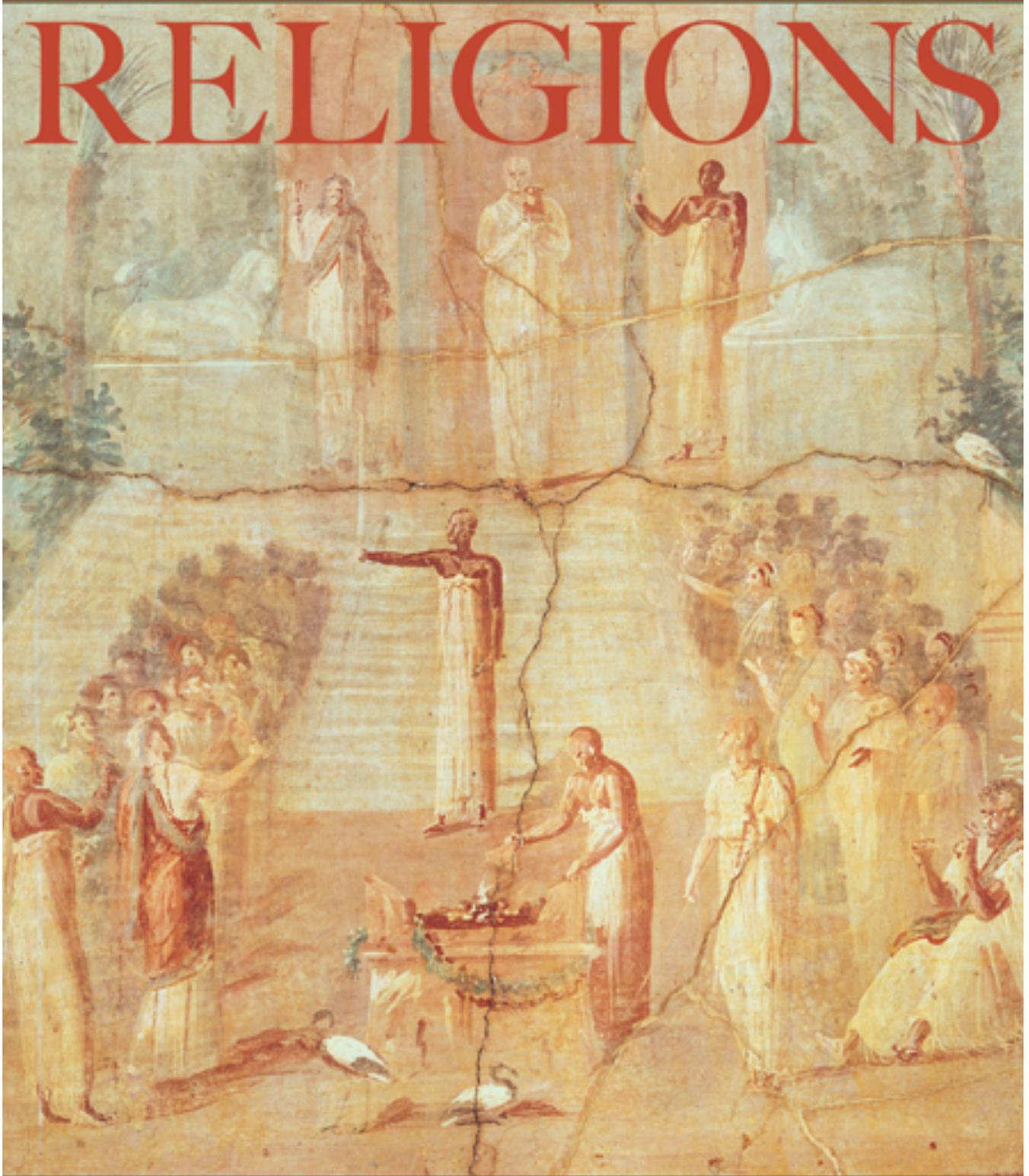


ANCIENT RELIGIONS



SARAH ILES JOHNSTON

GENERAL EDITOR

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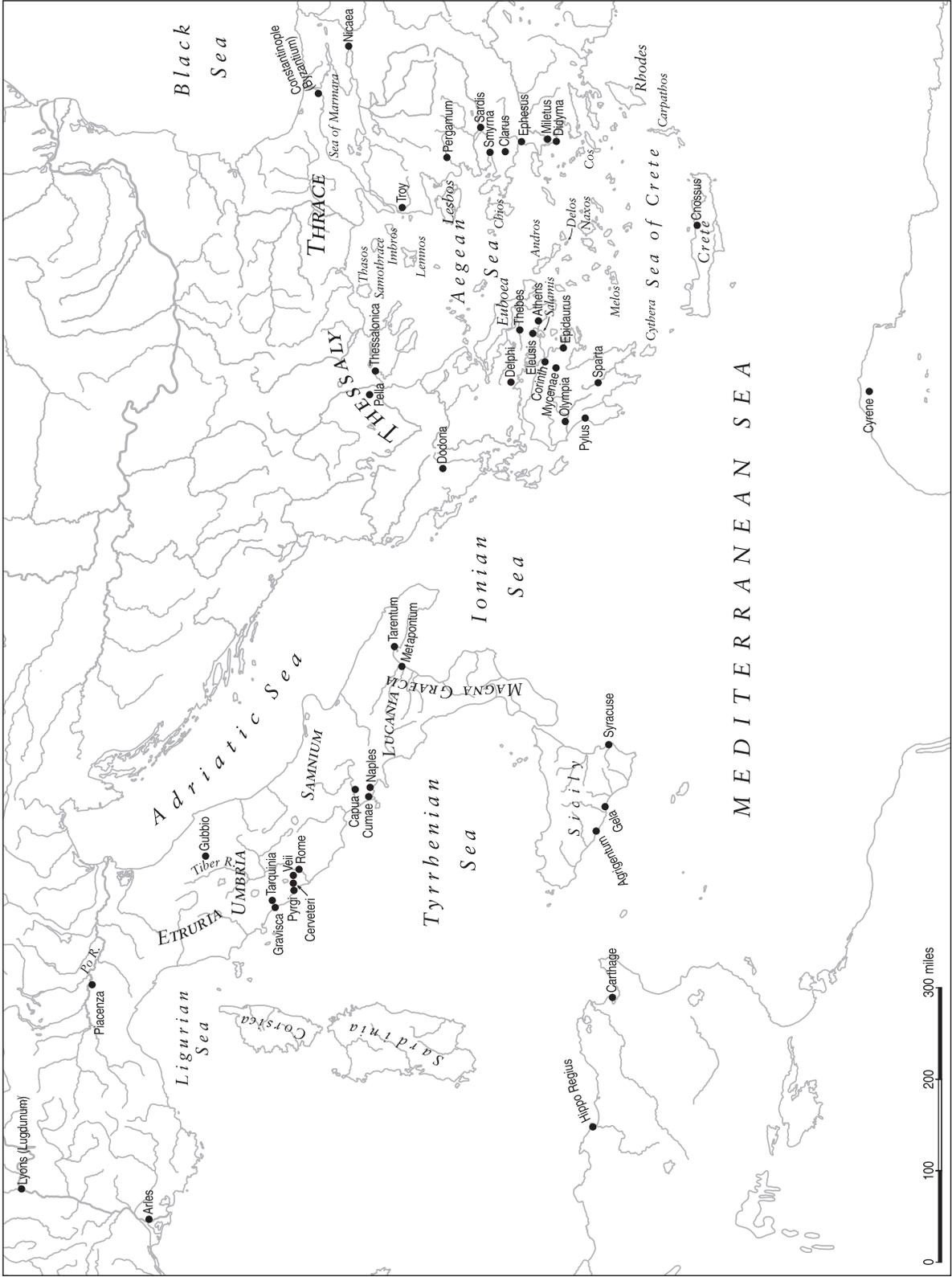
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What Is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?

Fritz Graf

In the darkest hour of his life, Lucius, the human-turned-donkey in Apuleius's novel *The Golden Ass*, is sleeping in the sand of a Mediterranean beach. He has barely escaped from yet another humiliation, public copulation with a woman in Corinth's circus, and he is at the very end of his considerable wits. He awakens to a brilliant full moon rising over the dark waters of the Corinthian Gulf. He addresses a prayer to the moon and its goddess. And lo and behold! a beautiful woman rises out of the silvery path on the water; she consoles Lucius and introduces her astonishingly multiple personality: "The Phrygians, earliest of humans, call me the Pessinuntian Mother of the Gods; the Athenians, sprung from their own soil, call me Cecropian Minerva; the sea-tossed Cyprians call me Venus of Paphus, the arrow-bearing Cretans Dictynna, the trilingual Sicilians Ortygian Proserpina; to the Eleusinians I am the ancient goddess Ceres, to others Juno, to yet others Bellona, Hecate, or the Rhamnusia Goddess; and the Ethiopians who are illuminated by the first rays of the sun, the Africans, and the Egyptians full of ancient lore and wisdom honor me with the true rites and call me with the true name: Isis" (*Golden Ass* 11.1–5). When making these claims in Apuleius's novel, Isis is well aware of the discordant unity of Mediterranean religions. She identifies herself with most of the great goddesses of pagan antiquity, from Rome and Sicily to Cyprus and Phrygia: despite different local names and different local rituals, all people worship the same divinity. Soon enough, the Virgin Mary would top—and topple—them all.

When Apuleius wrote these lines in the latter part of the 2nd century CE, most of the geographical area we assign to the religions of the ancient Mediterranean was united as part of the *Imperium Romanum* that stretched from the Rhine to the Euphrates and from Britain to Libya and Upper Egypt; the lands east of the Euphrates—Mesopotamia, Persia, Arabia—belonged to the

Parthians, who alternated between war and diplomacy with Rome. Many inhabitants of the empire were aware of its diverse and rich religious traditions, and an exchange among these traditions had been going on for some time already. Although mountains and deserts divided the land around the Mediterranean Sea into many small and distinct units (which accounted for the astounding variety of local cultures), the sea connected rather than separated the cultures along its shore; each river valley was a unit that was open to the sea as a common interface (see Horden and Purcell 2000).

