

Hesiod Introduction Part 2

Basic Facts about Hesiod

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"Let him hear the advice of Hesiod. ... The advice of Hesiod is good." — Aristotle

"Lampon ... greatly honors the sayings of Hesiod, the one he declares and recommends to his sons."
—Pindar

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Hesiod's Theogony & Works and Days.

WHO WAS HESIOD? In the ancient world, Hesiod was a *real* person—a real man and poet who lived and composed several epic poems. In more recent times, however, scholarly opinion has been divided about who, exactly, Hesiod was. Following trends in Homeric scholarship, many have turned up a skeptical brow to the notion that Hesiod was real, while others continue to believe. Consequently, a variety of answers have been offered to the "who was Hesiod" question. Of them, two stand out. Summarized by Andrew L. Ford, they are that Hesiod either was "an historical person" or that Hesiod merely represents "the name of a tradition."¹ Let's take a look at both answers in turn, beginning with the latter first.

One view is that Hesiod—the man, the poet—did not actually exist. Rather, following the nature of oral poetry, the name Hesiod represents a long oral tradition that was eventually solidified in several poems. Professor Robert Lamberton explains that the "contributions [to scholarship] of our own century have placed the very existence of the poet Hesiod into doubt." Lamberton himself favors the idea that Hesiod was more of a poetic construct and device. "Hesiod," he asserts, "is a name that from the sixth century before Christ (and perhaps earlier) has been attached to a substantial body of archaic and archaizing Greek poetry." As such, Hesiod is more literary persona than poet. He cites Anacreon and

Theognis as two other examples of the same or similar phenomenon. Both began as real poets before being utilized as literary personas, or masks, by later poets. His conclusion:

We are no longer in the position to say, 'Hesiod was born in Askra in Boeotia about 750 B.C.,' as if this were information on the order of 'Wordsworth was born at Cocker-mouth, Cumberland, in 1770.' Rather, we must perceive Hesiod as a mask for many anonymous voices, all trained, and trained well, over generations to sound the same, to speak with the same identity, and to pass on the same traditions.²

Others take the contrary view. For the scholar Stephanie Nelson, Hesiod was a real man, which is to say, "the poet described by the poems themselves." She holds this view knowing full well the way scholarly opinion has shifted over time. "Fashions change in Classical scholarship," she observes, "as they do in anything else." So it is that "Hesiod has moved from person to persona, and occasionally back again." Even so, she finds no solid reason why Hesiod should not be the real, historical person he claims to be in his poems. After all, she argues, at a time when all the glory was bestowed upon rulers and warriors, why would someone choose to write a poem from the perspective of a lowly, hardworking, suffering, and "boorish"—as Pausanias calls him—farmer or shepherd if he were not what he claimed to be? Accordingly, Nelson confesses, "I myself believe that he is who he says he is." Her conclusion: Hesiod "was, in fact, a farmer."³

Where do we stand, then? Was Hesiod real? As with so many other questions related to the ancient world—a point that is always well worth bearing in mind—we cannot be sure. Of course it is possible that the truth is found somewhere in between, in a mixture of the "real" and "not real" positions. Some suggest that while "Hesiod" represents a poetic tradition, the tradition itself nevertheless reveals the experience of real people. For example, Edward I. Bleiberg and his co-authors write that in Hesiod "we hear the genuine voice of a peasant farmer."⁴ With

due caution, Albin Lesky suggests the same: "We should be rather foolish if we examined too closely the historical and factual content of the verses. But that it reflects a genuine experience cannot be doubted."⁵ One last voice: Jennifer Strauss Clay judges that "the truth probably lies somewhere between opposing positions"—between an individual, real poet, the "first individual voice in Greek literature," and the "crystallization of a didactic tradition."⁶ In the end, all we can conclude with any certainty is that the name Hesiod represents those responsible for the Hesiodic poems, whether a single, individual person or many.

