

Greek Religion

The Classical World: Spring 2010

I. Oral Cultures

II. The Oral Nature of Greek Religion

III. The Greek and Roman Pantheons

References

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The Greeks as an Oral Culture

1200-900: **No** writing

ca. 9th century: Greek alphabet

800-450: semi-literacy (craft literacy)

450-350: literacy enters “curriculum”

ca. 350: a Greek literate public

So: Greek culture to be understood as oral.

Nature of Oral Cultures

“Sound only exists as it is going out of existence” (Ong)

Two implications:

(1) Memory was central – no external storage

(2) Communication was ***unique*** and ***unifying***

Oral Knowledge: How Gained

Thoughts had to be *memorable*

... *concrete* not abstract

... *narrative* not discursive

... close to *life as lived* – people doing things

... *formulaic* (e.g., “grey-eyed Athena”)

... *poetic* – rhythmic, balanced

... *redundant*

Oral Knowledge: How Kept

Knowledge was *hard-earned* and *precious*

Conservative

Innovation and experimentation discouraged

Homeostatic

“Things were *always* what they used to be”
(even when they weren’t)

– remembering requires *forgetting*

Communication in Oral Cultures

Oral communication ...

... is unique – ***non-repeatable***

... ***unifies*** the speaker and audience

... is an ***event*** (an ***action***), not just a message

Religions, Literate and Oral

Literate religions ...

... focus on doctrine

... are historical and are
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Oral religions ...

... focus on ritual

... are homeostatic, and superimpose mythic on the mundane

... are not to be understood logically

Greek Ritual

Words are events and deeds, not things or signs

Rituals didn't *refer* to the original events described in myths; rituals *recreated* those events.

Participants in rituals *lived* and *enacted* the mythical events.

“The once-upon-a-time is also a now, what was is also a living event. ... The cult is its present form, the re-enactment of an archetypal event, situated in the past but in essence eternal. ... The gods are at hand, as they were at the beginning of time, not only as majestic figures demanding reverence, but as what they are: supreme realities of the here and now...” (Otto, 29).

Sacrifice and Ritual

Prometheus at Mekone

Greeks: A pastoral people

Cf. Odyssey: “Eumaios – O my swineherd!”

Sacrifice sacralizes a feast – brings the gods
into the feast.

“If a man is able draw near to the gods, as the priest Chryses with Apollo or as Hektor or Odysseus with Zeus, he can do so because he has ‘burnt many thigh pieces of bulls’ (Il. 1.40, 22.170; Od. 1.66), for this is the act of piety: bloodshed, slaughter – and eating. It makes no difference if there is no temple or cult-statue, as often occurs in the cult of Zeus. The god is present at his place of sacrifice, a place distinguished by the heap of ashes left from ‘sacred’ offerings burnt there over long periods of time... . The worshipper experiences the god most powerfully not just in pious conduct or in prayer, song, and dance, but in the deadly blow of the axe, the gush of blood and the burning of thigh-pieces” (Burkert, 2).

Homeostasis and Greek Myth

Literature *froze* Greek myths, hitherto fluid

Poseidon was...

... Zeus' older brother (Hesiod, *Theogony*, ll. 453-469),

or

... Zeus' younger brother (Homer, *Iliad*, XV, ll. 158-204)

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Which is it?

How to Make Sense of Poseidon?

One way: Theological

Poseidon was born from Rhea *before* Zeus...

