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The Role of Myth in Political Thought

Abstract

This paper aims to suggest a new approach towards the analysis of myths, especially those of ancient Greece, and the role they play in the field of legal and political sciences. Even though the “political myth” is nowadays a recognized category, the “typical”, “old-fashioned” myths, that is, the stories of origins, creation, gods, and heroes, are still easily dismissed. Those stories however played an essential part in the formation of our culture and are not devoid of political themes. At their beginnings, when myths were being formed and retold, they were mingled with reality and perceived as “historical”. As part of tradition and history, they were the carriers of values and concepts, many of which could be deemed “political”, and they helped to create a sense of community. Therefore, this article proposes analysing the myth and the literary works retelling it, along with pertinent ancient history, in a “Greek” fashion, that is, without stressing the differences and classifications, but with reading between the lines, to see how deeply political thought can be rooted in peoples’ minds.

Keywords: antiquity, myth, Greece, politics.

Słowa kluczowe: starożytność, mit, Grecja, polityka.

Introduction

Scholars in many different fields of academia are currently exploring myths. They are the subject of research in history, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology, literary and religious studies, and many more. Why then would lawyers and historians of ideas or political and legal doctrines join this group? Why not leave myth, that what we may consider only as “tales” or “fables”, to others? Lawyers, still being influenced by the positivist paradigm, are meant to look for facts. Even within the area of history or philosophy of law, it can be clearly stated, what can be considered as a “fact”: archaeological findings, old texts, historical accounts. We can read works of the great philosophers, who dealt with questions related to constitutions, state, and law, analyze them from various angles, follow linguistic transformations, and even take into account the cultural context, but still the most “scientific” or at least practical narrations are being appreciated. At the

same time, we are striving for greater interdisciplinarity. Therefore, maybe it would be worthwhile to turn our eyes to different areas so that, while searching for facts, we shall not omit the essential elements that influence the shaping of culture, beliefs, and, consequently, ideas, including ideas of a political and legal nature.

It is worth taking notice of the ambiguity of the term “myth” itself. On the one hand, the classical myth is based on the faith and beliefs of primitive communities, belonging to the sphere of the *sacrum*, when knowledge related to the *profanum* was not yet fully developed. This category includes Greek mythology. On the other, modern myths are defined as beliefs that claim the right to shape the social world and sometimes even manage to influence it. In this case, they often take on a pejorative meaning, becoming the means of manipulating the society or restricting the freedom of the individual. At the same time, they are also stripped of that universality, which once constituted their value.¹ Taking all this into account, I shall try to move beyond the contemporary notions of myth and indicate that there is a certain continuity between myth and knowledge. Thus, I shall argue that the approach putting the myth (as something untrue) and science (dealing with truth and facts) in opposition to each other is incorrect, as is the one that gives the “myth” a pejorative coloration due to the specific narrative imposed by it, and finally, the rejection of myth’s “universality” is also incorrect, resulting from the need to assign its analysis to a specific field.

Quentin Skinner, one of the founders of the Cambridge School of the history of ideas, suggests that the linguistic analysis of historical texts should be enriched by the analysis of the context of their creation – how the author wanted to express his thoughts and how he could desire to be understood, not by the future generations, but by his contemporaries². It seems to me that even such an extension of the analysis is insufficient, since it presupposes limiting the scope of the research to the political sphere. Nowadays, we perceive the transition from myth to philosophy and science as one of the most important stages of development for civilization. However, we often omit the fact that the same reasons that caused the development of philosophy (the desire to explain the world, natural phenomena, and later also social structure and political dependencies) provided the reasons as to why the myths were created. As a result, the context of interpretation should not be limited only to the “contemporary”, but also take into account the cultural and historical context, which at the beginning of the formation of societies, was presented in mythology. Therefore, in this paper, I would like to stress the importance of studying myths and literary works devoted to them, which are beyond the scope of interest

