

History and citizenship: Does the reformed Greek Cypriot primary history curriculum include myths and legends that represent the 'other'?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the elements in ancient Greek myths that refer to the 'other' in the recently reformed Greek Cypriot history curriculum's primary phase programmes of study (MoEd, 2016). The article's opening section analyses the conceptual nature of such myths and their presence in modern curricula. It goes on to identify in these myths the presence of any foreign, different or gender-based 'other', and whether they are included in Greek Cypriot textual or visual teaching material about myths and legends. The article also considers the extent to which this material refers to characteristic, dominant female figures who play a leading role in classical myths and local historical narratives – figures associated with numerous Cypriot place names, traditions, historical accounts and fiction. The paper builds on Said's (1989) concept of otherness, post-colonial theory and Foucault's discourse analysis (Given, 2002) to consider in particular how the myth of Aphrodite, the gendered woman 'other', was marginalized during Venetian, Ottoman and British colonial rule of Cyprus from 1489 to 1960. More generally, it examines the significance of teaching ancient Greek myths as an aspect of Greek Cypriot citizenship education.

Keywords: Greece; Cyprus; ancient Greece; citizenship education; Greek Cypriot curriculum; Turkish Cypriots; identity; mythology and myths

Introduction

The relationship between myth and history

The relationship between myth and history has been the subject of extensive research that suggests that despite the fairy-tale structure and fluid form of myths, they contain sufficient historical traces to legitimize them as historical sources (Burkert, 1993; Csapo, 2005; Dieter, 2011; Karakantza, 2004). Identification of the concept of 'myth' dates back to the fourth century BC (Gourgiotou, 2004: 23), although it seems impossible to define precisely when it acquired its modern meaning (Dossas, 2008: 131). According to Buxton (2002), myths are multifaceted, polyphonic carriers of historical cultural messages and information with a defined social purpose. Myths are historically and geographically defined narratives with goals, a certain logic and purposes. Approaches to defining myths and their theoretical background include elements such as etymology, content, the aim of the narrative and the orientation of the interpreter (Kontakos, 2003: 31; Eliade, 1959). In terms of Greek mythology, a myth is a genre that has a specific, cosmogenic, theological or heroic content, with key mythical figures in leading roles.

In this sense, ancient Greek myths differ from Byzantine legends and the Norse sagas (Vernant, 1981; Foley, 2001: 2).

Significant changes in the academic approach to the study of myth and mythology occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing on the relationship of myths to their social and cultural environment (Dossas, 2008: 132), influenced by the sociological theories of Durkheim. However, the 'functional' or 'functionalist' theory of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and the Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytical interpretation of the symbolism of myths (Gourgiotou, 2004: 48), contributed to the creation of a structural analytical approach to analysing and interpreting them. Lévi-Strauss (1978) also developed a new psychological interpretation of the role of myths in archaic societies through examination of their mythical meaning and the unconscious that involved going beyond the strictly socially defined characteristics of myths.

Interpretative attempts to explain myths are 'a key to understanding the cultural past and the allegory of the critical interpretation of the present' (Siaflekis, 1994: 217). At the same time, the relationship between myth and history has been extensively examined and critiqued (Barthes, 1997; Burkert, 1979; Csapo, 2005; Karakantza, 2004). Academic experts no longer regard myths as repositories of accurate historical data because as an oral record they may only be reliable as historical evidence when referring to relatively recent events that their composers were aware of. However, as myths contain historical traces and imprints of the distant past, a 'historical approach' has validity in interpreting them (Mallios, 2011: 41–4).

According to Burkert (1979: 15), it is possible to use myths as testimony about the cultural characteristics of a historical era or society in which they are set. Myths become a guide to early human history, which may be imprinted in both their structures and detailed information. Myths of the classical era of ancient Greece identify characteristics of prehistoric tribal societies, for example in their attempts to master the natural environment, their religious beliefs and initiation ceremonies (Brillante, 1990: 107).

Today, mythology is a valuable educational resource for teaching about the roots of national and cultural history, two of the multifactorial elements that influence students' development of both personal and national identity. As such, myths are an integral element of many national curricula, playing a significant part in history, social sciences, humanities, literature, art and modern languages syllabuses.

