

TWO MAJOR MYTHOLOGICAL LEXICA: W.H. ROSCHER, *AUSFÜHRLICHES LEXIKON  
DER GRIECHISCHEN UND RÖMISCHEN MYTHOLOGIE* AND *LEXICON  
ICONOGRAPHICUM MYTHOLOGIAE CLASSICAE (LIMC)*

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The importance of mythology for the study of classical antiquity is enormous, given that both the poetry and the representational arts of the ancient Greeks and Romans drew their themes largely from myth. As a consequence, since school training` relied to a large extent on poetry, knowledge of the myths was an essential component of ancient education. Schoolchildren were obliged to learn by heart catalogues containing the names of gods, heroes, and mythical or historical places.<sup>1</sup> The abundance of ancient Greek myths in particular, with their many variations, which have come down to use through literature is as impressive as it is bewildering. Already in the Hellenistic period, with the development of libraries and scholarship, the need was felt to compile collections of myths whose purpose was to summarize this vast material and to present it in a systematic way – in fact in a geneological order, since the ancients viewed their mythical past as the initial stage of their history (Nilsson 1951, 12-15). A work of this sort that has come down to us is the “Library” (*Βιβλιοθήκη*) transmitted under the name of Apollodoros. The readership of such books is not entirely clear, but we may surmise that they were used chiefly as learning aids for the study of

literature. At the same time, we witness the creation of more complex mythological compilations, such as the illustrated tablets known as *tabulae iliaca*e (Sadursca 1964). Most likely these were not intended for schoolchildren, but rather for a wider audience of wealthy but relatively educated people who had an intense desire to show that they were nevertheless well-read in literature (Horsfall 1979, 26-48).

It was only natural that adequate knowledge of the ancient myths should remain a part of literary education even after Christianity prevailed, especially for the learned class, since ancient literature remained a model for language and style. In the most important Byzantine lexica, such as Hesychius and Suidas (or Suda), mythological names occupied an important place. Later, especially from the Renaissance onwards when Christian Europe sought to reconnect with the traditions of classical antiquity in science, literature, and the arts, a strong interest in the ancient Greek and Roman myths was manifested and began to be systematically cultivated. At first this interest was limited to the scholars (poets and philosophers) who created the Humanist movement. As early as the 14th century, Boccaccio in his *Genealogiae deorum gentilium et heroum* provided a basis for understanding ancient mythology (Gruppe 1921, 22-26). Artists followed, employing mythological themes in their works and frequently giving them a new, allegorical content (Rumpf 1953, 38-46).

But the most significant change in dealing with the ancient myths appears in the 18th century, and particularly its latter half.<sup>2</sup> From that time onward, knowledge of mythology gradually became a tool for the study of ancient Greek and Roman culture. Especially noteworthy is the largely successful – and above all methodologically consistent – attempt by the “father of archaeology” J.J. Winckelmann to interpret the reliefs on sarcophagi and

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<sup>1</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *adversus Mathematicos* 1, 258. Marrou 1965, 320-321.

<sup>2</sup> On the history of the study of ancient mythology see Gruppe 1921; Graf 1991, 15-57; Bremmer 1996, 62-64.

metalwork as depictions of episodes from ancient Greek mythology, on the basis of literary works (Himmelman 1971, *passim*). Winckelmann's views decisively influenced not only the formation of a classicistic trend in art, but also of a new, creative approach to the ancient literary tradition, chief representative of which was Goethe. Here we should note that, for admirers of classical antiquity like Winckelmann and Goethe, the ancient myths had no ideological or religious content, but were rather high level creations of the free human imagination, capable of providing suitable subjects for literary and artistic production.

Particularly important for the later development of mythological research, especially in Germany –the country where classical studies were most systematically cultivated and had the greatest influence on education– was the role played by Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812), professor of classical philology at the University of Göttingen. It is worth mentioning that his lectures, which were widely attended, also included the teaching of ancient art – an innovative feature for that time. Heyne introduced the use of the term “myth” to refer to a narrative that was not a simple literary invention (for which he employed the latin word “fabula”), but the expression of the spirit of a people and therefore an element in its history and culture (Bremmer 1996). This new perception stands at the beginning of the systematic study ancient mythology within the framework of research on antiquity. One result of the heightened interest in ancient myths was the publication of a number of more, or less, concise mythological lexica, based chiefly on the literary tradition of antiquity. The most notable of these was Jacobi's *Handwörterbuch der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, published in 1835. This work was never completed, in spite of its obvious usefulness.

