GREEK FOLK RELIGION

MARTIN P. NILSSON

FOREWORD BY ARTHUR DARBY NOCK

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the masses was on a lower level than the religious ideas of eminent literary men, but it is also true that those ideas made hardly any impression on the development of Greek religion. The writers were not prophets, and the philosophers were seekers of wisdom, not of religious truth. The fate of religion is determined by the masses. The masses are, indeed, susceptible to high religious ideas if they are carried away by a religious genius, but only one such genius arose in Greece, Plato. Even he wished to be regarded as a philosopher rather than as a prophet, and he was accepted as such by his contemporaries. The religious importance of his thought did not come to the fore until half a millennium after his death, although since that time all religions have been subject to his influence.

I should perhaps mention a third kind of inquiry which has been taken up by scholars in recent years, especially in Germany. Their endeavors cannot properly be called research, however, for they have been directed to the systematizing of the religious ideas of the Greeks and the creation of a kind of theology, or, as the authors themselves express it, to revealing the intrinsic and lasting values of Greek religion. To this class belong, among others, W. F. Otto and E. Peterich. The great risk they run is that of imputing to the Greeks a systematization such as is found in religions which have laid down their creeds in books. The Greeks had religious ideas, of course, but they never made them into a system. What the Greeks called theology was either metaphysics, or the doctrine of the persons and works of the various gods.[1]

It is of the greatest importance to attain a well-founded knowledge of Greek popular religion, for the fate of Greek religion as a whole depended on it. It is incorrect to say that we have not the means to acquire such knowledge, for the

[1] Θεολογία is πρώτη φιλοσοφία, Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, X, p. 1064a, ll. 33 ff. The persons and the works of the gods are described by Cornutus in a book entitled Ἐπιδρομὴ τῶν κατὰ τὴν ἑλληνικὴν θεολογίαν παραδεδομένων.

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kite, but he did not pay it any reverence. He needed rain, and sometimes cool weather, more than he needed the sun. He looked at the highest mountaintop in the neighborhood. Maybe it wore a cloudcap. This was promising, for up there on the top of the mountain sat Zeus, the cloud-gatherer, the thrower of the thunderbolt, the rain-giver. He was a great god. He had other aspects of which we shall hear later. The roar of the thunder was the sign of his power and presence—sometimes of his anger. He smote the high mountains, the tall oaks, and occasionally man with his thunderbolt. But the flash of the lightning and the roar of the thunder were followed by the rain, which moistened the soil and benefited the crops, the grass, and the fruits.

It was seldom necessary to pray for rain in Greece, for the course of the seasons is much more regular there than in northern Europe. Late autumn and winter bring rain; summer brings drought and heat. On the other hand, the weather is not so regular that certain days of the year could be fixed upon for weather magic. This is the reason why as weather god Zeus had few festivals. Sometimes heat and drought were excessive. Myths have much to tell about these disasters, and it is related that they were sometimes so great that the most extreme of all sacrifices, a human sacrifice, was offered. Two such sacrifices are recorded from historical times, one to Zeus Lykaios and one to Zeus Laphystios.[2] Zeus Lykaios received his name from the high mountain in southwestern Arcadia, Lykaion, on the top of which he had a famous sanctuary. Zeus Laphystios was named after the mountain Laphystion in Boeotia, although his cult belonged to Halos in Thessaly. On Mount Lykaion there was a well called Hagno. When there was need of rain the priest of Zeus went to this well, per-

[2] Herodotus, VII, 197, and Pseudo-Plato, *Minos,* p. 315c; Theophrastus in Porphyrius, *De abstinentia,* II, 27.

formed ceremonies and prayers, and dipped an oak twig into the water. Thereupon a haze arose from the well and condensed into clouds, and soon there was rain all over Arcadia.

Zeus Laphystios is well known from the myth of the Golden Fleece, according to which Phrixos and Helle, who were to be sacrificed because of a drought, saved themselves by riding away on a ram with a golden fleece. Their mother was called Nephele (cloud). At the bottom of this myth is weather magic such as is known to have been practiced at several places in Greece, including Mount Pelion, not far from Halos. At the time of the greatest heat young men girt with fresh ram fleeces went up to the top of this mountain in order to pray to Zeus Akraios for cool weather.[3] From this fleece, Zeus was called Melosios on Naxos,[4] and the fleece, which was used in several rites, for example, in the initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries, was called Zeus' fleece (*Dios kodion*). It is generally said to have been a means of purification and propitiation, and so it was. But its origin is to be found in the weather magic by which the weather god was propitiated. It had a place at Athens in the cult of Zeus Maimaktes, the stormy Zeus, who gave his name to the stormy winter month of Maimakterion.

