

RELIGIONS OF THE ANCIENT GREEKS

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In 402 BC Cyrus the Younger raised an army, including 13,000 Greek mercenaries, to depose his brother from the Persian throne. Among these mercenaries was Xenophon, whose account of his experiences, the *Anabasis*, brings Greek religions to life for us.¹ The *Anabasis* recounts the march of Cyrus' army from the west coast of Asia Minor to Assyria, where Cyrus died in battle, and the subsequent retreat of the '10,000' Greeks to a Greek settlement on the north coast of Asia Minor.

Throughout the march of the 10,000, divine guidance was sought for the actions of the group and of individuals. Before the army went into action animals were sacrificed to the gods; professional diviners (*manteis*) inspected the entrails of the animals to determine whether the gods favoured the proposed action. Divine assent was far from automatic: sometimes plans were aborted because of unfavourable sacrifices; and sometimes sacrifices were offered repeatedly in the hope of obtaining a definite response.²

Individuals too sought divine guidance. Uncertain about joining the expedition in the first place, Xenophon decided to consult the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. He enquired to which of the gods he should sacrifice and pray in order for his participation to be a success (3.1.5–8). Another Greek who was eager to become commander of the force sacrificed to the gods for three days, but gave up on his plans when the sacrifices did not prove favourable (6.6.36). The gods might even send guidance in dreams. After the disaster of Cyrus' death, Xenophon had a dream from Zeus the King, which he interpreted to mean that the Greeks should galvanise themselves to escape from the Persian Empire; he immediately set about persuading the Greeks to follow him (3.1.11–15).

The interpretation of such signs from the gods was of course open to dispute, and even accusations of fraud. Xenophon says that the

¹ Cf. Nilsson 1955–67: 1.784–91. ² E.g. 6.4.12–5.2. Cf. Jameson 1991.

sequence of seven unfavourable sacrifices which prevented the army from moving was initially ascribed to his own plan of keeping the army there to found a new city (6.4.15). Xenophon's defensiveness is also clear in his account of the consultation at Delphi, which served as a defence against accusation for treason. Cyrus was an enemy of Xenophon's own city of Athens, and Xenophon was exiled from his native city after the expedition.

Sacrifices were also offered to gain divine assistance. Xenophon, claiming poverty towards the end of the expedition, was told by a diviner who had inspected the entrails of a sacrifice to Apollo, that Zeus the Merciful (Meilichios) stood in Xenophon's way. Xenophon realised that he had not sacrificed to Zeus the Merciful since leaving Athens, did so the next day, and was immediately favoured by the return of the horse which he had just been forced to sell (7.8.3–6).³ One might promise to offer something to a god if he or she helped one. When Xenophon was trying to persuade the men that they had fair prospects for leaving Assyria safely, a man sneezed and the crowd took this to be a sign from Zeus of Safety (Soter) and immediately did obeisance to him. Xenophon proposed that they vow to sacrifice in thanks to that god (and to others) as soon as they reached a friendly land (3.2.8–9). When they reached the north coast, they duly sacrificed oxen to Zeus and the other gods, and celebrated athletic games, a normal component of Greek festivals.

On one occasion the Greeks set aside in thanks a tithe for the gods Apollo and Artemis of Ephesos on the west coast of Asia Minor (Ephesos being the place where the expedition had begun). Xenophon recounted how he had dedicated as general his share of the tithe, to Apollo at Delphi, and to Artemis in a new sanctuary on his estate some three kilometres south of Olympia which he lovingly described:

Here Xenophon built an altar and a temple with the sacred money, and from that time forth he would every year take the tithe of the produce of the land in season and offer sacrifice to the goddess, all the citizens and the men and women of the neighbourhood taking part in the festival. The goddess would provide for those encamped there barley meal and loaves of bread, wine and sweetmeats and a portion of the sacrificial victims from the sacred herd as well as of the victims taken in the chase . . . Within the sacred precinct there is a meadow and hills covered with trees – suitable for raising pigs, goats, cattle and horses, so that even the beasts of burden belonging to those who attend the festival may be well

