An Age Worse than Iron: The Evolution of the Myth of the Ages

Author: Vincent Falcone

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BOSTON COLLEGE

ARTS AND SCIENCES HONORS PROGRAM

AN AGE WORSE THAN IRON:
THE EVOLUTION OF THE MYTH OF THE AGES

A THESIS BY
VINCENT FALCONE

ADVISOR: DAVID GILL, S.J.
CLASSICS DEPARTMENT

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Abstract

The idea that mankind’s history is one of regress rather than of progress has been seen as central to the classical outlook on life. Bury and others have gone so far as to state that the idea of Progress in its modern sense could not have even occurred to the Greeks. This is perhaps too extreme, but it does reflect an important point: if regression over time was not the only idea for the Greeks, it was at least the dominant one. No story in classical literature reflects this idea more clearly than the Myth of the Ages. The earliest extant version of the story comes in Hesiod’s Works and Days (c. 700 B.C.), after which it appears dozens of times throughout ancient literature. The myth in its standard form tells that the history of mankind takes the form of four ages, each represented by a metal: the first is a happy and virtuous Golden Age; the next is a less perfect Silver Age, followed by a warlike (and even worse) Bronze Age; and the last, the most impious and wretched of all, is the current Iron Age. The early Hesiodic version uses this framework merely as a means to show man that he has fallen from divine favor and is left with a life of hardship that he must deal with through honest work and reverence for the gods. As other authors pick up the myth, alluding to it in genres as diverse as philosophy, theology, humor, and panegyric, the story changes in several ways. Each author of course uses it for his own purposes and alters it accordingly. In addition the Myth of the Ages undergoes an overall change: after Hesiod authors such as Aratus, Ovid, Seneca, and Maximus use the myth as a means to pair material progress with moral regression. These authors do not merely tell a story; they present a model, a simple and pre-civilized way of living that they see as vastly superior to modern “advanced” society. These authors look at the results of technological progress and see only negatives; for them the ship and the sword have brought nothing but greed and violence. They present a simple and virtuous Golden Age that lacks the fruits of civilization and a wretched and bloodied Iron Age that is flooded by them. The implication is clear: mankind has fallen from a life of primeval bliss at its own hands as a direct result of technological and societal advances. This becomes the dominant message of the Myth of the Ages, so much so that by the time of the Romans the myth had become little more than a literary cliché for criticizing civilization.
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INTRODUCTION

The Myth of the Ages is a topic that intrigued the Greeks and Romans for over eight hundred years, told in whole or alluded to briefly dozens of times throughout classical literature. The myth, summed up briefly, is that mankind has gone through a series of “races” (later “ages”), each symbolized by a metal and each a step down from the previous. The basic theme is that man once lived a life of primeval bliss which has now been lost and that society is not moving forwards but backwards. It is telling that this idea of regression over time is present in the two earliest extant works of the Greeks. In Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (c. 700 B.C.), the Myth of the Ages itself appears in its entirety; and in Homer too there is a trace of the same idea in the character of Nestor, who in *Iliad* I praises at length the men of his generation while criticizing those of the current generation.

Readily adaptable to history, theology, philosophy, or poetry, according to the message that the author wishes to get across, the myth was so prevalent throughout antiquity that for centuries afterwards readers wondered whether the notion of progress in its modern sense had even occurred to the ancients. Bury, in his landmark *The Idea of Progress* writes: “It may, in particular, seem surprising that the Greeks, who were so fertile in their speculations on human life, did not hit upon an idea which seems so simple and obvious to us as the idea of Progress”.\(^1\) Though the extremity of this theory has recently been questioned, even the questioners are forced to admit that the notion of

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regression over time was, if not the only, at least the dominant idea in the classical world.\textsuperscript{2}

Throughout its eight centuries of popularity, the Myth of the Ages was not unchanging. Each author who took it up as his topic used it for his own purposes to further his own agenda; and indeed, having been applied to genres of literature so diverse, this sort of adaptation of the story is easily understandable. The more important change, however, is the one that occurs in the myth as a whole. It goes from being merely an explanation for mankind’s current lot in life, an unchangeable lot, to a means of criticizing contemporary society. It becomes a model, a primitive and pre-civilized way of life that some see as superior to the complications of modern civilized society. The features of the Golden Age that come to be emphasized are not its virtue and supernatural leisure but its simplicity, and more specifically the natural simplicity that results from the lack of technological and societal advances.

What is evident in authors after Hesiod is a progression little by little towards this end. In the myth’s first Greek incarnation (Hesiod’s \textit{Works and Days}), there is no trace of this motif; in Hellenistic Greece this change appears for the first time but is mentioned only briefly (by Aratus); and by Roman times the Golden Age had become a literary cliché for criticizing the civilized ills of modern society.

\textsuperscript{2} L. Edelstein, \textit{The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967) was written largely as a response to those, such as Bury, who believed that the ancients could not even have conceived of Progress in its modern sense. E.R. Dodds, \textit{The Ancient Concept of Progress} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 1-25, written in turn as a response to Edelstein, plots a middle course between the two and argues that Progress, though not foreign to the ancient mind, appears during limited periods in antiquity and usually emphasizes scientific (rather than general) progress.
CHAPTER I: HESIOD’S *WORKS AND DAYS*

The earliest extant version of the Myth of the Ages comes in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, written roughly 700 B.C. (though an exact date cannot be certain). The *Works and Days* is a piece of wisdom literature in which Hesiod employs various means, including myth, allegory, parable, and outright exhortation, to advise against idleness and dishonesty. In addition to moral advice, Hesiod gives practical instructions on agriculture, seafaring, and religious conduct; and he also lists the proper seasons for different tasks. His account of the Myth of the Ages comes near the beginning of the work, placed between the story of Prometheus and the fable of the hawk and the nightingale.  

*Works and Days*, 106-201.

> εἰ δ’ ἐθέλεις, ἕτερον τοι ἐγὼ λόγον ἐκκορυφώσω εὕ καὶ ἐπισταμένως, σὺ δ’ ἐνί φρεσὶ βάλλες σήμιν, ὡς ὁμόθεν γεγάσασι θεοὶ θυμιτοί τ’ ἄνθρωποι.
> χρύσεον μὲν πρώτοσα γένος μερόπων ἄνθρώπων ἄθανατοι ποίησαν Ὀλύμπια δώματ’ ἔχοντες. οἱ μὲν ἐπὶ Κρόνου ἦσαν, ὅτ’ οὐρανῷ ἐμβασίλευσαν· ὥστε θεοὶ δ’ ἔζωσιν ἀκηδέα θυμιόν ἔχοντες νόσσιν ἄτερ το πόνου καὶ οἰζύσων ὀφεῖ τι δειλόν γῆρας ἐπῆν. αἰεὶ δ’ πόδας καὶ χειράς ὁμοίοι τέρτιον’ ἐν βαλίσας κακῶν ἐκτοσθεν ἄπάντων·
> θυνήσκον δ’ ὦσθ’ ὑπνῶ δεδιωμένοι· ἐσθλά δὲ πάντα τοίον ἦν· καρπὸν δ’ ἔφερε ζειδώρος ἄρουρα αὐτομάτη πολλόν τε καὶ ἄφθουν· οἱ δ’ ἐθελήμοι ἠσυχοί ἔργ’ ἐνέμοντο σὺν ἐσθλοῖσιν πολέεσσιν.
> ἀφεινοί μήλοισι, φίλοι μακάρεσσι θεοὶ· ἀυτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ τούτο γένος κατὰ γαῖα κάλυψεν, τοι μὲν δαμούνες εἰς Δίος μεγάλος διὰ βουλᾶς ἔσθλοι, ἐπιχεῖνοι, φύλακες θυμίτων ἄνθρωπον, ὧν ἅ φυλάσσοντοι τε δίκαι ἔσχελτοι οἱ ἱέρα ἐπισάμενοι, πάντη φοιτῶντες ἐπὶ ἅλαιν, πλουτοδόται· καὶ τούτο γέρας βασιλῆιον ἔσχον.

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δεύτερον αὕτη γένος πολύ χειρότερον μετόπισθεν ἀργύρεων ποίησαν 'Ολυμπία δῶματ' ἔχοντες, χρυσέω οὕτε φυήν ἑναλίγκιον οὕτε νόμιμα.

ἀλλ' ἐκατόν μὲν παῖς ἔσεα παρὰ μητέρι κεδυνῇ ἐτέρφετ' ἀτάλλων μέγα νῆπιος, ὥ ἐνί οἰκώμ. ἀλλ' ὀτ' ἄρ' ἢβησαι τε καὶ ἢβης μέτρου ἵκοιτο, παυρίδιον ζῶσεκον ἐπὶ χρόνον, ἀλγε' ἔχοντες ἀφραδίης· ὑβρίν γάρ ἀτάσθαλον οὐκ ἐθύναντο ἀλλήλων ἀτέχειν, οὐδ' ἀθανάτους θεραπεύειν ἥθελον οὐδ' ἔρδειν μακάρων ἱεροῖς ἐπὶ βοσμοῖς, ἢ δεῖμις ἀνθρώποισι κατ' ἠθεα. τοὺς μὲν ἐπείτα Ζεὺς Κρονίδης ἐκρυψε χολούμενος, οὐνεκα τιμᾶς οὐκ ἐδίδοι μακάρεσσι θεοῖς ο' 'Ολυμπος ἐχούσιν.

αὐτάρ ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῦτο γένος κατὰ γαία κάλυψεν, τοῖς μὲν ὑποχθοίου μάκαρες θυτοὶ καλέονται, δεύτεροι, ἀλλ' ἐμπισι τιμὴ καὶ τοῖσιν ὁπιθεὶ,

Ζεὺς δὲ πατήρ τρίτον ἄλλο γένος μερότων ἀνθρώπων χάλκειον ποιῆσα, οὐκ ἀργυρέω οὔδὲν ὑμίσιν, ἐκ μελίαν, δεινὸν τε καὶ ὀβριμον, οἰσίν 'Ἀρης ἐργ' ἐμελὲ στοιχύοντα καὶ ύβρις· οὐδὲ τι σίτου ἠθίον, ἀλλ' ἀδάμαντος ἔχον κρατερόφρονα υμὸν· ἀπλαστον· μεγάλη δὲ βία καὶ χεῖρες ἄπτοι ἐξ ὁμον ἐπέφυκον ἐπὶ στιβαροί μέλεσιν. τοῖν δ' ἴν χάλκεα μὲν τεύχεα, χάλκεοι δέ τε οἰκοι, χαλκῷ δ' εἰργάζοντο· μέλας δ' οὐκ ἐσκε ὀδήρος.

καὶ τοῖς μὲν χείρεσιν ὑπὸ σφετέροις δαμέντες βησαν ἐς εὑρόντα δόμον κρυεροῦ Ἀίδαο νωνυμίνοι θανάτος δέ καὶ ἐκπάγοις περ ἑοντας εἰλε μέλας, λαμπρὸν δ' ἐλιπον φάος ἤλαιοι.

αὐτάρ ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῦτο γένος κατὰ γαία κάλυψεν, αὕτης ἐτ' ἄλλο τέταρτον ἐπὶ χβου πουλυβοτείρη Ζεὺς Κρονίδης ποίησε, δικαιότερον καὶ ἄρειον, ἀνδρῶν ἤρωων θείων γένος, οἱ καλέονται ἠμίθειον, προτέρη γενεὴ κατ' ἀπείρονα γαῖαν, καὶ τοὺς μὲν πόλεμος τε κακὸς καὶ φύλος αὐνῆ, τοὺς μὲν ύφ' ἐπταπύλῳ Θήβη. Καβμίδι γαίη, ὀλεσε μαρναμένονς μήλων ἕνεκ' Οἰδιπόδαο, τοὺς δὲ καὶ ἐν νίσεαν ὑπὲρ μέγα λαίμαια βαλάσῃς ἐς Τροῖν άγαγών 'Ελένης ἕνεκ' ἦκομίοιο. ἐνθ' ἦτο τοὺς μὲν βανάτου τέλος ἀμφεκάλυψεν, τοῖς δὲ δίχ' ἀνθρώπων βιοτον καὶ ἦθε' ὀπάσασα Ζεὺς Κρονίδης κατένασσε πατήρ ἐν πείρασι γαῖης, καὶ τοὶς μὲν ναίουσιν ἀκηδέα θυμὸν ἔχομεν ἐν μακάρων νήσοισι παρ' 'Ωκεανὸν βαβυδίνην, ὀλβίοι ἔρως, τοῖσιν μεληδέα καρπὸν τρίς ἔτεος θάλλοντα φέρει ξειδώρος ἄρουρα.
<τηλού ἀπ’ ἀθανάτων τοῖσιν Κρόνος ἐμβασιλεύει.