We are told that in other places, also, people went to the mountain of Zeus to pray for rain. Ombrios and Hyetios are common epithets of Zeus, and we hear of sanctuaries of Zeus on Olympus and on various other mountaintops, such as the highest mountain of the island of Aegina, where he was called Zeus Panhellenios. In this sanctuary a building was erected

[3] C. Müller, ed., *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum* (Paris, 1841-73), II, 262.

[4] *Inscriptiones Graecae, consilio et auctoritate Academiae litterarum regiae borussicae editae* (Berlin, 1873-), Vol. XII, Fasc. 5, No. 48; interpretation by A. B. Cook, *Zeus; a Study in Ancient Religion* (Cambridge, 1914-25), I, 164.

to accommodate his visitors. Probably the weather god Zeus ruled from the highest peak in every neighborhood. It is supposed that Hagios Elias, who nowadays has a chapel everywhere on the mountaintops, is his successor.

We follow our peasant on his way. We pass the gardens and cornfields where most of his work was done. We shall return to them later. We follow him to those parts of the countryside which were not subject to the labor of men—the meadows and the pasture grounds, the mountains and the forests. Even in modern Greece there are vast tracts of land which cannot be cultivated, and the extent of such land was greater in antiquity. If our peasant passed a heap of stones, as he was likely to do, he might lay another stone upon it. If a tall stone was erected on top of the heap, he might place before it a bit of his provision as an offering (Fig. 4). He performed this act as a result of custom, without knowing the real reason for it, but he knew that a god was embodied in the stone heap and in the tall stone standing on top of it. He named the god Hermes after the stone heap (*herma*) in which he dwelt, and he called the tall stone a herm. Such heaps were welcome landmarks to the wanderer who sought his way from one place to another through desert tracts, and their god became the protector of wayfarers. And if, by chance, the wayfarer found on the stone heap something, probably an offering, which would be welcome to the poor and hungry, he ascribed this lucky find to the grace of the god and called it a *hermaion*.

Our peasant or his forefathers knew that the stone heaps sometimes covered a dead man and that the stone erected on top was a tombstone. Accordingly, the god who dwelt in the stone heap had relations with the dead. Although the people brought libations and food offerings to the dead in their tombs, they also believed in a common dwelling place of the dead.

Such contradictions are hardly noticed by simple people. This abode of the dead, the dark and gloomy Hades, was somewhere far away beneath the earth. On leaving their earthly home, the souls needed someone to show them the way, and nobody was more appropriate for this function than the protector of wayfarers, who dwelt in the stone heaps. Hermes, the guide of souls, is known not only from literature but also from pictures, in which he is represented with a magic rod in his hand, permitting the souls, small winged human figures, to ascend and sending them down again through the mouth of a large jar (Fig. 3). Such jars were often used for burial purposes.

Perhaps our peasant wanted to look after his stock, which grazed on the meadows and mountain slopes. The god of the stone heaps was concerned with them, too. The story, told in the *Homeric Hymn*, how, when a babe, he stole the oxen of Apollo, is a humorous folk tale invented by herdsmen who did not hesitate to augment their herds by fraud and rejoiced in such profitable tricks. One may think of the Biblical story of Jacob and Laban. To Hermes such stories were no boon, for he became the god of thieves.

On Olympus Hermes was a subordinate god, the messenger of the gods, and we know him chiefly as such. I take no account of later additions to his functions, which made him a god of commerce, of gymnastics, and of rhetoric. He was especially popular in one of the backward provinces of Greece, Arcadia, the land of shepherds. Here, too, the herms were especially popular in cult. Attention has recently been drawn to a series of Arcadian herms, some of which are double or triple and inscribed with the names of various gods in the genitive[5] (Fig. 2). Other gods than Hermes were also em-

[5] K. Rhomaios, "Arkadikoi Hermai," *Ephemeris archaiologike,* 1911, pp. 149 ff.

bodied in these stone pillars, a relic of the old stone cult, which has left many traces.

