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Classical Studies (*Altertumswissenschaft*) in the Anthropocene

Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of Classical Studies with the emerging field of inquiry known as the Anthropocene, which describes the current geological epoch marked by significant human impact on the Earth's systems. It delves into the implications of the Anthropocene for humanity, emphasizing the urgency of addressing environmental challenges. The discussion navigates through contrasting perspectives, including scientific, humanistic, and posthumanist views, examining their interpretations of the Anthropocene and its implications for society. Central to this exploration is the role of ancient myths, particularly the figure of Gaia, in framing narratives about human-nature relationships and environmental degradation. Drawing from Greco-Roman antiquity, scholars such as Haraway, Stengers, and Latour incorporate these myths into their analyses, offering alternative perspectives on humanity's relationship with the natural world. The paper concludes by highlighting the enduring relevance of ancient myths in the Anthropocene era, as they provide a means of grappling with the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary reality.

Keywords: Anthropocene, posthumanism, ancient myth

1 Anthropocene

This paper is an attempt to describe the place and significance of Classical Studies in a relatively new field of inquiry that emerged at the turn of the century and has grown rapidly over the past twenty-two years. This field, denoted by the term “Anthropocene” and first described by geologists, is primarily the province of geology, but it soon attracted the interest of the natural sciences and the humanities — as well as a number of other fields. It has also become the subject of literary works, visual art exhibitions, theatre and film performances, and is now even influencing so-called ‘pop culture’. In other cases, such widespread dissemination and publicity would have raised the specter of faddism and trivialization, but in this case such denigration would be premature and perhaps unfair. In geological terms, the Anthropocene is a highly critical phenomenon for humanity, the silencing, repression and underestimation of which, or more generally the theoretical and practical complacency in dealing with it, could even be described as a moral offence.

A more general observation may be useful at this point. The intense mobility that has been observed in the humanities over the last fifty years or so is generally a reflection of the rapidly changing contemporary social reality that humanistic studies, through their successive theoretical, conceptual and methodological ‘turns’ and ‘constructions’, seek to describe, interpret and understand. The *Altertumswissenschaft*, in particular, must follow and participate in this endeavor, albeit with critical vigilance if it is not to risk its seriousness and credibility. This means, on the one hand, that classical scholars would be well advised to engage in this dialogue only when they have something substantial to contribute to the relevant debates, and not out of an obsessive urge to confirm in every way and under every circumstance the relevance and usefulness of the knowledge offered by their ‘classical’ texts. On the other hand, trivial issues, which are generally inflated and declared to be the subject of heavyweight theories and research because they seem trendy or because they are used by certain new currents in the humanities for self-promotion and to secure resources for their own survival, should be left aside.

The term ‘Anthropocene’ was coined in 2000 by the Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the limnologist Eugene F. Stoermer.¹ Despite its widespread use, the term has not yet been accepted by the relevant international associations and committees of geologists, which is not surprising given the history of the term ‘Holocene’, the official name for the current geological epoch, which took more than a hundred years to gain acceptance after it was first proposed. Since the Earth, the object of their science, has a history of about 4.6 billion years, geologists (like astronomers) obviously work on time scales that can seem dizzying to humanists.

The Holocene Epoch is characterized by the end of one of the many glacial periods in the Earth’s history that were unfavorable to human life, by a consequent rise in temperature and by an unusual stability of the planet’s ecological conditions that lasted for about twelve thousand years. This stability is responsible for the birth and development of human civilization as we know it today, from the permanent settlement of groups of people, agriculture and the manufacture of tools, the creation of social institutions, the invention of writing and all the other means of storing and transmitting knowledge, to the modern revolution in fields such as neuroscience, biotechnology and information technology.

Since the end of the 19th century, but especially since the middle of the 20th century, there has been an increasing destabilization of the planet’s ecosystem. Today, not only has it been established by incontrovertible scientific methods and measurements that the delicate balance of the biosphere, the hydrosphere, natural

1 Crutzen/Stoermer 2000.

climatic variations and the atmosphere has been disturbed, but it also seems that the culprit behind these changes has been identified, and that it is none other than 'man' and his various activities. Crutzen and Stoermer used these findings to formulate their diagnosis of the end of the Holocene and the emergence of a 'new' geological epoch to replace or succeed it, which they aptly named the 'Anthropocene' (with the *-cene* component, as in the Holocene, derived from *kainos*, the Greek word for 'new').

