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The Greek Achievement

The Foundation of the Western World



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Underlying Patterns: Spiritual Life

There is one race of men, one race of gods; both have breath of life from a single mother [Gaia, the earth, according to legend]. But sundered power holds us divided, so that the one is nothing, while for the other the brazen sky is established as their sure citadel for ever. Yet we have some likeness, in great intelligence, or strength, to the immortals, though we know not what the day will bring, what course after nightfall destiny has written that we must run to the end.

Pindar, *Nemean* 6. (Translation: Richard Buxton)

While individual city-states were creating their own political and social structures in the Archaic age, Greek culture was developing an underlying cohesion through its shared religious beliefs. While the Egyptians saw gods in the sun, the sky, and in animals and the Jews worshipped a distant, awesome creator God, the Greeks, from earliest times had seen their gods as anthropomorphic, that is, having the attributes of human beings as the result of a common primeval mother (Gaia, the earth). There were no inhibitions in representing the gods, in sculpture and painting, for instance, in human form although there were conventions in the way this was done. Gods were never portrayed as older than middle age and it was not until the fourth century that Praxiteles scandalized the Greek world by presenting a full-size sculpture of Aphrodite naked.

Supreme among the divine powers were the twelve Olympians. The Olympians were not eternal beings; most of them has stories of their births associated with them and they had only achieved their preeminence through overthrowing another group of gods, the Titans. However, they were immortal, nourished by ambrosia, nectar, and the smoke of sacrifices in their home on Mount Olympus. In mythology they were presented as a family. Zeus, the father of the gods, is the

brother of Poseidon, god of the sea, and of Demeter, the goddess of corn. Hera, the wife of Zeus, conceived Hephaestus, the smith god, without a male partner, and Ares, the god of war through Zeus, although Zeus hated his son for the destruction he was able to bring to mankind. Zeus fathered through a variety of partners Athena, Apollo, Artemis (a goddess of hunting but also of childbirth), Aphrodite, Hermes, and Dionysus. Hephaestus and Aphrodite are married but Aphrodite frequently cuckolds her husband. The gods are not without feelings; they know grief (Zeus is distraught when he cannot save his son Sarpedon from death in the Trojan War), anger, and sexual desire.

The attributes of the female gods cover the full range of sexuality, from the virginity of Athena and Artemis to the lustful enjoyment of sex by Aphrodite. However, the goddesses can be divided into two groups: the virgins, Athena, Artemis, Hestia (the goddess of the hearth, who is not always classed as an Olympian), and those who do enjoy sexual relationships, Hera (who is ready to wear out Zeus with ardent lovemaking so that she can carry out her own designs while he recovers his strength in sleep), Demeter, and above all Aphrodite, who is the goddess of sexuality itself. The virgin goddesses are usually given specifically protective roles: Athena of cities, Artemis of hunters, and Hestia of the hearth, and hence the home. This may be because their inviolability is seen to give them power (once a real woman submits to marriage and a sexual life she is no longer independent) and so they can be cast in these more powerful roles. It has to be said that the meaning of the myths surrounding goddesses have proved enormously difficult to interpret, particularly when they are given roles that involve masculine traits (Athena as warrior, for example).

Although Greek mythology presented the Olympians as a family, their actual historical origins are very varied. Zeus has an ancient Indo-European ancestry and is present in Greece by Mycenaean times, as are Poseidon and Hera and possibly Athena and Artemis (in the Linear B tablets). Other deities, such as Aphrodite, were later imports from the East while even the "Mycenaean" gods adopted attributes from other cultures or absorbed them from local cults during the following centuries. As a result each god or goddess acquired certain powers, ways of operating and spheres of influence, built up from many different sources over time. There was no sacred book or presiding priesthood that tried to freeze the attributes of any deity, so they

developed flexibly to suit local situations. Zeus, for example, is a father figure, the most powerful of the gods, the bringer of military victory, a symbol of sexual potency, the protector of justice, and the upholder of rulers as well as the god of thunder and lightning. Athena was associated with Athens from the earliest times but she is also a more far-reaching protectress of cities and their strongholds (in Argos and Sparta, for instance). She is a goddess of war, urging on the Greeks at Troy, but as so often with Greek deities she is also concerned with the opposites, peaceful interests such as weaving and the protection of olive trees. (Olive oil is the prize in the Panathenaic Games held in her honour.) She is also a goddess of carpenters and credited with the construction of the first ship. She transcends the boundary between masculine and feminine.

The interlocking structure of divine power can be seen by exploring the natures of Apollo and Dionysus, opposites but also complementary to each other. Apollo is not known before the eighth century when he appears in epic poetry and at his main shrines, his birth place on the island of Delos and his remote mountain oracle at Delphi. At Delphi he acts as the communicator between the gods and the human race. He is always portrayed as young, associated with youth and the concerns of youth, athletics and education, poetry and music, and later, philosophy. His origins may, in fact, lie in his role as patron of the initiation ceremonies of youths into adulthood. His instrument is the lyre, a harmonious instrument, and through it he becomes known as the god of order and reason. Yet, like all the Greek gods, he can also be a god of vengeance, the bringer of plague (this is an attribute which seems to have been acquired from the East) but as so often, the power to destroy goes hand in hand with its opposite, the power to heal and purify. He cures those who are polluted and frees them for new roles (murderers are freed to found new colonies, for instance). The healing god Asclepius is his son.

