

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

GREEK RELIGION

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ORIGINS

Olympians and the Divine What is the historical origin of the Greek gods, those initially twelve potent Olympian figures whom the Greeks worshipped as the divine itself, and to whom they turned, throughout their history, for help and hope?

Homer and Hesiod The poets Homer and Hesiod both write from the belief in an earlier stage of their religion, in which the Olympian gods emerge as relatively civilizing and creative forces on the front line of the establishment of meaning in the cosmos.

Iliad and Odyssey For the most part Homer takes his gods into the narrative of his tales—The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—making gods and mortals into intimate friends and enemies with one another, and activating plot by means of 'divine mechanisms.'

Theogony Hesiod, in his *Theogony*, composed in the 8th century and thus probably 100 years later than Homer, tracks the origins of the Olympians back to their own more primitive ancestors. The origin of the cosmos would in fact be pre-Olympian; would be the mating of Ouranos (sky) and Gaia (earth), who would in their turn be replaced by their children Kronos and Rhea, Titans and elements of a pre-Olympian set of ruling powers. (By some Greek accounts Rhea was seen as the mother of the Olympian gods and a beneficiary of widespread worship in her own right.) The overall gist of this genealogy is clearly to set the stage for a generation of reason and order, the Olympian generation. The Olympians come off as correlatives to the human, and though in Homer the Olympian gods play every sort of game with their mortal colleagues, the gods are nonetheless of high order power, shrewdness, and beauty. It is only fate which overrules the Olympians, but against **that** iron power nothing created is effectual.

Olympian map of the gods The Olympian pantheon will have been a world organizing map in the mind of its believers. The personalization of natural forces—as we enforce it through mapping a Poseidon behind the roar of the sea, a Zeus in the thunder, an Hephaestus in the forge, a Hermes in the power of speedy communication—will be a way of organizing the world and drawing it close to consciousness. A narrative view of the world will form the framework of daily experience.

Sacred Spaces and Qualities Apart from the mapping and personalization issues, the Olympian pantheon will have promoted the tendency to sacralize places and qualities (like beauty, power, strength), and thus to hallow many regions of psychology and topography. Much in the world becomes sacred by its proximity to the Olympian, and though the sacralization in question is deeply anti-scientific, and will take according revenges on the anti-technical way Hellenism unfolds, that sacralization builds and grows from imagination that will pervade Greek culture, and lend it its unique stamp.

WORSHIP

Varieties of religious worship As we address these questions we realize, at once, that there were multiple forms of religious belief in Ancient Greece. As recently as the fifth century B.C., to which we have been devoting attention, there was a symbiosis of private cult religion with the official 'state' religion devoted to the Olympian gods.

Local cult sites The Olympian gods were the largely divine but partly human presences that the Greek mapped against the sky, acquiring order through this man-created GPM. The worship of these deities was specific to particular cult sites, and varied through the centuries, but was on the whole conservative and relatively simple. Worship was typically carried out inside a sanctuary (*temenos*) in which stood the temple, with its cult statue and before it its altar; while disposed around the sanctuary, which found itself either in the city or in the countryside, there would be religious-use outbuildings and perhaps a sacred grove. Though there was no official priesthood—just as there was no canonical text of origin (except for the Homeric epics which in a sense served as theological touchstones)—there was an officiant at any religious worship. This individual would supervise the sacrifice and libations that were devoted to a particular deity, and guarantee the authentic character of the hymns and praises that celebrated the god in question, thanking him/her for gifts from above. In the course of this sacrificial service—which drew its beauty from the aura of 'giving up'—the worshippers would eat the meat and entrails of the sacrificed goat (or sheep or oxen) and set aside the fat to burn as incense for the honored god of the precinct.

Religious cult traditions Parallel to this public worship, which we know from Homer on—the Greeks sacrificed before sailing to Troy, the shepherd Eumaios sacrifices in honor of his master, Odysseus--there is an ancient and largely subterranean cult religious tradition. This cultic tradition plainly speaks to the need, among the Greeks, to worship in direct connection with their emotions—which were more or less ritualized away in the official religion. (This is a guess. Perhaps an error. The Abrahamic religions, which in time developed somewhat later than Greek polytheism, instituted a new level of interiority, which is hard to find a parallel for in what we understand of the Olympian religion. We seem to find, in the Olympian religion, a rhetoric of rite and sacrifice which excludes forms of interiority we can account for.)

