

Topic overview

## **Greek Religion**

*A Handbook of Ancient Religions*

Ed. John R. Hinnells. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p[266]-317. COPYRIGHT 2007 John R. Hinnells

Full Text:

*Page [266]*

### **Greek Religion**

SUSAN GUETTEL COLE

An introduction to recent scholarship on Greek religion

Early history

The early Greek polis

Dividing the cosmos

The regional sanctuaries

Behaviour and belief

Defining the sacred

Temples and sacred places

The gods of the polis

Ritual acts

Prayer and the expectation of reciprocity

Votive gifts

Divination and oracles

Oaths: calling the gods to witness

Civic rituals

The power of dreams

The life-cycle

Birth

Rituals of maturation

Weddings and funerals

Serving the dead

Wearing amulets, making spells and cursing competitors

The shifting topography of the dead

Bibliography

## **An introduction to recent scholarship on Greek religion**

Greek religion is not a subject that the Greeks themselves would have recognized. Religion was not an abstract category, and the language had no generic term to identify it. Action was more important than ideas. Ritual acts accompanied almost every human activity, but piety could be measured only by being visibly displayed action. Men and women performed rituals to demonstrate expectation of divine response, but people did not have to enter a sanctuary or visit a temple to recognize the power of the gods. Because attention to the divine was a constant concern, and because ritual was almost always a social event, evidence can be found in any ancient source. Information is embedded in the works of ancient poets, philosophers, dramatists and orators, as well as in the works of artists and the architectural remains, inscriptions and the debris of daily life turned up by the archaeologist's spade. We often find important information where we least expect it.

The scholarship on Greek religion has always concentrated on basic questions, such as the problem of origins, the nature of divinity, the relation between myth and ritual, and the connections between Greek ideology and other belief systems of contemporary Near Eastern cultures. In the eighteenth century scholars tried to make Greek religion look like Christianity; in the nineteenth close attention was paid to literary sources that identified the Greek belief system as unique; by the early twentieth century the invention of ethnographical research had convinced some classical scholars that Greek religion was a fascinating collection of 'primitive' responses to a confusing and unstable environment. In the twentieth the pendulum swung between sober collection of evidence and speculation about universal patterns of ritual.

The work of Walter Burkert has focused discussion on all of these broader issues, inspiring a revival of interest and a new awareness of the importance of ritual in the ancient Greek experience. On the whole, attention has moved from a mid-

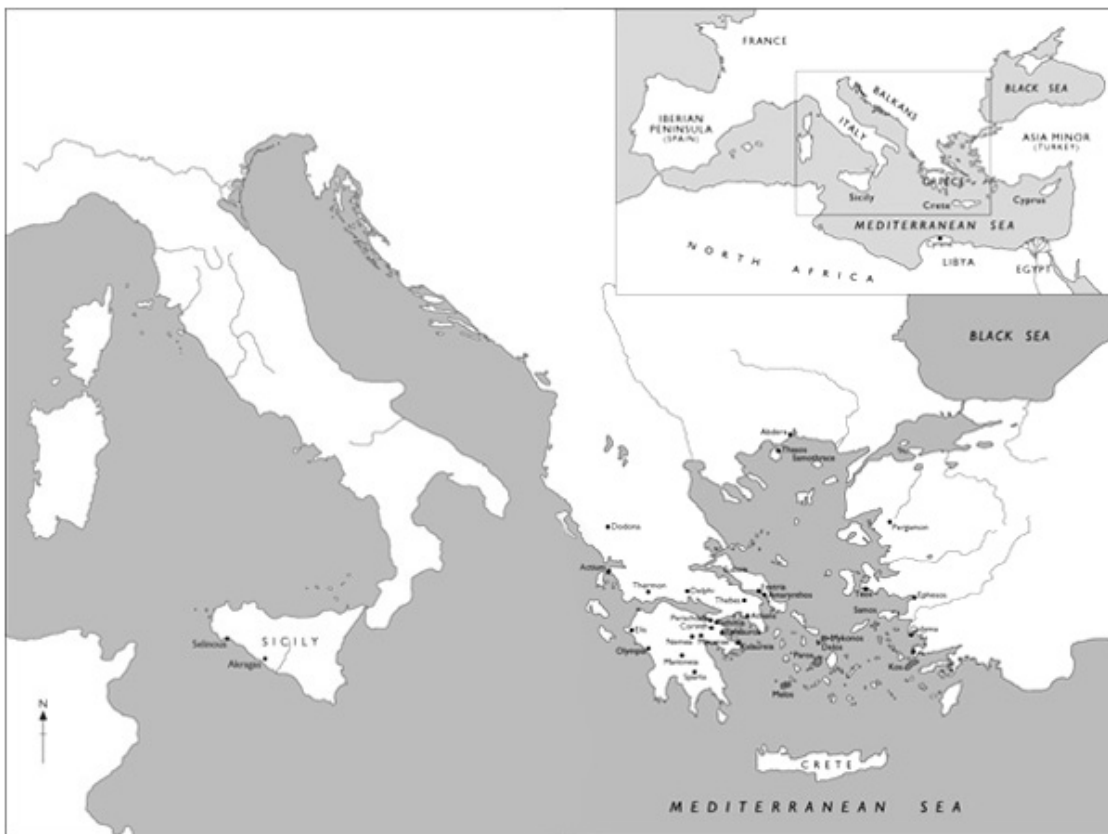
*Page 267 |*

century concern for individual members of the divine family (Otto 1965 on Dionysos, for instance) or the entire divine pantheon (Guthrie 1950) to description more thoroughly grounded in the varieties of evidence. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Paul Vernant (1989) have interpreted ritual as an expression of culturally determined patterns of thought. Some scholars notice the way in which rituals for the gods also reflect relationships of power between rulers and the ruled (Price 1987). Many look for patterns noticed by anthropologists in other societies (Bremmer 1983, 1999 and Seaford 1994). Others have broadened the definition of religion itself to embrace the acts of surreptitious ritual violence that Greeks directed at each other in the form of curses and love charms as well as rituals and devices for personal protection (Faraone and Obbink 1991; Gager 1992). New discoveries continue to introduce new subjects for debate. Discovery of the charred remains of a papyrus text at Derveni in 1964 has inspired a new interest in theogony and esoteric doctrine, and discussions of eschatology must now take into account the new evidence from texts inscribed on gold tablets found in the graves of followers of bacchic Dionysos.

Publication of new material evidence has raised questions about methodology, and experts from many fields now contribute to the discussion. Systematic publication of new archaeological and epigraphical material has facilitated regional studies of local cults, for example the work of Madelene Jost (1985) on Arcadia, Albert Schachter (1992) on Boeotia, and Fritz Graf (1985) on Ionia, but the volume of material has also raised expectations. Christiana Sourvinou-Inwood (1995), by bringing together discussions of image, material evidence and text, emphasizes the necessity of a unified approach for interpretation of the evidence. Pauline Schmitt Pantel's work (1992) on the social meaning of banqueting demonstrates the importance of a thematic study of the epigraphical evidence for a diachronic approach to the social context of ritual. At the same time, literary sources continue to provide a base for intensive studies of particular themes, like those of Robert Parker (1983) on pollution and Simon Pulleyn (1997) on prayer, books that illustrate the ritual procedures considered necessary for securing the attention of the gods. Other approaches to ritual concentrate on sacrificial procedure or the system of supplying the sanctuary with animal victims (for instance, Jameson 1988, 1991).

General studies continue to inform. Syntheses are provided by Simon Price (1999), Robert Parker (1996), Jon Mikalson (1983, 1998), Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel (1992), and P. E. Easterling and J. V. Muir (1985). A good

Page 268 |



**Map 6.1.** The ancient Mediterranean.

Page 269 |

Page 270 |

introduction to the basic issues is to be found in Jan Bremmer's *Greek Religion* (1999), a survey of the recent bibliography organized thematically to introduce readers to the new scholarship. Richard Buxton's volume, *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion* (2000), collects important articles of the late twentieth century and provides a different point of departure.

Group projects and conference proceedings are also good indicators of the range of current controversies. For the archaeological evidence, Susan Alcock and Robin Osborne (1994) present a collection responding to François de Polignac's theory about the relation of the organization of sacred space to the development of the ancient Greek city-state. N. Marinatos and R. Hägg (1993) have collected a series of articles on the physical remains of Greek sanctuaries. Susan Blundell and Margaret Williamson (1998) have brought together a collection of articles on gender and religion. Robin Hägg's collections

of conference proceedings of the Swedish Institute at Athens have brought the archaeological evidence to international attention. *Kernos*, an international journal devoted to the study of ancient Greek religion, reports extensively each year on new scholarship around the world. From this brief survey it is clear that what we call 'Greek religion' has provided a new focus for lively discussion involving all branches of the field. It is unlikely that the productive stream of new scholarship will dry up soon.

## Early history

The history of Greek religion is by and large the history of the Greeks themselves. During the Bronze Age (3000–1000 BCE) there were two distinct cultures in the Aegean area, Minoan (not Greek), located on Crete and some southern Aegean islands, followed by the Mycenaean (definitely Greek), extending from the mainland through the Cyclades as far east as the coast of Asia Minor. On Crete in the second millennium BCE Minoan religious ritual was organized around several palaces, large unwallled complexes that functioned as regional political centres. In each region the local palace was associated with sanctuaries on mountain peaks and in natural caves, usually at the outer reaches of the territory. There are indications that the Minoans, who spoke a language unrelated to Greek, practised a form of animal sacrifice. The imagery of animals, especially bulls, dominates the Minoan arsenal of decorative patterns. Representations of actual ritual, however, are rare, and possible remains of sacrifice ambiguous. Surviving ritual equipment is usually considered more appropriate for libation (pouring liquid offerings) and donations of agricultural products than for animal slaughter.

Page 271 |

On the Greek mainland during the Mycenaean period, sanctuaries in mountains or caves were almost unknown. The Mycenaean who brought the Greek language to the mainland (about 1900 BCE) practised forms of ritual organized around the local ruler's residence. Unlike the open Minoan palace, the typical residence of a Mycenaean leader was located on a height overlooking its territory and enclosed within a heavily fortified walled complex. Separate spaces or buildings for ritual have been identified only at Mycenae and on the islands of Keos and Melos. Clay tablets inscribed in an early form of Greek list items appropriate for sacrifice, suggesting that the Mycenaean practised animal sacrifice. The tablets also record the names of divinities, about half of which can be associated with gods and goddesses worshipped later by the Greeks throughout the Aegean area. The others do not appear among the known Greek divine names of the next millennium. That there was continuity of religious practice between the Mycenaean and their later Greek descendants is not to be doubted, but the content and structure of Mycenaean practice and the means of its transmission are nevertheless still difficult to reconstruct.

## The early Greek polis

The Iron Age began in the Greek Aegean in about 1000 BCE. The early centuries of the first millennium witnessed many changes in the Mediterranean area. In Greek areas after the destruction of Mycenaean palaces and the decline of the palace economy, populations scattered, local leaders multiplied, and durable written records came to an end. Considerable changes in social structure and political organization in the Greek lands of the Aegean contributed to innovations in ritual patterns. Smaller, dispersed agricultural communities replaced the centralized bureaucracies of the Mycenaean period; local landholders competed for political leadership; and religious ritual, no longer centralized around the residence of a chief, was beginning to be organized around sacred spaces sprinkled throughout the countryside. Two contrasting influences can be detected, one internal and the other external. Internally, veneration of prestigious local heroes encouraged a fierce allegiance to home and land. Distinctive forms of ritual for dead heroes at the sites of ancient Mycenaean tombs inspired legends that integrated local myths with the extended epic tradition. Externally, contact with the hierarchically organized empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia, Phoenician traders, and the mixed populations of Cyprus, Syria and Palestine broadened the experience of Greek travellers and emigrants and contributed to changes for those who remained at home. Increased access

Page 272 |

to a cultural context that emphasized myths of regeneration, distinctions between pollution and purification, a methodology for divination, and rituals grounded in sympathetic magic had an effect on Greek developments. Adapted to the institutions of the growing communities of the Aegean, some of these practices and ideas would be incorporated into the ritual of the early Greek city-state, the *polis*. At the same time innovations in architecture, sculpture and metalwork contributed a new material context for Greek rituals that emphasized the community rather than the authority of an individual ruler.

By the eighth century BCE space for public worship was recognized as belonging not to a ruler, but to a god. The gods themselves were now the guardians of surplus wealth and mediators of competition on the human level. Wealth, once

collected and displayed in the palace of a Minoan leader or deposited in the tomb of a Mycenaean ruler, would now be shared with the gods and exhibited in their sanctuaries. Specially designated sacred space was therefore systematically reserved for the gods. Sanctuaries of the gods were strategically placed where worshippers needed them, whether within core settlements, out in the cultivated lands of the city, or even at the borders of the community's territory. Public space set aside for the interaction between human and divine would be used to display the gifts that recognized and testified to divine support.

## Dividing the cosmos

The Greeks assumed that the earth itself was shared with the gods. Stability and continuity in support of human endeavour therefore required divine approval. In the Homeric *Iliad* (usually dated to the eighth century BCE), the natural divisions of a divided universe are explained in terms of a political agreement between three major gods: Zeus, Poseidon and Hades. Zeus is allotted the sky, Poseidon the sea and Hades the world of the dead, with the earth itself ruled in common by all three. A negotiated agreement had become a model for human behaviour. In the human realm, communities defined themselves by rituals that recognized divine power. The organization of the local city-state, *polis*, depended on the support of the gods. Special features of the landscape were associated with particular divinities. Zeus, as authoritative father of gods and human beings, was reached on the mountain top because he was the god who controlled the weather and sent rain. Demeter was the divinity of cultivated crops, Dionysos the god of fruits of the vine and woody plants (often located in the transitional space between plains and mountain), Poseidon the god of the sea, and Artemis, as divinity of the hunt, haunting the furthest

Page 273 |

boundaries. Nymphs were associated with the sources of water needed for growth and fertility, and Pan represented the raw animal energy of those who lived beyond the borders of the community.

