The religion of ancient Greece

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I. Mythology

Current conceptions of Greek mythology

The expression “Greek mythology” evokes the gods of Homer to most of us. We imagine Zeus, the father of gods and men, with his thunderbolt; Hera, his wife, the queen of heaven; Poseidon, the god of the seas, with his trident; Athena with her lance and shield; Apollo with his bow; his sister Artemis, the young huntress; Ares, the god of war; Aphrodite, the goddess of love; Hermès, the young and handsome messenger with the winged sandals. We have a somewhat vague picture of Olympus, where this divine family dwells and feasts together, partly as a place on a great mountain, partly as a distant place in the heavens. And we are not wrong, because that is how the ancient Greeks thought of them, even if, as we will see later, this is not the whole truth.

Herodotus on Greek Theogony

Fortunately for us, Herodotus, following his travels abroad and especially his visit to Egypt, came to reflect on the origin of his own religion. He left us this important statement:

“We have long ignored the origin of each god, their form, their nature, and whether they had all existed at all times: it is, so to speak, only yesterday that we know. I think in fact that Homer and Hesiod lived only four hundred years before me. Now it is they who were the first to describe the theogony in verse, who spoke of the nicknames of the gods, of their worship, of their functions, and who traced their figures; the other poets, who are said to have preceded them, did not come, at least in my opinion, until after them ”[1]. The chapter in which these words are found is a real little manual of Greek religion and will serve as a basis for our examination.

Greek theogony is largely a literary creation

Herodotus sets the tone for our investigation. The theogony of the Greeks, their beliefs about their gods, their origin, their character, their manners, their attributes, their appearance, were, for the most part, the result of literature, the work, not of the people, not even of the priest, but of the poet. The theogony was purposely "composed", arranged, by a number of epic singers and this process, according to Herodotus, ended roughly nine centuries BC.

There is a grain of truth in public opinion. current ( your endoxa), if viewed impartially. We have noted the traditional tendency to study Greek mythology by disregarding rites and subordinating it to literature. Now we see how it could have been. Greek mythology is, according to Herodotus, largely the product of literature. It is for this reason that our investigation begins with mythology rather than rituals. But, if the religion of Greece and especially its theogony were constituted mainly by Homer, what materials did he use? Nobody thinks that Homer created the gods: he only "described the theogony" and "traced their figures". So what were the gods before Homer?

The gods before Homer

It is again Herodotus who teaches us this. He speaks of a people who lived in Greece before Homer; their theogony, in the description given by Herodotus, contrasts sharply with that of Homer. "The Pelasgians," he writes, "used to sacrifice to the gods ( theoi) all the things that can be offered to them, as I learned in Dodona, and they prayed to them; but then they gave neither name nor nickname to any of them, because they had never heard them named ”[2]. There was a time, according to Herodotus, when Greece was inhabited by a people called Pelasgians and when this people worshiped gods who were not individualized, nor called by proper names like Zeus or Athena, nor even by more vague titles like "The one with the pers eyes" or "The Foudroyant"; where, in short, the gods were things and not people. Can we believe Herodotus? Globally, we can, because, on the whole, his testimony is confirmed by philology, comparative religion and prehistoric archeology;but it remains to explain the precise direction in which we must accept it.

Undifferentiated gods ( theoi )

Herodotus derives the word theos from the root the - "to establish" ( tithenai ) -; the gods "have established and maintain order in the universe" [3]. Here we have to reluctantly leave him. Plato [4] says that the first inhabitants of Greece, like most barbarians, had the sun, the moon, the earth, the stars and the sky as their gods and that these were called gods because they "run all over the place ”( theein = run). What he says about his primitive gods is instructive, although the etymology he suggests of theoi makes one smile. Theoi is more probably a simple variant of a root which means, in its various derivatives, "prayer", "charm", "sacred" or "taboo" (Festus ). The theos is the being who is behind these magical or religious processes, the being whose existence is implied by them, the sanction of prayer, charm, curse, taboo.

The comparative study of religions shows that, originally, man does not attribute a complete personality to the things he worships. Their personality comes to them because man gives them a human or animal form. Full personification succeeds "animism" [5], in which the gods are incorporeal, powerful but not personal things, who live anywhere, everywhere. These things are hardly, in our eyes, gods, but they become gods when man enters into relationship with them, locates them, fixes them by some form of worship. They only become entirely personal when an artist represents them with an image, however coarse, or a poet takes them as material for a story. Totemism is closely related to animism.Man imagines that the spiritual things he vaguely conceives of reside in natural objects and mainly in stones or trees.

The Pelasgic cult of fetish stones and pillars

In Pharae, in the second century AD, Pausanias saw a statue of Hermes, the god of commerce. It was square in shape, topped with a bearded head. Near Hermes were about thirty large square stones, "each of which is honored by the inhabitants under the name of some deity." [6] Pausanias adds: “In the most ancient times, all Greeks in general paid the same divine honors to images of rough stones which served them as statues. [7] ”In Thespiae, as we have already noted, the image of Eros was a block of rough stone; in Orchomene, where there was a very ancient sanctuary of the Charites, or Graces, the statues of the inhabitants were stones which had fallen from the sky.

The square-shaped nude "Hermes" was one step ahead of the rough stone. Pausanias tells us that the Athenians, zealous for all that concerns religion, “made hermes of square figure; and, in their imitation, the other peoples of Greece gave this form to all the statues of Hermes ”. [8] The Arcadians, [9] another early Pelasgic tribe, had "a marked taste" for the square shape of the statues of Hermes. Hermes, the handsome young messenger of Homer, with the goldenrod and winged sandals, was, in Arcadia and Athens, a "herm", a terminal or a pillar, something which marked the sacred character of a place, whether it is a street, a market place or a grave; it was the same for Apollo the surveyor, Poseidon and Athena, the Sun and Heracles. Who is behind the transformation;who made the symbol a person? “Homer”, says Herodotus; "Homer," said Pausanias. [10] As for Hermes and Hercules, [according to the verses of Homer, Hermes] is the messenger of [Zeus and] leads to hell the souls of the dead [and] Hercules carried out numerous and painful works. The reference is obviously to a Homer who surpasses the one we know through the Iliad or the Odyssey.

The Minoan and Mycenaean cult of the pillars

The cult of the undifferentiated, nameless theoi was Pelasgian; in Greece, as in other places, it preceded the worship of full human gods. From the earliest times, in Pelasgian Attica and Arcadia, and indeed throughout Greece, there was a cult of tree trunks, [11] rough stones and bare square pillars. To this testimony of literature is added that of prehistoric archeology. The Mycenaeans and the Cretan Minos subjects worshiped trees and pillars for at least a thousand years before Homer wrote his poems. The trees are dead, the pillars still survive today.

The Lion Gate of Mycenae

The best known of all the monuments of prehistoric Greece is the famous Lion Gate of Mycenae; it is usually misinterpreted. On the pediment of the door is a Doric column, standing on an altar-shaped base: on either side is a lion. We call the monument the Lion's Gate, but it could be called a pillar-sanctuary. Heraldic lions guard the pillar as much, if not more, than the door. The pillar is a theos. It is of particular shape; it tapers down, like the human body. Let us note a curious fact: the “Hermes” square of the Hellenistic period, where the artist became aware and began to study the past pre-Hellenic civilizations from the monuments and objects which survived from them, also narrows downwards; it is the indirect heir to the pillar. On an imprint of a seal found by Dr Arthur Evans in Crete, the pillar appears as a goddess; it stands on a pile of stones, which the Greeks called a hermaion [12] and, like the pillar, it is guarded by heraldic Lions. She is the Lady of the Lions, later venerated as Rhea in Crete, as Cybele in Asia Minor. The undifferentiated theos had been endowed with a gender and even a personality.

