Volume IX Number 1

Spring 1986

KING'S Theological Review

BERNARD LE BOVIER DE FONTENELLE (1657-1757):

ON THE ORIGIN OF MYTHS

TRANSLATED BY JULIAN BALDICK

INTRODUCTION

Fontenelle's *On the Origin of Myths (De l'Origine des Fables)* is undoubtedly one of the finest and most influential essays ever written. It is well ahead of its time in its approaches and insights, and of the greatest importance for the study of history, anthropology, and religion in general.

Fontenelle was a philosopher, a man of letters, a populariser of scientific theories and much more besides. One might call him a father of the 18th-century Enlightenment, but his living to be almost 100 makes a word like "ancestor" more appropriate. He himself was a myth in his own lifetime, the legend of a man who had become reason itself, in the glacial calm of his unruffled judgment: the ultimate example of Gallic logic pursued to its implacable conclusions.

The specialists have spilt a vast amount of ink over the question of when Fontenelle composed *On the Origin of Myths*. This is connected with the false problem of identifying the first founder of "comparative religion", a problem which seems to stem from excessive British and French patriotism. Fontenelle wrote a first draft under the title *On History (Sur l'histoire)*. Maria Teresa Marcialis (*Fontenelle: un filosofo mondano*, Sassari 1978, p. 145, n. 84) considers that any dating of this first draft is hypothetical, but suggests 1688-90. She dates *On the Origin of Myths* to the years following 1702 (ibid., p. 186, n. 160). The treatise was published in 1724.

This delay in publication has been explained as due to the irreligiously subversive character of the work, and the author's unwillingness to go too far and too fast in upsetting the French authorities, who were quick to stamp on any overt impiety. An explanation of the origins of religion which ended with the verdict that all peoples were extremely stupid was clearly an indirect attack on the Judaeo-Christian tradition. To make up for this Fontenelle makes ritual genuflexions to this tradition in his essay, but they are executed in so sardonic a style as to leave little doubt concerning his own feelings.

It has often been noted that subsequent 18th- and 19th-century theories of the first sources of myths and religious feeling did no more than repeat what Fontenelle had said. Indeed, well into the 20th century the theoretical study of myths was really proceeding no further. The discipline of comparative mythology had discredited itself so badly as almost to die of shame. When it was revived, in the last half-century, by the studies of Georges Dumézil (bitterly attacked by specialists who are often now badly discredited themselves), there was in a way a return to the insights of Fontenelle. For the 19th-century scholars had become bogged down by their preoccupation with etymologies, and had neglected the social background, on which Fontenelle had insisted, and to which Dumézil now reverted.

In recent times Claude Lévi-Strauss has, like Fontenelle, turned to detecting logical thinking in myths. But, as Marcialis has observed (ibid., p. 191), it is wrong to take the comparison further: for Fontenelle the logic to be found among "primitive" peoples is merely a poor and undeveloped form of our scientific thought, and not, as for Lévi-Strauss, thinking of a different and impressive kind.

More recently still, the leading French classicist Marcel Detienne has taken Fontenelle's essay as a starting-point for a persuasive study entitled *L'invention de la mythologie* (Paris 1981). He argues that both the ancient Greeks and modern European writers like Fontenelle invented the idea of the myth, which has no discernible existence as an independent literary form and cannot, as Dumézil confesses, be distinguished from the tale. Thus, we might put it, the concept of the myth is itself a myth.

The translation and notes which follow are based on the edition by J.-R. Carré (Paris 1932). The reader is asked to bear in mind that the French word *histoire* sometimes has to be translated as "history", and sometimes as "story". I have used an occasional phrase from the analysis of the work given by Andrew Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, London 1887, volume 2, pp. 321ff.

TRANSLATION

(1) We become so strongly accustomed to Greek myths during our childhood that when we are in a position to exercise our minds it no longer occurs to us to find them so surprising as they are. But, if one manages to view them through eyes other than those of habit, one cannot avoid being horrified to see that the whole of a people's early history is nothing but a heap of fantasies, dreams and absurdities. Could it be possible that we should have been given all that as being true? For what reason could we have been given it as being false? What could have been this passion of men for blatant and ridiculous falsehoods, and why should this passion no longer last? For the Greek myths were not like our novels, which are given to us for what they are, and not as history; myths are the only early history to be found. Let us try, if it is possible, to shed some light on this subject: let us study the human mind in one of its strangest products. It is in such products, quite often, that this mind best allows itself to be understood.

