

Those Infinite, Multiform Stories without Fixity: Myth and History, a Very Long Engagement

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Pričujoče besedilo obravnava problematično razmerje med antičnim zgodovinarstvom in mitologijo oziroma mitološkimi zgodbami kot virom za zgodovinske raziskave. Čeprav se je namreč grško zgodovinarstvo na neki način že v 5. stol. pr. Kr. soočilo s problematiko mitoloških vrivkov v snov metodološko dobro razdelanih zgodovinskih postopkov, je rimsko zgodovinarstvo še dolgo na kritičen način raziskovalo in prečiščevalo zgodbe ustanovnih mitov. Besedilo našteje in v daljših odlomkih obravnava nekatere metodološko pomembne pasuse, ki razodevajo odnos posameznih grških in rimskih zgodovinarstev do mita kot (ne-)vira, obenem pa skozi analitično branje filozofskega traktata Seksta Empirika, filozofa iz 2./3. stol., preizprašuje odnos (zgodnjega) rimskega zgodovinarstva do mitov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: historiografija, zgodovina, mitologija, mit, logografi, mitografi, Herodot, Tukidid, Polibij, analisti

This paper deals with the problematic relationship between ancient historiography and mythology, or mythological stories as historical sources for historical research. Although Greek historiography had, in a sense, already been confronted with the problem of mythological intrusions into the substance of methodologically well-developed historical procedures (as early as the 5th century BC), Roman historiography continued for a long time to critically investigate and purify the stories of the foundation myths. This paper presents a detailed analysis of some methodologically relevant passages that reveal the attitudes of individual Greek and Roman historians towards myth as a (non-)source. At the same time, it questions the attitude of (early) Roman historiography towards myth by examining the philosophical treatise of the 2nd/3rd century philosopher Sextus Empiricus.

KEYWORDS: historiography, history, mythology, myth, logographers, mythographers, Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, annalists

This paper is essentially about three things:¹ the (problematic) relationship between myth and Greek and Roman historiography, the critique of the use of myth by ancient historians,

¹ This paper represents a further development of the line of thought initiated in my paper published three years ago in the book *Worldview in Narrative and Non-narrative Expression* (Pobežin 2021). The hypothesis put forth in that paper was that early Roman historiography was not only genre-bound (Timpe 2001: 17), but also context-bound (Rome as a Mediterranean powerhouse – an emerging empire proper – being the context), and that the historians themselves *could have been* governed by the so-called world–mind conditionals (Piller 2009: 207). The question of *why* myth was not only employed but also meticulously explored has not been addressed in the above text. This question will be revisited here, with the intention of providing context through the use of longer quotations from a variety of authors.

and a tentative formulation of a research question (to which we will unfortunately fail to provide a convincing answer) about why some Roman historians kept employing myth, despite the existence of convincing rationalisations against such literary and methodological practices put forth by Greek writers.²

One of the key arguments presented in this paper challenges the widely held belief that the incorporation of myths into historical narratives by ancient historians indicates traditionalism, a lack of rigour and an inclination towards fictionality. We contend that this perception stems from a modern, rationalist perspective that fails to appreciate the literary conventions and historical context of ancient writings.³ This reliance on mythological sources, as we argue, was both natural and necessary given the *context* in which these narratives took shape, as well as the prevailing literary traditions. Prior to the advent of formal historical writing, the majority of prose and poetic works consisted primarily of myths and mythological narratives.⁴

It should be clear from the outset that the use of two terms employed frequently in this essay – “mythographer” and “logographer” – exploits their etymological capacity for play on words. With regard to the various types of historical work, “mythography” is, strictly speaking, genealogy, which is primarily concerned with establishing lines of descent and does not refrain from investigating the mythical period.⁵ The term “mythographer” is derived from the word “logographer”, which was used polemically by Herodotus and Thucydides in their works. This does not imply that Greek historians did not use the terms *mythographia* or *mythographos*.⁶ We will examine both terms before turning to the main problems related to the phenomenon of *mythistoria*⁷ outlined at the beginning of this section.

INCIPIT PROLOGUS

In his *Institutio oratoria*, Quintilian identifies three types of narrative: *fabula*, *argumentum* and *historia*. While *fabula* was used in tragedy and poetry, and *argumentum* in comedy, *historia* was the form of narrative used for things *that had actually happened*:

Now there are three forms of narrative, without counting the type used in actual legal cases. First there is the fictitious narrative as we get it in tragedies and poems, which isn't merely not true but has little resemblance to truth. Secondly, there is the realistic narrative as presented by comedies,

² Hawes 2014: 6–13.

³ See Darbo-Peschanski 2007: 27–38.

⁴ See Wardman 1960 for further discussion.

⁵ Marincola 2004: 1.

⁶ It is assumed that the majority of the audience reached by this paper will not be fluent in Latin and Greek. For this reason, all quoted passages are given in the English translation. When the context so requires, the original text is given in the footnote or, in the case of shorter sentences and phrases, within the body of the text.

⁷ Wiseman 2010: 73–86.

which, though not true, has yet a certain verisimilitude. Thirdly there is the historical narrative, which is an exposition of actual fact.⁸

The translation provided here is of some significance in relation to the subject matter of this paper.

For the purpose of this treatise, another author will be more thoroughly consulted. In his work “Against the Professors” (*Adversus mathematicos*), Sextus Empiricus (2nd/3rd century AD)⁹ presents an important observation regarding the art of history: “... there is no technical knowledge either of things infinite or of things which vary from hour to hour. But *particular histories* are both infinite, because of their great number, and without fixity, because the same facts are not recorded by all respecting the same person. [...] Thus, of an assumption which begins with a falsehood and is so multiform that it cannot be checked, and changes its shape at each man’s fancy, there can be no technical treatment. Moreover, since of the subjects of history one part is history, another legend, another fiction, – and of these history is the recording of certain things which are true and have happened ...”¹⁰

We may be tempted to interpret both texts with the focus on their two keywords, *veritas/ἀλήθεια*. Yet Sextus Empiricus’ reasoning¹¹ absolves him (and Quintilian) from any possible accusations of naivety.¹² As we shall demonstrate subsequently, Sextus’ argument did not concern the opposition of *truth* and *untruth* or even *fiction* and *non-fiction* (*fabula* – *gestae rei expositio*; πλάσμα – ἀληθῶν τινῶν [...] καὶ γεγονότων ἔκθεσις). Instead, it focused on the *cognitive potential of a narrative*. We shall revisit this observation in our concluding remarks.

