

# 1 What is Greek religion?

*Scholars of a relatively new discipline, the cognitive science of religion (CSR), are proposing new approaches to religion which challenge long-standing methodologies in anthropology and sociology as well as Classics. In their view, the human mind is supplied with an array of mental tools which give rise to religious beliefs and practices as by-products of normal cognition. After surveying the geographical and chronological boundaries of our investigation, we turn to the dual-process model, a fundamental cognitive principle which helps to explain why the Greeks were not distressed by what we often perceive as logical inconsistencies in their religion (e.g. between the local and Panhellenic personas of the gods). We then consider the dual-process model in the context of appropriate materials and methods for studying Greek religion, and conclude with the “minimally counter-intuitive concept,” another key idea in CSR. The illustrative essays examine strategies for conceptualizing the unlimited Greek pantheon, the interaction between Homer’s Hera and the Hera(s) of cult, and the nature of reciprocity, an adaptive feature of human social behavior which is also fundamental to Greek religion.*

## What is religion? A debate in progress

To most people, the proposition that “religion” is mainly about worshiping God or gods is not particularly controversial. They may stipulate in addition that religion is a source of moral instruction, afterlife hopes or emotional support, but higher power(s), however defined, remain at the center of popular perceptions of religion. In the academy, however, a very different attitude has long prevailed, particularly in the social sciences. Definitions of religion have mostly avoided superhuman beings, as if they were an embarrassment. Philosophers of religion have denied that the metaphysical truth claims of religion (“God exists”) can be judged as such.<sup>1</sup> Pointing to religious traditions that are supposedly non-theist, scholars of religion have struggled to agree on what constitutes a “religion,” and they have favored broadly inclusive definitions.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserted that religions are symbolic systems which people employ both to invest their world with meaning and to operate within that world. Robert N. Bellah, a sociologist, similarly defined religion as “a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his

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existence.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than acknowledging the role of deities, these definitions focus on how people use symbols to answer the big unknowns about life, death and the cosmos, and on how the answers shape their behavior in everyday life.

A very different approach, that of phenomenology, finds the core of religion in the experience of the “sacred” as opposed to the profane; or in the “numinous,” that which is wholly alien and therefore frightening, but also possesses a strong power of fascination. From this fundamental experience of something transcendent and unknowable flow our varied cultural understandings of life, death and the cosmos. The phenomenologists include Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. In spite of their mystical bent, they are reluctant to frame religion in terms of gods, preferring impersonal formulations such as “the holy” or “the sacred.”<sup>3</sup>

Very few thinkers have concluded that religion is primarily about human relationships with God or gods, and some have denied that gods have anything to do with religion.<sup>4</sup> Émile Durkheim, the father of sociology, defined religion as an “eminently collective thing,” a system of beliefs and practices that unites people in a moral community. Sigmund Freud asserted that religion was “an illusion,” noted similarities between religion and mental disorders, and traced the roots of religion to childhood fears and desires. Karl Marx described religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature . . . the opiate of the people,” a soothing fantasy which functioned to reconcile the poor to their wretched condition.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, some scholars have concluded that “religion” is not a useful conceptual category for comparative study because the widely varying phenomena we refer to as religions do not have enough in common to justify grouping them together. Jonathan Z. Smith wrote in *Imagining Religion* that religion cannot be distinguished from culture:

While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion – there is no data for religion. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy.<sup>6</sup>

The theorists of a relatively new discipline, the cognitive science of religion (CSR), are offering surprising new definitions which refocus attention on the role of gods and other superhuman beings in world religions. Already in 1966, Mel-ford Spiro defined religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated super-human beings.”<sup>7</sup> Cognitivist scholars such as Todd Tremlin likewise consider superhuman agents, whether they are gods, demons, angels, spirits, ghosts or ancestors, central to the phenomenon of religion:

While the history of religious studies is marked by an inability to yield a working definition of “religion” – to say nothing of universal agreement that gods are even a necessary component of such a definition – focus on human cognition makes the troublesome task of defining religion easier by showing,

in an empirically testable fashion, that the common variable in discussions of religion at any level – from its slate of beliefs to its system of rituals to its organizational principles – is indeed commitment to superhuman agents.

(Tremlin 2006.164)

Not all cognitivists would agree with Tremlin's absolute formulation, yet a focus on human perceptions of superhuman agency is distinctive of their work. Illka Pyysiäinen offers a less restrictive definition: "Religion is a phenomenon based on the human ability to form counterintuitive ideas, metarepresent them, and treat them symbolically."<sup>8</sup> In this and the following chapters, I will explain the terminology used by Pyysiäinen in more detail. For now it is sufficient to note that the most common "counterintuitive idea" in world religions is an anthropomorphic being with nonhuman superpowers, like invisibility, flight or mind-reading.<sup>9</sup> Dan Sperber, whose ideas have been foundational to CSR, prefers to think of religion as a polythetic or "family resemblance" category under which we can classify a number of related phenomena.<sup>10</sup> This is the best approach for Greek religion, because even if gods or heroes or the dead are central to most of its strands, they cannot account for all.

CSR posits that humans think by applying a variety of mental tools to representational structures (concepts and beliefs). At birth, the mind-brain is not a blank slate, but possesses blueprints for discrete, interlocking systems which govern perception, learning and memory. These systems constrain and shape our perceptions and thoughts to a far greater extent than we realize. A fundamental insight of the cognitive approach to religion is that our mental architecture creates a susceptibility to representations of superhuman agents, a tendency to find them memorable, compelling and plausible.<sup>11</sup> The same is true for magical beliefs, pollution/purity beliefs and certain other widely distributed subsets of religious thought. Together, these beliefs form the bedrock on which ritual, doctrinal and social outcomes are constructed. Religious thought, the cognitivists say, is nowhere near as variable among cultures as social scientists and historians have claimed, but instead manifests itself according to highly predictable patterns. Nor do truly non-theistic religions exist, although religious traditions may develop non-theistic doctrines. Theravada Buddhism is often cited as a non-theistic religion, but interaction with superhuman agents is typical of Theravada traditions in practice.<sup>12</sup> Such contradictions between doctrine and practice often reflect an important distinction between two forms of processing used by the human brain, which I will discuss below: intuitive and reflective cognition.

CSR faces an uphill battle in several sectors of the academy, where it will inevitably be criticized for reducing religion in all its complexity to a set of cognitive biases, and giving short shrift to social dimensions, cultural specificity and complex doctrines.<sup>13</sup> Because it echoes certain Tylorean and Frazerian ideas, it is vulnerable to caricature as "animism plus experiments."<sup>14</sup> Yet a central principle of CSR, that the same cognitive mechanisms underlie all religious experience, refutes the persistent nineteenth-century paradigm of primitivism, of "lower" forms of religion succeeded by "higher" ones. A cognitivist perspective has the

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potential to enrich our understanding of the role of religion in human experience. It asserts that religion is more than the sum of its political and social functions, a conclusion which challenges common theoretical assumptions in some fields (particularly Classical archaeology and ancient history).<sup>15</sup> Among other things, CSR convincingly explains why religious and paranormal beliefs have not faded away in the modern West for lack of empirical evidence to support them. Instead, such beliefs still thrive because humans continue to possess the same mental architecture that gave rise to religion in the first place. Religious thinking, it would seem, is natural.<sup>16</sup>

Past experience shows that a single theoretical stance or method will never tell us all we wish to know about religions. They must be studied from many disciplinary perspectives, including those of the social sciences and humanities. While CSR may have much to tell us about cross-cultural patterns in religion, it becomes more challenging to apply cognitivist methods as we focus in more detail on specific cultures and traditions.<sup>17</sup> Exactly where the limits lie remains to be seen. In this book, I will show that many aspects of Greek religion (e.g. the anthropomorphism of its gods, its methods of divination and its conceptions of pollution and purity) have a basis in human cognitive architecture. Current cognitive models attempting to map the relations between ritual and society, discussed in Chapter 4, yield mixed results when applied to Greek religion, and yet these models are useful heuristic tools, pointing the way to further research.

Scholars of Greek religion have long focused primarily on its social aspects. By now it is a commonplace to observe that ancient Greek religion was embedded in social and political institutions.<sup>18</sup> We are accustomed to “explaining” religious phenomena in functionalist terms, describing how religious beliefs and behaviors strengthened social cohesion and constructed identity. But heightened group identification and the other social “functions” of religion may be effects rather than causes. That they account for the genesis and transmission of religious ideas and behaviors is more often assumed than demonstrated. Then too, we seldom consider the possibility that religious beliefs and behaviors may have been neutral or even harmful in their effects on the long-term survival of a group. It is difficult to identify a benefit, for example, in the arbitrary Spartan refusal to fight during the festival of Karneia, which caused them to arrive too late at Marathon, and to send a reduced contingent to Thermopylai.<sup>19</sup>

The social aspects of Greek religion are apparent to every student, but religion does not exist solely by virtue of the group. Instead, it exists by virtue of the properties of individual minds. There are no private religions, yet every religious idea begins with an individual mind shaped by human cognitive constraints.<sup>20</sup> Such ideas are then elaborated and transmitted through social interaction to become part of a “religion.” In order to understand Greek religion, we need to begin with the mind. The Greeks were confident that their gods and goddesses existed and intervened in the world. For the most part, they gave credence to the content of their myths.<sup>21</sup> They believed that some people were powerful after their deaths, able to affect the world of the living. They thought that oracles revealed the will of

the gods. These individual and cultural beliefs had important social consequences. But why would anyone believe these things in the first place?

Classicalists who study the Greeks and their gods often observe that the English word “religion” has no equivalent in Greek. That the Greeks lacked an equivalent word or concept does not mean that they lacked religion, but it does present us with a preliminary challenge: we need to identify which aspects of Greek culture are under study in this book, and just what it is that we are attempting to understand.<sup>22</sup> Definitions of religion drawn from sociology and anthropology tend to reflect the distinctive concerns of those disciplines. For our purposes, therefore, I prefer to begin by considering how the word “religion” has typically been used in written English. Fortunately, the lexicographers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* have already performed this descriptive work:

Religion: Belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship; such a belief as part of a system defining a code of living, esp. as a means of achieving spiritual or material improvement.<sup>23</sup>

The lexicographical definition, with its heavy emphasis on superhuman powers, overlaps with concepts which were native to Greek culture, such as *eusebeia*, “reverence [toward the gods]” or *ta theia*, “divine matters.” The second part, however, is more difficult to align with Greek religion: “such a belief as part of a system defining a code of living, esp. as a means of achieving spiritual or material improvement.” This part of the definition has been influenced by the Jewish and Christian traditions, which include detailed codes of personal conduct ordained by a deity. The role of the Greek gods was typically to guarantee and enforce moral conduct rather than to define it. Greek culture, however, had no lack of systems defining a code of living; these were formulated by the poets and philosophers, many of whom were interested in the relationship between the individual and the gods, as well as the relationship between justice and the eschatological fate of the individual. Poets and philosophers also offered alternative answers to another dimension of religion which is omitted from the *OED* definition, but present in other dictionary definitions: explanation of the origin, nature and purpose of human beings, and of the universe.

Surveys of Greek religion often treat mythology, morality, cosmology and eschatology as marginal to the subject, but these are all pertinent to the modern conceptual category of “religion.” In worship contexts, Greek religion dealt selectively and sporadically with morality and eschatology, and scarcely at all with cosmology; these matters were instead taken up by the poets and philosophers. The overlap between mythology and worship has been a subject of historical debate and will be treated in Chapter 2.<sup>24</sup> A principal goal of this book is to work toward an understanding of Greek religion in daily practice, with a focus on its ritual component, but reflection on and speculation about the gods, their history and their relationship to humanity are also an important part of what we understand by “religion.”

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### Everything is full of gods

Every culture produces one or more sets of beliefs about what the world around us is and how it works. Like virtually every other people in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, the Greeks were polytheists who assumed that the world was full of gods. But the distinction between polytheism, likely the most ancient form of religion, and monotheism, a newer form which defined itself against polytheism, is not necessarily as clear as it seems at first glance. In spite of their claim to exclude all but one god, monotheistic traditions typically posit the existence of multiple superhuman beings (angels, jinn, saints, demons). Polytheistic traditions, for their part, may possess concepts of divine unity. This is the result of theological speculation, but it is not necessarily “late.” The *Rig Veda*, one of the oldest canonical texts of Hinduism, describes an original “One” deity who may have been the creator of the cosmos. Later Vedic literature elaborated the concept of the Absolute (Brahman) as the highest reality.<sup>25</sup> The Hellenistic Greek Isis cult developed a theology according to which the goddess encompassed all divine sovereignty within herself.<sup>26</sup> On a far simpler level, a Greek could speak of “the god” or “the divine” rather than a specific deity. Herodotus demonstrated this usage in his account of the Athenian sage Solon’s conversation with Kroisos, king of Lydia:

Kroisos, you ask me about human affairs, I who know that the divine (*to theion*) is utterly grudging and troublesome.

