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Greek Religion, Hades, Hera and Scapegoat, and Transmigration

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Published in:
EPRINTS-BOOK-TITLE

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2005

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Bremmer, J. N. (2005). Greek Religion, Hades, Hera and Scapegoat, and Transmigration. In *EPRINTS-BOOK-TITLE*

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GREEK RELIGION has long been the most important religion for Western European scholars who attempted to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of religion. Great historians of religion, from Vico and Herder to Friedrich Max Müller, Jane Ellen Harrison and Frazer of *The Golden Bough*, all steeped themselves in the religious legacy of the Greeks whom they considered superior to all other nations of the past. The study of Greek religion, then, is already several centuries old. The persistent efforts of classicists to collect and analyse the ancient Greek sources, be they coins, texts, vases, statues, inscriptions and excavations, have supplied a basis that is more firm and varied than is available for the study of any other ancient religion.

The basic character of Greek religion is clear. Like the other religions of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, Greek religion was embedded. In other words, there was no sphere of life without a religious aspect. 'Church' and 'state' were not yet separated, as is the rule in the modern world, with the exception of a few countries, such as Islamic Iran and Saudi-Arabia or the Roman-Catholic Philippines. Consequently, there is not Greek term for 'religion', which as a concept is the product of eighteenth-century Europe. The absence of the concept 'religion' also meant that there was not a distinction between sacred and profane, which became conceptualized only in Western Europe around 1900. The Greeks had no term for 'profane', but a relatively large vocabulary for 'holy'. The most important term was *hieros*, which is everything that has to do with sacred objects, sacred times and sacred buildings – in the felicitous formulation of Walter Burkert: *hieros* is 'as it were the shadow cast by divinity'. This is also the term that lies at the basis for the Greek word for priest, *hierous*, which is already found in Mycenaean times.

Religion was a public affair. Unlike modern European society where religion seems more and more to become a matter of the private sphere, Greek cult was always a public, communal activity. Worship outside that framework was suspect, and silent prayer and magic were relatively late developments. Yet there was an enormous difference with the adjacent countries of the Near East. Among the Greeks, religion was not used to support theocracies, as in Babylon or Egypt, or to limit access to the sacred to the aristocracy, as was the case in Rome. In Greece any citizen could bring sacrifices and there never developed a professional priestly class, like the Israelite priests, the Indian Brahmins, the Celtic Druids or the Iranian mullahs.

(gender)

Unlike Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Greek religion was polytheistic. However, the gods were not just separate individuals, but they all belonged to a pantheon that was supported by a Greek city, the polis. Admittedly, the great early poets, such as Homer and Hesiod, had created a kind of unity in that all these gods were accepted and recognizable all over Greece. Moreover, important cultural and cultic centers, like Olympia and Delphi, helped to establish a degree of homogeneity in worship. Yet every polis worshipped its own pantheon that, to a certain extent, was unique. In Sicily, for example, Demeter was the most prominent divinity, in Athens Athena and on Chios Dionysos. Moreover, small cities could support only a small pantheon, but a big city like Athens had dozens of sanctuaries with their corresponding divinities. Our model, then, is basically a panhellenic one, and the investigation of local religion as a reflection of local identity is still in its initial stages.

It was typical of polytheism that its gods covered only a limited area of life. Unlike God, Jehovah or Allah they were not loving, omnipresent or omnipotent. That is why piety never meant devotion to one god, but rather the proper performance of religious ritual. As the fourth-century politician Isocrates (7.30) observed: 'piety consists not in expensive expenditures, but in changing nothing of what our ancestors have handed down'. Impiety, on the other hand, came closer to our own ideas. It included temple robbery, killing suppliants and the introduction of religious innovations without the consent of the community. Socrates, for example, was executed on the charge of proposing new gods. Tolerance is not a great virtue of either polytheism or monotheism.

The many gods were also useful in explaining the vicissitudes of life in an age without insurance or social welfare. Dreams, accidents shipwrecks, plagues and earthquakes – all could be traced to particular gods and thus be given a place in the Greek worldview. And when the known gods failed, there were always the anonymous gods to take their places, in particular when the gods requested a human sacrifice.

