

Playing with Traditions
The Near Eastern Background to Hesiod's Story
of the Five Human Races

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A frequently asked question about the Near Eastern background of early Greek stories is 'how, if at all, this material might affect our interpretation of Greek literature'.¹ This question entails another important one, namely whether or not the Greeks themselves were aware of the Near Eastern origin of any of these stories. Glenn Most has stated that 'the similarities between the *Iliad* and *Gilgameš* or the *Theogony* and *Enūma Eliš* are evident and fascinating for us, but they were quite unknown, and of no interest whatsoever, to the Greeks'.² In this chapter I will challenge this assumption. I will argue that Hesiod's audience was aware of the oriental or, at least, foreign origin of the story of the five human races,³ and that Hesiod, or whoever composed the *Works and Days*,⁴ did his best to make it acceptable to a Greek audience. This argument assumes that this story has a Near Eastern background and was recently imported into Greece when the poem in its current version was composed.⁵

In order to defend this thesis, I will discuss the criteria by which we can determine if a Greek story or theme was adopted from the Near East or not, including possible indications that it arrived relatively recently in

¹ López-Ruiz 2010: 34, quoting Haubold 2002: 2, quoting Halliwell 1998: 235. I would like to thank the two editors of this volume for their insightful and critical comments, which made me rethink and reformulate parts of my argument. I know they do not agree with all I say in this chapter, so they should not be held responsible for its failings.

² Most 2003: 385, quoted with approval by Haubold 2013a: 11.

³ It is worth pointing out that Hesiod distinguishes between five (or four: see note 65 below) different human races (γένη), not ages, although the oriental story on which he based his account probably spoke of four metallic ages; cf. Currie 2012b: 39.

⁴ By convention, I will refer to the poet of the *Works and Days* as Hesiod, although I am persuaded by the arguments of Nagy 1990 and others that Hesiod is a poetic persona who represents the internal narrator but not necessarily the actual poet-performer; see most recently Koning 2018. This question does not affect my argument in this chapter.

⁵ I assume with most scholars that the version of the *Works and Days* we possess today dates back to the seventh century BCE, the same period that in the history of Greek art is referred to as the 'orientalising period'. On the dating of Hesiod's poems, see Koning 2018: 21–4.

Greece, and apply them to the story of the five human races in Hesiod. I will argue for a Near Eastern origin of this story against those who maintain that the story has a native Greek, a universal or Indo-European origin. The heart of the chapter is a demonstration that the way in which Hesiod introduces, adapts and integrates the story within the composition of the *Works and Days* as a whole strongly suggests that he expected his audience to be aware of its foreign origins. The paper ends with a discussion of what significance Hesiod or his audience would have attached to such recognisable foreign tales: would they have valued them more or less than their own native traditions?

The Near Eastern Origin of Hesiod's Story of the Five Human Races

I have identified the following six criteria that can help us to determine if we are dealing with an adaptation of a Near Eastern story or not.⁶ They are for the most part based on earlier discussions about possible Near Eastern influences on Greek literature.⁷ By an adaptation I mean a story or theme in Greek literature for which a Near Eastern story or theme is the most likely source, even if we have to postulate several intermediaries between the Greek and Near Eastern versions that have survived.⁸ I have identified the following conditions for the identification of a possible Near Eastern parallel. They will be explained in further detail below:

- (1) There is a reasonable correspondence between the Greek and the Near Eastern text(s).
- (2) The story or theme is not also part of an Indo-European or other tradition or attributable to common human experience.
- (3) It is quite unique and therefore unlikely to have been fashioned independently in Greece and the Near East.
- (4) It occurs in isolation from other Greek traditions, which it contradicts.⁹

⁶ For a more elaborate explanation of these criteria, see Lardinois 2018, where I also explain what I mean by 'Greece' and 'the Near East' in the Late Bronze/Early Iron Age and identify possible ways of transmission.

⁷ E.g., Penglase 1994: 5–12; Bernabé 1995; van Dongen 2008; López-Ruiz 2014a: 159–65; Rollinger 2015 and Currie 2016: 1–38.

⁸ Some have argued that only themes passed from one tradition to another (e.g., Mondy 1990), while others have emphasised the role whole narratives must have played in the transmission of stories and ideas from the Near East (e.g., Currie 2016: esp. 147–222). We don't have to choose between these two options.

⁹ This criterion and the following one are applied in Burkert 1992: 88–127.

- (5) It is found together with other adaptations from the Near East in the same Greek text or author.
- (6) Its Near Eastern origin helps to clarify aspects of the Greek text.¹⁰

The first three of these criteria are essential for arguing that a story or theme in Greek literature originated in the Near East. The other three are optional, but when they are met, they are an indication that the adaptation probably happened relatively recently. I will now apply these six criteria to Hesiod's story of the five human races.

The first and most important criterion is that there should be a reasonable similarity between the Greek and the Near Eastern texts. In *Works and Days* 106–201, Hesiod accounts how first there was a human race of gold, which lived like gods, subsequently a silver and bronze race, which progressively got worse, then the race of heroes, who fought at Thebes and at Troy, and finally the present race of iron, in which there are diseases and humans have to work hard, and which, Hesiod predicts, could get even worse and then be destroyed by Zeus as well.