....(...) γάρ μῦν ἔλυσε πατ[ήρ ἀνδρών] τε θε[ῶν τε

υῦν δ’ ἡδο[] μετὰ τοῖς τιμή[ν ἔ]χει ως ἐ[πιείκες].

Ζεύς δ’ αὐτ’ ἄλλο γένος ἰδ[κε]ν μερόπων ἀνθρώπων,

τῶν οἱ νῦν γεγάσασιν ἐπὶ [ ]

μηκέτ’ ἐπείτ’ ὥφελλον ἐγὼ πέμπτοις μετείναι

ἀνδράσιν, ἀλλ’ ἢ πρόσθε δανεῖν ἢ ἐπείτα γενέσθαι.

νῦν γάρ δὴ γένος ἐστὶ σιδήρειν’ οὐδὲ ποτ’ ἡμαρ

παύσονται καμάτου καὶ ὦζύος, οὐδὲ τι νῦκτωρ

τειρόμενοι: χαλεπάς δὲ θεοὶ δῶσον μερίμνας.

ἀλλ’ ἐμπτ’ καὶ τοῖσι μεμείξεται ἐσθαλ κακοῖοι.

Ζεύς δ’ ὀλέσει καὶ τούτο γένος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων,

εῦτ’ ἃν γεινόμενοι πολιοκρόταφοι τελέσωσιν.

οὐδὲ πατήρ παῖδεσσιν ὦμοιοι οὐδὲ τι παῖδες,

οὐδὲ ξεῖνος ξεινοδόκω καὶ ἔταρος ἔταρω,

οὐδὲ καίγυνητος φίλος ἔσσεται, ὡς τὸ πάρος περ.

αἴμα δὲ γηράκοντας ἀτιμήσουσι τοκής:

μέμυνται δ’ ἀρα τοὺς χαλεποῖς βάζοντες ἐπεσοῦν,

οἰκτλιο, οὐδὲ θεὼν ὅπων εἰδότες: οὐδὲ μὲν οἱ γε

γηράντεσσι τοκεῖσιν ἀπὸ θρεπτηρία δοιεν.

χειροδίκαι: ἓτερος δ’ ἑτέρον πόλιν ἐξαλαπάζει:

οὐδὲ τῆς εὐρόκου χάρις ἔσσεται οὐδὲ δικαίον

οὐτ’ ἁγαθοῦ, μᾶλλον δὲ κακῶν ἰκετήρα καὶ ὑβριν

ἀνέρα τιμήσουσι: δίκῃ δ’ ἐν χερσί, καὶ αἰδῶς

ἔσσεται: βλάψει δ’ ὁ κακός τοῦ ἀρέιον φῶτα

μύθοσιν σκολιοῖς ἐνέπων, ἐπὶ δ’ ὄρκον ὁμεῖται.

ξήλος δ’ ἀνθρώποις ὀδύροις ἀπασίν

δυσκόλας κακοχαρτος ὀμαρτήσει, στυγερότης.

καὶ τότε δὴ πρὸς Ἄλυμπον ἀπὸ χθονὸς εὐρυδείῆς

λευκοίοι κάρησοι καλυπτέομένα χρόα καλὸν

ἀθανάτων μετὰ φύλου ἱτον προσπλοῦντ’ ἀνθρώπους

Αἰδώς καὶ Νέμεσις: τὰ δὲ λείψεται ἅγεσα λυγρὰ

θυτοῖς ἀνθρώποις, κακοῦ δ’ οὐκ ἔσσεται ἅλκη.⁴

But, if you wish, I shall sum up shortly for you another story well

and skillfully; put it in your heart how gods and mortal men arose on the

same terms.

First of all, the immortals dwelling in Olympian homes made a

race of speech-endowed men of gold. They lived under Kronos, while he

reigned in heaven; and they lived like gods with carefree hearts, far from

labor and hardship; nor in any way was wretched old age imposed upon

them, but they always had the same strength in hands and feet, and they

delighted in feasts, apart from all evils; and they died as though subdued

by sleep; and all good things were theirs; and the grain-giving land

spontaneously bore crops, very much and without grudge; and they, happy and gentle, lived off the land with many excellent things. [They were rich in flocks, men dear to the blessed gods.] But because the earth covered this race, they are the good daïmones by the plan of great Zeus, guardians upon the earth of mortal men, [who therefore watch over both verdicts and wicked deeds, clothed in mist, wandering everywhere on the earth,] givers of riches; and they held the kindly prize.

Then afterwards those dwelling in Olympian homes made a second race of silver, worse by much, like the golden in neither appearance nor mind. But for a hundred years a child was raised by his dear mother, for a long time a youth playing in the house; but when they matured and the measure of manhood came, they lived for a very short time, bearing woes because of their folly; for they could not refrain from reckless violence towards one another, nor did they want to pay heed to the immortals nor to make sacrifice at the holy altars of the blessed gods, which is right for men according to custom. Indeed then Zeus son of Kronos, angered, buried them, because they did not give honors to the blessed gods who inhabit Olympus. But because the earth covered this race also, they are called the blessed men, below the earth, the second people, but nevertheless honor accompanies them also.

But father Zeus made another race of speech-endowed men, a third race, of bronze, in no way like that of silver, from ash trees, a race both terrible and mighty, for whom the mournful works of Ares and violence were a care; nor in any way did they eat bread, but they had a dauntless heart of adamant, rough men; and great strength and invincible hands grew from their shoulders on their mighty limbs. Bronze were their weapons, bronze were their homes, with bronze they worked; but there was no dark iron. And indeed they, overcome by their own hands, went to the dank house of chilling Hades, nameless; and dark death took them, though they were terrible, and they left behind the bright light of the sun.

But because the earth covered this race also, Zeus son of Kronos again made yet another race, a fourth, on the much-nourishing earth, more righteous and better, the godlike race of heroes, who are called demi-gods, the race before our own on the boundless earth. And evil war and the dread war cry destroyed some at seven-gated Thebes, the land of Cadmus, as they fought for the sake of the flocks of Oedipus, and others in their ships upon the great gulf of the sea, having gone to Troy for the sake of fair-haired Helen. Then death's end enveloped some of them, and father Zeus, son of Kronos, having granted to others of them livelihood and homes apart from men, let them dwell at the edges of the earth, and indeed they live with a carefree heart on the isles of the blessed near deep-eddying Okeanos; the happy heroes, for whom the grain-giving earth bears honey-sweet fruit, flourishing thrice a year. [Apart from the gods, Kronos rules over them. .... For the father [of men and of gods] freed him; [and now] among them he holds honor as [is fitting. But again Zeus] placed another race [of speech-endowed men, those who now] live upon [   ].]
Would that I were not among the fifth men, but that I had either
died beforehand or been born afterwards. For now indeed the race is of
iron; and never do men cease from toil or hardship during the day nor in
any way at night, though they are worn out; and the gods will give them
hard cares; and even goods things will be altogether mixed with bad
things. But Zeus will destroy this race of speech-endowed men also, when
they may go forth born with gray hair. Neither will father be at one with
sons, nor in any way sons with father, nor will guest with host and
comrade with comrade, nor will brother be dear, as was the case
previously. And soon they will dishonor their aging parents; and so they
will reproach them, speaking with harsh words, hardhearted men, and not
knowing reverence of the gods; nor indeed will they repay their aging
parents for their upbringing, men asserting right by the force of their
hands; and one man will sack the city of another; nor will there be any
favor for one true to his oath nor for a just man or a good man, but they
will honor the evildoer and the violent man; justice will be by violence,
and so too will one’s sense of shame; the wicked man will injure his
better, speaking with crooked words, and he will swear an oath upon
them. Envy, harsh, malicious, with an evil appearance, will accompany all
miserable men. And then indeed Shame and Indignation, their beautiful
forms shrouded in white robes, will go from the wide-pathed earth to
Olympus, among the race of the gods, forsaking men; and these mournful
woes will be left for mortal men, and there will be no safeguard from evil.

I.1 Structure of the Hesiodic Version

The Myth of the Ages takes the form of ordered regressions, though Hesiod’s
version is by no means as linear as later authors make it. There are five distinct
regressions in the myth:

i. The metals that represent the races become less precious (Gold, Silver,
    Bronze, Iron), with the race of heroes being an exception.

ii. The hastening of the onset of old age: the golden race does not age; the
    silver lives for a hundred years as children and only briefly as adults; and
    the iron race will eventually be born with gray hair. The bronze race and
    the race of heroes are not mentioned.
iii. Decreasing glory in the afterlife: the men of the golden race are made
minor divinities (daimones); the silver race has a less glorious place (they
are made the “blessed mortals”); and the bronze race is given no glory
whatsoever (they go to Hades “nameless”). What will happen to the iron
race is not mentioned; and the race of heroes is again a break in the
regression (some simply die, and others are sent to the Isles of the Blessed
to live an afterlife of leisure).

iv. Moral regression: the golden race is implicitly morally pure; the silver is
marked by violence and irreverence towards the gods; and the iron race
shows no devotion to the gods, to family members, or to guests. The race
of heroes again marks a pause in the regression (it is a race “more
righteous and better” than its predecessor). The bronze race is stronger
and more warlike than either the silver or the gold, but whether that is
meant as a sign of moral regression by Hesiod is questionable (the race of
heroes, an explicitly more righteous race, is also marked by warlike
tendencies).

v. Increase in hardship: the golden race lives a life of leisure; some hardship
enters in the Silver Age, where men live “for a very short time, bearing
woes because of their folly” (ll. 133-4); and the iron race is subject to
unremitting labor and misery. The bronze race is not mentioned, nor is the
race of heroes.

For Hesiod, then, the history of mankind is a fairly clear regression. The last race is a
striking contrast to the first: the Golden Age is a time of happiness, morality, and leisure;
and the Iron one of wickedness, greed, and hardship. However, there is a problem in
Hesiod’s scheme, one that has caused much confusion among scholars: the decline in the
intermediate ages is not a perfect one. Certain elements of regression are lacking in some
of the races; to what degree the bronze race is a decline from the silver is questionable;\(^5\)
and there is a distinct upturn during the Age of Heroes.

However, some confusion is understandable when one takes into account how
many traditions Hesiod pieces together in his version of the story. He incorporates no
fewer than four distinct and inherently contradictory traditions into his scheme of decline:
Near Eastern mythology, Greek religious beliefs, Greek history, and the Homeric
tradition. These elements often clash with one another and account in large part for the
break in the decline that occurs during the bronze race and the race of heroes.

