

# The Source of the Gods' Immortality in Archaic Greek Literature<sup>1</sup>

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No other trait of the gods is envied by men as bitterly as their immortality. This abyss between men and gods is one of the main themes of ancient literature and archaic Greek literature is no exception. The gods of archaic literature are γένος αἰὲν ἔόντων ('race of those who always are'), ἀθάνατοι ('immortals') and αἰετγενέται ('ever-living'). This paper first examines the opinion of some scholars that the eternal life of the gods is closely related to their godly aliments ambrosia and nectar,<sup>2</sup> and will further try to describe the relationship and weight of this observation with a more widespread archaic conception of gods' immortality.

Ambrosia and nectar, unlike many divine items, have no exact parallel in the human world, and can thus be called "mythical items". Although they share a few qualities with the food and drink of men, their nature and functions depend mostly on the creative imagination of the poets who describe them.<sup>3</sup> At times they are liquid, at other times solid; they are multi-functional, used as bathing cosmetics, preventers of stench, preservatives of corpses, and granters of immortality, but their main function is to serve as the nutriment of the gods.<sup>4</sup> What, according to basic archaic understanding, is the purpose of this divine meal? What end does it serve in the lives of the gods?

The first to address this question was Aristotle. In his *Metaphysics*, discussing the principles of perishable and imperishable things, he writes:

The school of Hesiod (οἱ μὲν οὖν περὶ Ἡσίοδου) and all the mythologists (ὅσοι θεολόγοι) thought only of what was plausible to themselves, and had no regard to us. For asserting the first principles to be gods and born of gods, they say that the beings which did not

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the annual conference of the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies held at Ben-Gurion University in May 2014. I am grateful to Prof. Margalit Finkelberg for her valuable comments on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> See quotations from West below. Cf. Roscher (1883, 51): 'Ambrosia und Nektar machen die Götter unsterblich'. Levin (1971, 33): 'The gods' eating of ambrosia is a renewal of deathlessness'. Garcia (2007), 161: 'Ambrosia is closely associated with the gods' immortality'. Although Clay (1997), 145; (1982), 115 rejected the idea that in Homer ambrosia and nectar make the gods immortal, she argued that they 'prevent them from aging and exempt them from the natural cycle of growth and decay'.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars who looked for the earthly origin of ambrosia and nectar came up with different answers. Bergk (1886), 669-682 and Roscher (1883), 22-33 thought ambrosia and nectar originated from wild honey. Wernicke (1894) 1809-1811 thought that the origin of ambrosia was a kind of bread. Wright (1917), 4-6 believed nectar was related to wine and ambrosia to dew. Onians (1951), 292-299 thought that ambrosia was the divine counterpart of liquefiable grease (marrow and fat) or olive oil offered to the gods, and that nectar's counterpart was wine. Levin (1971), 34 argued that nectar was a Semitic loan word, which originally signified a beverage scented with incense from the altar.

<sup>4</sup> On the multiformity of ambrosia and nectar, see West (1966), 342-343.

taste of nectar and ambrosia became mortal; and clearly they are using words which are familiar to themselves, yet what they have said, even about the very application of these causes is above our comprehension. For if the gods taste of nectar and ambrosia for their pleasure, these are in no wise the causes of their existence; and if they taste them to maintain their existence, how can gods who need food be eternal? (Trans. W.D. Ross)<sup>5</sup>

According to Aristotle, the writings of 'the school of Hesiod and all the mythologists' contain two conflicting views on the purpose of the divine meal. On the one hand the gods eat simply for their pleasure (χάριν ἡδονῆς), and on the other they eat to maintain their existence, by which Aristotle means their existence as immortals (i.e. imperishable things). Finding this fault with the mythologists, Aristotle abandons the field of mythology and moves on to the field of philosophy.

As we shall see, the philosopher was right to argue that archaic poets did not have consistent views on the purpose of the divine meal. The categories of their thought were far from those of philosophy, and views which appear inconsistent to us coexisted in their poetry without causing any discomfort. If we wish, however, to understand their thoughts, we should adopt a more lenient methodology than Aristotle's. First, we have to extract the notions that lie behind their stories. Then, whenever inconsistent notions are found, we have to look for their rationality, and enquire which was primary and which secondary. Let us begin then by examining the places in archaic poetry where the gods are described dining on their divine meal.