⁸ *Inst.* 2,4,2: *et quia narrationum, excepta qua in causis utimur, tres accepimus species, fabulam, quae versatur in tragoediis atque carminibus, non a veritate modo sed etiam a forma veritatis remota; argumentum, quod falsum sed vero simile comoediae fingunt; historiam, in qua est gestae rei expositio.*

⁹ Very little is known about Sextus Empiricus, a Pyrrhonian sceptic who reveals virtually nothing in his (many) works. Nothing of certainty can be asserted about him, not even where he was born. For further details see House 1980.

¹⁰ S.E. *M.* 1,259–263: οὐτε τῶν ἀπείρων οὐτε τῶν ἄλλοτε ἄλλως γινομένων ἔστι τις τεχνικὴ γνώσις, αἱ δὲ γε κατὰ μέρος ἱστορίαι ἄπειροί τε διὰ τὸ πλῆθος εἰσι, καὶ οὐχ ἔστωσαι διὰ τὸ μὴ τὰ αὐτὰ περὶ τοῦ αὐτοῦ παρὰ πᾶσιν ἱστορεῖσθαι. [...] οὐ τοίνυν τῆς οὕτως ἀπὸ ψευδοῦς ὑποθέσεως ἀρχομένης καὶ ἀδιεξιτήτου κατὰ πλῆθος καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐκάστου προαίρεσιν μεταπλαττομένης γένοιτ’ ἂν τις τεχνικὴ θεωρία. Πρὸς τούτοις ἐπεὶ τῶν ἱστορουμένων τὸ μὲν ἔστιν ἱστορία τὸ δὲ μῦθος τὸ δὲ πλάσμα, ὧν ἡ μὲν ἱστορία ἀληθῶν τινῶν ἔστι καὶ γεγονότων ἔκθεσις [...]

¹¹ One might argue that it is inappropriate to mention Quintilian and Sextus Empiricus on the same page, given that their lives may have been separated by a whole century. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that much of Sextus Empiricus’ thought, particularly with regard to the criterion of truth, was derived from the 1st century BC (see Sedley 1992: 24–25).

¹² See Nicole Loraux’s influential paper (Loraux 1982) on the concept of truth as inherently different from the modern categories. This should be taken into account when examining the work of 5th century BC historians such as Herodotus and, in particular Thucydides, as well as that of the 2nd century BC Roman annalists.

MYTH AND (EARLY ROMAN) HISTORY: A VERY LONG ENGAGEMENT

In his 27th book, Livy makes observations about the annalist Lucius Coelius Antipater (acme: 2nd half of the 2nd century BC) and his investigative capabilities:

I should make too long a digression about one solitary fact, if I were to go through all the accounts of the death of Marcellus. I will only cite one authority, Coelius. He gives three different versions of what happened, one handed down by tradition, another copied from the funeral oration delivered by his son who was on the spot, and a third which Coelius gives as the ascertained result of his own researches.¹³

It feels like we should refrain from quoting passages from Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, given that the majority of his first book is replete with mythical accounts, particularly the narrative covering the events preceding Aeneas' arrival in Italy. However, Livy makes it quite clear that he distinguishes between the events preceding the foundation of the city and those of later periods. He regards the former as *poeticae fabulae* rather than *incorrupta rerum gestarum monumenta*. He ensured that when he introduced the more fabulous moments, he made his readers aware of it (*inseritur huic loco fabula*).

We consider Livy here because his work came *after* the rational revision of the Roman historiographical method in the 1st century BC. Prior to this period, we see little restraint in employing myth as a historical source. It was embraced as an integral part of narrative.¹⁴ According to Plutarch, the first known Roman historian Fabius Pictor (ca. 254 – after 200 BC) employed the foundation myth:

But the story which has the widest credence and the greatest number of vouchers was first published among the Greeks, in its principal details, by Diodes of Peparethus, and Fabius Pictor follows him in most points. Here again there are variations in the story, but its general outline is as follows.¹⁵

According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, other early Roman historians followed Pictor's suit. Lucius Cincius Alimentus, Calpurnius Piso and even Porcius Cato readily incorporated mythological material in their oeuvres. Another interesting passage follows in Dionysius:

¹³ Liv. 27,27,12: *multos circa unam rem ambitus fecerim si quae de Marcelli morte uariant auctores, omnia exsequi uelim. ut omittam alios, Coelius triplicem gestae rei ordinem edit, unam traditam fama, alteram scriptam in laudatione filii, qui rei gestae interfuerit, tertiam quam ipse pro inquisita ac sibi comperta affert.*

¹⁴ Our biggest problem here is the lack of textual evidence; almost all of it is secondary, having been preserved by later writers for various reasons (cf. Poucet 1976, Verbrugghe 1981).

¹⁵ Plut. *Rom.* 3: τοῦ δὲ πίστιν ἔχοντος λόγου μάλιστα καὶ πλείστους μάρτυρας τὰ μὲν κυριώτατα πρῶτος εἰς τοὺς Ἕλληνας ἐξέδωκε Διοκλῆς Πεπαρήθιος, ὃ καὶ Φάβιος ὁ Πίκτηρ ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις ἐπηκολούθηκε. γεγόνασι δὲ καὶ περὶ τούτων ἕτεροι διαφοραὶ· τύπων δ' εἰπεῖν τοιοῦτός ἐστι.

