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## Salustius' composite theory of myths

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# Die pagane Theologie des Philosophen Salustios

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## Salustius' composite theory of myths\*

Robbert M. van den Berg

"Why, then, did the ancients use myths while ignoring these doctrines (λόγοι)? That is a question well worth examining." With this programmatic statement, Salustius introduces his discussion of myths. The issue is a pertinent one for any Platonist to raise, for Plato famously combines philosophical argument (*logos*) with myth. Many of Plato's readers, both ancient and modern ones, are troubled by this combination. What has rational philosophical discourse to do with invented stories? The question is all the more urgent for the Neoplatonist Salustius, because for him Plato is but one of a group of ancient authoritative myth-makers that also includes the great Greek poets Homer and Hesiod and the seer Orpheus. Such was in fact the esteem in which the emperor Julian and his circle held these myths, that they play an important role in the religious politics of his short-lived reign. Julian did not only spend much time and energy on the exegesis of these ancient myths, but he also ferociously attacked those who, to his mind, did not sufficiently respect the divine nature of myths. In his oration *On the Mother of Gods*, for example, he discusses the myth of her relation with Attis at considerable length, whereas in his oration *Against the cynic Heraclius* he severely criticizes Heraclius for his frivolous attempts at myth-making.<sup>1</sup> Below, we will come back to both orations, since Salustius' discussion clearly draws on these, and in particular on the one about the Mother of the Gods.

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\* Thanks are due to my fellow contributors to this volume for their constructive remarks and criticism and in particular to Adrien Lecerf for his thoughtful and detailed observations.

<sup>1</sup> P. ATHANASSIADI, "Le traitement du mythe: de l'empereur Julien à Proclus", in: M.-A. AMIR MOEZZI / J.-D. DUBOIS / C. JULIEN / F. JULIEN (Hg.), *Pensée Grecque et sagesse d'Orient. Hommage à Michel Tardieu* (Turnhout 2009) [63–76] 66–70 rightly insists on the political dimension of Julian's interest in mythology. As she observes, Julian, in articulating a theory of myths, addresses not just Christian polemics against Graeco-Roman myths, but also irreverent pagan attitudes towards those myths. On Julian's oration against Heraclius, see also NESSELRATH 2008 for an analysis of its content and R. M. VAN DEN BERG, "The Emperor Julian, Against the Cynic Heraclius (*Oration 7*): A Polemic about Myths", in: G. H. VAN KOOTEN / J. VAN RUITEN (Hg.), *Intolerance, Polemics, and Debate in Antiquity: Politico-Cultural, Philosophical, and Religious Forms of Critical Conversation in the Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, Graeco-Roman, and Early-Islamic World* (Leiden 2019) 424–439 for an analysis of polemical structure of the treatise.



The question of why Plato and other ancient authorities had made use of myths had been answered in different ways by different Neoplatonists. In this chapter, I intend to demonstrate how Salustius' answer to this question can be understood as a combination of the views of Plotinus, Porphyry, and theurgic Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and the emperor Julian on the issue of myths. By way of background, I shall in part one first briefly sketch these various Neoplatonic approaches to myths. The second part of this chapter consists of a close reading of Salustius' discussion of the topic in order to flesh out his own theory on myths. Finally, we will take a closer look at Salustius' application of this theory to his exegesis of the afore-mentioned myth of the Great Mother and Attis, which he provides as an illustration of his own theory.

## 1. Myths in the (Neo-)Platonic tradition

### 1.1. Introduction: Plato on myths

All Neoplatonic theories about myths and their relation to philosophy take, as may be expected, Plato's own use of and reflection on myths as their starting-point. Much can and indeed has been said about Plato's attitude towards myths, but for our present purposes it suffices to restrict ourselves to two issues: 1. the relation between myth and truth and 2. Plato's distinction between good and bad myths. Both issues come to the fore at the beginning of the *Republic*, when Socrates discusses what sort of myths should play a role in the upbringing of the young.

One such myth is the (in)famous noble lie. Plato introduces this story as follows:

And how about those mythic stories that we talked about just now: isn't it the case that because we have no way to know the truth about ancient events, we make a falsehood resemble the truth as closely as we possibly can, thus creating something useful? (Plato, *Republic* II, 382d1-4)<sup>2</sup>

Since we have no way of knowing what actually happened in prehistoric times, we cannot but speculate. The story that the noble lie tells of how the first inhabitants of the utopian city of Kallipolis were all born from the same earth yet were composed of different sorts of metals is clearly false: such things are impossible and hence have never happened in the past nor will ever happen in the future. At the same time, however, the political message of this false story "resembles the truth". It points to the fact that all citizens of a community owe their existence to that community

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<sup>2</sup> και ἐν αἷς νυνδὴ ἐλέγομεν ταῖς μυθολογίαις, διὰ τὸ μὴ εἰδέναι ὅτι τάληθές ἔχει περὶ τῶν παλαιῶν, ἀφομοιοῦντες τῷ ἀληθεῖ τὸ ψεῦδος ὅτι μάλιστα, οὕτω χρησίμων ποιοῦμεν;

and hence have an obligation towards it. The noble lie is relevant for our present concerns for two reasons. The definition of myths as false stories plays a role in the anti-Platonic polemics that in part underlie Salustius' initial question about the usefulness of myths. On the other hand, it also invites allegorical interpretation of myths, an invitation that was readily accepted by the Neoplatonists, be it not always in the same way.

Plato qualifies the false myth about the autochthonous origins of the inhabitants of Kallipolis as 'noble' in contradistinction to the false myths from Homer and Hesiod. The latter he rules out as unfit for the education of the young, since they imbue the young with all sorts of wrong ideas about the divine and morality. As the *exemple par excellence* of these corrupting myths, "the greatest falsehood about the most important things" (Plato, *Rep.* II, 377e5–6), Socrates refers to Hesiod's myth about the gruesome power struggle between the first generations of God-Kings. According to this story Uranus was castrated and overthrown by his son Cronus, who, in his turn, was dethroned and imprisoned in Tartarus by his son Zeus. In Plato's time, intellectuals tried to rescue Homer and Hesiod from the criticism that they represented the gods as human beings behaving badly by arguing that these stories had to be understood allegorically. Plato's Socrates is not overly enthusiastic about this proposition. If these stories have to be told at all, he opines, this should happen behind closed doors to the smallest number of listeners, after they had made an expensive sacrifice (Plato, *Rep.* II, 378a1–6). From the context, it seems evident that we are meant to understand this as a condemnation both of Homeric and Hesiodic mythology and of the allegorical interpretation of these. As we will find, however, Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Salustius were attracted to precisely the afore-mentioned myth of divine successions from Hesiod's *Theogony*. They took Plato's line about the need to keep the circulation of these stories restricted to the smallest possible circle as Plato's blessing for their own allegorical interpretations, provided that these were practiced within a restricted circle of philosophical minds.

## 1.2. Plotinus

In comparison to Porphyry and the emperor Julian, Plotinus' interest in myths appear to have been rather limited. Yet, he can be credited with a theory of the nature of myths that is in keeping both with Neoplatonic metaphysics and psychology. In short, Plotinus holds that myths are a didactic device that presents the eternal and unified intelligible in such a way that it can be understood by the human soul which thinks discursively.

Plotinus develops his theory in his treatise *On Love* (*Enn.* III 5[50]9) in the course of his allegorical interpretation of Plato's myth about the con-

ception of Eros in the *Symposium*.<sup>3</sup> Eros, we are told, was conceived during the party in celebration of the birth of Aphrodite, when Penia (Poverty) managed to sleep with drunk Plutus (Abundance). According to Plotinus, Plutus represents the rational principle (λόγος) in the intelligible world, Penia intelligible matter and Aphrodite Soul. Aphrodite / Soul, thus Plotinus, belongs to the realm of Being, represented in the myth by the garden of Zeus, the place where the party is said to have taken place. This however, raises a problem, for according to the Platonic conception of Being, Being is ungenerated, so how can Aphrodite said to have been born / generated? Plotinus comments:

But myths, if they are really going to be myths, must separate in time the things of which they tell, and set apart from each other the many realities which are together, but distinct in rank or powers, at points were rational discussion (*logoi*), also, make generations of things ungenerated, and themselves, too separate things which are together; the myths, when they have taught us as well as they can, allow the man who has understood them to put together again that which they have separated. (Plotinus, *Enn.* III 5[50]9,24–29; tr. Armstrong)<sup>4</sup>

Myths are stories, and stories are characterized by temporality: they start at a given moment and after a series of events arrive, in the end, at a conclusion. Hence Plotinus remark that myths “must separate in time the things of which they tell”. The temporality of stories, exemplified by stories about divine births, sits ill with the eternal nature of the intelligible. Hence, we may say that for Plotinus too myths are false, or, at least, not true ones.<sup>5</sup> Yet we, human beings, need myths, since we think in a discursive manner and hence struggle to grasp intelligible reality in its eternal simplicity. This is also evident from the fact that even philosophers tend to talk about the intelligible in terms of generation and so on. In other words, myths are a didactical tool which allows us, imperfect discursive souls that we are, to come to understand the intelligible, just as philosophical arguments are. The truth about timeless, unified intelligible being can only properly be grasped by the intuitive intellection that is characteristic of intellect (νοῦς). As Pierre Hadot (1990, 23) has put it well:

Le mythe et le discours sont donc deux formes inférieures de la pensée qui conviennent à l'âme tombée en ce monde. Mais, pour l'âme qui s'élève au niveau de l'Esprit ou qui s'approche du Bien, “les raisonnements scientifiques”, comme le dira Proclus (*In Tim.* I 302,5–6), “ne paraissent plus que comme des fables, lorsqu'elle est avec le Père, qu'elle se repaît de la vérité de l'Être”.

