

# 1 | Localism and the Study of Ancient Greek Religion: The Example of the Divine Persona

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*Julia Kindt's chapter explores the way in which the local dimension of ancient Greek religion has featured in Classical scholarship from the beginnings of the discipline to the present. A particular focus is on the way in which the categories of the local and the general have featured in the study of the ancient Greek gods and goddesses. Kindt argues that the problem of location is intrinsic to the structure of ancient Greek religion, which, in the absence of traditional locations of authority, had multiple centres and peripheries. The way in which the Greeks conceived of the personalities of the gods and goddesses is a case in point: the idea of a unified existence as implied in the concept of the divine persona is challenged by the multiplicity of ways in which one and the same deity manifested itself in the human world. Three different ways in which Classical scholars have conceived of the categories of the local in relation to the Greek divine persona in response to the problem of location come into the picture here: as a realisation of the general, as the place at which variation occurs, and as two dynamic forces that variously intersect in different locations at which ancient Greek religion manifests itself. Kindt shows that Classical scholars have used the local and the general in different ways to navigate such challenges of location. She points to the strengths and weaknesses of different uses and identifies productive avenues for further research. She concludes that recent developments in the study of ancient Greek religion, in particular the critique of the polis model of ancient Greek religion, have invigorated the study of local Greek religion. Once firmly linked to the city-state, the conception of the local has opened up to include a variety of ways in which ancient Greek religious beliefs and practices are grounded in local landscapes, local histories, and local communities.*

## Introduction

It has frequently been said that ancient Greek religion is notoriously hard to define.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is that it lacks many of the structures,

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Kindt 2009: 9 for some comments on the structure of ancient Greek religion. See also Beck 2020: 135 on the relevance of the local in this respect.

institutions, and sources of authority that define other religious traditions. Ancient Greek religion had no church and no separate class of priests. It also lacked a holy book, a dogma, and a creed. The Greeks did not even have a word for religion as such, and religion was embedded in society to such an extent that it was not perceived to be separate and separable from the contexts in which it was practiced.<sup>2</sup>

This peculiarity of ancient Greek religion makes it difficult to describe the unity and diversity of the religious culture of the ancient Greeks. On what grounds are we to decide what was at the centre of the Greek religious experience, and what was at its periphery? Or, to put the same question differently: who is going to determine what should count as typical or central in a religious tradition with multiple centres and peripheries? Ancient Greek religion articulated itself along different lines and in altogether different terms than many of the other religious traditions we are familiar with. It follows that if we want to understand ancient Greek religion in itself and in its relationship to society, we need to consider alternative structures, institutions, and sources of authority to those we traditionally refer to when we describe other religious traditions.

‘The local’ and ‘the universal’ (or ‘general’, ‘Panhellenic’) are two categories that are frequently invoked in Classical scholarship to describe the unity and diversity of ancient Greek religion.<sup>3</sup> Classical scholars speak of local and universal cults, of local universal festivals, of local and universal divine personas, and of local and universal myths. It may be tempting to see such references as merely ‘practical’ or incidental.<sup>4</sup> Yet that would be to turn a blind eye on what is at stake when we make such distinctions. Even cursory references to ‘the local’ and ‘the universal’ ultimately betray a conception of ancient Greek religion according to which beliefs and practices are organised around two opposing poles or forces. Yet despite the heavy conceptual weight both conceptions are carrying in many accounts of ancient Greek religion, they are rarely defined, with Classical scholars applying them differently, in different avenues of study, and to very different ends.

<sup>2</sup> On the embeddedness of ancient Greek religion, see Bremmer 1994: 2–4; Kindt 2012: 16–19; Eidinow 2015. See also the contribution of Hans Beck to this volume (Chapter 2).

<sup>3</sup> In current research in the field, these terms frequently feature as synonymous. Overall, I prefer to speak of ‘the general’ dimension of ancient Greek religion over ‘universal’ or ‘panhellenic’ due to the misleading associations that these terms evoke. On the notion of ‘panhellenism’ in ancient Greek religion, see e.g. Scott 2010: 250–73 (with further literature); Polinskaya 2013: 493.

<sup>4</sup> As suggested by Polinskaya 2013: 492, n. 9 in response to my chapter on religious localism at Olympia in Kindt 2012: 124.

This applies in particular to the category of ‘the local’. In most instances, it simply features in passing as a purely descriptive category in the context of alternative variants sketched against the background of what was thought to be universally the case in ancient Greek religion as such.<sup>5</sup> In this conception, the local mostly doubles as the idiosyncratic, deviant, and ultimately insignificant, but who or what is determining centre and periphery here remains frequently unclear (see in more detail below).

