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Giorgio De Santillana , Hertha Von Dechend

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Ever since the Greeks coined the language we commonly use for scientific description, mythology & science have developed separately. But what came before the Greeks? What if we could prove that all myths have one common origin in a celestial cosmology? What if the gods, the places they lived & what they did are but ciphers for celestial activity, a language for the perpetuation of complex astronomical data? Drawing on scientific data, historical & literary sources, the authors argue that our myths are the remains of a preliterate astronomy, an exacting science whose power & accuracy were suppressed & then forgotten by an emergent Greco-Roman world view. This fascinating book throws into doubt the self-congratulatory assumptions of Western science about the unfolding development & transmission of knowledge. This is a truly seminal & original thesis, a book that should be read by anyone interested in science, myth & the interactions between the two.

Hamlet's Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge & Its Transmission Through Myth Details

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Author : Giorgio De Santillana , Hertha Von Dechend

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Nathan Miller says

This one took me about two years to read.

John Henry says

This book is essential for anyone wishing to learn about the links between mythology, zodiac, precessional cycles, and transmission and creation of knowlegde in pre-industrial and ancicent civilizations. An absolute classic and opus magnus of the archaeo-astrology and mythology genres.

George Mills says

Amazing scholarship combined with exceptional thought and analysis make this an essential work. The book is marred however by the lack of an hypothesis as to the reasons why our ancestors went to so much pain to pass on the knowledge encoded in the myths. It uncovers many mysteries but it does not offer any answers.

Jeremy says

Utterly brilliant, groundbreaking, necessary book, which overturns many flawed and biased assumptions about the "primitive" past. The mere 450 pages are so densely packed that it took me almost three stinkin' weeks to read, but it was worth every frustrating minute.

The fundamental narrative structures of popular stories are clearly derivative and based *not* on a convergence of psychological archetypes but rather on older forms which have been widely diffused throughout seemingly-unrelated ancient cultures. The later accretions and interpolations and subtractions can deform a story almost beyond recognition, yet by tracing subtle influences to earlier versions, one can reconstruct migratory pathways that lead past the traditional classical Greco-Roman derivations, blending the Indo-Europeans with outside traditions hitherto unrecognized by some philologists.

The opening demonstration of this principle shows how the "Hamlet scheme" in which a whirlpool is made by women working a grinding mill - a great wheel in the sky - has been found in various forms through the north and west of Europe, from Iceland down to Rome. Ancient stories in the Nordic *Eddas* continue on back through Ireland, the mainland, and down to the Near East; the tales recorded much later in the *Shahnama* are as ancient as the hymns of the *Rig-Veda*, and the whole mass circles throughout the Shamanism of the steppes and the Indus river valley religions and finally to a nearly global treasury of universal myth.

The heroes proclaim that they rule over recurring sections of the Zodiac - over heaven and time - in an

essentially cosmological conception of the place of humanity, recurring in cycles of myth and ritual, eternal rounds, circles within cycles within wheels of a vast interconnected whole.

The problem is that prehistory is by definition unwritten, and only scraps and fragments of myth have survived from that time. Yet "an enormous intellectual achievement" is *presupposed* in the ancient view of the world, which even the earliest documents introduce *in medias res*. Archaic verbal imagery was in some cases a scientific language, preserved now only in fleeting implication discernible solely through painstaking correlation of hundreds of sources. As Giorgio de Santillana was professor of the history and philosophy of science at MIT, and Hertha von Dechend was professor of science at the University of Frankfurt (and a research associate at MIT), they are uniquely equipped for the task.

For instance, the "four corners" of the "earth" which moderns laughingly assume to be a primitive reference to a flat earth was actually the ideal plane made by the ecliptic spread between the four points of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes and the summer and winter solstices (it wasn't until around 1400 that "earth" was thought to represent the actual planet). The conceptual spinning poles marking the wobble of the axial tilt turned the planet into the middle connecting point of a sort of cosmic hourglass figure. The precession of the equinoxes marked each world-age - Christ opened that of Pisces, Ichthys, the Fish, and is known as the sacrificed lamb of the constellation of the Ram, which follows next.