The first point to understand is that the idea of regression over time was almost
certainly not invented by Hesiod himself or by the Greeks. Hesiod is known to have
borrowed extensively from oriental sources for his mythology,\(^6\) and it seems likely that
this story as well comes from the Near East. West suggests Mesopotamia as a probable
origin for the Myth of the Ages, since it was in a position both culturally and
gEOgraphically to disseminate the story to Greece and to the Near East in general.\(^7\) The
belief in regression over time was fairly widespread in the Near East in the first
millennium B.C.; there are at least five extant parallels for the Hesiodic version:

i. A close structural parallel is found in a story told in two lost books of the

Avesta, the holy book of Zoroastrianism. It is paraphrased in the

\(^5\) A.O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, eds., *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

\(^6\) For the relation of the *Theogony* and the Prometheus/Pandora myth to Near Eastern sources see P. Walcot,
Pahlavi *Dēnkart* 9.8 and *Bahman Yašt* I. 2-5. The story is framed as a vision in which Ahura Mazdāh reveals the future to Zoroaster. He is shown a tree with branches of various metals representing future kingdoms. There are four branches: one of gold, in which the king accepts Zoroastrianism and destroys the figures of other religions; one of silver; one of steel; and one of iron, an age ruled over by an evil king.8

### ii.

The Book of Daniel 2:31 contains a very similar story in which Nebuchadnezzar has a dream interpreted by Daniel. In his dream there is a statue composed of five different substances, each representing a kingdom to come. The head is of gold, representing the current age; the arms and breast are of silver; the belly and thighs are of bronze; the legs are of iron; and the feet are of a mixture of iron and clay. Each age is described as worse than its predecessor, with gold being the best.9

### iii.

A strong thematic parallel appears in Indian literature. There is a story of four world ages, or *yugas*, named after the throws of the die: *Krta* (four), *Tretā* (three), *Dvāpara* (two), and *Kali* (one). The first age (the *Krta yuga*) is marked by righteousness and happiness; and from there morality and virtue decline while disease and hardship increase with each successive *yuga*.10

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10 For translations of the original texts see P.E. Dumant, “Primitivism in Indian Literature,” in Lovejoy, 433-46.
iv. The story of the Fall in the Book of Genesis 3:1-23 contains another thematic parallel: man loses his primeval life of leisure only to have it replaced by a life of unrelenting toil.

v. The Babylonian and Sumerian king lists, in which early kings are said to have lived for progressively shorter lengths of time, parallel the shortening of lifespan over successive ages in Hesiod. This idea also arises in Genesis, where the first race of men has a lifespan of up to 963 years, which is limited after the flood to 120 years (Genesis 6.3). Though none of these passages fully parallels the Hesiodic myth, they together reflect distinct parts of a tradition from which Hesiod is undoubtedly borrowing; and together they encompass most of the regressions mentioned above: the decline in moral values, the shortening of man’s lifespan, the rise of hardship, and the scheme of metals representing different periods of time. The difference is that the oriental version is one of strict decline: as time moves forwards, mankind moves backwards in one way or another. In none of the Near Eastern models is there an upturn or even any ambiguity in the regression.

Hesiod uses the oriental tradition from which these parallels are drawn as his model, but it is important to note that he makes his version distinctly Greek. By incorporating Greek traditions that at times conflict with the strict decline of the Near Eastern parallels, Hesiod creates a regression that is somewhat ambiguous. First, he adds Greek religious traditions to the myth: he links the men of the golden race after their death to the *daimones* (minor divinities in Greek theology); and he has the Greek gods play an integral role in the decline. In his description of the bronze race, he puts forth
what can only be an attempt at actual Greek history (in its more modern sense). His account of the Ages of Gold and Silver, as befits an unknown time in the distant past, is highly poetic; he largely avoids specific descriptions, favoring instead to play on the contrast between the two races: the golden race does not grow old, while the silver race lives as adults for only a very short time; and after death the men of the golden race become “daimones… upon the earth” (l. 122-3), while those of the silver become “blessed men under the earth” (l. 141). Likewise, the silver race is explicitly a fall from the golden: that they are a “second” race is repeated twice (in l. 127 and again in l. 142); and Hesiod calls them “worse by much” than their predecessors (l. 127). In his description of the bronze race (a time closer to his own), his language shifts dramatically. The well-wrought parallels that marked Hesiod’s description of the first two ages are now completely lacking. He now speaks of actual bronze: “bronze were their weapons, bronze were their homes, with bronze they worked; but there was no dark iron” (ll. 150-1); and the only element of decline that remains is that the bronze race has no glory in the afterlife. The metal scheme is no longer symbolic here; Hesiod is speaking of an actual people in the history of Greece that used bronze exclusively, and his shift in style reflects that. Hesiod’s bronze race, then, coincides with what modern scholars would call the historical Bronze Age.

The Age of Heroes is an unequivocal break in Hesiod’s scheme of decline. It is a race “more righteous and better” than the one before it (l. 158); and it has a more glorious afterlife than the bronze race: the heroes “live with a carefree heart on the isles of the blessed” after death (ll. 170-1). This part of the story is almost certainly a Hesiodic

interpolation, for which he draws from the Homeric tradition (again a distinctly Greek
one). Hesiod knows that the warriors from this time period were marked by virtue and
honor, but that is a notion incompatible with the strict decline of the oriental models.

Likewise incompatible with a myth of decline is the fact that Hesiod seems to hint
that a better race could follow his own: “Would that I were not among the fifth men, but
that I had either died beforehand or been born afterwards” (ll. 174-5). If Hesiod believes
that a superior race might come in the future, then why all the talk of regression and the
prophecy that his own race will continue to decline until it is ultimately destroyed like the
others?

These discrepancies in Hesiod’s story of decline have caused more than a little
discussion among scholars. In trying to solve this problem, some would see his scheme
as cyclical, rather than as a simple downward regression. It has been suggested that
Hesiod could have internal cycles in mind (the golden, silver, and bronze races marking
one cycle, and the Age of Heroes starting another) or that he believes in a more general
cyclical theory of the universe. Others have suggested imaginative groupings of the races
in an attempt to remove the discrepancies.\(^\text{13}\) However, these schemes do nothing more
than obscure the meaning of the story. Internal cycles ignore many of the distinct
regressions that occur through all four metallic ages (such as the decline in lifespan and
the rise of hardship). Likewise, to attribute an overarching cyclical scheme to Hesiod
based on this passage places an enormous amount of weight on a single word (“ἔπειτα”
in l. 175); it seems fairly unlikely that this one word would suggest an entire cyclical

\(^{13}\) See P. Sinclair, ed., *Works and Days* (1932; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966), 15-7 for various
cyclical theories that commentators have put forth; and Lamberton, 117-8 for some of the more inventive
schemes that recent scholars have suggested.
cosmology that is otherwise completely lacking in the language of either Hesiod or Homer.

To understand why these discrepancies exist, it is important first to realize that Hesiod is putting together several distinct, and often conflicting, traditions in this one myth. He draws upon Near Eastern parallels, the Homeric tradition, Greek religious beliefs, and historical fact. With so many traditions packed into a single story, there are bound to be contradictions. This explains the internal discrepancies in what otherwise would be a clear scheme of decline; but it leaves the problem of “afterwards” in l. 175, a word which would seem to imply that Hesiod does not envision continuous decline.

“Ἐπεὶ ΤΑ” leaves two possibilities. One is that Hesiod may really think that better times could come. He does, after all, include the race of heroes in his myth, an indubitable upturn in the regression of man. If Hesiod believes that there was a righteous age in the recent past, it seems quite plausible that he may not believe that mankind’s downward regression is inexorable. The second possibility is that readers should perhaps not look too much into this one word. It could be a formulaic phrase or perhaps simply an expression of exasperation by Hesiod at his own race (the sense being “would that I lived any time but now”).14 Accepting either of these suggestions leaves the overall meaning of the myth intact. Hesiod’s main concern is the situation of the present age (i.e. one of vice and hardship), rather than that of the future.

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I.2 MEANING OF THE HESIODIC VERSION

The meaning of Hesiod’s account of the Myth of the Ages has often been somewhat misunderstood. Readers sometimes want to turn Hesiod’s version into what the myth in fact later becomes: a story about the decline of moral values in the face of material advances. The article on the Golden Age in The Oxford Classical Dictionary says: “[The Golden Age’s] end comes with a series of inventions that lead to the modern condition of humanity”.\(^\text{15}\) Likewise, Sinclair suggests that “Hesiod believed the history of man to be a continuous process of degeneration in which material progress was accompanied by moral decline”.\(^\text{16}\) Though this is a theme that Ovid, Aratus, and countless other authors up to the modern day later pick up on, it is not present in Hesiod’s version. His focus is most definitely not on the relation of technological progress to moral regress. In fact, the only mention of technology of any sort is when Hesiod speaks of the bronze race: “bronze were their weapons, bronze were their homes, with bronze they worked; but there was no dark iron” (ll. 150-1); and there his language is merely descriptive, not pejorative. In understanding this part of the myth, Lovejoy’s distinction between chronological and cultural primitivism is illuminating. Chronological primitivism is concerned with the temporal distribution of good in the history of man; it answers the question, “when was mankind at its high point?” Cultural primitivism, on the other hand, focuses on the tension between increasing technological and societal progress and decreasing morality; it is the usual vehicle of the civilized person who is discontent with his civilization.\(^\text{17}\) After Hesiod, the Myth of the Ages transforms quickly

\(^{15}\) The Oxford Classical Dictionary), s.v. “golden age,” by P.G. Fowler and D.P. Fowler.
\(^{16}\) Sinclair, 15.
\(^{17}\) Lovejoy, 1-22.
into one of cultural primitivism; Hesiod himself, however, is strictly a primitivist of the former sort.

If the story is not one of moral decline in the face of material progress, what, then, is it about? Hesiod sets forth his theme explicitly at the beginning of the myth: “put it in your heart how gods and mortal men arose on the same terms” (l.108). The men of the golden race live “like gods with carefree hearts, far from both labor and hardship [ὁιζύος]” (ll. 112-3); but the iron race, Hesiod’s own, is one of unrelenting misery, where men never “cease from toil or hardship [ὁιζύος] during the day nor in any way at night, though they are worn out” (ll. 176-8). The primary focus of the story is that men and gods at first lived similar lives, but that men eventually lost their life of luxury only to have it replaced by a life of hardship. This theme becomes clear also when taken in the context of the Prometheus myth that comes directly before it. Both tales have the loss of a carefree life as a central theme, an idea explicitly stated at the end of the Prometheus story (ll.90-5):

πρὶν μὲν γὰρ ζωεσκον ἐπὶ χθονὶ φῆλ᾽ ἀνθρώπων νόσφιν ἄτερ τε κακῶν καὶ ἄτερ χαλεποῖο πόνοιο νοῦσων τ᾽ ἀγαλέων, αἳ τ᾽ ἀνδράσι κῆρας ἔδωκαν. ἀλλὰ γυνὴ χείρεσι πίθου μέγα πώμ᾽ ἀφελοῦσα ἐσκέδασο· ἀνθρώποισι δ᾽ ἐμήσατο κῆδεα λυγρά.

For previously the tribes of men lived upon the land without evils and without difficult toil and painful diseases, which give death to men. But the woman, removing the great lid of the jar with her hands, dispersed them; and she created painful cares for men.

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18 For “on the same terms” for ὄμοβην see West’s footnote on the line. “From the same source” does not satisfactorily explain the meaning of the Myth of the Ages, despite the attempts of Sinclair and Verdenius to explain otherwise. The story is not about how both gods and men have a common starting point (Si.), nor is it an explanation of why the last of the gods left the earth (Ve.); We.’s translation is not an unwarranted extension of the meaning of ὄμοβην, and it captures perfectly the meaning of the myth in the context of the Works and Days.

19 M.L. West, Works and Days, 99. West omits l. 93.
Thus the two myths with which Hesiod begins set the tone for the rest of the *Works and Days*. Together they explain how man arrived at his current condition of toil and misery. Before Pandora was given to men as a punishment for the theft of fire, mankind lived happily; but now it is subject to misery and disease. Similarly, the primeval golden race lived a life of leisure and happiness; but Hesiod’s contemporary iron race must live one of hard work and suffering.

However, unlike the Prometheus myth, the Myth of the Ages focuses heavily on moral regression. The Golden Age is implicitly one of reverence and ethical purity (violence and irreverence do not enter the picture until the Silver Age); the Iron is one of complete disregard for the gods, for family members, and for traditional guest-host kindness, in which the just man is taken advantage of and the wicked man honored.

The second emphasis, then, is on the contrast in morality between the Golden Age and Hesiod’s own time and the moral regression that occurred in the process. It is important to note, however, that the moral regression is not brought on by the races themselves; nor is the loss of leisure and the consequent rise of work a function of moral regression, at least in Hesiod’s version. The golden race is inexplicably removed from the earth, and the silver race that replaces it is of no relation to the golden; it is “like the golden in neither appearance nor mind” (l. 129). The silver is in turn destroyed because of its irreverence and *hybris*, and the bronze race that follows is likewise unrelated to the silver: “but father Zeus made another race of speech-endowed men, a third race, of bronze, in no way like that of silver, from ash trees” (ll. 143-5). The bronze race wipes itself out by internal violence, and the race of heroes perishes by external violence. Since each race is made independent of the one before it, moral regression does not occur
simply because the children of one race are more wicked than their parents. Each new race is inexplicably created worse by Zeus (or better, in the case of the race of heroes); and, likewise, the hardship that is placed upon mankind over time is unexplained. A similar situation happens in the Pandora myth, where mankind loses its life of leisure not because of wrongdoing on its own part, but simply because one god has offended another. In both cases the loss of an easy life results from the whims of the gods, not the faults of mankind.

