

Ancient Greek Origin Myths

Naoíse Mac Sweeney and Eleni Kopanaki*

Origin myths from the ancient Greek world constitute a rich body of comparative material for the study of medieval origin myths. Not only did individual ancient Greek origin myths sometimes enjoy medieval afterlives, but the corpus of ancient Greek origin myths is a large and diverse one, facilitating many lines of analysis and comparison. In this paper, we will set out a brief overview of this corpus as a whole, highlighting the diversity of source material, thematic trends, as well as structural commonalities. Through this, we aim to shed light on how origin myths functioned in the ancient Greek world – how they acted both *in* and *on* society. To do this, we shall employ a »big data« approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to draw conclusions from a dataset comprising over a thousand individual mythic episodes. We hope that both the experimental methodology employed, and the insights it permits into the nature and function of ancient Greek origin myths, may be helpful in stimulating comparative discussions.

Keywords: ancient Greek, myth, origin, foundation, genealogy, big data, methodology, comparative

Introduction

The ancient Greek world was alive with myth, and many ancient Greek tales remained popular not only into the medieval period but also through to modern times. Yet the legends of monsters and heroes that tend to dominate our modern imagination were only part of a much wider mythological landscape. Much interest within antiquity was instead directed at the telling of origin myths, depictions of which adorned the walls of houses and public buildings, as well as appearing in the minor crafts including painted pottery and the images impressed on coinage; references to which found their way into the everyday idioms and bawdy jokes, as well as common onomastic practices and popular cult; and written accounts of which were recounted by professional scholars and poets, as well as local historians, tragic playwrights, and the authors of technical treatises. The ancient Greeks were obsessed with where they came from, and ancient Greek origin myths are varied and plentiful.¹

The sheer number of such myths means that they constitute a valuable dataset for the comparative study of origin myths from other periods. Points of similarity and difference

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1 Modern scholarship in the subject is also varied and plentiful and includes: Dougherty *Archaic Greek foundation poetry*; Calame, *Myth and performance*; Malkin, *Returns of Odysseus*; Berman, *Double foundation*; Patterson, *Kinship Myth*; Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths and Politics*; Mac Sweeney, *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies*.

may point to new insights, as might methodological considerations. In this paper, we aim to offer a brief introduction to ancient Greek origin myths for colleagues specialising in other historical periods, in the hope that this material might be thought-provoking from a comparative perspective.² By looking at the corpus as a whole, we also aim to shed new light on the role and place of origin myths within ancient Greek culture and society. Instead of delving into any individual myth in detail, we will look across the dataset employing a novel and experimental methodology. Our aim with this work is to consider the function of origin myths in the ancient Greek world, asking not what these stories *said* but what they *did*. How did these narratives function both *in* and *on* society? Our experimental methodology is no way intended to replace or negate more traditional approaches based on close reading and the detailed historical interpretation of individual texts, images, and mythic discourses. We affirm that such approaches are essential, and will always offer the best and most nuanced way to appreciate individual (hi)stories. Our methodology is proposed rather as a means of enhancing these traditional approaches, offering an additional perspective. While it is standard practice to contextualise studies of individual ancient Greek texts by considering them against the background of wider literary traditions and immediate historical setting, we suggest that it may also be fruitful to consider in relation to contemporary trends in mythmaking.

The work presented in this paper has been conducted within the frame of a larger research project into migration and the origin of ancient Greek cities, entitled »Migration and the Making of the Ancient Greek World« (MIGMAG). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 865644). As part of this project, we and other members of the project team gathered information about ancient Greek myths of foundation and origin, and examined these from the perspective of how they functioned to construct and negotiate collective identities during different periods within antiquity, and in different parts of the ancient Greek world. Forthcoming publications will set out in full the methodology adopted by this project, make the underlying dataset fully and openly available for scholarly scrutiny, explore the nuances of different mythic traditions in relation to various themes and historical contexts, and set out the full conclusions reached in the analysis.³ Due to constraints of time and space, it is not possible to include these elements within this short overview paper. Instead, our aim in this paper is much more modest. We will present an overview of the material collected, characterising the nature of the dataset as a whole, coming to some

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- 2 We have ourselves already benefitted from taking part in the 2024 workshop, »Medieval Origin Myths in Eurasian Perspective« and this resulting publication, learning much from the rich comparative perspective that it has afforded us. We are grateful to the organisers of the workshop and editors of this volume for this opportunity.
 - 3 The methodology used for this research was developed collaboratively by Naoise Mac Sweeney, Principal Investigator of the project, with Clara Hansen and Eleni Kopanaki, doctoral students on the project. Important contributions were also made by Bettina Bernegger, administrative assistant to the project. Data collection was undertaken by Mac Sweeney, Hansen, Kopanaki, and Bernegger; who have each also assumed responsibility for the primary analysis and interpretation of the material linked to different parts of the ancient Greek world. A monograph presenting this work in full is currently in preparation (Mac Sweeney et al. *Origin Myths*), while the dataset of collected myths is available for open access download (Mac Sweeney et al. *Database*).

broad conclusions about how origin myths functioned in ancient Greek society. This, we hope, may fruitfully be compared with the role played by origins myths in other historical contexts.

As for other colleagues writing within this volume, from the outset it was important to define the subject under discussion. What is an »ancient Greek origin myth«? The definition that we arrived at was as follows: any narrative (whether historical or mythical) that sought to explain the origins of a Greek civic or ethnic community (i.e., a community which claimed Greekness, or to be part of »*to hellēnikon*«).

Greek civic and ethnic communities came in a range of different forms at a range of different scales. Perhaps the best known is that of the *polis* or city state, an autonomous political unit that focused on a primary urban centre, around which was a territory or hinterland within which were often several secondary and smaller-scale settlements. Well-known and powerful *poleis* included Athens, Thebes, and Ephesus. At least 1,035 such *poleis* are attested from the archaic (c. 750-500 BCE) and classical periods (c. 500-300 BC), scattered across the shores of the Mediterranean and Black Sea from Crimea to Cyrenaica, and from Spain to Cyprus (figure 1).⁴ Yet there were also other Greek communities, operating at both larger and smaller scales. At smaller scales, individual towns and villages could also be the focal points of such communities. Examples might include the mining community of Thorikos within the territory of the *polis* of Athens; or the community around the famous sanctuary of Olympia within the territory of the *polis* of Elis. At larger scales, the Greek world also encompassed larger territorial states (such as the Ptolemaic Kingdom or the Kingdom of Macedon), federal units or alliances (such as the Achaians or the Thessalians), and *ethnos* or tribal collectives (such as the Ionians or the Dorians).⁵



Figure 1: Map of the ancient Greek world, showing *poleis* of the early classical period, c.500 BCE. Map by Georgia Tsiouprou.

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- 4 The number of 1,035 is that collected within the standard reference work, the *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* (Hansen and Nielsen, *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*). For a more recent overview of the *polis* as an institution and cultural phenomenon, see Ma, *Polis: A New History*.
- 5 For a critique of the modern tendency to focus narrowly on the *polis*, see Vlassopoulos, *Unthinking the Greek Polis*. For explorations of non-*polis* states with a particular focus on *ethnos* states, see Morgan, *Early Greek States*, and for federalism in Greek antiquity see Beck and Funke, *Federalism*.

At this point, it is important to note that these diverse ancient Greek communities were never united within a single political structure. »Greece« as a coherent political or social entity did not exist until the establishment of the modern Greek state in 1821, and indeed the definition of Greekness itself was hotly debated within antiquity.⁶ Myths about the origins of »the Greeks« as a whole were indeed sometimes told, yet these stories are small in number and appear only rarely in the surviving sources. Far more numerous and, apparently, far more important to ancient commentators were the thousands of myths that recounted the origins of different Greek civic and ethnic communities. Our focus in this paper therefore lies in the stories that so consumed the ancient Greeks themselves – the narratives that claimed to explain the origins of different Greek civic and ethnic communities.

