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“The pen fell from my hand  
when I was in my eighty-sixth year.”

Revisiting the work of Martin P. Nilsson

Edited by Jenny Wallensten & Gunnel Ekroth

STOCKHOLM 2024

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## ABSTRACT

2017 marked the 50th anniversary of both the death of Martin P. Nilsson, the eminent Swedish scholar of ancient Greek religion, and the publication of the third edition of his monumental *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*. Nilsson's scholarly output was huge, with a production of around 20 items annually, and he touched upon most aspects of the study of ancient Greek religion, be it in a book or an article, in a footnote or an in-depth argument. This volume constitutes a re-reading of Nilsson in the light of new ancient evidence, and modern methods and theoretical approaches.

Five leading researchers in this field of religion revisit major works of Nilsson's oeuvre—*Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, vols 1 and 2 (Jon Mikalson and Eftychia Stavrianopoulou), *Greek folk religion* (Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge), *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* (Matthew Haysom) and *Greek piety* (Michael D. Konaris)—in order to explore whether his works today are mainly touched upon with just the usual obligatory references or if they still have an active impact on contemporary discourses. Hopefully, this undertaking will stimulate others to explore the vast landscape of Nilsson's work in the future.

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## To be or not to be ... “popular”

Martin P. Nilsson's *Greek folk religion*, its context,  
and its modern echoes

### Abstract

Martin P. Nilsson's book *Greek popular religion* was published in 1940 and republished in 1961 with the slightly modified title of *Greek folk religion*. This work was deeply rooted in the conviction that many parts of Archaic and Classical Greece, outside the leading urban centres, were still in what Nilsson called “a backward state”. These places were supposed to preserve the way of life that had been common in earlier times, when Greeks were mainly peasants, not very advanced and culturally primitive. According to Nilsson, the simple religion of unlettered peasants was the most persistent form of Greek religion and at the core of what he called “popular” or “folk” religion. After placing this paradigm in the scientific context of its emergence, the present paper examines the paradoxes of Nilsson's interpretive model and compares his dichotomous view of “popular” *vs* “high” religion to some current approaches in the study of ancient Greek religion.\*

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To celebrate Martin P. Nilsson's work, I have been asked to address the thesis of his book *Greek popular religion*, published in 1940, and republished in 1961 under the title *Greek folk religion*. Since I am interested in ancient Greek religion as well as in the historiography of the history of religions, the task presents an opportunity to tackle analytical tools which are deeply rooted in specific moments of this field of research and to assess their possible utility for current scholarship. The notion of "popular religion" is one of these analytical tools, which has to be juxtaposed with several trends in the study of religion as a whole, on the one hand, and with the study of ancient Greek religion, on the other, in order to understand as precisely as possible the intellectual and methodological arena in which Nilsson's work came into play.<sup>1</sup> After making this effort of contextualization, I will next briefly address the current relevance of the notion of "popular religion" by assessing its more fashionable contemporary substitutes.

## History of religion(s): evolutionary comparative approaches

Insofar as the beginning of a scientific study of religion(s) is concerned, we are immediately confronted with the idea of a gradual evolution that starts in primitive culture, and progresses to the highest summits of religious beliefs and conceptions. In many of the works addressing religion that were written during the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, humankind was supposed to have gone through various "necessary" stages of religious development. For decades, the evolutionary perspective was one of the most persistent schemes of analysis in the history of religions. More or less implicitly, "Christianity" or "Science" were placed at the end of the religious road of humanity, a teleological view assumed, for instance, by scholars whose methods were as different as those of the linguist Friedrich Max Müller, the founder of Victorian anthropology Edward Burnett Tylor, or the mythologist and folklorist Wilhelm Mannhardt.<sup>2</sup> Even Émile Durkheim, opening new paths of investigation and outlining the territory of the French sociological school,

<sup>1</sup> In 2008, I asked the question of whether "popular" was an apposite notion for studying ancient Greek polytheism, taking the example of Greek sacrifice in order to assess this. In this perspective, the answer was clearly negative (Pirenne-Delforge 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Müller 1873; Tylor 1903 (first published in 1871); Mannhardt 1875–1877.

did not avoid escape evolutionary views in his masterwork *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, published in 1912 with the subtitle: *Le système totémique en Australie*. The adjective *élémentaire* in this title interestingly has both a chronological and a structural sense: by elementary, he means what comes first, but also the lowest common denominators of the concept under scrutiny, religion. In Durkheim's view, totemism was precisely the elementary form attesting to the social projection of collective consciousness, which explained why religion would never end as long as society existed: for him, religion and society would always remain strongly interrelated, even if the modalities of their relation had to evolve.<sup>3</sup>

