Greek Gods and Cognitive Sciences: About Jennifer Larson's *Understanding Greek Religion*

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I have been convinced for a long time that Dan Sperber's work (1974, 1996) offers many insights into understanding the various ways in which the ancient Greeks "believed in their myths" (to paraphrase the title of a famous essay by Paul Veyne [1988]). As I wrote some years ago, adhering to a statement like "Cronus swallowed his children" is not the terrifying result of a deficient rationality but rather the expression of a trust placed in the traditional background to which such a proposition belongs (Pirenne-Delforge 2009: 48–49). In this perspective, the distinction between intuitive and reflexive "beliefs" proposed by Sperber is an efficient tool for those who study ancient narratives involving gods and heroes and who encounter many cases of "counter-intuitive" assertions such as "Cronus swallowed his children". But not all counter-intuitive stories are considered convincing in the same manner and on the same level. The religious criteria of adherence are essential to understanding why some of these myths were considered as credible, while others were not. As Arrian wrote in his *Anabasis of Alexander*, "it is not necessary to provide a close examination of the myths from the remote past regarding the divine: what seems to be incredible as far as plausibility is concerned does not seem unbelievable at all if one adduces the divine to the tale" (Arr. *Anab.* 5.1.2). In the second century CE, Arrian was like Monsieur Jourdain, one of Molière's characters, who spoke in prose without realizing it: in the passage just quoted, Arrian was practicing cognitive science without knowing it!

All this is to say that, at least partly, I gladly endorse the development of what we call today the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) and that I have a lot of sympathy, admiration, and gratefulness for Jennifer Larson's

book. This volume is a useful work for students, who now have access to an insightful and well-informed survey of ancient Greek religion, which is much more than a simple "introduction". The book is also very useful for professionals in our field, who will find in it a clever and cautious application of CSR to the study of Greek polytheism, fed by a huge bibliography that Classicists do not usually take the time to read in depth. In particular, I want to emphasize and pay tribute to the remarkable use of scholarship in languages other than English. Such broad interaction with multilingual scholarship should go without saying, but my experience shows that it is increasingly rare (with some conspicuous recent exceptions, of course, such as the essay *On Greek Religion* by Robert Parker [2011] or Henk Versnel's book *Coping with the Gods* [2011]).

Since the present reflection is not a review as such but is part of a whole dossier discussing Jennifer Larson's book in the present issue of the *Journal of Cognitive Historiography*, I have chosen to take only the first of its chapters into consideration to assess the value of CSR for "understanding Greek religion" (to echo the title of the book, imposed by the series where it finds a place).

The topic I have selected is related to the question of "gods" against the background of the more general problem of "What is Greek religion?" The introductory summary of the chapter states that "the dual process model, a fundamental cognitive principle […] helps to explain why the Greeks were not distressed by what we often perceive as logical inconsistencies in their religion (e.g., between the local and Panhellenic personas of the gods)" (Larson 2016: 1). In this perspective, the "minimally counterintuitive concept, another key idea in CSR" is used to deal with the so-called inconsistencies. Larson develops three very interesting dossiers to address the conceptualization of the divine world:

a. the way of encapsulating an unlimited pantheon in the limited group of 12 Gods;
b. the contrast between the Homeric goddess Hera and the goddess Hera worshipped in cults;
c. the nature of the reciprocity between mortals and gods.

I will focus on the second point, since I have recently published, with Gabriella Pironti, a book entitled *L'Héra de Zeus* (Pirenne-Delforge and Pironti 2016). I have been especially interested in the way in which a CSR-based approach might discuss this goddess. Beyond such a particular interest in a specific goddess, analysing the link between the "Panhellenic" and the "local" dimension of Greek gods is one of the most important challenges for

those who study ancient Greek polytheism. In 1978, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood proposed that a Greek god had to be studied by recovering its local manifestations and, then, by relating these to its Panhellenic *persona*. In 1932, Louis Gernet had already written something similar albeit in different words. The so-called "École de Paris", in the 1970s and 1980s, challenged the "canonical" vision of Greek gods as personalities with a psychological profile, and resituated these "personalities", once and for all, in the mythological tradition. Today, the necessity of addressing different levels (local/Panhellenic, textual/ritual) in the study of Greek gods has become obvious, but the way of doing so is another matter and still a much debated issue.

In this respect, Larson highlights (2016: 13) the contradiction – for modern scholars – between a god honoured with various cult-epithets in different places in the same city, such as Zeus Hypatos, Zeus Olympios and Zeus Herkeios in Athens – (supposedly) considered as distinct deities by the Athenians – and the "reflective, mythological mode according to which Zeus was one god who appeared in various places under different cult titles". One of the deepest analyses of such an "inconsistency" has been given by Henk Versnel in his book *Coping with the gods* (2011). He advocated for not imposing consistency on contradictions and for not reconciling these variances at all cost. His book is, for a part, infused by CSR but Larson provides a more systematic view on the cognitive dimension of such apparently contradictory views and applies the "diagnosis" to Hera.