The gods set boundaries that people should not overstep. If they, nevertheless, did so, the most important consequence was the incurring of pollution. In the Greek world, fear of pollution helped to keep the social and religious order intact, even though purity did not play the same role it does in normative Judaism and Islam. Overstepping the divine boundaries could have even cosmic effects, as the Greeks did

not yet separate the human and divine spheres, like in modern Christianity. Grave crimes, like incest or murder, could have the effect that the gods intervened by sending the plague, as was the case when Oedipus had married his mother and Agamemnon offended Apollo's priest Chryses. Pollution was even invoked by the Greeks in cases where modern society would use a rather different kind of vocabulary. Men who practised homosexuality or women who prostituted themselves were considered impure and refused entry into sanctuaries.

Like older Judaism, but unlike medieval Christianity and Islam, Greek life was decidedly directed at this life not that of the hereafter. In fact, the early Greeks had hardly developed a view of the afterlife. This changed in some circles in classical times, but the percentage of Greeks strongly interested in the destination of their soul always remained small. Moreover, as the Greeks had no holy book or dogmas, it was especially in this area that idiosyncratic ideas could flourish. In other areas of life, religion was fairly traditional. Religious education was a 'hands on' business which children received in the family. As they grew up, they would be gradually socialized in the festivals and rituals of men and women, which only slowly adapted themselves to changing times. New ideas were long the territory of the poets who did the circuit of aristocratic courts and wove new ideas about the afterlife or unusual themes from the Near East into their poems. For example, in his *Iliad* Homer adapted cosmogonic themes from the great Oriental epics *Atrahasis* and *Enumah Elish*, and the poet Pindar clearly adapted Orphic (below) views in his *Olympian Ode*. Yet, on the whole, Greek religion changed only slowly during the archaic and classical period (ca. 800-300 BC).

Mycenaean religion (ca. 1400-1200 BC) is the oldest stage of Greek religion that we can reconstruct with some confidence. The many excavations and the decipherment of the Greek language of the period, the so-called Linear-B, enable us to see that many of the Greek divinities already go back to the second millennium. The tablets that survived through the fires that destroyed the palaces in Pylos, Thebes and on Crete have given us the names of Zeus, Hera, Athena, Artemis, Dionysos and Hermes, but not Apollo. Even relatively small gods, such as Paiaon and Enyalios, already existed. On the other hand, some divinities did disappear in the course of time. Zeus' wife Diwija and Poseidon's other half Posidaeja no longer existed in the classical period. As one tablet mentions Zeus, Hera and 'Drimios, son of Zeus', we may also safely accept some kind of Mycenaean mythology; the existence of several Indo-European

themes in classical Greek mythology, such as the kidnapping of Helen, points into the same direction. Continuity of names is no guarantee, though, for continuity in practices. There are very few cult places that can be demonstrated to have survived as such into classical times, and the Mycenaean ritual is hard to recover in the absence of detailed descriptions.

Homeric religion may have preserved some older stages, but scholars have increasingly become reticent in postulating them. Contemporary attention is directed, especially, towards the influence of the Orient and the function of the gods in the epics. The latter have a clear narrative role in that they help to organize the poems and its plots, but they also create a kind of anti-world in which the gods feast on the Olympus free from human toils and troubles and thus emphasize the difference between mortals and immortals. Gods and goddesses can intervene into the human world, even start relationships with them or form special friendships with individual humans, like Athena with Odysseus. Yet they cannot change the natural course of things and save their favorites from death. The gods, too, are subject to Moira, the embodiment of fate.

As poets had to be able to recite and revise the poems of Homer all over Greece, the poems contain few specific ritual names, such as festivals or months, and clearly give a highly stylized picture of contemporary religion. They mention those rituals that were widespread, such as sacrifice, prayer or the funerary rituals, but leave rites of initiation, which must have been still very much alive in the early archaic period, in the background. On the other hand, they avoid as much as possible mention of rites that later times called magical and neither do they report those strange details that make studies of local religion often so fascinating. Occasionally, the poets may have even invented rituals, such as the human sacrifice performed by Achilles in honour of his friend Patroclus.

