INTRODUCTION

1. The Homeric gods: prior considerations

This initial chapter is concerned with the religious background of the *Iliad*: with the ways in which the Olympian pantheon might have developed, and with what aspects of it might be due to Homer himself or the oral heroic tradition on which he drew; with the degree of artificiality and poetic elaboration or suppression consequently to be expected, and the possible awareness of that among his audiences; and especially with the assumptions that might underlie the connexions between men and gods through sacrifice and prayer. The conclusions that can reasonably be drawn are often speculative, and will need to be modified as research on contacts with the Near East, in particular, proceeds; but they are important none the less, affecting as they do the literary and aesthetic impressions made on audiences by divine scenes and episodes in the epic – for example over how far they might be understood as predominantly conventional, and therefore diminished in serious emotional impact. Clearly there are other things to be said, and in greater detail, about the divine characters of the *Iliad*, the individual gods and goddesses as actors and the rôles they play. These will be discussed as they arise in the different commentaries, as also by R. Janko in the introduction to vol. IV. Here, on the other hand, the emphasis is primarily historical and theological.

It is plain, in any event, that our own particular understanding of the nature of Homeric gods greatly affects the ways in which we respond to the *Iliad* as a whole, just as ancient audiences were affected by their own more contemporary reactions. There is no standard and accepted opinion about these matters, and the early stages of Greek religion still lie in darkness, a prey to modern intuition and, occasionally, self-indulgence. Thus, on the one hand, Gilbert Murray's *Five Stages of Greek Religion* of 1925 envisaged the Olympians as the creation of swashbuckling Achaeans, men like the 'real' prototypes of Agamemnon or Akhilleus and possessing their baronial virtues and vices; they were organized as a family and at the same time made more *risqué* and frivolous by Ionians like Homer, before being accommodated to civilized values in Athens and made into 'an emblem of high humanity and religious reform'. Even J. M. Redfield sees them, in a

quite different way, as 'literary gods'. Other writers, on the other hand, have inclined to take these gods more seriously, as symbols of permanence against which human ephemerality can be better understood (J. Griffin) or elements in a complex construction for confronting the world at large and keeping disorder at bay (J. P. Gould).[1] Many problems remain, some to be seen with particular clarity when plausible-sounding judgements about ancient religious topics, especially those based on comparative evidence, are subjected to close scrutiny.

Part of the trouble has arisen from a tendency to use one of the earliest pieces of ancient evidence quite uncritically and to prove a variety of inconsistent points. Herodotus' declaration at 2.53 that 'it was Hesiod and Homer that created a theogony for the Greeks and assigned the gods their names and divided out their honours and skills and indicated their appearances' was a not very profound remark based on the survival of Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* to describe the earlier phases, and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to describe the more recent actions, of the gods, with nothing known from any prior source beyond, perhaps, speculations like that accepted by Herodotus himself that these gods came ultimately from Egypt. His opinion on the operations of Homer and Hesiod is chiefly of interest for the period he placed them in ('not more than 400 years before my time', cf. vol. I, 3f.) and for what it reveals about his own sources and methods of argument. It is worth little in other respects, reflecting a naive view of the situation which probably assigns far too much originality to both the Hesiodic and the Homeric sides of the tradition.

The basic facts are these: that there are *no* Egyptian elements in the Greek divinities of the pre-Classical period; that Zeus, as his name (a form of Sanskrit Dyaus) and his functions as sky- and weather-god show, is an Indo-European import from the north-eastern regions from which the Greek-speaking peoples moved down into Greece about 2000 B.C.; and that the rest of the pantheon consists on the one hand of specific Asiatic adaptations (Aphrodite, Hephaistos, Artemis, probably Apollo) and on the other of local versions of broadly diffused Near Eastern functional archetypes as city-protector, mother-goddess, war-god and so on. That is putting the matter very dogmatically, and further detail will be added later; but these Asiatic and Indo-European associations, together with the later addition of Thracian Ares and Phrygian/Lydian Dionusos, and, more important, the idea of a council of gods under a supreme leader, itself Mesopotamian in origin, show the process of conflation and development to have been a long one, initiated no later than the 2nd millennium B.C. and