The rite of the Pelasgian theoi

The rite of rough stones in Greece was much the same as that of sacred stones all over the world. In Delphi [13] was a sacred stone on which the Delphians poured oil every day, and at each festival they covered it with unspun wool. The offerings were placed around the pillars and "hermes" or hung from them. In this remote time, there is no clear distinction between the god and the altar. In addition, the rough stone often marks a tomb, so that it is practically not possible to distinguish the cult of heroes and the cult of the pillars, or Hermes. Near the tomb of Melanippus [14], in the vicinity of Thebes, were three rough stones. On the tomb of the sibyl Herophilus [15] stood a less coarse "Hermes",more shaped by art, but which retained the square figure. Besides the ritual, the anointing, the prayer and the sacrifice to which they gave rise, the rough stones were believed to have all kinds of magical powers, to cure diseases, to treat the pollution of the blood and the madness that this pollution triggered.

In the ritual of rough stones, pillars and "hermae", as in their form, there is nothing specifically Greek, but nothing either that would necessarily indicate a foreign influence. Jacob, after dreaming that there was a ladder between earth and heaven and that the angels were ascending and descending it, was certain that he was in a sacred place, he anointed the stone with oil. served as a bedside and called this place Bethel, the House of God. It is even probable that the Greek word for baetyl comes from the Hebrew Bethel - but the cult of stones is a practice widespread all over the world and which it seems to have been characteristic of human nature, at the very beginning of its development. , rather than a race or group of races [16].

The "barbarian" influence helps to differentiate theoi

The example of the “Lady of the Lions” has shown us that the religion of the Pelasgians, within its own limits, began to give shape and personality to its gods. But we are a long way from the diversity, complexity, and highly developed humanity of Homer's pantheon. Didn't Homer finish the work of differentiation himself? Even Herodotus doesn't think so. Herodotus took the trouble to inquire and he went to Dodona, the oldest oracular sanctuary in Greece, where the priestesses told him that, over time, the Pelasgians, with their theoiundifferentiated without name, "learned to know, coming from Egypt, the individual designations of the gods other than Dionysos (they learned much later that of Dionysos)". The Pelasgians asked the oracle of Dodona if they could adopt the names which came from among the barbarians and “the oracle answered them that they could. Since that time, they have made use of it in their sacrifices ”.

Herodotus believes that his primitive people, the Pelasgians, received the names of their theoiundifferentiated from abroad, from peoples who do not speak Greek, from barbarians and mainly from Egypt. A little before the quoted passage, he said, more clearly, that the names of all the Greek gods, except Poseidon and the Dioscuri, Hera, Hestia, Themis, the Charites and the Nereids, had always existed in Egypt. Poseidon, he says, came from Libya, the others were Pelasgians, the cult of heroes, he adds, did not exist among the Egyptians. Hermes too, he then adds, was Pelasgian. The very fact that he makes careful distinctions leads us to think that there is some truth to his assertion.

Hermes' “Pelasgian” origin in his “Herm” form is not in doubt. The Charites, as we have already mentioned, were originally stones that fell from the sky. The excessive importance Herodotus places on Egypt is explained by the two facts that his informants were mostly Egyptian priests and that the oracle of Dodona, whom he also consulted, closely resembled, and was without doubt in close communication with, the oracle of Zeus Ammon at the Siouah Oasis in Libya.

Literary testimonies of oriental influence

We are stupidly inclined to be outraged by the idea that Greece borrowed from the East. This animosity is part of our exclusive classical tradition. It is only recently that we have come to see that the most original and artistic peoples, like individuals, borrow. The Greeks themselves boasted of their loans and frankly recognized them; the legendary accounts of contact with the Orient were appreciated and not ignored, and the truth expressed in these legends was constantly confirmed. Io, the ancestor of the Argiens, goes to Egypt, gives birth there to a son, the swarthy Epaphos, whose very name is a Hellenized form of the bull-god of Egypt, Apis. His descendant Danaos returns with his fifty daughters to the Pelasgian kingdom of Argos and the people who were once calledPelasgoi is now known as Danaoi. Cadmos comes from Phenicia to inquire about Europe; he founded Kadmeia, the citadel of Thebes. Near Thebes was discovered and excavated the sanctuary of the Great Semitic Gods, the Kabeiroi, the Father and the Son. In the Iliad [17], Egypt is mentioned only once, but it is the occasion for Achilles to speak about the richness and the splendor of the “Egyptian Thebes”, as if he knew her as well as that of Orchomena or Python. In the Odyssey[18], it seems natural that Menelaus, to return home, wandered the coasts of Cyprus, Phenicia and Egypt and touched the Sidonians, the Erembes and Libya. The silver crater that Achilles [19] offers as the prize for the race was "artistically crafted" "by skillful carvers from Sidon" and "Phoenicians then took it over the misty sea, exhibited in ports" .

Archaeological evidence of foreign influence

Homer's world is a world permeated by East and South, Asia Minor, Phenicia, Crete, Egypt, Libya. Recent excavations on prehistoric sites, in Mycenae, Tiryns, Troy, Crete and Egypt, have shown that these contacts existed long before Homer. We now know that the whole of the eastern basin and probably the western basin of the Mediterranean was, from the Neolithic, occupied by a people whose civilization was globally homogeneous and that this civilization continued without interruption from the Neolithic period until the time. historical. To this homogeneous civilization belonged the "Pelasgians" of Herodotus and, even if he did not know it, the Libyans, from where the god Poseidon came. Sicily is the vestige of a strip of land which, in past centuries,linked Europe and Africa; Crete has always been a springboard between North and South. At certain points in this primitive culture, notably in Troy, Mycenae, Tiryns and Crete, the very particular civilization that we call Mycenaean civilization appeared, a civilization of the Bronze Age which reached its highest point in the second millennium BC. .-C. And was already decaying before Homer's time. What interests us at the moment is that this pre-Homeric civilization, as we see it in Mycenae and Knossos, is deeply influenced by the East and especially by Egypt. For example, sword blades found in a stone tomb in Mycenae are adorned with mongooses hunting ducks; a wall painting from the fifteenth century BC, in Thebes in Egypt, shows "Mycenaean" vases.These were certainly not the occasions which failed the "Pelasgians" of Herodotus to borrow from the "barbarians". In the light of the excavations, the traditions that have been reported, to stick to the mythological ones, are considered to be historically true.

The Pelasgian religion taken over by the Hellenes

Herodotus told us about the theoi of the Pelasgians, of their primitively undifferentiated character and of the borrowing of the Pelasgians from the barbarians. Before coming to Homer, it is worth noting a third stage in development, a more significant stage than Herodotus thought. Later, he says, "The Hellenes received them (ie the gods and their names) from the Pelasgians." Another question now arises: who, in contrast to the Pelasgians, were the Hellenes? What was their part in the development of Greek theogony?

The Hellenes are a people of the North

Elsewhere in its History[20], Herodotus tells us that the Pelasgians "[those of Attica] had never emigrated" but that the Hellenes "[those of Sparta] had changed their homeland several times". They came from the north. "Hellen and his sons", says Thucydides [21], "[became] powerful in Phthiotis", that is to say in Thessaly. These Greeks were warriors who had led the expedition against Troy, the first collective enterprise which, according to Thucydides, united Greece. Their leader was Achilles. They were not of the same stock as the native Pelasgians, but immigrants from the north. Mr. Gladstone [22] long ago stressed that Dodona was their first homeland in Greece and that he also noted the obvious analogies between the Germans of Tacitus and the Hellenes, their tall stature, their red hair, their eyes. blue.