Intimately interwoven with comparatism, evolutionary approaches of the 19th and early 20th centuries were supposed to generate further progress in the knowledge of the origin as well as the future of religion (in the singular). Exotic primitive cultures were expected to give clues for identifying the emergence of religion as such, be it located in social projection—as in Durkheim's view—, in some inaccurate and “naïve” interpretations of natural and human phenomena, in an inadequacy of language or in the awe-inspiring world. In this respect, what one called “popular” traditions or rituals were regularly considered to be the relics of a distant past, which could be seen as unaffected by the course of time or, in contrast, as degenerative products of superstition.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, “popular” and “primitive” were connected to various extents, according to each scholar addressing these issues.<sup>5</sup>

Another element can be added to the picture of this period, which is the notion of “irrationality”, evaluated both negatively and positively. In a negative point of view, irrationality is considered as the opposite of reason, as what is absurd and illogical. The assessment of primitive cultures or “savage” peoples had been made according to this framework for a long time—at least since the Enlightenment. A beautiful example of this view

<sup>3</sup> Durkheim 1897–1898, v, n. 1. Cf. Scubla 2003, 103–106; Fournier 2007, 698–699.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Tylor 1903, ch. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Durkheim is an exception in this regard. For him, “popular” superstitions as well as elaborate doctrines are considered as developments rooted in “elementary” forms such as totemism: “À mesure qu'elle [la pensée religieuse] progresse dans l'histoire, les causes qui l'ont appelée à l'existence, tout en restant toujours agissantes, ne sont plus aperçues qu'à travers un vaste système d'interprétations qui les déforment. Les mythologies populaires et les subtiles théologies ont fait leur œuvre : elles ont superposé aux sentiments primitifs des sentiments très différents qui, tout en tenant aux premiers dont ils sont la forme élaborée, n'en laissent pourtant transpirer que très imparfaitement la nature véritable.” (Durkheim 1960, 10. Fourth edition, originally published in 1912).

is the little essay published in France by Bernard de Fontenelle in 1724 and titled: *De l'origine des fables*. The terms “irrationality” or “irrational” do not occur in the text, but a range of words that are used to identify the strange productions of the human mind at the beginning of history: “*chimères, rêveries, sottises, absurdités ridicules et grossières, ignorance, imagination*”<sup>6</sup> are opposed to reason. A history of the fables is nothing else than “*l’histoire des erreurs de l’esprit humain*”.<sup>7</sup> In this perspective, the absurdities witnessed in ancient mythology and religion are to be situated at the same stage of the “history of the failures of human mind” as what is attested among contemporary “savages”. Thirty years later, *The natural history of religion* by David Hume still opposed reason and absurdity,<sup>8</sup> but the author crossed the boundary between past and present. The notion of popular was therefore used to describe theism as such, both in ancient polytheism, considered as the “primary religion of men”, and in monotheism. So-called “popular theologies” were globally opposed to philosophical reason because all theologies have “a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction”.<sup>9</sup> Here are the seeds of a two-tiered model of religious experience: on the one hand, the intellectual leadership of people exercising their reason, on the other, the religious life of a large part of the communities, relegated to the realm of popular beliefs or superstition. This model is then positively transformed, once expurgated of its most excessive value judgements and apologetic considerations. It is at the heart of the study of religion conducted, on a synchronic level, by the German folklorists as Mannhardt and, on a diachronic level, by the English anthropologists, since Tylor.

## Greek religion: between *Kult und Glaube* and the “popular”

The study of ancient Greek religion—and Nilsson’s work—did not escape these trends of the history of religion at the end of 19th and in the first two decades of the following century. Nilsson’s first book on the topic, published in 1921 in Swedish, is an interesting case for understanding some aspects of the debates in the field at this time. In 1925, the book was trans-

<sup>6</sup> de Fontenelle 1989, 187 (first published in 1724).

<sup>7</sup> de Fontenelle 1989, 201.

<sup>8</sup> Hume 1757, section XI: ‘With regard to reason or absurdity’.

