

# Review Article: Myth, ritual and metallurgy

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**Myth, ritual, and metallurgy in ancient Greece and recent Africa** by Sandra Blakely. *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, 250x175mm, xiv+328pp, 27 figs, index, ISBN 0521855004, £50 (US\$90), h/b.*

Classicists may react with a degree of bewilderment when first glancing at this volume as the presence of 'Recent Africa' in the title makes it stand out from most books on the subject of ancient Greece. Classical archaeology, not to mention classics, has been caricatured as sitting on the periphery of archaeology and as having ignored the theoretical fracas that took place in the late eighties (Johnson 1999, 183–4). Relatively speaking, classicists are neither renowned for pushing the boundaries of their discipline nor working as part of interdisciplinary projects, although there are of course exceptions (Morris 1999; Snodgrass 1987). Those who have dared to trespass into classics from outside or who have chosen to pursue radical approaches from within have, even when producing interesting studies, often found themselves marginalised by the 'Classics establishment', *eg* Shanks (1996) and Bernal (1987). It is in this light that Sandra Blakely's decision to use African ethnography as a tool to interrogate classical sources can be understood as a brave and radical move.

Ancient Greek sources abound with references to mythical figures associated with metallurgy. Whilst Hephaistos with his place in the Pantheon is well known, it is the other lesser known figures such as the Telchines and the Daktyloi, amongst others, that Blakely has chosen to focus upon. Blakely starts her volume by indicating that despite this rich cast of mythical beings, the utility of these sources is compromised by their fragmented nature and the broad historical period which they cover. The result is frustration; these tantalising fragments cause dismay for scholars because of their breadth of associations. Rather than attempt a delicate dissection of these complex associations most scholars have tended to sidestep the challenge. In contrast, Blakely recognises that the reason for these sources being disregarded is

also their strength, since through these associations the place of metallurgy in the world of ideas in ancient Greece can be gleaned. What is needed is a method to begin this analysis and it is for this reason that Blakely chooses to fuse her classical studies with African ethnography.

Unlike their classical counterparts, archaeologists and scholars of ancient metallurgy will be more comfortable with the use of ethnographic studies of iron production. However, here too, the way in which Blakely has chosen to use ethnography will unsettle many who have familiarised themselves with this body of literature. The ethnography of iron smelting in Africa has a well established heritage, yet this vast body of data is not without its problems. Studies have tended to focus on a limited range of aspects including the technical, the status of the smith, and 'ritual'. As Marcia Wright (2002) has pointed out, many early studies tended to present a unified African cultural reality and often overemphasised particular aspects of ritual, particularly sexual symbolism and metaphor. Later studies have recognised the variation of practice and have placed accounts within specific culture histories. The attraction of 'Africa' as a focus for such studies is great and easily appreciated. If there is any unifying aspect to the diverse ethnographic accounts of iron smelting, then it is that the majority of cases can broadly be defined as bloomery smelting, although there are numerous variations and complexities (Killick 1991). It was because practices such as bloomery smelting had become all but extinct by the 18th century in Europe that Africa became seen as a laboratory where technological practice was thought of as preserved in a 'primitive simplicity' imbued with ritual, magic and symbolism. The potential for such studies being used as analogy for archaeological evidence is therefore clear.

Early observers of African metallurgy were not trained anthropologists but rather either colonial administrators or missionaries, each highlighting their own concerns within their accounts. Colonial administrators were often trained in classical philology and their reports regularly concerned the diffusion of technology from the classical world. Missionaries approached iron smelting and smelters from a different perspective. They saw ritual practice as behaviour in need of correction, that is Christianisation, which itself brought a degree of shame to smelting. It was here that missionaries were perhaps most likely to overemphasise the sexual metaphors in smelting and the role of ritual, as the presence of such would serve to justify their intervention. One such missionary, Wyckaert (1914), realised the tension between 'ethnographic' recording and missionary work whilst studying iron smelting amongst the smelters of Mwazye and attempting to promote Christian smelters who had agreed to abandon magic and rituals in smelting. In other missionary accounts non-Christian ideas were often omitted and an overt emphasis on sexual elements at the expense of technical detail emphasized the primitiveness of the participants since sexual openness was equated with primitive naivety.