From the conjectures of Mr. Gladstone Professor Ridgeway, in his Early Age of Greecemade it a living reality. In material culture, he showed that Homer's Achaeans differ for the most part from the Mycenaean Pelasgians and resemble the Celts of the North. The Homeric shield is round, the Mycenaean made up of two parts. The Achaeans are "well armored" or "iron armored"; no leggings were found in the Mycenaean layers; the Achaeans wear the breastplate; according to the excavations, the Mycenaeans did not wear any; in Homer, the fibula is an integral part of the clothing of men and women; it only appears in the last Mycenaean finds, with iron. Above all, in Homer, the dead are invariably cremated; the Mycenaeans bury their dead intact. The Achaeans of Homer are very similar to the populations of the North, to the great stature,with blond hair and blue eyes, whose blood runs through our veins. They are a primitive branch of those tribes of Norse warriors who later, like the Dorians or the Gauls, invaded the South on several occasions and mingled with the brown-skinned, small native peoples; mingled with them and, perhaps, saved them from being submerged in the great Asian Ocean.

Homer's complexity

To sum up, before Homer, before the formation of theogony through literature, three factors contributed to the making of Greek religion. First and at the very beginning, the primitive Pelasgian element; then and in its beginnings, perhaps, barely discernible from the Pelasgian element, foreign elements from Libya, Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor; finally, after millennia of this fusion, successive impulses from the North. This is the story told by Herodotus; these are the facts brought to light by archeology. The hallmark of Greek religion is not only or mainly this diversity, but above all the fact that, even before the beginning of Greek history, these factors had been absorbed by the imagination of a poet and transfused,transfigured into a kingdom that was more of fantasy than of faith.

Homer's pantheon

Homer, says Herodotus, "fixed for the Greeks a theogony, which attributed to the gods their qualifiers, divided between them the honors and the competences, drew their figures". And why ? Maybe not consciously but necessarily, because he brings them together in one family, in one place, north Olympus. It was to the Hellenes, Thucydides tells us, that the Greeks owed their first national unity and it is to this unity that they owe the Pantheon, which brought about a rigorous differentiation of the gods. A local deity is necessarily a do-everything deity; it will be more or less the same as the local deity of the neighboring tribe or the neighboring village. Bring them together and each will inevitably tend to specialize. Differentiated gods presuppose a sort of Pantheon;a Pantheon is a sign of a kind of political federation.

A Pantheon favors, if it does not provoke outright, anthropomorphism, the attribution of the human form to the gods. Forced by the condition of their worshipers to enter into human and even political relations, the gods necessarily became human. The gods who, like their worshipers, frequent the boulé or the agora must come there in human form. The artificial nature of all this is shown to us in Canto XX of the Iliad, where Themis summons all the gods to an assembly on Olympus. She must "[fly] everywhere" to find them. With the exception of Ocean, they all come, "to the rivers and to the nymphs of forests, fountains and meadows" and "they sat down under porticoes gleaming with gold ..." The old theoi, the local powers, must be made in human forms; it looks like we surprise them just as they reluctantly rush to accomplish this metamorphosis. Even among the Olympians who are continually in human form, we find that two of those who are obviously of foreign origin, Ares and Aphrodite [23], tend to leave Olympus to return to their own country, Thrace or Cyprus. .

The Nordic atmosphere of Olympus

The gods live on Olympus, a mountain in the north of Thessaly; their king, Zeus himself, is worshiped mainly in Dodona, north of Epirus. Once we become aware of this Nordic element in Homer, we are no longer surprised to have in his Olympus a certain taste, so to speak, of the atmosphere of the Edda. The gods of Homer, as has often been observed, are magnified men; but why are they so big and so loud? Simply because they are partly Nordic. The disproportionate grandeur, the grandiose excess are not "Greek" in the classic sense of the term. They are Teutonic and Nordic. When Poseidon, the shaker of the ground [24] descends on the battlefield, “he utters a terrible cry,similar to the cries of nine or ten thousand combatants delivered to their martial rage "and its cry" fills with indomitable force the hearts of all the Achaeans ". We remember that Tacitus [25] noted with astonishment the "harsh sounds and [the] hoarse noise" of the war cry that the Germans uttered to give themselves courage; cry in which "they seem to hear the very accent of value". It only takes Poseidon [26] three long strides to get from Samothrace to Aegean, certainly the look of a northern giant rather than that of a Greek god. Very Nordic are also Zeus' berserk fury and the harshness of his divine vengeance. There is perhaps something Greek and divine in wiggling your ambrosia hair and lowering your eyebrows to make Olympus tremble,but what about the fact of "[throwing the other gods] from their seats", [27] of seizing his son "by one foot" to throw him "from the divine threshold" [28], of beating his wife , to hang an anvil on each of his feet after having suspended it in the air [29], and to accuse him of wanting to "devour the bloody limbs of Priam" [30]? Homer's poetic magic makes us forget that these are not the ways of Greek gods, however primitive, but the crude farces of irresponsible giants. The eldersand to accuse him of wanting to "devour the bloody limbs of Priam" [30]? Homer's poetic magic makes us forget that these are not the ways of Greek gods, however primitive, but the crude farces of irresponsible giants. The eldersand to accuse him of wanting to "devour the bloody limbs of Priam" [30]? Homer's poetic magic makes us forget that these are not the ways of Greek gods, however primitive, but the crude farces of irresponsible giants. The elderstheoi have indeed been "tossed" considerably and are no better for it.

The absence of religious sentiment in Homer

Critics have often noted that Homer does not take his gods very seriously in their human aspect. Zeus, in his atmospheric qualities, is as majestic as his thunder; as husband and father he is inferior to the mortals he rules. "There is no god so good," observes Mr. Gladstone, "as the swineherd Eumæus." The closer the gods are to the gods of nature that they had been in part, the more they remain worthy of reverence. Poseidon, half-river half-sea, acts with resounding pomp. The divine blacksmith Hephaestus is lame and therefore, to the crude souls of other Olympians, ridiculous; when, god of fire, he fights with the god-river Xanthus, he is resplendent with glory. This lack of seriousness is partly explained,if we assume that the gods are a mixture of native elements and foreign elements. The bard sings of deities who are, at least in part, "the gods of other men."

Homer unconsciously reflects the existence of a racial mixture

Homer does not relate a conflict with the North, but, unconsciously, he reflects it. To take a simple example. Zeus and Hera, the divine bridegroom and the divine bride, are constantly in conflict. Why this conflict? From a human point of view, the answer is easy and obvious. Hera is jealous, Zeus constantly exasperated. Man makes gods in his own image. The real reason is quite different; Zeus and Hera's relationship reflects racial conflict. Zeus, father of gods and men, Zeus, the god of heaven, upon whom the same burden of fatherhood weighs as upon Wotan, is a man of the North, although he mixed early with the local gods of thunder , oak [31] and mountain of the Pelasgian population. Hera is indigenous, Pelasgian; originally, she had no connection with Zeus. She reigns alone in Argos in her temple, alone in Samos;his temple at Olympia is distinct from and much earlier than that of Zeus. In Dodona, the great oracular sanctuary of Zeus, there is no question of Hera, only of Dione, his wife, indistinct but real, at least etymologically. The Achaean conquerors descend to Greece and marry the country's daughters. Zeus leaves Dione in Dodona before going with his warrior tribe to Thessaly, where he too marries a local girl. In Olympus, where she appears simply as a jealous and quarrelsome woman, Hera is truly a boisterous princess, whom the foreign conqueror she married forces to act against her will but never subdues.indistinct but real, at least etymologically. The Achaean conquerors descend to Greece and marry the country's daughters. Zeus leaves Dione in Dodona before going with his warrior tribe to Thessaly, where he too marries a local girl. In Olympus, where she appears simply as a jealous and quarrelsome woman, Hera is truly a boisterous princess, whom the foreign conqueror she married forces to act against her will but never subdues.indistinct but real, at least etymologically. The Achaean conquerors descend to Greece and marry the daughters of the country. Zeus leaves Dione in Dodona before going with his warrior tribe to Thessaly, where he too marries a local girl. In Olympus, where she appears simply as a jealous and quarrelsome woman, Hera is truly a boisterous princess, whom the foreign conqueror she married forces to act against her will but never subdues.that the foreign conqueror whom she married forces to act against her will but never subjugates.that the foreign conqueror whom she married forces to act against her will but never subjugates.