Many scholars have recognised a correspondence between this story and one Indian and two Near Eastern accounts, starting with Richard Reitzenstein.¹¹ The first one of these is the *Book of Daniel*, which is part of the Hebrew Bible. It dates to the second century BCE, although it draws on much older sources.¹² In the relevant sections (2:31–45), Daniel explains a dream to the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar, who had dreamt that he saw a great statue with a head made of gold, a chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs made of bronze, its legs of iron and its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. Daniel explains that the different metals represent four successive kingdoms that progressively get worse. The last one of these is probably meant to refer to the contemporary kingdom of the Seleucids, which started as iron, but in the process got mixed with clay and has become brittle. The iron period in this story thus consists of two parts: a better and a worse half, just as in Hesiod. I will come back to this.

The other Near Eastern source is the *Avesta*, parts of which are preserved in the *Bahman Yast* and *Denkard*.¹³ These texts are even younger, dating to the early Middle Ages, but they go back to much earlier material as well.¹⁴ In them God presents to the great sage Zardust, known in the West as

¹⁰ Cf. Currie 2016: 33–6, who uses the term 'meaningfulness' for this criterion.

¹¹ Reitzenstein 1924–5. See, more recently, West 1997: 312–19, Woodard 2007: 112–50, Rutherford 2009: 14–16 and Currie 2012b: 58–9.

¹² DiTommaso 2005: 49–50. These sources may include Hesiod's *Works and Days*, see below.

¹³ West 1997: 313 n. 103. ¹⁴ Boyce 1984.

Zarathustra, a vision in which he sees a tree with four branches: one gold, one silver, one steel, and one of adulterated iron. God explains that the branches represent four historical periods. It starts with Zardust's own time, in which God still speaks to him and the true faith was established. The times then progressively become worse until the devils, called Dews, take over in the age of adulterated iron.

A third text that is usually connected to these accounts is a passage from the Indian epic *Mahābhārata*, which attained its present form between the fourth century BCE and the fourth century CE.¹⁵ In this passage four successive ages are described not in terms of metals but of throws of the dice. Just like the metals in the other versions of the story, these throws represent ages that progressively get worse.

Common to all these stories is the idea of four or five human ages that progressively get worse, resulting in the present age, and that are named after metals. This last feature is not found in the *Mahābhārata*, and it is therefore debatable if the Indian epic shows enough correspondence with the other texts to assume a connection. The resemblance between the other three stories is, however, close enough that it is reasonable to postulate a common source. The question then becomes what this source might have been and where we should locate it.

Michael Witzel has argued that the story of three or four ages is central to the mythologies of all peoples living in Eurasia and Northern and Middle America and goes back to a common tradition that formed itself in a period before the first passage of humans into the Americas (c. 20,000 BCE).¹⁶ In that case it could have been part of a much older, Greek tradition as well. Witzel has to distinguish, however, between two versions of the tale: one dealing with different generations of gods and the other with different races of humans. In Mesoamerica, furthermore, the races of humans progressively get better, not worse.¹⁷ The correspondence between these tales is therefore, in my view, not very close, and the common elements that remain (gods have ancestors, there were human races before the present one) could well have been arrived at by these peoples independently of one another. For the same reason, I am not convinced that we have to postulate a common origin for the Hesiodic story of the metal ages and the tale of the four human races in the

¹⁵ van Buitenen 1973: xxiii–xxv.

¹⁶ Witzel 2012: 86–90.

¹⁷ Witzel 2012: 88–9. In ancient Greece both versions of the tale are attested: the divine succession myth and the story of the five human races. Both of these Greek stories, in their present form, seem to have been influenced by Near Eastern versions: for the divine succession myth, see note 40 below; I argue for the Near Eastern origin of Hesiod's story of the five human races in this chapter.

Mahābhārata. What makes the Hesiodic version of the story of the five human races, however, unique and closely corresponding to the versions of the story that are preserved in the *Book of Daniel* and the *Avesta*, is the identification of these races with metals. This detail shows that this particular conception of the different races of men must post-date the passage of humans into the Americas, because metallurgy was not discovered before the fourth millennium BCE.¹⁸ The story probably originated in the Near East after 1200 BCE, when the melting down of iron ore was perfected and iron became more widely available, or earlier, but with a different kind of metal ranked as the least desirable one (see below).

Because all the corresponding texts are later than Hesiod's *Works and Days*, it has been argued that the line of transmission is from Hesiod to the *Avesta* and the *Book of Daniel*,¹⁹ or that the story is derived from an older Indo-European tradition, linking up in this way with Hesiod.²⁰ I consider this very unlikely. For one thing the story in Hesiod sticks out from its immediate context, as we will see. It is chronologically incompatible with the story of Prometheus that Hesiod tells both in the *Theogony* and in the *Works and Days*, and it is also different from the ages of men as represented in the Homeric epics. Hesiod's insertion of the race of heroes, which is traditional but not associated with any type of metal, further indicates that he adapted an original story that spoke about four or five metal races. An Indo-European origin of this story is unlikely, if we exclude the story from the *Mahābhārata* as a parallel, as I have advocated. No trace of successive metal ages is found in the Vedas nor is it attested in the mythology of any other Indo-European people outside the Near East.²¹

The author of the *Book of Daniel* ascribes the dream that tells the story of the different metal ages to a Mesopotamian monarch, suggesting perhaps that he associated the story with this region.²² It is therefore more likely that both the *Avesta* and the Hebrew Bible drew on an older,

¹⁸ Witzel 2012: 88 does cite as a possible parallel to Hesiod's story a myth of the Navajo that distinguishes between a golden-coloured age, a silver- and copper-coloured one and a black age. Because metallurgy was invented only after humans crossed into the Americas, this myth must represent an independent tradition. Alternatively, the Navajo story was somehow influenced by the account in Hesiod or, more likely, by the *Book of Daniel* after the arrival of Europeans in the Americas.

