Foreword

GREGORY NAGY

Homer and the Sacred City, by Stephen Scully, continues the Myth and Poetics series. My goal, as series editor, is to encourage work that will help integrate literary criticism with the approaches of anthropology and that will pay special attention to problems concerning the nexus of ritual and myth.

For such an undertaking, we may look to the comparative testimony of relatively complex societies, like the Ndembu of Zambia, and also of the smallest-scale societies, such as the Yukuna of the Colombian Amazon.¹ Just as important, we must pursue the varied testimonies of the most stratified societies, including what goes under the general heading of “Western civilization.” It is precisely here that the meaning of myth is the most misleading—and challenging. In a small-scale society myth tends to be viewed as the encoding of that society’s concept of truth; at the same time, from the viewpoint of Western civilization, myth has become the opposite of fact, the antithesis of truth.²

Since the ancient Greek concept of *politeia* serves as the foundation for the very word “civilization” and for our concept of Western civilization, a number of the books in the series will treat ancient Greece and the ancient Greek city-state, or *polis*. Scully’s book addresses the *polis* directly, examining the Homeric concept of a “sacred city” and

¹V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), and P.-Y. Jacopin, “La parole générative: De la mythologie des Indiens Yukuna” (diss., University of Neuchâtel, 1981).

²See especially M. Detienne, *L’invention de la mythologie* (Paris, 1981), and my review in *Annales: Economies Sociétés Civilisations* 37 (1982) 778–80.

showing that the sacredness of the city depends on the authority of myth in the earlier stages of Greek society.

The authoritativeness of Greek *muthos* or “myth” in early Greek poetics was the central subject of Richard Martin’s *Language of Heroes*, the first book in *Myth and Poetics*.³ As a concept, Scully asserts, the Greek city-state is a direct reflection of this authoritativeness. And the social foundation for the validity of myth is the city-state itself—not as a concept but as a reality, the same reality that in the course of ancient Greek history will eventually undermine the very meaning of myth.

³R.P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the “Iliad”* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989).