However, the Anthropocene is not just a geological term; it is also a diagnosis of contemporary reality and a prediction of the future linked to human actions and practices. This prediction, inherent in the Anthropocene, is essentially dystopian in nature, because it is based on the assumption that the exploitation of the planet's natural resources will reach (or has already reached) a tipping point at which the prospect of sustaining human life on the planet itself becomes uncertain.

Its key diagnostic character is largely responsible for the widespread and immediate acceptance of the concept of the Anthropocene, which allows us to immediately grasp the dramatic changes in the environment and the extent of the responsibility that humans seem to bear for them. In this sense, man is given the status of a geophysical force like the volcanoes, seismic energy, ice or large meteorites that hit the Earth, only his impact is considered even more powerful and destructive than these. Due to its conciseness and clarity, its inclusion and consideration of previous theoretical studies and research moving in the same direction, as well as a pervasive sense and experience of many people in their untheorized everyday lives, the term and concept of the Anthropocene did not need the pronouncements of the institutionalized bodies of geologists to become widely accepted by both the scientific community and the general public.

However, the aforementioned huge time spans and the differences between them that this concept highlights also contribute to the intense feel and vividness of the term 'Anthropocene'. The 12 millennia of the Holocene, which more or less overlap with known 'human history', the subject of the humanities or other 'historical sciences', do not even amount to a second of the Earth's 4.6 billion years of life. The same is true of the Anthropocene, whatever its beginning and duration may ultimately turn out to be. However, the density of events threatening flora, fauna and the planet as a whole seems to have reached alarming proportions during the Anthropocene. Humanity has faced many and varied crises in the past, but never one as complex and multidimensional as this one, which is not only technical and ecological, but also economic, political, social, cultural and ethical. Worse still, many experts argue that the catastrophic developments are already out of control and may be irreversible.

The anxiety and ‘vertigo’ caused by our anthropocentric temporalities is due to the fact that our perception of time, as shaped by (European) modernity, has conditioned us to distinguish the non-human from the human, and in particular the temporality of the earth from the ‘anthropocentric’ temporality of history. The difference between them is, of course, not only quantitative, however awe-inspiring the figures may be. The difference lies primarily in the fact that history and historical time are shaped by the choices and actions of human beings as intelligent and free beings, whereas the temporality of earth and nature, misnamed ‘history’, obeys natural laws and causality. On the one hand we have man as a rational subject and the field of freedom, on the other hand we have man as an irrational object and the field of necessity, on the one hand history and culture, on the other hand nature and all the attendant distinctions that define modernity (spirit – matter, mind/ratio/soul – body, cognition – sense, mental/inner world – sensible/outer world, *res cogitans* – *res extensa*). Such distinctions also have a hierarchical, evaluative aspect, deriving from the rational and spontaneous self-consciousness of the theoretical and practical subject. The Kantian “I think” (*Ich denke*) and “I do” (*Ich handle*) is the ultimate principle which, by manifesting itself as free self-consciousness and self-purpose, simultaneously constitutes, conceptualizes and evaluates reality as its object.

2 Man

As can be seen from the above, the adoption of the term by both the natural sciences and the humanities is not only due to the external characteristics of the ‘Anthropocene’, but also to its conceptual content. The crucial point here is the meaning of the first component of the term, *anthropo-*, meaning ‘human’, which brings us back to humanism and post-humanism, as these two currents are currently negotiating the conceptual content of ‘humanity’.

However, the meaning of the term ‘man’ as used by Crutzen and Stoermer in ‘Anthropocene’ has little to do with the humanities or with humanism and post-humanism. Rather, it is a purely scientific use of the word to denote the natural species ‘human’, i.e. one among many other species with which natural history and zoology are concerned. Understood as a geophysical force belonging to the natural world, man is just as much a blind, unintentional and purposeless force as the other geophysical forces. In this perspective, man is not the subject and creator of history, but the subject of objective processes that take place in his absence and “without his knowledge”.