Divine partition of territory reflected the patterns of division resulting from the founding of new cities and the establishment of settlements at home and abroad. Consolidation of local populations in a town centre (*astu*) became a characteristic pattern as Greek cities were founded along the coasts of the Black Sea and the coastal areas of southern Italy and Sicily. Colonial foundations imitated the rituals of their founding cities. New cities and old shared a system of religious ritual and a common family of gods, but new settlements also responded, each in its own way, to the influence of local indigenous populations.

Some communities believed that their people had always occupied the same piece of land and that the local divine hierarchy was bestowed later. The Athenians claimed that their ancestors were born from the land itself. They explained the status of Athena, goddess of the acropolis, by the myth of an ancient contest with Poseidon, decided by vote of a population already in residence. When Poseidon offered a gushing salt spring and Athena an olive tree, the people chose Athena as supreme divinity. This story recognizes the economic advantage of the olive, eventually Athens' primary export, but some versions of the myth find fault with the outcome because women were allowed to vote. The myth may also reflect a tension between those who made a living from the land and those who made a living from the sea. Athena's original name at Athens was the adjectival form, Athenaia, 'the Athenian goddess', a form that suggests a god named for a city, not a city named for a god.

Other communities claimed to remember migration from abroad and believed that their gods had discovered their city for them. The people of Kolophon on the coast of Asia Minor maintained that the gods themselves had marked out their territory and founded their sanctuaries. Still others, for instance the Thebans, were able to combine both traditions. Their foundation myth described how Kadmos came from the land of the Phoenicians, slew a monster on the site of Thebes and planted the monster's teeth to 'grow' the ancestors of the people who populated the land. Colonial cities, on the other hand, derived status from claiming foundation at the command of an oracle of Apollo at Delphi. In truth, the Greeks continued to be migratory throughout their history, and frequent movement, even of whole city populations, was a feature of the culture. Foundation myths were subject to revision; tradition was not permanent. The activities of war, travel associated with

Page 274 |

energetic commerce, and the experience of living close to neighbours of different cultures all contributed to a flexible system, responsive to innovation. Nevertheless, all who considered themselves 'Hellenes' (the term the Greeks used to identify themselves as a group) paid homage to the same family of the gods.

## The regional sanctuaries

Greek-speaking communities throughout the Mediterranean recognized the paternal supremacy of Zeus, the conventions of animal sacrifice, the rituals of warfare, and the same great 'international' sanctuaries. The most important sanctuaries were

those for Zeus at Olympia and for Apollo at Delphi and on Delos. In addition to these comprehensive centres, regional sanctuaries, such as those of Apollo at Kalapodi, Thermon and Didyma, the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona, and the sanctuaries of Hera on Samos and in the Argolid exercised more than a strictly local attraction. Political ties between cities were strengthened further when in the seventh and sixth centuries athletic contests at Olympia and Nemea (for Zeus) at Isthmia (for Poseidon) and at Delphi (for Apollo) brought together representatives from many cities on a regular basis.

International and regional sanctuaries provided neutral space for interaction between city-states, because the gods were believed to protect the institutions that encouraged peaceful interchange. Athletic contests imitated the competition of warfare, but were performed in the context of ritual designed to emphasize co-operation instead of violence. The truce that legitimated the festival at Olympia was under the protection of Zeus, the same god who also sanctioned the truce that concluded war. Weapons captured by victors and dedicated in his sanctuaries testified to his protection and support. Sanctuaries that sponsored great regional festivals attracted a clientele that reached far beyond the local constituency. New Greek cities in Sicily and southern Italy in the west joined their Peloponnesian rivals in competition at Olympia, and the wealth of these new cities was shared with the sanctuary by means of dedications deposited with the god. The most prominent of these cities demonstrated their accomplishments by constructing in the sanctuary their own treasury houses (*thesauroi*) to exhibit the fine gifts they had consecrated to Zeus.

The Ionian cities of the Aegean area celebrated together with festivals honouring Apollo at Delos. In the north the Phocians joined other communities in mutual support and competition at Delphi. They were organized with other communities on the

Page 275 |

mainland into an amphictyony, a regional league organized around a sanctuary. An important Peloponnesian amphictyony also operated in the Saronic Gulf around the sanctuary of Poseidon on the island of Kalaureia, where Peloponnesian communities, although competitive rivals at home, could meet together offshore at the neutral island site. Although the early years of the Greek city-state were a time of intense military and political competition, communities derived mutual strength from shared rituals. The institutionalized games and the sacrifices and processions sponsored by the regional sanctuaries encouraged co-operation. All recognized the authority of Apollo and Zeus, mediators of dispute and champions of law and stability.

Apollo and Zeus supported order and political organization. In recognition, many cities inscribed their earliest laws in sanctuaries of Apollo, sometimes cutting the text directly into the wall of the temple itself. Inscriptions on stone implied permanence, and the authority of Apollo gave authority to the laws. Cities also deposited revenues in the temples of their gods. At Thasos, in the early fifth century, a series of laws about street maintenance illustrates the importance of the sanctuaries to civic administration. Fines were collected in three different ways – by Apollo Pythios and the *polis*, by the *polis* alone, and by Artemis Hekate and the *polis*. Earlier, fines had been paid in their entirety to a god. Thasos in the 460s was a town in transition between a system that relied on the representatives of principal deities to collect fines and a civic system organized to maintain public funds. In the period of transition the city and its gods shared responsibility. Early Greek myth and poetry represented the gods as irresponsible and quarrelsome, but in the give and take of community life the gods were needed to keep order and to legitimate the political and judicial institutions that maintained each community.

## Behaviour and belief

Greek literature preserves many contradictory claims about the gods. At Olympia a statue of Zeus with a thunderbolt in each hand stood to warn visitors and athletes of the terrible punishment for anyone who broke an oath. Yet the statues of athletes fined for cheating lined the path into the stadium. A character in a fifth-century Athenian tragedy could even claim that the gods were merely human inventions, designed to frighten people and to keep them from doing, saying or even thinking anything wrong. Greek sanctuaries were crowded with the dedications of pious believers, objects given in return for a god's protection, but when the philosopher Diagoras visited Samothrace and saw the many thank-offerings and plaques dedicated

Page 276 |

by those saved from shipwreck, he was quick to observe that there would have been many more if those who drowned could have left them, too.

These examples illustrate some of the problems in interpreting the evidence for Greek beliefs about the gods. Families and individuals prayed for the attention of the gods at critical points in the life-cycle; traditional rituals involved the gods in projects both private and public; and cities maintained a complex calendar of public sacrifices and religious festivals. Understandably, most people were careful not to challenge what they accepted as the divine order. On the other hand, as cities grew and poets began to raise philosophical issues, both poets and philosophers offered criticism of popular

conceptions about the gods and even mocked some ritual practices. Usually tolerated by the flexible authorities of the new city-states, this habit of self-examination indicates a pronounced difference between Greek communities and the more rigidly organized hieratic systems of their neighbours to the east. Greek poets and philosophers constantly tested prevailing habits and popular assumptions without, however, arousing serious doubts about the system itself. The general population accepted the patterns of worship and traditional belief, called *ta patria*, 'ancestral rites', or *ta nomizomena*, 'what is customary'. Although Xenophanes (who wrote after 500 BCE) finds fault with traditional myths about the gods, and Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE) criticizes the Greek habit of praying to statues, these early philosophers are complaining not that people were too serious about the gods, but that they were not serious enough.

Xenophanes and Heraclitus were not punished for criticizing the system, nor did their criticism change that system. Intentional insult to the gods and deliberate lack of reverence (*asebeia*) was actionable and punishable, but impiety was usually defined in terms of actions, not ideas. *Asebeia* was associated with direct harm to sacred things or sacred rites. The concept included offences such as damaging or stealing sacred property, violating a person protected by right of sanctuary, or disclosing the content of the secret rites. There was no monolithic entity called 'religion'. Nevertheless, although the Greeks were not especially reverent people, the life of the community was organized by ritual, and the community itself derived strength from recognizing and participating in a shared system of ritual practice.

Religion was concerned not so much with belief or strong personal feeling, but with the public performance of traditional actions that recognized the gods and their divine power. Ritual almost always required a social act. What mattered most was

Page 277 |

the expected traditional gesture, made in the right way, at the right time. By and large people ignored the intellectual challenge of poets and philosophers and continued to assume that their livelihood, health and success depended on the good will of the gods. Even Heraclitus dedicated his philosophical writings in the temple of Artemis at Ephesos. For the population at large, traditional rituals reinforced confidence in the belief that the security of the community required the attention of the gods. Communal rituals represented the group acting as one and invited the gods to participate in human endeavour. Conversely, failure to perform a communal ritual properly could put the entire community at risk.

When Athenian jurors voted to put Socrates to death in 399 BCE, they apparently felt the weight of this risk. The charge of impiety covered two matters: that Socrates had failed to worship the gods the city worshipped and that he had introduced new gods. The case against Socrates had been brought for political reasons, but the official charges represent concerns consistent with traditional fears of the public. The enemies of Socrates were able to convince the jury that Socrates did not worship the gods the city worshipped. In accepting this argument, the jury erred. Xenophon tells us that Socrates participated regularly in public ceremonies and behaved in public no differently from anyone else. However, once the jury accepted the implications of the charge, execution was inevitable. The risk to the city of being obliged to share with Socrates any punishment incurred by an alleged offence to a divinity was too great.

Piety and reverence, *to hosion* and *eusebeia*, required giving everyone, mortal and immortal alike, their due. Sacrifice was one way to fulfil obligations to the gods; making a gift provided another. No one wished to offend a god or risk the anger of a divinity. Public ritual involved the whole community, and everyone was expected to follow established procedures and to demonstrate by their actions respect for the gods. The philosophers who found fault with religious practice did not themselves turn away from ritual. Democritus, the philosopher who invented atomism, was reluctant to die at the time of the Thesmophoria, a series of rituals celebrated by women for Demeter. These ceremonies required participants to maintain a special level of purity. Democritus considered the rituals so important that he is said to have succeeded in postponing his death for three days because he did not want his sister, who would have been polluted by his death and funeral, to miss them.

The flexible system of the individual Greek city-state, administered by the many instead of by the one or the few, depended on the public recognition of social obligation. The strength of this concept is illustrated by the story in Euripides' sole

Page 278 |

surviving satyr play, *The Cyclops*. In this play, Odysseus and his men, shipwrecked in the wilds of Sicily, come upon the cave of a solitary Cyclops. They expect to be received according to the rules of hospitality (*xenia*) recognized by gods and men. The Cyclops, a one-eyed monster who recognizes neither the gods nor the standards of civilized life, disappoints their expectations and goes so far that he even ignores the temple of his own father, Poseidon. He says that he pays no attention to the thunderbolts of Zeus, and claims that he does not need to sow crops or sacrifice because,

the earth brings forth grain, grass to feed my flock, and these animals I sacrifice to no one except to *me*, to the gods not a bit, but to the greatest divinity of all, to my stomach. To chug-a-lug and gobble up food for a day and

to cause oneself no pain, this is Zeus for men of good sense. As for those who established the laws that complicate people's lives, I say, let them go weep.  
(Euripides, *Cyclops* 332–40, translation by the author)

The Cyclops promises Odysseus a fire to warm him, salt from Poseidon to flavour his meal, and a bronze pot to clothe him, but Euripides' audience knew that Odysseus had to work fast to escape. He was not going to receive a meal, but if he stayed, would become the meal himself.

The Cyclops, who lives in isolation and acts only on his own behalf, violates all norms of community. The procedures of collective ritual, on the other hand, emphasized the group, created opportunities to involve the gods in collective decisions, and recognized the responsibilities of honour. The competitive ethic of epic warrior society and the emphasis on competition in both athletic and political arena were balanced in the developing city-state by a ritual system that recognized obligation to the suppliant, protected the rules of hospitality, and required those with more than average resources to subsidize public ritual and public festivals for the many.

The history of the ritual institutions of the Greek *polis* was to some extent the result of translating the norms of heroic society, based in epic poetry on competition between individuals, into the institutions that emphasized collective identity and the collective power of a more broadly defined group of male actors. In the political world of the Greek *polis*, individual achievement remained important, but individual achievement could be demonstrated only in the context of the community. Respect for the suppliant, in Homer granted to an individual by a ruler, was broadened in the era of the *polis* to include respect for anyone in a sacred space. Swearing oaths remained a means of sealing a contract between two individuals, but in

Page 279 |

the more complex world of the *polis*, representatives of the city could swear oaths on behalf of the entire community. Likewise, an individual could curse an enemy or rival, but the ritual specialists of the community could protect the population by issuing a curse in the voice of the whole.

Any individual could make a pilgrimage to a great and distant sanctuary, but those who were invested with the responsibility of representing their city enjoyed a special status. Cities could delegate representatives to sacrifice, pray or seek an oracle on behalf of the population at home. Representatives of the community whose task it was to witness sacred rites for the sake of fellow citizens at home were called *theoroi*. These were officials appointed to 'see' the rites for the sake of others and to make sacrifices on behalf of all for the security and welfare of their city. Individual states may have claimed political autonomy but, in fact, all cities strove for recognition in the rituals of the great regional sanctuaries. True autonomy was possible only when everyone recognized the same institutions of oath, truce and curse. Representatives from any city could engage in competitive discourse at the great sanctuaries because they were protected by ritual. Protection was necessary whether it was a matter of putting questions of public policy to oracles, competing for a city's honour in athletic events, making war, negotiating treaties, or making dedications on behalf of an entire population.