But concerning the babes born of Ilia, Quintus Fabius, called Pictor, whom Lucius Cincius, Porcius Cato, Calpurnius Piso and most of the other historians have followed, writes thus: By the order of Amulius some of his servants took the babes in an ark and carried them to the river, distant about a hundred and twenty stades from the city, with the intention of throwing them into it.¹⁶

Before we move on, we should make it clear that we are confronted with a challenging question regarding the literary strategies of the early Roman historians. It is not possible to ascertain the *exact* attitude of the early Roman historiographers – the annalists – towards myth. It is plausible that they were as critical of the historicisation of myth as some later authors (whose works we *do* have at our disposal) and their Greek predecessors and contemporaries discussed below.¹⁷ There are many explanations for why myths were not scrutinised as critically in early Roman historiography as they were by Greek writers. However, it would be an oversimplification to say that while Greek historians from the tradition of Thucydides to Polybius regarded anything that could not be verified first-hand as implausible, early Roman historiography emerged from a tradition of collective storytelling rather than individual criticism. In any case, it is prudent to leave the question open to the argument of tradition, as this is a relatively safe approach. The issue is directly related to the question of how early Roman historians perceived themselves,¹⁸ and to the educated guess about the extent to which they were familiar with the methodological advances of their Greek predecessors and counterparts.¹⁹ It is possible that their literary strategies had a lot to do with reassuring the political identities of the elites and the state.²⁰ However, it is also true that they operated within a cultural context that was largely unchanging and which they were unable to break away from.²¹

¹⁶ Dion. Hal. 1,79,4: περὶ δὲ τῶν ἐκ τῆς Ἰλίας γενομένων Κόιντος μὲν Φάβιος ὁ Πίκτωρ λεγόμενος, ὃ Λεύκιός τε Κίγκιος καὶ Κάτων Πόρκιος καὶ Πείσων Καλπούρνιος καὶ τῶν ἄλλων συγγραφέων οἱ πλείους ἠκολούθησαν, γέγραφε· ὡς κελεύσαντος Ἀμολίου τὰ βρέφη λαβόντες ἐν σκάφῃ κείμενα τῶν ὑπηρετῶν τινες ἔφερον ἐμβαλοῦντες εἰς τὸν ποταμὸν ἀπέχοντα τῆς πόλεως ἀμφοῖ τούς ἑκατὸν εἴκοσι σταδίους.

¹⁷ They certainly subjected them to critical scrutiny. According to Diodorus of Sicily, who characterizes this story as a *fabulistic* narrative, Pictor offers an alternative mythological story of Aeneas: “As for this story, [Quintus] Fabius [Pictor] who wrote the history of Rome offers another version, maintaining that Aeneas became an oracle and was led by a quadruped beast to establishing the city. When he was about to sacrifice a pregnant white pig, the beast ran away and took refuge under a hill where it bore thirty piglets [...]” (Diod. 7,5: Περὶ δὲ τῆς προσηγορίας ταύτης Φάβιος, ὁ τὰς Ῥωμαίων πράξεις ἀναγράφας, ἄλλως μεμυθολόγηκε· φησὶ γάρ Αἰνεΐα γενέσθαι λόγιον, τετράπουν αὐτῷ καθηγῆσεσθαι πρὸς κτίσιν πόλεως· μέλλοντος δ’ αὐτῷ θύειν ἕν ἔγκυον τῷ χρώματι λευκῆν, ἐκφυγεῖν ἐκ τῶν χειρῶν, καὶ διαχθῆναι πρὸς τινα λόφον, πρὸς ᾧ κομισθεῖσαν τεκεῖν τριάκοντα χοίρους.)

¹⁸ It may be that these historians, generally members of the governing elite, were in search of literary confirmation of their political role (cf. Timpe 2002: 18). However, we are arguing here that early Roman historiography was not only genre-bound. Also, as we are arguing that the “empire” in which the early Roman historians operated became culturally diverse by the end of the 2nd century BC, we shall try to point out that this new circumstance called for universalist literary strategies (Wiseman 2010).

¹⁹ Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BC) likely drew inspiration from Thucydides, whose works may have reached Rome shortly after the Third Macedonian War (Canfora 2006: 721–723; see also Wiseman 2007). If we accept that Rome and early Greek poetry were not isolated from each other, as Wiseman (2007: 68) suggests, then it is likely that early Roman and Greek historiography also had a close relationship.

²⁰ Timpe 2001: 18.

²¹ Spiegel 2009: 4.

“ONE CAN NO LONGER EMPLOY THE EVIDENCE
OF POETS AND FABULISTS”

In essence, the Greeks believed that myth could not have sprung *ex nihilo*; not all “myth” was considered to be *fabula*.²² They also believed that the gods took interest in human affairs²³ and even the most prominent champions of reason were *seen to be* no exception (Xen. *Mem.* 1,2). In Socrates’ reassuring arguments that the Athenians had every reason to be proud of their grand past, he invoked the example of Theseus (Xen. *Mem.* 3,5,10), juxtaposing the mythical and the rational. It was theatrical. However, this particular effect is also indicative of the fact that political (and cultural) identities relied on myths,²⁴ which goes beyond the Roman world.

In historiography,²⁵ Herodotus’ euhemeristic introduction to his *Histories* functions, perhaps not intentionally, as a rationalistic attempt at demystifying myth with regards to the “truth”, although the dismissal of mythological explanations for the animosities between the Greek and Persian worlds, which eventually culminated in the Persian wars, is not exactly convincing:

These are the stories of the Persians and the Phoenicians. For my part, I shall not say that this or that story is true, but I shall identify the one who I myself know did the Greeks unjust deeds, and thus proceed with my history, and speak of small and great cities of men alike.²⁶

As one of the most defining myths of the Greek world was too far in the past to be investigated using a historical method, Herodotus preferred to begin his narrative from an empirically palpable vantage point. However, the *rationale* seems to be diluted by mythological substance.²⁷ Subsequently, Greek historiography gradually steered away from involving myth in historical texts. As we shall see further on, there were consistent attempts at rationalization.²⁸

²² Marincola 2004: 118–119.

²³ However, we must not lose sight of the (numerous) Greek thinkers whose line of thought was borderline atheism. See Whitmarsh 2017.

²⁴ Walbank 2002: 179; Saïd 2007: 80.

²⁵ Finley 1959: 3–4. For the purpose of this textual illustration of the subject matter, we shall limit ourselves to a handful of Greek historiographers, although there is also evidence of critique among Roman writers, particularly Plutarch, Seneca, Quintilian, Lucian etc. (for further reading, see Finley 1965, Bosworth 2003, Marincola 2004: 118–127).

