

GREEK RELIGION

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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

II

Ritual and Sanctuary

An insight which came to be generally acknowledged in the study of religion towards the end of the last century is that rituals are more important and more instructive for the understanding of the ancient religions than are changeable myths.¹ With this recognition, antiquity is no longer seen in isolation, but embraced in the totality of so-called primitive religions, while in the higher, theologically developed religions, the same basis is quite certainly present in the practice, but forced into the background in the act of reflection. An origin for the rituals themselves was sought, for the most part without discussion, in primitive thought or imagination. In recent times, the tendency is more to regard rituals as an initially autonomous, quasi-linguistic system alongside and prior to the spoken language. Behavioural science, which has identified what are at least analogues of ritual in the animal kingdom, is able to come some way towards this position. From this perspective, ritual is an action divorced from its primary practical context which bears a semiotic character; its function normally lies in group formation, the creation of solidarity, or the negotiation of understanding among members of the species. Such actions constitute specifically religious ritual insofar as they signal a turning towards something extra-human or super-human; *de facto* the very act of turning away from the human has an eminently social function. Usually this something is circumscribed most universally as the sacred² or as the power,³ and the experience of the sacred is portrayed as the intense interplay of *mysterium tremendum, fascinans* and *augustum*. In the repertoire of signs this interplay is shown by the juxtaposition of things threatening and alluring – fire, blood, and weapons, on the one hand, and food and sexuality on the other – by gestures of submissiveness alongside imposing displays of power, and by the sudden alterations of darkness and light, masking and unmasking, rigidity and movement, sound and silence. This quasi-language operates not only through learning and imitation, but acts as an imprinting force, especially for children and adolescents. It signals and creates situations of anxiety in order to overcome them, it leads from the primal fear of being abandoned to the establishment of solidarity and the reinforcement of status, and in this way it helps to overcome real situations of crisis by substituting

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diverted activity for the apathy which remains transfixed in reality; it lays claim to the highest seriousness, to the absolute.

When considered from the point of view of the goal, ritual behaviour appears as magic. For a science of religion which regards only instrumental action as meaningful, magic must be seen as the origin of religion,⁴ since acts which seek to achieve a given goal in an unclear but direct way are magical. The goal then appears to be the attainment of all desirable boons and the elimination of possible impediments: there is rain magic, fertility magic, love magic, and destructive magic. The conception of ritual as a kind of language, however, leads beyond this constraining artifice; magic is present only insofar as ritual is consciously placed in the service of some end – which may then undoubtedly affect the form of the ritual. Religious ritual is given as a collective institution; the individual participates within the framework of social communication, with the strongest motivating force being the need not to stand apart. Conscious magic is a matter for individuals, for the few, and is developed accordingly into a highly complicated pseudo-science. In early Greece, where the cult belongs in the communal, public sphere, the importance of magic is correspondingly minimal. And however much the Greeks may hope that good things will flow from pious acts, they are nevertheless always aware that fulfilment is not guaranteed, but lies in the lap of the gods.

A survey of the forms of ritual might be articulated in terms of the various social groups which express themselves in ritual: the family and clan, peasants, craftsmen and warriors, citizens, king, priests. Alternatively, it might follow the spheres of life in which ritual unfolds its function: birth, initiation, and death, hunting and harvest, famine and plague, war and victory. Yet, the same repertoire of signs is employed by various groups in various situations. For this reason, the individual but complex ritual actions will be examined here first of all, and the Greek practice viewed against the background of more universal contexts. Only then, and in conjunction with the rich mythological elaboration, can the interaction of religion and communal life among the Greeks be presented.

1 'WORKING SACRED THINGS': ANIMAL SACRIFICE

1.1 *Description and Interpretation*

The essence of the sacred act, which is hence often simply termed doing or making sacred or working sacred things, is in Greek practice a straightforward and far from miraculous process: the slaughter and consumption of a domestic animal for a god.¹ The most noble sacrificial animal is the ox, especially the bull; the most common is the sheep, then the goat and the pig; the cheapest is the piglet. The sacrifice of poultry is also common,² but other birds³ – geese, pigeons – to say nothing of fish,⁴ are rare.

The sacrifice is a festive occasion for the community. The contrast with everyday life is marked with washing, dressing in clean garments, and adornment, in particular, wearing a garland⁵ woven from twigs on the head – a feature which does not yet appear in Homer. The animal chosen is to be perfect, and it too is adorned, entwined with ribbons, with its horns gilded. A procession escorts the animal to the altar. Everyone hopes as a rule that the animal will go to the sacrifice complaisantly, or rather voluntarily; edifying legends tell how animals pressed forward to the sacrifice on their own initiative when the time had come.⁶ A blameless maiden at the front of the procession carries on her head the sacrificial basket in which the knife for sacrifice lies concealed beneath grains of barley or cakes. A vessel containing water is also borne along, and often an incense burner; accompanying the procession is one or several musicians, normally a male or female flute-player. The goal is the stone altar or pile of ashes laid down or erected of old.⁷ Only there may and must blood be shed.

Once the procession has arrived at the sacred spot, a circle is marked out which includes the site of sacrifice, the animal, and the participants: as the sacrificial basket and water vessel are borne around in a circle, the sacred is delimited from the profane. All stand around the altar. As a first communal action water is poured from the jug over the hands of each participant in turn: this is to begin, *archesthai*. The animal too is sprinkled with water, causing it to jerk its head, which is interpreted as the animal nodding its assent. The god at Delphi pronounced through the oracle: 'That which willingly nods at the washing of hands I say you may justly sacrifice.'⁸ A bull is given water to drink: so he too bows his head.

The participants each take a handful of barley groats (*oulai*, *oulochytoi*) from the sacrificial basket. Silence descends. Ceremonially and resoundingly, and with arms raised to the sky, the sacrificer recites a prayer, invocation, wish, and vow. Then, as if in confirmation, all hurl their barley groats forward onto the altar and the sacrificial animal; in some rituals stones are thrown.⁹ This, together with the washing of hands, is also called a beginning, *katarchesthai*.

The sacrificial knife in the basket is now uncovered. The sacrificer grasps the knife and, concealing the weapon, strides up to the victim: he cuts some hairs from its forehead and throws them on the fire. This hair sacrifice¹⁰ is once more and for the last time a beginning, *aparchesthai*. No blood has flowed, but the victim is no longer inviolate.

The slaughter now follows. Smaller animals are raised above the altar and the throat is cut. An ox is felled by a blow with an axe and then the artery in the neck is opened. The blood is collected in a basin and sprayed over the altar and against the sides: to stain the altar with blood (*haimassein*) is a pious duty. As the fatal blow falls, the women must cry out in high, shrill tones: the Greek custom of the sacrificial cry¹¹ marks the emotional climax. Life screams over death.

The animal is skinned and butchered; the inner organs, especially the heart and the liver (*splanchna*), are roasted on the fire on the altar first of all.

Occasionally the heart is torn still beating from the body before all else.¹² To taste the entrails immediately is the privilege and duty of the innermost circle of participants. The inedible remains are then consecrated: the bones are laid on the pyre prepared on the altar in just order.¹³ In Homer, beginnings from all limbs of the animal, small pieces of meat, are also placed on the pyre: the dismembered creature is to be reconstituted symbolically.¹⁴ Later texts and paintings emphasize the pelvic bones and the tail; in the Homeric formula it is the thigh bones which are burned. Food offerings, cakes and broth, are also burned in small quantities; above all, the sacrificer pours wine over the fire so that the alcohol flames up. Once the *splanchna* have been eaten and the fire has died down, the preparation of the actual meat meal begins, the roasting or boiling; this is generally of a profane character. Nevertheless, it is not infrequently prescribed that no meat must be taken away: all must be consumed without remainder in the sanctuary.¹⁵ The skin falls to the sanctuary or to the priest.

The ritual of animal sacrifice varies in detail according to the local ancestral custom, but the fundamental structure is identical and clear: animal sacrifice is ritualized slaughter followed by a meat meal. In this the rite as a sign of the sacred is in particular the preparation, the beginning, on the one hand, and the subsequent restitution on the other: sacralization and desacralization¹⁶ about a central act of killing attended with weapons, blood, fire, and a shrill cry.

As soon as reflection found expression among the Greeks, the pious claim attached to this sacred act became ambivalent. Such a sacrifice is performed for a god, and yet the god manifestly receives next to nothing: the good meat serves entirely for the festive feasting of the participants. The sacrifice, it is known, creates a relationship between the sacrificer and the god; poets recount how the god remembers the sacrifice with pleasure or how he rages dangerously if sacrifices fail to be performed.¹⁷ But all that reaches to the sky is the fatty vapour rising in smoke; to imagine what the gods could possibly do with this leads unfailingly to burlesque. The ritual simply does not fit the anthropomorphic mythology of the gods. 'When gods and mortal men parted,' Hesiod relates, sacrifice was created:¹⁸ yonder the gods, immortals untouched by death, the heavenly ones to whom the sacrificial flame points; here men, mortals, dependent on food, killing. Admittedly, Hesiod's tale is then able to explain the division of the portions between gods and men only as a deception. At that separation at the first sacrifice, Prometheus, the ambivalent friend of man, set on one side the flesh and fatty entrails of the slaughtered bull and covered them with the hide and stomach, and on the other side he hid the white bones in glistening fat. In the name of the gods, Zeus chose the latter portion, intentionally, as Hesiod makes sure to emphasize; an earlier version will have told that the father of the gods was duped.¹⁹ At all events, biting comments about the burning of the bones and gall for the gods later form part of the standard repertoire of comedy:²⁰ can that which is not a gift be a sacrifice?

Greek tragedy²¹ surrounded its own scenes of uncanny violence and necessary destruction with the metaphors of animal sacrifice almost as a standard accompaniment, and frequently described and played out scenes of sacrifice. Without doubt both poet and public experienced what Walter F. Otto has called the 'violent drama of the animal bleeding to death, . . . the expression of a mood whose grandeur is paralleled only in works of high art'.²² The shock of the terrors of death present in the warm flowing blood strikes home directly, not as some painful adjunct, but as the very centre towards which all eyes are directed. And yet in the subsequent feast the encounter with death is transformed into life-affirming enjoyment.

Historically, this ritual of the sacrificial meal may be traced to the situation of man before the discovery of agriculture:²³ hunting, especially big-game hunting for cattle and horses, was the prime task of the male, and the principal source of food for the family. Killing to eat was an unalterable commandment, and yet the bloody act must always have been attended with a double danger and a double fear: that the weapon might be turned against a fellow hunter, and that the death of the prey might signal an end with no future, while man must always eat and so must always hunt. Important elements of the rites that came before and after the sacrifice may accordingly be traced to hunting customs, in particular the laying down of the bones, especially the thigh bones, the raising up of the skull, and the stretching out of the skin: attempts to restore the slain animal at least in outline. What Karl Meuli²⁴ called the 'comedy of innocence', the fiction of the willingness of the victim for sacrifice, is also to be seen in this context. In the sacrificial ritual, of course, these customs are closely interwoven with the specific forms of Neolithic peasant animal husbandry. The fact that the domestic animal, a possession and a companion, must nevertheless be slaughtered and eaten creates new conflicts and anxieties which are resolved in the ritual: the animal is consecrated, withdrawn from everyday life and subjugated to an alien will; not infrequently it is set free,²⁵ turned back into a wild animal. The fruits of agriculture, corn and wine, are also incorporated into the execution of the deed, as beginning and end, marking as it were the boundaries of domesticated life²⁶ from between which death erupts as from an atavistic chasm when the fruits of the earliest agriculture, the groats of barley, are transformed into symbolic missiles.

However difficult it may be for mythological and for conceptual reflection to understand how such a sacrifice affects the god, what it means for men is always quite clear: community, *koinonia*.²⁷ Membership of the community is marked by the washing of hands, the encirclement and the communal throwing; an even closer bond is forged through the tasting of the *splanchna*. From a psychological and ethological point of view, it is the communally enacted aggression and shared guilt which creates solidarity. The circle of the participants has closed itself off from outsiders; in doing so, the participants assume quite distinct roles in the communal action. First there is the carrying of the basket, the water vessel, the incense burner, and

the torches, and the leading of the animals; then come the stages of the beginning, the praying, the slaughter, the skinning, and the dismemberment; this is followed by the roasting, first of the *splanchna*, then of the rest of the meat, then the libations of wine, and finally the distribution of the meat. Boys and girls, women and men all have their place and their task. Directing the action is the sacrificer, the priest, who prays, tastes, and makes libation; in his awe of the divine he also demonstrates his own power, a power which, although it brings in reality only death, appears *e contrario* to embrace life as well. The order of life, a social order, is constituted in the sacrifice through irrevocable acts; religion and everyday existence interpenetrate so completely that every community, every order must be founded through a sacrifice.

1.2 Blood Rituals

The power of blood in belief and superstition has often been the subject of ethnographic discussion.²⁸ Among the Greeks what is striking is, if anything, a certain reticence towards blood magic; there is nothing of a universal blood taboo as in the law of the Jews.²⁹ Animal sacrifice is the shedding of blood; that the altars become bloody (*haimassesthai*) is a characteristic of the sacrificial act as such.³⁰ On vase paintings the white-chalked sides of the altars are always shown splashed with blood in testimony to the sacred work. An altar in Didyma was said to have been made from the blood of the victims.³¹ Significantly, the victims which are pleasing to the gods are warm-blooded animals, mostly large mammals; fish, though much more important for everyday sustenance, are rarely if ever sacrificed. What counts is the warm, running blood which arouses fear and suspicion. Unbloody sacrifices are described with special emphasis as pure (*hagna thymata*).³² The sacrificer, however, is not in some sense impure, but enjoys a sacred, exceptional status in accordance with the divine ordinance which sanctions and demands the shedding of blood at the sacred spot. For this reason a man who sits on or next to an altar cannot be harmed or killed; this would be a perversion of the sacred and would inevitably plunge the whole city into ruin.³³ The asylum of the altar stands in polar relation to the shedding of blood; the shedding of human blood constitutes the most extreme, yet dangerously similar contrast to the pious work.

In a number of cults human blood is shed; this the Greeks then trace to some barbaric origin. The image of the Taurian Artemis, which presided over the human sacrifices in Colchis and was later brought to Greece by Orestes along with Iphigeneia, is mentioned in particular as provoking such rites; it is said to be preserved in Halai Araphenides in Attica, where at the sacrifice for Artemis Tauropolos a man has his throat scratched with a knife,³⁴ or else with Ortheia in Sparta where the *epheboi* are whipped at the altar.³⁵

There are sacrificial rituals in which the shedding of blood appears to be

carried out for its own sake and not as the prelude to a meal; these are blood sacrifices in the narrower sense, *sphagia*.³⁶ They are found primarily in two extreme situations, before battle and at the burial of the dead; the other context in which they occur is at purifications. Before battle the Spartans slaughter a goat for Artemis *Agrotera*;³⁷ usually, however, the reports mention no god, but just the fact that on the battlefield, in view of the enemy, the general or the seers who accompany the army will cut the throats of animals; whole herds are driven along for this purpose. From certain signs in the victims the seers determine the prospects of success in the battle. The quasi-harmless and manageable slaughter is a premonitory anticipation of the battle and its unforeseeable dangers; it is a beginning. It is asserted that before the battle of Salamis captured Persians were sacrificed in place of the animals.³⁸ Myth knows many variants of the – ideally willing – sacrifice of maidens before battle; Iphigeneia in Aulis can also be placed in this group.³⁹ In Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* the threatening anticipation of bloodshed is presented as a binding oath: before the walls of Thebes the Seven slaughter a bull 'into a black-rimmed shield', touch 'with their hands the blood of the bull', and swear 'by Ares, Enyo and bloody Terror' to win or die.⁴⁰ Otherwise rites of blood brotherhood and the communal drinking of blood are generally attributed to barbarians or else to extreme groups at the edge of society.⁴¹

At the burial of the dead, animals are slaughtered and burned on the funeral pyre. At the funeral pyre of Patroclus, Achilles slaughters many sheep and oxen, four horses, two dogs, and twelve captured Trojans.⁴² This can be understood as an outburst of helpless fury: 'If you are dead the others should not live.'⁴³ Nevertheless, when it is related that 'about the dead man flowed blood such as could be drawn in cups', it is clear that the intention was for the blood to reach the dead man in some way, to give him back life and colour; red colouring is used in burials as early as the Palaeolithic.⁴⁴

Sacrifices of this kind are also repeated in honour of the dead man. Here no altar is set up, but a pit is dug in the ground (*bothros*),⁴⁵ into which the blood flows. The idea then arises that the downward flowing blood reaches the dead: 'satiating with blood', *haimakouria*.⁴⁶ In the earliest and definitive literary text describing such a sacrifice, this has become a conjuring up of the dead man: Odysseus, on the instructions of the enchantress Circe, digs out a square pit (*bothros*) at the edge of the world, and after a threefold libation and a prayer to Hades and Persephone, he slaughters a ram and a black sheep, causing the blood to flow into the pit; thereupon the souls (*psychai*) gather to drink the blood and so to awake to brief consciousness. The sacrificed animals are burned next to the pit.⁴⁷

1.3 Fire Rituals

Fire is one of the foundations of civilized life. It is the most primitive protection from beasts of prey, and so also from evil spirits. It gives warmth and light, and yet is always grievous and dangerous, the very epitome of

destruction: things great, fixed, and solid dissolve in smoke and ashes. Fire with its multiple fascinations is present in almost every cult act of the Greeks. Sacrifices without fire are rare, conscious exceptions,⁴⁸ and conversely there is rarely a fire without sacrifice; the hearth, *Hestia*, is a goddess as well.⁴⁹ An early form of the temple is the hearth house; the early temples at Dreros and Prinias on Crete are of this type, as indeed is the temple of Apollo at Delphi which always had its inner *hestia*.⁵⁰ Otherwise the altar stands as a rule in the open air opposite the temple entrance; by virtue of its function, the altar is the pre-eminent fire place, the hearth of the gods.⁵¹ Fire miracles are spoken of only in the Dionysos cult.⁵² Nevertheless, a sudden burst of flame from the altar fire is seen as a sign of divine presence,⁵³ and this gives special import to the libations of oil and wine poured over the altar.

Just as in the home the fire on the hearth is not allowed to die, so too in many temples an eternal fire is maintained: most notably in the temple of Apollo at Delphi, but also in the temple of Apollo Lykeios at Argos and in the temple of Apollo Karneios in Cyrene.⁵⁴ As a kind of technical refinement, the ever-burning lamp takes the place of fire in the temple of Athena Polias in Athens and in the temple of Hera in Argos and also in the Asklepios cult. A fire of this kind is the embodiment of the continuity of the sanctuary and of the body politic; Athena's lamp went out shortly before Sulla stormed and destroyed Athens.⁵⁵ With the extinguishing and rekindling of the fire, impressive enactment may be given to the sequence of completion, purification, and new beginning. In Argos, the hearth of a house in which someone has died is extinguished, and after the prescribed period of mourning, new fire is fetched from the state hearth, and the domestic hearth is kindled anew with a sacrifice.⁵⁶ The island of Lemnos

is purified at a certain time of the year, and the fire on the island is extinguished for nine days. A ship bearing festal envoys fetches fire from Delos. Once the ship has arrived and they have distributed the fire for all other needs of life and especially for the craftsmen who depend on fire, they say, 'from now on a new life begins for them'.⁵⁷

After the battle of Plataea, the Greeks all decided to fetch new fire from Delphi; thereafter, on the basis of certain signs, the Athenians repeatedly sent a Pythian mission to Delphi to bring fire to Athens in a tripod cauldron.⁵⁸

The altars which stand in the open air do not have fire burning on them continuously; they are kindled in an impressive ceremony in the course of the festival. At Olympia, the victor in the stadion race has the right to ascend to the altar to which the stadion leads, where the consecrated portions lie prepared, and to light the fire.⁵⁹ At the Panathenaia, the fire is carried in a torch race from the grove of Akademos through the market place to the altar of the goddess on the Acropolis.⁶⁰ The Argives fetch fire for their celebrations in Lerna from the distant sanctuary of Artemis Pyronia.⁶¹ Nocturnal

processions with torches⁶² are among the most primitive customs and never fail to impress; above all they have their place in Dionysos festivals.

Nothing lends a more unique and unmistakable character to an occasion than a distinctive fragrance; fire speaks not only to eye, ear, and physical sensation, but also to the sense of smell. The sacred is experienced as an atmosphere of divine fragrance. This was no doubt always taken into consideration in the selection of the woods and twigs for the sacrificial fire. In a Homeric formula the gods already have their 'fragrant altars'.⁶³ In Homer, too, the beginnings of that shift in meaning may be discerned whereby the ancient word for fumigating, *thyein*, came to be the normal word for sacrificing.⁶⁴ Exactly what Patroclus throws onto the hearth fire for the gods, and what Hesiod commends to be burned every morning and evening as an incense offering is not clear.⁶⁵ At all events, the import of specialized incense wares, primarily frankincense and myrrh, commenced about 700 at the latest; these came to Greece from southern Arabia via Phoenician intermediaries, and in Greek they retain their Semitic names. The cult practice must have expanded along with the trade.⁶⁶ The type of incense burner used, the *thymiaterion*, is of Babylonian-Assyrian origin, and probably came to the Greeks and Etruscans via Cyprus. Incense offerings and altars are associated particularly with the cult of Aphrodite and of Adonis; appropriately, the first mention of frankincense is found in that poem by Sappho⁶⁷ which conjures up the epiphany of the goddess Aphrodite in her grove of apple trees and roses between quivering branches and incense-burning altars. The use of frankincense is later customary everywhere; to strew a granule of frankincense in the flames is the most widespread, simplest, and also cheapest act of offering.

