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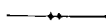
978-1-108-01543-1 - The Cults of the Greek States, Volume 1

Lewis Richard Farnell

Excerpt

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THE CULTS OF THE GREEK STATES



INTRODUCTION.

THE history of Greek religion, so much neglected in our country, is often mistaken for a discussion concerning its origins. The main scope of the present work is not the question of origin, but a survey of the most important texts and monuments that express the actual religious conceptions of the various Greek communities at different historical epochs. Such a study evidently concerns the student of the literature no less than the student of the archaeology of Greece, although the subject has been hitherto approached rather from the archaeological side. The question of origins may be put aside, although it may be true that one does not fully and perfectly know the present character of a fact unless one also knows the embryology of it. Yet this dictum expresses more the ideal of knowledge than a practical method of working. In dealing with so complicated a phenomenon as the religion of a people, it is surely advisable to consider separately and first the actual facts, the actual beliefs in the age of which we have history, rather than the prehistoric germ from which they arose. Again, this is the only aspect of the problem that directly concerns the student of the Greek world pure and simple, for the other line of inquiry, touching the birth of the nation's religion, can never be followed out within the limits of that nation's literature and

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monuments. And there are especial difficulties attaching to such an inquiry, for the origin is probably much more remote than is commonly supposed, and the inquirer is generally dealing with an age of which there is no direct evidence. To reconstruct the primitive thought requires all the aid that can be supplied by philology, anthropology, and the comparative study of religions, and so far the reconstruction is neither solid nor final. Great results were expected when first philology, with new methods and new material, was applied to the explanation of Greek myths and divine personages. The result has been meagre and disappointing, and this is perhaps due to three causes.

First, the philologist was working under the influence of the newly discovered Sanskrit language, and his point of departure for theological deductions was the Vedic literature, which was considered to be primitive, and to give the key to the myths and mythic religion of Greeks, Teutons, and Slavs^a. But the Vedic religion is already comparatively advanced, and gives but little clue to the origins and development of the religions of the other Aryan peoples.

Secondly, the philology of many of the interpreters of Greek myth and religion has been often unscientific, the earliest of them belonging to that period when the phonetic laws of vowel changes were not sufficiently understood, and when it was only an affair of consonants, and the later of them merely skirmishing on the ground in amateur fashion^b.

^a Vide Maury, *Histoire des religions de la Grèce antique*, vol. 1. p. 32.

^b Apart from the etymological discoveries about the name of Zeus, the chief contributions of philology to our knowledge of the origins of Greek religious personages have been supposed to be the identification of Ἑρμῆς with Sanskrit Saranyú-s, and Hermes or Hermeias with Sārameyás; these were first publicly put forward by Kuhn (*Die Herabkunft des Feuers*, &c. 2nd ed. pp. 6-8), and have been widely accepted. They are condemned however by more recent philology; the original form in Greek

of Saranyús would have been σαρηνύς, which would have become σερηνύς and then ἑρηνύς: Ἑρμῆς unaccountably lacks the rough breathing, and contains an unaccountable long ι, which never in Greek takes the place of εἰ. And the word Saranyús has the appearance of being a word of specifically Sanskrit derivation, which has not come down from the 'Ursprache.' Nor is there any foundation in Greek and Sanskrit mythology for the identification; for the story of Saranyús taking the form of a mare is not in the Rigveda, and may be a mere aetiological invention of the

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Thirdly, the philologists have mainly devoted themselves to maintain the view that the myths are allegorical accounts of physical phenomena, and the mythic figures are the personification of the elements and the powers of nature. It is often supposed that this process of interpretation is a new discovery of German science of the last generation; but in reality it is as old as the sixth century B.C.^a, and was rife in the fifth-century philosophy, in the poetry of Euripides and the younger comedy, and is a constant theme of the later philosophies and the early patristic literature. Of course the modern writers^b have dealt far more seriously and fruitfully with the theme, and by a comparison of the various groups of national myths, many luminous suggestions have been made of the way in which natural phenomena may be worked up into legends of personages. But as applied to the origins of Greek religion and the explanation of its development, the theory has produced only inconsequence and confusion; and it leaves little room for foreign influences, for the possibility that a deity might have been borrowed as a fully formed concrete person, having among his new worshippers no physical connotation whatever. The assumption explicit or implicit of writers of this school is generally this, that each Greek divinity represents some department or force in nature^c, and the formula

commentator, and the myth which has been supposed to correspond, about DemeterErinyes being pursued by Kronos in the form of a horse, has nothing to do with the Erinyes proper. The theory that Sarameyá-s is to be identified with 'Epeúas founders on the first vowel: the Greek equivalent should be Ἡραμει-ος. For the views expressed in this note, I am indebted to the kindness of my friend Professor Macdonell.