¹⁹ Boyce 1984: 70–2, Koenen 1994: 13. Koenen admits, however, that Hesiod 'grafted an heroic age onto a pre-existing narrative structure that catalogued the ages of mankind' and that 'the series of metallic ages is pre-Hesiodic' (24) and was influenced by oriental tales about cycles of ages, but he places this influence at an earlier period, in the second millennium BCE (25).

²⁰ Nelson 1998: 68, Woodard 2007: 112–50. ²¹ West 1997: 313 n. 104 and 2007: 23.

²² For geographical references as possible indications of the origin of the story, see Currie 2016: 201–4.

Mesopotamian story, the more so since we find more examples of entities ranked by metals in Mesopotamian sources preceding Hesiod's account. Babylonian mystical and mythological explanatory works, dating to the second millennium BCE, identify gods in order of importance with precious metals: a Neo-Assyrian fragment of a god-list, for example, equates the chief god An with silver, while other gods are identified with gold (Enlil), copper (Ea) and tin (Ninazal).²³ Another set of tablets ranks a group of Babylonian gods as, respectively, silver (Angal), gold (Enmešarra), copper (Ea), tin (Ninmah) and lead (Ninurta).²⁴ In Hittite mythology the primordial god Kumarbi, who bears some resemblance to Kronos, the god who presides over the golden race in Hesiod's account, has a son named Silver, who briefly reigned in his stead.²⁵ The identification of gods and, possibly, their reigns with metals is therefore attested in the Near East before Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Akkadian sources further recognise multiple ages of men that are successively destroyed by the gods.²⁶ Finally, we find the equation of the moral impurities of Israël with base metals in the Hebrew Bible outside the *Book of Daniel* as well.²⁷

I therefore consider it most likely that the story of the metal ages originated in Mesopotamia and spread from there to Greece, Iran and ancient Israel. It has been argued that this tale must have reached Greece in the Iron Age, because of the inclusion of iron as a metal of low value.²⁸ This is not necessarily the case: it is theoretically possible that the story reached Greece in an earlier period with a different list of metals, which Hesiod or one of his predecessors adapted to include iron.²⁹ There are other reasons, however, to assume that the story did reach Greece around the same time the *Works and Days* attained its present form, as we will see, making it likely that iron was already identified as the last metal in the Near Eastern story that Hesiod adapted.

The basic story of the metal ages has survived in two different versions. In the *Avesta* and in the *Book of Daniel* it is tied to a vision or dream that is given to a sage or king at the beginning of the cycle, in the golden age. The

²³ CT 24.49 (K.4349) E 3–6, quoted by Livingstone 1986: 182; cf. West 1997: 312.

²⁴ Livingstone 1986: 176–7.

²⁵ See Bachvarova 2016: 27–8 and 184–5 for the evidence; cf. Rutherford 2018: 9.

²⁶ For example, the Akkadian story of Atrahasis, which distinguishes four ages of humans, the current one and three previous ages that were destroyed by the supreme god Enlil: López-Ruiz 2014b: 68–81; cf. Koenen 1994: 20–2.

²⁷ *Isa.* 1:22 and 25, *Jer.* 6:27–30, *Ezek.* 22:17–19 and *Mal.* 3:2–3, quoted by West 1997: 312.

²⁸ West 1997: 319; Rutherford 2009: 16.

²⁹ The Babylonian sources quoted above distinguish gold, silver, copper, tin and lead. They predate the widespread use of iron.

story in the *Works and Days*, on the other hand, is told by a poet towards the end of the cycle. This may of course be a coincidence, but it could also be an indication that these two versions represent two different stages in the telling of the story. In that case the Hesiodic version could have been the older one, from which the source of *Daniel* and the *Avesta* deviated by recasting the story as a vision set in the golden age. I consider it more likely, however, that Hesiod adapted the version of the story as preserved in the *Book of Daniel* and the *Avesta*, to cast himself as a (Near Eastern) prophet or seer, but now situated in the present, because there are other indications in the text that Hesiod is presenting himself as a prophet or holy man in this part of the *Works and Days*.³⁰

The story in the *Book of Daniel* shares a unique feature with Hesiod's account in the *Works and Days*, which is the split of the current iron age into a bad and a potentially even worse period. This could have been part of the original story, but I would not exclude the possibility that the author of the *Book of Daniel* adopted this detail from Hesiod's poem, which in the Hellenistic period, when the author wrote, was a well-known Greek text. The *Daniel* story shares other similarities with the *Avesta* version, however, such as its setting in Mesopotamia and the presentation of the story as a dream or vision that is set in the Golden Age. The author of the *Book of Daniel* therefore must have drawn for his version of the story on an older Mesopotamian or Persian tale that inspired the *Avesta* story, as well.³¹

Of the three sources that preserve the tale no less than two are written in an Indo-European language: Greek and Persian. It is therefore understandable that some scholars have assumed that the story must have had an Indo-European origin and passed, either through Hesiod or a Persian source, to the one Semitic text that contains the story, the *Book of Daniel*.³² I have argued above that I consider this unlikely. First one should recognise that, although the Persians, like the Hittites, spoke an Indo-European language, their culture, including their mythology, was heavily influenced by the Semitic cultures on which they bordered.³³ The story of the metal ages is not attested among any other Indo-European-

³⁰ Scodel 2014; cf. Currie 2007: 185–97, van Noorden 2015: 86.

