

Hesiod - some notes about his life and works

Unlike Homer, Hesiod tells us about himself: he is from ASCRA in Boeotia. His father had been driven by poverty to leave CYME in Asia Minor where he was a merchant seaman to try his luck as a farmer in Boeotia. There Hesiod was born and brought up with his foolish brother PERSES.
(Works and Days 633-40, pp.55-56)

Date - late 8th century, a time for most Greeks of growing prosperity, expanding population, increasing mobility and much influence from the EAST.

Hesiod tells us he was instructed to become a poet by the MUSES while he was tending his lambs. The goddess presented him with a staff as a token of his new role and told him to sing of the immortals.
(Theogony 22-34, p.3)

THEOGONY

- a systematic genealogy of the gods from the beginning of the world and an account of their violent struggles for supremacy.

it lists over 300 names, some familiar, many invented for his purpose. Genealogy replaces cosmogony. His creation myth does not really answer the question of how or why - it merely lists a series of events. First came the Chasm ... then Earth and Earth gave birth to Heaven. The succession myth is interlaced with genealogies, crude acts of violence and cruelty originating in Hittite and Babylonian texts dating from 13th and 11th C.

Story of Prometheus - another narrative interlude, invented to explain certain institutions and features of the modern world.

His poetry may be tied to an OCCASION. Hesiod tells us he won a prize for poetry recital in Chalcis. (Works and Days 650-60, p.56) May have been Theogony.

WORKS AND DAYS

- a compendium of moral and practical instruction for a life of honest husbandry.

- less than half the text is taken up with agricultural tasks (WORKS)
- the rest deals with days which are favourable or unfavourable for different purposes (DAYS)

- an apter title might be 'The Wisdom of Hesiod' ; it is a galimaufry of advice for living a life of honest industry.

Much moral criticism and advice directed at Perses and some local kings, admonished for their idleness, should work for their bread. The story of Prometheus and Pandora used to explain why work is man's lot. (For BOX read traditional Greek storage jar!)

- then famous myth of successive ages or races of man. 'every reference to a 'Golden Age' in Western Literature and speech derives directly or indirectly from this passage of Hesiod.'

- then first animal fable in Western Lit. - a century before supposed date of Aesop.

-then practical instruction given to Perses on :

cereal cultivation
vine growing
sea-faring (for farmer wishing to sell produce overseas)
conduct towards the gods
superstitions and taboos
almanac of days of the month

The quarrel with Perses, the kiings probably existed but really only served as a stimulus for this work which drops them out once they have served their purpose.

STYLE

His poetry pre-dates Homer but draws from the same conventions so it is:

in same hexameter form
in Iolian dialect
uses formulaic diction - ornamental adjectives and adverbs ('Zeus the resourceful...who bears the Aegis...loud-thundering...') irrespective of context.

ZEUS

Hesiod has a strong religious attachment to Zeus as the great master of the world and overseer of justice. In the Teheogony he conquers by force but no doubt that this was good and right, just and wise. (Hesiod's tone reminiscent of hebrew prophets cf. 256ff. pp.44-45)

Other genealogical and didactic poems attributed to Hesiod but only Shield of Heracles surely his.

What the ancients thought of him:

- mentioned in same breath as Homer.

Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 565-470 BC)

"Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is held discreditable among men - thieving, adultery, deceiving one another."

Herodotus (5thC.)

"It was these who constructed a divine geneology for the Greeks and who gave the gods their titles, allocated their powers and privileges to them and indicated their forms."

Hesiod was the inspiration for much Alexandrian didactic poetry - and for Virgil 'and I sing of Ascrea's song through Roman towns'.