(Hdt. 1.32.1)

Artabanos similarly says to the Persian king Xerxes:

Life is so wretched that death has become the most elect place of refuge for the human being; the god (*ho theos*) is found to be grudging in this, giving us a mere taste of life’s sweetness.

(Hdt. 7.46.4)

In these cases, the speaker is not claiming that only one god exists, but is temporarily conceptualizing the divine as a unity. Herodotus’ usage was common among the Greeks.<sup>27</sup> Although the apparent contradiction with “polytheism” in these cases has puzzled scholars, such logical inconsistencies are typical of polytheism and, it should be stated, of religious thought in general. A cognitivist perspective will allow us to understand why. Similarly, polytheists use a variety of strategies to conceptually manage the large number of gods, goddesses, heroes, heroines and other superhuman beings in their cosmologies (Essay 1.1).

During the period we are studying, “belief” and “faith” were not part of the standard discourse about the gods. This was not because the Greeks lacked religious beliefs or were preoccupied with ritual at the expense of belief. That the gods existed and intervened in human affairs was a widely shared inference rather than an article of faith.<sup>28</sup> Confessions of faith happen when adherents to a sect or tradition feel the need to define themselves against others who hold incompatible

beliefs. Early Christians, for example, defined themselves against non-Christian Jews by affirming that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. In the Gospel of Matthew (16:15–16), Jesus asks Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” and Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.” This affirmation of belief in a proposition not accepted by others is a litmus test for membership in the group. Ancient polytheistic religions, and more particularly Greek religion, rarely involved such tests. It was the normal practice in hymns and prayers to affirm the powers, titles and territorial possessions of a particular deity, but the purpose of these affirmations was praise, not confession of belief.

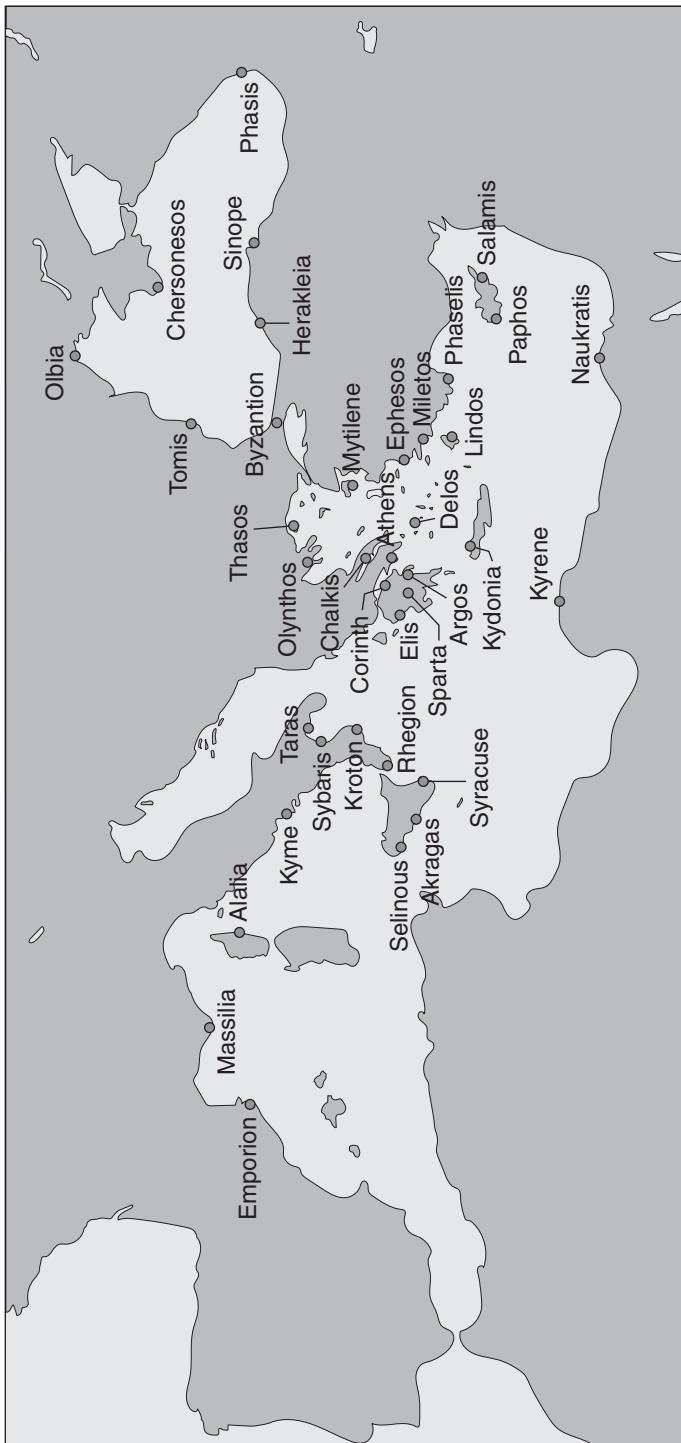
Oh Lord, you possess both Lykia and lovely Meionia,  
As well as Miletos, a delightful city beside the sea.  
But over sea-girt Delos you mightily rule in person.

(*Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 179–81)

Generally, the Greeks viewed their myths as accounts of real events in the distant past, but whether one believed a particular story about Apollo among the many told by the poets was a matter of individual opinion, and did not necessarily reflect on one’s overall level of piety. Nor was there a competitive marketplace of religions of the kind we observe in the modern West, where individuals choose, maintain and discard religious traditions and beliefs based on personal inclination.<sup>29</sup> Instead, one inherited a set of gods, heroes and rituals belonging to one’s family and place of birth. Unless an individual emigrated or lived in a multicultural setting, there was no need to choose a personal pantheon, even if a few cults (notably those involving mysteries) were elective. Nor did the Greeks share the modern perception that there exist distinct religions with more or less incompatible doctrines and customs. Instead of viewing the Egyptian or Babylonian systems as competing or erroneous religions, they typically assumed that these peoples were worshiping the same gods under different names. A Greek who worshiped the Egyptian god Ammon was not an apostate from the cult of Zeus. In fact, he likely assumed that Zeus was Ammon. Where there was no clear equivalent, moreover, new and foreign deities could be absorbed into existing local pantheons.

## **When and where**

The ancient Greeks ranged far beyond Greece. As the Mycenaean civilization was collapsing at the end of the Bronze Age, Greeks of varying ethnicity – Achaians, Aiolians, Dorians – emigrated to Cyprus and Asia Minor. Trade emporia and colonies were established overseas even as a new kind of state, the Greek polis, began to emerge during the eighth century.<sup>30</sup> A map of selected Greek-speaking cities in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea during the Archaic period (ca. 550) reveals how these people blanketed the coastlines and the islands, reaching Phasis (modern Poti, Georgia) in the east, Naukratis on the Egyptian delta and Emporion (Empúries, Spain) in the west. Only in Greece itself did Greeks penetrate and occupy the hinterlands.



Map 1.1 Greek-speaking populations in the Mediterranean and Black Sea during the Archaic period.

Given their far-flung settlements, it is no surprise that the Greeks lacked any form of national or political unity before the short-lived empire of Alexander the Great. They often regarded one another with suspicion, as enemies and foreigners. They spread across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, yet all traced their traditions to ancestral homelands in what we now call Greece. Their poets sang the struggles of great men and women who had lived in the distant but glorious past: battles to the death before seven-gated Thebes, or on the windy plain at Troy. They spoke a common language, albeit in multiple dialects. Many of their gods and rituals too were shared, but (to use the metaphor of language) the morphology and syntax of Greek religion varied from one place to the next. Although its variations were seemingly limitless, they were mutually intelligible, and Greek people shared a remarkably consistent set of inferences about the gods, and how to worship them, over the course of several centuries. This is what allows us to speak of “Greek religion” as a unity, rather than attempting to address a bewildering number of distinct “Greek religions.”<sup>31</sup>

Of which centuries are we speaking? Temporally, our investigation will encompass a lengthy period, beginning with the “Greek Renaissance,” when the Greek polis first appeared and the Homeric and Hesiodic oral traditions, with their accounts of the gods, were first committed to writing (i.e. the eighth century). The Archaic period, which saw the consolidation of Greek political systems and a growing awareness of Panhellenic culture, is conventionally dated from 800 to 480, the year the Persian king Xerxes invaded Greece. The subsequent Classical period was characterized by a great flowering of Greek poetry, art, philosophy and historiography. These cultural productions brought religion to new heights (as in the refinement of techniques for temple architecture and sculpture), but they also involved critiques of traditional religion (as in the dialogues of Plato and the plays of Euripides). Greek philosophers defined the divine in new ways, and a new culture of philosophical rationalism took root among the educated minority. Political instability in the wake of the Peloponnesian War, and the exigencies of the war itself, damaged the prestige of venerable religious institutions, such as the Delphic oracle.

The dominant political structure, the independent Greek city-state or polis with its priests and festivals of the civic gods, was profoundly changed when the Macedonian Alexander brought a great swath of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East under his sole dominion. Alexander’s death in 323 ended the Classical period and ushered in the Hellenistic, a time of ongoing political upheavals, widening disparities between the privileged and the poor, transformative encounters with non-Greek peoples, and new intellectual currents. During this period, the civic structures of many Greek poleis remained in place and the apparatus of traditional religion continued to function, but in a changed environment which inevitably affected its practice and interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, our discussion will focus on the Archaic and Classical periods, but with glances back to the prehistoric substrate of Greek religion, and forward to the Hellenistic period, particularly the century after Alexander’s death.

## Local and Panhellenic religion

In spite of their political fragmentation and their constant wars with one another, the Greeks possessed a shared cultural heritage, and recognized that this was so.<sup>33</sup> Besides their common language, three pillars of this heritage were participation in athletic contests we call “Panhellenic” (most conspicuously those for Zeus at Olympia), consultation of Apollo’s oracle at Delphi, and familiarity with the legend of the Trojan War as it was handed down in epic poetry under the name of Homer. Each of these cultural phenomena was in place by the end of the eighth century, and while not every city in the far-flung Greek world could send athletes to Olympia or set its weightiest questions before Apollo at Delphi, all acknowledged the prestige of these institutions. Implicit in these phenomena was a set of theological beliefs: the cosmos was inhabited by a great many gods, of whom the most important lived in a heavenly place, Olympos, in a blessed society of immortals; Zeus was the most powerful of these gods; the gods intervened in human affairs; mortals learned the will of the gods through Apollo’s oracular pronouncements.

Beginning in early Archaic times, if not earlier, a constant and dynamic tension existed between Panhellenic (“pertaining to all the Greeks”) and distinctively local components of Greek culture. Nowhere was this more true than in respect to the gods. Were a modern student, familiar with the gods as they appear in the *Iliad*, to travel back in time to Classical Sparta, she might be surprised to find that one of the most honored deities there was Orthia, a unique goddess absent from epic poetry. At some point, Spartan Orthia was assimilated to Artemis, but even then, she had little in common with Homer’s girlish huntress. Likewise a visitor to ancient Athens would learn that Dionysos and Demeter, two deities barely mentioned in Homer, were central to that city’s religious life. The depiction of Hera in the *Iliad* as a shrewish, scheming wife disciplined by her patriarchal husband Zeus is a theological and poetic construct, quite different from the persona of Hera revealed in regional worship (Essay 1.2). This state of affairs resulted from the fact that local pantheons and rituals evolved over centuries with no common yardstick by which to measure their own degree of adherence to or deviation from a cultural norm.

Because epic poetry enjoyed a broad cultural circulation, and was carried far and wide by traveling singers, it formed a counterweight to this particularism. Consider the challenges facing the epic poet whose task was to spin a story about the heroes of old, their interactions with the gods, and deeds of valor enacted in war. Whose gods should be depicted? Zeus as he was worshiped and visualized in Ionian Miletos, or in Dorian Sparta? Over the course of centuries, poets created a synthetic picture of gods and rituals from the mass of local particulars. This synthesis favored elements familiar to all, and avoided those easily recognized as regional and local. Cognitively speaking, local religion was characterized by a heavy reliance on intuitive religious concepts (see the section “Intuitive and reflective cognition”), while Panhellenic religion resulted from attempts to systematize and harmonize this mass of conflicting information. As in the Near Eastern epics that influenced Greek oral poets, the gods of the *Iliad* formed a supra-local pantheon, and were lifted from their earthly abodes in temples (local perspective) to the heavenly city of Olympos (Panhellenic perspective). In Greek cities, relationships among the gods were primarily conceptualized in spatial and

functional terms, whereas in the epic, they were familial and hierarchical. Thus in the polis of Athens (local perspective), Athena Polias resided in a fine temple at the city center and concerned herself with civic industries and activities, while Zeus Herkeios, worshiped at individual domestic altars throughout the city, protected the boundaries of each man's home against intruders. Though the father-daughter relationship of Zeus and Athena was not ignored at Athens, it was for the most part irrelevant to these two cults.<sup>34</sup> In epic poetry (Panhellenic perspective) Zeus' relations with other gods, including Athena, are defined by his status as the head of a divine family, and as the supreme ruler of the cosmos.