The festivals which are wholly defined by the destructive power of fire are extravagantly costly. The most detailed account of a festival of this kind is the one – admittedly from Imperial times – which Pausanias gives of the festival of Laphria at Patrai:⁶⁸

Round the altar in a circle they set up logs of wood still green, each of them up to sixteen cubits long; inside on top of the altar lies the driest of the wood. At the time of the festival they construct a smoother ascent to the altar by piling earth on the altar steps. They throw alive onto the altar edible birds and victims of all kinds, and further wild boars and deer and gazelles; some bring even wolf and bear cubs, others even fully grown wild beasts. They also place on the altar fruits of cultivated trees. Then they set fire to the wood. At this point I saw how a bear and many another animal forced its way out at the first rush of the flames, some even escaping by their violence; but those who had thrown them in now drive them back into the pyre.

The sanctuary becomes an amphitheatre. And yet the cult of Artemis Laphria comes from Calydon, where the cult place existed in Geometric

times with the earliest temple being built in the seventh century. The myth associated with her cult is older still; the *Iliad* tells of the anger of Artemis which led to the Calydonian boar hunt and finally to the death of Meleagros; he died, according to the original, pre-Iliadic version, when his mother Althaea placed back on the fire a log which had been torn from the fire at his birth.⁶⁹ a reflex of a sacrifice through destruction by fire. Clearly related are the Elaphebolia of Artemis of Hyampolis and the festival of the Kouretes in Messene.⁷⁰ Another fire festival attended with bull sacrifice and contests took place on Mount Oita in honour of Heracles.⁷¹ It was regarded as a commemoration of Heracles' terrible self-immolation at that very spot, a myth which undoubtedly took over important elements from the ritual. In Thebes there is a parallel nocturnal festival in which 'at the sinking of the sun's light the flame rising celebrates unceasing through the night, kicking upwards to the aether with fatty smoke'.⁷² Here the Alkeidai are honoured, the Sons of the Valiant One, identified as the children of Heracles; it was then told that their father had killed them in a fit of madness and burned them. On Mount Kithairon near Plataea, the Boeotians celebrated their fire festival by burning rude, human-shaped idols made of wood, the Daedala, and the story was told of Hera's quarrel and reconciliation with Zeus.⁷³ Again and again, the sacrifice of a man or of a god, hinted at in ritual and executed in myth, lies behind the fire festivals. The annual fires of European peasant custom are not, therefore, the origin and explanation of the ancient rituals,⁷⁴ which are not necessarily connected with the course of the sun and the rhythm of the year, but are rather offshoots and reinterpretations from the same root. Connections with the Minoan peak cults, and perhaps even with the Semitic and Anatolian fire festivals, must be considered, even though it is impossible to find direct proof.⁷⁵

Fire sacrifices in which animals or even men are burned wholly, holocausts, are characteristic of the religion of the West Semites, the Jews, and Phoenicians. Children were still burned in Carthage in historical times, and in Jerusalem the daily burning of two one-year-old lambs in the temple became the centre of the divine service.⁷⁶ The Greeks marvelled at this complete surrender to the god which contrasted with their own questionable Promethean sacrificial practice.⁷⁷ Among the Greeks, holocausts are found primarily in the cult of the dead, as described in the *Odyssey*; this corresponds to the burning of the corpse, and in both cases one speaks of a fire place, *pyra*.⁷⁸ For this reason, burning is widely regarded as characteristic of a special class of Chthonic sacrifices⁷⁹ in contrast to the Olympian sacrificial feast. This dichotomy, however, does not fit the evidence: there are sacrificial banquets in the cult of gods who are explicitly called Chthonic,⁸⁰ and also in the cult of the dead and especially in the hero cult;⁸¹ moreover, even if the great fire festivals for Artemis or Hera are excluded as special cases, there are holocausts even for Zeus.⁸² What is significant is more the fact that for Zeus Polieus, for example, first a piglet is burned, then a bull is slaughtered for the

sacrificial meal⁸³ – a sequence which is also very familiar among the Semites and which seems to correspond in an exaggerated way to the sequence of the normal sacrifice with the burning of the thigh bones followed by the meal.

1.4 *Animal and God*

Evolutionary theories found in animal worship a very attractive, more primitive antecedent to the belief in anthropomorphic gods. Further support for this view came from the discovery about the turn of the century of a half understood totemism which was seen as an original form of religion as such. It was not surprising therefore that animals worshipped as gods, animal gods, and totem animals were sought and found behind the gods of the Greeks.⁸⁴ Where this means that the god is identical with his victim, then the god himself is sacrificed and eaten. The explosive power of these reflections derived not least from their contiguity with the Christian theology of the sacrifice in the mass.

The concept of the theriomorphic god and especially of the bull god, however, may all too easily efface the very important distinctions between a god named, described, represented, and worshipped in animal form, a real animal worshipped as a god, animal symbols and animal masks in the cult, and finally the consecrated animal destined for sacrifice. Animal worship of the kind found in the Egyptian Apis cult is unknown in Greece. Snake worship is a special case.⁸⁵ Myth, of course, toys with animal metamorphoses. Poseidon in stallion shape sires – with Demeter, who is transformed into a mare – the primal horse Areion and a mysterious daughter.⁸⁶ Zeus in the shape of a bull abducts Europa from Tyre to Crete and fathers Minos on her. When we then hear how the sacrificial bull risen from the sea coupled with Minos' wife Pasiphae and fathered the Minotaur, the identification of divine progenitor and sacrificial victim seems complete.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, in the fully formulated myth, Minos and Minotauros are no more equated than their begetters. Io, Hera's priestess in Argos, is watched over as a cow by a guardian cloaked in a bull's hide called Argos, is made pregnant by Zeus, and is driven across the world by Hera; here, connections with the cattle herds and cattle sacrifices of Hera of Argos are manifest.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the Greeks avoid calling Zeus or Hera bull or cow even metaphorically, although in Egypt or Ugarit gods were addressed in this way without scruple. The only appellation of this kind is found in the fixed Homeric formula of the 'cow-eyed Mistress Hera' where it is no longer possible to distinguish what was metaphor and what was belief.

Dionysos is an exception. In the cult hymn from Elis he is invoked to come as a bull, 'with bull foot raging'.⁸⁹ Quite frequently he is portrayed with bull horns, and in Kyzikos he has a tauromorphic cult image. There is also a myth which tells how he was slaughtered as a bull-calf and eaten by the impious creatures of old, the Titans. In the Classical period, however, this

myth is suppressed and kept secret since it is scarcely compatible with the public image of the divine.

In the iconography, god and animal are intimately associated: the bull appears with Zeus, the bull or horse with Poseidon, the ram or he-goat with Hermes, the stag or roe with Apollo and Artemis. The iconographical tradition, however, has a life of its own, especially as it needs to differentiate gods by means of attributes; the bull god and stag god can be traced to Asia Minor/Hittite tradition;⁹⁰ the owl of Athena, the eagle of Zeus, and the peacock of Hera-Juno are little more than heraldic animals for the Greeks.⁹¹ In myth Hecabe is transformed into a dog and accompanies the goddess Hecate, doubtless an association of the names Hecabe-Hecate; nevertheless, this dog is described as the *agalma* of the goddess,⁹² a show-piece in which she takes delight, just as all gods take delight in the animal figures set up in their sanctuaries. Many of these figures represent in turn the favoured sacrificial victims of the god: bulls for Zeus and Poseidon, stags and goats for Artemis and Apollo, rams and he-goats for Hermes, and doves for Aphrodite.

Animal sacrifice is the underlying reality. In sacrifice, the power and presence of the Stronger One, the god, are experienced. Following a custom which stretches back to Çatal Hüyük and beyond, horns, especially bull skulls with horns, bucrania, are raised up and preserved in the sanctuary;⁹³ they mark the site of sacrifice as eloquently as the stains of blood on the altar. The Horn Altar of Artemis on Delos, which was made from goat horns, was famed as one of the wonders of the world. The most remarkable and most direct evidence for the wearing of animal masks is also found in the context of sacrifice: in Cypriot sanctuaries masks to cover the head were made from real bull skulls; terracotta figures wearing these bull-masks have also been found. These figures are not directly representing a bull god, but are priests, as is evident from the accompanying myth of the Horned Ones, the Kerastai, who made gruesome human sacrifices.⁹⁴ The sacrificer conceals himself by assimilating himself to the victim, and at the same time he seems to bring to life again the creature killed earlier. One may surmise that goat sacrifice, masked Pans, and the goat god Pan belong together in a similar way, and that for this reason the satyr play follows the tragedy, as the goat lamented by the goat singers is resurrected in a droll manner in the shape of a man masked in its skin.⁹⁵ Similarly, the wearing of a ram's fleece for purification⁹⁶ was very probably connected with a ram sacrifice. But direct evidence is lacking.

At the same time, the animal in Greek sacrifice seems to be associated in a particular way with man. Again and again, myth relates how an animal sacrifice takes the place of a human sacrifice or, conversely, how an animal sacrifice is transformed into a human sacrifice;⁹⁷ one is mirrored in the other. A certain equivalence of animal and man is doubtless inherited from the hunter tradition and is also quite natural to the cattle breeder. To both belong eyes, face, eating, drinking, breathing, movement, and excitement in

attack and flight. The slaughter then reveals the warm blood, flesh, skin and bones and also the *splanchna* which have always had the same names in both animal and man – heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, and gall-bladder, and finally the form and function of the genitals. That an animal is sacrificed in place of a man may be expressly stated.^{9b} At that separation of gods and men in the sacrifice, the dying animal belongs to this extent on the side of men, mortals. To the god it stands in a relation of polarity: through the death which it dies, it confirms *e contrario* the superior power of the wholly other, deathless, everlasting god.

2 GIFT OFFERINGS AND LIBATION

2.1 First Fruit Offerings

In human society the exchange of gifts is a social process of the first order; through giving and receiving, personal bonds are forged and maintained, and relations of superiority and subordination are expressed and recognized.¹ If the gods are the Stronger Ones and also the Givers of Good, then they have a claim to gifts. Plato has Socrates define piety² as 'knowledge of sacrificing and praying' and sacrificing as 'making gifts to the gods', and he counts on unquestioning assent. That the actual practice of animal sacrifice does not accord with this is seen as an age-old deception;³ the practice nevertheless goes hand in hand with gifts to the gods, not to mention the fact that the domestic animal as a possession must be given up for slaughter in honour of the god.

An elementary form of gift offering, so omnipresent that it plays a decisive role in the discussions concerning the origin of the concept of the divine is the primal or first fruit offering, the surrender of firstlings of food whether won by hunting, fishing, gathering, or agriculture.⁴ The Greeks speak of *ap-archai*, beginnings taken from the whole, for the god comes first. How exactly something of this portion may come to reach a higher being is, of course, of little importance. Such gifts may be set down on a sacred spot where they are left to other men or animals, they may be sunk in springs and rivers, fen and sea,⁵ or they may be burned; gift sacrifice turns into sacrifice through destruction. It is possible, of course, that the gifts may even come to benefit man again via the organization of temple economy and priesthood; but in the first instance at least, the act of renunciation demonstratively recognizes a higher order beyond the desire to fill one's belly.

The model of simple piety in the *Odyssey* is the swineherd Eumaios, who also manifests his good sense in relation to the gods. When he slaughters a pig for Odysseus, he lays pieces of raw meat – 'taking the beginning from all limbs' – in fat, sprinkles this with barley meal and throws the lot on the fire. At the distribution of the meat, he first of all sets aside one of the seven

portions for 'Hermes and the nymphs'. Before the men start eating, he makes first bits, *argmata*, go up in smoke.⁶

Elsewhere, also, first fruit offerings are regarded as characteristic of a simple, age-old peasant world.⁷ The pious man takes to a sanctuary a little of everything which the seasons bring, seasonal gifts (*horaia*), ears of corn or bread, figs and olives, grapes, wine, and milk. Such gifts dedicated in small rural shrines are a favourite theme of Hellenistic epigrams.⁸ Popular, lesser gods are mentioned: Pan, Hermes, the nymphs, Heracles, Priapos, and naturally Demeter and Dionysos; but heroes too are honoured in this way, as are those who fell at the battle of Plataea,⁹ and occasionally even the city god himself such as Poseidon of Troizen.¹⁰ The harvest festivals proper are not incorporated in the state calendar. The peasant or lord celebrates his *thalysia*¹¹ once the harvest has been gathered in from his field or estate; festal eating and drinking are naturally uppermost here, even though the gods are not forgotten; in this way the first fruit offering flows over once again into the customary animal sacrifice.

Xenophon¹² used part of his share in the spoils from the March of the Ten Thousand to found an Artemis sanctuary with an altar and temple at Skillous near Olympia,

and thereafter he always brought to the sanctuary the tithe of what the fields bore through the seasons of the year and made a sacrifice to the goddess; and all the citizens and the men and women of the neighbourhood took part in the festival. To those encamped in tents the goddess gave barley meal, bread, wine, nuts and olives, and a portion of the sacrificed animals from the sacred herd and a portion of the hunted animals.

The tithe is transformed into the gift which the goddess in turn offers to her guests at the festival. Elsewhere the tithe is often handed over to the temple in the form of a lasting votive gift, as a kind of tax.¹³

About 420 the sanctuary of Eleusis proclaimed its title to collect first fruit offerings for the corn goddess Demeter throughout Greece:¹⁴

The Athenians shall bring first fruit offerings to the two goddesses from the fruits of the field following ancient custom and the oracle from Delphi: from one hundred bushels of barley, no less than one sixth of a bushel, from one hundred bushels of wheat, no less than one twelfth of a bushel . . . The demarchoi shall collect this in the villages and deliver it at Eleusis to the sacred officials of Eleusis. Three corn silos shall be built in Eleusis . . . The allied states shall also bring first fruit offerings in the same manner . . . They shall send them to Athens . . . The city council shall also send notice to all other Greek cities . . . and shall urge them to make first fruit offerings if they wish . . . And if one of these cities

brings offerings the sacred officials shall receive them in the same manner. Sacrifice shall be made from the sacred cakes according to the instructions of the Eumolpidae, and also a sacrifice of three animals (*trittoa*) beginning with an ox with gilded horns, for each of the two goddesses from the barley and from the wheat, then for Triptolemos and the god and the goddess and Euboulos each a perfect victim, and for Athena an ox with gilded horns.

The silos were then in fact built, and the revenues that flowed into the sanctuary were obviously regarded simply as the capital of the temple and were used to finance normal sacrificial festivals.

The animal sacrifices in turn are – as in Semitic ritual – regularly accompanied by food offerings. A bequest on Thera prescribes:¹⁵ 'They shall sacrifice an ox, then [as food offerings] of wheat from one bushel, of barley from two bushels, one measure of wine and other firstlings which the seasons bring.' In addition to the unground groats of barley which are taken and thrown at the beginning, there is also ground barley, *psaista*, in various forms, as flour, broth, pancakes, and cakes;¹⁶ here a rich variety is found from place to place. Offerings of this kind are burned on the altar, some before and some after the bones and fat of the victim. Nevertheless, the amount of food destroyed in this way was kept within limits. From Classical times onwards there is increasing evidence of tables of offering, *trapezai*, being set up alongside the altar; choice pieces of roast meat, cakes, and similar offerings were placed on them; the offerings then fall to the priest. The procedure is rationalized even further when these gifts are collected from the very outset in cash; they are still called firstlings, but they are to be placed straight into the offertory-box, *thesauros*.¹⁷

In special cases the offering of first fruits stands on its own, without animal sacrifice, or even in contrast to it. In Phigaleia in Arcadia, offerings are made from 'the fruits of cultivated trees and especially the fruit of the vine, along with honeycombs and raw wool still full of its grease. These they place on the altar . . . then they pour oil over them.'¹⁸ In this case the associated myth of Demeter and the form of the ritual indicate a connection with Bronze Age Anatolia. The altar of Apollo Genetor, Begetter, on Delos never served for blood sacrifice, and in front of the Erechtheion in Athens, there stood another bloodless altar dedicated to Zeus Hypatos, Highest.¹⁹ As in Paphos,²⁰ these altars may preserve a Bronze Age tradition: the altar as table of offerings in the Minoan–Mycenaean mould.

2.2 Votive Offerings

The votive offering, the gift made to the god in consequence of a vow, differs from the first fruit offering more in occasion than in substance. It pervades all ancient civilizations and plays an essential part in defining the relation between men and gods as established in the exchange of gifts.²¹ In distress

and danger man seeks to find deliverance through a voluntary act of renunciation, one determined and circumscribed by himself. He seeks to master the uncertainties of the future by means of a self-imposed 'if – then'. Any situation of anxiety may present the occasion for a vow: for the individual, sickness or the perils of a sea voyage; for the community, famine, plague, or war. The vow is made aloud, ceremonially, and before as many witnesses as possible – the Greek word *euche* means simultaneously a loud cry, a prayer, and a vow.²² If the outcome is successful, fulfilment of the vow is an irrevocable duty, as well as an opportunity to parade one's success before the eyes of gods and men.

The vow may involve any gift requiring some minimal expense. An animal sacrifice²³ may be specified, for example, in which, once the crisis is over, men reassure themselves of the divine order; equally common is the promise of first fruit offerings or the promise to increase these offerings. Votive offerings and first fruit offerings then become linked in an unending chain throughout the year: at the harvest festival, prayers are made for new growth and increase, and the gods are promised their portion in turn. One may even go so far as to found a new sanctuary with an altar or even a temple,²⁴ but an initiative of this kind would generally require some special sanction through a divine sign. Slaves and animal herds may be bestowed on existing sanctuaries, and very occasionally members of the household are pledged for service in the temple.²⁵ Movable goods, primarily costly garments, may be handed over to the temple, or even a tract of land. Most common, however, is the practice of setting up in the temple artefacts made by oneself, votives in the true sense, *anathemata*.²⁶

The most extravagant form of setting up connected with vows and first-fruit offerings is occasioned by war. Hector promises to dedicate the armour of his opponent to Apollo, and Odysseus hands over Dolon's cap, bow, and spear to Athena.²⁷ Later, a fixed proportion of the booty won in war, usually a tithe (*dekate*), was taken out for the god before the distribution of the spoils began: this tribute is also called *akrothinia*, the topmost of the pile. Even before battle, however, a share of the spoils is awarded through vows to one or several gods; this also avoids any doubt about the god or gods to whom the army owes its victory.²⁸ Booty consists primarily of weapons: all Greek sanctuaries were resplendent with weapons captured in war, especially shields. A large revenue was also raised from the sale or ransom of prisoners of war, and a tithe of this revenue was given in turn to the god in the form of splendid votive gifts. Some of the most renowned artistic monuments of Greece came into existence in this way, from the Snake Column from the Persian Wars, to the Nike by Paionios in Olympia and the Nike from Samothrace. The Sacred Way at Delphi is lined with monuments to the victories with which the Greeks destroyed themselves in the fifth and fourth centuries. Polytheism allows every victory to be recognized without inhibition as proof of the power of a Stronger One, as an act of favour of specific gods who are then entitled to an appropriate thanks offering from those

whom they have exalted; but the gods give no guarantee against vicissitudes of fortune or precipitate downfall.

At the same time, gifts of a kind which no man might be offered also find their way into sanctuaries as a result of vows. Of these the most common is the hair offering.²⁹ At Patroclus' bier Achilles cuts off a long lock of hair which is pledged to his native river Spercheios. In many places boys and girls on entering their majority would cut their hair and dedicate it to some deity, a river, a local hero, or a god; the most pettily pretentious would even travel to Delphi to do so. Similarly, a girl would dedicate the playthings of her childhood in a sanctuary and present her girdle to Artemis before marriage.³⁰ On their retirement, aged hunters, fishermen, and peasants would dedicate the tools of their trade in a sanctuary.³¹ The things which man leaves behind at a turning point in his life remain preserved in the shrine. This dedication cannot be annulled; the renunciation is irrevocable. The background to this practice is clearly the sacralization of the remains of the sacred act, the hanging up of the skin and the elevation of the skull. By dedicating his hair, a man surrenders a part of himself to a higher power – a loss which admittedly causes no pain and is quickly replaced. Just as the sacralization at the sacrifice contains something of bad conscience and restitution, so here the anxiety associated with the turning point in life becomes a symbolic redemption from the powers which have previously ruled one's life. The bride in particular must not forget to show reverence to the virgin Artemis. The garments of women who have died in childbirth are dedicated in her sanctuary at Brauron,³² as if the miscarriage indicated a debt which must be settled posthumously.

