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Vulcan, Venus and Cupid on a 16th-century intaglio.

NO ORDINARY CRAFTSMAN WINNER OF THE STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION

*In 2019, the Hellenic Society launched a new essay competition which gives undergraduate students the chance to showcase their work. We received scores of high-quality entries from students from all over the world, and are delighted to present the winning essay here. **Emma Bentley** impressed the judges with her originality and the way that she uses the Hymn to Hephaestus to open up several important issues. Congratulations, also, to our two runners up: Gaia Marziale (King's College London) and Victoria Downey (Durham). The competition will be back this summer for its 2020 edition – keep an eye on our website for details.*

*Sing, clear-voiced Muse, of
Hephaestus, famed for his skill,
Who, with gleaming eyed Athena,
taught splendid crafts
To mankind upon the earth.
Hymn to Hephaestus 1–3 (translations are the author's own unless stated otherwise)*

So begins the *Homeric Hymn to Hephaestus*, a hymn to the Greek god of fire and metallurgy that presents craftsmanship as essential to the development of mankind. It praises Hephaestus (alongside the goddess Athena) for teaching mankind the skills that enabled humans to progress from living in caves 'like beasts' to enjoying a peaceful life 'in their own homes'.

This is one of 33 *Homeric Hymns*, each dedicated to a god and attributed to Homer in antiquity. Modern scholars argue that they had multiple authors and that most date to the Archaic period (seventh to sixth century BC), yet the *Hymn to Hephaestus* was likely composed in the second half of the fifth century BC in Athens. It features concepts typically associated with far grander philosophies and tragedies from this period, and is significant because it elevates the role of Hephaestus as well as that of the ordinary craftsman.

Praise of Hephaestus illuminates his technical skill. He is *klutotechnēs*, 'famous for his art', and this *technē* (craft or skill) is what sparked human progress. Now mankind lives in

peace throughout the year, protected by the homes they constructed. Life before craftsmanship was violent; the reference to 'wild beasts' conjures up images of a hostile natural world in which mankind was no different from animals. The fact that these technical skills are *taught* to mankind suggests a learning process, rather than an innate ability to master arts from birth (or from mankind's genesis). Craftsmanship has divine origins, but progress is driven by education and skill.

Unsurprisingly, the god that the hymn calls 'famous for his art' is known throughout Greek culture for his technical skills. Hephaestus constructed the shield of Achilles (*Iliad* 18.368–617), built palaces for

the gods and fashioned Pandora out of raw materials (*Theogony* 570–87). He was physically disabled; this is central to his mythology, significantly his expulsion from Olympus as a child. Accounts differ, but one has Hera eject him due to his disability and another (*Iliad* 1.590–94) claims that his disability was a result of Zeus throwing him from Olympus. Thus, Hephaestus is positioned as an outsider in the divine sphere. The scholar Robert Garland claims that Hephaestus' role as smith to the gods 'conforms to the social conditions of the day': many persons with physical disabilities in the ancient world took up occupations such as metalworking.

It was this technical skill that gave rise to Hephaestus' brief popularity in Athens during the building project initiated by the statesman Pericles in 447 BC. Craftsmen were in demand, so it is no surprise that Hephaestus' status flourished. This is demonstrated by the architecture of the period. The travel writer Pausanias describes both an altar to Hephaestus in the Erechtheion on the Acropolis (Pausanias 1.26.5) and the temple to Hephaestus (built between 449 and 414 BC), with a statue of Athena beside it (Pausanias 1.14.6). Athena and Hephaestus were associated with each other within Athens, just as they are in the hymn. The people of the island of Lemnos (to where Hephaestus fell from Olympus; *Iliad* 1.590) performed rites to Hephaestus and named their capital Hephaesteia in his honour, and imperial Athenian interest in the island may also explain societal interest in the god, as Edith Hall discusses. The central role of craftsmanship and the pairing of Athena and Hephaestus in the hymn support claims of a fifth-century Attic origin.

However, craftsmen, even during the Periclean building project, were not a universally privileged class, and the celebration of their profession is arguably a reflection of the demand for labour above all. Scholars such as Garland and Hall note that their ambiguous social position reflected that of Hephaestus

in relation to the other Olympians, who were a physically able 'leisure class'. His physical disability frequently rendered him the 'butt of cheap jokes', in the words of Garland, which modern audiences would hopefully condemn.

Yet one cannot minimize the role of *technē* in the progress of mankind, something that also occurs within the *Prometheus Bound*. The ambiguous dating and authorship of both works makes it impossible to know if *Prometheus Bound* influenced the hymn in any way, yet concepts certainly overlap. Here Prometheus, rather than Hephaestus, gives crafts (alongside fire) to mankind, *technē* helps liberate humans from a beast-like existence (*Prometheus Bound* 436–505). Both works suggest that artisanal skills enable or develop the qualities within mankind that render them recognisably human, and now able to exert influence over the natural world. *Technē* has a divine origin, but it is the skills of the humble worker that are paramount.

Further evidence to attribute the hymn to fifth-century Athens can be found in Martin West's statement that the 'concept of human progress from a primitive state' that is present in this hymn 'was an invention of the mid fifth century, associated with the sophist Protagoras'. Little of Protagoras' philosophy survives, but Plato characterized him in his *Protagoras*. In this dialogue he claims that Prometheus stole fire and technical skills from Hephaestus and Athena to give to mankind, and, on account of this, humans were able to build shelter and defend themselves (*Protagoras* 320d–22b). Plato sets this discussion in Athens in 433 BC or earlier, and, whilst we can never know what is Platonic and what Protagorean, it seems likely that the concept of progress within the *Hymn to Hephaestus* has a Protagorean influence.

However, for Plato's Protagoras, *technē* is not enough to ensure human survival, and Zeus has to intervene with the gift of political skill (*Protagoras* 322a–d). One should be

careful not to read a short hymn as a philosophical work, yet it does connect practical arts to virtue to a limited extent: the composer requests that Hephaestus grant them *arete*, excellence or virtue (*Hymn to Hephaestus* 8). *Arete*, when taken to mean moral virtue, is not normally associated with Hephaestus, yet it does connote fulfilling one's purpose or potential in any field. Therefore, the hymn may simply be appealing for excellence in craftsmanship. There is no real explanation of how mankind obtained the political skills that were necessary for survival in the *Protagoras* (perhaps they already possessed such virtues); however, this is irrelevant. It is possible that the *Hymn to Hephaestus* was composed for an Attic festival honouring Hephaestus, and this purpose requires no thorough philosophical or anthropological inquiry.

The *Hymn to Hephaestus* is not a grand work of tragedy or philosophy, but within it there are traces of complex concepts and mythologies. Of course, eight lines of verse do little to capture the difficult reality of being a craftsman, and it is likely that these arts were praised because of economic and architectural needs. Whether this celebration of craft was genuine or not, however, one can hope that the elevation of Hephaestus' intelligence and ability within the hymn, alongside the significance attributed to often marginalized professions, demonstrates the importance of both Hephaestus and ordinary labour to divine and human narratives.

Further reading

- Cashford, J. and Richardson, N. (2003) *The Homeric Hymns*. London
- Dolmage, J. (2006) "'Breathe upon us an Even Flame": Hephaestus, history, and the body of rhetoric', *Rhetoric Review* 25.2, 119–40
- Garland, R. (1995) *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World*. Ithaca NY
- Hall, E. (2018) 'Hephaestus the hobbling humorist: the club-footed god in the history of early Greek comedy', *Illinois Classical Studies* 43.2, 366–87
- West, M.L. (2003) *Homeric Hymns*. Cambridge MA