
The “Invention of Fiction”

“Invention” is one of the central tropes of classical, particularly Greek, scholarship: it seems that even in this methodologically hyperaware, post-postmodern age, we are still addicted to romanticizing narratives of origination (however contested). When it comes to the (discrete but interlocking) categories of fiction, prose literature, and the novel, recent years have seen originomania in overdrive. Can we attribute to Chariton, in the first century C.E., “the invention of the Greek love novel”?¹ Or was Theocritus responsible for “the invention of fiction”?² Or was it rather a question of “the birth of literary fiction,” thanks to philosophical innovations culminating in Plato and Aristotle?³ Or is “die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität”⁴ perhaps to be attributed to the development of relatively widespread literacy, in the fifth century B.C.E.? Yet a sense of fictionality has already been credited, by different scholars, to the poetry of Homer and Hesiod.⁵ “The invention of Greek prose,” meanwhile, might be sought in stories around and reflections on the figure of Aesop, which for us surface to visibility in the fifth century B.C.E.⁶ Clearly at one level these are merely rhetorical claims, *façons de parler*: few scholars, I imagine,

This chapter contains material drawn from Whitmarsh 2010d; I am grateful to Wiley-Blackwell for permission to reuse it.

1. Tilg 2010.
2. Payne 2007.
3. Finkelberg 1998. The extent to which Plato’s Atlantis story is self-consciously fictional has been much debated: see ch. 3, n. 9.
4. Rösler 1980.
5. See, e.g., Goldhill 1991.
6. Kurke 2010.

would if pressed argue that fiction, the novel, or literary prose was actually “invented,” definitively, at a specific historical juncture. Partly because these are our categories, not those of the Greeks or the Romans, ancient ones map only inexactly onto them. It makes no more sense to ask when in antiquity “fiction” was invented than “economics,” “stress management,” or “technology.” More than this, however, fiction is a cultural universal, and storytelling is an intuitive human activity; all cultures have, and always have had, a developed sense of the power of fictive creativity. All literature is to an extent fictional. Its social and aesthetic role may shift at different times, as may the manner of its presentation, but there is—I suggest—never a point in any culture’s history when fiction is “yet to be invented.”

At the same time, however, literature does have its own history, and certain practices and constructions come into (and indeed out of) focus at certain times. Literary history, moreover, is not simply about the discovery of new techniques, genres, or conceptual apparatuses; it also has an embodied, physical, institutional history. For example, in the Greek world, shifting conceptions of literature are bound up with the changing relationship between orality and the book,⁷ with the emergence of an archival culture in Hellenistic Alexandria (building on foundations laid in Athens), and with wider shifts in the political culture of the Greek world.⁸ So while, as we have said, fiction is not “invented” like the process of uranium enrichment or “discovered” like the moons of Jupiter, it should be possible to track its changing inflection throughout Greek literary history.

In this chapter, I aim to describe how prose fiction emerged as a marked category through the classical and Hellenistic periods. In so doing, I am deliberately avoiding the familiar questing after the “precursors” of the Greek novel. The novel as conventionally understood—that is to say, the romance form as practiced by Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus, Achilles Tatius, Longus, Heliodorus, and various fragmentary writers—is almost certainly a product entirely of Roman times.⁹ The formative work of modern scholarship on Greek prose fiction—still subtly influential—was Erwin Rohde’s *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* (The Greek novel and its forerunners), first published in 1876.¹⁰ Rohde’s interest lay primarily in the imperial romance, a phenomenon he sought to explain by revealing its “forerunners” in the Hellenistic period: principally erotic poetry and prose travel narrative. The novel, in his view, was the hybrid offspring of these two Hellenistic forms. Rohde’s work inspired a number of other attempts to locate the

7. Here Karen Ní Mheallaigh’s forthcoming book on Lucian and fiction is keenly anticipated.

8. I attempt to follow many of these threads in Whitmarsh 2004a.

9. See Bowie 2002a, which places the earliest novels in the first century C.E.; there is also much useful discussion in Tilg 2010, 36–78.

10. Rohde 1876, which I cite below from the 1960 reprint of the third edition (1914).

origins of the imperial romance,¹¹ but in general this kind of evolutionary narrative has fallen out of favor.¹² There are, however, two consequences of his argument that are still with us. The first is a general reluctance to consider Hellenistic prose narrative on its own terms. Despite a number of studies of individual works,¹³ scholars of ancient fiction have generally been too fixated on the paradigm of the imperial romance to acknowledge the existence of any culture of Hellenistic fiction. If, however, we cease to view Hellenistic prose culture teleologically—that is to say, simply as a stepping stone en route to the novel—then we can begin to appreciate a much more vibrant, dynamic story world, which we can understand on its own terms. As we shall see below, there are indeed elements of continuity between Hellenistic prose and the imperial romance, but the novel also marks a real break from its Hellenistic predecessors (see particularly chapter 2).¹⁴

The second fallacy I wish to identify is the belief that Greek culture was insulated from non-Greek influence. A veiled racism drives Rohde's project, which seeks to defend the novel against the charge (as he saw it) of Eastern influence; like his friend Friedrich Nietzsche, he was keen to distinguish the idealized Greek *Geist* from the corrupting effects of the East, which culminated in the success of Christianity. "What hidden sources," he asks programmatically (but, it turns out, ironically), "produced in Greece this most un-Greek of forms?"¹⁵ The identification of echt Hellenistic precursors allows him to preserve the Greekness of this superficially "un-Greek" form. Of course, few nowadays would formulate their views like this. Nevertheless, scholars of Greek tend (understandably) to emphasize Greek sources and hence tacitly to exclude the possibility of cultural fusion.

This chapter is principally designed to contest both these assumptions. The first half argues against the retrojection of anachronistic concepts of fiction, proposing that we should instead look for challenges to dominant modes of narrative authority (conveyed particularly through the genres of epic and history). The second claims that frictions both within Greek culture and between Greek and other cultures energized Hellenistic narrative.

ANCIENT FICTION?

The category of fiction is not only philosophically complex but also culture specific: each society, in each historical phase, has its own way of conceptualizing narratives that are accepted as not literally true but as vehicles for a kind of moral

11. Lavagnini 1921; Giangrande 1962; Anderson 1984.

12. Especially in light of the influential critique of Perry 1967, 14–15.

13. E.g., Lightfoot 1999 on Parthenius; Brown 2002 on Conon; Winiarczyk 2002 on Euhemerus.

14. See further Whitmarsh 2005b on the specific nature of the imperial romance.

15. Rohde 1914, 3.

or cultural truth. Fiction, as I see it, is not a linguistic pathology but primarily and most fundamentally a way of expressing a culture's view of the logic of the cosmos in narrative form;¹⁶ it is, hence, responsive to changing ideas around the nature of the cosmos and humanity's place within it.

Although eternally aware of the potentially fictive properties of all discourse, Greeks only rarely acknowledged fiction as a genre: partial exceptions can be found in forms of rhetoric and New Comedy (discussed below), but it was not until the emergence of the novel in the imperial period that one particular literary form became definitively fictive.¹⁷ In the Archaic, classical, and Hellenistic periods, on the other hand, literary "fictions" were rather communicated through established narrative forms that hovered ambiguously between truth and falsehood.