In the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and the *Homeric Hymns*, the gods and their divine horses are often described eating and drinking. In seven different places their meal comes after a journey. In four of these cases the diners are gods: Calypso serves Hermes ambrosia and nectar after his long journey to her from Olympus. Hermes complains about the length of the path he had to take, traveling over the endless waters, with not even one town to be seen where humans make sacrifice and offer hecatombs.<sup>6</sup> Thrice more a drink is served to a god arriving from far away:<sup>7</sup> Themis serves a drink to Hera, who has flown from Ida to Olympus;<sup>8</sup> Hera serves a drink to Thetis on her arrival at Olympus from the depths of the sea,<sup>9</sup> and Zeus serves nectar to Apollo returning to Olympus.<sup>10</sup> As food and drinks are served to newcomers, it is reasonable to assume that besides showing courtesy and respect, they are meant to revive the spirit of the arriving gods. In three other cases the gods' horses are given a fodder of ambrosia or other divine food after galloping over

<sup>5</sup> Arist. *Metaph.* 1000a15-17: οἱ μὲν οὖν περὶ Ἡσίοδον καὶ πάντες ὅσοι θεολόγοι μόνον ἐφρόντισαν τοῦ πιθανοῦ τοῦ πρὸς αὐτούς, ἡμῶν δ' ὀλιγόρησαν (θεοὺς γὰρ ποιῶντες τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ ἐκ θεῶν γεγονέναι, τὰ μὴ γευσάμενα τοῦ νέκταρος καὶ τῆς ἀμβροσίας θνητὰ γενέσθαι φασίν, δῆλον ὡς ταῦτα τὰ ὀνόματα γνώριμα λέγοντες αὐτοῖς· καίτοι περὶ αὐτῆς τῆς προσφορᾶς τῶν αἰτίων τούτων ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς εἰρήκασιν· εἰ μὲν γὰρ χάριν ἡδονῆς αὐτῶν θιγγάνουσιν, οὐθὲν αἴτια τοῦ εἶναι τὸ νέκταρ καὶ ἡ ἀμβροσία, εἰ δὲ τοῦ εἶναι, πῶς ἂν εἶεν αἰδιοὶ δεόμενοι τροφῆς).

<sup>6</sup> *Od.* 5.92-104.

<sup>7</sup> In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* no other divine drink replaces nectar, so when a drink is served to a god but the word nectar is missing, nectar should be understood.

<sup>8</sup> *Il.* 15.78-89.

<sup>9</sup> *Il.* 24.93-102.

<sup>10</sup> *h. Hom. Ap.* 1-12.

heaven and earth.<sup>11</sup> Like the horses of men, so the horses of gods need food to renew their strength.

The reviving power of ambrosia and nectar appears more manifestly in stories which describe their absence. Archaic poetry seldom tells of a god deprived of food and drink, but when Hesiod describes the punishment of a god who committed perjury after swearing by the water of the Styx, he says:

he lies without breathing for a full year, and never lays hands on ambrosia and nectar by way of food, but lies breathless and voiceless on his bed, wrapped in a malignant coma.<sup>12</sup>  
(Trans. M.L. West)

The god's illness, it seems, is somehow caused by a special power found in the waters of the Styx, a power that magically disables him. Yet to the lack of ambrosia and nectar Hesiod dedicates more words than to any of the symptoms of the disease, undoubtedly to emphasize the seriousness of the god's condition. It is fair to assume that the lack of nutrition, in Hesiod's view, prevents the god's recovery. If only he could lay his hands on ambrosia and nectar, his situation would surely improve.

In the *Hymn to Demeter* we find another goddess who abstains from ambrosia and nectar. The poet tells of grieving Demeter hastening out in search of her lost daughter Persephone:

For nine days then did the lady Deo roam the earth with burning torches in her hands, and in her grief she did not once taste ambrosia and nectar sweet to drink, nor did she splash her body with washing water.<sup>13</sup> (Trans. M.L. West)

Nine days of ceaseless search without food, drink or bathing suggests a growing sense of exhaustion and deprivation. Thus again, as in the case of the punished god, abstention from food and drink is taken to be wearying as their consumption is supposed to restore the goddess's strength.

If abstention from ambrosia and nectar might weary a god, ingesting them can bring about a wondrous restoration of powers. So we read in Hesiod, that when Zeus released the fearful Hundred-Handers from the depths of the earth to assist him in his war with the Titans:

he had offered them all things fitting, nectar and ambrosia, which the gods themselves eat, and in the breasts of them all their manly spirit was strengthened once they received nectar and lovely ambrosia,<sup>14</sup> (Trans. G.W. Most)

<sup>11</sup> *Il.* 5.368-369, 773-777, 13.32-38.

<sup>12</sup> *Hes. Th.* 795-798: κείται νήρυτος τετελεσμένον εἰς ἐνιαυτόν/ οὐδέ ποτ' ἀμβροσίης καὶ νέκταρος ἔρχεται ἄσσον / βρώσιος, ἀλλὰ τε κείται ἀνάπνευστος καὶ ἄναυδος / στρωτοῖς ἐν λεχέεσσι, κακὸν δ' ἐπὶ κῶμα καλύπτει.

<sup>13</sup> *h. Hom. Cer.* 47-50. ἐννῆμαρ μὲν ἔπειτα κατὰ χθόνα πότνια Διῶ / στρωφᾶτ' αἰθομένας δαΐδας μετὰ χερσὶν ἔχουσα, / οὐδέ ποτ' ἀμβροσίης καὶ νέκταρος ἠδυπότοιο / πάσσατ' ἀκηχεμένη, οὐδὲ χροά βάλλετο λουτροῖς.

