education that makes Plato our main source for such tales in ancient Greece. Yet the expression itself would have a long life and *aniles fabellae* would be the regular object of scorn in Roman society.⁷

Interestingly, around AD 300 we find one more example of both the maidens at the loom and the old women. After a scathing discussion of the myth of Attis, the Christian Arnobius rhetorically asks: 'When you read through such stories, I ask, do you not have the impression that you are listening to girls at the loom beguiling the boredom of a tedious task, or old women trying hard to distract credulous children, and giving out all sorts of fiction under the guise of truth?' (5.14, tr. G.E. McCracken). It is not clear where the well-read Arnobius got his idea of the maidens from, but he will hardly have been referring to his own time.

We have even less material on mothers telling stories. Yet there is an interesting passage in Euripides' *Wise Melanippe*, which is usually overlooked. In a speech to defend her babies, Melanippe says: 'Heaven and Earth were once a single form; but when they were separated from each other into two, they bore and delivered into the light all things: trees, winged creatures, beasts reared by the briny sea—and the human race.' The audience must have been pretty surprised to hear these Orphic doctrines,⁸ after she had assured them: 'This account is not my own; I had it from my mother' (fr. 484 Nauck², tr. C. Collard *et al.*). What we notice here is that mothers apparently could be trusted to be more serious in their myth-telling than nurses. The latter would try to frighten children with bogey figures who had little life independent of the world of children, such as Akko,⁹ Alphito (Plut. *Mor.* 1040b), Gello,¹⁰ Lamia,¹¹ and Mormo.¹²

Although early youth may seem to us the most normal age for mothers to tell stories to their children, the Greeks sometimes seems to have thought differently. In his *Life of Theseus*, Plutarch tells us that during the Athenian festival of the Oschophoria the *deipnophoroi*, women who imitated the mothers of the adoles-

6 For nurses in ancient Greece see Bradley 1991:13-36, Capomacchia 1994, 1999, Kosmopoulou 2001:285-92.

7 Massaro 1977, note also Moser-Rath 1977, Ziolkowski 2002.

8 For the Orphic content see Bernabé 2002:216f., Bremmer 2004.

9 Robert 1967:119-23, Strubbe 1978:378f., Winkler 1982, Kassel and Austin on Hermippus fr. 6.

10 Oeconomides 1965, Herter 1975:50f., D.R. West 1991, Johnston 1999:165f.

11 Douris *FGrH* 76 F 17; Phot. λ 61Theod. (with all references in the scholia); Halm-Tisserant 1989:67-82, Johnston 1999:173f., Tortorelli Ghidini 2000.

12 Robert 1966:119f., Herter 1975:50, M.L. West 1977:107, Johnston 1999:179f.

cents that had been selected by lot to accompany Theseus to Crete, once again told myths to the adolescent participants in the festival to encourage them. There is something peculiar about the notice, since one would not have expected mothers telling stories to their adolescent children, but lack of further information prevents us from any insight in this matter.¹³

Adults naturally could no longer believe such stories and referred contemptuously to the old ladies they had once listened to in awe. It cannot have helped either that old women were not highly esteemed as a class in ancient Greece.¹⁴ It was different with the mother who was perhaps the most valued female for the Greek male. It would have been impossible to speak disparagingly about her.¹⁵ That is why we find this difference in the appreciation of women and nurses regarding their telling of myths.

2. *Men's leschai*

Let us now move to the world of the males and concentrate on the *leschê*. In the last decade, virtually at the same time and independent from one another, both Walter Burkert and Richard Buxton have again drawn attention to this elusive term.¹⁶ Burkert concentrated on possible Near Eastern connections, whereas Buxton focussed on the performance of myths and stories in the *leschê*. He concluded that 'it is safest to regard the *leschê* as something about which we know tantalisingly little—but that little suggests there are interesting things which escape us. What we do know is that the *leschê* was a context within which itinerant singers, like Homer in the *Life*, could find an audience.'¹⁷ As neither of them has analysed all the material available, I would like to investigate the *leschê* once again. I will argue against Burkert that the institution had fewer religious roots than he suggests, and against Buxton that we know more about the *leschê* than he supposes, but less about its connection with singers than he thinks.

There are of course several ways of approaching the problem. As the institution is of considerable antiquity and probably reaches back into Mycenaean times (below), it may be rewarding to take our point of departure in that period. A fresh investigation of the Archaic Greek calendar has demonstrated that Greek society

13 Plut. *Thes.* 23.4 = Demon *FGrH* 327 F 6. For the Oschophoria and the *deipnophoroi* see Calame² 1996:143-48, Parker 1996:309f., 315f., Waldner 2000:102-75.

14 Bremmer 1987a, Pfisterer-Haas 1988, Zanker 1989.

15 Golden 1990:101-04, several studies in *Kentron* 8-9 (1992-94) and in *Ithaca* 16-17 (2000-01):23-145; note also the highly sentimental view of Wilamowitz, himself a 'Mutterkind,' as quoted by Braun 2000:621f. note 20.

