

4.5. Various Writers / Accounts of Religious Beliefs

What's remarkable about Greek religion is that they had neither a priestly class nor sacred texts. Instead the people interacted collectively with the gods through festivals, sacrifices, and other rituals, guided mainly by literature (including Homer and Hesiod) and tradition.

Hom. *Il.* 2. Source: Homer. *Homer's Iliad*. London: J. Cornish: 1862.

Lys. 30.17. Source: Lysias. *Lysias with an English translation*. Trans. W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U., 1930

Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.1079.1152. Source: Apollonius of Rhodes. *Argonautica*. Trans. R. C. Seaton. Cambridge, Mass.: Wm. Heinemann, 1912.

Plut. *Arist.* 21.1, Plut. *Thes.* 6, Plut. *Alc.* 18.1. Source: Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. Trans. John Dryden. London: J.M. Dent, 1910.

Homer: *The Iliad*, c. 800 BCE

And they did sacrifice each man to one of the everlasting gods, praying for escape from death and the tumult of battle. But Agamemnon, king of men, slew a fat bull of five years to most mighty Kronion, and called the elders, the princes of the Achaian host... Then they stood around the bull and took the barley meal, and Agamemnon made his prayer in their midst and said: "Zeus most glorious, most great god of the storm cloud, that lives in the heavens, make not the sun set upon us, nor the darkness come near, until I have laid low upon the earth Priam's palace smirched with smoke and burned the doorways thereof with consuming fire, and rent on Hector's breast his doublet, cleft with the blade; and about him may full many of his comrades, prone in the dust, bite the earth." Now, when they had prayed and scattered the barley meal, they first drew back the bull's head and cut his throat and flayed him, and cut slices from the thighs and wrapped them in fat, making a double fold, and laid raw collops thereon. And these they burnt on cleft wood stripped of leaves, and spitted the vitals and held them over Hephaistos' flame. Now when the thighs were burnt and they had tasted the vitals, then sliced they all the rest and pierced it through with spits and roasted it carefully and drew all off again. So when they had rest from the task and had made ready the banquet, they feasted, nor was their heart stinted of the fair banquet....

Lysias: *Against Nichomachos*, c. 400 BCE

I am informed that he alleges that I am guilty of impiety in seeking to abolish the sacrifices. But if it were I who were law-making over this transcription of our code, I should take it to be open to Nichomachos to make such a statement about me. But in fact I am merely claiming that he should obey the code established and patent to all and I am surprised at his not observing that, when he taxes me with impiety for saying that we ought to perform the sacrifices named in the tablets and pillars as directed in the regulations, he is accusing the city as well: for they are what you have decreed. And then, sir, if you feel these to be hard words, surely you must attribute grievous guilt to those citizens who used to sacrifice solely in accordance with the tablets. But of course, gentlemen of the jury, we are not to be instructed in piety by Nichomachos, but are rather to be guided by the ways of the past.

Now our ancestors, by sacrificing in accordance with the tablets, have handed down to us a city superior in greatness and prosperity to any other in Hellas; so that it behooves us to perform the same sacrifices as they did, if for no other reason than that of the success which has resulted from those rites. And how could a man show greater piety than mine, when I demand, first that our sacrifices be performed according to our ancestral rules, and second that they be those which tend to promote the interests of the city, and finally those which the people have decreed and which we shall be able to afford out of the public revenue? But you, Nichomachos, have done the opposite of this: by entering in your copy a greater number than had been ordained you have caused the public revenue to be expended on these, and hence to be deficient for our ancestral offerings.

Apollonius of Rhodes: *Argonautica*, c. 200 BCE

After this, fierce tempests arose for twelve days and nights together and kept them there from sailing. And above the golden head of Aison's son there hovered a halkyon prophesying with shrill voice the ceasing of the stormy winds; and Mopsus heard and understood the cry of the bird of the shore, fraught with good omen. And some god made it turn aside, and flying aloft it settled upon the stern-ornament of the ship. And the seer touched Jason as he lay wrapped in soft sheepskins and woke him at once, and thus spoke: "Son of Aison, you must climb to this temple on rugged Dindymos and propitiate the Mother of all the blessed Gods on her fair throne, and the stormy blasts shall cease. For such was the voice I heard but now from the halkyon, bird of the sea, which, as it flew above thee in thy slumber, told me all. For by her power the winds and the sea and all the earth below and the snowy seat of Olympus are complete; and to her, when from the mountains she ascends the mighty heaven, Zeus himself, the son of Cronos, gives place. In like manner the rest of the immortal blessed ones reverence the dread goddess."