The imperial capital itself attracted not only countless immigrants, but also their gods. Roman colonists in their turn carried Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva far east—Gaza in the corner between Palestine and Egypt even celebrated the Consualia, with its horse races in honor of the old and shadowy Roman god Consus (Jerome, *Life of Hilarion* 11). The Celtic goddess of horses, Epona, spread as far south as African Mauretania and as far east as Greek Corinth (Apuleius, *Golden Ass* 3.27); the Egyptian Isis had sanctuaries in Italy, Gaul, and Britain; and a recently invented mystery cult that borrowed elements from the myth and cult of Persian Mitra/Varuna spread all over the empire. More was to come. A small Jewish messianic sect that claimed one Christus as its founder was slowly conquering the empire, to be seriously challenged only by the followers of an Arabian merchant-turned-prophet from Mecca. If this cross-fertilization of religious traditions in the ancient Mediterranean is so highly visible in this period, how much further does it reach into the past?

The kaleidoscope of power

History helps to understand the area's character. The Mediterranean was not the only connecting factor: empire building had been going on for a long time already, and empires, even unloved ones, facilitate communication. Going backward in time, the Roman and Parthian empires appear as the heirs to the Hellenistic kingdoms that were carved out of Alexander's conquest—the kingdoms of the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, the Attalids of Pergamum—and that allowed Macedonian troops and Greek artists to dominate almost the entire region associated with the religions discussed in this volume. Before Alexander, the vast eastern regions, from Anatolia to Iran, Afghanistan, and Egypt, had been part of the Persian Empire, founded by Cyrus the Great. Cyrus had wrested it away from the Assyrians, whose empire had risen in the 9th and early 8th centuries, to embrace the entire region between Persia and the Mediterranean and even, for some time, Egypt. In the centuries immediately preceding the rise of the Assyrians—the “Dark Age” that separated the Bronze Age from the Iron Age—this space had been fragmented, with the sole exception of Egypt: at the very end of the Bronze Age, natural catastrophes and invaders (the somewhat enigmatic Sea Peoples) had destroyed the seemingly stable power structure of the Late Bronze Age. The city-states of Mesopotamia and the Levantine coast—not the least those of Phoenicia, the Neo-Hittite king-

doms along the modern border between Syria and Turkey, the small towns of mainland Greece, and the kingdoms of Phrygia and Urartu in central and eastern Anatolia—all led a more-or-less independent existence during these centuries. The 2nd millennium, “centuries of unity” in Braudel’s words, owed its unity and stability to a few large powers. Earlier in the millennium, the Babylonians had ruled in Mesopotamia and the adjacent areas, the Hittites in central Anatolia, while Egypt kept inside the Nile Valley; after about 1400 BCE, the Hittites pushed south toward Syria and Palestine and the Egyptians came north to meet them in the Battle of Carchemish, which settled the balance of power for a while. Smaller western Asiatic states such as Ugarit flourished, owing changing allegiances to the current dominant power, and the Minoan and Mycenaean kinglets in Greece kept their political independence at the margins of the larger powers, all the while eagerly absorbing their dazzling cultural achievements. Only Persia—the Empire of Elam in the hills east of the Tigris—was relatively isolated; its time would come later. The picture is somewhat hazier before that; the 3rd millennium was dominated by the splendor of Egypt’s Old Kingdom and the many thriving and rival cities of the Sumerians and Akkadians between the Tigris and the Euphrates.

The one and the many

Political geography is not irrelevant for the history of religion. The existence of large, more-or-less unified regions, which characterized the eastern Mediterranean from the late 3rd millennium onward, made inland communication relatively easy long before the Persians used the famous Royal Road that led from the western shore of Turkey well beyond Mesopotamia. The coasts had always been in easy communication with each other: the Mediterranean encouraged travel and contact, either along the shore or, hopping from island to island, over vaster bodies of water, even from the south coast of Crete to the Nile Delta or from Sicily and Sardinia to Spain. The epochs during which communication was slow in the eastern Mediterranean were short and transitory, and relatively intensive communication must be at least as old as the 7th and 6th millennia, when agriculture and urban structures rapidly spread throughout the entire Fertile Crescent. This argues for a relative homogeneity—or at least an osmotic similarity—of cultural space, which has an important consequence for historical methodology: whenever we spot parallels and agreements in ritual and mythology, diffusion, however complex, is as likely an explanation as is parallel origin.

The means of transmission, however, are numerous and not always clear. Commerce, diplomacy, and exile led individuals to travel or live abroad. “Send this boy to Yamhad or to Qatna, as you see fit,” ordered Hammurabi, according to a letter from Mari; and the Egyptian Sinuhe was living quite comfortably as a local dignitary among the Asians before the pharaoh recalled him; we are not told whether he took a god back with him. Sometimes, however, even gods

paid diplomatic visits, as did Shaushka “of Nineveh, mistress of all land,” who visited Amunhotep IV after 1350 BCE. Foreign wives were another matter. Dynastic marriages were common among the elite of the ancient Near East, as not only the Amarna Letters demonstrate. “The LORD was angry with Solomon” because he not only married many foreign wives (bad in itself) but because he followed their gods—“Ashtoreth [Astarte] the goddess of the Sidonians, . . . Milcom the loathsome god of the Ammonites, . . . Chemosh the loathsome god of Moab”—and even built shrines for them (1 Kings 11.5–9). Much later, the empress Julia Domna still favored her local Syrian gods while in Rome. There is no way of telling how transitory an influence the gods and cults had that these wives brought with them; the Syrian gods, however, backed by an immigrant community, did last some time. Conquerors brought gods with them, as did merchant communities and colonists. In the 2nd century CE, someone in Lydian Sardis renewed a sacred law written under the occupation of Artaxerxes II that regulated a Persian cult. The Thracian goddess Bendis, the Egyptian Isis, and the Sidonian Astarte arrived in Athens with the community of foreign traders that established itself in Piraeus.