16 Burkert 1993, reprinted in Burkert 2003:135-53, Buxton 1994:40-44. From the older studies the best is Bourguet 1877-1919.

17 Buxton 1994:43f.

of the late Mycenaean era was divided into three areas, each with a different calendar and its own dialect: the West Greeks (the later Thessalians, Phocians, Boeotians, Dorians and Lesbians, amongst others), the later Ionians and the later Arcado-Cypriots.¹⁸ As the first group provides the best information, we will start with them, beginning with the Thessalians, the most Northern group of the 'West Greeks' to provide some information about the *lesché*.

Admittedly, we do not find any mention of the *lesché* itself among the Thessalians, but we can deduce its (former?) existence from the fact that they had a month Leschanorios.¹⁹ The same month can be found on Crete in an unknown fourth-century city (*IC* II.XXX.1, 4) and in second-century Gortyn (*IC* IV.181, 17 and 26),²⁰ and its corresponding festival will therefore almost certainly have been a Mycenaean inheritance.²¹ Originally, *Leschanôr, 'having men in the *lesché*, *leschai*,' seems to have been the name of a divine patron of the *lesché*. The existence of such a patron can probably also be deduced from the Arcadian month name Leschanasios of Tegea (*IG* V 2.3, 29), which looks like the Arcadian variant of the Thessalian month name and presumes a festival *Leschanasia. Trümpy explains the name as a festival celebrated in honour of *Leschanax, 'Ruler of the *lesché*,' but normal Greek word formation would have given Leschanaxios or Leschanaktios and the name must be considered to be still unexplained.²² This month, too, almost certainly reaches back to the Mycenaean era, just like another Arcadian month name, Lapatos, is already attested in Linear B. We might even guess its place in the Mycenaean calendars. Chaniotis has observed that in Gortyn the month must have marked an important moment in the year and he suspects it to have been the first month of the second half of the year. And indeed, this is exactly the same position of the spring month Leschanorios in the Thessalian calendar.²³ As the related name Leschanoridas is attested only in fourth-century Tenedos (*VDI* 1974.1, 94) and fourth/third-century Chersonnesus (*SEG* 36.697), areas with a 'West Greek' population, it seems reasonable to assign Apollo Leschanorios, who is mentioned in some literary sources, to a 'West Greek' area too.²⁴

18 Trümpy 1997:286-89.

19 *IG* IX 2. 207c, 340a-1, 349c, 546, 960-1 *etc.*

20 Burkert 2003:143, also assigns the month to Achaia Phthiotis, but our only testimony, a *Freilasungsurkunde* from Thebes, uses Thessalian month names and does not correspond with what we know of the Theban calendar, *cf.* Trümpy 1997:239.

21 Thus, persuasively, Trümpy 1997:256. Sporn 2002:152 suggests a Spartan origin, but the month is not attested in Sparta.

22 *Contra* Trümpy 1997:254.

23 Chaniotis 1997:24 (I thank the author for kindly sending me a copy of his article), Trümpy 1997:216 (Thessalian calendar). Trümpy 1997:189 is unnecessarily sceptical about its spring position in Crete.

We have perhaps an indication of what happened in Thessalian *leschai* through a fifth-century dedication to Apollo Leschaios by a certain Aristion and his fellow *daphnêphoroi* in the context of the Delphic enneaeteric festival Septerion. The group made its dedication in the Deipnias area on the border of Larissa's territory during their procession from Tempe to Delphi in commemoration of Apollo's legendary procession after he had killed the dragon Python.²⁵ This was the occasion that the *daphnêphoroi* broke their fast for the first time—hence the name Deipnias—and Bruno Helly has attractively connected the epithet of the god with meals in a *leschê* by comparing the information that common meals were actually called *leschai* in Boiotia.²⁶ However this may be, in Thessaly we do find a fifth-century Leschos (*IG* II/III² 1956) and a third-century Leschinas (*IG* IX 2.517, 57), names which surely confirm the one-time existence of Thessalian *leschai*.

In fact, meals were important in other *leschai* too. An interesting example is the treasury of the Knidians in Delphi, which was famous for its paintings by Polygnotus.²⁷ It is regularly overlooked in discussions of this *leschê* that it was not the Knidians but the Delphians who called this sumptuous building a *leschê*. This is made clear by Pausanias, who provides a valuable testimony to the existence of the *leschê* in Phocis by relating: 'It is called by the Delphians *leschê*, because in former times they used to meet there to discuss matters which were more serious and those which were *mythôdê*' (Paus. 10.25.1). The architecture of the Knidian building strongly suggests that it was used as a dining hall.²⁸ On the other hand, its importance for discussion is confirmed by the fact that it was in this building that Plutarch (*Mor.* 412c) situated his dialogue on the decline of oracles. Several later sources indeed mention the *leschê* as a place for philosophical disputations,²⁹ and that is undoubtedly the reason why Heraclides Ponticus Junior called his book on philosophical problems *Leschai*.³⁰ This meaning continued that of 'serious discus-