But if the epic depiction of gods common to all the Greeks is a poetic construct, can we speak of “Panhellenic religion”? We can, because the prestige of epic, and its wide dissemination, also had an impact on ritual practice and material culture. For example, the sons of the tyrant Peisistratos unsuccessfully attempted to build a grandiose Athenian temple to Olympian Zeus, no doubt with the Panhellenic concept of Zeus ruling from Mt. Olympos in mind.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the sculptor Pheidias was reportedly inspired by lines from Homer when he created the colossal gold and ivory statue of Zeus at Olympia:

The son of Kronos nodded his dark brow in assent,  
And ambrosial locks flowed in waves from the Lord's  
Immortal head, and he shook great Olympos.

(Hom. *Il.* 1.528–30)<sup>36</sup>

Even though Panhellenic and local conceptions of a particular deity might vary dramatically in the eyes of moderns, they coexisted in the minds of worshipers, who switched between concepts as needed in different contexts.

### **Intuitive and reflective cognition**

In order to understand why and how the Greeks so often held contradictory notions about the gods in their minds, we need to return to cognitive science. Concepts and beliefs are processed in the mind through two cognitively distinct pathways. The intuitive pathway is fast, effortless and implicit; the reflective pathway is relatively slow, effortful and explicit. People do not need to expend mental effort learning concepts and beliefs of the first type; they arise naturally from a set of “first-order” mental tools and categories, many of which are established in early childhood as we interact with the environment. Intuitive inferences and the resulting beliefs seem self-evident. Consider the following examples (with the caveat that as intuitive inferences, they would not normally be represented explicitly):

- When I am hungry, I should eat.
- What I throw in the air will come back down.
- Animals move about, but plants do not.

Cognition processed through this first pathway is automatic, experiential, closely tied to the emotions and “inherently highly compelling.”<sup>37</sup> It allows us to

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function in daily life without consciously calculating how to execute every movement and decision.

Concepts and beliefs processed via the reflective pathway include these:

- Eating green vegetables makes me healthy.
- Throwing rocks at other people is against the law.
- Even though barnacles stay put, they are animals.

The second pathway is characterized by analysis, logical connections, abstractions and propositions that do not seem self-evident. It is highly likely to operate through the medium of language. Beliefs processed through this pathway are more easily changed when evidence contradicting them is recognized; indeed, doubting and disbelieving belong to this category of cognition.

Concepts and beliefs processed at these two levels may be held in the mind simultaneously, and they may conflict. For example, most people know that the earth revolves around the sun. But when watching a beautiful sunset, even scientists may remark on the sun’s “movement.” That the sun moves is understood intuitively; that it is stationary is a conclusion resulting from a more complex process of learning and reflection.<sup>38</sup> Even though we have been taught that the earth is not flat, we tend to visualize the path of an airplane crossing the Atlantic as a straight line rather than an arc. We use “tree” as a taxonomic category, even if we know that an oak is more closely related to a daisy than to a conifer. Dual-process theorists have not settled on a consistent terminology for these two categories or modes of cognition, but Sperber has described the two resulting kinds of beliefs as “intuitive” and “reflective,” and this is the terminology I use.<sup>39</sup> Sperber points out that the boundary between intuitive and reflective beliefs is not impermeable. For example, initially reflective beliefs (four is an even number) may enter the intuitive repertoire through repetition and reinforcement, while intuitive beliefs (the earth is flat) may be “unlearned” through reflection.

With respect to religious thought, we can draw a distinction between (1) intuitive mental representations and inferences, particularly as experienced through religion in practice; and (2) reflective propositions, particularly as experienced through myths and other forms of explicit discourse about the gods. Examples of intuitive religious beliefs include these:

- When I pray, Allah understands the language I speak.
- God feels emotions (e.g. anger or gladness).
- Apollo occupies physical space and moves from one location to another.

People are not necessarily conscious of these inferences; they remain unspoken because they seem so obvious. Reflective religious beliefs, on the other hand, are conscious thoughts which we formulate explicitly:

- Allah understands all languages because he knows everything.
- When people have sex outside marriage, God is angry.
- Apollo often carries a bow and arrows.

To a great degree, interactions with superhuman agents are predicated on intuitive cognition. Stanley Stowers refers to this as “the religion of everyday social exchange,” by which people interact with gods in ways that reflect very basic human inferences about how other minds work.<sup>40</sup> One such inference is that gods are capable of perceiving what we do. Another is that a god can feel pleasure or displeasure and take action as a result. Thus, intuitive religious thought involves an implicit theology, an unspoken set of assumptions about the properties of gods. People do not need to reason about such matters; intuitive beliefs are the products of our cognitive architecture, which has evolved to help us navigate the physical and social world. In this type of religious thought, a god is perceived as a nearby “interested party” who can enter into a reciprocal relationship with worshipers, interacting with them at a specific time and place (for reciprocity, see Essay 1.3). Another characteristic of the religion of everyday social exchange is “epistemological uncertainty” and an imbalance of knowledge between god and worshiper. That is, the god is presumed to know everything important, but the worshiper has few if any clues to the god’s state of mind, or whether the interaction will be successful. This knowledge imbalance distinguishes religious interactions from social interactions.<sup>41</sup>

Reflective cognition produces accounts of the gods and of human interactions with them. These are forms of explicit theology, not necessarily in the sense of systematic study of the divine, but in its original Greek sense of *logoi* (stories, arguments, rationalizations, accountings) concerning the *theoi*, the gods.<sup>42</sup> Religious thought of the reflective type can be expressed orally, visually through painting and sculpture, or in writing.<sup>43</sup> Mythmaking belongs to the reflective form of cognition, as does philosophical speculation concerning the nature of gods and their role in the cosmos. Mythmaking, however, embraces and incorporates intuitive inferences (e.g. the gods’ anthropomorphism), while Greek philosophy tends to critique and reject them. Mythmaking also relies far more than philosophy on symbolic thought, which is a special form of reflective cognition (see Chapter 2).

The concept of “superstition” is a product of the reflective religious modality, which may seek to marginalize intuitive beliefs and behaviors as naïve or doctrinally incorrect. But the usefulness of the distinction between reflective and intuitive cognition is not limited to explaining why world religions so consistently exhibit a gap between “theologically correct” doctrine, which is highly reflective, and real-world practice, which favors the intuitive.<sup>44</sup> It also pinpoints, for example, the cognitive mechanism which allowed the Greeks simultaneously to hold mental representations of the gods both as occupants of Olympos and as residents of nearby temples. As students of Greek religion, we too often attempt to explain away such logical inconsistencies, rather than simply allowing them to stand. For example, the Athenians seem to have been quite capable of regarding Zeus Hypatos, Zeus Olympios and Zeus Herkeios as distinct deities. Intuitively, this makes sense, because they were worshiped in separate locations and had differing spheres of interest. Whenever they wished, however, the Athenians could shift to a reflective, mythological mode according to which Zeus was one god who appeared in various places under different cult titles. They generally felt no need to reconcile these contradictory views.<sup>45</sup>

With its temples, festival calendars and mass animal sacrifices, Greek civic religion was a special case of the religion of everyday social exchange, a reciprocal relationship with the local gods writ large and conducted on behalf of the state. It too was primarily predicated on shared intuitive inferences about the gods and their behavior, but it also involved a strong admixture of reflection on religion: priests devised explanations for ritual traditions, the assembly debated how to interact with the gods in crisis situations, poets meditated on the inscrutability of the gods and so on. Additionally, it required a great investment in the curation and oversight of large sanctuaries and their festivals, activities we might call infra-religion. The official who organized a procession, kept temple accounts or purchased a hundred sheep was not directly interacting with a god, but his activities supported the religious life of the city.<sup>46</sup>

## Using the evidence

Because we are studying antiquity, we cannot directly observe a Greek woman praying, or interview a Greek man about his perceptions of what takes place during a sacrifice. We find evidence of historical interactions with the gods in material culture. Sanctuaries, altars and temples formed the physical environment for many interactions. Gifts were left in sanctuaries, sometimes with messages inscribed for the gods. Animal bones and pottery were deposited around altars after ritual feasts. Material culture has the advantage of being firmly moored to historical acts of worship in a specific place and time. Archaeological evidence for religion, however, is difficult to interpret. Even when we can draw firm conclusions about what the worshipers *did*, what they were *thinking* is a different matter.<sup>47</sup> A few, precious inscribed texts record prayers, dedications, hymns, curses and other specific instances of interaction with the divine. For example, two hexameters inscribed on an eight-inch bronze statue (Figure 1.1) read:

Mantiklos dedicated me to the Far-Shooter of the Silver Bow  
 From his tithe. You, Phoibos, give something pleasing in return.  
 (CEG 326)

This is a record of a message from Mantiklos to (Phoibos) Apollo in the city of Thebes during the first quarter of the seventh century.

Texts like this raise methodological questions of their own. Was this inscription meant for Apollo to “read,” or was it intended primarily to impress other people? To what degree does this conventional formula reflect what Mantiklos was thinking when he made the dedication? Did Mantiklos have in mind the local Apollo, Homer’s Apollo (who is called “Far-Shooter” and has a silver bow) or both?<sup>48</sup> Still, this type of evidence is the closest we can come to direct observation of ancient religion in practice. It expresses typically intuitive religious beliefs: Apollo is a person with whom Mantiklos can interact; Apollo understands the Greek language; Apollo is pleased by gifts. It also expresses reflective religious



*Figure 1.1* Bronze votive statuette dedicated to Apollo by Mantiklos, ca. 700–675. From Thebes. Photo © 2016 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

beliefs: Apollo is an archer with a silver bow; when people obtain goods, they ought to share with the gods through the custom of tithing.

The majority of our written evidence for Greek religion comes in the form of texts whose authors are reflecting on religion outside of a ritual context.<sup>49</sup> For example, depictions of gods and/or worshipers in epic poetry form a major

category of evidence. Consider the following account of a sacrifice of one hundred cattle in Book 1 of the *Iliad*:

So he spoke, praying; and Phoibos Apollo heard him.  
 But when they had prayed and thrown the barley grains,  
 They first drew back the heads of the cattle, cutting their throats, and  
 skinned them;  
 They removed the thigh-bones, then enveloped them in fat,  
 Making two layers, and placed raw meat on top.  
 And the old man burned this on firewood, and over it poured  
 Bright wine, and the youths with him held five-pronged forks.  
 Through the whole day they kept appeasing the god with song,  
 The sons of the Achaians, singing the lovely paean,  
 And dancing in praise of the Far-Worker, who heard and was glad.