³ Zeus Meilichios was worshipped widely throughout the Greek world, largely by individuals and families: Jameson, Jordan and Kotansky 1993: 81–107; Appendix no. 1; see below, p. 51 for his cult at Selinus.

fed. Around the temple itself is a grove of cultivated trees which produce fruit in season. The temple is a small scale version of the temple at Ephesos; the image of the goddess, carved from cypress wood, is like the image at Ephesos, although that one is made of gold. By the temple stands a plaque with the following inscription:

‘This place is sacred to Artemis. He who owns it and enjoys its produce must offer in sacrifice a tenth each year, and from the remainder must keep the temple in good condition. If someone fails to do these things, the goddess will take care of it.’⁴

Many aspects of Xenophon’s account are surprising to those reared on Jewish or Christian religious assumptions.⁵ In place of one male god, in the *Anabasis* there is a multiplicity of gods, even unidentifiable gods. Gods are both male (Zeus, Apollo), and female (Artemis). There is no religious sphere separate from that of politics and warfare or private life; instead, religion is embedded in all aspects of life, public and private. There are no sacred books, religious dogma or orthodoxy, but rather common practices, competing interpretations of events and actions, and the perception of sacrifice as a strategic device open to manipulation. Generals and common soldiers, not priests, decide on religious policy. The diviners are the only usual religious professionals, and religion offered not personal salvation in the afterlife, but help here and now, escape from the Persians or personal success and prosperity. Religious festivals combined solemnity and jollity. Practice not belief is the key, and to start from questions about faith or personal piety is to impose alien values on ancient Greece.

A PANHELLENIC SYSTEM

The religious system exemplified in the *Anabasis* was one common to all Greeks. The 10,000, drawn from numerous Greek cities, were not just an army of Greeks, they were almost a Greek polis on the move. Their practices and attitudes illustrate a religious system common to all Greeks. They were able to operate easily with a common set of rules, despite the fact that they and their diviners were drawn from numerous cities in different parts of the Greek world. Delphi functioned in the background as a Panhellenic Greek sanctuary of indisputable authority.

⁴ 5.3.4–13. On the site of this sanctuary see *BCH* 64–5 (1940–1) 245–6; Delebecque 1955; Themelis 1968.

⁵ Price 1984a: 11–16; cf. Phillips 1986: 2697–711. Gould 1985 exemplifies a thoughtful modern approach.

Everyone knew who Zeus the Saviour was and what a proper sacrifice was. Only after celebrating communal sacrifice did the army sometimes celebrate processions and athletic competitions in separate regional groups (4.5.5). Only when negotiating with non-Greeks did new rules have to be established. One non-Greek tribe wishing to establish friendly relations with the Greeks asked the Greeks to exchange pledges: ‘thereupon the Macronians gave the Greeks a barbarian lance and the Greeks gave them a Greek lance, for the Macronians said that these were pledges and both sides called the gods to witness’ (4.8.7). The Greeks, of course, knew that other people had their own gods and worshipped in their own ways and only with them were they uncertain over how to articulate common ground.⁶

These common practices can also be seen very nicely in the material records. The same types of dedications were made in sanctuaries all over the Greek world. For example, especially in the sixth century BC marble statues of men and women, life-size or larger, were often dedicated in sanctuaries of the gods or put up as grave markers. They have been found everywhere from Sicily to the Crimea, and from the north Aegean to Cyrene in Libya (Fig. 1.1).⁷

Common rules of course did not eliminate debate. After the battle of Delium (on the border of Attica and Boeotia) in 424 BC, the Athenians and the Boeotians exchanged heralds, each side accusing the other of transgressing Greek customary practices. The Boeotians claimed that, while it was an established custom of all Greeks for invaders to keep away from sanctuaries in the country they invaded, the Athenians had actually fortified Delium, the sanctuary of Apollo, and even dwelt in it, doing there whatever men do in a profane place, even drawing for common use the water which was untouched by themselves except for use in lustrations connected with the sacrifices. The Athenians responded that they had not and would not damage the sanctuary: according to custom the sanctuary belonged to whomever had control in a country (as the Boeotians had done on originally invading the land), and the water they had turned to only due to the constraints of war, which would meet with indulgence even from the gods.⁸ Disputes of this kind show that common Greek customs provided a framework to which people of different states could refer.