24 Cleanthes *SVF* I.123, 33; Cornutus 32 (with an improbable explanation); Plut. *Mor.* 385c.

25 Pind. fr. 249a Maehler, *Pae.* X(a), cf. Rutherford 2001:200-05; Hdt. 6.34.2; Ephoros *FGrH* 70 F 31b; Theopomp. *FGrH* 117 F 80; Callim. fr. 86-89, 194.34-36 Pfeiffer; *IG* IX 2.1234; Plut. *Mor.* 293c, 417e-418d, 1136a; Ael. *VH.* 3.1; Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* 4.11-14 Drachmann; more recently, Brelich 1969:387-438, Burkert 1983:127-30.

26 *IG* IX 2.1027, cf. Helly 1987:141f., who compares *Etym. Magnum* 561 = *Etymologicum Gudianum* λ 366: Λέσχαι παρὰ Βοιωτοῖς τὰ κοινὰ δειπνητήρια (with many thanks to Aphrodite Avaganiou for showing me her edition of the inscription in her forthcoming study of the Thessalian cults). For Boiotian common meals note also Plato, *Leg.* 636B; Polyaeus, *Strategemata* 2.3.11.

27 See most recently Kebrić 1983, Stansbury-O'Donnell 1989:203-15, Cousin 2000, Oakley 2001.

28 Pouilloux 1960:120-39, Tomlinson 1980:224-28, Maass 1993, 178ff.

29 Plut. *Mor.* 385c; Hierocles, fr. 2 Arnim; Ath. 5.192a; Phot. λ 210 Theod. (with the lexicographical references); Apost. 10.59.

30 Heraclides *SH* 475-80 Lloyd-Jones/Parsons.

sion, council,' which we already find in Herodotus (2.32, 9.71) and which must also be its meaning in Callimachus' moving epigram for his friend Heraclitus where he remembers how often 'the two of us made the sun go down in *lesché*.³¹ In fact, discussion must have been the most striking element of the earlier *lesché*, although the Greeks in general clearly were not greatly impressed by the quality of the arguments offered. It is hard to think of any other place where people spoke in public that has generated so many words connected with 'quibbling,' 'vaunting' or 'talking rubbish,' right down to the insulting *κυσολέσχης* (*PCG Adesp. 186 KA*).³²

Plutarch also mentions another aspect of the *lesché*. When they entered the building, they saw their friends already sitting and waiting for them. It is rather striking that the friends sat at a table and were not reclining, as was usual at a symposium. And indeed, whenever any detail is given it is invariably said that people are *sitting* in *leschai*.³³ Now seated dining was still the rule in Homer,³⁴ and Aeschylus 'Homerizes' the cannibalism of Thyestes by letting him eat his children sitting.³⁵ Sitting was also customary among the Macedonians (*Curtius* 8.6.5), Thracians (*Xen. An.* 7.3.21; *Ath.* 4.151a), Illyrians (*Theopompos FGrH* 115 F 39), Celts (*Posidonius* fr. 87.15), ancient Romans,³⁶ and early Egyptians (*Ath.* 5.191f). As among these more 'Barbarian' peoples, the custom had also been preserved in conservative Crete and backwards Arcadia.³⁷ In Athens, sitting had maintained itself not only at the festival of the *Anthesteria*,³⁸ but also in the Tholos in the Agora where the *prytaneis* took their meal sitting. In fact, archaeology has uncovered a number of round buildings in sanctuaries where dining clearly took place sitting and not reclining.³⁹ Evidently, the *lesché*, too, had preserved the earlier 'Homeric' position.

31 Callim. *Epigr.* 2; add to Pfeiffer's testimonia *Apost.* 17.97; Merli 1997.

32 I collect here the relevant verbs (without their corresponding nouns and adjectives), nouns and adjectives: (κατ)ἄδολεσχέω, ἀερολέσχης, ἔλλεσχος, ἐννομολέσχης, ἐρίλεσχης (*Parthenius* fr. 22 with *Lightfoot ad loc.*), ἰσχνολέσχης (not in *LSJ*; *Suda* ε 2613), λεσχάζω, λεσχαίνω, λεσχῆν, λεσχῆνευμον (not in *LSJ*; *IC* II.v.4), (προ)λεσχηνεύω, ληρολεσχέω (not in *LSJ*; *Tzetzes* on *Ar. Nub.* 291a, 331, 358), λογολεσχέω, μεταρσιολεσχέω, μετεωρολεσχέω, ὄνειρολεσχία, οὐρανολέσχει (not in *LSJ*; *Eustathius* on *Od.* 1.419), περιλεσχῆνευτος, πλατυλέσχης, πρόλεσχος, στενολεσχέω, χρησμολέσχης.