[1] J. M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago 1975) 76; J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford 1980) chs. 5 and 6; J. P. Gould in P. E. Easterling and J. V. Muir, edd., *Greek Religion and Society* (Cambridge 1985) ch. 1.

carried on in largely unreconstructable ways thereafter. The development of heroic poetry and the arrival on the scene of Homer and Hesiod around 750–700 B.C. clearly led the way to increased systematization and personal detail, but scarcely to a radical formulation or reformulation of divine powers as such. Other factors, like the emergence of the names of Zeus, Here, Poseidon, Artemis and a form of Athene (as well as Paian and Enualios) from the Linear B tablets, and the fixed formular status of divine epithets in Homer,[2] demonstrating the widespread acceptance of divine functions and titles at least for the three or four generations necessary for the development of such formular systems, show that Homer must have come at a relatively late stage in the formation of Olympian theology. The same can be said of Hesiod, whose attention to snakes and monsters, to chthonic powers in general which the Homeric tradition preferred to ignore, is unlikely to be due to *recent* contact with the Near East (as part of the Orientalizing movement of the late eighth and seventh centuries B.C., that is) but depends rather on material inherited somehow from Mycenaean times. Some scholars do not agree, for reasons well stated in Oswyn Murray's *Early Greece* (Fontana Paperbacks 1980) 88f.; but references to Kronos imprisoned below the earth in *Iliad* bks 8 and 14 show the Homeric tradition to have been aware of the Succession-myth describing the violent displacement of the first generation of gods, a myth which is closely parallel to the Hurrian–Hittite tale of Kumarbi from the later second millennium B.C. and must have been known in Greece long before 700.

Some of the first generations of gods in those ancient tales are actual embodiments of important world-constituents. Thus Hurrian and Babylonian Anu and Greek Ouranos are the sky, with the 'weather-god' and Zeus as more refined meteorological powers. Such functions are not often emphasized in the Homeric pantheon. Poseidon is closely associated with the sea and perhaps lies behind the Trojan Horse as god of earthquakes, but even Zeus, though he still on occasion deploys the thunderbolt, has lost much of his cosmological force – or rather it has been converted into force of a different kind, authority, that is, over his fellow-gods and mankind. Something similar has happened with other divine functions that are likely to have been of high antiquity and maintained by local cults. Thus Here's rôle as goddess of Argos is equivocal in the *Iliad* in that she is willing to see Mycenae with Argos and Sparta destroyed later, if only Troy can fall now (*Il.* 4.51ff.) – that means that the Judgement of Paris, a developed mythical fantasy with strong folktale characteristics, weighs more heavily upon her, in the minds of these poets, than her traditional cult-status as great goddess

[2] Like Παλλάς, Ἀγελείη, Ἀλαλκομενηΐς, Φοῖβος, ἑκαεργός, ἀκερσεκομής, μητιέτα, νεφεληγερέτα, αἰγιοχοῖο, βοῶπις, ἐριούνιος, διάκτορος, φιλομμειδής, ἰοχέαιρα, ἐνοσίχθων, ἐννοσίγαιος, γαιήοχος, ἀμφιγυήεις.

of the Argive Heraion. Athene's functional rôle in the poem is rather as war-goddess than as city-protectress, in so far as these can be separated, with her almost contradictory sponsorship of household crafts receiving an occasional mention. Hephaistos performs his function of bronze-smith from time to time but is equally important as a peace-maker among the gods, who on a famous occasion usurps the rôle of Hebe or Ganymede and pours the nectar (*Il.* 1.584ff.). Aphrodite, apart from her rôle as Aineias' mother and protector of her favourite Paris, is largely confined to her basic sphere of love, just as Ares is of war, although both take on broader personalities in their involvement with Diomedes in bk 5 (as well as with each other and Hephaistos in Phemios' song of divine adultery in *Odyssey* bk 8). Hermes is the persistent messenger and escort, though the former function is largely filled by Iris in the *Iliad*. Artemis is sometimes goddess of hunting, but Apollo's connexion with prophecy and healing is only occasionally implied, and he operates more fully as defender of the Trojans and their allies.