³¹ Boyce 1984: 71 argues that the mixture of iron and clay in *Daniel* is derived from the adulterated or intermixed iron found as the fourth type of metal in the Zoroastrian version of the story and that the Hebrew version of the story goes back to an Iranian tale. This explanation does not preclude influence from Hesiod's poem as well.

³² Woodard 2007: 112–50. West 2007: 23 disagrees, and Calame 2009: 95–6 is sceptical.

³³ For the Hittites, e.g., Metcalf 2015a: esp. 79–103, Bachvarova 2016 and Rutherford 2018. The same has been argued, of course, for ancient Greece: e.g., Burkert 1992 and 2004, West 1997, López-Ruiz 2010 and 2014a.

speaking people nor in any archaic Greek source outside the *Works and Days*. It fits, on the other hand, the distinction of different human ages and the attachment of metals to different levels of gods in our Babylonian sources. A Semitic or Sumerian origin of the story, therefore, seems more likely than an Indo-European one. When the story passed from the Near East to Greece in the late eighth or seventh century BCE, it probably did so as an oral tale.³⁴

Now that we have found a reasonable correspondence between the story of the five human races as narrated by Hesiod and Near Eastern sources and we have argued that it is unlikely that the Greeks inherited the story from an Indo-European tradition or derived it from common human experience, but probably adapted it from a Near Eastern tale, we still do not know if we are dealing with a recent adaptation or one that had been part of Greek culture for a long time. I have therefore identified three additional criteria that can help us to determine if an adaptation in Greek literature is relatively recent or not. The first one of these is the so-called argument of isolation, which applies when a story or theme stands out from its Greek context. If a parallel with a Near Eastern text contradicts better-attested Greek traditions, the story or theme is more likely to have been a recent adaptation. Adrian Kelly has objected to this criterion, arguing that the fact that a theme occurs only once or very sporadically in our Greek sources does not necessarily mean that it cannot be old and originally Greek.³⁵ He is, of course, right about this, but when we find, at the same time, a close parallel to this theme in a Near Eastern text, especially if it dates from more or less the same period as the Greek text,³⁶ it does make it more likely that it was recently adapted from the Near East than when the theme is repeated often and appears to be well integrated in other Greek texts. It does not prove it, but it does make it more plausible.

The story of the five human races is not found in archaic Greek poetry outside Hesiod's *Works and Days*. It is factually incompatible with the

³⁴ Oral transmission is now the consensus for the transmission of stories from the Near East to Greece in the Mycenaean or archaic Greek period: see e.g., Henkelman 2006, López-Ruiz 2010: 5, Haubold 2013a: 24 n. 24, Bachvarova 2016: 5 and *passim*. Currie 2016: 198–9, 207, however, argues that (some) Greeks in the archaic period must have been acquainted with fixed texts, either in oral or written form, close to the texts we possess from the Near East, in order to explain some of the more comprehensive allusions. In later periods it is more likely that some Greeks learned to read cuneiform texts or texts written in Aramaic, Phoenician or Persian.

³⁵ Kelly 2008: esp. 260–73.

³⁶ Lardinois 2018: 901. If we include the Babylonian stories about the different ages of humans and the equation of gods with metals of different values, the period in which this theme is attested in the Near East extends from the middle of the second millennium through the middle of the first millennium BCE (*Daniel*) to the middle of the first millennium CE (*Avesta*).

story of Prometheus, which Hesiod narrates just before this story and which is also attested in the *Theogony*. It is also incompatible with the ages of men as represented in the Homeric epics. Homer only knows of two, or possibly three,³⁷ ages: the age of heroes, whom he characterises as demi-gods, and the current age of men. Hesiod obviously inserts the age of heroes, known from the Greek epic tradition, into the prototypical scheme of the four metal ages. Hesiod himself signals to his audience that this is a tale that is different from the Prometheus story by introducing it as ‘another *logos* which I will summarise well and skillfully’ (ἕτερόν τοι ἐγὼ λόγον ἐκκορυφώσω / εὔ καὶ ἐπισταμένως).³⁸ I will come back to this.

Hesiod’s story of the metal races of men is surrounded by other possible adaptations of Near Eastern stories and themes. The whole genre of (extensive) wisdom literature, as exemplified by Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, seems to have been influenced by Near Eastern and Egyptian precedents.³⁹ Hesiod’s introduction of the story of the five races is different, however, from the way in which, for example, the story of the succession of divine kings, starting with Ouranos and ending with Zeus, is incorporated in the *Theogony*. This story has also been generally recognised as derived from Near Eastern sources, including the Hittite *Song of Emergence* and related compositions,⁴⁰ but it is fully integrated in the poem (not introduced as ‘another story’) and it does not contradict the dominant account of Zeus’s descent in the Homeric epics.⁴¹ This story therefore does not meet my fourth and sixth criteria: it does not occur in isolation from other, early Greek traditions, and the recognition of its Near Eastern origin, which I consider beyond doubt, is not necessary for understanding Hesiod’s account. It therefore does not have to be a recent adaptation, but could have entered the Greek epic tradition already in the second millennium BCE.⁴² The story of the different metal ages, on the other hand, is explicitly marked in the text as different from the preceding account of the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus.