Thus, in the Myth of the Ages Hesiod does not attempt to speculate why moral regression has occurred or to implicate mankind in its loss of leisure. He views the races as separate entities, each destroyed as a whole by the gods or by themselves; each new race that springs forth is created inherently righteous (the golden race and the race of heroes) or inherently wicked (the silver, bronze, and iron races). In other words, the men of the iron race did not create their situation of hardship; it was handed to them by the gods. Hesiod’s purpose is only to reveal to men their current lot in life and at the same time to provide man with one example to follow (that of the golden race) and another to avoid (that of the iron race). What follows in the Works and Days is more or less Hesiod’s attempt to provide further guidance for men on how to live morally and how to most effectively deal with their life of labor.

At the heart of Hesiod’s version of the Myth of the Ages, as in almost all of the later versions, is a commentary on contemporary values. Hesiod’s focus, however, is not on the ills of civilization as civilization (i.e. on technology, private property, trade, and so on), but on the hardship and moral vices of his current age. In telling his story, Hesiod

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20 For this interpretation see Lovejoy, 31; and James Hastings, ed., Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), s.v. “Ages of the World (Greek and Roman),” by K.F. Smith, 193.
confuses religious, historical, literary, and foreign traditions; but his overarching theme is clear: mankind has fallen from a primeval life of leisure; and though it was by no fault of its own, it must find a way to deal with the repercussions that are now present, namely hard work and suffering. Hesiod’s remedy for these repercussions, honest labor and reverence for the gods, is the main theme of the *Works and Days* as a whole.
Chapter II: Versions of the Myth after Hesiod

In the centuries that followed the *Works and Days*, the primeval morality and happiness of man remained a prevalent theme. Theognis (c. 544 B.C.) discusses the topic in a passage from his *Elegies*: he tells how man once lived a life of piety, but that the goddesses Good-Faith and Moderation left the earth for Olympus, leaving only Hope behind (*Elegies. A, ll. 1135 ff.*).\(^{21}\) The Greek comic poets were fond of satirizing Hesiod’s account of the spontaneous generation of food. In Teleclides’s *Amphictyons* (c. 440 B.C.), one character, speaking of the first race of men, says: “For every stream flowed with wine, and barley cakes fought with wheat cakes to enter the mouths of men, pleading to be gulped down if they loved the whitest. And fishes, coming to men’s houses and baking themselves, would serve themselves upon tables. And a river of soup flowed by the couches, swirling hot meats” (*Amphictyons* in Athenaeus, *Deipnos*. VI, 268).\(^{22}\) Several other comic authors of the same period, including Cratinus and Pherecrates, wrote passages of this nature. Another early appearance of the theme comes in fragments 128 and 130 of Empedocles (c. 444 B.C.), in which he extols the vegetarianism of primitive man while criticizing the modern custom of slaughtering oxen for food and sacrifice.\(^{23}\) The fragments are small and their context unknown; but they, along with the other passages mentioned above, show clearly that eulogizing early man remained popular long after Hesiod.

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\(^{21}\) Lovejoy, 32.

\(^{22}\) For this passage and those of Cratinus and Pherecrates see Ibid., 38-41. Translation of the Teleclides passage by Lovejoy.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 32-3.
II.1 ARATUS AND CULTURAL PRIMITIVISM

The Myth of the Ages itself reappears in a more complete form in Aratus’s *Phaenomena*. Aratus, a Hellenistic poet who lived from c. 315 B.C. to 240 B.C., was heavily influenced by the early Stoic Zeno. His most famous work, the *Phaenomena* (c. 276 B.C.), gives a detailed description of celestial motions and weather patterns. It is notable for its picturesque digressions, the longest of which is on the Ages of Man.

Aratus’s account of the myth appears early in the work when he describes the constellations and comes to Virgo.\(^2^4\)

*Phaenomena*, 96-136.

οὐδ’ ἐτ’ ἐφη εἰσωτήρος ἔλευσεσθαι καλέσωσιν:
“οἶνης χρύσειοι πατέρες γενεὴν ἐλήπτοντο
χειροτέρην. ὑμεῖς δὲ κακώτερα τεξείεσθε
καὶ δὴ που πόλεμοι, καὶ δὴ που ἀνάρσιον αἶμα
ἐσσεται ἀνθρώποις, κακὸν δ’ ἐπικείεται ἄλγος.”
ὡς εἴποισ’ ὀρέων ἑπεμαίετο, τοὺς δ’ ἄρα λαοὺς
eἰς αὐτὴν ἔτι πάντας ἐλίμιπάνε παπταίνοντας.
ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ κάκεινοι ἐτέθνασαν, οἰ δ’ ἐγένετο
χαλκεῖν γενεὴ, προτέρων ὀλοκώτεροι ἄνδρες
(οἱ πρῶτοι κακοεργὸν ἐχαλκεύσαντο μάχαιραν,
εἰνδίην, πρῶτοι δὲ βοῶν ἐπάσαντ’ ἁρωτήρων),
δὴ τότε μισήσασα Δίκη κείνου γένος ἄνδρῶν
ἐπταβ’ ὑπορανῆ, ταῦτην δ’ ἄρα νάσσατο χώρην,
ἤχι περ ἐνυχθη ἐτί φαίνεται ἀνθρώποις
Παρθένους ἕγγυς ἔοισα πολυσκέπτοιν Βοώτεω. 25

And see the Maiden under both feet of the Bootes, who carries in her
hands the bright Ear of Corn. Whether she is from the race of Astraeus,
who they say is the ancient father of the stars, or from some other, let her
be borne along free from cares. Another story runs among men, that
perhaps she was once upon the earth and came face to face with men; and
she never scorned the tribes of ancient men or women, but she sat mixed
with them, even though she is immortal. They called her Justice; and,
having assembled the old men in the marketplace or the wide-pathed
street, she sang aloud, urging laws for the people. Not yet did they know
bitter strife or the much-blaming dispute or turmoil. But they lived as they
were; the difficult sea lay hidden, and not yet did ships bear livelihood
from afar, but cattle and plows and Justice herself, queen of the people,
giver of just things, provided everything ten thousand times over. She was
there as long as the earth still bore the golden race. She was in the
company of the silver race sparsely and not altogether eagerly, longing for
the customs of the ancient people, but nevertheless she was still there
during the silver race. She came from the echoing mountains at night
alone, and she did not deal with anyone with gentle words; but whenever
she filled the great hills with men, then, assailing them, she threatened
them because of their wickedness, and she said that she would never come
in their presence when they call her: “What a worse race the golden
fathers have left behind. You will bear one worse yet; and indeed for men
there will be wars and hostile blood, and evil woe will be laid upon them.”
Speaking in this way, she sought out the mountains, and so she abandoned
all the people still looking around for her. But when also those men had
died out and the bronze race was born, men more hostile than their
predecessors (they first forged from bronze the evil-working sword of the
roadside, and they first ate plough-bearing cattle), indeed then Justice,

hating the race of those men, flew up to heaven, and so she inhabited that place, where she still appears to men at night, the Maiden, near the far-seen Bootes.

This account differs remarkably from the Hesiodic version. The first and most conspicuous discrepancy is that Aratus reduces the races of man from five to three (gold, silver, and bronze). With the removal of the Age of Heroes, he takes away the ambiguity of Hesiod’s account and leaves a strictly linear regression. Next, Aratus makes the races themselves responsible for their decline, radically altering the meaning of the myth. Mankind’s hardship is now brought on primarily by its lack of justice, which is symbolized by Dike (Justice) appearing in its presence less and less. Men have a life of leisure as long as the goddess is present at all times. Food is provided as a function of simple labor and piety (in Hesiod’s version it appeared spontaneously): “cattle and plows and Justice herself, queen of the people, giver of just things, provided everything ten thousand times over” (ll. 112-3). In the Silver Age Dike appears less regularly; and by the time of the Bronze Age she is gone completely and with her mankind’s life of leisure.

Aratus, then, moralizes the myth to an extent that Hesiod never intended. For Aratus mankind devolves because of its lack of justice; in the Works and Days, men regress, but moral degradation is only part of a general decline that is inexplicably instituted by Zeus. Similarly, while Hesiod sees the races as distinct entities, one being destroyed altogether and another being created anew, Aratus makes his races related by blood: “What a worse race the golden fathers have left behind. You will bear one worse yet; and indeed for men there will be wars and hostile blood, and evil woe will be laid upon them” (ll. 122-5). Sons are more immoral than fathers, who are in turn more immoral than their fathers. There is no divine intervention at work here; mankind has
become more wicked on its own over successive generations, and for that reason it has lost its former life of happiness.

Aratus couples this moral decline with technological progress. His description of the Bronze Age is marked by ills peculiar to the civilized world: “they first forged from bronze the evil-working sword of the roadside, and they first ate plough-bearing cattle” (ll. 131-2). The golden age, in contrast, explicitly lacks such complications: “but they lived as they were; the difficult sea lay hidden, and not yet did ships bear livelihood from afar” (ll. 110-1). Aratus notably keeps a few features of Hesiod’s bronze race, such as its warlike character and its use of actual bronze (in both versions it is the only race to explicitly utilize the metal for which it is named). Unlike Hesiod, however, he describes the metal in explicitly negative terms. For Aratus the bronze sword is “evil-working”; for Hesiod the tools and armor of the bronze race are merely “of bronze.” The change is remarkable; now material progress is not simply described in passing but implicated in no uncertain terms as a corrupting influence that played a part in mankind’s decline in moral values and consequent loss of leisure.

The change is explicable by Aratus’s Stoicism, of which his story has a healthy dose.27 The primary maxim of the Stoics is to “live in accordance with nature” and for them that means living a life of simplicity (i.e. a life free from modern complications such as seafaring and metalworking). The Aratean version of the myth is clearly meant to show that a simple life is a happy life: mankind once had a life of leisure, and it was because it lived simply. That blissful existence was lost when humans invented the

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26 Lovejoy, 36.
instruments of trade and warfare, which are, for Aratus, unnecessary complications that played a large part in man’s moral regression.

It follows that Aratus’s intent in writing his version is much different from Hesiod’s. The latter means to show man his current condition and how he should best deal with it; the loss of his life of happiness was unavoidable and brought about by divine will. For Aratus, however, the conditions of the Golden Age are not quite as supernatural as Hesiod makes them. Food does not appear spontaneously, but as a result of simple agriculture and justice, the gods are not responsible for the decline of mankind; and there is no talk of an afterlife of glory for primitive men. The Aratean Golden Age is marked by conditions that could conceivably be reproduced naturally: freedom from war, the absence of foreign trade, vegetarianism, and simple work. The implication is clear. A return to a life of simplicity and justice could result in a return to the Golden Age; the Hesiodic golden age, on the contrary, could only be reproduced by divine aid. Smith sums up this new focus of the myth nicely: “[C]ivilization beyond a certain point is not in harmony with nature. Accordingly, beyond a certain stage of civilization, we can be neither healthy, virtuous, nor happy. Now, as journeying into the future should bring us finally to a state of ideal misery, so journeying into the past should take us back finally to a state of ideal happiness…. The Golden Age of the past was, therefore, the ideal simple life of the past”. The Aratean Golden Age is not a supernatural period where men are

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28 As befits a Stoic, Aratus is a “hard” rather than a “soft” primitivist, emphasizing the fruits of simple labor, rather than having food handed to mankind with no effort whatsoever. Lovejoy, 36.
29 Ibid.
30 Smith, 196.
better off simply because they have the favor of the gods, but “an idealization of the agricultural and pastoral stage of human history”.\textsuperscript{31}

With Aratus, then, the Myth of the Ages takes a new direction. The early history of man is no longer merely a description; it is now a model, a pre-civilized alternative to the complications of civilization. In the \textit{Phaenomena} primeval man is not extolled for his virtue alone, but because he lived a simple life that was free from technological advances. This is precisely the distinction that Lovejoy makes between chronological and cultural primitivism. Hesiod, a strictly chronological primitivist, has a life of leisure simply handed to his golden race at the whim of the gods and for no other reason than that it was the first race. Aratus’s Golden Age, on the other hand, is blissful because it lacks certain aspects of civilization, namely warfare, seafaring, and the eating of animals. Mankind, then, has lost its life of leisure at its own hands because of the moral degradation that Aratus sees linked to material progress.