(2) During the first ages of the world, and among the nations who had not heard speak of the traditions of Seth's family, or who did not preserve them, ignorance and savagery must have been at a level so extreme that it can now hardly be imagined. Let us consider the Kaffirs, the Lapps and the Iroquois; but even then let us take care to remember that these peoples, being no longer new, must have reached some degree of knowledge and culture which the earliest men lacked.

(3) The more ignorant one is, and the less experience one has, the more prodigies one sees. The earliest men saw many, and, since fathers naturally relate to their children what they have seen and what they have done, only prodigies were to be found in the narratives of those times.

(4) When we recount something surprising, our imagination is inflamed with regard to its object, and of its own accord impels itself to magnify it, adding to it what it may lack to make it completely supernatural, as if regretting

to leave a beautiful thing in a state of imperfection. Moreover, we are flattered by the feelings of surprise and admiration which we arouse in our listeners, and we are only too glad to excite these feelings further, because this seems somehow to add to our vanity. These two reasons, put together, explain why a man who has no intention of lying when he begins a slightly unusual story can nevertheless catch himself telling a lie if he pays good attention. From this it follows that one needs a sort of effort and special care in order to tell nothing but the exact truth. What, after that, will be the case of those who are naturally inclined to invent things and deceive others?

(5) Thus since the narratives told by the earliest men to their children were often false in themselves, because they were told by people subject to see many things that were not there, and since, on top of that, they were often exaggerated, either in good faith, in the way which we have just explained, or in bad faith, it is clearly evident that they were already badly spoilt from their very beginning. But this will certainly be much worse still, when they pass from mouth to mouth: everyone will deprive them of some little touch of truth, putting in some touch of falsehood, and mainly that supernatural falsehood which pleases most. Perhaps, after a century or two, not only will there remain nothing of the little truth which was there to start, but also there will hardly remain anything of the first falsehood.

(6) Will what I am going to say be believed? There was even some philosophy in those uncultivated times, and it greatly helped in the birth of myths. Those men who have a little more inspiration than others are naturally led to look for the cause of what they see. "From where can this river come, which keeps on flowing?", some reflective man of those days must have asked. A strange sort of philosopher, but one who would perhaps have been a Descartes in these days. After a long period of meditation he made the very happy discovery that there was someone who took care to keep pouring this water out of a jug. But who kept providing him with this water? Our thinker did not proceed so far.

(7) It must be observed that these ideas, which can be called the systems of those times, were always copied from the things that were best known. People had often seen water being poured out of a jug: it was thus very easily imagined how a god poured out the water of a river, and, thanks to the very ease with which it was imagined, one was entirely led to believe it. Accordingly, in order to explain thunder and lightning, one had no hesitation in visualising a god in human form, hurling bolts of fire at us: ideas obviously borrowed from very familiar objects.

(8) This philosophy of the earliest ages depended on a principle so natural that today our own philosophy still has no other: that is to say that we explain the unknown things of nature by recourse to those that we have in front of our eyes, and transfer to the science of physics the ideas with which experience provides us. We have discovered through practice, and not through guesswork, the power of weights, springs and levers: it is only through weights, springs and levers that we make nature work. Those poor savages who were the first to inhabit the earth either were completely unacquainted with these things, or had paid no attention to them. Therefore it was only through the crudest and most palpable things known to them that they explained the effects of nature. What have we done, in the one case and in the other? We have always visualised the unknown in the form of what was known to us; but, fortunately, there is every reason in the world to believe that the unknown cannot avoid resembling what we know at the present time.

(9) From this crude philosophy, which, of necessity, prevailed in the earliest ages, the gods and goddesses were born. It is quite curious to see how human imagination has engendered false deities. Men saw lots of things which they would have been unable to do: thunderbolts were hurled, winds were stirred up, and waves were made to rise and fall. All that was far beyond their powers. They conceived of beings more powerful than themselves, capable of producing these huge effects. It was clearly necessary that those beings should be constituted like men. What other form could they have had? As soon as they have a human form, imagination naturally gives them all that is human: thus they appear as men in every way, with the sole difference that they are always a bit more powerful.