<sup>9</sup> Hume 1757, section XI.



lated into English as *A history of Greek religion* and prefaced by the great British scholar Sir James George Frazer. In some sense, this book, rooted in courses taught by Nilsson at the University of Uppsala, forms the basis of what would become the monumental *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*.<sup>10</sup> In parallel, he wrote a study titled *Primitive time-reckoning*, an ethnographic exploration conducted in order to illuminate his study of the Greek calendar;<sup>11</sup> this was followed by papers about Swedish folklore, as well as about the prehistory of Christmas celebrations. Nilsson's work was continuously focused on Greek religion, revealing his masterly command of all aspects of his field of research, but his interest in ethnography and folklore gives us important clues for understanding the way he addressed the main issues of Greek religion.

The second chapter of the short *A history of Greek religion* is titled 'Primitive belief and ritual' and it brings together the two paths of investigation I have mentioned earlier: ethnology and history of religion. The Minoan-Mycenaean heritage was important for Nilsson—the famous “picture-book without text” that Matthew Haysom addresses in this volume—, but such a developed culture already left behind it the more primitive forms of religion, those very forms that the historian of religion attempts to unearth and bring to light.<sup>12</sup> Nilsson was perfectly conscious that the Greek evidence is problematic and cannot fully sustain his ambition. The method of investigation cannot be historical in the strictest sense of the word, he says, since the material dates from later, post-Homeric periods. However, “our justification for seeing in this material survivals from a religious stage which was far earlier than the Homeric or even the Minoan-Mycenaean period lies in its primitive character, and in the fact that it recurs among all peoples of the world, among the primitive races as well as among the rustic populations of the countries of Europe”.<sup>13</sup> For supporting his view, he relied on a metaphor which I do not resist the pleasure of quoting extensively:<sup>14</sup>

To use an old illustration, a highly developed religion is like the total vegetation of a forest. The great gods are the tall trees, which raise their mighty heads the highest, are most conspicuous to the eye,

<sup>10</sup> On this book, see J. Mikalson's contribution to the present volume.

<sup>11</sup> Nilsson 1920.

<sup>12</sup> Nilsson 1952, 76. For the “picture-book without texts”, see Nilsson 1952, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Nilsson 1952, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Nilsson 1952, 77.

and determine the character of the forest. But it is also easiest to fell them and plant new ones instead. It is more difficult to eradicate the brushwood, which their crowns conceal and deprive of air but cannot stifle—what we are accustomed to call the lower figures of popular belief. And the grass upon the ground is still more stubborn, ever the same blades springing up and the same simple flowers blooming. It is this under-vegetation of belief and custom which we shall now try to examine.

The frame of reference contains several levels. Rudimentary beliefs and customs are attested among primitive contemporary peoples evidenced by ethnography, and ethnological research tries to reconstruct the religious development of peoples by identifying transitional stages which should be present everywhere, from the “stubborn under-vegetation” to the higher levels of religious production. However, Nilsson did not subscribe to some global interpretations such as totemism, which would also apply to the ancient Greeks. Without completely closing the door on some totemistic stage in ancient Greece, he supposed that such ideas and rites “were transformed under the influence of a new world of ideas, in particular agrarian ideas”.<sup>15</sup> Peasants are supposed to be conservative, and they were in ancient Greece just as in modern Europe: “the rustic customs have preserved many relics of an outgrown religious stage”.<sup>16</sup> Much more than primitive cultures analysed by Victorian anthropology, the vivid source of inspiration for Nilsson is the European *Völk Kunde* documented by German scholars as Mannhardt.<sup>17</sup> The strong certainties and deep representations of men working the earth are at the core of religion, and all the rest—“higher religion”—is built on this firm and solid basis. Primitive life as Nilsson tried to unearth it does not come from afar, wearing totemistic attire: it is deeply rooted in the fields of Europe.

When he published his *Greek popular religion* in 1940, the ideas about the Greek peasant briefly outlined 20 years earlier were still present and the structure of the book integrates some elements of the previous one, to which he applied the framework of “popular” interpretation. The premise of the book is that many parts of Archaic and Classical Greece, outside the leading urbanized cities, were still in what Nilsson called

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<sup>15</sup> Nilsson 1952, 78.

<sup>16</sup> Nilsson 1952, 89.

<sup>17</sup> On the importance of the work of Mannhardt and his influence on Scandinavian circles, see Bringéus 1991, quoted by Rosa 2018, n. 114.

“a backward state”. These places were thought to preserve the way of life that had been common in earlier times, when Greeks were supposed to be mainly peasants.<sup>18</sup> Their religious life is at the core of what he called “popular” or “folk” religion.

