

From Olympus to Camelot: The World of European Mythology by David Leeming

Folklore Forum 37.1 (2007).

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In *From Olympus to Camelot: The World of European Mythology*, David Leeming has seemingly taken on the role of popularizer, in the sense of offering to a lay audience a readable account of the work of a variety of scholars on a complex subject. He sets out to describe “the great mythological traditions of the European continent in a historical, cultural, and comparative context” with the assumption that “something approximating a European mythology emerges from the substructure” (v). Leeming is looking for a big picture.

Leeming combines the comparative method with a diachronic approach, and the big picture that he finds as a result is a story of progress from ice age bear worship to Christianity and modern philosophy. Through it all runs a strand of theoretical readings, finding in the various mythologies archetypes and Indo-European themes. The book contains three parts: “The Background,” “The European Cultures and their Pantheons,” and “European Mythic Patterns and Christian Hegemony.” The early chapters are citation heavy, but this recedes as the stories take center stage. Leeming recounts the sources of the myths, from archaeological data to literature and oral tradition. He refers to concepts such as variation and performance, though little is made of them.

Leeming's theoretical framework draws largely on the works of Joseph Campbell and Marija Gimbutas. Later he brings in others, such as Georges Dumezil, to solidify the Indo-European frame. In getting at the big picture, Leeming has overlooked much of the scholarship of the last hundred years. He makes passing reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss and quotes Jaan Puhvel several times, but much of the book refers to Campbell, Gimbutas,

Robert Graves, and Leeming's own books. However, some small errors creep into his research. As part of a chapter called “European Deities and Creation Myths,” Leeming retells part of Hesiod’s *Theogony*. Here he writes: “The swallowed offspring of Kronos and Rhea were released from their captivity in their father, Time. In gratitude, they gave their brother the hidden thunder and lightning, thereby recognizing him as the supreme sky god” (150). Zeus did receive lightning bolts. These, however, came from “his uncles, other sons of Ouranos/whom their father in a fit of idiocy had bound.”¹ This is a reference to the Cyclopes, not to the same generation as Zeus. Leeming has rendered Kronos as “Time,” but others have pointed out that these “two words [Kronos and chronos] are not etymologically related.”² Graves, from whom Leeming draws many of his Greek stories, tells us that Kronos was interpreted by later Greeks as Time, but probably meant Crow.³

In this one small volume Leeming can only offer a few stories from each area. He includes chapters on “Baltic, Slavic, and Balkan Mythology,” and “Finnic and other Non-Indo-European Mythologies.” Leeming does a great service to his readers by including stories from such areas, which are often overlooked in popular mythology books. His presentation of Roman mythology, with its attention to the Etruscans and ancient deities such as Ops and Consus, is more comprehensive than what we're likely to find on bookstore shelves. It is worth noting, however, that the areas outside the Indo-European scope fade away as Leeming focuses more on patterns in the last part of the book. He lays his lens over Celtic, Greek, Roman, and Germanic myths, always pointing to Christianity.

To some extent, the above criticisms might not be fair. Leeming sets out to notice patterns, not to recount a history of scholarship. Yet to ignore that scholarship becomes curious when the author employs some of it to suit his purpose. The chapter on “The European Mythic Hero” includes discussion of Campbell's “Monomyth.” It builds to a discussion of Jesus as a mythic hero, which might have been bolstered by making reference to the already extant literature on this very topic.

Leeming's book is most likely to appeal to a popular audience. It includes wonderful stories, many of which have not received as much attention as they deserve in this type of venue. He has recast the history of European mythology in light of as many of the texts as he has been able to assemble. In his final chapter, “European Philosophical Myths in the Modern World,” Leeming is able to include some original scholarship while fulfilling the promise of his diachronic method. He concludes with a statement about the continued uses of myth as aspects of philosophy in economics, religion, psychology, and

science. He brings his reader right into the present, showing a progression of ideas that goes back thousands of years.

NOTES

1. Hesiod. *Theogony*. trans. Stanley Lombardo. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), 75.
2. William Hansen. *Handbook of Classical Mythology*. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004), 217.
3. Robert Graves. *The Greek Myths*, Vol. 1. (New York: Penguin Books. 1960), 38.