Archaic and classical religion received its specific 'colour' from the gods, whose statues were everywhere and whose exploits could be seen on the thousands of vases that adorned Greek homes. The distinctive nature of a god was determined by various aspects. First, there was his name, which was often further determined by his epithet, a typically Greek habit, although not unknown in Rome too. Some divinities received the epithet from their place of worship, if they dominated that place, such as Apollo Anaphaios (the small Cycladic island of Anaphe), Artemis Ephesia (Ephesus), Demeter Eleusinia (Eleusis) or Heracles Thasios (Thasos). Other epithets indicated

the function of the god: Artemis Phosphoros ('Bringer of light, salvation'), Hermes Agoraios ('Of the market') or Zeus Ktesios ('Protector of possessions'). Second, the myths about the divinities related their families and deeds. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, for example, detailed the kidnapping of Persephone by Hades and the ways Demeter responded by instituting the Eleusinian Mysteries. The myth thus closely connected Demeter with the institution that glorified her. Myth also told that the goddess Leto had two children, Artemis and Apollo. As all three divinities were connected with initiation, this function probably helped to create their family; at the same time, all three were also closely connected to (south-western) Anatolia and their probable geographical origin may have also contributed to their being a family. Art must have helped to visualise the gods. Vases, statues and mirrors were highly standardised and in this way helped to create a mental image of the gods: Zeus with his lightning, Athena with the owl and Poseidon with his trident. In addition, all kinds of ritual aspects, such as the place of a divinity's festival in the calendar, the location of the sanctuary and the nature of the sacrifices received, contributed to the place of the divinity in the community. It was the sum total of all these factors that created the persona of a Greek divinity.

Unlike the Egyptian gods, Greek gods were very much anthropomorphic. Their frivolous adventures were popular themes in Greek poems and their uncanny behaviour was frequently explored in tragedy. Hesiod related their genealogy in his *Theogony*, in which he was heavily dependent on the epics of the Ancient Near East. His poem established the classic family relationship in which Zeus and Hera were the leading divinities who, together with their brothers, sisters and (half-)children, live on the Olympus. Later times liked to think of them as a group of twelve, of whom Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Athena, Aphrodite, Apollo and Artemis are always mentioned, but Dionysos, Heracles and Hestia less regularly. Their parents Kronos and Rhea were relatively unimportant, as were their grandparents Tethys and the castrated Ouranos; their great-grandmother Gaia is only a shadowy figure. The occurrence of Oriental motifs in the *Theogony* makes it likely that this genealogical system is relatively late and almost certainly postdates the Mycenaean era.

The gods have been systematised in various ways. The Greeks themselves opposed the heavenly gods to the subterranean ones, in particular Hades and his wife Persephone who, due to their inferior position, hardly receive cultic honours. Late antiquity introduced the opposition Olympian and chthonic, which it associated with

different altars and types of worship. Yet recent scholarship has increasingly seen that the distinction is not supported by the pre-Hellenistic evidence. That is why we opt for a distinction between 'orderly' and 'disorderly' or 'central' and 'ec-centric' gods: gods who support the social order and gods who are more removed from or in opposition to that order.

The most important Greek god was undoubtedly Zeus, one of the few Greek gods with an uncontested Indo-European name. At one point he must have progressed from a position as weather god to the supreme divine ruler. It seems likely that some Anatolian influence has played a role, but gods do not exist separate from their worshippers and the mechanics of these shifts in the Greek pantheon (or other panthea!) are still only dimly understood. It is clear, though, that his promotion to the top took place relatively late, as he had only few festivals and hardly any months named after him. He never occupied the same position in cult that we can see in the case of Roman Jupiter or Babylonian Marduk.