2.3 Libation

The outpouring of liquids, libation,³³ though it has now disappeared from our culture, was one of the most common sacral acts during prehistoric times and especially in the civilizations of the Bronze Age. Alongside the poetic word *leibein*, *loibe*, the Greeks use two terms in which Anatolian and Indo-European tradition meet,³⁴ *spendein*, *sponde* on the one hand, and *cheein*, *choe* on the other. *Spendein*, significantly, is associated primarily with wine, the fruit of the Mediterranean; there are, however, also *choai* with wine and *spondai* with honey, oil, and water.³⁵ The distinction is based in the first instance on the type of vessel employed and the manner of its manipulation: the *sponde* is made from the hand-held jug or bowl and the pouring is controlled; the *choe* involves the complete tipping and emptying of a larger vessel which may be held or may stand on the ground. The *choe* is intended for the dead and for Chthonic gods; nevertheless, one can also speak of *spondai* for the *chthonioi*.³⁶

The *sponde* is performed whenever wine is drunk. Before drinking one's fill, a libation is poured; this is already found fixed in a formula in Homer.³⁷ In symposia³⁸ there are later specific rules which prescribe, for instance, that from the first krater a libation is to be made to Zeus and the Olympians, from

the second to the heroes, and from the third and last to Zeus Teleios, the Finisher; or alternatively, from the first to the Agathos Daimon and from the third to Hermes. Each participant is free to invoke a god with further libations.

Invocation and prayer are inseparable from libation: the cup is filled in order to pray, and the filled cup is passed to the guest with the invitation to pray in turn. In order to supplicate the gods aright at all, a libation is therefore required.³⁹ When embarking on a voyage, wine is mixed in kraters and then emptied into the sea from the stern of the ship, amid prayers and vows.⁴⁰ When Achilles sends Patroclus out to battle, he takes from his chest the cup from which he alone drinks, cleans it, washes his hands, and draws the wine; then, stepping into the court, he pours out the wine and, looking up to the sky, prays for the victory and safe return of his friend. Zeus grants one prayer, but denies the other.⁴¹

Wine libations also have a fixed place in the ritual of animal sacrifice. The cry *sponde!*, *sponde!* may introduce any sacrificial act.⁴² To conclude the ritual, wine is poured over the flames on the altar which are consuming the remains. Thus the sacrificer with the libation bowl in his hand above the flaming altar became a favourite iconographical motif.⁴³ Even the gods themselves, however, were shown holding the libation phial⁴⁴ in real statues and especially in paintings. Perhaps the priest would pour the wine into the divine libation bowl and the wine would flow from there in turn. The god, as it were, makes offering to himself, or rather, he is drawn into the giving and taking of the serenely flowing stream, an epitome of self-sustaining piety.

The libation consequently stands in a certain polarity to the blood sacrifice which precedes it. The *sphagia* open hostilities; the *spondai* end hostilities. Normally there is no other word for armistice or peace treaty than simply the *spondai*. 'We, the polis, have made libation'⁴⁵ means: we have resolved and committed ourselves. The Truce of God at the time of the Panhellenic festivals, the Olympic Games, or the Eleusinian Mysteries, is also designated in this way. 'Sponde bearers'⁴⁶ make their way through the lands to proclaim and bring about the truce; such libation is bloodless, gentle, irrevocable, and final.

Libations which the earth drinks⁴⁷ are destined for the dead and for the gods who dwell in the earth. A rite of this kind is already performed by Odysseus as he conjures up the dead:⁴⁸ around the offering pit he pours a libation for all the dead, first with a honey drink, then with wine, and thirdly with water; over this he strews white barley and beseeches the dead, promising future burnt sacrifices. Similarly, in Aeschylus' *Persians*, the queen brings milk, honey, water, wine, and oil and also flowers to the grave of the dead king;⁴⁹ the songs which accompany the pouring call the dead Darius to the light. The second play in the Aeschylean *Oresteia* takes its title, *The Libation Bearers*, from the offerings which Electra brings with her handmaidens to the grave of the dead Agamemnon. The unfolding of the ritual has a rhythm which corresponds to that of the normal sacrifice: first the

ceremonial procession to the grave with all the vessels being borne along; then a silence, a prayer to the dead man; then the pouring, accompanied by wild cries of grief like the *Ololyge* at the sacrifice.⁵⁰ In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles provides the most detailed description of a libation ritual which is performed in the grove of the Eumenides by way of atonement. First, water is fetched from a freshly flowing spring; cauldrons which stand in the sanctuary are garlanded with wool and filled with water and honey; turning towards the east, the sacrificer tips the vessels towards the west; the olive branches which he has been holding in his hand he now strews on the ground at the place where the earth has drunk in the libation; and with a silent prayer he departs, not looking back.⁵¹ The silent peacefulness of this act becomes a symbol for the mysterious disappearance of the dying Oedipus.

'The souls', wrote Lucian,⁵² 'are nourished by the libations.' Accordingly, the libation is usually accepted without question as a drink offering, a gift of food. That the earth drinks is said explicitly often enough. Mythology must then admittedly attribute curious needs to the dead and subterranean beings, and why wine is poured straight onto the ground for the Heavenly Ones remains unexplained.⁵³ In fact, however, the libation of wine before drinking is a clear instance of a first fruit offering in its negative aspect. What is important is not that the libation reaches its destination, but that the offerer surrenders himself to a higher will in the act of serene wastefulness. The libations to the dead therefore signal a recognition of the power of the dead. What distinguishes the outpouring from other gifts of food is its irretrievability: what is spilled cannot be brought back. The libation is therefore the purest and highest form of renunciation.

And yet this is not all. The role of oil in libations has been noted with surprise:⁵⁴ how can something which is not a drink be a drink offering? Nevertheless, oil is specified along with wine and honey for *spondai*.⁵⁵ When grave stelae are anointed and garlanded,⁵⁶ they may be taken as representatives of the dead who, like the living, are anointed and wreathed for the festival. But oil is also poured over special stones in special places without anthropomorphic associations. In front of the Palace of Nestor in Pylos there stands a stone which always glistens with oil and on which the king takes his seat.⁵⁷ Stones glistening with oil stand at crossroads; whoever it was that had made libation there, the superstitious man at least is careful to demonstrate his veneration for these stones.⁵⁸ In this case it is obviously simply a matter of demarcation, of fixing a centre or point of orientation. Whoever pours out oil here assures himself of the spatial order of things; any stranger who passes by recognizes from the glistening that other men have established their order here. Similarly, the traces of offerings at the grave of Agamemnon announce the presence of Orestes,⁵⁹ and this is also the sense given by the stains of blood left on the white-chalked altar.⁶⁰ The centre of the world is, as mythology knows, the Omphalos stone at Delphi; this too is a place of libations.⁶¹

The outpouring of water has many associations and is understood and

described by the Greeks in many different ways. At the beginning of the normal sacrifice one speaks simply of the washing of hands, *chernips*.⁶² Also when water is poured out at the grave, bathing water⁶³ for the dead is often mentioned; in particular it is said that someone who has died unmarried must in this way receive a posthumous bridal bath⁶⁴ in order to attain the goal of life. At the same time, however, the thirst of the dead is also spoken of;⁶⁵ libations of water conclude the other outpourings of honey and wine. Then there are special water-carrying festivals, *Hydrophoria*, such as the one in Athens. In the sanctuary of the Olympian Earth there was a cleft in the ground where, it was said, the water from Deucalion's flood had flowed away; here the water which had been carried along was obviously poured away.⁶⁶ To conclude the Eleusinian Mysteries two vessels of a special form were filled – with water? – and then overturned, one towards the west and one towards the east, while to the heavens one cried 'rain!' and to the earth 'conceive!' – in Greek a play on words: *hye – kye*.⁶⁷ The same formula was engraved on a fountain. Dearth and surplus, rain magic, and flood clearly constitute the semantic field of such a ritual, though not in the form of sympathetic magic, but taken once again from the fundamental sense of libation: raising to hope through serene wastefulness.

3 PRAYER

Libation, sacrifice, first fruit offerings – these are the acts which define piety.¹ But each of these acts must be attended by the right word. Any wrong, evil, coarse, or complaining word would be harm, *blasphemia*, and so the good speech, *euphemia*, of the participants consists in the first instance in holy silence.² Out of the silence there rises up the apostrophe to an Opposite, an invocation and entreaty: the prayer.³ There is rarely a ritual without prayer, and no important prayer without ritual: *litai – thysiai*, prayers – sacrifices is an ancient and fixed conjunction.⁴ In the *Odyssey*, when Penelope prays to Athena, she washes, dresses in clean garments, and prepares the groats of barley in the sacrificial basket.⁵ As a rule, wine is fetched for libation or granules of frankincense are strewn in the flame. On important occasions a full sacrifice is performed, and a special procession, known as a procession of supplication, *hikesia*, may even be organized to the god in his sanctuary.⁶

The usual word for to pray, *euchesthai*,⁷ also means to boast, and in victory, to let out the cry of triumph: such prayer is more an act of drawing attention to oneself than of submission. The king, general, or priest who directs the sacrifice and makes libation prays aloud and for all. Usually the prayer includes within it the vow – which is likewise called *euche*; so it is made officially and before witnesses. The gods, of course, can also hear soft entreaties;⁸ and in exceptional cases, in the cult of uncanny, subterranean gods, silent prayer is prescribed.⁹

Ara, too, means prayer and vow, but at the same time it is also a curse.

Success and honour for one is usually inseparable from humiliation and destruction for another; the good *ara* and the evil *ara*¹⁰ go hand in hand. *Ara* has an archaic sound and recalls the direct power which the word of prayer exercises as a blessing or as a curse which, once uttered, can never be retracted. In the *Iliad*, the title of the priest who knows how to manipulate such words of prayer is *areter*:¹¹ it is Chryses who brings the plague on the Achaean army with his prayer and who later brings the plague to an end. In the poetic setting, this prayer is admittedly a well-formulated entreaty to the personal god Apollo, who heeds his priest.

A more elementary stratum of invocation is touched by those traditional, linguistically meaningless, word-sounds which accompany specific dances or processions each of which is associated with a particular god. Through sound and rhythm they help to mould the experience of the festival, and at the same time they receive their content from that experience. The act of sacrifice is marked by a shrill cry, the *Ololyge* of the women; the same cry of women accompanies birth as the coming and intervention of a birth goddess is awaited, and it recurs in other situations of crisis, such as supposed possession.¹² The Dionysian revellings are recognized by wild shouts, especially the cry *euhoi* – transcribed as *evoe* in Latin – and also *thriambe*,¹³ *dithyrambe*. Associated with the Apollo cult is the Paeon, or more precisely, the shout *ie ie paian*, with the special rhythm of three short and one long; this shout gives its name to the hymn which drives out pestilence and celebrates victory, and also to the god who so manifests himself.¹⁴ *Iakch' o Iakche* is the shout which accompanies the procession to Eleusis; here, too, a name is heard in the cry, *Iakchos*, the name of the one who is supposed to lead the procession as a daimon and is probably identical with Dionysos; later he was also carried along in the form of a statue.¹⁵ *Dithyrambos* was also used as an epithet of Dionysos. The collective scream leads to the brink of ecstasy; as soon as the Greeks come to offer an account of these words, they speak of personal, anthropomorphically represented gods.

It is a striking fact, but one that is very closely connected with this anthropomorphism, that in Greek no ancient liturgical prayer formulae are transmitted, no Veda and no Arval Hymn. Indo-European coinings are preserved in the poetic language, but by virtue of that very fact they may be employed quite freely. A basic prayer form¹⁶ with variations in detail arises from its function. At the beginning, underlined by the request 'Hear!', comes the name of the deity. Great importance is attached to finding the right name, especially appropriate epithets; as much as possible, epithets are heaped one upon another – a feature which probably also derives from Indo-European tradition – and the god is also offered the choice: 'With whatever name it pleases you to be called'.¹⁷ An attempt is also made to define the sphere of the god spatially by naming his favoured dwelling place or several possible places from which he is to come. This is followed by a justification for calling on the god, in which earlier proofs of friendship are invoked by way of precedent: if ever the god has come to the aid of the suppliant, or if the

suppliant has performed works pleasing to the god, has burned sacrifices and built temples, then this should now hold good. Often the assurance 'for you are able' is slipped in. Once contact has been established, the entreaty is made succinctly and clearly and is usually accompanied by the promise for the future, the vow; piety is supposed to guarantee constancy. Philosophically refined religious sensibility later took exception to the self-interested directness of these *euchai*; one should, it was recommended, pray simply for the Good and leave the decision to the god.¹⁸ Such sublimated piety could never become the general rule: Normally the Greeks had no qualms about praying for an other's destruction.^{18a}

Kneeling down to pray is unusual.¹⁹ The gesture of entreaty is outstretched arms. To invoke the heavenly gods, both hands are raised to the sky with upturned palms; to call on the gods of the sea, the arms are extended out to the sea; the hands are also stretched towards the cult image. A cult image or sanctuary must always be given a friendly greeting – a *chaire* – even if one is simply passing by without any special reason,²⁰ or else the gesture of a kiss may be made by raising a hand to one's lips;²¹ a short, simply prayer may always be added. Socrates greets the rising sun also in this way.²² Simple apostrophes invoking the gods punctuate everyday life; in excitement, fear, amazement, or anger, the 'gods' or some fitting divine name are invoked. Often names of local gods trip off the tongue, or else Zeus and Apollo and especially Heracles, the averter of all that is evil; *Herakleis* – *mehercule* in Latin – is almost as overworn as the exclamation, 'Jesus!'. Women have their own special goddesses, Artemis, Pandrosos, and so on.²³

Special measures are required, however, if the dead or the gods of the underworld are to be reached. Poets describe how the suppliant hurls himself on the ground and hammers the earth with his fists.²⁴ Where the purpose was to harm or curse, the silent and lasting inscription replaced such invocations from the fifth century at the latest: leaves of lead – of the kind also used for letter-writing – were inscribed surrendering one's enemy to the gods of the underworld; these leaves were buried in the shrines of subterranean gods or in graves. While the official cult always continues with the spoken word, the innovation of the written word is used to serve magical ends. The magical act replaces the invocation: 'I write down', 'I bind down';²⁵ this is therefore called *katadesis*, *defixio*.

4 PURIFICATION

4.1 Function and Methods

All creatures must keep clean, eliminating matter which is a source of irritation and so is defined as dirt. For man, cleaning becomes one of the formative experiences of childhood. Cleanliness sets limits. The child learns how ready others are to banish a dirty person along with his dirt, and how,

by following certain procedures, an acceptable status may be regained. Purification is a social process. To belong to a group is to conform to its standard of purity; the reprobate, the outsider, and the rebel are unclean. Groups which set themselves apart from the rest of society may do so through an appeal to special, heightened purity. Accordingly, the emotionally charged activities of cleaning have become ritual demonstration. By celebrating the elimination of irritating matter, these rites delimit a more highly valued realm, either the community itself in relation to a chaotic outside, or an esoteric circle within society; they mediate access to this realm and so to a higher status; they play out the antithesis between a negative and a positive state and so are suited to eliminate a state which is truly uncomfortable and disruptive, and to lead over to a better, pure state. Purification rituals are therefore involved in all intercourse with the sacred and in all forms of initiation; but they are also employed in crisis situations of madness, illness, and guilt. Insofar as in this case the ritual is placed in the service of a clearly identifiable end, it assumes a magical character.¹

The most widespread means of purification is water, and in Greek purification rituals² contact with water is fundamental. In addition, there is the practice of fumigation³ to eradicate foul smells, a primitive form of disinfecting; Odysseus sulphurates the hall after the blood bath he has caused.⁴ The Greek word for to purify, *kathairein*, is perhaps to be derived from the Semitic word for cultic fumigation, *qtr*.⁵ Since, moreover, fire consumes and destroys everything, including things unpleasant and disgusting, one can say: 'fire purifies everything.'⁶ Two further requisites of Greek purifications are less immediately intelligible, the winnowing fan (*liknon*) and sea onions (*skilla*). The winnowing fan⁷ purifies the corn as the swinging movement of the basket allows the chaff to be blown away by the wind. The swinging of the basket over the head of the initiand, suggests analogy magic, but equally the showering of the new-comer⁸ may be recognized as an abreaction of aggressive feelings, just as the victors in the games are honoured by pelting with leaves (*phyllobolia*). No Greek explanation is found for the use of onions,⁹ but a Hittite ritual text is illuminating: the onion is peeled skin by skin, until nothing remains;¹⁰ in this way the disturbing matter is eliminated very elegantly. The use of blood sacrifice for purification is ambiguous, but nevertheless purification is thereby brought within the central reserve of the sacred work.

Whatever is ritually and forcibly eliminated in the act of purification can be interpreted as a gift to certain powers who are therefore uncanny and perverse and better not mentioned by name: 'For you the dirty water for whom it is necessary and for whom it is right.'¹¹ From the time of Xenocrates onwards, one speaks of *daimones*;¹² concerned with unclean things, they are in turn unclean. Modern interpreters, seeking to clarify the ideas which accompany the ritual, prefer to speak of a material conception of pollution¹³ which can be transmitted through contact, but which can also be isolated, concentrated,

and eliminated. In practice few words and no detailed explanations were needed: the social function was immediately manifest and effective.

Purification rituals are familiar in the Ancient Near East as in the Old Testament. Homer mentions not only the 'pure garments' and the washing of hands before prayer and sacrifice, but also the purification of the entire army after the plague.¹⁴ A number of special prescriptions are found in Hesiod. Still able to find a place in mythology were the purifications from madness – Melampus and the Proitides¹⁵ – and from blood guilt¹⁶ – Apollo and Orestes. The problem of murder and the murderer, especially its power to cast a shadow over later generations and the means of overcoming this by purification, seems to have become increasingly urgent during the course of the seventh century. The Delphic Oracle clearly played a leading role in this development while nevertheless exploiting local traditions whenever possible.¹⁷ Special purifying priests, *kathartai*, also appeared who promised relief in cases of epidemic and civil discord. The most famous of these, Epimenides of Crete, purified Athens of the Cylonian pollution some time before 600.¹⁸ Families and individuals were also inclined to trace calamities of all kinds to some ancient pollution, to the wrath, *menima*, of some mysterious power.¹⁹ From the practice of ritual, in the figure of impurity, a concept of guilt develops; purification becomes atonement.

A process of internalization of this kind leads, of course, to a questioning of ritual. Already in Hesiod an inner dimension corresponds to the outer when he warns against crossing a river 'without washing wickedness and one's hands'.²⁰ Plato later writes, 'The impure man is whoever is wicked in his soul';²¹ and even an orator²² can demand that a priest should 'not keep himself pure for a certain number of days, but be pure in his whole way of life'. An often quoted line which was engraved over the entrance to the Asklepios sanctuary at Epidaurus reads: 'Purity is to think pious things.'²³ In practice, such statements were regarded not as devaluing the outer forms of piety, which were still rigorously upheld, but as adding a deeper dimension. In the sphere of purification, ritual and ethical reflection could therefore merge without a break.

4.2 *The Sacred and the Pure*

The demand for purity draws attention to the boundary which separates the sacred from the profane; the more scrupulously and intensively purification is pursued, the greater the difference in order appears. 'In no way can a man pray to Zeus spattered with blood and filth';²⁴ hence the washing of hands, *chernips*, before libation and sacrifice. Clean clothing is also worn, and occasionally white garments are prescribed.²⁵ Vessels containing water, *perirranteria*,²⁶ are set up at the entrances to the sanctuaries, like the fountains of holy water in Roman Catholic churches; everyone who enters dips a hand in the vessel and sprinkles himself with water. There is no consecration of the water, but often

it must be drawn from a particular source. Not a few sanctuaries have their own spring or fountain, but occasionally the water must be fetched from further afield, from an ever-flowing spring or from the always powerful sea. The water-carrying maiden with the jug on her head, the *hydrophoros*, is fixed in the iconography of worship and also appears frequently in votive terracottas.²⁷ The purifying power of fire is joined to the power of water when a log is taken from the altar fire, dipped in water, and used to sprinkle the sanctuary, altar, and participants.²⁸

The Indo-European word for sacred, *hagnos*,²⁹ is defined and narrowed down in Greek through its opposition to defilement, *mysos*, *miasma*. The conception of specifically cultic purity is defined by considering certain more or less grave dislocations of normal life as *miasma*. Disturbances of this kind are sexual intercourse,³⁰ birth,³¹ death, and especially murder. *Hagnos* in the exemplary sense therefore applies to whoever shuns contact with blood and death, especially the virgin. Virgins play leading roles in many cults. Priestesses must often observe chastity at least for the period of their office;³² but priests and temple servers too must on occasion attain a certain degree of *hagneia*, especially in preparation for the festival. This involves not only avoiding sexual intercourse and contact with women in childbirth and households in mourning, but also observing dietary prohibitions, fasting for several days, and eating certain unusual foods.³³ These prescriptions vary according to time and place; there are no universally unclean foods as with the Jews. Curiously, the *hagneia* may even involve a prohibition on bathing: the contrast with everyday life or some future act of cultic purification is more important than obvious cleanliness.