Myths in education

The teaching of mythology (myth, legends, sagas) dates back to the fifth century BC. Teachers and educators recognize the power that mythological stories have to enchant and inspire students (Rearick, 1997), a factor perhaps reflected in their almost universal presence in national curricula. For example, in England the teaching of mythology initially focused on classical Greece as the cradle of civilization (Jenkyns, 1980: 42), a pattern that has continued to the present day. Mythology is included in the primary phase of the 2013 English National Curriculum for History's study units on 'Ancient Greece and its influence on the Western world' and 'The Roman Empire in Britain' (DfE, 2013). The curriculum expects 9–11-year-olds to 'increase their familiarity with a wide range of books, including myths, legends and traditional stories' (ibid.: 43).

Similarly, the Swedish curriculum (National Swedish Agency for Education, 2011) includes mainly Nordic myths, sagas, legends and songs in the teaching of Swedish history, as well as classical Greek myths in the teaching of European history. Likewise, in 1924 Ireland (INTO, 1996) introduced Celtic mythology because it supported Irish students' development of national identity as citizens of the newly independent Irish

state, Eire, previously part of the United Kingdom. Rooted in a strong ideology of cultural nationalism and propelled by the achievement of political independence, curricular policy was intimately linked to cultural and political objectives. The INTO (Irish National Teachers' Organisation), in reflecting the resurgence of national identity, adopted a motion at its Annual Congress in 1920 calling for the establishment of a special committee 'in order to frame a programme or series of programmes in accordance with Irish ideals and conditions, due regard being given to local needs and views' (ibid.: 7).

In modern Greece, mythology also occupies a central position in the primary phase curriculum, as the title of a standard textbook indicates, *Apo tin Istoría sti Mythología* [From Mythology to History] (Maistrelis *et al.*, 2008). Through ancient Greek myths and legends, Greek students learn about the origin of the universe and the gods, and the heroes and heroines of the ancient Greek world in the wider context of understanding the seminal role of ancient Greece in the history of both modern Greece and Western civilization. Crucially, in Cyprus it has a role in influencing their emerging sense of identity and awareness of being Greek Cypriots, and how they can play a positive role in harmoniously living in an island divided between Cyprus and its Turkish-occupied territories.

Introduction of a new Greek Cypriot history curriculum

The European Union's (EU) Educational Reform Commission was set up in 2004 to align European and national educational provision with countries' European objectives and their national imperatives (Campani, 2014). In 2009, the commission established a working party to create a framework for EU countries' history curricula (Makriyianni *et al.*, 2011; Makriyianni, 2011; Psaltis *et al.*, 2014). In the case of Cyprus, intense discussions on the history curriculum focused on the question of the threat to the teaching of national identity from adopting a multicultural, European and international approach. Curricular proposals accepted that ancient Greek mythology was a source of substantive special information about various aspects of the Greek past, including national identity, while highlighting the need to differentiate between the oral provenance of myths and reliable historical sources. Accordingly, students study mythology to find information about the past, for example about lifestyle and religion, to develop an awareness of their historical roots and emergent multifactorial identity, and to be able to distinguish between myth and history (MoEd, 2016).

The revised Cypriot educational system includes in the third- and fourth-grade syllabuses myths about the Minotaur, Daedalus and Icarus, and the Argonauts, and a summary of the *Iliad* including Homer, and myths that this paper addresses. Significantly, in relation to its primary curriculum, the Greek Cypriot government explains:

A basic responsibility of Primary Education is to help pupils become acquainted with their civilization and tradition and to develop respect and love for their national heritage, become aware of their national identity, the Greek language, the Greek Orthodox religion and their history. (MoEd, 2010: 55–6)

One of the five aims of the Cypriot primary curriculum complements the role that ancient Greek myths can play both in history education and citizenship education so as to 'develop social understanding, resiliency, belief in humanitarian values, respect for cultural heritage and human rights' (ibid.: 59).