²⁶ Her. 1,5: ταῦτα μὲν νῦν Πέρσαι τε καὶ Φοίνικες λέγουσι· ἐγὼ δὲ περὶ μὲν τούτων οὐκ ἔρχομαι ἐρέων ὡς οὕτω ἢ ἄλλως κῶς ταῦτα ἐγένετο, τὸν δὲ οἶδα αὐτὸς πρῶτον ὑπάρξαντα ἀδίκων ἔργων ἐς τοὺς Ἕλληνας, τοῦτον σημήνας προβήσομαι ἐς τὸ πρόσω τοῦ λόγου, ὁμοίως σμικρὰ καὶ μεγάλα ἄστυα ἀνθρώπων ἐπεξιών.

²⁷ Herodotus’ scepticism seems feeble, but recent scholarship has demonstrated that previous criticism of Herodotus was not always well placed (Jouanno 2018: 10–15; see also Baragwanath and de Bakker 2012: 1–10 for the history of scholarship on Herodotus and particularly on the “Herodotean paradox”).

²⁸ Hawes 2014: 6–13.

In this respect, Thucydides' short story about the *tyrannicides* (Thuc. 1,20) performs a two-fold function. It tames the mythological matter in the *ἀρχαιολογία* (*archaiologia*),²⁹ but also distances the narrative from the realm of everything that was out of reach of serious historical research:

All men show the same *uncritical acceptance of the oral traditions* handed on to them, even about the history of their own country. [...] Anyone accepting the broad *facts* of my account on the arguments I have adduced will not go wrong. He will put less faith in the *glorified tales* of the poets and the compilations of the *prose chroniclers*, whose stories are written more to please the ear than to *serve the truth*, are incapable of *proof*, and for the most part, given the lapse of time, have passed into the *unreliable realms of romance*. He will conclude that my research, using the *clearest evidence* available, provides a sufficiently accurate account [...]³⁰

What are Herodotus and Thucydides concerned with? Hecataeus, Herodotus' predecessor, wrote that he has “written things as they seemed true (*alethes*) to him”, thus opening the gate for all the writers to inherit the genre. However, it was Thucydides who perfected this *techne*. Herodotus himself applied the term *logopoiioi* to his predecessors, including Hecataeus, but seemingly without any prejudice. Meanwhile, Thucydides had already applied the term *logographers* in a somewhat derisive manner:

On the whole, however, the conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, safely be relied on. Assuredly they will not be disturbed either by the lays of a poet displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the **chroniclers** that are attractive at truth's expense; the subjects they treat of being out of the reach of evidence, and time having robbed most of them of historical value by enthroning them in the region of legend. Turning from these, we can rest satisfied with having proceeded upon the clearest data, and having arrived at conclusions as exact as can be expected in matters of such antiquity.³¹

²⁹ Marincola 2004: 119.

³⁰ Thuc 1,20–21: οἱ γὰρ ἄνθρωποι τὰς ἀκοὰς τῶν προγεγενημένων, καὶ ἦν ἐπιχώρια σφίσιν ἢ, ὁμοίως ἀβασανίστως παρ' ἀλλήλων δέχονται. [...] ἐκ δὲ τῶν εἰρημένων τεκμηρίων ὅμως τοιαῦτα ἂν τις νομίζων μάλιστα ἃ διήλθον οὐχ ἀμαρτάνοι, καὶ οὔτε ὡς ποιηταὶ ὑμνήκασι περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὸ μείζον κοσμοῦντες μᾶλλον πιστεύων, οὔτε ὡς λογογράφοι ξυνέθεσαν ἐπὶ τὸ προσαγωγότερον τῆ ἀκροάσει ἢ ἀληθέστερον, ὄντα ἀνεξέλεγκτα καὶ τὰ πολλὰ ὑπὸ χρόνου αὐτῶν ἀπίστως ἐπὶ τὸ μυθῶδες ἐκνευικηκότα, ἠρῆσθαι δὲ ἠγησάμενος ἐκ τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων σημείων ὡς παλαιὰ εἶναι ἀποχρόντως. Translations of quotes from Thucydides': Thucydides, Hammond, Rhodes 2009 (bold text mine).

³¹ Thuc 1,21: ἐκ δὲ τῶν εἰρημένων τεκμηρίων ὅμως τοιαῦτα ἂν τις νομίζων μάλιστα ἃ διήλθον οὐχ ἀμαρτάνοι, καὶ οὔτε ὡς ποιηταὶ ὑμνήκασι περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὸ μείζον κοσμοῦντες μᾶλλον πιστεύων, οὔτε ὡς λογογράφοι ξυνέθεσαν ἐπὶ τὸ προσαγωγότερον τῆ ἀκροάσει ἢ ἀληθέστερον, ὄντα ἀνεξέλεγκτα καὶ τὰ πολλὰ ὑπὸ χρόνου αὐτῶν ἀπίστως ἐπὶ τὸ μυθῶδες ἐκνευικηκότα, ἠρῆσθαι δὲ ἠγησάμενος ἐκ τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων σημείων ὡς παλαιὰ εἶναι ἀποχρόντως.

Thucydides' use of the term *logographers* calls for reflection. In Hobbes' version,³² this term is translated as “prose writers”. In Jowett's translation³³ the term “chronicler” is used, and the same is found in Crawley's version.³⁴ It is not our intention to assess the suitability of these translations. However, it is possible to suggest that they have overlooked a significant aspect of the term and that they have written their accounts in a manner that is lacking in certain respects. This could be described as either “at truth's expense” or perhaps without a comprehensive narrative framework. *Inseritur huic loco praemonitio*: according to extant sources, the “logographers” composed various texts, including the *logoi*, of which too little is known. However, there is nothing to say they completely lacked sound historical material, as both Herodotus and Thucydides relied on these same sources.