<sup>3</sup> On Plotinus' theory, see, e.g., PÉPIN 1958, 190–192; HADOT 1990, 22–25.

<sup>4</sup> Δεῖ δὲ τοὺς μύθους, εἶπερ τοῦτο ἔσονται, καὶ μερίζειν χρόνους ἃ λέγουσι, καὶ διαίρειν ἀπ' ἀλλήλων πολλὰ τῶν ὄντων ὁμοῦ μὲν ὄντα, τάξει δὲ ἡ δυνάμει διεστώτα, ὅπου καὶ οἱ λόγοι καὶ γενέσεις τῶν ἀγεννήτων ποιοῦσι, καὶ τὰ ὁμοῦ ὄντα καὶ αὐτοὶ διαίρουσι, καὶ διδάξαντες ὡς δύνανται τῷ νοήσαντι ἡδὴ συγχωροῦσι συναίρειν.

<sup>5</sup> PÉPIN 1958, 192: “or le mythe est un image, et, à ce titre, reflète la vérité par une sorte de pacte naturel. Mais il n'est pas lui-même la vérité”.

Plotinus, however, gives us not only a reason of why myths were composed in the first place, but also a justification for allegorical interpretation: once myths “have taught us as well as they can”, we have to abstract from the story-like structure of the myth, by putting together what the myth has separated, as Plotinus himself in fact does in the treatise *On Love*. It is this sort of operation that prepares us to transcend the limitations of discursive soul towards the intuitive understanding of intellect (νοῦς).

### 1.3. Porphyry

Porphyry developed an elaborate and highly influential theory on the nature of myths, and those of Plato in particular, in his response to the polemical treatise against Plato's myth of Er by Colotes of Lampsacus, a pupil of Epicurus. Neither Colotes' work, nor that of Porphyry has survived, but reports by Proclus in his *Commentary on the Republic* and by Macrobius in his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* give us some idea of the gist of both Colotes' criticism and of Porphyry's reply. Proclus reports that:

The Epicurean Colotes brings a charge against Plato of doing away with scientific truth and wasting his time when telling stories concerned with falsehood like a poet, rather than giving demonstrations like a scientist. (Proclus, *In Remp.* 2,105,23–26 Kroll = Porphyry, *fr.* 182F.1–22 Smith; tr. Wilberding, adapted)<sup>6</sup>

Colotes here uses Plato's own definition of myths as false stories (see p. 172 above) against him. Colotes had clearly hit a nerve, as appears from the fact that Porphyry felt forced to answer him some 500 years later, while even a century later, both Proclus and Macrobius, independently of one another, still find it necessary to deal with Colotes. We may thus assume that Salustius' question about the usefulness of myths, which in, a similar manner, contrasts myths to philosophical *logoi*, too, is part of this polemical exchange about myths between Platonists and their opponents, especially since Salustius clearly knows of some of the ideas that Porphyry had developed in his treatise against Colotes.

Colotes had accused Plato not just of preferring false myths over argumentative λόγοι, but also of being inconsistent. For at the beginning of the *Republic* Plato, Colotes had pointed out, takes to task the poets for inventing stories that might corrupt the morals of the young. These corruptive myths include the Hesiodic tale of the power-struggle between Uranus, Cronus and Zeus, referred to above, but also Homer's gloomy depiction of Hades. Plato's condemnation of Homer's Hades, Colotes had argued, was inconsistent with his own eschatological myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*. Taking up Plato's distinction between good and bad myths, Por-

<sup>6</sup> Ὁ μὲν Ἐπικούρειος Κωλώτης ἐγκαλεῖ τῷ Πλάτῳ, ὅτι τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἀφείκει τὴν ἐπιστημονικὴν περὶ τοῦ ψεύδους διατρίβει μυθολογῶν ὡς ποιητής, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀποδεικνύς ὡς ἐπιστήμων.

phyry replies that Plato's condemnation of myths at the beginning of the *Republic* had not been categorical:

Neither does philosophy resist all stories, nor does she take pleasure in all of them. ... For, there are two types of narrations. One type concerns a composition of the narration that has been put together from indecent and monstrous acts that are unworthy of the gods, for example gods who commit adultery, Saturn who cuts off the genitals of his father Caelus and who himself, in his own turn, again is thrown into chains by his son once the latter has seized the kingship – this entire genre the philosophers prefer to ignore. The other type reveals the teaching about sacred matters under the pious veil of fictitious events and covered up by decent matters and dressed in decent names. And this is the only genre which the prudence of the philosopher who deals with divine matters allows for. (Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* I 2,6 and 2,11 = Porphyry, *fr.* 182cF Smith; tr. my own)<sup>7</sup>

Macrobius, who writes in Latin, here refers to Uranus and Cronus by their Roman names Caelus and Saturn. Interestingly, Porphyry, unlike Salustius, follows Plato in his condemnation of this myth. Plotinus and Porphyry hold different views on the function of the fictional element of myths. Whereas Plotinus sees it as a didactic tool to clarify the obscure structure of the metaphysical world, Porphyry thinks of it as a mechanism to hide the truth. The false fictional cover story acts, as it were, as a veil that covers the true hidden message of the myth. We are hence meant to lift that veil, i.e. to interpret myths allegorically.

A second important distinction between Plotinus' views about myths and those of Porphyry concerns the subject-matter of myths. According to Porphyry, the fictitious veil is not just meant to shield doctrines about the divine from the unkempt masses, but also in keeping with the subject-matter of these doctrines, i.e. nature (φύσις). Since Nature, in the famous words of Heraclitus, likes to hide, true doctrines about nature have to be should be presented in a cryptic manner, hence the need for fictional stories and allegorical interpretation:

And that this fiction is in a way in accordance with nature, because even "Nature likes to hide itself", according to Heraclitus (22 A 123 DK). And just as the daimons that guard nature through some such fictions as these reveal their gift to us in the form of dreams or waking visions. And they use ambiguous language, and signify different things through different fictions, revealing images endowed with form as likenesses of things having no form at all, and still other things through analogous figures. Sacred ceremonies and acts of initiation are full of these things, which actually draw their efficacy from this secrecy and concealment among the initiated. (Proclus, *In Remp.* 2,107,5–14

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<sup>7</sup> *Nec omnibus fabulis philosophia repugnat nec omnibus adquiescit ... aut enim contextio narrationis per turpia et indigna numinibus ac monstro similia componitur ut di adulteri, Saturnus pudenda Caeli patris abscondens et ipse rursus a filio regno potito in uincla coniectus, quod genus totum philosophi nescire malunt – aut sacrarum rerum notio sub pio figmentorum uelamine honestis et tecta rebus et uestita nominibus enuntiat et hoc est solum figmenti genus quod cautio de diuinis rebus philosophantis admittit.*

Kroll; Porphyry, *fr.* 182F Smith; tr. Wilberding, adapted; cf. Macrobius, *In Somn.* I 2,17 = Porphyry, *fr.* 182dF Smith)<sup>8</sup>

Pierre Hadot has traced the reception of Heraclitus' maxim in his last book *Le voile d'Isis*. As he rightly stresses, for Porphyry the scope of myths is restricted to those lower divine powers such as daimons and the hypostasis of Soul that are somehow linked to the material realm (i.e. Nature). This aspect of the divine world is studied by what Hadot calls "theological physics" (*physique théologique*). As we found above, however, Porphyry's own teacher Plotinus makes use of myths when doing "theology" (*théologie*), i.e. the study of the higher divine powers that transcend the material world completely. The same holds true for later Neoplatonists, such as the emperor Julian, Salustius and Proclus.<sup>9</sup> This does not mean, though, that Salustius rejects Porphyry's ideas about physical myths altogether. Rather, as we will find, he assumes that theological and physical myths supplement each other.