According to Hesiod and the *Homeric Hymn*, Hermes cared for and protected the livestock, but we do not find many evidences of this function in his cult. It fell to other gods. Apollo is called Lykeios, an epithet which surely describes him not as the light god but as the wolf god. And why should not the shepherds have appealed to the great averter of evil for protection against the most dangerous foe of their flocks, the wolf? Pastoral life found expression in another god who was always especially Arcadian, Pan. He came to Athens late—not until the time of the Persian wars. He is represented with the legs and face of a goat; he is as ruttish as the he-goat; he plays the syrinx, as the shepherds do in the lazy hours when the flocks graze peacefully; but he may also cause a sudden panic, when the animals, seized for some unknown reason by fright, rush away headlong.

There are many rivers in Greece, but few of them are large. Most of them are small and precipitous, and many are dry in summer. Water is scarce in Greece, and so the benefits received from the rivers are especially appreciated. In ancient times the rivers were holy. An army did not cross a river without making a sacrifice to it, and Hesiod prescribes that one should not cross a river without saying a prayer and washing one's hands in its water. The aid of the rivers was sought for the fertility not only of the land but also of mankind. After the sixth century B.C., names taken from certain rivers were common, for instance, Kephisodotos, the gift of Kephisos. When the young man cut his long hair, he dedicated the locks to the neighboring river.

The rivers each had their god. These gods are represented in the shape of a bull or a bull with a human head (Fig. 6). Such a figure is sometimes called by the name of the great river

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fore, that the god of water was also the god of earthquakes. One of the epithets by which he was designated in Laconia, Gaiaochos, has been interpreted as "he who drives beneath the earth."

The Greeks also knew other horse-shaped daemons, the centaurs and the seilenoi. The centaurs have in part the body of a horse and in part that of a man. Homer calls them beasts. They appear only in the myths of art and literature, and they seem to have been localized in two districts, Mount Pelion and northwestern Arcadia. There is no doubt that they were derived from popular belief. If the proposed etymology, according to which the word means "water whipper,"[6] is correct, they were water spirits. In that case, one might believe that they were originally spirits of the precipitous mountain torrents. At all events, their character is rough and violent. They resemble the spirits of wood and wilderness which appear in the folklore of northern Europe. They represent the fierce and rough aspects of nature. They are depicted as using uprooted fir trees for weapons and as carrying the victims of the chase on a pole.

There is another kind of horse daemon, which is often represented in works of art of Ionian origin. These daemons are distinguished from the centaurs by having the body of a man with the legs and tail of a horse and by being ithyphallic. There has been a lengthy discussion concerning their name. It was proposed to assign to these daemons, which were confined to the Ionian area, the name of seilenoi—we know from inscriptions that they were so called—in distinction from the goatlike satyrs, which were supposed to be Dorian.[7] The at-

[6] P. Kretschmer in *Glotta*, X (1920), 50.

[7] There has been a lengthy discussion. I cite only E. Reisch, "Zur Vorgeschichte der attischen Tragödie," *Festschrift Theodor Gomperz dargebracht zum siebzigsten Geburtstage* (Vienna, 1902), pp. 451 ff., and the most recent work, F. Brommer, *Satyroi* (Dissertation, Munich, 1937).

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tale motif of a man compelling a nymph to become his wife. She bears him children but soon returns to her native element. Thetis was originally a sea nymph whom Peleus won by wrestling with her. She soon abandoned his house and only returned from time to time to look after her son, Achilles. Nymphs are often mothers of mythical heroes.

The nymphs are almost omnipresent. They dwell on the mountains, in the cool caves, in the groves, in the meadows, and by the springs. There are also sea nymphs—the Nereids—and tree nymphs. The nymphs had cults at many places, especially at springs and in caves (*Fig.* 8). Caves with remains of such cults have been discovered. Most interesting is the cave at Vari on Mount Hymettus.[9] In the fifth century B.C., a poor man of Theraean origin, Archedemos, who styles himself "caught by the nymphs," planted a garden, decorated the cave, and engraved inscriptions on its walls. Still more interesting is a cave which was recently discovered at Pitza in the neighborhood of Corinth.[10] The discovery is famous especially for its well-preserved paintings on wood in Corinthian style. One of these tablets represents a sacrifice to the nymphs, and the other represents women. There are a lot of terracottas representing women—some of whom are pregnant—Pan, satyrs, and various animals. The character of the cult and its connection with the nature daemons and with animals is evident, but, on the other hand, it appears that it was preeminently a cult of women and that the women applied to the nymphs for help in childbirth. Such cults are also found in other places. In the so-called prison of Socrates at Athens, where a century ago women brought offerings to the Moirai

[9] *Amer. Journ. of Archaeology,* VII (1903), 263 ff.; the inscriptions in *Inscriptiones Graecae*, Editio minor (Berlin, 1913-), Vol. I, Nos. 778-800.