Just as Poseidon had a wife Posidæja ('Mrs. Poseidon') in Mycenaean times, so Zeus' first wife must have been Dione ('Mrs. Zeus'), a goddess later worshipped only at the edges of the Greek world. In Homer, though, Hera is already his permanent wife, even though the relationship is not pictured as a happy one. In the *Iliad*, Hera is jealous and Zeus regularly has to penalise her. The difficult relationship perhaps reflects the ambivalent position of Hera within the social order. On the one hand, she is the goddess who 'keeps the keys of wedlock', as Aristophanes says in his *Thesmophoriazusae* (973), but that function seems to have been the consequence of her position as wife of Zeus; her cult as goddess of marriage was certainly panhellenic but not prominent. An older layer becomes visible in the centers of her worship, Argos and Samos. Here Hera's festivals display strong signs of ancient New Year festivals. Moreover, here she is also closely connected with the coming-off-age of both boys and girls, who perhaps demonstrated the newly acquired status of adulthood during the New Year festivals. In any case, it seems that in the course of time this older function receded for the newly found one of goddess of marriage.

The divinity closest to Zeus was Athena who was born from his head. The myth surely reflects the aspect of intelligence that is prominent in Athena: she is closely connected with women's crafts like weaving and male artisans, like the smiths; even the Trojan Horse was built by a carpenter under her supervision. Originally, Athena seems to have been a tutelary goddess of cities, which is probably

her oldest recoverable layer, as in Mycenaean times she received the title Potnia, 'Mistress'. Her temple is attested on many an acropolis, the strategic heart of a Greek city. Her statuette, the Palladium, the name of which comes from her still unexplained title Pallas, functioned as a polis talisman and as such even played a role in Vergil's *Aeneid*. It is not surprising, then, that she often received the epithet Polias or, more literary, Poliouchos. Given this protective role of the city, it is not surprising that, like Hera, Athena too is associated with the growing up of the young generation, especially in Athens.

Apollo's origin is still debated. In recent decades his name had been tied to the yearly Doric assembly, the *apellai*, but etymological rules and the distribution of his name make this less likely. As he was still absent from the Mycenaean tablets, he probably entered Greece from Lycia where his mother Leto was a highly prominent goddess. His connection with initiation has clearly shaped his divine nature to an extent that is hard to parallel with other gods. Aristocratic male youths had to be able to sing, dance and play the lyre, and this explains why Apollo was closely connected with these activities. Male initiation also meant the entering of a new stage of life in which political activities were highly important. That is why Apollo is often associated with the center of political institutions of the polis. In this role he is regularly worshipped as Apollo Lykeios or Delphinios; the latter non-Indo-European epithet even strongly suggests that in this capacity Apollo had taken over pre-Greek institutions. Finally, the completion of the male initiatory ritual was often celebrated in a kind of New Year festival. That is why Apollo was also the god of the new beginning, be it the god of the new moon, the god of purification or the god of divination, which often made an end to a period of confusion and uncertainty.

Apollo's sister Artemis goes back to a time in which hunting was still of prime importance, witness her title 'Mistress of the Animals'. Such protecting goddesses were often also initiatory divinities, as was the indeed the case with Artemis. She was in particular associated with the raising of girls at the margin of civilization in areas that were well watered or near rivers or lakes. Their lush nature reflected that of the maturing maidens whose beauty the male Greeks so highly admired. Rather strikingly, these areas were also often border areas and just as initiates are on the critical border between youth and adulthood, so Artemis also functioned in other decisive moments like the critical phase of a battle, where she was the one to give victory.

If Zeus, Athena and Apollo were the gods who stood in the center of the Greek polis, other gods were more 'off center'. Poseidon must once have been a very powerful god, but in the course of the post-Mycenaean age he was displaced by Zeus. He was in particular associated with men's associations, such as the pan-Ionic league, and the ancestor of several tribes. This function also connected him to male initiation in some places. Poseidon was the god of brute force in men and animals. That is why he was also considered to be the god of earthquakes and such powerful animals as horses. That is also why in more settled times Poseidon's domain was largely relegated to the sea, the area of the fishermen, but also the area that was feared by the Greeks because of its unpredictability.