Sources for Greek Origin Myths

The heterogeneous nature of the subject is reflected in the heterogeneous nature of the source material. Even in the largest *poleis* and the most powerful of kingdoms, there were no official court historians, and no officially sanctioned myths of origin. In this sense, our sources for ancient Greek origin myths are fundamentally different to many others discussed in this volume. Ancient Greek historical and mythographic texts were certainly written in celebration of individual states and dynasties, but these were rarely official, in that very few historians enjoyed the official patronage of a ruler, and very few myths had the status of official history.⁷ Instead, mythographical writings served a range of purposes and were aimed at a range of audiences. Origin myths were recounted for popular audiences at civic and religious festivals; within diplomatic negotiations to remind interlocutors of ancestral feuds or alliances; by orators and sophists in competitive demonstrations of scholarly erudition; and to delight dinner guests in compendia of historiographical and sociological curiosities. The diversity of these writings in terms of form, context, and genre stands testament to the depth of interest that ancient Greeks took in their origin myths.

Within this paper, our focus is solely on these ancient Greek written sources. They constitute a rich and diverse corpus, nonetheless bound together by the coherence of language and literary tradition. Other manifestations of origin myths – such as the images depicted on coins, in vase painting, references made in epigraphy, or in cult practice – have been excluded from the corpus on this basis. These other instantiations and representations of origin myths are, of course, vital for any in-depth discussion of specific myths and their social and cultural contexts. In this paper, however, due to constraints of space we shall restrict ourselves to presenting an overview of the single most important class of source material for ancient Greek origin myths: literary texts written in the ancient Greek language.⁸

6 For changing ancient definitions of Greekness between ethnicity, culture, territory, and politics, see Hall, *Hellenicity*, 25-36, and 125-171.

7 A notable exception is Kallisthenes, who accompanied Alexander of Macedon on his campaigns and wrote an »official« history.

8 Texts written in other ancient languages, notably Latin, do sometimes also offer evidence for ancient Greek origin myths. However, as the factors shaping the composition and preservation of these texts are different, they are not discussed in this paper.

Despite this central pillar of coherence within the corpus, it is important to acknowledge the partial and imperfect nature of the dataset that will be presented here. Most of the literary texts that survive from antiquity did not do so as original artefacts, but instead by being copied and re-copied through the centuries within late antique and early medieval manuscript traditions. As a result, only fragments remain of many texts, surviving as quotations or summaries in the works of later authors. For yet many more authors, no text at all survives, merely oblique references to works that once existed, but which are now lost. A recent estimate of these survival rates posits a ratio of roughly 2:5 – for every two authors from whom passages of text still survive, the writings of five authors whose names are known to us have been lost completely.⁹ These numbers do not, of course, tell us anything at all about the »unknown unknowns«, or the less popular and perhaps the less prolific authors of antiquity whose names have also disappeared over the ages. As a result, our corpus therefore contains source material of variable quality, both in terms of the length of texts, and their reliability.

Ancient Greek literary texts that recount the origins of Greek civic and ethnic communities are therefore heterogeneous in more than one way. They deal with heterogeneous subject matter – the diverse, dispersed, and decentralised communities of the ancient Greek world. They do this in a heterogeneous fashion – appearing in a range of different literary genres and social contexts. Their state of preservation and reliability is also heterogeneous – meaning that we can never be sure if we have the whole picture.

To deal with all this unruly heterogeneity, we have adopted a »big data« approach, collating large datasets and assessing these in relation to standardised criteria in order to discern trends and patterns across both time and space. There is sometimes concern about big data approaches within some areas of the humanities, as these approaches cannot capture the detail and nuance of close readings and individual source analysis. In addition, as we have highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, the datasets are often deeply and structurally flawed, shaped by various factors which mean that they are rarely fully representative. Yet working with flawed and partial datasets is a standard feature of many academic disciplines, and it has long been established that if the nature of the dataset is understood and the taphonomic factors that have structured it are investigated and acknowledged, some valid conclusions can nonetheless still often be drawn about overall trends and patterns in the data, giving us a glimpse of the »big picture«.¹⁰

By zooming out to get the big picture, we hope to gain a broad perspective on how ancient Greek origin myths functioned, and what their place was within ancient Greek society. As

9 According to the Canon of Greek Authors and Works of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, for the period between the 8th century BCE and the 5th century CE, there are more than 1,800 authors with existing works, and more than 4,500 known authors in total (Pantelia, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, xxi).

10 An example of this is archaeology. Archaeological data is entirely composed of partial and problematic datasets, shaped by complex and multiple taphonomic factors. Archaeologists have, over the last two centuries, developed sophisticated methodologies for working with such datasets, in particular taphonomic studies and assemblage analysis. There is no suggestion that archaeologists should not study their material or draw conclusions from it, on the basis that it is partial. See Cipolla, Crellin and Harris, *Archaeology for Today*, for a discussion of how archaeological thinking, and in particular relational thinking and approaches based on assemblages, might potentially be applied beyond the bounds of academic archaeology.

already stated in the introduction to this paper, we argue that this big data and big picture approach is complementary to the detailed and nuanced discussion of individual myths in their full historical context. We reaffirm once more that both approaches are crucially valuable. Micro approaches are crucial for an appreciation of how individual myths really worked and the complex dynamics of how they acted on and in ancient Greek society. But this macro approach will, we hope, give us another way to contextualise this nuanced understanding, offering us a better sense of how the aggregation of all such individual dynamics shaped the fabric of ancient Greek culture.

Dataset and Methodology

Even within the frame of a large-scale research project such as this one, the quantity of material for ancient Greek origin myths is such that the compilation of a comprehensive corpus was not feasible. Instead, in our work we focused on five case-study regions, the selection of which was in part determined by a deliberate attempt to include different histories and different cultural and political trajectories, but also by practicality and feasibility, given the wider goals and constraints of the project. As for any project where case studies are used to investigate broad questions, we want to acknowledge that the picture gained from the current corpus may change if and when more data is integrated. We very much hope that it will be possible to expand the corpus in the coming years, testing our tentative conclusions and improving our understanding of ancient Greek origin myths.

Within the Greek peninsula, we considered central Greece, in particular the regions of East and West Lokris and the city of Thebes; as well as Athens. Further east, we gathered origin myths for the thirteen cities of Ionia, strung out along the western seaboard of Anatolia; and, also, for the larger region of Cilicia in southern Anatolia, peopled by a mix of non-Greek indigenous groups, Levantine and Mesopotamian migrants, as well as Greek communities. In the central and western Mediterranean, we considered the region of Magna Graecia in southern Italy, as well as the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, and finally the Greek cities of Spain and southern France. Despite this range, our data collection has left large portions of the ancient Greek world untouched, in particular Libya and Egypt, Cyprus, the Black Sea, northern Greece, the Aegean islands, and the Peloponnese. We hope that it will be possible to expand the corpus to these regions in the coming years.

Our approach was to begin with these locations, and then gather textual references for origin myths linked to people and places within these locations. The organisational framework for data collection was therefore geographical according to the place discussed within the origin myth. Our aim was to be as comprehensive as possible, gathering all documented references within secondary literature, before searching digital corpora of texts for specified locations or mythical episodes where this was possible, and physical indexes where it was not. While we have aimed in all cases for a comprehensive collection of all surviving textual references to Greek origin myths in the specific regions, the nature of human error will inevitably mean that we may have missed some along the way. Our corpus, then, may continue to grow in the coming years, although the main bulk of the material has already been collected and analysed.

The ambition for comprehensive collection has led to a corpus of 1,920 discrete passages of ancient Greek text, written by 226 distinct authors who lived between the 7th century BCE and the 13th century CE. Of these, no dates could be assigned to six authors, and a further 46 authors lived in periods that might be characterised as late antique or early medieval (in or after the 4th century CE). During these periods, both Greek literary traditions and the

nature of Greek civic identities were dramatically different from those in earlier »classical« antiquity.¹¹ As a result, both the undatable authors and those belonging to late antiquity will be treated separately from the remaining 171 authors, although of course all authors remain vitally important for understanding mythic variations and content.