[10] Summary description in *Archäologischer Anzeiger, Beiblatt zum Jahrbuch des archäologischen Instituts,* 1934, pp. 194 ff., and 1935, pp. 197 ff.

for success in marriage and childbirth,[11] the Moirai may have succeeded the nymphs. The nymphs were very popular in cult. They were beautiful and kind and represented the gentle and benevolent aspects of nature and of almost all its parts. It is quite understandable that they were venerated by women especially. Although the cults of women were not absolutely separated from those of men, men and women went different ways and had different occupations in daily life, as they still do in the Greek countryside. The women had their special concerns centering around marriage and childbirth, and it was only natural that they should apply to divinities of their own sex. The nymphs were to be found everywhere and were supposed to be especially benevolent to those of their own sex.

There is a great goddess who is very similar to the nymphs and who is accompanied by nymphs. She is called Artemis, "Lady of the Wild Things." She haunts the mountains and the meadows; she is connected with the tree cult and with springs and rivers; she protects women in childbirth; and she watches over little children. Girls brought offerings to her before their marriage. Her aspect is different in different parts of Greece, but it always goes back to the general characteristics just mentioned, except that one or another of them comes more into the foreground. Her habitual appearance is determined by Homer and the great art and literature of Attica. She is the virgin twin sister of Apollo and by preference the goddess of hunting. How her relation to Apollo came about is not clear. We may only remark here that both carry the bow as their weapon. Of course, the goddess who haunts the mountains and the forests with a bow in her hand is a hunting goddess. Artemis was much more than that, but the Homeric knights, as well as the inhabitants of the great Ionian cities,

[11] J. C. Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion; a Study in Survivals* (Cambridge, 1910), p. 121.

had no relation to the free life of nature except in the sport of hunting, which they loved. Hence, this side of Artemis' nature was especially emphasized.

Other very interesting and very popular aspects of Artemis' nature were prominent, especially in the Peloponnesus. She was closely connected with the tree cult. She is sometimes called Lygodesma, because her image was wound round with willow; Caryatis, after the chestnut; and Cedreatis, after the cedar. Dances and masquerades of a very free and even lascivious character assumed a prominent place in many of her cults, in which men as well as women took part. Cymbals have been found in the temple of Artemis Limnatis in the borderland between Laconia and Messenia.[12] During the excavations of the British School in the famous sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta, a number of terracotta masks, representing grotesque faces of both men and women, were found (Fig. 7). It is very probable that similar masks were worn by the dancers who performed in this cult. In these customs we find the popular background for the mythological Artemis who dances with her nymphs.

Artemis was the most popular goddess of Greece. She was the leader of the nymphs, and, in fact, she herself was but the foremost of the nymphs. Archedemos, who decorated the cave of Vari, dedicated his inscriptions to the nymphs, but one of them is addressed to the Nymph, in the singular. One of the crowd of nymphs was singled out as a representative of them all, and she became the great goddess Artemis.

Christianity easily swept away the great gods, but the minor daemons of popular belief offered a stubborn resistance. They were nearer the living rock. The Greek peasant of today still believes in the nymphs, though he gives them all the old name

[12] H. Roehl, ed., *Inscriptiones Graecae antiquissimae praeter Atticas in Attica repertas* (Berlin, 1882), Nos. 50, 61, 73.

of the sea nymphs, *Neraids*. They haunt the same places, they have the same appearance and the same occupations, and the same tales are told of them. It is remarkable that they have a queen, called "the Great Lady," "the Fair Lady," or even "the Queen of the Mountains." Perhaps she is a last remembrance of the great goddess Artemis, or perhaps there has been a recurrence of the process by which Artemis, the foremost of the nymphs, became a great goddess. Nobody knows, but the fact that the nymphs alone survive in modern popular belief is a telling argument for their popularity among the Greek people in ancient times.

