

Lawrence KIM

**Hecataeus of Miletus and Palaephatus on the Past: Complicating the Ancient
'Rationalization' of Myth**

Hecataeus' opening words—"I write the things that seem true to me; for the stories of the Greeks, as they appear to me, are numerous and ridiculous" (*FGrH* 1 F 1)—are customarily taken to represent one of the earliest instances of the Greek skeptical attitude toward their tradition. (e.g., Derow in Hornblower (ed.) *Greek Historiography* (Oxford, 1994)) The fragment is thus seen as a programmatic statement for Hecataeus' historical method—to recover the truth by eliminating the fantastic elements from myths. This method has come to be known as 'rationalization' (see De Sanctis, *RFC* 11 (1933); Nenci, *Rend. Lincei* 8.6 (1951); Fertonani, *PP* 22 (1952); and the survey by Nicolai, *QUCC* 84 (1997)), and is illustrated, for instance, in a passage where Hecataeus moves Geryon from Iberia (which seemed too far away for Heracles to drive cattle to Eurystheus in Mycenae) to "somewhere in the region of Ambracia and Amphilocheia" (F 26). Thus Hecataeus is supposed to have simply reduced the myths to a reality that accorded with 'rational' standards, ushering in a technique that was to have a long heritage in antiquity: scholars point to examples in Herodotus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Plutarch, etc., not to mention Euripides or Apollonius of Rhodes. This modern assimilation, however, of all ancient attempts to write the history of the heroic age under the rubric of 'rationalization' perhaps masks the rather considerable variation among them. What I hope to show in this paper is that Hecataeus' method is much more than a mere elimination of the fantastic, and that rationalization itself is a more complicated practice than has generally been assumed. To accomplish this, I shall compare Hecataeus' approach to myth with that of an author who has customarily been seen as the exemplary practitioner of rationalization in antiquity: Palaephatus, the fourth-century b.c.e. mythographer (see Stern (tr. & comm.) *Palaephatus* (Wauconda IL, 1996) which reprints Festa's Teubner text; von Blumenthal, *RE* 18.2 (1942); Osmun, *CJ* 52 (1956)). (Passages from both authors will appear on a handout).

Palaephatus' *Peri Apistôn* (*On Unbelievable Things*) is a collection of traditional tales systematically reinterpreted as misunderstandings of ordinary events: for example, Callisto's metamorphosis into a bear was the result of the following turn of events: Callisto had gone into a grove of trees while hunting; she came across a bear, which promptly ate her. When her hunting companions, who had seen Callisto enter the grove, saw a bear emerge, they thought that she had turned into a bear (14). For many scholars (e.g., Wipprecht, *Die Entwicklung der rationalistischen Mythendeutung* (Tübingen, 1902); Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos* (Stuttgart, 1942); Jacoby, *Atthis* (Oxford, 1949); Buffière, *Les mythes d'Homère* (Paris, 1956)), Palaephatus represents the pinnacle of the 'rationalizing' method; he is thorough and adheres to the methodological precepts laid out in his preface: all stories have a kernel of truth, nothing that does not exist now could have ever existed, and traditional tales are the result of an extended game of 'telephone', in which the process of transmission necessarily involves miscommunication; the job of the mythographer, then, is to trace the story back to its original, non-fantastic, form.

On a cursory comparison, Palaephatus and Hecataeus look remarkably similar: they both

believe in an underlying truth to every myth, come up with versions that contain no fantastic elements, and occasionally in Hecataeus, and always in Palaephatus, account for how the mistake arose in the first place. What I want to show, however, is that, while Palaephatus and Hecataeus both end up with results that appear similar, they use different methods to get those results. A closer look at Hecataeus' fragments uncover an attention to detail and historical specificity that are utterly lacking in Palaephatus, who is focused solely on stories not anchored in space or time, but only represented as having taken place a long time ago. Palaephatus relies only on evidence internal to the story in question, and hence could be comprehensive. Hecataeus, however, could only apply his critical standard under certain circumstances: occasionally he simply reduces a clear exaggeration, but more often he only proceeds when he possesses additional information that suggests a possible path to a more correct version. (This explains Hecataeus' non-rationalizing fragments, which have often been taken rather as evidence of Hecataeus' inability to fully realize his method (e.g., Fowler, *JHS* 116 (1996))) I conclude by outlining some ways in which Hecataeus' practice is similar to those of Herodotus and Thucydides' attempts to investigate the heroic age, and reiterating the extent to which this strand of historical inquiry is quite distinct from the 'rationalizing' in Palaephatus.