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Vinciane PIRENNE-DELFORGE, *Le Polythéisme grec à l'épreuve d'Hérodote*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres / Collège de France, 2020. 1 vol. 13,5 × 21 cm, 251 p. (*Docet Omnia*, 6). ISBN : 978-3-515-12809-4.

- 1 The last half century has seen a dazzling array of new approaches in the study of Greek polytheism. Moving away from a polis-centred model into which every student of Greek religion was once initiated, scholars have now advocated alternative frameworks ranging from 'personal' and 'lived' religion, to 'network' analyses, comparative perspectives, and the application of cognitive theories. Pirenne-Delforge's latest book is a nuanced response to recent shifts in scholarly trends, and a critical reflection on current debates on the character of Greek polytheism. While revisiting old issues central and fundamental to the study of Greek religion, it offers a whole host of new insights into the analysis of Greek gods, the tension between unity and diversity, and the choice of conceptual tools by ancient historians.
- 2 The author confronts the thorny question of terminology from the outset: can we speak of Greek 'religion' when studying the ancient Mediterranean? Carefully tracing the history of the terms 'religion' and 'polytheism', she demonstrates that neither represents the ancient Greeks' own use of word, and that their subsequent use is closely bound up with Christian polemics. Nevertheless, she reminds us, in historians' attempt to avoid or get rid of terms with Christian associations, not only will we leave ourselves with no interpretive tool, we will also be perpetuating, consciously or unconsciously, the prejudice that Christianity is *the* true religion. In fact this 'purge' in terminology can go on: what about 'religious', 'piety', 'thanks-giving', 'miracle', and so on? Whether or not modern historians can give credence to the relations between the

ancient Greeks and their gods, what is important is that they are recognized by the Greeks themselves. The definition of 'religion' chosen by the author aptly emphasizes this: its key element consists in 'les relations avec la sphère supra-humaine dont cette culture postule l'existence' (p. 55).

- 3 A central issue threaded through the whole book is the constant, and seemingly unreconcilable, tension between unity and diversity, the general and the particular, inherent in Greek polytheism. The question of 'one or many' has attracted scholarly attention in recent theoretical analyses of Greek cult epithets: to what extent is Zeus Meilichios the same as Zeus Ktesios? How much difference is there between the innumerable Zeuses bearing different epithets? Pirenne-Delforge shows, significantly, that the plurality (poly-) in the word 'polytheism' is not restricted to divine figures but is manifest at every level of Greek religion, from sacrificial and other ritual practices, to cult places and sanctuaries, divine names and epithets, and conceptions of the divine: these might vary between different levels of organization (Panhellenic, regional, polis, sub-polis, and so on), from place to place, from one individual to another, and across different time periods. So overwhelmingly diverse is every aspect of Greek polytheism that the singular 'religion', one may object, can hardly capture its diversity. Pirenne-Delforge categorically emphasizes the plurality and multiplicity inherent in Greek polytheism on the one hand, but on the other reaffirms the value and validity of Greek 'religion' in the singular. To speak of Greek 'religion' (rather than 'religions'), in her view, is not to obscure or obliterate the bewildering plurality in Greek polytheism, but to recognize that '*une certaine unité sous-tend les relations que les Grecs entretenaient avec leurs dieux*' (p. 95).
- 4 To demonstrate that this unity is not a construct invented by the historian, Pirenne-Delforge puts her arguments to the test by using Herodotus, who best documents the diversity of religious customs (*nomoi*) across and within ancient Mediterranean cultures. Close analysis of his *Histories* and other sources reveals that 'Greek gods' and 'Greek sacrifice' existed in the ancient Greeks' own representation of *theia pragmata*. Such categories tend to lie 'dormant' in the Greeks' perception of religious matters, but come to the surface when a contrast is made with non-Greek phenomena or in a foreign milieu. A question nevertheless remains: in the absence of a centralized religious authority, what gives unity to Greek polytheism? How far can regional, local, and personal variations go before any element loses its 'Greekness'? Other eminent scholars have conceptualized aspects of this tension using the symbolism of a concertina (capable of expansion and contraction) or kaleidoscope (capable of changing from one to many varied visions),¹ whereas Pirenne-Delforge stresses that both unity and diversity are constitutive of our understanding of Greek polytheism, and have to be studied together at every level of analysis. These two forces, the unifying and diversifying, the centripetal and centrifugal,² hold each other in check, so that there was a limit to how far variations could go.
- 5 The analysis of the Greek gods has undergone various important shifts in paradigms over the last few decades. The 'structuralist' approach associated with Vernant and Detienne emphasizes that Greek gods were divine powers rather than persons, and that they need to be defined in relation to other powers in the pantheon. Versnel in *Coping with the Gods* (2011) is similarly preoccupied with the question of 'one or many', but he is anti-structuralist in stressing the inconsistencies in the Greeks' perception of the gods and their ability to entertain multiple conceptions of a divine figure. Pirenne-