Sometimes the primitive order of things is reflected in a more civilized way. It is out of politeness that Zeus, when he summons the rivers and the nymphs of Olympus, abstains from demanding the presence of the old Ocean, "from which are born all rivers, all seas, all fountains and the deepest sources ”[32]. He could have forced him to do so, because Ocean "himself fears the lightning of the great Zeus And his dreadful thunder ..." [33].

The survival of racial distinctions in the rite

The ritual is always conservative. The ancient ritual of the oath visibly testifies, especially among the Trojans, of an opposition between tradition and novelty. On the verge of fighting with Paris, Ménélas said to the Trojans: “You will bring two lambs, a white male and a black female, one for the Earth, the other for the Sun; we'll bring another one for Zeus. "[34] The Trojans, in whom the Pelasgian element predominates, still swear by the ancient gods of nature and practice the old" sympathetic "rite of the sacrifice of a black female in honor of Mother Earth, d 'a white lamb in honor of the shining sun. The Earth and the Sun, even if we write them in capital letters, can never be more than half humanized, but, it will be remembered, it was the Earth and the Sun that, according to Plato,the first Greeks had for gods.

The influence of the plastic arts on Greek theogony

Greek theogony, a complex mixture of early Pelasgian elements, eastern elements and northern elements, was shaped by literature. But not by literature alone; the plastic arts quickly lent their support. Homer's gods stand out so clearly, in such magnificent human forms and in such a bright and vivid atmosphere, that they already resemble living statues. In the primitive sanctuaries, such as the Erechtheion, the old hermes, pillars, rough stones remained and were often, until in the last times, the true object of the rite; but there were added votive images of the gods, in terracotta, marble, gold and ivory, similar to the portrait that Homer had made of them: of Zeus, with his thunderbolt; of Athena, with her lance and shield; of Apollo,with a bow and arrows. This is not a simple guess. Tradition expressly states that Phidias [35], when asked after what model he intended to represent Olympian Zeus, replied: "According to the 'ideal model that Homer had given him':" Kronos' son frowns his thick eyebrows. The ambrosian hair quivers on the head of the immortal prince, and it shakes the vast Olympus, and it makes the earth tremble and the wave to their abyss. "and he shakes the vast Olympus, and he shakes the earth and the waves to their depths. "and he shakes the vast Olympus, and he shakes the earth and the wave to their depths. "

Paintings on vases often show us the image and cult of the ancient theoipelasgians, hermme, or pillar. Sometimes, fortunately, they let us see the process of transition from the Pelasgian hermme to the human god of Olympus. Two vases from the British Museum [36] show the scene of Pelops and Oenomaus taking the oath before their chariot race. On a vase, between the two rivals, is an altar and, above it, not the image of Zeus, but a square pillar marked with DIOS - "De Zeus". This is a Herme which, according to the inscription it bears, belongs to Zeus. On the other vase [37], there is the same altar and the same Hermetic pillar, but there is no inscription and on the pillar stands the figure of a fully human Zeus. The stratification of cults spreads out in a way before our eyes.

II. The ritual

The Greek rite is less characteristic than the Greek theogony

The attitude of a people towards their gods is influenced neither by the poet nor by the artist. This is why the rite of the Greeks bears much less the Greek imprint than their theogony. Their rite teaches us that they had a lot in common with other peoples, even if it shows a certain serenity and a certain moderation. In its simplest form, the rite teaches us even more about the conflict between different racial elements within the Greek people, a conflict both exacerbated and mitigated by the genius of Homer.

The rite of the Olympians

The Homeric rite is simple and uniform. It consists of a prayer, accompanied by a spray of barley grains, followed by an animal sacrifice. Some of the flesh is tasted by the worshiper and is then burned in honor of the god; the rest is eaten in banquet, with wine in abundance. The goal is to "convince the gods" and, to convince a god of the North, there is nothing like a copious meal of roasted meat washed down with wine [38]. It is an offering by fire, because, the gods being heavenly gods, the sacrifice must be sublimated to reach them.

The rite relating to chthonic or infernal powers

Herodotus speaks of another rite, referred to by another name, which is addressed to completely different powers - worship of the dead, of heroes. He did not think that this rite had been borrowed from Egypt, he said expressly: “They [the Egyptians] have nothing of the sort. During his travels, he discovered that the worship given to Heracles was different according to the places; he came to the conclusion [39] that "among the Greeks, those act most judiciously who have two temples of Heracles, one where they sacrifice to him as to an immortal, under the name of Olympian, the another where they pay him the honors due to a hero ”.

Herodotus recognizes that the rite of an Olympian was quite distinct from the cult of a hero. Fortunately, Pausanias [40] provides us with information on this ritual. Phaistos having come to Sicyon, he noticed that the Sicyonians "honored Hercules simply as a hero". “He ordered that divine honors be returned to him: however, in order not to revolt the Sicyonians, he allowed them to reserve a small part of the victim, to offer it again to the same Hercules, as Heroes. From that time, adds this Author, they slaughter a lamb, and roast its belly along the Altar, they eat part of the victim, and offer the other to Hercules, as to a Hero; so that he is revered today as a God and as a Hero ”.

The distinction is clear. Everything is for the hero: we cannot eat the food of the dead; the hero takes part in the feast offered to him. In addition, (this point is important), the rites performed in honor of the hero preceded those of the Olympian. Phaistos found a people whose cult was heroic, he left them Olympian rites. We can say that the hero's rites belonged to the early Pelasgian layer and that the Olympian rites were elaborated or imported later.

The conflict between the two rites

Sicyon, at the very entrance to the Peloponnese, changed its rite. She also changed her name. At the time of Hesiod [41], Sycione was called Mekoné. A name change indicates a change, or at least an addition, of population. Pausanias [42] tells us that there was a primitive indigenous population in Mekoné; Hesiod says that "the gods and mortal men quarreled in Mekon". The commentator of Hesiod tells us the reason for the conflict. It was decided, in Mekoné, "which gods would divide the mortals". In Mekoné, Prometheus played a prank on Zeus, persuading him to choose, parts of a sacrificed ox, the white bones covered with fat, the parts regularly allotted to the Olympians. Prometheus belonged to the ancient family of the Titans. The struggle between the Titans and the Olympians is over in Homer; Hesiod tells it in detail.Prometheus was the ally of man against the tyranny of the "new gods", [43] the Olympians. He was tortured because he had given mortals for their own use the sacred fire of the Olympian sacrifices. In Mekoné, later Sicyon, as in many other places, the new cult of the Olympians was superimposed on the old cult of heroes.

Burial and hero worship

The hero worship on his tomb assumes that the dead man is somehow alive and locally present, that his spirit is in the tomb, or in the Herme gravestone, or nearby, ready to be angered or appeased. The burial of bodies can give rise to such beliefs and, indeed, have given rise to them in all parts of the world. The ghost of a man who was strong when he was alive will be powerful and will become a kind of god; he is part of the invisible and, because he is so close, his descendants establish relationships with him, bring him offerings and make sacrifices to him. But Homer's Greeks did not bury their dead, they burn them. The body once burned, the spirit does not remain in the tomb, but flees to a distant place, beyond a river, an isolated place,inaccessible. The ghost of Patroclus is explicit [44]: "... I will never return from Hades again, when you have granted me the honors of the stake. A ghost so distant and so spectral, purged by fire of all human needs and attachments, was not worth worshiping by anyone.