Things are different, however, when Paul Crutzen speaks of a “huge task” for (natural) scientists and engineers to “have to show society towards ecologically sustainable management of the planet in the Anthropocene era”. This requires appropriate behavior at all levels and possibly large-scale geoengineering, e.g. climate optimization”, a “daunting task” that “lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require appropriate human behavior at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to ‘optimize’ climate”. These proposals echo the modern Cartesian view of man as “master and possessor of nature” (*maître et possesseur de la nature*). Crutzen, like many other mainly natural scientists (chemists, biologists, geographers, etc.), adopts and exaggerates the anthropocentrism of modern humanism by stressing the Promethean character of man, based on science and technology. In other words, man is seen here, on the one hand, as a self-acting and free subject, outside the earthly, physical reality, which he treats as a passive and inert object and with which, to repeat Kant’s famous phrase, “he can do what he wants”. On the other hand, an explicit or implicit conviction of the natural scientist is the idea that man is a free practical subject whose actions are governed by moral laws formulated by himself and who ultimately chooses the good, which in this case is the useful application of his technological means.

The extreme and more consistent view of humanity assumed here is expressed by the so-called ‘ecomodernists’, who claim that the disasters highlighted by the Anthropocene are due to the fact that humanity is not yet understood anthropocentrically to the extent that it can and should be understood, or that it has not yet differentiated itself from other beings to the extent that is appropriate to its nature. This means that human interventions have such dangerous and catastrophic consequences for our living conditions in the Earth System only because human action has not yet sufficiently freed itself from its dependence on natural history. This conviction is at the heart of the Ecomodernist Manifesto, which proclaims, among other things, that “knowledge and technology, applied with wisdom, might allow for a good, or even great, Anthropocene”, and that “a good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world”.²

In the humanities, however, there are some, such as the American philosopher Roy Scranton, who see the Anthropocene as the definitive confirmation of anthropocentrism, without trusting man and without sharing the technocratic optimism

2 An Ecomodernist Manifesto. A Manifesto to Use Humanity’s Extraordinary Powers in Service of Creating a Good Anthropocene, <http://www.ecomodernism.org> (accessed April 2024).

of the natural scientists. According to this pessimistic current, the destruction of the environment by man is irreversible. All that remains for man in the “Anthropocene” is to “learn to die”, that is, the Socratic-Platonic “study of death” followed by other thinkers such as Cicero, Seneca, Montaigne or Spinoza. From this insight, Scranton argues, follows the importance of the humanities because, as he writes, “we will need a new way of thinking our collective existence. We need a new vision of who ‘we’ are. We need a new humanism — a newly philosophical humanism, undergirded by renewed attention to the humanities”.³ In addition to ancient Greek philosophy, however, this new humanism includes ancient epic and dramatic poetry, as well as historiography and works from other traditions.

The importance of the humanities in general, and of the study of antiquity in particular, is self-evident here and needs no further discussion.

The situation is different with posthumanism, whose contribution to deepening the debates on man, humanism and the Anthropocene must be acknowledged, regardless of whether one accepts or rejects its positions.

The posthumanist conception of the ‘Anthropocene man’ moves in exactly the opposite direction to that of the ecomodernists. The recognition of man as a geological force in the Anthropocene amounts to the transcendence and abolition of modernity’s hierarchical opposition between subject and object, culture (or history) and nature, historical time and natural (geological) time. This is why posthumanists speak of a hybrid formation they call ‘natureculture’. Posthumanists accept the diagnosis of the planet’s dramatic ecological situation, but reject the extreme anthropocentrism already expressed in the linguistic form of ‘Anthropocene’ and openly expressed in the aforementioned humanist interpretation of it, and draw exactly the opposite conclusions from the latter. The plight of the environment discussed in the context of the Anthropocene is useful and crucial, according to posthumanist theorists, mainly because it reveals the devastation and impasse to which the fantasies of omnipotence of modern anthropocentric thought have led. In the face of the dizzying ‘deep time’ of Earth’s history, the insignificance of man and the inadequacy of the fundamental proposition of anthropocentrism, according to which ‘man is the measure of all things’, are further highlighted. What is required in the present situation is the radical ‘decentralization’ and weakening of man, so that the non-human agencies manifesting themselves in the Anthropocene can fully develop and occupy their proper space.