The book is a rambling treatise on a bewildering bunch of obscure myths and creation stories. I loved the parenthetical story of Il-mater, the daughter of the air, descending to the surface of the waters (much like the Holy Ghost - long understood to be a feminine mother-figure - hovered and brooded over the waters in Genesis), floating above the world until Ukko/Zeus sent his bird to her to create the world out of seven eggs with her.

We range over the Golden Age ending in the Twilight of the Gods; the world wars between Aesir and Vanir; the Celestial Wars of the Indians; the cosmic context of the otherwise-ludicrous Biblical story of Samson. We are treated to discussions on the rivers of forgetfulness, and speculations on how they are related to Native American myths. We wander through Plato's Pythagorean "world above" and the rivers and oceans of space between heaven and earth; the whirlpool with the tree overhanging it common from Greece to Polynesia, with "the way of the dead" being through the Milky Way. Ancient star maps are discussed, showcasing the constellations common from Egypt to China such as the Arrow. The extraction of the navel of the earth in stories from Turkestan to King Arthur and his sword are tied together.

The cosmological conceptions spreading from the Ancient Near East to India in the great Temple-building complexes which grew out into the Indonesian islands culminating in such monuments as Barabudur are shown to have commonalities with a great surplus of art, such as the African calabashes with cosmic scenes inscribed on their surfaces. There is an amazing discussion on all the different types of cosmic trees, such as the Yggdrasil. We search for eternal life with Gilgamesh (and other fire-bringers like Prometheus and Maui) and the goddesses in the great river of the sky and watch Plato's Timaeon Demiurge creating a planetarium of sorts, creating souls in equal number with the stars and distributing them throughout the cosmos where, if they live well, they might one day journey back to their first star.

The Cosmic Tree of the Northwest Africans turning in a spiral marking the rotation of the stars; in the *Kalevala*, Ilmarinen climbs the great Tree to grasp the stars, and Vainamoinen sweeps him away in the whirlwind out to Pohjola. The Sampo - the Sanskrit *skambha*, "pillar, pole" - is part of the mill, with the tree which grows from it being the world axis, leading back to the Indo-European complex and beyond. The Shaman climbing the notches like stairs on his post or tree is mimicking an ascension to Heaven just as did the Mesopotamian Priest on his seven-planetary-spheres-tiered Ziggurat; the Chinese myths are even more

explicitly calendrical and sky-conscious, and the Siberian cosmological drums contain a wealth of performance-based records of stellar events.

What is ultimately shown through the wild untamed mass of material Santillana and von Dechend have collected is how the typical view of cultural history as a steady rise from primitive man to our modern enlightened age is simply not based on evidence. As Marija Gimbutas and Riane Eisler have shown, high cultures existed far earlier than we have been taught to imagine.

One bit of advice: read all the appendices as you go along! (Yes, all 39 of 'em.) Don't save them for later; I found them absolutely vital to understanding the arguments presented. Those of us who are not multilingual would also do well to keep Google Translate open, as there are multiple quotes in different languages which add interesting details.

With a thesis this revolutionary, there are bound to be minor flaws as the details are worked out. The underlying problem with this book (among so many other books) - my major disagreement - is that it attempts to allegorize the myths more than always seems to be necessary; I deeply disagree that a cosmological interpretation *inherently* implies fictitiousness. A more literal *and* a more figurative reading are not mutually exclusive; that is, even if the myths are used to record and *name* astrological principles, the *personages* they take their names from don't always have to be imaginary as well. *Both* stories can often be true. If anything, the causation seems to me more likely to be reversed in this book; that is, the figures *predated* their use as labeling devices for the astronomical concepts. In the ancient cosmology, Nut can be the Mother of the Sky both symbolically when related to the zodiac, and literally as a Queen of Heaven giving birth to the Stars, the souls of humanity.