33 *Hes. Op.* 501; *PCG Adesp.* *823 KA (with all paroemiographical references); *Vita Homeri* 12, 15; *Plut. Lyc.* 16.1, *Mor.* 412d; *Ael. VH* 2.34; *Procop. Goth.* 7.32.9.4; *Etymologicum Gudianum* a 23, l 308.

34 *Hom. Il.* 9.199 ff., 24.126, 457 ff.; *Od.* 1.130 ff., 3.32 and 472, 4.238, 7.203, 17.478, 20.136.

35 *Aesch. Ag.* 1594., with a characteristically learned note by *Eduard Fraenkel*.

36 *Varro apud Servius, Aen.* 7.176; *Isid. Etym.* 20.11.9; *Rathje* 1983:23f.

37 *Crete*: *Pyrgion FGrH* 467 F 1; *Heraclides Lembus* fr. 15 *Dilts*; *Cic. Mur.*, 35. *Arcadia*: *Ath.* 4.148f-149d.

38 For the *Anthesteria* see most recently *Burkert* 1983:213-47, *Bowie* 1993:35-39, 146-50, *Bremmer* 2003:46-50.

Food must also have been an important item of the *leschai* in Sparta, since according to Cratinus (fr. 175 KA) the Spartan *lesché* was a kind of *Schlaraffenland* where sausages were nailed to the walls. Admittedly, the Spartan standard diet was extremely frugal and even sacrifices, the usual providers of meat in antiquity, small and cheap.⁴⁰ Yet the produce of the hunt could be brought as a desert to the mess where, in order to strengthen the competitive spirit, the names of the contributors were announced publicly.⁴¹ Cratinus, then, will certainly have overdone his picture, but he can hardly have been totally off the mark.

Pausanias mentions two specific *leschai* in Sparta. The *lesché* of the (otherwise unknown) Crotani near the tombs of the royal dynasty of the Agiadae (3.14.2) and the *Poikilê* near the heroa of the family of the Aegeids (3.15.8). It is difficult to deduce the function of these *leschai* from Pausanias' sparse notices, but they seem to have belonged to aristocratic families. Burkert suggests that they might have been connected with the aristocratic 'Toten- bzw. Heroenkult,'⁴² but similar 'club houses' are attested elsewhere. Already in the early 1930s Louis Gernet had compared these Spartan *leschai* to other houses of groups of men, such as the shrine of mystery rites (*telestêrion*) that Themistocles had rebuilt for his clan, the Lykomids, in Phlya after the Persian invasion. Pausanias calls the building a *klision* and reports that the Lykomids chanted songs of Orpheus and a hymn to Demeter at their ceremonies.⁴³ Similar buildings are the *megara* of the Kouretes in Messene (Paus. 4.31.9), of the Meliastai in Mantinea (Paus. 8.6.5) and of the mystery cult of Despoina in Lycosoura (Paus. 8.37.8). Gernet persuasively pointed to the initiatory function of the Kouretes,⁴⁴ which also fits the 'wolfish' name of the Lykomids,⁴⁵ and compared the *lesché* to a so-called 'men's house,' a comparison we will come back to in a moment.⁴⁶

In any case, neither of these aristocratic *leschai* seems to have been the *lesché* where the members of a phyle had to bring a new born child in order to have it

39 Cooper and Morris 1990, 66-85, Hoensch 2003:186ff.

40 Frugal diet: Hdt. 9.82; Ar. Av. 1281-82, *Lys.* 279; Antiphanes fr. 46 KA; Diphilus fr. 96 KA; Xen. *Lac.* 2.5-6, 5.3. Sacrifice: Plato *Alc.* 2.149A; Plut. *Lyc.* 19.8.

41 Xen. *Lac.* 4.7; Masson 1986:137 (on the name Therikyôn).

42 Burkert 2003:140.

43 Lykomids: Simonides fr. 627 Page; Plut. *Them.* 1; Paus. 1.22.7, 4.1.5-9, 9.27.2 and 30.12; Hesychius λ 1391; *IG II²* 2670, 3559; note also Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.20.4-6 on the celebration of mysteries at Phlya.

44 For their background in initiation see most recently Legras 1993, Graf 1999.

45 For wolves and initiation see Bremmer 1987b:43.

46 Gernet and Boulanger 1970:72; as regards the Kouretes the same suggestion had already been made by Harrison 1911:27 note 3. For some of these, often underground, houses, see also Robert 1969:1005-07.

accepted into the community. Plutarch (*Lyc.* 16.1) relates that the investigation of the child was conducted by the 'eldest of the members of the *phylê*,' and his notice implies that in earlier times a *leschê* must have occupied an important position in a phyle in conservative Sparta.