(Hom. *Il.* 1. 457–63, 472–4)

Although the sacrifice is described with a level of detail which makes it seem realistic, this is not a record of a historical interaction with Apollo, but a fictional description of one, which operates according to somewhat different rules. Notice, for example, that the epic poet suffers from no epistemological uncertainty: he knows what Apollo was thinking and can share this information with his audience. Cognitively speaking, composing a poetic description of a sacrifice is a radically different act from performing the ritual itself. Here, the poet is operating from many of the same inferences as a worshiper, but he is also a creative artist working reflectively within the Panhellenic conventions and traditions of epic.<sup>50</sup>

The distinction between reflective and intuitive cognition is also useful in the analysis of visual culture. Consider a sacrificial scene on a Classical Athenian votive relief (Figure 1.2), a sculpture set up by worshipers in a sanctuary in order to honor a god or hero. Such reliefs commemorate a specific sacrificial occasion, which is represented in a schematized format: the dedicators of the relief (here Panis and Aigirios with their child) approach the deity with hands raised in greeting. They are about to sacrifice to Herakles, who is represented on a larger scale than his worshipers. The god faces them and watches as a slave or a junior member of the family leads forward the animal destined for sacrifice; a female attendant carries a basket with the equipment for the ritual. An inscription identifying both the dedicators and the deity is carved onto the frame.<sup>51</sup>

Compare a Classical Athenian vase painting depicting a sacrificial scene (Figure 1.3): an anonymous adult man, the officiant at a sacrifice, stands at an altar as a younger assistant roasts the viscera of the butchered animal on spits. Because the scene is “post-kill,” the species of the sacrificial animal is unclear. The officiant holds a bundle of meat or bones over the altar, as another assistant pours from a jug. To the right, Apollo (represented on the same scale as the humans) observes the activity, apparently unseen by the worshipers. There is a distinct sense of male camaraderie, especially in the eye contact between the older man and his young acolyte.<sup>52</sup>



Figure 1.2 Herakles leans on his club as a family approaches with a sacrificial ox. Marble votive relief to Herakles, Athens, first half of the fourth century. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece. Photo © Vanni Archive/Art Resource, NY



Figure 1.3 An adult man and two youths perform a sacrifice to Apollo, who stands on the right. One of the boys holds meat on a spit over the fire while another pours a libation. Attic red figure bell krater by the Pothos painter, ca. 430. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource

Folkert van Straten's study of sacrificial iconography has revealed that almost all Classical Greek votive reliefs with sacrificial scenes show the “pre-kill” phase, while only slightly more than half of vase paintings do. (Of the remaining vase paintings, most, like Figure 1.2, show the handling of meat.) This divergence results from the differing uses of the objects: the votive relief was a memorial of a specific interaction with a god, in which inferences of the intuitive type were dominant. From the perspective of the dedicant, it was important to show the species and age of the sacrificed animal, and thus the value of the gift he was presenting to the god. It was also important that the god be portrayed in the relief, identified by the appropriate attributes and depicted as receptive to the greetings of the worshipers. In artistic contexts that commemorated real-life cult activity or emphasized religious emotion, it was standard to show the god's large size relative to the worshipers, conveying their pious sense of awe before a divine being who was quite literally “superhuman.” Once commissioned and completed, the sculpture was set up in the sanctuary as a memorial of a successful sacrifice.<sup>53</sup>

The vase painting, on the other hand, was not a memorial of a specific interaction with a god, but a generic scene designed to attract buyers who would use the vases as household items. On vase paintings of sacrificial scenes, the figures are rarely named, and in scenes of procession to the altar, expensive animals are overrepresented. The recipient deity might or might not be depicted nearby; this was by no means an essential element of the scene, as it was on votive reliefs. In Figure 1.3, Apollo is present, yet the painter does not attempt to represent a direct interaction between god and worshipers, and convention does not require that the god (recognizable by his long hair and laurel staff) be differentiated from the worshipers by size. The two most prevalent “post-kill” scenes on vases show the viscera of the animal roasting on spits, as in this example, or the sacrum and tail burning on the altar.<sup>54</sup> In the standard Classical Athenian procedure for alimentary sacrifice, the main participants tasted the roasted viscera while they burned a variable portion of the animal for the god (the muscle meat was afterwards roasted or boiled, and distributed to guests for feasting). Thus the scenes of roasting innards evoke the fellowship created among the participants as the first taste of meat was consumed. The sacrum and tail were often burned as the god's portion, and the curling of the tail in the fire was considered a favorable sign: the sacrifice had been successful. Such vases offered reflections on the *concept* of sacrifice – especially its social, devotional and culinary pleasures.<sup>55</sup>

The Sanskrit Vedas and the Homeric epics, originally oral compositions, show that explicit theology can thrive in the absence of writing. Systematic theology, however, cannot. Reflection on the gods becomes substantially more complex and sophisticated with the arrival of advanced literacy. Plato's philosophical works, which alternately embraced and critiqued traditional religious beliefs, could not have been composed without the technology of writing. Athenian tragedians problematized the gods as cruel and selfish (Euripides' *Hippolytus*) or explored the ethics of human sacrifice (Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*), even though such sacrifices were not, and likely had never been, a part of the religion of everyday social exchange in their culture.<sup>56</sup>

Although the reflective form of religious cognition typically takes intuitive religious thought as its starting point and either elaborates upon it or reacts against it, we must avoid characterizing the former as “advanced” and the latter as “primitive.” The two are parallel cognitive phenomena. Neither cultures nor individuals evolve their way out of the intuitive modality. This explains the substantial gap between the “theologically correct” doctrines of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and so forth and the actual practices and beliefs of most adherents in their everyday lives. As the product of natural cognition, the religion of everyday social exchange is with us today, in every world tradition, and will likely always be with us. By the same token, theological religion is a product of our human faculties of reason and imagination, which have been with us as long as the gods themselves.

### The Greeks and the counterintuitive

The complex interrelation of intuitive and reflective beliefs in religion is illustrated by the prevalence of minimally counterintuitive concepts (MCIs) in religious thought. To create an MCI, begin with a familiar concept like “pencil,” “mountain” or “cat.” Each of these belongs to an intuitive ontological category which is established in early childhood. A pencil is an artifact, a mountain is a natural non-living object and a cat is an animal. Now endow each concept with at least one property that violates the intuitive assumptions we hold about its category. Let the pencil grow (a biological property), the mountain listen to what you say (a psychological property) and the cat become invisible (a physical property). Growth in a pencil is counterintuitive, whereas growth in a cat is ordinary. Should a cat grow to weigh forty pounds, this would be bizarre, but not counterintuitive. The counterintuitive need not be impossible or unnatural: tiny, invisible creatures which cause illness are MCIs, yet they exist.<sup>57</sup>

*Table 1.1* Examples of counterintuitive concepts: each concept violates an ontological category by attributing to it contradictory properties from a domain of intuitive knowledge. Adapted from Barrett 2008.410.

<i>Ontological Category</i>	<i>Folk Psychology</i>	<i>Folk Biology</i>	<i>Folk Physics</i>
Person	A person who knows the future	A person born from a tree	A person who exists in two places at once
Animal	A horse that talks	A bird with bronze feathers	An invisible cat
Plant	A tree that answers questions	A flower that bleeds	An herb that grows in the air
Artifact	A ship’s prow that gives advice	A statue that walks	A bag that encloses the winds
Non-living natural object	An angry mountain	A stone that sheds tears	A spring that is solid in warm weather

In order to be remembered well and orally transmitted without special memory aids, a concept should be *minimally* counterintuitive. Too many category violations (a pencil that grows, flies, moves through solid objects and solves algebraic equations) will make the concept more difficult to remember. Transferred properties yield good MCIs: the mountain has hearing, a property we intuitively attribute to animals and people, but not to natural objects. If, however, we also stipulate that the mountain hears everything being said anywhere in the world, we have violated our intuitive beliefs about how hearing works. A pan-auditory mountain is a more difficult concept than a simple hearing one, and less readily transmitted.<sup>58</sup>

Greek mythology is full of MCIs: a lion whose hide cannot be pierced; a flying, immortal horse; men with goat's legs and ears; birds who shoot bronze feathers like arrows; a bag that can hold the winds. The metamorphoses so characteristic of Greek myth are counterintuitive because they violate our intuitive inferences that membership in a species and individual personhood are permanent. In 1985, Michael Kelly and Frank Keil tabulated all the transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. They discovered that metamorphosis follows predictable patterns based on intuitive category assumptions. For example, in the *Metamorphoses*, a conscious being (mortal or god) is much more likely to be transformed into another conscious being (20%) or an animal (51%) than into a plant (10%) or a solid inanimate object (12%). Likewise, an inanimate object is more likely to be transformed into another inanimate object than into a conscious being.<sup>59</sup> Although some transformations may be determined by narrative considerations, these broad patterns reveal cognitive constraints on the concept of metamorphosis. Kelly and Keil recorded zero instances of conscious beings transformed into abstract ideas; such a metamorphosis would be excessively counterintuitive.<sup>60</sup>

Not all MCIs are equally likely to end up as religious concepts. In fact, MCIs are abundant in popular culture: animals talk, crimefighters have super strength and young women start fires with the power of thought alone. These are all examples of MCIs with good inferential potential: they generate stories. Inferentially impoverished MCIs, by contrast, lead nowhere. Which is more interesting, a person who disappears when you speak to him, or a person who grants wishes? Consider an invisible tree. Clearly it is an MCI, but it is far less interesting than a talking or listening tree. This is because having the ability to talk or listen makes the tree an agent. Agentive MCIs are more likely than others to be transmitted as religious concepts. But what distinguishes Superman the comic-book hero from Herakles the god? Why are some MCIs viewed as real-world agents in spite of their counterintuitive properties, while others are just as clearly understood to be fictional?

The answers are contextual. Our ability to mentally represent MCIs may manifest itself reflectively and consciously in creative contexts (as when we read or write fiction), but it may also function in connection with the suite of mental tools we use to recognize and interact with agents in our immediate environment (Chapter 2). For example, suppose that the sound "meow" is heard whenever I visit a certain park. Intuitively, I infer that some agent is making the sound, and that the

agent is a cat. If the cat continues to vocalize, yet mysteriously cannot be located, I may reflectively conclude that contrary to my normal expectations, this cat is invisible. When they possess explanatory power and are emotionally compelling, MCIs generated this way may be perceived as “real” rather than fictional, transmitted to other people who find them plausible, and culturally elaborated.<sup>61</sup> For example, many people in the United States interpret coins found in unexpected places as messages (usually of comfort or moral admonition) from deceased loved ones. This concept of “pennies from heaven” explains a minor mystery of everyday life and appeals to deep emotions. It has been disseminated through testimonial letters sent to a widely syndicated newspaper column. According to Pascal Boyer, religious MCIs matter to us in ways that Superman cannot. In cognitive terms, they activate multiple mental systems, “those that govern our most intense emotions, shape our interaction with other people, give us moral feelings, and organize social groups.”<sup>62</sup>

In cultures with established traditions of superhuman beings, plausibility is easily achieved, especially if the agent is identified or its existence confirmed by authority figures. The proliferation of cults in Greek polytheism can be attributed in part to intuitive inferences that some superhuman agent needs to be addressed in response to virtually any misfortune, success or unusual event. Consider, for example, the following oracle given to the people of Miletos, who consulted Apollo at Didyma after an earthquake:

As regards this sign (*sēmeion*), propitiate Steadfast (*Asphaleos*) Poseidon with sacrifices and ask him to come propitiously and to preserve the order of your city unshaken, apart from danger. For he is coming very near you. Him you must guard against and pray to, so that henceforth you may reach old age undaunted by evils.

(DI 132.2–7; Fontenrose 1988.190; late second century)

Apollo’s oracle advised the citizens to establish a new cult to Poseidon under the name Asphaleos in order to ward off future disasters. The Milesians already worshiped Poseidon, but the earthquake caused them to infer that some dangerous *new* agency was at work. Was Poseidon Asphaleos a different god from the other Poseidons at Miletos? Yes and no. Together with a set of new sacrifices, the use of a new cult title satisfied the need to address this unknown power, while the identification of the dangerous god as Poseidon, a deity “known” to cause earthquakes, situated the new cult within the familiar context of a shared theology.

## Emic and etic approaches

Anthropologists speak of “emic” and “etic” approaches to culture. These terms are derived from the adjectives *phonemic* (referring to the way the sounds of speech are perceived by the speaker) and *phonetic* (referring to the physical production and acoustic properties of the sounds as objects of scientific study). An emic approach to culture, then, represents an insider’s point of view or (for

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ancient historians) an attempt to fully empathize with and grasp that point of view. It reflects the judgments, mental categories and assumptions characteristic of a given culture. An etic approach reflects the broader contextual knowledge of an outsider who is measuring, comparing and analyzing his observations with an entirely different, universalizing frame of reference.

As a practical matter, it is questionable whether moderns have the ability to achieve a truly emic perspective on an ancient culture, yet the emic/etic distinction is useful in thinking through our approaches to the evidence.<sup>63</sup> For example, etic methodology often requires the assumption that those who practice a religion do not understand their own beliefs and behaviors. To see what I mean, imagine that Jack, a modern Classicist, attends a symposium in 425 and has a conversation with an Athenian citizen:

- Jack:* You're from the village of Thorikos, aren't you, Stephanos? Why do you sacrifice twice a year to the hero Thorikos?
- Stephanos:* Thorikos founded the village, and he watches over our affairs.
- Jack:* No, I don't think so. The real reason you sacrifice to Thorikos is because the ritual activity allows you to construct a group identity.
- Stephanos:* No, that's not it. It is ancestral custom to sacrifice to Thorikos at his tomb. My father did so and his father before him.
- Jack:* Yes, your ancestors used that tomb to articulate their territorial claims. And by the way, it's not even a real tomb.
- Stephanos:* (discreetly, to a slave) When you mix the next round, Lydos, more water.