The 'us' and 'other' in myths in the Greek Cypriot history curriculum

Central to the educational role of myths in teaching history and citizenship in the primary curriculum is the presence of 'us' and the 'other'. Focusing on these aspects highlights concepts such as conquest, colonialism, gender differentiation and acculturation – that is, the 'cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture' (ibid.: 60–1). These concepts also relate to the period of Cyprus's colonization and foreign rule for over a thousand years until independence in 1960. They enable teachers to explore with students how studying myths helps them to develop an understanding of, and sensitivity towards, similar current controversial and sensitive issues rooted in Cyprus's past, including its current partition.

In this way, myths can be a powerful testimony to the interaction and changing relationships between different cultures, civilizations and states – the 'us' and the 'other' – particularly where culturally and politically there is an asymmetrical relationship between the two civilizations. The 'us' usually defines the 'other' as inferior in crude, stereotypical terms, and uses representations that inflame and support, to different degrees, differentiation, discrimination, prejudice, subjugation and control. The concepts of 'us' and the 'other' are structurally ingrained in the relationship between states and jurisdictions, and within societies where there is a dominant race, faith, ideology, group, class or social stratum, with the 'us' dominating and even ruling the 'other' (Said, 1989). Here, 'us' and the 'other' are historical and cultural constructs.

The presence of the 'other' in myths (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1992: 30) involves overlapping sets of dynamic mutual relationships, complex transformations and shifting tensions in the field of social institutions, ritual and political life (Segal, 1982: 231–2). The concept of otherness in myth is not a single, unitary idea (Dossas, 2008: 9). So, in analysing myths, it is necessary in each case to define what 'otherness' means, and where the 'other' is in juxtaposition to the 'us', particularly where the 'us' is the dominant, colonizing party. In the rest of this paper, this colonial and post-colonial perspective enables the identification, analysis and explanation of the 'other' in the Daedalus, Theseus and the Minotaur, Hector and Jason, and the Argonauts myths in the Greek Cypriot primary curriculum.

The 'other' in the myths selected in Greek Cypriot primary education

Daedalus

The Daedalus myth reflects issues arising from the interrelationship between an advanced and a less advanced civilization. The mythical Athenian, Daedalus, is the creator of the palace of Knossos and its Labyrinth, a maze beneath the palace on the Mediterranean island of Crete. The myth raises issues of migration and acceptance of 'us' by the 'others', where the 'us' are immigrants from a technologically and culturally more advanced civilization. Daedalus symbolizes Athenian cultural superiority over Minoan culture in the fields of architecture, invention, technology, craftsmanship and the creative arts – particularly painting, pottery, weaving and carving. The Cretan ruler, King Minos, as the 'other', employed Daedalus to design, build, decorate and furnish his palace of Knossos with frescoes, artefacts and statues.

The Daedalus myth is highly relevant to the role of history in education for citizenship in liberal democratic states and jurisdictions, as it raises questions about how the 'other' treats the 'us' where the 'other' has jurisdiction over the 'us'. The

myth suggests that states such as Minoan Crete, while being militarily and politically dominant, can appreciate, respect and accept the benefits they gain from a more culturally advanced civilization.

Theseus and the Minotaur

Minoan Crete's role as the 'other' vis-à-vis the Athenian 'us' is also reflected in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. A primary school version reads:

King Minos of Crete was a powerful man with a very strong army whom rulers of neighbouring Mediterranean states, including Athens, feared. When he ordered their rulers to send him goods and money they obeyed. It was the only way to stop him going to war with them as they knew his army and navy would easily defeat their forces.

In the Labyrinth below his palace King Minos kept a huge, terrifying monster – the Minotaur. It had the head of a bull and the body of a man. The Minotaur ate people – men, women and children – whom King Minos fed to it in its labyrinth. Once in the maze the Minotaur's sacrificial victims would wander around in its jet-black darkness until the Minotaur found and devoured them. (Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus, 2013: 48)

Athens was a kingdom whose ruler obeyed King Minos. Each year, King Minos ordered the Athenian king to send him 14 children to feed to the Minotaur. Theseus was the king's son, and volunteered to go to Crete to end King Minos's barbaric practice of sacrificing Athenian children to the Minotaur. Theseus sailed from Athens to Crete with the children and was happy to be the first to enter the Labyrinth to encounter the Minotaur. With the help of King Minos's daughter, Ariadne, who had fallen in love with him and had slipped him a dagger with which to fight the Minotaur, Theseus killed the monster after a ferocious fight. Emerging from the Labyrinth, he then escaped from Knossos and sailed for Athens with the 14 children and Ariadne.

