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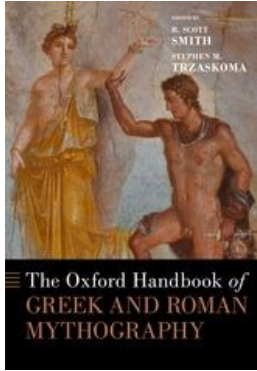
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CHAPTER

20 Palaephatus, *Unbelievable Tales*

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Abstract

The ancient mythographer Palaephatus's *Unbelievable Tales* is a collection of well-known myths and rationalizing explanations of them. The chapter offers an analysis of a) the philosophical notions underlying Palaephatus's project, mostly articulated in his proem, b) the rigid structure of his entries, and c) the methods he employs to reconstruct the historical truth behind the myths under investigation, all hinging on plausibility and narrative logic—it is human misunderstanding that is at the core of all mythopoesis. Although Palaephatus's historicizing approach perhaps seems simplistic and arbitrary, it is at the same time also systematic, coherent, and consistent. Palaephatus thus occupies a unique place in the history of mythography and the exegesis of myth. References to modern scholarship provide the *status quaestionis*; some long-held notions are, however, significantly qualified.

Keywords: Palaephatus, mythography, rationalization, historicism, exegesis

Subject: Religion in the Ancient World, Classical Studies

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1. Author and Content

It is rather difficult to pin down the rationalizing mythographer known as Palaephatus. Scholars generally believe that he was a Peripatetic working in Athens around 330 BCE, but this broad consensus is one of convenience. Evidence for his life and intellectual context are slim. Our main source is the *Suda*, which contains four entries for Palaephatus, three of which in all likelihood refer to the mythographer (the multiplication presumably owing to some mix-up of biographical details). The few other sources we have confirm—at least, do not contradict—this briefest outline of Palaephatus’s date and place. Neither stylistic analysis nor *Quellenforschung* can bring us much further: his language is simple and common, and the myths he presents are generally standard, unremarkable versions. The association with the Lyceum is generally assumed but hardly obvious from his work (see esp. Zucker 2016). It is likely that his name, meaning “teller of old tales,” is a pseudonym.

The *Suda* credits this elusive character with several books on history and mythology; all that we have left, however, is a rather short compendium discussing fifty-two separate myths and their explanations (the last seven of which are spurious), preceded by a brief introduction. This text is transmitted under the title *Unbelievable Tales* (*Peri Apistōn*).

The exact relationship between our text and the original work by Palaephatus is impossible to determine. According to one of the entries in the *Suda*, there were originally five books; and there are other sources that refer to Palaephatus’s treatment of myths that are absent from our version of *Unbelievable Tales* (see Stern 1996: 4–5; unfortunately, no collection of Palaephatus’s testimonia exists). Our text is therefore presumably an epitome, perhaps created sometime before the 10th century. Whether the compiler only used authentic, Palaephatean material or also included that of other authors is debated. To my mind, the strongest arguments favor the first view, and it seems safe to say that ^{p. 275} what we have was written by Palaephatus, with the obvious exception of the last seven entries (46–52); these are late Byzantine additions that deviate from the preceding material because they offer only summaries of myths but no rationalizing explanations.

The selection criteria used by the epitomizer are largely unclear to us. Hence, we do not know why he included the myths we have and excluded others; nor do we know whether he took his myths from all five of the original books—if there were five in the first place. The order of the myths seems rather random as well; little attention was paid to geographical or genealogical sequence, which are otherwise common organizational structures in mythography. We do recognize certain thematic clusters, perhaps taken wholesale from the original—some entries focus on Heracles (7, 18, 24, 32, 36–40, 44, 45), some on Thebes (3–6, 41), some on different persons with the same name (Glaucus, 25–27)—but nothing indicates that this is purposeful on the part of the author (see further Stern 1996: 22–24). We are thus left all the more in the dark regarding the structure of the original work.

2. Rationalizing Aims and Methods

In the proem the author sets out the aims and methods of his rationalizing approach (on rationalizing generally, see Hawes, this volume), claiming first of all that traditional myths, said to be believed only by overcredulous people, are the products of extravagant fantasy by eager-to-please poets and *logographoi* (early historians). Furthermore, only “research”—that is, on-site autopsy and interviews with locals—can bring out the truth behind those tales. Both claims should be regarded as commonplaces well-known from historiography since they are not followed up in the book. There is no reason to assume that Palaephatus engaged in extensive traveling, and there is no mention of him cross-examining local experts. Similarly, the poets and logographers do not return as significant factors in the supposed process of mythopoesis.