Jack's approach to the ritual is wholly etic; he adopts a functionalist theoretical stance which draws on Émile Durkheim's ideas about religion. Durkheim thought that religion had little to do with gods or the supernatural. Instead, religion was society's way of perpetuating and strengthening itself: God and society were one and the same thing.<sup>64</sup> An emic stance, by contrast, insists on the value of Stephanos' perception that he is dealing with a superhuman being, and that the relationship with this being is important to Stephanos, his family and his village. One of the benefits of a cognitive approach is that it allows us to consider Greek religion etically as an expression of universal human patterns of thought (of which the thinkers themselves may be quite unaware), yet it simultaneously yields insight into emic perspectives. While observing that Stephanos' worship of the hero Thorikos has social consequences, we can also acknowledge and explain his strong intuition that Thorikos is real.

It used to be an axiom of the discipline that Greek religion was about rituals rather than beliefs, and that it was experienced collectively rather than individually. Indeed, rituals and collective experience must dominate any account of Greek religion, because they loom very large in our evidence. Yet Greek religion can be reduced neither to practice nor to group rituals. Epiphanies of the gods in dreaming and waking visions, for example, were not confined to ritual contexts,

and gods usually appeared to individuals rather than groups.<sup>65</sup> During the latter half of the twentieth century, the dominance of ritual in scholarly discourse resulted in a marginalization of superhuman powers. Again, etic approaches conflicted with what the Greeks themselves tell us about the importance of the gods and heroes. The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a resurgence of interest in individual experience, and the gods have been brought back into the equation.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, an emic perspective is that of an insider, but which insider? Cultures are not homogeneous. A well-educated Greek and an illiterate one, a Spartan and an Athenian, a master and a slave, a man and a woman, might have divergent and conflicting ideas about various aspects of religion. Much of the source material for our study of religion consists of writings by intellectuals, highly literate individuals (almost all male) who offered a great many reflections concerning the gods and human relations with them, but whose ideas were not necessarily representative of the population as a whole.

### **ESSAY 1.1: TWELVE GODS, AND OTHER WAYS TO LIMIT A PANTHEON**

If we counted them all, the total number of Greek gods worshiped in all places and times would reach into the tens if not hundreds of thousands. The Greek cosmos was, as Thales observed, “full of gods.” Therefore people needed strategies for limiting this unwieldy, unbounded set of superhuman beings.<sup>67</sup> While nobody attempted to seek out and recognize every god by name, inclusive expressions like “to Athena and the other gods and goddesses” were common in prayers as a means of avoiding offense.<sup>68</sup> Generally, it was understood that an individual honored the deities and heroes whose altars were established in his or her home, neighborhood and state. But not everyone attended to every god. For example, some deities were worshiped electively (Adonis or Sabazios in Classical Athens) or according to one’s gender (Herakles often excluded women from his cults). The aggregate of superhuman beings with personal significance and salience for an individual has been called a “meaningful god set.”<sup>69</sup> Individuals seem to have intuitively maintained their meaningful god sets without the need to explicitly enumerate them.

If we wish to identify a meaningful god set at the group level, we must first define the group. Is it composed of all the inhabitants of a region, a polis, a village? Male citizens? Their female kin? Aristocratic citizens? The meaningful god set for a given group consists of the superhuman agents who are “significant and salient” for most of its members. When dealing with ancients who are no longer around to be interviewed, we must roughly approximate the criterion of “significant and salient” by equating it to “superhuman agents who were regularly the objects of prayer or other rituals.”<sup>70</sup> Beginning in the sixth century, communities sometimes inscribed sacrificial calendars on stone, listing the gods who received

sacrifices on behalf of the public; these constituted meaningful god sets for people *in their roles as citizen men and women*.

One of the most complete of these calendars comes from late Classical Erchia, a deme (township) in Attica.<sup>71</sup> It includes sacrifices for eleven (or perhaps twelve) major deities, most of whom had shrines in the deme: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Leto, Apollo, Artemis (and/or Artemis-Hekate), Athena, Hermes, Dionysos and Ge. If gods with cult titles are counted as separate deities (Apollo Lykeios, Apollo Delphinios, etc.), the number rises to twenty-six. In addition to these, the calendar provides sacrifices for at least fourteen minor figures or collectivities (nymphs, heroines, Herakleidai, Acheloös, Aglauros, etc.), whose offerings are not necessarily lesser in value than those of the “major” gods. Given that the demesmen and women would also have participated in at least some of the cults in the urban center, the number appears astonishingly high, yet people did not hold all of these superhuman figures in their minds at once, nor did everyone attend to every cult. Instead, they focused on different members of the set during each month of the year, and different individuals or families assumed the priestly duties for each god or hero, so that the cognitive burden was spread among many people.<sup>72</sup> Whether at the individual or group level, meaningful god sets were the product of cognitive constraints (the number of significant gods individuals and groups can reasonably attend to), practical constraints (the amount of resources available to devote to them) and contingencies of time, place and culture.

A “local pantheon” consists of the total number of superhuman agents tied to a given geographical area by altars, sanctuaries or other landmarks. Local pantheons were inevitably larger than most individuals’ meaningful god sets (i.e. no man or woman of Attica had all the superhuman agents of Attica in his or her meaningful god set). On the other hand, the Greeks had a mental category which corresponds to the local pantheon. They often used expressions like “all the gods, goddesses and heroes who dwell in our city (*polis*) and land (*chōra*)” or “the local gods and heroes” (*theoi kai hērōes enchōrioi*).<sup>73</sup> Local pantheons varied, most obviously in their heroes, river gods and other such figures who were unique to the place. Occasionally they included major deities who were unique, such as the goddess Aphaia on Aigina. In an important sense, deities such as Athena Parthenos in Athens, Artemis Orthia in Sparta and Zeus Ammon in Kyrene were also unique. A deity’s cult title or *epiclēsis* (“surname”) expressed this individuality.<sup>74</sup> Whether an Athenian citizen thought of Athena as residing on the Athenian Akropolis, its counterpart at Sparta or the heavenly Olympos was a contextual matter. Intuitively speaking, Athena Polias (“of the city”) lived in Athens and possessed a unique identity, as did Athena Chalkioikos (“of the Bronze House”) at Sparta. Reflectively speaking, Athena was a goddess who lived on Olympos and was worshiped by many cities and peoples.

Certain gods and goddesses, then, were familiar by name and general persona to all the Greeks, even as their functions, titles, rituals, iconography and relative importance varied from one location to the next. Robert Parker proposes (with certain caveats), that from 700 onward virtually all Greek communities worshiped a core group of twelve to thirteen deities: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Apollo,

Artemis, Dionysos, Hermes, Aphrodite, Demeter (normally with Persephone/Kore) and Herakles, as well as Hestia at the level of domestic cult.<sup>75</sup> This assemblage probably matched no one's meaningful god set, yet it reveals a common cultural heritage.

In order to create a narrative or an image representing the concept “all the gods,” poets and artists had to be selective. Let us define a “limited pantheon” as any such selection of gods that serves in place of the unbounded, unmanageable whole. In the Homeric poems we observe a limited pantheon which corresponds roughly to Parker’s list of gods recognized in cult. But Homer’s pantheon is shaped by factors specific to the epic genre and the subject matter of the poems. Zeus, who guides the course of history, and Athena, who watches over Greek heroes, are all-pervasive in the Panhellenic epic. Of sixty-seven deities mentioned in Homer, the most frequently named after Zeus and Athena are Apollo, Ares, Hera, Poseidon, Hephaistos and Aphrodite, in that order. The less commonly worshiped gods Hephaistos, Ares and Hades are significant in the epic, while the universally worshiped Dionysos and Demeter appear but are given short shrift, and Hestia is completely ignored.<sup>76</sup> Homer has many collective expressions for all the gods (*the athanatoi theoi*, “immortal gods”; the *theoi aien eontes*, “gods who are forever”). The Homeric poems refer to a subset of gods who “possess Olympian abodes” (*Olympia dōmat’ echontes*), an emic category which was to have a long history.<sup>77</sup>

It is worth pausing to see how Homer handles an episode where most gods are notionally present, but only a selection can be mentioned.<sup>78</sup> Book 20 of the *Iliad*, for example, begins with a divine assembly summoned by Zeus. Homer uses this opportunity to acknowledge the existence of many local gods:

But Zeus bade Themis<sup>79</sup> call the gods to the meeting place  
From the peak of many-valleyed Olympos, and she journeyed  
Everywhere, calling them to the house of Zeus.  
Not a river was absent, except for Okeanos,  
Nor any nymph, of all that dwell in the fair groves,  
In the sources of the rivers, and the grassy meadows.

(Hom. *Il.* 20.4–9)

Once the gods are assembled, Zeus instructs them to choose sides in the Trojan War and to descend to the battlefield while he himself observes the action from Olympos (22–5). The din of battle disturbs even Aidoneus (61–5), the lord of the dead beneath the earth, who fears that the violence may expose his realm. The fighting gods are arranged in five pairs:

For there stood opposite Lord Poseidon  
Phoibos Apollo with his winged arrows,  
Against Enyalios [Ares], the goddess grey-eyed Athena;  
Against Hera, Artemis of the golden distaff was pitted,  
The loud-voiced archer, sister of the Far-Shooter;

Against Leto stood the strong, swift runner Hermes  
 And opposite Hephaistos, the great, deep-eddying river  
 Whom the gods name Xanthos, and men Skamandros.

(Hom. *Il.* 20.67–74)<sup>80</sup>

Taken as a whole, the episode constructs a theologically coherent pantheon organized by spatial location, with representatives from the earth (rivers and nymphs), the heavens (gods who inhabit Olympos) and the underworld (Aidoneus and the dead). The selection of combatants, on the other hand, is dictated by the requirements of the narrative. Hephaistos, for example, takes the field specifically in order to counter the onslaughts of the river Skamandros with fire.<sup>81</sup> Conspicuously absent from the assembly and the battle are Demeter, Hestia and Dionysos.

Hesiod's *Theogony* (ca. 700) daringly attempted to account for *all* the gods, organizing them by genealogy. This was a remarkable feat of theological classification, and it radically departed from the religion of everyday social exchange, with its sanctuary-based local gods.<sup>82</sup> Like Homer, Hesiod worked within a Pan-hellenic tradition which stripped most local gods of their individuality and cult titles, replacing them with descriptive epithets suited to the epic meter. In Hesiod's cosmos, as in that of Homer, there was one Zeus, one Athena, one Apollo. The Muses of his local Mt. Helikon were identical to the Muses of Olympos (although it is telling that he allows them both epithets, "Helikonian" and "Olympian").<sup>83</sup> In the proem to the *Theogony*, the Muses hymn (1–21) nineteen members of a limited pantheon:

- 1 Zeus, who holds the aegis
- 2 Queenly Argive Hera, who walks on golden sandals
- 3 Grey-eyed Athena, the daughter of aegis-holding Zeus
- 4 Phoibos Apollo
- 5 Artemis, who delights in arrows
- 6 Poseidon the earth-holder, who shakes the earth
- 7 Reverend Themis
- 8 Quick-glancing Aphrodite
- 9 Gold-crowned Hebe
- 10 Lovely Dione
- 11 Leto

Hesiod's theological project is an account of cosmic history and its culmination in Zeus' Olympian regime. This "Olympian" theme reveals that his plan is Pan-hellenic in scope: it acknowledges geographically unique deities like the rivers and nymphs, but pays them scant attention. The Muses' hymn therefore focuses first and foremost on Zeus' consorts and offspring; only Poseidon falls outside this circle. Hera, whose affiliation with the Argive peninsula ran very deep, is the only major deity to receive a geographical epithet (just as she does in Homer). The absent Demeter and Dionysos, meanwhile, may have been conceptualized as earthly, un-Olympian gods because of their agricultural interests.<sup>84</sup> With the

remaining eight deities, Hesiod expands our temporal and physical conception of the cosmos far beyond Homer's tripartite division of earth/sky/underworld:

- 12 Iapetos
- 13 Kronos of crooked counsel
- 14 Eos (Dawn)
- 15 Great Helios (Sun)
- 16 Bright Selene (Moon)
- 17 Gaia (Earth)
- 18 Great Okeanos
- 19 Black Night

These are primordial gods, who belong to the generations before Zeus. The Titans Iapetos and Kronos allude to Zeus' struggle for power, and the creation of men through the actions of Iapetos' son Prometheus.<sup>85</sup> Except for Ge and Helios, these divine beings rarely received formal cultic attentions. Yet they were not therefore irrelevant to Greek religion. Okeanos, for example, was an important figure in popular cosmology, while Kronos came to play a significant role in Greek ideas of the afterlife.<sup>86</sup> The Muses' hymn concludes in a prayer-like fashion with the inclusive formula "and the holy race of the other deathless gods."