The ease of communication had, from early on, worked to smooth over differences inside the wider region; and common socioeconomic conditions helped. All of the major players, even when speaking very different languages, were inhabitants of city-states, sharing a rather similar outlook on the world and comparable ideals and lifestyles. Whether ruled by a priest, a king, a group of aristocrats, or the city council and the citizens’ assembly—all were living in urban centers that usually were walled, had a main temple and (when ruled by kings) a palace, with a high degree of commercial exchange and a rural hinterland controlled by the city; further outside were the nomadic pastoralists in the deserts of Syria and Judea or the mountains of Anatolia and Persia. The cities in turn had grown on the foundation of agriculture that defined the region since the Neolithic revolution and set it against the nomadic pastoralists. The city-states might be united under a powerful ruler, as they were under Egypt’s god-king or the Hittite or Iranian conquering warrior caste; they might be conquered and sometimes destroyed by a powerful neighbor; or they might flourish by establishing changing coalitions: this only marginally affected their function as unities that were more-or-less self-sufficient. In religious terms, this meant that each city had its own pantheon, its own calendar of festivals, and its own mythology; alliances or political dependence on another power could express themselves in additional cultic elements that did not fundamentally alter the overall appearance of the cults.

The relative homogeneity is mirrored in the history of the writing systems. Egypt invented its own complex system and stuck to it for almost three millennia; knowledge of hieroglyphic writing petered out only during Roman imperial times, at about the time when the Copts began to develop their own alphabetic system. Throughout the Bronze Age, the rest of the region almost universally used the cuneiform system invented in Mesopotamia and now proving adaptable to all sorts of languages, including, albeit somewhat clum-

sily, Indo-European Hittite. Only the marginal Minoans had their own syllabic system for internal use, which they handed over to the Mycenaeans for use in yet a different language, Greek. The collapse of the Late Bronze Age empires destroyed this unity, but also opened the chance for the spread of a vastly improved system; whereas Cyprus adapted the Mycenaean syllabic systems and the late Hittite kingdoms developed their own hieroglyphs, the West Semites invented a much better alphabetic script. It adapted itself to every language, its twenty-odd signs were easily mastered, and so it spread rapidly to Greece, Anatolia, and Italy, in local variations whose vestiges are still with us today. The persistence of these variations—including Hebrew, Phoenician, and Aramaic in the east—should warn us against overrating the cultural and religious homogeneity and neglecting the force of local identities even in the 1st millennium of the Iron Age: it is a homogeneity of broad outlines, not of details.

Musical divinities

The give and take among religious traditions easily reaches back to even before the Mediterranean Bronze Age. This at least is what an emblematic case, the cult of the goddess Cybele, the “Great Mother” (*Magna Mater*) of Greeks and Romans, suggests (Borgeaud 1996; Roller 1999). Ancient worshipers and modern scholars alike agree that the goddess as we know her was Phrygian in origin. Her city, Pessinus, remained a theocracy under the archpriest of the Great Mother well into Roman times; her priests were eunuchs who had initiated themselves into the cult through self-castration. In early Iron Age Phrygia, the goddess was omnipresent. Inscriptions called her *Matar* (Mother), sometimes adding the epithet *kubileya*, which ancient Greek authors derived from the Phrygian word for “mountain.”

The goddess arrived in Greece in the 8th or 7th century BCE, first on the eastern islands, but very soon as far west as southern Italy. The Greeks called her “Mountain Mother” (*Meter Oreia*), in a close translation of her Phrygian name, but also turned her epithet into the proper noun Cybele—and identified her with Rhea, the mother of Zeus, thus turning the foreigner into a native of venerable antiquity. In Phrygia and in Greece, she had cults on mountains, where her images or altars were directly sculpted from living rock. Such images in Phrygia, carved into mountain cliffs, represent her frontally and standing; the Greeks partly adopted this, but soon abandoned it in favor of showing her on a throne between two standing felines (lionesses or panthers). This image appears so often in archaic eastern Greece that it must cover a variety of local goddesses, all perceived by their worshipers as being akin to the Phrygian goddess. Eastern Greeks also called her Kybebe: as such, she had a cult in Lydian Sardis and in many cities further east. Kybebe is the Hellenization of another Anatolian divine name, Kubaba, the main goddess of Carchemish, an age-old city-state in northern Syria and the main link between Mesopotamia and Anatolia, an influential power after 1000 BCE. Kubaba’s animal was the lion;

her cult in Sardis was ecstatic, like the cult of Cybele, but it lacked the eunuchs and castration that were typical of the cult of the Phrygian Lady. Although Greeks and Romans identified Cybele and Kybebe, the eastern Greeks sometimes perceived a difference and Hellenized Kybebe/Kubaba as Artemis or Aphrodite, the former identification stressing her nature as mistress of wild animals, the latter her erotic power.