¹ That, for me, is actually the case of usage of the term “myth” by Drucilla Cornell. In her essay *Doubly-Prized World: Myth Allegory and the Feminine*, she states that “both myth and allegory are necessary, indeed unavoidable, in feminist theory”, which suggests a different, positive approach to the term “myth” as something that shall help us with shaping a better future, yet at the same time she writes: “The only solution to this danger [unmodified feminism – A.C.] is to understand myth as artificial mythology so that the structure of second nature reinstated by myth will appear as our mythology. Nothing more, nothing less. There can always be other mythologies.” Therefore, that “myth” bears all characteristics typical for its modern understanding. Its positive aspects can be discussed, but does it actually aim to shape the reality, if it does not possess the universality nor durability required from the myth? See: D. Cornell, *Doubly-Prized World: Myth Allegory and the Feminine*, “Cornell Law Review” 1990, Vol. 75 (3), pp. 645, 696.

² Q. Skinner, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, “History and Theory” 1969, Vol. 8 (1), pp. 48–49.

not only of the history of statehood, but also often of that of the philosophy of law. Peter Fitzpatrick in his book entitled *Mythology of Modern Law*, while concentrating mostly on the Anglo-Saxon tradition writes: "Its [Law's – A.C.] quasi-religious transcendence stands in opposition to its mundane temporality. It incorporates the ideal yet it is a mode of present existence".³ Although I do not want to argue here, as Fitzpatrick does, that law itself is a kind of myth, I want to point out that myths can teach us not only about the beginnings of civilizations, history, and tradition, but also about social order, constitutions, and the beginnings of law itself.

Bearing the aforementioned points in mind, the question arises: what exactly is a myth? At the very beginning it is worth noting that the very concept of myth is ambiguous and dependent on the area of research. There have been many attempts to define (or avoid defining) myth and mythology. Władysław Kopaliński regards the myth as a "imaginary tale about the creation of the world, gods, legendary heroes" or "sacred story justifying and codifying the religion beliefs associated with magic, worship and ritual".⁴ Mircea Eliade confirms that view, declaring that it could be difficult to find one definition of the word 'myth' that would satisfy all scholars, though later he adds: "Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings'".⁵ Robert Graves describes myth by enumerating what it is not, though he also states that "a large part of Greek myth is politico-religious history".⁶

Myth and knowledge

What is certain is that myths are the carriers of tradition and values. Western culture retains a certain continuity and its foundations are deeply rooted in ancient, above all Greco-Roman, tradition. In this initial period of the development of civilization not only values and history found their justification in mythology, but also the sense of belonging to one culture, community, clans or tribes, and finally, political consciousness was formed in a similar way. Myths described origins, important events, the shaping of laws and rules of social coexistence, the chronology of events, biographies of rulers, deeds of heroes, and many, many more, initially for the entire civilization, and later, along with the formation of smaller socio-political organizations, for these particular communities. Similar myths can be found in every corner of the globe. Some of them are more popular, such as Norse, Roman, or Greek mythology, others are known primarily to enthusiasts and researchers of specific cultures. However, all myths at the beginning perform functions analogous to history, understood as based-on-fact knowledge about society and its past, trying to justify and clarify the present by rooting it in the past, as well as passing on current knowledge about the world. Mythology was also an expression of accumulated experience, the first 'teacher of life' before this function was taken away from it and as-

³ P. Fitzpatrick, *Mythology of Modern Law*, New York 1992, p. X.

⁴ W. Kopaliński, *Mit* [in:] *idem, Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych*, <http://www.slownik-online.pl> (access: 28.03.2018).

⁵ M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, New York 1963, p. 5.

⁶ R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, London 1992, p. 17.

signed to history by Cicero. Recognizing the importance of myth and its significance for the ancients can also have a significant meaning for the contemporary perception of the world, especially in times when people tend to focus almost exclusively on the days to come, and perceive history as an anachronistic and almost useless field of knowledge, which, unlike other disciplines, has no impact on the future.