In some ten pages dedicated to the goddess, the author deftly manages to give a lot of essential information and to provide very good insights into understanding the figure of Hera. These can be summarized as follows. In the whole Greek tradition, Hera is the wife of the father and king of the gods, Zeus. In Homer, she is represented as a shrew, always getting angry at her husband. According to Larson, this is "a poetic construct fashioned in the service of Panhellenic epic, which insists on the primacy of Zeus" (2016: 33). Therefore, there is a "logical conflict" between the narrative understanding of Zeus as ruler of all the gods and the cultic predominance of Hera in Argos or Samos, for example. But, on the other side, as the author rightly remarks, an archaic dedication made in the important sanctuary of Hera at Perachora, in the Corinthian territory, is addressed to Hera *Leukōlenos* ("white-armed"), which is a formulaic epithet used in Homeric epic. The same blurring of narratives and cults is made by Sappho in a fragmentary hymn to the goddess (fr. 17 Voigt), where the poetess evokes the protection given by Hera to Agamemnon and Menelaus, as part of her own request which refers to honours for the goddess in Lesbos. At the same time, in a fragment of Sappho's contemporary countryman Alcaeus, the reference to the local goddess, called "famous goddess of the Aiolians, mother of all"

seems to be independent from any Panhellenic background. Larson inter-prets the expression as an indication "that Hera of Lesbos was a successor to one of the powerful Bronze Age goddesses who dominated Greek and Anatolian religion" (2016: 36). In Argos, Hera was a powerful deity, who oversaw the most fundamental needs of her city, a situation which seems to be very different from the one found in Athens, for example, where the goddess receives far less attention (but it should be remarked that Athena, as the tutelary goddess of the city, possessed similar functions to those which were attributed to Hera in Argos). In archaic Samos, on the contrary, her sanctuary was on a well-travelled maritime route and Hera received much local and international attention. Larson rightly stresses that "as in Argolis and Lesbos, Hera's Samian cult helped to shape her people's ethnic and civic identity" and that "the Geometric and early Archaic periods were to some degree an 'Age of Hera'" (2016: 39). In the same period, very few *poleis* (not to say *any polis at all*) made Zeus their patron deity (2016: 33), a situation which contrasts with the one found in Panhellenic sanctuaries where his "supreme power was recognized"; this is a valuable observation which deserves to be developed further (as it will be by Gabriella Pironti in a forthcoming book). And that's it. Larson does not come back to CSR at the end of the analysis of Hera and I conclude from this that I do not have to search for a resolution to the supposed "contradictions" between the Homeric shrew and the powerful Argive or Samian goddess, independent from Zeus, because of the capacity of the human (and thus, the Greek) mind to pass from intuitive to reflexive beliefs without necessarily feeling an uncomfortable sense of logic contradiction.

Despite my real sympathy for some of the aspects of CSR to which I referred above, I feel an uncomfortable sense of theoretical shortcoming in this way of attributing presumed "contradictions" to mental processes. Before explaining discrepancies by resorting to CSR, we should first con-sider that they result from our own difficulties in understanding other cultures and, as far as gods are concerned, especially polytheistic cultures. "Mental frame" can be an interesting tool to understand "contradictions", but first and foremost it should be understood as a place where myths and rituals, narratives and gestures resonate as specific "languages". Greek poets who narrated tales, painters who decorated vases, and worshippers who honoured the gods in sanctuaries could articulate those languages far more easily than modern scholars who are embedded in their own "monotheistic" rationality.

In the case of Hera which I examine here, the link with Zeus is essential for apprehending the various specific contexts where the goddess appears. I do not have the place to provide here the whole demonstration which was

published elsewhere (Pirenne-Delforge and Pironti 2016), but it can be said that the goddess in all her aspects, as a character in narratives as well as the recipient of cults, becomes more comprehensible if we call upon the notions of marriage, legitimacy, power and sovereignty. In her various cult-places, the goddess is the "Hera of Zeus" even where the god seems to be absent: for example, in Argos and Samos, sacrifices related to divine marriage are well-attested (in this respect, Hera's marriage always implies a husband…), and one of the pediments of the Argive temple depicted the birth of Zeus and the Gigantomachy, which is a strong indication of Hera's link with Zeus' sovereignty over the cosmos. Marriage and royalty are firmly related to Hera in all her narrative and ritual manifestations, and these characteristics are deeply rooted in her relation to Zeus. If we take this background into consideration when looking at our evidence, we do not need CSR to understand the so-called "contradictions" between the narrative *persona* of the goddess and her cultic aspects. Larson is perfectly right when she writes that "the shrewish wife is a poetic construct fashioned in the service of Panhellenic epic". However, such a poetic construct (Zeus is the ruler and Hera is dominated) is not necessarily in contradiction with the powerful goddess of the Argive plain. In both cases, Hera is closely connected with Zeus and his power, but the "languages" used to express the relationship are different.

Hera is at the same time Spouse and Queen, struggling for her own prerogatives on Mount Olympus and protecting Zeus's reign from the danger of being overthrown (her anger brings opposition from within the matrimonial pair, which is a far more interesting perspective than seeing the opposition as simple domestic disputes or the gesticulations of an ancient "Great goddess" tamed by her husband). She also protects the Olympian house from the mortal children of Zeus (for example, thanks to her, Heracles has to become a god before entering Olympus). In this perspective, all the pertinent remarks of Larson about Hera mentioned above could find a place in a cultural interpretation without necessarily referring to human cognition in general. The use of CSR is only a tool among many others for understanding Greek religion.

Endnotes

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