<sup>14</sup> *Hes. Th.* 639-642: ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ κείνοισι παρέσχεθεν ἄρμενα πάντα, / νέκταρ τ' ἀμβροσίην τε, τὰ περ θεοὶ αὐτοὶ ἔδουσι, / πάντων <τ'> ἐν στήθεσσι ἀέξετο θυμὸς ἀγίγνωρ, / ὡς νέκταρ τ' ἐπάσαντο καὶ ἀμβροσίην ἐρατεινήν...

From the fact that Zeus plied Obriareus, Cottus and Gyges with ambrosia and nectar we learn that they were not attainable, or at least were in short supply, down in the murky darkness. The result was immediate: the Hundred-Handers instantly regained their divine might, joined the war on that same day, and led Zeus and the Olympians to victory.<sup>15</sup>

The invigorating powers concealed in ambrosia and nectar can also cause a miraculous growth of infant gods. Thus in the *Hymn to Apollo*, as Themis served infant Apollo ambrosia and nectar, this was the outcome:

Once you had eaten the divine food, Phoibos, then the golden cords no longer restrained your wriggling, the fastenings no longer held you back, but all the ties came undone. At once Phoibos Apollo spoke among the goddesses: "I want the lyre and the crooked bow as my things. And I shall prophesy Zeus' unerring will to humankind". So saying, he began to walk on the broad-wayed earth as Phoibos the far-shooter of unshorn locks, and all the goddesses looked on in wonder.<sup>16</sup> (Trans. M.L. West, slightly modified)

When Apollo ate the divine food, he ceased to be an infant. To the amazed eyes of his nurses, he broke his bonds, started talking and began traveling the earth. From this moment Apollo appears in the hymn as a full grown god with a great future ahead.

In other places in archaic poetry a divine feast or meal is described, a common custom in the life of the gods. Calypso's maidens set before her a table of ambrosia and nectar; Hephaistos, Hebe, Themis and Ganymedes decant sweet nectar for the gods.<sup>17</sup> Such episodes reflect, first and foremost, the happy and carefree life of the gods, in which divine aliments are found in abundance. The assumption that they are also necessary for reviving the gods' weary spirit, if it exists at all, is to be found only in the background.

These are all the representations in archaic poetry of gods dining on ambrosia and nectar, and here we can easily draw our first conclusion. The roles of ambrosia and nectar in archaic poetry, as aliments of the gods, were shaped in a parallel way to the role of food and drinks in the human world. As our food serves to sustain our strength, to cause growth, and to bring us pleasure, so do ambrosia and nectar in the realm of the gods. That is not to say, however, that there is no difference between heaven and earth. The gods' aliments can cause miraculous growth and immediate recovery of godly powers, and the pleasure emanating from them is divine. The archaic poets, of course, are not committed to all these functions at once. At times they highlight one aspect, at times another, depending on the requirements of the scene they describe.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rowe (1978), 92; West (1966), 342. Ambrosia and nectar had the same effect on Achilles who fasted grieving for Patroclus. Athena dripped them on his breast, and he vigorously returned to the fighting (*Il.* 19.352-354).

<sup>16</sup> *h. Hom. Ap.* 127-135:

Αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ Φοῖβε κατέβρωσ' ἄμβροτον εἶδαρ, / οὐ σέ γ' ἔπειτ' ἴσχον χρῦσειοι στρόφοι  
ἀσπαίροντα, / οὐδ' ἔτι δεσμά σ' ἔρυκε, λόνοντο δὲ πείρατα πάντα. / αὐτίκα δ' ἀθανάτησι  
μετηύδα Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων· / εἶη μοι κίθαρίς τε φίλη καὶ καμπύλα τόξα, / χρήσω δ'  
ἀνθρώποισι Διὸς νημερτέα βουλήν. / Ὡς εἰπὼν ἐβίβασκεν ἀπὸ χθονὸς εὐρυοδείης /  
Φοῖβος ἀκερσεκόμης ἑκατηβόλος· αἰ δ' ἄρα πᾶσαι / θάμβεον ἀθάναται·

<sup>17</sup> *Il.* 1. 595-604; 4.1-4, 15.84-88; 20.231-234; *h. Hom. Ven.* 202-217.

### Does the divine meal have any other role?

As mentioned briefly above, some scholars have argued that dining on ambrosia and nectar is strongly related to gods' immortality. Not long ago M.L. West posited this connection:

Our mortal life and death, our health and sickness, are bound up with what we eat and drink. If the gods are exempt from death and disease, it is because they are nourished by special aliments not available to us.<sup>18</sup>

The connection between ambrosia and nectar and the immortality of the gods rests on three main arguments: (1) a few verses in the *Iliad* and one paragraph in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* which are understood as alluding to the notion that ambrosia and nectar are responsible for the gods' immortality; (2) an argument based on etymology; (3) stories about gods who bestowed immortality on their beloved mortals or preserved their bodies by means of ambrosia and nectar.