Palaephatus bolsters his position in the proem with two philosophical notions, one attributed (probably wrongly) to Melissus and (the otherwise unknown) Lamiscus: “what came into being still exists and will exist hereafter.” This slogan entails the Aristotelian concept of the fixity of species, the main text-internal piece of evidence for Palaephatus’s alleged Peripatetic affiliation. Armed with this notion, the author is able to reject anything that is impossible by the standards of contemporary reality. For instance: there could never have been a Minotaur, because there are not any today, either (*Palaeph.* 2).

The other philosophical doctrine adhered to concerns the relationship between words and things, a familiar sophistic topic that is treated in several Platonic dialogues. Palaephatus's idea is often summarized as being based on a dichotomy between "deeds" (here taking the place of the more common "things"), which were there first, and the "words" for them, which came later. This view is expressed by Plato's characters Gorgias and Hermogenes (see Santoni 1998: 13–14; 2000: 23–24), the logic obviously being that if it were the other way around (that is, first words, then things or deeds), the words would have no referent and would make little sense. Palaephatus's position, however, seems slightly more complicated in that he further subdivides "words" into *onomata* (names) and *logoi* (words or stories), the first subcategory being earlier than the second. It seems likely that such a distinction should be understood as a polemic against the view expressed in Plato's *Critias*, where mythology is described as an attempt to explain the "names" of the first people, their "deeds" being utterly lost (see Van den Berg 2017). In contrast to this view, Palaephatus argues that both "names" and "deeds" can still be known, despite the nefarious influence of mythification and forgetfulness. This claim allows him to contend that the strange and impossible myths the Greeks tell each other must have some kernel of truth. It is Palaephatus's task to reconstruct the actual event, and, at the same time, demonstrate how historical truth became a tale of wonder.

Palaephatus's proem does not adhere to the strictest demands of theoretical preciseness and coherence. And his basically historicizing approach is not unique, either; before him, Hecataeus, Herodotus, and Hellanicus had already voiced the opinion that certain mythical tales were nothing more than the warped renderings of some misunderstood historical reality (see Stern 1996: 10–16; Smith and Trzaskoma 2007: xx–xxiii). Euhemerus, slightly later than Palaephatus, in fact, reduced all myth and religion to this process of mythification. What *is* undeniably original, however, is Palaephatus's completely systematic, consistent, and univocal treatment of the myths under investigation. It is obviously from "exemplary practice rather than theoretical axioms" (Hawes 2014b: 142) that the treatise derives its strength. When we see the mythographer at work, we understand the technique—and the ideological gap between him and Euhemerus, the other historicizing rationalist from this period. Whereas Euhemerus traces back the gods to historical individuals and thus casts doubt on faith and religious practice as a whole, Palaephatus stays clear of myths that feature divinities and hardly even mentions the gods. He applies his method exclusively to tales of heroes and monsters, creating belief instead of disbelief (paraphrasing Stern 1996: 8): his reconstruction of ancient history, devoid of hybrid creatures and impossible superhumans, is indeed quite realistic.

3. Palaephatus's Explanations: Structure

Nowhere is Palaephatus's methodical rigor more visible than in the Procrustean structure of his entries. First, he presents us with a summary of the myth in question (sometimes obviously narrated in such a way as to facilitate the explanation that comes later), which he then proceeds to criticize briefly as illogical, inconsistent, or physically impossible. Next comes the reconstruction of true events, comprising of historical and realistic elements that replace the mythical ones. Concluding remarks often close off the entry. An example is *Palaeph. 7*, on the horses of Diomedes (the translations here and elsewhere are taken from Stern 1996):

They say that Diomedes's horses ate men. Ridiculous! Horses enjoy barley and oats rather than human flesh. Here is the truth: men of long ago made their living with their own hands, and it was by tilling the ground that they acquired food and abundant resources. But a certain Diomedes became preoccupied with the breeding of horses. His delight in them reached the point that he lost his property: he sold everything he had and squandered it on the raising of his horses. So his friends called the horses "man-eaters"—and that is how the myth began.