The presence of old men in Spartan *leschai* is already mentioned by Cratinus (fr. 175 KA), and the antiquity of this element of the *leschê* is confirmed by Sophocles, who in his *Antigone* (160) speaks of a 'specially convoked *leschê* of elders.' In these passages the old still clearly seem to have a certain political clout. This is certainly no longer the case in the *Life of Homer* (12) where the poet sits down 'in the *leschai* of the old men' or in an anecdote about Epicharmus who 'in extreme old age' sits in a *leschê* 'with some of his contemporaries' droning on about their limited life expectancy (Ael. *VH.* 2.34 = Epicharmus T 16 KA).⁴⁷

We have a few other other testimonies about *leschai* in Dorian areas. If the anecdote about Epicharmus has any connection with historical reality, it might point to a *leschê* in his town, Syracuse, but its existence in Megara seems to be more certain. The city knew common meals and Theognis uses the *hapax leschazô*, the seemingly earliest example of a verb connected with *leschê* with the meaning 'talking rubbish'.⁴⁸ We move onto firmer ground in Kos where *ca.* 300 BC a certain Diomedon forbids 'to use the *leschê* in the sanctuary as a store room'; this *leschê* may have been a dining room gone out of use.⁴⁹ However, the oldest mention in Dorian areas occurs in Rhodian Kamiros where an Archaic inscription says: 'I am the *lescha* of Euthytidas, son of Praxiodos, son of Euphagos, son of Euphylidas.' As in the Spartan cases, Burkert suggests that we may have here a dining hall in a funerary context,⁵⁰ but the meaning 'grave' is attested in a late Pisidian inscription from Termessos (*TAM* III.187) and seems therefore more attractive. We also note a *Leschaios* on fourth-century Rhodes (*SEG* 12.360.II), which seems to point to worship of Apollo *Leschaios* on the island. The latest Dorian example is the first-century (BC) 'Leschis, son of Ammon' from Cyrenaica with the typically local ending *-is* (*SEG* 26.1839, 17), but we do not know if there once had been a real *leschê* in the Pentapolis as background to this name.

Our final testimonies for *leschai* among the 'West Greeks' derive from the Aeolians. The pseudo-Herodotean *Life of Homer* (12, 13) represents Homer performing in the *leschai* in Cyme, and from the third century BC onwards several sources mention a certain *Lesches* of Lesbos (T 1-6 Bern. = T 3-7 Davies) as the

47 Note also *IC* II.v.51, 2, a fragmentary Cretan grave epigram of the early Empire: ἐρίσασμα [γ]ερόντων λεςχήνευμ' ἄλιας παιδι.

48 Theognis 309 (meals), 613 (verb).

49 Segre 1993:I.ED 149.84f. (replacing earlier editions).

50 *SEG* 26.867 (with bibliography); Burkert 2003:II.140.

author of the *Ilias Parva* who, according to Phanias of Lesbos (fr. 33 Wehrli²), lived before Terpander. Unfortunately, the basis for his chronology is hard to see and one cannot but suspect educated guesswork.

As the Tegean month name Leschanasios (above) is the only testimony for possible *leschai* among Arcado-Cypriots, we proceed to the Attic-Ionian area. In Athens there must have been several *leschai*. A fifth-century *horos*-stone marks off 'public *leschai*' (IG I³ 1102), and such boundary stones may well have been a subject in Antiphon's 'On Boundaries' against Nikokles, which mentioned *leschai* (Harp. s.v. *leschai*). Two other fourth-century *horos*-stones were found between the Areopagus and the Pnyx in the deme of Melite (II² 2620a, b). Finally, a fourth-century inscription from Aixone stipulates that details of a leasing contract should be inscribed on two stelai and set up both in the temple of Hebe and in the *leschê*, presumably of the deme (II² 2492, 23). The last clause is particularly interesting, as it shows that this *leschê* still performed an official function in the deme. The *leschai* perhaps continued to have 'political' force as a parallel institution to the deme-assembly for discussion of common affairs, like social events in the community hall and church alongside formal town meetings. Perhaps it was the combination of such *leschai* with the tradition of 360 γένη in Athens that led to the idea of 360 *leschai* in Athens that we can read in the scholia on Hesiod's *Works* (491).⁵¹

As the tragedians use the term to denote skilful talking, conversation, social company or council,⁵² we may safely deduce these activities as those practised in the *leschê*. Moreover, there also seems to have been a kind of social code, as was the case at the symposium, since according to the fourth-century comedy playwright Epicrates it was not done to make insulting gestures in the *leschê*.⁵³ In any case, the *leschê* was already early on notorious in Athens for its discussions without end, since it was proverbial to say 'I break up the *leschai*' when it was time for work.⁵⁴

Moving from Athens to Euboea we notice the Ἰακμοίων λέσχη, the 'Young Men's *Leschê*' near Chalcis. The notice in Plutarch's *Greek Questions* (298d) relates that the place received its name from the protection given by young men in the prime of their youth to a suppliant. Unfortunately, the time when this happened is not specified, but the tradition seems to imply that among the Chalcidians the *leschê* once was a reputable institution. This suggestion is perhaps supported by the occurrence of a Lescheus in fourth-century Eretria (IG XII 9.191B, 29 and 245B, 381).