To do this, however, it is necessary to revise and reformulate all of man’s hitherto dominant conceptions, concepts and interpretations of himself, nature, culture and society, as well as of his relations with other living and non-living beings, and

3 Scranton 2015, 19.

in this endeavor the use of diverse and heterogeneous sources and forms of knowledge and discourse is both permitted and required. The guiding principle here is, on the one hand, the displacement of man from his privileged position and the abandonment and critique of the traditional anthropocentric perspective, which is in fact androcentric and especially carnophallogocentric; on the other hand, the adoption of a way of thinking that takes into account and restores what the anthropocentric perspective has obscured, silenced, repressed and suppressed.

Posthumanist positions are expressed by thinkers such as the recently deceased French sociologist Bruno Latour. For the Anthropocene, Latour urges the need for a philosophical stance according to which we can only control the planetary consequences of human actions if we admit that humans voluntarily give up the ontological and epistemological privileges granted to them by traditional anthropocentrism and share the ‘fate’ of agents who do not fall under the subjective-objective distinction:

“The point of living in the epoch of the Anthropocene is that all agents share the same shape-changing destiny, a destiny that cannot be followed, documented, told, and represented by using any of the older traits associated with subjectivity or objectivity. Far from trying to “reconcile” or “combine” nature and society, the task, the crucial political task, is on the contrary to *distribute* agency as far and in as *differentiated* a way as possible — until, that is, we have thoroughly lost any relation between those two concepts of object and subject that are no longer of any interest any more except in a patrimonial sense”.⁴

Latour and his fellow travelers in posthumanism recognize agency and autonomy in all kinds of entities, animate and inanimate, material and immaterial, physical and cultural, hybrid, real and fictional, without any distinctions or hierarchies. Instead, they emphasize the essential connections between them.

In this context, posthumanists also turn to Greek antiquity. Of particular note is the strong presence of ancient Greek myths in posthumanist theories and accounts of the Anthropocene. The remainder of this paper explores this phenomenon in order to demonstrate the significance of posthumanists’ use of ancient myth and its implications for the role and meaning of antiquity in the Anthropocene.

4 Latour 2014, 15.

3 *Gaia* (Earth) and Myth

As far as archaeology is concerned, a rough overview of posthumanist texts dealing with the Anthropocene reveals the conspicuous presence of myths from Greco-Roman antiquity, and even myths of a certain kind. For example, in the work of three of the most prominent posthumanist theorists of the Anthropocene, the American professor of the history of consciousness and feminist studies Donna Haraway, the Belgian philosopher, chemist and historian of science Isabelle Stengers, and the aforementioned Bruno Latour, the ancient Earth deity Gaia (Χθών) appears in the context of their analyses of the relationship between humans and nature in the Anthropocene. As Haraway writes, “Gaia figures the Anthropocene for many contemporary Western thinkers”.⁵ In the conceptual field generated by Gaia (Χθών) and the other ancient Greek — female — chthonic deities, similar mythical traditions of other places and continents are then incorporated.

Space does not allow me to develop here the place of the Gaia myth in the usually hermetic texts of the posthumanists. We will limit ourselves to pointing out just one such text, which is crucial and common to the three theoretical thinkers mentioned above, and in which we can see the importance of the study of antiquity (Altertumswissenschaft) in the Anthropocene.

From Johann Jakob Bachofen’s famous theory of ancient matriarchy (*Das Mutterrecht*, 1861) to contemporary feminist ecology, the ancient Greek myth of Gaia has been used to highlight elements and aspects of human life that have been lost in the course of modern history as a result of the “Rationalisierung” and “Entzauberung” of the world (Max Weber) and the domination of nature by human science and technology. As the goddess of the earth and mother of the gods, Gaia is a living, physical being who, as women’s studies scholars have convincingly argued, is not subject to the forms of modern reason, since such a female figure could never be understood, recognized or controlled within the framework of a patriarchal order. It is from this perspective that the reception of the ‘Gaia Hypothesis’ by the British chemist James Lovelock and the American biologist Lynn Margulis in the last two decades of the last century is interpreted. Lovelock’s ‘Hypothesis’, first formulated in the early 1970s and then developed into a comprehensive geobiological theory with the help of Margulis, argues that the Earth is a bio-governing system, i.e. an organism capable of creating and regulating the conditions that make its own life possible. Because Lovelock named this organism after the ancient Greek mythological deity Gaia, his theory was denounced as unscientific, obscurantist, mystical, etc.