The conception of the ‘general’, ‘global’ or ‘universal’ is only at first sight more straightforward. As Irene Polinskaya has pointed out, in current scholarship in the field, ‘the general’ features in three related but distinct contexts: ‘doing things in a Greek way, doing what other Greeks do, and feeling Greek’.<sup>6</sup> All three dimensions focus on different aspects of Hellenicity, rendering the conception of ‘the general’ less clear-cut than may initially appear. Moreover, this dimension of ancient Greek religion remains largely virtual until it manifests in a particular time and place, thus blurring the boundary between ‘the local’ and ‘the general’.

This chapter revolves around a series of interrelated questions. What is ‘local’ Greek religion? What dimension of the religious comes into focus only in the category of ‘the local’? How does it relate to the notion of religion as a universal force that prevailed at different levels of ancient Greek culture and society and that helped to convey a sense of Hellenicity? And, finally and most importantly, what can the study of local Greek religion contribute to our understanding of localism in the ancient world.

I shall try to answer at least some of these questions by exploring how localism has been studied, is studied, and could be studied in a particular area in which such questions of unity and diversity have been particularly prevalent: that of the ancient Greek gods and goddesses. Classical scholars have pursued radically different approaches to the study of Greek divinity, generating divergent pictures of the unity and diversity of the Greek pantheon and the individual gods that comprise it. The categories of ‘the local’ and ‘the general’ have played a key role in scholarly disagreements in this dynamic area of current debate. To consider how they have been used and to what end allows insights into what is at stake when we speak of ‘local horizons’ of ancient Greek religion more generally.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the use of both dimensions in the study of the Greek divinities has evolved together with the larger shifts in paradigm in

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Walter Burkert’s (1985) comments on local variants in Greek representation of the gods and goddesses.

<sup>6</sup> Polinskaya 2013: 516.

the study of ancient Greek religion. To trace some of these developments therefore sheds light not only on new insights into the nature of Greek divinity, but also on its larger context of scholarship on ancient Greek religion. I show that, as far as the ancient Greek gods and goddesses are concerned, both the local and the universal dimensions reveal different aspects of one and the same deity. So even though neither ‘the local’ nor ‘the universal’ are unproblematic categories, they are able to capture different aspects of the religious experience of the ancient Greeks. Far from being the antagonistic categories as which they are sometimes still presented, ‘the local’ and ‘the universal’ together define the religious tradition of the ancient Greeks. Considered in interaction with each other, they allow us to explore a central dynamics within ancient Greek religion: the interplay between localising and universalising forces or tendencies as they can be observed in a number of ancient texts and contexts, including in myth, sacrifice, divination, and divine representation.

### **The Problem of the Unity and Diversity of Ancient Greek Divinity**

To understand how questions of unity and diversity apply to the study of the ancient Greek gods and goddesses some general remarks about the nature of Greek divinity are in order. Like in most religious traditions, the question of ‘what is a god or goddess?’ is central also to ancient Greek religion.<sup>7</sup> It informs the body of cultural beliefs and practices in the ancient world that we refer to as religion. It also gives us insights into the ancient Greek outlook on life in a number of areas: morality, justice, and causation, and ancient Greek views of what it means to be human – and what it means to be Greek.

Frequently overlooked in scholarly discussions of this question is the fact that it can be answered in two fundamentally different ways: ontologically – as a statement about what sets the supernatural apart – and in terms of the unity and coherence of a particular deity. Understood as an ontological problem, the question has generated productive research into the kind of features (or powers) that distinguish the Greek gods and goddesses from humanity, above all those of immortality, omniscience, and

<sup>7</sup> As Albert Henrichs (2010: 20–22) has reminded us, the question was first raised explicitly by Pindar.

superhuman strength and beauty.<sup>8</sup> Understood as a question about the unity of a given deity as imagined by the ancient Greeks, however, the response to this question has become such a commonplace in the way we think of ancient Greek religion that it is rarely discussed.