#### 1.4. Theurgic Neoplatonism (Iamblichus; Julian)

The attitude of both the emperor Julian and Salustius to myths is to a large extent determined by the theurgic Neoplatonism of Iamblichus. Whereas both Plotinus and Porphyry assume that the pursuit of Neoplatonic philosophy by itself enables the human soul to ascend towards the intelligible and hence become divine, Iamblichus holds that divinization of the human soul requires divine assistance and that this divine assistance can only be invoked by means of theurgic rituals. These rituals consist in the correct manipulation of so-called symbols (σύμβολα), i.e. (parts of) animals, plants, stones etc. that are sacred to specific gods, in order to channel divine powers that will enable the human soul to ascend. The efficacy of theurgy is a matter of the correct performance of the ritual, philosophical understanding does not come into play at all. As Iamblichus puts it in a famous passage from his treatise on theurgy, *Reply to Porphyry* (also known under its traditional title *De Mysteriis*, or *On the mysteries of Egypt*):<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> καὶ ὅτι τὸ πλασματώδες τοῦτο κατὰ φύσιν πῶς ἐστίν, διότι καὶ ἡ φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ καθ' Ἡράκλειτον· καὶ ὡς οἱ δαίμονες οἱ προστάται τῆς φύσεως διὰ δὴ τινῶν τοιούτων πλασμάτων ἡμῖν ἐκφαίνουσιν τὴν ἑαυτῶν δόσιν ὄναρ τε καὶ ὕπαρ, λοξὰ φθεγγόμενοι, δι' ἄλλων ἄλλα σημαίνοντες μεμορφωμένα τῶν ἀμορφῶτων ἀφομοιώματα καὶ διὰ τῶν ἀνὰ λόγον ἄλλα σχημάτων, ὧν δὴ καὶ τὰ ἱερά πεπληρωσθαι καὶ τὰ δρώμενα ἐν τοῖς τελεστηρίοις, ἃ καὶ δρᾶν αὐτῷ τῷ κρυφίῳ καὶ ἀγνώστῳ παρὰ τοῖς τελουμένοις.

<sup>9</sup> P. HADOT, *Le voile d'Isis: essais sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature* (Paris 2004) 70.

<sup>10</sup> The title *De Mysteriis* is a modern invention by Ficino; the most recent editors of the text, SAFFREY / SEGONDS (2018, IX–XXI) hence prefer the title *Reply to Porphyry* (*Réponse à Porphyre*).

... thinking does not connect the theurgists to the gods. For if it did, what would prevent people who philosophize in a theoretical manner to experience theurgic union with the gods? As things stand, however, this is not true. To the contrary: it is the accomplishment of ineffable acts that are religiously performed and beyond all understanding and the power of the unspeakable symbols that can only be understood by the gods that bring about theurgic union. (Iamblichus, *Reply to Porphyry* 73,1–8 SAFFREY / SEGONDS = *The Mysteries of Egypt* II 11, 96,13–97,2 des Places)<sup>11</sup>

Iamblichus' point is emphatically not that theurgy replaces philosophy, but rather that theurgy and philosophy do different things. Rational philosophy accounts for the possibility of theurgic practices and explains why these are necessary for the salvation of the human soul. The salvation itself, however, can only be accomplished by means of non-rational rituals.

Iamblichus in *Reply to Porphyry* does not deal with the role of myths within the context of theurgic ritual. The emperor Julian, though, does so, while hinting that he gets his ideas from Iamblichus.<sup>12</sup> Especially instructive in this regard is his speech *Against the Cynic Heraclius*, which is about the uses and abuses of myths. Heraclius had incurred the wrath of Julian by giving a public speech which centered around a myth of his own making about an encounter between the gods Pan and Zeus. The hairy Pan was apparently meant to represent Julian, who sported a philosopher's beard and otherwise cultivated an unkempt appearance. Julian's main grief against Heraclius, or so he says, is that by representing a mortal human being as a god, Heraclius had been disrespectful to the gods. As part of his attack on Heraclius, Julian discusses various types of myths and when (not) to use to them. Most importantly, Julian distinguishes between ethical and theological myths. The former play a role in the education of the young, and hence are free of any possible offensive element. The latter have a place in the celebration of initiation rites (τελεταί), i.e. of theurgic rituals, and may contain offensive elements. This distinction echoes Plato's recommendation in the *Republic*, alluded to above, that in the case of the education of the young myths like Hesiod's account of the violent succession of the first God-kings should be avoided, but that they may perhaps be the subject of allegorical interpretation in the secluded context of a religious ceremony. Two passages are in particular relevant for our present purposes. The first one goes as follows:

[The composition of myths] only comes into play, if at all, in the case of practical philosophy that is concerned with the individual and in the case of theology that is con-

<sup>11</sup> ... οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡ ἔννοια συνάπτει τοῖς θεοῖς τοὺς θεουργοὺς· ἐπεὶ τί ἐκάλυψε τοὺς θεωρητικῶς φιλοσοφούντας ἔχειν τὴν θεουργικὴν ἔνωσιν πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς; νῦν δ' οὐκ ἔχει τό γε ἀληθὲς οὕτως, ἀλλ' ἡ τῶν ἔργων τῶν ἀρρητῶν καὶ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν νόησιν θεοπροπῶς ἐνεργουμένων τελεσιουργία ἢ τε τῶν νοουμένων τοῖς θεοῖς μόνον συμβόλων ἀφθέγκτων δύναμις ἐντίθησι τὴν θεουργικὴν ἔνωσιν.

<sup>12</sup> For Iamblichus' influence on Julian's conception of myths as theurgic instruments, see BOUFFARTIGUE 1992, 337–345.

cerned with initiation and mystery rites. "For nature likes to hide itself" and the hidden essence (οὐσία) of the gods does not bear to be thrown out in plain words to an impure audience. For this reason, the ineffable nature of the *characteres* is useful, even when unknown. For it benefits not just the souls, but also the bodies and brings about the presence of the divine. That, I believe, also often happens because of myths, when divine things are poured out by means of riddles and the enactment of myths over audiences of common people who are unable to receive these in a pure form. (Julian, *CHer.* 11, 216B–D)<sup>13</sup>

Julian, like Porphyry (cf. above, p. 176–177) before him, quotes Heraclitus' famous saying "Nature likes to hide itself", when discussing the allegorical interpretation of myths. Yet both Neoplatonic authors use it to make a very different point. According to Porphyry, myths play a role in theological physics: the fictitious mythical story serves as a veil to keep certain doctrines about the cosmos hidden from view. According to Julian, myths of the type that he is discussing here are about the essence (being) or nature of the gods, and hence theological in nature. Moreover, the function of the fictional element becomes a different one. Iamblichus compares it to the so-called *characteres* in the case of theurgic ritual. These are meant to call forth divine powers in the same way as material symbols do.<sup>14</sup> In fact, these myths are recited or even played out in the context of the celebration of theurgic rites. This point has been observed by various scholars. According to Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013, 142f.), for example,

... Julian goes beyond the traditional allegorical interpretation and conceptualises the telestic myths analogously to theurgy as efficacious vehicles of divine action. Theurgy is thus here enlarged to include not only the performance of rituals, but also the advanced reading and interpretation of myths; both are held together by the aura of initiation and divine inspiration.

Tanaseanu-Döbler is right about the theurgic qualities of myths. Yet, it should be noted that what corresponds to the performance of the ritual is not primarily the interpretation of the myth, but the mere listening to it. Julian (above, p. 178–179) draws a distinction between listening to a theurgic myth and its interpretation. Ordinary participants in a ritual may fail to grasp the allegorical meaning of the myth that is read out to them. Hence, they will fail to obtain special knowledge about the essence (οὐσία) of the

<sup>13</sup> τούτων δὴ τῶν μερῶν οὔτε τῷ λογικῷ προσήκει τῆς μυθογραφίας οὔτε τοῦ φυσικοῦ τῷ μαθηματικῷ, μόνον δέ, εἴπερ ἄρα, τοῦ πρακτικοῦ τῷ πρὸς ἓνα γινομένῳ καὶ τοῦ θεολογικοῦ τῷ τελεστικῷ καὶ μυστικῷ. "φιλεῖ γὰρ ἡ φύσις κρύπτεσθαι", καὶ τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον τῆς τῶν θεῶν οὐσίας οὐκ ἀνέχεται γυμνοῖς εἰς ἀκαθάρτους ἀκοὰς ῥίπτεσθαι ῥήμασιν. Ὅπερ δὲ δὴ τῶν χαρακτήρων ἢ ἀπόρητος φύσις ὠφελῆν πέφυκε καὶ ἀγνοουμένη· θεραπευεῖ γοῦν οὐ ψυχὰς μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ σώματα, καὶ θεῶν ποιῆ παρουσίας. Τοῦτ' οἶμαι πολλάκις γίγνεσθαι καὶ διὰ τῶν μύθων, ὅταν εἰς τὰς τῶν πολλῶν ἀκοὰς οὐ δυναμένους > τὰ θεῖα καθαρῶς δέξασθαι δι' αἰνιγμάτων αὐτὰ μετὰ τῆς μύθων σκηνοποιίας ἐγχέηται.

