

Anonymous, *On Unbelievable Stories*

translated into English by Greta Hawes

translated from the text of Festa (1902)

1.

One should know that some say that the Egyptians were the earliest people; others say the Phrygians, but that, of the Greeks, the oldest were the Athenians and the Pelasgians, who are now called Arcadians. Of the cities, they say that the Athenian Acropolis was founded by Cecrops, the dual-formed, autochthonous hero. The second oldest was the city founded by Phoroneus, son of Inachus, and third was Itonus in Thessaly, founded by Deucalion, son of Prometheus.

2. The seven wonders.

The statue of Zeus at Olympia, 36 cubits tall. The temple of Artemis at Ephesus. The altar of horn at Delos, said to have been created from the right horns of victims sacrificed to the god in a single day. The Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. The pyramids of Egypt, of which the largest is 400 cubits tall. The walls of Babylon. The Colossus of Rhodes, 70 cubits tall, which Chares of Lindus built.

Some include on this list also the Asclepion at Epidauros, the altar at Parion, the hanging gardens, the standing Athena statue in Athens, and the palace of Cyrus.

3. The golden fleece.

It is a poetic fabrication that the object guarded in Colchis was a truly golden fleece; it was a book written on leather containing instructions on how to produce gold through alchemy. And so, in all likelihood, the men of that time called it 'golden' because of the alchemical power it possessed.

4. How it is said Apollo and Poseidon built the walls of Troy.

Apollo and Poseidon are said to have built the walls of Troy. But this is not so: rather, Laomedon built the city in an impious way. There was an exceptionally revered temple of Apollo and Poseidon on the acropolis; he plundered it and spent the money on building the walls.

5. Cerberus.

The dog Cerberus belonged to Aidoneus, king of the Thesprotians. Thieves seized him at night and hid him underground in a dark cave. But Heracles retrieved him and gave him to Eurystheus.

6. The wrestling match between Heracles and Achelous.

They say that Heracles fought Achelous in single combat. But here is how it was: the Achelous flowed between the Aetolians and the Curetes and would cut off great tracts of land, sometimes

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favouring one tribe and sometimes the other. As a result, a great quarrel arose. Heracles, coming to the Aetolians as an ally, defeated the Curetes and, having confined the river in a single channel and one outlet, he strengthened the land to the advantage of the Aetolians and took away Deianeira, daughter of Oeneus.

7. Pasiphae.

Pasiphae, having fallen in love with a young local man, made Daedalus her accomplice and assistant in the affair. Even prior to this, she had been in the habit of watching whenever he was working on something, and so, while he was making a very beautiful statue of a cow, which resembled a living one to a very great extent, she continually went to Daedalus' house to see the cow and have sex with her lover, until the affair was detected. The stories told about this are mythical.

8. The Chimaera.

This is what Plutarch says about the Chimaera in his monograph *De Mulierum Virtutibus* [248c]: The Chimaera was an east-facing hill, and in summer it produced violent and fiery reflections and flares which, spreading across the plain, would cause the crops to wither. Bellerophon, recognizing this, cut through the smoothest part of the cliff, which was primarily responsible for sending out the reflections.

9. Narcissus.

It is said about him that, after seeing his own reflection in water and falling in love with it, Narcissus leapt into the water to embrace his reflection, and drowned. This is not true. He drowned not in water, but in this way: having seen his own image in the fluid nature of his physical body, that is, his corporeal existence, which is the image most distant from the true soul, and conceiving a desire to embrace this as a part of himself, that is to say, falling in love with life according to this image, he drowned, submerged, having destroyed his true soul, that is to say the life that truly belongs to it—as the saying goes: fearful of his own shadow. This teaches us to be wary of enthusiasm for the most distant thing as if it were the most important thing because this brings about the death of the soul, that is, the destruction of true judgement about things and of the appropriate perfection in it in accordance with reality. So says the author of *Proverbial expressions in Plato*.

10. Alexander.

One should know that Alexander, or Paris, did not judge the goddesses but, being clever, he composed an encomium on them. This gave rise to the myth that he decided a contest between Pallas, Hera, and Aphrodite.

11. Pan.

Polyaenus, in his *Stratagems* [1.2], says that Pan was the first to invent a military formation and that he named it a 'phalanx'. He arranged the wings [lit. 'horns'] on the right and left, and so they depict him with horns. Furthermore, he was the first to instil fear in enemy forces, using cunning skill. After learning from sentries that a great force of enemy soldiers was attacking him, Dionysus was terrified. Pan, however, was not afraid: by night he signalled to Dionysus' army to raise a great war cry. They

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sounded the trumpet and yelled, and the rocks and valleys echoed it back. Stricken with fear, the enemy fled. And so, honouring Pan's stratagem, we sing of his beloved Echo, and call the empty, night-time fears of armies 'panics'.

12. Endymion.

Endymion was the first to devote himself to examining the stars and so he would stay awake the entire night and mostly sleep during the day. Because of this, he has been called Selene's lover, from his attachment to her for that purpose. So says Plato.

