

# THE AMERINDIAN AND THE MYTH OF THE GOLDEN AGE

## O AMERÍNDIO E O MITO DA IDADE DO OURO

Alberto Garcia<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT: In discussing the influence of myth upon the initial moments of contact between Europeans and Amerindians, perhaps no other image is more predominant in this cultural exchange than Amerindian emerging as a being from the mythical Golden Age of mankind. The predominance of this myth in early encounters between the two cultures was a result of the renewed interest in antiquity and the classical themes contained within the canon of Greek and Roman works. In this essay, I examine several sources by which 15<sup>th</sup> century Europeans would have known of the Golden Age myth, (Hesiod's epic poem *Works and Days*, Lucretius's *epic On the Nature of Things*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and then demonstrate how some of the common elements of this myth become manifest in short excerpts from the initial descriptions of the Amerindians provided by Christopher Columbus and Pero Vaz da Caminha. In drawing connections between the Golden Age myth and the writings of Columbus and Caminha, it is hoped that this small survey of the literature will demonstrate how myth enabled the European to describe foreign beings in a familiar imagery that extended from Western antiquity.

KEYWORDS: Golden Age. Columbus. Caminha. Age of Discovery.

The Brazilian scholar Alfredo Bosi writes that the dialectic of colonization centers on the careful examination of three words: culture, cult, and colonization. Colonization, according to Bosi, is an all encompassing project whose driving force constantly seeks to express itself on the level of the Latin word *colo*: "to occupy new land, explore its benefits and subdue its natives" (Bosi 15). Culture, on the other hand, is a conjunction of the practices, techniques, symbols, and values that should be transmitted to new generations in order to guarantee the reproduction of a state of social co-existence (Bosi 16). Within this realm culture, mythology can be said to occupy a double function: It may be the foundation by which a society is unified, such as the Platonic noble lie in *The Republic*, or it may serve to demarcate difference, which in turn may serve as a justification of exclusion and appropriation. In discussing the influence of myth upon the initial

---

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. in Literatures of English (Univ. of California-San Diego, San Diego, CA); Graduate Teaching Assitant - Univ. of California-San Diego, San Diego, CA. ([alberto\\_garcia4444@yahoo.com](mailto:alberto_garcia4444@yahoo.com))

moments of contact between Europeans and Amerindians, perhaps no other image is more predominant in influencing the European conception of New World and its inhabitants than that of the Amerindian as a being from the mythical Golden Age of mankind. The predominance of this myth in early encounters between the two cultures was a result of the renewed interest in antiquity and the classical themes contained within the canon of Greek and Roman works. In the following essay, I would like to examine several sources by which 15<sup>th</sup> century Europeans would have known of the Golden Age myth, and demonstrate how some of the common elements of this myth becomes manifest in the initial descriptions of the Amerindians provided by Christopher Columbus and Pero Vaz da Caminha.

### **In the Pages of Antiquity**

While there are a variety of sources from which 15<sup>th</sup> century Europeans could have understood the myth of the Golden Age, there are three that I believe deserve special attention for they embody key elements that are present in this myth: Hesiod's epic poem *Works and Days*, Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Perhaps the earliest reference that relates the myth of the Golden Age is can be found in Hesiod's epic poem *Works and Days* (ninth century BCE; Levin 14). In this work, the creation of man by the immortals signifies the perfection of the species. Hesiod describes the "golden race of mortal men" in the following language:

They lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and from toil and grief: miserable age never rested on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the

fruitful earth unforced bore them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.

(Hesiod 11)

Apart from a poetic celebration of the initial creation of humanity, another striking characteristic of Hesiod's *Works and Days* is that it recounts the gradual degeneration of humankind from its idyllic apogee. As the first race of humans becomes "covered by the earth," and the ages pass from gold, silver, bronze and finally to iron, humanity becomes more violent and plagued by suffering. Of this Iron Age, Hesiod writes:

Men never rest from labour and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night . . .  
The father will not agree with his children, nor the children with their father . . .  
there will be no favour for the man who keeps his oath or for the just or for the good; but rather men will praise the evil doer and his violent dealing. Strength will be right and reverence will cease to be.