While Apollo stands for order and boundaries, Dionysus is the god who transcends boundaries. He is the god of wine who gave the vine to the human race and thus the possibility of drunkenness and disorder. He is associated with wild places, the rich growth of wild plants, and sexuality. (A model phallus was often carried in his processions.) His routs are ecstatic dances, often performed in the mountains by women worshippers, the Maenads, who work themselves into a frenzy to the sound of flute and drums before collapsing. He is also a god

who changes his identity through adopting a mask and hence brings the possibility of personal transformation. The drama festivals are celebrated in his honor (see Chapter Twelve). In legend Dionysus and Apollo are often placed together as if their powers need to feed on each other. Dionysus was given a place at Delphi alongside Apollo. In the passing of time one gives way to the other; Dionysus is associated with winter, Apollo with summer; Apollo with the day, Dionysus with the night. It is a reminder of the completeness of the Greek spiritual experience; reason and unbridled emotions are both given their homes but it is recognized that in a healthy *cosmos* order needs to be balanced by disorder, the measured tones of the lyre by the impassioned fervor of the beating drum. (The idea of Apollo and Dionysus as complementary opposites was stressed by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872]. He argued that the stress on Apollo and the progressive march of reason, exemplified by Greek culture after Euripides and Socrates [see Chapter Thirteen] had stifled a more primeval, pessimistic aspect of the Greeks represented by Dionysus. The essence of the Greeks, he claimed, is to be found in their early tragic drama.)

In many cases the specific attributes or interests of a god are personified by forces or beings which act as mediators between human beings and the gods. Dike, justice, the special preserve of Zeus, appears in the poems of Hesiod as a woman. Those who feel they have been treated unjustly can appeal to her and she in her turn approaches Zeus on their behalf and he can bring revenge on an impious community. In her turn she has a daughter Eunomia, good order, who works actively to calm unrest in a city. Aphrodite is associated with Eros, love; Athena with victory, Nike, who is personified as a small winged figure held in Athena's hand. Nike is a celebratory figure. Among the glories of the Paris Louvre is the Nike of Samothrace, a Victory with great outstretched wings, which probably commemorated a third-century naval success. Ares, the god of war, on the one hand, is surrounded by more awesome forces, the personifications of Fear and Terror. Asclepius, the god of medicine, on the other hand, has daughters Hygieia and Panacea (both adopted as terms in the later history of medicine). By the fourth century some of these personified forces were being given cult worship in their own right. The most spectacular success was that enjoyed by another daughter of Zeus, Tyche, fortune (normally good fortune), who became a major cult figure in Hellenistic times.

The Olympians stood out from among a mass of lesser gods. Some of these, Hades, for instance, were associated with death and could not even be mentioned by name. Others were local gods whose powers and attributes remained limited even if their cults spread more widely. Pan, the goat god, was centered on Arcadia in the central Peloponnese. A god of shepherds, his cult spread throughout Greece through the fifth and fourth centuries, but he never ranked among the Olympians. He became the god held responsible for spreading panic to armies and also a symbol of sexual obsession. Hestia was universally honored as the goddess of the hearth but was seldom given Olympian status. According to legend her identification with one fixed place, the hearth, prevented her joining the gods on Olympus, while ancient taboos surrounding the hearth seem also to have given her perpetual virginity so that she could never be joined to the Olympian family in marriage.

The minor gods and goddesses merge into the heroes, many of whom are children of the gods and human partners. Heracles (the Roman Hercules), perhaps the greatest of the heroes, was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, Alcmena. Hera, Zeus' wife, hated him and attempted to poison him by sending serpents to his cradle. The baby Heracles, already superhuman in strength, killed them with his bare hands. As a response to the hatred of Hera, Heracles acquired the protection of Athena and then embarked on a career in which his enormous strength was used to subdue a variety of awesome animals (the Nemean lion, a Cretan bull, and a boar from Arcadia) and complete seemingly impossible tasks like the cleaning out of the Augean stables. He emerged as a protective figure who was given cult worship by his adherents almost on the same level as that of a god. Rulers of the Peloponnese (where his cult appears to have originated), the Pisistratids of Athens and the royal family of Macedonia all adopted him as their protector. Other heroes enjoyed more local support, as the savior of a particular city. Theseus was the protector of Athens, "appearing" when most needed at the battle of Marathon, and linked to the bringing of democratic government to the city. Heroes may be mythical but some really existed, the founders of new cities, for instance, or overthrowers of tyranny such as Harmodius and Aristogeiton in Athens (page 166).

This profusion of divine figures who ranged from all-powerful but remote Olympian gods to human beings honored after their death (there is no evidence of any Greek general receiving cult worship dur-

ing his lifetime before the Spartan Lysander in the early fourth century though there were occasions when Olympic victors did so) helped blur the division between the sacred and the profane. There were places and things in the Greek world that had permanent sanctity. They would include temples, for instance, their surrounding sanctuaries, and statues of the gods. For others sanctity was more ephemeral. Places, people, and actions could acquire sacredness when they were endowed with that quality through ritual. An animal brought for sacrifice and the man who carried out the sacrifice had no intrinsic sacred quality until they became involved in the ritual of sacrifice, and even the altar where the sacrifice took place only took on its full readiness for the ceremony when the basket containing the sacrificial knife had been carried around it.

Rituals are ceremonies or a series of activities which accompany any significant moment in a community's life and which are traditionally carried out in the same form from year to year or occasion to occasion. It is the repetition which is important. By placing rituals at fixed times, in designated places, or to mark particular moments, such as the transition of a youth to adulthood, marriage, or death, a human society achieves stability and psychological security. It is probable, in fact, that a society which did not order its existence through rituals would collapse into chaos. (There is a famous anthropological study, *The Mountain People* by Colin Turnbull, which charts the disintegration of the Ik people of central Africa as ancient rituals were abandoned under the stress of economic change.)