\textbf{II.2 OVID AND THE FURTHER EVOLUTION OF THE MYTH}

Aratus’s cultural primitivism is limited to only a few (albeit important) lines in his account of the Myth of the Ages; but it is the start of a new direction for the story that is tremendously influential for later authors, particularly the Romans. Three centuries after Aratus, another major literary figure picks up the Myth of the Ages; Ovid’s account comes in \textit{Metamorphoses} I, in which he tells of the creation of the world and moves on to describe its first people. What began in the \textit{Phaenomena} as comparatively a trickle now becomes a veritable flood of criticisms regarding civilization.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
Metamorphoses. I, 89-150.

aurea prima satast aetas, quae vindice nullo,
sponte sua, sine lege, fidem rectumque colebat.
poena metusque abierant, nec verba minantia fixo
aere ligabantur, nec supplex turba timebat
iudicis ora sui, sed erant sine vindice tuti.
nondum caesa suis, peregrinum ut viseret orbem,
montibus in liquidas pinus descenderat undas,
nullaque mortales, praeter sua, litora norant.
nondum praecipites cingebant oppida fossae;
non tuba directi, non aeris cornua flexi,
non galeae, non ensis erat: sine militis usu
mollia securae peragebant otia gentes.
ipsa quoque inmunis rastroque intacta nec ullis
saucia vomeribus per se dabat omnia tellus;
contentique cibis nullo cogente creatis
arbuteos fetus montanaque fraga legebant
cornaque et in duris haerentia mora rubetis
et quae deciderant patula Iovis arbore glandes.
ver erat aeternum, placidique tepentibus auris
mulcebant zephyri natos sine semine flores.
mox etiam fruges tellus inarata ferebat,
nec renovatus ager gravidis canebat aristis.
flumina iam lactis, iam flumina nectaris ibant,
flavaque de viridi stillabant ilice mella.
postquam Saturno tenebrosa in Tartara misso
sub Iove mundus erat, subiit argentea proles,
auro deterior, fulvo pretiosior aere.
Iuppiter antiqui contraxit tempora veris
perque hiemis aestusque et inaequalis autumnos
et breve ver spatii exigit quattuor annum.
tum primum siccis aer fervoribus ustus
canduit, et ventis glacies adstricta pependit.
tum primum subiere domus (domus antra fuerunt
et densi frutices et vinctae cortice virgae).
semina tum primum longis Cerealia sulcis
obruta sunt, pressique iugo gmuere iuvenci.
tertia post illam successit aenea proles,
saevisor ingenii et ad horrida promptior arma,
non scelerata tamen. de durost ultima ferro.
protinus inruptit venae peioris in aevum
omne nefas: fugere pudor verumque fidesque;
in quorum subiere locum fraudesque dolique
insidiaeque et vis et amor sceleratus habendi.
vela dabat ventis (nec adhuc bene noverat illos)
navita; quaeque diu steterant in montibus altis,
fluctibus ignotis insultavere carinae,
communemque prius, ceu lumina solis et auras,
cautus humum longo signavit limite mensor.
nec tantum segetes alimentaque debita dives
poscubatur humus, sed itumst in viscera terrae:
quasque recondiderat Stygiisque admoverat umbris
effodiuntur opes, inritamenta malorum.
ianque nocens ferrum ferroque nocentius aurum
prodierat; prodit bellum, quod pugnat utroque
sanguineaque manu crepitantia concutit arma.
vivitur ex rapto; non hospes ab hospite tutus,
non socer a genero; fratrum quoque gratia rarast.
imimet exitio vir coniugis, illa mariti;
lurida terribiles miscent aconita novercae;
filius ante diem patrios inquirit in annos;
victa iacet pietas, et virgo caede madentes,
ultima caelestum, terras Astraea reliquit.32

First, the Golden Age was created, which, with no defender, of its
own free will, without law, respected faith and righteousness. Penalty and
fears were absent, nor were threatening words bound on fixed bronze, nor
was a suppliant crowd afraid of the face of its own judge, but they were
safe without a defender. Not yet had the pine, cut down in its own
mountains so that it might see a foreign land, descended into the flowing
waves, and men came to know no shores besides their own. Not yet did
deep ditches gird towns; there was no trumpet of straight bronze, no horn
of curved bronze, no helmets, no sword: without need of the soldier,
carefree races passed gentle lives of leisure. The earth of its own will also,
free from and untouched by the rake and not wounded by any plows, gave
all things by itself; they, content with the crops generated with no one
compelling them, gathered the fruits of the arbute tree and mountain
strawberries and cornel berries and mulberries clinging to harsh bramble
bushes and the acorns that fell from the broad tree of Jupiter. Spring was
everlasting, and calm zephyr with warm breezes caressed flowers born
without seed. Soon also the earth, though untilled, bore crops and the
field, not plowed, grew white with dense ears of grain. Now streams of
milk, now streams of nectar went forth, and tawny mead dripped from the
green holm oak.

After the world was under Jove, with Saturn having been sent to
dark Tartarus, the silver race went forth, worse than gold, more precious
than tawny bronze. Jupiter shortened the time of the old spring and by
winters and summers and unequal autumns and a brief spring, he made the
year pass in four periods. Then first the air, burned by dry heat, grew
white hot, and frost hung bound to the winds. Then first men entered

32 Lee, Ovid: Metamorphoses I.
homes (their homes had been caves and dense shrubs and twigs bound by bark). Then first the seeds of Ceres were hidden in long furrows, and bulls groaned, oppressed by the yoke.

After that race, a third race of bronze followed, more savage in their characters and more prone to horrible arms, though not wicked. The last race is of hard iron. Every crime burst forth headlong into this age of a worse vein: shame and truth and faith fled; and in their place entered lies and tricks and treachery and violence and a wicked love of possessions. The sailor gave sails to the winds (nor up to now had he come to know them well); and ships, which for a long time had stood in lofty mountains, leapt about in unknown waters. And the careful surveyor marked off the ground, beforehand held in common, as though sunlight or air, with his long measuring stick. And not only was the ground asked for crops and the rich food that was owed, but men went into the innards of the earth and the wealth, which it had hidden and moved to the Stygian shadows, was dug up, incentives for evil. And now harmful iron and gold, more harmful than iron, went forth; war went forth, which fights for both and shakes rustling arms with a bloody hand. They lived by theft; host was not safe from guest, nor father-in-law from son-in-law; the kindness of brothers was also rare. Husband threatened the death of his wife, wife of husband; terrible stepmothers mixed ghastly poisons; son inquired into the years of his father before the day; piety lay defeated, and the maiden Astraea abandoned the lands dripping with slaughter, the last of the gods.

Ovid wastes no time in getting to his assault upon the corrupting influence of material progress; his golden race lives a life of complete bliss, though several distinct aspects of civilization are absent. He begins by describing the golden race’s lack of one particularly Roman aspect of society, legalism (ll. 89-93); the Golden Age is inherently just and thus has no need for laws or judges. From there he moves on to criticize Aratus’s primary targets, the instruments of trade and warfare (ll. 94-100). Ovid adds also the invention of agriculture to his litany of the ills of civilization (ll. 101-112), something that even his predecessor would not consider a negative influence (Aratus eulogizes the early agricultural life of man and includes “cattle and plows” as part of the simple labor that primitive man engaged in). During the Silver Age, Jupiter introduces the seasons and harsh weather, forcing men to enter homes and take up agriculture. The
bronze race is mentioned only in passing, and by the time of the iron race the arts of civilization have risen to their height while mankind’s morality and life of leisure have been lost completely. In his description of the Iron Age, Ovid further assaults the fruits of civilization: he laments for a second time navigation (ll. 132-4), followed by private property (ll. 135-6), mining (ll. 137-40), and warfare (ll. 141-3).

Ovid’s account is perhaps best seen as a reconciliation of previous versions of the myth, smoothing out the inconsistencies inherent in the early Hesiodic version, in Aratus’s more moralized account, and in Roman traditions about early mankind. The Ovidian version keeps Hesiod’s scheme of four metallic races (while Aratus only had three).33 His golden race, like that of Hesiod, enjoys spontaneously generated food: “the earth of its own will also, free from and untouched by the rake and not wounded by any plows, gave all things by itself” (ll. 101-2). Following the Hesiodic version, Ovid has Jupiter play a part in the decline of at least one of the races (the silver), during which he inexplicably creates the seasons, forcing men to enter homes.34 Ovid also maintains the bronze race’s traditionally warlike character: they are “more savage in their characters and more prone to horrible arms” (l. 126). Perhaps drawing upon the Works and Days, he notes in addition that the brazen race is not wicked by nature, but only bellicose. Finally, his description of the iron race is very much like that of Hesiod, who also speaks of family member cheating family member and guest injuring host.

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33 It should be noted that Ovid moves on to describe the destruction of the Iron Race by flood in the Lycaon story. Ovid, then, does not conceive of himself as being part of the Iron Race, but of an unnamed fifth race created from the stones that were thrown by Deucalion and Pyrrha. Lee, 81, and Lovejoy, 43-9.
Ovid is also clearly influenced by the account of the myth in the *Phaenomena*. The works of Aratus enjoyed immediate success in the centuries after his death, particularly among a Roman audience, the *Phaenomena* being the third most read work in antiquity following the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.³⁵ His poems were the subject of several Latin translations, the so-called *Aratea*. The *Phaenomena* itself was translated by, among others, Cicero, Varro, and Ovid himself. Though Ovid’s version is now lost, Aratus’s influence is tangible in his other works, most notably the *Fasti*.³⁶

The first and most obvious Aratean element in Ovid’s account of the myth is that he pairs material progress with moral regression, and to an extent that far surpasses even Aratus. The latter’s mark can be seen clearly by the fact that Ovid mentions the onset of warfare and navigation (Aratus’s two main targets) twice and in great detail (in ll. 94-100 and again in ll. 132-4, 141-3). He follows Aratus also in omitting Hesiod’s Heroic Age, which would have been placed between the bronze and iron races. One effect of this is that Ovid’s version, like that of Aratus, is strictly linear. The golden race is perfect; the silver is “worse than gold, more precious than tawny bronze” (l. 115); the bronze is warlike, but not “wicked”; and the iron race is the very definition of wickedness. The most striking tribute to Aratus, however, is in the last few words of the Ovidian story: “the maiden Astraea abandoned the lands dripping with slaughter, the last of the gods” (ll. 150-1). It is not Shame and Indignation leaving the lands (as in Hesiod), but Astraea, the daughter of Astraeus, whom Aratus called *Dike*.³⁷

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³⁶ Gee notes that “both works are in a sense calendars, both in a sense didactic poems.” E. Gee, *Ovid, Aratus, and Augustus: Astronomy in Ovid’s Fasti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3-4.
³⁷ Anderson, 166.
Despite the influence of these two authors, however, Ovid makes the version in the *Metamorphoses* his own. As was mentioned earlier, he inundates his version of the Myth of the Ages with references to the negative side of technological and societal progress. In his lengthy description of these advances, however, he adds an element that is present nowhere in the *Phaenomena*. He stresses the absurdity and unnaturalness of material progress: in his society, “a suppliant crowd is afraid of the face of its own judge” (ll. 92-3); “the pine” is “cut down in its own mountains so that it might see a foreign land” (ll. 95-6); and and the earth is now asked for “wealth” in addition to “crops” and “rich food” (ll. 137-8). Conversely, during the Golden Age the earth is not “wounded by any plows” (ll. 101-2); “ships… for a long time stood in lofty mountains” (ll. 133-4); and “the ground” is “held in common, as though sunlight or air” (ll. 135-6). For Ovid, then, technological progress is not merely a corrupting influence (as it was for Aratus), but an inherently absurd thing. Trees are snatched from mountains and put into the water; people fear the judges that are meant to guarantee justice; and the land is asked not only for livelihood, but also for riches.