A bath followed by dressing in new robes forms part of individual initiations, of initiations into mysteries,³⁴ and of the wedding ceremony which, of course, is celebrated as a sacrificial feast. In the sanctuary of Athena Krania near Elateia there are special bath-tubs for the boy who holds the five-year office of priest.³⁵ Before the Eleusinian initiation the *mystai* all bathe together in the sea near Athens on a certain day.³⁶ Reliefs show how this was followed by a purification with torches: Heracles, in the act of receiving the Eleusinian initiation, sits on a ram's fleece with his head veiled while a priestess holds a torch close beneath him.³⁷ On another relief, the Two Goddesses themselves seem to hold out torches towards a child sitting on the ground; while in mythology, Demeter thrusts the Eleusinian child Demophon straight onto the fire on the hearth in order 'to purge him of all mortality'.³⁸ When other portrayals of Heracles' initiation show the use of the *liknon* as well,³⁹ late systemization⁴⁰ was able to speak of a purification through the elements, water, fire, wind. There is also a purification by earth, a wiping off: in certain mysteries clay and bran are smeared on the initiand, especially on his face, and then wiped off. Thus, a purifier is someone who has knowledge of offscourings.⁴¹ By its contrast to the artificial defilement, the subsequent purity appears all the more impressive.

Dirt gathers even in sanctuaries and on images of gods; regular cleaning is as unavoidable as it is delicate. Ritual has once again transformed this into a festival, or rather an anti-festival, an uncanny and impure occasion which at the same time enhances the proper, pure festival by way of antithesis. The demonstrative enactment of the uneasiness of the defilement makes the purity of the new beginning all the more secure. So in Athens the Plynteria,⁴² the washing festival, fall in the last month of the year. Virgins and women clean the ancient wooden image of the city goddess Athena: 'they remove her ornaments and veil the image'; the day is regarded as a day of ill omen on which no important business should be started. Not to be confused with this is the annual procession in which the *epheboi* carry another image of Athena, the Palladion,⁴³ to the sea where it is purified in order to be set up once more on the ancient site of an important law court, where crimes such as homicide are tried: the condemned man is banished, but after certain purification ceremonies he may occasionally be able to return. His exile, purification, and return follows the path of the image which goes to be purified. A similar procession in Argos in which a Pallas image is carried to the bath is known from a poem by Callimachus.⁴⁴ An inscription from Kos prescribes that when a sanctuary has been polluted by a dead body, the priestess must take the boy-nursing goddess, Kourotrophos, to the sea to purify her there.⁴⁵ In this way the proper distinction between the divine and the mortal is re-established.

4.3 *Death, Illness, and Madness*

Disturbances which set everyday life out of joint are confined and mastered by the demand for purification precisely because they cannot simply be avoided or eliminated. The most harmless of these is sexual intercourse, but a purification is still necessary before intercourse with the gods may be resumed. Death cuts much more deeply into the life of relatives, of the house; those affected are impure and are excluded for a certain period from normal life. Anyone who visits them must purify himself on leaving by sprinkling himself with water.⁴⁶ During this period the defilement is given dramatic outward expression: the mourners wear torn or dirty clothes, refrain from washing, and rub earth or ashes on their heads. When a Spartan king dies, two free persons from each family must defile themselves, says Herodotus – not spontaneous reaction, but action prescribed. In Iulis on Keos a decree restricts by law the number of those who may and must defile themselves (*miainesthai*) in this way:⁴⁷ mother, wife, sisters, daughters of the dead man and their daughters, and then not more than five other women. At the end of the prescribed period, they must all purify themselves with a bath by pouring water over their heads; the house too must be purified – sprayed with sea water, smeared with earth, and then swept out. Sacrifice is then to be made on the hearth which has meanwhile been extinguished: the normal relation to

the gods is restored. It is clear how the constraint of the ritual is also a help; whatever is able to be done is thereby externalized, objectified, and can be set aside at the specified time.

Illness and disease can also be understood as defilement. In the first book of the *Iliad*, as the wrath of Apollo turns aside after reparation has been made to his priest, Agamemnon commands the Achaeans to wash off their defilement (*apolymainesthai*); 'and they washed themselves and threw the washings into the sea.'⁴⁸ The purification is followed immediately by the festival of the god, which fills the whole day with the beautiful cult hymn, the paeon, and with sacrifices. Apollo is the god of such purification and healing. His sanctuary in Didyma is said to have been founded when Branchos came there to drive out the plague, which he did by swinging bay branches and sprinkling the people with them while chanting a mysterious, incomprehensible hymn.⁴⁹ Mention is repeatedly made in the Archaic period of purifying priests of Apollo who could similarly banish plagues.⁵⁰

The special preserve of purifying priests is mental illness, madness, which is regarded unquestioningly as sent by a god. The purification is to conduct the abnormal over into normality. The mythical instance is the madness of the daughters of King Proitos of Tiryns which was provoked by Hera or Dionysos and which spread to all the women of the city.⁵¹ In reality this is a ritual breaking away from normality; the description of the outward disfigurement of the mad Proitides recalls primitive make-up and masks, like the hideous idols from the shrine in Mycenae. The path back to normality was found by the seer Melampus. One version transfers the purification which he performed to the sanctuary of Artemis in Lousoi: the name Lousoi was associated with washing, *lousthai*. In the clear light of the fifth century, the author of *On the Sacred Disease* holds forth against the 'magicians, purifiers, begging priests and quacks' who treat epilepsy with 'purifications and incantations . . . and of the remains from their purifications, some they hide in the earth, others they throw in the sea, and others they carry away into the mountains where no one will touch them or tread on them.'⁵²

The Korybantic madness to which Plato repeatedly alludes was regarded as a special kind of possession.⁵³ The Korybantes stand under the sway of the Great Mother of Asia Minor. At the sound of one specific tune each will lose consciousness and be driven to a delirious dance under the power of the Phrygian music. When the dancer is finally overcome with exhaustion, he feels release not only from his madness, but from everything which had previously oppressed him. This is the purification through madness, the purification through music, which was later to play such a prominent role in the discussions about the cathartic effect of tragedy.⁵⁴

4.4 Purification by Blood

'They purify themselves by defiling themselves with other blood, as if someone who stepped in mud should try to wash himself with mud,'

proclaims Heraclitus, thus exposing to his ridicule the paradox in this most striking of purification rituals.⁵⁵ It has its place especially in the purification of the murderer. The act of murder gives rise to a peculiar, almost physically experienced pollution, *agos*, in which the murderer is ensnared: he is *enages*. Admittedly, his extreme position is ambivalent, just as sacrament and sacrilege merge in every act of sacral killing; thus it has been debated whether the word *agos* and the word for sacred, pure, *hagnos*, might share a common root.⁵⁶ This, at all events, would lead into prehistory. The community of Archaic times knows its obligation to drive out the *agos* and the murderer with it: he must leave his home and seek a protector abroad who will take charge of his purification; until then no word must pass his lips, nor may he be received in any house, nor share a table with others: anyone who comes into contact with him is similarly defiled.⁵⁷ The mythical instance is the matricide Orestes who flees abroad after his deed. Various places with their local rituals claim connection with his purification: in Troizen⁵⁸ in front of the Apollo sanctuary stood a hut of Orestes which was said to have been erected to avoid receiving the murderer in a normal house. A priestly group met there regularly for a sacral meal. In Athens, the curious wine-drinking on the day of defilement during the Anthesteria festival⁵⁹ was traced back to the arrival of Orestes. After Aeschylus it was imagined how Apollo himself had purified Orestes at Delphi with a pig sacrifice. Vase paintings give an idea of the procedure, similar to that used for the purification of the Proitides: the piglet is held over the head of the person to be purified and the blood must flow directly onto the head and hands.⁶⁰ Naturally, the blood is then washed off and the regained purity is made outwardly manifest as well.

A purification of this kind is clearly in essence a *rite de passage*. The murderer has set himself outside the community, and his reincorporation at a new level is therefore an act of initiation. Thus the purification of Heracles before the Eleusinian initiation and the purification of Orestes have distinct structural parallels; a piglet sacrifice is involved at Eleusis as well.⁶¹ To offer a surrogate victim to the pursuing powers of vengeance is an idea which seems natural in expiating a murder, but the essential aspect seems to be that the person defiled by blood should once again come into contact with blood. The ritual is a demonstrative and therefore harmless repetition of the shedding of blood in which the result, the visible defilement, can equally demonstratively be set aside; in this way the deed is not suppressed but overcome. Comparable is the primitive custom where the murderer sucks in the blood of his victim and then spits it out again:⁶² he must accept the fact through intimate contact, and at the same time effectively free himself of it.

Blood is also quite frequently shed for purification in other contexts. The most detailed evidence is given in connection with the lustration of the Assembly and of the Theatre in Athens. At the beginning of the assembly, special officials, *peristiarchoi*,⁶³ carry piglets around the square, cut their throats, spray the blood over the seats, cut off the genitals and throw them away. How the carcass was disposed of we do not learn. The name of the

officials indicates that the ritual is taken originally from the purification of the domestic hearth, a preparatory sacrifice before the rekindling of the hearth and the resumption of normal sacrifices and prayers to the gods. Purificatory sacrifices of this kind are accompanied by an act of encirclement. The Mantineans⁶⁴ purify their whole land by leading blood victims (*sphagia*) all around the boundaries before slaughtering them. In Methana,⁶⁵ to protect the vineyards from a blighting wind, a cock is cut in two, and then two men run around the vines in opposite directions each carrying a bleeding piece; the pieces are buried at the point where the men meet. Demonstration of power, demarcation, and eradication are elements of such action. The connections with the normal sacrifice, especially with the bloodying of the altars, are manifest; but here especially, the purification ritual appears reduced to a magical-instrumental function.

A counterpart to the act of encirclement is the act of passing between the bloody halves of a bisected victim. The Macedonian army in particular is purified by being marched between the parts of a bisected dog – the head to the right, the hind quarters to the left. A sham battle follows.⁶⁶ A corresponding ritual exists not only in Boeotia, but even earlier among the Hittites; Old Testament and Persian parallels can also be adduced. The deliberate cruelty is part of the steeling for battle; it may even be said that a man who has refused military service is taken as the blood victim. To this extent the bisected victim represents a special form of the preparation for battle through *sphagia*. The passing through, the *rite de passage*, is purification in that it leads to the desired status; for this reason, the expiation of murder and the initiation into war can both be called purification.

4.5 *Pharmakos*

Among the purification rituals special attention has long been focused on the expulsion of the *Pharmakos*, for here at the very centre of Greek civilization human sacrifice is indicated as a possibility, not to say as a fixed institution.⁶⁷ Thanks to the insulting poems of Hipponax,⁶⁸ the most remarkable details are known from Colophon in the sixth century. Hipponax threatens his enemies with ignominious destruction by vividly describing how one deals with a *Pharmakos*: a man chosen on account of his ugliness is first feasted on figs, barley broth, and cheese, then he is whipped out with fig branches and sea onions, being struck above all seven times on his *membrum virile*. Our Byzantine witness then claims that he was finally burned and his ashes scattered in the sea; whether he is to be believed has long been disputed. In Abdera,⁶⁹ some poor victim is bought every year as a purificatory sacrifice, *katharsion*; he is fed royally and then on a certain day is led through the city gates, made to walk round the city walls, and finally chased across the boundaries with stones. Similarly, at the Thargelia festival in Athens,⁷⁰ two men are chosen again on account of their particular loathsomeness, 'one for

the men, and one for the women'; they are draped with figs and led out as *katharsia*, and perhaps they too were driven out with stones. On dire occasions such as plague, the people of Massalia–Marseilles⁷¹ resorted to similar measures: a poor man was offered pure and costly food for a year, then, decked in boughs and sacred vestments, he was led around the whole town amid curses and finally chased away. From the cliffs of Leukas⁷² in the precinct of Apollo Leukatas a condemned criminal was plunged into the sea every year; he was, however, provided with wings to lighten his leap and an attempt was made to fish him up again. Another report⁷³ speaks of a young man being plunged into the sea for Poseidon, in order to be rid of all evil with him: 'become our offscourings' (*peripsema*). In Chaironeia, Hunger, *Boulimos*, is whipped out of the door in the form of a slave.⁷⁴

Speculations about the Vegetation Spirit have tended to obscure the simple and terrifying character of this drama. The same drama, well-nigh bereft of ritual accompaniment, appears in a possibly historical report from late antiquity.⁷⁵ As the plague was raging in Ephesus, the miracle man Apollonios assembled the entire population in the theatre, then suddenly he pointed to an old beggar clad in rags: this was the plague daimon. Thereupon the poor beggar, in spite of his pleas for mercy, was stoned until a great cairn towered over his corpse. The aggression excited by fear is concentrated on some loathsome outsider; everyone feels relieved by the communal projection of the fury born of despair, as well as by the certainty of standing on the side of the just and the pure.

Accordingly, the performance of the ritual in exceptional situations of anxiety, such as in Massalia, may well be the earlier form. That the Attic Ostrakismos,⁷⁶ the judgement by potsherd on a disturbing individual, is a democratic rationalization of a similar tradition has long been recognized. The Thirty Tyrants were then able to designate their political murders as a purification⁷⁷ – a purge in the most ominous sense of the word. The religiously circumscribed form is connected in Ionia and Attica with the festival of the Thargelia in the early summer, with the first fruit offerings from the new harvest: purification as a prerequisite of the new beginning.

It is clearly essential that the creature to be driven out be first brought into intimate contact with the community, the city; this is the sense of the gifts of food which are constantly mentioned. Figs⁷⁸ are doubly contrasted to normal culture, to the fruits of the field and to the flesh of the victim; they point to sweetness, luxury, licentiousness, a breath of a golden age from which reality must be rudely distinguished. The encircling, which is also found in purifications with water and with blood, includes all the pure members of the community; the outcast is then called the one wiped off all around, *peripsema*. This is not active killing, but simply a matter of offscourings which must be thrown across the boundaries or over the cliffs, never to return.

Corresponding to this in the Old Testament is the famous, though itself quite puzzling rite of driving the scapegoat out into the desert; this has given

the whole complex the usual name of scapegoat ritual.⁷⁹ In Greece there are a number of instances of an ox being driven out, either towards enemies on whom it brings misfortune, or else across the boundary.⁸⁰ Comparable rituals are attested in the Near East.⁸¹

To expel a trouble-maker is an elementary group reflex; perhaps in the most distant background there is also the situation of the pack surrounded by beasts of prey: only if one member, preferably a marginal, weak, or sick member, falls victim to the beasts can the others escape. The outcast is then also the saviour to whom all are most deeply indebted.

The Greek description as *katharmos* makes the process seem unequivocal, as if it were merely dirt which is eradicated; myth, however, points to the provocative ambivalence. It may even be the king who becomes the outcast: King Kodros of Athens has himself killed by the enemy while dressed as a beggar;⁸² there is the wandering King Oedipus;⁸³ King Thoas of Lemnos is cast out to sea in a chest at the revolt of the women, the great *katharmos*.⁸⁴ Alternatively, the group member handed over to the enemy, pelted, and killed is a particularly beautiful, chosen maiden, such as *Polykrite* of Naxos, who is honoured with sacrifices at the Thargelia festival.⁸⁵ The expulsion of adolescents, as in the case of the Lokrian maiden tribute⁸⁶ to Athena of Ilios, which is described as propitiation for the sacrilege of Ajax the Lokrian, may, of course, also be part of an initiation ritual in which the purifying separation leads on to a reincorporation which allows the old order to continue. In the foundation sagas of a number of colonies it is related that the first settlers had been dedicated as tithes to the god at Delphi and so had been sent abroad; the driving out, a kind of *ver sacrum*, is here interpreted as a first fruit offering instead of as a *katharmos*;⁸⁷ in other foundation sagas it is again outsiders, bastards, and slaves, who are driven out and find a new beginning in the foreign land.⁸⁸

5 THE SANCTUARY

5.1 *Temenos*

The cult of the Greeks is almost always defined locally: the places of worship¹ are fixed in ancient tradition and cannot be moved lightly. Sanctuaries are often preserved and tended through catastrophes, revolution, and changes in population. The Temple of Apollo continued to tower over Corinth long after the city had been destroyed by the Romans, and even today a number of its columns are still standing. Even Christians followed tradition, erecting chapels in place of sanctuaries or transforming temples into churches; the cathedral of Syracuse incorporates the Athena Temple from the fifth century.

Modern experience of a Greek sanctuary is indissolubly fused with Greek landscape.² Something of this even touched the ancients: they speak of the towering heights, the rocky cliffs of Delphi, and the sweet charm of sacred

groves with their rustling leaves, singing birds, and murmuring brooks.³ Yet the cult is not a response to the experience of the landscape.⁴ If ever a breath of divinity betrays some spot as the sphere of higher beings,⁵ then this is evoked by the institutionalized cult.

Just as the rites frequently give form to the opposition between indoors and outdoors, so in relation to the township there are centrally and peripherally placed sanctuaries. The former crown the high fortress – the Acropolis – or border on the market place – the Agora; the latter seek out mountain heights or else swamps and marshland, *limne*. In particular there is an Artemis *Limnatis* and a Dionysos *en limnais*.⁶ Here in the marshes the ancient practice of sacrifice by sinking or drowning has doubtless left its trace while the climbing up, the leading up of victims to the mountain can call on an equally impressive tradition. The sanctuaries, however, were often placed not on the very summit but on a protected col.⁷ The divine names are not confined to specific functions. There is Apollo in the market place,⁸ as well as in the lonely mountains of Bassae; there are peak cults of Zeus, but equally Hera Akraia or Aphrodite on Acrocorinth. The goddess of the citadel is pre-eminently Athena; outside the city on a hill there often lies a sanctuary of Demeter,⁹ which enters into a certain polarity with the everyday life of the city.

The sacred site must be marked unmistakably, but natural features are seldom appropriated for this purpose. Grottos and caves play only a marginal role; the most striking is the mystery cult in the Ida cave.¹⁰ The wild rocky gorge at Lebadeia with its many springs undoubtedly lent features to the subterranean Trophonios cult;¹¹ there are also sanctuaries which are located at hot springs.¹² The simple marking with rock and tree is usually sufficient. At the centre of the Eleusinian sanctuary stood an unhewn rock that was always left open to view;¹³ the sanctuary of the Olympian Earth in Athens encompassed a natural cleft in the rock.¹⁴ Nevertheless, stones are also set up, unwrought stones (*argoi lithoi*);¹⁵ in Delphi the stone worked in the characteristic form of the navel was regarded as the centre not only of the sanctuary, but also of the world: the two eagles which Zeus released from the furthest West and the furthest East met at this spot.¹⁶

The tree, however, is even more important than the stone in marking the sanctuary, and this corresponds not only to Minoan–Mycenaean but also to Near Eastern tradition.¹⁷ The shade-giving tree epitomizes both beauty and continuity across the generations. Most sanctuaries have their special tree. In Athens the carefully tended olive tree stands on the Acropolis in the sanctuary of the Dew Goddess, Pandrosos; that it immediately broke into leaf again after the Persians had burned down the temple in 480 was a vivid assertion of the unbroken vital force of Athens.¹⁸ In the Hera sanctuary on Samos the willow tree (*lygos*) remained always at the same spot and was even incorporated into the great altar.¹⁹ On Delos the palm tree was shown against which Leto had leaned at the birth of the twin gods Artemis and Apollo; Odysseus can compare Nausikaa's virgin beauty with nothing more

fitting than this Delian palm.²⁰ In Didyma²¹ there stood the laurel tree of Apollo; in Olympia it was a wild olive tree (*kotinos*), whose twigs were used to wreath the victors.²² Particularly old and sacred was the oak (*phagos*) of Dodona which imparted the oracle with the rustling of its branches.²³

The tree is closely associated with the goddess. The carved image of Athena in Athens is made of olive wood²⁴ and the image of Hera in Tiryns is made of wild-pear wood.²⁵ Coins from Gortyn²⁶ and from Myra in Asia Minor²⁷ show a goddess sitting in a tree: the former depicts Europa, who is approached by Zeus in the shape of an eagle, and the latter shows Artemis Eleuthera. Nonetheless, dark myths which tell of the goddess or the maidens in her service being hanged on the tree²⁸ are a warning against taking the tree cult simply as a precursor of the goddess cult. Offerings have been hung on trees from time immemorial: animal skins by age-old hunting custom, and also discs, *oscilla*, which move in the wind; for mythological fantasy or tradition these are hanging sacrifices. Thus it may also be said that a Dionysos idol is made from the wood of the pine tree on which Pentheus met his death.²⁹

Often a tract of woodland belongs to the sanctuary, a grove, *alsos*, called *altis* in Olympia, either constituting the sanctuary itself or lying immediately adjacent.³⁰ The name feeding place points to its practical function as a grazing area for the pack animals and mounts of the participants at the festival, though this in no way precludes a certain feeling for nature, especially as the grove is reserved for sacral use.

More important still is water for drinking and for watering the animals as well as for the special purity of the cult. Many sanctuaries have their own springs and fountains, especially the Demeter sanctuaries;³¹ but in Didyma³² too there is a well near the altar; from the Alea temple in Tegea³³ a separate door leads down to the fountain; the Heraion of Argos has its brook at least at the foot of the hill.³⁴ In Delphi, the water of the Kassotis spring flows into the Apollo sanctuary itself, while the much more powerful and more famous Castalian spring gushes from the rocky gorge nearby.³⁵ On the Acropolis in Athens, the most important mark of the cult apart from the olive tree was the 'sea', a little pool of salt water in a hollow in the rock; though incorporated into the north hall of the Erechtheion, it had always to remain open to the sky.³⁶ Here it is the symbolism of the deep which is important, rather than any practical use.