#### 1. *Hom. Il. 5.339-342 and Arist. Metaph. 1000a9-13*

In all the cases surveyed above of the gods' feeding on ambrosia and nectar, the idea that they are related to immortality is never explicitly stated. But in two places, one in the *Iliad* and the other in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, we do find something that comes close to that idea. In the *Iliad*, when Aphrodite is wounded by Diomedes and her wound bleeds, Homer reminds us that the blood is not human, but ichor that flows in her veins:

and immortal god's blood dripped from her, / ichor, which runs in the blessed gods' veins / – they do not eat food, they do not drink gleaming wine /, and so they are without blood and are called immortals.<sup>19</sup> (Trans. M. Hammond)

West commented on these verses: 'The gods' immortality results from their special diet.' This interpretation seems to supplement what in West's view can be logically deduced from these lines. Homer says the gods do not eat food and drink wine (341) and therefore they are called immortals (342). West adds the positive reason that complements this negative one: the gods are immortal because they do eat ambrosia and nectar.<sup>20</sup>

This interpretation, however, seems to burden these verses with a load greater than what they actually carry. In these verses the poet first explains that the gods have no

<sup>18</sup> West (2007), 157. This statement is said about gods in many cultures including the gods of Greece. He explicitly expresses the same view concerning the Greek gods in his comment on *Il. 5.339-342* quoted below.

<sup>19</sup> *Il. 5.339-342*:

...ρέε δ' ἄμβροτον αἷμα θεοῖο / ἰχώρ, οἷός περ τε ῥέει μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν / οὐ γὰρ σῖτον ἔδουσ', οὐ πίνουσ' αἶθοπα οἶνον, / τοῦνεκ' ἀναίμονές εἰσι καὶ ἀθάνατοι καλέονται.

<sup>20</sup> West (2011), 158. Cf. scholion bT's comment on 5.341: 'καὶ μὴν πολλὰ τῶν ζώων οὐ σῖτον ἔδουσιν, οὐ πίνουσιν οἶνον καὶ οὔτε ἀναιμα οὔτε ἀθάνατά εἰσιν. δεῖ τοίνυν προσπακοῦειν τῷ <οὐ σῖτον,> ἀλλ' ἄμβροσίαν, <οὐ πίνουσιν οἶνον,> ἀλλὰ νέκταρ'. 'But many living creatures do not eat food nor drink wine and yet they are neither bloodless nor immortal. Therefore one should implicitly understand [in the expression] "no food", but ambrosia, [and in the expression] "they do not drink wine", but nectar'. (My translation)

blood as they do not eat human food and drink wine. To this observation he adds that these qualities, the gods' bloodlessness and their non-dependence on human food, are a token of immortality. Naming these particular qualities as characteristics of immortality probably sprang from the association with the fact that when a human is deprived of food or suffers a severe loss of blood, he dies. However, to say that the gods are immortal because they have no blood and do not eat human food is not equivalent to saying that they are immortal because they do eat ambrosia and nectar. Whether the gods' immortality does or does not result from their godly aliments is not discussed in these verses and cannot be inferred from them.

In contrast to the *Iliad*, the passage in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is more outspoken regarding the connection between the gods' meals and their eternal life. The lines were quoted at the beginning of this article, but let us look at them again:

The school of Hesiod and all the mythologists (ὄσοι θεολόγοι) thought only of what was plausible to themselves, and had no regard to us. For asserting the first principles to be gods and born of gods, they say that the beings which did not taste of nectar and ambrosia became mortal...<sup>21</sup> (Trans. W.D. Ross)

We do not know who exactly is meant by 'The school of Hesiod and all the mythologists', who said that 'the beings which did not taste of nectar and ambrosia became mortal'. Aristotle might be referring to a story relating how the gods acquired immortality by way of ambrosia and nectar, or of gods who became mortal when they stopped consuming it. Such a story, however, is never told in our sources, which makes our reconstruction only conjectural.

## 2. Etymology

Many scholars have tried to decipher the etymological origin of ambrosia and nectar and to show its proximity to immortality. To quote West again:

The Vedic gods...are *amṛtāḥ*, literally 'non-dying', and their food is designated by the neuter of the same word, *amṛtam*...The Greek word that corresponds exactly to *amṛtam* (\**η-μῆ-το-μ*) is ἄμβροτον. We do not find this used by itself of the divine food, but we find ἄμβροτον εἶδαρ...which should not be understood as 'immortal food' but as 'food of non-dying'. It is alternatively called ἄμβρόσιον... εἶδαρ or ἄμβροσίη, 'ambrosia'.<sup>22</sup>

The etymology of nectar is much more difficult to trace. Chantraine suggested five possibilities, only to conclude: 'pas d'étymologie établie.'<sup>23</sup> 'According to a widely (though not universally) accepted etymology', writes West, 'the word is to be analyzed as \**nek-trh2*, "getting across (i.e. overcoming) (premature) death"'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Arist. *Metaph.* 1000a9-13.