51 Oikonomides 1987 goes too far in identifying all kinds of places as *leschai*.

52 Aesch. *Cho.* 665, *Eum.* 365; Soph. *Ant.* 160, *OC* 167; Eur. *Hipp.* 384, *IA* 1001, fr. 473 Nauck².

53 Epicrates fr. 10, 29-31 KA, but the text is somewhat corrupt.

54 Eupolis fr. 192, 156 KA; Plato fr. 244 KA.

Our oldest testimony in Ionia undoubtedly derives from the *Odyssey*, where Melanthe reviles Odysseus: 'And you are unwilling to go to a smithy to sleep or to a *lesché*, but you talk too much here [*sc.* in the palace of Odysseus]' (18.328-9, tr. Buxton). The passage is elaborated upon by Hesiod (*Op.* 493-501),⁵⁵ who adds that the *lesché* is warm in winter, which perhaps is additional information regarding the *leschai* in Boiotia, where in fifth-century Thespieae we also find a Lesschon (*IG VII.1888-9*, 5). Melanthe's words already suggest that idle talk was a favourite pastime in the *lesché*, and this surely is confirmed by Heraclitus' use of the verb *λεσχηνεύομαι* (B 5 DK). Finally, in addition to Cyme, the *Life of Homer* (15) also represents the poet as performing in the *lesché* of Phocaea. That is all that we seem to be able to say about the *leschai* of the Ionians.⁵⁶

Let us now try to draw some conclusions about the nature and history of the *lesché*. It seems almost certain that the *lesché* was an institution already existing in Mycenaean times; in fact, both the position of Leschanorios/Leschanasios in the calendar and the existence of the divine patron seem to point to an important position of the *lesché* in that era. Among the 'West Greeks' the patronage was taken over by Apollo Leschanorios/Leschaos, who has not been found among the Ionians. This absence fits Apollo's absence from the Ionian *Urkalender* and is one more argument for this god being a 'West Greek' creation.⁵⁷ Apollo's connection with the coming of a new season or year, with initiation and with the assembly of the people (the Dorian *Apellai* that perhaps has given him his name) makes it probable that the *leschai*, in their days of political importance, were (one of?) the places where the old men admitted the young men to the ranks of the adults, once a year.⁵⁸

The early function of the Greek *lesché* can only be approximately reconstructed. Yet its still visible connection with both a Spartan *phylê* and an Athenian deme as well as the prominence of the elder males suggests that in the last centuries of the second millennium and in the first centuries of the first millennium BC the *lesché* functioned as a kind of meeting house of the youths (Chalcis) or the most important males of the community; evidently, these also took their communal meals there, just as they would do, for example, in the Athenian *prytanikon*. The fact that people did not recline but remained sitting in the *lesché* is an important indication for its origin in a more distant era.

55 Note that this passage probably inspired Ausonius, *Epistulae* 6.23, where in a macaronic masterpiece *lesché* probably means 'existence,' cf. Green 1991:615f.

56 For *lesché* as a building note also Pollux 9.49 and, perhaps, *P Oxy.* 3239.I.10.

57 Trümper 1997:32f., referring to Burkert 1975, but see now Beekes 2003.

58 For these aspects of Apollo see Versnel 1993:289-334.

At the same time, the building could apparently also function as a guesthouse for passing strangers. Burkert has well compared the information by the Cretan *Lokalthistoriker* Dosiadas (FGrH 458 F 2) that in every Cretan polis there were two buildings. The first was the men's house (*andreion*) where the communal meals were taken but also tables for guests were present, whereas the second was a *koimêtêrion*, a guesthouse.⁵⁹ In other words, Crete had divided into two buildings what in earlier times or in other places had been only one.⁶⁰

Exactly a century ago (from the time of my writing) an *Assistent* in the Bremen Museum für Völker- und Handelskunde, Heinrich Schurtz (1863-1903), had already noted the importance of the *lesché* for the community and interpreted it as the men's house of 'primitive' peoples.⁶¹ In the spirit of his time, Schurtz put the men's house in an evolutionistic context and applied the notion to a whole range of buildings, ranging from the house of the unmarried youths of a community to the place where the elders came together to discuss matters of communal interest and with many forms in between; it was also in this house that strangers normally stayed the night.⁶² As we just saw, Gernet had reached the same conclusion and as a convinced Durkheimian he had undoubtedly already read Schurtz; elsewhere in his oeuvre he points out that in his interpretation of the Spartan *syssitia* as 'men's houses' Schurtz had been pre-empted by Bachofen in his *Mutterrecht*.⁶³ Although we may have some qualms about the theoretical framework of Schurtz and although the scarcity of early sources hardly allows us any certainty,⁶⁴ his suggestion is very attractive given the ubiquitous worldwide presence of the men's house on earth, which has left traces even in Europe.⁶⁵