The Greek sanctuary, however, is properly constituted only through the demarcation which sets it apart from the profane (*bebelon*). The land cut off and dedicated to the god or hero is known by the ancient term which really signifies any domain at all, *temenos*.³⁷ Even when a river or the all-seeing sun god Helios is worshipped, he receives his well-defined *temenos*.³⁸ The boundary is marked by boundary stones which are often inscribed, or else by a massive stone wall, usually about the height of a man. Mostly only one entrance is allowed; there the water basins for purification are set up. Within

the water basins only what is pure is admitted.³⁹ Hence within the sanctuary everything is forbidden which would produce a *miasma* – sexual intercourse, birth, and death. As time went on, the scruples if anything increased: Delos was purified twice, under Pisistratus and again in the year 426/5;⁴⁰ first, graves were removed from the area which could be seen from the sanctuary, then from the whole island; pregnant women and the dying were transferred to the neighbouring island of Rhenia. Pausanias the Spartiate, who had been left in the sanctuary of Athena Chalkioikos to starve, was dragged out still alive, although this also violated the asylum of the sanctuary.⁴¹ Admittedly, the taboos of the sacred are essentially ambivalent here too: the god can celebrate marriage in the sanctuary, Apollo and Artemis were born on Delos, and sacrificial victims forever bleed to death at the altar. Frequently a site of sacrifice is interpreted as the grave of a hero whose grisly death in the sanctuary is then recounted in myth.⁴² In order to make way for the gods, who are out of the ordinary in the most eminent sense, all that is exceptional in the life of men must remain excluded.

5.2 Altar

The *temenos* is set apart for the sacred work, for sacrifice; its most essential element, more essential than the cult stone, tree, and spring, is the altar, *bomos*, on which the fire is kindled.⁴³ 'Temenos and fragrant altar' of the god is already a Homeric formula.⁴⁴ There are natural rock altars;⁴⁵ altar and cult stone are then identical. In simple rustic shrines a few stones roughly set together may serve as an altar.⁴⁶ In a number of large and important sanctuaries the remains of ash and bone are allowed to grow up into great mounds; even at Olympia this and nothing else was the Altar of Zeus.⁴⁷ The normal Greek altar, however, is well built, constructed of bricks and white-washed with lime or else fitted together from carefully hewn stone blocks. Not infrequently the sides are decorated with volutes. In between lies the metal tablet on which the fire burns. Large altars have one or more steps built to one side, which the priest can mount to lay the consecrated portions on the fire and to pour the libation.

According to literary sources, the celebrants stand around the altar; the water vessel is carried around everyone in a circle at the beginning. In many sanctuaries, however, the altar stands so close to the *temenos* wall that an irregular semicircle is the only conceivable arrangement.⁴⁸ The temple façade then, as a rule, forms the background. The entrance to the *temenos* usually leads directly into the cult area in front of the altar. In a number of cases there is theatre-like terracing which could make the ceremonies visible to a greater number of people.⁴⁹

The altar is ceremonially set up when the first sacrifice is performed; this act is often attributed in myth to some hero, to a king of ancient times, or to Heracles. Thereafter, the position of the altar remains fixed, whatever other

alterations may affect the sanctuary. In the Heraion on Samos the excavators were able to distinguish seven different states of the altar before it received its final, monumental form at the hands of Rhoikos about 550.⁵⁰

A *temenos* need not be reserved for one god alone, but may include several sacrificial sites, several altars, which then stand in a defined relation to one another. Frequent is the antithesis of offering pit or ground level hearth and raised stone altar, corresponding to a Chthonic and an Olympian sacrifice; hero and god are in this way directly associated with each other; otherwise each may have his own separate *temenos*.⁵¹

5.3 Temple and Cult Image

Greek culture as a whole has been termed a temple culture,⁵² for it was in the building of temples, not of palaces, amphitheatres, or baths, that Greek architecture and art found its fulfilment. But from the point of view of Greek religion, the temple was by no means given as a matter of course; most sanctuaries are older than their temples, and a number always disdained the temple. The temple is the dwelling place, *naos*, of the deity; it houses the anthropomorphic cult image. The beginnings of temple building therefore overlap with the history of the development of the images of the gods.

Greeks themselves later proposed the theory that the pure and earliest worship of the gods was without images.⁵³ In fact, in many places the most important gods of the Mycenaean period, Zeus and Poseidon, did without cult image and temple down into Classical times. It is possible that the Indo-Europeans used no images of the gods. On the other hand, the temple as house of the cult statue had long been the centre of worship in the religions of Egypt and Mesopotamia and was taken over by the Hittites and – with the exception of Israel – by the West Semitic peoples. Before and alongside this there are the (usually female) statuettes of Neolithic tradition, but rarely can anything specific be ascertained about their meaning or use.⁵⁴ The Minoan–Mycenaean civilization occupies a special position.⁵⁵ Here there are individual temples and, at least in the late phase, statuettes, mostly statuettes of goddesses, are set up in sanctuaries. But these statuettes usually appear in groups; there is not the unique cult statue which represents the god as lord of the sanctuary.

The Homeric poems, on the contrary, know the temple as the dwelling place (*neos*) of a particular god, and this corresponds to the situation at the end of the Geometric period. Apollo transports Aeneas to his temple in Troy where Leto and Artemis tend his wounds in the *adyton*. In the *Odyssey*, Athena betakes herself to Athens and enters the 'close built house of Erechtheus'. The Phaeacian city has its temples of gods, and the companions of Odysseus wish to set up a temple to Helios and to furnish it richly to atone for the slaughter of the god's cattle.⁵⁶ When in the sixth book of the *Iliad* the Trojan women organize a procession of supplication to the temple of Athena

to lay a robe on her knees, a seated image of the goddess is certainly presupposed:⁵⁷ cult image and temple belong together. The early temples are in fact dedicated to those very gods who are also represented by cult statues: Hera, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, and then Demeter;⁵⁸ Poseidon and Zeus temples follow later. Nevertheless, a number of sanctuaries always remained without temple and cult image.

For temple and image, just as for the altar, there is a ceremonial setting up (*hidryein*).⁵⁹ Foundation offerings are buried beneath the walls – precious heirlooms, statuettes of gods, and pots with offerings of food; animal slaughtering, fire, a sacral meal, and libations always accompany the ceremony. Connections with Hittite–Anatolian tradition are probable. The cult image is called *hedos* as that which has an immovable seat; poets are also fond of using the word *bretas* which must be of foreign origin.⁶⁰

The prehistory of the temple has many strands. The connection with the megaron of the Mycenaean royal palaces has often been emphasized. Corresponding to this in the eighth century is the hearth house temple, an oblong building with an entrance on the narrow side and a central hearth; the most important examples are at Perachora near Corinth⁶¹ and at Dreros on Crete. In the Dreros temple a cult bench of Minoan–Mycenaean appearance was found, but there were also unique figures made of hammered bronze which represent Apollo, Leto, and Artemis.⁶² Perhaps these may be called cult images; nevertheless, cooking and eating also took place in the hearth house temple. The elongated apsidal buildings in Thermos, in the federal sanctuary of the Aetolians, were probably also houses for sacrificial banquets; when, in the eighth century, a building of this kind was surrounded by a ring of wooden columns, there arose one of the earliest examples of a columned temple.⁶³ Earlier still and truly decisive for the following period is the installation in the Heraion on Samos⁶⁴ – not a hearth house, but an elongated rectangular building with a central row of columns probably dating from as early as the ninth century. This building was then enclosed, again in the eighth century, by a ring of wooden columns. Here the fire site, the altar, stands in the open air opposite the temple which opens out towards it; the altar dates back into the tenth century. Hera's cult image was a wooden image probably dating from the eighth century, some impression of which is given by a statuette from the seventh century. The memory still lingered, however, of an earlier stage when the goddess had been represented simply by a plank (*sanis*), just as on the island of Ikaros a rude piece of wood was regarded as Artemis.⁶⁵ The particular type and role of the image led to the particular form of temple. An entirely different kind of building, a horse-shoe shaped wooden structure, was erected in the eighth century at Eretria to Apollo Daphnephoros,⁶⁶ perhaps as a tabernacle, a bay hut corresponding to the bay bearing in honour of this god. Quite different again is the rectangular stone building of the Athena temple at Gortyn⁶⁷ which was constructed about 800 and stands in the North Syrian/Late Hittite tradition. It encloses not a

cult image but an offering pit; a large altar was added shortly afterwards somewhat further down the hillside, and an almost life-size stone figure of a seated goddess was set up nearby.

Images of gods do not seem to have been produced in the dark age, but were used nonetheless. Minoan–Mycenaean figurines remained to hand and were employed as foundation offerings as late as 700. In the temple on Keos, the head of a large Middle Minoan statue had clearly been set up as a cult image.⁶⁸ In Olympia, too, there was discovered a very modest little Mycenaean figure which had been deposited or lost there at some very much later date.⁶⁹ In addition, a considerable number of small bronze statuettes of a Warrior god of Syrian–Hittite origin clearly also found their way to Greece, with helmet, shield, and threateningly brandished spear.⁷⁰ The possible role of wooden figures quite eludes our grasp. Nonetheless, *xoanon*, carved figure, is the usual word for statuette.⁷¹ There are a number of pointers towards the use of small, movable figures in the cult. In Patrai, an image of Dionysos is kept in a chest and produced only once a year for the nocturnal festival, for the sight of the image brings madness; the priestess of Ortheia in Sparta wears the image of the cruel goddess on her arm during the bloody spectacle;⁷² in Aigion the priest of Zeus and the priest of Heracles each keep a bronze statuette of their god in their own homes.⁷³ The gods which Aeneas brought from Troy are imagined as small figures in a closed container, like those that the head of a household still possessed very much later.⁷⁴ Ovid describes how in the cave of the Mother Goddess numerous wooden images of the gods are to be seen.⁷⁵ All this may in principle be older than the setting up of cult images in temples. As a separate tradition there is the undoubtedly ancient custom of erecting wooden phalloi or ithyphallic figures as apotropaic markers, forerunners of the herms.⁷⁶

In the eighth century, images of gods in clay and bronze begin to be produced once more, some in the typical epiphany gesture of Minoan–Mycenaean tradition, and others in the now particularly popular Warrior style. The unique pillar-shaped cult image of Apollo at Amyklai with helmet and spear also seems indebted to this latter type,⁷⁷ and its influence continues to be felt in the large-scale sculptures of powerful, war-like gods: Athena with the lance, Zeus with the thunderbolt, and finally the magnificent god from Artemision.

The surviving images are almost exclusively small votive figures from sanctuaries; the true cult images were *xoana*, carved from wood. Besides the standing image such as the image of Hera on Samos, another principal type is the image of the seated goddess – a type which ultimately goes back to Çatal Hüyük. A seated goddess is portrayed in the image of Hera of Tiryns, which was later housed in the Argive Heraion and regarded as one of the oldest images in existence;⁷⁸ the ancient image of Athena Polias in Athens was also seated,⁷⁹ and the same type is presupposed in the sixth book of the *Iliad*. The much larger than life-size cult image of Apollo on Delos which was made in the sixth century achieved wide renown:⁸⁰ its left hand held a bow

and its outstretched right hand held statuettes of the three Charities; the image was overlaid with gold.

The subsequent development is a commonplace in all histories of architecture and art. After the invention of the roof tile, the familiar normal type of Greek temple develops in the seventh century, everywhere replacing the diverse earlier, primitive structures: a platform raised in three steps supports a rectangular stone building with a gently sloping gable roof, preferably one hundred feet long (*hekatompedos*). Not without Egyptian influence, the column orders are perfected, the Ionian in Asia Minor and the Doric in Argos and Corinth. From the sixth century on, we find a universal acceptance of those fixed conventions for columns, entablature, frieze, and pediment which were to dominate the architecture of the Mediterranean for more than seven hundred years. The centre of the temple is the *naos* proper, in Latin, the *cella*, where the cult image is set up on a pedestal; the furnishings include a table of offerings, incense stands, and occasionally an ever-burning lamp; the room is lit by the great, high doorway which faces towards the east. A porch often adjoins the door opening. Occasionally a door leads behind the *cella* into an inner room which only a few may enter, an *adyton*.⁸¹

With the rise of large-scale marble sculpture in the seventh century, and the discovery of hollow casting in bronze in the sixth century, the creation of statues of the gods becomes the most elevated task of plastic art. The cult images were generally already in existence and could not be replaced; the famous archaic and classical works are almost all votive gifts.⁸² Still there are new temples to be built and new images to be consecrated. In the fifth century the chryselephantine image appears in place of the wooden statues as the highest display of artistic splendour: around a wooden core, the robes are worked in pure gold and the flesh is worked in ivory. Just as temple architecture attained its acme and a certain finality in the Temple of the Olympian Zeus (about 460) and in the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis (consecrated in 438), so, in the judgement of the ancients, the two chryselephantine images by Pheidias, the Athena Parthenos on the Acropolis and the Zeus of Olympia, were the culmination of all Greek religious art. Pheidias' Zeus in particular set its seal on the artistic representation of the gods for centuries; even a Roman general was awestruck by its majesty.⁸³

However much the picture of Greek religion was thereafter defined by the temple and the statue of the god, for the living cult they were and remained more a side-show than a centre. The sacredness of the ancient *xoana* was, of course, extolled, and often it was said that they had fallen from heaven;⁸⁴ a Palladion in particular was a possession to be cherished greatly, even though it was never a pledge of divine nearness as in Rome. There are no magical rites to give life to the cult image as in Babylon.⁸⁵ The statues which were famous were the work of artists who were known by name; these were famed for their beauty as *agalмата*, glorious gifts in which the gods must also delight. Philosophers from Heraclitus onwards warned against confusing the image with the god, 'as if they were to try and converse with houses'; nevertheless,

one can say in prayer, 'Thy image, O goddess', without equating image and deity.⁸⁶ As a matter of fact, the suppliant did go up to the image to pray, and this was the reason for entering the temple;⁸⁷ the image was cleaned and decked out in the festal rite, it was presented with a new robe (*peplos*) and dressed. Such attention was bestowed primarily on the ancient *xoana*; the great Panathenaic procession immortalized on the Parthenon frieze can only have encircled the Parthenon in order to take the robe to the very ancient image later set up in the Erechtheion.⁸⁸ Processions with images of gods – which play a major role in the Ancient Near East – are an exception. There are purification processions such as those for the Palladion or the abduction and return of the Samian Hera;⁸⁹ such a moving of the immovable is an uncanny breaking up of order. As an antithesis, an expression of binding order, there are fettered images of gods, especially of Artemis, Dionysos, and Ares;⁹⁰ they await the abandoned and perilous unchaining in the festival of licence, which must then lead back to the established order.

During the sacred work of sacrifice at the altar the temple is at the back of the participants; they look towards the east and pray to the sky, just as the temple opens out to the east.⁹¹ So the pious man stands as it were beneath the eyes of the deity; but it is not the inner space of the temple which draws him in, withdrawing him from the world. The festival is enacted in the open air around the altar and temple; built as a façade, the temple, which can be circled in the shade of the column-borne entablature, provides the magnificent background; it stands giving strength behind the man who looks out on the world; it dismisses him as it welcomed him.

However much skill and craftsmanship of the highest quality went into the construction of a Greek temple, the scale and expenditure were kept within human proportions: the entire Periclean building programme on the Acropolis cost the city of Athens no more than did two years of the Peloponnesian War.⁹²

5.4 *Anathemata*

The sacred spot arises spontaneously as the sacred acts leave behind lasting traces: here sites of fire, there stains of blood and oil on the stone – rudiments of altars of differing types and functions. Where ash, charcoal, and bones accumulate at the same place the great ash altars are formed. Even the Palaeolithic hunters, moreover, deposited bones and raised up the skulls of the animals hunted; in the shrines of Çatal Hüyük bull skulls are set up in rows. So too in Greek sanctuaries skulls from the victims of the hunt and sacrifice are placed on display;⁹³ bucrania with garlands therefore become the stereotype relief decoration on altars and sacral buildings. In sanctuaries dedicated to Artemis and Apollo goat horns accumulate; a deposit of this kind was found in Dreros, and on Delos the great Horn Altar of Artemis, which was viewed with astonishment as one of the wonders of the world, was constructed from goat horns.⁹⁴ Furthermore, the locks of hair shorn at an

initiation ritual, or indeed anything left behind at a cultically accentuated turning point in life, will also remain at the sacred spot.⁹⁵ And if the distinctiveness of the sacred is to be upheld, then the implements employed at sacrifice cannot simply be returned to profane use.

From such beginnings, the custom of setting up things in the sanctuary (*anathenai*) clearly underwent an unprecedented expansion from the eighth century onwards, primarily in connection with the votive offering. The object set up in this way, *anathema*,⁹⁶ is a lasting, visible gift: a witness to one's relationship to the deity, the principal form of expression for private devotion and the most representative document of official piety. As the inscriptions state, the donor expects a gracious gift in return, even if only that the god may grant him occasion to set up another gift in the future.⁹⁷ The gifts can take many forms. Valuables in early times are garments and metal. Since the object set up acts as a sign, a substitute model, a sign of the sign, can take its place: bronze and terracotta figurines, or a painting on clay or wood; quite an industry in devotional objects developed at an early date.

One group of anathemata can be understood as giving permanence to the sacrificial act: vessels of all kinds, roasting spits, sacrificial axes, and above all tripods. The tripod cauldron, which was used as a cooking utensil for boiling the meat and at the same time had considerable intrinsic value as metal, became the most representative votive gift of Greek sanctuaries.⁹⁸ In this Olympia led the way; from about 700, the dominant form was the Orientalizing griffin cauldron which showed Urartian/North Syrian influence. Animal figures should also be seen in the context of sacrifice,⁹⁹ especially the ox figures which appear with a certain continuity even through the dark age. Cult scenes are often depicted on votive tablets, and, from the fourth century onwards, on large elaborate votive reliefs.¹⁰⁰

To what extent the small anthropomorphic votive figures represent the god or his devotees is often very difficult to decide;¹⁰¹ both undoubtedly appear. Gods can be recognized in early times by the epiphany gesture, and later by certain characteristic attributes; men often carry an animal for sacrifice. The votive figures need not be strictly related to the deity of the sanctuary in which they are placed; statuettes of other gods can also be dedicated.¹⁰² Large statues in limestone, marble or bronze may be erected by those who have been connected with the god in a special way and wish to give lasting expression to this bond, particularly boys and girls who have discharged temple duties, such as the Arrhephoroi on the Acropolis and the Children from the Hearth in Eleusis,¹⁰³ or priests and priestesses. The victors at Olympia similarly have the right to set up a bronze statue in the sanctuary.

The pious act of dedication is thereby transformed into an act of public ostentation. One creates one's memorial, *mnema*. The anathemata of much frequented sanctuaries are the most efficacious testimonies to a glorious past. Gyges of Lydia was always known to the Greeks through his gold in Delphi, and Croesus of Lydia – the proverbial Croesus – secured even greater

renown.¹⁰⁴ Changeable as the fortune of war was, the victor always hastens to erect his monument in Olympia and Delphi. Shields in sanctuaries are already spoken of by Homer, but all other weapons could also be surrendered to a god; to commemorate a sea battle, a ship's beak or even an entire ship might be dedicated.¹⁰⁵

Within a relatively short period of time the popular sanctuaries inevitably became quite overwhelmed with votive gifts. Priests supervised the setting up. The worthless trinkets were buried from time to time in the sanctuary, to the delight of modern archaeologists; the most valuable gifts constituted the principal assets of the temple and careful account of them was kept. As stories attach to remarkable objects, the temple inventory becomes a chronicle; the anagraph of Lindos is preserved in inscription.¹⁰⁶ To produce votive gifts from the Trojan War gradually became a matter of course. The riches naturally attracted rapacious attention. The gold of Croesus was melted down for Phocian mercenaries during the Sacred War (356–346) and many a later tyrant financed himself by the same method. Clearings in the forests of statues were later made by Roman art collectors, but Pliny could still write of thousands of statues in Delphi.¹⁰⁷

Votive gifts are a stimulus to further building activity in the sanctuary. Characteristic are long, open colonnades, *stoai*, usually at the boundary of the sacred precinct. The earliest and exemplary structure of this kind was erected once again in the Heraion on Samos as early as the seventh century; Didyma followed suit shortly afterwards.¹⁰⁸ The colonnades offer the visitor shelter from sun and rain and also encourage him to linger awhile. In the sixth century separate treasure houses, *thesouroi*, begin to be set up, above all in Olympia and Delphi; these themselves are in the shape of small temples and are in turn a gift to the god, part of the *aparche* or *dekate*. Like the sacrifices which votaries multiply in the votive representations, so divine image and temple are reproduced. The god will delight in everything, just as man can take pride in everything; all are *agalmata*.¹⁰⁹

Priestly dwellings in the sanctuary itself are the exception;¹¹⁰ the demands of purity admit no normal human life. On the other hand, houses for sacrificial banquets, *hestiatoria*,¹¹¹ are frequently erected within the *temenos* or very near by, especially after the hearth house temple had given way to the normal temple which serves solely as a dwelling place for the deity.