It was not until 1937 that the ethnography of iron smelting was finally accommodated within an explicitly academic framework (Cline 1937). Cline's study was a reaction to trends in psychology and sociology which were increasingly dismissive of archaeology and ethnography. He felt that by collating many existing works he could undertake a critical analysis and encourage further comparative work. Acknowledging the lack of anthropological training, and the biases in observation, Cline forwarded the first robust typology for furnace architecture and used this data to evaluate patterns of diffusion and the evolutionary assumptions that underpinned them. Cline's study was timely since it was during this period that bloomery smelting went into serious decline across the continent. Whilst some instances of bloomery smelting survived till the 1960s these were rarely continuous traditions and more often ethnographic experiments (Gordon and van de Merwe 1984). Today, it is widely acknowledged that not only does iron smelting on the African continent have a long and varied history but that it is the result of complex social processes which have played a significant role in shaping both the recent and distant past (Vogel 2000). It is ironic then that whilst Blakely's title might surprise contemporary classicists, until the advent of modern ethnographic and archaeological research it was generally assumed that iron-smelting technology had diffused to Africa from the Classical world. The association of

the two areas of study then might not be so surprising as first thought, and it is an indicator of the maturity of the discipline that a tradition once thought to have derived from the Eastern Mediterranean is now being used to inform our knowledge of the Classical world itself.

Ethnography as a form of analogy is well established in archaeology and there has been considerable development of the ways in which it has been brought to bear on archaeological evidence. Yellen (1977) identified four categories of analogy; the first three rely on the use of ethnography, whilst the final form uses laboratory analogies and experimental archaeology. Underpinning Yellen's scheme was the desire to characterise how we use analogy in archaeology and how ethnography allows us to test models constructed from archaeological data. Hodder (1982) later transformed the way analogy is understood in relation to archaeological data and proposed that analogies may be seen as formal, probable or relational. Formal analogy is predominantly concerned with basic interpretation, for instance how we recognise a clay structure which exhibits evidence of intense burning and covered in slag as a smelting furnace. Probability analogies make use of 'quasi-universal' cross-cultural rules or generalisations (Parker Pearson 1999). For instance, most ethnographic case studies note that iron production is gendered with males most often presiding over smelting. Relational analogies are indirect analogies between ethnographic contexts and archaeological case studies. They are the most complex form of analogy and link 'different manifestations through a common structuring principle' (Parker Pearson 1999, 35). The strength of relational analogies is that they are based on the structuring of social relations so that differing material outcomes can be understood in terms of common ideas and values. It is the sensitive analysis of each case, archaeological and ethnographic, which makes this class of analogy different from the general rules described in Yellen's scheme. It is into relational analogy then that Blakely's analysis best fits.

Both the complexity of the historical processes associated with 'African' metalworking and the compilation of the ethnographic record make Blakely's task an extremely challenging one. Whilst there are widely-acknowledged issues with how analogy is used in archaeology, Blakely finds herself with the challenge not of using ethnography to approach archaeological evidence but to elucidate what we know of the 'daimones' of Greek texts. The issue then is not one of reconciling material culture of disparate communities, nor is it to understand the nature of social relations that materialise through specific practices. Instead, it is to try and understand how

evidence from diverse ethnographic sources can illuminate the fragmentary and historically-scattered evidence for these mythical beings. The reasons for choosing the daimones for such an analysis are obvious. Incorporated within this class of divines are better known characters such as the Telchines, famous for working in the forge of Hephaistos, and the Dactyloi who themselves bear names associated with metalworking (Akmon, Dammameneus, and Kelmis being Anvil, Hammerer, and Iron respectively) and whose name echoes ideas of dextrous skill. Incorporated also are the Korybantes, Kabeiroi, and the Kouretes. Together, these figures connect magic, autochthony, music, dance, cosmological order, and fecundity. Already, it should be clear that these are themes that are often reiterated in a range of ethnographic studies of 'African' iron working.