The practice of cremation came, along with many other healthy and invigorating customs, from the North, from the Germans of central Europe, who lived in the great forests where fuel was plentiful. The funeral of the Germans, which, as Tacitus describes [45], consisted in burning the hero, sometimes in the company of his horse, on a large stake, are the counterpart of the funeral of Patroclus. The cremation rid the survivors of the physical impurities of the corpse; it also freed them from the greatest fear of primitive man, the haunting terror of the ghost.

The curse of blood and the price of blood

All ghosts are more likely to be feared than loved, the ghost of an enemy is undoubtedly hostile, but the most relentless of all is the ghost of a murdered man. According to the primitive vision, the blood, once shed on the earth, poisoned the earth and especially poisoned the murderer fed on the fruits of the earth [46]. The murderer, like Cain [47], was "cursed from the earth." There is no cure for a disease which manifests itself in this way, unless the murderer, like Alcméon (48), can find a "new land", like the "new land", at the mouth of a river. a great unpolluted river which is thus able to feed the murderer. The idea of ​​polluted earth was replaced or, rather, perhaps, supplemented by the idea that the ghost of the deceased became a curse so to speak incarnate,Erinyes haunting the assassin and sucking his blood. This curse of blood knew no end; murder called murder.

Of all this relentless, endless vendetta, Homer knows nothing. He only knows the price of blood, which seems to be an impersonal substitute for it. But the progress is real; the evil done is recognized, atonement made and an end put to the interminable, pitiless, bloodbath. Ajax, in the Iliad, blames Achilles for his inflexibility and reminds him that a man accepts compensation for the murderer of his dead brother or son; and thus "the author of [his] loss, by sacrificing his riches, rests quiet in the bosom of his homes, and his satisfied enemy abandons his vengeance" [49]. Here too, progress seems to have come from the North. Tacitus [50] tells us that, among the Germans, “… hatred is not implacable: even homicide is absolved by delivering a certain quantity of large and small cattle:the whole family accepts this satisfaction ”. There is no reference here to the doctrine of the poisoned land or the bloodthirsty Erinyes.

The rite of magical purification is unknown to Homer

Just as Homer does not know the curse of blood, nor the haunting ghost, so he does not know anything about the purification imposed on one who has committed a crime of blood or the appeasement of the angry dead. It is indeed to be noted that he never speaks of magical purification - the purification of spiritual evil by physical means. Once Odysseus [51] has killed the suitors and hanged the bad girls, he cleans his house, but the cleaning is simple, natural, we could say scientific; the means he employs are those we could use today to disinfect a dirty house; it uses water and sulfur. There is no question of what the ancients called "purifying ceremonies", that is, magical purifications.

These ceremonies were, however, quite common in historic Greece and even were part of the usual ritual of the state. When Plutarch [52] was archon in his city of Chaéronée, he had, in an official capacity, to preside over a strange ceremony, which, he tells us, was very popular. They would take a domestic slave, whip him with rods of agnus castus (a purgative plant) and throw him by the shoulders out of the house, saying to him: "Out of famine and in health and wealth." The rite was called the "banishment from hunger." This ceremony has nothing to do with the cult of Olympus or even with the cult of theoithe most undetermined. It is downright magical. Moreover, it is by no means typically Greek. Many primitive peoples are inclined to think that evil, physical and moral, is a substance which can be transferred. The children of Israel [53] lay down their sins on a scapegoat and drive him out into the desert. In modern times, the inhabitants of Pithuria, says Dr. Frazer [54], with each epidemic of influenza build a small cart, harness two goats in it, hunt them in a wood and the "flu" goes away. with them.

The opposition of the Olympic Games and the Pelasgian rite

Overall, therefore, we see that, in the ritual as in the theogony, there are two layers: first there is an upper layer of rites belonging to the Olympians, whether these rites were actually imported or whether they were deeply influenced by the conquerors of the North and, secondly, a lower layer of rites belonging to the natives of the South. These include the elements common to the East - the cult of Pillars and Hermes, Heroes and Ghosts, ceremonies that are purely magical and do not involve a ghost or a god. The speaker Isocrates [55] has not heard of the racial conflict, but he defines the difference very clearly: “Among the divinities, some are the causes of good: we call them Olympians; the others are in charge of misfortune and vengeance: they have harmful names;in the former, individuals and cities erect temples and altars; the latter receive the homage neither of prayer nor of sacrifice: we set them aside by rites. "

III. Mysteries

The Mysteries of Demeter and Dionysus

Until now and certainly in the eyes of Isocrates, the Olympian rite may seem, in comparison with the chthonian rite, more advanced, more human, but, if the "rites of banishment" have a cruel and barbaric character, we cannot do not forget that this "banishment" - even if it is physical - contains the seeds of something which, thanks to Christianization, should be considered as superior, the notion of spiritual purification. This is what emerges very clearly from a category of rites that Homer did not know, or at least of which he says nothing; the rites of which no Olympian was the object, that is to say the Mysteries. These mysteries are mainly associated with the name of a goddess and a god who have no place in the Olympus of Homer, Demeter and Dionysus. A "mystery", even in its most primitive form,always has two parts. First of all, a preliminary purification; on the other hand, a rite in which certain sacred foods are tasted and sacred objects handled, visions obtained and words heard, which cannot respectively be tasted, touched, obtained or heard in complete safety without this preliminary purification. The man about to be initiated was called, when he had been purified, a myste and when he had seen, tasted, manipulated, an epoptes, a spectator.The man about to be initiated was called, when he had been purified, a myste and when he had seen, tasted, manipulated, an epoptes, a spectator.The man about to be initiated was called, when he had been purified, a myste and when he had seen, tasted, manipulated, an epoptes, a spectator.

The Greeks had no beliefs, no dogmas, no strict doctrine. But, in the case of the Mysteries, they had what we call a confiteor, or confession of rites performed. Fortunately, the “confessions”, or, as the Greeks called it, the “symbols” of the Eleusinian Mysteries, are preserved. We also know what the preliminary purification consisted of. Each candidate bathed with a young pig [56] in the sea. Both the priest and the sacrifice were purified by sea water. The ceremony was called Elasis - pushing, hunting before one; the meaning of this ceremony appears clearly in the light of "famine outside" in Chaéronée. It was a rite of "banishment". The "symbols", or confession of rites, are the following for Eleusis: "I fasted, I drank the kykeon,I took the object from the basket and, after having performed the act, I put it in the basket, then again from the basket in the basket. [57] Fasting was a natural part of the purification; it was followed by two things, consuming the Kykeon and handling some unknown sacred objects.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were devoted to Demeter, Mother Earth and Kore, her daughter. We, with our modern minds, would expect the Eleusinian mystery creed to begin like this: “I believe in Demeter, the mother and her daughter, Kore; I believe that Kore went down to Hades in winter and was resuscitated in spring. The Greek demanded the confession of the ritual acts performed; on this point he was rigid; as for thought and imagination, he instinctively gave them free rein.

"I drank Kykeon" is the equivalent of "I tasted the first fruits". The new flour was used to make a kind of cake, the pelanos. As long as the solemn tasting had not taken place, this new flour was taboo; it was forbidden food. The mysteries of the savages of central Australia are associated with the removal of certain taboos on food. The meaning of the second rite is less clear. We do not know with certainty which were the sacred objects which were handled in the mysteries of Eleusis. Other Mysteries allow us to conjecture it. In the Thesmophoria there were symbols of fertility, such as, for example, pine cones; in the Zagreus Mysteries, objects that seem insignificant to us - a ball, a mirror, a "rhombus"; but imprinted objects,undoubtedly for initiates, of deep significance. Such objects are still used during the initiation ceremonies of wild peoples.