From the earliest times it was accepted that poetry could mislead as well as pronounce authoritatively. Hesiod's Muses know how to tell "lies like the truth," as well as the truth (*Theogony* 27). A similar phrase is used of Homer's Odysseus (*Odyssey* 19.203), who prefaces his narration to the Phaeacians with a reminder that he is "famous among all for my deceptions" (9.19–20). Lyric poetry from Archilochus to Pindar is also full of reflections upon the truth status of stories and myths.¹⁸

The fifth century, however, saw a set of cultural developments that increased consciousness of fictitious narrative.¹⁹ When drama emerged as a major form in the fifth century, it too became a prime site for exploring questions of truth and fiction. The Sicilian Sophist Gorgias famously claimed that in tragedy "the deceiver is more just than the nondeceiver, and the deceived wiser than the undeceived" (fr. 23 DK). Drama also presents the earliest examples of what critics would later call plasmatic narrative: that is to say, stories based on neither historical nor mythical but on invented characters and events.²⁰ This kind of plot can be found in mime and even occasionally in tragedy (see, e.g., Arist., *Poet.* 1451b), but is most prominent in comedy. Old Comedy often blends real figures (e.g., Cratinus's Pericles or Aristophanes's Cleon) with fictional and uses scenarios that are fantastical distortions of contemporary reality. Hellenistic New Comedy, however, is based entirely around invented figures and (at least after Menander) set in a hazy, idealized version of the democratic city.

Comedy is thus one preimperial literary genre that consistently handles people and events that are—and are recognized by the audience as—entirely conjured from the author's imagination. The boundaries between fictive and "real" worlds

16. Pavel 1989; Newsom 1988; Currie 1990.

17. Morgan 1993, 176–93; similarly Schirren 2005, 15–37.

18. Pratt 1983; Bowie 1993.

19. Finkelberg 1998; Rösler 1980, although the connection between textuality and fiction seems less direct than he claims.

20. Sext. Emp., *Adv. gramm.* 1.263; for Latin versions, see *Rhet. ad Her.* 1.13; Quint., *Inst.* 2.4.2; see further Barwick 1928.

are constantly and knowingly traversed: for example, in the *parabaseis* of Aristophanic comedies (when the chorus “steps aside” and addresses the audience directly), or in the scene in the same poet’s *Women at the Thesmophoria* where interjections relating to the here and now punctuate Euripides’s and Mnesilochus’s attempts to conjure the world of Euripides’s *Andromache*.²¹ Another case is rhetoric: the scenarios of invented declamatory exercises (*progymnasmata* like Lucian’s *Tyrannicide* and *Disowned*), acted out by a speaker who adopts the persona of another (a prosecutor, defendant, or famous figure from the past), involve impersonation and make-believe.²² Both set-piece rhetoric and comic drama are indeed, as has long been acknowledged, key intertextual reference points for the imperial romance, invoked as literary precedents.²³

Whether such dramatic and rhetorical acting actually constitutes fiction, however, is a matter of definition. Certainly the reader is contracted into a willing suspension of belief concerning the text’s veracity, but that fictionality may be said to be a coefficient factor rather than central to the text’s purpose. Yet it pays, as we have already said, to remain aware that fiction is not an ontologically solid quality that either is or is not in a text. If (as I have claimed above) all literature contains an element of fictionality, then the history of fictionality is also the history of literature. That, clearly, is beyond the scope of a humble chapter, so for the present purposes, I will concentrate instead on narrative forms, particularly prose narrative. In fictional prose narrative, we might say, the fiction is embodied in the discourse itself rather than the performance. In drama and rhetorical logography, the founding “untruth” is perhaps the act of impersonating another: the fictionality flows from the brute disjunction between a performer with a real identity and the identity he claims. This is the case particularly, but not exclusively, when such texts are received through oral performance, a scenario that allows for complex “disjunctural” effects, such as in the famous case of the actor Polus, who carried his own son’s ashes when performing in Sophocles’s *Electra*.²⁴ Fictional narrative, however, operates in a very different way: there is no disjunction between true and false identities, because (with the partial exception of the author)²⁵ such texts contain no true identities at all. This distinction is, avowedly, slippery, especially when we accept that narrative forms sometimes may have been accessed through public recitation—that is, through a form of impersonation. But without wishing to shut

21. Ar., *Thesm.* 871–928.

22. Webb 2006, especially 43–44; Van Mal-Maeder 2007 explores the fictionality of the declamations while resisting the temptation to see them as genetic ancestors of the novel: see pp. 115–46.

23. Fusillo 1989, 43–55, 77–83; Whitmarsh 2005a, 86–89; see, however, Van Mal-Maeder, previous note, for reservations.

24. Aul. Gell. 6.5.1–8.

25. See ch. 4.

off such avenues for future investigation, I shall for now keep the focus centrally on the fictional narrative book, which defines its fictionality in a distinctively absolutist and discursive way.

Epic and Fiction

Preimperial fiction, understood in this way, emerges not as a freestanding category but as an ontologically ambiguous subcategory of existing narrative forms. Of these, the most evident is traditional hexameter epic. I wish to turn now to consider briefly the reception of Hesiod and Homer from the classical into the Hellenistic period. Their poems became particular targets of scorn in the early classical period, when the so-called Ionian revolution shifted the burden of cosmic explanation from mythical narrative to physiological speculation. Xenophanes (early fifth century) mocks epic “inventions [*plasmata*]” about centaurs (fr. 1.22 DK) and naïve anthropomorphisms (frs. 13–14 West), chiding Homer and Hesiod for their depictions of divine immorality (frs. 10–11 West). Heraclitus too castigates his epic predecessors vigorously (frs. 42, 56–57, 105, 106 DK). This process of decentering the cultural authority of epic continued within the philosophical tradition, most notably in Plato’s famous critiques (in *Ion* and especially *Republic* II–III and X).

Much of the anxiety, as the above examples show, focused on the role of the gods, who were held to behave in ways that were either unbecoming or incredible.²⁶ For some ancient writers, the Homeric gods themselves were fictions. In a dramatic (perhaps satyric) fragment of the late fifth century, Critias or Euripides has Sisyphus claim that “a shrewd and thoughtful man” invented the gods, in order to terrify other humans into social conformity (fr. 19.11–13 *TGrF*). Whether this heretical belief was disproved later in the narrative we do not know, but it is clearly designed to reflect (or refract) contemporary Sophistic beliefs, mimicking the patterns of social-constructionist anthropological etiology elsewhere attributed to Prodicus and Protagoras.²⁷

This form of theological debunking is most fully realized in a Hellenistic text, the *Sacred Inscription* attributed to Euhemerus of Messene (early third century B.C.E.; discussed more fully in “Imaginary Worlds” below and in chapter 3), which survives principally in summary via books 5 and 6 of Diodorus of Sicily.²⁸ The author claims to have visited the Panchaeon Islands (supposedly off the eastern coast of Arabia), where he saw a golden pillar inscribed with the deeds of Uranus, Cronos, and Zeus, three Panchaeon kings (Diod. Sic. 6.1.7–10). The Greek gods were, it transpires, originally historical mortals, who were accounted gods because

26. Feeney 1991.

27. *PHerc.* 1428 fr. 19, with Henrichs 1975, 107–23; Plat., *Prot.* 320C–323A.

28. Testimonia in Winiarczyk 1991; discussion in Winiarczyk 2002.

of Zeus's great achievements. As I argue more fully in chapter 3, the Euhemeran narrative predicates its sense of its own status as a fictional text on a knowing, intellectualized tradition of commentary on Homeric and Hesiodic misrepresentations, particularly of the gods.