## Defining the sacred

The world of the Cyclops is a world without boundaries, a world without social obligations, and a world without gods. It turns the world of the *polis* upside down. Greek religious ideology recognized three categories of existence, the dead, the living and the immortal. This division is reflected in the popular cosmology of a tripartite universe with separate realms for the living, the dead and the divine. Expectation of death divided humans from the gods. The gods were *hoi athanatoi* (the immortals) or *hoi makares* (the blessed), who in Homeric poetry could move at will between the divine realm and the earth. This mobility was recognized in the early Greek *polis* by the division of public space. Untouched by death, the gods required a special space in the human realm, where they could be reached by human ritual. The land was imagined as divided into those places where normal human life could be lived and those places specially marked, where there was the possibility of encountering divinity. The sanctuary (*to hieron*, 'the sacred space') was a space marked off, a *temenos*, a space 'cut off' from normal human life because it was a space for the gods. To reach the gods or to enter a sacred space a person

Page 280 |

had to be pure (*hagnos*) or purified (*katharos*). Because the gods did not share in all human physical processes, bodily functions were kept separate from sanctuaries. Humans had to be 'pure' or 'purified', 'cleansed' to engage in a ritual relationship with a divinity. Anyone contaminated by defilement (*miasma*) was filthy (*miaros*) or dirty (*bdeleros*). The gods avoided death because death or contact with a corpse was also polluting. For this reason, cities kept cemeteries outside the city wall. Communication with the gods required observance of routine rules for purity, because any worshipper who was not purified, *ou katharos*, could compromise sacred space and spoil any ritual act in progress.



The Greek language had no specialized religious vocabulary, but several key terms were used to define human relationships with the gods and the obligations of the individual to the community. The terminology of piety stressed living in accordance with both divine and human rules. The term *hieron*, 'sacred', was a versatile word, used in the singular to refer to both the sanctuary and the sacrificial victim, and in the plural (*hiera*) for the ritual acts, sacrifices, prayers and libations performed in honour of the gods. The priest, *hiereus*, or the priestess, *hiereia*, officiated in sacrifice with the assistance of specialists, especially the *mageiros*, who was slaughterer, butcher and sometimes even cook. Priests and priestesses performed a variety of official duties. Gender of attendants was usually, but not always, matched to the gender of the divinity.

Other key adjectives meant one thing when applied to gods and another when applied to humans. *Hagnos* used of humans meant 'pure', but when used of gods described their effect on humans. The term *hosios*, 'pleasing to the gods', meant 'sanctified' or 'consecrated' when used in relation to the gods, but 'acting according to the rules of human behaviour' when applied to human concerns or human actions. *Hosion kai dikaion*, 'piously and rightly', was a common expression to describe an act performed in accordance with human laws: by making communal obligation a concern of the gods, the city-state strengthened its authority. In the plural *hiera kai hosia* (*hosia* coupled with *hiera*) could refer to correct ritual behaviour and the correct treatment of other human beings because treating other people appropriately and justly was pleasing to the gods.

No single word meant 'pious'. The Greek language made a distinction between piety, *to hosion* (openly demonstrated) and respect or reverent feeling, *eusebeia* (experienced internally). The abstract term *eusebeia* encouraged both appropriate ritual behaviour and the right relationship with the gods, but also included the sense of having the right relationship to the family,

Page 281 |

the city and the dead, as well as maintaining the right relationship with friends, strangers and suppliants. The range of the semantic field is clear from a remark of Aristotle (philosopher, fourth century BCE), who describes its opposite, *asebeia* ('impiety'), as 'being out of tune with the gods and lesser divinities' and also with the dead, one's parents, and one's fatherland.

## Temples and sacred places

Some places acquired their sacred nature simply by virtue of what they were, a particularly beautiful grove of trees, a secluded cave or a cool spring within the city walls or out in the country. Athenians worshipped Athena on the acropolis, Pan in caves, Zeus Ombrios (Zeus of the rain cloud) on mountaintops and the Semnai Theai, 'Revered Goddesses', at Kolonos in a grove so charged with special power that no one was supposed to enter. But a space could also be made sacred by an act of consecration that established a boundary to set the site off from everyday life. A sanctuary (*to hieron*) was such a designated space, with or without buildings. Such space did not need a temple to be recognized as sacred.

Special rules separated activities in a sanctuary from the activities of everyday life. Boundary stones (*horoi*), a wooden fence, a stone wall, ritual installations or a text displayed at the entrance indicated the boundary between the space where normal human life was lived and the area set aside for communication with the divine. The earliest inscriptions marking the boundaries of sacred areas were simple inscriptions of a single word, *horos* (boundary) or a simple phrase, 'boundary of the sanctuary' (*horos tou hierou*). More complicated signs with detailed texts came later. These inscriptions preserve a variety of rules. The conditions most often stipulated for caution include very recent sexual intercourse, recent attendance at a funeral, contact with childbirth, the wearing of certain clothing and the eating of certain foods. Any of these could be considered polluting. The most frequently mentioned and probably the most consistently recognized concerns were contact with the dead and participation in a funeral or contact with or the experience of childbirth. Special vessels filled with pure spring water, *perirrhantaria*, stood at the entrance to a sanctuary to mark the transition between open space and sacred space. Worshippers could demonstrate the purity that made them eligible for collective ritual by sprinkling themselves with the pure water. This reassuring gesture guaranteed the state of purity necessary for taking part in the group ritual. Sprinkling with pure water was an important signal, not only to the gods but also to other worshippers. No one wanted to engage in ritual

Page 282 |

with someone who was not qualified. A polluted individual threatened the entire group.

The typical Greek temple provided a central enclosed space (*cella*) to display the cult statue of the divinity. Temples usually faced east, so that the statue of the divinity faced the door, the main altar and the rising sun. A high stone altar, which the Greeks called *bomos*, usually stood in front of the temple. The altar was the focal point of the sanctuary because this was the place of sacrifice, where direct contact with divinity was possible.

The temple itself was a place to visit and honour a god, but usually not a place for communal worship. Frequency of access depended on the divinity and the local rules. Statues were of two types, archaic images called *xoana* (usually carved in wood and small and light enough to be carried or transported in procession), and large statues in stone that could fill the interior space of the *cella*. The most expensive of these were made of fine marble, with exposed feet, forearms and hands in ivory, and the eyes in precious stones. In addition to the cult statue of the divinity housed in the temple, other statues could be found outside in the open air. These could represent the divinity, other divine attendants, or priests and priestesses who has performed the obligations of a term of service to the god. By the late fourth century BCE, under the influence of Macedonian custom, statues of rulers and special benefactors were also erected in sacred areas.

Developed sanctuaries were embellished not only with temples, but also with any of a number of outbuildings and constructions. These could be such structures as treasuries (erected by individual cities to display public dedications), residences for priests and ritual attendants, altars, dining rooms, the grave of a local hero or heroine, a stoa (an extended, rectangular building with a columned porch on its long side), or exhibition halls to display the votive gifts and dedications testifying to the divinity's generous dispensations. Greek temples could be of any size and were constructed of a variety of building materials. The earliest temples, ninth and eighth centuries BCE, were of wood and mudbrick. Limestone temples were an innovation of the seventh century BCE. Marble, introduced for the first time at Delphi in the sixth century, became a mark of status and prestige in the fifth. As stone began to be used everywhere, temple size increased. By the end of the Persian Wars (479 BCE), at least sixty-one large temples in stone had been built in Greek communities. The most magnificent of these were located on the margins of the area settled by Greeks – to the west in Sicily at Selinous and Akragas, and to the east in Ionia on Samos, at Ephesos and at Didyma. The magnificence of a city's temples was a statement

Page 283 |

of prestige rather than a record of piety.

Of the sixty-one known examples of large stone temples, forty-two can be associated with a particular god. In the late archaic and early classical periods Apollo, with eleven, was the divinity with by far the most large stone temples. Hera was runner up with five, and Poseidon and Athena, with four each, were tied for third place. Zeus enters the list in only three of the forty-two examples, and Artemis in only two. Demeter, who had hundreds of small, local sanctuaries, simple with only modest structures, was honoured with size only in the far west. Artemis, who later had as many as 175 sanctuaries in the Peloponnese alone, in the early fifth century was honoured with a large stone temple only at Corcyra and Ephesos. Ares is noticeable by his absence, as are Dionysos and Aphrodite. Ares did not have many temples because, as the god of war, he was not very popular. The other two, universally recognized because their gifts included sensual and sexual pleasure, do not seem to have inspired monumental temples in the archaic and classical periods at all. Public worship of Dionysos was centred on the theatre, and Aphrodite's sanctuaries were usually modest. Hestia, rarely personified, was worshipped in the form of the public hearth and permanent fire of the *polis*. The number and size of a divinity's temples is not an indication of importance. There were other ways to recognize the gods.

## The gods of the polis

Each *polis* had its own contingent of divinities, some dwelling in the countryside and others at the town centre. When people prayed, they began with an invocation that located the divinity in a particular place or at a particular cult site. It was important to match the divinity to the request, and it was also necessary to know where to find a god. In a crisis, one could call on all possible candidates for help. When the dramatist Aeschylus (525–456 BCE) represents the women of Thebes under siege, he shows them praying to all the gods of the *polis* for protection. These women call their gods 'the fortress-protecting gods of the land' and name them as 'Zeus, Pallas Athena, Poseidon, Ares, Cyprian Aphrodite, Apollo Lykeios, Hera, Artemis and Ogkas [a local Theban hero]'. At Selinous in the fifth century, after a local victory, citizens inscribed on the wall of one of their temples a vow of thanks to 'Zeus, Phobos, Apollo, Poseidon, the Tyndaridai [Castor and Pollux], Athena, Demeter Malophoros, Kasipatea, and all the other gods, but especially Zeus'. It is easy to see why Zeus and Phobos were so important. Zeus was considered the leader and Phobos, whose name means 'fear' stood for the terror the soldiers of

Page 284 |

Selinous had inspired in their enemy. The people of Selinous recognized all of the local gods because it was unwise to deprive a divinity of credit where credit might actually be due.

None of the divinities addressed at Selinous is associated specifically with the last defence of the city, its wall. Gods were more likely to be connected by function to natural features of the landscape, not to physical features of the built city. Gods might be considered residents of a city, but except for Hestia, whose name actually means 'hearth', individual deities were rarely identified with a particular architectural feature. One exception is the gate of the citadel. At Athens in the second

century BCE the travel writer Pausanias encountered Hermes Propylaios (Hermes of the main gateway), Hekate Propylaia (Hekate of the main gateway) and Artemis Epipyrgidia (Artemis on the Tower). In town, the gods took on the responsibilities of citizenship. At Athens Athena was still Athena Polias, goddess of the acropolis heights, and Zeus was still Zeus Polieus, god of the high citadel, but the two also became Athena Boulaia and Zeus Boulaios, because now they also protected the deliberations of the Council (*Boule*). Gods still protected the landscape: Demeter the fields, Artemis the territorial boundaries, Poseidon the sea, Zeus the tops of mountains, and Pan the uncultivated wild areas. Even the borders of Attica were recognized by the institutions of the city. In the fourth century, when the young men of Athens swore the oath that made them ephebes (citizen soldiers in training), they swore to defend their weapons, their comrades, all things *hiera* and *hosia*, and concluded their statement with the land itself:

and I shall not hand down a diminished fatherland, but one increased in size and strength as far as I am able and [working together] with the assistance of all ... I shall also honour the ancestral sacred rites. The witnesses [to this oath] are: the gods Aglauros, Hestia, Enyo, Enyalios, Ares and Athena Areia, Zeus, Thallo, Auxo, Hegemone, Herakles [and] the boundaries of my fatherland, and the wheat, the barley, the vines, the olives, the figs.

(translation by the author, following Fornara)

In this oath, which may be older than the inscription of the fourth century BCE that preserves it, the boundaries of the *polis*, invoked as witnesses, were just as vital to the city-state as the crops that fed its people. Aglauros and Hestia were worshipped by the *polis* at its centre, Aglauros in a cave on the east slope of the acropolis, and Hestia in the nearby *prutaneion*, the building that sanctified political unity. Ares, Athena Areia (Warrior Athena) and Zeus Areios (Warrior Zeus)

Page 285 |

were defenders of the city. Thallo ('Blooming') and Auxo ('Increase') were concerned with the crops and human reproduction, Hegemone was 'leadership' personified, Herakles represented the special prowess a soldier needed to fight successfully in battle, and Enyalios, and Ares represented the martial fury that turned farmers into fighters.

Each *polis* organized its sanctuaries, whether those in the city or the countryside, in its own way. Topography, politics and geographical conditions all played a role, but any local pantheon could be revised. Eretria, Mantinea and Thasos, three different city-states, illustrate three different ways of organizing local divinities. Eretria, settled in the eighth century BCE, was spread out around a central public space (*agora*) near the natural harbour. The grave of a local hero, unnamed, was prominent in the early town, but located some distance from the *agora*. A small, hairpin-shaped temple to Apollo, early focus of the *agora*, was eventually replaced by successively larger structures on the same site as the town developed. Apollo protected the institutions of the city; Demeter protected agricultural production and the reproductive capacity of the city's women. A small temple of Demeter, called 'Thesmophorion' in honour of Demeter's greatest and universal festival, the Thesmophoria, stood on the hill overlooking the town centre, aloof from the settlement. Demeter Thesmophoros was important to the city, but her sanctuary was modest, her rites reserved for women and not to be seen by men's eyes. Artemis, equal in status to her brother Apollo, had her own temple outside the town, near the frontier of Eretria's territory in the area of the old Mycenaean site at Amarynthos. Here a river ran into the sea, creating the combination of water sources that seem to have been considered ideal for a sanctuary of Artemis. For Eretria, the sanctuary of Artemis at the extremity of her territory was just as important in defining the interests of the *polis* as the gods at the centre. The treasury of the city was eventually kept at the sanctuary of Artemis, and her festival, the Artemisia, became one of the major annual celebrations of the city. The ceremonial procession in honour of Artemis connected her sanctuary to the town, where Apollo and Artemis, with their mother Leto, were the divinities by which the *polis* swore its collective oaths. These three divinities were also represented on the stone reliefs that decorated the city's important inscribed documents.