(Hesiod 17)

From this earliest example, one can already see the presence of the concept that would become identified as soft primitivism, the idea that the closer man is to nature the more perfected he is; however, this idea of degeneration present in Hesiod's work would leave the European reader of the Renaissance to believe that he or she was not living in a privileged time in history but rather in the most degenerate.

In his poem *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things)*, the Roman writer Lucretius (ca.99-55 BCE) on the other hand views primitive man quite differently from Hesiod's idealization of him (Medina 12). For Lucretius, this myth, rather than narrating humanity's fall

from grace, demonstrates a process of evolution. Humans learn how to use fire, invent art, and use animal skins for clothing. The most important advance, however, is the development of language, of which Medina observes: “*El lenguaje aparece como espontánea perfección de los gritos guturales que como en todo animal era una natural manifestacion de los sentimientos internos*” (“Language appears as a spontaneous perfection of the guttural screams that, like in all animals, were a natural manifestation of internal sentiments”; Medina 12, my trans.<sup>2</sup>). In opposition to the negative outlook represented by Hesiod’s narration, individuals in the Renaissance could rejoice in being the highest evolution of humanity, contributing a critical role in the development of the Graeco-Roman-Christian culture.

However, as the scholars John Moffitt and Santiago Sebastian have observed, perhaps the most influential classical writer to influence the imagery of the Golden Age for the Renaissance reader was Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid) (March 20, 43 BC – 17 AD), for besides Virgil he was among the best loved classical poet in both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Moffitt & Sebastian 80). Moffitt and Sebastian present the following imagery from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

In the beginning was the Golden Age, when men of their own accord, without threat of punishment, without laws, maintained good faith and did what was [inherently] right. There were no penalties to be afraid of; no bronze tablets were erected; no carrying threats of legal actions; no crowd of wrong doers, anxious for mercy, trembled before the face of their judge: indeed, there were no judges, men lived securely without them . . . These peoples of the [primordial] world, untroubled by any fears, enjoyed a leisurely and peaceful existence, and had no use for soldiers.

---

<sup>2</sup> For my translations from Spanish to English, I have used the following dictionary: Merriam Webster’s Spanish-English Dictionary. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1998.

(qtd. in Moffitt and Sebastian 80)

Harry Levin in his work *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* comments of these various portrayals that prior to 1492, the myth of the Golden Age had been an expression of chronological primitivism. However, after Europe's encounter with the Americas, this myth came to embody a manifestation of cultural primitivism. Faced with "genuine primitives," Europeans were bound to eke out their first impressions by drawing upon their imagination and upon the precarious analogy of a well-remembered myth (Levin 59).

### **Visions of the Golden Age**

In making a transition to the influence of these myths and their presence in the initials writings of Columbus and Caminha, I would like to begin with some observations by the scholar Guillermo Guicci. In his book *Sem Fé, Lei ou Rei*, Guicci observes that since the advent of Greek creation myths, Western civilization has become accustomed to thinking in terms of correspondence between external appearances and ethical values. He writes:

Monstros como o ciclope Polifemo acrescentam á sua deformidade física uma moral. São antropófagos, não hospitaleiros, violentos, arrogantes. Inversamente, a beleza e a harmonia das partes (não no nível máximo) desencadeiam, em geral, reações positivas. (Guicci 40)

Monsters like the Cyclops Polyphemus add to their physical deformity a moral one. They are anthropophagi, inhospitable, violent, and arrogant. Inversely, beauty and a harmony of the parts (not in the maximum level) provoke, in general, positive reactions. (my trans.<sup>3</sup>)

---

<sup>3</sup> For my translations from Portuguese to English I have used the Mini Collins Dicionário. In addition, for translations of Caminha's letter I have also used Cunha, A.G. "Vocabulário da Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha." Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa Textos e Vocabulários. Ministério da Educação e Cultura:

In his first official letter after his return from the Americas, Columbus describes for the Spanish monarchs the geographical wonders of, potential profit from, and the inhabitants of the American islands which he believed to be the Orient. In his first description of the natives Columbus writes to the Sovereigns:

Todas estas islas son populatísimas de la mejor gente sin mal ni engaño que aya debaxo del çielo. Todos, así mugeres como hombres, andan desnudos como sus madres los pario, aunque algunas mujeres traen alguna cosita de algodón o una foja de yerva, con que se cubijan. No tienen fierro ni armas, salvo unas çimas de cañas en que ponen al cavo un palillo delgado agudo: todo lo que labran es con piedras. Y no e podido entender que alguno tena bienes propios . . . (Colón 229)

All of these islands are densely populated with the best people under the sun; they have neither ill-will nor treachery. All of them, women and men alike, go about naked as their mothers bore them, although some of the women wear a small piece of cotton or a patch of grass with which they cover themselves. They have neither iron or weapons, except for canes on the end of which they place a thin sharp stick. Everything they make is done with stones [stone tools]. And I have not learned that any one of them has private property. . . . (trans. Zamora 192)

These descriptions, which also appear in the Letter to Santángel, the version that was authorized for general readership in Europe, emphasize three qualities of the Amerindian: innocence, the lack of private property, and, perhaps most significant of all, the absence of iron (fierro). As I have shown in the previous section, these qualities were fundamental

characteristics of humanity within the imagery of the Golden Age myth, and in choosing, either consciously or unconsciously, to describe the Amerindians in this manner, Columbus established an association of similitude in which Europeans could then process his encounter by way of familiar images.

The Brazilian Amerindians that inhabit the world of Caminha's Carta also display many of the same characteristics as those described by Columbus. In his first in-depth description of the indigenous inhabitants of Vera Cruz he writes the following, "*A feição deles é serem pardos, maneira de avermelhados, de bons rostos e bons narizes, bem feitos. Andam nus sem cobertura alguma. Não fazem o menor caso de encobrir ou de mostrar suas vergonhas; e nisso têm tanta inocência como em mostrar o rosto.*" ("Their appearance is of a mixed color, more reddish in color, and [they have] good faces and good noses that are well formed. They go nude without any covering. They do not make the slightest effort to cover or to show their genitalia, and in that they have such innocence as if they were showing their face"; Caminha 226, my trans.)

Of this description the scholar Mario Chamie has observed Caminha's use of the adjective "bom" ("good") and the manner in which it dominates his physical description of the Amerindians; Chamie writes:

Um pouco na linha de extração aristotélico- tomista de que o Bom, o Belo e o Bem são verdadeiros, a impressão de conjunto parece, no fundo, ser ditada pela naturalidade da nudez sem malícia nem constrangimento, coisa que em principio a moralidade de extração aristotélico- tomista- cristã denunciaria. (Chamie 30)

Extracting a little along the line of Aristotelian-Thomist [philosophy] in which the Goodness, the Beautiful, and the Good are real, the whole impression [of the pair

of Amerindians] appears fundamentally dictated by the naturalness of the nudity without malice or constraints, something that in principle Aristotelian-Thomist-Christian morality would denounce.

(my trans.)

While the nudity the Amerindians displayed conflicted with the customs of the European explorers, (who were immersed in the Aristotelian-Thomist- Christian tradition of the Old World), the innocence (“inocência”) that Columbus and Caminha see in the actions of the Amerindians and with which the explorers describe the people they meet allows the Amerindians to exist in an imaginary plane that initially transcends the moral prescription of the Europeans. In this, the Amerindians of the Caribbean and Brazil are allowed to maintain their humanity in the physical sense since they resemble those original beings of the Golden Age myths and not the monstrous beings believed to inhabit the outer edges of the known world.