Classical scholarship routinely makes use of a central image – a central metaphor – to conceptualise the nature of Greek divinity: that of the divine persona.<sup>9</sup> The significance of this idea to ancient Greek religion cannot be underestimated. Much of ancient Greek thinking about the nature of the gods and their availability to human knowledge is channelled through the concept of the divine persona: To say that the gods are like people harbours a series of complex claims about their nature. When we think of Apollo, Zeus, or Aphrodite we tend to think of them as having the attributes of personhood, and with these I refer not only the obvious characteristics of divine anthropomorphism – the fact that gods frequently look and act like humans – but also more abstract traits such as agency, self-awareness, and an understanding of values, both real and symbolic, to name just a few.<sup>10</sup>

To conceive of the gods as persons has the advantage of providing a template into which different kinds of information about individual divinities can be integrated. It is in the image of the divine persona that disparate myths about a deity's birth, parentage, character feats, and interpersonal relations link up, that seemingly unrelated areas of influence come together; it is in the image of the divine persona that various ritual practices like prayer and sacrifice make sense: precisely because they are directed towards a being that shows many, if not all, of the attributes of personhood, and is thus able to appreciate and respond to words and deeds.<sup>11</sup>

Given the central role it plays in current scholarship, it may be surprising to note that the conception of the divine persona has emerged in Classical scholarship only relatively late. It is linked to the works of some of the most important scholars which have shaped the field in the twentieth century. While the notion is still conspicuously absent from *Den grekiska religionens historia* (1922) of the Swedish scholar Martin P. Nilsson, which

<sup>8</sup> See in detail Henrichs 2010 (with further literature). Ancient Greek divine ontologies also draw on the category of the animal, albeit in different ways than that of the human. See in detail Bremmer 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Pirenne-Delforge 2013; Bonnet, Belayche, and Albert-Llorca 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Divine anthropomorphism: Osborne 2011: 185–215; Petridou 2016: 32–43.

<sup>11</sup> See Larson 2016: 40–47 for an account of the reciprocity between gods and humans in ancient Greek religion informed by cognitive theory.

in its German translation (*Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, 1927) went through several editions, it can be traced back as far as W. F. Otto's *Die Götter Griechenlands* (1929).<sup>12</sup>

For Otto, each divinity was a separate articulation of the ancient Greek genius ('Geist').<sup>13</sup> The goddess Athena, for example, is characterised by Otto as such: 'No more than other genuine divinities can Athena be understood from a single and particularly striking activity. The powerful mind which made her the Genius of victory extends far beyond the range of the battlefield. Only the "bright eyed intelligence" . . . is an adequate characterisation of her ideal with its multiplicity of vital functions.'<sup>14</sup> In his book on interpretations of Dionysos, Park McGinty concludes that, even though Otto himself never refers to it as such, this amounted to 'a kind of personality'.<sup>15</sup> The earliest clear articulation of the concept of the divine persona then comes from Walter Burkert, who, in his famous account of Archaic and Classical Greek religion, referred to the gods having 'eine dauerhafte Identität', rendered into the English translation of his book as 'a distinctive personality'.<sup>16</sup>

The conception of the divine persona draws on an image generated by the ancient Greeks themselves. In Homeric epic, the gods and goddesses feature as complex characters who love, long, hope, fight, and suffer alongside human protagonists. It is the concept of divine personhood that allows the Greek hero Menelaos insight into the real reason for Odysseus' long travels when he speculates on Zeus' character. In Book Four of the *Odyssey* he states: ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν που μέλλεν ἀγασσεσθαι θεὸς αὐτός, ὃς κείνον δύστηνον ἀνόστιμον οἶον ἔθηκεν. – 'But of this, I suppose, the god himself must have been jealous, who to that hapless man alone vouchsafed no return.'<sup>17</sup> Like a person, Zeus and the Greek gods and goddesses express emotions and are engaged in a complex network of relationships. Like persons they are organised in terms of family relations and genealogical relationships. The advantages of this are clear: gods who look and act like persons inherently 'make sense'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. 'Ein Gott ist gewachsen nicht durch innere, von seiner ursprünglichen Funktion ausgehenden Entwicklung, sondern auch durch das Hinzutreten von mehr äußerlich angeschlossenen Elementen' (Nilsson 1927: 386).

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Otto 1929: 57. <sup>14</sup> Otto 1929: 57. <sup>15</sup> McGinty 1978: 163.

<sup>16</sup> See Burkert 1985: 119, 123; German orig.: Burkert 1977: 119, 197. 'An enduring personality' would be a closer translation of 'dauerhafte Identität', which puts the focus slightly differently.

<sup>17</sup> Hom. *Od.* 4.181–82.

<sup>18</sup> See Osborne 2011: 194–215 for an extended account of the history of the divine body in ancient Greece.