Mantineia, an old community in the central Peloponnese, had a very different environment. Cut off entirely from the sea, the territory of Mantinea was surrounded by mountains and positioned squarely on the only direct route through the Peloponnese between Argos and Sparta. The relationship of the plains to the mountains and mountain passes influenced the

Page 286 |

placement of Mantinea's sanctuaries. In the archaic period the population was concentrated around a shallow hill whose name, 'Ptolis,' indicates an ancient fortified citadel. As the population grew, the Mantineians moved about a kilometre south and fortified a new town site, complete with central agora. Even when the town moved, however, the gods retained their old places in the countryside. A grove of Demeter lay in the plain near the old village of Nestane; Poseidon Hippios (inland, a god of earthquakes and horses) had his sanctuary at the edge of a mountain; Dionysos and Black Aphrodite shared a sanctuary in the foothills; and to the north the Mantineians celebrated festivals at a major sanctuary of Artemis shared with neighbouring Orchomenos. Mantineian heroes and heroines included Herakles, Penelope, Arkas (son of Kallisto), and the local heroine, Antinoë. When Pausanias visited in the second century CE, he found Asklepios sharing a temple with Leto,

Apollo and Artemis, and in town, Zeus Soter (Zeus Preserver), Zeus Epidotes (Zeus the Generous), Zeus Keraunos (Zeus the Thunderbolt), Zeus Kharmon (Zeus Rejoicer), Zeus Eubouleus (Zeus of Good Advice), Hera and the Dioskouroi. Demeter and Kore, with an eternal fire, seem to have been outside the town. Pausanias identifies the public hearth of the city, Hestia Koine (Common Hearth), with a circular hearth at the grave of Antinoe.

The Mantineians had accumulated an impressive group of divinities, but the process was gradual. Asklepios could not have been worshipped in Arkadia until the late fifth or early fourth century BCE, and other divinities noticed by Pausanias in the second century CE could not have been important in the Peloponnese before the Roman period. Pausanias calls attention to a temple of Aphrodite Summachia, 'Aphrodite of the Alliance'. The goddess is described with an epithet that recognizes Aphrodite's support for the Roman victory at Actium in 31 BCE. Nevertheless, the Mantineians also remained loyal to the worship of the ancient local Peloponnesian Athena Aleia, and they kept their own 'Black' Aphrodite (said to be so named because she identified night as the best time for sex). Nevertheless, Mantineians were flexible enough to acknowledge Roman power by recognizing an Aphrodite friendly to Romans. They even connected another local Aphrodite to the Roman myth of Aeneas. Finally, at the time of Pausanias' visit, a place had already been reserved for the emperor Hadrian's boyfriend, Antinoos, only recently recognized as a hero after his early death.

Thasos, an island in the northern Aegean colonized from Paros, had her own unique history. Like her mother-city Paros, the town of Thasos was a harbour town on an island. Both cities were grape growers and wine producers, both were fortified,

Page 287 |

and both had sanctuaries both inside and outside the city wall. The original colonists had brought three things to Thasos from Paros: sacred fire, the images of their gods (*amphidrumata*), and the special sacred objects necessary for replicating their hometown rituals in the new city. These two cities shared a tradition of transplanted rituals and images, similarities in local topography and a similar economic base, but they did not have identical ritual histories.

The list of divinities at Thasos included Zeus, Apollo, Artemis, Athena (called Poliouchos, 'she who holds the city'), the Charites (the Graces), Peitho (Persuasion), Demeter, Kore, Eileithyia (goddess of childbirth), Herakles, Hera, Poseidon, Dionysos, Hermes, Pan and the Dioskouroi. Demeter had extra-mural sanctuaries on both islands, and Herakles, Dionysos, the Dioskouroi, the Charites, Hermes, Eileithyia and Artemis Polos appear on both lists. Similarities end here. First, local heroes seem to have traded places. Thasian Archilochos, son of the Parian founder, had a *heroön* (heroic shrine) in the agora at Paros, and the Parian military leader Glaukon was accorded heroic honours at his grave in the agora at Thasos. At Thasos Artemis had her temple inside the city wall near the agora, while at Paros she was located in the Delion, a sanctuary of her brother, Delian Apollo, outside.

Thasos was unusual in that the city had a double acropolis. Athena Poliouchos occupied one peak and Apollo Pythios the other. Apollo's epithet associates him with Delphi, not with Delos as at Paros. No temple site has been identified with Athena in the town of Paros. Herakles was recognized in both towns, but the Phoenician Herakles in the Thasian agora, as described by Herodotus (historian, fifth century BCE) is unique. Finally, influence did not always travel from the older to the younger community, as tradition maintained. Thasos was a source of inspiration for her own mother-city when Artemis Polos (Artemis who wears the *polos*, a high-crowned hat), who had been introduced into Thasos from Thrace to the north, moved from Thasos to Paros.

At Thasos the fortification wall represented the physical integrity of the city. Thasos could be maintained in warfare even when cut off from its vineyards on the mainland, as it was when under siege by the Athenians under Kimon in the 460s. The people of Thasos guarded their city with a symbol that could be classified as a form of magic. At one of the highest points reached by the citadel wall, near the very top of the acropolis itself and not far from the temple of Athena Poliouchos, a striking image protected a vulnerable section of the wall. Carved on a large block of the wall from the lintel, two giant eyes stare straight ahead, creating the dangerous and aggressive, direct and head-on gaze believed capable of paralysing whoever

Page 288 |

dared to face it. The relief itself is a rare surviving example of protective magic on behalf of the entire community. Dedicated by a man named Parmenon, the image was placed to frighten attackers and freeze them in their tracks. The giant eyes gazing out over the approaches to the city were placed there as a first-strike defence against invaders.

Demeter was located just outside the Thasian wall, a typical position for her sanctuary in Greek colonial cities both east and west. At Thasos Demeter's little sanctuary overlooked the harbour. Pausanias describes how the priestess of Demeter, the *parthenos* Kleoboia, arrived by boat from Paros with the basket containing Demeter's sacred objects on her lap. The women of Thasos gathered in this sanctuary for the annual Thesmophoria, the festival celebrated throughout the Greek world by the wives of citizens to prepare the way for the autumn planting of grain and to guarantee the community's harvest the next

summer. Near the Thesmophorion was an open precinct with several modest altars belonging to the Thasian *patriai*, the traditional hereditary groups into which the citizens were divided. An inscription indicates that at the sacrifice for Athena Patroie, women were allotted sacrificial meat (480 BCE). The altar of Demeter and the altars of the *patriai* belonged together because both encouraged family continuity in the context of the *polis*.

## Ritual acts

The Cyclops in Euripides' play did not need to sacrifice because he did not recognize the gods. For the Greeks, on the other hand, human endeavour of any sort required communication with the divine. Animal sacrifice provided the most impressive means of gaining the attention of a god. Every performance of ritual slaughter underlined the division between human and animal, and every act of sacrifice attempted to bridge the division between human and divine. There were often special requirements for participation. Gender, status, kinship, residence, political affiliation, administrative assignment and profession were some of the categories that defined eligibility. Eating together emphasized unity, whether the group was the family, the *deme* (local residential unit), the tribe, the *phratry* (male kin group) or the *polis* at large. Sacrifice connected the community with the gods, but it also reiterated the social order, confirmed group identity and provided opportunity for celebrating important relationships.

The philosopher Theophrastos (fourth century BCE) lists three reasons to sacrifice to the gods: to honour them, to fulfil an obligation of exchange and to gain benefits. Every act of sacrifice was a transaction. In exchange for worship or honour

Page 289 |

(both of which were represented by the Greek word *timē*), even the gods owed something in return. Likewise, when a prayer or request was answered, worshippers offered a gift of thanks, and often dedicated a tangible object in a sanctuary where others could see it.

There was no comprehensive term for animal sacrifice in Greek. The word 'sacrifice' in English suggests an act of renouncement, of giving up something important or valuable in exchange for a god's attention. In the case of most Greek sacrifices, however, very little was actually given up to the gods. The word *thusia*, the term most commonly translated as the noun 'sacrifice', had no connotation of giving something up. It referred to the very specific activity of the fire turning meat and fat into smoke. The gods, who did not eat food, did not need meat, but they did demand recognition in the form of the smoke that rose naturally to the sky. Smoke represented the purified part of the animal, indicated human attention and homage, and was the only thing that reached the gods. It was the human participants who ate the meat. Where the victim was an edible animal, the main result of the ceremony was a high-protein communal meal.

In a story about the invention of sacrifice, the poet Hesiod (late eighth century BCE) explains why the gods did not receive the edible portions of the animal. In a challenge to Zeus, Prometheus wrapped a thighbone in shining fat, so that Zeus would choose the most attractive, but least edible portion. He out-tricked himself when he tried to trick Zeus, because Zeus understood what Prometheus was up to and chose the inedible portion anyway. Prometheus was therefore severely punished because he had tested a god. For punishment, he was sent to the ends of the earth, fastened to a cliff, and had to submit to an eagle (the bird of Zeus) feeding on his liver.

The story about Prometheus indicates a certain ambivalence about the institution of animal sacrifice. Menander (Athenian writer of comedies, fourth century BCE) makes fun of the uneven distribution of meat and calls those who sacrifice thieves:

For them, incense and cake, that's called 'piety', that's all the god gets, placed on the fire ... and as the tail and the gallbladder burn, the parts that aren't edible, they gobble down the rest themselves.

(Menander, *Duskolos* 447–53; translation by the author)

A portfolio of sacred actions framed the killing of the animal, the division of meat and the serving of the meal. The major ingredients required for sacrifice included the animal, pure water, barley (and cakes), wine and wood. Cattle, sheep, goats

Page 290 |

and pigs were the animals normally used in sacrifice, sheep being the most common, but cattle (because they were the most valuable and therefore the most expensive) the most prestigious. Other items, for instance the special cakes, liquids like milk or honey, or an animal for preliminary sacrifice (*prothusia*) were also possible ingredients, depending on the deity and the occasion. A libation of liquid (*sponde*), often wine, might be included in a series of actions, or it could stand alone. The plural of the word for libation, *spondai*, was the word for 'truce' because a truce required mingling libations from both

parties.

A typical sequence of events can be reconstructed by comparing the major sacrificial scenes in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. First the animal was prepared for slaughter while attendants brought pure spring water in a special bowl or pitcher and barley in a basket. Those officiating washed their hands and sprinkled barley. After the barley was scattered, the leader marked out the altar by sprinkling around it the pure water and more barley. Then he prayed and cut some hairs from the forelock of the animal before throwing them into the fire as a first offering. This act was followed by a libation of wine and sprinkling of barley into the fire and by a stroke of the axe to stun the animal. The attendants pulled the head of the animal back so that the slaughterer could cut the throat with a knife.

At the moment when the slaughterer cut through the neck of the animal, any women present raised the *ololuge*, a ritual cry that announced the animal's death. Restricted to women, the *ololuge* marked the moment as special and called attention to the deed. The animal was then lifted up, so that the blood could run out and life could leave the flesh. The carcass was singed and skinned, the meat divided, and a thighbone wrapped in fat. The thighbone and fat, the portion for the god, were burned on the altar. The culminating event of the ritual was a communal meal shared by the group for whose benefit the rite was performed, but the rest of the meat could not be prepared for the meal until the gods themselves were satisfied. The inner organs of the animal, called *splanchna* (lung, heart, liver, kidneys and spleen), were roasted on sticks over the fire and distributed to the group. These were consumed first, and the meat itself was either roasted or cooked in a stew pot. Ritual eating always remained central to the experience of visiting a sanctuary. As a result special buildings with rooms designed to accommodate reclining banqueters became a standard feature of sanctuary architecture.

Some kinds of sacrifice were associated with situations of such risk that the flesh of the animal could not be eaten. Examples are *sphagia* (slaughter where the blood of the animal had special meaning), holocaust (complete consumption of the animal

Page 291 |

by fire) and oath sacrifice (where pieces of the animal were treated in a special way). The Spartans on military campaign, when leaving the boundaries of their own territory and crossing into the territory of an enemy, performed *sphagia* at the frontier. For this occasion, the neck of the animal was cut and the blood flowed into the ground. On the battlefield itself the Spartans did not begin to fight until a professional seer had slaughtered a young female goat to Artemis Agrotera (Artemis of the Wilds), examined the internal organs and decided that the time and place were appropriate for battle. Offerings to the dead, in particular offerings to heroes, constituted another category of powerful actions. Human in life, heroes in death rarely attain the status of a god. Herakles, his mortality burned away in his death by fire, was an exceptional hero who could also be called *theos*, 'god'. Asklepios was another. As intermediaries between gods and humans, heroes were assumed to have protective powers, and their graves were recognized as special sites. Offerings to the dead were delivered at the grave in liquid form: water, wine, honey, milk or blood. If in blood, the animal was slaughtered on the spot and the head held down so that its blood could flow directly into the ground to reach the hero buried below.

Literary descriptions of actual sacrifices and sacrificial calendars are selective in what they include. There is no clear pattern that isolates rites for a hero from rites for a god, or even the rites of Homeric Olympians from the rites of divinities below the earth. Different kinds of rites could be combined together into a single event. In the case of oath sacrifice there was a broad list of procedures from which any particular series of actions could be constructed for a specific ritual occasion. In oath sacrifice it appears that the gender of the animal matched the gender of the agent. Parts of the animal (testicles, if male) were cut up. A male swearing what was called a 'great' (solemn) oath stood on cut-up body parts and uttered a curse promising self-destruction if the oath were forfeit. Females were asked to swear an oath when the paternity of their child was an issue. Herodotus says that when the mother of the Spartan king Kleomenes swore an oath about Kleomenes' paternity, she held the meat of the animal in her hands. The remains of the carcass had to be destroyed, burnt entirely in holocaust or thrown beyond the borders of the city's territory, in the mountains, at a crossroads or into the sea.