³⁷ Most 1998: 121.

³⁸ *Op.* 106–7. For text and translation of the *Works and Days* I follow Most 2006–7.

³⁹ Walcot 1962, West 1997: 306–33, Rutherford 2009: 17–19 and Scodel 2014.

⁴⁰ Metcalf 2015a: 176 with extensive bibliography, adding Rutherford 2018 and Kelly, Chapter 16 in this volume.

⁴¹ On alternative versions of the succession myth presented by divine characters in the epics, see Lardinois 2018. They should be distinguished from the version adopted by the narrator, which is very close to that of Hesiod.

⁴² Rutherford 2018: 17–18.

Traditional Elements in Hesiod's Story of the Five Human Races

Hesiod's account of the metal races of men is laced with elements from traditional Greek mythology. Many of these elements have been identified by Glenn Most, who uses them to argue for the Greek origin of the story of the five human races.⁴³ A Greek origin of the story fails to explain, however, the incompatibility of the story with the preceding myth of Prometheus, which proclaims an immediate transition from a blissful period before Mekone, similar to the Golden Age, to the present age of men.

My contention is that Hesiod expected his audience to recognise the incompatibility of the two stories. As Richard Buxton remarks, 'To accuse Hesiod of inconsistency, of being unable to sustain a logical argument, would be wholly to misunderstand him. He *signals* the fact that the two stories are contradictory.'⁴⁴ What Hesiod subsequently does, however, is to insert elements from more traditional stories, such as the myth of Prometheus, into the 'foreign' and contradictory account of the successive metal ages. In this way he adapts the foreign story to its new Greek context without hiding what he is doing. This adaptation was made easier by the fact that the epic tradition already distinguished between different races of men (pre-flood or pre-Mekone, heroes, current generation), as we have seen, but the mapping of these races onto a series of metal races and expanding their number to five was something new.

Hesiod is here doing something that Dutch classicists have identified as 'anchoring innovation'.⁴⁵ He introduces a new story, borrowed from the Near East, into Greek mythology (an 'innovation'), but makes this story better understandable and more acceptable to his Greek audience by connecting it to ('anchoring it into') descriptions of gods, heroes and giants they know from their own tradition. Glenn Most remarks, at the end of the article in which he argues for the Greek origin of the story of the metal ages, 'I do not mean to suggest that Hesiod could not possibly have derived some degree of inspiration for his myth of the races from oriental

⁴³ Most 1998.

⁴⁴ Buxton 1994: 178. The attempt by Sourvinou-Inwood 1997 to reason away the differences in chronology between Hesiod's story of the five human races and the Prometheus story fails to convince. Her suggestion, for example, that the silver race lived just like the golden one under the reign of Kronos, and represents the paradisaical state in which humans lived before Mekone, is not supported by Hesiod's text.

⁴⁵ Anchoring Innovation is the Gravitation Grant research agenda of OIKOS, the Dutch National Research School in Classical Studies. For more information see www.anchoringinnovation.nl. For a programmatic article, explaining the concept, see Sluiter 2017.

sources.⁴⁶ My disagreement with him is therefore one of degree rather than principle. Most allows in this quotation for some elements of the story to be derived from the Near East (e.g., the list of metals), but he believes that most of the story is Greek. My contention is that most of the story is Near Eastern (e.g., the succession of four metal ages) and would have been recognised by his audience as such, but that Hesiod makes it Greek by adding known elements from earlier Greek traditions to it.

The first traditional elements that can be found in Hesiod's description of the golden race is its identification with the time of Kronos (*Op.* 111). Here he follows the chronology of the Succession Myth, which places the reign of Kronos before that of Zeus. In the *Theogony*, the reign of Kronos is depicted as cruel and tyrannical, but there was an equally old tradition that depicted the time of Kronos as happy and joyful.⁴⁷ This tradition is reflected not only in Hesiod's account of the golden race, but also in stories about Kronos' rule over the Islands of the Blessed, found in *Works and Days* 169 and, for example, in Pindar's *Olympian* 2.70–80.⁴⁸ The idea that before the current times there was a period when humans lived like gods is also presupposed by the Prometheus story.

In the *Works and Days*, the golden race is described in very similar terms to the Islands of the Blessed, which by the time of the composition of Hesiod's poem were already part of the Greek tradition:⁴⁹ those who dwell in them live 'with a spirit free of care' (ἀκηδέα θυμὸν ἔχοντες, *Op.* 170b = 112b) and the grain-giving field bears crops for them all year around (*Op.* 172–3 ≈ 117–18). After the golden race was ended, the people who were part of it are said to live on as 'spirits' (δαίμονες), whom Zeus appointed 'as guardians of mortal human beings: they watch over judgements and cruel deeds, clad in invisibility, walking everywhere upon the earth' (*Op.* 123b–5). The conception of such spirits seems to have been traditional too. We find the exact same description of *daimones* who assist Zeus as guardians of justice in the *Works and Days* (253b–5), and the recently discovered Brothers song of Sappho confirms the belief in such spirits in the archaic Greek period.⁵⁰ Finally, the golden race, like the other races of men (with

⁴⁶ Most 1998: 126. ⁴⁷ Versnel 1993: 89–135, esp. 90–9 and 129–32.