Although the same enthusiasm for direct physical encounters between gods and humans did not endure into later centuries, and the human–divine relationship was re-cast along more abstract lines, the conception of the divine persona remained largely intact throughout Classical antiquity. The Homeric, person-based conception of divinity remained in the background as a powerful response to the question of what the Greek gods and goddesses were like.<sup>19</sup> For example, the concept of divine jealousy – an inherently ‘human’ trait embedded in the notion of divine personhood – also informs the concept of divine revenge and jealousy paraded in as diverse genres as Greek tragedy and the *Histories* of Herodotus.<sup>20</sup> It still resonated strongly in the literature of Roman Greece with its focus on the Classical past, and it also influenced the early Christian writers.<sup>21</sup>

Despite its undeniable explanatory powers, however, the notion of the divine persona raises as many questions as it answers. Problems emerge as soon as we scrutinise the coherence of the picture ancient sources reveal about the Greek gods and goddesses. As soon as we consider the local evidence from different parts of the Greek world, the idea of a unified divine persona shows itself to be more problematic.

Consider for example the case of the divine epithets, the ‘byname’ Greeks added to their gods to further qualify their identity. The existence of geographical divine epithets referring to a particular place flags a number of issues about the integrity of the divine persona.<sup>22</sup> Is Apollo Delios (‘of the island of Delos’) the same or a different god from Apollo Teneatos (‘of the city of Tenea’)?<sup>23</sup> What does it mean that the Aphrodite Kypria (‘of Cyprus’) was worshipped well beyond the island and that her cults were found in different parts of the ancient Greek world?<sup>24</sup> And, moving beyond local epithets: why did Zeus feature with different epithets within the confines of the same community?<sup>25</sup> What (if any) was the

<sup>19</sup> On the anthropomorphism of the Homeric gods see Gagné and Herrero de Jáuregui 2019.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Aphrodite’s jealousy and vengeance in Eur. *Hipp.* 21–28; and the gods’ jealousy and anger falling on Kroisos, Hdt. 1.34, and foretold by Artabanos, Hdt. 7.10.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Theoph. *Ad Autol.* 1.3; Cyprian *Ad Demetrianum* 7.

<sup>22</sup> Toponyms here serve as a shorthand to a whole set of contexts and ‘locations’ including those of landscape, memory, cults and the people servicing them, etc. I thank Corinne Bonnet for pointing this out to me.

<sup>23</sup> Delios: Soph. *Aj.* 704; Thuc. 1.13.6. Teneatos: Strabo 8.6.22, cf. Paus. 2.5.4.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. in places as disparate as Athens (Paus. 9.5.17); Corinth (Strabo 8.6.20); Sparta (Paus. 3.15.10); Metropolis in Thessaly (Paus. 9.5.17); etc. On the unity and diversity of Aphrodite see in detail Pirenne-Delforge 2013.

<sup>25</sup> As for example the case in Attica where Zeus was worshipped not only as Zeus Olympios (Paus. 1.17.2), but also as Zeus Panhellenios (‘of all Greeks’, Paus. 1.18.9), Zeus Ktesios (‘of gain’, Paus. 1.31.4), Zeus Soter (‘saviour’, Str. 9.1.16), Zeus Eleutherios (‘liberator’, Pl. *Theag.*



relationship between Zeus Horkios ('of oaths') and Zeus Panhellenios ('of all Greeks')?<sup>26</sup> Is a god or goddess with the same epithet in different parts of the Greek world the same divinity?<sup>27</sup> The concept of the divine persona is at odds with the fragmented identity of the Greek gods and goddesses as presented in our sources.

Already in antiquity, the opportunities that this plurality provided for a stinging refutation of belief in the divine persona did not go unnoticed. In the later second century CE, for example, the Christian apologist Clement of Alexandria offered a blistering critique of the traditional religions of Greece and Rome, specifically targeting the conception of the Greek gods. He states:

There are some who record three gods of the name of Zeus: one in Arcadia, the son of Aether, the other two being sons of Cronus . . . Some assume five Athenas . . . And what if I were to tell you of the many gods named Asclepius, or of every Hermes that is enumerated, or of every Hephaestus that occurs in your mythology? Shall I not seem to be needlessly drowning your ears by the number of their names?<sup>28</sup>

Divine names, Clement says here, make sense only when they refer to a single god or goddess. The moment there are many Athenas or Aphrodites or Hermes in play, the concept of the divine persona – and the religious system based on it – becomes problematic at best.

The question of 'what is a Greek god or goddess?' remained relevant throughout antiquity. As a question about the unity and diversity of an individual deity it challenges our understanding of the integrity of the divine persona. And, as I will show in the next section of this chapter, it does so in ways that relate directly to how Classical scholars have conceived of the category of 'the local'.