Holocaust was not uncommon, but consumption by fire of an animal otherwise suitable for eating would have wasted scant protein resources and was therefore reserved for special circumstances. When required as preliminary to another rite,

Page 292 |

holocaust might indicate a special form of purification. For example, in a list of procedures on Kos the piglet consumed in holocaust for Zeus Polieus prepared the way for the multiple sacrifice that celebrated the union of the island's three tribes. At Sikyon a sacrifice to Herakles combined *thusia* and holocaust and recognized Herakles as both god and hero. First a lamb was slain, the thighbones were roasted on the altar and the meat divided, but only part of the meat was eaten in the normal way because the rest had to be consecrated to the hero in holocaust.

Women participated directly in sacrifice only in limited and specific rituals and, it appears, only when those rituals did not

include men. A *mageiros*, the specialist in charge of killing the animal, presided over sacrifice even where women worshipped alone. Vase paintings depicting a woman holding a knife for butchering are rare. Sanctuary regulations and ritual calendars authorize rites where women feasted at their own celebrations without men. At the Thesmophoria, always off bounds for men, fasting preceded the feast that concluded a ceremony designed to encourage an abundant food supply. Banquet menus included bread, cakes, cheese and meat, especially roast pork and pork stew. Other rites without men mentioned in sacrificial calendars and dedications include sacrifices to Dionysos and Semele in the Attic *deme* Erchia, rituals at Thasos to Athena Patroe, and the sacrifice to Demeter Chloe at Mukonos.

## Prayer and the expectation of reciprocity

Some Greek words used to describe ritual behaviour or ritual gesture had a double meaning. The common word for prayer was *euche*, but the verb ‘to pray’ (*euchesthai*) could also mean ‘to proudly publicize’. In a prayer to a god, therefore, the line between making an appeal and making a proud assertion was thin. Although, as Pindar (poet; fifth century BCE) says, gods and men belong to different categories, it seems that the Greeks did not need to prostrate themselves before divinities. They addressed their gods standing, face up and right arm extended. Free women and girls (in comedy, also slaves) sometimes kneeled to pray, but women kneeled only in critical situations or when the request had to do with the family.

Formal prayers had three parts: invocation of a divinity (identified precisely with specific epithets); justification or argument (including reminder of past worship); and finally, the request itself (explicitly stated). Most extant examples of any length are from poetic texts. The one most frequently cited is the first prayer in the *Iliad*, addressed to Apollo by his priest, the Trojan

Page 293 |

Chryses, who wants the Greek leader, Agamemnon, punished for insolence:

Hear me, god of the silver bow, you who protect Chryse and sacred Killa and rule Tenedos with your power. If ever I roofed a temple pleasing to you, if ever I burned for you the fat thighs of bulls or goats, fulfil this wish for me: may the Danaans pay for my tears with your arrows.

(*Iliad* 1.37–42; translation by the author)

Comic parodies, in all likelihood based on well-known formulas, are frequent. In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, a comic play by Aristophanes (writer of comedies in the late fifth and early fourth century BCE), the women pray to Athena, invite her to their festival and ask for peace. Their invocation of Demeter and her daughter, Kore, although it lacks a specific request, nevertheless preserves the ‘if ever’ reminder used in Chryses’ prayer. This formula indicates a continuing relationship with the two goddesses as well as the expectation of their response. The prayer itself constitutes an urgent request that the two goddesses be present to witness and therefore recognize and honour the ceremonies their worshippers are about to perform:

And come, O Goddesses, kind and generous, to your sacred grove, where you illuminate with your torches the sacred rites, an immortal vision not permitted for men to see. Approach, come, we entreat you, O most powerful Thesmophoroi! If ever before you came when called, come now, too, we implore you, to us here.

(Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 1148–58; translation by the author)

Choral performances at festivals or in a sanctuary often set the stage for a divinity’s epiphany by issuing an invitation sung in verse. Hymns were prayers set to music. Other forms of prayer were normally not sung. The several different words for prayer, *euche*, *ara*, *lite* and *hiketeia*, are not interchangeable. *Ara* could mean ‘prayer’, but it could also mean ‘curse’. *Litai* were urgent requests made in situations of crisis, and *hiketeiai* were formal requests of supplication made only by those in truly desperate circumstances to someone obliged to respond.

All forms of prayer emphasized the necessity of catching the divinity’s attention, inviting the divinity’s presence and prompting the divinity’s good will. If sacrifice was a transaction, prayer was the verbal counterpart that made clear the obligations on both sides. It was the expectation of an exchange of gifts that kept the relationship with a god alive. The Greek word *charis* (in English ‘grace’, or better, ‘reciprocal generosity’) covers both sides of the process. If part of a prayer

Page 294 |

was like a public declaration (reminding the god that the worshipper deserved attention), then the response to a god’s generosity in granting the request was commendation or praise. A Hellenistic hymn to Serapis on Delos contains the phrase ‘We praise the gods because they bestow worthy *charis*.’ In a dialogue by Plato (philosopher, 428–347 BCE), Socrates

suggests to Euthyphro that sacrifice was the same as making a gift to a god and that prayer was the same as making a request. Euthyphro agrees, but in fact both acts could occur together and the god's action in granting a request could be considered reciprocation for the gift implicit in any sacrifice.

Prayers were appropriate in any context and could be offered at the beginning of any project. For individuals a prayer might be spoken at the dawn of a new day or at the beginning of the farming season. The gods could be invited to aid in any undertaking. People prayed for help in love and in war, for successful crops, for children, or simply for good fortune. Prayers were also routinely offered on important public occasions, at the opening of a meeting of the assembly or the council, and at the beginning of dramatic festivals, athletic contests and military campaigns. Prayers could request favours for friends and harm to enemies. The official prayer spoken at the beginning of every meeting of the Athenian assembly included a curse against traitors and enemies of the people.

Sacrifice and prayer belonged together, but prayer did not require sacrifice, and even prayers accompanying sacrifice could be quite simple. Some expressions, where a wish made with a single word involved a god in its fulfilment, were in fact abbreviated prayers. Free people could give orders to a god; a slave could only make a wish. The prayers of slaves lacked formal structure and were expressed as wishes. Free people, on the other hand, had no qualms about addressing a god with a command in the imperative mood. Moreover, when slaves prayed, they prayed without sacrifice. In situations where a slave is depicted accompanying a family in sacrifice, that slave is present as a member of the household to provide domestic service, not as a direct participant or recipient.

Women could pray at home, even silently, and women could offer prayers in the context of a festival of their own. In group sacrifice, however, their prayers were probably important only in those rituals where they themselves had a designated role. On the whole, women played a supportive but minor role in any sacrifice where a male was present. As we have seen, their only act of agency was the ululation at the moment of the animal's death. This high-pitched, reverberating cry vibrating deep in the throat called attention to situations of crisis just past. Women cried the *ololuge* in jubilation at the moment of a birth, in

Page 295 |

sorrow at the moment of death, and at a sacrifice to emphasize the instant of the kill.

Menander's *Duskolos*, staged in 317 BCE, ends in a marriage, and the groom's mother spends almost the entire play in prayer and sacrifice to Pan and the Nymphs. These are the divinities associated with the local spring where the bride will fetch the water for her wedding ceremony at the end of the play. As in this play, women prayed even to male divinities, but the issues of their concern are primarily the issues of family life, that is, personal health, successful childbirth, the health of family members, the well-being of children, and even the well-being of farm animals ('Elpis, daughter of Andronikos, prays a prayer and makes a vow for the sake of the mule', in an inscribed Greek prayer from Lydia). Males were concerned about such issues, too, but they were also active in a wider sphere and had broader interests and more opportunities to represent the community in fulfilling the obligations of public ritual.

## Votive gifts

When a prayer was answered and a request granted, the gods expected thanks. People could express their gratitude in the form of a sacrifice. In another play of Menander the announcement of a marriage inspires a character to sacrifice a pig to mark the occasion. Worshippers also dedicated gifts to the gods. Permanent tokens of thanks to the gods survive as reminders of ritual performed or as thanks for gifts received. When dedicated in fulfilment of a vow, such gifts are called votives. These objects are the tangible records of a complex system of exchange between human and divine realms, a form of exchange that assumed mutual reciprocity between gods and human beings. Thousands upon thousands of such gifts are found in sanctuaries everywhere. Gifts range from elaborate, specially commissioned statues and reliefs to the modest ceramics mass-produced in local workshops. Donations created such clutter that sanctuaries often had to have special rules to regulate display.

A dedication could record a ritual act, service to a divinity or a positive response to a prayer. Some were merely ornamental, others were real tools or miniature models of real tools. From these we can often identify the occupation or accomplishments of the donor. Soldiers dedicated arms and armour captured in battle, craftsmen dedicated their tools, athletes dedicated their athletic equipment, and women dedicated their jewelry and the products of their weaving, as well as their loom weights, distaffs and spindles. Other votives, in the form of reliefs and simple ceramic or metal vases and figurines, represent ritual or

Page 296 |

objects significant for cult. Reliefs depict the dedicator in an act of ritual. Figurines in bronze or inexpensive terracotta



represented the god, the worshipper or the animal victim. The rich variety of the extant votives makes it difficult to classify dedications. The wealthy dedicated buildings and statues and commissioned objects made from valuable materials. Ordinary people were more likely to dedicate mass-produced votive reliefs, ceramic figurines or simple objects of daily use. Freedom of choice was limited only by means. Although local sanctuary officials could regulate the display of votives within the sanctuary, the choice of an individual dedication was up to the donor and not controlled by sanctuary personnel or local governing bodies. For this reason the record of votive practice offers the possibility of a glimpse into the interests, concerns and anxieties of ordinary people.

Plato reminds us that people dedicated gifts in both prosperity and need, and says that those in need, especially women and sick people, were most likely to make dedications. The epigraphical evidence shows that women usually targeted female divinities, but that when they chose to honour a male divinity, that divinity was more likely to be Dionysos or Asklepios than any other. Asklepios presided over the physical health of individuals, and special concerns for women's health, especially with regard to fertility and the risks of pregnancy and childbirth, are strikingly evident in the dedications and testimonies of women at his healing sanctuaries.

From patterns of gift giving, we might infer that some divinities were worshipped primarily by men (Zeus, Poseidon, Ares); others by both men and women (Apollo, Artemis, Athena); and still others almost exclusively by women (Demeter, Kore, Hera). Categories, however, are not always neatly drawn. The evidence is by and large archaeological. The variety of dedications is more limited at sanctuaries of female divinities, where the most common objects are ceramic female figurines, woven clothing, weaving tools, jewelry and bronze mirrors (both miniature and full size), and animal figurines. Women worshipped female divinities that protected children. Such divinities were called 'kourotrophic' (child-nourishing). Female divinities also protected men. More than 100,000 votive lead figurines, both male and female, found in the sanctuary of Artemis Ortheia at Sparta, indicate that she was a goddess for both.

The material remains of votives and dedications can correct distortions of the poets. Material remains can also raise problems of interpretation. Hera is a good example to consider. This goddess is a puzzling figure. Although her rituals emphasized marriage, the female life-cycle and athletic competition, the literary sources represent her as a jealous wife, an incompetent

Page 297 |

mother and an annoyance to the hero Herakles. Yet, she has a Mycenaean pedigree, important sanctuaries and a long history of receiving substantial dedications in the Argolid, at Perachora and on Samos. In the Argolid Hera received thousands of small items reflecting ritual (miniature offering tables, 1500 miniature ceramic pots of many shapes, and bronze and terracotta animal figurines) plus many items associated primarily with women (2800 bronze dress pins, 2000 knobbed straight pins, a considerable amount of other forms of jewelry and thirty bronze mirrors). Of 2865 terracotta figurines in the Argive Heraion, 85 per cent were standing or seated females representing her worshippers. Argive Hera received no weapons (although one of the prizes at her games, for men, was a bronze shield), but Hera at nearby Perachora enjoyed armour, weapons and iron spits, in addition to jewelry (miniature rings and pins) and seated and standing females in terracotta. Material remains, especially the dedications, establish that Argive Hera was not a template for Hera elsewhere.

## Divination and oracles

The habit of regular communication with the gods encouraged the expectation of direct response. That response could take many forms. For example, in some cases of animal sacrifice, before the meat for eating was cooked, the tail of the animal was burned on the altar. The way it curled, the direction it turned, and how it moved while burning, were all carefully observed in order to determine whether the sacrifice was propitious. The conditions of inner organs could be considered an important indicator of divine will. Professional seers (*manteis*) studied the colour, character and shape of the liver and gallbladder to discover clues to divine intention. Specialists also looked for signs in the flight of birds; the content of dreams; unusual natural phenomena (eclipse of moon or sun, thunder or lightning on a clear day); or climatic disaster (drought, famine or plague). The Greek practice of hepatoscopy (scrutiny of the liver of a sacrificial victim) shared many parallels with Mesopotamian practice, and in this and other kinds of divination the religious traditions of Akkadian and Babylonian cultures must have provided the original model.

Cities retained professional seers to take omens when leaders had to make important decisions at times of extraordinary risk. Situations of risk included founding a new city, deciding to make war, crossing the boundaries and leaving the territory of the *polis* on campaign, or making a significant legislative or administrative decision. The Greek word for seer was *mantis*, a

Page 298 |

word connected with an ancient word for 'know'. The reputation of the seer was highest in the archaic period. Even in the

mid-fifth century, when Perikles sent the professional seer Lampon to give advice to the founders of an Athenian colony in southern Italy, the office of *mantis* was still a respectable position. By the fourth century BCE, however, the craft had become so debased by imitators who sold prophecies for cash that those who sought advice from a *mantis* could be considered to be excessively superstitious.

