What Is Myth? Crash Course World Mythology #1

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hello, my name is Mike Rugnetta, and this is Crash Course Mythology.

Mythology is a complicated subject: it touches on literature, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, religion, and even science. How you ever tried to make a Slurpee mixing all of the flavors together? Mythology is exactly like that, but it's a Slurpee of knowledge, with no brain freeze and a lot to learn. So maybe actually a tiny brain freeze, but a different kind of brain freeze.

What I'm trying to say is that, don't be surprised if some of what you hear in the next forty or so episodes echoes some of the things you may have heard in other Crash Courses. And don't worry if what you hear in one episode reminds you of what you've heard in another.

We do that on purpose and usually, we know what we're doing. Right, Thoth, ancient Egyptian god of knowledge with an awesome ibis head? Right.

Do ibis-headed gods like bird seed?

We have so much to learn ahead!

[Opening music]

There are a couple of reasons mythology is a more difficult subject than some of the others we've tackled. One is that many myths are very, very old, and often exist in many versions. So just keep that in mind when we discuss a particular myth during the series.

If you've heard the myth in a different form, it doesn't mean that we've gotten it wrong, though that is always possible - just ask Atë, the Greek goddess of folly. It just may be that we're working from a different version of the myth. We'll try to put references to the versions that we're using in the show notes. Sometimes, we'll even be presenting composites of a number of different tellings of these myths.

Another difficulty with mythology is that it's open to so many interpretations. Are myths records of historical fact? Deliberate fictions? Ways of understanding otherwise incomprehensible events? Misunderstandings? We are not in a position to say. It's the kind of thing that scholars spend their entire lives arguing about.

Along with the myths, we're gonna present possible interpretations, but let's be clear: these are interpretations, not facts in the sense that their meanings can be confirmed by a weight of evidence.

Mythology has been argued about and theorized for over a hundred years, and many myths can be read, and understood, in a number of ways. When presenting interpretations, we're gonna let you know that we're doing that, so that you don't think that we're presenting an interpretation as a fact. Because that will get us into arguments, and we would love to avoid those.

This is also probably a good time to point out that in many instances, the line between myth and religion is blurry. And, as we're gonna explain in a minute, we're working with a definition of myth that focuses on story, rather than truth.

When one views myths primarily as stories or as literary artifacts, it allows you to enjoy them and think about them apart from their value as structures of religious belief. So, when we recount stories from the Bible as myths, we're not definitively saying that they're either true or untrue, just that they're stories that people have used in a variety of ways over time.

A third problem in discussing myth is that most myths don't have nameable authors, or even when they do, like Homer or Virgil, it turns out these guys were really just recasting older stories into new language. Most of the time, we don't know who originated myths, or how, or why, but, luckily, for our purposes here, that actually doesn't matter much.

But the last problem we have to talk about does matter. And that's the difficulty of finding a good, working definition for the word "myth." This is tricky, especially given the way we use the word in contemporary English. Much of the time, when we say something is a myth, what we mean is that it's not true. For example, the idea that you swallow eight spiders a year while you're sleeping - it's not true. It's a myth.

Not sure if this applies to Australians though; I would wager that you guys swallow at least eight spiders a year. Everything I know about Australia, I learned from the internet.

Because we use the term myth to mean something that isn't true, we can come away with the definition of myth as a story that is false and not to be taken seriously. But myths have been taken seriously. By scholars, sure, but more importantly, by generations and generations of people who've heard these stories, and found in them something worth telling again.

Which is not to say people don't question their myths. Philosophers were writing about the absurdity of Greek myths as far back as the sixth century B.C.E., probably even earlier.

So if a myth isn't just a story that someone made up or a word that we use to label something as false, then what is it?

Myth comes from the Greek word "mythos" - which means word or, more significantly, story. That doesn't mean every myth, or even the most important ones are Greek, but those will probably be the ones most familiar to our viewers in American and Europe. At least, until the new Rick Riordan series gets going.

And honestly, if goddesses of love, Aphrodite and Freya, ever got into an arm wrestling competition, Aphrodite would TOTALLY dominate, because Freya cries golden tears, and Aphrodite kills people. BOOM. Sorry, I got sidetracked by Greek myths; that's gonna happen a lot. Just ask Hermes, Greek god of roads.

So, we're gonna start by saying that a myth is a story, but it's a special kind of story, that for the purposes of this series has two primary characteristics: significance and staying power.

This means that the subject matter is about something important, something about how the world works or how the world itself got going, how things came to be. And then there's staying power. These are stories that have survived centuries, sometimes millennia and this is testament to the deep meaning or functional importance of these stories to the people who hear and tell them.

Now, if I know Crash Course fans, there are probably some people right now saying, "Mike, it sounds like you might lump in folktales, and maybe even fairy tales, with your myths."

I'm not gonna lie. There may be a folktale that creeps in from time to time, but we're gonna steer clear of fairy tales for the most part. For die hard folklorists - and yes, that is a thing - proper myths only deal with the creation or the world, or maybe the universe, and thus, all real myths are religious, or quasi-religious.

Mythology theorists who come at myths from a religious studies angle tend to say that the main characters of myths must be gods, but this leaves out hero stories, which I think are pretty important, and also, those are the ones with the sea monsters, so we're gonna

include those too.