The items in the *Peri Apistōn* vary considerably in length, but not much in structure. The (near) omnipresence of the schema (mostly analyzed as bipartite; see, for example, Santoni 2000: 13–14; Hawes 2014a: 48; or tripartite, for example, Stern 1996: 17; Gibson 2012: 87) may find its origins in a Peripatetic penchant for systematization. The rigidity may also have been inspired by more practical concerns, since the strictly uniform treatment of myths made Palaephatean exegesis instantly recognizable and comprehensible to any reader (Santoni 2000: 12; Hawes 2014b: 135–136; Delattre 2013: 149). This suggests that the original work was meant as a catalogue-like reference book (however it was organized), fragmenting the whole of Greek mythology into separate, self-contained episodes. The myths are cut loose from any social context, an effect that is further enhanced by the colorless, unadorned summaries (so typical in mythography) that start off every item.

4. Rationalizing Strategies

Scholars usually pay a great deal of attention to the hermeneutic strategies adopted by Palaephatus, discerning several types for the sake of convenience (Osmun 1956: 133–135; Stern 1996: 18–21). The obvious usefulness of such categories, however, should not divert us from what they have in common. All of Palaephatus's explanations point at the historical truth by showing us how the actual facts were transformed into mythical tales. Palaephatus thus argues from the myths, and despite his promises of empirical research, he does not employ arguments or proofs that are independent from the texts he is analyzing. He offers us plausibility and narrative logic, nothing more. Modern categories may obscure the fact that in his work, there is but one cause for mythopoesis: misunderstanding. It thus seems wise to keep categories to a minimum, allowing for misunderstood (1) appellations, (2) situations, and (3) expressions, or, to use Palaephatus's terms, misunderstood "names," "deeds," and "words."

p. 278 The first type of explanation is put to use quite frequently. We encounter human individuals with the name of an animal, who are mistaken for the animal itself: the mythical dragon guarding Thebes was really a king called Dracon (item 3); similarly, the Ram who saved Helle and Phrixos (30) and the Bull who slept with the Cretan queen Pasiphae (2) were, in fact, men called Ram and Bull, respectively. By extension, the names Scylla (20) and Pegasus (28) actually belonged to ships, not mythical creatures. Occasionally, Palaephatus invents transparent place names: the Hundredhanders were denizens of a place called "Hundredhand" (19), just as the three-headed giant Geryon lived in "Tricranium" (24). To solve the myth of the Sphinx, Palaephatus even goes so far as to claim that the word *ainigma* (riddle) means "ambush" in the Theban dialect, allowing for a reconstructed reality in which Sphinx (in reality, an Amazonian queen) regularly killed off Thebans by setting "ambushes" (4).

The second category is that of misunderstood situations. For instance: it is far more likely, when hunters saw Atalanta and Melanion entering a cave and lions leaving it, that the lovers were devoured by the beasts instead of turning into them (13; the same goes for Callisto and the bear, 14). Amazons were not war-like women, but simply men wearing women's clothing (32). The hero known as Glaucus "of the Sea" (27) was not a man miraculously turned into an aquatic immortal, but an excellent fisherman and diver who eventually died at sea and thus was never seen again. Palaephatus does not argue these cases: he relies on the reader's common sense.

Scholars often single out a specific type in this category, that of the so-called first inventor (*prōtos heuretēs*): a technological innovation is misunderstood by others and an incredible tale is fabricated to account for it. The best-known example of this explanatory device is found in item 1, on Centaurs—these fantastical beasts were, in fact, the first horseback riders, taken as impossible hybrid creatures by surrounding peoples. Other examples include Lynceus, whose mythical ability to see under the earth is explained by his invention of a lamp that could be used in mines (9); Pandora, we are told, was not really made up of clay, but regularly applied an earthen cosmetic to her face (34); and Medea, whose awful reputation of boiling old men can be derived from her invention of the sauna (43).

