



Myth at the heart of the Roman Empire

A330: Myth in the Greek and Roman worlds

Chris Smith:

We're dealing with the archaeological reality, we're dealing with a story which has grown up, and then we're dealing with the Romans' capacity to put that story onto the monuments that they themselves see.

"They are a part of my DNA, a part of my culture, a part of Rome."

Vox Pop: Fa parte del mio DNA, fa parte della mia cultura, fa parte di Roma.

Richard Buxton:

As a child you would hear myths being told by your nurse, or your mother, or your grandfather. Greek myths were something which people experienced from the cradle to the grave.

Hall:

The world of myth was the entire imaginative and philosophical world of the culture of the Greeks before the invention of philosophy and drama in about the 5th. So if they were trying to work out how responsibility, and ethics, and guilt work, then actually they would think about someone like Helen of Troy. Did she cause the Trojan War? Or was it the gods who caused the Trojan War? Or was it maybe the Greeks being very keen on expanding an empire? You know, they bashed through basic problems of ethics by thinking about myth.

How did powerful political figures make myth their own?

Smith:

When Augustus comes to power his use of myth, his use of his genealogy, his use of these foundational myths of Rome isn't something that comes from nowhere. It's critically important to understand what Augustus does as part of the power-play of the late republic, which involves, critically, using the foundational stories.

Jessica Hughes:

He came to power after fifteen years of civil war and he inherited a very fragmented community, and he used the foundation myths to give people a sense of communality, of common origins and of social unity.

Chris Smith:

And it's one of the keys to Augustus's success that he so successfully manipulates and monopolises those stories for his family and his person, making it very difficult afterwards for anyone else to get access to the constitutional foundations and beginnings of Rome.

How was myth adapted for new audiences in ancient Greece?

Edith Hall:

Travelling groups of actors took these plays across the entire world and everybody absolutely loved it. The Greek world was theatre-crazy.

Chris Emlyn Jones:

The number of people going to see the plays might have been 10-14,000, but in terms of the audience it's probably more like a sort of football match or a pop concert than it would have been what we understand as a play.

Actress:

I understand the horror of what I am to do but anger, the spring of all life's horror, masters my resolve.

Richard Buxton:

We're dealing with explorations, we're dealing with thought experiments, testing to destruction - those are the kinds of things which tragedies are about.

How have myths been perpetuated through Western European art and thought?

Jeremy Dimmick:

Ovid manuscripts were produced at lots of different levels for lots of different kinds of consumer. This is an aristocratic one.

Jessica Hughes:

You definitely get the sense as you look through medieval or Renaissance illuminations that the artists are taking these myths from the text and they're making them their own, and they're making them relevant to a contemporary audience.

Why did myth inspire so many artists during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries?

Chris Smith:

One of the great things about the foundation myths is that they are extraordinarily dramatic, and you have a wonderful confluence, I think, of two different things. You have popes and political leaders who are desperate to show the way that they're connected to the past and the great history of Rome. You also have painters who want interesting things to paint.

Jessica Hughes:

Myth was so highly valued at the time, it wasn't enough for a statue just to be old. It had to have its own story as well, and its name.

How do myths continue to be retold in popular culture?

Paula James:

We're talking about the myth of Pygmalion, which Ovid tells in Book 10 of his epic poem, the Metamorphoses. This myth has been taken up through the centuries actually in literature and art, and in cinema.

Lorna Jowett:

There's always an issue about slavery and ownership, and with what's most often orchestrated to do the jobs that other people don't want to do.

Paula James:

Although I'm not suggesting that Pygmalion has sculpted a slave for himself, he has certainly sculpted a compliant woman who will be faithful only to him.

"I believe that mythology still exists today. We mustn't lose them or we risk losing our identity."

Vox pop:

Io credo che la mitologia esista ancora e non la dobbiamo perdere, altrimenti rischiamo di perdere la nostra identita'.