Nilsson adopted an intermediate position between the two main interpretive trends of his time. I have already touched upon the first, already present in 1921 but more clearly criticized in the new book: Nilsson could not subscribe to an anthropological perspective obsessed with the supposedly most “primitive” aspects of Greek rituals; the so-called Cambridge ritualists like Jane Harrison were the target of this criticism.<sup>19</sup> The second one was addressed to studies of ancient Greek religion based solely on literature and philosophy: Walter Friedrich Otto and his *Götter Griechenlands* (1929) were the targets in this case, and perhaps also, but at another level of appreciation,<sup>20</sup> Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff with his *Glaube der Hellenen* (1931–1932). For von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, the Greek perception of the divine was mediated by the great authors and philosophers; for Otto, the Greek gods were an objective reality.<sup>21</sup> Reviewing the *Dionysos* of Otto (1933), Nilsson concluded: “*Dieses Buch ist nicht Wissenschaft, wie ich Wissenschaft begreife und begreifen muss, sondern Prophetentum.*”<sup>22</sup>

The contrast with both perspectives, “primitivistic” and “literary”, is clear in Nilsson’s introduction: “In trying to understand Greek popular religion we must start from the agricultural and pastoral life of the countryside, which was neither very advanced nor very primitive culturally.”<sup>23</sup> He then followed the figure he calls “our peasant” in the various aspects of his simple life by identifying the ritual activity in which he was supposed to participate, for example, in order to obtain rain, to protect his stock, and to sustain fertility. Thus, Zeus, Hermes, Artemis, the Nymphs, and local heroes were considered very “popular”. According to Nilsson, “this aspect of Greek religion was certainly not the highest but it was the

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<sup>18</sup> Nilsson 1961, 5: “Many parts of Greece, however, remained in a backward state, ... they still preserved the mode of life which had been common in earlier times, when the inhabitants of Greece were peasants ...”

<sup>19</sup> Nilsson 1961, 3. On that “school”, see Calder 1991 and Ackerman 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Nilsson 1961, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Gagné 2019, 75–80.

<sup>22</sup> Nilsson 1935, 181 (I owe the quotation to Gagné 2019, 76).

<sup>23</sup> Nilsson 1961, 5.

most enduring ... It was a religion of simple and unlettered peasants, but it was the most persistent form of Greek religion.”<sup>24</sup>

In the following chapters, he addressed the Eleusinian mysteries, considering them as the most impressive flourishing of what was initially “popular” religion. Then he dealt with domestic cults assimilated to “popular” cults and discussed what he called “a popular religion of the townspeople”,<sup>25</sup> that is, in fact, “popular” in the slightly different sense of what is suited to or intended for the general masses. The Great Dionysia or the Panathenaia were closely connected with such a popular taste. In the last chapter, he refers to superstition and magic, as well as oracles and predictions, as practices considered particularly “popular”. Interestingly, the conclusion of the book (p. 139) referred once more to the metaphor of the grove with tall trees that can be easily removed and replaced, and an undergrowth of brushwood and grass that is persistent and difficult to eradicate. However, in this case, the metaphor goes further. The undergrowth can change:

... only if the mother soil is changed. This took place in ancient Greece, as it does today, through the rise of new conditions of life, industry, commerce, democracy, and intercourse between peoples and classes. Popular religion changes accordingly. In backward parts of the country, however, the old mode of life and the old popular religion persisted and have continued to persist down to our own day, but they are giving way again because conditions of life are once more being profoundly changed.<sup>26</sup>

This point of view explains why Nilsson was mainly interested in cult (*Kult* in his masterpiece in German), even if the words *belief* in his books in English, or *Glaube* in his work in German, are not absent. However, he made a strong distinction between the popular beliefs rooted in cult and the religious thought evidenced in high literature (*der Glaube* studied by von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff), the latter either philosophical speculation or myths that he considered as a domain of little religious value.

Nilsson continuously denounced two main tendencies in the study of ancient religions: searching for their core in obscure origins supposedly shared by all humankind, as well as limiting the religious experience

<sup>24</sup> Nilsson 1961, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Nilsson 1961, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Nilsson 1961, 139.

of an ancient community to the testimony of its intellectual leaders. In some sense, later scholarship has given him due credit, on the one hand by contesting the scientific value of evolutionary primitivism, and, on the other, in developing a still-growing interest in the religious experience of segments of the ancient population, such as women, children or slaves, who were completely absent from the evidence favoured by Classical philology as practised by eminent scholars such as von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff or Otto.<sup>27</sup> However, Nilsson's work was also a product of his time and the peasant of his "popular religion" was mainly a free male citizen.