As for the rest, they are scarcely mentioned, and the conclusion remains that for the most part these Olympian gods and goddesses behave, under Zeus, as individuals transcending by far the special rôles, functions and local associations that actual cult and tradition might have imposed on them. Admittedly, if more were known about the cults of these deities before Homer, their functions might often appear less specific than they became later, in the Archaic and Classical periods for example; for if every settlement inclined to have its own particular deity, it would be quixotic to expect him or her to confine their interests to metallurgy, medicine or hunting, for instance. Even so, the epic tradition might reasonably be suspected of viewing them not so much through cultic rôles but rather as archetypes of social and sexual relations seen largely in human terms (so e.g. B. C. Dietrich, *Tradition in Greek Religion*, Berlin 1986, 120).

Because of these often quite sophisticated social rôles, most modern critics seem happy to credit most of the idea of the Olympian family to Homer, and to see that as his basic contribution to the development of Greek religion. Yet the Asiatic origins of the concept are virtually undeniable.[3] The Sumerian gods were envisaged in just such a way – as the Igigi, living together on a divine mountain, related to each other under the kingship of Enlil (or Marduk in the derivative Babylonian pantheon), controlling the destinies of men on earth, receiving sacrifices from them. This last characteristic is important, because it is through animal sacrifice that we most clearly discern the pre-Homeric status of the gods conceived as a group. For the Homeric poems reveal sporadic traces of a complicated set of tales about an epoch, preceding that of the Homeric heroes, when men

[3] Cf. in general *ANET*; Kirk, *Myth* chs. 3 and 4; H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Near East* (London 1973); Burkert, *Religion* ch. 3.

and gods feasted together, at least on special occasions. More specifically, the gods are occasionally envisaged as absenting themselves from Mt Olumpos, either individually or *en masse*, to go and share in hecatombs – a feast at which many roast oxen were served, that implies – with the Aithiopes (in the *Iliad*) or the Phaeacians (in the *Odyssey*). Those mythical peoples, together, surprisingly enough, with the Cyclopes and the Giants, were part-divine, descended from the gods in some sense, and they, at least, maintained the habit of common dining, of commensality, which had ended so far as ordinary mortals were concerned not all that long before the heroic era described by Homer. Hesiod in the *Theogony* (535ff.) relates the tale of how an agreement was reached at Mekone between Zeus on behalf of the gods and Prometheus on behalf of men about the division of meat which men and gods had until then shared in common. The two races are now to be separated, with gods receiving a share through the act of sacrifice – Prometheus' attempt to fob them off with the inedible portions, mainly the bones, was successful, or equivocally so, since Zeus (according to Hesiod's final version) was aware of what was happening. Presumably he condoned the deceit only because the gods, in a way, no longer had need of the edible portions.

That is interpretation, and Hesiod does not even suggest it; yet it accords with the Homeric purging of some aspects of sacrifice and divine carnality which will be discussed shortly. Exactly why the two sides broke off relations, at least in their communal contacts (for protection of a favourite, as of Odysseus by Athene, can obviously still continue), is uncertain; that forms part of another defective myth, of the Golden Age and the 'reign of Kronos'. He ruled over the golden race of men according to *Works and Days* 109ff.; they were eventually hidden by the earth somehow, but made by Zeus into benevolent daimons over the earth. Kronos was deposed in the wars between generations among the early gods; Zeus managed to escape being swallowed by him as a baby, and so despatched him to Tartaros with the other Titans. Signs of this (as already noted) are present in Homer, but it is alien to his main heroic theme, and it was Hesiod who in his *Theogony* attempted to tie the various tales together into a more or less coherent whole.