It is important to note, that for the earliest communities, the myth was devoid of the signs of fiction.⁷ It was a tale meant to rationalize and explain events, natural phenomena, and, in the broader sense, history as a whole. It is a tale, in the form of a narration, but for the ancients it could not be judged merely by the criterion of faith, as it was also believed to relate facts. Mircea Eliade draws attention to the necessity of ritual repetition of the myth in a fixed, traditional form, from which any departure or modification is *de facto* desecration of the great story. That statement was already criticized by Jean-Jacques Wunenburger,⁸ although I would like to point out that even on the basis of Greek mythology, Eliade's statement is too strong. Any form of expressing a myth within literature was at the same time its reinterpretation. For example, it is enough to consider the myths of the so-called Trojan cycle, that is, those relating the story of the Trojan War. In Homer's epics, Odysseus is admittedly cunning, but above all he is a wise counsellor. Being at the same time also courageous and valiant, he was a personification of a variety of virtues. The same Odysseus in Sophocles' play *Philoctetes* is portrayed as a desperate, egotistic, opportunistic person, who cares about neither the fate nor the feelings of his companions, but only about the effects that shall be beneficial for him and, possibly, other Achaeans. Meanwhile, Neoptolemus is a gentle young man, full of compassion and susceptible to other people's influence, while other sources present him rather as arrogant, demanding, and hungry for glory.⁹ In tragedies, whose most famous authors were all closely connected with Athens, it is this *polis* that has symbolic meaning. Its rulers (Theseus, then his son Demophon) are defenders of the oppressed,¹⁰ and it is the venue where the most important legal disputes are settled and new rules for punishment are established (the best example of which is the history of Orestes).¹¹ Meanwhile, Creon, the ruler of the rival city of Thebes is depicted as almost a tyrant and suffers punishment from the gods. Myths are therefore subject to constant reinterpretations and transformations, depending on the prevailing situation and the sympathy of the writers, singers, and story-tellers who are the interpreters. Drucilla Cornell also refers to this aspect of the myth, stating that "We re-collect the mythic figures of the past, but as we do so we reimagine them. It is the potential variability of myth that allows us to work within myth to re-imagine our world".¹²

⁷ H. Podbielski, *Mit kosmogoniczny w Teogonii Hezjoda*, Lublin 1978, p. 26.

⁸ *Palingeneza mitu w literaturze XX i XXI w.*, eds. M. Klik, J. Zych, Warszawa 2014, p. 9.

⁹ See: Homer, *Iliad*, transl. A.T. Murray, Cambridge–London 1924; Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, transl. R. Jebb, Cambridge 1898; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, transl. M. Grant, Lawrence 1960, p. 114; R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*..., p. 702.

¹⁰ Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, transl. R. Jebb, Cambridge 1889; Euripides, *Children of Heracles. Hippolytus. Andromache. Hecuba*, transl. D. Kovacs, Cambridge, MA 1995.

¹¹ Such decisions were indeed made in Draco's time who established new laws regarding homicide. For Orestes' story see: Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, transl. H.W. Smyth, Cambridge 1926.

¹² D. Cornell, *Doubly-Prized...*, p. 697.

The above remarks lead to another observation. Myths are created as a form of explanation. They can be invented “on the spot”, as a means to explain or illustrate a concrete thesis that is being raised and, as such, approach today’s meaning of “metaphor”. Eliade considers both famous platonic allegories – that is, the Cave and the Chariot with two horses – to be the explanations of the eschatological myth, the platonic “mythology of the soul”.¹³ But there are also those myths that simply “exist” with no certain author or time of creation. They are constantly repeated and stored in human memory, and finally, in some way preserved, most often in literary form. Those are the classical myths I mentioned above, which, despite bending to the will of those who record or preserve them, still carry universal rights and values. In this sense, myths are also a way of expressing knowledge, not only historical or natural, but also, as it could be stated nowadays, sociological, enabling the reconstruction of the formation of individual and, consequently, social consciousness.