Then again, I'm just a stodgy euhemerist, so what do I know.

Amanda at Nerdification Reviews says

This text is extremely dense and was definitely not read in one sitting. In fact, it was not even read within one year.

This book is groundbreaking because it was both pioneering in the subject matter, and written by individuals with the necessary credentials to present the subject matter. Traditionally, individuals who are strongly opposed to alternative theories of ANYTHING choose to pick apart the education of anyone who brings forth a new idea. And yet, in this case, both authors are highly educated and had been working with the subject for years. You would think that this fact brought credibility and popularity to the text, but alas, that was not the case.

The theory which it presents is fascinating and the authors leave very few details unstated. Ancient myth has captivated and fascinated many modern men, but attempting to read the stories from within the mindset of ancient man is a different experience entirely.

Think about the effect that the night sky would have had on ancient man.

Is it possible that the heroes of myth represent celestial bodies which hung in the sky above?

Jönathan says

I would give this book six stars if that were possible.

James says

This is a book that reminds me of the mythological discourses by Joseph Campbell. It is an anthropological detective story that traces the origins of myths throughout the world and finds common elements in their origins. One finding is that the geography of myth is not that of the earth but rather is celestial. For anyone who is familiar with Greek mythology this is not a surprise, but we find here again that mythological language transcends cultural and geographic boundaries. The author explores myths unfamiliar and familiar. For example he discusses the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in "The Adventure and the Quest". In it he finds connections with myths from India to Greece and beyond linking the symbols to constellations in the sky. The chapter concludes with a reference to knowledge:

"The notion of fire, in various forms, has been one of the recurring themes of this essay. Gilgamesh, like Prometheus, is intimately associated with it. The principle of fire, and the means of producing or acquiring it are best approached through them." (p 316)

The essence of human knowledge seems bound up in these mythological origins. A difficult read, but worth persevering, *Hamlet's Mill* should be of interest to all who are interested in the origins of man's mind and his images of the world.

Phred Padgett says

This is my favorite book of all time. An essay on worldwide myth and legend. He is an MIT professor; 2/3 of the essay is his, the last 1/3 is the appendix by Hertha von Dechend, Hamburg U. I used two bookmarks and always read her remarks. Simply boggles the mind that ancient stories could be so similar while so geographically distant from one another. The "Mill" of the title represents the earth's wobble, which takes nearly 26,000 years to complete, and the ancients knew this. How could they? The sky tales are similar as well, divided into the 12 segments. From childhood I dismissed the adults speaking of myth and legend with a wink and a nod, as if they were the foolishness of our childish ancestors. I just KNEW there was a basis for all of it!

Christy says

Fascinating, if somewhat dizzyingly presented and unsystematic. The project is to show that mythic ideas about cyclical time, world ages, their characteristics and dominant players, were actually based in close observation of the heavens and the complex apparent movements of planets and constellations, and particularly the precession of the equinoxes. Since the whole universe was thought to be ruled by the same living, volitional forces, it was by no means a simple "primitive" or childlike fantasy that what happened in the sky was related to what happened on earth in describable ways.

The authors' point is not to dismiss the modern scientific method but to say that there is a tendency to look at the history of human knowledge in a reductively linear way, from less to more sophistication and mastery of complexity, and that such a view actually runs counter to the evidence provided even by what little we have of these early cosmologies.

For folklore fans, the stories themselves are from a treasure trove of not-the-usual-suspects sources: Guyana, Peru, India, Persia, Africa, Northwest and Plains Indians, as well as the Norse and Greco-Roman standbys.

