

The Humor of Palaephatus

Palaephatus was an obscure historian and mythographer of the classical age. He wrote several works, but what remains is one book of a curious, originally five-book-long text: *On Incredible Tales* (Περὶ Ἀπίστων). It consists of a collection of short chapters, each devoted to a single episode of traditional Greek myth. The unifying feature of the collection is the hermeneutic method that Palaephatus applies his chosen myths, which imparts a consistent and strict order to each chapter. Each chapter introduces a traditional tale, only to call its historicity into question and offer what he takes to be a “true account” (τὸ ἀληθές) of the mythical events. He arrives at the truth by putting the unbelievable myth through the so-called method of “rationalization,” whereby supernatural elements are extracted. The skeletal remains of the story are then filled in with a narrative that Palaephatus ostensibly has collected from his research and travels, which included extensive personal interviews. The monotony of Palaephatus’ work, and the reductive view of myth that his interpretive project seems to advance, has led many commentators to scorn the author and his work. Referring to Palaephatus’ purported education at the hands of Aristotle, Schrader asked: “tam insulsum hominem docuerit Aristoteles?” (Schrader 1894, 54) Schrader’s negative assessment of Palaephatus is shared by many including Wilamowitz, who calls *On Incredible Tales* a “miserable piece of work” (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1909, 101n184; see also Demarche 1904, 410-1; Rose 1940, 78; Feeney 1991, 31). Even more recent scholars, who see value in Palaephatus’ work, nevertheless understand him to be engaged in a “fundamentally absurd” project and they concede the legitimacy of his critics’ analyses (Stern 1996, 8; Hawes 2014, 37).

This paper makes the case that Palaephatus is undeserving of his negative reputation, and argues that his project was to satirize the very form of historicizing rationalization of which he is so often considered a naïve proponent. In sum, I argue that Palaephatus' *On Incredible Tales* produces historicizing interpretations of myth *in jest* rather than in earnest. The bulk of the paper can be well described as explaining Palaephatus' joke.

After briefly establishing the literary terminology that I will be using in my discussion and situating my usage within the larger academic discourse on mythical "rationalization," I move on to my main investigation. I demonstrate a fundamental incoherence between the work's preface, which outlines the author's commitment to two principles (i.e., "The Historicity of Myth" and "The Continuity of Nature") and its body, which consistently contravenes these principles. In applying the principles articulated in the preface, Palaephatus claims to be able to reverse engineer historical (and hence believable) stories from patently unhistorical and unbelievable ones, but the success of his method is dubious. I suggest that the tension between the preface and body of the work is a key source of humor and meaning, as it reveals how attempts to historicize traditional myth inescapably leads to the creation of unrealistic, and indeed incredible, accounts. Other sources of humor in Palaephatus' work are also considered, particularly the presence of what I call the author's "iconoclastic cynicism," his anti-aristocratic impulse towards characterizing mythic heroes in an unflattering manner. Palaephatus does not just demystify traditional myths, but he does so in a way that humorously deprives mythic heroes of their presumed nobility.

Finally, I identify a group of 4th century Attidographers (including Hellanicus, Cleidemus, and Phanodemus) as the specific group of individuals towards whom Palaephatus' satire was aimed. In constructing their local histories of Attica, each of these authors extensively

incorporated elements from traditional Greek myth and endorsed them as historically accurate (Dillery 2005, 2015). These authors show that the demystifying and historicizing interpretations showcased in Palaephatus' work were in common use at the time of his writing, and provides a persuasive motive for Palaephatus' work. It shows that, as all good satirists do, Palaephatus had a living, breathing, and politically salient target.

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