In Greek society every kind of relationship could be structured ritualistically, even the way in which a lover was approached or an illness was treated, but normally ritual was concerned with public affairs, the marking of a new season, the welcoming of children as adult citizens, preparation before battle, the opening of a session of the people's Assembly. It was a feature of Greek ritual that it was always carried through under the auspices of the gods. Hence ritual can never be separated from spiritual life. It might be in fact designed as a means of communicating with the gods, as sacrifice was, or as a means of asking the protection of the gods for the event to be celebrated. As in other societies rituals in Greece were reinforced by their repetition over generations so that the abandonment or omission of a ritual (or even its carrying out in the wrong way) brought a sense of foreboding, the fear that the gods would withdraw protection or wreak revenge. When

Thucydides describes the plague of 430 in Athens he seems as much concerned with the abandonment of the rituals of burial, because of the sheer numbers to be buried, as with the loss of life itself.

It was the city that normally mediated between the individual citizen and the gods by providing rituals, festivals, communal feasting, the building of city temples, through which the community as a whole could seek divine protection. In so far as piety can be defined in the Greek world it lay in public participation in the city's rituals. The citizen had to be seen helping his fellow citizens to secure the good will of the gods if he was to be truly a citizen. His participation in the rituals that sustained the support of the gods was as important as any other political activity. Any act of impiety which threatened the relationship had to be condemned. Acts of sacrilege might include the desecration of a sanctuary or the statue of a god (this is why a mutilation of the Herms [figures of Hermes with an erect phallus which served as boundary markers] in Athens in 415 aroused such horror), the introduction of a new god, or the denial of the existence of old gods. Even the incorrect use of words during a ceremony (*blasphemia*) could threaten the relationship. These crimes of sacrilege made their perpetrator polluted and his pollution (*miasma*) could spread the anger of the gods to the whole community in the form, perhaps, of plague, famine, or the infertility of women. The penalty the community had to inflict on the offender was death, or at the very least exile. Similarly the committing of a murder was seen to pollute the whole city. Mythologically it was believed that the murderer would be pursued by the Furies. In real life, a murderer, as a polluted person, could not be approached, talked to, sacrificed with, or welcomed into a home (but he could be purged of his pollution by Apollo and then sent into exile). In Athens it was a responsibility of the murdered man's kinsmen to prosecute the murderer and if they did not act to remove the polluted man they themselves were guilty of impiety. Those who had been associated with the dead, particularly closest relatives, were also assumed to be polluted and could be temporarily excluded from any sanctuary.

While the city community defined and judged the acts of impiety which threatened its own well-being, the wrath of the gods could also fall on any individual. The gods were sensitive to excess of any kind, in particular any act of pride which infringed their own role as controllers of nature. *Hubris*, the humiliation of others simply for one's own pleasure or to show off one's superiority was not only an unpar-

donable offense against the victim, but offended the gods' sense of moral order. This was Xerxes' offense when he attempted to conquer the Hellespont by building a bridge over it. His humiliation by the Greeks was the gods' revenge.

Even more offensive was any direct attack on objects sacred to the gods. As Sophocles put it in a Chorus from *Oedipus Tyrannus*:

*But if any man comes striding, high and mighty
in all he says and does,
no fear of justice, no reverence
for the temples of the gods,
let a rough doom tear him down,
repay his pride, breakneck, ruinous pride!
If he cannot reap his profits fairly,
cannot restrain himself from outrage,
mad, laying hands on holy things untouchable!
Can such a man, so desperate, still boast
he can save his life from the flashing bolts of god?*

(Translation: E. F. Watling)

Similarly, when an oath was made the gods were seen as its guarantors and so those breaking an oath could expect divine retribution. Punishment for this and other misdoings could continue down the generations. The curse imposed on the Alcmaeonid clan in seventh-century B.C. Athens was not forgotten and may have affected seven hundred families some two hundred years later. The device of passing the gods' revenge down the generations helped explain, of course, why seemingly pious men might suddenly suffer misfortune. (On the other hand, success in games, in war, or in the overthrowing of tyrants was believed to make the recipients especially honored of the gods, even to the extent of deserving cult worship after death.)

Nor did it matter than an individual knew he had offered the gods. The tragedy of Oedipus lay in his punishment for crimes (killing his father and marrying his mother) which he could not have possibly known he was committing. (He had been separated from his parents at birth and so recognized neither of them.) Retribution could be terrible. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Hippolytus is killed after a bull sent by Poseidon drives his chariot onto a great rock. Others die in war as the gods abandon or destroy them. The Greek gods, it has been said, were

neither good nor evil, but simply powerful. The protection of humans was not their main concern.

However, human beings were not completely helpless. Although the ways of the gods were unknowable, they honored loyalty to friends, respect given to suppliants (on the grounds that they were without the protection of their city but gained instead the protection of Zeus), and the fulfilling of obligations made to others. The relationship between man and gods rested in fact on this sense of obligation—a sacrifice to the gods was understood to deserve divine favor in return, though this favor could never be guaranteed. In the *Iliad* the priest Chryses, anxious to get the god Apollo to wreak havoc on the Greeks who have humiliated him, reminds the god of the temple he has provided for him and the many sacrifices he has carried out. His hope is that Apollo will reciprocate the favor shown him—as he does—by sending a plague on the Greeks! His prayer takes a typical form in reciting the god's titles, stressing the sacrifices made and then submitting the request:

*Hear me,
lord of the silver bow who set your power above Chryse
and Killa, the sacrosanct, who are lord in strength over Tenedos,
Simintheus, if ever it pleased your heart that I built your temple,
if it ever pleased you that I burnt all the rich thigh pieces
of bulls, of goats, then bring to pass this wish I pray for:
let your arrows make the Danaans [Greeks] pay for my tears shed.*

(Translation: Richmond Lattimore)

Communication with the gods through sacrifice was believed essential if there was to be any hope of their support. At its most simple, a sacrifice involved a killing of an animal and the division of the body into parts, some of which were offered to the gods and the rest kept for communal consumption. The origins of the ritual lay perhaps in the need to find an appropriate way to kill domesticated animals and consume them and the ritual was designed to make this in some way legitimate through the pretense that the animal died willingly, although there was always the recognition that the transition from life to death was an awesome one.