The importance of these matters is that there was a quite ancient assortment of tales, on which Homer occasionally drew, about the gods as a group mingling in certain ways with the ancestors of the Homeric heroes. It may or may not be legitimate to conclude with W. Burkert (*Religion* 46) that the Mycenaean tablets reveal 'at least the beginnings of a mythical family of the gods', but the Homeric epics of themselves demonstrate that the idea is not a Homeric invention. The history of divine relations with men is a long and complex one, going back at least several generations (and

in view of Mesopotamian parallels probably a very long time indeed) in the oral heroic tradition and the popular sources on which it drew. Even the relation of Phaeacians and Giants is worked out in a way, for at *Od.* 7.54–68 the disguised Athene tells Odysseus how Eurumedon, king of the Giants, was father of Periboie, who gave birth to Nausithoos, king of the Phaeacians, after mating with Poseidon. These Phaeacians are ἀγχίθεοι, close to the gods, who come down and feast with them when they sacrifice hecatombs, or so Alkinoos claims at *Od.* 7.201–6. This is not *ad hoc* invention – the interconnexions between these exotic and half-divine survivors (who live, like the Cyclopes and the twin groups of Aithiopes, at the ends of the earth and out of touch with ordinary mortals) are too complex, too consistent and too casually revealed for that.

Near Eastern influence is obviously a crucial factor. Exactly how, when and to what degree it was exercised on the formation of specifically Greek religious ideas is unknown; clearly Ugarit and Cyprus were important points of contact in the later Bronze Age. But it is most plainly perceived in the case of individual deities. Zeus is shown by his name to be Indo-European, but his functions have significant parallels, too, with those of Babylonian Marduk. Aphrodite is pure Sumerian/Akkadian in type and origin, she is Inanna and Ishtar, Canaanite Anath, the love-goddess, downgraded by the Greeks from her aspect of 'queen of heaven'. Artemis is west-Asiatic, a version of the mother-goddess type; Asiatic also is her mother Leto and her brother (in the developed Greek pantheon at least) Apollo – whose epithet Lukeios is more plausibly connected with Lycia in S–W Asia Minor than with wolves, and whose northern, Hyperborean associations seem to be secondary. Hephaistos is another familiar west-Asiatic representative, the smith-god and divine armourer, localized in lightly-Hellenized Lemnos just off the Asiatic coast. Hades and his consort Persephone have much in common with the Sumerian ruler of the underworld, Queen Ereshkigal – of course the change of sexes and the promotion of Hades to be brother of Zeus himself are important too. Only Here, Athene, Poseidon, Hermes and Demeter (who has few heroic connexions) have strong claims to be predominantly Hellenic in origin and development, or at least to be deep-rooted local versions of common Near Eastern archetypes.

I have drastically simplified, even now, this question of the Asiatic components of the Greek gods; but Mesopotamian influence extends beyond individual types to general themes and ideas about the structure of the world in religious terms, and they are probably even more significant. The idea of a 'golden age' is curiously ambiguous and patchy among the Greeks, and that probably arises from the conflation of Mesopotamian and,

in this one case, Egyptian elements. The divine family is an easy product of a group of gods and goddesses belonging to different generations, a Sumerian belief from at least the third millennium B.C. The triumph of the youngest of the gods in a crisis is another motif that connects Zeus and Marduk, though it may also have broader folktale affiliations. The 'lowering of kingship from heaven' is a key Mesopotamian notion which ultimately lies behind the erratically developed Homeric idea of god-reared kings, symbolized by Agamemnon's ancestral sceptre descended from Zeus himself at *Il.* 2.100ff. The realm of the underworld is curiously similar even apart from its rulers – the seven gates of Mesopotamian myths have no exact Greek parallel, but the river of the dead and the infernal ferryman are common to both. The idea of *moira* or destiny as a divine instrument is difficult and confused in many Greek contexts, but is a plausible development of the concrete *me*'s or divine ordinances of the Mesopotamian gods. Olumpos itself is a non-Greek name applied to several peaks in western Asia as well as to the Thessalian mountain that became home of the gods for the Greeks; the Ugaritic divine assembly, too, took place on the 'northern mountain' according to texts of the later second millennium B.C.