As George Steiner states, philosophy and literature occupy the same space due to their common mean of expression, which is language. What is more, at the base of philosophical thought, Steiner sees a kind of “poetry”¹⁴ – the intertextual core of the philosophical message contained between the lines, and he considers philosophy itself, in the wake of Robin George Collingwood, “the poem of the intellect”¹⁵: “Where philosophy and literature mesh [...] echoes of the origin can be heard”.¹⁶ And poetry lies at the foundations of the entirety of Greek literature. The first great prosaic works in ancient Greece were in fact the *Histories* by Herodotus, which constituted a border point, being both the beginning and the end of an era in the historical and cultural spheres. The previous forms of art and literature had deeper, more intimate and religious characters. The use of poetry as a means of expression indirectly gave the author some qualities of divinity, because poetic inspiration came from the gods themselves, namely the Muses, daughters of Zeus. The poet was *de facto* perceived both as a sage and a prophet, proclaiming timeless truths and principles, however, as they have been revealed to him by gods, he also shared a secret, divine Truth, and so he was a connecting link between both the mundane and religious reality. Therefore, the poetic form of expression was at the same time more personal and universal. Likewise, myths, expressed initially mostly through poetry, can be treated in a similar way. Just as the poetry linked the listeners with the *aoidos*¹⁷ and through him with the world of gods, traditions, values, history, and therefore the whole cultural heritage, the myth created a bridge between past and present, presenting history, explaining the genesis of natural phenomena, teaching correct behavior, and thus shaping individuals’ characters. Similarly to knowledge, which today can be ascribed the quality of ‘scientific’, myths have strived for a certain universality, trying to explain the surrounding reality and, at the same time, embed it in the aforementioned cultural context. The original direct form of oral poetry, delivered by the *aoidos* in front of the auditorium, guaranteed this universality, making it widely available, while at the same time involv-

¹³ M. Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 2: *From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, Chicago 2011, p. 201.

¹⁴ G. Steiner, *The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan*, New York 2011, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁷ The Greek “singer” or “oral poet” who delivered his poems in front of the audience.

ing the listeners in the shared experience of the story told. Plato himself draws attention to the fact that the written word strips the oral word of its dignity and deeper meaning.¹⁸ Therefore he, despite putting his own thoughts into words and writing them down, uses a form of dialogue¹⁹ to establish a closer relationship, with the reader – interlocutor relationship based on a greater trust and directness that allows mutual participation in the process of thinking. That form of unity between people, sharing common knowledge, tradition, and culture, was also possible on the basis of oral poetry.

On the other hand, Claude Lévi-Strauss situates the myth at the opposite end of linguistic expression than poetry.²⁰ According to him, poetry is specific, and difficult to translate, while the myth contains common elements, always understandable and similarly perceived. I do not think, however, that these observations would apply to Greek poetry, due to its specificity. From a strictly technical point of view, the earliest poems,²¹ not only in ancient Greece, but also in the Balkan countries, were based on a set of specific formulas, allowing future generations of singers to repeat the story.²² This form of storytelling made it easier to maintain the rhythm, complement the content, and introduce listeners to the world already known to them. Early Greek poetry then was also supposed to be similarly perceived and understood. Certain universal elements had to be consistent, changes were reduced to the details of the action, depending on the place, the situation, the author's motivation, and the reasons for retelling the myth. What is more, however, these poems were created with the potential listeners in mind. Poetry, as I stated before, was universal and had a wide range of influence. It was not just art for art's sake, but it most often carried some message, be it a historical, moral, or practical one, since the poets shared knowledge of the past and truth revealed by the gods. It therefore initially possessed similar qualities to the myth itself. And, while myths generally exist somehow above or beyond the language they are related in, they are also susceptible to interpretations, depending on time, possessed knowledge, or historical traditions. Although the core of the myth remains the same and retains its universality, it requires precisely what the Greek poetry provided, and what is currently required to apply the acquired knowledge: dissemination, analysis, compliance with the included messages, values, and facts (or their refutation), thus a highly interdisciplinary approach. Consequently, contemporary literary studies see literary works as the main carriers of mythical content, which, on the basis of Jungian archetypes, constantly return in various forms.²³

¹⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus* [in:] *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, transl. H.N. Fowler, Cambridge–London 1925, p. 275.

¹⁹ G. Steiner, *The Poetry...*, p. 25.

²⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Structural Study of Myth*, "The Journal of American Folklore" 1955, Vol. 68 (270), p. 430.