There are also those myths that don't feature any supernatural elements at all - what Professor Robert Segal calls beliefs, or credos. Most Americans will be familiar with the "rags to riches" story of the American dream. Those stories are myths - not because they aren't true -sometimes poor people do become rich and successful in spite of tough upbringings, and largely because of grit and hard work. They're myths not because they have religious significance, they're mythic because of their staying power and the tenacity with which proponents of the myth take them to be true. Because these types of stories fit into our broad definition of a significant story were personalities are the lead characters, we will be talking about them - but only in a later episode.

At this point, it might be a good idea to give an example of the kind of stories we'll be talking about in this series. And, to do so, I'm gonna go to Greece. YAY! Greece! Wine-dark seas, delicious olives, beautiful ruins, anti-austerity protests, and the setting for the story of Persephone.

Take us there, Thought Bubble.

Persephone was the daughter of the harvest goddess, Demeter, and supreme god, Zeus, who were brother and sister - we'll get into all that weird incest stuff later - and her original name was Kore, which can be translated as "girl."

One day, Kore was out picking flowers when she caught the eye of Zeus's brother, Hades, who rode up from the underworld (also confusingly called Hades) and kidnapped her to make her his wife and also probably raped her, but again we're gonna save the deeply uncomfortable sexual content for another episode except for this brief mention right here. Sorry.

Kore was understandably upset. Demeter was full on enraged and threatened to make all mankind starve, so finally, Zeus had to go and ask his brother to give Kore back.

In some versions of this myth, this was a problem for Zeus, because he had promised Kore to his brother as a wife, without telling Demeter first. Hades was not a dumb guy, and before he let Kore go, he offered her a snack. Kore had been warned to never eat anything in the underworld, but she must've been extremely hungry by then, and really, I mean, how much harm could six honey sweet pomegranate seeds really do? Well, turns out, a lot.

In some versions, she eats them on purpose because she actually liked her husband. In others, she's tricked into it. Either way, even six seeds matter.

Kore has to remain in the underworld for six months out of the one month for each seed that she ate, and will spend the other six months on Olympus with her parents. During the six months in Olympus, Demeter would allow the fruits and grains to flourish. The rest of the time, Demeter would mourn Kore, who had renamed herself Persephone, and the ground would freeze, and nothing would grow and that is why we have winter.

Thanks, Thought Bubble!

So, this is a story that is significant because of its explanatory power. The fancy term for this is an etiological narrative, or origin story. The Persephone myth explains the seasons, relating the cycle of planting and harvest to the actions of the immortals.

For some mythologists, like E. B. Tylor, this story is an example of myth as primitive science. Tylor and many other theorists drew a distinction between primitive people, who used myths to explain the world in which they lived, and modern people, who use science for that purpose. For Tylor, myth and science can't really be reconciled; science has taken the place of myth, so we don't need myths anymore.

This is a pretty hardcore theory, and since we like to view things complexly here at Crash Course, we're not gonna subscribe to it, or any theory, wholeheartedly. But we are gonna introduce some of these theories to you, so that you can make up your own mind.

Right now we're not gonna get too deep into the theory of myths - mythography, if you wanna thrill your friends and impress people at parties. Because I want to tell you where the series is planning to go, but also because there are a lot of theories to mythology, and I don't want to include too many of them in this introduction.

As long time viewers know, it's easy to get lost in the weeds once we start talking about theory, which is part of the reason we love theory so much. And it's one of the reasons we have eight Sanskrit deities who are guardians of the right direction. This series isn't going to be comprehensive. We can't present everything there is to know about thousand-year-old stories in four hundred odd minutes of video.

But we are gonna try to introduce you to some myths you might not know, from places that you might be less familiar with. This approach is gonna be comparative and thematic, rather than geographic. Here's what we're planning.

The first theme we'll be covering is the most difficult: creation myths. Most cultures have some story of how the world and the people in it came to be and we're gonna spend a few weeks working through them. Be forewarned, creation myths are often mysterious, the language can tricky or obscure, so expect a bit of confusion and a lot of interpretation. Also some turtles for a significant distance in the downward direction. It's turtles all the way down.

After we see how the world and, sometimes, the universe was created, we're gonna examine pantheons: the groups of gods that feature in stories from different cultures, and how they function in those cultures.

And then we're gonna take a look at how the universe was destroyed - looking at flood myths and the apocalypse. Now, obviously, this puts us in the realm of religion and the potential for challenging people's belief systems is high. Like we said earlier, we're gonna try to focus on the stories, and leave questions of truth and belief up to you.

In the second half of the series, we'll come down from Olympus and Valhalla and all those various mountains; we're gonna do about ten episodes on heroes from all over the world, which should be really fun, maybe even super. See what I did there?

After heroes, we're gonna talk about mythical places and creatures and objects like winged sandals, and we'll finish up with a few episodes on myths in the modern world, which, for viewers of Crash Course Psychology and Literature, might sound a bit familiar.

So, that is the broad outline of this series. We're really excited to be bringing this to you, really hope you enjoy it. Will it become the stuff of legend? Just ask Balder, Norse god of joy.

We'll see you next week. Crash Course Mythology is filmed in the Chad & Stacey Emigholz studio in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all these nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

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Thanks for watching, and if you're ever in the underworld, DON'T EAT ANYTHING.