<sup>14</sup> For the identification of these *characteres* with theurgic *symbola*, see, e.g., BOUFFARTIGUE 1992, 340f. and VAN LIEFFERINGE 1999, 233.



gods. This is because on the epistemological principle that like is known by like, people who have not yet perfected themselves by purifying themselves are unlike the divine and hence cannot have knowledge of the divine essence. Still, even just listening to these theurgic myths has a beneficial influence on both their imperfect soul and body. This is in line with the non-rational nature of theurgic ritual (cf. the text quoted at p. 178 above): it is all about the performance of the ritual, not about rational understanding. Hence whereas Porphyry thinks of the fictional element as a means of exclusion of impure souls, Julian thinks of it as an instrument of inclusion: the essence of the gods may remain hidden to the many, yet they may still profit from the beneficial divine powers that the theurgic myths summon up.<sup>15</sup>

This does not away with the practice of allegorical interpretation, as appears from Julian's elaboration on theurgic myths:

But, since I have made mention of myths that play a role in initiations (*telestikoi mythoi*), let us now try to see for ourselves which sort of myths should go with each of the two parts of philosophy (i.e. ethics and theology, see the text mentioned above, p. 178–179, RMvdB). We don't always need the ancient witnesses, but I will now follow in the recent footsteps of a man whom I personally "revere and admire" (Homer, *Od.* VI 168) most after the gods, as much as I do Aristotle and Plato. He speaks not of all myths, but only about the myths that play a role in initiations (*telestikoi*), the ones that Orpheus has given us when he established the most holy initiations (*teletai*). For what is incongruous in myths puts us on the way to the truth, precisely because it is thus. For the more paradoxical and monstrous the riddles, the more they tell us not to take things literally, but to work on the hidden content and not to stop before, under the guidance of the gods, these things become clear and the intellect in us is initiated, or rather perfected, and, if there is such a thing, the element that is superior to intellect itself, i.e. a little part of the One and the Good that has the all in a partless manner, the fullness of the soul, and that in the One and the Good holds together all of soul because of its superior, separate and transcendent presence. (Julian, *CHer.* 12, 217B–D)<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the contribution by Adrien Lecerf to this volume, p. 70–72, for a similar observation.

<sup>16</sup> Ἐπει δὲ καὶ τῶν τελεστικῶν μύθων ἐπεμνήσθη, φέρε νῦν ὁποίους εἶναι χρῆ τοὺς ἑκατέρω τῶν μερῶν ἀρμόττοντας αὐτοὶ καθ' ἑαυτοὺς ἰδεῖν πειραθῶμεν, οὐκέτι μαρτύρων παλαιῶν ἐν πᾶσι προσδεόμενοι, ἐπόμενοι δὲ νέοις ἴχνησιν ἀνδρῶς ὃν ἐγὼ μετὰ τοὺς θεοὺς ἐξ ἰσῆς Ἀριστοτέλει καὶ Πλάτωνι ἀγαμαὶ τέθηπά τε. Φησὶ δὲ οὐχ ὑπὲρ πάντων οὗτος, ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ τῶν τελεστικῶν, οὓς παρέδωκεν ἡμῖν Ὀρφεὺς ὁ τὰς ἀγιοπάτας τελετὰς καταστησάμενος. Τὸ γὰρ ἐν τοῖς μύθοις ἀπεμφαῖνον αὐτῶ τούτῳ προσδοποιοῖ πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν· ὅσῳ γὰρ μᾶλλον παράδοξόν ἐστι καὶ τερατῶδες τὸ αἰνίγμα, τοσοῦτῳ μᾶλλον ἔοικε διαμαρτύρεσθαι μὴ τοῖς αὐτόθεν λεγομένοις πιστεύειν, ἀλλὰ τὰ λεληθότα περιεργάζεσθαι καὶ μὴ πρότερον ἀφίστασθαι, πρὶν ἂν ὑπὸ θεοῖς ἡγεμόσιν ἐκφανῆ γενόμενα τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν τελέσῃ. μᾶλλον δὲ τελειώσῃ, νοῦν καὶ εἰ δὴ τι κρείττον ἡμῖν ὑπάρχει τοῦ νοῦ αὐτοῦ, τοῦ ἑνός καὶ τάγαθου μοῖρά τις ὀλίγη τὸ πᾶν ἀμερίστως ἔχουσα, τῆς ψυχῆς πλήρωμα, καὶ ἐν τῷ ἐνὶ καὶ ἀγαθῷ συνέχουσα πᾶσαν αὐτὴν διὰ τῆς ὑπερεχούσης καὶ χωριστῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐξηρημμένης παρουσίας.

The anonymous recent authority whom Julian here follows is probably Iamblichus.<sup>17</sup> Above we found that Porphyry tried to rescue Plato from Colotes' criticism of inconsistency: Plato at the beginning of the *Republic* rejects the myths of Homer and Hesiod because of their offensive elements: his own myth of Er, however, is free of these and hence is admissible. Iamblichus is less concerned with defending Plato against this charge, but instead tries to justify the use of shocking myths in ritual settings. As appears from the context, Julian here has in mind in particular the myth of the murder of young Dionysus by the Titans and his subsequent resurrection, which played an important role in the Orphic mysteries. The paradoxical nature of this myth (how could a god suffer and even be killed?) is an incentive to look for the deeper meaning of the myth. The correct understanding of such a myth is not given to just anyone. In the text quoted at p. 178–179 above we found that impure souls may benefit from simply listening to such a theurgic myth, but they will fail to come to understand the essence (οὐσία) of the gods that is communicated through the myth. In the case of those who are actually able to arrive at an allegorical interpretation of the myth, this involves a process of the perfection of certain mental capacities, our intellect and mystic organ, the One in us. One could thus say that in this respect Iamblichus takes up Plotinus' theological approach to myths (as opposed to Porphyry's theological physics), be it that theurgy plays no role in Plotinus' account.<sup>18</sup> According to Plotinus, the discursive human soul is ill-equipped to capture intelligible truth because of its temporal and unified nature, hence the need of mythical fictions. The epistemic faculty that does allow us to fully take in this intelligible truth is intellect (νοῦς). Plotinus holds that doing philosophy by itself suffices to perfect our inner intellect. Iamblichus holds that the perfection of intellect (and the superior mystic organ) is a matter of theurgic initiation. Since only very few people will reach this stage of perfection, very few people will actually be able to grasp the truth about divine essence (οὐσία). Most of us will have to do with the beneficial effects of divine activity (ἐνέργεια) that can be channeled through theurgic ritual and is effective anyhow, regardless we understand it or not.

## 2. Salustius' mythology

We will now proceed with a close-reading of Salustius' discussion of myths. In order to help the reader to maintain an overview of the discus-

<sup>17</sup> Thus, e.g., BOUFFARTIGUE 1992, 338; VAN LIEFFERINGE 1999, 229; TANASEANU-DÖBLER 2013, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Note, though, that Plotinus, unlike Iamblichus, makes no reference to the myths' offensiveness and apparent absurdity.

sion, I shall now first give a brief outline of the argument. The numbers between square brackets refer to the corresponding paragraph below, the numbers between round brackets to the relevant paragraph of Salustius' text. The table of the end of this contribution, too, provides a summary of argument and brings out how Salustius combines the Plotinian, Porphyrian and theurgic views on myth into one single theory.

[2.1] Salustius' discussion of myths starts from the question "Why, then, did the ancients use myths while ignoring these doctrines (λόγοι)?" Salustius proceeds to give three answers to this question.

[2.2] Salustius first establishes *that* these ancient myths are divine from the fact that these were used by three different groups of divinely inspired users (3,1).

[2.3] He next explains *why* allegorical myths are divine: they are somehow like the gods. This likeness renders the gods favorable to those who use these divine myths, hence the ancients had good reason to use myths (3,2). Some myths are like the gods in that they imitate their essence (οὐσία) (first answer), while other myths are like the gods in that they imitate their activities (ἐνέργεια) within the cosmos (second answer) (3,3).

[2.4] An additional reason for using myths is that it is a discriminative mode of communication: only those capable of understanding them will get the allegorical message (third answer) (3,4).

[2.5] Salustius continues by establishing five types of myths (4,1–5).

[2.6] These five types can be reduced to three groups of myths, which are now made to correspond to the three groups of ancients that made use of myths (4,6).