⁴⁸ See West 1978: 194–5. The description of Kronos' rule over the Islands of the Blessed was elaborated upon in lines *Op.* 173a–e, which are found on two papyri.

⁴⁹ A reference to the Islands of the Blessed, as the ἡλύσιον πεδῖον, is found in *Od.* 4.561–9. See below.

⁵⁰ *Brothers Song* 14 and 18: Obbink 2016: 25 with Stehle 2016: 278–9.

the possible exception of the last race of iron),⁵¹ is said to be created by the gods (*Op.* 109–10). This corresponds to stories about the creation of Pandora, as narrated both in the *Theogony* and in the *Works and Days* itself, or to tales about Prometheus' creation of humankind.⁵² The references to races created out of gold and silver could also have reminded Hesiod's audience of Hephaestus' ability to create moving creatures out of silver and gold.⁵³

The silver race is much inferior to the golden one. The people in it, after they grow up, 'suffer pains because of their acts of folly. For they could not restrain themselves from wicked outrage against each other nor were they willing to honour the immortals' (*Op.* 133b–5). One is reminded of stories such as those of Tantalus or Lycaon, who butchered their own sons and tried to feed them to the gods.⁵⁴ The fact that members of the silver race live on as 'blessed mortals under the earth', where they receive honours (*Op.* 141–2), could allude to existing cults of the dead or to the belief in evil spirits.⁵⁵

Bruno Currie has well explained the skilful way in which Hesiod integrates the epic tradition that the heroes of old fought in armour of bronze (e.g., Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων, *Il.* 1.371) in his description of the race of bronze. Hesiod does not say that the members of this race were made of bronze, as the races of gold and silver were made from the metals after which they were named, but rather that they were named after their *use* of bronze, which makes them resemble the heroes who fought at Troy.⁵⁶ In this way Hesiod combines the *literal* use of bronze in previous generations, as proclaimed by the Greek epics, with the *metaphorical* quality of the metal in the sequence gold, silver, bronze and iron, suggested by the underlying Near Eastern tale.⁵⁷ Indeed, Hesiod suggests that the bronze race actually emerged from ash trees or ash tree nymphs (ἐκ μελιῶν, *Op.* 145), an allusion to an older, Indo-European tradition that proclaimed

⁵¹ Most 1998: 111–13. The golden and silver age are said to be created by the gods 'who have their mansions on Olympus' as a collective (*Op.* 110, 127), while the creation of the bronze age and the age of heroes is attributed to Zeus alone (*Op.* 143, 158). According to the alternative verses 173a–e, the age of iron was also created by Zeus.

⁵² *Op.* 60–82; cf. *Th.* 570–84. On the sources for the story about Prometheus' creation of mankind, see Bremmer 2008: 33.

⁵³ Hom. *Il.* 18.417–21, *Od.* 7.91–4; cf. Most 1998: 110. ⁵⁴ Gantz 1993: 531–8 and 728–9.

⁵⁵ Cults of the dead: West 1978: 186. Evil spirits, who must be appeased: Clay 2003: 89–90.

⁵⁶ *Op.* 150–1: τῶν δ' ἦν χάλκεα μὲν τεύχεα, χάλκεοι δέ τε οἶκοι, / χαλκῷ δ' εἰργάζοντο μέλας δ' οὐκ ἔσκε σίδηρος ('their weapons were of bronze, bronze were their houses, with bronze they worked; there was not any black iron').

⁵⁷ Currie 2012b: 45–7.

that humans were born from trees.⁵⁸ The way the supernatural strength of the bronze men is described is reminiscent of the description of the Hundred-Handers in the *Theogony*.⁵⁹ They are therefore described as a mix between primeval giants and the heroes who fought at Troy. Like most of these heroes, at least according to the Homeric epics, they go down to Hades after they die at each other's hands.

Hesiod's audience may well have thought that this was the extent to which he had integrated the heroic age into the succession of metal races and probably expected him to continue with a description of the iron age, but then Hesiod surprises them (and many later critics) by inserting a separate race of heroes. This race is furthermore introduced as 'more just and superior' (δικαιότερον καὶ ἄρειον, *Op.* 158) than the previous race of bronze, thus interrupting the progressive deterioration of the races found in all other versions of the tale. I will come back to this. The heroes are otherwise described as in the epics: they fight at Thebes and before the walls of Troy (*Op.* 161–5). The fact that these wars are explicitly said to have led to their destruction may be an allusion to Zeus's plan to stop the overpopulation of the earth by starting these two wars, as narrated in the *Cypria*.⁶⁰ Zeus awarded some of these heroes by settling them in the Islands of the Blessed after their death, as Menelaus and Helen are in the *Odyssey*.⁶¹

It is further worth mentioning that this race of heroes is referred to as demigods (ἡμιθεοί), a word attested only once in the Homeric epics (*Il.* 12.23), in a passage that explicitly looks back at the heroic age as a period distinct from the present one.⁶² It therefore may have been the common term for those semi-divine heroes who lived before the current generations of men.⁶³ Finally, there may be a humorous recognition of

⁵⁸ West 1978: 187 and 2007: 374–5. Clay 2003: 97 argues that this tradition is referred to in *Th.* 185–7 as well.