²¹ I use the term "poetry" as it is described by Aristotle, which is for most of the non-prosaic species of literature. The distinction between "poetics" (the theory of literature) and "poetry" (the genre) is of no fundamental importance here, since it is the message contained that is most important. The reflections about the "form" complement the comparison between myths and poems as carriers of universal knowledge and values.

²² Principal research in this area was conducted by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the 1930s. For further reading, see: A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge 1964.

²³ *Palingeneza mitu w literaturze...*, p. 6.

Referring to the methodology proposed by Quentin Skinner, I do believe that, while analyzing historical texts, we should include not only the context of creation, but the whole cultural and historical context of the work: not only ‘how the author could have desired to be understood’ but actually, how he could be understood given the milieu he was living in. Not only current problems, but also tradition and history, including myth, form the basis of political theories and solutions suggested by philosophers, this, regardless of whether they agree with them or assume their rejection or need to change. To refer to an example close to my area of interest, i.e. analysis of a mixed constitution. We can analyze Cicero’s works in the context of the Republic’s crisis, and see his optimism and hopes for its survival and his ideas that might save it. We may compare his views with those of Polybius and see how differently they perceived the Republic, despite the fact that they both glorified it. We may notice how diversely they presented the functioning of Roman institutions and emphasized other values and goals of the mixed system. We can even consider their common inspirations with Aristotle’s works, although in this case the analysis of the broader cultural and historical context causes further reflections, as Polybius might not have a chance to become familiar with Stagirite’s works.²⁴ Therefore, we are moving back in time, to Plato himself. It was he who proclaimed the first concrete theories about state and law. But then, the question arises: is this the beginning? And before? Had there been no reflection on subjects related to state and law in those last few centuries before the establishment of the *poleis* of ancient Greece? The search for these is in no way a formation of the “mythology of doctrine”. It does not attribute to previous authors the creation of foundations or assumptions of later thoughts. It is only meant to look for the ideas, the expressions of thought that are unavoidable in any society and can lead to some doctrines. If we question the stability of our *polis* and create a myth attributing divine protection to it, do we form a political doctrine? Not yet. But it clearly shows that we already think in terms that might be considered “political”. And at the beginning of each civilization there is a history regarding its emergence, and that history is often intertwined with myth. Initially, history is a myth enriched with unnatural, unusual, divine elements, but equally credible to its creators as later chronicles and systematized works and historical character.

Myths are extremely durable, exceeding the limitations of time and space. While we may have problems with remembering precise historical dates or describing and analyzing events from beyond our spectrum of interest, most Westerners will not encounter similar problems when it comes to retelling, even briefly, the history of the Trojan War, the tale of Biblical flood, or the works of Heracles. Thus, some events from probably even more than three thousand years ago, do not pose excessive difficulties for most people. They are so deeply rooted in our minds and culture that we are almost bound to encounter them someday and remember them, because they contain everything the listener or reader is looking for in a great story. In these myths, however, not only are stories of beginnings, events, and great deeds presented, but also, although more often indirectly and between the lines, political and legal ideas.²⁵ The myth, by referring to

²⁴ K. Leśniak, *Aristoteles*, Warszawa 1965, p. 26. See also: A. Ceglarska, *Polybiusz – zapomniany następca Platona*, “Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne” 2013, Vol. LXV (1), p. 421.

²⁵ R. Tokarczyk, *Metodologia relacji czas a trwanie idei politycznych i prawnych* [in:] *Czas a trwanie idei politycznych i prawnych*, eds. K. Chojnicka, A. Citkowska-Kimla, W. Kozub-Ciembroniewicz, Warszawa 2008, p. 71.

common beliefs, not only enables the unification of certain social groups, due to their profession of similar deities, but also facilitates the identification of values relevant to this new community, thus indirectly presenting the real structure of the contemporary society and at the same time, the factors that bind them together. In addition, myth allows legitimization of certain principles, or even specific rights, just by referring to their genesis in the sphere of the sacred.