Cybele's mythology was very rich. In the Pessinuntian myth that was given a Greek form in the late 4th century BCE (Arnobius, *Against the Pagans* 5.5–7), Cybele's companion is Agdistis, a goddess born from Zeus's intercourse with a rock—a story that is very close to the Hittite myth of Ullikummi from the Cycle of Kumarbi: the diorite monster Ullikummi is born from Kumarbi's intercourse with a rock and is as destructive as Agdistis. More common is the story of Cybele's love affair with the prince and shepherd Attis, which resulted in Attis's self-castration and death. Many stories narrated the terrible fate that befell a lover of the Great Goddess, beginning with the Sumerian poem of Inanna and Dumuzi and ending with the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* (Inanna too, like Kybebe, was understood to be identical to Aphrodite). Gilgamesh was able to recite a long *leporello* of Ishtar's damaged lovers, in an episode that resonates in Diomedes' attack on Aphrodite in book 5 of Homer's *Iliad*. The stories thus lead back toward the Anatolian and Mesopotamian Bronze Age.

In archeology and cult, however, the Great Mother is difficult to grasp during the Bronze Age—but her iconography is already attested in late Neolithic Anatolia: a mother-goddess is highly visible in Neolithic Çatal Höyük in central Anatolia (ca. 6200–5400 BCE), represented in a statuette of an enthroned and naked motherly goddess with felines at her side, which looks tantalizingly close to the iconography of the Great Mother from early Iron Age Greece. In the same Neolithic settlement, a mother-goddess is closely associated with bulls—a symbolism that has been connected with the agricultural revolution of the region and its concomitant “revolution of symbols” (Cauvin) and that resonates, millennia later, especially in Minoan religious iconography.

This situation is complex, but typical. A neat unilinear derivation, dear to scholars, is impossible: Greek Cybele/Kybebe looks back to Pessinus and to Carchemish, and it is highly probable that the cult entered the Greek world from Anatolia from at least two sanctuaries: a sanctuary near Colophon in Ionia and another one in Cyzicus on the Hellespont are likely candidates. During the Bronze Age, the cult never really surfaces for us. This must have to do with the nature of our tradition, which is concentrated on the Hittite capital and the ritual world of the court: Kubaba, “Queen of Carchemish,” becomes highly visible as soon as the Hittite power collapses. But there were stories, traditions both in Anatolia and in Mesopotamia, that were close to her. And she made her first appearance, quite impressively, in late Neolithic times: one suspects that this, too, is connected with the nature and social function of her cult in these very first urban agricultural settlements. There must have been religious traditions as old as the Neolithic Age, tenaciously preserved and distributed throughout much of western Asia, whose visibility for us depends funda-

mentally on the nature of the sources that are, before the epigraphic and textual explosion of the Iron Age, very narrow windows on the past indeed.

The Phrygian Matar Kubileya is not the only migrating divinity, although her story might be more complex than many, and such migration is not confined to the 1st millennium when, among others, the Etruscans and Romans adopted Greek gods such as Apollo or Asclepius. In the late Bronze Age, some Babylonian divinities such as Ea also gained a place in the pantheon of the Hittites, at the side of original Hittite and immigrant Hurrian divinities. Anat, the female companion of Baal in Ugarit, became popular in Egypt, especially during the 19th and 20th Dynasties; her consort Baal is present from the 18th Dynasty onward. Among the casualties of war were many divine images—the Hittites, we hear, abducted the image of Shimigi from Qatna in Syria (El Amarna no. 55), and the Persian conquerors took the statues of the gods together with all kinds of cult equipment and sacred writing from Egyptian shrines. While it is not clear whether this happened for religious reasons or because those statues were made of precious materials, at least the Romans had a habit of transferring the cults of conquered neighboring cities to their own.

One consequence of this general awareness, at least among Greeks and Romans, was what scholars call, with a term borrowed from Tacitus, *interpretatio*—to treat the divine names of other religious systems as translations of one's own: a divine name, in this reading, is nothing more than a linguistic marker, different in each individual culture, for a divine entity whose existence transcends those cultures. When informing his readers about the gods of other peoples, Herodotus consistently uses the Greek names, as when he talks about the Scythians: "They adore only the following gods: mostly Hestia, then Zeus and Gaea (they have the tradition that Gaea is Zeus's wife), after them Apollo, Aphrodite Urania, Heracles, and Ares" (*Histories* 4.59). Later historians repeat the procedure: "Among the gods, they adore especially Mercurius . . . , after him Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva," Caesar writes about the Gauls (*Gallic Wars* 6.17). This reflects the attitude of worshipers as well, from Lydians and Lycians of Herodotus's time to the inhabitants of imperial Syria or Gaul. Votive inscriptions and sacred laws use the divine name in the language they are written in, and even theophoric names are translated: the same person who is Dionysicles in a Greek document turns into Bakivalis in a Lydian one. The list of the homologues of Isis in Apuleius follows this tradition. The habit of interpretation, however, is much older: in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Uranus (Sky) corresponds to Akkadian Anu (Sky); Cronus to Hurrian Kumarbi, Sumerian Ea, and Akkadian Enki in the Babylonian succession myth. Whoever brought those stories to Greece translated the names. And he must simply have repeated what his bilingual Near Eastern informers, long accustomed to this, told him; the translating habit goes far back. The Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual lists of divine names must be the result of bureaucratic interest in a Mesopotamia where, in the 3rd millennium, the two languages co-existed. Again, it is Egypt that seems to remain somewhat isolated during the Bronze Age and gives the impression of being different even later. It is not by

chance that Herodotus—who otherwise makes constant use of Greek names everywhere—uses the Egyptian names Osiris for what “the Egyptians say is Dionysus” (2.42) and Isis for she who is “Demeter in the language of the Greeks” (2.59; see Monotheism and Polytheism).