(10) From this comes something which has perhaps not yet been the subject of reflection: namely, that in all the deities conceived by the pagans, they have made the idea of power predominate, and have paid almost no attention to wisdom, or justice, or all the other attributes which accompany divinity. This is the strongest proof that these deities are very early, and the best indication of the path followed by the imagination in forming them. The earliest men knew no quality finer than that of brute strength: wisdom and justice did not even have a name in the ancient languages, as they still lack one today among the American savages. Moreover, men acquired their first idea of a higher being from unusual events, and in no way from the regular order of the universe, which they were incapable of recognising or admiring. Thus they conceived of the gods in a time when they themselves had nothing finer to give them than power, and conceived of them according to what bore the insignia of power, not according to what bore the insignia of wisdom. It is not surprising, then, that they conceived of several gods, often mutually antagonistic, cruel, strange, unjust and ignorant. All that is not directly opposed to the idea of strength and power, which is the only one that they would have formed. Those gods were certainly bound to be affected both by the period in which they had been made and by the occasions which had caused them to be made. Even then, what wretched sort of power were they given? Mars, the god of war, is wounded fighting a mortal: that is a great blow to his dignity, but, as he retreats, he produces a shout of which 10,000 men together would have been incapable. It is by virtue of this vigorous shout that Mars gains the upper hand over Diomedes; and that will be enough, in Homer's sound judgment, to serve the honour of a god.[1] Given the fashion in which the imagination is composed, it is content with a little, and it will always recognise as a deity anyone who has a little more power than a man.

(11) Cicero has said somewhere that he would have preferred Homer to have transferred the qualities of the gods to men, rather than to have transferred – as he has – the qualities of men to the gods.[2] But Cicero was asking too much of him: the qualities which, in his own day, he attributed to the gods were totally unknown in the time of Homer. Pagans have always copied their deities from themselves: thus, the closer that men have come to perfection, the closer the gods have come as well. The earliest men are very brutal, and sacrifice everything to

strength: the gods will be almost just as brutal, only a bit more powerful. Thus are made the gods of Homer's time. Men then begin to have ideas of wisdom and justice: the gods gain thereby, begin to be wise and just, and are so increasingly, in proportion to the development of these ideas among men. Thus are made the gods of Cicero's time, and they were far superior in value to those of Homer's, because far superior philosophers had put their hands to it.

(12) Up to this point the earliest men have given birth to myths without, so to speak, its being their fault. Men are ignorant, and consequently see many prodigies. Surprising things are naturally exaggerated as they are told, and are moreover laden with various falsehoods as they pass from mouth to mouth. The crudest and most absurd kinds of philosophical systems are established, but no others can be. Now we shall see how, with these foundations, men have, in a certain fashion, delighted to deceive themselves.

(13) What we have called the philosophy of the earliest ages proved to be entirely suitable for combination with factual history. A young man falls in a river, and his body cannot be found. What has happened to him? The philosophy of the time informs men that this river contains girls who rule over it: the girls have kidnapped the young man, and quite naturally so. No evidence is needed to believe this. A man of unknown parentage possesses some remarkable talent. There are gods who are formed approximately like men: no further attention is paid to his family – he is a son of one of those gods. The majority of myths, considered attentively, will be found to be no more than a mixture of facts and the philosophy of the time, which explained their miraculous aspect most conveniently, and attached itself to them in a very natural fashion. It was just a case of gods and goddesses, who resembled us entirely, and who were very well cast to act opposite men on the stage.

(14) As stories of real facts, mixed with these false products of the imagination, were very current, people began to invent stories without any foundation, or, at the very least, facts in which there was something remarkable were recounted only with the embellishment of trappings recognised as likely to give pleasure. These trappings were false, and perhaps sometimes they were even presented as such. However, the stories were not considered mythical. This will be understood if we compare our modern history with that of old.

(15) In a period distinguished by the highest degree of wit, such as the age of Augustus and our own, there has been a desire to argue about men's actions, look into their motives and come to know their characters. The historians of such times have adapted themselves to this taste, and have taken great care not to transcribe facts in their nakedness and dryness: they have attached motives to them, along with portraits of the actors. Do we think that these portraits and motives are the exact truth, believing in them as we do in the facts? No; we know perfectly well that the historians have guessed them as best they could, and that it is almost impossible that they should have guessed correctly. However, we do not find fault with the historians for having looked for this embellishment, which does not go beyond the bounds of probability; and it is because of this probability that this mixture of falsehood, which we accept as being possible in our histories, does not make us consider them as myths.