Polybius uses the term μυθογράφος (*mythographos*) on several occasions, perhaps most eminently when he makes a statement that in the “present day in which every sea and land has been thrown open to travellers [...] one can no longer employ the evidence of poets and fabulists (ποιηταῖς καὶ μυθογράφοις χρῆσθαι)”.³⁵ In the latter instance, the use of the term is clearly pejorative. According to Polybius, a *mythographer* is a fabulist who presents “tainted witnesses to disputed facts” (ἀπίστους ἀμφισβητούμενων παρεχόμενοι βεβαιωτάς).³⁶ Strabo clearly associates the term “mythography” (μυθογραφία) with epic poetry but also mentions attempts at hypercriticism towards mythography (3,4,4):

So no one could be surprised if [...] some men, having believed in these stories [about Odysseus] themselves and also in the wide learning of the poet, have actually turned the poetry of Homer to their use as a basis of scientific investigations, as has been done by Crates of Mallos and certain others as well. Other men, however, have greeted all attempts of that sort with such ferocity that they not only have cast out the poet, as though he were a mere ditch-digger or harvest-labourer, from the whole field of scientific knowledge [...]³⁷

³² *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury. Thucydides*. Translated by Thomas Hobbes. London: Bohn, 1843.

³³ *Thucydides translated into English; with introduction, marginal analysis, notes and indices. Volume 1. Thucydides*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881.

³⁴ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Richard Crawley. London: Everyman, 1998.

³⁵ Pol. 4,40,2: τοῦτο γὰρ ἴδιόν ἐστι τῶν νῦν καιρῶν, ἐν οἷς πάντων πλωτῶν καὶ πορευτῶν γεγονότων οὐκ ἂν ἔτι πρέπον εἴη ποιηταῖς καὶ μυθογράφοις χρῆσθαι μάρτυσι περὶ τῶν ἀγνωστούμενων [...]

³⁶ In defence of these fabulists, if such a thing is called for, it is necessary to acknowledge that the canonized historians often explored and wrote about the contemporary events, some of which they may have even experienced first-hand (e.g. Thucydides and Xenophon).

³⁷ Strabo 3,4,4: οὐ δὴ θαυμάζοι τις ἂν [...] οὐτ' εἴ τις αὐταῖς τε ταύταις ταῖς ἱστορίαις πιστεύσαντες καὶ τῇ πολυμαθείᾳ τοῦ ποιητοῦ καὶ πρὸς ἐπιστημονικὰς ὑποθέσεις ἔτρεψαν τὴν Ὀμήρου ποίησιν, καθάπερ Κράτης τε ὁ Μαλλώτης ἐποίησε καὶ ἄλλοι τινές. οἱ δ' οὕτως ἀγροίκως ἐδέξαντο τὴν ἐπιχείρησιν τὴν τοιαύτην ὥστε οὐ μόνον τὸν ποιητὴν σκαπανέως ἢ θεριστοῦ δίκην ἐκ πάσης τῆς τοιαύτης ἐπιστήμης ἐξέβαλον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς ἀναμεινόμενους τῆς τοιαύτης πραγματείας μαινομένους ὑπέλαβον· συνηγορίαν δὲ ἢ ἐπανόρθωσιν ἢ τι τοιοῦτον ἕτερον εἰς τὰ λεχθέντα ὑπ' ἐκείνων εἰσενεγκεῖν οὐκ ἐθάρρησεν οὔτε τῶν γραμματικῶν οὔτε τῶν περὶ τὰ μαθήματα δεινῶν οὐδέεις. καίτοι ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ δυνατόν εἶναι καὶ συνηγορῆσαι πολλοῖς τῶν λεχθέντων καὶ εἰς

In the first chapter of his *Theseus*, Plutarch elaborates on the concept of *mythography*: “Now that I have traversed those periods of time which are accessible to probable reasoning and which afford basis for a history dealing with facts, I might well say of the earlier periods ‘What lies beyond is full of marvels and unreality, a land of poets and fabulists, of doubt and obscurity.’”³⁸ Like Polybius and Strabo, Plutarch clearly associates the term *mythography* with *poets* and *fabulists* (and, indeed, with the remote past beyond the scope of rationalist analysis). Mythography qualifies as a fabulist narrative with little or no evidentiary value, which deals with earlier periods that lie beyond the point in time which is accessible to historical reasoning and verification.

It is important to note, however, that while it may be tempting to view myths as purely fictional or even frivolous, even the most respected historians, such as Thucydides and Polybius recognized that there was a kernel of truth to be found within these stories, often hidden beneath layers of poetic language.³⁹ In any case, myths may serve as markers in historiographic narrative, indicating the lost “true account” of whatever was supposed to be in their place.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in the Roman and Greek worlds, the past (even the distant past that had been relegated to the realm of legend and mythology⁴¹) was deeply ingrained in every aspect of public and private life.

BUT THERE IS ANOTHER STORY, A MORE FABULOUS ONE ...

According to Strabo, Lucius Coelius Antipater (acme in the 2nd half of the 2nd century) related a story about Evander from Arcadia as the founder of Rome:

When Heracles was driving the cattle of Geryon he was entertained by Evander; and since Evander had learned from his mother Nicostrate (she was skilled in the art of divination, the story goes) that Heracles was destined to become a god after he had finished his labours, he not only told this to Heracles but also consecrated to him a precinct and offered a sacrifice to him after the Greek ritual, which is still to this day kept up in honour of Heracles. And Coelius himself, the Roman historian, puts this down as proof that Rome was founded by Greeks – the fact that at Rome the hereditary sacrifice to Heracles is after the Greek ritual.⁴²

ἐπανόρθωσιν ἄγειν καὶ μάλιστα ταῦτα ὅσα Πυθίας παρεκρούσατο τοὺς πιστεύσαντας αὐτῷ κατὰ ἄγνοιαν τῶν τε ἐσπερίων τόπων καὶ τῶν προσβόρων τῶν παρὰ τὸν ὠκεανόν. ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ἐάσθω λόγον ἔχοντα ἴδιον καὶ μακρόν.

³⁸ Thes 1: οὕτως ἐμοὶ περὶ τὴν τῶν βίων τῶν παραλλήλων γραφὴν, τὸν ἐφικτὸν εἰκότι λόγῳ καὶ βάσιμον ἱστορίᾳ πραγμάτων ἐχομένη χρόνον διελθόντι, περὶ τῶν ἀνωτέρω καλῶς εἶχεν εἰπεῖν: ‘τὰ δ’ ἐπέκεινα τερατώδη καὶ τραγικὰ ποιηταὶ καὶ μυθογράφοι νέμονται, καὶ οὐκέτ’ ἔχει πίστιν οὐδὲ σαφήνειαν.’

³⁹ Jouanno 2018: 17.

⁴⁰ Frazer 1990: 5–6.