Naturally, the enormous progress in research on antiquity during the 19th century soon created the need for a reliable reference work to replace the handy but outdated lexica no longer able to meet either the requirements of

university education nor the needs of a more broadly educated public.<sup>3</sup> The classical philologist Wilhelm Friedrich Roscher (Göttingen 1845 – Dresden 1923) decided to fill this gap. Roscher had become known to the scholarly community in the early 1870s through a series of studies on ancient Greek mythology in which he employed the then new comparative method. The ambitious enterprise to record as fully as possible all the available ancient evidence concerning Greek and Roman myths in a reference work is characteristic of the broader effort to systematize scientific research in general which held sway in Germany during this period.<sup>4</sup> The wide acceptance and high level of classical studies in particular is evident from the fact that Roscher was not a university professor, but a grammar school teacher: he served as Oberlehrer at the Meissen Fürstenschule from 1871 to 1882, later as Konrektor (Assistant Director) at Wurzen Gymnasium (near Leipzig), of which he became Rektor (Director) from 1894 to 1905.

Roscher's original intention was to produce a thorough and systematic handbook of ancient mythology. But he soon realized that the comprehensiveness and ease of use he strived for could not be achieved unless the work took the form of an alphabetically arranged, analytical mythological dictionary, which had to be the result of the collaborative effort of many researchers. The title chosen was *Ausführliches Lexikon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie* ('Analytical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology'). The coordination of this collective work became his lifetime work. In support of the plan he chose, Roscher adduces, in the preface

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<sup>3</sup> The inadequacy of earlier works, including Jacobi's mythological lexicon, the most complete among those in existence at the time, was pointed out by W.F. Roscher, who deplored in particular the deficient treatment of Roman mythology and the neglect for the representations of myths in art, as well as their interpretations. See Roscher's brief presentation of the new mythological lexicon, which he himself had started to prepare, in the Bulletin of the Teubner publishing house, *Mitteilungen der Verlagsbuchhandlung B.G. Teubner*, 1879, Heft 2, 27: "Freilich ist auch dieses Werk (i.e. Jacobi's lexicon) in vielen Punkten völlig veraltet, namentlich gilt dies von der römischen Mythologie, der Kunstmythologie und von der Mythen-deutung."

to the first volume, a truly impressive fact: the two most comprehensive systematic handbooks of ancient Greek and Roman mythology available at the time (those of Welcker and Preller) taken together contain, according to their indices, no more than 300 names beginning with A, whereas in his own lexicon the corresponding number of names exceeds 1,400.<sup>5</sup>

Roscher's basic objective was to offer "an objective, as far as possible, concise, yet complete presentation of the myths known from literary tradition, always based on the sources."<sup>6</sup> By the term "sources", Roscher apparently had in mind something more inclusive than just literary texts. This is evident from his laudable decision to incorporate into the entries of his *Lexikon* the available archaeological evidence concerning ancient myths, thus acknowledging the considerable progress accomplished in the study of ancient art. Along with this novel approach went the provision to include illustrations in the form of drawings.

The first official announcement of the lexicon came out in 1879,<sup>7</sup> but the actual editorial work must have begun earlier. It is worth mentioning (strange as it may appear by today's standards) that this very costly and ambitious publication effort, undertaken by the well-known publishing house of Teubner in Leipzig, which specialized in scholarly publications, received no public financial support of any kind. Another noteworthy achievement was that in spite of organizational and technical problems, the time needed for the

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<sup>4</sup> See Dover 1993 on the development of the study of antiquity within the context of the general flowering of scientific research in Germany in the second half of the 19th century.

<sup>5</sup> Vol. I, 1, Vorrede, VI: "Um das Gesagte recht augenfällig zu beweisen, bemerke ich, daß selbst in den beiden besten und relativ vollständigsten Handbüchern der griechischen und römischen Mythologie zusammen nach Ausweis der Register kaum 300 A-namen behandelt sind, während unser Lexikon (die Homonymen mitgerechnet) deren über 1,400 enthält."

<sup>6</sup> Vol. II, 1, Vorrede, VII: "... eine möglichst objektive, knappe und doch vollständige, stets auf die Quellen gegründete Darstellung der literarisch überlieferten Mythen ...".

<sup>7</sup> See the Bulletin of the Teubner publishing house (above note 3).

production of the first volume (1884-1890),<sup>8</sup> containing the letters *A-H*, was not unreasonably long: writing and editing the entries took five years, printing another six (Vol. I,1, Vorrede, VII).