This linguistic habit, however, has consequences. Hellenistic Isis can be depicted with the attributes of Demeter, take over her epithets, such as “bringer of wealth” (*ploutodoteira*) or “lawgiver” (*thesmophoros*), and be described with qualities that come from Greece: “Among Greek cities, you love most Athens: there, you brought forth grain for the first time, and Triptolemus distributed it to the Greeks, riding a chariot drawn by your sacred snakes.” This statement, from an aretology of Isis (i.e., a long list of her accomplishments), transfers elements of Eleusinian Demeter to the Egyptian goddess. In the Late Bronze Age, Assur, the main god of the Assyrians, was not only identified with the Akkadian Enlil, but also took over Enlil’s role as the god of destiny. Canaanite Baal, present in Egypt after the 18th Dynasty as a warlike and aggressive divinity, sometimes took over the iconography of Seth: that might explain why an Egyptian myth makes Seth lust after Anat, the Ugaritic consort of Baal. In Hittite Anatolia, sun-divinities were important; scholars point out that a Hurrian and Hittite sun-god were identified and that the Akkadian Shamash lent them details of mythology and iconography, whereas the sun-goddess of Arinna was identified with Hapat, a goddess whom the Greeks later knew as Lydian Hipta, nurse of Dionysus.

Earlier scholars called all this “syncretism.” More recently, this term has come under scrutiny: originally, it was a term of Christian missionary theology, censuring the admixture of native religious traditions to Christian belief and practice in a colonial setting; thus, it was a normative term. The use of similarly normative terms in the history of religion—in a project that can be only descriptive—has always created problems, most famously in the case of the term *magic*, not the least because the necessary redefinition of the term proved difficult and contentious, as the divergences in its use even in this volume show (see *Magic*). Thus, more recently, syncretism was replaced by the more-fashionable term *hybridity*. This term originated in colonial history and was also adopted to describe immigrant cultures; it always refers to the result of adaptations and assimilation of either native or immigrant cultures or languages to the dominant culture or language. Neither term describes accurately the processes of transfer and assimilation that have been going on in Mediterranean religions over the millennia, from the late Neolithic period to the rise of Christianity. Sometimes, a dominant culture was the origin of religious features—the Hittites were influenced by the Mesopotamian cultures, the Minoan and Mycenaean by Egypt and the Levant, the Etruscans and Romans by the Greeks who arrived in southern Italy as colonists. Sometimes, items of a conqueror’s religion were taken over by the conquered—the West Semite Hyksos brought Baal and Anat to Egypt, the Persians brought Anaitis and the fire cult to Anatolia. Sometimes, the conquerors adopted large parts of the religious system already in place—most famously the Hittites, although the evidence is

so closely focused on the king that it might distort the facts: the king had political reasons for concentrating the empire's religious traditions in his own hand. In other places, the natives resisted the pressure of conquerors or colonizers: the eastern Greeks turned the Persian term for a religious functionary, *magu-*, into a term of abuse, while the Scythians on the northern shore of the Black Sea killed their king when he became infected with the cult of Dionysus in Greek Olbia (Herodotus, *Histories* 4.79). The Egyptians kept their distance from the Greek settlers in Naucratis, who continued their local cults of Athena or Dionysus; if anything, the settlers shaped details of their cult after impressive Egyptian rituals that they witnessed.

Inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean, it seems, thus could travel wherever they wanted and almost always meet the gods they knew; sometimes, there might have been different stories attached to them—the Scythians, according to Herodotus, thought that Zeus's wife was Gaea; the Babylonians narrated, as a citizen of Ugarit might have realized with some surprise, that their Astarte, whom the Babylonians called Ishtar and the Sumerians Inanna, once had been taken prisoner by her sister, the queen of the dead. But when Hittites imagined that their Zeus, the storm-god Teshub, had been born from his father's body, some Greek traveler or merchant brought this back in a somewhat garbled form, as the story that ended with Cronus vomiting up the five siblings of Zeus together with the stone that he had swallowed instead of his youngest son.

There were, of course, exceptions, where theological centralization imprinted believers with the uniqueness of their own god—most prominent in Judaism after its turn toward monotheism and then of course in Christianity. But neither denied the existence of gods of the others—it was an ongoing concern of Israel's religious elite to prevent the cult of all those Baalim. The Christians quickly turned the many gods of the others into *daimonia* (1 Cor. 10.20–21), to be fought and exorcised. And the polytheists refused to recognize the uniqueness of the one God and, continuing their interpretative mood, turned YHWH into yet another form of Dionysus or of Baal.