The reputation of oracular sanctuaries was very different. An oracle was a message in a god's voice delivered (usually) through a human medium as the result of a specific request from a private or public enquirer. Questions were usually framed to provoke a simple positive or negative answer. Apollo's sanctuaries at Delphi in the middle of the Greek peninsula and Didyma on the coast of Asia Minor were both great oracular centres. Apollo was also associated with many small, local oracular shrines in places like Boeotia, a territory riddled with the springs, caves and fissures in the earth believed to be sources of the god's direct address. Zeus was the god of prophecy at the important oracular site at Dodona. Female intermediaries were associated with both Delphi and Dodona, but male prophets delivered the messages from Apollo at Didyma. In Greek Asia Minor, local traditions also supported a form of prophecy delivered by female prophets whose title was 'Sibyl'.

Procedures differed. For Apollo, purification preceded consultation, and at Delphi questions put to the Pythia (the priestess who delivered the god's response) could produce a text. Responses were ambiguous and, like riddles, constituted puzzles to be solved. Responsibility for interpretation belonged to the enquirer, not to the god. In the archaic and classical periods cities throughout Greece and even foreign dynasts consulted the oracle at Delphi. Representatives of cities and foreign rulers put questions before the god not so much to discover the course of future events as to confirm the viability of a policy or plan already under discussion. The prestige of the oracle in support of legislative decisions was connected to Apollo's authority as expert in the procedures for purification, as well as to his reputation for support of law and the process of legislative deliberation.

Dodona is another story. Located in a distant valley deep in Epirus, the oracle of Zeus at Dodona had the reputation of great antiquity. Priests called 'Selloi' went barefoot with feet unwashed. Zeus himself, possibly represented by the great oak tree that grew in his sanctuary, was attended by three priestesses and accompanied by doves. Ancient traditions differ in the

Page 299 |

precise details. Just how responses were delivered is not divulged; some believe the god's will was interpreted from the rustling of the oak leaves, others from the cries of the doves. Enquiries were inscribed on small lead tablets, written by the petitioners themselves. Dozens survive, still rolled or folded just as they left the inscriber's hands. Apparently Zeus could understand the contents without unrolling the tablets. Requests are simple and framed so that the god could respond with a positive or negative sign. The form is usually, 'Is it better for X to do Y?' The simplicity of the procedure did not diminish the oracle's reputation. The god at Dodona was consulted by cities and kings on matters of public policy, by individuals on issues relating to profession, business deals and petty crimes, and, most touchingly, by men concerned about marriage, children, family welfare, the fertility of their wives and the paternity of their children.

Delphi was not above politics. At the time of the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BCE, the neutrality of sanctuary administrators was compromised by expectation of a Persian victory. When representatives of the Athenian leader Themistokles sought an oracle to help Athenians choose a viable defence policy, the first reply of the Pythia was pessimistic. Her reply indicated certain destruction for the Athenians and advised flight. As Herodotus tells the story, the Athenian emissaries were so upset by this response that they put their question to the Pythia a second time. Herodotus' version of the second response of the Pythia, representing as a possibility the successful fulfilment of Themistokles' plan to abandon the city and rely on the Athenian fleet for victory, sounds very much as if it were composed not before, but after the defeat of Persia at Salamis.

No, Athena cannot appease great Zeus of Olympus with many eloquent words and all her cunning counsel. To you I declare again this word, and make it as iron: All shall be taken by foemen, whatever within his border Cecrops contains, and whatever the glades of sacred Cithaeron. Yet to Tritogeneia shall Zeus, loud-voiced, give a present, a wall of wood, which alone shall abide unsacked by the foemen. Well shall it serve yourselves and your children in days that shall be. Do not abide the charge of horse and foot that come on you, a mighty host from the landward side, but withdraw before it. Turn your back in retreat; on another day you shall face them. Salamis, isle divine, you shall slay many children of women, either when seed is sown or again when the harvest is gathered.

(Herodotus 7.141; trans. D. Grene)

Page 300 |

Delphi could clearly be influenced by political events. The oral tradition that preserved the Pythia's responses was open to interference, and the reputation of the oracle could be tarnished by playing favourites. Although later Greeks assumed that the height of Delphic influence was reached in the archaic period (before 480 BCE), the sanctuary continued to thrive and to be embellished by expensive dedications later, throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In the second century CE, Plutarch regretted that the spring associated with the voice of Apollo seemed to have dried up, but the oracle itself did not cease to function. Responses were no longer always delivered in verse. Nevertheless, the attention of Nero in the first century and of Hadrian in the second indicates that Delphi's reputation still remained high.

## Oaths: calling the gods to witness

Early Greek society was a society without written contracts. Oaths sanctioned agreements between individuals, between the individual and the community, and, at higher levels, between communities. At Athens citizens swore oaths to mark important stages in their lives. Young men swore the oath of the ephebes when undertaking military training, and fathers swore an oath of paternity when introducing a son to his phratry. An oath was required whenever a man made the transition from private status to public responsibility. Magistrates swore an oath when they assumed office, and jurors swore an oath before serving in trials. Lykourous (orator, fourth century BCE) said that oaths held the democracy together, and Isokrates (orator, fourth century BCE) makes it clear that piety required not only respect for the gods, but also respect for oaths. Oaths could be an object of fun on the comic stage and elsewhere, but even Thucydides (Athenian historian, fifth century BCE), although he did not believe in oracles, recognized loyalty to oaths and respect for sanctuaries and suppliants as fundamental to the code that made social stability possible.

To illustrate the importance of keeping a promise Herodotus quotes an oracle delivered at Delphi to Glaukos, a Spartan who told a lie to avoid returning a sum of money he had held in trust on oath. The Pythia replied in very harsh terms, describing the irrevocable penalty for breaking an oath. She said that the child of Oath was nameless and relentless, without hands or feet. This monster would pursue the perjurer and destroy forever his house and family line. In the end Glaukos suffered exactly what the Pythia described. Herodotus tells the story to demonstrate the tradition of Delphic authority in shaping standards for behaviour. Any oath involved a god and every oath implied a self-curse if it were broken. A man without

Page 301 |

descendants was a man who would not be remembered in family cult, a man whose family and ancestral gods died with him. Glaukos failed in his duty as a father and failed in his duty as a citizen because in the eyes of the city it was the citizen's duty to preserve the fatherland (*patris*) and the altars of the gods.

## Civic rituals

Every *polis* had its own collection of deities, every city centre was adorned with the sanctuaries and altars of its own divinities, and each *polis* had its own calendar of festivals. One of the Greek words for 'festival' was *heorte*, a word that connoted festivity, pleasure and relaxation. Months were named for traditional civic festivals and the year followed a cycle that recognized major divinities. At Athens seven days of each month were set aside for sacrifices to Agathos Daimon ('Good Demon'), Athena, Herakles, Hera, Aphrodite, Artemis, Apollo, Poseidon, and the local Athenian hero, Theseus. Almost half of the days in the Attic year were targeted for a special celebration or sacrifice. Religious festivals provided the only interruption of the civic calendar, vacation from business responsibilities or break from the work schedule of the agricultural year.

Funerals and festivals provided one of the principal opportunities for young men to see young women in public, but it is not absolutely clear that women regularly attended all great public festivals. Aristophanes' *Strepsiades* bought a tuppenny cart for his son at the Diasia, a festival of Zeus, but we hear nothing about fathers taking their daughters. Females participated in some events designated for males, but only to perform a specific, limited ritual function. In such cases sexual status and sexual purity were strictly regulated. At the Dionysia the only female in the procession was the young girl who carried the basket of ritual objects required for sacrifice. Inscriptions that commemorate such service are careful to indicate status because basket carriers had to be a *parthenos* (unmarried). Few scholars believe that women attended the theatre in Athens, but we do not even know that females were welcome in the crowds that lined the streets for the rowdy rituals of the parade that preceded the dramatic events.

Most cities began their year as closely as possible to the summer solstice, which corresponded roughly with the conclusion of the grain harvest. At Athens the solstice also marked the beginning of the annual term of office for most city magistrates. Here the festival called Dipolieia ended the year and set the stage for the year's new administration. The celebrations,

honouring Zeus Polieus, god of an open precinct high on the acropolis, had two parts: celebration of the first field ploughed

Page 302 |

(the Field of Hunger behind the *prutaneion*) and a ritual dilemma resolved in the *prutaneion* with a trial for murder after the ox was killed in sacrifice. Bouzyges, in Athenian myth the first man ever to plough a field, was represented in the first part by an official who uttered a series of curses as he walked up and down the furrows. His list represents the reverse of the Cyclops' priorities. Condemning those who did not respond to social obligation, he cursed those who refused to share water, those who refused to share fire and those who refused to give directions to the lost.

Sacrifice of the plough-ox could be staged as a murder, because the ploughox, a working animal, was an unusual victim for sacrifice. Moreover, he was tricked into assenting to his own death when he bowed his head to eat the grain placed on the altar. The sacrifice where the 'murder' took place and the trial in the *prutaneion* complemented each other because each event made a claim for the values of collective procedures. The ploughing of the field in conjunction with the public curses demonstrated that successful agriculture depended on fulfilling communal responsibility. The gods encouraged successful agriculture only in a city whose citizens, unlike the Cyclops, understood civic responsibility and the importance of judicial solutions for dealing with violence.

The ominous events of the Dipolieia were dispelled by its optimistic conclusion. This conclusion prepared the way for the competitive environment and public festivities of the Panathenaia, the celebration that set the new year on its way. The Panathenaia began with a procession. Images of Athena's myths were woven into a new robe presented to the goddess and displayed like a sail on the cart that carried it through the streets. The *arrhephoroi*, young girls in service to Athena on the acropolis, and the *ergastinai*, the girls who wove the robe, marched in procession together with the ephebes, officials, priests, priestesses and representatives of the population to the acropolis. There, in the presence of the Twelve Gods, they presented the new robe to Athena. People came from all over Attica to see the procession and to attend the athletic, nautical, musical and poetic competitions that followed. Athena's priests and assistants had to work all day slaughtering the cattle to prepare the sacrifices and provide the meat for the banquets consumed by Athenian citizens, who feasted with their neighbours in small groups throughout the centre of town.

## The power of dreams

Physical health in this world was more important than spiritual healing in preparation for the next. People turned to several divinities when challenged by illness or disability, but the specialist was Asklepios, son of Apollo. This god's major site was

Page 303 |

Epidauros, where he seems originally to have been a hero associated with the god Apollo Maleatas. In the late sixth century BCE Asklepios had only an altar and one small building, but by the fourth he was honoured with a full-fledged temple and cult statue. The expansion of the sanctuary at Epidauros together with Asklepios' elevation from hero to god (*theos*) reflects his special appeal and wide popularity.

A reputation for success explains the success of Asklepios. For a fee, sanctuaries of Asklepios offered treatment that included purification, sacrifice, seclusion, therapeutic bathing and incubation. At Epidauros petitioners slept in the sanctuary in hopes of dreaming about a visit from the god. Thank offerings in the form of tablets depicting a scene from treatment, carved in stone or painted on wood, were displayed in the sanctuary. From these images and from local oral tradition sanctuary administrators constructed a series of narratives about successful cures. An anthology of such narratives was recorded on large stone tablets displayed prominently in the sanctuary. Many of these narratives share a common structure. The typical pattern includes sleeping in the sanctuary; seeing a vision in a dream; recognizing the god; having an experience with snakes; undergoing violent, but painless, surgery; and in the end, achieving health. In the following example the god is represented by one of his sacred snakes:

A man's toe was healed by a snake. He was in a terrible condition from a malignant ulceration on his toe. During the day he was carried out of the *abaton* (a restricted area in the sanctuary) by the servants and was sitting on a seat. He fell asleep there and then a snake came out of the *abaton* again. When the man woke up, he was well and he said he had seen a vision: it seemed to him that a good-looking young man had sprinkled a drug over his toe. (*Inscriptiones Graecae* IV<sup>2</sup> 121.113–19; trans. L. LiDonnici)

It was important to acknowledge the god's attention:

Hermon of Thasos. He came as a blind man, and he was healed. But afterwards when he didn't bring the fee

for the cure, the god made him blind again. Then he came back and slept here, and the god restored him to health. (*Inscriptiones Graecae* IV<sup>2</sup> 122.7–9; trans. follows that of L. LiDonnici)

According to the official account inscribed on stone, Asklepios and his sacred snake were transported to Athens by chariot from Epidauros in 420/19 BCE. The god and his sacred snake were received at Athens by a certain Telemachos, who paid for the landscaping when the city established a sanctuary for the god. The episode illustrates what was needed to establish a

*Page 304 |*

new god at Athens: a sponsor willing to negotiate with officials; a clientele to lobby for space for a temple; and an assembly of citizens predisposed not only to the god's advocates, but also to the god himself. Procedures for receiving a new god were as complicated as the procedures for naturalizing new citizens. Officials managed festivals, but authority for decisions about cult matters lay with the assembly, and all decisions about civic ritual, such as the sacrificial calendar, the upkeep of sanctuaries and the regulation of priests and priestesses, were subject to public debate and confirmed by vote.

Asklepios represented for Athenians the possibility of health for individuals. The arrival of Asklepios at Athens on the heels of the plague earlier in the 420s suggests to some that he was brought to Athens because residents were concerned about the ravages of this disease. Epidemics, however, were not a speciality of Asklepios. Plague belonged to Apollo, who as Hekatebolos (Far-Shooter) or Apotropaïos (Averter) could both inflict plague and take it away. Asklepios was more concerned with ordinary chronic conditions and disabilities. Moreover, he did not treat cities; he treated individuals. His sanctuaries profited from public awareness of the new approach of Hippocratic physicians. Sanctuary procedures incorporated professional medical techniques and imitated the contemporary Hippocratic emphasis on attention to symptoms and the individual case history. By combining an attractive and generous divinity with the pleasant surroundings of his sanctuaries and the personal attention of his staff, the administrators of his sanctuaries developed rituals that inspired confidence and attracted a wide clientele.