In many places Poseidon was closely connected with Demeter. The association must be going back to an early stage in Greek religion, as is illustrated by Poseidon's metamorphosis into a stallion when Demeter tried to flee from him in the shape of a mare – a type of myth that has clear Indo-European parallels. Poseidon's ancient political side probably explains why at various places Demeter was also connected with political power; she even seems to have been connected with initiation in some places before the rise of the mysteries (below). However, Demeter was celebrated in particular during the festival of the Thesmophoria, the most popular women's festival in ancient Greece. During several days all the women of the community assembled to celebrate this fertility festival where men were excluded. The occasional symbolic exclusion from power made men nervous and they saw to it that the women assembled only in local communities and never in cities as a whole.

If Demeter is certainly 'ec-centric', the god of the 'anti-order' par excellence was Dionysos. Myth designated him as the stranger among the gods, as it related his arrival from Thrace. Earlier generations of scholars usually interpreted these stories as reflections of a historical development, but a more recently published Linear-B tablet has shown that Dionysos was already worshipped in Mycenaean Crete. Consequently, these myths of arrival are better interpreted as ways of expressing the nature of Dionysos as 'stranger' in the Greek world. This aspect of his nature becomes apparent from his festivals, where we can find the split-up of society in its two gender halves, the equality of slaves or the prominence of the phallus in a procession. In some communities, Dionysos was even associated with human sacrifice. In this capacity he was even worshipped on Lesbos as Dionysos Omestes, 'Eater of Raw Meat'. A similar 'anti-social' nature appears from Dionysos' mythical followers, the satyrs and

maenads. The latter could commit heinous crimes, as Euripides' *Bacchae* so well illustrates. The former showed themselves on the Greek vases in such anti-social activities as masturbation and sex with animals. Dionysos was a more problematic god than the many scenes of him happily drinking suggest.

Other gods were less influential. Hephaestus was the god of the smiths, who seems to have played a more important role in the early Archaic Age than in later times. His main place of worship was Lemnos, an island where the inhabitants once spoke a language related to Etruscan and which was conquered only in the late sixth century by the Greeks. This means that originally Hephaestus was the god of a pre-Greek population.

Aphrodite was the goddess of love with a clear background in the Ancient Near Eastern goddesses like Ishtar. However, this love was not only physical, but also political. Aphrodite was often associated with the people as a whole or with smaller councils of magistrates. Her worship supposedly promoted the harmony and unity of those concerned. It is the Oriental connection that made her also into a goddess of military affairs and in several cities her statue was armed. The connection also received expression on a mythological level: Aphrodite was the beloved of Ares, the god of war.

Like Dionysos, Ares was also reputed to come from Thrace to express his outsider position in the Greek pantheon. In Homer, Ares is already closely identified with another war god, Enyalios, but in cult the two remained separated. Ares was the god of the bloodthirsty side of war. This made him an unpopular god, who had few cults and whose sacrificial animal, the dog, did not invite to communal meals.

In addition to these major divinities there were also smaller ones, like Gaia, ('Earth'), Hestia ('Hearth'), Eirene ('Peace'), Thanatos ('Death'), Arete ('Virtue') and other personifications. Yet the Greek pantheon was much smaller than, say, the Hittite or Roman one. The reason for these differences is still unexplored, just as the nature of polytheism and the implications of the difference with monotheism is still largely a *terra incognita*.

On the other hand, we have reached a better understanding of the mutual relations within the pantheon. It is the great merit of Georges Dumézil (1898-1986) to have insisted on the fact that the gods of a pantheon should not be looked at in isolation. Although the divinities have each their own sphere or mode of action, they can also combine their influence or display their powers in opposition to other gods.