Rituals and places

If, thus, travelers in the Mediterranean world found their own gods everywhere, albeit somewhat disguised at times and speaking in foreign tongues, would they also have been able to participate comfortably in another culture's cults or at least have recognized places of cult and understood most of the things they saw being performed? And, as a possible consequence of this: is the process of osmosis and assimilation that is visible with regard to the divine world also visible in the forms of rituals and their physical surroundings?

The basic forms of cult seem to have been recognizable enough. When, in an Ovidian tale, a young traveler from Greek Thebes passes an altar somewhere in Lycia, "black with soot and ashes," he imitates his local companion who is

mumbling a short prayer—nothing more than “bless me”—and then wants to know “whether this altar belongs to the nymphs, to Pan, or to a local divinity” (*Metamorphoses* 6.325–30). In other words, this foreigner recognizes the altar as a marker of sacred space and a focus of the rituals connected with it, but he is unable to name the recipient of the cult. Similarly, Herodotus had no problem identifying processions, sacrifices, festivals, temples, images, and altars when traveling in Egypt—to the extent that he derived Greek religion from Egyptian, as some centuries later Dionysius of Halicarnassus derived Roman religion from Greek.

Prayer and sacrifice, but also libation, procession, and votive gift, are the elements of cult that, in manifold combinations, made up the impressive festivals of ancient cities or were performed, alone or in combination, by individuals on their own behalf; altar, temple, and image were markers of space where cult took place. These ritual and architectural forms are almost ubiquitous elements of religion—this must be the reason that a foreigner could recognize them and understand their basic message.

When thus, on this very basic level, ritual might have been understandable throughout human societies, the question begins to be much more complex once we look into transfer and assimilation, and not only because of the problem of attestation. While one’s own gods certainly were part of what defined one’s identity—as was one’s city, one’s language, and one’s family—the rituals in which one participated and their very specific forms, which were learned from early youth, defined identity even more so. Changing rituals can be understood to threaten loss of identity, as the debate about reforming the Catholic liturgy after the Second Vatican Council made clear. And over and over again, religious innovation and protest resulted in new rituals—the sacrifices of Pythagoreans or Zoroastrians, the strictness of Jewish ritual rules, the specific forms of baptism or Eucharist in early Christian groups all defined in-groups against outsiders. And even outside this conscious step of distancing one’s group from all the others, differentiation through behavior is vital because it is behavior—not belief—that is visible. Meuli (1975: I.336) tells the story of the German woman who attended a funeral in a neighboring village and inquired solicitously whether one should start weeping already in the funeral home or only when in the cemetery—local customs matter, and if they did even in the highly normative world of Christian ritual, all the more so in the much more diverse and much less normative world of the early Mediterranean cultures. Pausanias’s guidebook, the sacred laws, and the many etiological stories can teach us how many varieties of the basic sacrificial ritual existed even in the linguistically and culturally rather uniform world of Hellenistic Greece.

Furthermore, even small differences can carry significance and express social function, which makes assimilations much harder—or makes borrowing a highly selective and conscious process. Libation, the visible pouring out of an often valuable liquid such as oil or wine, is a ritual act that some scholars have traced back to prehuman origins. Whereas in Greek and Roman cult, libations are usually part of an overall sacrificial ritual or else confined to small gestures

such as the one that opened and closed the symposium, they were much more visible in the eastern monarchies; this has been seen as asserting social superiority through the royal gesture of conspicuously squandering wealth. Libation vessels with elegant long spouts thus become important items in Bronze Age Anatolia and Mesopotamia—but also, at about the same time, at the royal courts of Shang and Chou China. This should teach us how easily a similar function—to turn libation into a conspicuous act—generates a similar form.

Still, transmission and borrowing are well attested in the sphere of ritual. Not all cases are as straightforward as the case of scapegoat rituals. To drive out an animal or a person charged with all the negative forces of the community is something that West Semitic and Greek cities shared, and it seems to have drifted west in the early Iron Age; this is benignly simple (see Ritual). The case of hepatoscopy—the practice of using the liver of a sacrificial sheep to divine the future—is more intriguing. It is attested in Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, Anatolia, and Etruria, not the least by the existence of surprisingly similar liver models that were used to help the diviner's memory. Again, a movement from east to west is highly likely, despite the intriguing and unexplained absence of the technique in Greece, the natural interface between the Levantine east and Italy.

More complex still is sacrifice. Everywhere in the Mediterranean world, sacrifice was at the center of cult. Its ostensible purpose was to feed the gods or the dead: most often, from Ur to Rome, sacrifice was understood as a common banquet of gods and humans. Thus, as in human diet, the meat of freshly slaughtered domestic animals was the choice dish, but all other food, from bread and fruit to wine, water, and oil, was used as well. Refusal to participate in animal sacrifice is always the result of theology and, in some sense, a protest against the killing, be it the Zoroastrians' cult of pure fire or the Pythagoreans' vegetarianism, which was grounded in their eschatological beliefs in reincarnation. Beyond this very general agreement, which again goes well beyond the Mediterranean world, things become complex and diverse. To convey the food to the gods by burning—to take one of the most conspicuous traits in Greek and Roman sacrifice—was no universal practice: in the large and rich Mesopotamian and Egyptian temples, the priests of the king received the food and presented it to the gods; then, the priest and their human guests ate it themselves. This is why the ritual of "Opening the Mouth" is the fundamental ritual for installing a cultic image in Mesopotamia and Egypt: "This statue without its mouth opened cannot smell incense, cannot eat food, nor drink water," as a ritual incantation has it. But the prerogative of priests to feed on the sacrifice is widespread even where burning dominates. When the newly conscripted Delphic priests of Apollo despair about living high up on a barren mountain, the god comforts them: "Each of you, a knife in his right hand, will continuously slaughter sheep, and you will have plenty, since the mortals will bring always them to me" (Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* 535–37). West Semites, in marked difference from the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, burnt the gods' parts on their altars, as did the Greeks already in the Mycenaean age and later

