

Hum 110: Ionian Thinkers--Archaic Philosophy & Science

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Historical Background:

"The period around or shortly after 500 BC saw the first major burgeoning of philosophy, associated with the names of Heraclitus of Ephesus in Asia Minor, and Parmenides of Elea in south-west Italy. Heraclitus was the first great prose stylist of the Greek language. Not only did he add numerous new stylistic devices to creative prose in order to convey his philosophical insights, but he did so some two generations before the literary reading public was made aware of them through a comprehensive theory of style. A number of fragments quoting verbatim from his book give the impression that it was a collection of sayings or aphorisms. More recent research has shown, however, that it must also have contained lengthy passages of discourse. The latter's succinct diction, replete with metaphors, puns, poetic figures of speech, and tonal and rhythmic parallels or antithesis, was thus by no means restricted to the formulation of maxims" (Albrecht Dihle, *A History of Greek Literature*, p. 82).

Using the above information to place Heraclitus regionally and temporally, as well as the information in the packets, where does Heraclitus fit in the history of Greek Thought as outlined by Vernant? What are some of the historical concerns of his day? How do you see his work as responding to them?

Other Reading Questions:

1. How do you define philosophy and science? What is the difference between the two? Into which category each of these authors? Do you read a philosophical text differently from a scientific text? If so, how?
2. Heraclitus says that "the teacher of most is Hesiod" (B57). Compare the philosophical views of Hesiod and Heraclitus. On what points do they agree and disagree? What does each have to say about the cosmos? Pretend that you are Heraclitus and you are going to sing/rewrite the "Theogony." Where would you start? What would you include? Is there anything that you definitely would leave out of your version?
3. Compare Heraclitus' view on rivers, war, strife, justice, and the divine to the views held by Homer and Hesiod.
4. Compare the views of Heraclitus, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and the Fifth-Century Pythagorean. What overlap do you notice? What are the points of contention? Do we share any of these beliefs today?
5. In *Art and Experience in Classical Greece*, J.J. Pollitt suggests that "If the apparent mutability of the physical world and of the human condition was a source of pain and bewilderment to the Greeks, the discovery of a permanent pattern or unchanging substratum by which apparently chaotic experience could be measured and explained was a source of satisfaction, even joy, which had something of a religious nature" (4). Do the texts you have read for today alleviate this source of pain in any way? If so, how? What do they offer as solace?