Next we turn to a limited pantheon in visual form. During the early sixth century, Athenian vase painters grew interested in depicting divine assemblies. The Sophilos dinos (Figures 1.4 and 1.5; ca. 580), for example, illustrates the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, an event attended by "all the gods."<sup>87</sup> Like the Battle of the Gods in *Iliad* 20 and the proem to Hesiod's *Theogony*, it depicted a limited pantheon requiring a process of planning and selection: which gods would be included, and how would they be arranged? Sophilos decided to structure the scene as a real-life wedding procession. He gave Demeter, Hestia and Dionysos important places at the head of the group, in positions which would normally be taken by the bride's relatives. Also on foot in the first cohort are the Olympian goddesses Leto and Hebe, as well as Peleus' friends, the centaur Cheiron and his wife, Chariklo; they are followed by the Olympian Themis with a group of nymphs.<sup>88</sup> The second stage of the procession comprises pairs of deities whose importance is signaled by their mode of travel in chariots. Each is accompanied by an attendant group of minor goddesses:

- Zeus and Hera with the Horai (Seasons)
- Poseidon and Amphitrite with the Charites (Graces)
- Ares and Aphrodite with a group of Muses
- Hermes and Apollo with another group of Muses
- Athena and Artemis with the Moirai (Fates)

Sophilos' theme is not war but love. Assembling as many erotic and nuptial pairs as possible, he follows Hesiod in pairing Poseidon with Amphitrite, and Ares with Aphrodite. The Seasons, Graces, Muses and Fates, all Olympian daughters



Figure 1.4 The Sophilos dinos, procession of the gods for the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. From right, Poseidon and Amphitrite in chariot, Ares and Aphrodite in chariot accompanied by the Muses. Lower register: stag and lions.  
Photo © Trustees of The British Museum



Figure 1.5 The Sophilos dinos, detail. From right, Athena and Artemis in chariot, Okeanos, Tethys and Eileithyia, Hephaistos. Photo © Trustees of The British Museum

of Zeus, are appropriate to a wedding with its joyful celebration and promise of offspring.<sup>89</sup> At the end of the procession walk Thetis' grandparents, Okeanos (portrayed as a river god) followed by his wife, Tethys, with the Olympian birth goddess Eileithyia, and last of all, Hephaistos on a donkey. Sophilos' limited pantheon is consistent with the Athenian cultic environment, where Demeter, Dionysos and Hephaistos were important, yet it is more attuned to Panhellenic myth than to local cult.<sup>90</sup> He expresses the concept of “all the gods” by uniting a host of Olympian deities with the earth-dwelling guests (Okeanos, Cheiron, Chariklo, nymphs) of Peleus and Thetis. The underworld is ignored, for Hades and the dead would be unwelcome at a wedding.

So far, we have explored the “meaningful god set,” which is defined cognitively, and the “local pantheon,” which is defined geographically. We compared these with examples of “limited pantheons” in poetry and art, which result from the interaction of local and Panhellenic traditions with narrative and visual constraints. A different way of representing “all the gods,” used primarily in cultic contexts, was the “condensed pantheon,” an *explicitly* limited selection of gods which could stand for the whole.<sup>91</sup> So far as we know, condensed pantheons did not begin to appear until the late sixth century (522/1), when according to Thucydides (6.54.6), the younger Peisistratos founded an altar dedicated to “The Twelve Gods.” The exact composition of these twelve is not known; the site of the altar in the NW agora has been excavated, but no trace of divine iconography from the earliest period was uncovered.<sup>92</sup> Around this time, Athenian vase painters developed an interest in assemblies constructed around the new myth of Herakles’ apotheosis and reception on Olympos. Although very few painters aimed for a set of exactly twelve gods, both the “assembly” vases and the altar in the agora suggest new currents of thought about which gods had a claim to a special, exclusive status, whether as “Olympians” or as members of a numerically restricted group.<sup>93</sup>

That the Panhellenic sanctuary of Olympia also organized a condensed pantheon around the number twelve, and did so as early as the sixth century, is suggested by the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*, which describes Hermes preparing a sacrificial meal with twelve equal portions beside the banks of the Alpheios river.<sup>94</sup> Although the name “Twelve Gods” is not used, Pindar speaks of “six twin altars” at Olympia, and from a fragment of the Greek historian Herodorus, we learn that these were dedicated respectively to Zeus Olympios and Poseidon, Hera and Athena, Hermes and Apollo, the Charites (who apparently counted as one) and Dionysos, Artemis and Alpheios, and Kronos and Rhea.<sup>95</sup> This group is distinctive, reflecting local traditions, such as the myth of Artemis’ pursuit by the river god Alpheios, and the rare worship of the Titans Kronos and Rhea. Several “major” gods, including Demeter and Aphrodite, are missing. The three same-sex pairs are complemented by three opposite-sex pairs with erotic or nuptial connotations. Yet in spite of the evident “local” character of this condensed pantheon, only Zeus is supplied with an *epiclēsis* (“Olympios”). The other members of the group are all of Panhellenic renown, and even the local river Alpheios is mentioned by both Homer and Hesiod.<sup>96</sup>

During the sixth century, then, Greek communities began to favor the number twelve as a limiting criterion for condensation of their local pantheons. As noted

earlier, Parker's count of indispensable gods also amounts to twelve or thirteen. Thus, the number twelve is large enough to allow coverage of the key gods in the pantheon of a typical Greek city, even as it exerts pressure toward generalization (e.g. the stripping of the *epiclēsis*) and Panhellenization along epic lines. Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Hittite parallels for groups of twelve deities have been suggested, and these may have played a role, yet the number twelve recurs in many Greek cultural contexts.<sup>97</sup> Beyond this, it has the conceptual and iconographic advantage of being divisible by two, three, four and six, so that gods can be broken down into pairs or other combinations; the extant archaeological evidence bears witness to a fascination with these possibilities, and structuralist studies have fruitfully interpreted the resonances thus created.<sup>98</sup> Plato was sensitive to the number twelve, and attracted to the potential for systematization it presented; in the *Laws*, he organized the tribes and monthly festival calendar of his ideal city around the Twelve Gods, but idiosyncratically included Plouton without specifying the composition of the members.<sup>99</sup>

"Twelve Gods" cults came to be associated with the concept of foundation (as at Olympia) and with the heroic expeditions to the boundaries of the known world that established a Hellenic presence overseas. Agamemnon is supposed to have founded an altar to the Twelve at Cape Lekton in the Troad, and Jason at the "Sanctuary" (Hieron), a landmark location on the Bosporos.<sup>100</sup> In contrast to Archaic condensed pantheons occurring in the Greek homeland, such as those of Olympia and Athens, these later references to groups of Twelve express an overtly Panhellenic perspective, where the exact composition of the Twelve is less relevant than the fact that they are a distinctively Greek group of gods.<sup>101</sup> At the height of its empire, Athens promoted the ideology of Panhellenism, presenting itself as an exemplar of what it meant to be a Greek city. Perikles is said to have proposed a Panhellenic congress and spearheaded a Panhellenic colony at Thourioi, while foreigners were encouraged to honor Demeter and Kore at Eleusis, as though the Attic goddesses were universal Greek deities.<sup>102</sup> The east frieze of the Parthenon (completed in 438/7) includes twelve gods seated in two groups of six to witness the Panathenaic procession. Zeus, Hera, Ares, Demeter, Dionysos and Hermes are on the left side of the frieze, and on the right, Athena, Hephaistos, Poseidon, Apollo, Artemis and Aphrodite. The frieze melds a Homeric and Panhellenizing vision of the major gods in the pantheon (Hera and Ares) with the realities of cult and worship (Demeter and Dionysos).<sup>103</sup>

The Hellenistic period saw the spread of the Twelve Gods cult to many Greek cities, where they became guardians of civic harmony and prosperity.<sup>104</sup> Cults of the Twelve resisted standardization and manifested themselves in ways that reflected local priorities. The cult at Delos, for example, is thought to have been organized with four altars of three gods each, an arrangement which would have accommodated the distinctive Delian triad of Apollo, Artemis and Leto.<sup>105</sup> At Magnesia on the Maiandros, a Hellenistic decree (197/6) concerning the cult of Zeus Sosipolis ("Savior of the City") prescribed a procession with individual wooden images of the Twelve Gods, which were brought to a circular area (*tholos*) in the agora near their altar. Three couches (presumably to hold four gods each) and musicians were to be provided. The procession took place in conjunction with

separate observances for the key civic deities Zeus Sosipolis, Artemis Leukophryene and Apollo Pythios. In spite of the fact that most localities were able to list “their” Twelve, the lack of specificity in the very concept of “the Twelve” must have facilitated the transmission of the cult from one local context to another. Moreover, the Twelve Gods could be worshiped as a plurality alongside one or more of its individual members.<sup>106</sup>

Given the significant role of Twelve Gods cults in civic ideology, and their relationship to mental representations of the pantheon, it is not surprising that when rulers began to be deified, they attempted to associate themselves with Twelve Gods cults. Beginning in the mid-fourth century, Philip II, Alexander and their successors found alternative solutions to the predicament faced by Herakles, who was said to have refused membership in the Twelve on the grounds that one of the existing members would have to be expelled to make way for him. In a procession at Aigai where images of the Twelve were carried into the theater, Philip had his own statue displayed in such a way that it would be difficult to see him as anything other than the Thirteenth God.<sup>107</sup> At Athens the orator Demades later proposed that Alexander be enrolled as the Thirteenth God, a suggestion which was soundly rejected, although we also hear that Alexander succeeded in having many Greek cities add him to the Twelve. Subsequent rulers attempted to achieve membership by proximity: on Delos, the temple to the Twelve has produced the remains of two colossal statues of Hellenistic kings.<sup>108</sup>

The Twelve Gods were a group of variable composition, and this potential for variation allowed the Twelve to express either a local or Panhellenic identity, depending on the context. The Twelve Gods are therefore to be distinguished from the familiar “Twelve Olympians” of mythology textbooks, a group whose membership seems to have become canonical only in 217, when the Roman Dii Consentes were syncretized with a selection of gods from the Greek pantheon. (The occasion was an attempt to appease the gods after Hannibal’s victory at Lake Trasimene.) The Romans held a banquet with food placed before twelve statues, arranged in male-female pairs on six couches.<sup>109</sup> This Graeco-Roman condensed pantheon corresponded to the Parthenon Twelve, but excluded Dionysos/Liber in favor of Hestia/Vesta, presumably because of Vesta’s greater importance for the Romans. It still serves us today as a conceptual filter, a Panhellenizing first approach to the Greek gods in all their unmanageable multiplicity.

## **ESSAY 1.2: HOMER’S HERA AND THE HERA(S) OF CULT**

Next we turn to the dynamic relationship between Panhellenic and local concepts of Hera. The differences outweigh the similarities, yet the portrait of Hera in the *Iliad* reveals knowledge of the Argolic goddess, while local worship of Hera often reflected the influence of epic. Epic poetry aimed to present a coherent picture of Hera by locating her on Olympos and shaping the Olympian pantheon as a patriarchal family ruled by Zeus. Yet epic Hera’s special characteristics of partisanship and ferocity reflect her cultic history as the preeminent goddess of the Argolid and

To delight you with boxing and dance and song.  
 Whoever met them, the Ionians assembled,  
 Would call them deathless and unaging,  
 For he would see the grace (*charis*) of all,  
 And the sight of the men, and the women  
 With lovely belts, and the swift ships,  
 And their great wealth would delight his heart.

(*Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 146–155)

Just as we approach powerful people with tokens of respect, requests for favors and thanks for benefits received, the Greeks offered gifts to the gods for the sake of *timē* (honor), *charis* (gratitude) and *chreia* (need), the three reasons for sacrifice suggested by Theophrastus.<sup>164</sup> The view that offerings to the gods were bribes or commercial exchanges is a reflective critique of intuitive belief and practice. Although regularly renewed since ancient times, this critique misrepresents the actual dynamics of worship.

Narratives about the establishment of Greek cults tended to feature a god's outright demand for *timē*. This initial coercion was transformed into a relationship characterized by respectful awe rather than abject fear. Whereas myths often warned of the gods' coercive powers, cult practice almost always attempted to establish or maintain reciprocity. In cases where deities were not perceived as amenable to reciprocity, people dealt with them using magic, a topic to which we will return in Chapter 3.