Asklepios was not the only divinity recognized for offering remedies. Tiny body parts of gold, electrum and ivory, dating as early as the late eighth to the middle of the seventh century BCE, have been found in deposits at the temple of Artemis at Ephesos. Ceramic models of body parts dedicated to a healing god had become common by the fourth century. They are found throughout mainland Greece (including Thrace) and the Aegean islands and occur as well at Pergamon and Ephesos. Offerings seem to cluster by type. Eyes for Demeter, breasts and vulvae for Artemis and Aphrodite, and male genitalia for Asklepios indicate a certain symmetry, but there is no evidence that individual sanctuaries specialized in particular diseases. At Corinth, the collection includes ceramic heads, ears, eyes, tongues, chests, arms, hands, fingers, legs, feet, hair and thighs.

A series of inventories from the sanctuary of Asklepios at Athens provides a check on actual deposits. These inventories list items of gold and silver to be melted down by the sanctuary. Body parts displayed at the Athenian Asklepieion included

*Page 305 |*

heads, ears, faces, eyes, jaws, mouths, body trunks, hearts, breasts, arms, hands, fingers, male and female genitalia, and legs. The inventories also list reliefs, crowns, ritual equipment, coins, jewelry, medical equipment and personal items, such as drinking vessels, cooking utensils and little boxes for cosmetics. On the whole the inventories record a higher proportion of dedications from women than from men. Women dedicated most of the jewelry and a higher proportion of body parts. Males dedicated most of the equipment associated with priestly service (ritual vessels, crowns and medical instruments) because, as administrators of the sanctuary, they made ceremonial dedications at the conclusion of service. As far as limbs and organs are concerned, men and women made dedications for themselves and occasionally for other members of their families. Men made dedications for their wives, fathers and mothers for their sons or children, and once a mother and grandmother joined together in making a dedication on behalf of a child.

A concern for reproduction and the health of women and children is evident from both votives and inscriptions. Women dedicated most of the votives concerned with reproductive problems, and in the narratives recorded at Epidauros female sterility is a serious problem. Petitioners, however, were on the whole more likely to be male than female, and male bodies suffered from a wider variety of medical problems. When we compare the inventories that list donors, we can see that males were treated for injury, blindness, paralysis, lameness, lice, kidney stone, tuberculosis, hepatitis, infection, pleurisy, indelible tattoos, headache, arthritis, dyspepsia and gout, while females were brought to the sanctuary for reproductive disorders, in particular, prolonged or false pregnancy or sterility, and dropsy, tumour, infection, blindness and tapeworm.

Healing sanctuaries continued to be a growth industry after the fourth century and were so popular that evidence for temples of Asklepios became a reliable measure of the spread of Hellenism in Asia Minor in the Hellenistic period. Although direct attention to the individual client might go some way to explain this phenomenal development, the construction rate of new sanctuaries for Asklepios was everywhere dependent on city sponsorship. At Erythrai in the second quarter of the fourth

century BCE, the city passed legislation to retain for the *polis* the privilege of the first sacrifice at a festival for Asklepios. In other cities Asklepios became the major divinity in the Hellenistic period. This is true at Kos (home of one of antiquity's great medical centres), where Asklepios and his sanctuary were the focus of an annual festival attended by *theoroi*,

Page 306 |

representatives from cities throughout the Greek world. The festival of Asklepios at Kos was so popular that it eventually rivalled even well-established Pan-Hellenic festivals at Delphi and Olympia. Elaborate facilities for guests, dormitories for those awaiting dreams, large facilities for therapeutic bathing and theatres for entertainment are among the improvements added to sanctuaries of Asklepios in the Hellenistic period. Asklepios may have been a god who served individuals, but his sanctuaries were sponsored and maintained by cities.

## The life-cycle

The cycle of life from birth to death was organized by a series of rituals to mark important transitions. Some ceremonies stressed the completion of an earlier stage, others emphasized transitions to the next. Many of these rituals were the responsibility of the family. Local customs varied, but gods were often involved, and the city had an interest in the cycle, whether of rituals that eased a child into public responsibility or of the procedures by which the dead were reconciled to the grave.

## Birth

Birth, as the first transition, was a time of danger for the mother as well as the child. A woman in childbirth was considered to be especially polluted, even able to pollute others. This means that she herself could not enter a sanctuary or approach the gods in ritual or supplication until she had waited from ten to twenty-one days for the pollution to dissipate. During this period rituals for the newborn were the responsibility of the family. An infant, *brephos* (the same word also means 'foetus'), was not considered a member of the family until recognized by the father. The first few days were a period of stress for most infants, and Aristotle tells us that babies were not named immediately. Families waited to assess the infant's chance for survival. To join the family the child was carried around a hearth in the house in ceremonies called *amphidromia* ('rites of running around'), similar to the reception at the hearth that brought a new slave or new bride into the household.

When an infant was named (on the fifth or tenth day) the chosen name could indicate a tie to a local god. Personal names based on expressions compounded with the name of a god were common. Such names are called theophoric names. Because he was protector of young boys through childhood and adolescence, Apollo was the god whose name most parents

Page 307 |

used. Apollodoros, a very popular name, meant 'gift of Apollo', and Artemidoros meant 'gift of Artemis'. 'Apollonius', 'Demetrius' and 'Dionysius' were all adjectival forms of a divine name. Others, Diogeiton ('neighbour of Zeus'), Pythogeiton ('neighbour of the Pythian god, Apollo') or Athanogeiton ('neighbour of Athena'), all indicate that the family lived near a sanctuary. Theophoric names were not so much an indication of personal devotion as a sign of Hellenic identity. Claiming a god's protection seems to have made parents feel more secure.

## Rituals of maturation

Political status and paternity were a concern of the city and a concern of the gods. Every year, the adult males of the community met in small groups consisting of the extended male kin group. These groups were called *phratriai* (phratries). In Athens during the Apatouria, a three-day festival for Apollo, each phratry held its own meeting. Members gathered to announce recent births, to recognize the maturity of sons ready for membership, and to hear young adult members announce the names of their brides. Fathers of children born in the past year offered a sacrifice (*to meion*) to introduce new sons to the group. By accepting the sacrifice, the phratry acknowledged paternity and provided an important contribution to family coherence and community stability. Fathers of sons who had reached adolescence offered the *koureion*, a second sacrifice that marked a boy's application for membership. The father's oath accompanied this ritual. Phratry members voted on the application, and if rejected, the animal for sacrifice was simply led away. On the third day of the Apatouria a new cycle of paternity began when the young male members about to marry offered the *gamelia* to announce their marriage and thereby legitimate the union in the eyes of the kin group. The celebrations in the phratries provided an important opportunity for young males to join their fathers in ritual, to become acquainted with their extended male kin, and to learn the rituals they would be expected to perform when they assumed the responsibilities of adulthood. The Apatouria was considered to be a

time of pleasant festivity, and those who offered sacrifices were expected to provide a holiday meal for the membership.

In Attica Zeus Phratrios and Athena Phratia received the sacrifices in the phratry. For other male rituals, Apollo was often the model for young males preparing for citizen status. As Apollo Patroos, he was recognized at several levels. Originally attached to institutions of the *genos*, the name for the exclusive hereditary groups limited to males of the oldest and most prestigious families, his jurisdiction was broadened as the citizen body grew. For the phratries, Apollo Patroos validated the

Page 308 |

individual paternal line. For the city of Athens, as father of their mythical ancestor, Ion, he ratified for citizens membership in the Attic family. Candidates for public office had to give the names of parents and grandparents, to report the location of their Zeus Herkios (Zeus of the courtyard, protector of the household), and to locate their Apollo Patroos and their family's graves. Apollo Patroos was invoked when magistrates took the oath because he was witness to family status and family continuity.

An early stage in the male life-cycle was under the jurisdiction of Dionysos. He was the god whose gift of wine, properly used, encouraged commensality. An important ritual introduced very young boys about three years old to the drinking of wine. Called 'Pitchers' (Choes), this ceremony took place each year on the second day of the three-day Anthesteria, the festival in February when the wine of the year before was tasted for the first time. Toddlers were wreathed with flowers and given tiny pitchers filled with watered wine. The child's first official taste of wine was offered in a controlled setting and marked his first entry into male society. The ceremony was still celebrated in the second century CE, the date of an inscription listing the Choes with three other important stages of life: birth, military training (*ephebeia*) and marriage.

At about eighteen years of age an Athenian male was registered in his father's *deme*, the smallest division of the citizen body, but only after scrutiny by the city council (*boule*). Those eligible for service as ephebes were taken to the *prutaneion*, the building that sheltered the communal hearth of the entire *polis*. Here they were introduced to the city's hearth and sacred fire. Next they advanced to the sanctuary of Aglauros at a cave on the east slope of the acropolis, where they swore the oath of the ephebes (see above). Aglauros, daughter of an early king of Attica, was worshipped as a heroine, and her sanctuary probably marks the birthplace of Erichthonios the mythical king born from the earth who was progenitor of all Athenians through his daughter, Kreousa. Athena had presided over his birth, just as she presided over the people of Athens. When young men swore the oath to take up the responsibilities of citizenship, they laid claim to a common identity that made all citizens members of one Attic family. The induction of the ephebe began at the centre of the city and gradually moved outwards, as the youths were formally introduced to the boundaries of the territory, replicated at the city wall by the sanctuary of Artemis Agrotera, just outside. Artemis' epithet means that she was Artemis of the 'wilds', goddess of the fringe area at the outer limits of the city's political reach.

Page 309 |

Artemis, Hera, Demeter, Athena and Aphrodite presided over the lives of young girls. Artemis, the goddess most widely associated with the female maturation process, was especially popular in the Peloponnese. Elsewhere, in particular in the Argolid, at Elis, on Samos and probably at Poseidonia, Hera took first place. Artemis was a permanent virgin, but Hera, worshipped in the Argolid as virgin, wife and widow, represented the complete female life-cycle. To assure divine protection young girls danced and sang hymns for Artemis in choruses throughout the Peloponnese. In Attica they played the part of bears in the *arkteia*, a festival where their dance separated them from the first stage of childhood and prepared them for the next. Girls wove textiles and dedicated them to Kore in Lokroi; to Hera on Samos; to Artemis in Attica and Boeotia. They did this to glorify a goddess, but also to demonstrate their achievement of the skills that would make them good wives and mothers.

Goddesses who presided over the rituals of the female life-cycle often required attendants who had to be unmarried and sexually pure. In the case of Artemis, such attendants imitated the status of the goddess and also served as example for all the girls of the city. Young women had to know Artemis before they could come to know Aphrodite. Myths of Artemis, where young women are punished severely for pre-marital sexual experience, demonstrate the consequences of arousing her anger. Death in childbirth was explained by her arrows. A fourth-century inscription from Cyrene shows how important Artemis could be for the welfare of the *polis*. The people of Cyrene recognized that if Artemis was not satisfied with the rituals performed by the young women of the city, the whole population would suffer. They consulted Delphi and received an oracle that validated local procedures for protecting young women as they married and anticipated their first child. This law isolates three important stages: before marriage (although the text is uncertain), at the time of marriage and in pregnancy. Detailed instructions for performing rituals for Artemis are laid out and penalties assessed for any young woman who failed to comply. The city took an interest in the health of its young women because the risks of neglect threatened everyone.

## Weddings and funerals

Weddings and funerals were family affairs, but gods were invoked at several points in the proceedings, and divinities protected specific aspects of the process. The divinities associated with weddings and marriage included Apollo and Artemis (associated with transitions), Zeus and Hera (whose marriage was a model), Peitho (goddess of persuasion) and Aphrodite

Page 310 |

(who represented sexual arousal). Except for the announcement of marriage at the *gamelia*, most of the ceremony was centred on the bride herself, because she was the individual for whom marriage required the most significant change. For her, the wedding was both a physical and a social transition.

Before the ceremony the bride had to be purified by a ritual bath. The water came from a local spring especially designated for such occasions. The dozens of fragmentary miniature *loutrophoroi*, vases for carrying water for ritual baths, found in the waters of a copious spring in a cave near Athens represent the full-sized pitchers used by local brides for the ritual. The deposits identify this as the designated spring for the local *deme*. The purity of the bride, called 'nymph' from her wedding day until the birth of her first child, was emphasized by the purity of the spring, guarded by divine nymphs. Other items found in the cave include dolls, dedicated by the bride who no longer needed the toys of childhood. Terracotta figurines representing Eros, Aphrodite, Pan, Silenos and a satyr, found together with ordinary female figurines in the same place, were also dedications. These recognized the bride's new sexual responsibilities. The water from the communal spring purified the bride and prepared her for her reproductive responsibilities in marriage.

The main event of the ceremony was the procession that carried the bride from her parents' home to the home of the new husband. The procession openly displayed the new union before neighbours who might be called upon later to witness that it had taken place. Friends and family accompanied the wagon that carried bride and groom, singing the wedding song to Hymen, a divinity of marriage, and shouting the ritual (and ribald) cries that were supposed to keep bad spirits at bay, encourage sexual success and promote the successful fertility both families anticipated. The bride, who was veiled during the transition, did not reveal her face until just before she untied her belt, the act that represented the gift of her body to her husband. The untying of her belt was under the protection of Artemis Lusizonos (Artemis who 'loosens belts'), the same Artemis who would protect the young wife when she untied her belt again to deliver her first child. On the next day her parents brought gifts, and her mother offered sacrifice to Hera, the goddess identified with the keys of marriage.

## Serving the dead

The last transition was the transition of death. Greeks thought of death as separation of the living self, in Homer the breath, in later writers the soul, from the body. Death itself was considered polluting. Because the body without the soul could not

Page 311 |

be purified by any ritual, even the funeral was a source of pollution for participants. Funerals, like weddings, had several stages. Women presided over the activities most charged with pollution. They washed the body, supervised the laying out (*prothesis*) of the corpse, and participated in the laments and other rites of mourning within the home.

