



The death of the Old Bull of the Year apparently poleaxed, and the birth of the New Year's Bull-Calf from a date cluster; under the supervision of a Cretan priestess, who identifies herself with the palm-tree. From a Middle-Minoan bead-seal in the author's collection (diameter enlarged $1\frac{1}{2}$ times). About 1900 B.C.

ROBERT GRAVES

The Greek Myths

Introduction by
RICK RIORDAN

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Foreword

Since revising *The Greek Myths* in 1958, I have had second thoughts about the drunken god Dionysus, about the Centaurs with their contradictory reputation for wisdom and misdemeanour, and about the nature of divine ambrosia and nectar. These subjects are closely related, because the Centaurs worshipped Dionysus, whose wild autumnal feast was called 'the Ambrosia'. I no longer believe that when his Maenads ran raging around the countryside, tearing animals or children in pieces (see 27. *f*) and boasted afterwards of travelling to India and back (see 27. *c*), they had intoxicated themselves solely on wine or ivyale (see 27. *3*). The evidence, summarized in my *What Food the Centaurs Ate* (*Steps*: Cassell & Co., 1958, pp. 319–343), suggests that Satyrs (goat-totem tribesmen), Centaurs (horse-totem tribesmen), and their Maenad womenfolk, used these brews to wash down mouthfuls of a far stronger drug: namely a raw mushroom, *amanita muscaria*, which induces hallucinations, senseless rioting, prophetic sight, erotic energy, and remarkable muscular strength. Some hours of this ecstasy are followed by complete inertia; a phenomenon that would account for the story of how Lycurgus, armed only with an ox-goad, routed Dionysus's drunken army of Maenads and Satyrs after its victorious return from India (see 27. *e*).

On an Etruscan mirror the *amanita muscaria* is engraved at Ixion's feet; he was a Thessalian hero who feasted on ambrosia among the gods (see 63. *b*). Several myths (see 102, 126, etc.) are consistent with my theory that his descendants, the Centaurs, ate this mushroom; and, according to some historians, it was later employed by the Norse 'berserks' to give them reckless power in battle. I now believe that 'ambrosia' and 'nectar' were intoxicant mushrooms: certainly the *amanita muscaria*; but perhaps others, too, especially a small, slender dung-mushroom named *panaeolus papilionaceus*, which induces harmless and most enjoyable hallucinations. A mushroom not unlike it appears on an Attic vase between the hooves of Nessus the Centaur. The 'gods' for whom, in the myths, ambrosia and nectar were reserved, will have been sacred queens and kings of the pre-Classical

era. King Tantalus's crime (see 108. *c*) was that he broke the taboo by inviting commoners to share his ambrosia.

Sacred queenships and kingships lapsed in Greece; ambrosia then became, it seems, the secret element of the Eleusinian, Orphic, and other Mysteries associated with Dionysus. At all events, the participants swore to keep silence about what they ate or drank, saw unforgettable visions, and were promised immortality. The 'ambrosia' awarded to winners of the Olympic footrace when victory no longer conferred the sacred kingship on them was clearly a substitute: a mixture of foods the initial letters of which, as I show in *What Food the Centaurs Ate*, spelled out the Greek word 'mushroom'. Recipes quoted by Classical authors for nectar, and for *cecyon*, the mint-flavoured drink taken by Demeter at Eleusis, likewise spell out 'mushroom'.

I have myself eaten the hallucinogenic mushroom, *psilocybe*, a divine ambrosia in immemorial use among the Masatec Indians of Oaxaca Province, Mexico; heard the priestess invoke Tlaloc, the Mushroom-god, and seen transcendental visions. Thus I wholeheartedly agree with R. Gordon Wasson, the American discoverer of this ancient rite, that European ideas of heaven and hell may well have derived from similar mysteries. Tlaloc was engendered by lightning; so was Dionysus (see 14. *c*); and in Greek folklore, as in Masatec, so are all mushrooms—proverbially called 'food of the gods' in both languages. Tlaloc wore a serpent-crown; so did Dionysus (see 27. *a*). Tlaloc had an underwater retreat; so had Dionysus (see 27. *e*). The Maenads' savage custom of tearing off their victims' heads (see 27. *f* and 28. *d*) may refer allegorically to tearing off the sacred mushroom's head—since in Mexico its stalk is never eaten. We read that Perseus, a sacred King of Argos, converted to Dionysus worship (see 27. *i*), named Mycenae after a toadstool which he found growing on the site, and which gave forth a stream of water (see 73. *r*). Tlaloc's emblem was a toad; so was that of Argos; and from the mouth of Tlaloc's toad in the Tepentitla fresco issues a stream of water. Yet at what epoch were the European and Central American cultures in contact?

These theories call for further research, and I have therefore not incorporated my findings in the text of the present edition. Any expert help in solving the problem would be greatly appreciated.

R. G.
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Introduction

The medieval emissaries of the Catholic Church brought to Great Britain, in addition to the whole corpus of sacred history, a Continental university system based on the Greek and Latin Classics. Such native legends as those of King Arthur, Guy of Warwick, Robin Hood, the Blue Hag of Leicester, and King Lear were considered suitable enough for the masses, yet by early Tudor times the clergy and the educated classes were referring far more frequently to the myths in Ovid, Virgil, and the grammar school summaries of the Trojan War. Though official English literature of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries cannot, therefore, be properly understood except in the light of Greek mythology, the Classics have lately lost so much ground in schools and universities that an educated person is now no longer expected to know (for instance) who Deucalion, Pelops, Daedalus, Oenone, Laocoön, or Antigone may have been. Current knowledge of these myths is mostly derived from such fairy-story versions as Kingsley's *Heroes* and Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*; and at first sight this does not seem to matter much, because for the last two thousand years it has been the fashion to dismiss the myths as bizarre and chimerical fancies, a charming legacy from the childhood of the Greek intelligence, which the Church naturally depreciates in order to emphasize the greater spiritual importance of the Bible. Yet it is difficult to overestimate their value in the study of early European history, religion, and sociology.

'Chimerical' is an adjectival form of the noun *chimaera*, meaning 'she-goat'. Four thousand years ago the Chimaera can have seemed no more bizarre than any religious, heraldic, or commercial emblem does today. She was a formal composite beast with (as Homer records) a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. A Chimaera has been found carved on the walls of a Hittite temple at Carchemish and, like such other composite beasts as the Sphinx and the Unicorn, will originally have been a calendar symbol: each