For a community to survive it is essential that the most nutritious pieces of any killed animal are consumed by the human participants. Otherwise they squander their best resource and starve. As the killing

and offering of animals became the way in which the Greeks honored and appeased their gods, this left the problem of how one could justify denying the gods the best of the meat. It was the sort of situation which the Greeks found easiest to resolve through the use of myth, in this case the celebrated story of Prometheus. Prometheus (actually one of the Titans) was present at a feast of men and gods, but hid the best part of the meat after a sacrifice and offered Zeus only the bones concealed in fat. Zeus was furious and removed the use of fire from mankind. From now on there was a chasm between the world of man and the realm of the gods. Prometheus, however, stole fire back and now the gods retaliated by sending mankind women in the shape of Pandora. Pandora brought a storage jar whose cover she removed to release all kinds of evils into the world. Men had to marry women, with all the challenges they brought as partners, to ensure the survival of the human race. Food now was deeply buried underground and had to be worked out from the ground with backbreaking toil. Yet the best meat could be retained on earth and the gods offered the rest.

The rituals of sacrifice were well defined. The animal (a bull was the most prestigious offering, a sheep the most common) was prepared and taken in a joyful procession full of music and song to the place of sacrifice, normally an altar, the only place where blood could be shed, set within a sanctuary. The illusion was always maintained that the animal went to sacrifice willingly as if it wished to offer itself to the human community that would eat it, and it would be sprinkled with water, the shaking of its head which followed being interpreted as its assent to its death. The ceremony would begin with a prayer to the gods followed by each participant's taking a handful of barley from a sacred basket and throwing it at the animal. This was perhaps a means of drawing all the participants into collective responsibility for the death of the animal—the throwing of grains symbolizing an act of violence against it (in some cases stones were thrown instead of barley grains). Then, from the same basket, the sacrificial knife would be drawn and tufts of hair cut from the animal's forehead and thrown into the fire burning by the altar. This act marked a transition, the animal no longer enjoyed any special protection and it was now slaughtered by having its throat cut. The blood was allowed to run over the altar. The moment of death was marked by the impassioned shrieks of women. This sudden outburst of emotion acted as a recognition of the enormity of what had been done in taking the life of a domesticated

animal. (There were different rituals involved in the killing of wild animals.)

The animal was then cut up. The *splanchna* (heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys) were roasted and eaten separately by those nearest to the sacrifice. They were seen to contain the emotional essence of the animal. The thigh bones, tail, and other inedible pieces were offered up to the gods by being burnt on the altar. Then there was a transition to a less sacred time as the participants feasted on the rest of the meat. The ceremony was brought to an end by wine being poured over the smoking altar.

Libations, the pouring out of a portion of wine, were an essential part of many rituals. Wine could not be drunk until some had been poured as an offering, and as a ship set sail a *krater* of wine was poured from its stern. Most often the wine was spilled on the ground and libations were above all associated with offerings to the dead and the gods who lived below ground, the chthonic gods. This shadowy world was associated with the dead and the underworld (of which Hades, the brother of Zeus, was overlord.) Some of the darkest forces in Greek mythology, the Furies, for instance, were assumed to live there. This world was approached in a very different way. There were taboos associated with the way the gods could be addressed, sometimes their names could not be used. Sacrifices took place in pits rather than on altars. Lamentations were allowed. It was as if the space was made legitimate for expressions of grief which were taboo as far as worship of the Olympian gods were concerned. Yet the dark earth was also the source of food, the preserve of Persephone, the wife of Hades and daughter of the corn goddess Demeter. Admission to the mysteries of Persephone and Demeter with their life-giving powers helped ward off the terror of death. (See further, page 141.)

Sacrifices could be held in many different contexts and were always the central point of any major festival. At Olympia the morning of the third of the five days of the Games was marked by the sacrifice of a hundred bulls to Zeus which all the judges, competitors, and representatives of cities attended. The great competitive games of the Greek world were irrevocably tied to the worship of the gods. Originally, in Homer, for instance, where Achilles hosts games in memory of his companion Patroclus, games accompany funerals but, as has been suggested earlier, the pressures from aristocrats to have a more formalized setting for a display of their skills led to the emergence of a regular cal-

endar of games. The Olympic Games remained the most prestigious of these.

Olympia set in the valley of the river Alpheus in the northwest of the Peloponnese still holds much of its ancient lushness and there is an atmosphere of peace and gentle fertility there which is different from any other in Greece. For centuries the site of the Games was lost after earthquakes felled the main buildings and silt from the shifting Alpheus covered the site, following the closure of the games by Christians in the 390s A.D. Only in the eighteenth century was it rediscovered and excavations could begin. The core of the ancient site is the Altis, the sacred grove which served as the main sanctuary. Here excavators found the great altar to Zeus placed, according to legend, on the spot where the god had claimed the site as his own by hurling a thunderbolt at it. The ashes from the sacrifices were allowed to accumulate around it from one Games to the next so that the altar became as a great mound. Nearby, the great temple to Zeus, built in the fifth century to house Pheidias' vast statue of the god, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, lies in ruins after being felled by an earthquake in the sixth century A.D. (although it had been destroyed by fire before this). The massive drums of its columns survive, some still concertinaed where they fell, and most of its fine early classical sculptures have been recovered, preserved in the soil. More intact is the ancient temple to Hera, wife of Zeus, some of whose sixth-century columns still stand. Within this temple was a table of gold and ivory on which the olive crowns of the victors were placed. A sacred olive tree close to the temple of Zeus was used to provide the wreathes of the victors. A mass of statues and altars (reputedly seventy altars in all) dedicated by victors and cities filled the remaining space. Between the north wall of the sanctuary and the overlooking hill of Kronos were treasuries, most of which had been donated by the wealthier Greek cities of southern Italy.