Separation from the living was represented by the procession (*ekphora*) to the cemetery, the public event that announced the death to the community. This procession imitated the invisible journey of the soul or 'image' (*eidolon*) of the dead person from this world to the next. Cities, careful to minimize exaggerated public expressions of family prominence or influence, resented excessive public displays of personal wealth and uncontrolled gestures of mourning on the part of the women of the family. Female participation in public funeral ritual, especially the *ekphora*, was considered to be problematical. Therefore, only women closely related to the dead person could take part. Cities often passed legislation to limit the number of women that could be seen in public at a family funeral. The traditional laments delivered by female relatives and close friends of the deceased, well known from epic and dramatic poetry, were curtailed in the *polis* and, if performed at all, had to be confined to the home.

Burial of the corpse or its cremated remains satisfied the claims of the dead on the living. For those lost at sea or others whose bodies were unrecoverable, families provided an empty tomb. Offerings were made to the dead at the gravesite on the third and ninth days after the funeral, and on the thirteenth day the family closed this stage of ritual obligation with a meal that reconstituted the family as a unit. Other ceremonies at the gravesite would follow every year, on the anniversary of the death. Completion of all customary rites secured the corpse in the grave, and the dead in the underworld, because once received by the gods of the dead, Hades and Persephone, the dead could not return.



## Wearing amulets, making spells and cursing competitors

Devices for rituals of protection were well known in Greek literature. Hermes gave to Odysseus the plant called *molu*, to keep Circe from turning him into a hog; Demeter knew a plant to protect babies from sudden infant death; and people wore amulets to avoid trouble and achieve success. Women wore amulets to encourage conception, and Athenian mothers shielded their babies from harm with amulets in the form of the snake that had protected the infant Erechtheus. Mothers who attached amulets to their babies' clothing had good reason to fear infant death. Powerful spirits roamed the earth, spirits like

Page 312 |

Gello, said to kill virgins and new babies, or Mormo, who ate her own children, and Lamia, ready to kill any child. Some people did not believe in amulets, but even the great Athenian leader Perikles, well known for his preference for philosophy and natural science, when on his deathbed, allowed the women of his family to hang an amulet around his neck. Educated males may have been contemptuous of such practices, but the impulse to seek special protection from danger was accepted by the society as a practical strategy. Soldiers converted their shields to protective amulets by decorating them with representations of fierce monsters designed to frighten the enemy. The owl on Athenian coins, with its threatening full frontal stare, made each coin a protective amulet for the entire city.

Greek religious practice also includes a dark corner of personal rituals secretly performed to compel an oblivious victim. Such rituals included writing love charms to force a beloved from the arms of another or scratching a curse on a lead tablet to destroy a competitor in law, business, athletics or politics. Individuals at all levels of society participated in such practices. Writing a curse while reciting it aloud increased its effectiveness, insured that it would not be forgotten, and, what is more, enabled its conveyance to the underworld, where the deities who could carry out the terms were to be found (for example Hermes Chthonios, Persephone, Hades and the Erinyes, spirits of revenge). The preferred messenger for transmission was a young person recently, but untimely dead, an *ahoros*. A message deposited in the grave of one who had died too soon accompanied the wraith straight to the underworld.

The general opinion about such rituals is not favourable. Perikles was embarrassed by his amulet, and Plato shows nothing but contempt. In ancient literature, women are held responsible for most of the trouble, but in fact, when extant examples of actual practice are considered, most known practitioners are male. Two issues aroused suspicion. One was secrecy, the other was acting alone. Spells and curses cast by the individual in solitude, without an audience, for personal gain and directed at a victim without warning or explanation were considered problematical. Such tactics were not only antisocial, they were unfair. Some rituals delivered in secret, however, differed very little in intent and method from public rituals designed to secure protection for the whole city. The giant pair of eyes on the city wall at Thasos, its gaze aimed to paralyse attackers, was displayed in public because it protected the entire city. At Teos and Abdera public curses were proclaimed at the greatest annual festivals. Pronounced on behalf of the city by a magistrate speaking to the entire citizen population, these official curses clarify the difference between a public and a private curse. The public curse at Teos threatened destruction for

Page 313 |

anyone who interfered with the local grain trade or any individual who tried to cast spells against the many. What was at stake was not the casting of spells (for what else is a public curse?) but doing so alone, secretly, on the sly and, even more terrible, targeting 'the many'.

Fear of the negative consequences of unofficial spells indicates the depth of the belief in the potency of any spell. For this reason the *polis* retained the institution of the public curse, an instrument invoked especially in periods of crisis. At Athens, on the eve of a major military expedition during the Peloponnesian War, almost all the protective statues standing before the doors of private homes and public buildings in Athens were destroyed. The entire city was in uproar. Those held responsible were convicted on a charge of impiety. As an indication of the seriousness of the crime, conspirators were publicly cursed by all the priests and priestesses of the city. One priestess is said to have refused to participate, claiming that she was a priestess who performed prayers, not curses. We do not hear much about public cursing after the classical period, but private cursing, although never officially approved, persisted throughout antiquity, leaving behind for us a twisted trail of bizarre texts scratched on lead, papyrus and scraps of broken pottery.

## The shifting topography of the dead

The journey to the underworld was the final separation. There was little common opinion about conditions, but everyone knew that once the last boundary was crossed, there would be no return. Families sought to complete all rites securing a dead relative in the grave in order to create a firm boundary between the land of the dead and the land of the living. There

were, however, few fixed features to define that boundary. Poets describe water to be crossed, some even mention a gate, but the geography of the underworld was under constant revision, landmarks were altered by every poet who attempted a description, and even though some groups claimed esoteric knowledge about what lay beyond, there was little agreement about content.

Epic poetry knew the underworld as a gloomy place under the earth. For narrative reasons, Homer's dead can hear and speak, but sometimes only when they have drunk blood; they can be seen but not touched because they are only witless images, *eidola*, of their former selves. Both Homer and Hesiod describe a place of darkness associated with punishment. For Hesiod, it is a place of confinement for the rebellious Titans. For Homer, it is the corner where Sisyphos, Tantalos and

Page 314 |

Tityos endlessly labour. Both poets also hint at another possibility. Homer tells of an Elysian Field, far in the west, a place for the special dead, where there is neither punishment nor tedium. Structurally, this place beyond the waters of Okeanos seems equivalent to what Hesiod calls 'Islands of the Blessed', a place whose name implies that only those close to the gods can reach it.

The first hint of the possibility of preparing for something better comes at the end of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, probably composed in the sixth century BCE, where those who have seen the rites of Demeter, therefore *olbioi*, 'blessed' (also 'rich' or 'happy'), are distinguished from those who must go down to the misty darkness. For the first time there is a hint of the possibility of dissolving the difference between the gods and the dead. That possibility is associated with annual rituals for Demeter and Kore, begun at Athens and concluded at Eleusis. By the classical period Eleusis was the home of *mysteria*, 'mysteries', rituals that could not be described or discussed, but which were available to all who spoke Greek, male and female, slave and free. Eleusis became a new kind of Pan-Hellenic sanctuary, dominated by Athens, but open to individual Greeks from elsewhere who wished to share in the possibility of this special blessing. The temple of Demeter at Eleusis was unlike any other in the Greek world. Built to enclose Demeter's secret rites, it had columns on the inside to support a roof that enclosed a space large enough for a large group to worship. The building had no cult statue, and its only separate room was the interior, windowless space where the Hierophant (priest who 'shows the sacred things') kept the sacred objects. The base of the temple was cut directly into the living rock, with the risers for candidates cut into the stone on three sides. Here initiates stood as spectators. We are still in the dark about the content of the ceremony and the precise details of the blessing, because those who 'saw' the rites were never to tell what they had seen, heard or been shown.

In Pindar and Plato the contrast between the *olbioi* and those who go down to the misty darkness is much more dramatic than the comparison in the Homeric Hymn. For Pindar, the dead are judged and separated into two groups: those who must pay a penalty and those, only a few, who having kept their oaths need not suffer. After completing three cycles of earthly life free from injustice, the just may walk the road of Zeus to the Island of the Blessed, a place of light, flowers, pleasant breezes and clear water. Plato also predicts two pathways, a journey and a judgement, but he makes the goal consonant with his own philosophical theories, correcting not only flaws of the new popular notions about the afterlife, but flaws in the way life itself was lived.

Page 315 |

The journey after death is also a theme for tiny, inscribed gold tablets found buried with corpses throughout the Greek Mediterranean. The inscriptions describe a journey through a landscape bordering the land of the dead and a choice the soul must make. Some even give advice on how to address the gods of the dead. The gold tablets give hints of a widespread network of freelance ritual specialists sharing in an oral tradition of esoteric poetry. The gold tablets are souvenirs of a special ritual experience and they serve as a badge of membership in a privileged group. The god who protects this group is Bacchic Dionysos; by experiencing his special rites, the worshipper becomes *bakchos*, a status shared with the god himself. On the journey to the land of the dead the inscriptions remind the soul of the experience of those rites because the soul must choose between the water of Forgetting and the water of Memory in order to reach its special destination. Whoever drinks the water of Memory will walk the sacred road of the blessed together with other *bakchoi* and *mystai* (initiates).

The ceremonies of the *polis* emphasized collective ritual, but the gold tablets focused on the individual. Evidence for private esoteric *mysteria* in the classical period is scarce. Practitioners must have been discreet. With the Bacchic mysteries there comes a new emphasis on privacy, choice and personal goals. While the goal of the secret ritual pertains to the next life, the experience suggests the possibility of aspiring to new forms of ritual identity and new definitions of achievement in this one.

The gold tablets, like the case histories published at Epidaurus, and the curse tablets everywhere, are signs of new ways of ritual communication in the fourth century BCE. Popular literacy has had an impact on religious practice and religious experience. Reading a text where a god gives instructions encourages the reader to become a direct participant in his own

rituals. Narratives of personal experience and the recitation of performative utterances creates illusions of the possibility of power. The texts on gold, the narratives at Epidauros and the inscribed competitive curses everywhere are working texts, potent in themselves. Reading them now, we can experience a miracle cure, curse a rival in politics, an opponent in litigation or a competitor in a race. We can even approach the waters of Memory and ask to take a drink.

## Bibliography

- Alcock, S. and R. Osborne 1994. *Placing the gods: sanctuaries and sacred places in ancient Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blundell, S. and M. Williamson 1998. *The sacred and the feminine in ancient Greece*. London: Routledge.
- Bremmer, J. 1983. *The early Greek concept of the soul*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
1999. *Greek religion*. Greece & Rome, New Surveys in the Classics 24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bruit Zaidman, L. and P. Schmitt Pantel 1992. *Religion in the ancient Greek city*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burkert, W. 1977. *Greek religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
1983. *Homo necans*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
1992. *The orientaling revolution: Near Eastern influence on Greek culture in the early Archaic age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Buxton, R. 2000. *Oxford readings in Greek religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Detienne, M. 1977. *Dionysos slain*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1994. *The gardens of Adonis: spices in Greek mythology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Detienne, M. and J.-P. Vernant 1989. *The cuisine of sacrifice among the Greeks*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Easterling, P. E. and J. V. Muir 1985. *Greek religion and society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Faraone, C. A. and D. Obbink 1991. *Magica hiera: ancient Greek magic and religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gager, J. G. 1992. *Curse tablets and binding spells from the ancient world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Graf, F. 1985. *Nordionische Kulte*. Rome: The Swiss Institute in Rome.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. 1950. *The Greeks and their gods*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hägg, R. 1996. *The role of religion in the early Greek polis*. Stockholm: The Swedish Institute.
- Hägg, R., N. Marinatos and G. C. Nordquist 1988. *Early Greek cult practice*. Stockholm: The Swedish Institute.
- Jameson, M. H. 1988: Sacrifice and animal husbandry in classical Greece. In C. R. Whitaker (ed.), *Pastoral economies in classical antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 87–119 (Cambridge Philological Society, Suppl.; v. 14).
1991. *Sacrifice before battle*. In V. D. Hanson (ed.), *Hoplites: the classical Greek battle experience*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Jost, M. 1985. *Sanctuaires et cultes d'Arcadie*. Paris: J. Vrin.

- Mikalson, J. 1983. *Athenian popular religion*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
1998. *Religion in Hellenistic Athens*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Otto, W. F. 1965. *Dionysos: myth and cult*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Parker, R. 1996. *Athenian religion: a history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1983. *Miasma: pollution and purification in early Greek religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Polignac, F. de 1995. *Cults, territory, and the origins of the Greek city-state*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Price, S. 1987. *Rituals and power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1999. *Religions of the ancient Greeks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pulleyn, S. 1997. *Prayer in Greek religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schachter, A. 1992. Policy, cult, and the placing of Greek sanctuaries. In A. Schachter and J. Bingen (eds.), *Le sanctuaire grec*. Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 37. Geneva: Fondation Hardt, pp. 1–57.
- Schmitt Pantel, P. 1992. *La cité au banquet*. Rome: École française de Rome.
- Seaford, R. 1994. *Reciprocity and ritual*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sourvinou-Inwood, C. 1995. *Reading Greek death*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- VanBremen, R. 1996. *The limits of participation: women and civic life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods*. Amsterdam: C. Gieben.
- Van Straten, F. T. 1995. *Hiera kala*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Vernant, J.-P. 1980. *Myth and society in ancient Greece*. Sussex: Harvester Press.

**Source Citation** (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

"Greek Religion." *A Handbook of Ancient Religions*. Ed. John R. Hinnells. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007. [266]-317. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.

Document URL

[http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX1310100016&v=2.1&u=pima\\_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=413e0f581f153beb5158efed4ca11a19](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX1310100016&v=2.1&u=pima_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=413e0f581f153beb5158efed4ca11a19)

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|CX1310100016