The real value of this volume is that from the outset the potential problems with such an analysis are acknowledged, with the result that Blakely has produced a very conscious study which constantly reflects on its own method and conclusions. What we are provided with is an exploration of the semantic realm within which the daimones place the practice of metallurgy. Beyond the themes mentioned above, we are confronted with a realm which extends from parturition to the sanctioning of kingly power. To a large degree, the encompassing analysis of Greek myth and the role of those associated with metallurgy parallels many of the contextual or socio-technical analyses of craft-working which have emerged within archaeology over the last decade or so (Dobres 2000; Giles 2007). Whilst there have been other analyses of metallurgy, myth and Greek literature (*eg* Morris 1992), most have focused on Hephaistos (Delcourt 1957) who is, in comparison with the daimones, rather limited as a figure for analysis, especially in terms of the breadth of associations beyond metallurgy and craft.

It is acknowledged early on in the text that the associations of the daimones extend well beyond the realm of metallurgy with some, namely the Korybantes and Kouretes, not even being formally associated with metallurgy. It is here that ideas of metallurgy and more obscure or indirect associations allow fascinating connections to be drawn. For instance the idea of festival and rupture in everyday routines becomes one context for understanding the associations which are woven into metallurgical production. This is something which is strongly emphasised in both literary and ethnographic sources. It is particularly pleasing to see how regionality is introduced into the analysis. The localised nature of festivals and the regional associations of specific daimones, *eg* the Dactyloi with Mount Ida, serve to remind us that the

world within which archaeological evidence for metal production is located was one of acknowledged regionalism. This is something that is too often forgotten when we are considering the trade in metals across the eastern Mediterranean with venturing Greek colonists and voyaging Phoenicians. Just as varied were the relationships between those involved in metallurgical practices and authority, *viz* the Dactyloi and their attendance on Zeus. Some may query why there is a need to emphasise the symbolic and ritual associations of myth but it should be remembered that much of our understanding of craft production for this period when Greek myth is being crystallised in text is actually informed by much later writings. Attitudes to contexts of production and indeed craft producers in the classical world, have perhaps been based more on the derision shown towards them by later writers such as Plutarch than by the thoughtful interpretation of the production contexts themselves. The analysis offered by Blakely serves to counter this from a new perspective and although not explicitly concerned with archaeological evidence, demonstrates a facet of the Greek world which needs to be considered when undertaking the analysis of such material. Having digested her work, it is difficult to understand how evidence relating to metallurgical production could ever be studied from a purely technical perspective.

After a considered introduction, the volume covers two themes: metallurgy and birth, and metallurgy and political power. Each is examined through mythological reference to daimones and includes reference to other representations and associations. It is here that the understanding of the rôles of these divine beings is supported by detailed parallel analysis of ethnographic evidence. The analysis is balanced and considered; spurious associations and overworking of evidence are notably absent, with the result that convincing associations are established. For instance, chapter six addresses issues of fertility and ritual performance and compares three functions of the daimones' dance—magic, war and fertility—with African songs associated with smelting. Weaponry is seen to be a common point of reference in both Greek and African examples, with a desire to ensure human and terrestrial fecundity. Whilst such observations fit well, Blakely highlights how the sexualisation of production and the caveat against militarism that recur in the African examples are inverted in the Greek system. For instance, in the latter, arms and violence are understood as a means through which emerging life is encouraged and ensured. What we are left with then is a delicate treatment of the nuances of each case and how production in both contexts draws on a far-reaching web of meaningful symbolic associations.