13. Phaethon.

Likewise, it is said that Phaethon was the son of Helios. But here is how it was. Phaethon calculated the course of the sun, as Endymion did with the moon, but these calculations were not precise and he died leaving his account incomplete.

14. Bellerophon.

Bellerophon's horse was not winged, as in the myth. Rather, by pursuing astronomy, turning his thoughts to higher things and wandering amongst the stars he went up to the heavens not on a horse but by using his mind.

15. Icarus.

Icarus, in the grip of youthful impetuosity and recklessness, seeking unreasonable things, and being excitable in his mind, lost hold of reality, came adrift from all reason, and was carried down into a sea of unfathomable affairs. The Greeks tell this story in another way and create the Icarian Gulf from it.

16. Io.

Io, the daughter of Arestor, was a priestess of Hera. When her father discovered that she was pregnant while still unmarried (for she no longer appeared virginal but seemed larger and prettier than usual because of her sexual maturity, so that the Argives called her 'cow'), he was enraged. He put her under guard and appointed an uncle, Argos, to watch over her. Argos, because he did not sleep but remained ever-vigilant and never allowed her the opportunity to escape, was given the name 'Panoptes' ['all eyes']. But, at Io's request, a local man named Hermaon killed Argos without being seen. Io, now free, fled with her accomplices and boarded a merchant ship. She was carried by a storm over that sea which is now called 'Ionian', and she passed many places until she came safely to Aeria, where she was thought a goddess on account of her beauty. So says Charax in his *Hellenica*.

17. Dionysus.

Charax says that Semele, the daughter of Cadmus, is said to have fallen pregnant while still unmarried. During the birth a thunderbolt struck; she disappeared but the baby survived. The people imagined her to have obtained divine honours, as is said of those struck by lightning, and they called

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her 'Thyone' ['Offering']. Cadmus argued that the child was divine because he had been rescued from the fire, and gave him the patronymic of the Egyptian Dionysus.

Alexander of Aphrodisias says the following in his *Physica*: It is not without reason that they tell these stories: the Bacchant follows Dionysus because dancing results from wine, Satyrs because of lightness of movement, Lydians because some find release through him and a leopard because of the vividly coloured hallucinations experienced in drunkenness: for under the influence of wine each person has his own different, variegated reasoning, and the pelt of the animal is, likewise, densely dappled. A single Bacchant, raving, committed murder since many, intoxicated, also kill. Dionysus is naked because wine provokes the disclosure of drinkers' thoughts. He lusts after Aphrodite and Ariadne because drinkers are commonly struck by extreme desire for women. He has with him a bald man because large quantities of wine greatly empty the brain and harm and wither the body, and because of this they also call him 'Maron'. [. . .] He was struck with a thunderbolt and placed in a thigh: this means that often wine which has been placed in the sun is then brought to perfection in its blending and strength while hidden in jars. He has four women as his sisters because wine progresses through four changes and transformations.

18. The chains in Homer.

Some say that Homer uses the word 'chain' allegorically to mean the days, and the rays of the sun.

19. Cronus.

It is not true that Cronus was bound by Zeus. Rather, Cronus travels on an outer orbit far from us which appears slow and is difficult for humans to observe. On this account it is said that he stands still and, in a sense, is bound with fetters. The depth of the lower atmosphere is called Tartarus.

20. The fire from Diomedes' weapons.

What is that incessant fire which would flash from the weapons of Diomedes? Athena is traditionally known as the 'lightbringer' and she is the patroness of intellectual activity and true wisdom. She lit a fire in Diomedes' soul, and took away the mist, that is to say his ignorance, in the presence of which the soul is blind. For it is said: What is more I have taken the mist from your eyes, which before was upon them [// 5.127]. And that's what the fire should be thought to be, and it is Athena who provides it. Thus in Proclus.

21. 'The oak axle creaked loudly'.

The oak axle creaked loudly under her weight [// 5.838]. But how can something weightless cause the effects of weight? They say that the things which participate must be regarded as analogous to whatever it is in which they participate. Although the god being participated in is one, the soul participates in one way, the intellect in another, the imagination in another, and perception in another: they participate untwistedly, indivisibly, in shapes and through experiences respectively. That which is participated in is uniform according to its basic existence but diverse according to its participation [i.e. that which participates in it]. It is imagined by the participants sometimes in one way and sometimes in another owing to their weakness; and that is not all: even weightlessness seems to cause weight.

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22. 'Solecism'.

Solon, after questioning Croesus, was in Cilicia and founded the city of Soli, in which he settled some Athenians. Over time they became 'barbarized' and spoke 'solicistically', from which comes the term 'solecism'.

23. The *seisachtheia*.

Solon of Salamis was the first to introduce *seisachtheia* [debt relief] to the Athenians. This was a redemption of human bodies: after all, having borrowed money using their bodies as collateral and having no means to pay, they were enslaved.