the Romans and Etruscans; they did not feed the images but the gods themselves. Hebrews, after all, had no cult images at all, whereas Greeks and Romans consecrated them in a different way or not at all. The sequence of burning and banquet is common to all of them, as is the presence of both “whole offering” and “shared offering,” the rite of entirely burning the animal and the rite of sharing it in a banquet. Lines of transmission can be guessed at, but they are complex: while the correspondence of Hebrew *bāmâ* (high place of cult) and Greek *bōmos* (altar) seems to point to a derivation of the western rite from the West Semitic world—with perhaps Cyprus as an interface—the most conspicuous form of altar in Greece, the ever-growing heap of ashes and remains of burnt animals, has parallels in central Europe already in the Late Bronze Age. The practice of burning animals could have arrived in Greece from several sides and is perhaps an Indo-European heritage reinforced from the West Semitic east.

In other cases again, a common phenomenon does not necessarily call for an explanation of transfer and assimilation. Ecstatic or “intuitive” prophecy is known all over the globe, and it is well at home in the ancient Mediterranean. Ecstatic prophets were widely attested in Mari during the epoch of Hammurabi, and their similarity to more recent biblical prophecy has been noted; the temporal distance, however, forbids the assumption of a simple transfer. Female ecstasies are well attested in the cult of Ishtar at Arbela in the Assyrian epoch; not much later, the Greeks have their Sibyl and the Delphic Pythia, but also the male prophet Bacis; the fame of the Sibyl survives the Christianization of the Roman Empire. While specialists like this can be imagined as itinerant and thus as easy agents of transfer, it is impossible to indicate simple lines of development, and there might be no necessity for it: suffice it to indicate, once again, a common religious matrix.

In this essay, I have regarded the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world as being in constant contact with each other—a contact that, similar to that of languages in contact, resulted both in assimilation and in dissimilation. I have not looked for specific characteristics of “the” religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, beyond their being in almost constant contact; in fact, this, to me, seems their main characteristic. This is a rather minimalist approach. I am not looking for unique characteristics, those traits that would differentiate the religions of the ancient Mediterranean from, say, the religions of Southeast Asia or of Mesoamerica. To look for such unique traits in cultural studies too often proves elusive and is motivated as often by ideological longings as by disinterested scholarly concerns. Rather, I am looking for characteristics that confirm the relative unity that would justify the enterprise of studying these different religious cultures together in one vast project. Already the political and social histories of the world between the Italian peninsula and the mountains east of the Tigris argue for a high degree of interpenetration that began well before the Late Bronze Age, and the same is true for cultural history, although here, research has barely begun. The margins, as always, might be somewhat

hazy and permeable to an outsider—ancient Iran also looks toward India, Celtic northern Italy toward Gaul and Spain: there are no sharp boundaries in cultural history. But the space in itself is clearly defined.

Nor have I given in to the temptation to sketch a typology of religions according to the major sociopolitical forms, the opposition between city-states and nomadic tribes being the main divide. But while the different concerns of these groups certainly were reflected by the different functions of their divinities and their rites, any more constant and fundamental difference in the religious systems is elusive. Jewish monotheism cannot be explained by nomadic pastoralism alone, but is the result of a complex constellation of social, economical, and political forces. Many city-states such as Mari combined city dwellers and nomads or developed their sedentary city life from a former nomadic life. This double origin was easily visible in lifestyle choices, but proves considerably more elusive in religion. We lack a clear religious parallel to the exhortation of a prophet in Mari to his king “to ride in a chariot or on a mule” and not to ride a horse, to follow the example of the “Akkadians,” not the nomads—both lifestyles were available, but with different values attached (*Archives Royales de Mari*, Tabl. VI.76.20). Cultural systems, furthermore, can retain (and sometimes resemanticize) elements that belong to former sociopolitical systems—the pastoralist’s reed hut remains prominent in Mesopotamian rituals well into the Iron Age, and the Greek pantheon remains organized as a royal court even under Athenian democracy. No theory up to now convincingly correlates social and religious systems, and most attempts by sociologists such as Max Weber or Niklaus Luhmann have concentrated on Christianity and sometimes naively generalized Christian conceptions of religion. Other possible differences, such as the difference between the religion of a city-state and of a kingdom that unites many city-states, are even less relevant: we do not deal with different religious systems but with rituals designed to express the status of the king. These rituals are, on the king’s side, rituals of his court, and, on the city’s side, additions to the already existing body of rituals and beliefs, but they do not change the system.

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