^a Vide Schol. Ven. *Il.* 20. 67; Theagenes sees in the Homeric battle of the gods the warfare in the elements, and the opposition of certain moral ideas.

^b In such works as Kuhn's *Die Herabkunft des Feuers, &c.*, and in Schwarz *Der Ursprung der Mythologie*, in spite of mistaken etymology and interpretation,

much valuable material has been gathered and sifted, though valuable more for the general history of folklore and ritual than for the study of Greek religion. Of still greater scientific value is Mannhardt's *Wald- und Feldkulte*.

^c Welcker, *Griechische Götterlehre*, 1. p. 324, says 'Aus Naturgöttern . . . sind alle . . . persönlichen Götter hervorgegangen: the object of the history of Greek religion is, according to him, to discover the nature-origin of the divinity and to trace it out in the myths. The principle is accepted by Maury in his *Histoire des religions de la Grèce antique*, though his work is chiefly occupied with a statement of the historical facts. The method and subject-matter of Preller's *Griechische*

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which they often put forward, or at least appear to take for granted, is that the deity is a personification of that sphere or department. But it is doubtful whether this formula is ever of any avail for explaining the origins of any religion; whether 'the personification of a natural phenomenon' is a phrase appropriate to the process which gives birth to the earliest religious conceptions of a primitive race^a. The words suggest the belief that, for instance, the primitive ancestor of the Greek was aware of certain natural phenomena as such, and then by a voluntary effort gave them a personal and human form in his imagination. Something like this undoubtedly happened in the case of the personification of the mountain. Ordinarily when walking up Olympos the Greek knew well enough that he was not treading on the bones and flesh of a living being, and he was under no illusion; then for purposes of his own he chose to personify it, knowing well that the natural phenomenon was one thing, the person another. But this was at quite the latest epoch of Greek religion, and exhibits probably a relatively late mental tendency or power. It is doubtful if the primitive mind could personify things thus, for it probably lacked this sense of the limits of personality, or the border-line between the sentient and the non-sentient, or the distinction between human natural or supernatural phenomena. The aboriginal Greek may have regarded the mountain, or the sky, or the stone as sentient^b, possessed with power to help him or to hurt him; and may have tried to appease it with certain rites, without believing in a definite and clearly conceived person who lived in the sky or in the mountain. The superstitious man in Theophrastus seems to have held this view about the sacred stones which he daily

Mythologie is based on the same idea. Perhaps the best exposition of the historical facts of certain parts of Greek religion that has yet appeared, free from any theory about origins, is to be found in K. O. Müller's *Hellenische Stämme*.

^a Schwarz, in his *Der Ursprung der Mythologie*, takes a more correct view

than many writers of his school, when he says 'für unsere älteste Zeit existirt der Begriff einer sogenannten Symbolik . . . noch gar nicht,' &c., p. 12.

^b Dio Chrys. *Or.* 12. p. 233 Dind. ὥστε καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν βαρβάρων πενία τε καὶ ἀπορία τέχνης ἔρη θεοῦς ἐπονομάζουσι καὶ δένδρα ἀργὰ καὶ ἀσθμούς λίθους.

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anointed with oil. A distinct stage would be that at which the man personifies the object, as the early Greek may have personified the Sun or the Moon, or as the late Greek personified Olympos: it is proper to this view that the definite person is supposed to be in or about the object, and has no action or life independent of it^a. A third stage is that to which Greek religion, as we first know it, had attained: the object of worship is a personal divinity who may happen to reside in a certain sphere of nature and administer the laws of that sphere, but has a real complicated existence independent of it and not wholly to be explained in reference to the laws of it. Now those who have followed the physical interpretation of Greek divinities are rarely explicit as regards these distinctions. We are told that the etymological proof is complete that the various branches of the Aryan family worshipped the sky-god, because the various ethnic names of the chief god contain a root which means 'bright' or 'sky' (*div* or *dyu*)^b. But the question of great importance concerning the original idea still remains; does philology prove that the primitive Aryan tribes worshipped the sky as such—as an animated thing, a fetish; or on the other hand as a personal being anthropomorphic and clearly defined, but with power and functions limited to the sky; or lastly as a personal god who lived in the sky, and was therefore called the sky-god (just as all the divinities living in the heavens might be called *Ὀυρανῶνες*), but as one who could be detached from his element and exercise moral or physical influences elsewhere?

It would seem that we must have some sort of answer to these questions, before we can say that we have found the primitive Aryan idea of divinity, even though we may be sure that that idea was physical or derived immediately from the physical world. But the mere presence of the root 'div' in the various names of the chief god does not tell us at all

^a Oceanos and Gaea are instances of such crude personifications.