Dionysian religion Many of the themes of Greek cultic religion center around the worship of the god Dionysus, who is regularly associated, in Greek experience, with wilderness, the wild in the human person, ecstasy induced by wine, and the phallic, for Dionysus is in all his faces connected with fertility and with that generative power of the body which is sublimated off, in Olympian religion, into stylized forms, in which fundamental human concerns are 'aestheticized.' The Dionysian element was normally either locked out or stylized in the presentations of the Olympian religion. Normally but not always. In Euripides' play *The Bacchae*, the forces of an unleashed Dionysian female cult overturn the representative of the state. In that play we see King Pentheus of Thebes humiliatingly driven into cross dressing by the women of his city, who drive him from his power and leave him helpless in a tree!

Dionysus and the sub conscious One version of the Dionysian backstory defies anything except a handbook account—for it takes 'myth' into regions of the social sub-conscious. It shows us how much more deeply embedded in individual worship Dionysus was than were the Olympians.

Dionysus (in his incarnation as Zagreus) is the son of Zeus and Persephone; Zeus gives his inheritance of the throne to the child, as Zeus has to abdicate due to Hera's anger over a child being born by another mother; the Titans are enraged, and under Hera's instigation decide to murder the child. Dionysus is then tricked with a mirror and children's toys by the Titans who murder and consume him. Athena saves Dionysus' heart and tells Zeus of the crime; he in turn hurls a thunderbolt on the Titans. The resulting soot, from which sinful mankind is born, contain the bodies of the Titans and Dionysus. The soul of man (Dionysus factor) is therefore divine, but the body (Titan factor) holds the soul in bondage. Thus it was decreed that the soul returns to the body ten times during its life-cycle.

Dionysus, mystery religions, Christianity One message of this non-Olympian phantasmagoria, is that the birth of Dionysus represents the persistence in the human of a soul element which can enter and leave the body. This backstory links to the cults of Dionysus, which flourished especially in Eleusis, from where we learn of the growingly powerful Eleusinian mysteries, which merge ultimately into later mystery cults, at the intersection of late Greek culture and the Roman Empire, in the last two centuries before Christ. Into the increasing diversity of Greek religious practices, especially into the new cult milieu which presses forward from the 4th century B.C. on, we see merging influential cults like Orphism, later Mithraism, and then, still in a loose continuity with the mystery cults of Dionysus, the salvation cults (like the Gnostics) which compete with the nascent Christian Church in the early centuries after Christ's death.

SCEPTICISM AND CRITIQUE

Philosophical skepticism Throughout the development of Greek religion there was a tradition of skepticism and philosophical critique. We all know that the accusers of Socrates made much of his alleged disrespect for the gods. That charge was a serious one, perhaps the most damning brought against him. At the very end of the fifth century, when the Athenian *polis* had passed its moment of greatest public brilliance, a major victory (The Persian Wars) fading into history, a major loss (The Peloponnesian Wars) in their immediate present, the Athenians felt the fragility of their *polis*, and the need to reaffirm its official belief foundations. Scepticism and doubt about the old values were everywhere. It might be added that into this uneasy cultural climate entered the influence of the Sophists, those itinerant teachers of knowledge, and of ways, as the dramatist Aristophanes constantly illustrated, of making 'the worse appear the better reason,' the new rhetoric replace the old legal securities that such as Solon, already in the sixth century, had fought to safeguard. These Sophists seemed to the man on the street to be sowing the belief that any belief goes. The Athenian on the street was made anxious by these widespread developments, and Socrates was one of the victims of this climate.

Religion and Belief What level of religious belief do we find as we cruise from Homer through the lyric poets to Greek tragedy in the fifth century, and then to Plato and Aristotle? On the whole we find little challenge to the claims of the Olympian (or cult) religions. We may feel that, for Homer, the gods occasionally appear as human playthings, that for Hesiod a stiff genealogical account of the gods takes the place of real belief, that for the tragedians--Aeschylus in the *Oresteia* , Sophocles in *Antigone*, Euripides in the *Bacchae*--the gods and their world serve as ways of talking about morality and destiny on the purely human level, but for all that these gods remain principle mainstays of order in the universe.