The study of the ways in which Greek-speakers adapted some of these common ideas and themes to their own special needs and emphases is one of the most exciting and difficult challenges for the modern student of Greek religion. Many of the blank areas of the mythical map respond to this kind of approach. The myth of the great flood is a concrete example, since it is clear that this is a Mesopotamian idea in origin, one that lacks reality when transposed to largely unfloodable Greece and therefore loses its centrality in the tale of the relations between men and gods. Ambiguities over the Golden Age (what caused its termination? and who had enjoyed it, men in general or just favourites or descendants of the gods?) are similarly caused: in fact there is one particular area in which Mesopotamian themes had to be drastically curtailed or adjusted – precisely, that is, over the relations between men and gods. It was here that the Greeks most radically rethought this Mesopotamian inheritance; for the Mesopotamian gods had created men to be their slaves, to bake their bread and clean out their temples. The 'black-headed ones' were tolerated for just so long as they performed these functions efficiently; if they became noisy or too numerous, a portion of them would be wiped out by the attack of some divinity. Relics of this theme of insubordination and over-population can be seen in the Greek context (specifically in the *Cypria*'s interpretation of 'the plan of Zeus', *Il.* 1.5n.), but generally speaking the Greeks utterly rejected this view of men as slaves of the gods, at least until the rise of Orphism in post-Homeric times. Men had once banqueted with the gods on special

occasions like the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, there was no total separation then, and it was for some disputed reason, probably involving bloodshed, that the two had finally separated. But the gods were still seen as concerned over men – indifferent at times, as the epic shows, but ultimately viewing them as very far from slaves and chattels.

Because of this radically different viewpoint many of the Mesopotamian mythical and religious themes had to be bowdlerized or suppressed. The House of Hades is a less destructive and dismal place than the Mesopotamian House of Dust, in which the dead are clad with feathers and feed on dust and can be hung on hooks in front of Queen Ereshkigal; the infernal judges Minos and Rhadamanthus imply a distinct set of values here. We could hardly imagine the Homeric gods agreeing to make a concerted attack on mankind, and not only because of their difficulty in reaching unanimous decisions – even the Mesopotamian gods eventually unite against the murderous Erra and in defence of men, but only because that is where their interest now lies. Most important of all in this context is the Greek ambivalence over the creation of mankind itself. There are specific and graphic Mesopotamian myths on this topic, but the Greeks talked vaguely of Deukalion and Prometheus and concentrated on the safer topic of the creation of women. That is probably because a united divine resolve to create men would lead directly to that unpalatable theme of men designed to be slaves of the gods.

All that adjustment of age-old and widely diffused versions of divine organization and behaviour clearly happened long before the final composition of the *Iliad* – much of it, one might guess, before a poetical tradition had developed at all in any recognizable form. Homer's gods have already lost most of their Asiatic colouring, and in most respects have also lost the contradictions arising from the process of cross-cultural assimilation. That stage in their formation is definitely pre-Homeric.

The *post*-Homeric state of affairs, by contrast, is predictably much clearer. Now the gods of the Greek world are firmly established in temples, they are brought down as far as they can be to earth and anchored again in specific localities – not necessarily within the cities themselves but close to them, where the ancient cult-spots have become enormous sanctuaries like those of Here near Argos and Samos, and of Huakinthos-Apollo a few miles out of Sparta. Homer's Olumpos-based gods, only occasionally associated with specific temples or *temene*, must have seemed very different to his audiences from the gods and goddesses they were already worshipping in their new temples, some of them quite substantial ones; of course the gods were not always present there, but their more or less continuous concourse on Olumpos must already have seemed a slightly artificial idea. The tradition of temple-worship doubtless goes back a long way, but the singers

of the epic tradition had turned attention away from it because it did not fulfil their requirements for dramatic, united and unlocalized divine participation.

Other aspects of cult and belief survived the implied diversion of the epic tradition. First, the rituals concerned with agrarian fertility which lay at the heart of some of the organized festivals of the developed *polis* – in Athens the Puanepsia, Anthesteria and Thargelia or, for a more restricted public, the Thesmophoria or Eleusinia. Second, these great religious festivals themselves, whether based on fertility, initiation or the celebration of a particular deity. A Homeric precedent is seen in the gathering of male citizens on the sea-shore of Pulos to make special sacrifices for Poseidon in *Odyssey* bk 3, or in the procession of women to entreat Athene in her temple in Troy in *Iliad* bk 6; but generally speaking these public acts of worship are not, for obvious reasons, a typical epic theme. Third, the cult of the dead, either by offerings soon after death or in the worship of powerful ancestors, is borne out by the cemeteries as well as by literary references from the Archaic age on. This merges with the cult of heroes to which the epics themselves seem to have given an impetus. Lastly, the important household cults of Hestia, the hearth, of Zeus in his aspects of Meilikhios and Herkeios, protector of the store-room and courtyard, of Hermes and Apollo Aguieus, guardians of fertility and property; with these one can join the countryman's worship of nymphs and spirits of mountain, spring, river and forest, though these do find some mention in the *Odyssey*.