[2.7] Having thus answered his initial question of why the ancients use myths, Salustius next adds flesh to the bones of his schematic treatment of myths by means of a brief exegesis of the myth of Attis and the Mother of the Gods (4,7–11).

## 2.1. The question: why myths rather than *logoi*? (3,1)

Salustius' treatise is meant as a work of philosophy, i.e. a work of *logoi*. Salustius stresses the logical nature of the treatise directly at the outset of his work. He demands of his intended readers (1,1) that they "should have received good guidance ever since childhood and should not have been brought up with thoughtless opinions" and that they be "of a good nature and intelligent, in order they are somehow like" Salustius' *logoi*. He next lists these *logoi* (2,1) as the starting points of his philosophical treatise about the gods and the cosmos. Salustius' insistence on the philosophical nature of his instruction about the divine, raises the question of why the ancients (παλαιοί) preferred to present their theological doctrines in mythological form, rather than by means of *logoi* as Salustius does. These ancients are, as

we will see, ancient philosophers like Plato, poets like Homer and Hesiod, and priests like Orpheus.

While the question about the relation between myth and *logos* makes sense within the context of Salustius' own project, there is probably also a polemical dimension to it. As we have already noted (§ 1.3), the question of why one might prefer myth over *logoi* probably derives from the polemics of the Epicurean Colotes against Plato's myth of Er. Epicurean polemics against other philosophical schools is given a new leash of life in late Antiquity, when Christian intellectuals start to recycling bits of it in their own polemics against pagan Neoplatonic philosophers. The (supposed) agreement between the teachings of the ancients and the philosophy of the Neoplatonists was seen as the ultimate proof for the truth of the latter. If Salustius in his treatise prefers *logoi* over myths – and for good reason, as either Colotes or a Christian polemicist might add – he seems to implicitly criticize the ancients. But if so, he would undercut the very authority of the ancients to which the pagan Neoplatonists appealed to justify their philosophy. Salustius' position is that the ancients had good reasons to use myths and furthermore that their myths and his philosophical *logoi* do not exclude each other. Myths are, as we would now say, good to think with. For as, Salustius observes, the very fact that the ancients use myths already gives rise to the philosophical question of why they do so and thus prevents us from being “intellectually lazy”.

## 2.2. Demonstration *that* myths are divine (3,1–3)

According to Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* B.1 (89b24–35) there are four types of question: 1. the that (τὸ ὅτι); 2. the why (τὸ διότι); 3. if it is (εἰ ἔστι); 4. what it is (τί ἐστι).<sup>19</sup> Usually the first two and the last two are grouped together.<sup>20</sup> In keeping with these Aristotelian guidelines, Salustius here first demonstrates that (ὅτι) myths are divine (3,1) and next seeks to answer the question why (διὰ τί) this is so (3,2).

*That* myths are divine, is easy to tell when one considers the ancients who have used myths. Salustius distinguishes three groups: 1. “those poets who are divinely inspired”, 2. “the best philosophers”, and 3. “those who introduced the mysteries and the gods themselves in their oracles”

<sup>19</sup> On the reception of these four Aristotelian questions, see J. MANSFELD / D. RUNIA, *Aëtiana. The Method and Intellectual Context of a Doxographer. Volume Two: The Compendium*. *Philosophia Antiqua* 114 (Leiden 2009) 168–172, and especially 169 regarding theological discussions.

<sup>20</sup> For the second couple of questions (whether the gods exist and, if so, what their nature is), cf. 3,3: “the myths tell all that there are gods. Which gods there are and what they are like, however, they tell only to those who are capable of understanding”.

(3,1).<sup>21</sup> These three groups composed their myths under divine inspiration, hence they need to be divine.

### 2.3. Two explanations of *why* myths are divine (3,2–3)

The question of *why* these myths are divine is a one that “philosophy should investigate”. On the assumption that some myths deal with the essence (οὐσία) of the gods, while others with their activities (ἐνέργεια), Salustius comes up with two, not very different, explanations that revolve around the idea that allegorical myths are divine in the sense that they are somehow like the divine.

Regarding myths that are concerned with the essence of the Gods, Salustius’ point is that myths have unique powers that allow us to come to know the otherwise unknowable essence of the gods. Above we discussed how, according to Iamblichus and the emperor Julian, the allegorical symbolism of the myths is not just a literary but also theurgic device. Salustius here hints at this theurgic aspect of allegorical myths. He first postulates that as a universal rule, like is attracted to like, while unlike things turn away from each other.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it is necessary that discourses about the Gods are somehow like them, “in order that they are worthy of the being (οὐσία) of the gods and render the latter well-disposed towards those who deliver these discourses. This could only be done by means of myths”. This echoes Julian’s remark (p. 180) that we will only be successful in our allegorical interpretations and hence come to know their essence (οὐσία) if we do so “under the guidance of the gods”.

But how are myths like the Gods? Salustius’ point here is that allegorical myths imitate the way in which the Gods present themselves to us by presenting some aspects of the divine in a clear and hence easily accessible form, while other aspects in a hidden manner. Salustius here focusses on manifestations of divine goodness. There is a direct relation between the goodness of the gods and their being (οὐσία), for according to Platonic metaphysics Goodness is the cause of all Being, and hence Goodness makes knowledge of Being possible.<sup>23</sup> Some aspects of divine goodness manifest themselves in visible form, and hence are common knowledge. Other, intelligible, aspects of divine goodness are only accessible to intel-

<sup>21</sup> Cf. 4,6 for a similar division into three groups. I assume that “those who introduced the mysteries and the gods themselves in their oracles” constitute one group. Oracles play an important role in mystery-cults. Think, e.g., of the case of the *Chaldaean Oracles* that play an important role in the case of theurgic rituals.

<sup>22</sup> This principle of the attraction of like things is known as *sympatheia*. It is this bond of *sympatheia* between the gods and theurgic symbols which make theurgy possible.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Plato, *Rep.* VI, 508b12–509a8 (the simile of the sun: the Good is the cause of Being and makes knowledge of it possible).

ligent people.<sup>24</sup> I assume that Salustius here thinks of the Stoics and Platonists respectively. The Stoic doctrine about divine providence is based on the perceived order and goodness of the physical world. Salustius here refers to these perceptions of divine goodness as “common goods” (ἀγαθὰ κοινά). I suggest that the predicate “common” alludes to the Stoic theory of the common notions (κοινὰ ἔννοια). The omnipresence of commodities in this world (i.e. common goods such as fruit to eat, water to drink *et cetera*) gives rise to the common notion of divine providence. In the introduction (1,1–2), Salustius had already mentioned these common notions as a necessary requirement for a proper understanding of his treatise: “Furthermore, they (i.e. the readership of Salustius’ treatise, RMvdB), should know the common notions. Common notions are those notions on which all people agree when questioned in the right manner.” Yet, such common notions are at best starting points. Stoics, unlike Platonists, fail to grasp the intelligible goodness that is behind the visible manifestations of divine Goodness. A similar distinction between things visible to all and invisible things that can only be grasped by intelligent people applies to myths. These too are a mixture of what is evident (the story as it is told) and hidden (the implied, yet untold allegorical message about the divine essence). The evident element of myth is of use to all: “the myths tell all that there are gods.” Its hidden, allegorical message about the essence of the gods, however, is only understandable to a few initiates: “which gods there are and what they are like, however, they tell only to those who are capable of understanding.” This is in line with Julian’s point that we should not think of the fictional, outward element of myths as a means of exclusion of the many, as seemed to have been the point of Porphyry, but as a way to include them: they too profit from myths, even if only to a limited degree.

Next, Salustius explains the use of (some) myths by the ancients from the activities (ἐνέργειαι) of the gods. Whereas the essence of the Gods is located in the intelligible, the activities of the gods are located in the cosmos. Myths about the cosmos imitate the structure of the cosmos. The fictional cover story of these myths corresponds to the visible aspects of the cosmos (e.g. bodies and colors), the hidden allegorical doctrine the invisible powers in the cosmos, i.e. souls and intellects.

#### 2.4. A third explanation of the use of myths by the ancients (3,4)

By way of additional explanation, Salustius observes that allegorical myths are discriminative. As we found above, not all people are able to grasp the

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Julian, *In Matr.* 12, 172A–C: It is an easily observable fact that the sun has the power to draw up all things from the earth by making them grow. “We ought then to make these visible things proof of the unseen powers of the sun”, i.e. to elevate human souls from the material realm to the divine world.

truth about the divine. The inability of unintelligent people to do so would cause them to despise the truth about the divine, if it were presented to them in a straightforward manner. The doctrines contained in these myths are hence intended for intelligent people. The riddling nature of allegorical myths forces them to philosophize. This holds especially true in the case of disturbingly strange myths, such as the stories about divine adultery, theft, and power struggles, i.e. the myths that Plato has ruled out as unsuited for the education of the young.