### Localism and the Divine Persona: Debates and Positions

Classical scholarship has made use of the categories of 'the local' and 'the general' in order to answer questions of the unity and diversity of the

121a), Zeus Boulaios ('of the council', Paus. 1.3.5), Zeus Hypatos ('the highest', Paus. 1.26.5), and Zeus Polieus ('guardian of the city', Paus. 1.28.10).

<sup>26</sup> Zeus Horkios: e.g. Paus. 5.24.2. Zeus Panhellenios: e.g. Paus. 1.44.13.

<sup>27</sup> As for example is the case with Apollo Archegetes ('first leader') who was worshipped in Megara (Paus. 1.42.5), Naxos in Sicily (Thuc. 6.3), and Kyrene in Libya (Pind. *Pyth.* 5.60).

<sup>28</sup> Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.24 P. Transl. G. W. Butterworth.



ancient Greek gods and goddesses. In scholarship in the field, ‘the local’ has featured in three different ways. First, as a realisation of ‘the general’. Second, as the point where variation within ancient Greek religion occurs. And third, along with the general as two cultural forces that variously cross over and intersect.

All three lines of enquiry conceptualise the relationship of the local and the universal in different ways, offering different responses to questions of unity and diversity. While the first two perspectives are not without merit, there are problems inherent to both. The third and most recent perspective transcends these problems. It moves beyond the binary between localising and generalising views on ancient Greek religion that has shaped much scholarship in the past and investigates their interplay at different locations at which ancient Greek religion manifested.

## The Local as the Realisation of the Universal

A powerful line of enquiry into the nature of Greek divinity draws a general picture of the ancient Greek gods, emerging from myriad local representations. Take the ancient Greek god Apollo.<sup>29</sup> Pots and reliefs from different parts of the Greek world show that representations of Apollo adhere to a common visual language, with the god typically represented as a handsome young man, sporting a bow and an arrow or a lyre (among other visual clues) as on the attic red-figure calyx-krater represented in Figure 1.1.<sup>30</sup>

The argument here is that as a major Olympian deity, Apollo was worshipped throughout the Greek world in ways that were recognisable and ‘made sense’ to Greeks from other poleis. That is to say that general areas of influence – in healing, music, poetry, purifications, and prophecy – remained remarkably consistent no matter whether at Athens, or Sparta, on the beautiful Greek island of Delos, or elsewhere in the Greek world.<sup>31</sup>

This picture of unity is further supported by the Homeric epics, in which Apollo features as a (more-or-less) well-rounded and powerful divine persona.<sup>32</sup> In the *Iliad*, he intervenes on behalf of Khryses and is involved

<sup>29</sup> On Apollo see now Graf 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Representations of Apollo: *LIMC* II.2., s.v. ‘Apollon/Apollo’: 182–454.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. the evidence collected in *ThesCRA* II.5, s.v. ‘Rites et activités relatifs aux images du culte’: 419–507, in particular 431 (Apollo).

<sup>32</sup> But see Herrero de Jáuregui 2021 on panhellenic and local dimensions of divinity in Homer. The Homeric gods: Graziosi 2013.



Figure 1.1 Apollo and Tityos. Attic red-figure calyx-krater.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

in Patroclus' murder by Hector.<sup>33</sup> In the *Odyssey*, Apollo brings about plagues and is associated with song and prophecy.<sup>34</sup> The picture of the potent god emerging from epic poetry is grounded in the integrity of the divine persona in the context of the epic universe.

Incidentally, this is exactly how Apollo features in Walter Burkert's enduringly influential account of ancient Greek religion.<sup>35</sup> After a brief account of the origins of the deity, Burkert foregrounds the general dimension of Apollo as a deity worshipped throughout the Greek world.<sup>36</sup> About his role in healing, for example, Burkert states: "That Apollo is a god of healing remains a central trait in his worship from the mythical foundation of Didyma when Branchos, ancestor of the priestly line of the Branchidai, banished a plague, to the building of the well-preserved temple in the lonely mountains of Bassai in Arkadia."<sup>37</sup> Here and elsewhere, Burkert conveys the impression of unity as if there was a Greek master-narrative about Apollo, his identity, relations, and areas of influence, which, albeit

<sup>33</sup> See Hom. *Il.* 1.8–21; Hom. *Il.* 16.788–857 respectively.

<sup>34</sup> Plague: Hom. *Il.* 1.43–53. Song: Hom. *Il.* 8.488. Prophecy: Hom. *Il.* 8.79–81, 15.252–53.

<sup>35</sup> Burkert 1985: 143–49.

<sup>36</sup> 'Apollo has often been described . . . as "the most Greek of the gods"'. Burkert 1985: 143.

<sup>37</sup> Burkert 1985: 147.