These are certainly not post-Homeric *in origin*. Widespread temple-cults, regular veneration of the dead, rituals of fertility and public festivals are firmly established in the Archaic age, and it would be extraordinary if the extremes of public and private worship were not widely known before, as well as after, the acme of the Homeric tradition. The conclusion is therefore inevitable that Homer and the epic tradition suppressed *a great deal* about the ordinary religious practices of their day. That may not be found very surprising: in many respects it reflects the nature of the epic subject-matter itself; but once again the *Odyssey*, with its developed peacetime scenes both of palace and of countryside, provided an opportunity that was broadly rejected.

One act of worship which, as we saw, was definitely not suppressed is the act of animal sacrifice. The process itself is described in typical scenes and seems more or less automatic (although sometimes abbreviated) so far as the human participants are concerned – but is the reaction of the recipients, the gods, so straightforward? The life of these dwellers on Mt Olumpos is modelled on that of a prosperous and artificially extended family: the generations have been concertina'ed, there are too few grandparents and too many half-sisters, but it is all very human. They have their own party-

nights at which Apollo plays the lyre and the Muses provide vocal backing (*Il.* 1.601–4), and at which they eat – what? One of the most remarkable and least emphasized paradoxes of 'Homeric religion' is that these transcendent creatures are implied on several occasions to depend on mortals for one thing only, the coarse hunger-allaying smell and smoke of burning suet, spiralling to heaven from the fat-encased thigh-bones roasted in preliminary ritual down below. That is never stated in completely direct terms, but Zeus favours Hektor, for example, because he never fails in such offerings. We might expect them to eat great, god-sized steaks at their own banquets, but of course what they actually consume is ambrosia, 'immortal food' never further specified than that, washed down not with wine but with nectar. And yet that was not always so; it was not so long since the age of commensality and the marriage of Thetis and Peleus – no mention there of separate diets like those of Odysseus and Kalupso at *Od.* 5.196–9! Indeed the Hesiodic tale of the division at Mekone showed that until the end of that golden age of commensality gods and men had eaten, on special occasions at least, the same food: the best cuts, that is, of oxen. That idea is firmly passed over by Homer; his references to ambrosia and nectar are (as will be seen) surprisingly infrequent, but whenever the gods are glimpsed dining on Olumpos that is presumably what they have.

Homer, then, spares his audience any suggestion of meat-savour-sniffing in the golden halls of Olumpos, just as he keeps clear of any signs of drunkenness among the gods – only Dionusos gets drunk, and then not in Homer and not in heaven. In short, there has been a significant degree of what I have elsewhere called de-carnalization of these Olympians in the course of the epic tradition, not least, one might conjecture, by Homer, the monumental composer, himself. That this was not simply a revival of vegetarian cults in the Late Bronze Age (when 'tables of offerings' for grain, honey, oil and wine are far commoner than outdoor altars for burnt sacrifices) is shown by the almost total neglect in the poems of non-animal offerings, apart from occasional libations of wine.

It is important to look more closely for a moment at the Homeric mentions of divine diet. There are four places in the epic where the gods are specifically said to feast on hecatombs. The simplest is *Il.* 9.535, where 'the other gods fed on hecatombs' – but (as Griffin notes, *HLD* 187 n. 22) this lay in the past, in the tale of the Calydonian boar and its aftermath. Two of the other instances show the gods as sharing in a hecatomb-feast with the Aithiopes: *Il.* 23.205–7 and *Od.* 1.25f., to which *Il.* 1.423f. can in effect be added. The first of these is especially explicit: Iris (hardly the most material of these deities) says she is going to the Aithiopes 'where they are sacrificing hecatombs to the immortals, that I too may feast on a share of the sacred