It is clear that already at an early stage the *lesché* had lost most of its political importance. It still remained, though, the place *par excellence* for old men to muse about things past and present. At one time, discussions must have been almost without end and this evidently became less and less acceptable after the birth of the symposium and the development of different political institutions, such as the assembly. This process of decline probably took place at different speeds in differ-

59 Burkert 2003:142f. For the *andreion* see Laurencic 1988.

60 Note that *klision*, Pausanias' term for the 'men's house' of the Lykomids, can also mean 'inn' (Hesychius κ 3017).

61 Schurtz 1902:313, 331. Schurtz was accepted by Brelich 1969:424 note 69, who in turn is accepted by Buxton 1994:42, but he seems to have been overlooked by Burkert 1993.

62 Schurtz 1902:209.

63 Gernet 1983:120, Usener 1907:122 mentions Schurtz in his discussion of the ephebes, but saw the book too late to incorporate it properly.

64 See the critique by Schlesier 1953:177-95; for a debatable explanation of the interest in men's societies at Schurtz's time see See 1994:319-42; more persuasively, Brunotte 2004a,b.

65 Schurtz 1902:312-17, Wolfram 1956.

ent communities, but must already have been fairly advanced in the fifth century BC. That is why *lesché* also acquired the meanings 'conversation,' 'small talk,' *causerie*, telling of big stories (below) *etc.*⁶⁶ It is therefore understandable that the *lesché* virtually stopped being productive in an onomastical respect in the third century BC; the only exceptions are the early second-century Pergamene poet Leschides, whose origin is unfortunately unknown,⁶⁷ and the example from the outlying corner of the Libyan Pentapolis (above). It returned to onomastic favour only in the first century AD, but now as a women's name ('Miss Gossip?').⁶⁸ Can there be a clearer sign that this once important male institution had lost all of its former significance?

There is one final testimony on the *lesché* which we have left until this moment, since its value is hard to evaluate. At the end of the nineteenth century, William Robertson Smith noted the resemblance between *lesché* and Hebrew *liškah*, of which the oldest mention occurs in *1 Samuel* (9.19-22).⁶⁹ When Saul has met Samuel, the latter invites him to a 'high place.' There he brought Saul and his servant 'into the *liškah*, and made them sit in the chiefest place among those that had been invited, which were about thirty men.' Burkert reasonably suggests that the *liškah* is here a building where people dine from sacrifice,⁷⁰ even though our text is silent about any religious ritual. After the religious centralisation in Jerusalem by Solomon the *liškah* is found mainly connected with the Temple, although, strangely enough, it does not occur in the chapters on the building of Salomo's temple (*1 Kings* 6-7). In the later books of the *Old Testament*, it is a Temple hall where people drink (*Jeremiah* 35.4) or priests eat (*Ezekiel* 42.13), but which can also serve as a Temple store room for valuables (*Ezra* 8.29) or as the office of a scribe in the royal palace (*Jeremiah* 36.12, 20). Apparently, the main resemblance between *lesché* and *liškah* is that both were buildings where one could dine, and Palestinian archeological evidence seems to suggest that this dining in Israel too happened on benches.⁷¹ The Hebrew material, then, is a welcome confirmation of our observation that the *lesché* was also a dining hall. And it is the more welcome, since the term *liškah* must have existed already in the first centuries of the first mil-

66 Note its occurrence as *causerie* in Cicero, *Att.* 6.5.1, 12.1. For Cicero's use of Greek in his letters to Atticus see Swain 2002:146-62.

67 For Leschides see Suda λ 311 = *FGrH* 172 T 1 = SH 503 Lloyd-Jones/Parsons, *cf.* Cameron 1995:282f. Lloyd-Jones/Parsons have overlooked his mention in Suda κ 2395.

68 Solin 1982:1168, 1313.

69 Smith ²1894:254 note 6.

70 Burkert 2003:137f.; add to Burkert's literature Kellermann 1984, but note also *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* I 665; IV 703; VI 568-69, 1064; 1197; VIII 652; Brown 1995-2001:1.18, 43, 141-2, II.96, 300, 311, III.340.