This kind of fiction thus emerges as reflexive rather than autonomous, nesting as it does in the periphery of the epic tradition. The *Sacred Inscription* is in one sense the least "Euhemeristic" of such mythological rationalizations, if we take that label to point to the careful sanitization of traditional myth so as to exclude implausible elements.²⁹ It does not deal at all, so far as we can tell, with the explication of Homeric and Hesiodic narrative; the travels of Zeus related on the inscription proper are not presented as the kernel of truth underlying traditional mythology. But there were plenty of other writers engaged in the project of stripping away poetic embellishment. Already in the celebrated opening of Herodotus we find the stories of the thefts of Europa, Helen, Medea, and Io presented in a pared-down, "realistic" mode (1.2.1–1.5.2). In an equally famous passage, Thucydides scales back the Greek expedition to Troy, arguing that while it may have been the largest up to that point, it was considerably smaller than anything in his own time (1.10). Significantly, Thucydides here makes mention of the principle of poetic exaggeration: "It is likely that, being a poet, he [Homer] adorned [*kosmēsai*] his poetry with a view to magnification [*epi to meizon*]" (1.10.3; see too the following section). This is an early example of the prose "position statement," marking the rivalry between prose and verse as veridical genres.³⁰

Herodotus and Thucydides were aiming at communicating a type of truth—even if, in Herodotus's case at least (see the following section), in a strikingly polyphonic medium. We cannot, however, assume this of all such "rationalists." It is extremely difficult to assess the tone of, for example, Palaephatus (possibly fourth century B.C.E.), whose jejune narrative style and simplistic procedure can, depending on one's vantage, seem either naïve or ludic:

They say that Diomedes's mares were man-eating. How laughable! Horses eat hay and barley, not human flesh. The truth is as follows. In ancient times, people labored for themselves and got food and wealth by working the land themselves. But one man started to rear horses. He took pleasure in these horses up until the point when he lost his possessions. He sold them all and used the money to feed his horses, so his friends started to call these horses "man-eating." That is what happened, and the myth was generated thereby. (7)

29. Winiarczyk 2002, 136.

30. See ch. 12.

The word *laughable* discloses the stakes: what version of the story we choose to believe will determine whether we laugh with or are laughed at. But is this radical banalization of the Diomedes legend not in itself ludicrous? Certainly the pretext has something of an Old Comedy plot about it: Aristophanes's *Clouds*, notably, centers on the ruinous state of the household thanks to Pheidippides's obsession with horses. But while it is always attractive to posit a hypersophisticated, self-deconstructive motive that will rescue a text like this from its own apparent inconsequentiality, there are no explicit triggers: it is invariably possible to read Palaephatus, as indeed most people have, as a simple monomaniac. Yet as I have hinted above and argue at greater length in chapter 3, the *Sacred Inscription* seems different: there is every reason to believe that the original text was avowedly and playfully fictional. This seems to go too far for the work of Euhemerus's successor Dionysius "Scytobrachion" (The leather arm), who in the second century B.C.E. composed prose versions of the Argonautic and Trojan events shorn of mythological apparatus.³¹ In both cases, as far as one can tell from the fragments and summaries that survive, there is a playful tension between claims to narrative realism and the outrageously bathetic treatment of canonical myth.³²

Further challenge to the veridical authority of epic came from the development of forensic oratory, beginning in fifth-century Athens. Particularly critical was the role of "plausibility [*to eikos*]": invoking or impugning the credibility of a particular account was a way of buttressing or assailing a speaker's trustworthiness.³³ Rhetoric opened up a new language for assessing narrative: Do we believe Homer's version of affairs? Is he a credible witness? Questions of narrative plausibility thus become central to literary criticism (they are famously prominent in Aristotle's discussion of tragic plotting in the *Poetics*). These debates persisted into the Hellenistic period. In the early third century, the scholar-poet Callimachus protests that "the ancient poets were not entirely truthful" (*Hymn to Zeus* 60) in their account of the gods' drawing of lots for Heaven, Earth, and Hades: "It is plausible [*eoike*] that one should draw lots for equal things," not on such asymmetrical terms (*ibid.*, 63–64).³⁴ Later, in the first century C.E., Dio Chrysostom would argue that Troy was not captured, making heavy use of the criterion of *to eikos* in his argument (11.16, 20, 55, 59, 67, 69, 70, 92, 130, 137, 139). Were such rhetorical confabulations promoted in the intervening Hellenistic period? We can, appropriately enough, appeal only to plausibility.

31. *FGrH* 32; Rusten 1982 adds three other fragments. For the influence of Euhemerus see Winiarczyk 2002, 139–42.

32. As emphasized by Rusten 1982, e.g., p. 112 (on the Libyan stories): "A work of fiction."

33. Goldhill 2002a, 49–50.

34. On the wiles of this poem see especially Hopkinson 1984.

Let us return to late-fifth-century Athens. The decentering of Homeric authority also allowed Sophists to begin experimenting with alternative Homeric "realities." Hippias claimed to have an authoritative version of Trojan events, based not on Homer alone but on a synthesis of multiple sources (fr. 6 DK). Gorgias, followed in the mid-fourth century by Isocrates, defended Helen on the count of willing elopement and composed a defense speech for Palamedes. Homer's most notorious woman could thus be reappraised, and a figure who does not appear in the *Iliad* could be wedged into the narrative. Sophistry also fostered a relativistic approach to storytelling. Around the turn of the fourth century, Antisthenes composed versions of Ajax's and Odysseus's speeches for the arms of Achilles. Once forensic rhetoric had permitted the idea that a single event could be narrated from multiple perspectives, then the Muse-given authority of the epic narrator ceased to be wholly authoritative.

This development allowed for the possibility of versions of the Trojan narrative told from alternative angles. The best-known examples are imperial in date: in addition to Dio's *Trojan Oration*, noted above, we also have Philostratus's *Heroicus* (see chapter 7), which impugns Homer's version of events for its pro-Odyssean bias, and the diaries of Dares and Dictys, which purport to offer eyewitness accounts of the Trojan War.³⁵ This phenomenon has its roots in the numerous Hellenistic prose texts attempting to establish the truth of the Trojan War, now largely lost to us: philological works such as those of Apollodorus and Demetrius of Scepsis and synthetic accounts such as those of Idomeneus of Lampsacus and Metrodorus of Chios. Other versions seem to have come closer to the fictionalizing accounts of the imperial period. Palaephatos, whom we met above, composed a *Trōika* that seems to have been full of the wonders better known from his extant *On Incredible Things*. A particularly alluring figure is Hegesianax of Alexandria Troas, a polymath of the third to second centuries B.C.E. who composed a prose *Trōika* pseudonymously ascribed to one Cephalon (sometimes called Cephalion) of Gergitha. "Cephalon" was probably not presented as a contemporary of the Trojan action, as is sometimes claimed: his account of the foundation of Rome by Aeneas's son Romus (*sic*), two generations after the war, seems to rule that out (*FGrH* 45 F 9). Nevertheless, the narrator certainly did pose as a voice from the distant past, and convincingly enough to persuade Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing not much more than a century later, that he was an "extremely ancient" authority (*AR* 1.72 = *FGrH* 45 F 9; see also *AR* 1.49 = *FGrH* 45 F 7).

Hellenistic texts also demonstrate a different kind of relativization of narrative authority, based on the conflict between local traditions. Callimachus's *Hymn to*

35. On this trend in imperial literature see especially Kim 2010a.

Zeus begins by noting the clash over Zeus's birthplace between two versions, the Cretan and the Arcadian. The poet professes himself "in two minds" before deciding on the Arcadian version on the grounds that "Cretans are always liars" (4–9). The rejection of the "lying" tradition does not by itself guarantee that the other is true; in fact, the more emphasis one places on partiality in traditional narrative, the less likely it becomes that any of it is true. "May my own lies be such as to persuade my listener!" (65), the Callimachean narrator expostulates when contesting the story of the divine drawing of lots, discussed above. A dense and cryptic wish, to be sure, but hardly one that strives to conceal the fictiveness of mythological narrative.