In the end, Roscher's mythological lexicon became a larger and more influential work than its instigator and editor (who unfortunately did not live to see his life's work completed) had anticipated. Early on the dictionary became a publishing success, as the number of subscribers, both within and outside Germany, far exceeded the original expectations. This development had positive consequences for the work itself, as Roscher himself acknowledged in the foreword to the first volume: the limitations originally imposed on the length of entries, especially the longer ones, given that the lexicon was to be completed in 17-20 fascicles, were abandoned following the successful circulation of the first fascicle of volume one. It was decided that in the future, entries dealing with the major gods and heroes would be more exhaustive than originally foreseen. Indeed some of these entries are not unlike short monographs. To guarantee completeness, which was one of the chief's goals of the dictionary, Roscher decided to publish additions to the relatively brief entries of the first fascicle, as well as series of supplements containing further additional material and new entries. The supplements would include two philological studies of wider interest: one by E. Schwartz on the ancient mythographers, and one by Fritsche on modern theories of mythology. With these additions, Roscher intended to make the dictionary a first class scholarly tool for the study not only of mythology, but also of the religion of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In the end this goal was achieved, although with modifications and considerable delays.

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<sup>8</sup> The lexicon's volumes carry double publication dates since the work appeared in fascicles: the first date corresponds to the publication of the first fascicle, the second to that of the last. Thus, the first volume bears the publication date 1884-1890.

In the foreword to the second volume (1897), containing the letters *I-M* and completed without undue delays 7 years after the first, the tone is still optimistic. Roscher expresses the hope that the dictionary will be completed in 7-8 years, barring unforeseen impediments. He does not fail to praise his collaborators for their zeal and their nearly general respect of deadlines, nor does he neglect to thank the publishing house for the generosity with which it agreed to an increase in the number of illustrations. Things changed in the eleven years which intervened until completion of the first part of volume three (1908), containing the letters *N-P*. It is significant that Roscher attributes the main responsibility for the delay in publication to the “unfavourable present situation” (*‘die Ungunst der Gegenwart’*), a phrase which denotes the decrease in public interest for classical education and culture<sup>9</sup> along with the difficulty of finding new collaborators. The second part of volume three, containing the letters *Q-S*, was completed in 1915. The outbreak of World War I made continuation of the work difficult, and thus the first part of volume four, containing the letter *T*, was not published until 1924, a year after the death of Roscher, to whom Konrat Ziegler succeeded as editor. The second part of the fourth volume, containing the letters *U-Z* and the additions, was published in 1937. Thus, Roscher’s mythological lexicon was completed 53 years after publication of the first fascicle of volume one.

Changes were made in the supplements, whose number increased from two to four: (1) C.V.H. Bruchmann, *Epitheta deorum quae apud poetas graecos leguntur* (1893). (2) J.B. Carter, *Epitheta deorum quae apud poetas latinos leguntur* (1902). (3) E.H. Berger, *Mythische Kosmographie der Griechen* (1904). (4) O. Gruppe, *Geschichte der klassischen Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte während*

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<sup>9</sup> Vol. III, 1, Vorrede, V. One has to admit that Roscher’s view is strongly affected by his marked conservatism in cultural matters, which led him, for example, to reject all forms of non-academic art. But it is a fact that by the beginning of the 20th century classical education had begun to lose the dominant position and high prestige it had previously enjoyed in Germany.

*des Mittelalters im Abendland und während der Neuzeit* (1921). Schwartz's work on the ancient mythographers was never published, while Fritsche's study on the history of the study of ancient mythology was replaced by Gruppe's. The catalogues of epithets used for the gods in the ancient Greek and Latin authors are both extremely useful.

Roscher's mythological lexicon enjoyed a positive reception from the outset and continues until today to be an indispensable reference work, one which no library devoted to classical antiquity can do without. Its entries are still useful, mainly for their thorough collection and examination of the written sources. In contrast, the presentation of monuments with mythological representations, already selective from the outset, has become obsolete and inadequate due to the spectacular growth of the archaeological material and the great progress made in its study. In the early 1970s, almost a century after the announcement of publication of Roscher's mythological lexicon, this realization led to the undertaking of a major international effort to publish an illustrated mythological lexicon of classical mythology, the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (*LIMC*). The soul and driving force of this initiative was Lilly Kahil, professor at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland and director the CNRS research center in Paris (Université de Paris-X, Nanterre), who for nearly a quarter of a century worked incessantly towards its completion (Leclant 2000, IX-X). It is significant that from the outset the organizational effort to support the *LIMC* went far beyond the publication of a mythological dictionary. The intention was to create a comprehensive and constantly expanding database of mythological representations. National committees were created in participating countries, as well as an international steering organ ("Fondation pour le *LIMC*"). The national committees remained autonomous with respect to organization and funding, and most managed to create important archives of monuments with mythological representations, many of which are unpublished. Although

access to the unpublished material is inevitably restricted, these large databases were essential for the production of the mythological dictionary and are capable of supporting further archaeological research. The supervision of the scholarly work was entrusted to a scientific committee (Comité Scientifique), while an editorial committee (Comité de Rédaction) was created to deal with practical issues. The current editorial work is carried out by a team of scholars in Basel, Switzerland, which is the seat of the international *LIMC*-Foundation. As we shall see, the whole of this organizational structure remained in place even after the completion of the lexicon.