Whether Hesiod was a real person or merely a literary persona, what do we know about him? The short answer is whatever Hesiod revealed about himself in his poems. Hesiod was born in Ascra, a small rural community in the ancient Greek region of Boeotia in central Greece. (Ancient Athenians, by the way, considered the Boeotians rather "stupid.") According to Hesiod, Ascra was "miserable in winter and painful in summer."⁷ He explains that his father came from Aeolian Kyme, a town along the coast of modern Turkey. We're given to understand that he migrated to Ascra sometime before Hesiod's birth, likely setting up as a farmer and shepherd and sometimes travelling merchant. He did so thanks to the poverty of his situation in Aeolian Kyme. Hesiod explains that his father "wasn't fleeing riches or wealth or happiness. No, he was fleeing wretched poverty that Zeus gives to men."⁸

Working in the manner of his father, Hesiod helped farm his family's allotment of land and looked after their sheep. It was while he was acting as shepherd that he suddenly felt the calling to be a poet. In the *Theogony*, he claims that "one day the Muses taught Hesiod beautiful song when he was tending his sheep." He goes on to explain that "they blew into me a divine voice to celebrate and glorify what will be and what was before. Moreover, they called on me to hymn the race of blessed ones who always are."⁹

We get the idea that while Hesiod practiced poetry, he nevertheless continued working the family

farm. At some point, he travelled to Chalcis in Euboea to compete in “the games of battle-minded Amphidamas” —the same games reported in the legendary *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*. He recounts that he won first prize. “I was victorious with a hymn,” he states, “and I carried off a tripod with earlike handles” —one he dedicated to the Muses.¹⁰

The only other information about Hesiod’s life we have from his poetry has to do with the division of the family farm between Hesiod and his brother Perses, whom Hesiod most frequently labels “foolish.” Given Hesiod’s brief and sparse account, scholars disagree on the details of what exactly happened. Nonetheless, we can say with confidence that Perses appealed the initial division. More, he hoped to influence the court’s “gift-greedy kings” in order to support his appeal by honoring them with, well, *gifts*.

The longer answer to the “what we know about Hesiod” question is that ancient biographers added many details to his life story, many of which we are in no position to judge whether they are factual or not. We’re told, for example, that his father’s name was Dius and his mother’s was Pycimede. One source even confidently gives Hesiod’s genealogy going back to his great-grandfather Melanopus. All of this may be true or not—who knows? But then we get to his death. Pausanias informs us that “there are conflicting versions of the death of Hesiod.”¹¹ All ancient sources agree that he was killed for sleeping with the wrong woman—the sister of two brothers. The conflict is over whether he was actually the one who slept with the woman or it was another man. If the latter, then the two brothers killed him by mistake. Regardless, we are told that after being murdered, his body was thrown into the sea. But that wasn’t the end of Hesiod! No, as Solon relates the story in Plutarch’s *The Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, “The body of Hesiod, as soon as it left the land, was taken up by a company of dolphins, who conveyed it to Rhium in Molycreia.”¹² The detail is doubtlessly one of the most amusing of the ancient additions to Hesiod’s biography. But with it, and since we’ve presumably ventured into the land of the fabulous, let’s move on to Hesiod’s poems.

What are Hesiod’s major works? Scholars all agree that Hesiod is responsible for two epic poems, the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*. The *Theogony* recounts the birth of the gods, including who slept with whom and who begot or gave birth to whom. The *Works and Days* is much harder to characterize. Generally speaking, though, it is a book of advice—about how things are and why they are the way they are; about how to approach work and the hardships of life; about justice and injustice; about the road to success and wealth; and lastly, though there’s more, about the cycle of work to be done throughout the year and the character of and activities for each day of the month. The prolific classics scholar Martin L. West proposes it would have been better to call the poem “the Wisdom of Hesiod.”¹³ Quite true.