<sup>22</sup> West (2007), 157.

<sup>23</sup> Chantraine (1974), 741-742. Many other linguists dealt with the etymology of ambrosia and nectar and this list cannot include them all. See, e.g. Wright (1917), 4-6; Thieme (1968), 102-112, 113-132; Levin (1971), 31-50; Griffith (1994), 20-23; Gamkrelidze – Ivanov (1995), 721-722; Watkins (1995), 391-393.

<sup>24</sup> West (2007), 158.

Now, if the origin of ambrosia, as well as its literal meaning in Greek, is ‘non-dying’, and if the origin of nectar is ‘getting across death’, this strengthens the conjecture that ambrosia and nectar are indeed aliments of non-dying, and as such they grant immortality to the gods. This linguistic conclusion, however, cannot be accepted without further examination.

The search for the linguistic background of words to determine their meaning is certainly an important tool, but one that should be handled with utmost caution. Meanings of words depend more on a cultural custom valid for its time than on their linguistic origin from a distant past. The safest way to decipher a word’s meaning is therefore to examine, if possible, its use through all its appearances in different contexts. This rule applies especially to words such as ambrosia and nectar, which appear dozens of times in archaic sources.

The adjectives ἄμβροτος and ἀμβρόσιος recur in archaic poetry in a much more general sense than their original and literal meaning (‘undying, immortal’) dictates. Both have acquired the broader meaning ‘divine’, hence function as ‘an epithet of everything belonging to the gods’.<sup>25</sup> Thus the hair of the gods is ambrosial, as are their robes, their sandals, the fodder of Hera’s horses, and so on.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, the noun ambrosia should not *a priori* be taken to mean what its origin or literal meaning dictates, namely ‘undying’, for it could also generally signify ‘divine food’, ‘food of the immortals’. The etymology of the noun ‘nectar’, as indicated above, is much more conjectural, and cannot in itself determine its meaning in archaic sources. If its origin is indeed linked to the idea of undying, the adjective νεκτάρεος exhibits a similar process of detachment from the original meaning, as νεκτάρεος signifies ‘nectarous’ or ‘fragrant’.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, if we set aside this apparent distancing from the original meaning and focus on the literal meaning ‘immortal, eternal’, none of the phrases mentioned above (ambrosial hair, sandals etc.) can carry the meaning ‘of non-dying’ in the sense of ‘which grants non-dying’, as West suggests for the phrases ἄμβροτον / ἀμβρόσιον εἶδαρ (‘food of non-dying’). The meaning of these phrases is not ‘hair which grants undying’, but ‘immortal, eternal hair’ (if not generally ‘divine hair’). As for the nouns ambrosia and nectar, as manifested in the cases surveyed above, when they serve as nourishment of the gods their functions are portrayed as divine equivalents to those of human food, and are never related to gods’ immortality. Hence when described as nutriments of the gods there is no justification for understanding ambrosia and nectar as ‘food which grants non-dying’, i.e. as the cause of the gods’ immortality.

### 3. Bestowing Immortality

Four stories in archaic poetry tell of gods who bestowed immortality upon their favored mortals using ambrosia and nectar. Demeter anointed the baby Demophon with ambrosia to make him immortal.<sup>28</sup> Artemis made Iphimede immortal by dripping ambrosia onto

<sup>25</sup> LSJ, s.v. ἄμβροτος, ἀμβροσία.

<sup>26</sup> *Il.* 1.529, 14.177; *h. Hom. Cer.* 40-41 (hair); *Il.* 24.341-342; *Od.* 1-97-98, 5.44-45 (sandals); *Il.* 5.338, *Od.* 21.507 (robes); *Il.* 8.434 (fodder).

<sup>27</sup> LSJ, s.v. νεκτάρεος.

<sup>28</sup> *h. Hom. Cer.* 231-245.

her head.<sup>29</sup> The gods made Tantalus immortal using ambrosia and nectar. He shared them with his friends and was punished for that transgression.<sup>30</sup> The Horai and Gaia, says Pindar, shall drip nectar and ambrosia on the lips of Aristaios, the son of Kyrene and Heracles, and make him immortal.<sup>31</sup> The preservative effect of ambrosia and nectar is apparent in stories about the prevention of decay of corpses of heroes who fell in the Trojan War. This appears thrice in the *Iliad*: Thetis instills ambrosia and nectar into Patroklos' nose to protect his body from rotting;<sup>32</sup> Aphrodite anoints Hector's body with ambrosial rose-sweet oil, so that Achilles will not tear his skin dragging his body away;<sup>33</sup> Zeus orders Apollo to anoint Sarpedon with ambrosia and send him back to Lycia for burial.<sup>34</sup>

Now, if ambrosia and nectar are represented as means of bestowing immortality on humans, as well as protecting dead bodies from decay, they obviously possess an inherent and independent capacity for doing just that; this capacity, it follows, has the same effect on the gods. This is the final argument in favor of grasping ambrosia and nectar as responsible for the gods' immortality and agelessness, and indeed it is the one that carries most weight. We shall return to it later.