The layout, especially of the ancient and important sanctuaries, arose gradually over the centuries, with constant rebuilding and additions. There is therefore no real architectural plan, no strict organization of the buildings in reciprocal relation. Each building, especially each temple, is in the first instance an individual, constructed for its own sake and beautiful as an *agalma*. Only the relationship between the temple and altar with the intervening sacral area is defined functionally and to some extent constant. The symmetrical layout of temples, colonnades, stairways and altars was the product of Hellenistic architects designing great temple complexes for new foundations. A harmonious relationship between the individual parts of a

sanctuary was nonetheless achieved by the builders and architects even in Archaic and Classical times; the vitality of this sacral architecture lies precisely in its seeming irregularity.

6 PRIESTS

Greek religion might almost be called a religion without priests:¹ there is no priestly caste as a closed group with fixed tradition, education, initiation, and hierarchy, and even in the permanently established cults there is no *disciplina*, but only usage, *nomos*. The god in principle admits anyone, as long as he respects the *nomos*, that is, as long as he is willing to fit into the local community; for this very reason, of course, role distinctions between strangers and citizens, slaves and freemen, children and adults, women and men, are all important at times. Herodotus records with amazement that the Persians must call on a Magus for every sacrifice;² among the Greeks, sacrifice can be performed by anyone who is possessed of the desire and the means, including housewives and slaves. The tradition of rites and myths is easily learned through imitation and participation; much can even be acquired of the specialist arts of the seer simply through observation.³

At every major cultic occasion there must, of course, be someone who assumes the leadership, who begins, speaks the prayer, and makes the libation. Prerequisite for this role is a certain authority and economic power. The sacrificer is the head of the house, family, or village, the president of the council, the elected chief magistrate of the city – known as the archon in Athens – or the army general. Where there is still a kingship, as in Sparta, the kings have special responsibility for intercourse with the sacred.⁴ In Athens, alongside the archon, there is also a king, *Basileus*, who like the archon is elected for one year. The king is responsible for the ancient religious ceremonies, conducting 'all traditional sacrifices',⁵ in particular, the Mysteries, the Lenaia, and the Anthesteris – in which his wife also has a spectacular role to play. The archon, on the other hand, directs the Panathenaia and the Dionysia, the major festivals that were organized in the sixth century. At Olympia, the organization of the cult is closely associated with the administration of the Elean state: the city magistrates elected in Elis make the annual sacrifice of a ram to Pelops in the Pelopion.⁶

The sanctuary is the property of the god; the *temenos* is removed from human use, unless for the benefit of the sanctuary and the sacrificial festivals. To ensure that everything is done in proper order, a responsible official is required – the priest, *hierews*, or the priestess, *hiereia*.⁷ Priesthood is not a general status, but service of one specific god in one particular sanctuary. No one is a priest as such, but the Priest of Apollo Pythios or the Priestess of Athena Polias; several priesthoods can, of course, be united in one person.

Various officials function as precinct governors. There will generally be just one caretaker, *neokoros*. To organize the sacrifices, from the purchase

of the animals to the sale of the skins, sacrifice executors, *hieropoioi*, are appointed; and more important still are state commissions to oversee the finances of the sanctuaries, *epimeletai*, *hierotamiai*.⁸ The priest rarely lives in the sanctuary, but he is expected to be conscious of his responsibilities; in one case an inscription specifies that the priest be present in the sanctuary at least ten days a month. If necessary, the sacrifice can be performed without a priest.⁹

Priesthoods are often hereditary in certain ancient families which owe their status not least to this prerogative. In Athens it is the Eteoboutadai who provide both the priest of Erechtheus-Poseidon and the Priestess of Athena Polias, so administering the central cults on the Acropolis. Their eponymous ancestor Boutes – whose name points to the sacrifice of oxen – was, they say, the brother of the first king Erechtheus, putting their priesthood almost on a level with the kingship. The family of the Praxiergidai oversees the Plynteria festival, so assuming office shortly before the priest of Erechtheus and the priestess of Athena leave the Acropolis. The Thaulonidai perform the ancient bull sacrifice for Zeus on the Acropolis at the Bouphonia. The Bouzygai provide the priest of Zeus at the Palladion. The Mysteries of Eleusis remained until the end of antiquity in the hands of the Eumolpidai and the Kerykes, with the Eumolpidai providing the hierophantes and the Kerykes providing the Torch-bearer, *dadouchos*, and the Sacred Herald, *hierokeryx*.¹⁰ The Branchidai maintain a similar relationship to the Apollo sanctuary at Didyma. Upstarts also invest themselves with a dignity to suit: Gelon and Hieron, the tyrants of Gela and Syracuse, claimed that a hierophantic office of the Chthonic gods was hereditary in their family, and after their great victory over Carthage in 480 they proceeded to build a Demeter temple in Syracuse.¹¹ Founders of sanctuaries later regularly secured the priesthood for themselves and their families 'for all eternity'.¹²

Priests are installed; as early as the *Iliad* it is said that the Trojans established (*ethekan*) Theano as priestess of Athena.¹³ As with other posts, the appointment is decided by the community, usually the political assembly. Sortition may be seen as an intimation of divine will. In Asia Minor, priesthoods were regularly auctioned in many places from Hellenistic times.¹⁴ Depending on the *nomos*, the priesthood may last for a year, for a festal cycle, or for life. An annual priesthood is frequently eponymous, that is, the local chronology is related to the list of the names of the priests. For Hellanikos towards the end of the fifth century, the list of the Hera priestesses at Argos, as the list reaching furthest back, was the backbone of his historical chronology.¹⁵

A priestly office brings revenues, at least provisions, in accordance with ancient custom. Together with the sacrificial victim the priest receives gifts of food, which he uses only in part at the sacrifice; he is accorded an honorary portion (*geras*) of the roast meat, usually a leg, and the foods deposited on a table next to the altar eventually fall to him.¹⁶ Often he receives the skin as

well. With progressing rationalization, fixed charges are set and levied along with the victim; once these are fixed in cash, the sanctuary receives a collection box, *thesauros*, with a slot for coins.¹⁷ The begging procession of the priest is an exception in Greece, but belongs in an ancient tradition.¹⁸

The temples in the Near East, from the very beginning of high civilization, were economic concerns supporting a large body of priests. Scarcely anything comparable exists in Greece, although parallels deriving from Eastern traditions can certainly be found in Asia Minor. Delphi is an exception: situated in craggy isolation on the steep hillside, it is simply unable to support a peasant community of any size. In the *Hymn to Apollo*, the Cretans whom the god has led to Pytho as his priests enquire: 'And how shall we now live?' Smilingly the god comforts them: 'Each man shall carry a knife in his right hand and simply slaughter sheep – and these will be available in plenty . . . But guard my temple and receive the crowds of men.' So the Delphians live for the sanctuary and from the sanctuary.¹⁹ The oldest family, traced back to Deukalion, the survivor of the flood, furnishes the five Consecrated Ones, *hosioi*;²⁰ another kin group, the Labyadai, with its festal banquets, is known through an ancient cultic decree.²¹

Non-Greek elements are evident in the cult of Artemis-Upis of Ephesos, not only in the remarkable cult image with its pectoral which was later seen as many-breasted. The high priest, *megabyzos*, is a eunuch. A society of men, set apart for a year and bound to sexual abstinence, meets for sacral meals; they are called *essenes*, bee kings. There are also consecrated maidens; the myth tells of Amazons who founded the sanctuary.²² Castrated priests are attested in the cult of Kubaba-Kybele, and Hecate of Lagina in Caria also has eunuchs, just as Aphrodite-Astarte has her male transvestites.²³

In Greece the priesthood is not a way of life, but a part-time and honorary office; it may involve expense, but it brings great prestige. The pious man treats the priest with reverence: at the sack of Ismaros, Odysseus spares Maron in the grove of Apollo, and Alcibiades frees priests without ransom.²⁴ The priest is consecrated (*hieromenos*). His hair is usually long and he wears a head-band (*strophion*), a garland, costly robes of white or purple, and a special waistband; he carries a staff in his hand. The priestess is often represented carrying the large key to the temple, *kleidouchos*. In the theatre seats of honour are reserved for the priests.²⁵ The priest is 'honoured among the people as a god', as the *Iliad* says.²⁶

In a number of cases the priest seems almost to appear as a god. In Thebes, the priest of Apollo Ismenios is a boy of noble family; at the Daphnephoria festival he follows behind the laurel pole, wearing a golden garland and a long festal robe and with his hair untied – the epitome of the youthful god with unshorn hair.²⁷ At the Laphria festival in Patrai, the priestess of Artemis rides on a chariot drawn by deer;²⁸ similarly, when the Hera priestess at Argos drives to the sanctuary on an ox-drawn cart, she is especially close to the cow-eyed goddess.²⁹ At Pellene the priestess of Athena

appears with helmet and shield,³⁰ and in Athens the priestess of Athena wanders through the streets wearing the aegis.³¹ In mythology Iphigeneia is the victim, priestess, and double of Artemis.

A priestess very commonly officiates for goddesses and a priest for gods, but there are important exceptions and complications.³² In Athens, the priestess of Athena Polias is not a virgin but a mature woman who has put conjugal relations behind her.³³ Pallas in Argos is escorted to the bath by a priest.³⁴ In the Demeter cult priests are common, notably *hierophantai*, though they are, of course, accompanied in office by priestesses and *hierophantides*. Dionysos quite frequently has priestesses, and so may Apollo and even the Zeus of Dodona.

Widespread and characteristic is the consecration of boys and girls for a period of temple service. In Athens two *arrhephoroi* are allotted to serve on the Acropolis; they start the work of weaving the *peplos* for Athena and tend the sacred olive tree; at the end of the year they are discharged in a mysterious nocturnal ceremony.³⁵ Similarly, in Aigeira and Patrai, a maiden is consecrated to Artemis before marriage, while in Kalauria a maiden is consecrated to Poseidon;³⁶ in Athens, girls are sent to Artemis at Brauron as she-bears, *arktoi*.³⁷ Boys are consecrated not only to Apollo as in Thebes or to Zeus as in Aigion,³⁸ but also to Athena as in Tegea and Elateia.³⁹ In the temple of Aphrodite at Sikyon,⁴⁰ an old woman serves as *neokoros* along with a virgin known as the water carrier, *loutrophoros*; these two alone may enter the temple, while all others may pray to the goddess only from the entrance: the goddess of sexual life can be approached freely only by those who are excluded from her works. The tension seeks discharge: mythology tells how Poseidon, to whom the virgin in Kalauria is consecrated, ravished Aithra on the Sacred Island nearby and sired Theseus.⁴¹ In the background initiation rituals may be sensed which merge, in mythology at least, with child expulsion and child sacrifice.

The significance of all such details is revealed only in each individual case. As a common denominator of what is required of a priest there remains the purity, *hagneia*,⁴² befitting the sacred. This involves eschewing contact with death⁴³ and with women in childbed, and a negatively charged relationship to sexuality. Life-long celibacy is scarcely ever found.⁴⁴ From time to time dietary prohibitions and fasts are to be observed, but real asceticism develops only in protest against the civilization of the polis and its priesthood.⁴⁵ At the installation of a priest there are frequently special initiations, *teleisthai*, as for the *hosioi* in Delphi.⁴⁶ As for other requirements, the priest should above all be a worthy representative of the community. This means that he must possess full citizenship⁴⁷ and also that he must be free from any physical defect.⁴⁸ The mutilated and crippled are excluded. Otherwise, in contrast to more responsible positions, it is true that anyone can become a priest.⁴⁹

7 THE FESTIVAL

7.1 Pompe

As the sanctuary articulates space, so the festival articulates time.¹ Certain days – reckoned to include the preceding night – are set off from the everyday; work is laid aside and customary roles are dissolved in a general relaxation, but the festival programme holds new roles in readiness. Groups come together, setting themselves apart from others. The contrast with normality may be expressed in mirth and joy, in adornment and beauty, or else in menace and terror.

The fundamental medium of group formation is the procession, *pompe*.² The active participants separate themselves from the amorphous crowd, fall into formation, and move towards a goal, though the demonstration, the interaction with the onlookers, is scarcely less important than the goal itself. Hardly a festival is without its *pompe*. The centre to which the sacred action is drawn is naturally a sanctuary where sacrifices take place; but the pathway is also important and sacred. To reach a centre such as the Acropolis in Athens, the procession sets out from the city gates and makes its way through the market place.³ At the Eleusinian festival the Sacred Way runs from the same gateway through thirty kilometres of countryside. The sacred objects are first brought along this pathway to Athens by the *epheboi* and then returned at the head of the great procession of *mystai* for the nocturnal celebrations.⁴ In Paphos the procession leads from the new city to the old city with its ancient sanctuary.⁵ There are also processions which vividly enact the abandonment of the sanctuary, the interruption for a period of purification.⁶

Pompe means escort, but how far the procession is an end in itself can be seen from the expression meaning to celebrate a festival, *pompas pempein*, literally, to accompany the escorts. There are all kinds of appurtenances to be carried and corresponding roles with fixed titles such as basket bearer, water bearer, fire bearer, bowl bearer, and bough bearer.⁷ In the Demeter and Dionysos cult covered containers whose contents are known only to the initiate are carried around in connection with the Mysteries – the round wickerwork basket with a lid, *kiste*, and the veiled winnowing fan, *liknon*⁸ and consequently there are *kistephoroi* and *liknophoroi*. Sacred appurtenances of this kind may also be borne along on a chariot, as is Demeter's basket, *kalathos*, in the procession in Alexandria.⁹ An especially impressive form of transport is the ship on wheels, the ship chariot. Above all, the procession almost always includes the victims for the sacred work and the festal banquet. The participants themselves demonstrate their special status not only with festal garments, but also with garlands,¹⁰ woollen fillets, and twigs which they hold in their hands.

The classical monument which gives the fullest idea of a great *pompe* is the Parthenon Frieze, originally 160 metres in length, which ran around the *cella* wall of the Parthenon.¹¹ At the beginning of the year the Panathenaic procession presented the goddess with a new robe, the *peplos*; the robe had been carried through the city on a ship chariot and now, represented on the east face over the entrance to the temple, the Erechtheus priest stands holding the folded robe between the twelve Olympian gods. The procession moves along both sides of the temple towards this centre: there are basket bearers and victims for Athena (four oxen and four sheep on one side, and a suggestion of a hecatomb on the other), bowl bearers and water bearers (to donate and carry these vessels was the special privilege and duty of the metics), musicians, venerable old men, and above all warrior youths, some armed with shields and some on horseback who are particularly eye-catching. There are also war chariots with warriors practising the special sport associated with the festival – jumping down from the hurtling chariot. Naturally the civic officials are also represented, as well as the virgins and women who have made the *peplos*. The entire citizenry present themselves in their essential groupings in this, the greatest *pompe* of the year.

A characteristic form of the Apollo cult is the bay bearing, the *Daphnephoria* festival. We have a description of the Theban festival for which Pindar composed songs:

They wreath a piece of olive wood with bay sprigs and flowers of many colours; at the top a bronze globe is fixed from which smaller spheres hang down; a smaller globe is fixed at the centre of the piece of wood and purple ribbons hang from it; the lower part of the wood is wrapped about with a saffron-coloured cloth . . . At the head of the *daphnephoria* goes a boy whose parents are still living; his nearest relative carries the piece of garlanded wood; the bay bearer himself follows behind and touches the laurel branch; his hair is untied and he wears a golden garland, a festal robe reaching down to his feet, and special sandals; he is followed by a chorus of maidens with twigs in their hands.¹²

At simpler festivals one can imagine a straightforward bay branch in place of the maypole or Christmas tree type of object described here. So, in the Delphic ritual, every eight years a boy fetches the bay branch from the Tempe valley in Thessaly.¹³

Apollo himself is called bay bearer, *Daphnephoros*, and myth tells how the god himself brought the purifying bay to Delphi after slaying the dragon. The boy in Thebes, specially decked out and grasping the bay, seems to represent the god himself. In the *Hymn to Apollo* the poet has the god himself leading the procession to Delphi with lyre in hand and playing sweetly.¹⁴ The god is present; but for this cult images are not necessary. Processions with cult images are more the exception.¹⁵ At the Great Dionysia the image of Dionysos is brought to Athens from Eleutherai; vase paintings portray the

advent of the god in the ship chariot.¹⁶ In Therai in the mountains of Taygetos, a *Kore* statue is escorted from the Marsh to the sanctuary of Demeter Eleusinia for the festival.¹⁷ The Magna Mater makes her entrance seated on an ox-drawn wagon.¹⁸ Then there is the leading away of cult images for the unsettling purification. Terror spreads when the otherwise unmoved image is moved. The image of Artemis of Pellene 'usually stands untouched in the temple, but when the priestess moves it and carries it out, no one looks on it, but all avert their gaze; for not only to mankind is its aspect awful and grievous, but even trees it causes to become barren and cast their fruit wherever it is carried.'¹⁹ The divine presents a Medusa head; those who escort it share in its power.

7.2 *Agermos*

Processions collecting gifts are widespread and still survive in some places in European popular culture.²⁰ In ancient Greece customs of this kind make only a marginal appearance, but they certainly exist. Only from a late Byzantine source do we learn by chance that even the priestess of Athena Polias went through the city collecting on certain days.²¹ On such occasions she wore the aegis of the goddess, now no longer a real goat skin, but a garment made of woollen fillets, though something of the ancient terror still attached to it by its very name. In particular, the priestess sought out newly married wives, who no doubt owed gifts to the virgin goddess so that the terror would become a blessing to them. The priestess of Artemis at Perge in Pamphylia also collects.²² Aeschylus had Hera appear as a wandering priestess seeking gifts for the Nymphs, the 'life-giving daughters of the river Inachos'.²³ In Ionia, the women collect gifts while singing a hymn to Opis and Arge, the Delian maidens.²⁴ In Sicily, herdsmen enter into the cities in a special procession, wearing deer antlers, hung about with bread in the shape of animals, and carrying a leather pouch with all kinds of grains and also a wine skin; as they collect gifts they announce in song the advent of peace, good luck, and health.²⁵ Elsewhere, processions of this sort are staged by children – in Athens at the Thargelia festival in summer and at the Pyanopsia in autumn. They carry an olive branch wreathed with fillets of wool and laden with numerous firstlings, fruits of all kind, bread, and little flasks of oil. The branch is called Eiresione, and they sing: 'The Eiresione brings figs and fat bread, honey in pots, and oil to rub down, a cup of strong wine so you go drunk to bed.'²⁶ On Samos, the children sing 'Wealth enters in', while on Rhodes the *Swallow Song* adds light-hearted threats to the begging requests: 'or we'll carry off your door, or your wife.'²⁷ These, once again, are Apollo festivals. To the promise of blessings there corresponds an almost sacral claim to gifts. Elsewhere such activities, performed by societies of men or boys, are often connected with the cult of ancestors who are represented in masks. This cannot, or perhaps can no longer, be shown to be the case anywhere in Greece. The public cults are financed from the public

purse. Collecting therefore appears as a characteristic of unofficial sects; in addition to the Apollo collectors such as Abaris,²⁸ there were also the adherents of the Magna Mater of Asia Minor, the Meter collectors, *metragyrtai*;²⁹ the true polis Greek treated them with disdain.

7.3 *Dancing and Hymns*

Rhythmically repeated movement, directed to no end and performed together as a group, is, as it were, ritual crystallized in its purest form: 'Not a single ancient initiation festival can be found that is without dancing.'³⁰ To belong to a traditional group means to learn their dances. Following on ancient custom, the Greeks have group dances of many kinds, not for virtuosi and not for arbitrarily paired couples, but for representative members of the community. The group of dancers and the place for dancing are both called *choros*; there are choruses of boys, of maidens, and of women, and also war-dances for warriors. Dancing and music are inseparable. Even the simplest musical form, the song, leads to dancing; as musical instruments,³¹ the double flute, *aulos*, and the plucked string instruments, *kithara* and *lyra*, are most prominent; percussion instruments are associated with foreign orgiastic worship.

To celebrate a festival is to set up choruses. Even the processions have their special hymns; Pindar wrote *daphnephorika* for Thebes. The procession may halt at various points along the route in order to perform exacting hymns and dances. In Miletos there is a guild of singers, *molpoi*, in honour of Apollo Delphinios; along the pathway of the procession to the Apollo sanctuary at Didyma there are six appointed shrines at which they perform their paean.³² The hymn becomes associated with the sacrificial victim which is led along in the procession: Pindar speaks of the 'ox-driving dithyrambos',³³ and the goat singers, *tragodoi*, and hence ultimately tragedy, probably take their name from a procession which leads the goat to sacrifice.³⁴

In the sanctuary itself, the special dances are even more elaborate. On Delos, boys and girls dance the Crane Dance (*geranos*) with tortuous, labyrinthian movements: it is said that the maidens and youths from Athens invented this dance together with Theseus after escaping from the labyrinth.³⁵ Mythical Kouretes brandish their shields in a dance around the newborn Zeus child; and the Orientalizing bronze shields from the Ida cave on Crete testify to the reality of such shield dances in the context of an initiation festival of the eighth century.³⁶ In a hymn from Palaikastro, youths invoke Zeus as greatest *Kouros* to come to Dikte to spring in flocks, fields, towns, and ships, and doubtless it is the dancing leaps of the youths themselves in which this power of the god is present.³⁷ When Pallas Athena leapt in full armour from the head of Zeus, she brandished her shield and lance in a war-dance, and in imitation of this divine origin, the war-dance, *pyrrhiche*, is performed at her festival, especially at the Panathenaia.³⁸ The names Paean and Dithyrambos refer equally to the god, his hymn, and his dance, perhaps from

Minoan tradition.³⁹ Elsewhere too, the experience of the dance merges with the experience of the deity. At the Gymnopaedia boys dance for Apollo, and everywhere girls dance for Artemis: the vigorous, youthful form of these divine siblings appears as a projection of these dances. Apollo himself plays for the dance, and Artemis joins in the dance with her Nymphs.⁴⁰ In the groups of Nymphs or Charites, in the bands of Kouretes, and even in the case of the dance-loving satyrs, divine archetype and human reality are often virtually inseparable, except that what for man is the short-lived blossom of youth attains permanence in the mythical-divine archetype.