But the Mysteries were not simply magical rites aimed at promoting the fertility of cultures and the general material prosperity of man in this world; they gave hope - and this is arguably the secret of their extraordinary influence - of help and advice, even some substantial bliss in the land of shadows beyond the grave .

The Mysteries and the Future Life

We tend to think today that religion is necessarily associated with hopes and fears about life after death. Yet in Homer's scheme of things, if theogony and rite are present, there is hardly any eschatology. The gods, in fact, are considered immortal, but good heroes do not go to Olympus to stay with them forever, any more than bad heroes are sent to Tartarus. In Homer, Tartarus is not a hell for the wicked, but simply the home of the rebellious Titans. Later, the Tartarus and the rebellious Titans are transferred to Hades. Homer's heroes, good or bad, after death, are dark images ( eidola), "The light shadows of the dead". Even the Pelasgian heroes, who survive locally as objects of worship in their own graves, have no activity, except that they are in relation to their survivors. They depend on them for their food and subsistence; they are gods for them, so to speak; for them, there is no question of happiness, peace and eternal rest.

Yet we know that the Greeks of the sixth and fifth century BC firmly hoped to enjoy eternal bliss and were much less afraid of suffering from beyond the grave. These hopes and fears were instilled in them in the Mysteries. Plato says [58]: "Whoever arrives at Hades without having received either the prior initiation or the complete initiation will be plunged into the quagmire, while the one who will have been purified and then initiated will live with the gods. "Pindar says [59]:" Happy is he who goes down into the hollow earth after having seen these things; because he knows the end of life, he also knows the kingdom given by Jupiter. It is clear that in the Mysteries not only were sacred things tasted and handled, but a revelation was made about the divine origin of man and his end. Such a doctrine,foreign to Homer and his Olympian universe, did not emerge from the native cult of heroes, nor from a vague belief ineidola . It took its source in certain aspects of the worship of two non-Olympian deities, Demeter and Dionysus; and it came mainly from the south, from Egypt, probably via Crete.

Cretan and Egyptian elements in the Mysteries

According to tradition [60], Demeter, like Dionysus, immigrated to Attica. She was received at Eleusis by Celeus, he by Icarus; their arrival dates from the reign of Pandion, that is to say, according to traditional chronology, around 1500 BC Demeter, in the [Homeric Hymn to Demeter], says that she came from Crete. The Cretans [61] claimed to have given the mysteries to Greece. Moreover, they affirmed that the rites which, in Eleusis and elsewhere in Greece were secretly practiced in the form of mysteries, had existed in them for a very long time, were practiced there "openly and taught to all". Crete, for religion, for civilization in general, was a passageway from Egypt to Greece.

Demeter, says Isocrates [62], made Attica "two gifts". These are the culture and the “initiation rite”. He adds that initiation gives those who take part in it "for the end of life and for all eternity sweeter hopes". We have often tried to establish an intrinsic link between the first and the second gift. The Greeks, it is believed, saw in the sowing and germination in spring a symbol of the death and resurrection of the body and soul of man. There is a simpler reason for this link. Demeter made her "two gifts" because she had borrowed them from Isis. Isis, the Egyptian goddess of agriculture, is also, as wife of Osiris, the queen of the underworld. The Egyptians, perhaps because their climate was favorable to the preservation of the body,very early on developed a somewhat material doctrine of immortality and this doctrine was intimately linked to the rites of the god and goddess of agriculture, Isis and Osiris. Diodorus [63] is not wrong, on the whole, to say that "all the mythology of Hades" was imported from Egypt into Greece. The Mysteries of Osiris, he tells us, are the same as those of Dionysus and those of Isis are identical to the mysteries of Demeter, "there is only the difference of the names". He adds: “The punishment of the wicked in hell, the flowery fields of the abode of the good and the fiction of the shadows, are an imitation of the funeral ceremonies of the Egyptians. One of these ceremonies involved burying parts of the Book of the Dead, a kind of guide for the dead, telling him where to go and what to do.

Some of these instructions must have been given in the Greek Mysteries. Plutarch [64] compares death to initiation to the great mysteries. “The first stage,” he said, “is a painful wandering, disarray, an anxious aimless run in the dark. Then, before the end, you are seized by all kinds of fears, and everything is thrill, trembling, sweat and fear. Finally, one is greeted by a wonderful divine light and one is received in a pure landscape and in flowering meadows where voices resonate and where one sees dances, where one hears solemn and sacred songs and where we can see divine silhouettes ”. All this, everyone knew, or the honorable Plutarch would not have said it. The secret that could not be told lay in the rites and the words, the precise formulas,probably magical in nature, taught by the hierophant to the initiate.

The Mysteries of Dionysus

It is obviously easy to merge Isis, the Mother, the Giver of the crops, the Lawgiver, with the Earth Mother, Demeter. Her aspect of Queen of Shadows reappears in Persephone as the wife of Hades. The fusion of Osiris with Dionysus is complex and needs an explanation. This is all the more necessary as a doctrine of the divine origin of man, which Pindar calls "the kingdom given by Jupiter", has developed in relation to the god of the Mysteries Dionysus. The Greek god Dionysus absorbed into his personality two alien deities, of distinct origin, a Thracian god of orgy and ecstasy and a god of mysteries, Zagreus, almost identical to the Egyptian Osiris. The merger of the two was facilitated by the fact that each in turn was associated with the vine.The Thracian god of ecstasy was originally a god of beer, Sabazios, but when it was imported into southern Greece, he adopted the drink of its inhabitants: his orgies and his swarms of worshipers. were tolerated, moderate, but never really held in high regard. Osiris was the “cultural hero” of all of Egypt; he introduced the vine and agriculture there; the conviction of the immortality of the soul was linked to its worship. The Zagreus of the Cretans (65) was practically indistinguishable from Osiris and it was from Sabazios and Osiris, linked by the vine, that the Greeks composed their strange and complex Dionysus, then made him the son of Zeus and Semele in the theogony of Olympus.her orgies and her swarms of worshipers were tolerated, moderate, but never really held in high esteem. Osiris was the “cultural hero” of all of Egypt; he introduced the vine and agriculture there; the conviction of the immortality of the soul was linked to its worship. The Zagreus of the Cretans (65) was practically indistinguishable from Osiris and it was from Sabazios and Osiris, linked by the vine, that the Greeks composed their strange and complex Dionysus, then made him the son of Zeus and Semele in the theogony of Olympus.her orgies and swarms of worshipers were tolerated, moderated, but never really held in high esteem. Osiris was the “cultural hero” of all of Egypt; he introduced the vine and agriculture there; the conviction of the immortality of the soul was linked to its worship. The Zagreus of the Cretans (65) was practically indistinguishable from Osiris and it was from Sabazios and Osiris, linked by the vine, that the Greeks composed their strange and complex Dionysus, then made him the son of Zeus and Semele in the theogony of Olympus.The Zagreus of the Cretans (65) was practically indistinguishable from Osiris and it was from Sabazios and Osiris, linked by the vine, that the Greeks composed their strange and complex Dionysus, then made him the son of Zeus and Semele in the theogony of Olympus.The Zagreus of the Cretans (65) was practically indistinguishable from Osiris and it was from Sabazios and Osiris, linked by the vine, that the Greeks composed their strange and complex Dionysus, then made him the son of Zeus and Semele in the theogony of Olympus.

Dionysos and Osiris

Zagreus, the god of Mysteries, is completely different from the Thracian god of ecstasy and has nothing to do with the Olympian gods; and this, in particular, in three respects. In all three respects he resembles, what am I saying, identical to Osiris.