⁵⁹ *Op.* 148–9: 'Unapproachable they were, and upon their massive limbs grew great strength and untouchable hands out of their shoulders.' Cf. *Th.* 150–3 and 649. See Clay 2003: 91–7, who compares the bronze men to the armed warriors of Theban myth, the Spartoi, who sprang from the earth, and to the Giants. Most 1998: 122 points to Otus and Ephialtes, the two hubristic giants whom Odysseus sees in the underworld (*Od.* 11.305–20) as exhibiting some of the same features as the race of bronze. See also West 1978: 174 and van Noorden 2015: 77–8.

⁶⁰ Scholion D ad *Il.* 1.5, quoted by West 2003: 80–2.

⁶¹ *Od.* 4.561–9. For more heroes who in later sources were said to reside there, see West 1978: 192–3.

⁶² West 1978: 160, Martin 2018: 130. The term does appear more regularly in the Greek lyric poets.

⁶³ Most 1998: 111–13 may be right that Hesiod chooses the word γενεή (*Op.* 160) to designate the race of heroes instead of γένος, which he uses for the other races of men, in order to present them as an earlier *generation* of the present race of men rather than a whole new species. In so doing he would respect the fact that many aristocratic families traced their lineage back in an unbroken succession to the heroes. Cf. Koenen 1994: 11, Sourvinou-Inwood 1997: 11–12, and Clay 2003:

common tradition in that Hesiod makes Zeus alone responsible for creating this race of heroes and the previous race of bronze heroes, while the previous two races were the creations of all the gods together, since it was traditionally believed that ‘father Zeus’ (Ζεὺς δὲ πατήρ, *Op.* 143) was the begetter of many of these demigods.

The iron race is described in terms very similar to the conditions humans found themselves in after Mekone and after Pandora opened her jar. They are plagued day and night by toil and distress and worn down by suffering,⁶⁴ and, they receive from the gods a mixture of good and bad (*Op.* 179), just as Pandora was said to be ‘a beautiful evil in exchange for good (i.e., fire)’.⁶⁵ One is also reminded of the two jars of Zeus in *Iliad* 24.527–33, from which Zeus gives to humans at best a mixture of good and evil. Yet, things could even get worse. Hesiod ends his description of the iron race with a prophecy about the possible further deterioration of this race.⁶⁶ Here, too, we find many echoes with themes that are picked up elsewhere in the *Works and Days*, such as a brother who is no longer a friend or men who speak crooked words and swear falsely.⁶⁷ I agree with those who argue that this deterioration of the present race of iron is not inevitable: it will only come about if people like Perses, or the ‘gift-devouring’ kings who support him, continue in their evil ways.⁶⁸ Hesiod presents them, and through them his audience, with a choice: preserve the present order, in which bad comes mixed with good things, or go down the path of injustice, at the end of which ‘there will be no safeguard against evil’ (*Op.* 201).

For Hesiod, humans have a choice between leading a relatively good or bad life. This is probably also the reason that he changes the original story of the metal ages, as it came to him from the Near East, and does not present the succession of human races as a progressive decline. Instead, he inserts the race of heroes as one that is in fact ‘more just and superior’ (*Op.* 158) than the previous race. Hesiod also never says that the bronze race is

93. Currie 2012b: 40–1 disagrees. Most 1998: 121 also recognises, however, that Homer makes a clear distinction between the heroes and ‘such mortals who live now’ (οἷοι νῦν βροτοὶ εἶσι, e.g., *Il.* 5.304).

⁶⁴ *Op.* 177–8. Cf. *Op.* 100–4. ⁶⁵ *Th.* 585, cf. *Op.* 57–8, *Th.* 602.

⁶⁶ On Near Eastern parallels for both the content and the form of this prophecy, see Scodel 2014.

⁶⁷ *Op.* 190–4, cf. 219–21. For more examples of themes that are echoed elsewhere in the *Works and Days*, see van Noordén 2015: 66–7.

⁶⁸ Most 1998: 117 n. 47: ‘Interpreting the future tenses in the prophecy of lines 180–201 as predictions of an outcome from which there is no possible escape is not precluded by the rules of Greek grammar, but makes it impossible to understand why Hesiod should have bothered to compose this poem at all and stands in evident contradiction to the moderate optimism he expresses elsewhere.’ Cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 1997: 4, Scodel 2014: 70.

worse than the silver one, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has pointed out.⁶⁹ One can of course deduce this from the metaphorical value of the two metals and the different fates of the two races after their death, but Hesiod introduces the bronze race as ‘not similar to the silver one’ (οὐκ ἀργυρέῳ οὐδὲν ὁμοῖον, *Op.* 144), while in the case of the silver race he says explicitly that it is ‘much worse than the previous’ golden race (πολὺ χειρότερον, *Op.* 127). Hesiod seems more interested in juxtaposing acts of reverence (golden race) and irreverence (silver race), bad warfare (bronze race) and heroic battles (race of heroes), or justice and injustice (iron race 1 and prophesied iron race 2) than in following the inevitable path of moral decline of the original story, as many critics have remarked.⁷⁰ My footnote to their work would be that Hesiod was doing this openly, in full view of his audience, which knew the oriental version of the story with its progressive decline of the different metal ages, and therefore was able to appreciate both Hesiod’s deviations from this story and his insertions of allusions to common Greek traditions.