Within this corpus, we have opted to classify the dataset primarily by author, as the least unsatisfactory of the available options. For the reasons mentioned above, classification by text was too vulnerable to the uneven patterns of preservation and literary survival. We found that focusing rather on subdivisions of texts such as »passages«, »chapters«, or »books« was practical on a daily basis for ease of reference, but on reflection decided that this was not methodologically rigorous as a unit of analysis. These textual divisions were rarely the designations of the authors themselves, but instead were more often imposed on texts by later commentators, and therefore might be useful terms of reference, but could not be the basis for any meaningful quantification.

Quantification by author does, of course, present its own challenges. Crucially, textual references of radically different scales are all allotted the same weight. The orator Aelius Aristides, for example, discussed the various origin stories of his home city of Smyrna across no fewer than four different speeches, whereas only a brief mention of Smyrnaean origins appears in a single sentence in Pseudo-Herodotus' *Life of Homer*. Despite the difference in the scale and depth of the treatment, both Aelius Aristides and Pseudo-Herodotus each only gets a single count in a list of authors who wrote about Smyrnaean origins, as their works bear witness to the simple fact that the Smyrnaean myth was textually recounted during their lifetimes. Naturally, the scale and depth each author dedicates to origin myths in general, or to origin myths of specific cities or people, is a measure to consider and can be studied against, for example, their geographical context, literary genre, and political inclinations. But for grasping wider trends in mythmaking and dissemination (rather than focusing on individual authors), a mere reference is enough to indicate that a myth has caught an author's attention, has been transmitted, and was relevant for the wider mythic discourse beyond its local context. While we acknowledge the obvious problems with this system, we have not, to date, been able to determine a good way of weighting different types of textual treatments appropriately.

Using the author as an anchor does, however, give us a working proxy through which we can locate myths in space and time.¹² It allows us to consider, for example, whether most authors who wrote origin myths about Athens actually hailed from Athens, or whether Athenian origins were a topic of broad interest for authors from across the ancient Greek world. Similarly, it allows us to explore whether stories about Athenian origins were more popular in some periods rather than others, or whether they remained consistently popular

11 Some of the factors impacting on the production and survival of literature in ancient Greek from late antiquity are discussed in Kazhdan, *History of Byzantine Literature* and Krumbacher, *History of Byzantine Literature*.

12 The biographical details of individual authors are often the subjects of intense scholarly discussion. As nonspecialists in these discussions we have relied on standard reference works for this information – the Trismegistos database, Brill's New Pauly, and Brill's New Jacoby.

through time. The ability to ask and answer questions such as these can give us an additional way of thinking contextually about individual myths, stories, and texts.

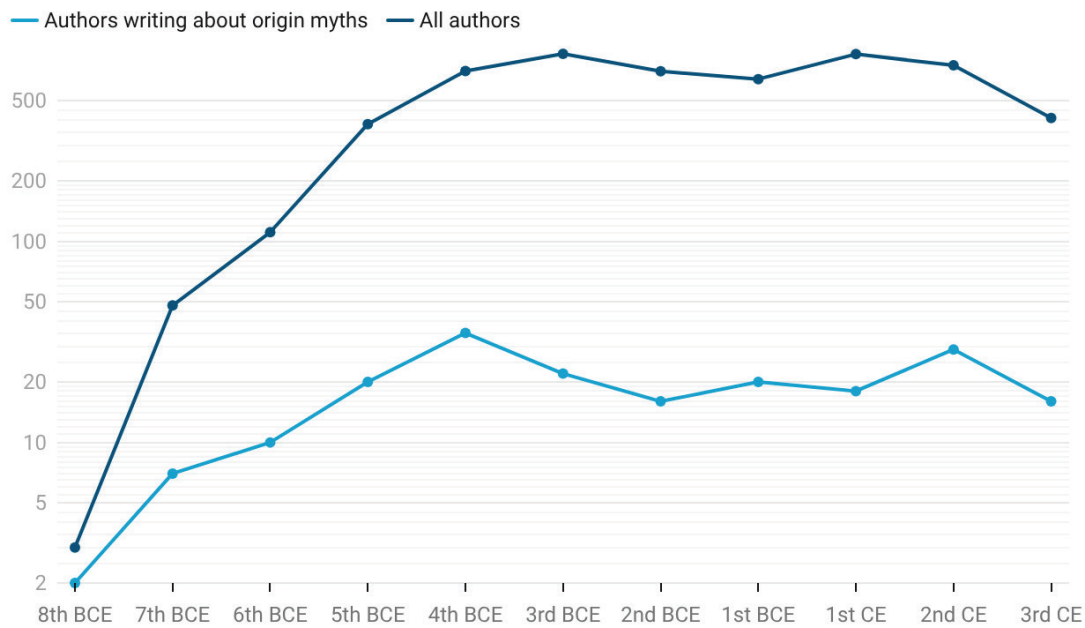
Such chronological and geographical position, however, relies on the biographical details of ancient authors – which often remain obscure. However, in many cases dates can be reconstructed for their lives (either on the basis of style and language, or in relation to events referenced within their texts), and their places of origin or work are sometimes recorded. The scholar and poet Callimachus, for example, lived between c.310–240 BCE, and originally hailed from Cyrene in Libya, although he worked and lived for most of his adult life at the great Library of Alexandria in Egypt. The origin myths that he recounted can, therefore, be understood as being written in a specific historical context – that of North Africa in the 3rd century BCE, even though the content of these myths recounted the imagined origins of Greek communities across the Mediterranean and Black Sea. Callimachus' account of the foundation of Smyrna might, therefore, be *mythologically* located in Anatolia in the mists of a heroic deep past. It is, however, to be *historically* located in the Hellenistic period of the 3rd century BCE amongst the scholarly elites of the Ptolemaic capital city. By using the author as an anchor, we can place these 1,920 textual instantiations of origin myths back into their historical contexts and begin to discern patterns in the overall corpus.

Chronological Patterns

The chronological distribution of our dataset was a question of primary concern. Were origin myths equally important throughout Greek antiquity, or were there moments when they became more and less significant? And what does this tell us about the shape of ancient Greek history as a whole? It is possible to get a sense of this from the waxing and waning of our corpus over time. Figure 2 below shows the count of authors in our corpus (i.e., the number of authors who are known to have written in the Greek language about the origins of Greek communities in our study regions) by century, starting from the earliest Greek literary texts in the 8th century BCE and ending with the 3rd century CE, after which (as stated above) literary traditions shifted dramatically. The number of authors in our corpus is presented alongside the number of authors as listed in the Trismegistos database for each century, as a proxy for the total number of authors writing in ancient Greek.¹³ We have done this because the variations in our corpus become more meaningful when viewed in the context of broader patterns of literary production and text preservation.

13 The Trismegistos database is a standard reference source, although it is far from being the only reference for authors writing and texts written in ancient Greek. An alternative would be the corpus of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. We are still working with the data from this corpus, to see if it aligns with that of the Trismegistos database, and to consider how the corpora in both databases compare with our own.

Authors per century (logarithmic scale)



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2: Chart showing the number of authors writing about Greek origin myths in relation to the total number of Greek authors from the Trismegistos database over time (logarithmic scale). Created by Datawrapper.

At first glance, it becomes evident that literary activity in our corpus mirrors, in many respects, the broader patterns of ancient literary production and survival rates. Notably, the sudden increase observed in the classical period in both corpora is followed by a gradual reduction in the Hellenistic period, after which there is a period of general, but uneven, increase accompanying the Pax Romana into the Common Era. There are several points, however, where the corpus of authors writing origin myths diverges from the complete corpus of Greek authors. Perhaps most significantly, notable moments of inflection occur in the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE. In the 1st century BCE, the number of Greek authors overall continues to decline, following a trajectory that had begun two centuries earlier. At this moment, however, the number of authors writing Greek origin myths takes an upturn, reversing its trajectory. The opposite happens in the 1st century CE. Just as the overall number of Greek authors begins to climb again, the number of authors writing about Greek origin myths decreases. These divergent trajectories tell us that during these periods, the place and function of origin myths in ancient Greek society was changing.