## Notes

- 1 Philosophers: this line of reasoning follows Wittgenstein in shifting focus away from truth claims to “forms of life.” That is, the significance of religious beliefs lies in how people live, not whether gods exist. See Kishik 2008.113–16.
- 2 Geertz 1968.4; Bellah 1991.21.
- 3 Otto 1924 [1917]; Eliade 1959.
- 4 In this book, I sometimes use “gods” as shorthand for the wide variety of culturally postulated superhuman beings found in polytheistic traditions. With respect to Greek religion, this category includes gods and goddesses; heroes, heroines and other powerful dead; nymphs and other nature spirits; and assorted *daimones*.
- 5 Marx 1970 [1844].131; Durkheim 1915.47; Freud 1928.39.
- 6 Smith 1982.xi. For refutation of anthropologists’ doubts about the value of “religion” as an etic category see Boyer 1994.29–60, and for the historical use of the term “religion” within the discipline of Classics, see Bremmer 1998b.10–14.
- 7 Spiro 1987.197, reprinted from a 1966 article entitled “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation.” Compare Renfrew 2007.113–14. As Burkert notes (1996.7n.23), Spiro’s definition insists on culture, but the basic mechanism is extracultural.
- 8 Pyysäinen 2003.53. Compare Pyysiäinen 2002a on the problem of defining religion. Barrett (2011.232) declines to give a definition of religion, arguing that cognitive science “does not pretend to exhaustively explain everything that might be called ‘religion’ (provocative book titles aside).” He is, presumably, referring to Pascal Boyer’s *Religion Explained* (2001).
- 9 Counterintuitive: Atran (2002.13–14), who has proposed a synthesis of cognitive theory with “commitment theory” (focusing on the dynamics of costs and benefits to the

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- group and individual), defines religion as the “passionate communal display of costly commitment to counterintuitive worlds governed by supernatural agents.”
- 10 Polythetic: Sperber 2004.750.
- 11 Mental tools: also referred to in the literature as modules (e.g. Sperber 1994) or systems (e.g. Boyer 2001). Sperber and Hirschfeld 2004.41 give a summary of the best-documented mental tools, which include theory of mind, folk biology and face recognition. Susceptibilities: for dispositions (effects which have been positively selected for in biological evolution) versus susceptibilities (side effects of dispositions) see Sperber 1996.67.
- 12 On the alleged non-theism of Theravada Buddhism, see Spiro 1987.189–97. In my view, Theravada Buddhism is either a religion which includes a set of non-theistic doctrines of varying relevance for practitioners or a non-theistic philosophy which has become (for most practitioners) a religion.
- 13 See the critique by anthropologist James Laidlaw (2007.213), a specialist in Buddhism and Jainism, who suggests that cognitive scientists successfully explain “what the Enlightenment called ‘Natural Religion’ and ‘superstition,’” but not religion or the specifics of religious traditions.
- 14 Vulnerable to caricature: as Parker (2014) observes.
- 15 Political and social: for religion as political ideology see e.g. Knapp 1996. For a history of theoretical perspectives in Greek religion see Morris 1998.
- 16 Boyer 1994.3: “The content and organization of religious ideas depend, in important ways, on noncultural properties of the human mind-brain.” Barrett 2004.21: “Belief in gods arises because of the natural functioning of completely normal mental tools working in common natural and social contexts.” It should be noted that scholars sympathetic to theism (e.g. Visala 2011) have been attracted to CSR for this very reason. On the analogy of natural language acquisition see Whitehouse 2004.29.
- 17 Specifics: For this problem see Whitehouse 2007 (calling for an integration of causal explanation and interpretive methodologies). Compare the caveats of Kindt 2012.44 and Day 2005.86–88 (e.g. the suggestion that the conceptual toolbox of cognitive theory is “infinitely removed from the facts that most scholars of religion want to understand”). Cross-cultural: while I avoid the term “human universal,” the evidence suggests that every individual is born with a susceptibility to religion. Furthermore religious beliefs and behaviors are found in every (or nearly every) culture. Whether religion is truly “universal” is a red herring; what requires explanation is its near-ubiquity across cultures. On human universals and cultural relativism see Brown 1991.
- 18 Embedded: e.g. Price 1999.3: “There is no religious sphere separate from politics and warfare or private life; instead, religion is embedded in all aspects of life, public and private.” In spite of this embeddedness, a cognitivist approach suggests that the *causal* factors producing religious beliefs and practices can be distinguished from those driving other aspects of culture.
- 19 Marathon: Hdt. 6.106.3. Thermopylai: Hdt. 7.206.1. On functionalism see Sperber 1996.47–9.
- 20 No private religions: Gould 1985.4. Compare Pyysiäinen 2003.233. Most if not all cognitivists would agree with Sørensen (2007.47) that cognitive constraints on the mind are not sufficient to explain cultural phenomena. They are, however, necessary to explain them.
- 21 Credence: the most educated and skeptical thinkers “purified myth of the marvelous” but did not question the historicity of heroes, the Trojan War and so forth. See Veyne 1988.41–57.
- 22 No word for religion: the lack of an explicit category of “the religious” in a given culture need not mean that people lack an implicit concept, nor that the category is not useful from an etic perspective. Boyer (1994.31) gives the example of the distinction between an ungrammatical sentence and a meaningless one – everyone intuitively recognizes the difference without having a word for it.

- 23 Renfrew (2007.113) also discusses this definition.
- 24 For the categories “religion,” “mythology” and “ritual,” including the relationship between Greek myth and religion, see Bremmer 1998b.10–24.
- 25 “One”: *Rig Veda* 10.129. For the parallelism between concepts of unity in the *Rig Veda* and the pre-Socratic philosophers, see Mendoza 2011.29–30; Bernabé and Mendoza 2013.
- 26 Isis: Versnel 1990.39–95, 2011.283–301.
- 27 For Herodotus’ inconsistent use of terminology relating to gods and heroes, and for his concept of divine unity see Harrison 2000.158–81. Common among the Greeks: Harrison 2000.171–5; Versnel 2011.268–80. Sources collected (mostly in French translation) in François 1957.
- 28 Some historians (e.g. Price 1984.10–11, citing Needham 1972) have denied that “belief as a religious term” was operative in ancient Greek religion, arguing instead that it is a Christian construct. “Belief” was not often articulated as a central component of piety, because assent to the existence of gods who intervene in human affairs was a shared but largely intuitive and tacit inference. See also Price 1999.126–7 and Versnel 2011.292, 539–59 (esp. 540n.6, citing cognitive approaches which affirm, *contra* Needham, that belief is a natural capacity shared by all human beings). Compare Barrett 2004.1–19 on what cognitivists mean by “belief.” For interdependency of belief and ritual see Yunis 1988.38–58; Kowalzig 2007.2.
- 29 For our purposes this reduces the usefulness of rational choice theory, another relatively new approach to religion pioneered by Rodney Stark. For an introduction see the essays in Young 1997.
- 30 For colonization from pre- and non-polis communities during the eighth century, see Antonaccio 1999.112–13.
- 31 Unity: Burkert 1985.8. For “Greek religions” see Price 1999.ix, 1–10. As he points out, this terminology usefully foregrounds regional variation. For caveats about “shared” gods and rituals see Polinskaya 2010.48–54.
- 32 Stressing continuity in the polis against the usual descriptions of civic breakdown: Gruen 1993; Mikalson 1998.288–323.
- 33 Shared: there is debate over exactly when the majority of Greeks began to think of themselves explicitly as “Hellenes.” The current tendency is to place this development quite late and to assign a weightier role in the early Archaic period to family and civic identity: see Konstan 2001.31–6; Hall 2002a.168–220, 2004.50.
- 34 This is not to suggest that epic poetry utterly neglects cultic understandings of the gods in favor of mythic ones. Homer does in fact mention the cult of Zeus Herkeios (*Od.* 22.333–6), and we know from other sources that this title and function of Zeus were widespread.
- 35 Temple to Olympian Zeus: Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 5.20 (1313b).
- 36 Pheidias: compare Polyb. 30.10.6, Strabo 8.3.30.
- 37 Compelling: Epstein and Pacini 1999.463. (Although they refer to the two processes as “experiential” and “rational,” intuitive beliefs are not to be regarded as “irrational” but instead merely nonreflective. Most intuitive beliefs are for all practical purposes correct; otherwise we would not be able to function in daily life). For overviews of dual-process approaches, see Chaiken and Trope 1999; Tremlin 2005, 2006.172–182; Evans and Frankish eds. 2009.
- 38 The sun’s movement: Barrett 1999.324.
- 39 Terminology: Sperber 1997, esp. 78–9, describing how reflective concepts and beliefs arise from the human capacity for metarepresentation (for which see Chapter 2 and the glossary in this volume). See also Mercier and Sperber 2009, reconciling the dual-process model with the cognitivist theory of mental modules specialized for various tasks. Some aspects of the intuitive/reflective distinction were anticipated by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Vilfredo Pareto (for a summary see Evans-Pritchard 1965.78–99).

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- 40 I have borrowed Stowers's phrase "the religion of everyday social exchange" and elements of his description (Stowers 2011.37–9) but I differ with his views in other respects.
- 41 I draw the term "epistemological uncertainty" from Stowers 2011.39. Cf. Burkert 1996.6 on the "knowledge barrier" (*adēlotēs*). For interaction with gods as a fundamentally social activity, but with the difference that unlike human agents, gods always possess "strategic information," see Boyer 2002.77; Tremlin 2006.113–121. On "strategic information" see further Chapter 2.
- 42 Theology: Henrichs 2010.21 cites the first appearance of the word *theologia* in Pl. *Resp.* 379a6. Arist. *Metaph.* 14.4 (1091a29–b112) refers to "theologians" whom he identifies with the early cosmogonic poets.
- 43 Epstein and Pacini's model stresses that the "rational" (i.e. reflective) mode is highly verbal and mediated by language. They write (1999.463) that the intuitive/experiential system can be a source of creativity "at its higher reaches, and particularly in interaction with the rational [i.e. reflective] system." For our purposes, I have included the visual arts within the category of "reflection" on religion because they involve metarepresentation. For "visual theology" see Elsner 1996.518.
- 44 "Theological correctness": Barrett 1999.
- 45 Inconsistency: Versnel 2011.60–87, 83–6, 517–25. The example of the Zeuses comes from Mikalson 1989.70–3 (cf. Mikalson 1991.3–5), who discusses the paradox that these and several other Zeuses were "treated, particularly in cult, as different, independent, deities." On this topic in relation to cult titles, see Parker 2003.182. As Boyer (1994.41) notes, it is fallacious to assume that the religious representations in a given culture are integrated and logically consistent.
- 46 Certain duties that we might consider administrative or mundane were, however, sacred in the eyes of Athenians. On a red-figure amphora in the Peiraeus Museum (Inv. 7341), Athena supervises the transport and pouring of her sacred olive oil by two citizen men: Themelis 2007.21–6.
- 47 On interpreting material culture in terms of specific beliefs see Morris 1998.34–5.
- 48 Epithets: e.g. Hom. *Il.* 1.14 (Far-Shooter, or perhaps Sure-Shooter), 1.37 (silver bow). Mantiklos' dedication: Day 1994.39–43; Depew 1997.238.
- 49 Outside a ritual context: for this key distinction see Price 1984.115; Ullucci 2011.60.
- 50 Using Homer as evidence: for a recent discussion see Whitley 1991.34–9 (concluding that Homer can at best provide "useful suggestions" for interpreting late Dark Age society). Comparison of six sacrificial scenes in Homer: Kirk 1981.64–70. On literary texts as sources for religion, see Harrison 2007, and for tragedy see the differing approaches of Mikalson 1991 and Sourvinou-Inwood 2003.
- 51 Herakles relief: Robinson 1948; van Straten 1995 fig. 93 (R90). The figure of Herakles on the relief imitates a lost statue sculpted by Lysippos.
- 52 Vase: Louvre G 496; van Straten 1995 fig. 152 (V200).
- 53 Van Straten 1995.186–92. For the individual's "different degree of involvement with the sacrifice depicted" on vase and votive relief, see van Straten 2005.27.
- 54 Victim species: van Straten 1987.161–7, with discussion of methodological issues. Post-kill: van Straten 1995.186–92. On interpreting sacrificial scenes in vase paintings and votive reliefs, cf. Lissarague 2012.565–70.
- 55 For the god's portion, see Ekrøth 2007. For bovids and caprids, the femora (sometimes wrapped in fat) and/or the sacrum and tail were the preferred portion. For adult pigs, different procedures obtained, possibly the burning of bits of meat as in Hom. *Od.* 14.419–38. Preferences of vase buyers: van Straten 1995.24.
- 56 On the abnormality of human sacrifice in Greek religion see Bonnechere 1994.311–18, 2007.
- 57 Bizarreness is culturally relative; counterintuitiveness is not. A plant that eats people is counterintuitive because it violates a fundamental inference about the category "plant"; a plant named George is merely strange. Plants that eat people occur regularly