In his account of the myth, Ovid also reconciles peculiarly Roman notions about the prehistory of mankind with the distinctly Greek and Stoic versions that have come before him, all of which are, understandably, inconsistent with one another on certain points. The most notable way that Ovid Romanizes the myth is that he goes back to Hesiod’s scheme of four metals, but at the same time removes the Age of Heroes, a typically Greek tradition that is derived from the Homeric poems. The Ovidian version also begins with a criticism of a characteristically Roman institution, legalism; he sees the current legal system as corrupt, in which judges have become an object of fear and there
is need for an “avenger”.

Similarly, his description of the diet of primitive man has distinctly Roman elements. The traditional constituents of early man’s diet for Roman authors are arbute berries, acorns, and mountain strawberries, all of which are mentioned by Ovid.

Ovid’s main concern, like that of both Hesiod and Aratus, is to contrast modern and primitive man. The one lived a simple life free from the ills of modern society; and the other is utterly wicked, despite the “progress” that technology and civilization have undergone. Ovid, however, virtually relegates the intermediate races to the background and in the process removes several elements of degradition that are present in the Hesiodic version. Instead of having mankind decline somewhat continuously in ordered regressions (e.g. a glorious afterlife for the men of the Golden Age to a less glorious afterlife for those of the silver to an ignominious one for the bronze race), Ovid simply has one negative element enter into the Silver Age (the seasons) and another into the Bronze Age (warfare), while neglecting to describe the conditions of either age more fully. It speaks for itself that his descriptions of the golden and iron races span twenty-three lines each, while those of the silver and bronze encompass only eleven and three lines respectively. Likewise, Ovid often has his Golden and Iron Ages parallel each other directly: the golden race explicitly lacks the instruments of trade and warfare, while the iron is flooded by them (and in fact he uses very similar language when describing the unnaturalness of seafaring in his account of both ages); the men of the Golden Age leave the land alone, not “wounding” it with the tools of agriculture, while the iron race digs into the earth not only for food, but also for riches; and the “faith and righteousness” (l.

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Anderson notes that the role of *vindex* was often claimed in propaganda by rulers such as Caesar and Octavian. Anderson, 162.
90) of the Golden Age is in stark contrast to the Iron Age, from which “shame and truth and faith” have “fled” (l. 129).

The emphasis on primeval man in contrast to modern man and the relegation of the intermediate ages to the background can also be explained by the fact that Ovid is Roman. In the interim between Aratus and Ovid (a span of roughly three hundred years), the myth underwent several changes at the hands of Latin authors. It was reduced from its original five races (or three in the case of Aratus) to two: the Age of Saturn and the Age of Jupiter, the former representing fortunate primitive man, the latter unfortunate “modern” man. 40 Ovid’s main focus, then, is on two ages; he discusses the Golden, when Saturn reigned, and the Iron, under Jupiter, in great detail while leaving the Silver and Bronze Ages largely undiscussed.

Ovid reconciles several previous traditions regarding early man in his version of the Myth of the Ages; and at the same time, like Hesiod and Aratus before him, he makes his account distinctly his own. It is clear throughout his version that he intends to continue the trend begun in the Phaenomena of linking technological and societal progress to moral regression. Although the Ovidian version lacks many of the moralizing elements of Aratus’s story (his golden and Silver Ages have supernatural elements, and thus could not be reproduced naturally; and it is unclear whether his races are linked by blood), it maintains its predecessor’s spirit: the onset of civilization has been coupled with a degradation in morals. Ovid takes this theme to an extreme that even Aratus does not dare, adding agriculture, laws, mining, and private property to the litany of the ills of material progress.

39 Lucretius describes the diet of primitive man in similar terms in De Rerum Natura. V, 939-42.
CHAPTER III: PHILOSOPHICAL AND OTHER USES OF THE MYTH

In addition to the actual accounts in didactic and quasi-historical texts, the Myth of the Ages is, understandably, very prone to philosophical and literary adaptation by those uneasy with their contemporary society. The very nature of the Myth of the Ages is ready material for cultural primitivists to mold into a critique of modern society in favor of the simplicity of early man. Among those who refer to the myth to condemn modern society and the fruits of civilization are Maximus of Tyre (in the context of Cynic philosophy), Seneca (in that of Stoic philosophy), and Tibullus. There is also the matter of Vergil’s enigmatic Fourth Eclogue, by far the most famous allusion to the Myth of the Ages, which seems to proclaim the return of a new Golden Age at the birth of an unnamed child. In each case these authors use the Myth of the Ages for their own purposes but at the same time maintain the traditions regarding it that have been passed down through Hesiod, Aratus, and Ovid.

III.1 CYNICISM AND MAXIMUS OF TYRE

The most extreme example in antiquity of a group striving to detach itself from modern society, seeking instead a more primitive way of life, is the Cynics. Cynicism has recently been called more of a cultural movement than an ordered philosophy. Boas suggests that “Cynicism is not a philosophy, it is an asocial, amoral, and anti-intellectual way of living”. This movement began with Antisthenes (c. 366 B.C.) in

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40 For several passages relating to the Ages of Saturn and Jupiter, see Lovejoy, 43, 53-5. Lovejoy quotes also a passage from the Heroïdes, in which Ovid himself contrasts the Age of Saturn to the Age of Jupiter.


Athens, who was heavily influenced by the Sophists. In literary tradition Cynic philosophy was born out of his contact with Socrates in prison, where he met with “what was later associated with the Cynic type in its most serious form: poverty, voluntary asceticism, physical insensibility and hardiness, psychical firmness, and absolute personal integrity”.  

These ideals of self-sufficiency and detachment from society take an almost absurdly asocial form in the person of Diogenes of Sinope, Antisthenes’s successor and the most famous member of the Cynic movement, around whom a legend developed that is embodied in anecdotes by later authors. These later accounts depict Diogenes as the cultural rebel *par excellence*, being called a “dog” instead of a man, a term that he himself probably saw as a complement. Diogenes is portrayed as acting asocially at every turn: eating in the marketplace, farting at assemblies, using foul language, and even masturbating in public. The driving motive for such actions, if indeed a rational motive can be found, is, in a phrase attributed to Diogenes, “defacing the currency of custom,” i.e. giving what is “in accordance with nature” precedence over what is “in accordance with custom or law”.

The Cynic ideals of poverty, asceticism, absolute self-reliance, and the precedence of nature over custom understandably fit in very well with the philosophy of primitivism. Seeing modern life as inherently immoral and favoring instead the ideals of self-sufficiency and simple living in accordance with nature, the Cynics turned sharply

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43 Ibid., 629.
46 Diogenes Laertius, VI, 71.
away from modern society and looked instead to the past; for the Cynic “[societal]
progress was not a god-given task but delusion and self-destruction”. 48 Most aspects of
modern civilization, such as housing, clothing, cooked foods, and societal organization,
were deemed unnatural and thus unnecessary. Diogenes himself reportedly “lived in a
wine jar, wrapped a single strip of cloth around his body in lieu of fur, feathers, or scales,
lapped up water like a dog, and withdrew from all social duties”. 49

The Myth of the Ages, then, would seem a logical and ready vehicle for the
Cynics to express their discontent with contemporary society. Unfortunately, owing to
the utter lack of early Cynic literature, such a connection is impossible to find anywhere
from the period during which Greek Cynicism flourished. It comes only later at the
hands of Maximus of Tyre (Second Century A.D.), a philosophical essayist writing at a
time when Diogenes and the Cynics had been made literary types and the objects of
legend. Still, the pairing of the Cynic life with the Myth of the Ages is intriguing and
reveals the primitivism inherent in the movement.

In one of his Dissertations he answers in the affirmative the question: “Is the
Cynic life to be preferred?” In responding to the question, he basically considers it to
mean: “Was life in the Golden Age preferable to contemporary life?” Maximus begins
his argument in Dissertation 36 by describing the creation of mankind and orienting the
reader in the time when “life was under Saturn” in “what Hesiod called the Golden Age.”
Prometheus’s role has interestingly been changed from culture-hero to creator of

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47 Lovejoy sums up this idea: “The Cynic ethics may be said to reduce, in its practical outcome, almost
wholly to primitivism. Cynicism was the first and most vigorous philosophical revolt of the civilized
against civilization in nearly all its essentials….” Lovejoy, 118.
48 Edelstein, 61.
mankind whose handiwork has been ruined by the introduction of societal and technological advances.

After briefly describing man’s simple life at creation, he turns to the “argument arising from the myth”: whether the life of the Golden Age or that of the Iron Age is to be preferred. Maximus’s description of the Iron Age is perhaps the most thorough extant condemnation of civilization in antiquity:

When, then, men, having the earth allotted to them, divided it up in portions amongst themselves, they surrounded themselves with walls and fortifications, and wrapped soft cloths around their bodies, and protected their feet with skins; and some hung gold about their necks, others about their heads, others about their fingers, as a kind of charm, both for luck and for ornament; and they built themselves houses, and invented locks and halls and gateways. They began, also, to molest the earth by digging and burrowing in it for metals; nor did they leave the sea unvexed, but constructed on it ships for war and travel and trade. Even the air they could not let alone, but plundered it by catching birds with bird-lime and nets and all manner of devices…

Maximus criticizes in the usual manner what would normally be called the “advances” of civilization. He attacks those that are condemned by both Ovid and Aratus and adds some new criticisms of his own: the iron race marks off private

Lovejoy, 145.

property, constructs fortifications, wears clothing and jewelry, builds houses and devices to protect them, engages in mining, constructs ships, and fills the sky with nets to catch birds. Land, air, and sea are polluted by technological advances.

From there Maximus goes on to criticize modern man’s lust for hunting, wealth, and warfare, his injustice towards his neighbors, and his systems of government, whether democracy or tyranny.

Having described the “discord and dissension” of the iron race, he poses a question: “To which shall we give the prize of victory?” What follows is an interrogation of primitive and modern man; a series of rhetorical questions are posed, asking which of the two would prefer his lifestyle over the other’s: primitive man living a simple life, “naked, without home, without art, having the whole earth as his city and his home,” or modern man with the drunkenness and lust that fills the world during the Iron Age. The obvious winner of the contest is primitive man. After the victor is named, Maximus eulogizes at length the person whom he sees as the embodiment of the simple life, Diogenes of Sinope, the most famous Cynic.53

Maximus does not give merely a description of a blissful time past, but a model of the way life should be. There is no fruit springing from the ground or rivers of milk and honey; there is only simplicity. Like the Aratean Golden Age, Maximus presents reproducible conditions: the absence of trade, technology, and war; anarchy in a political sense; and communal living without the extravagances

52 Translation by Lovejoy. Lovejoy, 149.
53 As Lovejoy notes, the eulogy of Diogenes is of the “usual vein,” following very closely Dio Chrysostom and other earlier writers; by the time of Maximus, Diogenes had become a legend who was known of mainly from anecdotes and stock descriptions. Ibid., 151.
of modern society. In short, the life of Diogenes (or at least his life as it is portrayed in subsequent literature), the life of the Cynics, is the proper way to live. Nakedness, poverty, and rigid asceticism are small prices to pay for a “life in accordance with nature”; and in fact the simplicity that these “hardships” bring is far superior to a life complicated by the “progress” of society.

The Myth of the Ages has thus been remolded at the hands of a philosopher to promote the goals of a philosophical movement. Though Maximus is writing five centuries after the Cynic founders, the Myth of the Ages (not in its original sense, but as modified by Aratus and Ovid) nevertheless provides a perfect literary model for the Cynic lifestyle. Cynicism as an asocial movement represents the very essence of the cultural primitivism that is injected into the myth by post-Hesiodic writers.

III.2 SENECA: STOIC PRIMITIVISM IN ITS MOST EXTREME FORM

Stoicism, a philosophical school founded by Zeno in the Fourth Century B.C., was heavily influenced in several respects by the Cynic movement. Indeed, before establishing the philosophical foundations of Stoicism, Zeno himself was in contact with the Cynic Crates before he became disgusted with the extremes of Cynic living. The Stoics maintained the Cynic notion of individual detachment and living in accordance with nature but focused more on emotional detachment, rejecting also the Cynic penchant for shockingly asocial actions. For the Stoics “the highest good… can only be found in what is conformable to nature”. With

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55 Ibid., 227.
regard to man himself, what is in accordance with his nature is rational living; and the Stoic ethics, summed up briefly, is that “[o]nly virtue is good, and happiness consists exclusively in virtue”.  