^b Welcker, *Griechische Götterlehre*, i. p. 135. Preller-Robert, *Griechische Mythologie*, I. p. 115. Prof. Max Müller's view in the *Science of Language*, 2.

p. 491, appears to be that the original root *dyu* was applied first to God in a spiritual sense and then to the sky; but that the two meanings had become fused in the divinity before the separation of the races.

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in what sense the sky was worshipped. Otto Gruppe—a desperate sceptic in regard to other systems than his own—maintains that it does not even prove that the sky was worshipped in any sense whatever by all the tribes, but that the root may have originally signified ‘bright’ and could serve equally well to form the word meaning sky and the word meaning God^a.

Now the name of Zeus is the only name in the whole of the Greek Pantheon upon which philology has anything certain to say, and what it says does not seem to amount to so much as was at first supposed. All attempts to explain the other Greek names of divinities, with the possible exception of Semele and Dionysos, have been unsuccessful. Demeter was undoubtedly regarded by the Greeks at certain times as an earth goddess, and $\Delta\eta$ is a dialect-form of $\Gamma\eta$, so that ‘mother-earth’ would seem to be a translation for Demeter in accord with etymology and ancient religious belief; but modern philology^b pronounces this to be an impossible compound, and we have no right to say that the name Demeter means mother-earth. And if we do not know the meaning of Demeter, the case seems desperate with such names as Apollo, Artemis and Athene.

Deprived then of the aid of etymology, the writers of this sect have tried to fix the original meaning of the god or goddess by an analysis of the various myths attaching to the personage. And the result is disheartening enough, and might discredit the physical theory. The whole realm of nature has been ransacked; sun, moon and stars, storm-cloud, lightning, the blue sky, the dawn, the evening, have each in turn been taken as the substance of this or that divinity, and very recently a French writer M. Ploix in an extraordinarily wrong book has proved that every Greek and Latin deity is the twilight. What is most remarkable is that the storm-cloud and the blue sky are sometimes found to be of equal use in explaining all the myths and all the cult of the same personage.

^a *Die Griechischen Kulte und Mythen*, pp. 119–120.

^b Ahrens, *Dor. Dial.* p. 80.

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If we believe that in the background of all the various Greek religious personages, who in the clear light of Greek religion appeared as ethical ideal figures, there is a physical phenomenon, it may be useful to go on trying to find it. But though serious arguments may be urged for this belief, there are two errors that are often committed in the investigation. In the first place the distinction is often ignored between the primitive idea and the ideas that were in the mind of the Greek worshipper of this or that historical epoch : for instance the writer often fails to note that Athene, who originally may have been the air, or the storm-cloud, or the twilight, was certainly never one of these things, or a personification of one, for the Athenian who sacrificed to her in any age of which we have distinct record^a. The other is a serious error in logic : it is often argued that because a certain divinity was originally merely an elementary power, therefore all the legends and all the attributes of that divinity can and should be explained in reference to that element of which the god or goddess is the expression. To what quaint results this method of reasoning leads we can best gather from Roscher's article in his *Ausführliches Lexikon* on Athene. Athene, according to him, was the thunder-cloud and her origin and career are thus explained : she is called Athene Salpinx, not because, as a goddess very inventive in the arts, she invented the trumpet, but because the thunder is loud and the trumpet is loud and a poet might call the thunder trumpet-voiced. By a parity of reasoning she becomes a goddess of war because the thunder is warlike, and she invented the ship and the chariot, because the thunder-cloud is often regarded as a ship and as a chariot. She also becomes a goddess of peace and the arts of life, owing to a very curious metaphor. The cloud was described as a woollen fleece ; and wool was spun ; therefore Athene appeared as a spinning-goddess. Now spinning implies a certain degree of intellect, therefore the spinning-goddess becomes the goddess of wisdom, social, political or any other kind ; and her whole character is thus

^a Aristoph. *Pax* 410, 411 ἡμεῖς μὲν ὑμῖν (τοῖς θεοῖς) θύομεν, τοῦτοιαι δὲ (Σελήνη καὶ Ἡλίω) οἱ βάρβαροι θύουσι.

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deduced. One cannot help feeling the unreality of this, which seems the *reductio ad absurdum* of the physical-allegorical theory^a. To preserve oneself from this, one may maintain that, even if we allow that a physical fact formed the background of the personal idea, the intellectual or moral concepts could be brought into it without any dependence on that fact, as the goddess might become the pre-eminent divinity of a progressive race that would connect with her name the various stages of their progress. Granted this, it must then be allowed not only that the question of origins stands apart from the question about the later historical facts, but that the discovery of the origin will often throw but little light on these.