The third type, "misunderstood expression," hinging on the literal interpretation of a metaphor, is a very productive tool. It is employed when Palaephatus rounds off his reconstruction of the "actual" event by presenting some unknown observer(s) who comment(s) on it. This small bit of direct speech is understood literally and causes mythification. Actaeon, for instance, spent all his money on his hunting dogs and thus, in the end, was said to be "devoured" by them (6; just like Diomedes was by his horses, 7); similarly, the musicians Zethus and Amphion asked the members of their audiences to pay them for performances with stones for the wall of Thebes—hence, word got around that "the wall was built with a lyre" (41).

p. 279 Direct speech is mostly absent from mythography because of its tendency "to tell its story as economically as possible" (Fowler 2006: 40). Palaephatus uses it sparingly as well, except for these anonymous comments—they occur in more than half of the items, often as part of rationalizations that in fact hinge on explanations of the first or second type. For instance: after explaining the Winged Horses of Pelops as the name of a ship (29), Palaephatus still finishes off the entry with direct speech: "The people said: 'Pelops carried off Oenomaus's daughter on his Winged Horses and took to flight.' Thus the myth was fashioned." Another example is the item on Daedalus (21), that rationalizes the myth of his supposedly "walking" statues by crediting the renowned sculptor with inventing statues that whose feet are apart instead of together; Palaephatus then still imagines people saying, "Daedalus made his statue walking, not standing." The prominence of misunderstood expressions is presumably not merely a case of "overlap" (Stern

1996: 19), but illustrates Palaephatus's belief, voiced in the proem, that the people's "words" are crucial to the process of the creation of myths.

5. Outlook and Influence

Myths, then, come to be by mistake, not intention. The influence of poets and logographers is at best secondary, enhancing the mythical element to create fascinating and astonishing tales that because of their appeal have become canonical. There is, apparently, no function for myths other than simple entertainment; Palaephatus cannot credit the human imagination with more than the capacity to twist empirical reality. This is surely a limited and overly simplistic view, for which Palaephatus has been severely criticized by modern scholars—and the same goes for his rationalizations, some of which are considered more fanciful than the myths they are meant to explain.

The absurdity of some of the explanations, coupled with the obvious falsity of his promise of empirical research, may suggest that Palaephatus's rationalizations are not made in earnest, an impression that is strengthened by the similarity between his work and rhetorical exercises (Gibson 2012). I believe, however, that the methodical rigor, the size of the original book, and the absence of any obvious attempts at humor amply demonstrate that the Palaephatean project was meant quite seriously. Palaephatus's direct influence on two other short collections called *Peri Apistōn*—one by Heraclitus the Mythographer (1st or 2nd c. CE; see Hawes, this volume) and one by an anonymous, undatable mythographer—further demonstrate that it was, in fact, taken seriously. Palaephatus's *Unbelievable Tales* may at times strike us as rather unbelievable; but it is the first systematic and consistent, "scientific" attempt at a historicist-rationalist reading of Greek mythology.

Further Reading

Text, Translations, and Commentaries

The standard critical edition of Palaephatus is that of Festa (1902), a volume containing similar material written by Heraclitus Mythographus and an anonymous author. The most accessible translation-cum-commentary is that in Stern (1996); he offers a relevant introduction, literal translation, thorough commentary, and many cross-references. The translation of Santoni (2000) comes with a detailed introduction and commentary. There are also recent annotated translations: Jarkho (1988a, 1988b), Russian; Sanz Morales (2002) and Torres Guerra (2009), Spanish; Ramelli (2007), Italian; Brodersen (2002), German; and Koning (2016), Dutch.

p. 280 Studies

For questions of date and authorship, see von Blumenthal (1942); Fornaro (2000); and Santoni (2012). The most reasonable and complete treatment of the subject can be found in appendix I of Hawes's monograph (2014a: 227–238); Zucker (2016: 15–17) neatly sums up the question.

Hawes's monograph also offers the best discussion of Palaephatus's place in Greek rationalizing mythography; one should also consult her (2014b) article. Still useful on Palaephatus's intellectual context is Wipprecht (1902: 11–20). Gibson (2012) focuses on the use of Palaephatus in rhetorical exercises in (late) antiquity; see on the 'genre' of Palaephatus's project Bouvier (2015), and on his reconstruction of history Koning (2022).

Santoni (1998) discusses the theoretical assumptions in Palaephatus's proem; see on the proem also Hunter (2016). Trachsel (2005) makes an attempt to track down Peripatetic traces in both Palaephatean theory and practice; Zucker (2016, esp. 17–22) rightfully casts doubt on oft-assumed Aristotelian influences. Van den Berg (2017) relates the tricky relationship between "deeds," "names," and "words" in the proem to older speculations on the origin of myths, already present in Plato's *Critias*.

Osmun (1956) offers a convenient discussion of Palaephatus's exegetic tools, and so does Stern (1999).

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