A slightly different way of looking at the same data is the chart in figure 3. This shows the number of authors writing about Greek origin myths as a percentage of all Greek authors. The chart shows that between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE (the 8th to 6th centuries have been excluded from this chart, as in absolute terms the numbers are too small for the representation of percentages to be meaningful), the number of authors who chose to write about origins declined. Put simply, writing about the origins of cities, states, regions, and peoples became increasingly less popular over the course of these four centuries. The decline then reverses sharply, and origin myths became a more popular topic again in the 1st century BCE, before their popularity dropped once more in the 1st century CE, only to recover in the 2nd.

The significance of these trends becomes clearer when the chronological patterns are considered alongside contemporary changes of geography and genre.

Authors writing about origins as a percentage of all authors

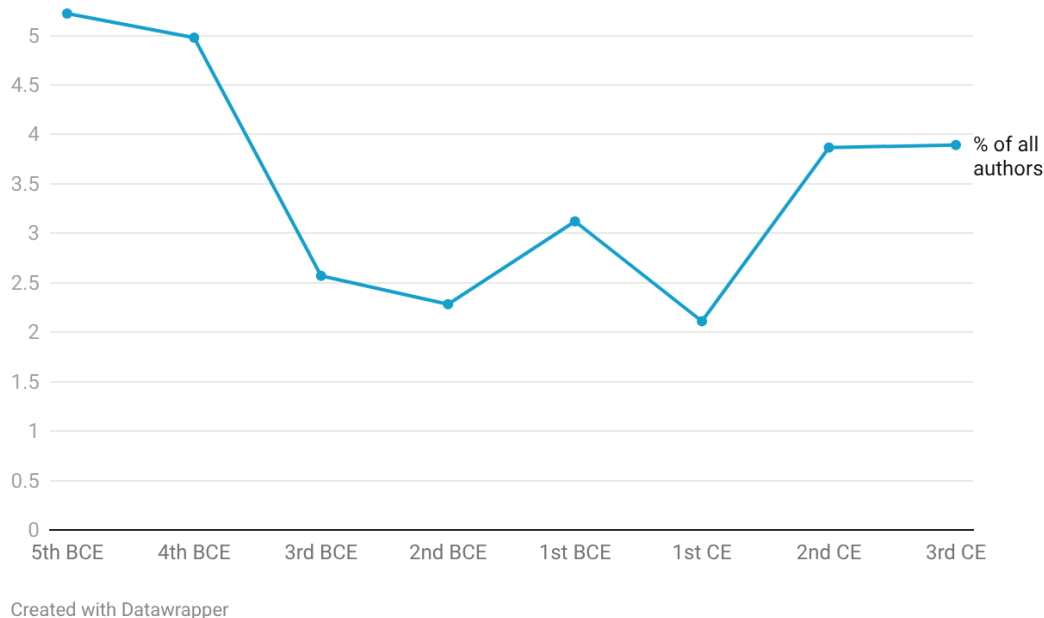


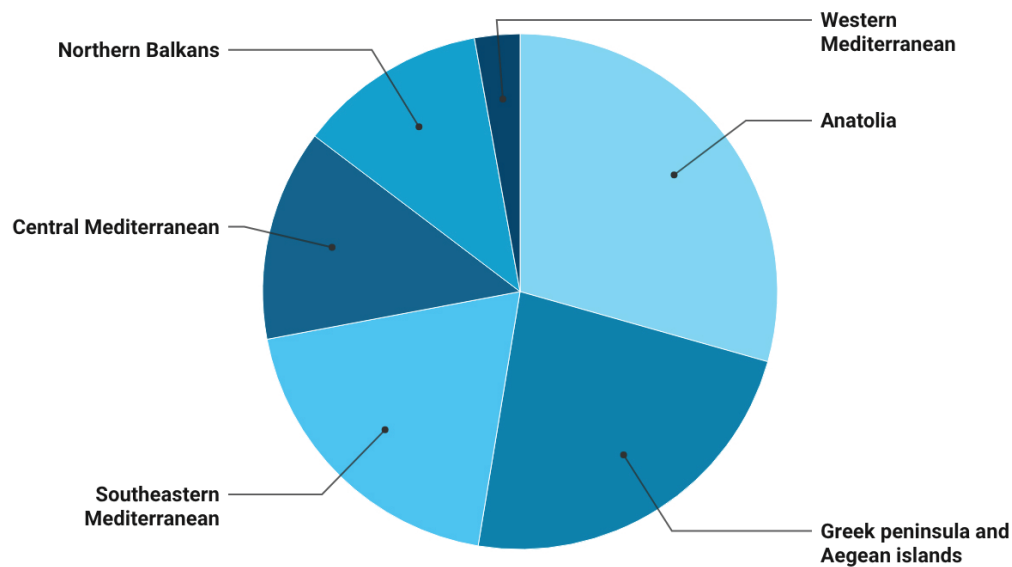
Figure 3: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths as a percentage of the total number of Greek authors over time. Chart created by Datawrapper.

Geographical Patterns

The geographical emplacement of Greek origin myths also has much to tell us about the role(s) that such myths played in Greek antiquity. Did origin myths matter more to Greeks in some regions than in others? And did this change over time? Figure 4 presents the authors of our corpus according to their region of purported origin, using the blunt tool of six (rather large and somewhat artificial) regional groupings. This initial distribution shows a fairly even split between the regions, with broadly similar numbers of authors hailing from the Greek peninsula and central Aegean islands, and from Anatolia and the eastern Aegean. Significant proportions of authors also come from the southeastern Mediterranean (the Levant, Egypt, and Libya), the central Mediterranean (the Italian peninsula and Sicily), and the northern Balkans (Macedonia, northern Greece, northern Aegean), while only a handful of authors are associated with the western Mediterranean. This relatively even distribution is perhaps unsurprising, given the geographical spread of the study regions selected for this project.

A more significant pattern does begin to emerge, however, when this same data is considered over time (figure 5). This suggests that interest in origin myths followed a strikingly different trajectory in different regions. Authors originally from the Greek peninsula and the central Aegean islands, traditionally considered to be the core region of the ancient Greek world, seem to have been deeply invested in origin myths only during a very specific moment in time – the classical period of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. In contrast, authors from Anatolia and the eastern Aegean were much more consistently engaged with discourses of origins throughout Greek antiquity. Other regions appear in our corpus somewhat later, and seem to take an interest in origin myths also mostly at particular moments during antiquity.

Authors by region of origin

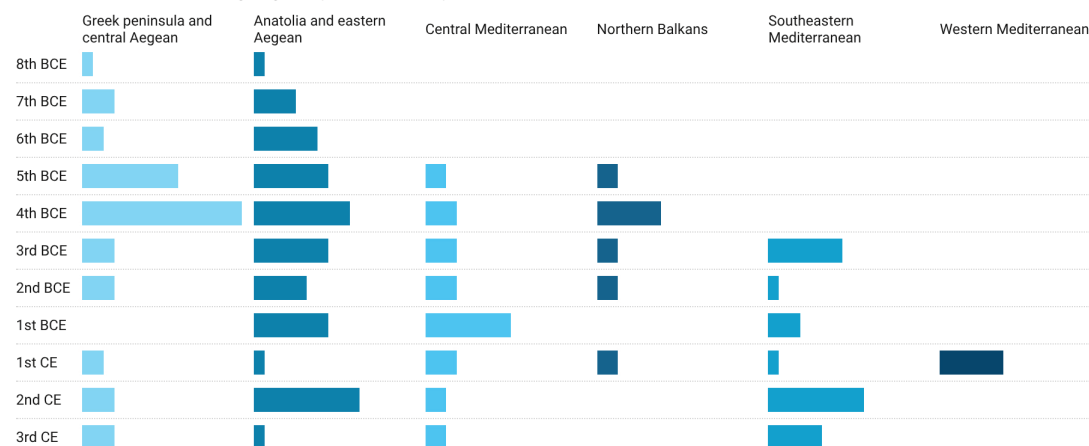


Created with Datawrapper

Figure 4: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to their region of origin. Chart created by Datawrapper.