First of all, the god of Mysteries is mortal; he is dismembered, dies and comes back to life. The Olympians, before all things, are immortal ( athanatoi). For the Greeks, as for the Christians, only the God who dies and comes back to life can bring the hope of immortality; the prototype of this god is Osiris, cut into fourteen pieces, recomposed by Isis and resuscitated. The barbaric story of Osiris' dismemberment and the rite it explains probably originate from certain primitive burial rites. The first inhabitants of Egypt practiced what is called the “second burial”, that is, the dismemberment of the decomposing body. Later, probably through borrowings from a race that had emigrated to Egypt, they adopted the practice of mummification, which promoted a doctrine of the immortality of the body.

Second, in the worship of the god of Mysteries, the devotee becomes one with the god and therefore immortal. Has any Greek ever dreamed of union with Zeus or Athena or Apollo? But the worshiper of the Cretan Zagreus becomes Bacchos [66]. In the Mysteries of Demeter and in those of Dionysus, the goal, in so far as the ceremonies are not simply agricultural, is union, always union, by eating the god, by marrying him, by symbolically being reborn. like him. On an Orphic tablet, the initiated soul is greeted with these words: “You have become god, from the man that you were. The pure soul in the Egyptian hells becomes Osiris. "I am the child of the earth and of the starry sky," says the Orphic. Why ? Because he is Osiris and Osiris is the child of Sibou, the earth and of Nouit, the sky.

Third, the cult of the mystery god is ascetic. No Olympian enjoins abstinence from his worshipers, the Olympians were gods of this world, not of the next. But the Egyptian religion, unlike the Greek religion, was focused on a future life. This life was a long purification. The soul in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, [67] after an almost endless negative confession [68], cries out four times, "I am pure". On the tablet just mentioned, the Orphic initiate says, "I come, pure from the pure"; the Cretan worshiper of Zagreus, when he becomes a bacchos, is "dressed in white", he abstains, not really from wine - this asceticism is only addressed to the intemperate Nordics -, but, in a more human way , of any meat and therefore of the ritual pollution of birth or death.It is only through this asceticism that he can hope to liberate the divine element in him and thus become one with the god; it is only in this way that he can escape the judgment of Rhadamanthe (Ra Amenti) and go to the Elyos fields, whose very name is borrowed from the Egyptian “fields of Aalu”.

Egyptian influence on the mystery gods

The ritual of the Mysteries is deeply marked by the Egyptian religion. Zagreus or Dionysus, the central figure, is modeled on Osiris and this Egyptian influence was felt in the other gods. The Olympians were too strong, too deeply rooted in lore, to be overlooked, but they all more or less blended into the melting pot of Mysteries. The mystical hymns which are known to us as "Orphics" show us, not living and defined Olympians, but dark shapes with blurred outlines, which, if they bear Olympian names, are in fact interchangeable silhouettes, half monotheists, half pantheists. “In all initiations and mysteries the gods come in various forms and appear in a variety of states, and sometimes, even,they present themselves to view in a formless light; sometimes this light takes the human form, and sometimes also a different form [69]. One would almost believe reading a direct description of Egyptian pantheism, of gods who change and are transformed, sometimes human, sometimes animals, sometimes still solar. If the names of the Orphic hymns were removed, it would often be impossible to tell which gods are being celebrated. It is the same for the addresses to the Egyptian gods.If the names of the Orphic hymns were removed, it would often be impossible to tell which gods are being celebrated. It is the same for the addresses to the Egyptian gods.If the names of the Orphic hymns were removed, it would often be impossible to tell which gods are being celebrated. It is the same for the addresses to the Egyptian gods.

Orphic mysticism

In conclusion of the remarks he makes on Hesiod and Homer, Herodotus says: “the other poets, who are said to have preceded them, did not come, at least in my opinion, until after them. He has in particular the religious poets - Orpheus, Musaeus and the others - and this is the only allusion that, in his sketch of Greek religion, he makes to the movement we know as "Orphism. ". To date, everything suggests that he was probably right,; nothing specific about "Orphism" we know before its appearance in Athens in the 6th century, the religious century which saw the birth of Confucius in China, Gautama in India, Jeremiah and Ezekiel in Israel, Pythagoras in Greece and, more importantly for we saw Athens send to Crete, the land of the Mysteries, Epimenides, so that he "purifies the people".

By the name of "Orphics" are meant all the elements which are so remarkably absent from Homer and which literature, at least consciously, has overlooked - such are the sentiment of evil, the need for purification, the he idea of ​​an incarnate and suffering man-god, and, closely related to these, the idea that man is immortal and that he definitively escapes evil by a new purification in another world.

These elements, as we have seen, are, on the whole, non-Greek. They come from Crete and Egypt, perhaps in part from Thrace and Asia Minor; they easily merged with the early Pelasgian religion, with theoiundifferentiated and their semi-magical ritual. They were always strangers to the Olympian religion; but "what is important is that the mystical and 'enthusiastic' explanation of the world has never lacked apostles in Greece, even though the mainstream of speculation, as stated by Athens, was constantly going in the opposite direction, with the aim of penetrating little by little into the essence of things through reflection ”[70].

Orphic mysticism and Greek philosophy

We have observed above that the Greek religion was largely a literary product. The various Pelasgian, Eastern, Hellenic elements - were "agglomerated" there by Hesiod and Homer. Orphic mysticism, largely ignored by poetry, at least by the poetry which has come down to us, had a considerable influence on another branch of Greek thought, philosophy. With Homer the philosopher could not make any compromise. Plato [71] complains that Homer tells the mythological stories which "sin against verisimilitude" and are "[dangerous]". Long before this famous accusation of Plato against the poets, Xenophanes, himself a rhapsode, had put his finger on the weak point of Homer's theogony - his anthropomorphism. Homer's gods were immoral,which was the obvious:

Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods

All that in men is shameful and blameworthy

What is more, there were no gods at all, for there were many of them and God is one. [He praises Colophon for saying:]

Unique and all-powerful, sovereign of the strongest,

God does not resemble us in mind or body.

Humans, making gods in their image,

lend Them their thoughts, their voices and their faces

[Following Colophon, Xenophanes states:]

If cattle, horses or lions had hands

Or could draw with their hands

And perform the tasks incumbent on men,

Horses would draw their gods in the form of a horse ,

And the cattle would do the same:

All would give the gods their respective bodily appearance.

We are often told that the supremacy of Zeus was "the first step towards monotheism". Xenophanes reached his goal by a short cut.

Philosophy adopts the Pelasgian and Orphic religion instead of the Olympian religion

The Olympian Zeus is of no use to the early philosophers, but, as it is in the nature of things that they do not completely break with religion, they revert to the gods who were before Zeus, the undetermined powers, the theoi and the forces of nature. Thales, the first to seek unity in things, taught that the world was born out of humidity; he turns to Ocean, which Zeus did not dare to summon to the assembly of the gods - Ocean, the source rather than the father. Pherecydes tries to use Zeus, by transforming him by a false etymology into Zas, "the Living". The "Hermes" reappear in the Orphic Mystery god Phanes:

With his four pairs of eyes

He [Phanes] looks here and there [72]

The importance Empedocles places on guilt and purification and its cycle of reincarnations comes from Orphism. Plato is indebted to primitive mythology and its Orphic developments [73]. His cosmic Eros is an Orphic god; his inspired madness comes from the Thracian cult of Dionysus, his doctrine of Elenchus, of intellectual catharsis, is founded on the purification of the mysteries; his anamnesis, “the action of recalling memory”, on the Orphic spring of Remembrance, Mnemosyne; even his Ideas have something of the "wonderful divine light" of the beatific visions that initiates had. The mystery religions which inspired the poet-philosopher Plato had a less powerful, but perhaps more essential influence on Greece than all the gods and goddesses that Homer shaped.