Let us note finally in this section that the poet Callimachus represents a rare intrusion into this predominantly prose landscape, and even he is adopting a prosaic voice at this juncture. This kind of fiction is intimately bound up with the questioning of verse and, in particular, epic's claims to divinely inspired authority.

History and Fiction

These cultural shifts in the nature of narratorial authority also had implications for the writing of history. Prose records emerged in the fifth century out of the same adversarial climate that produced cosmologists, scientists, and philosophers: a claim to speak the truth was at the same time a rejection of the falsehoods spoken by predecessors.³⁶ As early as Hecataeus of Miletus (early fifth century) we find an author's programmatic assertion that he will deliver "the truth," in explicit contrast to the "many ridiculous [*geloia*] stories" told by the Greeks (*FGrH* 1 F 1a). Herodotus (1.1–5) and particularly Thucydides (1.1–22) begin with rationalized, scaled-down accounts of the Trojan War that programmatically announce each author's factual reliability. Thucydides's austere rejection of "the mythical element [*to muthōdes*]" (1.22.4) in favor of "accuracy [*akribeia*]" (1.22.2, 5.20.2, 5.26.5, 5.68.2, 6.54–55) marks his predecessors as inherently untrustworthy. Indeed, extant authors of Greek history (Xenophon, the Oxyrhynchus Historian, Polybius, Dionysius, Arrian, Appian, and so forth) do seem generally to replicate his fondness for relatively unadorned, linear narration.

Yet there was also a different tradition, stemming from Herodotus, which privileged storytelling, exoticism, and wonder (*thauma*). *Thauma* is, indeed, a key term in the history of fictional thought. Wonders occupy a peculiarly indeterminate epistemological position, between the plausible and the impossible.³⁷ Moreover, wonders standardly form part of a discourse of geographical otherness,

36. Lloyd 1987, 56–70.

37. Packman 1991.

located at the margins of Greek ken.³⁸ *Thaumata* within a narrative are culturally or physiologically exotic, or both: they thus serve as a challenge to "our" received ideas as to what is plausible and what not.

Collections of *thaumata* and paradoxes become a genre in their own right in the Hellenistic period (thanks, apparently, to Callimachus's lead): such authors as Palaephatos, Antigonos of Carystus, Archelaos (*SH* 125–29), Aristocles, Isigonos of Nicaea, and Apollonius compiled catalogues of wonderful plants, animals, and events. Wonders also played an important role in the narrative texture of the now-fragmentary fourth-century historians Theopompus, Ephorus, and Timaeus. Dionysius of Halicarnassus remarks of Theopompus that "he tells of the inaugurations of dynasties and goes through the foundations of cities, he reveals the life-styles of kings and the peculiarities of their habits and includes in his work any wondrous paradox produced by land or sea" (*Pomp.* 6 = *FGrH* 115 T20a [4]). These writers—famously excoriated by the austere Polybius (12.4a)—seem to have raised Herodotus's digressiveness (*FGrH* 115 T29–31 [Theopompus], 70 T23 [Ephorus], 848 T19 [Timaeus]) and prurience (*FGrH* 115 T2 [Theopompus], 79 T18b [Ephorus]) to new heights. Rather than seeing this habit of collecting wonders in Polybian terms, as a deficiency of seriousness, it is preferable to see it as the sign of a distinctive literary aesthetic celebrating narrative polymorphousness—an aesthetic that seems to have exerted continued influence in swaths of Hellenistic history now largely lost (composed by figures such as Eudoxus of Rhodes, Myrsilus of Lesbos, and Zeno of Rhodes) and whose influence can be seen everywhere in the imperial romance (particularly in Antonius Diogenes's *Implausible Things beyond Thule*), as well as in the *Alexander Romance* (discussed below, in "Greece and Egypt").

Allied to this textural experimentation was a willingness to embrace diverse content, including erotic narrative. Polybius's disapproving gaze also falls on a more centrally Hellenistic historian, Phylarchus (third century), whom he famously accuses of untruth and of presenting his narrative more like a tragedy than a history (2.34 = *FGrH* 81 T3). What Polybius actually means here has been vigorously debated,³⁹ but other sources indicate that the reference might well be to content as well as form. Phylarchus's histories certainly included erotic, and indeed mythological, narrative. The manchette of one of Parthenius's *Love Stories* (see next section), a distinctive version of the attempted rape of Daphne by Apollo, claims it derives from "Diodorus of Elaea and the fifteenth book of Phylarchus" (Parth. XV = *FGrH* 81 F 32). Plutarch attributes another of these stories (XXIII), detailing the love of Cleonymus of Sparta (third century) for his unfaithful wife Chilonis, to "Phylarchus and Hieronymus" (*Pyrrh.* 27.8 = *FGrH* 81 F 48, 154 27.9 F 14).

38. Romm 1992.

39. Walbank 1960.

Undoubtedly the most “romantic” of historians, however, was Ctesias of Cnidos, who served as the doctor to the Persian king Artaxerxes II (ca. 436–358 B.C.E.). Ctesias’s principal compositions were the *Persian Affairs* and the *Indian History*, the former of which survives in summaries by Diodorus and Photius, as well as numerous fragments.⁴⁰ These works were known in antiquity for their scurrility and exaggeration. Plutarch in his *Artaxerxes*, while using the *Persian Affairs* as a source for his narrative, refers to the “all sorts of nonsense with which Ctesias filled his book” (1.4 = Ctesias T 11d *FGrH*), which “turns away from the truth toward the dramatic and mythical [*to muthōdes*]” (6.9 = Ctesias T 11e *FGrH*). Lucian, in the prologue to his fantastical *True Stories*, cites Ctesias as one of his literary precursors: “He wrote things about India and its customs that he had neither seen nor heard from anyone truthful” (1.3 = Ctesias T 11h *FGrH*).

The surviving testimonia on Ctesias are uniformly critical of his mendacity, but he was clearly widely read in antiquity, particularly for his orientaling perspective on Persia and the Middle East. (If more of Ctesias survived, then our understanding of the Persian scenes in Chariton and Heliodorus would no doubt be richer.) Nor is his significance confined to this. He is our earliest known source for the story of the union between the (historical) Syrian Semiramis and the (mythical) Assyrian king Ninus (*FGrH* 688 F 1), which captivated later writers including Cornelius Alexander “Polyhistor” (*FGrH* 273 F 81) and the author of the fragmentary proto-novelistic work that modern scholars call *Ninus*, probably of the first century C.E.⁴¹ This story clearly took on a narrative life of its own: Semiramis could be a hyperpowerful queen with divine elements, as in Ctesias, who makes her the daughter of the Syrian goddess Derceto (≈ Atargatis) and implicitly associates her with Astarte/Ištar; in the novel, she is transformed into a blushing maiden;⁴² elsewhere we read that she was a prostitute who tricked Ninus out of his kingdom (*FGrH* 690 F 7, 681 F 1; Plut., *Mor.* 753d–e).⁴³

Ctesias is also the source of an erotic intrigue between the Mede Stryangaeus and the Scian Zarinaea, alluded to in a later source (ps.-Demetr., *De eloc.* 213; see also *P.Oxy.* 2230 [= *FGrH* 688 F 8b]). This story has a range of motifs that will reappear in the imperial romance: threatened suicide, a love letter, the bewailing of fortune.⁴⁴ Again, the influence on the later novels is arguably direct. Stryangaeus’s letter to Zarinaea contains the phrase “I saved you—and although you were saved

40. Text: *FGrH* 688; see also the Budé edition of Lenfant 2004 and Stronk 2010. On Ctesias’s importance in the history of fiction see especially Holzberg 1993 and Whitmarsh, forthcoming a.