#### The Loose Link Between Divine Food and Divine Immortality

The evidence we have seen so far (excluding the last argument, to which we shall return) cannot be taken at face value to support the conclusion that ambrosia and nectar are responsible for the gods' immortality. The examination of contexts revealed the weakness of the etymological argument; the ambiguous verses from the *Iliad* seem not to support this conclusion at all, and the late evidence from the *Metaphysics* offers us only a conjecture based on reconstruction. To this we now add that other weighty considerations lead us to question whether archaic poetry ever held this conception at all.

That only one paragraph in the *Metaphysics* indicates a possible connection between gods' immortality and their divine meal is the first attestation to the feeble connection between the two. If one argued that this connection is taken for granted, therefore never explicitly stated, our answer would be that the archaic corpus is big enough to expect even obvious beliefs and conceptions to be mentioned, especially as the subject at issue, the immortality of the gods, is one of the more fecund subjects of archaic poetry at large.

No less important than the absence of this explicit notion, however, is the lack of any literary exploitation of the highly fertile idea that the gods' eternal life depends on an external source. We can see how fruitful this conception can be when we turn our attention to stories that different cultures told about the immortality of their gods.

The theme of immortality is a favorite in Indian texts. One famous tale, attested in several versions, relates the churning of the ocean of milk. According to the Mahābhārata, lord Vishnu advised the gods and the anti-gods to churn the ocean in order

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<sup>29</sup> Hes. fr. 23a.21-24.

<sup>30</sup> Pi. *O.* 1.51-64.

<sup>31</sup> Pi. *P.* 9.59-65.

<sup>32</sup> *Il.* 19.37-39.

<sup>33</sup> *Il.* 23.184-187.

<sup>34</sup> *Il.* 16.666-683.



to acquire from it *amṛta*, the elixir of life. Ananta, the snake that supports the earth, was summoned to uproot the huge Mount Mandara, which was used as the churning staff. The gods took the mountain to the ocean and placed it on top of Akūpāra, king of tortoises. The gods on one side and the anti-gods on the other pulled on Vasuki the snake, who served as the twirling rope. As the ocean was churned many wonderful things came out, but eventually appeared Dhanvantari, the physician of the gods, who carried a gourd that held the elixir. The anti-gods stole the elixir, but Vishnu recovered it. He took the shape of a bewitching woman and seduced the anti-gods to hand it over to him. The anti-gods then raced after the gods, but Vishnu held on to the elixir and gave it to the gods to drink. One anti-god named Rahu took the guise of a god and began to drink it too, but he was betrayed by the sun and the moon, and Vishnu cut off his head on time. This was followed by a great war, which the gods eventually won and gained possession of the elixir, which was guarded carefully ever after.<sup>35</sup>

No one who reads this story can have any doubts about the source of the gods' immortality. They owe it to the *amṛta* which they fought hard to get. Notice also how fruitful this notion is: from it stemmed the wonderful story of the acquisition of the elixir of life, the drama of its theft and recovery, the mini-drama of the enemy who laid his hands on the elixir but was stopped in time, and the opportunity for the gods to win a great war over it.

Nordic mythology shows this potential as well. It tells a story of the goddess Idunn, keeper of the apples that the gods ate to renew their youth. Once the giant Thiazi in the shape of an eagle seized Idunn and her apples and flew to his abode. The gods soon began to grow old and forced Loki to recapture Idunn. Loki flew to the rescue in the form of a falcon. He found Idunn while Thiazi was away, changed her into a nut, held her in his claws and flew away. Thiazi chased them in the shape of an eagle. As he was flying too swiftly to stop, his wings caught a fire that the gods kindled, and he was slain by the gods.<sup>36</sup>

To this we can add two more stories from Celtic mythology: one tells how the Tuatha Dé Danann, the godly heroes of Irish myth, became immortal and free from old age and disease by drinking Goibniu's ale. A different tale relates how they gained their immortal youth by eating berries that grow in the land of promise. Once when they returned home

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<sup>35</sup> *MBh.* 1.15-18.