The great merit of the writers of this school is that they were the first who attempted by scientific method to bring some order into the chaos of mythology. But the more recent study of anthropology has contributed much more to the explanation of mythology and some part of religion; its pretensions are fewer, its hypotheses more stable and real, and its range of comparison wider. In the explanation of Greek religion by means of anthropological ideas and methods, English research has taken the lead; although there are many valuable suggestions tending to the same point of view in Mannhardt's *Wald- und Feldkulte*; and the article on Dionysos in Roscher's *Lexikon* is an important contribution to this inquiry. Taking Mr. Lang's treatise on *Myth Ritual and Religion* or Mr. Fraser's *Golden Bough* as instances of recent anthropological work bearing on Greek religion, one sees that they deal less with the question of origins, or with the primitive thing or the primitive thought out of which and by which the Godhead was evolved, than with the question of survivals, the inquiry how far a certain part of the ritual and mythology of the more developed nations can be explained

^a As an instance of the confusion which might be introduced into the interpretation of classical texts, by the application of the solar theory of myths, we might take Paley's absurd interpretation of Sophocles' phrase in the *Trachiniae* (line 831) *Κενταύρου φονία*

νεφέλα, a poetical description of the shirt of Nessus which wrapt Heracles in a cloud of deadly smoke. Paley explains it as though Sophocles were unconsciously repeating the language of a lost solar myth.

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by means of the ritual and mythology of savage or primitive society. The assumption is that primitive man spontaneously ascribes to his divinities much of his own social habits and modes of thought, and that mythology is not merely highly figurative conversation about the weather, but like ritual itself is often a reflexion of by-gone society and institutions. It is ritual that is chiefly the conservative part of religion. And in ritual the older and cruder ideas are often held as in petrification, so that the study of it is often as it were the study of unconscious matter, in so far as it deals with facts of worship of which the worshipper does not know the meaning and which frequently are out of accord with the highest religious consciousness of the community. The anthropologist does not pretend to do more than supply us with a new key for the interpretation of certain parts of mythology and ritual, but the results of this new science have been already of the greatest value for the student of Greek cults and much more may be hoped from it; it has done much to explain the strange contradiction that often exists between the ritualistic act and the more ideal view about the divinity, and the study of a very important chapter in the history of Greek religion, the chapter on sacrifice, depends almost wholly on its aid.

The account of the historical period of Greek religion must deal equally with the literature and the monuments; it is from the combined testimony of both that we learn what the religion was in reality to the people themselves, what were its processes of organic growth, what were its transitions from lower to higher forms. Both are records, but of unequal value. The literature takes precedence of the monuments because its testimony begins at an earlier date.

The poems of Homer testify to a highly developed structure of religious thought, showing us clear-cut personal forms of divinities with ethical and spiritual attributes. But the contemporary art, standing alone, would suggest that the Greeks had hardly arrived at the anthropomorphic stage of religion at all, but were still on the lowest level of fetishism. This of course only means that poetry attained a power of spiritual expression at a far earlier date than did painting or

sculpture. But when Greek art was developed it became a truer record of the national and popular belief than the literature. For the painter and still more the sculptor was usually the servant of the state, executing state-commissions; he could not then break away from tradition, but must embody in his work the popular view about the divinity, however much he might refine and idealize. On the other hand the poet or the philosophic writer was far more free. He could express the aspirations of the few, could put forth religious conceptions such as are found in Pindar and Euripides reaching far beyond the range of the popular view. But the history of any religion is equally concerned with testimony such as this; for it has to deal with the twofold question, what was the average meaning of the religion for the nation, and what ideal expression did it occasionally receive. And the latter question must often be discussed before we can sufficiently answer the former. For instance, it is not impossible, as may afterwards be shown, that the later popular view about Ourania Aphrodite was coloured by the Platonic interpretation of the title.

But the art and the literature were not mere records of the religion; they were forces that directly or indirectly assisted its growth. It is a saying partially true that Greek theology took its shape from Homer^a. His poems were doubtless a great moment in that development from a stage of religious thought, at which the divinities were amorphous, vague in outline and character, lacking ethical quality, to the stage of clear and vivid anthropomorphism, of which the personal forms are plastic and precise. We need not regard Homer as a religious reformer, consciously setting himself to refine away the monstrous and primitive elements of the religion. The result is still the same; as the fruit of his poetic work and imagination the people inherited a higher and clearer religious view. The Greek epic poetry is probably

^a Herodotus in a well-known passage somewhat exaggerates their influence when he says of Hesiod and Homer οὗτοι δὲ εἰσιν οἱ ποιήσαντες θεογονίην

Ἕλλησι, καὶ τοῖσι θεοῖσι τὰς ἑπανυμίας δόντες, καὶ τιμὰς τε καὶ τέχνας διελόντες, καὶ εἶδεα αὐτῶν σημήναντες 2. 53.