

Rocket Philology

“At the time, I must have been reading Herodotus because it would seem to me like something out of Herodotus.” So Claudia Dreifus mused not about Solon or Croesus, but rather about the 1960s space race in her New York Times science column (July 14, 2009). “What,” she ponders, “is more mythic than walking on the Moon?” It might seem odd to talk about myths, Ionian historians, and rockets in the same sentence, but as we approach the 50th anniversary of the Moon landing, I would like to suggest that Dreifus’ reaction to the early space program is far from unique. Rather, it is the product of a continuous iconography and propaganda tying the world of space travel to the ancient world. NASA’s classicizing references were, as I shall show, consistent, planned, and effective at summoning to mind the Greco-Roman world.

The U.S. has always advertised its rockets as mechanized gods. The first substantial rocket produced in the United States was developed under the name “Hermes” in the early 1950s. Through a chance scientific syncretism, a repurposed version of the Hermes rocket launched the Mercury capsule, NASA’s first crewed spacecraft. Next came the appropriately two-person Gemini capsule, then the Apollo and the massive Saturn rocket. At an undetermined point, the pantheon of NASA names was officially codified: the minutes of a NASA subcommittee meeting in May, 1960 give us a *terminus ante quem*, but the naming convention is certainly older. The Army’s follow-on projects after Hermes in the 1950s, the Juno and Jupiter rockets, show that the trend was well-rooted already by 1960.

The intent behind these names is more difficult to reconstruct. Sources from various government history offices (NASA, Air Force, etc.) are helpful for the “when, who, and where” questions, less so for “why.” The Atlas rocket, used by NASA in the early 1960s, was named by

Karel Bossart in July, 1951 to reflect either the god's "powerful shoulders" (Wells et al., 1976) or the parent company of a contractor building the rocket (Neufeld, 1990). This is almost certainly not the whole story, however: Atlas was America's first nuclear ICBM and was succeeded by the Air Force's Titan ICBM, also later used by NASA. To a classicist (or an attentive myth student), the punishment of Atlas and the Titans by Zeus seems the clear referent: the Titanomachy becomes a metaphor for American nuclear posturing. Neil deGrasse Tyson and Avis Lang (2018) have recently reminded us that the ostensibly peaceful orientation of NASA is complicated by its complicity in forwarding the aims and technology used by the American military; I will also explore how the classical world was coopted for similarly militaristic purposes in American space ventures.

More important than the intent behind these names is their effectiveness in eliciting a response from the public. Jim Lovell, the commander of Apollo 13, did not intend for the Homeric reference in the name he chose for his vessel ("Odyssey") to have as much meaning as it did; yet when the disastrous mission turned into a modern *nostos* as the crippled spacecraft limped home, Homer's epic seemed the perfect metaphor for the crew's trials. "It was Odysseus struggling to return to Penelope," wrote Joseph Lelyveld for the New York Times (April 18, 1970); the capital "O" in a letter to the editor of the Irish Times was certainly no accident when the author confessed to being "absorbed" by the "wonderful Odyssey of Apollo 13" (April 23, 1970).

Perhaps today's NASA has lost the mythic qualities Claudia Dreifus once associated with it: names like NEOWISE and INTEGRAL just do not spark the imagination. And yet the occasionally inspired name still pops up, such as the Juno probe sent to learn the secrets of Jupiter, whose moons are named after the god's paramours. But in a world where Ryan

Gosling's failure to plant an American flag on the Moon in the movie *First Man* constitutes a threat to contemporary American identity, the importance of NASA's early space programs to the modern imagination is all too clear; classicists, then, have a chance to point out, clarify, and criticize the elements of that history which utilized—for better or worse—the myths and cultures of the ancient Greek and Roman world.

Bibliography

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