For example, the fact that Apollo and Artemis are siblings cannot be separated from their connection with initiation (above). Hera and Aphrodite are both associated with love and marriage, but whereas Hera is responsible for the protection of marriage as such, Aphrodite promotes its sexual part. Ares and Aphrodite were already a pair in Homer. Both divinities were at the margin of the pantheon, but also each other opposites. There is a Poseidon Hippios and an Athena Hippiia. Both divinities are clearly concerned with horses, but whereas Poseidon is responsible for the power and fierceness of horses, Athena is the goddess who gives man the power to use the animal in an intelligent manner. It becomes more complicated when we see that the Athenian ephebes worshipped Ares and Athena Areia. Evidently, Ares was responsible for their courageous behaviour in battle, but Athena must have helped them to do this in a strategically intelligent manner. In a different way, myth often told of Poseidon's defeat by other gods, in particular Apollo and Athena. This shows that Greek gods were not only persons but also embodied powers, as in this case Poseidon's defeat symbolized the conquest of 'chaos' by the powers of order, intelligence and civilization. Both the aspect of 'person' and of 'power' should always be taken into account when looking at individual Greek gods.

Heroes, the 'demi-gods' between gods and men, are a feature of Greek religion that is hard to parallel in other religions. Their origin has been much discussed, but rarely with the right attention to an important terminological question. Surely, it is impossible to speak of a hero cult before there was a category of heroes named and conceptualised in opposition to the category of the gods. Unfortunately, this simple truth is rarely taken into account in scholarly literature. Yet the religious meaning of the Greek word *herôs* as 'demi-god' did not start to materialise before the last decades of the sixth century. In fact, the order gods-heroes-men does not occur in extant Greek literature before Pindar's *Second Olympian Ode* (2) of 476 BC where the poet wonders: 'What god, what hero and what man should we celebrate?' It is not easy to explain this development, but it is clear that in the later sixth century BC a gradual hardening took place of the division between the main gods of the Greeks and all other (by lack of a better word!) supernatural beings worthy of worship. This development was perhaps due to the growing status of Homer, but, as there was no independent authority to decide who belonged where, some heroes stayed hovering on the edge, such as Achilles and Heracles, whose precise status – hero or god? – remained debated. The development took a long time to materialise fully and should

not be retrojected into earlier centuries. In that period we have tomb cults, cults of the ancestors, cults of founders of cities, but it is only from the late Archaic Age onwards that we start to have hero cults in the technical sense of the word. Consequently, we should avoid speaking of hero cult in the earlier Archaic Age.

Due to their origin, the category of the heroes turned out to be the lowest common denominator of a motley of ‘supernatural beings’, such as faded goddesses like Helen, culture heroes like Prometheus and mythological supermen like Heracles. In the later fifth century the category became expanded to fallen generals like the Spartan Brasidas, who was killed in action in 422 BC. As time went on, the Greeks started to connect their great mythological heroes, like Agamemnon and Odysseus, with older graves or grottoes, and scholars have all too long thought that these late connections also implied age-old continuities.

Yet the connection with graves does point to an important quality of the heroes: their local association. Unlike the gods, heroes are nearly always associated with a family, a political or social group, or a city. Many people gave regular greetings and offerings to the shrine of their neighbourly hero and clearly expected something positive in return. Armies could see heroes on their side, just as in the First World War the German and English soldiers saw angels coming to their assistance. The Locrians even left a gap in their phalanx where Ajax was supposed to defend the ranks. However, heroes could also be nasty and mean. The chorus of Aristophanes’ *Heroes* sings: ‘we are the guardians of good things and ill; we watch out for the unjust, for robbers and footpads, and send them diseases – spleen, coughs, dropsy, catarrh, scab, gout madness, lichens, swellings, ague, fever (some words missing). That’s what we give to thieves’ (tr. Robert Parker). There is always something ambivalent about the heroes, as there is about the gods.

Ritual

Heroes: see most recently C. Antonaccio, *The Archaeology of Ancestors* (Lanham, 1995); G. Lorenz, ‘Die griechische Heroenvorstellung in früharchaischer Zeit zwischen Tradition und Neuerung’, in Ch. Ulf (ed.), *Wege zur Genese griechischer Identität* (Berlin, 1996) 20-58; R. Hägg (ed.), *Ancient Greek Hero Cult* (Stockholm,

1999); G. Ekroth, *The Sacrificial Rituals of Greek Hero-Cults* (Liège, 2002); R. Hägg (ed.), *Greek sacrificial ritual, Olympian and chthonian* (Stockholm, 2004).