Greeks pointed to the significance and value of these common prac-

⁶ Rudhardt 1992.

⁷ Cf. Snodgrass 1983 on transport of such sculpture. For their dedication, see below, p. 62.

⁸ Thucydides 4.97–8. For appeal to accepted deities, 2.74.

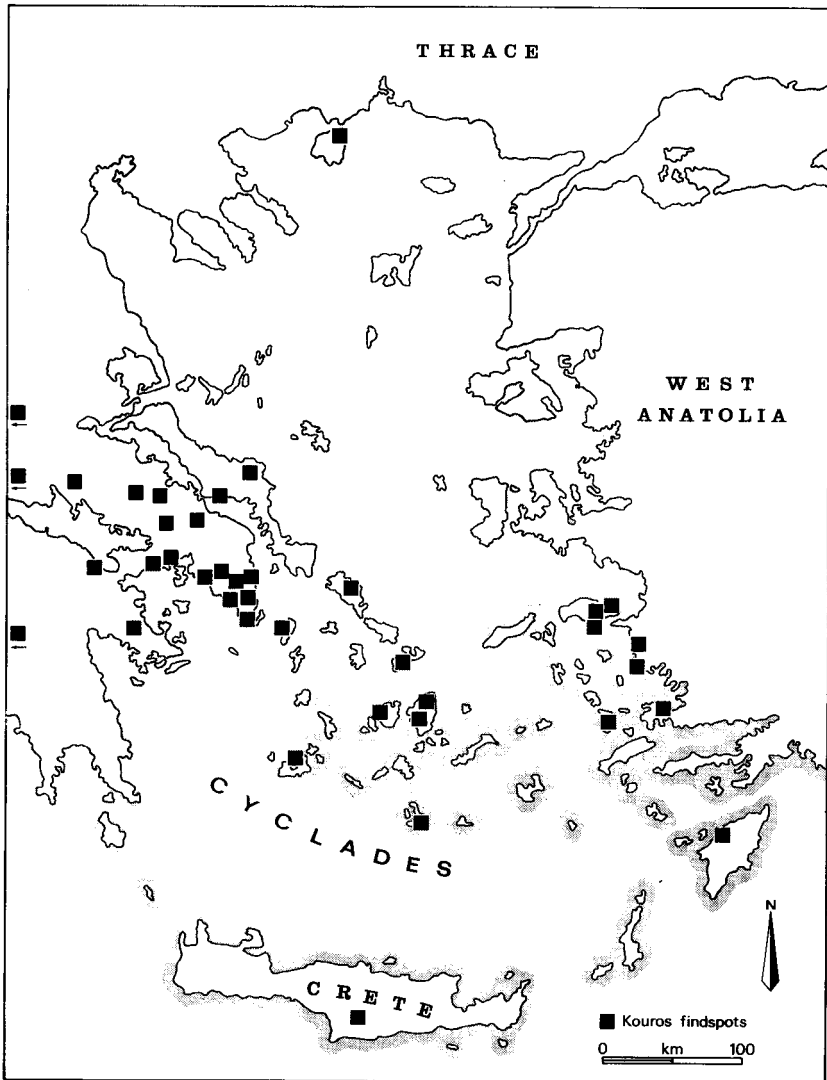


Fig. 1.1. Findspots of marble statues of men (*kouros*).