5 Haraway 2016, 51.

The concept of the Anthropocene, however, created the conditions for a different perception of both Lovelock's theory and the ancient myth of Gaia, as well as of myth in general.

In the work of these authors, Gaia is used as a concept in opposition to the distinction and dichotomy between nature and history associated with modern anthropocentrism. These theorists seek to decentralize and disempower humans, to abolish the separation of nature and history, and to empower and emphasize Gaia as a distinct force and action. However, the crucial element of interest they all share lies elsewhere: All three, drawing on Hesiod's *Theogony* and other ancient texts, emphasize the dark, destructive dimension and power of Gaia.

According to Latour, for example, "Gaia, Ge, Earth, is not a goddess properly speaking, but a force from the time before the gods", "prolific, dangerous, savvy, the ancient Gaia emerges in great outpourings of blood, steam, and terror, in the company of Chaos and Eros."⁶ The French sociologist's use of the ancient myth has a Platonic, ironic connotation: on the one hand, he criticizes it and distances himself from it; on the other, he points out and implies through it features of the planet that are inaccessible to traditional, anthropocentric scientific discourse, while, like Plato, he himself invents a kind of "myth". He thus transforms, among other things, the Gaia of mythology into a hybrid created by mythology and science, which, as he writes "threatens us, while we threaten it".

Similarly, Stengers and Haraway both emphasize the need to construct new, compelling narratives that allow us to break free from the anthropocentric, i.e. androcentric, perspectives and practices that have led to the Anthropocene and its threats. Such narratives do not seek scientific 'objectivity', nor do they offer bright utopias as antidotes to the dark present, but they do propose new ways of being and living in the world, and they do call for political action. In their own theoretical constructs, both researchers use Gaia, the chthonic deity associated with creation and destruction, to describe the planet's balance disturbed by anthropocentric/androcentric practices.

For Stengers, Gaia is an unpredictable, dark and pernicious force that infiltrates and threatens everything. The Belgian philosopher associates Gaia with the 'sixth great extinction' of species that she believes is currently taking place.

Finally, Haraway refers to Gaia in the form of *Xθών*, the goddess of the earth and the underworld, to whom she also attributes the qualities of the terrifying and the formless. Haraway associates *Xθών* with other dark female deities of ancient Greek mythology, such as the Gorgons and especially Medusa, the Harpies or the Furies,

6 Latour 2017, Third Lecture: Gaia a (finally secular) figure for nature.

alluding to the responsibility and guilt of patriarchal, male-dominated humanity for the current state of the earth and nature.

All three thinkers incorporate ancient mythical deities into their theories, through which they attempt to explain the destruction of nature and the constant threat and insecurity of life that lurks in the Anthropocene.

It is clear, however, that the emergence and strong presence of ancient myths in our time is far from accidental or merely decorative and aesthetic. The pernicious impact of human activities on the environment has transformed nature into something alien, unfamiliar and frightening to human beings; and it is the experience of this transformation that has given rise to the explanatory use of ancient myths, revealing their interpretive potential and relevance.

Myth, argued the great German theorist Hans Blumenberg, offers man a way of confronting the pressing indeterminacy of reality, which he cannot bear because it does not lend itself to conceptual knowledge and thus terrifies him. Blumenberg calls this indeterminacy the ‘absolutism of reality’.⁷ Myth, in other words, weakens this ‘absolutism of reality’. The initially anonymous, unknown, unknowable, threatening and meaningless real is named, incorporated into a sequence of events, made meaningful and thus ‘tamed’. The terrifying and monstrous nature of the world is subdued and the world itself is “made in an initially not moral but physiognomic sense of the word “friendlier”. This is a question of man’s need to listen to myth in order to feel at home in the world.”⁸

In this way, the ancient myth, an integral part of the study of antiquity, continues to demonstrate its importance and function in the Anthropocene, confirming the Neoplatonist Salutius’ well-known statement about this literary genre: *ταῦτα δὲ ἐγένετο μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἔστι δὲ αἰεί*.⁹

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⁷ Blumenberg 1979, 9.

⁸ Op. cit. 127.

⁹ *Περὶ θεῶν καὶ κόσμου* IV 9 (RocheFort).

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