For authors from the North Balkans this is the 4th century BCE and around the time of Macedonian territorial expansion, when texts written by northern Greek and Macedonian authors were more likely to have been widely transmitted. For authors from the central Mediterranean it is the 1st century BCE, coinciding with the consolidation of Roman imperial power across the Mediterranean. And for authors from the southeastern Mediterranean interest spikes in the 3rd century BCE, with the emergence of a new literary hub around the Library of Alexandria, but is more consistent from the 2nd century CE onwards.

Authors per century by region of origin



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 5: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to their region of origin per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.

Patterns of Genre and Literary Form

Yet more nuances emerge when shifting patterns in genre and literary form are layered onto the analysis. Unlike the chronological and geographical contextualisation, which was anchored solely at the level of the author, the examination of literary forms and genres also operates at the level of the individual work, since a single author may have engaged with multiple forms and genres. As with chronology and geography, there are many problems with the classification of our corpus in relation to forms and genres.

The distinction between verse and prose is perhaps the clearest, based as it is on literary form. Within the ancient Greek literary tradition, verse is the elder, evolving from oral traditions, and maintaining a performative and public aspect throughout antiquity. In contrast, prose literature in ancient Greek first emerged in the 6th century BCE in western Anatolia, from where it grew in popularity and spread to encompass a range of genres. In addition to verse and prose, in our analysis we found a third category to be helpful – that of erudite texts. Instead of the long, connected narrative passages that tend to comprise works of prose, these texts are more commonly (although not always) constructed from an accumulation of short snippets or briefer passages, collected into a single work. The central feature of this form, however, is the centrality of intertextuality. Intertextual engagements and original composition are fundamentally intertwined within these works, leading to a hybrid form. This literature of erudition emerged in the scholarly context of Hellenistic Alexandria, where earlier texts were studied, interpreted, and reworked in a spirit of imitation and emulation, but burgeoned in the Roman period, particularly in the context of wider trends towards Roman philhellenism in the 2nd century CE. This body of texts is characterised by systematic practices of collecting, summarising, correcting, critiquing, comparing, and preserving earlier works.

It seems that writing about Greek origin myths largely follows this chronological pattern, with prose appearing later than verse, and erudite texts later again (figure 6). Yet two factors are noteworthy. First, the significant spike in the number of authors writing in prose in the 4th century BCE is remarkable, entirely eclipsing all other literary forms. The revival of verse in subsequent centuries owes much to the Hellenistic interest in diversified forms. A second point of interest is that erudite literature only begins to take significant interest in origin myths in the 2nd century CE, several centuries after the emergence of the form, as part of wider literary trends of the Hellenistic period, in the 3rd century BCE.

The picture is made yet more complex when we consider genre. Distinctions of literary form are independent of, but sometimes overlap with, classifications based on genre. This is because while designation of a genre may sometimes relate to a text's literary form (e.g., »epic poetry« or »letters«), in other cases it might relate instead to the text's thematic content (e.g., »history« or »scholia«). Some of our genre classifications, therefore, align neatly with literary forms (epic, lyric, drama, and epigram all fit within »poetry«; letters, oratory and the novel are all contained within »prose«; and scholiast and encyclopaedia lie entirely within »erudite«), while others operate across more than one literary form (i.e., history, geographical writing, biography, technical literature, and miscellany).

Classification by genre is complex for several reasons. Firstly, given the existence of genres relating to content and genres relating to form, it is possible for the same text to belong to two genres simultaneously – for example, the *Pharsalia* by Lucan records historical content, but it does so using the medium of epic poetry. The process is made even more complex by the fact that genres frequently intersect and develop alongside one another, not always