Once again, one has the impression that Salustius here takes up an element of Colotes' polemics against Plato's myth of Er that was also useful to the Christian adversaries of Julian's religious politics. Proclus reports that one of the points that Colotes had raised against Plato's eschatological myths was the following:

[Colotes claims that] these sorts of myths necessarily have no real purpose: They are not suited to the masses because they cannot understand them, and they are unnecessary for the wise, as they have no need to become better from such objects of fear. And since [these stories] cannot of themselves tell [us] for whom they are written, they show us that the effort directed at telling them is pointless. (Proclus, *In Remp.* 2,106,9–14 Kroll = Porphyry, *fr.* 182F 1–22 Smith; tr. Wilberding, adapted)<sup>25</sup>

Salustius' third explanation thus provides an answer to Colotes' criticism. Yes, it is true that the masses fail to understand myths, but that is actually a good thing. It prevents them from adopting a dismissive attitude towards the gods. And no, it is not true that myths are unnecessary for intelligent people: myths force them to philosophize. Telling myths is hence not pointless at all.

## 2.5. Five types of myths (4,1–5)

Salustius next distinguishes between five types of myths, which he organizes in accordance with the Neoplatonic metaphysical hierarchy. This distinction is furthermore informed by the various reasons that the ancients had for using myths that we have just distinguished:

1. Theological myths (θεολογικοί μύθοι) that deal with the essence of (οὐσία) the divine in isolation from the body. These myths correspond to Salustius' first explanation of why myths are divine (i.e. some myths imitate the divine essence). As an example, Salustius refers to "Cronus, who devours his children". The myth hints at the being of god, since god is intelligent and every intelligence reverts upon itself. Salustius derives this

<sup>25</sup> ὅτι τοὺς τοιοῦσδε μύθους πολὺ τὸ μάταιον ἔχειν ἀναγκαῖον· τοῖς μὲν γὰρ πολλοῖς οὐδὲ συνεῖναι δυναμένους αὐτῶν εἰσὶν ἀσύμμετροι, τοῖς δὲ σοφοῖς οὐ δεομένοις ἀμείνοσιν ἐκ τῶν τοιῶνδε γίνεσθαι δειμάτων περιττοί· πρὸς τίνας οὖν γράφονται, παρ' αὐτῶν ἑπείν οὐκ ἔχοντες μάταιον ἀποφαίνουσιν τὴν περὶ τὰς μυθολογίας ἑαυτῶν σπουδήν.

example from Plotinus *Enn.* V 1[10]7,33–35, who interprets this story “as told in mysteries and myths about the gods” as an allegorical description of divine Intellect.<sup>26</sup>

2. Physical myths (φυσικοί μῦθοι) that deal with the divine activities (ἐνέργεια) of the gods regarding the (physical) cosmos. These myths correspond to Salustius' second explanation of why myths are divine, i.e. some myths imitate the divine activities, for example those of intellects and souls.

3. Psychic myths (ψυχικοί μῦθοι) that deal with the activities (ἐνέργεια) of soul (ψυχή) itself, and in particular with those our own individual souls. These myths correspond once again to Salustius' second explanation: cosmic myths are both about the visible, bodily aspects of the cosmos and its invisible aspects, such as the souls that inhabit it. To some extent physical and psychic myths are hence about the same topic, i.e. soul in the cosmos, yet in the case of psychic myths the focus is on the relation of the individual soul to the cosmos. Such myths play an important role in telestic rituals, since these are concerned with the liberation of the individual soul, as we will find in our discussion of the myth of the Mother of the Gods and Attis.

4. Material myths (ὕλικοι μῦθοι) as told by the Egyptians. Matter (ὕλη) holds the lowest position in Neoplatonic ontology and the myths that correspond to it rank lowest in Salustius' hierarchy of myths. Whereas the supreme theological myths deal with the gods in isolation from the bodily, and the intermediate physical myths with the activities of the gods regarding the cosmos and hence regarding the bodily, these myths identify, wrongly, the gods with bodies such as earth, water, fruits, and wine. While it is true that these are consecrated to the gods, they are not the Gods themselves. Salustius' criticism of Egyptian mythology may come as a bit of surprise. Many Neoplatonists held the Egyptians in high esteem, most of all Iamblichus, who even wrote his manifesto of Neoplatonic theurgy, *Reply to Porphyry*, under the pseudonym of Abam(m)on, an Egyptian priest, precisely because he considers Egyptian priests as authorities in religious matters.<sup>27</sup> Arthur Darby Nock, in his commentary, suggests that we should understand this remark against the background of the polemical attacks by Christians on paganism. Salustius, thus Nock, “is chiefly concerned with saving the traditional Greek religion as interpreted

<sup>26</sup> On Plotinus' theological exegesis of this myth in terms of his metaphysics, see P. HADOT, “Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus in Plotinus' Treatise Against the Gnostics”, in: H. J. BLUMENTHAL / R. A. MARKUS (Hg.), *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought. Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong* (London 1981) 124–137.

<sup>27</sup> On the “Egyptian fiction” of *De Mysteriis*, see SAFFREY / SEGONDS 2018, LXI–LXXI.



by later Neoplatonism. He could not prejudice his case by trying to defend Egyptian cults, which presented a vulnerable side to Christian polemic".<sup>28</sup>

Nock's explanation is along the right lines, yet allows for some elaboration. Salustius here takes sides in a debate about the correct interpretation of Egyptian mythology. This debate had started as a polemic between Stoics and Platonists about the correct interpretation of Egyptian mythology. As is borne out by Plutarch in his treatise *On Isis and Osiris*, Stoics had interpreted Egyptian mythology in much the same way as they had done in the case of Greek mythology. Stoic philosophy is materialistic, and hence they read Egyptian mythology as being about the material cosmos. To some extent Stoic readings of myths thus resemble Porphyry's physical interpretation of myths (cf. § 1.3 above). There is an important difference between Porphyrian and Stoic allegory, though. As we found above, Porphyry's physical myths imitate nature in that the story as it is told resembles the visible elements of the cosmos, whereas the untold allegorical message resembles the invisible divine powers. These invisible divine powers do not have a place as such in Stoic philosophy. Hence the Stoic interpretation of myth is not so much about discovering some secret doctrine underneath the cover story by means of an allegorical interpretation, but about correctly substituting divine names for physical entities. This method of substitution is known as the μεταληπτικός τρόπος. Substitution is precisely how Salustius here characterizes the material exegesis of myths: Isis = earth, Osiris = moist, Typhon = warmth, Cronus = water and so forth. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 64–66, 376F–377E criticizes such stoic interpretations of Egyptian mythology as misguided and a source of atheism.<sup>29</sup>

Stoic interpretations of Egyptian mythology come next up in the debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus on the status of theurgy. In his *Letter to the Egyptian Anebo*, Porphyry calls attention to an Egyptian Stoic Chairemon and his interpretation of Egyptian myths by means of substitution.<sup>30</sup> According to Porphyry, "Chaeremon and the others do not believe in anything prior to the visible worlds".<sup>31</sup> This runs counter to the assumption

<sup>28</sup> NOCK 1926, xlvi. Cf. ROCHEFORT 1960, 29f. n. 14 to p. 6 for a similar explanation.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 66, 377E: people like Cleanthes "are spreading dreadful and atheistic teachings in that they transfer the names of the gods to imperceptible and inanimate objects that are of necessity destroyed by the men who need them and use them" (transl. Griffiths); ἀλλὰ δεινὰς καὶ ἀθέους ἐμποιοῦσι δόξας, ἀναισθητοὺς καὶ ἀψύχοις καὶ φθειρομέναις ἀναγκαιῶς ὑπ' ἀνθρώπων δεομένων καὶ χρωμένων φύσει καὶ πράγμασιν ὀνόματα θεῶν ἐπιφέροντες. I owe this reference to Jan Opsomer.

<sup>30</sup> According to Porphyry, *Against the Christians* (fr. 39 HARNACK = Chairemon test. 9 VAN DER HORST) Origen learned the μεταληπτικός τρόπος of interpretation from the Stoics Chaeremon and Cornutus.