It was around the sanctuary that the Games took place, every four years in the first full moon after the summer solstice. A month beforehand the competitors began to assemble at Elis, the city which supervised the Games. Most were young aristocrats, imbued with the spirit of competitiveness from childhood, though they represented their cities as much as themselves or their class. They had to be Greek by descent. (In one case Alexander king of Macedon, c. 498–452 B.C., managed to convince the scrutineers that he alone of his countrymen was Greek by

virtue of direct descent from Heracles.) Two days before the Games were due to start the competitors with the judges and officials would process from Elis to Olympia to arrive for a swearing-in session before a statue of Zeus in the Council Room on the edge of the sanctuary. Then on the second day the sporting events would begin with the chariot races in the hippodrome. Wealthy aristocrats, or occasionally a city, would provide the teams and charioteers for this most dangerous of events but reap the glory of victory for themselves. It was in 416 B.C. that the Athenian Alcibiades entered no less than seven teams and took the first two places, a success which he shamelessly exploited in the Athenian Assembly. That afternoon there was a pentathlon consisting of discus, javelin, jumping, running, and wrestling events. Athletes competed naked. While there were stories to justify this (of one runner who got entangled in his shorts and lost and of another who lost his shorts and then went on to win) nudity went hand in hand with notions of heroism and it was an appropriate "costume" for competitive games. The following morning, the third, saw the great sacrifice to Zeus and it was followed in the afternoon by the most ancient and prestigious of the individual events, the foot races. Originally there was one, of 600 feet (200 meters), the length of the stadium. The winner of this had the Games named after him. Added to this foot race later was one double the length and a much longer one, more than 3 miles, (5,000 meters). The fourth day saw wrestling, boxing, and the *pankration*, a form of wrestling which, unlike the normal wrestling event, allowed the fighting to be taken to the ground. The fifth and final day ended with the crowning of the victors and feasting and celebrations.

The structures which housed these events, the stadium, the palaestra (for wrestling and jumping events), and a *Gymnasium* large enough to accommodate running events and discus and javelin events, survive in ruins though the hippodrome has been lost. It is hard now to recreate the excitement of the games though there are enough existing accounts to give some idea of the noise, tension, and crush of the thousands who massed for the festival. The area around the games would have become a vast tented arena, crammed with food sellers, merchants, prostitutes. For the competitors the glare of publicity and the stress of competing must have been as intense as it is for modern sportsmen. The glory of victory was as exhilarating as the humiliation of defeat was devastating. Some victors, Milo the wrestler who won

five times at Olympia and twenty-five times at other games, and Leonidas of Rhodes who won the three foot races at four successive Games, became legendary figures. Leonidas (second century B.C.) became worshipped as a local deity.

A sacrifice, even at so majestic an occasion as the Olympic Games, could only be offered in hope. The favorable response of the gods could never be guaranteed. It is hardly surprising that there was an intense desire to find out the will of the gods, especially when a choice that offended them might have dreadful consequences. This was the function of the oracle, an attempt to find out the will of the gods before a risky action was undertaken. Apollo was the god who was normally used as a source of the Olympians' will but Zeus had an oracle at Dodona (in Epirus, northern Greece), reputedly the oldest of them all, and Asclepius, the god of healing, answered questions on health at his shrine at Epidauros in the Peloponnese. Normally, a priestess, sometimes in a trance, provided the words of the god. The range of concerns was wide. An individual (and they seem to have formed the majority of the supplicants) approached an oracle to ask, according to Plutarch, "if they shall be victorious, if they shall marry, if it is to their advantage to sail, to farm, to go abroad." Cities sought advice on political matters, how to deal with troublesome neighbors, whether a war would be successful. The oracle of Apollo at Delphi was used to receive advice about the best spots for new colonies. Matters that might offend the sensibilities of the gods always required special guidance. It was wise to approach an oracle before introducing a new cult, for instance, and when founding heroes were needed for the ten new tribes instituted in Athens by Cleisthenes (page 167), a list of a hundred possible figures was drawn up and the oracle at Delphi asked to choose ten.

Oracles appear to have been used as much to provide reassurance and divine sanction for policies already agreed on as to provide a definitive answer. No one ever expected certainty from an oracle. Usually the advice was given in a cryptic or ambiguous message and it was left to the supplicant to decipher what it meant (although some shrines provided interpreters). This gave a supplicant an opportunity to shape an interpretation in his own interests as Themistocles did before the battle of Salamis (page 180). There were famous cases of misinterpretations. King Croesus of Lydia failed to realize that the empire the oracle predicted would be defeated was to be his own, and the Spartans

were similarly "wrong-footed" when an attack on the neighboring city of Tegea, undertaken in the belief that the oracle had told them they would win, ended in disaster. If an oracle was unambiguously favorable then it could have real force, in giving title to overseas territory, for instance. An unfavorable oracle, on the other hand, left the responsibility on the shoulders of anyone who persisted in the action warned against.

At least fifteen oracle sites are known from the Greek world but Delphi was by far the most prestigious. Its site on the southern slopes of Mount Parnassus was believed to be the center of the world. Legends told how Apollo took possession of the site after killing a serpent, Python, the guardian of the spot for its original goddess, Gaia, the earth. (This myth may reflect a hope that the Olympian Apollo had triumphed over the Chthonic Gaia.) First and foremost, Delphi was a holy place. A league of neighboring states, the Amphictionic League, oversaw the oracle's activities and could, as they did on four occasions, declare a sacred war on any state which violated the sanctuary or its visitors. It was an accessible place in ancient times: Visitors (who did not have to be Greek although Greeks tended to be placed higher in the queue!) ascended the mountain slope from the sea, and in contrast to Olympia, which seems to have been virtually deserted between games, Delphi was always a hive of activity. So it developed other functions. It was an important center for the exchange of news and it seems, in fact, that the priests could often offer superior advice to supplicants simply from absorbing the mass of gossip that came their way. Cities used the site to show off their wealth or military victories by building treasuries along the Sacred Way which led toward Apollo's temple. There is some evidence that visiting rulers recruited their mercenaries there as well.