Both the Daedalus and the Theseus and the Minotaur myths portray Minoan Crete as the 'other', a culturally underdeveloped and barbaric civilization. The myths tell of Minoan acceptance and assimilation of the cultural superiority of the 'us', the more advanced Athenian civilization epitomized in both the creation of the palace of Knossos and the killing of the cannibalistic Minotaur.

Hector and the Trojan War

In Greek mythology, the Trojan War was waged against the city of Troy by the Achaeans (Greeks) after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband Menelaus, king of Sparta. The war is one of the most important events in Greek mythology and has been narrated through many works of Greek literature, most notably Homer's *Iliad*. (Wikipedia, 2018)

Homer's *Iliad* tells the story of the Trojan war between Troy and an alliance of Greek states from an Achaean (Greek) point of view. Central to the *Iliad* is the myth of Hector, the greatest Trojan warrior. Hector, the son of Priam, King of Troy, is the 'other', while the Greeks are the 'us'. The *Iliad* portrays Hector as an acceptable heroic figure whom the Greeks respect as he shares common ideals and values, despite being a deadly enemy. In the final section of the *Iliad*, Hector fights Achilles, the Greeks' greatest warrior. Achilles defeats and kills Hector, mutilates his body and exhibits it as a victorious

trophy. Achilles then responds magnanimously to appeals from Hector's father Priam to return Hector's body for a Trojan state funeral:

Then thus the ancient King godlike replied.
 'If thou indeed be willing that we give
 Burial to noble Hector, by an act
 So generous, O Achilles!
 Nine days we wish to mourn him in the house;
 To his interment we would give the tenth,
 And to the public banquet; the eleventh
 Shall see us build his tomb; and on the twelfth
 (If war we must) we will to war again'.
 (Homer, 1860: lines 823–35)

Achilles' volte-face confirms Hector's heroic status as an equal. Achilles' treatment of Hector can be a stimulus for consideration of the role of dialogue, discussion and mediation in teaching students tolerance, understanding, forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion, acceptance and respect for even the most bitter of enemies when considering difficult and controversial issues.

Jason and the Argonauts: The Golden Fleece and Medea

There are multiple references to the 'other' in a different context in the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, in which Jason, the hero of the myth, sails on a voyage to the kingdom of Colchis on the edge of the world known to the ancient Greeks. Jason's mission is to retrieve, or rather steal, the fabulously valuable Golden Fleece of a ram that the King of Colchis keeps in a glade with a dragon as its guard. On their voyage to Colchis, Jason and his crew of warriors, the Argonauts, have many adventures. In these they represent the dominant, hegemonic 'us' in how they interact and treat the 'other' that they encounter.

When Jason and the Argonauts arrive in Colchis, they meet King Estes and his daughter Medea, an exotic, magical, powerful, independent-minded and strong-willed female 'other'. Medea immediately falls in love with Jason and decides to help him gain the Golden Fleece. The king had promised to surrender the Golden Fleece to Jason but then refuses, telling Jason he can only have it if he survives a challenge: the sowing of a field with dragon's teeth that will spring from the ground as armed warriors and try to kill him. Jason survives the dragon's teeth challenge with the help of Medea, who uses magic to protect him from the dragon-teeth warriors and also tells him how to kill them. When her father still refuses to hand over the Golden Fleece, she helps Jason steal it. She, Jason and the Argonauts then escape from Colchis and return to Greece.

Through Medea's behaviour, the Jason and the Argonauts myth challenges one of the most powerful bonds in ancient Greek society: that of blood and kinship and the convention of the absolute dedication of daughters to their fathers, at the expense of any other loyalties, including to their husbands or lovers. Medea defies tradition, custom and the established exercise of patriarchal authority and power to use her magical powers to oppose her father's attempts to deny Jason the Golden Fleece. The myth also raises other issues of major importance and relevance today. It teaches that moral imperatives underpin individual autonomy, which can result in a radically different perspective on the social position of women (Dossas, 2008: 160).