Financial support for this effort came from multiple sources. Most of the local national *LIMC* committees were funded, to varying degrees, by their national or local scientific academies, while the work as a whole was under the patronage of UNESCO and the International Union of Academies (Union Académique Internationale). The largest contributions came, however, from various national and international organizations and foundations, such as Italy's Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR), France's CNRS, Greece's Archaeological Society, and most notably, from the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research (Schweizerischer Nationalfonds für Wissenschaftliche Untersuchung, Fonds National Suisse pour la Recherche Scientifique). Recently the J. Paul Getty Trust has provided the *LIMC* with substantial funding.

The fact that this new mythological dictionary was the fruit of an international collaboration led to the choice of its latin (or rather latinised) title, which, however, is rarely cited in full, as it has been replaced both in written and oral usage by the abbreviation *LIMC*. The entries are written in one of the four internationally recognized languages of classical archaeology: English, French, German and Italian. The lexicon was planned for completion in eight double volumes, one for the text and one for the plates. It is worth

stressing that one of the *LIMC*'s greatest strengths lies in its abundant and high-quality illustrations. The structure of the entries is uniform, and was established at the outset by the scientific committee: 1. Introduction. 2. Bibliography. 3. Catalogue. 4. Commentary on the representations and conclusions. The written sources are treated briefly in the introduction to each entry, since *LIMC* does not aspire to replace Roscher's lexicon in this area. The chief goal of the entries is to present as fully as possible the iconographic material relating to ancient myths. From this viewpoint it is in agreement with the general principle which Roscher had established for presentation of the written sources.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, *LIMC* also examines Etruscan art, which frequently had Greek models, especially in mythological scenes, as well as the art of the peoples on the "periphery" of the Greco-Roman world, who are in turn divided into "eastern" and "western". The Near East is of particular importance in this respect, as the Greeks borrowed many elements from the Near East in the areas of religion and mythology (Burkert 1992). Subsequently, with the spread of Greek civilization, many eastern gods came to be considered as local manifestations of Greek gods and heroes.

It is noteworthy that publication of the *LIMC* was in fact completed in just sixteen years, i.e., in a shorter time than any other collective work of comparable extent. The first volume was published in 1981, less than 10 years after the project's inception, and the last volume in 1997. This means that on average, a volume was published every two years. This speed had of course its price, since some of the entries submitted with delay had to be printed in later volumes, out of their alphabetical order. It also became necessary to impose limitations on the length especially of the larger entries in the last two volumes'. But despite its inevitable shortcomings, omissions and

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<sup>10</sup> On the methodological principles of *LIMC* see Giuliani 1997, 241-246. These principles were to some extent imposed by the work's structure and, although they are open to some criticism from the point of view of modern iconographical research, the usefulness of the work itself has never been questioned.

discrepancies *LIMC* remains a real treasure of information and above all an unequalled collection of iconographic material for the study of the ancient myths and, consequently, for the study of ancient religion as well.<sup>11</sup> The great usefulness of the work lies in the enormous number of systematically ordered documents, in the great number of high-quality illustrations, and in the bibliographic references contained in its entries. The user can thus find conveniently collected most of the material he needs in order to study any mythological subject, without having to consult a large number of publications (Borbein 2000, 63). It is therefore not surprising that the completion of the lexicon was greeted as a major event for classical scholarship (Chamoux 1998, 300-303). The only dark side of the picture is its extremely high price, which puts it out of the reach of most individuals and even of some libraries.

The success of the new mythological lexicon led the Council of the *LIMC* Foundation to the decision to maintain in place the organizational scheme which had supported it, and in particular the Basel team which had carried out the editorial work. The purpose of this decision was twofold: 1. to facilitate the consultation of the enormous material collected by creating an electronic database, which will continue growing and will eventually include illustrations forming the basis for the publication of a supplement to *LIMC*, and 2. to take advantage of the significant experience obtained at the level of international collaboration in order to undertake new publishing ventures in the field of research on the ancient world. In fact, a large new collective work is already under preparation, aiming to collect and systematically present the written and iconographic testimonies relating to religious practices and rituals in classical antiquity as well as the material remains of cultic acts from ancient

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<sup>11</sup> See the detailed reviews of Tiverios (1981, 312-320; 1984-1986, 199-213; 1989-1990, 195-202) and Borbein (2000, 57-63).

sanctuaries. The title of this work is: the *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* (ThesCRA).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> On the subject of *LIMC* and its continuation an exhibition was organized in Basel in 1998 by Bertrand Jaeger and Wolf-Rüdiger Megow: "Das Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae – Ein Blick in die Zukunft". Ausstellung, Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig, 1 April – 15 July 1998. Most of the information presented here regarding this subject derives from the exhibit brochure.

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