CONCLUSION

The history of Greek religion remains to be written

This imperfect sketch will have served its purpose, if it has shown how complex and changeable Greek religion is, and how much work remains to be done before a full account can be given of it. This chapter of its history which relates to pre-Homeric religion is still only sketched out. The materials necessary for the study of the "Mycenaean" and "Minoan" religion which have been unearthed in Crete have just been brought to our attention. Second, many aspects of Homer's and Hesiod's theogony are still problematic. We still have to take and examine the Olympians one by one to determine what is Pelasgian, Eastern, Hellenic or Norse in Zeus, Poseidon, Athena and the others. As for Orphism, it remains problematic. What are,in the mysteries, elements of Pelasgian origin and imported elements; when and where were they imported? How many were borrowed directly from Egypt? How many in Crete, Phenicia or Asia Minor? How, at its beginnings, does religion act on philosophy, does philosophy react on religion? Finally, a difficult and delicate task, which was neglected, except by Homer, but particularly important for the Greek religion, it would be necessary to know the attitude of each author - of Pindar, of the tragedians - towards the different elements of this religion. complex, personal outlook and idiosyncrasy. How much has each of them changed the religious material?when and where were they imported? How many were borrowed directly from Egypt? How many in Crete, Phenicia or Asia Minor? How, at its beginnings, does religion act on philosophy, does philosophy react on religion? Finally, a difficult and delicate task, which was neglected, except by Homer, but particularly important for the Greek religion, it would be necessary to know the attitude of each author - of Pindar, of the tragedians - towards the different elements of this religion. complex, personal outlook and idiosyncrasy. How much has each of them changed the religious material?when and where were they imported? How many were borrowed directly from Egypt? How many in Crete, Phenicia or Asia Minor? How, at its beginnings, does religion act on philosophy, does philosophy react on religion? Finally, a difficult and delicate task, which was neglected, except by Homer, but particularly important for the Greek religion, it would be necessary to know the attitude of each author - of Pindar, of the tragedians - towards the different elements of this religion. complex, personal outlook and idiosyncrasy. How much has each of them changed the religious material?difficult and delicate task, which was neglected, except by Homer, but particularly important for the Greek religion, it would be necessary to know the attitude of each author - of Pindar, of the tragedians - towards the different elements of this complex religion, his personal vision and his idiosyncrasy. How much has each of them changed the religious material?difficult and delicate task, which was neglected, except by Homer, but particularly important for the Greek religion, it would be necessary to know the attitude of each author - of Pindar, of the tragedians - towards the different elements of this complex religion, his personal vision and his idiosyncrasy. How much has each of them changed the religious material?

JE Harrisson, The Religion of Ancient Greece , London, Archibald Constable & Co ltd, 1905, excerpts, translated from English by BK

[1] Herodotus, II, 53.

[2] Ibid. , 52.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Cratyle , 397 D.

[5] The developments contained in this paragraph apply only to savages. In reality, the cults derived from the Indo-European “religion” among the peoples of the white race have absolutely nothing to do with animism, as G. Dumézil has clearly shown. “… There is a word deus in Latin, and that is no small thing. Once again we encounter the Indo-European fact. The word is in fact found in most Indo-European languages ​​... The important fact is that, wherever we can specify the meaning, \* deiuo- designates an individual, personal, fully constituted being, - what he also designates in Latin (deus; plural dïuï, normally reduced to diï, dï… This conserved term is enough to ruin the predeistic construction, since it proves that not only the oldest Romans,but their Indo-European ancestors were already in possession of the type of divinity that we are trying to derive before our eyes from a concept equivalent to mana, from this numen, diverted from its meaning. "(Archaic Roman religion , Payot, 1974, p. 47-48). [editor's note]

[6] Pausanias, VI, 22.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid. , IV, 33.

[9] Ibid. , VIII, 48.

[10] Ibid. , VIII, 32.

[11] Xenophon, Memorables , I, 1-14.

[12] Etym. Mag., Sub. voc.

[13] Pausanias, X, 24.

[14] Ibid. , IX. 18.

[15] Ibid ., X, 12.

[16] “In regions of megalithic tradition, trees or stones are venerated as divinities; they are sometimes considered to be the ancestors of the clan; it even happens that a stone is designated as the mother… The myth of the petra genilrix can be found from Asia

Minor to the Far East ”( <http://krapooarboricole.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/vade> -yves-sur-la-maternite-du-chene-et-de-la-pierre-in-review-of-the-history-of-religions-tome-191-nc2b01-1977-pp-3-41.pdf , p . 8-9). On the other hand, it seems that, originally, the so-called Indo-European peoples did not know this cult.

[17] Iliad , IX. 381.

[18] Odyssey , IV, 83.

[19] Iliad , XIII, 741.

[20] Hérodote, I, 52.

[21] Thucydides, I. 3.

[22] Studies in Homer , I. p. 553.

[23] Odyssey , VIII. 265.

[24] Iliad , XI. 152.

[25] Tacitus, Germania , III.

[26] Iliad , XIII, 11.

[27] Ibid. , XIV, 276.

[28] Ibid. , I. 580.

[29] Ibid. , XV. 18-21.

[30] Ibid. , IV 34-36.

[31] AB Cook, Zeus, Jupiter and the Oak , CI. Rev. , 1903, 1904.

[32] Iliad , XX. 7.

[33]Ibid. , XXI. 195.

[34] Ibid. , III, 104.

[35] Strabo, III. § 353.

[36] Brit. Mus. Cat, F. 331.

[37] Brit Mus. Cat F. 278.

[38] In fact, nothing like a hearty meal of roast meat washed down with wine to convince a Nordic god already partly subject to Mediterranean influences, wine being the Mediterranean alcoholic drink par excellence. (editor's note)

[39] Herodotus, II, 43.

[40] Pausanias, II, 10, 1.

(41] Hesiod, Theogony , 535; and Schol ad loc .

(42] Pausanias, II. 5. 5.

(43] It is therefore absolutely false that Promethheism is a specifically “western” tendency (editor's note)

(44] Iliad , XXIII. 75.

(45] Tacitus, op. Cit. , 27.

(46]) Aeschylus Choéphores , 64-68.

(47] Genesis , IV, 11, 12.

(48] Pausanias, VIII, 24, 819.

(49] Iliad , IX. 632.

(50] Tacitus, op. Cit. , XXI) .

(51] Odyssey , XXII, 481.

(52] Plutarch, Quaest. Symp. , VI, 8.

(53] Leviticus , XVI. 21.

(54] The Golden Bough), 2nd edition, III. p. 93 and following.

(55] Isocrates, Orat. , V, 117.

(56] Plutarch, Life of Phocion , XXVIII.

(57] Clement of Alexandria, Protrepticon , II, 21, 2.

(58] Phaedon , 69c.

(59] Pindar) , Frg. 102.

(60] Apollodorus, III, 14, 7.

(61] Diodorus, V. 27, 3.

(62] Isocrates, Panegyric , 28.

(63] Diodorus, I, 96.

(64) in W Heinemann, Plutarch's Moralia , vol. 15: Fragments , Harvard University Press, 1969, fragment 178.

(65] Euripides, Frg. 475.

(66] Ibid..

(67] Chap. CXXV.

(68) The negative confession consists in declaring to have lived according to certain principles, or, more precisely, not to have violated them. (Editor's note)

(69] Proclus, Commentaries on the Republic de Plato , in H. Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine , p. 270.

(70] G. Murray, History of Ancient Greek Literature , p 68.

(71] Plato, The Republic , II, 380.

(72] Hermias, in Plat. Paedr. , P. 125.

(73] FM Cornford, Plato and Orpheus , Class. Rev. , Dec. 1903, p. 433.