(16) In the same way, after the earliest peoples had, in the ways previously described, acquired the taste for these histories, into which there came gods, goddesses and the supernatural in general, histories were no longer produced without ornamentation. It was known that that could be untrue; but in those days it was probable, and that was enough to maintain these myths in the position of histories.

(17) Nowadays the Arabs still fill their histories with prodigies and miracles, which are most ridiculous and grotesque. Doubtless they consider that as mere ornamentation, by which they are not afraid to be deceived, because among them this is a kind of literary convention. But when histories of this kind fall into the hands of other peoples, whose taste demands that facts be transcribed exactly as they happened, then either these histories are believed as the literal truth, or at any rate people persuade themselves that they have been believed by those who have published them, and by those who have accepted them without contradiction. In any case there is a considerable misunderstanding. When I said that the falsehood in these histories was recognised for what it was, I meant by those who were slightly enlightened; for as regards the common people, it is destined to be taken in by everything.

(18) In earliest times, not only was the surprising side of factual history explained by a fanciful kind of philosophy, but also the subject-matter of philosophy was explained by factual narratives conceived just as one desired. People saw two constellations near the North Pole, called the two Bears, which would always appear, and never set like the others. They did not think that this was because these constellations were close to a pole that was raised in relation to the observer – that much was not known. It was imagined that of these two Bears one had been the mistress, and the other the son of Jupiter, and that, when these two people had been changed into constellations, Juno in her jealousy had asked Oceanus not to let them come down to him and go to rest there like the others.[3] All the metamorphoses are the science of physics of those earliest times. Mulberries are red, because they are stained with the blood of a pair of lovers;[4] the partridge always flies very low, because Daedalus, who was changed into a partridge, remembered the misfortune of his son, who had flown too high, and so on.[5] I have never forgotten being told in my childhood that the elder had once borne grapes as good as those of the vine, but after the treacherous Judas had hanged himself from this tree its fruit had become as bad as it is now. This myth cannot have been born before Christianity, and it is of precisely the same kind as those ancient metamorphoses collected by Ovid, showing that men have always had a liking for stories of this sort. They give pleasure in two ways: they strike the mind with some element of the supernatural, and they satisfy one's curiosity with the explanation that they appear to give for some natural and well-known fact.

(19) Beyond all these specific factors in the birth of myths, there were two others, more general, and of the very greatest assistance to them. The first is one's right to invent things similar to those already accepted, or to extend them by means of results that they entail. Some strange occurrence will give rise to the belief that a god has been in love with a woman – at once all stories will be packed with nothing but gods in love. You believe in the one all right: why not believe in the other? If gods have children, then they love them and use all their powers on their behalf when

occasion demands: and there you have an inexhaustible source of prodigies which cannot be dismissed as absurd.

(20) The second, which greatly assists us in our errors, is blind respect for antiquity. Our fathers believed in it: should we claim to be wiser than they? These two factors, put together, work wonders. The first, given the slightest foundation laid by the weakness of human nature, extends a folly to infinite proportions; the second, provided only this folly has gained a footing, preserves it for ever. The first, because we are already in error, obliges us to proceed further and further into error, and the second forbids us to extract ourselves, because we have been in error for some time.

(21) Thus we see, as far as seems likely, the reasons which have impelled myths to the heights of absurdity that they have reached, and the reasons which have kept them there; for nature's own part therein was neither entirely so ridiculous nor so great in quantity; nor are men so mad that they could have dreamt such fantasies up all at once, believed in them, and taken a very long time to rid themselves of them, had it not been for the interference of the two things just mentioned.

(22) If we examine the errors of recent times, we shall find that they have been established, extended and preserved by the same elements. Admittedly, we have not reached a degree of absurdity such as that of the ancient Greek myths, but that is because we did not set off from so absurd a starting-point in the first place. We are just as good as they were at extending and preserving our errors, but fortunately they are not so great, because we are illuminated by the lights of the true religion, and, in my opinion, by some rays of the true philosophy.