71 The best discussion is Kellermann 1984:607 (benches).

lennium BC, given its occurrence in 1 *Samuel* and in an, admittedly damaged, Punic inscription.⁷²

Smith's idea of a connection between *leschê* and *liškah* was virtually immediately accepted by the ancient historian Eduard Meyer (1855-1930) and the Indo-Europeanist Otto Schrader (1855-1919), who both suggested that an Anatolian language stood at the cradle of the Greek and Hebrew terms.⁷³ Although this view has not been totally abandoned by post-war linguists,⁷⁴ it has been rejected by the majority of them, who now opt for a Greek etymology of *leschê* and connect the term with the root *λεχ.⁷⁵ Burkert goes along with this majority and looks for connections with the Mycenaean festival Lechestroterion and the Roman *lectisternium*,⁷⁶ but nothing in our later sources points into that particular ritual direction. As 'lying' was hardly the most prominent feature of the *leschê* (above), and *liškah* stands isolated in North West Semitic,⁷⁷ its Anatolian origin still seems attractive. Given the differences between the Greek and Israelite functions, on the one hand, and its Anatolian/Rhodian connections with a grave, on the other (above), the original meaning of the Anatolian verbal ancestor may well have been a specific shape of building.

Having now acquired a relatively clear picture of what the *leschê* was in the course of time, we can finally attack the problem posed by the few passages that connect the *leschê* with the telling of myth: Pausanias on the Delphian *leschê* and the mention in the *Life of Homer*. From these, the latter is assigned by Wilamowitz to the period 130-80 BC, but other students of the *Life* are inclined to date it to the first centuries AD.⁷⁸ In any case, the *Life* hardly contains old traditions, and it seems better to see the reference to Homer's performance in the *leschê* of Cyme as a narratological device to stress the poet's poor position before people try to have him accepted by the town's *boulê*, 'senate,' which dismally fails this unique opportunity for eternal fame. In other communities, too, Homer has to put up with positions hardly befitting his poetical pre-eminence, such as being kept by a schoolmaster in Phocaea (15), being hosted by a goat herd in Pitys (21), being a

72 Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995:1.576.

73 Meyer ²1909:627, Schrader 1911:469.

74 Their suggestion is still accepted by Furnée 1972:257, who in note 36 also points to a non-Indo-European suffix -αρο-/α and compares λεσχάρα? (*Etymologicum Genuinum* s.v. Λεσχάρααι Alpers).

75 See the etymological dictionaries of Frisk and Chantraine.

76 *Lechestroterion*: PY Fr 343+1217. *Lectisternium*: see the bibliography in Beard 1998:1.63 note 195.

77 Kellermann 1984, M.L. West 1997:38 (who also rejects a Greek etymology, but favours an origin from the Near East).

78 Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1916:414ff., Schmid and Stählin 1929:84 note 7. For English translations see Lefkowitz 1981:139-55, M.L. West 2003:354-403 (with the best modern edition).

tutor to a Chian (24), being schoolmaster in Chios (25) *etc.* In other words, the passage can hardly be adduced in support of a one-time place where itinerant poets performed their myths.

Pausanias' reference is more persuasive. He clearly opposes 'matters which were more serious' to 'those which were *mythôdês*,' which has here the meaning 'fictitious,' 'fabulous,' 'over the top,' but not the meaning 'serious myth.' The same meaning we find, for example in Plutarch and Lucian;⁷⁹ the meaning is also reflected in Apuleius' reference to the *fabulam Graecanicam* in the Prologue of his *Metamorphoses*. In these authors, *mythos* 'in the conventional rhetorical division of narrative, denotes the category of untrue-and-unlike-the-truth,' a meaning that can be found widely after Aristotle.⁸⁰ Pausanias, then, is a rather important testimony that some kind of untrue narrative with entertainment value was told in the *leschê*; surely the Greeks must have also told myths among their entertaining tales to pass the time. We find a similar connection between *leschê* and *mythos* in two entries in Hesychius λ 703-4 where we read: λεσχηνεῖ and [...] μυθολογεῖ and λεσχηνευθέντα: μυθολογηθέντα. Evidently, these references imply the same association between the *leschê* and the telling of 'tall' stories.

Finally, the latest connection between myth and the *leschê* is found in Eustathius, who in his commentary on *Iliad* 9.502-7 refers to the traditional stories about the gods as μυθολέσχα. In his edition, my compatriot Van der Valk tersely notes '*contemptum denotat*' and '*ex Eust. solo, ut videtur, est nota*.'⁸¹ With these examples we have exhausted our material. Much about the *leschê* still remains obscure, but one thing seems now pretty clear: the *leschê* was hardly the place for itinerant singers, but after its political heyday many a Greek may have listened there to myths, even though more in the spirit of entertainment than in that of a serious tale.⁸²

79 Plut. *Rom.* 25.4 μυθῶδές ἐστι, μᾶλλον δ' ὅλως ἄπιστον, *Sol.* 32.4 ἀπίθανος παντάπασι καὶ μυθῶδης; Lucian *VH.* 1.2 τεράστια καὶ μυθῶδη, *Philops.* 5.2 ἄπιστα καὶ μυθῶδη; Philostr. *VA.* 5.1, *Her.* 7.9.

80 Thus, on *mythos* in Ach. Tat. 1.2.3, Morgan 2001:155, who overlooked the best discussion of this meaning of *mythos*: Meijering 1987:72-90.

81 Van der Valk 1976:775.

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