Authors writing in different literary forms per century

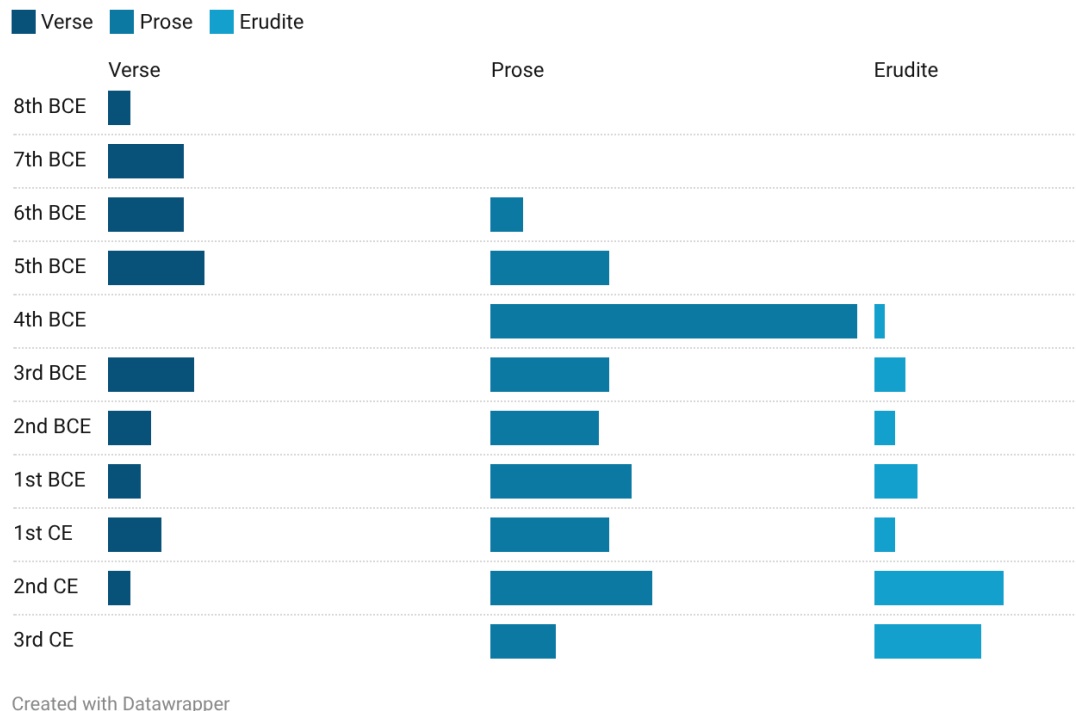


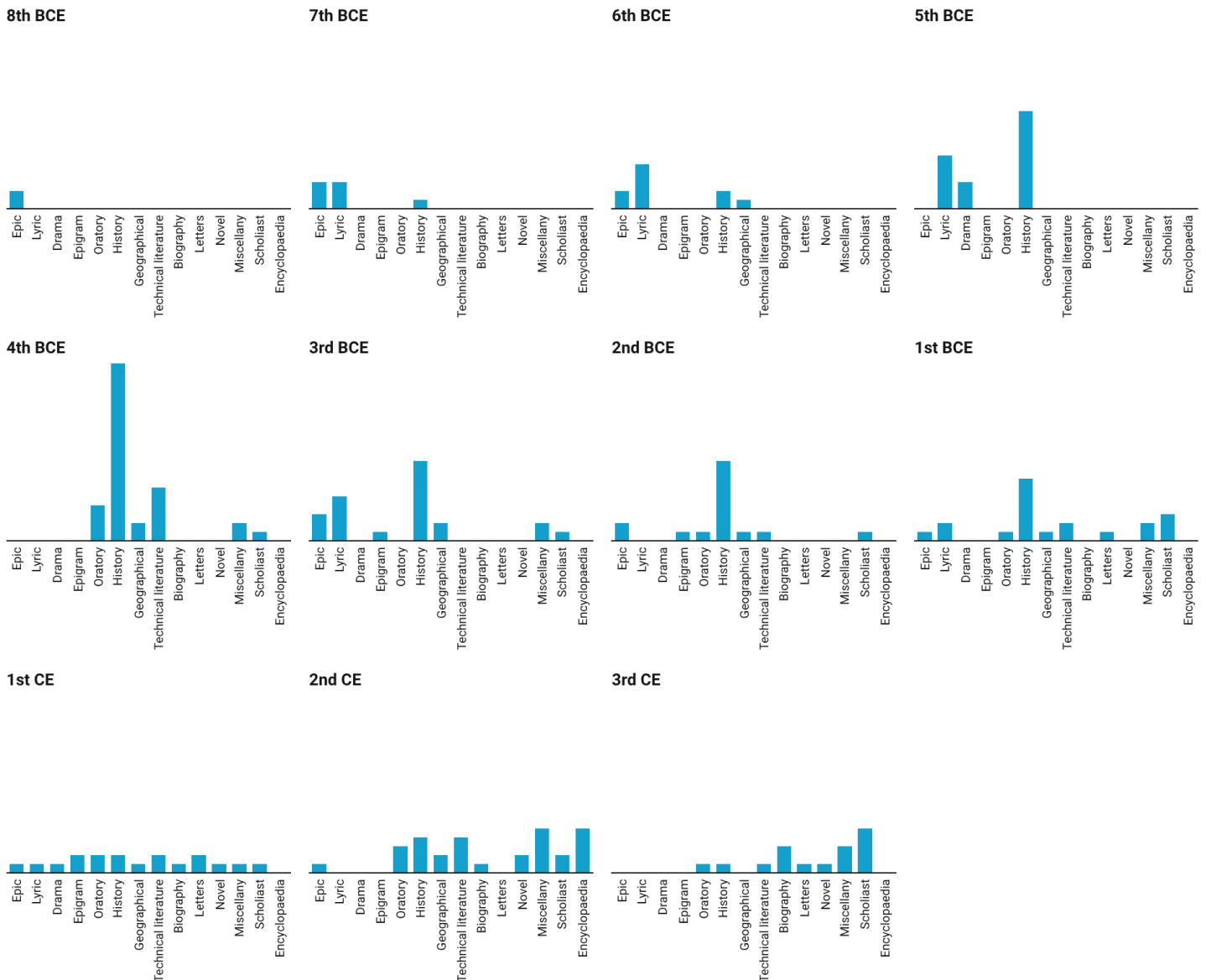
Figure 6: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to literary forms employed per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.

allowing for a clear distinction (e.g., the blurred boundary in antiquity between »history« and »geographical writing«);¹⁴ and yet more complex once more by the fact that while some genres were recognised as meaningful categories during antiquity itself (e.g., »drama«), others are entirely modern designations (e.g., »the novel«). Yet despite these difficulties, genre remains a helpful way of thinking about our corpus, as it gives us a good sense of the intended audiences and social contexts of the texts. We classified texts by genre, therefore, mostly as a »thought tool« to help with this social contextualisation. In our definition and application of generic categories therefore, we have largely followed standard reference works within our field, adapting these as necessary for our corpus.¹⁵

14 For the intertwined development of history and geography and their correlation, especially in Strabo, see Montanari, *History of Ancient Greek Literature* 2, 977-982.

15 We were primarily informed by the definitions provided in Hose and Schenker (eds.), *Companion to Greek Literature* and Harrison (ed.), *Companion to Latin Literature*. This was supplemented with information from compiled studies on the histories of ancient and Byzantine literature, such as Montanari, *History of Ancient Greek Literature* and Kazhdan, *History of Byzantine Literature*, as well as genre-definition entries in Brill's New Pauly encyclopaedia and philological studies focused on individual genres or authors. For a discussion of the genre classifications used, and the criteria upon which they are based, see Mac Sweeney et al, *Origin Myths*.

Authors writing in different genres per century



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 7: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek about Greek origin myths according to genres employed per century. Chart created by Datawrapper.

Two points stand out as being particularly relevant here. First is the spike in the numbers of historiographical texts within our corpus in the 4th century BCE in particular, accounting for no insignificant proportion of the dataset as a whole. Second is the spread of genres within our corpus in the latter part of our period – most notably within the 1st century CE, when stories about origins appeared in texts written across a wide range of different genres, aimed at a range of different audiences, and read in a range of different social contexts. Both points will help us to understand the specific history of origin myths in Greek antiquity.

The Changing Place of Origin Myths in Ancient Greek Society

Considering these three axes of analysis together, we can begin to make some inferences about the changing place of origin myths in wider Greek society and culture. It is perhaps significant that stories about the origins of Greek communities appear within the very earliest texts that we have in the ancient Greek language. Even though relatively few works in ancient Greek survive from the 8th and the 7th centuries BCE, our corpus nonetheless begins in this early period, demonstrating that discourses about origins, foundations, and ancestries were »baked into« ancient Greek literature from the very start. The unbroken continuation of our corpus across more than a millennium into late antiquity stands testament to the resilience of origins as a literary theme – these myths were evidently a stable part of ancient Greek literary traditions. This is further supported by the fact that authors within our corpus hail from almost all regions of the ancient Greek world. Origins were not an obsession of any region in particular – instead, they were a theme for writers across the ancient Greek world, across classical antiquity. This point, prosaic as it might seem, gains significance when the sustained Greek interest in origin stories is compared with relatively low levels of interest in origins within other bodies of ancient literature.¹⁶

From the 6th century BCE onwards, we can begin to point towards some emergent trends. It is at this point when we might begin to see a particular interest in origin discourses amongst authors from Anatolia and the eastern Aegean (figure 5), although given the comparatively high levels of literary production in the region at the time, it is not currently possible to tell whether this apparent trend is significant. We can be more confident, however, about a trend that begins in the following 5th century BCE and which matures in the 4th.

The sudden increase in our corpus observed in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE (figure 2) corresponds to the emergence of new genres across Greek literature as a whole: the flourishing of drama in the Athenian *polis*-context of the early classical period, followed by a fourth century boom in prose writing (history, technical literature, oratory), which significantly expanded literary activity beyond the (predominantly oral) verse genres of the preceding archaic period.¹⁷ Amongst these, the spike in our corpus appears to have been driven in particular by works of historiographical prose (figures 6 and 7). This might not seem surprising, given that origin myths, by their fundamental nature, deal with events in the past. However, we have already seen that origin narratives were already an established feature of poetic genres in the previous centuries, including venerable traditions in epic (such as the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, an epic compilation of heroic and demographic genealogies) and lyric (such as the reflections of poets such as Archilochus and Mimnermus on recent violent conquests). In addition, extended treatments of origin myths are also known in drama (such as Euripides' celebrated plays, the *Erechtheus* and the *Ion*, each offering slightly different perspectives on Athenian origins). Nor was it inevitable that the new prose histories would

16 Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature, in comparison, appears to be less concerned with discourses of community origin and is more concerned with cosmological origins and/or the origin of human civilisation as a whole; see Hess, *I Studied Inscriptions*.

17 For wider trends in the literary activity of the classical period, see, e.g., McGlew, *Literature in the Classical Age*; Montanari, *History of Ancient Greek Literature*. See also Goldhill, *Invention of Prose*.

necessarily include origin narratives. Greek historiography tends to focus on events either within or at the edges of living memory (e.g., Herodotus and the Persian Wars, Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War, Xenophon and the campaigns of Cyrus the Younger), and indeed ancient Greek historians famously argued against treating events from the deep past because of their inherent unknowability (e.g., Thucydides' *archaiologia*; Herodotus' *prologue*). It seems that the new prose histories engaged with origin myths despite, rather than because of, the emerging conventions of the genre.