Early Greek Appreciation of Oriental Tales

It is impossible to know what Hesiod’s original audience would have made of his adaptation of the story of the metal ages. All we can do is extract from Hesiod’s wording how he presented it. For this I come back to the words with which he introduces the tale in lines 106–7: it is ‘another story’ (ἕτερον λόγον) that he will ‘summarise’ (if that is what ἐκκορυφώσω means)⁷¹ both ‘well and skilfully’ (εὖ καὶ ἐπισταμένως), ‘if you (i.e., Perses, but also his audience) want me to’ (εἰ δ’ ἐθέλεις). The introduction of a story as a ἕτερος λόγος is unique in archaic Greek poetry. ἕτερος here could simply mean ‘another, a second’ story, but the *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos* may well be correct to list it under the meaning ‘different, of another kind’ of the adjective.⁷² The word λόγος is ambiguous as well: it seems to be unmarked (any tale,⁷³ important or not) versus the marked

⁶⁹ Vernant 1965: 18 (1983: 7); cf. Most 1998: 108 and Clay 2003: 82.

⁷⁰ Vernant 1965 (1983), Koenen 1994: esp. 8–10, Most 1998: esp. 119–20, Clay 2003: 85 and Currie 2012b.

⁷¹ See Wakker 1990 for this explanation with references to earlier discussions of the term.

⁷² *LfggE* 2.758, citing *Op.* 21 and *Od.* 9.302 as other examples of this use of the adjective; cf. van Noorden 2015: 70.

⁷³ Wakker 1990: 87–8 argues convincingly for the meaning tale (‘Erzählung’) rather than speech.

term *muthos*.⁷⁴ As West remarks concerning Hesiod's choice of the word *logos* here: 'Hesiod presents the story not as an absolute truth but as something that people tell, worth serious attention.'⁷⁵

Hesiod's specification that he tells the story 'well and skilfully' (εὖ καὶ ἐπισταμένως), emphasises the poetic skill with which he put the story together, which does not preclude, of course, that he also wanted his audience to learn from it: this is indicated by the phrase σὺ δ' ἐνὶ φρεσὶ βάλλεο σῆσιν ('you lay it up in your spirit') in the second half of line 107. The story helps to underwrite the central message of his poem, namely that people have a choice in leading a just life or not. My contention is that Hesiod felt the need to introduce the story nevertheless as an unmarked, alternative tale, because it was only recently introduced into Greece and therefore would still have been recognised by his audience as oriental or at least 'foreign'.⁷⁶

The ancient Greeks probably reacted differently to different oriental stories in different ways, as modern peoples do today to foreign stories. One may take as an example the very different, and often contradictory, reactions to American blockbuster movies in Europe: they are generally frowned upon by the cultural elites, but nevertheless very popular. I have argued elsewhere that some oriental tales are alluded to in the *Iliad* to underscore the lies told by, respectively, Hera and Poseidon.⁷⁷ Plato refers to his own version of the four metal races as a 'Phoenician lie' (Φοινικικόν τι [ψεῦδος]), a term that was apparently used for a story that people claim to be true, whereas in fact it is not.⁷⁸ It is, however, definitely not the case that the Greeks always considered tales that originated in the Near East as lies. The Succession Myth is a good counter example: despite its Hittite or Phoenician origin, it is at the heart of Hesiod's *Theogony* and presented there as absolutely truthful. It may even be that the oriental or foreign origin of the story, when it was first introduced, gave it more weight, just as the wisdom of Indian gurus today may find more resonance among

⁷⁴ Calame 2009: 64 with earlier bibliography. Contrast *Od.* 11.368 and *Op.* 10, where Hesiod describes his way of speaking in the poem as a whole as 'speaking a *muthos*' (μυθησαίμεν) of 'truthful things' (ἐτήτυμα) to Perses.

⁷⁵ West 1978: 177.

⁷⁶ I believe the story was introduced into Hesiod's community in the late eighth or early seventh century BCE and had floated around long enough for him and his audience to know it, but short enough that it could still be recognised as foreign.

⁷⁷ Lardinois 2018. In the same article I argued that it is impossible to determine if Homer's or Hesiod's audiences would have recognised these tales as specifically 'oriental' (however they would have defined this term) or simply as 'foreign', i.e., not the type of story they were used to hearing.

⁷⁸ Pl. *Rep.* 414c, introducing the story in *Rep.* 415a–c; cf. Str. 3.5.5 (Vol. 1 440 Radt).

Western Europeans than their own Christian myths.⁷⁹ These Christian myths, of course, at one time had originated in the Near East as well. Hesiod's presentation of the story of the five human races, I would argue, falls somewhere in between these two extremes. It is not presented as a lie nor as a tale that his audience was necessarily expected to believe. It contradicts the canonical account of the Prometheus' myth, which Hesiod tells first, but it is still a serious story from which, if skilfully adapted and properly understood, one can learn about the human condition.

⁷⁹ I am thinking, for example, of the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who was quite popular in Western Europe and the United States in the seventies and eighties of the last century; see Way and Way 2018.

GODS AND MORTALS IN EARLY GREEK AND NEAR EASTERN MYTHOLOGY

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