(23) The origin of myths is generally ascribed to the lively imagination of the Eastern peoples: personally, I ascribe it to the ignorance of the earliest men. Install a young people at the North Pole: its first histories will be myths – indeed, are not the earliest records of the Arctic entirely full of them? They are packed with nothing but giants and magicians. I do not deny that a strong, blazing sun can provide men's minds with a final cooking, and thus bring to perfection the inclination to gorge themselves on myths that they already have; for this, however, all men are gifted independently of the sun. Moreover, in everything that I have just said, I have credited men only with what is common to them all, and what must be as effective in the polar regions as at the Equator.

(24) If it were necessary, I could perhaps show clearly an astonishing resemblance between the myths of the American Indians and those of the Greeks. The former used to send the souls of the wicked to muddy and disagreeable lakes, as the Greeks used to send them to the banks of the Styx and the Acheron. The Indians believed that rain came from a girl in the clouds, playing with her little brother, who used to break her water-jug: is that not very like those water-nymphs, pouring water out of urns? According to Peruvian tradition, the Inca Manco Guyna Capac, whose father was the Sun, was able, thanks to his eloquence, to persuade the inhabitants of the country, who used to live like wild beasts in the middle of the jungle, to come out and conduct their lives according to rational laws. Orpheus did the same for the Greeks, and he too had the Sun for his father: this shows that for a time the Greeks were savages just as much as the Indians, that they were extracted from barbarism by the same means, and that the collective imaginations of these two peoples, so far removed from one another, have joined in believing the possessors of remarkable gifts to be children of the Sun. Since the Greeks, when they were still a young people, did not, for all their wit, reason more intelligently than the barbarians of America, who, as far as can be seen, were a fairly young people when discovered by the Spaniards, there is cause to believe that the American Indians would eventually have come round to reasoning as intelligently as the Greeks, had they been given enough time.

(25) The ancient Chinese also used the ancient Greek method of inventing stories to explain natural phenomena. What causes the ebb and flow of the tide? You can readily perceive that they are not going to think of the pressure of the Moon on our vortex.[6] It is because a princess had 100 children, of whom 50 inhabited the coast, and the other 50 the mountains. They produced two great peoples, who often make war on each other. When the inhabitants of the coast are beating those of the mountains and driving them back, we have the flow; when they are driven back by them and flee from the mountains to the coast, we have the ebb. This way of philosophizing is rather like that of Ovid's Metamorphoses, so true is it that the same ignorance has produced approximately the same effects among all peoples.

(26) It is for this reason that there is no people whose history does not begin with myths, except the Chosen People, among whom Providence, by a special dispensation, has preserved the truth. How remarkably slow men are to reach a rational conclusion, however simple it is! To preserve the memory of facts just as they happened is not something particularly marvellous; but many centuries will pass before people are able to do that, and until then the facts which are remembered will be just fantasies and dreams. It would be a great mistake, therefore, to be surprised that philosophy and rational thought should have been very crude and imperfect for many centuries, and that even today their progress should be so slow.

(27) Among most peoples, myths turned into religion; but among the Greeks they also turned, so to speak, into adornment. As the ideas that they provided did no more than correspond to the most common conformation of the human imagination, poetry and painting assimilated them perfectly well, and the love of the Greeks for those arts is well known. Deities of all kinds, disseminated everywhere, giving life and animation to everything, lacking interest in nothing, and, most important of all, often acting in a surprising fashion, cannot fail to produce a pleasing effect, whether in poems or in paintings, where it is merely a question of charming the imagination by presenting objects that it grasps easily and finds striking at the same time. How should myths not suit the imagination, which has itself given birth to them? When poetry or painting brings them into play to exhibit to our imagination they do no more than return its own handiwork to it.

(28) Errors, once established among men, have the habit of enrooting themselves very deeply, and attaching themselves to various means of support. Religion and common sense have freed us from belief in the Greek myths, but they still manage to survive among us through poetry and painting, and seem to have found the secret of

being necessary to them. Although we are infinitely more enlightened than those whose crude minds and simple faith invented the myths, we have little difficulty in recapturing the turn of mind that made them like the myths so much. They devoured the myths because they believed in them, and we devour them with as much pleasure, but without believing in them. There could be no better proof that imagination and reason have hardly anything to do with one another, and that things by which reason is no longer in the least deceived lose nothing of their charm with regard to the imagination.