Delforge's present volume builds on what one might call the 'neo-structuralist' approach which she has developed in collaboration with Pironti. While recognizing the anthropomorphic tendencies in the Greeks' perception of their gods, she follows Vernant in stressing that a god is not a 'person', but a divine power with a broad spectrum of competences (*technai*). Despite the potential plurality of each divine figure, she argues, '*quelque chose de stable paraît transcender la polyonymie de chaque figure divine*' (p. 128). She uses the symbolism of a 'network' (réseau) to capture the dynamic powers and different attributes of each god. Nevertheless, it is unclear if the concept of a network necessarily leads to '*quelque chose de stable*': all that it emphasizes is the interconnected nature of a god's different powers, but that was already the assumption underlying what Parker calls the 'snowball theory' of polytheism.³

- 6 After almost two decades of lively debates on the relevance of 'belief' in the study of Greek polytheism, most historians now recognize that 'belief' existed among the Greeks in a broad sense without Christian overtones, that a plurality of different 'beliefs' coexisted, and that 'belief' is indispensable in making sense of the Greeks' relations with their gods. Nevertheless, beyond these broad consensuses, progress in the investigation of 'belief' seems to have reached an impasse. Pirenne-Delforge takes the subject further by taking a fresh look at the closest Greek equivalent *nomizein*. The two aspects of its meaning—the ritualistic sense of 'to practice and observe as a custom', and the cognitive sense of 'to believe', 'to recognize as gods'—have often been considered separately, whereas Pirenne-Delforge emphasizes that they are two sides of the same coin. To recognize a certain figure as god, in her view, implies a whole series of rituals and cultic actions rendered to the god concerned, and therefore *nomizein tous theous* in effect means to integrate the gods in the *nomoi* of the society. The cognitive recognition of a god in one's mental sphere is expressed in religious customs, and so we should no longer prioritize ritual as primary or more important than belief. Even for phenomena such as divination and sacrifice, which seem manifestly ritualistic, Pirenne-Delforge demonstrates that these practices are in fact closely linked with the Greeks' representation of the gods.
- 7 Other key issues arising from the book include the relations between gods in literature and gods in lived religion, the boundary between 'public' and 'private' religion, and the relations between the Panhellenic and the local. Each side of these dichotomies tends to form a separate object of analysis in existing studies and is rarely brought together or considered on the same plane in any given analysis. Yet Pirenne-Delforge almost effortlessly brings together different aspects, reminding us that the boundary in these polarities is fluid, permeable, and often ill-defined. In fact hardly any phenomenon in Greek religion can be studied solely from the perspective of either the polis or the individual, the literary or the cultic, the general or the particular, when both aspects are complementary to each other.
- 8 Forcefully argued and remarkably well-informed, this profoundly thoughtful book beautifully brings together a great deal of valuable insights and an impressive amount of learning resulting from many years of reflection on this subject. It challenges future generations of students and scholars in Greek religion to aspire to a new standard: to study Greek polytheism in its different manifestations and in its totality, and to deploy a multiplicity of perspectives for understanding the complexity of what can justifiably be called Greek religion.

NOTES

1. R. PARKER, *On Greek Religion*, Cornell, 2011, p. 87; H. VERSNEL, *Coping with the Gods*, Leiden, 2011, p. 212; M.S. SMITH, *Where the Gods Are*, New Haven, 2016, p. 57.
 2. E. KEARNS, "Archaic and Classical Greek Religion", in M.A. AWEENEY, M.R. SALZMAN, E. ADLER (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World*, Cambridge, 2013, p. 281–284.
 3. R. PARKER, *On Greek Religion*, Cornell, 2011, p. 86.
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