After diverging from the Cynics, some Stoics tended to strengthen the primitivism inherent in the Cynic movement, treating “nature” as equivalent to the cosmos (as opposed to “human nature”) to a “degree not apparent in the extant Cynic fragments”. Accordingly, men, as Nature made them (“Nature” being synonymous with the Stoic creator God for the Roman Stoics), “must have been perfect; thus there was implicit in the Stoic piety the assumption of a fall of mankind from its primeval and natural excellence”.  

This strain of Stoic primitivism found a ready vehicle for expression in the Myth of the Ages, as one sees clearly in the Aratean version. Stoic versions of the Myth of the Ages take two basic forms, the first being a description of a simple primeval Golden Age that is juxtaposed with modern civilization (as in the *Phaenomena*) and the second a portrayal of a future Golden Age in accordance with Stoic cyclical theory. Both serve basically the same function as a critique of modern society. However, the Stoic notion of a future Golden Age is not, as one would expect, an optimistic look forward to a time in which all of society’s ills will have been purged. Such a notion is strictly incompatible with Stoic cyclical theory and determinism. For the Golden Age to return in the context of world cycles, a *magnus annus* will have had to pass, at the end of which the universe will have been resolved completely into fire (in an *ecpyrosis*, or cosmic

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56 Ibid.
57 Lovejoy, 261.
conflagration), from which the world will have been born again and everything will have happened as it did in the previous world cycle. The Golden, Silver, and Bronze Ages will rise and fall in turn; and “again there will exist Socrates and Plato and every man, with the same friends and fellow citizens, and he will suffer the same fate and will meet with the same experiences and undertake the same deeds”. With such a deterministic outlook upon each cycle, optimism of a future Golden Age is impossible. The Iron Age will return just as before, the Stoics will decry man’s current lot and look to a future Golden Age just as before, the universe will resolve itself into flames just as before, and these things will be repeated in exactly the same way ad infinitum.

Both the cyclical and traditional outlook on the Myth of the Ages find eloquent expression in the most extreme cultural primitivist of the Stoic school, the Roman Seneca (A.D. 1-65). Before dealing with the myth itself, which appears several times in Seneca’s plays, however, it is perhaps best to look briefly at his philosophical views on advanced civilization. This topic is dealt with exhaustively in his Moral Epistles 88 and 90.

In the former Seneca attacks the so-called liberalia studia as unnecessary; he argues that life gives man knowledge and experience far greater than could be extracted from Homer or Hesiod. He then asserts that most traditional subjects are improper topics of study, including mathematics and music. The only subject that should be pursued is virtue, the sole source of happiness for a Stoic. The passage

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58 Ibid.
59 Nemesius, De Natura Hominis. c. 38. Translation by Lovejoy. Ibid., 84.
61 See Lovejoy, 264-78, for text and translation of the full passages.
is inherently primitivistic. All of the arts of society are useless and should not be studied, and virtue alone (taught by life and by nature) will lead man in the right direction.

Moral Epistle 90 is more explicit in its primitivism. Just as in Moral Epistle 88, Seneca asserts that philosophy is the highest (and in fact the only proper) topic of study. In the process he speaks of the first men who “being uncorrupted… followed nature”. The leader of these men was chosen because of his innate quality of mind, rather than the lesser means by which rulers ascend to power in contemporary society. He goes on to say that the arts of modern society and the tools of men cannot have been discovered by philosophy (refuting a claim by Posidonius), but that “the cunning of men, not their wisdom, invented all these things.” He asserts that Diogenes (the ascetic) is far superior to Daedalus (the inventor); and he goes on to criticize the superfluous inventions of modern society, such as devices meant to suffuse one’s home in perfume and dining rooms with movable ceilings. In summation: “Necessities come into being with simple effort; towards luxuries one must labor…. Luxury has departed from nature, luxury who day by day increases herself, through so many ages she grows and pushes the intellect towards vices.” He concludes logically from this assertion that early man was both the happiest and the most morally upright: “What race of men is happier than that one? They delighted in all nature in common.” But soon avarice enters upon the scene, which turns the fields,

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formerly unplowed and fertile for all, into objects of contention and creates private property and with it the excesses of modern living.

Seneca’s primitivism, thus set forth in his philosophical writings, finds a literary model in the Myth of the Ages. He refers directly or indirectly to the myth in three of his dramas, the Medea, the Phaedra, and the (perhaps pseudo-Senecan) Octavia. A brief choral ode in the Medea (ll. 301-379) speaks of the perils of seafaring; the chorus criticizes the first sailor and extols early men, who knew an “honest age, far removed from deceit” (l. 329-30). After condemning seafaring itself as too dangerous, the chorus refers to cyclical theory and, implicitly, a new Golden Age: “There will be an age in later years, in which Oceanus will loosen the chains of all things and the great earth will lie open and Tethys will cover the young world” (ll. 376-8).

In Phaedra ll. 483-564, Hippolytus, confronted with Phaedra’s desire, seeks refuge in the Golden Age of the past; the speech, divided into two sections, first “praises the simple life of ancient ways” and then “gives a quasi-historical sketch of the development of civilization and its decline from primitive ease and innocence to the corruptions of modern life”. The second section begins: “In this manner, I think, the first age poured forth those who lived mixed with the gods. There was no blind lust for gold; no holy boundary stone, a judge for the people, had divided the fields in the open country; not yet had gullible ships

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63 Seneca, however, knew well that he could not be present for a second Golden Age. His interpretation of a future Golden Age is strictly in tune with Stoic cosmology. In Natural Questions. III, 30, 8, he says: “[After cosmic destruction, every animal will be born anew and man, unknowing of crime and born under better auspices, will be given to the earth. But for them also innocence will not endure, except when they are new. Vice creeps in swiftly.” All things will be destroyed, man will be born innocent, he will be corrupted, and the process will repeat itself infinitely.

traversed the sea: each man had not come to know his waters; no walls had girded cities with immense mass and frequent towers, no soldier wielded savage arms in his hand….” (ll. 525-33). After attacking these traditional ills of the Iron Age (private property, seafaring, and warfare), Seneca rounds off the list with agriculture, greed, and ambition.

The third and final passage comes in the Octavia, which may or may not have been written by Seneca himself. This issue is, however, inconsequential in the present discussion. Whether or not Seneca is the true author, the passage reflects in Senecan style the same notion that he repeats implicitly and explicitly in his other dramas and philosophical writings: modern society is marked by extravagance and bloodshed, but primitive man lived a life of bliss without such things. In the passage Seneca (an actual character in the play) speaks at length about the Stoic cyclical view of the universe (ll. 388-448). The author-character, condemning himself for seeking a lofty station in life because of his present trouble with Nero, tells of the destruction of the world and the subsequent return of “the maiden Justice” to a world in which warfare and private property will be absent. Soon enough, however, a new race will arise that engages in hunting and fishing, agriculture, mining, private property, and warfare; along with these advances will enter violence, greed, and the “worst evil,” luxury.

These three passages from Seneca’s tragedies reflect the most extreme (extant) examples of Stoic cultural primitivism. The Myth of the Ages takes for 

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the most part its usual form as modified by Aratus and Ovid. The influence of
Seneca’s fellow Stoic Aratus is most tangible in the Medea passage, criticizing
seafaring, and the Octavia passage, which explicitly mentions Astraea twice (II.
398 and 425). Throughout the three passages the targets remain mostly the same
as those of Ovid and Aratus: seafaring and warfare (mentioned by both) and
agriculture, private property, and mining (condemned by Ovid only).

Just as in the Phaenomena, The conditions that Seneca describes are ones
that can be reproduced naturally. He means clearly to imply that important Stoic
ideals are embodied in the Golden Age. Accordingly, his Golden Age is more of a
model than a mere description of a supernatural time past. Seneca does diverge
from Aratus in one important area: he explicitly condemns agriculture. Seneca,
then, cannot be looking back to the simple agricultural stage of human history that
his predecessor extolled.

Nevertheless, Seneca follows Aratus and Ovid’s conception of the
prehistory of man closely and adds further Stoic elements. Mankind is in its
current state of sin and wickedness because it lives too extravagantly. This
extravagance was brought about directly by the series of inventions that led to
modern society: the sword, the plow, the ship, and so on. If man were to once
again “live in accordance with nature” as the golden race did, he would live a life
of true virtue and hence a life of true happiness.

66 For the debate on authenticity see L.Y. Whitman, ed., The Octavia: Introduction, Text, and Commentary
(Stuttgart: Verlag Paul Haupt Bern, 1978), 5-12; Whitman falls into the (minority) camp of those who
believe that Seneca is the true author.
III.3 Tibullus, the Age of Saturn, and the Age of Love

Tibullus (born between 55 and 48 B.C.) mentions the Myth of the Ages twice in his Elegies. Like Vergil, Maximus, and to some extent Ovid, he reduces the original five ages to two, the Age of Saturn and the age of Jupiter. The first book of the Elegies is a series of reflections, memories, and prayers arising from Tibullus’s recent separation from the object of his affection, Delia. One of these reflections is on the Age of Saturn, which he contrasts with the current warlike Age of Jupiter. By the time Tibullus writes his Elegies, the myth had been thoroughly transformed at the hands of Aratus; and in fact the former follows the latter closely in impli cating technological progress, especially seafaring and the smithing of the first sword, as a corrupting influence upon modern man.


quam bene Saturno vivebant rege, prius quam
tellus in longas est patefacta vias!
nondum caeruleas pinus contemperat undas
effusum ventis praebueratque sinum;
nec vagus ignotis repetens compendia terris
presserat externa navita merce ratem.
illo non validus subiit juga tempore taurus
non domito frenos ore momordit equus;
non domus ulla fores habuit, non fixus in agris
qui regeret certis finibus arva lapis;
ipsae mella dabant quercus, ultroque ferebant
obvia securis ubera lactis oves;
non acies non ira fuit non bella nec ensem
immiti saevus duxerat arte faber.
nunc Jove sub domino caedes et vulnera semper,
nunc mare, nunc leti mille repente viae.
parce, pater: timidum non me perjuria terrent,
non dicta in sanctos impia verba deos.68

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How well they lived when Saturn was king, before the earth was laid open into long roads! Not yet had the pine defied the dark blue waves and not yet had it presented its unfurled sail to the winds; nor had the wandering sailor, seeking profits in unknown lands, weighed down his raft with foreign trade. In that time, the strong bull did not go under the yoke, the horse did not bite upon reigns with a tamed mouth; no house had doors, no stone was put in place in fields to govern boundaries with fixed limits; oaks gave forth honey by themselves, and of their own accord sheep offered udders full of milk to carefree men; there was no blade, no anger, no wars, nor had a savage smith led out the sword with unkind skill. Now under lord Jupiter there are always murders and wounds, now there is the sea, now there are a thousand roads of sudden death. Spare me, father: false oaths do not frighten me, nor do impious words said towards the holy gods.

The similarities to the Aratean and Ovidian versions are striking. The advances of civilization that have led to the downfall of man are the usual ones: the ship and the sword (Aratus’s two culprits), coupled with agriculture and the domestication of animals (criticized by Ovid, but not Aratus). Tibullus’s Golden Age, like that of Ovid, is marked by “soft primitivism”; honey flows from trees and milk from sheep, and the men living under Saturn are “carefree.” His own addition to this traditional mix is the introduction of doors and roads. Tibullus’s Iron Age, under Jupiter, in contrast, is marked by the usual technological and societal advances and also their companions, impiety and violence.

More interesting is a passage that comes later in the *Elegies*. In Book II, 3, 35-74, Tibullus, in attempting to win over his dark mistress Nemesis, describes the Iron Age as an Age of Pillage and the Golden Age as one of Love:

“The Iron Age praises not Love but Pillage” (l. 35). He goes on to assert the role of pillage in various evils currently afflicting mankind and implicitly criticizes technological progress at the same time: “Pillage girded the wild blade with

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69 Nemesis (Book II) and Delia (Book I) are probably pseudonyms for two real women, but who they are is unknown. Malby, 42-6, and R.J. Ball, *Tibullus the Elegist: A Critical Survey* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1983), 11.
discordant arms: from here blood, from here murders and death came nearer.