Myth has a twofold function. It is at the same time, an expression of the old ways of thinking and a means of describing the present. Thus, the Greek myth exists on two levels: historical and contemporary, being a carrier of memory about the old times and the beginnings of civilization, but at the same time an expression of present-day values and a way to justify the current situation.²⁶ Therefore, even that “classical myth”, which we are tempted to consider as just a “fable”, was an expression not only of religious beliefs, but also of purely practical principles, social structure, and applicable laws. Those elements are clearly expressed for example in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, where the genealogy of the gods also reveals the most desirable traits of the rulers. From the practical and legal point of view, even the ancient Greek judicial procedure finds its justification in a myth, since it was initially based on oaths made by the parties to the dispute. Both in the *Iliad* and in the poems of Hesiod, the oath, and thus the appeal to higher powers, is a form of statement most fraught with consequences. People take gods as their witnesses and the Olympians swear by Styx – the oldest and most powerful of the rivers, who also was one of the first of Titans to stand by Zeus’ side and thus was endowed with privileges and uttermost respect.²⁷ The cosmogonic myth itself presents, in an allegorical form, the formation of the community, initially only due to the strength of the leader, subordinating the individuals to his rule, and later by referring to the commonly recognized higher values, including laws and moral norms. The so-called “Theban cycle” (that is, myths referring to the history of Thebes, from the story of the city’s foundation by Kadmos, through the life of Oedipus, to the war of Seven against Thebes and its consequences) not only presents important issues related to the conflict between the state law and the natural law, but also illustrates the changes taking place in the situation of the monarch, whose competences were gradually undermined, later leading to the development of various political systems in the Greek *poleis*, where power could have been exercised by groups or even all citizens. The stories, already related by Hesiod and Herodotus, describing various relationships of the most important god, Zeus, are a metaphorical representation of the creation of new values, as well as various contacts between Greek culture and the outside world, especially the Orient, pointing out mutual inspirations, but also fundamental differences between them, not only in the cultural but also in the political sphere. The first historians also search for the true causes of later conflicts in mythology. Finally, even the myth describing the fate of the children of Heracles may be a reflection of the contemporary relations prevailing in Greece, for instance by emphasizing Mycenae’s hegemony during the epoch not without a reason called “Mycenae”, as well as explaining the later migrations of peoples and the displacement of the Achaeans by the Dorians.

²⁶ Although these two forms of perceiving the myth are often put in opposition. More on this subject and on the various ways of understanding the myth, see: M. Dybizbański, W. Szturc, *Mitoznawstwo porównawcze*, Kraków 2006, pp. 5–7.

²⁷ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, transl. H.G. Evelyn-White, Cambridge–London 1914, pp. 282–283.

All these examples in my opinion indicate, that one cannot consider contemporary Greek beliefs as mere “fables” or “legends” in the present sense of those words. They contain many elements that not only permit the re-creation of the historical changes taking place in Greece at that time (the course of which can also be traced through other sources), but above all, the process of evolution of Greek thought and the first threads of ideas, suggesting constant interest in the issues of statehood, community, the role of the ruler, and legal norms in a broader social and cultural dimension.

The importance of myth in the political sphere is unquestionable. Even nowadays we have to deal with some “mythologies”, however, modern myths differ from the ancient ones. The latter were generally formed as holistic stories woven into a specific moment in history, and are more often fragmented, trying to explain only a certain moment or episode of time. It is however worth noting, that a wide group of various myths (cosmogonic, founding, sacral, personal, etc.) in the 20th century were enriched with a separate type of political myth. However, once again I would argue, that for Greeks it was not typology that was important, and so the “political myth” existed there and then, only without being given a separate name, just interwoven between all the others. Like myth, political myth does not have a uniform definition. However, political mythology above all intends to manage the collective consciousness and behavior of human masses. Political mythology should be simple and obvious,²⁸ not operating on abstract concepts, but easily comprehensible symbols, like the distinction between “enemy” and “friend”. Nevertheless, even that most simple distinction we owe to the Ancients: it is Herodotus who uses the conflict between Greeks and their Persian enemies to establish a clear opposition between Hellenes and barbarians. The political myth is particularly noteworthy in the description of totalitarian countries, where the myth of a leader is often created. Yet that was also the point of ancient mythology. Thus, in ancient Athens, there was a tendency to assign all significant constitutional reforms leading to a democratic constitution to Solon, the first famous legislator, bypassing the actual founder of the system, i.e. Cleisthenes. As a result, the Athenians gained a greater sense of community and of the “antiquity” of their constitution, and therefore greater motivation to protect it, since it was a part of their common tradition, which stood in opposition to, for example, their greatest rival, Sparta, which actually had its own great half-historical, half-mythical law-giver: Lycurgus.