41. Stephens and Winkler 1995, 23–71.

42. Billault 2004.

43. These traditions are discussed in Whitmarsh, forthcoming a.

44. Holzberg 1993, 81–82. And indeed the summary of the story preserved by Nicolaus of Damascus and, since Felix Jacoby, included among the Ctesian fragments (F 8C Stronk) is considerably more “romantic.”

by me, I have been destroyed by you" (ps.-Demetr., *De eloc.* 213). Chariton and Achilles Tatius (perhaps via Chariton) seem to have picked up the phrasing in their letters of aggrieved lovers (Char. 4.3.10; Ach. Tat. 5.18.3–4).

Works like these raise difficult questions. They are not plasmatic: they deal with figures and events that already existed within the broad span of traditional records of the past. Moreover, while Lucian may cite Ctesias as a liar, and Polybius may reprove Phylarchus for mixing lies and truth, there is nothing to suggest that such texts were "fictional" at the level of contract between reader and narrator. Ancient readers presumably turned to historians for truths, even if there were discrepancies between different kinds of truth and the different narrative registers through which they were communicated. Even so, neither is this history in the Thucydidean sense, of "realist" chronological sequence and meticulous accuracy. Ctesias, Theopompus, Ephorus, and Phylarchus, in their different ways, seem rather to have privileged (what they understood as) the Herodotean tradition of thrilling, episodic narrative; they reinstated "the mythical element [*to muthōdes*]" so famously excoriated by Thucydides (1.22.4; see also 1.21.1). It is in the margins of historiography that Hellenistic prose culture developed its most vigorous storytelling.

LOCAL HISTORIES

In order to approach Hellenistic fiction, then, we need—paradoxically—to set aside the concept of fiction and turn instead to the gray areas between history, mythology, and creative storytelling, for it is here that Hellenistic culture typically locates its most exuberant narratives. I want to examine first of all the local history of cities. ("Local history" is, of course, not a coherent genre but a modern label covering everything from verifiable recent history to the fantastic mythography of origin narratives.) Such works were widely composed throughout Greek antiquity, particularly in those periods when regional identity was under pressure from larger, "globalizing" (i.e., usually imperial) forces:⁴⁵ I count in Jacoby's *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (FGrH) more than eighty-five titles from the Hellenistic period alone that allude to specific locales. Here more than anywhere, however, we are hampered by the fragmentary nature of sources. In the overwhelming majority of cases we have only brief snippets preserved in later sources, and reflecting the interests (often narrowly lexicographical) of the transmitting author.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to focus on local history as a locus for fictional thinking. Greek accounts of the past that survive intact from antiquity are as a rule the synthesizing overviews that were too culturally authoritative for Christian late antiquity and Byzantium to ignore. Below this visible tip, however,

45. For this phenomenon see Whitmarsh 2010a.

lies a huge iceberg of diversity. Many of these stories may have circulated orally, whether jealously preserved as part of local culture or intermingled with more exotic stories thanks to cross-cultural traffic among travelers, traders, prostitutes, and soldiers. Oral culture is of course lost to us now, but some of its vibrancy can be detected in written texts that survive.

The political organization of Greek society was highly conducive to generating stories. Each community advanced its claims to prominence through local myths, often in the form of *ktistic* (dealing with foundation) or colonial narratives. For the classical period, the works of Pindar and Bacchylides testify to this phenomenon in abundance. Epigraphy in particular exemplifies the genuine, ongoing importance to individual cities of ktistic myth in the Hellenistic period. Far from being simply a parlor game for intellectuals, as was once thought, local myth-history was a politically important medium, through which a city might advance its particular claim to preeminence. Poets might be commissioned to add the luster of verse: Apollonius of Rhodes and Rhianus were active in this field.⁴⁶ Narratives might be inscribed on stone: an excellent example is the inscription recently discovered in the harbor wall of Halicarnassus, which connects the city's foundation with the nymph Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, "the inventor of marriage."⁴⁷ Another medium for preserving and disseminating local history was religious cult. The guides (exegetes) whose role was to explain the sacred history of epichoric cult sites are more familiar from imperial texts such as Plutarch's *On Why the Pythia No Longer Prophesies in Verse*, Pausanias, and Longus,⁴⁸ but the practice is already attested in Strabo (17.1.29) and would almost certainly have existed in the Hellenistic period.

What do these stories have to do with fiction? The first point to make is that local myths are both endowed with an intrinsic cultural authority and conceded (at least by the elite sophisticates who tend to record them) a licence to confabulate, free from the rationalist strictures of more urbane narrative. Local history is expected to be bizarre, exotic: it tolerates stories of immortal intervention, of metamorphosis, of improper passion. It is no doubt for this reason, in part, that Longus's faux-naïf *Daphnis and Chloe* (second–third century C.E.) is dressed in the garb of a local myth, as told to the narrator by the exegete of a Lesbian cult of the Nymphs.

There is also a recurrent linkage between erotic narrative and local history: sexual union seems often to betoken some kind of foundational event.⁴⁹ Consequently, a number of texts emerged that used this form as a cover for scurrillity

46. CA, 5–8, 12–18; Cameron 1995, 47–53.

47. Lloyd-Jones 1999a, 1999b.

48. C. P. Jones 2001a, and below, chapter 6.

49. Rohde 1914, 42–59.

and titillation. The most notorious example is the *Milesian Events* (*Milēsiaka*) of Aristides: "lascivious books," according to Plutarch (*Crass.* 32.3).⁵⁰ Ovid refers to Aristides in the same breath as one Eubius, "the author of an impure history" "who recently wrote a *Sybaritic Events*" (*Tristia* 2.413–16). The *Suda* also attests to such works. Philip of Amphipolis (of unknown date) composed *Coan Events*, *Thasian Events*, and *Rhodian Events*, the last of which is styled "totally disgraceful" (*Suda*, s.v. "Philip of Amphipolis"; see also Theodorus Priscianus, *Eupor.* 133.5–12).

Late-Hellenistic prose collections of local narratives (by Nicander, Parthenius, Conon, and others)⁵¹ point to the fact that they were increasingly perceived to have intrinsic narrative interest, independent of their original (or supposedly original) function in local ideology. Such collections are often united by narrative theme: Parthenius gathers love stories (like the pseudo-Plutarchan assemblage, which is probably later in date), and other later examples include the collection of metamorphosis stories of Antoninus Liberalis. What this suggests is that local histories came to be viewed as repositories for arresting and alluring narrative, independent of their political, cultural, or religious value to their communities. Parthenius, indeed, dedicates his collection to his patron Cornelius Gallus for use in his (Latin) hexameters and elegiacs.

Local history is not "fictional" in the same way as the imperial romance.⁵² Its subject matter veers from obscure mythology to central mythology to recent history, with plenty of indeterminate areas between. It is not, however, plasmatic, like the novel or New Comedy: the stories are never presented as wholly invented. Indeed, the function of the manchettes that accompany many of Parthenius's narratives is precisely to identify the sources of the stories. For these reasons, it is misleading to present local history as a genetic predecessor of the imperial romance.⁵³ To grasp the fictionality of local history, we need to resist, once again, conceptions of fiction that are shaped by the imperial period.