<sup>36</sup> Thiodolf, *Haustlǫng* 1-13; *Gylfaginning* 26; *Skáldskaparmál* 56, 22. The apples that grow in the Garden of the Hesperides, which Heracles was ordered to pluck from their tree, are often thought to be apples of immortality or eternal youth. See Rose (1950), 216; Nilsson (1968), 627-628; West (2007), 159. Yet even if the original legend told about apples of immortality, it is important to remember Gantz's remark (1993), 413, after a survey of artistic and literary representations of this story: 'No author suggests that possession of these apples might convey immortality, or youth, or any special advantage.' One Attic stamnos presents a doubtful exception to this rule, on which see Stafford (2012), 47. Golden apples which grow in a faraway garden of the gods were perhaps thought to be wonderful enough to be desirable in their own right. Yet even if these apples did originally convey immortality or eternal youth, no evidence suggests that they were related to the gods' immortality.

one of them fell to the ground. From it grew a tree with magical berries, and they sent a giant to guard it.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that different cultures tell stories that link the immortality of the gods to particular aliment does not suggest, of course, that each story provides a comprehensive account of its author's or its culture's views. Each culture deserves a separate study to encompass the different views reflected in its literature. What these stories do show us, however, is what happens when the conception that the god's immortality depends on an external source predominates in the author's mind: it is reflected in the stories he tells.

Compare these stories with the state of affairs in archaic poetry. Nowhere do we find a story that stems from this assumption. No story relates how the gods won their immortality; never does a god achieve immortality by eating ambrosia and nectar; never is a war fought over them. The expected result of the absence of ambrosia and nectar is never found either. Never does a god lose his immortality or endure the danger of losing it hanging over his head.<sup>38</sup> Only once briefly do we hear of Tantalus, who was punished for giving the gods' food to his friends.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, archaic literature tells of many figures that were made immortal by the gods, without specifically mentioning ambrosia or nectar. The *Hymn to Aphrodite* tells of Ganymedes, whom Zeus made immortal and transported to Olympus.<sup>40</sup> It also recounts the tale of Eos, who asked Zeus to grant immortality to her lover Tithonus, but forgot to ask for eternal youth.<sup>41</sup> Other stories are told in the epic cycle: in the *Aethiopis* Eos appealed to Zeus to make her son Memnon immortal after he was killed by Achilles.<sup>42</sup> In the *Cypria* Zeus gave the Dioscuri 'immortality on alternate days'.<sup>43</sup> Unlike the fragment of Hesiod, in which Artemis made Iphimede (Iphigenia of later tradition) immortal by dripping ambrosia on her head, the *Cypria* only states that she made her immortal.<sup>44</sup> In the *Telegony* Circe makes a whole family immortal: Telegonus,

<sup>37</sup> O'Grady (1855), 113-121; MacCulloch (1918), 54-56, 131. References are taken from West (2007), 159, n.133.

<sup>38</sup> Of peculiar interest is the story Circe tells Odysseus, that ambrosia is brought to Zeus by two doves which fly over the Clashing Rocks. One of them is always captured by the rocks, and Zeus sends another to restore the number (*Od.* 12.59-65). As West remarked, this tale is probably a version of a widespread story of obtaining the elixir of life from beyond a portal that closes behind one who enters it to prevent his return (2007, 158). If this is true, the Greek variation is worth examining. The substance acquired is ambrosia, not a rare matter but one that is found in abundance on Olympus, much more than two doves can carry. Secondly, ambrosia itself is not represented in the tale as responsible for Zeus' immortality. It seems, therefore, that Circe offers us a subtle version of the common Indo-European tale of acquiring the elixir of life. This version suppressed the original goal of achieving an elixir of life, but retained as the center of the story the difficulty of acquiring it. This modified version, of course, coincides with what we have seen above, that nowhere in archaic poetry do ambrosia and nectar grant immortality to the gods.

<sup>39</sup> *Pi. O.* 1.51-64.

<sup>40</sup> *h. Hom. Ven.* 202-217.

<sup>41</sup> *h. Hom. Ven.* 218-238.

<sup>42</sup> *Arg.* 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Arg.* 3; *Pi. N.* 10.54-59.

<sup>44</sup> *Arg.* 8; *Hes. fr.* 23a.

Telemachus, Penelope and the deceased Odysseus.<sup>45</sup> Hesiod relates that Dionysus wed Ariadne, and Zeus made her immortal and ageless for him.<sup>46</sup> Heracles' apotheosis was by Hesiod's account the result of performing a great deed for the gods (probably his assistance in the Gigantomachy).<sup>47</sup> According to Hesiod and Pindar, Semele lives among the Olympians. Her apotheosis was probably caused by a bolt of lightning.<sup>48</sup> The graphic style of the epic cycle and the *Theogony* may be responsible for the omission of the method by which immortality is bestowed. Nevertheless, it seems that the idea which underlies most of these stories is that Zeus has the power to bestow immortality without recourse to an external source.<sup>49</sup> These stories reveal that even when a story does relate how immortality was bestowed, ambrosia and nectar do not always come to mind. This would not have happened if they were indeed deemed responsible for the immortality of gods.