⁴¹ Calame 2003: 9.

⁴² Stra. 5,3,3: αὐτὴ μὲν οὖν ἡ μάλιστα πιστευομένη τῆς Ῥώμης κτίσις ἐστίν. ἄλλη δὲ τις προτέρα καὶ μυθώδης Ἀρκαδικὴν λέγουσα γενέσθαι τὴν ἀποικίαν ὑπ’ Εὐάνδρου. τούτῳ δ’ ἐπιξενωθῆναι τὸν Ἡρακλέα ἐλαύνοντα τὰς

Strabo is quite clear on this point: the story offered by Antipater is μυθώδης (*mythodes*) – *fabulous*, although Antipater enjoyed a good reputation.⁴³

Antipater’s contemporary Cnaeus Gellius engaged with the same mythological cycle:

After punishing Cacus, Hercules dedicated the altar to *Pater Inventor*, which he had vowed if he found his lost cows. This Cacus lived in the place called *Salinae*, where the *porta Trigemina* now is. Cacus, as Gellius related, was imprisoned by the Etruscan Tarchon, to whom he had been sent as an ambassador by King Marsyas, accompanied by Megales the Phrygian. Cacus escaped from his chains and, having returned to the place from which he started, seized a kingdom in the area of the river Vulturnus and Campania with forces of some size. While he was daring to lay his hands in addition on the lands which had passed into the control of the Arcadians, he was overwhelmed under the leadership of Hercules, who happened to be present at the time. The Sabines took in Megales, after learning the methods of augury from him.⁴⁴

Both accounts, which we examine here as the alternative *ktisis* story, can be read in parallel to provide a more comprehensive account of Cacus, Hercules and Evander. This account was later picked up by several other authors.⁴⁵ The discrepancies could suggest that Antipater and Gellius (much like other early Roman historians) engaged in a critical⁴⁶ and careful⁴⁷ evaluation of the mythical material. The question remains as to

Γηρυνόου βοῦς: πυθόμενον δὲ τῆς μητρὸς Νικοστράτης τὸν Εὐάνδρον (εἶναι δ’ αὐτὴν μαντικῆς ἔμπειρον, ὅτι τῷ Ἡρακλεῖ πεπρωμένον ἦν τελέσαντι τοὺς ἄθλους θεῶ γενέσθαι, φράσαι τε πρὸς τὸν Ἡρακλέα ταῦτα καὶ τέμενος ἀναδείξαι καὶ θῦσαι θυσίαν Ἑλληνικὴν, ἣν καὶ νῦν ἔτι φυλάττεσθαι τῷ Ἡρακλεῖ. καὶ ὁ γε Κοῦλιος, ὁ τῶν Ῥωμαίων συγγραφεὺς, τοῦτο τίθεται σημεῖον τοῦ Ἑλληνικὸν εἶναι κτίσμα τὴν Ῥώμην, τὸ παρ’ αὐτῆ τὴν πάτριον θυσίαν Ἑλληνικὴν εἶναι τῷ Ἡρακλεῖ.

⁴³ For Valerius Maximus, Antipater was a *certus Romanae historiae auctor* (Val. Max. 1,7,6); according to Priscianus, Antipater only used trustworthy sources (Prisc. 8,383: *ex scriptis eorum qui veri arbitrabantur*).

⁴⁴ Cornell 2013: F17 (= Peter F7, Chassignet F6). Solin. 1.7–9: *quippe aram Hercules, quam uouerat si amissas boues repperisset, punito Caco Patri Inuentori dicauit. (8) qui Cacus habitauit locum, cui Salinae nomen est, ubi Trigemina nunc porta. hic, ut Gellius tradidit, cum a Tarchone Tyrrheno, ad quem legatus uenerat missu Marsyae regis, socio Megale Phryge, custodiae foret datus, frustratus uincula et unde uenerat redux, praesidiis amplioribus occupato circa Vulturnum et Campaniam regno, dum adirectare etiam ea audet quae concesserant in Arcadium iura, duce Hercule, qui tunc forte aderat, oppressus est. (9) Megalen Sabini receperunt, disciplinam augurandi ab eo docti.*

⁴⁵ According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1,39), Cacus (Κάκος) steals Hercules’ cattle while the hero is asleep, dragging them backwards by their tails. When Hercules wakes up and realizes that his cattle are missing, he confronts Cacus in front of his cave. The latter refuses to allow Hercules to search the area and instead calls upon his neighbours to help. However, when the cattle start mooing, Hercules kills Cacus and then builds an altar to *Zeus Heueresios* (Ζεὺς Εὐρέσιος) – *Father Inventor* –, and is finally led by the locals to Evander (Εὐάνδρος), the king of the region. See March 2009: 204–205 for a more detailed recap of the story. See Secci 2013 for versions in Livy, Ovid and Propertius (p. 196, footnote 3) and particularly Virgil.

⁴⁶ Plut. *Rom.* 3 τοῦ δὲ πίστιν ἔχοντος λόγου μάλιστα καὶ πλείστους μάρτυρας τὰ μὲν κυριώτατα πρώτος εἰς τοὺς Ἕλληνας ἐξέδοκε Διοκλῆς Πεπαρήτιος, ὃ καὶ Φάβιος ὁ Πικτωρ ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις ἐπηκολούθηκε.

⁴⁷ Dionysius says of Aelius Tubero, for instance, that he was “careful in the compilation of his history”: ὡς δὲ Τουβέρων Αἴλιος δεινὸς ἀνὴρ καὶ περὶ τὴν συναγωγὴν τῆς ἱστορίας ἐπιμελῆς γράφει (DH 1,80,1). Incidentally, Tubero was appreciated by Cicero who deemed him worthy of imitation (Cic. *Q. Fr.* 1,1,3: *Tubero, quem*

why they chose to include them in their historical accounts in the first place, given the methodological criticisms expressed by their Greek counterparts.