Greek and Near Eastern Narratives

The forms of local history and mythology emerging into view during this period were not just Greek.⁵⁴ We have already discussed the multiple versions of the story of the Syrian Semiramis and the Assyrian Ninus, which (for Greeks at least) stemmed ultimately from Ctesias. As the doctor of Artaxerxes II, Ctesias is likely to have had access to Persian narratives, perhaps even the "royal parchments" of

50. Bowie, forthcoming.

51. See Lightfoot 1999, 224–34.

52. *Ibid.*, 256–63.

53. As, e.g., Lavagnini 1921 does.

54. On this material see Whitmarsh and Thomson, forthcoming; Whitmarsh, forthcoming a, discusses Ctesias and the *Cyropaedia* in terms of cultural bifocality.

which he makes mention,⁵⁵ and he may well have spoken the language. Similarly culturally bifocal was Xenophon, whose experiences with the mercenary army of ten thousand who fought to support Cyrus—in his rebellion against Ctesias’s patron Artaxerxes—will have brought him into contact with different traditions. Xenophon’s most “novelistic” work was the *Cyropaedia*, an idealized biography of the king who united the Persians and Medes. Interwoven with the central section is a subnarrative dealing with the constant, enduring love between Panthea and Abradatas, before the latter is tragically killed in battle (4.6.11–12, 5.1.2–18, 6.1.31–51, 6.3.35–6.4.11, 7.1.15, 7.1.24–32, 7.1.46–49, 7.3.2–16). Critics have rightly emphasized the influence of this episode on the imperial romance, particularly on the Persian episodes of Chariton’s *Callirhoe*.⁵⁶ We also have a report in Philostratus (third century C.E.) of a work called *Araspes in Love with Panthea* (Araspes being a suitor of the Xenophontic Panthea), which (so says Philostratus) some attribute to Dionysius of Miletus but is in fact the work of a certain Celer (*Lives of the Sophists* 524). Whether this was a “novel” (as modern critics mostly assume) or (more likely, in my view) a rhetorical declamation, it shows the iconic significance of the Panthea sequence in amatory literary history. We also read of a now-lost *Pantheia the Babylonian* by Soterichus of Oasis (writing under Diocletian), which was quite probably a romance (*FGrH* 641).

Indeed, erotic prose seems to have been associated with Eastern storytelling from the very beginning. Herodotus’s *Histories* begins with the intriguing assertion that Persian *logioi*—the term seems to mean something like “prose chroniclers” (see Nagy 1987)—tell the story of the Trojan War as an escalation in tit-for-tat woman stealing after the Phoenician abduction of Io (1.1–4). The Phoenicians’ version, Herodotus proceeds to tell us, is different: Io left willingly, having fallen pregnant by the captain of a Phoenician ship (1.5). Whether Herodotus is accurately reporting Persian and Phoenician traditions is simply unknowable: it is possible, but it is equally possible that this represents an Orientalist mirage. The central point for our purposes, however, is that he is presenting himself as someone with access to Persian and north-Semitic cultural traditions—and also, crucially, that these traditions are preserved in a form alien to the Greek generic taxonomy, as “realist” (i.e., nonmythological) erotic prose.

The allure of glamorous Oriental eroticism remains evident throughout the Hellenistic period. The Ninus and Semiramis story was undoubtedly the most popular “Orientalist” narrative, but we can identify others. Particularly notable is the association between (particularly erotic) prose fiction and Semitic culture.

55. Diod. Sic. 2.32.4 = *FGrH* 688 T3, F 5; Diod. Sic. 2.22.5 = *FGrH* F 1b. On the question of the historicity of the “royal parchments” see Llewellyn-Jones 2010, 58–63; Stronk 2010, 15–25. For *diphtherai* as parchment books see Hdt. 5.58.3.

56. Perry 1967, 166–73; Reichel 2010, 425–30.

One striking example is the complex of narratives around Stratonice, the wife of Alexander's successor Seleucus, and her stepson Antiochus (later to be Antiochus I): according to the story, he fell in love with her and began wasting away; the doctor Erasistratus diagnosed the problem, and then Seleucus ceded to him not only Stratonice but also his kingdom.⁵⁷ Despite the historical characters, the main theme of the story is clearly folkloric: an inversion of the motif of the lusty older woman and the virtuous younger man, familiar from the Greek Hippolytus myth and the Hebrew story of Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). Lucian's version strongly underlines the Semitic overtones of the story, segueing into an etiology of the cult of the Syrian goddess Atargatis at Hierapolis.⁵⁸ It looks very much as though the historical story has been blended with a Syrian myth in order to explain the distinctive nature of the Hierapolitan cult.

This interpenetration of Greek and Semitic erotic narrative is paralleled elsewhere. A certain Laetus composed a *Phoenician Events*, including accounts of the abduction of Europa and Eiramus's (Hiram's) presentation to Solomon of his daughter (together with an amount of wood—presumably Lebanese cedar—for shipbuilding; *FGrH* 784 F 1[b]). The latter story was also told by Menander of Ephesus, who was widely held (no doubt on his own testimony) to have learned Phoenician to access his sources (*FGrH* 783 T3[a]–[c]). According to the *Suda*, Xenophon of Cyprus (undatable but probably Hellenistic and perhaps Ovid's source for the relevant stories in the *Metamorphoses*) composed a *Cypriot Events*, glossed as "a history of erotic plots" including the stories of Cinyra, Myrrha, and Adonis. All of these figures are Semitic in origin and no doubt reflect Cyprus's partially Phoenician heritage. We can point also to the *Nachleben* of the Phoenician setting in the imperial romance, in Lollianus's *Phoenician Events*, and in Achilles Tatius's *Leucippe and Clitophon*.

Another erotic story that may have a Semitic source is the notorious love between the children of Miletus, either of Caunus for his sister Byblis or the reverse. The major Hellenistic versions are in the fragmentary works of the epic poets Apollonius of Rhodes and Nicaenetus⁵⁹ and the prose mythographers Parthenius⁶⁰ and Conon.⁶¹ The Semitic case⁶² is based partly on the incest motif (which superficially resembles that of the Cypro-Phoenician Myrrha narrative) and partly on the name *Byblis*, which looks like an eponym for the Phoenician city

57. Val. Max. 5.7 ext.; Plut., *Demetr.* 38; Luc., *DDS* 17–18; App., *Syr.* 308–27; further sources at Lightfoot 2003, 373–74.

58. Luc., *DDS* 19–27; see Lightfoot 2003, 373–402, with copious reference to Semitic parallels.

59. CA, 5, 1.

60. Parthenius 11, incorporating his own hexameter version, fr. 33 Lightfoot = *SH* 648.

61. Brown 2002. Sources discussed at Rohde 1914, 101–3; Lightfoot 1999, 433–36.

62. Brown 2002, 59–60.

of Byblos. It is also possible that *Caunus* is an originally Phoenician name, given that Caria absorbed Phoenician influence. (Armand d'Angour points out to me, additionally, the Phoenician town known to the author of the biblical 1 Chronicles as *KWN* [18.8].) Again, a Semitic erotic myth seems to have entered the Greek tradition; as it has done so, its etiological aspects have been gradually pared away to emphasize the erotic narrative.