David Montaigne says

This is a dense analysis of ancient mythology in which the authors explain that most myth is not about the adventures of historical human characters but of astronomical bodies. There are similar stories and themes in myths around the world, not necessarily because there was an Atlantis providing a cultural heritage for everyone on earth, but because everyone observes the same skies. The sun always appears to make the same annual journey through the background stars, and ancient cultures were also very much aware of precession. This is where it gets the most interesting. It's all well and good to notice Mars takes roughly two years to complete an orbit, and to write stories about a character with warlike attributes who returns after a two year journey, as von Dechend notes in the preface to the book. It's much more impressive to see that many cultures understood the almost 26,000 year cycle of the precession of the earth's axis. Such knowledge tells us civilizations were devoting a minimum of several centuries to careful astronomical observation, because it would take generations to notice a one degree change. It would take thousands of years to notice the vernal equinox sun or winter solstice sun moving through various constellations. Yet many cultures did notice, and when they pass down stories involving zodiac signs we need to decide if they are extremely ancient clues which time the stories to distant epochs. Is a golden calf about the vernal equinox sun in the Age of Taurus? Is the golden fleece about the sun in Aires? Are stories of lions about the age of Leo? If so, then civilization goes back much further than we have been taught to believe.

Themes the authors focus on include the "Mill" of the title, with spinning millstones representing the circular rotation of planetary orbits and our own planet around its axis, generating our view of a spinning sky. As so many ancient cultures have myths about the world tree (used as an axis shaft) being chopped down or having its roots gnawed away at, or the sudden unhinging of the mill peg, and the destruction of the mill, we must wonder why ancient writers did not view the pole of rotation as a permanent fixture. Is it merely because they noticed gradual change, with a series of pole stars over the 25,800 years of precession? Or did they survive more than mere gradual change? Were there sudden pole shifts in which the entire surface of the earth suddenly changed position, with earthquakes and tidal waves and the demise of great civilizations? The authors, early on, mention "catastrophes and the periodic rebuilding of the world." (p. 3) Such events would certainly be the focus of any writing done by survivors in the generations following such an event - and one good way to convey knowledge of such ideas through generations of post-catastrophe dark-ages would be to simplify the scientific and mathematical principles into myth. So we see the same unusual numbers in Egypt, in Norway, in India, in Mexico... and we are taught some science without necessarily realizing what we pass on to the next generation.

"Hamlet's Mill" would have benefitted greatly from better editing. A huge mass of relevant material is presented, but not organized with the flow of a well-honed argument. I think the information presented was ground-breaking, and as an author myself, I found it extremely useful. My own discovery of specific patterns in ancient writing may not have been deciphered had I not read "Hamlet's Mill" and other great books on

mythology and astronomy and ancient history. Readers interested in an analysis of ancient myth may want to read Joseph Campbell's "The Mythic Image" or for an archaeoastronomical deconstruction of myth, perhaps Hancock and Bauval's "Message of the Sphinx" or Hancock's "Fingerprints of the Gods." "Hamlet's Mill" merely hinted that major religions may really be more about astronomical processes than we thought, but for more such astrotheological analysis of the major religions read books by Acharya S like "Suns of God" or "The Christ Conspiracy." Weidner and Bridges' "The Mysteries of the Great Cross of Hendaye," Michell's "The Dimensions of Paradise," the Flem-Aths' "When the Sky Fell," Montaigne's "End Times and 2019" and Hapgood's "Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings" are probably all of great interest to anyone who likes "Hamlet's Mill."

A. J. McMahon says

I should make clear straight away, given the five star rating I have given this book, that Hamlet's Mill is actually not all that well written. Santillana and Dechend write tortuous sentences that are difficult to follow; the material, which is often complex and detailed, is often poorly presented and their points are not always obvious. A page turner it is not. However, their thesis is so radical and their scholarship so thorough, that it has undeniable claims to be one of the Great Books of History. Their thesis is that myths are a form of astronomy in code. Mythological personages represent the planets and the journeys these deities undertake are planetary orbits. Central to the whole vision is Hamlet's Mill itself, which is a coded representation of the polar axis around which the planet rotates. Conventional academia did not respond to this thesis with cries of joy; in fact, conventional academia did not respond to this thesis at all, and it has generally been ignored by the mainstream. It was, however, a major influence on Hancock's Fingerprints of the Gods, where he devotes a whole chapter to this book. (In fact, anyone who finds Hamlet's Mill baffling can turn to Hancock, who does a good job of explaining its key message.) The full importance of this book has yet to be determined.

