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0521287855 - Greek Religion and Society - Edited by P. E. Easterling and J. V. Muir

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# *Greek Religion and Society*

Edited by

P. E. EASTERLING

Fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge

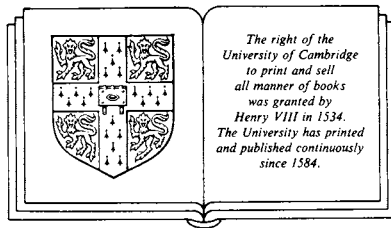
and

J. V. MUIR

King's College London

With a Foreword by

SIR MOSES FINLEY



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter/Prelims

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, Melbourne 3207, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1985

Reprinted 1986, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2002

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 84-19964

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication data*

Greek religion and society.

1. Greece – Religious life and customs

I. Easterling, P. E. II. Muir, J. V.

306'.6'0938 DF 121

ISBN 0 521 28785 5 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Cambridge University Press

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FOR  
JOHN SHARWOOD SMITH

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## *Preface*

This book has two purposes. First, it is intended for students in the upper forms of schools, undergraduates, and others who may be studying aspects of Greek society and Greek civilization and who need access to a useful range of modern scholarly views on Greek religion. Second, it is intended by the editors and by all who have contributed to it as a small token of gratitude from the world of scholarship to a modest and remarkable man who has devoted a great part of his life to maintaining the vigour of the Classics in education and for whom Greek religion has been a perennial subject of fascination.

The editors would like to express their thanks to the contributors for their ready co-operation, to Sir Moses Finley for writing the Foreword, and to Cambridge University Press for their help in producing the book.

*Cambridge*  
*London*  
*October 1984*

P. E. EASTERLING  
J. V. MUIR

## Foreword

M. I. FINLEY

As is stressed by Cartledge later in this volume, religion was one area of human behaviour in which the archaic and classical Greeks left no legacy, in any strict sense, to the modern world. That role was taken over by Christianity, and, however much Christianity in its early period was formulated in language and concepts borrowed from Greek philosophy, it nonetheless created an unbridgeable divide from the pagan religions that came before. That divide and the absence of a legacy are responsible for the desperately alien quality of much of ancient Greek religious belief and practice.

It follows that the effort to comprehend is an extremely difficult one. There is a familiar, traditional approach that really can no longer be tolerated, what Gould calls 'decoding'. It has two facets. One is to draw lines between the superstitions of the untutored masses and the rational beliefs of the intellectual (and social) élite. That requires us either to forget or to explain away Socrates' last words: 'I owe a cock to Asclepius, Crito. You pay it and do not neglect it' (Plato, *Phaedo* 118). The other is to hunt for similarities and then to play them up far beyond anything they can bear. The Greeks – more correctly, the educated élite among them – were thereby converted into good chaps basically like us. A case in point is the equation heroes = saints, which I find worse than unhelpful. No doubt one appealed to Heracles when in trouble as some today appeal to Santa Lucia, and no doubt the Greeks were faced like us with tensions and uncertainties, with unanswered and unanswerable questions. But that no more justifies confusing the quality of the attempted solutions in religion than it warrants confusing modern physicians and surgeons with

witch-doctors because they both try to grapple with disease and death.

A new way of looking at Greek religion is therefore required, and in recent decades that has been one of the central efforts in the study of antiquity. This volume reflects that effort. And one important point that immediately emerges (from the enterprise as a whole, not necessarily from each chapter in this book) is that for parallels and comparative insights, one must turn to such people as the Dinka or Azande of Africa. In doing so, it is immediately essential to add, one is not conjuring up the spirit of James Frazer and Jane Harrison at the turn of the present century. Value-judgements, based on our own value-systems, are taboo. The current approach, which draws on a new generation of anthropologists, such as Evans-Pritchard, Geertz and Lienhardt, rejects the very notion of 'primitive' or of a 'rational' as against a 'non-rational' (or even 'irrational') approach to the questions to which religion addresses itself. However, at least one difference between the ancient Greeks and their modern parallels strikes me, for one, as important: we know about Greek spirits and Greek possession from Pindar and Herodotus and Euripides, themselves Greeks, whereas about the Dinka we must rely on Professor Lienhardt of Oxford. The Dinka have produced no poets, no scientists, no philosophers. They are not even literate. To that extent, a difference in cultural levels is hardly deniable.

How fundamentally alien Greek religion was (to our eyes) is most easily shown by a simple listing, in which I shall try to stress aspects of religion that have been widespread since antiquity and not to consider phenomena that may be thought to be a peculiarity of the twentieth century. (Exceptions are known to every point that follows, but they do not invalidate the generalizations.)