What interests primitive man is not nature in itself but nature so far as it intervenes in human life and forms a necessary and obvious basis for it. In the foreground are the needs of man together with nature as a means of satisfying those needs, for upon the generosity of nature depends whether men shall starve or live in abundance. Therefore, in a scantily watered land such as Greece, the groves and meadows where the water produces a rich vegetation are the dwelling places of the nature spirits, and so are the forests and mountains where the wild beasts live. In the forests the nymphs dance; centaurs, satyrs, and seilenoi roam about; and Pan protects the herds, though he may also drive them away in a panic. The life of nature becomes centered in Artemis, who loves hills and groves and well-watered places and promotes that natural fertility which does not depend upon the efforts of man.

Anyone who wishes to understand the religion of antiquity should have before him a living picture of the ancient landscape as it is represented in certain Pompeian frescoes[13] (Fig. 9) and in Strabo's description of the lowland at the mouth of

[13] M. Rostovtzeff, "Die hellenistisch-römische Architekturlandschaft," *Römische Mitteilungen*, XXVI (1911), 1 ff.

the river Alpheus.[14] "The whole tract," Strabo says, "is full of shrines of Artemis, Aphrodite, and the nymphs, in flowery groves, due mainly to the abundance of water; there are numerous hermae on the roads and shrines of Poseidon on the headlands by the sea." One could hardly have taken a step out of doors without meeting a little shrine, a sacred enclosure, an image, a sacred stone, or a sacred tree. Nymphs lived in every cave and fountain. This was the most persistent, though not the highest, form of Greek religion. It outlived the fall of the great gods.

This is not the end of the story. Our peasant certainly passed on his way other small sanctuaries or groves where he paid his respects. Not gods or nature daemons but heroes dwelt in them[15] (Fig. 10). Although modern scholars have proffered other opinions, the Greeks were persuaded that a hero was a man who had once lived, who died and was buried, and who lay in his grave at the place where he was venerated. I should think it likely that our peasant had heard weird stories about heroes, such as those about the hero of Temesa, to whom the most beautiful virgin of the town had to be sacrificed until the famous boxer Euthymus drove him out in a regular fight, or about the hero Orestes, whom the Athenians did not like to meet at night because he was apt to give them a beating and to tear off their clothes. If our peasant became sick he believed, perhaps, that some hero had attacked him. In other words, ghost stories such as are not yet forgotten were told of the heroes. The hero was a dead man who walked about corporeally, a revenant such as popular belief tells of everywhere. But this aspect of the heroes lingered only in the background, for in Greece the heroes had cults and were generally

[14] Strabo, VIII, p. 343.

[15] The most comprehensive treatment is by L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921).

helpful. Their cult was bound to their tomb, and their power was bound to their relics, which were buried in the tomb. This is the reason why their bones were sometimes dug up and transferred to another place. Cimon, for example, fetched the bones of Theseus from the island of Scyros to Athens, and the Lacedaemonians with some difficulty found the bones of Orestes beneath a smithy at Tegea and transferred them to Sparta when they wanted his help in the war against the Arcadians. The heroes were especially helpful in war. The sense which the word "hero" had in Homer, namely "warrior," was not forgotten either, and the heroes were particularly well suited to defend the land in which they were buried. In the battle of Marathon, Theseus rose from the ground to fight with his people against the Persians. The Locrians in Italy left a place open in the file for Aias, and in the battle of Sagra he was said to have wounded the commander of their foes, the Crotoniates. It sometimes occurred that a people sent its heroes to help another people.

There were an exceedingly large number of hero tombs and sanctuaries all over the countryside. The names of only the best known of these heroes, and especially those with mythological names, are recorded. Very many were anonymous or called only by some such epithet as "the leader." Others were designated simply by the place where their cult was located. This fact emerges, for example, from the sacrificial calendar of the Marathonian tetrapolis,[16] in which we find four couples, each consisting of a hero and a heroine, and in addition to these some other heroes. In the inscription of the Salaminioi,[17] which was discovered recently during the American excavations at Athens, we also find a series of heroes designated by the localities of their cults in the neighborhood of Sunium.

[16] *Inscriptiones Graecae*, Editio minor, Vols. II-III, Pt. 1, No. 1358.
[17] Published by W. Ferguson in *Hesperia*, VII (1938), 31 ff.

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