In the center of the sanctuary stood a temple to Apollo (the existing ruins date from the fourth century B.C.) and it was here that supplicants came to consult the Pythia, the virgin priestess. Admission was only on the payment of a fee and the carrying out of a sacrifice to see whether the god was willing to be consulted. Then the supplicant would enter the temple and the question to be asked passed on to the priestess. What exactly the Pythia did is unclear (she was invisible to supplicants). She certainly worked herself into some kind of trance but her words were usually intelligible or at least could be made so by interpreters.

While an oracle might give the impression of a real if brief encounter with a god, some individuals felt the need for a more intimate or enduring relationship. The more impassioned rituals of Dionysus, for instance, allowed the participants to feel that they had achieved an ecstatic if temporary unity with the god. Entangled in them are songs and incantations believed to have been passed down by the mythical singer Orpheus (a find of papyri in 1962 on a funeral pyre at Derveni in Macedonia has enlarged the body of surviving Orphic texts although these remain notoriously difficult to interpret). A rather different approach, requiring a long period of preparation and more sober series of ceremonies, was that followed by the initiates of the mystery (the Greek *mysteria* means "secret things") cult of the goddess of corn, Demeter, and her daughter Persephone at Eleusis. Eleusis was a site which had Mycenaean origins and its central hall, where the climax of the initiation process took place, stood for a thousand years until closed by Christians in the fourth century. The myth of Demeter and Persephone that underlay the rituals dealt with one of the most painful of transitions, that between maidenhood and marriage as a daughter leaves her mother for an unknown man and his home. In the myth, Zeus promises Persephone, his daughter by Demeter, to his brother Hades. To the horror of both, Persephone is abducted by Hades to the underworld and as a result of trauma both she and Demeter give up eating. Then Demeter, disguised as an old woman, visits the world and comes to Eleusis. Here she sees married women going about their daily business and becomes aware that it is only through marriage that the fertility of the human race can be ensured. After Demeter brings a famine to the world, a compromise is made under the auspices of Zeus. Hades accepts that during winter Persephone will stay with him and be given the status of Queen of the Underworld but each spring she will return to the earth, and hence to her mother, bringing the first fruits of spring with her. The human race will enjoy forever the annual rhythm of the seasons.

Those men and women who wished to involve themselves more closely in a celebration of these goddesses could choose to become initiates. The only requirements were that they be Greek speaking (hence slaves might be eligible, and there is the case of one man giving initiation as a gift to his prostitute slave-lover because everything else she earned went to her owner) and were free of impiety. The process stretched over six months, starting appropriately in the spring, and

involved a complex of rituals including fasting, retreats, and purifications in water. Finally, each autumn, a great procession of the initiates, followed by a mass of spectators, made its way from Athens (which had taken charge of the rituals) to Eleusis. The initiates were segregated within the great hall and in three days of ever more secret rituals, including the showing of ancient sacred objects and the revelation of texts, they approached the climax of the initiation. What went on at this moment remains secret (no ancient author ever revealed it), but it was clearly a highly emotional experience in which the participants felt they had achieved direct contact with the divine world and would enjoy a blessed afterlife.

This hope of a fulfilled afterlife was a rare thing in the Greek world. The conventional Greek belief was that there was no certainty of happiness in another world. The shades of ordinary mortals would wander without purpose in the darkness under the earth. There are some exceptions to this. In myth gross wrongdoers, such as Sisyphus, who attempted to cheat death, are punished by the gods in the underworld (in Sisyphus' case by perpetually pushing a boulder up a hill). A few, though it was never clearly defined which few, could pass on to Elysium, paradise, where they lived lives like those of the gods. Those outside could only watch. As Pindar put it:

*For them the sun shines at full strength . . .
The plains around their city are red with roses
and shaded by incense trees heavy with golden fruit.
And some enjoy horses and wrestling, or table games and the lyre,
and near them blossoms a flower of perfect joy.
Perfumes always hover above the land
from the frankincense strewn in deep-shining fire of the gods' altars.*

(Translation: William Barnstone, 1962)

While sacrifices provided an immediate but short-lived means of communication with the gods, centering on the most basic need of the community for food, more permanent offerings to the gods were made as a thanksgiving for favors or as a means of ensuring more in times to come. A votive offering, in effect, involved the permanent renunciation of wealth or resources in favor of the gods. These offerings could take many forms. A temple was the most prestigious and enduring of

them, a symbol of a city's pride and its wealth but also the mark of its commitment to the gods. Inside it could be filled with a grandiose cult statue, such as Pheidias' statue of Athena in the Parthenon, precious offerings to the god, or with the city's treasure or trophies from war. The Parthenon also housed a mass of swords and shields.

A temple normally stood in a demarcated sacred area, the sanctuary or *temenos*, a term that went back to Mycenaean times when it described the estate of a ruler. Now that the gods were seen as the supreme forces in the city, this was their estate, an area sacred to them, where processions ended and sacrifices began, at the altar found in every *temenos*. The *temenos* offered a special setting for votive gifts and it was within them at the great Panhellenic shrines that cities would dedicate their treasuries. The sacred way to the temple of Apollo at Delphi was lined with them. Many sanctuaries also had a mass of statues that had been presented to the gods as offerings. St. Paul visiting Athens in the first century A.D. found the city "a forest of idols" and one excavated sanctuary, Ayia Irini, in Cyprus has yielded some two thousand terra-cotta statues, some greater than life size. It was success in war or in the games that encouraged the giving of votive gifts. The Athenian treasury at Delphi commemorating Marathon, complete with mythical heroes cast in bronze, is a particularly grandiose example of a war offering, and the Athenians followed it with a commemoration of the victory over the Persians at Eurymedon (c. 468, see below), a bronze palm tree with a gilt Athena in its branches. Athletes, or their cities, would celebrate their victories by the dedication of a statue of themselves at their moment of greatest glory.