The weakness of the connection between the gods' immortality and their divine meal is also manifested in stories in which divine aliments do not necessarily grant eternal life. The nymphs in the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, who are to rear Aeneas son of Anchises and Aphrodite, eat divine food (ἄμβροτον εἶδαρ). They live long but eventually do die.<sup>50</sup> As noted above, the Hundred-Handers, and probably the other gods imprisoned in Tartarus, do not feed on ambrosia and nectar and still they do not die. The preservative effect of ambrosia was insufficient to grant Tithonus eternal youth; Eos kept feeding him with ambrosia, but he continued to age.<sup>51</sup> Archaic poetry, to conclude, does not reflect the notion that ambrosia and nectar are the causes of the eternal life of the gods.

### Immortal and Ageless Forever

What, then, according to archaic understanding, is the explanation for the eternal life of the gods? The answer to this question is not hard to find. All the archaic poets share one basic notion: the gods are immanently immortal, and as such their eternal life does not depend on any external source. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this notion is one of the most persistent ideas of archaic poetry as a whole.

The validity of the notion that the gods are immanently immortal is reflected first in the belief that the gods' immortality is inherited. A pairing of two gods will always produce immortal offspring. Hybrids, by contrast, are always mortal, as the interference

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<sup>45</sup> Arg. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Hes. *Th.* 947-949.

<sup>47</sup> Hes. *Th.* 950-955; Pi. *N.* 1.67-75; *I.* 4.55-60. For different accounts, see Gantz (1993) 460-463; Stafford (2012), 171-175.

<sup>48</sup> Hes. *Th.* 940-942; Pi. *O.* 2.25.26. West (1966), 416 comments that this apotheosis corresponds to the belief that what is struck by lightning becomes holy and imperishable.

<sup>49</sup> Circe, on the other hand, may have used witchcraft, and Artemis may have used ambrosia and nectar, as Hesiod's fragment indicates.

<sup>50</sup> *h. Hom. Ven.* 256-272.

<sup>51</sup> *h. Hom. Ven.* 218-238.

of human flesh negates the possibility of producing immortal offspring.<sup>52</sup> All the theogonies of archaic poetry assume this notion of innate immortality.

Immortality is common to all gods despite the great differences between them. For this reason the poets do not conceive that a god may die. Even when gods are defeated in great wars, at most they are thrown into the depths of Tartarus to continue their miserable existence there.

The eternal life of the gods shapes their literary character perhaps more than anything else. As mentioned above, their synonyms and epithets are 'γένος αἰὲν ἔόντων' / 'αἰὲν ἔόντες', 'race of those who always are'; 'ἀθάνατοι', 'immortals'; 'αἰειγενέται', 'ever-living'. The eternal life of the gods is one of the main reasons that they are 'μάκαρες', 'blessed', and 'ῥεῖα ζώοντες', 'live at ease', a theme that enjoys countless variations and developments. The contrast between the brevity of human life and the eternal life of the gods is also one of the great themes that occupy archaic poetry. Needless to say, although the motif of the immortality of the gods is fully exploited and highly fertile in archaic poetry, it is never connected to any external source.

But as we have seen, in contrast to the widespread notion of innate immortality are four stories in which the gods bestow immortality on mortals by means of ambrosia and nectar, and three others in which dead bodies are preserved. These are indeed the only cases in archaic poetry from which the independent powers of ambrosia and nectar as granters of immortality and agelessness can be deduced. This takes us back to the Aristotelian contradiction mentioned at the beginning of this paper: if the gods are immanently immortal, their immortality does not result from ambrosia and nectar; and if it results from ambrosia and nectar, they are not immanently immortal.

These contradictory views, however, can now be easily classified according to their importance and level of influence. Contrary to the opinion that ambrosia and nectar are a source of the immortality of gods, the absence of an explicit statement linking ambrosia and nectar to the immortality of the gods, added to the lack of poetic exploitation of the notion that ambrosia and nectar make the gods immortal, which stands in sharp contrast to the centrality and fertility of the notion of innate immortality — all leave no room for doubt: the gods, according to the basic archaic conception, are immortal by their very nature; the connection between their immortality and sustenance is insubstantial and weak.

This conclusion indicates that one should not base far-reaching conclusions on stories in which ambrosia and nectar grant immortality and protect corpses from rotting; that is, one should not learn from these stories that the immortality or agelessness of gods is dependent in any way on their diet, because it is an obvious fact that the heroes of these stories are always men, never gods.<sup>53</sup> These stories do indeed show that ambrosia and nectar have the power to grant immortality as well as to preserve dead bodies, and that these powers coincide with the function indicated by their etymologies; nevertheless, archaic poetry limits these capacities to the world of men. The reason for this is plain:

<sup>52</sup> One exception to this rule is Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele (*Il.* 14.323-325, *Hes. Th.* 940-942); another is Polydeukes, son of Zeus and Leda, who was born immortal (*Cypr.* fr. 9).

<sup>53</sup> Contra the scholars mentioned in note 2 and especially Clay (1997), 145; (1982), 115. See note 2 above.

humans who are doomed to die by their very nature, are in need of an external source, ambrosia and nectar, to make them immortal. The gods on the other hand are in no need of external aid to achieve immortality. They are immortal by nature, hence the story of making them so is never told.

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