Although the names and basic rhythms of the dances are traditional, the cult in no way demands the repetition of ancient, magically fixed hymns. On the contrary, the hymn must always delight the god afresh at the festival; therefore for dance and hymn there must always be someone who makes it, the poet, *poietai*. The literary genre of choral lyric, which can be traced from the end of the seventh century, accordingly develops from the practice of the cult and culminates in the first half of the fifth century in the work of Pindar. The invocation of the gods, the enunciation of wishes and entreaties, is interwoven ever more artfully with mythical narratives and topical allusions to the festival and chorus. Already in the seventh century, several choruses are competing for the honour of performing the most beautiful hymn – with the costuming of the chorus then also playing its role. The religious function, the relationship with the gods, is in danger of being lost in the rivalry; but all are well convinced that the gods, like men, take a delighted interest in the contest.

7.4 *Masks, Phalloi, Aischrologia*

Masks,⁴² the most ancient means of surrendering one's own identity and assuming a new extraordinary identity, come to the Greeks through various traditions. There are Neolithic and also Near Eastern connections.⁴³ There are animal masks, and also, in particular, ugly, ridiculous masks. Besides the processions and the dancing of masked figures, there are masks which are raised up and worshipped, sometimes even becoming cult idols.

The most direct evidence for the wearing of animal masks comes from those bull skulls cut into mask shape which were found in Cypriot sanctuaries;⁴⁴ this practice, however, did not have any direct influence outside Cyprus. Nevertheless, the wine-pouring youths at the festival of Poseidon in Ephesus are called bulls, *tauroi*, maidens in the Spartan Leukippides cult are called foals, *poloi*, priestly groups of bees, *melissai*, are more frequent, and there are also bears, *arktoi*.⁴⁵ Along the selvage of the robe on the Despoina statue from Lykosoura all kinds of musicians are shown masked as animals, mostly with donkey-like masks, but also creatures with cow and pig heads;⁴⁶ even though the iconographical motif of the animal orchestra reaches back to Sumerian times, some ritual context must lie in the background. That hybrid creatures such as Centaurs and Pans are in reality

masked figures is highly probable.⁴⁷ We are well informed about the costume of the Silenoi and Satyrs: the flat-nosed mask with animal ears and the animal skin apparel or loin cloth with horse tail and phallos attached. This get-up has admittedly become the literary satyr play from the end of the sixth century, and has thereby attained a different relation to reality from the earlier ritual.⁴⁸

Grotesque masks of old women are found in the sphere of female deities, especially Artemis; striking clay specimens were found as votive gifts in the Ortheia sanctuary.⁴⁹ It is said that the masks were properly made of wood and that the wearers were called *kyrittoi*, and *bryllichistai*;⁵⁰ men could also appear in masks of ugly women. The story was told that by the river Alpheios in Elis, Artemis and her nymphs had smeared their faces with mud in order to escape the amorous attentions of the river god – a reflection of the ritual use of such grotesque masks.⁵¹ Terracotta, pot-shaped masks from the Hera sanctuary at Tiryns date from as early as the eighth century – the earliest Gorgon heads with wild tusk-like fangs;⁵² they undoubtedly go together with the myth of the witch-like metamorphosis of the daughters of King Proitus, which took place in Tiryns, and with the grotesque painting on the idols from Mycenae.

If the three avenging goddesses, Praxidikai, were worshipped in the shape of heads,⁵³ these will doubtless have been pot-masks of this kind. The Gorgon mask appears on its own as an apotropaic sign, with round goggling eyes, lolling tongue, and jutting teeth.⁵⁴ An ancient Gorgoneion which was said to be the work of the Cyclopes stood in the market place at Argos.⁵⁵ A mask of Demeter Kidaria was kept in Pheneos in Arcadia, and at the mystery festival the priest would don the mask and 'beat the subterranean dwellers with a rod'.⁵⁶ An elevated, bearded mask may represent the god Dionysos;⁵⁷ that it was also worn to represent the frenzied god directly may be surmised.

The mask effects a transposition into a new and unknown world, but apart from the petrifying Gorgon, this, for the Greeks, is not so much an uncanny and unsettling world as a world of absurdity and aggressive obscenity. There are many variants of the procession with giant false phallos; the wearers of these massive membra must conceal their bourgeois identity by smearing themselves with soot or bran or by wearing masks. Thus a Hellenistic author describes the soot-smeared *phallophoroi* and the *ithyphalloi* who march along in masks representing drunks.⁵⁸ Mask and phallos also go together in the satyr costume. But even in the Artemis cult there were girls who appeared in phallic attire.⁵⁹ Clown-like mummers, probably connected with some popular dithyrambos, are known in particular from Corinthian vase paintings, where they parade a mock nudity with their buttocks padded out in an exaggerated way and indulge in all kinds of buffoonery.⁶⁰

As a counterpart to this there are ugly sayings, *aischrologia*, and obscene exposures in women's festivals, especially at the Thesmophoria. As the women celebrate on their own at the expense of the men, the antagonism

between the sexes is played up and finds release in lampoonery. A name for mocking songs on such occasions is *Iambos* – developed as a poetic genre since Archilochus; the ritual background still shows through in the *Iambos on Women* by Semonides, which tears the opposite sex to pieces type by type.⁶¹ *Iambe* was made into a mythical figure, a maid who was able to cheer up Demeter after her sorrow and fasting.⁶² In Athens, the Stenia festival immediately before the Thesmophoria was given over to the exchange of abuse between the sexes.⁶³ The women in Aegina, financed by specially appointed *choregoi*, presented mocking choruses at the festival of Damia and Auxesia, though here the raillery was directed only at other women from the district.⁶⁴ On the island of Anaphe, however, men and women jeered at one another at the sacrifice for Apollo Aigletes – a practice initiated, according to legend, by the slave girls of Medea during the Argonaut expedition.⁶⁵ During the procession to Eleusis grotesquely masked figures sat at a critical narrow pass near the bridge across the brook known as the *Rheitoi* and terrorized and insulted the passers-by.⁶⁶ At Dionysian festivals wagons drove through the streets carrying masked figures who shouted abuse at everyone they passed in a proverbially coarse manner.⁶⁷

Rites with sexual emphasis are generally understood in terms of fertility magic in Frazer's sense.⁶⁸ The Greek evidence, however, always points most conspicuously to the absurdity and buffoonery of the whole affair: there is a conscious descent to the lower classes and the lower parts of the anatomy, mirrored in the talk of mythical maids. Just as pomp and ceremony contrasts with everyday life, so does extreme lack of ceremony, absurdity, and obscenity; a redoubled tension arises between the two extremes, adding further dimensions to the festival. Similarly there are sacrifices which demand the very opposite to the usual holy silence, wild cursing or affected lamentation.⁶⁹ By plumbing the extremes the just mean is meant to emerge, just as the sexes which greet each other with jeers are dependent on each other.

7.5 *Agon*

The agonal spirit, *der agonale Geist*, has, since Friedrich Nietzsche, often been described as one of the characteristic traits and driving forces of Greek culture.⁷⁰ The number of things which the Greeks can turn into a contest is astounding: sport and physical beauty, handicraft and art, song and dance, theatre and disputation. Whatever is instituted as custom comes almost automatically under the jurisdiction of a sanctuary. On Lesbos, a beauty contest of the girls took place at the annual festival in the sanctuary of Zeus, Hera, and Dionysos;⁷¹ some such contest seems to be mirrored in the myth of the judgement of Paris. On a votive gift from Tarentum, a girl boasts of having outshone all others in a wool-carding contest;⁷² the earliest Greek inscription concerns a boy who 'of all dancers plays most gaily'.⁷³

Musical contests appear primarily in honour of Apollo and Dionysos; flute-players, flute-players with singers, and kithara-singers each compete with one another at the Pythian Games in Delphi; in Athens, dithyrambs, comedies, and tragedies are staged competitively at the Dionysia, while at the Panathenaia, rhapsodes vie with one another in the recitation of Homer.

Even more popular, of course, were the sporting contests. The simplest form, the foot-race, and its most extravagant variant, the chariot race, which developed from the Bronze Age chariot fight, were the most important, and tended to overshadow the other events such as wrestling, boxing, long jumping, and javelin throwing. Nevertheless, the sporting event is no profane festival. Funerary rites are at first a major occasion for games, as evidenced by the epic description of the funeral games for Patroclus and also by Geometric vase paintings and later inscriptions; the *epitaphios agon* persists into Classical times. Karl Meuli has described how the prize contest proceeds from the grief and rage of those affected by the death.⁷⁴ Later, however, attention is focused on the games connected with calendrically fixed festivals, and the trial of strength of the living also has an initiatory character. In the sixth century, four Panhellenic festivals come to form a recognized group: the Olympia, the Pythia at Delphi, the Nemeios in honour of Zeus and the Isthmia for Poseidon near Corinth. Other city festivals such as the Panathenaia in Athens or the Heraia in Argos strove to attain an equal status without quite succeeding.⁷⁵

Mythology associates these games also with funeral games, with a local hero whose death had occasioned the first celebration; Pelops or Oinomaos in Olympia, Archemoros in Nemea, Palaimon on the Isthmus, and in Delphi the Python dragon. As a matter of fact, the *agon*, as transition from an aspect of death to an aspect of life, is intimately connected with the various sacrificial rituals. In Olympia, the games are preceded by a thirty-day period of preparation during which the athletes are required to observe a vegetarian diet and sexual abstinence. The festival opens with sacrifices, a preliminary sacrifice for Pelops, and great ox sacrifices for Zeus.

The consecrated portions then lay on the altar, but had not yet been set alight; the runners were one stadion away from the altar; in front of the altar stood a priest who gave the starting signal with a torch. The victor put fire to the sacred portions and so went away Olympic victor.⁷⁶

The oldest stadion led directly to the Zeus altar; the victor in the simple foot-race was the Olympic victor whose name was recorded from 776 onwards. The sprint marks the transition from the bloody work to the purifying fire, from the Chthonic to the Olympian, from Pelops to Zeus. Similarly at the Panathenaia, the special sport, the leap from the chariot, is intimately connected with the sense of the New Year festival; at the Dorian Karneia festival the race is still more ritual than sport.⁷⁷ An event curiously surrounded by mythology is the discus throw: it was while practising this

sport that Apollo himself killed his youthful favourite Hyakinthos – as if the throw with the unpredictable stone disc sought out a chance victim.

7.6 *The Banquet of the Gods*

The natural and straightforward aim of a festival is feasting – eating and drinking. In Greek sacral practice this element is always present. The meal in the sanctuary may be marked as extraordinary when, in contrast to normal civilization, the ancient way of life is imitated:⁷⁸ a bed of twigs, *stibas*,⁷⁹ takes the place of seats or banqueting couches, and the house is replaced by an improvised hut, *skene*⁸⁰ – misleadingly translated as tent. The twigs on which one sits assume a symbolic character which varies according to deity and festival: pine or willow for the Thesmophoria, and wild olive branches in Olympia.⁸¹

The festival is spoken of as the 'fulsome banquet of the gods';⁸² and yet the portion of the gods at the normal Olympian sacrifice is somewhat more than precarious. For gods to be expressly entertained as guests at a meal is the exception, but it still gives a number of festivals their special character. So in Athens, Zeus of the Friends, Zeus Philios,⁸³ may be invited to a banquet: a banqueting couch (*kline*) is prepared and the table is spread with all that is necessary; reliefs show the god present at the feast. The mortals themselves obviously join in with a will. This Zeus who is treated on such familiar terms is obviously not immediately identical with the sky god who hurls thunderbolts.

The real guests at the entertaining of gods, *theoxenia*, are the Dioskouroi. They are celebrated above all in the Dorian area, in Sparta, but in Athens also they are presented with a breakfast in the Prytaneion where a table is spread with cheese, cakes, olives, and leeks. Vase paintings and reliefs show the divine horsemen galloping through the air towards the two *klinai* prepared for them.⁸⁴

In Delphi,⁸⁵ the Theoxenia are a major festival which also gives a month its name. Delegations arrive from all over Greece and numerous gods are invited to the banquet, though, understandably, Apollo comes to dominate the proceedings more and more. A scurrilous *agon* is fought out: whoever can offer Leto the largest horn onion receives a portion from the sacred table. All portions from the table of the gods, however, are eventually distributed to men, and the breakfast of the gods is followed by general eating and drinking on the part of mortals.

It was from Delphi that the Romans took over the feasting of the gods, *lectisternium*; but at the same time, ancient tradition was probably preserved and activated in this; the Veda after all reputedly shows the invitation of gods to a meal, and the Dioskouroi most particularly point to Indo-European tradition.⁸⁶ Among the Greeks this is in part more a matter of family custom than polis religion; along with Zeus Philios there is the custom of meals for heroes and meals for the dead.

7.7 *Sacred Marriage*

Especial curiosity has always been aroused by a number of allusions to the secret climax of a festival in sexual union, a sacred marriage, *hieros gamos*. In fact, as far as Greece is concerned, the evidence is scanty and unclear.

A tradition of sacred marriage exists in the Ancient Near East:⁸⁸ the Sumerian king is the lover of the Great Goddess and betakes himself to the temple of the goddess to consummate his marriage ceremonially. In the same way a priest may then be united with a goddess, or a priestess with a god. In Egyptian Thebes, the chief priestess is the divine consort of Amun, and on Cyprus, Astarte is the consort of the priest-king. Beside this there is the sacral prostitution in the Ishtar–Astarte cult, the presence of male and female prostitutes in the sanctuary, something also attested on Phoenician Cyprus; similarly, Aphrodite has her hetairai even in Corinth.⁸⁹

Quite different in kind is the idea of the marriage of the Sky Father with the Earth Mother in the thunderstorm.⁹⁰ With burlesque grandeur the *Iliad* portrays how Zeus and Hera unite at the summit of Mount Ida, veiled in a golden cloud from which glistening drops fall to the earth. Later poetry depicts the fructifying marriage of heaven and earth more directly, without using divine names, whereas the visual arts remain bound by the spell of Homeric anthropomorphism.⁹¹

To what extent such a sacred marriage was not just a way of viewing nature, but an act expressed or hinted at in ritual is difficult to say. In Athens the marriage of Zeus and Hera was celebrated towards the end of the winter in the Theogamia festival,⁹² but all we learn is that there was sumptuous feasting on that day. The procession with wooden figures, *daedala*, in Boeotia⁹³ is interpreted in the aetiological myth as a bridal procession, but it ends in a fire festival in which the figures burn along with the wooden altar. On Samos also the Hera festival is much too complicated to be understood simply as Hera's wedding.⁹⁴

Near Knossos on Crete the marriage of Zeus and Hera is likewise celebrated, indeed, it is imitated;⁹⁵ this might, of course, be no more than an evening bridal procession followed by a nocturnal festival, *pannychis*. Nevertheless, Hesiod tells⁹⁶ that it was on Crete that Demeter united with Iasion in a thrice-ploughed corn field and thereafter gave birth to Plutos, wealth in corn. Here, perhaps from ancient Neolithic tradition, we find the association between ploughing/sowing and procreation, and between harvest and birth. Since Mannhardt, this has been connected with popular customs of couples rolling on the cornfield, the *Braulager auf dem Ackerfeld*. The name Iasion is connected also with Samothrace, thus pointing to both mysteries and pre-Greek customs. That sexual elements play a role in mystery initiations is virtually certain, but there is hardly any clear evidence; how in Eleusis, for example, conception and birth-giving was indicated remains obscure.⁹⁷ The

fact that in mythology Iasion is struck by a thunderbolt indicates that a sacred marriage of this kind stands closer to sacrifice than sensual pleasure.

In the domain of Dionysos the sexuality is less veiled; in some forms of Dionysos initiations at least, just as in later Gnostic sects, real sexual intercourse seems to have taken place, in particular pederasty at the initiation of *mystai*;⁹⁸ primitive initiation rituals, the introduction of adolescents to sexuality, may lie in the background. When such things became public, however, it was regarded as a scandal; Rome proceeded against it with unprecedented severity.

At the Dionysian Anthesteria festival in Athens, the wife of the king, the Basilinna, is given to the god as wife;⁹⁹ their union was said to take place in the Boukolion in the market place. The technicalities of the act, whether an image was involved or whether the king donned the mask of the god, are left to speculation. The mythical reflection of this is Ariadne whom Theseus, the first king of Attica, had taken as wife and whom, at divine command, he was then obliged to surrender to the god at night time. Ariadne is surrounded with orgiastic rites and lamentation, just as at the Anthesteria wantonness appears united with dark myths of death. Here, too, the marriage is sacred insofar as it is more than human pleasure.

8 ECSTASY AND DIVINATION

8.1 *Enthousiasmos*

Since the sacred, the divine, always appears as out of the ordinary and wholly other, the overwhelming experiences of a changed and extended consciousness are, if not the sole origin, at least one of the most essential supports of religion. The experience may rest on natural disposition, acquired technique, or the influence of drugs, but at all events, the individual sees, hears, and experiences things which are not present for others; he stands in direct contact with a higher being and communicates with gods and spirits. For the ancient high civilizations it is nevertheless characteristic that the established cult is to a large extent independent of such abnormal phenomena. This is also true of Greece where ecstatic, mediumistic, and yoga-like experiences are far from unknown, but are either pushed to the periphery of religious life or else strictly circumscribed; they do not become the foundation of a revelation.

The words which the Greeks use to describe such phenomena are varied and inconsistent. An ancient name and interpretation for an abnormal psychic state is *entheos*: 'within is a god', who obviously speaks from the person in a strange voice or in an unintelligible way and induces him to perform odd and apparently senseless movements. At the same time, however, it is said that a god seizes or carries a person, that he holds him in

his power, *katechei*, which gives in translation the term *possessio*, possession.² But stepping out, *ekstasis*, is spoken of just as much, not in the sense that the soul leaves the body, but that the person has abandoned his normal ways and his good sense;³ and yet one can also say that his understanding (*nous*) is no longer in him.⁴ These various expressions can neither be reconciled systematically nor distinguished in terms of an evolution in the history of ideas; they mirror the confusion in the face of the unknown. The most common term is therefore *mania*, frenzy, madness.

Frenzy is described as a pathological outburst provoked by the anger of a god. As well as the pathological frenzy of the individual, there is also ritual and institutionalized, collective frenzy, especially the frenzy of the women of a city as they break out at the festival of licence. The aim, nonetheless, in reality and in myth, is to bring madness back to sense, a process which requires purification and the purifying priest.⁵ In particular, the Greeks seems to have discovered ecstatic cults connected with flute music in northern Asia Minor among the Phrygians; accordingly, the possession mentioned most frequently is possession by the Mother of the Gods, whose power also extends over the initiation and purification of the Korybantes.⁶ Nevertheless, Hera, Artemis, Hecate, Pan, and other gods can also send madness. Epilepsy, as the sacred disease, is interpreted and treated according to this same schema, with the attack of the god being countered with purifications.⁷

That divine presence in transfigured consciousness can also be experienced in a positive way as a blessing, namely in song and dance, is illustrated only by one early but later forgotten passage: the choruses of maidens on Delos know 'to imitate the dialects and chatterings of all men; each would say that he were speaking himself: in such a way is the beautiful song joined together for them.' This has justly been compared to the Pentecostal miracle and the speaking in tongues in the New Testament. The disciplined hymn dissolves into uncontrolled sounds which are nevertheless miraculously filled with meaning for the festival participants.⁸ Perhaps some vestige of the epiphany of the deity in dance, as inferred for the Minoan religion, is preserved here.