If, as previously stated, it would be prudent to consider this literary strategy as a mere matter of tradition, there is another safe approach that we will not pursue here, namely the question of truth (*veritas/ἀλήθεια*).⁴⁸ This approach unnecessarily leads us astray and down the path of morality⁴⁹ and neglects the specific aspect of historiography-as-literature where plausibility/credibility played a central role.⁵⁰

Before we propose a different perspective on this matter, let us revisit Sextus Empiricus' critical view of mythological stories (as part of history). The core of his criticism, relevant to our subject, hinges on the observation that *there is no technical knowledge either of things infinite or of things which vary from hour to hour* (οὔτε τῶν ἀπείρων οὔτε τῶν ἄλλοτε ἄλλως γινομένων ἔστι τις **τεχνικὴ γνῶσις**).⁵¹ The cornerstone of his scepticism resides on the criterion of scientific method – *τέχνη (téchne)*. We need to look more closely at the continuation of the passage that was quoted at the beginning of this article. It must therefore be quoted *in extenso*:

Moreover, since of the subjects of history one part is history, another legend, another fiction – and of these *history is the recording of certain things which are true and have happened* [...] and *fiction is the narrating of things which are not real events but are similar to real events* [...] and *legend is the narrating of events which have never happened and are false* [...] – since there exists no art which deals with things false and unreal, and the legends and fictions, which form the main subjects of the historical part with which grammar is concerned, are false and unreal, it will follow that there exists no art which deals with the historical part of grammar. [...] For, firstly, *the Grammarians have not furnished us with a criterion of true*

ego arbitror, praesertim cum scribat historiam, multos ex suis annalibus posse deligere, quos velit et possit imitari.) The question of which historian Aelius Tubero is meant by Dionysius and/or Cicero remains open to debate (Richardson 2011: 157; see also Weaire 2005: 248); see also Cornell 2017.

⁴⁸ The attempts by modern scholars to separate historical fact from literary embellishment in the works of Greek and Roman historians have been aptly described by T. P. Wiseman (Wiseman 1979: 39) as an exercise in futility. It was observed that the quest for absolute historical veracity is ultimately futile (Cawkwell 1997: 9), for the very nature of these ancient works defies such simplistic categorisation.

⁴⁹ Potter 1999: 15–16. The act of swearing an oath to the truth places a significant burden on historians to ensure the accuracy of their narratives. In any case, even if a historian were inclined to fabricate or exaggerate, they would have had to apply layers of what might be called a “veneer of credibility” in order to gain the trust and acceptance of their audience (Farrington 2015: 49).

⁵⁰ Nicolai 2007: 15–17. It also shifts our focus – perhaps too radically – on the question of how much “historical truth” remains when a narrative text is stripped of its literary merit. See White 1986: 121 for the argument about histories as “fictions of factual representation” (cf. also Spiegel 2009). Some, e.g. Woodman (1998: 18), believe that once the “rhetorical kitsch” is removed from historical narratives, there is very little historical value left. For further details on the debate about the factuality of Greek and Roman historiography, cf. Moles 1993: 114–121 and Bosworth 2009 on the use of sources by ancient historians. See also Potter 1999: 138 for arguments against Woodman’s criticism of the “truthfulness” of ancient historical texts. However, this approach overlooks the paradigmatic nature of ancient history (Nicolai 2007: 16).

⁵¹ S.E. M. 1,259.

history, so that we might determine when it is true and when false. In the next place, as the Grammarians have no history that is true, the criterion of truth is also non-existent [...] For we must establish first which of these dissentient narrators is telling the truth, and then inquire as to the facts [...]⁵²

Notwithstanding the erroneous assumption that “grammarians do not instruct us as to how history should rightly be written”,⁵³ the quote is surprisingly modern, particularly in postulating the criterion of *veritable history*. Sextus acknowledges the existence of legends and fictions within historical narrative, yet he appears to suggest that it is difficult to devise a method that would distinguish “recordings of certain things that have happened” from fiction. As he observes, *particular histories are infinite [...] and without fixity* (αἰ δέ γε κατὰ μέρος ιστορίαί ἄπειροί [...] καὶ οὐχ ἔστῶσαι).⁵⁴ The multiplicity of accounts pertaining to a single individual or event precludes the possibility of conducting a methodologically sound study (τεχνικὴ θεωρία) of these narratives, as they are innumerable in number (ἀδιεξίτητοι κατὰ πληθός) and subject to arbitrary modification (πρὸς τὴν ἐκάστου προαίρεσιν μεταπλαττομένοι).⁵⁵

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION – EPILOGUS

Sextus’ arguments may appear devastating at first glance, but they may offer a form of redemption for Roman historiographers through the concept of equipollence. If there is no definitive criterion of truth, then multiple accounts may be considered equally credible, leading to a suspension of belief.⁵⁶ In our case, this suspension would apply to distinguishing between true and untrue accounts. In this respect, it can be *observed* that myths are explored and exploited in historiography (to the detriment of the historical works) not because they are *untrue* per se, but because there may be no methodologically certain way of determining *how true or false* they are. Does this exonerate historians from the

⁵² S.E. M. 1,263–268: Πρὸς τούτοις ἐπεὶ τῶν ιστορουμένων τὸ μὲν ἐστὶν ἱστορία τὸ δὲ μῦθος τὸ δὲ πλάσμα, ὧν ἡ μὲν ἱστορία ἀληθῶν τινῶν ἐστὶ καὶ γεγονότων ἔκθεσις [...] πλάσμα δὲ πραγμάτων μὴ γενομένων μὲν ὁμοίως δὲ τοῖς γενομένοις λεγομένων [...] μῦθος δὲ πραγμάτων ἀγενήτων καὶ ψευδῶν ἔκθεσις [...], ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἔστι τέχνη τις περὶ τὰ ψευδῆ καὶ ἀνύπαρκτα, ψευδῆ δὲ ἐστὶ καὶ ἀνύπαρκτα τὰ περὶ τοὺς μύθους καὶ τὰ πλάσματα, περὶ ἃ μάλιστα τοῦ ἱστορικοῦ μέρους ἡ γραμματικὴ καταγίνεται, οὐκ ἂν εἴη τις τέχνη περὶ τὸ ἱστορικὸν μέρος τῆς γραμματικῆς. [...] πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ οὐ παραδεδώκασιν “ἡμῖν οἱ γραμματικοὶ τῆς ἀληθοῦς ἱστορίας κριτήριον, ἵνα καὶ ἐξετάζωμεν πότε ἀληθὴς ἐστὶν αὐτὴ καὶ πότε ψευδής. εἴτα καὶ μηδεμίᾳ οὐσίᾳ “ἀληθοῦς ὁ ἱστορίας παρὰ τοῖς γραμματικοῖς οὐδὲ τὸ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς κριτήριον ὑποστατόν ἐστιν [...] πρότερον γὰρ δεῖ ὑποστῆναι ἐν τοῖς διαφωνοῦσι τὸν ἀληθεύοντα, καὶ τότε ζητεῖν τί ἐστίν·