Pillage bid dangers to be doubled on the wandering sea, when it gave warlike prowss to dubious ships” (ll. 37-40). The desire for plunder drove man also to mark off private property, to travel to foreign lands, seeking “foreign stone” (i.e. mining), and to desire luxury and extravagance. This attack on pillage is largely aimed at the current suitor of Nemesis, a foreign ex-slave.

In the second half of the passage, he changes his target to agriculture, specifically the gods Bacchus and Ceres, whom he blames for taking Nemesis away from him. In the process he criticizes the diet of modern man and extolls that of primitive man (or at least the Roman conception of his diet): “Oh crops begone, so that girls would not be only in the fields. Let the acorn provide food and let water be drunk in the primitive way. Acorns nourished men of old, and they loved here and there unceasingly. What would it have harmed not to have had sown furrows? And at that time, to those upon whom Love breathed, gentle Venus presented joys openly in a shady vale” (ll. 67-71). There is a stark contrast between the modern Age of Pillage, filled with ships, swords, and mining, all brought about out of a desire for plunder, and the Saturnian Age, marked by simplicity and love.

Tibullus should perhaps not be taken altogether seriously in these passages. He probably does not intend to propound real primitivistic views here, especially given the whimsical nature of the latter passage. The two passages, however, are very interesting in the context of the Myth of the Ages. Tibullus uses the myth, like the Cynics and Stoics, for his own purposes, not for purely

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70 Empedocles saw the Golden Age in a similar fashion. Empedocles, Fragments 128 and 130.
philosophical reasons, but as playful reflections on his lost loves. The fact that the myth appears here in a work of elegiac poetry rather than in its more common position in a didactic or semi-historical work such as the *Metamorphoses* or *Works and Days* attests to the popularity of the myth. The passages of Tibullus also make it evident exactly how much cultural primitivism had been embedded in the myth since Hesiod’s version. Like his contemporary Ovid’s account, almost every line in Tibullus’s passages on the subject of the Ages of Man is an unequivocal condemnation of modern civilization and contemporary *mores*. By the time of Tibullus, the myth was clearly thought of almost entirely in terms of cultural primitivism: its primary purpose was not simply to be an interesting story or a didactic tale, but as a means to criticize modern civilization and its technological and societal advances.

**III.4 THE FOURTH ECLOGUE OF VERGIL**

Vergil’s Fourth Eclogue, the so-called “Messianic Eclogue,” announcing the return of the Golden Age, is at the same time the most famous and the most misunderstood allusion to the Myth of the Ages. In the poem Vergil announces that the Sibylline oracles have been fulfilled and that the Golden Age will soon return, the catalyst of which is the birth of a child in the consulship of Pollio. The poem is marked by numerous traditions regarding the Golden Age, some of which come from Ovid, Aratus, and Hesiod, and others from unknown sources that seem to have been previously alien to the Myth of the Ages. Early in the poem he writes: “Now the Maiden returns, the Saturnian kingdom returns, now a new race
is sent down from the lofty sky. Favor the boy just now being born, chaste
Lucina, with whom the iron race will disappear and the golden shall surge forth
upon the entire earth” (ll. 6-10). Vergil here recalls Hesiod (the new race being
“sent down from the lofty sky”), Aratus (“Virgo,” i.e. Astraea, is mentioned), and
Roman notions of the “Saturnian kingdom.” Like Aratus and Ovid, he mentions
in several places the evils of technological advances: “Still, there will arise a few
traces of the old deceit, which bid men to tempt the sea with ships, to gird towns
with walls, to dig the plow in the earth” (ll. 31-33); and “even the voyager
himself will yield to the sea, and no seafaring pine will exchange wares; the
whole earth will bear all things; the ground will endure no rake, the vines no
sickle; the rustic farmer will also soon release the yoke from his oxen” (ll. 37-41).
The ills of civilization are more or less the same as the ones that Ovid mentions:
seafaring, fortification, and agriculture. At the same time there are other
traditions that have not been mentioned in any previous account of the myth, such
as the reign of Apollo (probably associated with the Sibyl, the oracle of Apollo). There is a more extended notion of impossibility than simply the spontaneously
generated food of the Hesiodic version: “nor will the herds fear great lions” (l. 22)
and “now the ram will alter his wool in the meadows with sweetly red murex, now
with saffron lutum; spontaneously sandyx will clothe grazing lambs” (ll. 43-5).

This internal mingling of traditions, however, is minor in comparison with
the confusion inherent in the overarching scheme of the poem. To understand this
it is necessary to return to the beginning of the Fourth Eclogue: “Sicilian Muses,

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let us sing of things a little greater! Trees and the lowly tamarisks do not please all; if we sing of woods, let the woods be worthy of a consul. The last age of the Cumaean song has now come; the great order of ages has been born anew” (ll. 1-5). Indeed, here at the outset is where the uncertainties begin to arise. Exactly what the “Cumaean song” and the “great order of the ages” are have been debated at great length. What the “Cumaean song” prophesied is unknown, since the Sybiline Books were destroyed by fire in 83 B.C.; Lovejoy reproduces one of the “Sibylline Oracles” that foretells in similar language a future age of bliss, but admits that it is almost certainly spurious.\(^{73}\)

Similarly, “the great order of the ages” is problematic. It is possible that Vergil may be referring to the cyclical theory of the Stoics; this would seem to be supported by his use of language that is both cyclical and deterministic: “there will then be another Tiphys and another Argo that will bear chosen heroes; there will be also other wars and again great Achilles will be sent to Troy” (ll. 34-6). It has been thought until recently that this is probably the meaning of the “great order of the ages”.\(^{74}\) Such an interpretation, however, is hopelessly at odds with Stoic cosmology. The governing system of the poem cannot be the Stoic conception of world cycles; for a cycle (either 18,000 or 10,800 years in length)\(^ {75}\) to begin anew would require universal destruction by conflagration (the ecpyrosis). Vergil believes that the child who has just been born will grow to perform great deeds and usher in an age of peace and prosperity in the near future,

\(^{73}\) Lovejoy, 85.
\(^{74}\) Smith, 200, and R. Coleman, ed., *Vergil: Eclogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 130-1
a notion that is obviously incompatible with universal destruction and cyclical determinism.

There is a second option that has been suggested: Servius asserts that there is a separate Sibylline scheme of world cycles, incorporating to some extent the Stoic notion of the Great Year, that involves ten ages. Such a system, however, as Rose points out, is incompatible with ancient astronomy (which, in fact, Vergil seems to have had little interest in to begin with). There is also the problem that, beyond Servius’s brief discussion of the matter, no further detail concerning the Sibylline scheme exists.

No satisfactory cyclical system, then, has been suggested; and confusion does not end there. The “young boy” that Vergil praises is not named. This has led to a wide range of suggestion regarding the boy’s identity and is perhaps much of the reason for the poem’s preservation and popularity, since later Christians mistakenly identified the boy with Christ. Indeed, it is relatively unlikely that, after so much scholarly debate on the subject, the boy will ever be named convincingly.

Scholarship on the Fourth Eclogue has the overall air of ambiguity, but the answer may be simpler than the discussion would seem to imply. It seems highly probable that Vergil does not have a precise cyclical or astrological scheme in mind (he was of course neither a philosopher nor an astrologer by trade). Lovejoy briefly mentions what is perhaps the truth regarding the passage: “The problem of

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75 Lovejoy, 80.
76 Rose, 172-4.
its precise meaning is perhaps insoluble…. That Virgil intended anything more
than a gracefully hyperbolic complement to the father of the child is uncertain”.
This seems to be the most logical answer to the problem of the Fourth Eclogue. It
is at its heart a complement to a father regarding his newborn child.

Vergil is not opposed to flattery, outright or implicit, in the Eclogues or
his other works. He explicitly praises the consul Pollio (one candidate for the
father, though an unlikely one) in the Fourth Eclogue itself: “let the woods be
worthy of a consul” (l.3) and “with you…this glory of time shall enter, with you
as consul, Pollio…. [w]ith you as leader” (ll. 11-3). He manages also to have
rustic herdsmen singing the praises of the same Pollio in Eclogue III (ll. 84-9).
More broadly speaking, Vergil was not opposed to inserting passages, thinly
veiled as more serious topics but aimed mostly at impressing his patrons, into his
other works. The most obvious example is the Marcellus episode in Aeneid VI, a
passage fairly similar in nature to the Fourth Eclogue, but speaking of the great
deeds the boy would have done had he lived, not what he will do in the future.
The episode is certainly not a light piece of imperial flattery, but it is also not
what one would call necessary in the context of the Aeneid. It is likewise hard to
believe that the Fourth Eclogue, stripped of its reputation and that of Vergil,
should be treated as, at its heart, anything more than overblown panegyric.

As for the inconsistencies mentioned previously, much ink has been spilt
over what are perhaps impossible (but more pertinently, inconsequential)

78 Clausen, 126-9.
79 Lovejoy, 85.
problems to solve. Vergil refers to a “great order of the ages,” a “Cumaean song,” and a “reign of Apollo,” which undoubtedly meant something to him and to his contemporary audience. Unfortunately, the sources that would explain such phrases to modern readers have been lost; and further attempts to discern their meaning are perhaps mere exercises in futility.

Putting aside these difficulties, there are interesting parallels to Hesiod, Aratus, and Ovid that show to some extent how the myth evolved and was reconciled by later authors: cultural primitivism, spontaneously generated food, and the reduction of Ages are all present. Beyond this, the Fourth Eclogue is worth mentioning mainly because of its literary fame and misinterpretation. It is, strictly speaking, not a primitivistic take on the Myth of the Ages; but nor is it truly “millenarianism,” as Boas calls it.\footnote{The return of the Golden Age would become a feature of imperial flattery as well, being mentioned in the reigns of at least sixteen different emperors, including Nero and Augustus. M.L. West, \textit{Works and Days}, 177.} Given the obsequious tone of the Fourth Eclogue and similar Vergilian passages, it is improbable that the poet truly believes that a millennium-like period of peace and prosperity is approaching; it is more likely that he is simply applying in an extreme way the time-honored art of literary flattery.

\footnote{\textit{Dictionary of the History of Ideas}, vol. 3, s.v. “Primitivism” by G. Boas, 581.}
CONCLUSION

The evolution of the Myth of the Ages is on the one hand gradual and linear, progressing steadily towards the end of cultural primitivism, and on the other contradictory and twisting, bending in whatever way a given author may wish in order to transmit his desired message. In the earliest version Hesiod intends only to show his contemporaries that they have fallen from a primeval life of bliss to a modern life of hardship, though by no fault of their own, and to suggest the best means to deal with this new life (i.e. by honest labor and by honoring the gods). In addition, he makes a Near Eastern story distinctly Greek by injecting Greek religious and historical ideas into the myth. Aratus further transforms the myth to promote the Stoic ideals of simplicity and “life in according with nature.” Accordingly, he removes the supernatural elements of the Hesiodic version and emphasizes instead natural features (the lack of the sword and the ship, the presence of vegetarianism, and races that are related by blood), suggesting personal responsibility for man’s fall and the possibility of a return to his life of happiness (if only he were to live a more simple life). Ovid reconciles the two views but takes Aratus’s idea a step further, lamenting the advances of civilization in nearly every line of his account of the myth. In the process, however, he makes the Myth of the Ages distinctly Roman, emphasizing peculiarly Roman traditions about the prehistory of man.

This trend, apparent in all three actual accounts of the story, is further reflected in allusions to it by authors of other literary genres. Maximus and Seneca, intending to promote philosophical ideals (the former those of the Cynics
and the latter those of the Stoics), use the Myth of the Ages as a standardized criticism of the fruits of civilization, what it had in fact become by their time. Tibullus takes the same myth and emphasizes the same theme, but has a different goal in mind: to playfully reflect upon two lost loves. Likewise, Vergil maintains the Ovidian and Aratean motif of pre-civilized simplicity but changes the purpose of the myth radically, using it instead as hyperbolic panegyric to praise the birth of a child and to flatter the child’s father.

The first aspect of the evolution of the myth, that each author uses it for his own purpose, seems obvious; but it is perhaps worth understanding just how diverse these purposes can be (panegyric, history, philosophy, and humor) while still maintaining the second aspect of the evolution, the increasingly prevalent theme of the tension between material progress and moral regress. Regression in morality became inexorably paired with technological and societal progress after Hesiod. No matter what the intended message of later authors alluding to the myth may have been, this pairing remained.
Works Cited