A different kind of Semitic narrative hove over the Greek horizon with the translation of the Septuagint: a number of the so-called Apocrypha have been claimed as “novels” (including Esther, Susanna, Judith, and Daniel—the Greek version of which is longer than the Hebrew, having taken on a life of its own).⁶³ Whether Greek gentiles actually read them is difficult to ascertain: beyond the famous reference to Genesis in the treatise *On the Sublime* (9.9)—which is itself impossible to date—there is little evidence for a “pagan” Greek readership of Jewish texts. It is, indeed, hard to see how the Jewish novels could appeal directly to gentiles: they primarily express faith in God’s ability to rescue his chosen people from foreign oppression. Even at the stylistic level, they manifest a certain intractability, their paratactic style (which renders the *vav* [“and”] constructions distinctive to the Hebrew language) marking their difference from “native” Greek. But direct influence is only one form of cultural contingency, and they do in fact share motifs with Greco-Roman story culture. In particular, the focus on the preservation of female integrity in the face of predatory monarchs (found in Judith and Esther) is a theme in both Latin (Lucretia) and Greek (Chariton, Xenophon, Achilles, Heliodorus) narrative.

Certainly, the Greek erotic tradition seems to have influenced Jewish narrative. Retellings of the erotic segments of the Torah by Josephus and Philo inflect them with Greek narrative motifs.⁶⁴ The convergences between Greek and Jewish are closest in the extraordinary *Joseph and Aseneth* (perhaps Hellenistic), which elaborates on the biblical story of Joseph’s marriage to a young Egyptian maiden (Genesis 41:45; see also 26:20). The date is extremely controversial—estimates range from the second century B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E.⁶⁵—but the safest guess seems to be that it is a Hellenistic Jewish text overlain with Christian material. Whatever the truth of the matter, the history of this text is clearly interwoven with the rise of the erotic novel. This narrative plays repeatedly on the substitution of erotic with righteous motifs. Aseneth is egregiously beautiful like a goddess (4.2); she is immediately stupefied by the sight of Joseph (6.1), grieves when they are

63. See especially Wills 1995, 2002.

64. Braun 1934.

65. Bohak 1996 argues for the second century B.C.E. on the basis of claimed links with the temple of Onias IV at Heliopolis; Kraemer 1998, 225–85, sees the work as late antique. Further discussion of this dating (and other issues) in Whitmarsh, forthcoming a; see also Whitmarsh 2012.

separated after their initial meeting (8.8), and weeps in her room that night (10.2).⁶⁶ Yet their relationship is built around not erotic obsession but pious reverence of the Jewish god. Although this text is aimed at Jews and is probably a translation from the Hebrew (it displays the same paratactic style as the Apocrypha, discussed above), it is clearly designed for a readership also familiar with the Greek literary (and particularly erotic) repertoire.

Greece and Egypt

The existence of significant Hellenistic prose stories on pharaonic themes, Egypt's prominence in the later, imperial romance, and the significance of Hellenistic Alexandria as a point of intersection between Greek and Egyptian traditions⁶⁷ have together led some to believe that the novel first developed in Egypt.⁶⁸ (Traces of narrative motifs from the pharaonic period have even been detected in imperial romances.)⁶⁹ While any crude hypothesis of a single cultural origin for the novel is unconvincing (in light of the evidence discussed above for local Greek and Semitic elements), it is clear that Egypt played an important role in the novelistic *imaginaire*.⁷⁰

Two major traditions are of critical importance. The first is that surrounding the legendary pharaoh Sesonchosis (sometimes called Sesostris or Sesosis), credited with numerous conquests in Asia and Europe. In addition to the various historical (or quasi-historical) accounts of this figure,⁷¹ we also have three papyrus fragments that seem to derive from a "novelistic" version of his story, composed in unassuming Greek.⁷² Two are military (one names the king's adversaries as an "Arab" [i.e., Palestinian?] contingent, led by one Webelis); a third, however, is erotic, describing the handsome young king's relationship with a girl Meameris, the daughter of a vassal king. This episode does not appear in any of the "historical" versions of the narrative, and the themes of young love, wandering, infatuation, erotic suffering, and distraction at a banquet (Stephens and Winkler 1995, 262) invite obvious comparisons with the imperial romance. Thematically, the narrative resembles the fragmentary, novelistic version of the *Ninus* romance (discussed above): each deals with a great national leader from the distant past, focusing on both military exploits and erotic vulnerability.

66. See further Philonenko 1968, 43–48; S. West 1974.

67. Selden 1998; Stephens 2003.

68. Barns 1956.

69. I. Rutherford 2000. On the issue as a whole see I. Rutherford, forthcoming; Stephens, forthcoming.

70. Nimis 2004.

71. Hdt. 2.102–11; Maneth. fr. 34 Robbins; Diod. Sic. 1.53.

72. Stephens and Winkler 1995, 252–66.

What we are to conclude from these similarities is less clear: is *Sesonchosis* an influential Hellenistic text (or, at any rate, part of an influential but now lost Hellenistic tradition)? Or does it represent a specifically local-Egyptian, populist variant on the imperial romance? A third alternative, no doubt the safest, is to rephrase the terms of the question. “The Greek novel” and “the *Sesonchosis* tradition” were not monolithic and wholly independent, nor was any traffic between the two necessarily unidirectional. As in the case of the Phoenician and Jewish material discussed above, Greek narrative prose proves to be a flexible and capacious medium, able to incorporate numerous cultural perspectives.

This is nowhere truer than in relation to the most important Egyptian-centered text, the text we call the *Alexander Romance*.⁷³ The work survives in numerous recensions, some prose and some (Byzantine) in verse; in all, there are more than eighty versions from antiquity and the middle ages, in twenty-four languages (including Pahlavi, Arabic, Armenian, and Bulgarian). Different versions contain different episodes, sequences, and cultural priorities: the *Alexander Romance* is a prism through which cultural light is sharply refracted.

The earliest recension is referred to as A and represents a text probably compiled between the second and fourth centuries C.E. The raw materials for this earliest stratum of the complete text were, however, Hellenistic: a bedrock of (creatively) historical narrative, an epistolary novel (manifested in the various letters that dapple the text, most notably Alexander’s letters to his mother Olympias, 2.23–41), and a work of Egyptian propaganda. The last is the motivation behind the identification of Alexander as the son, and hence continuator, of the last pharaoh, Nectanebo (1.1–12). The Persian invasion can thus be reinterpreted as a minor blip in the otherwise unbroken tradition of wise, powerful, and autonomous Egyptian kingship. On seeing a statue of Nectanebo, Alexander is told that a prophecy was delivered to his father: “The exiled king will return to Egypt, not as an old man but as a youth, and will beat down our enemies, the Persians” (1.34.5). Alexander’s pharaonic credentials, indeed, are more deeply rooted than this. He visits monumental obelisks set up by *Sesonchosis* (1.33.6, 3.17.17), is hailed as a new *Sesonchosis* (1.34.2), and even receives a dream visitation from the man himself, who announces that Alexander’s feats have outdone his own. These episodes function on two levels: Alexander is appropriated into Egyptian history, as the restorer of Egypt’s self-determination, and the *Alexander Romance* presents itself as a rejuvenated version of the *Sesonchosis* tradition.

In the substance of the narrative, however, Alexander represents a figure with whom all peoples can identify: a wise, brave, questing prince, seeking out the

73. Which I cite from Kroll’s 1926 edition of the A recension. Fuller discussion of the *Romance* is in Whitmarsh, forthcoming a, and below chapter 6.

edges of the earth. As so often in Greek narrative of this period, he is also a lover: a section toward the end, perhaps originally a separate romance, details his (entirely fictitious) liaison with Candace, queen of Meroë (3.18–23). Here too there is a hint that the author is weaving together different traditions: Candace lives in the former palace of Semiramis (3.17.42–3.18.1). What is striking is not so much the tweaking of the Ninus and Semiramis story (which is not as great as one might suppose: the Ctesian Semiramis did in fact visit Nubia) but the author's self-conscious concern to portray this section of his narrative as a metamorphosed version of it. If the fidelity to tradition is dubious, the negotiation of the anxiety of cultural influence is artful. The *Alexander Romance* presents itself as the summation of that tradition, outdoing each of its predecessors, just as its subject outdid all others in conquest.