tices in order to strengthen unity at times of crisis. According to Herodotus, this is what the Athenians did when they declined a last minute invitation to capitulate to the Persian king Xerxes in 480 BC:

for there are many reasons why we should not do this even if we so desired, first and foremost the burning and destruction of the images and dwellings of our

gods, which we are constrained to avenge to the utmost rather than make covenants with the doer of these things, and next the sameness of all Greeks in blood and speech, and the shrines of the gods and the sacrifices that we have in common and the likeness of our way of life, to all of which it would ill become the Athenians to be false. (8.144)

Although these arguments were not decisive for some Greeks, who either went over to the Persians or remained neutral, for many the experience of shared religious customs, especially in the face of an enemy who had actually destroyed temples, was a factor that strengthened their will to resist.⁹

The Panhellenic system referred to by the Athenians was constructed in the archaic period (eighth to sixth centuries BC). The material evidence for civic sanctuaries begins around 800 BC and continues for more than a thousand years.¹⁰ It was also in the eighth century that Olympia and Delphi emerged as sanctuaries of more than merely local interest; the games at Olympia, which probably began in the eighth century, were joined from the early sixth century by games at Delphi, the sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea and that of Poseidon at Isthmia to form the centre of a Panhellenic festival cycle.¹¹

The system of different deities was also articulated in the archaic period. According to Herodotos (2.53), it was Homer and Hesiod who constructed the genealogies of the gods and gave to the gods their names, distributed their honours and skills and indicated their appearances. Before then, the Greeks did not know the origins of each of the gods, whether they were all eternal or what sort of appearance each had. Herodotos puts this view forward as a personal opinion, but it is one with much plausibility. Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (of the late eighth or possibly seventh century) and Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (c. 700 BC?) did serve as classic formulations of Greek ideas about the divine to which subsequent generations responded in their own ways (below, p. 13).¹² Many of their ideas were still alive in the second century AD. The Greeks of this later period continued to believe, for example, that Athena was the daughter of Zeus and that gods might appear to individuals as they had to Homer's heroes. The latter belief is depicted (and criticised)

⁹ For other appeals to Panhellenism see Herodotos 7.132, 8.121, 9.81; ML 27, trans. Fornara 1983: no. 59 (serpent column, below p. 60). Epitaphs: ML 24, trans. Fornara 1983: no. 21 (Corinth); ML 26, trans. Fornara 1983: no. 51 (Athens); Tod 1.20, trans. Fornara 1983: no. 60 (Megara).

¹⁰ Some mainland sites (Isthmia, Olympia, Amyclae, and sites in the Argolid, all in the Peloponnese, and Kalapodi in central Greece) illuminate the nature of changes between the end of the Bronze Age palaces and the ninth century BC: Morgan 1996; 1997. Burkert 1992b offers a sketch of eighth-century developments. ¹¹ Morgan 1993; Golden 1998.

¹² West 1995 argues for a mid-seventh century date for the *Iliad*.

most vividly in the Acts of the Apostles; when Paul and Barnabas visited the town of Lystra in southern Turkey and Paul cured a crippled man, the crowd shouted in their native language ‘the gods have come down to us in human form’, and they called Barnabas Zeus and Paul they called Hermes because he was the spokesman.¹³ This was not a mere figure of speech. The local priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and he and all the people were about to offer sacrifice. The story thus offers the Christian author of Acts an opportunity to explain the nature of the true god.

This book ranges widely in time, from the archaic period down to the second and third centuries AD (and indeed beyond). The system was, I believe, fairly stable over this long time span, and, crucially, cities, though increasingly subject to the rule of kings or emperors, retained their role as providers of the principal framework within which most Greeks interpreted their existence.¹⁴ There were of course some changes over this long period. Although Greeks may have believed that their rites were completely ‘ancestral’, civic practices certainly changed. New cults of the gods were introduced and new ideas about the gods were developed; and when Greek cities came under the dominance of external rulers, whether Greek or Roman, they established cults of those rulers using as a template the existing cult of the gods. For example, after Athens had fallen to the Macedonian Demetrios Poliorketes (Besieger of Cities), the Athenians welcomed him in 291/290 BC with offerings of incense, crowns and libations and sang a processional hymn comparing Demetrios, a theophoric name, and Demeter