'Us', the 'other' and the issue of gender

Both Ariadne in the Theseus and the Minotaur myth, and Medea in the Jason and the Argonauts myth relate to the contentious issue of the marginalization of mythical female figures, who play a key role in prehistoric, ancient Greek, Roman and post-Roman Cypriot history (Peristianis, 1995; Stavrides and Kyriazis, 2009: 28–37). The worship of the goddess of fertility or Mother Nature (Paulides, 1991; Papageorgiou, 2004) indicates that in prehistoric Cyprus, female deities had a major role. During the classical Greek and Roman Cypriot era, fertility goddess worship transmuted into worship of the goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, who is identified with the island. The conversion of Cyprus to Christianity and the independence of the Church of Cyprus from the fifth century AD saw the Virgin Mary replace Aphrodite as the island's female deity and iconic figure. The Virgin Mary thus continues the unbroken tradition from the prehistory of Cyprus of a female's dominant cultural, social, national and religious role.

In 'Corrupting Aphrodite: Colonialist interpretations of the Cyprian goddess', Given (2002) addressed the question of what happened to the Aphrodite myth during the period that Cyprus was under post-Roman Byzantine rule. The rulers of Cyprus marginalized Aphrodite and portrayed her negatively. To them, Aphrodite was a threat to their regimes as a symbolic focal point, an exotic 'other', for potential Cypriot resistance. Confirmation of Aphrodite's treatment under Cypriot rule is reflected in the contrast between her extensive presence in oral myths and the few statues of her that have survived (Paulides, 1991). The connection of Aphrodite to a heroic archaic Cypriot past and the implications of her post-Roman representation (Spurr, 1993) have established and strengthened perceptions of her iconic Cypriot role (Given, 2002). The ideology that guided post-Roman interpretations of Aphrodite (Koulouri, 2012: 8) marginalized both her and other significant female contributions to Cypriot cultural tradition. The significance, attributes and role of iconic females in Cypriot myths are almost totally absent in the official Greek Cypriot primary school teaching materials. The Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture oversaw and distributed the only textbook that mentions her, but it excludes Aphrodite's 'voice' and significance, only representing her pictorially.

Conclusions: Mythology and its educational implications

This paper has examined whether recent reforms of the Cypriot history curriculum including ancient Greek myths involve 'us' and the 'other' (Mallios, 2011). The presence in such myths of 'us' and the 'other', where civilizations encounter and confront each other, provides a rich educational resource for studying, in particular, gender, ethnic, social, ideological, faith, cultural, communal, familial, tribal, regional and national issues, and controversial and difficult issues involving rights, values, morals, ethics and behaviours. A unifying factor is the explicit and implicit threat of the 'us' to the 'other' – the ruling elite of the others' indigenous jurisdiction or state. The resolution of such encounters enables both history and citizenship educators safely to problematize often controversial and difficult subjects arising from social, cultural and political interaction contextualized within myths. Controversial and difficult issues central to both history and citizenship education permeate ancient Greek myths such as Daedalus, Theseus and the Minotaur, Hector, Jason and the Argonauts, and the Golden Fleece and Medea, and the representation of Aphrodite in the Byzantine era.

The Greek Cypriot primary curriculum's myths can play a positive role in the historical education of students to understand their emerging Cypriot identity, and the

beliefs, values and qualities they need for active citizenship in a liberal democratic state. Selected myths are a powerful educational tool that teachers can use to problematize issues concerning assimilation, incorporation, acceptance or rejection. The interaction between the 'us' and the 'other' in myths can be influential in educating for living in the European Union, which is characterized by mobility, migration, assimilation, integration and the coexistence of multiple sociocultural groups and ethnicities. Teaching about the 'other' from different perspectives can help remove stereotypical, bigoted preconceptions and misinterpretations. The interest of students and teachers in myths can be demonstrated in the context of European partnerships between primary schools, where myths and legends offer opportunities for shared investigation and cooperation.

Nevertheless, we should note that the female 'other' is absent from the myths selected for the new Cypriot curriculum. Their presence is limited to individual, minimal, visual representations, despite the wealth of myths throughout the ancient Greek and Roman periods from Cyprus in which female figures dominate, and that characterize the ancient Greek and Roman periods.

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