(1) Greek religion had no sacred books (until the late appearance of such anomalies as Orphic texts or the so-called Sibylline books), no revelation, no creed. It also lacked any central ecclesiastical organization or the support of a central political organization. The Greek world was a cultural concept, an abstrac-

tion. Individual city-states had virtually unlimited authority in religious affairs as in everything else. However, there was no body with the power or the authority either to lay down rules for the whole Greek world or to enforce any. Hence there could, strictly speaking, be neither Greek orthodoxy nor Greek heresy. When Herodotus wrote that it was Homer and Hesiod who 'first fixed for the Greeks the genealogy of the gods, gave the gods their titles, divided among them then their honours and functions, and defined their images' (2.53), he was pointing to the essential truth that it was only the cultural authority of the poets that preserved a measure of unity and coherence among the religious ideas and practices of Greek communities that in his day extended from the eastern end of the Black Sea almost to the Straits of Gibraltar. That unity is remarkable under the circumstances, but the extreme diversity, at least in details, magnifies by many times the burden of the modern student. The tradition had it that when Anaxagoras fled from Athens because of a charge of blasphemy under a law of about 433 B.C., he was welcomed in Lampsacus, where he was buried with honours a few years later. And Plato has Socrates informed in prison that if he would flee he would receive a warm welcome from Crito's friends in Thessaly.

(2) Although large numbers of men and women were involved in the administration of religion, in the care of temples and altars or sacred sites, in the conduct of festivals and sacrifices, and so forth, and though we call them 'priests' in modern languages, a priesthood as that vocation is understood in many post-ancient religions did not exist. The great majority of so-called priests were simply public officials whose duties in whole or in part, usually the latter, included responsibility for some portion of the religious activity of the community. More often than not, they were selected by lot and they held office for only a year or even six months (as at Delphi), though some exceptional priesthoods were hereditary and, eventually, quite a number became life offices available for purchase (openly and legally). There was no special training, no sense of a vocation.

Greek ‘priests’, in sum, were customarily not holy men; they were also not particularly expert or qualified in matters pertaining to their duties in office. Yet someone had to settle disagreements over the rules of sacrifice or matters of pollution and purification or of blasphemy, and it is remarkable how ill-informed we are as to who these people were and as to their activity. Athens had a small number of such official experts, called *exēgētai*, but so far as we know not before about 400 B.C.; so did some other cities, and others may have relied on unofficial experts. Against that apparently small number there were countless unofficial ‘holy men’, like the oracle-mongers and soothsayers about whom Thucydides was so contemptuous, and against whom, he says (8.1.1), the Athenians turned in anger when their predictions of a successful invasion of Sicily in 415 B.C. were falsified by the disaster of 413. The contrast with Rome is striking: there divination was a state matter, though also in the hands of laymen, resorted to with staggering frequency and according to recognized rules, whereas private diviners and soothsayers were almost, though not entirely, unknown. The latter, it need hardly be said, led an uncertain existence everywhere, for their prosperity and sometimes their safety depended on their ‘success’.

(3) It follows as a matter of simple logic that places of worship were also radically different from anything known in later ages – despite the fact that the temple was the most expensive and imposing building of the Greek city. To begin with, the temple was hardly ever ‘a place for congregational worship’ (Coldstream): the exceptions, such as the *Telestērion* at Eleusis or the temple of Asclepius in Epidaurus, were rare and in fact help ‘prove the rule’. The temple was the house of the god, where his or her cult-image and often his or her treasure were stored; where, therefore, public access was severely restricted as to both numbers and times. The treasure was, after all, often very considerable (including costly decorations of the statue) and a temptation to robbery. Furthermore, wherever very large statues existed, most spectacularly in

the temple of Zeus at Olympia, little space was left for anyone else.

The siting of Greek temples was extraordinarily varied, and today we often fail to grasp the reasons behind a particular choice. It would be neat if the main temples of a city were regularly on its acropolis, but that was not the case. Apart from the fact that not all cities had an acropolis, there appears to have been a tendency in the early years of stone-temple construction to locate them on frontiers rather than at the centre. The ridge of temples in Sicilian Agrigentum is an extreme illustration. Sometimes there was an obvious functional reason for the location, as in temples of Poseidon, god of the sea, on headlands and promontories (such as Cape Sunium in Attica). But again that was not always the case: the temple of Poseidon in Corinth was in the city centre. And there were great numbers of shrines, for example at springs, that were neither temples nor in a sense structures at all. The one indispensable mark of a sacred shrine was an altar.

The centrality of the altar had two fundamental implications. The first is that most public worship and much private worship as well took place out of doors. In so far as an Olympian divinity was involved, the image was taken out of its temple-home for the occasion and 'presided' over the festivities, whatever they were, whether processions, games, dances or sacrifices. The second implication is that the sacrifice was the central act in worship, if one may be singled out. It is hard to think of a public action in which some god or gods were not sacrificed to as a preliminary step in seeking divine favour and support.