Anne Hamilton says

Six stars at times. One star at others.

Brilliant but so discursive. Full of shining gems of thought, encrusted with all but impenetrable allusions. Without a knowledge background in half a dozen different mythologies, there are many sections here so difficult to understand. There are paragraphs with references to five different myths (for example, American Indian, Finnish, Hindu, Greek and Egyptian) and, although I have a passing acquaintance with some, I was often lost.

It's like walking in on a conversation where the authors are talking to each other and feel no need to explain each term as it arises. Often they do - but also they often don't. If you are familiar with such words, you probably won't notice these lapses - but I was too often floundering and the context didn't give the meaning away.

That said, there's still heaps of thought-provoking stuff here - and I'll read the book again.

the Skrauss says

It's all connected! In more ways than one. Myth continues to open its vastness to me, yet withholds its secrets. Why are all myths all over the world so similar? Because they contain astronomical and mathematical knowledge and are the vehicles used to transmit this knowledge to the future.

Brilliant thesis. It raises the question, why do we stop looking? Why stop there? Where ever "there" happens to be, it is not the final answer and ceasing investigation stifles human growth. Yet here we are believing that the pyramids are only 4000 years old and that we are the first advanced civilization on earth.

Clay Kallam says

I read this book long ago, and just as with Calazzo's "The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony", it made a lot more sense when I read it the second time. (Thus inspired, I will soon try Robert Graves' "The White Goddess" again.)

There is really no way to summarize this book, as Giorgio de Santillana wants to tease out how preliterate human beings viewed the universe. One of his basic assumptions (which is hard to argue with) is that a human being from 20,000 years ago had the potential to be just as intelligent as a human being today.

Given that premise, de Santillana uses ancient myths to uncover the archaic (for lack of a better word) mode of thought, remembering that the framework for any system was totally different than our literate one. For one thing, "Hamlet's Mill" doesn't claim to reveal a complete or even consistent system -- instead, it gives modern readers a glimpse of something wondrous strange.

"Hamlet's Mill," though, has precious little to do with Hamlet, except that he is related to Amlethus, a mythic figure who owned a powerful mill. That mill's wheel, as it turns out, is the turning of the stars in the sky, and its axle is, more or less, the axis that runs from the North Pole.

de Santillana spends a lot of time linking various myths to show that the idea of the great wheel in the sky as the arbiter, and even instigator, of events on earth was the basis of archaic thought. In fact, he says, one of the major differences between the archaic world view and ours is that the only measure used was that of time, and time was measured only by astronomical occurrences.

With the introduction of literacy and spatial measures, human beings conjoined space with time as the two primary means of dividing and understanding the universe, an undoubtedly richer and more standardized system. But de Santillana's reconstruction (whether wholly accurate or not) of an archaic mode of thought shows us that not only were ancient humans as capable as we are of devising a complex intellectual structure, but that, as the wheel of the stars continues to turn, with zodiacal age replacing zodiacal age, we too will be looked on from some distant future as hopelessly simple and barely worth of attention.

Without mechanics, without a means to measure, without a language capable of grasping and communicating complex ideas, de Santillana claims that Hamlet's Mill was used as an explanatory device in many disparate, and occasionally contradictory ways. In other words, if an event needed explanation, some aspect of the wheel of the stars and its axis was called on: For example, the great flood (most likely the abrupt filling of the Black Sea basin some 8,000 years ago) was caused when a mythic figure pulled the axle of the wheel

from its mooring, allowing the waters to escape.

Now we believe the great flood happened when the barrier between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea abruptly gave way many thousand years ago, but our confidence in the mechanical could turn out, when Hamlet's Mill has turned many more times, to be no more justified than the archaic world's belief that as above, so below.

J says

The inspiration for Fingerprints of the Gods.
Difficult read. I skimmed it while reading F of the G's.