Thus he spoke, and his words were welcome to Jason's ear. And he arose from his bed with joy and woke all his comrades hurriedly and told them the prophecy of Mopsus the son of Ampycus. And quickly the younger men drove oxen from their stalls and began to lead them to the mountain's lofty summit. And they loosed the hawsers from the sacred rock and rowed to the Thracian harbor; and the heroes climbed the mountain, leaving a few of their comrades in the ship. Now there was a sturdy stump of vine that grew in the forest, a tree exceeding old; this they cut down, to be the sacred image of the mountain goddess; and Argos smoothed it skillfully, and they set it upon that rugged hill beneath a canopy of lofty oaks, which of all trees have their roots deepest. And near it they heaped an altar of small stones and wreathed their brows with oak leaves and paid heed invoking the mother of Dindymos, most venerable, dweller in Phrygia... And with many prayers did Aison's son beseech the goddess to turn aside the stormy blasts as he poured libations on the blazing sacrifice; and at the same time by command of Orpheus the youths trod a measure dancing in full armor, and dashed with their swords on their shields, so that the ill-omened cry might be lost in the air—the wail which the people were still sending up in grief for their king.

Hence from that time forward the Phrygians propitiate the Great Mother with the wheel and the drum. The trees shed abundant fruit, and round their feet the earth of its own accord put forth flowers from the tender grass. And the beasts of the wild wood left their lairs and thickets and came up fawning on them with their tails. And she caused yet another marvel; for hitherto there was no flow of water on Dindymos, but then for them an unceasing stream gushed forth from the thirsty peak just as it was, and the dwellers around in after times called that stream, the spring of Jason....

Plutarch: *Life of Aristides*, c. 110 CE

21.1: And the Plataeans undertook to make funeral offerings annually for the Hellenes who had fallen in battle and lay buried there. And this they do yet unto this day, after the following manner. On the sixteenth of the month Maimacterion (which is the Boiotian Alakomenius), they celebrate a procession. This is led forth at break of day by a trumpeter sounding the signal for battle; wagons follow filled with myrtle-wreaths, then comes a black bull, then free-born youths carrying libations of wine and milk in jars, and pitchers of oil and myrrh (no slave may put hand to any part of that ministration, because the men thus honored died for freedom); and following all, the chief magistrate of Plataea, who may not at other times touch iron or put on any other raiment than white, at this time is robed in a purple tunic, carries on high a water-jar from the city's archive chamber, and proceeds, sword in hand, through the midst of the city to the graves; there he takes water from the sacred spring, washes off with his own hands the gravestones, and anoints them with myrrh; then he slaughters the bull at the funeral pyre, and, with prayers to Zeus and Hermes Terrestrial, summons the brave men who died for Hellas to come to the banquet and its copious drafts of blood; next he mixes a mixer of wine, drinks, and then pours a libation from it, saying these words: "I drink to the men who died for the freedom of the Hellenes."

Plutarch: *The Life of Theseos*, c. 110 CE

The feast called Oskophoria, or the feast of boughs, which to this day the Athenians celebrate, was then first instituted by Theseos. For he took not with him the full number of virgins which by lot were to be carried away [*to the Labyrinth*], but selected two youths of his acquaintance, of fair and womanish faces, but of a manly and forward spirit, and having, by frequent baths, and avoiding the heat and scorching of the sun, with a

constant use of all the ointments and washes and dresses that serve to the adorning of the head or smoothing the skin or improving the complexion, in a manner changed them from what they were before, and having taught them farther to counterfeit the very voice and carriage and gait of virgins so that there could not be the least difference perceived, he, undiscovered by any, put them into the number of the Athenian virgins designated for Crete. At his return, he and these two youths led up a solemn procession, in the same habit that is now worn by those who carry the vine-branches. Those branches they carry in honor of Dionysos and Ariadne, for the sake of their story before related; or rather because they happened to return in autumn, the time of gathering the grapes.

The women, whom they call Deipnopherai, or supper-carriers, are taken into these ceremonies, and assist at the sacrifice, in remembrance and imitation of the mothers of the young men and virgins upon whom the lot fell, for thus they ran about bringing bread and meat to their children; and because the women then told their sons and daughters many tales and stories, to comfort and encourage them under the danger they were going upon, it has still continued a custom that at this feast old fables and tales should be told. There was then a place chosen out, and a temple erected in it to Theseos, and those families out of whom the tribute of the youth was gathered were appointed to pay tax to the temple for sacrifices to him. And the house of the Phyalidai had the overseeing of these sacrifices, Theseos doing them that honor in recompense of their former hospitality.

Plutarch: *Life of Alcibiades*, c. 110 CE

After the people had adopted this motion and all things were made ready for the departure of the fleet, there were some unpropitious signs and portents, especially in connection with the festival, namely, the Adonia. This fell at that time, and little images like dead folk carried forth to burial were in many places exposed to view by the women, who mimicked burial rites, beat their breasts, and sang dirges. Moreover, the mutilation of the Hermai, most of which, in a single night, had their faces and phalli disfigured, confounded the hearts of many, even among those who usually set small store by such things. They looked on the occurrence with wrath and fear, thinking it the sign of a bold and dangerous conspiracy. They therefore scrutinized keenly every suspicious circumstance, the council and the assembly convening for this purpose many times within a few days.