(29) Up to now we have included in this history of the origin of myths only what is taken from the very heart of human nature, and indeed it is this which has prevailed there; but to this some external factors have been added, mention of which must not be omitted. For example, since the Phoenicians and Egyptians were older peoples than the Greeks, their myths were passed on to them, and were expanded in this process, while even their most truthful stories turned into myths. Phoenician (and perhaps Egyptian also) was full of words of double meaning, and in any case the Greeks hardly understood either tongue. Here was a wonderful source of misunderstandings. Two Egyptian women, whose surname means "dove", come to live in the forest of Dodona as fortune-tellers: the Greeks think that there are two real doves, perched in the trees and engaged in prophesying, and then before long it is the trees who are prophesying themselves. The word for a ship's rudder in Phoenician also means "speaking": the Greeks, in the story of the Argonauts, imagine that their ship had a rudder which actually spoke.[7] Modern scholars have found a thousand other examples, in which it is obvious that the origin of many myths is to be found in what are commonly called "false friends", which the Greeks were very prone to find in Phoenician or Egyptian. Personally, I feel that the Greeks, in spite of having so much wit and curiosity, showed a considerable lack of either the one or the other in not thinking of acquiring a perfect knowledge of those languages, or in neglecting them. Were they not well aware that almost all their cities were Egyptian or Phoenician colonies, and that most of their old stories came from those colonies? Were not the beginnings of their language and the antiquities of their country dependent upon these two languages? But these were barbarous languages, harsh and disagreeable. A charming delicacy of feeling!

(30) When the art of writing was invented, it helped greatly to spread myths and give one people the riches of all the follies of another, but on the other hand there were some positive advantages: to a small degree, the uncertainty of tradition was established, and the corpus of myths no longer expanded at the same rate, while remaining approximately in the same condition as at the time when writing was invented.

(31) Gradually, ignorance receded, and as a result less prodigies were seen, fewer false systems of philosophy were constructed, and stories became less mythical – for all of this follows from one thing to another. Up to this point the memory of things past had been handed down only through pure curiosity, but now it was realised that this could be useful, whether to preserve those things on which nations prided themselves, or to decide the disputes which could arise between different peoples, or to provide moral examples (and I think that this purpose was the last to enter men's heads, although people make the most noise about it). All this required that history should be true – by "true" I mean true as opposed to the stories of the past, which were full of nothing but absurdities. Thus, among some nations, history began to be written in a way that was more rational, and usually had the air of plausibility.

(32) From this point no new myths appear: people are satisfied with the preservation of old ones. But as for those minds that are madly in love with antiquity, is there anything of which they are incapable? It is fondly imagined that in these myths the secrets of physics and ethics lie concealed.

(33) Could it have been possible, that the Ancients should have dreamt such things up, without having some subtle purpose? The prestige of the Ancients always inspires respect; but those who invented the myths were undoubtedly not the sort of people who would know about ethics or physics, or find sufficient skill to disguise these sciences beneath an artificial imagery.

(34) Let us not look, therefore, for anything in myths except the history of the errors of the human mind. This mind is less capable of committing errors as soon as it knows just how capable of committing them it is. To have filled one's head with all the extravagances of the Phoenicians and Greeks does not constitute a science. But it is a science, to know what brought the Phoenicians and Greeks to these extravagances. All men are so much alike that there is no people whose follies should not make us tremble.

NOTES

1. Homer, *Iliad*, V, 835-863.
2. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, I, XXVI 65.
3. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, 401-531.
4. Ibid., IV, 51-166.
5. Fontenelle's memory betrays him: Ovid (ibid., VIII, 236-259) says that the nephew of Daedalus was turned into a partridge during a terrifying fall, and that consequently the partridge is afraid of heights.
6. Allusion to Descartes' theory of "vortices" as explaining tides, a theory espoused by Fontenelle, but conclusively demolished by Newton. Cf. Fontenelle, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes/Digresssion sur les anciens et les modernes*, ed. Robert Shackleton, Oxford 1955, editor's Introduction, pp. 4-5 and 22-7.
7. Here Fontenelle gives a confused version of the story about the oracle of Dodona, to be found in Herodotus (II, 55-7), before passing on to the legend of the prophesying beam cut from an oak of Dodona and placed in the stem of the *Argo* (cf. Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, I, 524-8 and IV, 580-592.