- in fantasy books and films precisely because they are minimally counterintuitive. It is unlikely that plants with funny names will ever have the same appeal.
- 58 My explanation of MCIs is adapted from those of Boyer 2001.51–91 and Barrett 2004.22–30. Cf. Atran 2002.95–107, Pyysäinen 2002b.
- 59 Kelly and Keil 1985.408, 413–15 (additionally, conscious beings were more likely to be transformed into mammals or birds than into reptiles, amphibians, fish or insects).
- 60 The Greeks had a tendency to endow abstract concepts with agency, but not in narratives of metamorphosis. Personifications such as “Justice” and “Grace” seem to arise instead from strongly anthropomorphizing (Chapter 2) habits of thought and corresponding narrative traditions.
- 61 Barrett 2004.26–7, citing “Chivo Man,” a man-goat hybrid believed by some to haunt a citrus ranch in modern-day California. Chivo Man is derived from Mexican folklore.
- 62 Boyer 2001.135.
- 63 Truly emic: Evans-Pritchard (1965.24, 43, 47) memorably argued that many scholarly attempts to think emically amount to the “If I were a horse” fallacy. For emic vs. etic approaches to Greek culture see Versnel 1991.184–5; Bremmer 2007.139–43.
- 64 Durkheim 1915.206. For the need to avoid labeling phenomena as exclusively “social” or “religious” see Morris 1998.32–7. For a critique of Durkheim from a cognitive perspective see Bloch 1989.1–18, 106–36 (against Durkheim’s claim that cognitive categories are entirely social in origin); Pyysäinen 2003.55–75.
- 65 For a recent formulation of the long-standing scholarly dogma that practice (i.e. ritual) trumps belief in Greek religion see e.g. Price 1999.3. Cf. the statements to this effect by Burkert, Cartledge, Osborne and others, collected in Versnel 2011.544–5.
- 66 While some Classicists (e.g. van Straten and Versnel) have never lost sight of the gods, increased disciplinary focus on the gods and Greek theology is evident in Bremmer and Erskine eds. 2010 and Naiden 2013. For critique of the view that ritual is primary and fixed while the gods are fluid and variable see Scullion 1994.76–7.
- 67 Thales 11 A 22 *DK* (= Arist. *De an.* 411a7–8). On managing pantheons see Georgoudi 1996; Parker 2011.70–73; Versnel 2011.1–149, 501–15; Polinskaya 2013.87–115.
- 68 Avoiding offense: Versnel 1981b.13, 2011.501 with n. 2.
- 69 Meaningful god set: Polinskaya (2013.92; cf. Levy 1990.273–4) defines a “meaningful god set” as the set of deities that “have common significance and salience for a local community.” The scientists (Roberts, Chiao and Pandey 1975) who coined the term, however, were working with individuals. Their Chinese and Hindu informants had meaningful god sets of about fifteen, in spite of their knowledge of 60–100 gods.
- 70 Agents: but note that a superhuman agent may be salient for an individual or group even if that agent is not, or not regularly, the object of cult (Roberts, Chiao and Pandey 1975.123); the Christian Satan is a good example.
- 71 Erchia: *LSCG* no. 18 (= *SEG* 21.541). For this calendar see Jameson 1965; Parker 2005.65–71; Mikalson 2010.48–50.
- 72 The Erchia calendar is divided into five sections labeled alpha through epsilon, each of which represents equal expenses. Most such calendars were inscribed less as ritual *aides-mémoires* than as financial records. The five sections were probably assigned to five “liturgists” or wealthy community members expected to fund the sacrifices. For religion in the Attic demes see Mikalson 1977; Parker 1987, 2005.50–78.
- 73 Who dwell: *SEG* 19.698 (Kolophon; late fourth century). Local: Thuc. 2.74. For these and other such expressions as a way of ordering the pantheon see Versnel 2011.88–119.
- 74 On *epiclēseis*: Brûlé 1998; Parker 2003.
- 75 Parker 2011.71.
- 76 Gods in Homer: Dee 1994. Dowden (2007.45) provides a chart with numerical tabulation.
- 77 Homeric expressions: e.g. Hom. *Il.* 1.494 (gods who are forever), 2.30 (Olympian abodes), 3.298 (immortal gods). As for the heroes, there is debate over when their worship originated; see Chapter 5.

## 52 What is Greek religion?

- 78 “Homer” is to be understood as shorthand for the collective oral tradition plus one or more individuals who ultimately committed the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to writing.
- 79 The name of the Titaness Themis means “divine law.” Such personified abstracts were characteristic of Greek theology as far back as we can trace it, and they often appeared in cult. See Stafford 2000.1–44.
- 80 Aphrodite, we later learn (Hom. *Il.* 21.416–33), attempts to help Ares but is wounded by Athena.
- 81 Tripartite system: Homer (*Il.* 15.186–93) offers a different tripartite arrangement in the myth of the division of the cosmos between Zeus, Poseidon and Hades. The inclusion of Leto, the mother of Artemis and Apollo, is surprising, yet epic tradition makes her a resident of Olympos, and she is more plausible as a partisan of the Trojans than any of the other major deities.
- 82 Hesiod’s one major concession to cultic matters in the *Theogony* is an embedded “hymn” to the goddess Hekate (*Theog.* 411–52) describing the extensive benefits she confers on mortals.
- 83 Both epithets: Hes. *Theog.* 1, 25. Cf. Hes. *Op.* 1, “Muses from Pieria” (= Olympos, both the mountain and the heavenly place).
- 84 For Hera, see Essay 1.2. On the un-Olympian character of Demeter see Shapiro 1989.139. As agricultural deities both she and Dionysos are in some sense earthbound. Hesiod’s main narrative describes Aphrodite (*Theog.* 190–8) as an elder goddess born from the severed genitals of Ouranos; however, the appearance of Dione in these lines appears to follow the Homeric tradition (Hom. *Il.* 5.370–84) in which Aphrodite is Zeus’ daughter by that goddess. Such inconsistencies result from the techniques of oral composition.
- 85 Hesiod does not recount Prometheus’ creation of man but perhaps assumes it. He attributes the creation of woman to Zeus and Hephaistos (Hes. *Theog.* 560–612, *Op.* 70–82).
- 86 Okeanos: e.g. Aesch. *PV* 136–43; Hdt. 4.36.2 (skeptical of the popular view); Pl. *Phd.* 112c. Kronos ruled over the Isles of the Blessed: e.g. Hes. *Op.* 166–75; Pind. *Ol.* 2.67–73.
- 87 Sophilos dinos: Williams 1983. All the gods: Hom. *Il.* 24.59–63. Compare Bremmer (1999.15), who focuses on the depiction of hierarchy in the scene, and Shapiro 2012 for assemblies of gods. Polinskaya (2013.97) is skeptical about the use of visual sources to explore Greek pantheons. The reservations of Laurens (1998.61) apply to a specific type of vase with non-narrative groupings of gods.
- 88 For our immediate purposes, the “Olympian” gods are not “the major gods” but those regularly described as dwelling on Olympos. By this criterion, Themis, Leto and Hebe are quintessential Olympians, as are the Muses.
- 89 Poseidon-Amphitrite and Ares-Aphrodite: Hes. *Theog.* 930–7. The group as a whole has strong affinities with Hesiod’s description of Zeus’ consorts and offspring (*Theog.* 901–23), including Themis, the female pluralities, Leto, Hebe and Eileithyia.
- 90 Williams (1983.30) interprets the collocation of Demeter and Dionysos in Eleusinian terms.
- 91 I draw the term “condensed pantheon” from Georgoudi 1998.76: “un mini-panthéon grec, une sorte de panthéon condensé.”
- 92 Altar in Athens: Hdt. 6.108.4; Long 1987.62–6, 159–66; Shapiro 1989.133–41; Georgoudi 1996.43–50. A damaged relief cylinder of unknown function, dating no earlier than the second half of the fourth century, was found near the site (Long 1987.6–7). Of the gods depicted, Poseidon, Demeter with Athena, Zeus with Hera, and Apollo are securely identified.
- 93 Assemblies and Herakles: Shapiro 1989.133–41.
- 94 The exact location of Hermes’ banquet has been debated and it is not certain that the etiology refers to Olympia. For recent treatments see Georgoudi 1996.66–70; Johnston and Mulroy 2009.8–11; Versnel 2011.309–77.

- 95 Twin altars: Pind. *Ol.* 5.1–7, ca. 452. Cf. Pind. *Ol.* 10.43–53 (Herakles finds the cult); Long 1987.58–62, 154–7. Herodotus: *FGrH* 31 F 34a-b (ca. 400). Among a profusion of altars in the Altis, Pausanias (5.14.4–10) mentions double altars for Artemis with Alpheios, Apollo with Hermes, and Dionysos with the Charites, as well as an altar of Zeus Laoitas and Poseidon Laoitas, but the theme of twelve gods had been lost by this period.
- 96 Alpheios: Hom. *Od.* 3.489 (grandfather of Diokles); Hes. *Theog.* 338 (one of the twenty-five sons of Okeanos).
- 97 Near Eastern parallels: Long 1987.139–52; Rutherford 2010. Number twelve: Weinreich 1924–1937, cols. 767–72.
- 98 Divisibility: Sissa and Detienne 2000.158. Resonances: e.g. Vernant 1983.127–75 (on Hestia and Hermes).
- 99 Plat. *Leg.* 745de, 828b-d. Compare Plat. *Phaedr.* 246e-247a, where eleven gods, who are not fully enumerated, drive chariots through the sky, ensuring the order of the cosmos, while Hestia remains “alone in the house of the gods.”
- 100 Agamemnon: Strab. 13.1.48. Jason: Ap. Rhod. *Arg.* 2. 531–4 with scholia; Polyb. 4.39.5–6. The scholiasts supply lists of the twelve at the Bosporos site, where Hades seems to have been included.
- 101 Foundation and Hellenism: Georgoudi 1996.74–5, 1998.73–7; Rutherford 2010.53–4. A Twelve Gods cult was also attributed to Deukalion, the Greek counterpart of Noah, who founded an altar to the Twelve after the flood. One of Deukalion’s sons was Hellen, ancestor of the Hellenes (Hellanicus *FGrH* 4 F 6).
- 102 Panhellenism: Plut. *Per.* 17 (congress); Diod. Sic. 12.9–11 (Thourioi); Hall 2002a.206–7. Eleusis: Suk Fong Jim 2014.207–19.
- 103 All the gods of the frieze can be linked to Athenian cults in one way or another (for examples see Long 1987.169–73). Viewers may have perceived them on either the local or the Panhellenic levels, but the presence of Hera and Ares (both relatively insignificant in Attic cult) and the absence of Herakles show that this is not a “meaningful god set” for most Athenians.
- 104 Civic harmony: Georgoudi 1996.62–4.
- 105 For Delos see Long 1987.87–90, 182, 198–201; Georgoudi 1996.59–62.
- 106 Magnesia on the Maiandros: *LSAM* 32 (= *SEG* 46.1467; *IMagn.* 98); Long 1987.53–4. Plurality: Georgoudi 1996.77–8, 1998.82–3; Versnel 2011.270, 510–15.
- 107 Herakles: Diod. Sic. 4.39.4. Philip: Diod. Sic. 16.92.5, 95.1.
- 108 Alexander: Ael. *VH* 5.12. Add: Luc. *Dial. mort.* 13.2. Colossal: Long 1987.199–200.
- 109 For the Dii Consentes and the *lectisternium* of 217 see Long 1987.96–7, 235–9.
- 110 On this tutelary pattern and its conflict with Panhellenic religion see Parker 2011. 86–7.
- 111 Current scholarly consensus holds that in the Archaic period, Hera was more closely associated with Mycenae and the eastern Argive plain than with Argos itself. Thus the Homeric epithet may refer to the “Argeia” or Argive plain and environs. Discussion: Hall 1995; Auffarth 2006.78–81; Kowalzig 2007.167.
- 112 Compare the opposing prayers to Hera and Athena in Eur. *Phoen.* 1364–76.
- 113 Linear B: both goddesses are mentioned in Pylos tablet Tn316. For text and translation see Palaima 2004.120–1.
- 114 “Husband of Hera”: Hom. *Il.* 7.411, 10.5, 10.329, 13.154, 16.88. Compare the name Poseidon, which seems to be composed of *posis* “husband” plus the name of an unknown goddess: O’Brien 1993.121–2. On Hera and Zeus at the Argive Heraion see Pfaff 2013.278n.9.
- 115 On Zeus see Cook 1914–40 and Farnell 1896–1909, Vol. 1.35–178 (both methodologically out of date but still useful for the collected information); Dowden 2006; Larson 2007.15–28. Linke (2006) suggests that Zeus was avoided as a polis deity precisely because his supremacy was problematic in the context of intra-polis competition, whereas he could safely oversee competition at Panhellenic sanctuaries.