but

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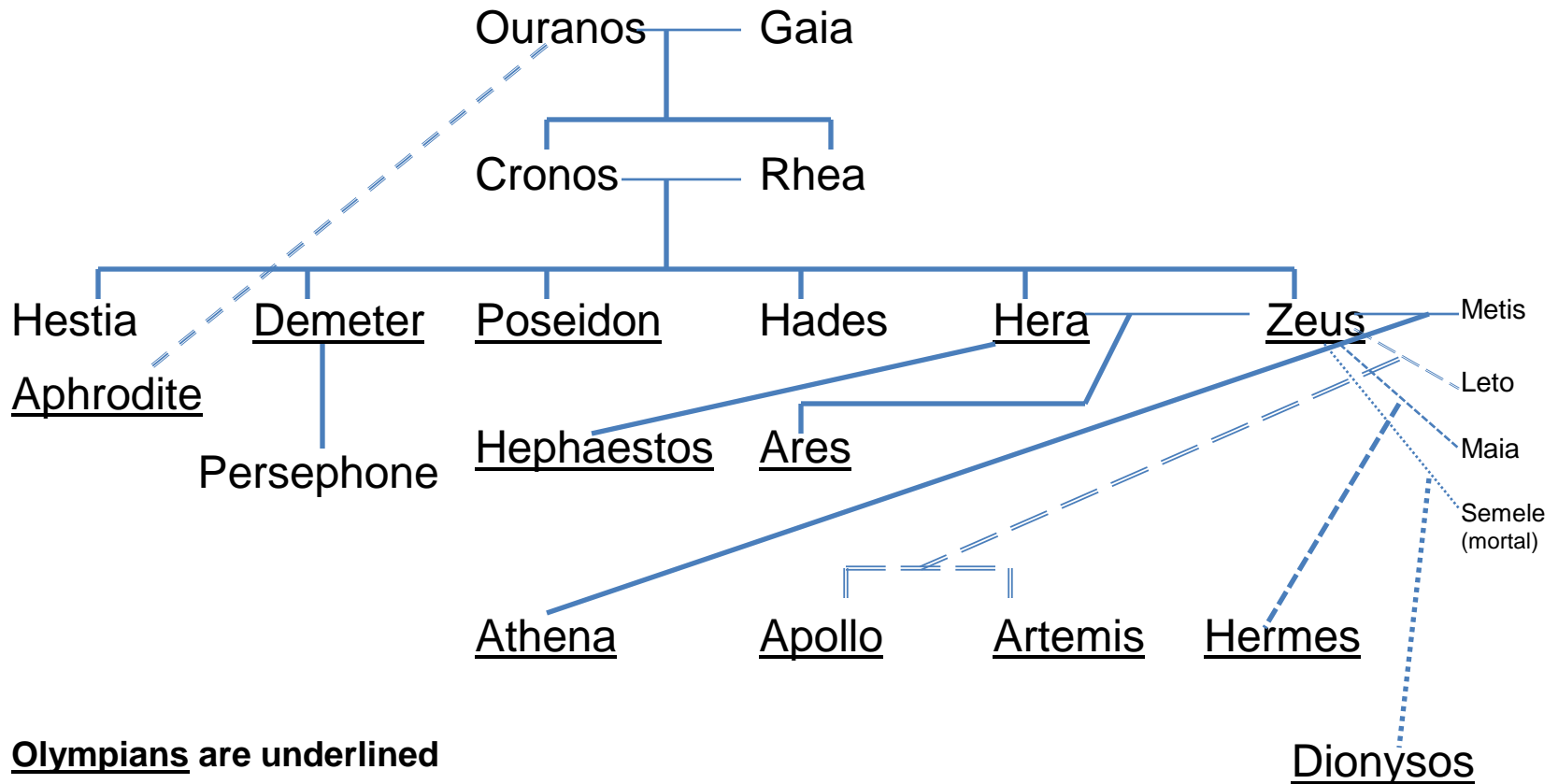
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Both ways are literate (logical) understandings.

Greek Pantheon



Development of Roman Gods

Pre-Etruscan

Main triad:

Jupiter

(sky; ruler)

Mamers/Mars

(war)

Quirinus

(agriculture;
assembly)

Janus (beginnings)

Vesta (city)

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Etruscan Influence

New main triad:

Jupiter (*qua* Zeus)

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Menrva (arts; *qua*
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Nethuns (sea; Poseidon)

Borrowed from Greeks:

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Post-Etruscan

Ca. 496: additional triad:

Ceres (bec. Demeter)

Liber (bec. Bacchus)

Libera (bec. Proserpine)

Greek gods assimilated:

Mercury (Hermes),
Apollo, Bacchus

Italic gods transformed:

Venus (orig. magic
charm; Aphrodite)

Diana (Alban; Artemis)

Vesta (Hestia)

Greek and Roman Pantheons

<u>Greek</u>	<u>Roman</u>
Cronos (father of Zeus)	Saturn
<u>Zeus</u> (sky)	Jupiter
<u>Hera</u> (marriage)	Juno
<u>Poseidon</u> (sea)	Neptune
Hades (underworld)	Pluto
Hestia (hearth)	Vesta
<u>Demeter</u> (agriculture)	Ceres
<u>Athena</u> (wisdom)	Minerva
<u>Apollo</u> (healing)	Apollo
<u>Artemis</u> (hunt)	Diana
<u>Ares</u> (war)	Mars
<u>Aphrodite</u> (<i>eros</i>)	Venus
<u>Hephaestos</u> (metalwork)	Vulcan
<u>Hermes</u> (messenger)	Mercury
<u>Dionysos</u> (wine)	Bacchus
Persephone (daughter of Demeter)	Proserpine