Milesian thought When we step aside from the literary artistic portrayal of the gods, to the burgeoning traditions of philosophical thought which are flourishing from the sixth century on, in parallel with the Olympian worship, we note that the Gods are largely ignored, to be replaced by independent thought at grips with the uncertainty of the universe. It is at this point, with say the Milesian thinkers of Asia Minor—Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes—that the Greeks begin to envisage a world in which 'gods' play no part, or in which the role of the gods is questioned to the roots. What happens when Thales proposes *water* as the fundamental world substance, and attributes the universe we know to consequences of condensation and evaporation, or when Anaximenes essentially does the same thing with the key principle of 'air' or 'the cosmic infinite'? What happens is that we take a step into proto-science, we shift our vocabulary of explanation away from the gods. Contemporary to these Milesians is another fifth century thinker like Anaxagoras, who has retained his fame for suggesting that the gods are anthropomorphic creations. It is he who suggested, boldly, that if horses had/have gods, they would be gods in the form of horses. Such thoughts as these are clearly directed against the main religious current of Greek worship.

Plato and Aristotle When it comes to Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century, we will have to say that at the summit of speculative thought, the Greeks retain the framework of the Olympian divine but use it as a vehicle for theology rather than practical worship. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato speaks of the ambience of the divine gods, and of the journeys of the soul in the direction of the Empyrean.

Many and wonderful to see are the orbits within the heavens and the blessed gods constantly turn to contemplate these as each busies himself with his special duties. There follows whoever will and can [this includes good human souls], for envy has no place in the company of heaven. But when they proceed to the divine banquet, they mount the steep ascent to the top of the vault of heaven; and here the advance is easy for the gods' chariots, well balanced and guided as they are, but the others have difficulty

Aristotle and the gods For Aristotle, god is pure act, the order of the cosmos at the stage where it is the possibility of all that is. Metaphysics has gobbled up theology, though the metaphysics Aristotle built was to pass on, influentially, to the greatest theologians of the Middle Ages—Averroes, Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas.

Philosophy and theology Philosophy, in other words, will prove out as a region where the Greeks were able to sustain their belief in supersensual forces, without committing to the practice of day to day Olympian worship.

Stoics and Epicureans Finally it should be added that when we come to the Stoics and Epicureans—Zeno, Epicurus—in the fourth century B.C. and onward, we are among Greek thinkers and moralists for whom the universe is composed of particles in motion, the gods are forgotten except as mainstays for morality, and successful moral behavior becomes a sufficient effort for the human.

Discussion questions:

Does what we call Greek mythology seem to you to be a living element in Greek worship of the gods, or is 'mythology' a literary creation developed by later cultures looking back on the behaviors of the Olympian (and other) gods? What is the history of Greek mythology itself?

State religions, like the Olympian, usually have to address issues concerning the afterlife. Do you see any evidence of concern for that issue among the expressions of Olympian religion in Athens—or more generally in ancient Greek culture?

Would you say that the Olympian religion was a religion of consensus, without great power to insist on its practices? Or was this religion, which grew up without a Bible or a priestly caste, actually strictly coercive? Was there a penalty for disregarding the religion?

What was the religious view of Plato and Aristotle? Were they believers who took religion into metaphysics? Or, non-believers, who used the religion of their culture as metaphors of thinking?

Was the Olympian religion concerned with what was in people's souls, as we say, or only with what they did in ritual practice?

As you understand the practice, why was animal sacrifice the chosen means of ritual worship in ancient Greece? Were the Greeks one with other ancient peoples in their devotion to this religious practice?

Can you imagine a fifth century B.C. worshipper being an adherent both of the Olympian religion and of a mystery cult? Would there have been a difficult tension between these two allegiances?

Was the Olympian religion concerned with what was in people's souls, as we say, or only with what they did in ritual practice?

Was Homer a kind of Bible for the fifth century B.C. Athenians? Can you see how the two epics of Homer provide models of behavior and practice for later generations?

Reading suggestions:

Hesiod (8th Century B.C.), *Theogony*

Buxton, R., *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 1-55.

Euripides, *The Bacchae* (405 B.C.)

Allen, Reginald, ed., *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle* (1950)

Mylonas, George, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 224-285.

Burkert, Walter, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 1-82.