Imaginary Worlds

The primary locations for such narrative confections were, then, Egypt and the Phoenician/Palestinian coast. Others did exist (e.g., the Black Sea littoral in the fragmentary *Calligone*, of uncertain date), but I want to conclude by focusing briefly on two "utopian" narratives set in imaginary worlds, the *Sacred Inscription* attributed to Euhemerus of Messene (early third century B.C.E.), mentioned above, and Iambulus's *Islands of the Sun* (ca. second–first century B.C.E.).⁷⁴ Each is preserved primarily in a summary by Diodorus of Sicily (2.55–60 and 6.1.3–10, respectively) that gives little flavor of the tone or style of the originals and moreover appropriates the content to suit Diodorus's own agenda: a universal history in which all the individual elements cohere. Euhemerus's and Iambulus's narratives are geographically similar: both involve sea journeys beginning in Arabia (via Ethiopia in Iambulus) and continuing into the Indian Ocean. It is tempting, given our discussion above, to see these journeys as self-conscious attempts to outdo the Semitic and Egyptian narrative traditions, by progressing geographically beyond.

Despite the difficulties in peering through the Diodoran fog, certain features are evident. Euhemerus, as we have seen in "Epic and Fiction," was concerned primarily to provide human, historical identities for the Homeric/Hesiodic pantheon. He seems not to have described the journey to Panchaea in any detail; the process of geographical dislocation is primarily a device allowing him to offer a perspective that is radically alternative to traditional Greek thought. In this respect, Euhemerus is a forerunner of authors like Jonathan Swift, the Samuel Butler of *Erewhon* and *Erewhon Revisited*, Edwin Abbott, Jules Verne, and Pierre Boulle.

74. There are useful summaries of scholarship on utopias in Holzberg 2003; see also ch. 3.

Iambulus is more difficult. Some have detected a philosophical, even political, promotion of a communist society “according to nature [*kata phusin*].”⁷⁵ Certainly the islanders “do not marry, but hold their wives in common, rearing any children that are born as common to them all, and love them equally. . . . For this reason no rivalry arises among them, and they live their lives free of faction, extolling like-mindedness to the highest” (2.57.1). Iambulus (or Diodorus) describes a society that embodies the ideals of Greek politics (no “faction [*stasis*],” only “like-mindedness [*homonoia*]”) by following the principles of common property laid out in Plato’s *Republic*.⁷⁶ Yet the sociopolitical aspects of the island in fact receive far less attention than its bountiful nature and the extraordinary health, size, and longevity of its inhabitants. Diodorus prefaces his summary by promising to recapitulate in brief the “paradoxes” (2.55.1) found on the island, a strong signal that he, at any rate, conceived of Iambulus as a purveyor of marvels rather than a systematic political theorist. Lucian too refers to Iambulus’s “paradoxes,” adding that “it is obvious to everyone that he fabricated a falsehood [*pseudos*]” (*True Stories* 1). Iambulus seems to have found room enough within a supposedly veridical genre, the geographical travel narrative, to create a “fictional” work.

As recent scholarship has noted, there is an intrinsic connection in the ancient world between travel and fiction: alternative geographies are home to alternative realities.⁷⁷ Names of Hellenistic authors such as Antiphanes of Berge—who famously claimed to have visited a climate so cold that words froze in the air (Plut., *Mor.* 79a)—and Pytheas of Massilia became bywords for literary confection. It is important, however, to reemphasize that there was no firm generic dividing line between “factual” report and “fiction.” The writers we have discussed in this section inhabited the same literary space as more sober geographical writers, such as Strabo—which is why Diodorus felt licensed to include such material in his own purportedly historical work.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has partly been about how not to write the history of Greek fiction. I have argued against linear, “smoking gun” models that seek to pinpoint moments of invention or discovery. Fictionality inheres in all literary discourse; the question to ask is thus not when it was invented but how it was differently inflected over time. In particular, it is crucial not to attempt to write the history of fiction simply by reverse-engineering the imperial romance.

75. See, e.g., Dawson 1992.

76. Pl., *Rep.* 449c–50a.

77. Romm 1992, especially 172–214.

I conclude with two positive observations. My first is this: the kind of fictional discourse I have traced in this chapter (and I freely concede there are other types) is intimately tied to the emergence of a prose culture built around the book, which—in contrast to earlier poetic texts whose authority was predicated on that of the inspired performer, the *maître de vérité*—places the accent more on the power of language to create its own plausible world. Plausibility—to *eikos*, this concept so closely tied to the forensic culture of the law courts—at first sight implies realism, approximation to reality (the root verb *eoika* means “I resemble”). In this sense, a plausible story is one that coheres with what we know to be true about the world in which we live, and indeed, as we have seen, much of the fictional material we have been discussing emerges from critiques of the “unreality” of traditional poetic claims. Yet there is another dimension to *to eikos*: a plausible story is also one that is internally coherent, true on its own terms. In other words, plausibility is manufactured discursively, within the confines of the narrative itself. What is at issue, when fictional worlds are being made, is not realism but a constructed reality effect. The contained world of the prose book, then, makes for an entirely different experience of fictionality than that of the performed song.

Second point. When I write of a “world-making” power, I am doing more than invoking a classic text in the modern philosophy of fiction;⁷⁸ I am also referring to the trend toward geographical relocation, moving away from the familiar urban landscapes that had served as backdrops for much earlier narrative and into spaces that were felt as exotic, whether for their distant, marginal location, for a perception of cultural otherness, or for their out-of-the-way oddity within Greece itself. This alienation of narrative setting relates to a historical process that we might call Hellenistic but in fact begins already in the fifth century B.C.E. (and the roots of which are indeed already visible in the Homeric and Hesiodic poems): a gradual mapping out of a wider *oikoumene*, and its incorporation into the Greek imaginary. A work such as Euhemerus’s *Sacred Inscription* bears the same relationship to the Indian Ocean as *The Tempest* bears to the New World or *2001: A Space Odyssey* to space. Narrative fiction has assumed the shape of real journeys of exploration, particularly in the context of the competitive imperialism of the successor empires (and we should note that Euhemerus’s expedition is explicitly cast as a voyage mandated by King Cassander of Macedon).

Yet Euhemerus’s phantasmatic projections of other worlds represent only one variety of prose fiction’s encounter with the other, and should not be generalized. Greeks did not merely peek at other peoples over the crenellations of their own cultural traditions. The prose literature of (particularly but not exclusively) the postclassical period also represents genuine contact zones, spaces where Greek,

78. Pavel 1989.

Egyptian, and Semitic discourses can hybridize to yield new, distinctive forms. The works discussed in this chapter do not simply rehash barbarian stereotypes. Rather, people with an impressive range of cultural competence composed them: figures like Ctesias, Laetus, Alexander Polyhistor, and the authors of *Joseph and Aseneth*, the *Alexander Romance*, and *Sesonchosis*. Matters, indeed, become still more interesting when the empire starts (to borrow Salman Rushdie's phrase) "writing back," when Semitic and Egyptian peoples begin to compose in Greek and insert their own priorities and values into the Greek literary tradition. Although (as we shall see in chapters 13 and 14) there certainly were Jewish poets, it is striking that prose fiction, with its in-built attraction to other worlds, proved the most fertile space in which to explore this particular variety of colonial encounter.