Vegetable and animal matter were both frequently employed (and a number of different liquids were poured out as libations), and the burning of parts of animals was of itself a sufficient excuse for out-of-doors worship. It is necessary to stress 'parts of animals' because the sacrifice was not only a way of offering the gods food and drink, it was also a way of establishing a table fellowship in which human beings shared with the divine. The feast commonly

followed the sacrifice, and the edible parts of the sacrificial animals were largely reserved for the feast. Many meanings can be read into the burnt offering, not all of them logically compatible. One is the idea of a continuum that held together all living parts of the universe; men shared in the feast with each other as they did with the gods.

(4) Given the political fragmentation of the Greek world, with the corresponding autonomy of hundreds of city-states, given the fact that the administration of public religion was within the province of the state, and given the large number of divine and semi-divine beings to be honoured, it is hardly surprising that the total number of festivals was ‘extraordinarily high, both absolutely and as a proportion of the days in the year given over’ to them (Cartledge). In Athens, which appears to have been somewhat exceptional, one third or perhaps slightly more of the days in each year were marked by one festival or another (though of course not all of them were celebrated by everyone).

The range of rituals at these festivals was no less extraordinary, many of them having originated in the early archaic period (or even before) and having therefore become more or less unintelligible to the participants in classical times (and to us). But in general they comprised sacrifices, ‘hymns’, dances and processions, which are intelligible enough in essence if not in the details. There was, however, one feature of a number of festivals that was peculiarly, perhaps uniquely, Greek. That was the practice of competition in athletics, music, dance and theatre (but never in the plastic arts).

The most striking aspect of this competitive ritual was the way in which it dominated some of the major panhellenic festivals, including the ‘Big Four’, the games at Olympia (for Zeus), Delphi (for Apollo), Nemea, about two-thirds of the way from Corinth to Mycenae (also for Zeus), and at the Isthmus of Corinth (for Poseidon). All four were in places that were politically insignificant, whereas the efforts of Athens to elevate its own Panathenaic festival to comparable standing were unsuccessful: there was too much danger to the rest of the Greek world in allowing an already

powerful state to acquire the added halo of a major religious festival. Tragedy and comedy were written for a similar (annual) competition in Athens, but the Greater Dionysia, at which the new plays were performed each year, made no claim to pan-hellenic religious status. Some idea of the place of these particular festivals in Greek culture may be gained from the fact that the Olympic Games, the greatest of all and the only one that remained exclusively an athletic competition, were repeated every four years for more than a thousand years from their foundation, traditionally in 776 B.C.. An estimated 40,000 men attended, many coming from considerable distance – the largest number of people assembled in one place on a particular occasion (other than a few major battles) in all Greek history.

It would be absurd to imagine that they all came to Olympia from the same motives and had the same reactions, or even that their motives and reactions were somehow consistent with each other. Ambiguity was inherent in Greek religious thinking and practice: the gods, after all, could be forces for disorder as well as for order, their shrines were ‘holy but dangerous places’ (Easterling). All this was abundantly manifest in their myths, their accounts of what lay behind the sacred places and practices.

A myth is a story, but it is not only a story: it was the standard Greek device of explanation in the sphere of the divine and the religious. Like everything else we have been concerned with, myth was open-ended: the myth-making process went on throughout Greek history. We can see it at work only in the restricted sphere of imaginative literature, where we can watch, so to speak, while Aeschylus or Euripides shapes or re-shapes myths. In a way, that leaves us with a distorted picture, for the ‘original’ myth-making process was a non-literary one in inception and for most of the centuries thereafter. I do not underestimate the contribution of the poets: Herodotus’ remark about Homer and Hesiod which I have already quoted sums up their role in tidying up an inherently untidy, indeed chaotic, accumulation of tales. But one wonders how much of this process, this conversion of



myth into an art-form, affected the day-to-day life of ordinary Greeks, with which religion was enmeshed in every crevice. In a fundamentally non-literate world, myth performed a variety of roles and functions. It gave shape and meaning to the past, to history, for one thing. Our concern here, however, is with myth in its particular role as the vehicle for religious explanation, and the danger must be recognized of 'rationalizing' it by over-stressing its most artistic, most intellectual manifestations.

That brings us back to the question I touched upon at the beginning, the significance of differences in social status and education. That there was no simple correlation should be obvious: one need only think of Nicias or Xenophon, men of wealth and education, whose almost oppressive conventional piety was abundantly displayed, or of the quite vicious sneering at Socrates in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes (the impact of which is clearly noticed by Plato, *Apology* 19c–d). But there were the famous sceptics whom Muir discusses, Xenophanes in the sixth century B.C., Protagoras and Thucydides in the fifth, and others. How much impact did they have, and on whom? That kind of question is hard enough to grapple with in a world we can observe directly; it is much worse in a world that is long since dead.

These are the kinds of questions this book is concerned with. The effort to make sense of ancient Greek religion is, as Gould says in his closing words, not of merely antiquarian concern; it 'may perhaps tell us as much about our world and our society'. It is fitting, finally, that such an enterprise should be dedicated to the presiding genius over the renewal in our time of classical studies in this country, John Sharwood Smith.