## **Conclusion**

The discovery of the Americas in 1492 offered European writers and readers an opportunity to dream that the myth of the Golden Age could find location in a physical geography and that its inhabitants, unaltered through the progression of the ages, were still living in their own mythical Age. Lewis Hanke further supports this idea when he observes in his work *Aristotle and the American Indians* that the Europeans who first encountered the New World looked upon it with “medieval spectacles,” and that the reservoir of curious ideas about man and semi-men (including the myths of the Golden Age) were freely drawn upon in the description of Americas (Hanke 3). While these short excerpts from the initial letters of Columbus and Caminha demonstrate this wealth of imagery that was at the disposal of writers as they attempted



to describe the Amerindians in familiar terms, the mythology of the Golden Age also contained negative consequences for the Amerindians as the European position on their nature quickly shifted from one of soft primitivism to hard primitivism, in which Amerindians were viewed as savage for their lack of “civilization.” In this sense, the double function of mythology served as a means to assimilate the Americas and its inhabitants into familiar terms for 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Europeans, and then opened the routes by which the Old World felt justified to appropriate a new geography for the sake of colonizing and civilizing both the land and its inhabitants.

*SUMÁRIO: Na discussão da influência do mito nos momentos iniciais do contato entre europeus e ameríndios, talvez nenhuma outra imagem seja tão relevante do que a do ameríndio como um ser da Idade do Ouro mítica. A predominância desse mito nos primeiros encontros entre as duas culturas foi o resultado de um renovado interesse na antiguidade e nos temas clássicos contidos no cânone das obras gregas e romanas. Neste ensaio, examino várias das fontes através das quais os europeus teriam ficado sabedores do mito da Idade do Ouro (o poema épico Os trabalhos e os dias, de Hesíodo, o poema épico A natureza das coisas, de Lucrecio, e Metamorfoses de Ovídio) e após demonstro como alguns dos elementos comuns desse mito se manifestaram através de pequenos excertos das descrições iniciais dos ameríndios dadas por Cristóvão Colombo e Pero Vaz de Caminha. Ao traçar conexões entre a Idade do Ouro e os escritos de Colombo e Caminha, espera-se demonstrar como o mito habilitou o europeu a descrever seres que lhe eram desconhecidos usando um imaginário familiar que datava da antiguidade clássica.*

*KEYWORDS: Idade do Ouro. Colombo. Caminha. A Idade dos Descobrimentos.*

## **Bibliography**

Bosi, Alfredo. *Dialética da Colonização*. 1992. São Paulo: Schwarcz, 1993.

Caminha, Pero Vaz de. *A Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha*. Ed. Jaime Cortesão.

Rio de Janeiro: Livros de Portugal, 1943.

Chamie, Mário. *Caminhos da Carta: Uma leitura antropológica da Carta de Pero*

*Vaz de Caminha*. Ribeirão Preto: FUNPEC, 2002.

Colón, Cristóbal. *Textos y Documentos Completos*. Ed. Consuelo Varela.

- Madrid: Alianza, 1982.
- Cunha, A.G. “Vocabulário da Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha.” *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa Textos e Vocabulários*. Ministério da Educação e Cultura: 1964.
- Guicci, Guillermo. *Sem Fé, Lei ou Rei: Brasil 1500-1532*. Trans. Carlos Nougé. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1993.
- Hanke, Lewis. *Aristotle and the American Indians: A Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World*. London: Hollis and Carter, 1959.
- Hesiod. “Works and Days.” Trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White. *Hesiod: the Homeric Hymns and Homeric*. Ed. T.E. Page. New York: Macmillan, 1914.
- Levin, Harry. *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969.
- Medina, Juan A. Ortega y. *Imalogia del Bueno e del Mal Salvaje*. México D.F.: UNAM, 1987.
- Mini Collins Dicionário: Português -Inglês; Inglês- Português*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1996.
- Moffit, John F. and Sebastian, Santiago. *O Brave New People: The European Invention of the American Indian*. Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico Press, 1996.
- Zamora, Margarita. *Reading Columbus*. Berkeley: UP of California, 1993.