

Hesiod and the Thespian Festival of the Muses

The Hesiodic tradition (from pre-5th century until just recently) has maintained that Hesiod - a mere rustic bard - had met and been tutored by the Muses near Ascra and Mount Helicon in Boeotia; inspired by them, he wrote the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Whether the Muses were taken literally or metaphorically, Hesiod himself, in contrast to the nameless and faceless author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, was still taken as literal and the autobiographical elements in the poems as true: his feud with his brother, the homeland and resettlement of his father, etc. Local inhabitants of the town of Pyrgake pointed out to travelers the home of Hesiod, with Helicon in the background. But in the last two generations, especially as the nature of oral poetry has become clearer, a historical Hesiod has become less accepted. We will look mainly at the account given by Plutarch, himself also a Boeotian, who was born during the reign of Claudius and died during the reign of Hadrian and who wrote a commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days*.

There is almost no evidence of the existence of *Theogony* or *Works and Days* prior to the Hellenistic age. Musaeus and Orpheus are clearly legendary characters, but Hesiod gives so much detail about himself in the works that it has been hard to see him as merely a literary construct. Plutarch, who may have written a life of Hesiod, believed Hesiod was a historical figure, but evidence he gives casts doubt on the integrity of some of the details of Hesiod's autobiography. Doubts about a real Hesiod are modern, but doubts about details of Hesiod's life were ancient. The festival of the Muses at Thespieae perpetuated (or perhaps created) the bard of Ascra, but no highly individualized biography of Hesiod is attested before the festival's inauguration.

Plutarch's home, Chaeronea, was only about 30-40 km from Ascra, so he would have been familiar with the area and the festival, though he records (via Proclus) the destruction of the town of Ascra by Roman times. Hesiod's deprecatory comments about Ascra must have made him (if he existed) unpopular in his own times. Pausanias visited Thespieae and the festival, though no one records having visited Ascra - although Strabo may have, since he locates it correctly in his writing (time of Augustus), when it may already have been a deserted ruin. The valley below Pyrgaki may have had few inhabitants, but Hippocrene fountain is identified as right up the hill, and in antiquity the valley was the site of the most famous musical contest. (The nine Muses may be reflected in nine local saint place names.) The spring (with its ancient masonry) up on the barren mountain is still used for watering stock, especially in late summer, when all the valley is otherwise dry.

The French excavators of the 3rd century site maintain that the contest must have been earlier than the remains they found, but the Festival is attested only for the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The site contained a stoa and a theater in addition to the altar and statue of the 9 Muses, but Constantine carried off to Constantinople much of the materials and most inscriptions found here are Roman.

The Thespiots ran the festival and traced their tradition back to Hesiod - though there is no evidence for the truth of their claim. No Heliconian shrine to the Muses is attested before 300 BC, though the sponsors aligned themselves firmly with the Hesiodic tradition.

What effect did the festival have on the text of Hesiod? Boeotians claimed some but not all of *Works and Days* as Hesiodic, but others listed much more, including *Theogony* and other minor works. Aelian refers to some lines as mistakenly attributed to Hesiod. Although the Hesiodic poems have a coherent internal unity, the relation between archaic Greek poems and their prologues is unclear; there were questions raised by ancient literary critics. But the prologues did survive with their works into the Middle Ages. Removing the prologues to *Works and Days* would drop out most

of the place names and much personal detail - and would also cut out the major references to the Muses, not desirable to those running the cult.

The Works and Days seafaring section seems unlikely for a rustic shepherd to write, but then Hesiod claims his knowledge comes from the Muses. According to Proclus, Plutarch rejects this passage as an insertion. However, Pausanias, about fifty years after Plutarch's death, refers to the existence of the tripod that Hesiod won over Homer (in the supposed contest of Hesiod and Homer) and dedicated to the shrine. Did Plutarch believe that the tripod the shrine showed to visitors was being given a false antiquity? He may have seen it and determined that it was being faked by the priests of the Heliconian Muses.

Stripped of prologues and the seafaring passage, Hesiod has little local color (and little also about the Muses). With these, the Muses take center stage, and this fosters the work of the shrine. Without them, the tripod, the shrine's prized artifact, loses its antiquity and the contest of Hesiod and Homer becomes a later invention, probably by the shrine priests.

Plutarch may thus be giving us clues about the nature of the development of archaic poetry and the way(s) it was altered in transmission - but Plutarch probably believed pretty much everything about the traditional Hesiod other than the seafaring/tripod passage.