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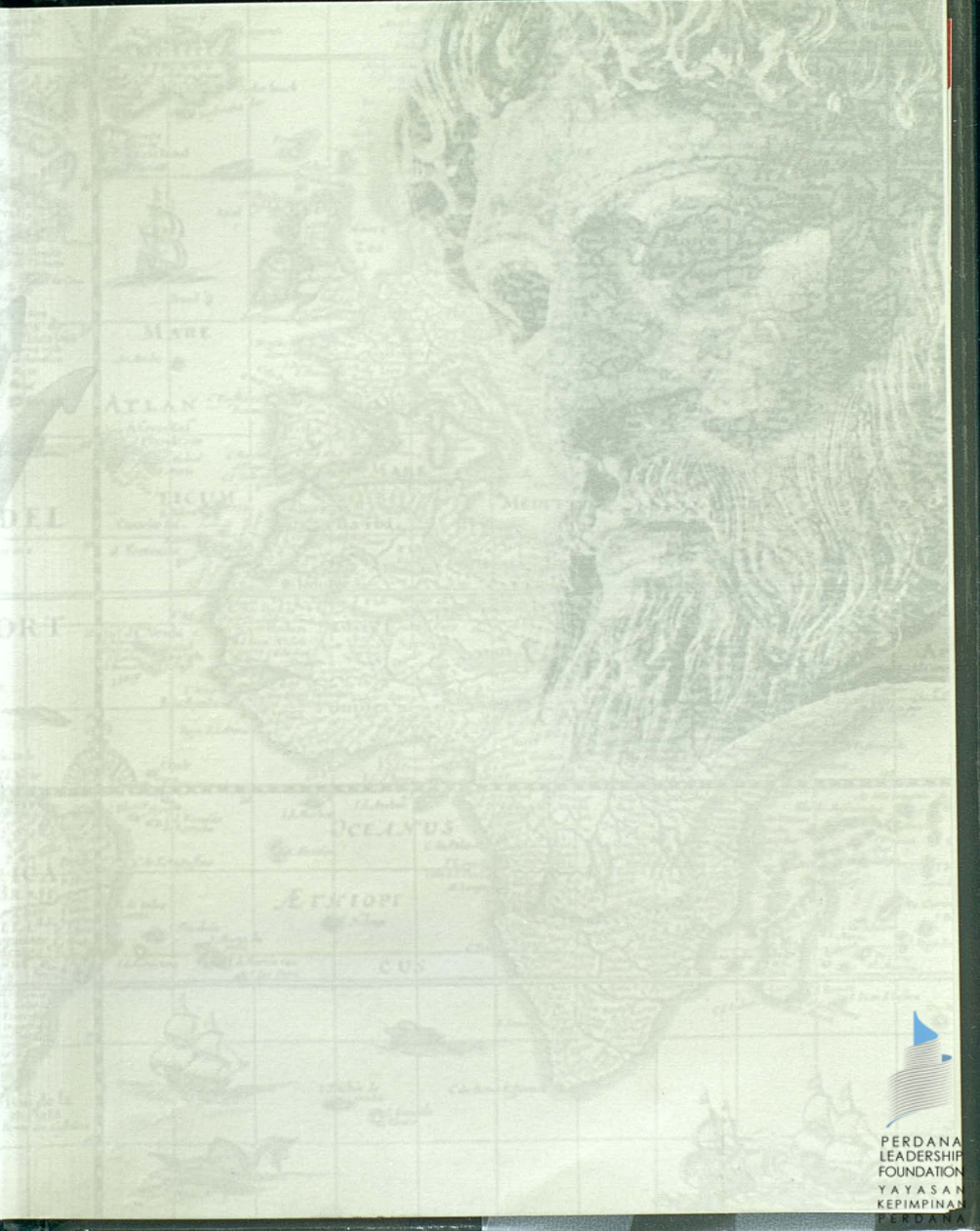


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Including mythologies from all over the globe, from the Far East to Siberia, *World Mythology* recounts the myths and traditions, and explains the social and cultural influences behind some of the most fascinating civilisations in history.

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# Introduction

WE OWE THE WORD myth, like many others in common use today, to the ancient Greeks. No modern language has a substitute, and there can be no better way of understanding what mythology is about than by taking a look at the original meaning of the word.

Descended from the idea of speech itself, myth had by the fifth century BC come to mean a story, a narrative of events. The historian Herodotus, who wrote an account of the wars between the Greeks and the Persians, was anxious to record everything he could about this great struggle, even if some of the tales might be regarded as myths or legends. He admitted that he was unsure of their factual accuracy, but such was their interest they simply could not be ignored. It was for his reader to decide what could or could not be believed. This suggestion of a myth being a tall story, something fictitious rather than a statement of fact, was pushed even further by the philosopher Plato, who was concerned to distinguish between those things we can accept as being true and those we cannot.

But the rise of reasoning in Ancient Greece did not immediately undermine the importance of mythology. For it was

realised how myths were traditional stories which embodied the heritage of the Greek-speaking world. They contain, a mythologist would say today, the basic thought-patterns by which the ancient Greeks knew themselves as a separate people. He might add that the strength of Greek mythology, like other notable traditions, lay in its collective narrative. Unlike a story composed by a single author, a myth always stands on its own, with a plot and a set of characters easily recognised by those who listen to the story-teller, poet or dramatist making use of it. When for instance, the Athenians watched plays performed every year at their religious festivals, they were already aware of the events a playwright like Aeschylus or Sophocles would so often choose to tell. The aftermath of the Trojan War never ceased to fascinate them, nor did the tragedy of Oedipus ever fail to hold their attention. That after becoming aware of his terrible deeds of patricide and incest, Oedipus should have chosen to die in the grove of Colonus near Athens made his tragedy a subject of intense local interest. Sophocles's play *Oedipus at Colonus* can indeed be said to draw together the deepest feelings of the ancient Greeks about crime, punishment and fate in the final release of the blind Theban ex-king.