<sup>31</sup> Porphyry, *Letter to Anebo* fr. 81 SAFFREY / SEGONDS = Chairemon, fr. 5 VAN DER HORST. On this passage, cf. A. FOWDEN, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge 1986) 138–141.

that underpins theurgic symbolism. All sorts of material objects have the power to attract the divine because this world and all things in it are the products of the creative activities of the gods who are at home in the intelligible world. These material objects have a relation to the gods, but are not themselves Gods. Iamblichus, in his reply to Porphyry, protests that Porphyry's account of the position of the Egyptians is misguided. The Egyptians do not say that all things are physical, but distinguish between physical things and non-physical entities such as soul and intellect.<sup>32</sup>

Whereas, as we have seen, Julian and his circle are for the most part happy to follow in the footsteps of Iamblichus (cf., e.g., the text quoted above, p. 180), Salustius here probably chooses to follow Porphyry's take on Egyptian religion in order not to play into the hands of Christian polemicists. Eusebius, for example, in *The Preparation for the Gospel*, paraphrases the above-mentioned passage from Porphyry as testimony that *all* pagan gods are nothing but physical objects.<sup>33</sup> In a response to such attacks on paganism, Salustius here presents Stoic substitution and the physical interpretation of myths not as a Greek approach to myths, but as something that is typical of the Egyptians and that has little to do with the Greeks. Hence also his condemnation of this position in the strongest possible way: "To say that these things (i.e. earth, moist, warmth etc., RMvdB) belong to the gods, just as plants, stones, and animals do, is something that intelligent people do. To call these things gods, however, is something that only insane persons would do."

5. Mixed myths (μικτοὶ μῦθοι) that combine elements from 1. theological, 2. physical, and 3. psychic myths. As an example of such a myth, Salustius mentions the one about the judgement of Paris: Eris, the goddess of Envy, had not been invited to the banquet of the gods in celebration of the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. Eris tries to wreck the divine banquet and throws a golden apple in the middle of the partying gods as a prize "for the most beautiful". This results in a beauty contest between the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. The Trojan prince Paris acts as the judge and grants the prize to Aphrodite. According to Salustius the divine banquet party is a theological element, since it presents the gods among themselves. One may compare this to Plotinus' theological exegesis of the divine party in celebration of the birth of Aphrodite. The apple represents the cosmos and the dispute among the goddesses over it the fact the various divine activities that are it work in this world. This is therefore the physical element of this myth. Paris represents the psychic element: he is the human soul that, of all these divine powers, only sees that of beauty.

<sup>32</sup> Iamblichus, *Reply to Porphyry* 197,12–15 SAFFREY / SEGONDS = *The Mysteries of Egypt* VIII 4 (198, 11–14 DES PLACES).

<sup>33</sup> Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* III 9,15 and 13,8 = Chairemon, *fr.* 6–7 VAN DER HORST.

## 2.6. The five types of myths and their ancient users (4,6)

Salustius' five types of myths sit seemingly ill with the fact that in the previous section he had identified only three groups of ancients that used myths (3,11): the best of the philosophers, inspired poets and priests. The five types of myths can, however, easily be reduced to three. The psychical and psychic myths may be grouped together since they are both about the cosmos, whereas the material myths have been rejected as misguided. This leaves us with the following three groups of myth: 1. theological myths, cosmic myths, consisting both of 2. physical and 3. psychic myths, and 5. mixed myths.

This reduction now allows Salustius to combine his initial list of ancient myth-users with these categories of myths: ancient philosophers used theological myths, ancient inspired poets used cosmic myths and ancient priests of telestic rituals used mixed myths. In the case of philosophical-theological myths we should presumably think of Plato's myths, such as the afore-mentioned myth about the birth of Eros from the *Symposium* that had been discussed by Plotinus.

The link between cosmic myths and inspired poets is not immediately clear. As we found, Porphyry is the main Neoplatonic representative of idea that myths are a form of theological physics. The best example of this the approach is his treatise *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, an allegorical interpretation of a passage from Homer's *Odyssey* (XIII 102–112).<sup>34</sup> The first half of the treatise (§§ 5–31) interprets the cave itself as a symbolical representation of the material cosmos. In the second half of the treatise (§§ 31–35), Porphyry focuses on Odysseus as an allegorical representation of the human soul which tries to flee this material cosmos. Hence, the Homeric passage combines elements from physical myth and as a psychic one.

This leaves us with the third category that of mixed myths, which are used in telestic rituals. Salustius briefly explains this telestic use of myths as follows: "the mixed myths belong to the mysteries (*teletai*), because every mystery-rite aims to connect us both to cosmos and the gods". In other words, mixed myths are about us, enmattered souls, i.e. the topic of 3. psychic myths. They play a role in telestic rituals that seek to connect us to the cosmos, i.e. the topic of 2. physical myths and, ultimately, to the Gods themselves, i.e. the topic of 1. theological myths. This brief explanation of why telestic myths are mixed reflects Iamblichus' conception of theurgy as demiurgy. As Gregory Shaw has explained in his study of Iamblichean theurgy, the theurgist imitates the Platonic Demiurge. The cosmos, being the product of the divine Demiurge, is the perfect living-

<sup>34</sup> On Porphyry's *On the Cave of the Nymphs* and its structure, cf. K. ALT, "Homers Nymphengrotte in der Deutung des Porphyrios", *Hermes* 126 (1998) 466–487.

being: all its (physical) parts are arranged in the best possible way. These parts are the equivalent to theurgic σύμβολα. Hence, we may think of the cosmos as perfect, giant theurgic statue, that is supremely capable of channeling the divine powers. Man is a micro-cosmos. Theurgy makes it possible for us to become Demiurges of our own microcosm, i.e. to render our microcosm into a copy of the perfect cosmos itself. By imitating the cosmos, we thus turn ourselves into equally fit receptacles of the divine powers. These divine powers next allow us to ascend towards the divine.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.7. The myth of Mother of the Gods and Attis: an example of a mixed, theurgic myth (4,7–11)

Salustius' discussion of the myth of the Mother of Gods and Attis, with which he rounds up his discussion of myths, helps us to clarify further how and to what end mixed myths combine the various types of myths. He did not single out the myth of the Mother of the Gods and Attis for no reason. As Susanna Elm has put it well, the emperor Julian had made "this myth the showpiece of Roman imperial political and religious philosophy".<sup>36</sup> He does so in his oration *On the Mother of the Gods* in which he presents an interpretation of the myth that, he emphatically claims, is of his own making.<sup>37</sup> The oration was composed at the time of the equinox of the spring of 362, on the occasion of the celebration of the festival of the Mother of Gods. Salustius, writing shortly after Julian's oration, here presents his readers with an abridged version of Julian's exegesis.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Salustius' version is at times hard to follow without recourse to Julian's oration. While Salustius may thus have little to add by way of interpretation of the content of the myth, his discussion still is a worthwhile complement to that of Julian, since, unlike Julian, he reflects on the nature of the myth. As already the fact that Julian composes his oration in celebration of the festival of the Mother of the Gods indicates, this is an example of what Salustius calls *telestic*, mixed myths. In my discussion of Salustius' treatment, I will, therefore, be less interested in the details of his interpretation of particular elements of the myth and all the more so in the question of how the myth illustrates his concept of mixed myths and how its different parts (i.e. its theological, physical, psychologic elements) contribute to its theurgic function.

<sup>35</sup> For theurgy as demiurgy, see SHAW 1995, 45–57.

<sup>36</sup> S. ELM, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church. Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus and the Vision of Rome* (Berkeley 2012) 119.

<sup>37</sup> Julian, *In Matr.* 3, 161C; 19, 178D; on the degree of originality of Julian's interpretation, see LECERF 2014.

<sup>38</sup> According to ROCHEFORT 1960, xxv, Salustius probably composed his treatise somewhere between 22 March and 16 June 363.

Salustius begins by giving a brief summary of the myth (4,7): the Mother of the Gods saw Attis near the river Gallus, fell in love with him and gave him her felt hat decorated with stars. Attis next falls in love with a nymph and leaves the Mother to live with her. Because of this, the latter makes Attis castrate himself in a fit of insanity. Gallus leaves the nymph and returns to the Mother to live with her once more.

Salustius next interprets the myth as an allegorical story about (Neoplatonic) demiurgy (4,8–9). The Mother is the “Life-producing Goddess” and as such the cause of demiurgic divinities, such as Attis.<sup>39</sup> Attis himself is “the Demiurge of the things that come to be and perish”. While Plato in the *Timaeus* mentions only one Demiurge, Neoplatonists, in order to make Plato’s account fit their many-layered ontology, produced a hierarchy of Demiurges. In his oration, the emperor Julian had identified Attis with the lowest Demiurge, the so-called third one, that is responsible for the actual creation of the things in the material realm.<sup>40</sup>

This Demiurge is at the border between the intelligible and physical world. This border is in the myth represented by the river Gallus, i.e. the “Milky Way, from which derives the body that is susceptible to affections”.<sup>41</sup> The love of the Mother for Attis and her gift of the hat represent the fact that the primary gods bring the secondary gods to their perfection. While this all is about the gods among themselves in isolation of the physical world, we may assume that Salustius considers this to be the theological bit of the myth, comparable to the divine birthday party in the myth about the birth of Eros from the *Symposium* and to the divine wedding party in the myth about the golden apple and the judgement of Paris.