Not only did they engage – they engaged enthusiastically. The 4th century BCE is an outlier in all of our charts. The new genre of prose history embraced the origin myth at scale, suddenly and dramatically, and nowhere was this more evident than amongst writers from the Greek peninsula and the central Aegean. Although these writers show relatively little interest in origins for much of Greek antiquity, their interest increases in the 5th and reaches a high peak in the 4th century BCE (figure 5). This must be seen in relation to the contemporary historical context. The 4th century saw struggles for hegemony between Greek states on the peninsula – the defeat of Athens by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War was followed by conflict between Sparta and Thebes, and the second half of the century was characterised by the rise of Macedon under Philip II and his son, Alexander.¹⁸

Amidst these new political realities, Greek communities might have sought solace in (or a romantic reimagining of) their identities, rooting these discourses of identity in their own ancient pasts. Indeed, around this time, origin myths often seem to have been coloured with political significance. This is sometimes evident when we consider the specific textual contexts of many of these narratives. The tale of a city's origin is recounted, in many cases, within the frame of diplomatic interactions – with alliances or rivalries being cast as ancestral brotherhoods or enmities.¹⁹ This is true, not only of the new prose historiography, but also of its close relation within ancient Greek literary tradition, oratory. In one prominent speech of the 4th century for example, the Athenian orator Isocrates reflects on his city's recent loss of power and subordination to Spartan hegemony, describing how the Ionian cities broke their former alliance with Athens, despite originally being peopled by Athenian migrants (Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 122). Here, as in many other cases, the recounting of the origin myth occurs in the text within an explicitly political frame.

Also relevant is the kind of origin myths being told. This aspect of our analysis is ongoing, and only preliminary results can be shared here, but some intriguing patterns in mythic content are already beginning to emerge for the 4th century BCE. For example, during most of Greek antiquity, origin myths were written with an emphasis on the agency of heroic or remarkable individuals. Herakles is described as the progenitor of many Sicilian communities, for instance (e.g., Diodorus Siculus 4.23.1-2); while the urbanisation of Athens is attributed to Theseus (e.g., Plutarch, *Theseus* 36); and the foundation of many cities and cults in the central Mediterranean to Odysseus (e.g., Cassiodorus, *Var.* 12.15.1) and Diomedes

18 For this dynamic period in ancient Greek history, see Ma, *Polis*, as well as Tritle, *Greek World*, and also Börm and Luraghi, *Polis in the Hellenistic World*.

19 For what is known as »kinship diplomacy« in the ancient Greek world, see in particular Patterson, *Kinship Myth*.

(e.g., Strabo 5.1.8).²⁰ Yet in the 4th century BCE, for the first and the last time in antiquity, more authors attributed agency to collective groups rather than remarkable individuals when recounting origin myths (figure 8). The people of Delphi as a whole were credited with the foundation of Magnesia (Theophrastos F631 Rose). A group of assertive Trojan women were described as the agents behind the settlement of Kroton, forcing their menfolk to comply with their demand by burning their ships (Aristotle, *Mirabilia* 840b.109-110). We also find references to a group of Spartans founding the city of Taras (Plato Leg. 637B); a set of refugee Phokaiaans establishing Massalia (Isokrates, *Archidamos* 84); and a band of lawless Lokrians settling in Amphissa (Aischines 3.113), amongst other tales of collective action. In a world that was increasingly controlled by kings and tyrants, the origins of Greek communities were untypically cast in terms of communal agency.

Numbers of authors attributing agency in origins to individuals and to collectives

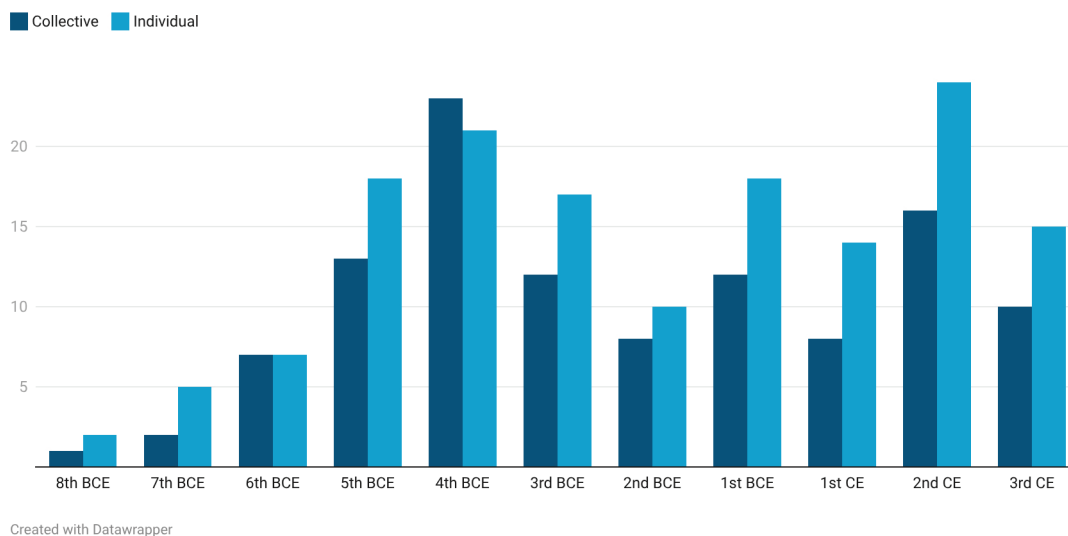


Figure 8: Chart showing the number of authors writing in ancient Greek attributing agency to individuals and collectives in the establishment of new communities. Chart created by Datawrapper.

Another characteristic of the origin myths told in the 4th century BCE is an emphasis on indigeneity and autochthony.²¹ It is in this century when stories of Athenian autochthony are at their peak in the work of a group of local historians known as the Atthidographers, as well as appearing in other genres including works by Isokrates (e.g., Isokrates, *Panath.* 12.126) and Plato (e.g., Plato Tim. 22a; Plato Critias 110B).²² In the 4th century we also read about the

20 For Odysseus and Diomedes as founding heroes, see Malkin, *Returns of Odysseus*.

21 For autochthony and indigeneity in ancient Greek origin myths more generally, see Detienne and Jones, *Art of founding autochthony*; Pelling, *Bringing autochthony*; Roy, *Autochthony*.

22 For the myth of Athenian autochthony, see Loraux, *Born of the Earth*; Blok, *Gentrifying genealogy*; Calame, *Myth and performance*. For the Atthidographers, see Harding, *Story of Athens*.

Thebans as »*spartoi*« or »sown men« who grew out of the Theban soil (e.g., Palaephatus, *De Incredibilibus* 3; Androtion BNJ 324 F60).²³ A range of other communities are also described in terms of indigeneity at this time, including the Ephesians (Ephoros BNJ 70 F114a), the inhabitants of the Ionian cities more generally (Aristoboulos of Kassandreia FGrHist 139 F6), the Lokrians (Aristotle fr 560 Rose), the Samians (Aristotle F571 Rose), the people of Anchiale (Ptolemaios Lagu BNJ 138 F5), and the Sicilians (Philistos Syracusanus FGrHist 556 f45).

Overall, the telling of origin myths in the 4th century BCE, then, constitutes a very particular literary phenomenon, set within a particular historical context. Both qualitatively and quantitatively, it represents a departure from previous practices. At that particular time, origin myths functioned in an unusually powerful and political way within ancient Greek culture, perhaps having particular salience on the Greek peninsula and in the central Aegean. This was set to change, however, towards the end of the 4th century, and with the dawning of a new historical and literary context in the Hellenistic period.