In the Dionysos cult ecstasy plays a quite unique role, with the result that Dionysos almost acquires a monopoly over enthusiasm and ecstasy, but this ecstasy is ambivalent. In mythology the frenzy may appear once again as a catastrophe sent by the implacable Hera,⁹ but since the god himself is the Frenzied One, the madness is at the same time divine experience, fulfilment, and an end in itself; the madness is then admittedly almost inseparably fused with alcoholic intoxication.¹⁰

At the same time, there is the phenomenon of a quite different, sober emotion which overtakes the individual. There are people who are seized by the nymphs and abandon house and home to hide in caves in the wilderness;¹¹ there is the case of Aristeeas who is seized by Phoibos and miraculously transported to northern lands from which he returns with tales of Apollo's

remote and wondrous people, the Hyperboreans.¹² In the seventh and sixth centuries, a number of such miracle men seem to have travelled about; they have been called wandering shamans, and influences from the realm of Scythian nomads are probable.¹³ Whether, like shamans, they gave ecstatic demonstrations is something which can only be inferred indirectly from the legends which surround them, especially those concerning their ability to fly. There is also the report concerning Hermetimos from Klazomenai, whose body lay as if dead while his spirit went journeying and brought back information about distant places and even about the future.¹⁴ More widespread and doubtless older is the conviction that every seer must stand in a special relationship to the divine since his words presuppose a knowledge which is more than human; and similarly the oral singer is dependent on his goddess, the Muse, who sends him happy inspiration from moment to moment.

Plato distinguishes the prophetic madness of Apollo from the telestic madness of Dionysos, before adding, as other types of madness, the poetic and the erotic or philosophical enthusiasm.¹⁵ By naming Apollo and Dionysos in this way, the peripheral phenomena of consciousness are consigned within well-defined spheres: divination here, initiation there. Two brothers, the sons of Zeus rule over the respective spheres, while Zeus himself, the highest god, stands as father above them in the clear space of thinking, *phronein*.

8.2 *The Art of the Seer*

In acting, man is compelled to make a hopeful projection of the future. In doing so, it is simply a feature of animal learning that specific expectations are linked to specific observations: one recognizes signs – which for man are linguistically fixed and culturally transmitted. For a distinction between chance and causal nexus there is at first neither theory nor method; experiments can scarcely be risked. Furthermore, the gain in confidence which the signs bring as an aid to decision-making is so considerable that occasional falsification through experience does not tell against them.

Faith in signs can persist without religious interpretation, as superstition, just as in our own culture. Similarly, the casting of lots functions quite automatically as a rule of play, as a decision-making mechanism. In the ancient cultures nevertheless a religious interpretation is long established: signs come from the gods, and through them the gods give direction and guidance to man, even if in cryptic form. Precisely because there are no revealed scriptures, the signs become the pre-eminent form of contact with the higher world and a mainstay of piety. This is also the case among the Greeks: to doubt the arts of divination is to fall under suspicion of godlessness. All Greek gods freely dispense signs following grace and favour, but none so much as Zeus; the art of interpreting them is bestowed by his son Apollo.¹⁶

For to discover the interpretation which is convincing and beyond doubt, a

charismatic gift, inspiration, is required. From time immemorial this task has been performed by a highly esteemed specialist, the seer, *mantis*, a prototype of the wise man. The gift is handed down from generation to generation. Not only did mythology create genealogical connections between the legendary seers – Mopsos as grandson of Teiresias – but even historical seers would trace themselves back to some figure such as Melampus; in Olympia there was the line of seers known as the *Iamidai*.¹⁷

Significantly, the Greek word for god, *theos*, is intimately related to the art of the seer: an interpreted sign is *thesphaton*, the seer is *theopropos*, and what he does is a *theiazein* or *entheazein*.¹⁸ The *Iliad* seer Kalchas is the son of Thestor; the seer with second sight who is introduced into the *Odyssey* is called Theoklymenos, and the tribe which guards the unique Oracle of the Dead in Epirus is called the *Thesprotoi*. Insofar as the seer speaks in an abnormal state, he requires in turn someone who formulates his utterances, the *prophetes*.¹⁹ The word for seer itself, *mantis*, is connected with the Indo-European root for mental power, and is also related to *mania*, madness.

In practice, however, the art of interpretation becomes to a large extent a quasi-rational technique. Any occurrence which is not entirely a matter of course and which cannot be manipulated may become a sign: a sudden sneeze,²⁰ a stumble,²¹ a twitch;²² a chance encounter or the sound of a name caught in passing;²³ celestial phenomena such as lightning, comets, shooting stars, eclipses of sun and moon, even a drop of rain.²⁴ Here the transition to scientific meteorology and astronomy is made almost imperceptibly. Then, of course, there are dreams – ‘the dream also is from Zeus’ – but Penelope in the *Odyssey* already knows that not every dream has a meaning.²⁵

The observation of the flight of birds plays a special role, perhaps from Indo-European tradition. This is the special art of the seers in the ancient epics, of Teiresias and Kalchas; their title is therefore also *oionopolos*. *Oionos*, the bird of omen, is pre-eminently the bird of prey: whether one or several appear, and whether from right or left, is always of significance. The seer has his fixed seat;²⁶ the association of right – good, left – bad is unequivocal; as a rule the seer faces north. Nevertheless, the Greek seers do not seem to have developed a fixed *disciplina* like Etruscan and Roman augurs. In Homer,²⁷ the bird omens are poetic invention, unlikely contrivance, making the interpretation all the more self-evident. Nevertheless, a man like Xenophon²⁸ still sought out a seer in the year 401 to discover what was meant by the fact that he had heard a perched eagle screaming to his right: this, he learned, was a great sign, but one which also portended suffering; this knowledge helped him endure.

Sacrifice, the execution of the sacred work, is followed with heightened attention; here everything is a sign: whether the animal goes willingly to the altar and bleeds to death quickly, whether the fire flames up swiftly and clearly, what happens at the burning in the fire, how the tail curls and the bladder bursts.²⁹ In particular, the inspection of the livers of the victims developed into a special art: how the various lobes are formed and coloured is

eagerly awaited and evaluated at every act of slaughter. This technique originates in Mesopotamia, and its diffusion can be traced through Mari and Alalach to Ugarit and the Hittites and into Bronze Age Cyprus. In Homer, at all events, there is an allusion to this practice at one point;³⁰ evidently it was taken over from the East by the Greeks in the eighth/seventh centuries. The Etruscans obtained their much more detailed *haruspicina* from the same source, not via the Greeks; no Greek counterpart has as yet been discovered for the liver models with inscriptions and signs such as are known from Assyria, Ugarit, Cyprus, and Etruria.

The inspection of entrails is the prime task of the seers who accompany the armies into battle. Herds of victims are driven along expressly for *hiera* and *sphagia* – although also, of course, for provisioning. Without favourable sacrificial signs no battle is joined. At Plataea, Greeks and Persians remained encamped opposite each other for ten days because the omens – obtained by the same techniques – did not advise either side to attack.³¹ Even that mercenary horde, the Ten Thousand, which plundered its way through barbarian lands, would never embark on a raid without sacrifices; when the omens remained unfavourable for several days they were threatened with starvation, but an expedition undertaken in defiance of the signs did in fact prove disastrous. Finally the right sacrificial liver came to light and the day was saved.³² King Agesilaos could still be persuaded in 396 to abandon a campaign on the basis of unfavourable omens.³³

Whether the credit for a victory was due to the commanding general or the *mantis* was therefore a matter which was certainly open to dispute; at all events, to have a good seer was of the utmost importance. At the time of the Persian Wars, the Spartans went to exceptional lengths to secure the services of the seer Teisamenos from the line of Melampus, who did in fact win five great victories for them, including the victory at Plataea.³⁴ And the Athenians, after their victory at Cnidos, in 394 ordained in an inscription that the seer Sthorys who had led them be granted Athenian citizenship.³⁵ Alexander still had his seers; in the Hellenistic armies their influence diminishes.

That the seer creates the good omens in some magical way and so induces success is never articulated;³⁶ rather it is believed that there is a complicated and tortuous path to the goal which must be discovered by means of signs. The philosophical question as to how omens, predetermination, and freedom of the will can be reconciled was discussed extensively only in Hellenistic times; the discovery of natural laws in the sphere of astronomy acted as a catalyst to this discussion, and at the same time produced a new and enormously influential form of divination in the shape of astrology. In the early period one can always try to make something even of unfavourable signs by waiting, circumvention, purification, repetition; conversely, it is important that even favourable omens be accepted³⁷ with an approving word or vow in order for them to achieve their fullest efficacy. Here we find confirmation that the aid to decision-making, the gain in self-confidence, is

more important than real foreknowledge, just as the seers decide above all what is to be done and what is not to be done without saying what will happen.

8.3 Oracles

It is in the cults which attach to specific sanctuaries that the gods are present, and their signs, too, are therefore concentrated on cult places. But success in the interpretation of signs could, more than anything else, carry the fame of a god and of his sanctuary far and wide. In this way, from the eighth century onwards, a supra-regional and even international importance was attained by certain places where the god offers a service, *chresmos*, to those in search of counsel; the Greeks called a place of this kind *chresterion* or *manteion*, the Romans *oraculum*.³⁸ Near Eastern and Egyptian sanctuaries had led the way in such specialization; the oracles of Daphne near Antiocheia,³⁹ Mopsuestia in Cilicia,⁴⁰ Sura⁴¹ and Patara in Lycia,⁴² and Telmessos in Caria⁴³ stand in Asia Minor tradition; the Greeks probably came to know the Amon oracle at the oasis of Siwa shortly after the foundation of Cyrene about 630.⁴⁴ By that time the Lydian King Gyges had already sent offerings of gold to Delphi.⁴⁵

The methods of imparting oracles are almost as varied as the cult forms; attention is attracted first, of course, to the most spectacular mode, that in which the god speaks directly from a medium who enters the state of *enthousiasmos*.

Dodona, the sanctuary of Zeus in Epirus, boasted of being the oldest oracle.⁴⁶ The *Iliad* has Achilles pray to the Pelasgian Zeus of Dodona; 'about you dwell the Helloi (Selloi?), the interpreters, with unwashed feet, sleeping on the ground.'⁴⁷ That remarkable body of priests later disappeared, and even their name is discussed only on the basis of this *Iliad* text. Odysseus alleges he has gone to Dodona 'in order to learn the plan of Zeus from the oak of lofty foliage';⁴⁸ the Hesiodic *Catalogues* perhaps already spoke of three doves which dwell in the oak tree;⁴⁹ according to later tradition it is three priestesses who are called the doves;⁵⁰ they enter a state of ecstasy, and 'afterwards they do not know anything about what they have said.'⁵¹ The excavations have exposed the simple tree sanctuary; not until the fourth century was a small temple added, after the Molossian kings of Epirus had assumed the protectorship of Dodona. From that time onwards, Dodona enjoyed a certain popularity; nevertheless, it is mostly private individuals who on the surviving lead tablets approach the god for advice on everyday problems.

The Oracle of the Dead at Ephyras⁵² must be of ancient repute and the name of the surrounding Thesprotoi clearly points to their divine mission; the association of Odysseus' journey to Hades with this spot is probably older than our *Odyssey*.⁵³ The two rivers there were then given the names of the rivers of the underworld, Acheron and Kokytos.⁵⁴ About 600 the tyrant Periandros of Corinth conjured up the soul of his dead wife there.⁵⁵ The

installation uncovered through recent excavations dates only from the fourth century; earlier structures were doubtless lost when that monumental new building was erected. The centre is a square complex with walls of polygonal masonry three metres thick giving a Cyclopean appearance. Around this runs the approach corridor, once completely dark, passing a bathroom, incubation and dining chambers, places for purification, for throwing a stone, and for bloody sacrifice, and finally leading through a labyrinth with many doors into the central chamber, beneath which a vaulted crypt represents the world of the dead. Perhaps there was a machine for producing ghostly appearances – iron rollers which have been found are interpreted in this way – or perhaps the eating of certain kinds of beans had a hallucinogenic effect; numinous experience and manipulation may overlap.

Comparable is the oracle of Trophonios at Lebadeia.⁵⁶ A veritable journey into the underworld is reported by Pausanias from his own experience. After long preparations, the inquirer at the oracle is led at night time into a vaulted chamber from which a whirlwind miraculously carries him through a small aperture above the ground; when he returns he is unable to laugh. This last detail, as well as the descent, *katabasis*, is also mentioned in the early sources,⁵⁷ but it is not known to what degree the theatrical, and perhaps even mechanical, elaboration of the process is a product of the Imperial Age.

Dream oracles are more straightforward. After preparatory sacrifices, the inquirer spends the night in the sanctuary; priests are at hand to assist in the interpretation of the dreams.⁵⁸ This incubation later flourished above all in the domain of the healing gods, in the Amphiaraion at Oropos⁵⁹ and in the Asklepieia. The practice, however, also leads back into Asia Minor tradition: the oracle of Mopsos in Cilicia was a dream oracle, as was the oracle of the Telmessians in Caria.

Mopsos, grandson of Teiresias and rival of Kalchas, was also regarded as founder of the oracle at Klaros near Colophon.⁶⁰ This oracle persisted through a number of crises and destructions into the Imperial Age, when it enjoyed its greatest renown. In the Imperial building a vault led beneath the temple to the sacred spring which, according to mythology, had gushed from the tears of Teiresias' daughter Manto; the *thespiodos* drank from this water and thereby became *entheos*. Whoever wished to enter in to the oracle was first required to undergo an initiation, *myesis*.⁶¹

A sacred spring also existed in the other great Apollo oracle of Asia Minor at Didyma near Miletos. Here it was a priestess who entered a state of ecstasy while holding the laurel wand of the god in her hand, wetting her feet with the water, and breathing in its vapours.⁶² In Patara in Lycia the priestess was shut up in the temple at night: she was visited by the god and filled with prophecy.

There is no oracle of which so much is known or about which so much is in dispute as that of Pytho, the sanctuary of the Delphians.⁶³ Originally, it is said, the god gave responses here only once a year at the festival of his advent in the spring;⁶⁴ but as a result of the fame of the oracle, services came to be

offered throughout the entire year; indeed, at times three Pythiai held office at once. The Pythia is a woman dedicated to the service of the god for life; she is dressed as a young girl.⁶⁵ After a bath in the Castalian spring and after the preliminary sacrifice of a goat, she enters the temple, which is fumigated with barley meal and laurel leaves on the ever-burning *hestia*, and descends into the *adyton*, the sunken area at the end of the temple interior. This is where the Omphalos stands and where, over a round, well-like opening in the ground, the tripod cauldron is set up; the cauldron is closed with a lid and it is on this that the Pythia takes her seat. Seated over the chasm, enveloped by the rising vapours, and shaking a freshly cut bay branch, she falls into a trance. The Hellenistic theory that volcanic fumes rose up from the earth has been disproved geologically; the ecstasy is self-induced. Medium-like abilities are not entirely uncommon. Admittedly it was also regarded as possible to bribe the Pythia. The utterances of the Pythia are then fixed by the priests in the normal Greek literary form, the Homeric hexameter.

The Apollo *temenos* in Delphi was obviously not founded before 750;⁶⁶ nevertheless, the *Iliad* already speaks of the rich treasures held fast within the door-sill of the god.⁶⁷ It is clear that in the founding of the Greek colonies in the West and on the Black Sea from the middle of the eighth century the instructions of the Delphian god assume a leading role.⁶⁸ Once again this is less a matter of prediction than of helping to make decisions in these risky and often abortive undertakings. Later, important state constitutions are also submitted to the Delphian god for approval; this was done with the Spartan Rhetra which was attributed to Lycurgus⁶⁹ and even with the thoroughly rational *phylai* constitution introduced by Cleisthenes in Athens in 510.⁷⁰ Apollo's proper domain is cultic questions – innovations, restorations, and purifications in the cultic sphere. The sacred law of Cyrene and the *aparche* decree of Athens were both ratified by Delphi.⁷¹ That Delphi manifestly failed to foresee the Greek victory in the Persian Wars and all too clearly recommended surrender badly damaged its reputation, in spite of all attempts to reinterpret its pronouncements. Thereafter political decisions were increasingly taken without reference to the oracle.⁷² Instead, we hear of inquiries by private individuals such as Chairephon's question whether anyone was wiser than Socrates.⁷³ Before joining Cyrus' adventurous revolt against the Great King, Xenophon inquired at Delphi not whether he should become involved or not, but 'to which gods he should sacrifice in order to remain safe and sound';⁷⁴ in obedience to the response he sacrificed to Zeus Basileus, and even though he achieved no great success, he at least returned safe.

There was also a lot oracle in Delphi;⁷⁵ this is also recalled by the formula 'the god took up' (*aneile*) for the giving of the response. The inspired divination is therefore clearly secondary; indeed, it is generally believed to be of non-Greek origin. Frenzied women from whose lips the god speaks are recorded very much earlier in the Near East, as in Mari in the second millennium and in Assyria in the first millennium;⁷⁶ Mopsuestia, Daphne,

Patara, and Telmessos are non-Greek, but nevertheless have no inspired divination; in the Branchos tradition of Didyma⁷⁷ and also in Klaros pre-Greek elements may be present. In addition there is the tradition about the sibyls, individual prophesying women of early times who admittedly are known only through legend. The most famous sibyl was connected with Erythrai, but a sibyl is also supposed to have reached Delphi; it is interesting that a Babylonian sibyl is also mentioned.⁷⁸ The sibyl of Kyme-Cumae became most important by virtue of her influence on Rome; the conquest of Cumae by the Oscans in the fifth century admittedly destroyed this tradition, but at the same time provides a *terminus ante quem*.⁷⁹ Heraclitus assumes as well-known that the sibyl 'with raving mouth . . . reaches over a thousand years . . . by force of the god'.⁸⁰ The Delphian sibyl also called herself the wedded wife of the god Apollo.⁸¹ In 458 Aeschylus presented Cassandra on stage as a frenzied prophetess; she refused to satisfy the desire of the god and in punishment her prophecies are no longer believed.⁸² How the sibyl suffers violence from the god is alluded to by Vergil also.⁸³ There are hints of a similar relationship between the Pythia and Apollo, even if it was only Christians who first elaborated this with sexual details.⁸⁴ The priestess in Patara had a relationship of this kind with her god and parallels are found elsewhere in Asia Minor,⁸⁵ but this is manifestly not the case in Semitic inspired divination; in Klaros and on Mount Ptoion⁸⁶ a male seer is seized by the god. Inspired divination is again too complex for its origin and the stations of its diffusion to be clearly defined.

The preservation of oracular utterances was doubtless one of the earliest applications for the art of writing in Greece, which began to spread about 750. The utterance is thereby freed from the context of question and answer, from the execution of the ritual, and can become of importance at another place at another time. Age inspires respect; ancient sayings especially are therefore collected in writing and so are always ready to hand. That forgery begins as soon as recording goes without saying. Sibyl oracles which last a thousand years probably played a leading role among the written oracles; later, probably about 600, oracles of Epimenides of Crete appear,⁸⁷ then, overshadowing his, oracles of the ancient bard Orpheus and of his disciple Musaios.⁸⁸ The oracles of Bakis,⁸⁹ who claimed to owe his inspiration to the Nymphs, become important at the time of the Persian Wars and even thereafter; Bakis seems to be an Asia Minor, Lydian name. His oracles take the general form of a conditional prediction: 'but when . . .'; a particular event is alluded to in bold metaphors, often drawn from the animal world, which will be followed by something terrible, very rarely something gratifying; ritual advice is then given. Cities began to make official collections of oracles. Most long-lasting was the influence of the *libri Sibyllini* – written in Greek – in Rome. In Athens, Onomacritus was charged with the task of collecting the oracles of Musaios about 520; the poet Lasos proved him guilty of a forgery and Onomacritus was forced to leave Athens.⁹⁰ Whereas Herodotus energetically defends the authority of Bakis,⁹¹ the comedy of

Aristophanes presents highly dubious figures touting oracle books, and in Plato the mockery is compounded with a moral condemnation of the misuse of ritual. Even the collections of oracles did not become holy writ; the surviving collection of the Sibylline Oracles is of Judeo-Christian origin. Onomacritus instead became the exemplary name for the problems connected with the editing and forging of literary texts.

III

The Gods

I THE SPELL OF HOMER

The rituals, even if they may be described as a kind of language intelligible in its own terms, are in fact always bound up with language in the true sense. Human speech is integrated into the rituals to invoke an opposite, and then as explanations are invented, questions asked, and tales told about this opposite, the very substance and meaning of religion itself is spoken of. For the high civilizations of the ancient world this opposite is assumed unquestioningly to consist of a plurality of personal beings who are understood by analogy with man and imagined in human form; the notion of the 'gods', anthropomorphism and polytheism are found everywhere as a matter of course.'

The peculiar quality of Greek religion within this common framework is to be understood negatively in the first instance: there is no priestly caste with a fixed tradition, no Veda and no Pyramid texts; nor is there any authoritative revelation in the form of a sacred book. The world of writing is long kept apart; classical drama is still enacted in a single, unique performance, and Plato's philosophy retains the fiction of living dialogue.

But a polytheistic world of gods is nevertheless potentially chaotic, and not only for the outsider. The distinctive personality of a god is constituted and mediated by at least four different factors: the established local cult with its ritual programme and unique atmosphere, the divine name, the myths told about the named being, and the iconography, especially the cult image. All the same, this complex is easily dissolved, and this makes it quite impossible to write the history of any single god. The mythology, of course, may relate to the ritual, the divine name may be etymologically transparent and illuminating, and the images may point with their various attributes to both cult and mythology; but names and myths can always be spread abroad much more easily than rituals, while images transcend even linguistic barriers, and so the various elements are continually separated from one another and reformed in new combinations.

So in Greece, very similar cults do in fact appear under the names of different gods: fire festivals² belong to Artemis, Demeter, Heracles, and even