A specific kind of votive offering was made to Asclepius, the god of healing, at his shrine in Epidaurus in the Peloponnese. Asclepius was originally a hero, the son of Apollo by a mortal woman, Coronis, but he became transformed into a god when legend credited him with the ability to raise men from the dead. His origins were in Thessaly but it seems that the priests at the small shrine at Epidaurus successfully planted a connection there and by the fifth century the shrine had become known to the sick throughout Greece. As Pindar put it:

*All who came
Bound fast to sores which their own selves grew,
Or with limbs wounded, by grey bronze*

*Or a far-flung stone, or wasting in body with summer fire or with winter,
He, loosing them all from their several sorrows,
Delivered them. Some he tended with soft incantations,
Some had juleps to drink,
Or round about their limbs he laid his simples,
And for some the knife; so he set all up straight.*

(*Pythian Ode III*, 47–53; translation: C. M. Bowra)

Epidaurus eventually came to host games and theater. (Its theater survives as the best preserved in mainland Greece.) Those seeking cures would have to purify themselves and be free of any pollution before entering the sanctuary and they would then sleep in a special building near the god's temple. It was here that the god would appear to them in a dream and offer them advice. The shrine was littered with offerings of the parts of the body cured (a practice still found in churches in Greece today), but details of cures could also be recorded in writing on pillars inside the sanctuary.

For those who did not survive there would be a commemoration on the site of their burial. In the graves that have been found in Athens, in increasing numbers from the sixth century onward, the dead were commemorated by having oil flasks, *lekythoi*, either placed with the body or brought to the grave. By the beginning of the fifth century these *lekythoi* typically have scenes painted in red against a white background and these show a variety of activities connected with death, a warrior leaving his wife or mother, the family of the deceased around his or her tomb or the journey to the underworld itself. Until the second half of the fifth century there are no more formal grave markers, although there may have been wooden commemorative tablets that have perished. Then after 450 B.C. the stone grave *stela*, a slab with a relief carved on it, appears. These *stelai* are simple and often moving memorials remarkable for the high proportion that contain portrayals of women. It has been suggested that the new status given to women citizens by Pericles' law of 451 B.C. (which stated that only "women of Attica" could bear citizen children to Athenian husbands) accounts for this. Men, who alone would have been able to commission these monuments, must have wanted to honor their wives. Those that do show men are also simple and there is no stress on heroic poses. This is a more sober, community-oriented world than that of the heroes of old.

The traveler Pausanias, traveling through southern Greece in the second century A.D., still found many of the ancient sanctuaries and treasures intact but the temptation to plunder their riches was irresistible to those who did not fear the revenge of the gods. The Roman conquest of Greece brought the first sackings. The destruction of Corinth, in 146 B.C., for instance, was one of the greatest acts of vandalism of the ancient world. The Roman general Sulla, determined to finance his wars against Mithradates, king of Pontus, in the 80s B.C., plundered Delphi, Epidaurus, and Olympia; but there were still five hundred bronze statues remaining at Delphi to be carted off by Nero in the first century A.D. in retaliation for a pronouncement of the oracle's condemning his murder of his mother. In the late fourth century Christian edicts ordered the destruction of pagan temples and as the Roman empire collapsed, successive waves of invaders completed the destruction of the sanctuaries. Those few statues that survive have invariably lost the setting for which they were made. They stand now as isolated works of art divorced from their original role as mediating forces between the Greeks and their gods. Johann Winckelmann must take much of the responsibility for perpetuating this image of sculptures standing in lonely splendor.

The spiritual world of the Greeks was underpinned by myths, *muthoi*, stories of the exploits of gods and heroes. These stories included genealogies of the gods, great epics such as the Trojan War, accounts of the foundation of cities, the adventures of heroes and tense family dramas. Although many myths were tied to a particular locality, Greek mythology gradually came to interlock in a series of connected narratives, often with the major participants related to each other, just as the Olympian gods were. All Greeks were at home with these narratives which were continually being reinforced by being presented in vases, monumental sculpture, and theater.

Where did Greek myths come from? Some, Hesiod's genealogies of the gods, for instance, were imported from abroad, mainly from the East. Some were probably based on real events—there may actually have been some kind of conflict between Mycenaean Greeks and Troy that provided a base for a wide variety of epic narratives. In prac-

tice, however, it has proved difficult to tie myth in with historical events. Myths develop their own lives all too easily and are continually being adapted by later generations so that any core of historical reality can easily be lost. (As already mentioned, a study has been made of the French *The Song of Roland*, written down for the first time about A.D. 1150, which shows it to be a massive distortion of the events it claims to record.) As early as the fifth century B.C. educated Greeks recognized that myths may have nothing to do with any real events and distinguished them from *logoi*, stories which did attempt to describe the truth.