The mythologization of the lawgivers is yet another element that confirms my thesis. Important issues related to the formation of the first communities, their structure of organization, their way of exercising power, and the role of law already arise in mythology. Raising distinctive borders that put myth and history as well as myth and science in opposition to each other seems to me unjustified. All subsequent theories describing the ideal state, just rulers, the best law, and even future processes of historical change, were in a sense just new myths, recounting desirable values and postulates in the legal and political fields. This pathway was followed in the 19th century by Georges Sorel,²⁹ who recognized myths as a set of ideas that reflect the aspirations of people and, at the same time, stimulate them to act. Therefore, he acknowledged the myth not only as an

²⁸ M. Jaskólski, *Mit polityczny* [in:] *Słownik historii doktryn politycznych*, Vol. 4, red. K. Chojnicka, M. Jaskólski, Warszawa 2009, p. 197.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 195.

idea, but as a tool for its implementation – the political myth does not design the ideal future, but is a means of influencing the present, a tool of action, a spontaneous manifestation of the will of a certain social group (specifically – the proletariat). The sources of the myth were, once again, the irrational elements of human nature. Unlike utopia, for Sorel the myth was not designed to embody a perfect future, but to affect the present. In my opinion, a similar relationship can be observed in the Greek myths. Although they contain various demands and suggestions for improvement of the current situation (e.g. they encourage the pursuit of the principles of justice), they combine them with practical elements. Striving to implement these principles, then, involves the desire for change, redefining the values recognized as the most important (for example by replacing courage with justice) and opposing those, who ignore them, even if they are the rulers. Thus, myths remain not only carriers of tradition, but also sources of information about ongoing transformations and postulated reforms. The myth was an expression of certain truths that enabled the setting up of the connection between the individual man and the larger world of his culture and civilization. It simultaneously connected and separated different cultures. It introduced the basic dichotomy, later precisely defined by Herodotus, dividing the world into what was „ours”, that is, what was known and Greek; and what was “other”, that is, what was alien and barbarian.³⁰ And this division definitely has a distinct political dimension.

Conclusion

Most of the modern sciences, using the concept of “myth”, first apply their own definition to that term and then use it appropriately for their own field of research.³¹ As Ben Halpern states:

There are, for example, the philosophical and philological mythologists; the psychoanalytic school or schools (Freudian and Jungian), each with its considerable, relatively segregated, bibliography of studies of myths; the historical anthropologists and the functional anthropologists; and the French sociological students of religion and myth. The subject matter of all these schools is in general the same. If they are relatively isolated schools, it is because they apply different academic disciplines and different principles of explanation to the same matter.³²

That tendency was unfamiliar to Greeks. For them, most of our contemporary typologies were devoid of fundamental importance. Their pursuit of the compilation of various, often seemingly dissimilar threads, was reflected in many areas. Physics, music, biology, literature, politics and ethics, and science and art, constituted a general unity,

³⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, transl. A.D. Godley, Cambridge 1920, I.1.

³¹ For example, G. Sorel uses the “myth” in political sense, K. Mannheim associates it with ideology, the feminist writers discuss the “matriarchal myths” (i.e. C. Eller, *The Myth of the Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future*, Boston 2000), in religious studies the necessity of the “sacred” component of myths is discussed, cultural studies deal with past myths as well as the new ones created by modern (pop?) culture and each of these fields has their own recognized authorities who research their own specific fields, defining the concept of “myth” adequately to their scope of research.