Salustius next interprets Attis’ falling in love with the nymph as the demiurgic powers at work within the cosmos. While in the Neoplatonic metaphysical scheme of things every act of emanation is followed by one of reversion, the third demiurge reconnects again with the Mother of the Gods, i.e. with his cause. As we have seen above, physical myths hint in an allegorical manner at the invisible powers that are behind the visible cosmos, i.e. intellects and souls. Attis, being a Demiurge, belongs to the former category, as Julian, *In Matr.* 3, 161C stated explicitly when describing Attis as a “demiurgic intellect”. This episode of the myth thus represents its physical element. Salustius concludes his discussion about the gods and their activities as follows: “These things never happened, but are forever the case: Intellect too sees all things at the same time, whereas lan-

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Julian, *In Matr.* 6, 166A–B.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Julian, *In Matr.* 3, 161C; on Julian’s third Demiurge, see further OPSOMER 2008, esp. 146–148 and LECERF 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Julian, *In Matr.* 5, 165B–C.

guage (*logos*) tells one thing after another".<sup>42</sup> These words echo Plotinus' above-mentioned explanation of why humans need myths, i.e. as a means to overcome the limitations of the discursive way in which the human soul, unlike the divine Intellect, thinks.

Now that Salustius has interpreted the myth in terms of the demiurgy of the macrocosm, he relates this to the microcosm of the human soul and the celebration of the festival of the Mother of the Gods (4,10–11): "Since the myth is in this way related to the cosmos, we ourselves imitate the cosmic order – for what better way would there be to put ourselves in order? – and re-enact these events during the festival." We, human souls, are like Attis / the third Demiurgic intellect in that we ourselves too have descended from the divine into the realm of matter and that we too should aim at reverting towards the Gods. Here, we have thus hit upon the psychic element of the myth, which is about the activities (*ἐνέργειαι*) of individual soul (*ψυχῆ*) in the cosmos. While the fate of Attis the Demiurge is analogous to that of our souls in that both descend into the depths of matter, they differ in one crucial aspect. The Demiurge is a divine intellect, we are human souls. The myth may seemingly tell us that Attis at some given time left the Mother of the Gods for the nymph, i.e. that the demiurgic intellect at a given moment truly descended into matter, but this is only a matter of speaking. As Julian (*In Matr.* 11, 171C–D) puts it, echoing once again the Plotinian conception of myths as presenting atemporal things in a temporal sequence: "those things never happened, apart from the way in which they happen at present. No, Attis is forever the servant of the Mother and her charioteer; forever he lusts for the realm of becoming".<sup>43</sup> Thus, the third demiurge, while descending into the realm of matter remains at the same time at the intelligible level. This is different in the case of the human soul. Julian and his circle follow Iamblichus against Plotinus on the issue of the (un)descended soul. Whereas Plotinus holds that the best part of soul coincides with Intellect and therefore never ever completely leaves the intelligible realm, Iamblichus argues that the soul, being soul, cannot be an intellect and hence descends in its entirety from the intelligible realm. It is precisely this complete descent which makes theurgy necessary. In keeping with this, Salustius here stresses that our reversion towards the divine in imitation of the reversion of Attis, the demiurgic intellect is brought about by participating in the celebration of the (theurgic) festival of the Mother of the Gods. The third Demiurge and its creative

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Julian, *In Matr.* 10, 169D–170A (on the castration of Attis and his subsequent return to the Mother of the Gods): "and let no-one assume that I mean to say that these things were ever done and ever happened" (Καὶ μὴ τις ὑπολάβοι με λέγειν ὡς ταῦτα ἐπράχθη ποτὲ καὶ γέγονεν).

<sup>43</sup> Καὶ οὐδέποτε γέγονεν ὅτε μὴ ταῦτα τοῦτον ἔχει τὸν τρόπον ὄνπερ νῦν ἔχει, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ μὲν Ἄττις ἐστὶν ὑπουργὸς τῆς Μητρὶ καὶ ἠνίοχος, αἰεὶ δὲ ὄργᾳ εἰς τὴν γένεσιν ...

activities constitute the pathway between the intelligible divine realm and the material cosmos. The descent of the demiurgical activities produce the material cosmos, whereas the upward reversion that corresponds to this emanation allow the soul to travel upwards.<sup>44</sup> The theurgic festival, celebrated at the time of the spring equinox when the demiurgic activities are most evident in the world that comes to life again, allows the human souls to profit from these to be transported back upwards to the divine realm.<sup>45</sup> Salustius next continues to discuss various aspects of the rites of the Mother of the Gods, such as the cutting down of a tree, fasting and the consumption of milk and the time of the year at which these rituals are performed, and gives allegorical interpretations of these in corroboration of his initial interpretation of the myth.

### 3. Concluding remarks

The table of the end of this contribution summarizes my reading of Salustius' chapter on myths. From it, it appears that Salustius' distinction between theological, cosmic, and mixed myths mirrors the Neoplatonic causal process. The theological myths describe the divine causes as such, which remain forever the same. The physical myths describe the procession of creative activities which causes this cosmos to be. The psychic myths describe how each individual soul too is part of this procession. The human soul is a microcosm that first needs to align itself with the macrocosm of the physical myths and, next, to ascend towards the intelligible gods of the theological myths. The myths that describe this process thus contain a mix of physical and theological myths, and are for that reason called mixed myths. These mixed myths do not just describe this process of reversion, but actually contribute to it. Because of their symbolic nature, they have the theurgical power to channel the divine powers at work in the cosmos in such a way that they elevate the soul back to its divine origin. It is an open question whether Salustius' theory about myths, which combines in an elegant way the previous theories of Plotinus and Porphyry with the theurgical interests of the Iamblichean school was his own invention. Given Salustius' very concise presentation of what appears to be a very rich theory, one is tempted to assume that, as is the case with the exe-

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Julian, *In Matr.* 11, 171B–C: the superiority of the gods (i.e. of the Mother of Gods) rules out the possibility that they themselves descend towards this world. What may descend however, is a superior being which combines the active and the passive (Attis), which has the power to elevate the things of this world to a better existence. Cf. SHAW 1995, 225f. on the festival of the great Mother as a theurgic ritual.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Julian, *In Matr.* 12, 172C–13, 173A: from the evident fact that at the time of the spring equinox the sun draws up all things from the earth, we may deduce its invisible power to lead upwards the souls of the blessed.

genesis of the myth of the Mother of the Gods and Attis, Salustius here offers his readers an abridged version of an existing, more elaborate treatment of the same material. If so, one is tempted to think of Iamblichus. But then again, this may be to underestimate the ingenuity of Salustius himself.

Neoplatonic Approaches to Myth	Salustius' Five Types of Myths	Mixed Myth (1): the judgement of Paris	Mixed Myth (2): The Mother of the Gods and Attis
<b>Plotinus:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Theological Myths (about the intelligible gods)</li> <li>– Myths are a didactic device that presents atemporal reality in a temporal fashion.</li> <li>– Example: the conception of Eros at the divine party in honor of the birth of Aphrodite</li> </ul>	1. Theological myths: about the οὐσία of the gods	Theological element: the divine banquet in honor of the marriage of Peleus and Thetis representing the gods among themselves in the intelligible realm	Theological element: the relation of the Mother of the Gods (= source of demiurgic divinities) with Attis (= third demiurge)
<b>Porphyrius:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Myth as physical theology (about the divine powers at work in the cosmos, including the human soul)</li> <li>– Myths are meant as a protective veil.</li> <li>– Example: Homer's 'Cave of the Nymphs'.</li> </ul>	2. Physical myths: about the divine ἐνέργειαι in the cosmos (intellects and souls) 3. Psychic myths: about the individual soul in the cosmos.	Physical element: the dispute of the three goddesses about the apple: divine forces at work within the cosmos	Physical element: Attis falls in love with Nymph: descent of demiurgic powers into matters (=> constitution of the cosmos); castration and return of Attis to the Mother: reversion of the third demiurge away from the material cosmos to the divine realm. Psychic element: the individual human soul imitates the demiurgic activity of Attis.



Neoplatonic Approaches to Myth	Salustius' Five Types of Myths	Mixed Myth (1): the judgement of Paris	Mixed Myth (2): The Mother of the Gods and Attis
<p><b>Iamblichus / Julian:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Theurgic myths (myths allow us connect to the divine)</li> <li>– Myths are symbolic stories (in both the literary and theurgic sense)</li> <li>– Examples: the myth of the judgement of Paris; the myth of the Mother of Gods and Attis</li> </ul>	<p>5. Mixed myth: connects the human soul in the cosmos (cf. Myth type 3.) through the divine powers at work in the cosmos (cf. Myth type 2.) to the gods themselves (cf. Myth type 1.)</p>		<p>Mixed element: the celebration of the festival of the Mother of the Gods and Attis (including recitation of myth) at the moment of the spring equinox = theurgy</p>