As noted above, our corpus declines through the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE (figure 2). This matches a general decline in the overall corpus of surviving Greek literature, and can in part be explained by a resurgence of verse genres, particularly lyric poetry and elegy, whose lower transmission rates likely account at least partly for this slight dip, reflecting reduced surviving output rather than a genuine decline in literary activity.²⁴ This renewed interest in verse was accompanied by the emergence of erudite literary forms, and both of these literary developments relate in no small part to the new scholarly culture that flourished in Alexandria with the establishment of its famous library. By this time, the Greek world was characterised by large empires – the Ptolemaic, the Seleucid, and the Antigonid dynasties ruled over vast stretches of territory in the eastern Mediterranean and in western Asia; while the Roman and Punic empires controlled large parts of the central and western Mediterranean.²⁵ This is not to deny the continuing importance of the local at this time – indeed, our own corpus demonstrates the vitality of local traditions and continuing interest in regional and micro-regional narratives. However, the incorporation of smaller independent communities within larger political entities altered the frames of reference. While these new empires did not yet sponsor »official« works of historiography and standard versions of origin myths to any significant degree, they nonetheless had an impact on literary output. The centre of literary gravity shifted, and indeed the dominance of Alexandria in Greek literary culture at this time is reflected in the geographical shifts within our corpus, with the southeastern Mediterranean now constituting a major locus (figure 5). But origin myths were often also less explicitly

23 For this myth of Theban autochthony, see Nimis, Theban autochthony and Athenian ideology; Berman, Double foundation; Berman, Myth, literature, and the creation. writings of the mythographers, and archaeological evidence, this article argues that the two stories of foundation existed in parallel in the early Greek poetic tradition and represent two distinct contexts of composition, one Mycenaean and the other archaic. Only with prose mythographers and logographers such as Hekataios and Pherekydes were these stories chronologically and genealogically ordered. This ordering represents a permanent change in how the mythic material was and continues to be understood.«, »container-title«: Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-

24 For the literature of the Hellenistic period, see Montanari, *History of Ancient Greek Literature* 2; Phillips, Citation and transmission; Sampson, Papyrology.

25 For the history of the Hellenistic period, see Shipley, *Greek World After Alexander*.

inflected with political significance. They were compiled in the new erudite genres, included within historical and geographical works, and alluded to in verse (figure 7). Often, however, references to origin myths were brief, even fleeting, and seemed to have been included mostly to add colour to a text, or to demonstrate the author's virtuoso scholarship.

It has previously been assumed that interest in origin myths was particularly strong in this period, given the broader literary currents of the time, as well as the historical context of warring Hellenistic kingdoms. Previous scholars have written about the Hellenistic period as one when mythopoetic activity reached »hitherto unprecedented levels«,²⁶ and argued that a new genre of *ktisis*-poetry (poetry recounting foundation myths) was invented at this time.²⁷ While both of these assertions might yet be true, quantitative analysis of our corpus suggests that in real terms (and in particular in relation to the preceding classical period of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE), the importance of origin myths actually declined in the Hellenistic age. Put plainly, stories about the origins of Greek communities played a less central role, both in literature and in wider society, than they had done previously.

This is emphatically not the case in the 1st century BCE. Despite a continued decline in the number of ancient Greek texts overall, our corpus grows both in absolute (figure 2) and relative (figure 3) terms. It seems that, in proportion to all literary activity, more time was being invested in the writing of origin myths. Once more, the historical context of this trend is important. The 1st century BCE saw the consolidation of Roman power in the Mediterranean, as Rome steadily defeated rival empires and kingdoms. A revival of origin as a theme in ancient Greek literature is likely related to a similar interest in origins found in contemporary Latin literature. Although not discussed here for reasons of space, Latin authors at this time were crucially concerned with origins, foundations, and lineages. It was in this period that the tale of Roman origins began to harden into a canonical »official« form under the direction of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, centring on Aeneas and his flight from Troy, the arrival in Italy and establishment of a hybrid dynasty, the birth of the twins Romulus and Remus, and finally the foundation of the city of Rome itself.²⁸ Authors writing in Latin did not confine themselves, however, to narrating Roman origins. They also reflected on origins and ancient interconnections between a wide range of groups both within Rome's conquered territories and beyond.

The impact of Rome on our corpus is perhaps most evident in figure 5, which shows the geographical distribution of authors within our corpus. The 1st century BCE is the only time when significant numbers of authors from the central Mediterranean wrote in the ancient Greek language about origin myths, many of them describing the origins of Greek cities in Italy and Sicily, but others also discussing the various origins of other Italian communities and groups. Yet interest in origin stories was also strong at this time amongst authors hailing from Anatolia and the eastern Aegean (figure 5), a fact that might perhaps be related to the Roman engagement with Troy.²⁹ Such stories did not always make explicit reference to

26 Scheer, *Past in a Hellenistic present*, 218.

27 Dougherty, *Archaic Greek foundation poetry*.

28 For Roman origin myths, see Wiseman, *Remus*; Wiseman, *Myths of Rome*; Squire, *Figuring Rome's foundation*.

29 For Troy and Rome, see Mac Sweeney, *Troy: Myth, City, Icon*; and for the impacts of this on other Anatolian communities, see Mac Sweeney, *Failed Nostoi and foundations*.

Roman origin discourses, but sometimes alluded to them in indirect and subtle ways, through mythological parallels and the use of common motifs.³⁰ This is not to say that Greek origin myths in this period were necessarily politically instrumentalised, as the origin myths of the 4th century BCE had often been. Rather, the cultural frame of Greek origin myths had shifted – Latin literary traditions, Roman cultural expectations, and also the »official« historiography of the Julio-Claudian imperial vision all played a part in altering the environment. As the Romans sought to make sense of the world through origin narratives, the Greeks also began to rethink their origins afresh.

If the 1st century BCE saw origin myths occupying a disproportionately large amount of literary attention, then the 1st century CE saw the opposite – origin myths decreasing in importance (figure 3). It is in this century that we see them appearing in the widest range of different genres of texts (figure 7), showing up in all different kinds of literary productions from epic poetry to technical treatises, and from romantic novels to encomiastic speeches. By this point, origin myths are everywhere, but at the same time they are also nowhere in particular. It is as if they have melted into the generic background of underlying literary landscape, a theme once more »baked into« Greek literature as it was in our very earliest sources, but which occupied no particular place in the cultural and political imaginary of the time.

In the centuries that followed, origin myths return to popularity, and our corpus swells once more (figures 2 and 3). Much of this increase, however, is driven by the proliferation of texts in erudite genres – scholia, encyclopaedias, lexica, as well as several miscellanies and technical treatises (figures 6 and 7). With this shift, we see origin myths moving out of the literary mainstream and into the world of scholars and antiquarians. The rising popularity of origin myths was not driven by their place in public discourse or the wider cultural consciousness. Instead, these stories increasingly appear in our corpus because they were compiled and compared, discussed and analysed by specialists – grammarians and sophists, philhellenes and aesthetes – writing primarily for each other. This is particularly true of the 2nd century CE, when nuggets of obscure knowledge were bandied back and forth by members of the elite learned class in competitive displays of virtuoso erudition.³¹ From this point onwards, origin myths may have been prevalent in the surviving source material, but they were not necessarily relevant to wider Greek society.

Conclusions

The gradual slide into prolific irrelevance is a fate that we ourselves may perhaps avoid, if we are willing to think in terms of the big picture, to try out new methods, and to open up comparative perspectives. We have tried, in this paper, to do all three. By compiling a large dataset of origin myths and by considering this corpus in relation to various axes of analysis, we have made a first attempt at telling the history of origin myths in the ancient Greek world. It is a history that leads to new insights for the study of Greek antiquity, but, we hope, may

30 This theme is a complex one and cannot be fully explored here. A more detailed treatment will be offered in Mac Sweeney et al., *Origin Myths*.

31 For literature and culture in the 2nd century CE, particularly under the influence of the Second Sophistic, see Part V in Richter and Johnson (eds.), *Oxford Handbook to the Second Sophistic*.

also prove valuable for readers approaching this article from a comparative perspective. There is much that can yet be learned by all of us, not just about what origin myths *say*, but also about what origin myths *do*.

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