Although the title may give the impression that this book seeks a balanced analysis and hence contribution to the study of myth, ritual and metallurgy in both recent Africa and ancient Greece, it should be realised that the focus is really on using African ethnography to understand Greek myth. On one level, details presented by Blakely are fascinating and are a welcome addition to the existing body of analysis of 'African' ethnography. There are of course several texts which detail ethnographic accounts in more detail, but any criticism made on this level is to miss the point of Blakely's efforts; she is concerned with the interplay between these bodies of evidence not in the single analysis of either. Blakely has laboured hard in providing a detailed account of the Fipa, Hausa and BaKongo, and has succeeded in a thoughtful analysis of these studies. Informative as her analyses are, the ethnography chapters do at times feel rather protracted and might make the reader retreat to primary sources or wish for these to be dealt with in a more succinct manner. Despite its highly focused topic this volume has far reaching consequences. Perhaps the most useful ideas that emerge from Blakely's analyses are the composite nature of production and the ways in which metaphorical power is embodied in transformative acts. Our understanding of the Greek pantheon is at times too focused on correlations between characters and singular traits or attributes, human or natural. Blakely however echoes Marcia Wright's (2002) points on metallurgists having composite identities. Her analysis of the power relations between leaders and metallurgists demonstrates this well in the case of the BaKongo. In the discussion of investiture of the BaKongo kings in which smiths play an active and important role (p186), she notes how the King leads the cult of the dead whilst the smith is head of an equally powerful Bisimbi cult that links humans and nature whilst emphasising transformation; Bisimbi are dead humans who have gone through various transformations to end up as river stones. Whilst this case study demonstrates the fluid categories which exist between nature and culture for the BaKongo, it also shows how kingly power is linked to the means of production, and how the smith assumes a role which marshals natural elements such as charcoal (from the bush), air, and ore (from the ground) to produce cultural tools which till the earth, these tools themselves being worked on river stone anvils—which are transformed humans. The BaKongo smith and king are thus intimately linked to each other not only in their roles as cult leaders but through the control of cultural and natural forces which are materialised in the practice of metallurgy.

There is no doubt that this volume succeeds in its negotiation of the various methodological pitfalls and the

author should be congratulated for this. It is a thorough and significant piece of work and will be a standard text for any enquiry into Greek myth and metallurgy. However, there will be many who will remain doubtful about how these two disparate areas could be reconciled in one study whilst others may question 'why' one would ever want to combine Classics and African ethnography. The simple answer to such doubts is that Blakely has shown how African ethnographic work provides a meaningful framework within which to rethink classical texts. The importance of this cannot be overstated, as the way such texts have been used conventionally lacks rigorous anthropological method and is held back by needlessly conservative approaches. Despite its novel approach, Blakely's detailed engagement with evidence guarantees that it will neither be marginalised nor ignored. Although it concentrates on using African ethnography to better understand classical references to metallurgy and the mythical figures associated with it, it has important and wide-ranging implications for the way classicists, archaeologists, and historians of science and technology should think about writing any history which relates to metal production.

Although outside the scope of her aims, it is still hard to understand how Blakely resisted the temptation to work through some of her ideas on the mounting body of archaeological evidence relating to metal production. Passing references are made to aspects of archaeological evidence, but there is little effort to develop some realisations made in the text through a case study of archaeological evidence. However, I expect it will not be long before archaeologists begin to use Blakely's analysis to better understand current archaeological evidence. This will allow us to formulate research questions which address contexts of production in new and exciting ways, allowing us to place metallurgical practice within a complex web of associations which permeate Greek attitudes to metal, metal workers, and production or creation. We need not necessarily look for the *Ntangala* chest of the chief smelter but hints of such practice may come in many forms, from the way space is used and defined to the presence of specific forms of material culture (iron rings being a case in point). Whilst specific finds might be interpreted in a new light, the diverse ritual practices outlined in Blakely's study suggests that careful statistical analyses might also provide evidence of ritual practice. For instance the ratios of certain types of animal bones on metallurgical sites, and how these compare to other sites where metallurgy was not practised might be one avenue to explore; metallurgical practice can, and should, be linked to a wide variety of other practices encountered on site. To enable this to happen, excavation strategies

will have to acknowledge the potential of such approaches from the outset. The insights provided in this volume effectively map out an agenda for future enquiries into the cultural context of metallurgical practice. This need not be limited to Greece but can be extended more widely. Having demonstrated the utility of African ethnography in the context of ancient Greece, it opens the way for such sensitive comparisons to be undertaken elsewhere, indeed Blakely herself makes reference to dwarves, elves and metallurgy in European myths. Although others may not have such a rich body of textual evidence, the presence of such strong ritual associations with metallurgy is compelling evidence which should encourage us to devise research strategies, both in the field and the laboratory, which will help us begin to indentify these practices.

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