for the greatest and dearest of the gods have come to our city: here indeed the time [of the Eleusinian mysteries] has brought together Demeter and Demetrios. She comes to celebrate the solemn mysteries of the Daughter [Persephone] but he, as is fitting for a god, is here in gladness, fair and smiling. Something august he seems, all his friends around him and he himself in their midst, his friends the stars even as he is the sun. Oh son of the most mighty god Poseidon and of Aphrodite, Hail! For other gods are either far away or have not ears, or exist not, or heed us not at all, but you we can see in very presence, not in wood and not in stone, but for real. So we pray to you, first bring peace, you most dear. For you have the power.¹⁵

¹³ Acts of the Apostles 14.8–18; cf. Lane Fox 1986: 102–67.

¹⁴ Cf. Price 1984a; Lane Fox 1986: 27–261. Parker 1996 demonstrates the lack of sharp divides in the history of Athenian cults, at least down to 250 BC. On the Hellenistic period see Gordon 1972; Stewart 1977; Chaniotis 1995 on new festivals; Mikalson 1998.

¹⁵ Athenaios 6.252f–254a = Demochares, *FGH* 75 F 2, Duris, *FGH* 76 F 13. Habicht 1997: 92–3. Cf. Parker 1996: 256–64. Earlier honours at Athens, below, pp. 28–9; cults of emperors, below, p. 158.

Such language struck some later and perhaps some at the time as ‘flattery’, but we cannot dismiss it so simply. It shows not the decay of the old cults, but their continuing ability to express the relationship of a Greek city to the ruling power.

Another change is that the geographical scope of the system expands over time. While the Panhellenic games of mainland Greece were originally limited to Greeks, the definition of ‘Greek’ changes, as those once classified as ‘barbarian’ adapted Greek mythology to signal their membership of the Greek world. Already in the early fifth century BC a king of Macedon, initially refused permission to compete at the Olympic games, gained acceptance by claiming Argive descent. And c. 200 BC a man from Sidon, a Phoenician town on the coast of what is now Lebanon, was able to participate in the Panhellenic Nemean games by virtue of the place of Sidon in Greek mythology.¹⁶

The vitality of the system in the Roman period is illustrated most clearly in the description of Greece by Pausanias. Pausanias, who came from Lydia in Asia Minor, travelled extensively in mainland Greece in the mid-second century AD and wrote up his *Description of Greece* between c. AD 150 and 175. This work, which is often seen simply as an antiquarian guidebook, in fact depicts the religious culture of mainland Greece as central to Greek cultural identity. Pausanias is very conscious of the history of Greece: when he visited the sanctuary of Delium, he knew about the battle there nearly 600 years before. But he is not interested simply in the past. He evokes a living religious system, of festivals with their local peculiarities, and local stories about the gods in whose honour the festivals were held and who were sometimes thought to be present at the festivals. As an outsider in mainland Greece, he weaves together the local particularities in his travel narrative. Like Herodotos expressing the religious community of the Greeks in the face of Persian invasion, Pausanias articulates the Panhellenic religious system of a Greece under Roman rule.¹⁷

The sources for the history of Greek religions are numerous and very varied. Of the literary sources it has been said that there is hardly any

¹⁶ Panhellenic games: below, p. 39. Macedon: Herodotos 5.22. Sidon: L. Moretti, *Iscrizione agonistiche greche* (Rome, 1953) no.41, trans. in Austin 1981: no.121. From the second century BC onwards Romans too were allowed into the Panhellenic games – they also could claim Greek origins (below, ch.8).