⁵³ At least one critical and methodological treatise is known from this period, e.g. Lucian’s (ca. 125 – after 180) *Quomodo historia conscribenda sit* (Πῶς δεῖ ἱστορίαν συγγράφειν). Sextus Empiricus’ claim raises some interesting questions: either he did not know about Lucian’s work, or it came too late, in which case this could be an argument towards a narrower dating of his life. However, since quite a number of historians (some of whom are listed in this paper) wrote on *how to write history* – albeit less explicitly than Lucian – we can, perhaps, dismiss Sextus’ claim as a rhetorical rant.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 1,260.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 1,263.

⁵⁶ See Svavarsson 2011: 29.

burden of seeking “the truth”, as if to say that: “since it is impossible to ascertain whether a given assertion is true or untrue, and as it may be both, it is meaningless to pursue the matter and be content with it”⁵⁷ Certainly not. But it does present an argument in favour of shifting the focus from the truth to the *credibility* (appearance) of the mythological stories employed by historians. Taken at face value, these stories were both true *and* untrue. In the case of a historian such as any one of the early annalists – or even Livy – who engaged in an honest re-examination of stories, such as that of Hercules and Cacus, the issue lies elsewhere: cultural context.

By the early 3rd century BC, Rome had already absorbed most of Italy. Consequently, the known annalists were already operating in a multicultural empire which, it could be argued, imposed itself on them as much as they imposed their political views on it.⁵⁸ The story of Hercules and Cacus, in which the Arcadian prince Evander plays a key role as the founder of the first city on the Palatine hill, transcends the exclusive Roman cultural sphere (polis). It melds elements of two originally Greek myths (Hercules, Evander) to create an alternative *ktisis* story closely associated with the local Hercules cult celebrated at the *Ara maxima Herculis invicti*, situated near the so-called Forum Boarium. Furthermore, Evander also leaves his trace in the Aeneas story, in which he establishes a link between the Romanized Hercules cult and the mainstream foundation myth. In examining this story, Antipater and Gellius “internationalized” the Roman origin narrative, extending the “date” of the empire’s creation by at least one generation.⁵⁹

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⁵⁷ Cf. Massie 2013: 226–227; Machuca 2021: 328. See also Byrd 2023.

⁵⁸ See Pobežin 2021: 100–102 for a more elaborate argument about the annalists and the world-mind conditionals (Piller 2009).

⁵⁹ This paper is a result of studies conducted in the research project “Empire and Transformation of Genre in Roman Literature” (J6-2585) funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, and the research program “The (New) Cultural History of Intellectual Heritage: Slovenian Historical Space in Its European Context” (P6-0440) funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

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VSE TISTE PREŠTEVILNE IN RAZNOLIKE, VSAKOKRAT DRUGAČNE ZGODBE: ZELO DOLGA ZAROKA MED MITOM IN ZGODOVINO

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Kljub temu, da so že grški zgodovinarji »klasičnega obdobja« razmeroma zgodaj koncipirali metodološko utemeljeno skepso do mitoloških zgodb kot zgodovinskih virov (Thuc. 1,20; Pol. 4,40), so se zlasti zgodnji rimski zgodovinarji (»analisti«) še dolgo sklicevali na različne »ustanovne« mite, jih analizirali, primerjali in prečiščevali.

Članek izpodbija prepričanje, da vključevanje mitov s strani antičnih (rimskih) zgodovinarjev pomeni pomanjkanje kritične distance na eni in izraz politične nuje na drugi strani. Ta perspektiva je namreč pregloboko zakoreninjena v sodobnem racionalističnem pogledu, ki spregleda zgodovinski in literarni kontekst antičnih (zgodovinskih) del: miti so bili zaradi prevladujočih literarnih tradicij pred pojavom formalnega zgodovinarstva naravni in nujni del pripovedi, vseskozi pa so ostajali eden od temeljev kulturne in politične identitete.

Grški zgodovinarji, ki so v tem članku posebej izpostavljeni, predstavljajo (ob zavesti, da njihova dela predstavljajo zanemarljiv odstotek literarne zapuščine grškega zgodovinarstva) različne pristope k demistifikaciji in kritiki mitov v zgodovinarstvu. Prav nasprotno se je zgodnje rimsko zgodovinarstvo, na katerega so sicer močno vplivale kolektivne narativne tradicije, pogosto sklicevalo na mitološko materijo: zgodovinarji analisti, kot so Fabij Piktor, Lucij Celij Antipater in drugi, so v svoja dela vključevali in z vso resnostjo pretresali elemente ustanovnih mitov (prim. Stra. 5,3; DH 1,39).

Pričujoči članek izpostavlja stališče, da mitoloških vrivkov v zgodovinarstvu delih ni mogoče presojati po razmeroma sodobnem kriteriju (ne)resničnosti pričevanj, pač pa je veliko bolj smiselno upoštevati njihovo (literarno) verjetnost. Kulturni kontekst, v katerem so omenjeni zgodovinarji delovali, mita ni avtomatično postavljaj pod vprašaj: kritika, ki jo zasledimo pri Tukididu in Polibiju, se nanaša predvsem na (ne)preverljivost in pokvarljivost mitoloških ali celo zgodnejših zgodovinskih pričevanj.

Zato pričujoči članek v branje priteguje tudi odlomek iz besedila »Proti učiteljem« manj znanega skeptika Seksta Empirika (2./3. stol.), ki v citiranem odlomku (S.E. *M.* 1,259–263) do problema zavzame držo, ki se nujno izteče v ataraksijo: njegov skepticizem odpira vrata za več pričevanj, ki se lahko štejejo za verodostojna, in poudarja izzive razlikovanja med resničnimi in lažnimi pripovedmi.

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