So why do myths evolve and hold such psychological prominence? Partly because people love telling and listening to stories but, even more, because myths fulfill deep-rooted needs. "Myths function like shoes: you step into them if they fit. Old shoes, like traditions that are (or seem) ancient, are usually the ones you feel most comfortable with," writes Richard Buxton, in his *Imaginary Greece*. The myths acted to keep alive the idea of a heroic age, the exploits of which provided exemplars for almost any kind of behavior. Myths can be used to give actions legitimacy, to justify, for instance, keeping the best meat for human participants even when the object of a sacrifice is to honor the gods who might thus expect it themselves. In tragic drama they were used as a means of exploring real-life dilemmas in a way that distanced them from any day-to-day context. What were the consequences of women being betrayed by their husbands (Euripides' *Medea*), or defying city laws by honoring obligations to one family (Sophocles' *Antigone*)? These problems could be worked through safely and thus defused as begetters of tension. But myths can also be woven into rituals to give these greater richness and symbolic power. The Greeks, for instance, were profoundly aware of the importance of moments of transition, especially the crucial one for women of the transition from virginity to marriage. The goddess most affected by the transition was Artemis, the virgin goddess of hunting and wild places with whom virgin girls were especially associated. It was recognized that making the transition into marriage meant abandoning the relationship and that recompense had to be made. There were a number of myths which told of how an animal sacred to Artemis, a bear or a deer, for instance, had been killed and the goddess, furious at this intrusion into her domain, had demanded that a girl be sacrificed as compensation. In the rituals which accompanied the transition to womanhood these myths

were woven in. The girls would dress up as bears as if they were replacing the life of the dead bear with their own lives and a sacrifice of a goat which had been dressed in girl's clothing would be made. Thus the importance of the transition, the fact that something valuable was owed to the goddess as one moved from one part of life to another, was played out in a way which must have been psychologically satisfying to the participants but without anyone's being hurt.

Myths provided the core of a city's consciousness. A crucial element of Athens' identity and self-confidence rested on the belief that Athenians were the only Greeks of pure blood and there was a myth to support this. It was said that the semen of the god Hephaestus had been placed in the earth of Attica by Athena and that Erechtheus, the first king, had sprung from it. So the Athenians had backing for their claim that they had emerged directly from their native soil, unlike those whose cities had been founded by outsiders. The Spartans, like other Dorians, claimed their ascendancy in the Peloponnese on the grounds that they were banished children of Heracles (who, tradition said, was born in the Peloponnese) simply returning to their heritage, and their earlier presence there had given them the right to rule over other Peloponnesian Greeks such as the Messenians.

As myths were normally passed on orally, only a tiny proportion of the body of original Greek mythology has survived. Some, the Homeric epics, for instance, had such importance that they were written down but most myths were not. On the other hand some of the most popular myths exist in a variety of versions as a result of being developed in different contexts and localities. There is no fixed and hallowed version of a Greek myth as there is, for instance, of the life of Christ as represented in the Christian gospels (and even here the point is made by there being four versions of equal status). So it is impossible to pin down a definitive version of any Greek myth and interpretations of myths are difficult when the context in which any version was developed is missing. The versions of the myths of suppliants or the Eumenides (Furies) in Aeschylus' plays (see pages 223 and 246) are comprehensible largely because the political situation in Athens in which they were set is known as well as are the political biases of their author. Most myths have no such contextual foundation.

Those myths which do survive do tell us something about the concerns of the Greeks but what is not clear. Some scholars believe that every word of any surviving myth, even the color given to an animal,

for instance, has its relevance and a complex picture of the Greek worldview can be created through the analysis of myth. This approach tends to assume that the Greeks breathed and lived myths to the exclusion of all else, that details were added for a purpose, rather than simply to make the story more arresting, and that a representative and fairly complete sample of myths has survived. None of these assumptions is likely to be true. Some have gone further. Rather than keep Greek myths within the historical context of ancient Greek society and its specific needs, they have claimed a universal significance for Greek myth. A Greek myth, in short, is assumed to say something fundamental about the human condition. The classic example comes from psychoanalysis where Freud selected one Greek myth, the story of Oedipus, and interpreted it in such a way as to claim that all small sons (in every human society) wish to kill their fathers and marry their mothers. It is beyond the scope of this book to speculate why Freud chose this particular myth and why it was adopted as a universal truth by so many of his followers (Richard Webster's *Why Freud Was Wrong* is a good, if hostile, starting point) but it is an instance of how a myth can be used and developed far beyond its original context and function. This happens, of course, with myths anyway. Freud, however, went further in assuming a myth contained a truth which could be proved scientifically. No educated Greek would have been prepared to do the same.

Whatever the precise part played by myth, it served a major part in defining the spiritual consciousness of the Greeks. There was a sense perhaps to be found also in modern India, that the world of the gods and heroes was never very far away. As one historian Peter Brown has put it, "Greece was a spiritual landscape rustling with invisible presences." Even when a new mood of speculative questioning threatened to undermine traditional religious beliefs, Greek religion retained its power. It was too deeply embedded in Greek culture to be uprooted until the coming of a more powerful and monolithic spiritual force, Christianity (see Chapter Twenty).

8

Revolutions in Wisdom: New Directions in the Archaic Age

While shared religious beliefs and mythology gave a coherence to Greek culture, this culture never fossilized. The inherent tensions within and between city-states brought continual challenges to the conventional ways of seeing things. In the sixth and early fifth century, in particular, a number of developments, predominantly in Ionian and mainland Greece, gave a new impetus and vigor to Greek civilization. Among these was an intellectual revolution which can fairly be said to have planted the seeds of Western science and philosophy.

The revolution had its origins in the Ionian city of Miletus. Miletus was a prosperous trading center enjoying extensive contacts inland and overseas, with the ancient cultures of the Near East, with Egypt, and with its colonies along the coast of the Black Sea, although now that the gulf on which it stood has silted up it is difficult to imagine its past glories. It was a city which had known severe internal tensions, partly as a result of Lydian expansion onto its hinterland. How these may have made it the home of the first philosophers is unclear but a combination of exposure to other cultures with a tradition of intense debate within the city may have shattered conventional ways of thinking.

The arguments of the Milesian thinkers survive only in fragments or in the writings of later philosophers. Since they were feeling their way forward into new territory the concepts they used are not always easy