¹⁷ Elsner 1992, who misses the significance of Pausanias’ origins and focus. Cf. Calame 1995a and Alcock 1996 on Pausanias as ethnographer. Arafat 1996 and Swain 1996: 330–56 on attitudes to Roman rule.

ancient author who did not have something to say about Greek or Roman religion, because 'religion' impinged everywhere.¹⁸ The texts include not only those by authors of the fifth and fourth centuries, like Herodotos and Xenophon, but range in date from Homer to Pausanias and beyond. The sources also include more than just literary texts. Inscriptions on stone or bronze record details of religious calendars, sacred laws and civic decrees regulating cults. Much of our evidence concerns Athens, and this is partly why Athens will feature quite largely.¹⁹ I have tried, however, not to make the book Athenocentric, nor to write another study of Panhellenic religion, but to examine local practices and myths and their relationships to the common Greek system.

Reconstructing rituals or myths by drawing on such texts can be very problematic. Written 'sources' for Greek religion are of extremely variable quality (and date). Those wishing to reconstruct classical Athenian rituals or myths, for example, draw on allusions in Aristophanes, descriptions in Pausanias, and antiquarian details preserved anonymously in Byzantine commentaries on ancient authors.²⁰ I have tried to eschew the composition of a melange derived from texts spanning a millennium and more. Though I have tried to show elements of continuity in Greek religions between (say) Xenophon and Pausanias, I present the later authors as voices in their own right. I have also tried to start my arguments not from antiquarian statements of dubious date and validity, but from texts of known contexts and perspectives.

Archaeological evidence of sanctuaries or of representations of rituals is also always pertinent; this book lays especial emphasis on presenting this material evidence. Methodological issues arise when one tries to relate texts and material evidence.²¹ Some of the problems can be illustrated in connection with the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. A myth, perhaps articulated in the early fifth century BC, told that four temples preceded the one built towards the end of the sixth century BC:

- (i) a laurel temple in the shape of a hut,
- (ii) a temple of wax and feathers built by bees,
- (iii) a bronze temple built by the gods Hephaistos and Athena,

¹⁸ Nock 1933: 272.

¹⁹ Parker 1996 on Athens; Parker 1989 explores the differences between classical Athenian and Spartan religions. On religion in Roman Sparta see Cartledge and Spawforth 1989: 193–7; Spawforth 1992.

²⁰ For an exposition of the problems and inadequacies of later texts on one Athenian festival, the Anthesteria, see Hamilton 1992: 5–62.

²¹ Cf. Renfrew 1985: 11–26 on problems of analysing the archaeology of a religious site.

(iv) a stone temple built by the heroes Trophonios and Agamedes, burnt down in 548 BC.²²

Though it might be tempting to find archaeological correlates of all four of these temples, the temptation should be resisted. Though there might have been an eighth-century temple at Delphi constructed out of laurel and with an apsidal end, it is more likely that the laurel temple (i) is a refraction of the importance of the laurel in the cult of Apollo. There was an all-stone temple at Delphi from 675–650 BC, but temples (ii), (iii) and (iv) are likewise mythical creations designed to express ideas about the ideal evolution of Delphi from nature to humanity through the divine and heroic spheres.

The point that we must not, in the first instance, interpret archaeological evidence in the light of written evidence can also be seen in another Delphic example. A myth, perhaps originating in the Hellenistic period, told how the site of Delphi was first discovered by a goatherd who had lost some animals down a chasm in the rocks.²³ When he approached the spot, he was overcome by vapours and began to prophesy. A vivid story, which was taken at face value by some modern scholars who asserted that this explained the workings of oracular prophecy at Delphi. Unfortunately, the geology of Delphi is such that there can never have been actual vapours, and there was, at most, only a symbolic chasm in the temple itself.

Archaeological evidence and the written record each need some care in their interpretation and should ideally be studied in isolation before they are combined. The structures of the texts are themselves at least as interesting as the ‘factual’ details in them. One cannot pile together ‘facts’ culled from texts without regard for contexts, in categories of which one is unconscious and which may well be inappropriate. The historian of Greek religions needs to be alert both to modern categories and questions, and also to those of the ancients.

²² Pindar, *Eighth Paean* 58–99; Pausanias 10.5.9–13. Cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 1979.

²³ Diodorus Siculus 16.26. Cf. Price 1985.