³² B. Halpern, “*Myth*” and “*Ideology*” in Modern Usage, “History and Theory” 1961, Vol. 1 (2), p. 134.

supporting each other, shaping each individual, who then participated in the formation of the society. And since the community was of paramount importance, every element of life could have influenced its affairs, the affairs of *poleis*. This is what we now call “politics”. Mythology was also such an element. Given all that, I still would like to propose for consideration a new, or rather different approach – trying to think in the “Greek” way – which is not to stick rigidly to the definitions, analyzing the myth only in its own meaning or pondering what exactly the myth is and how we can define it, but rather to look beyond that, to what that myth can convey: to the stories, the values, and the virtues. Nowadays, while applying our “clear” positivist categories and dividing science into many isolated fields of specialization, we simultaneously simplify our way of thinking and overlook the fact, that social life is actually one of the fields that goes beyond clear classifications and involves the simultaneous cooperation of many different sciences: sociology, political science, history, and anthropology, as well as jurisprudence, since the culture that shapes it consists of many diverse elements, of which only a part is based simply on facts. At the same time, rejecting the strictly analytical way of thinking does not have to lead to complete relativism. The Greeks enjoyed the concept of combining and mixing, the most striking example of which is the whole idea of a mixed constitution – the most stable one and closest to the ideal. Creation of a stable, strong, but also just regime (similarly to the upbringing of such an individual) required the combination of knowledge and values, which were not the result of a sudden, philosophical reflection of a genius mind, but which were already contained in literary works, and earlier – in myths, which were a permanent source of references and inspiration. They contain many motifs concerning justice, law, punishment and the possibility of redemption, the position and duty of the ruler, and individual freedom and its relation to the community, thus, values important not only for philosophers, but also for lawyers themselves. Not only the very content of myths, but also the relationships between various constant elements (guilt-punishment, bravery-fame, modesty-appreciation, etc.) prove their universality and make them easier to understand. And these foregoing ideas enable us to reach the core values of our European culture, which have their roots in early antiquity and yet still retain their continuity to this day.

That is why I believe it is so important to include also this early, mythologized period of time, when the foundations of later views and political ideas are formed, in the studies devoted to the development of political thought. Reconstruction of ideas presented in mythology may, in my opinion, allow us to find the first manifestations of the political consciousness of people of that time, and thus enable us to observe the entire process of doctrine development, as well as complement our interpretation of works of later philosophers and expand the current catalogue of sources. An analysis of the role of the myth and its relationship with history may even make it possible to determine, whether it is possible to find the genesis of “politics” and “political” at stages even earlier than the formation of Greek *poleis*, when the rules, institutions and laws were only evolving, but the political reflection, even if not named so directly, was already present in peoples’ minds.

Rola mitu w myśli politycznej

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu zaproponowanie nowego podejścia do analizy mitów, zwłaszcza tych związanych ze starożytną Grecją, oraz do roli, jaką odgrywają one w dziedzinie nauk prawnych i politycznych. Mimo że „mit polityczny” jest dziś uznaną kategorią, to „typowe”, „dawne” mity, czyli historie o początkach, stworzeniu, bogach i bohaterach, wciąż bywają lekceważone bądź pomijane. Historie te odegrały jednak istotną rolę w kształtowaniu naszej kultury i nie są pozbawione również wątków politycznych. Początkowo, gdy mity dopiero powstawały, łączyły się one z rzeczywistością, często będąc postrzegane przez ówczesnych ludzi jako „historyczne”. Jako elementy tradycji i historii były nośnikami wartości oraz koncepcji, z których wiele można uznać za „polityczne”, a w ten sposób umożliwiały i ułatwiały kształtowanie się poczucia wspólnoty. Dlatego w niniejszym artykule proponuję „greckie” podejście do analizy mitów, dzieł literackich je przedstawiających, a także ich związków z danymi historycznymi, czyli podejście niepolegające na podkreślaniu różnic pomiędzy mitem a historią, lecz uwzględniające różnorodność interpretacji oraz czytanie pomiędzy wierszami, co umożliwia zaobserwowanie, jak głęboko myśl polityczna może być zakorzeniona w umysłach ludzi.

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