Were any other poems attributed to Hesiod? Contrary to modern scholarly views, most ancient Greeks believed that Hesiod wrote a number of other poems. One was the *Shield of Heracles*, a poem about the birth of the demigod Heracles, his shield made by the smith-god Hephaestus, and Heracles’ fight to the death with Kyknos, the son of Ares. Many scholars hold that the first fifty-six lines of the *Shield* are from the *Catalogue of Women*, alternatively called the *Ehoiai*, another poem that was attributed to Hesiod. The *Catalogue* recounts the generations of heroes—the offspring of gods and women—down to the time just before the Trojan War when Zeus planned destruction for the heroes. *Other* poems similarly recount a variety of myths and legends. They include the *Great Ehoiai*; *The Wedding of Keyx (Ceyx)*; the *Melampodia* (about the prophet Melampus); *The Descent of Peirithous to Hades* (about his descent with the hero Theseus); and the *Aegimius*. Since we only possess fragments of these poems, we are somewhat in the dark as to what they were about. Other works attributed to Hesiod include, among others, the *Astronomy* or the *Astrology*, a poem about the stars and constellations; *Bird Omens*, which was likely about securing happiness and fortune by means of reading the various god-sent bird signs in the sky; and the *Precepts of Chiron*, a poem of advice given by Chiron, the wise centaur who instructed Achilles and other heroes.

Without going into any details, other poems attributed to Hesiod by some writers in antiquity include the *Great Works*; *On Preserved Foods*; *The Idaean Dactyls*; the *Dirge for Batrachus*; and *The Potters*.

The date—when were Hesiod’s poems composed? Most scholars suggest that Hesiod’s poems were created sometime around 700 BC. Some place them before 700; some after. As Robert Lamberton reports, “The most respectable modern opinions on the date of the *Theogony* range from the last quarter of the eighth century (M.L. West) to the second quarter of the seventh (G.S. Kirk), that is, within the century or so just *after* the apparent introduction of alphabetic literacy in Greece.”¹⁴ Similar dates are given for the *Works and Days*.

What time period does Hesiod’s work represent? Hesiod’s *Theogony* represents what we may term “mythological time,” the time, as the poet puts it, “from the beginning,” when the gods first came into being down to the heroic age. As for the *Works and Days*, it likely represents the second half of the eighth century BC. Hence, we see what life was like for a small land owner and farmer at the beginning of Greece’s Archaic period. Summarizing modern scholarship, Stephanie Nelson cites Hesiod himself as evidence for this view, including his “reference to the games . . . for Amphidamas, who may have been killed in the Lelantine War,” which scholars date from c. 730-c.700 BC.¹⁵

So ends Item 2, “Introduction Part 2 – Basic Facts about Hesiod.” **See you in Item 3, “Introduction Part 3 – The Ancient Encounter with Hesiod.”**

NOTES

¹ Andrew L. Ford, “Plato’s Two Hesiods,” in *Plato & Hesiod*, 134.

² For his position regarding Hesiod’s existence, see Robert Lamberton, *Hesiod* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), xiv, 11, 15.

³ See Stephanie Nelson, *God and Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil*, 31-32. On the other hand, Jonathan M. Hall observes, “One wonders how an individual who, in some senses, conforms to all the characteristics of a peasant society and continuously urges the necessity of labor . . . managed to find the time to compete in poetic contests.” Jonathan M. Hall, *A History of the Archaic Greek World ca. 1200-479 BCE* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 27.

⁴ Edward I. Bleiberg, James Allan Evans, Kristen Mossler Figg, Philip M. Soergel, and John Block Friedman, eds. “The Boeotian School of Epic.” Vol. 2, *Arts and Humanities through the Eras: Ancient Greece and Rome 1200 B.C.E.-476 C.E.* (Detroit: Gale, 2005), 127.

⁵ Albin Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, trans. Cornelis de Heer and James Willes, 92.

⁶ Jenny Strauss Clay, *Hesiod’s Cosmos*, 3.

⁷ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 640.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 637-638.

⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony* 22-23; 31-33.

¹⁰ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 654-658.

¹¹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 9.31.6.

¹² Plutarch, *The Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* 19.

¹³ See the introduction in Martin L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony and Works and Days* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), xiii.

¹⁴ Robert Lamberton, *Hesiod*, 15.

¹⁵ Stephanie Nelson, *God and Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil*, 33.



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