With regard to primitivism, he fought against the anthropological evolutionary model exemplified by the totemistic global explanation, but in his model the European peasant has essentially taken the place of the exotic "primitive" people. Nilsson rooted his own primitive religious stage in the agrarian past of the Greek communities, which could be uncovered and identified in "backward" parts of the land. The obsession regarding origins, which is typical in the 19th century (and for a part in the early 20th), was still present in his work, though in a particular register, and Nilsson was perfectly aware of it. In the 'Letter to Professor Arthur D. Nock on some fundamental concepts in the Science of Religion', first published in 1949, he strongly advocates for evolutionism because "there is always a development, always an evolution".<sup>28</sup> Even if he is opposed to transposing the series preanimism, dynamism, animatism, animism, polydaemonism, polytheism, monotheism from a logical to a historical basis, he writes to his American colleague that he can still be called an evolutionist, not in the "logical" sense of the word, but for its historical implications.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding the two-tiered model of religious experience—in brief, "popular" and "higher" religion—, Nilsson implicitly inherited the model proposed by the 18th-century philosophers mentioned before, but with an important difference: he strongly valued what he considered the common Greek religious experience, "popular religion". Contrary to the Enlightenment, he did not despise this level of religious practice as *absurdités ridicules et grossières, ignorance, imagination*. Nevertheless, he still perceived Greece as a special case because Reason—*Logos*—inherited by Western Europe was supposed to have emerged there during the Archaic

<sup>27</sup> Nilsson 1961, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Nilsson 1960, 346.

<sup>29</sup> Nilsson 1960, 347.

period. The “high” Greek civilization modified and overlaid primitive elements during the course of its history.<sup>30</sup> For example, fabulous monsters or creatures swallowing others without injuring them are said to be “extremely common in primitive tales”, but were “too extravagant for the rationalistic Greeks”.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, all these tales survive “only in remote regions of the mythology”.<sup>32</sup> “The distinguishing feature of the Greek mind, its rationalism, led to a selection, a purification, and a remodelling of the too fantastic elements in the folk-tale material; the Greek myth has arisen from the folk-tale through a process of humanization”.<sup>33</sup> But this is not *Kult*, only fantasy without real connection to “the religion of the masses”,<sup>34</sup> in other words with “popular” religion. In order to escape the ambiguities of myth and the intellectual discussions about its lack of rationality already present in ancient texts, the study of cult offers a firmer ground for his investigation.

## Paradoxes and perplexities

There is an intriguing paradox in Nilsson’s choice of the designation “popular religion”. In his project to reintroduce the neglected agrarian past and present into the study of Greek religion, he labelled as “popular” or defined as originally “popular” so much evidence that we may well wonder what is not popular in the ancient Greek religion reconstructed by the Swedish scholar. Let us take the example of Eleusis. Why do the mysteries receive a whole chapter in Nilsson’s book? The main reason for this extensive treatment is the agrarian symbolism of the ceremonies, closely related to the expected intervention of Demeter in the fields and the growing of cereals. The link between the supposed origin of the mysteries and the preoccupations of simple peasants is the main criterion for their inclusion in the demonstration. If we cease to consider its obscure origins, do we get a better understanding of the Eleusinian mysteries by

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<sup>30</sup> Nilsson 1961, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Nilsson 1952, 50.

<sup>32</sup> Nilsson 1952, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Nilsson 1952, 49. Also on p. 75: “Their marvellous qualities of mind, their rationalism, and clarity of thinking could brook no ambiguity or confusion. Hence was born among them that independent searching after truth which is Science, the greatest offspring of the spirit of Greece.”

<sup>34</sup> Nilsson 1940, 3–4.

labelling them as popular?<sup>35</sup> If we take into account the two possible meanings of the word “popular”, respectively as what is “right or appropriate for the taste and knowledge of ordinary people” and what is “liked or enjoyed by a large number of people”, we understand that the second may explain why Nilsson included the mysteries, the Panathenaia or the Dionysia in his book, even though it is the first which is endorsed by Nilsson in his book. Even if one were to accept the idea that “popular” is an interesting interpretative tool, there would be a methodological flaw in the choice to include these festivals in the presentation.

Another example allows us to widen the discussion. According to Nilsson, “the cult of the heroes corresponded to a popular need which was so strong that it continued to exist in Christian garb”.<sup>36</sup> He does not justify this statement but its implicit reference is to the cult of the saints. In fact, the scholarly treatment of the cult of the saints provides an interesting point of comparison as far as “popular” religion is concerned. As Peter Brown has remarked it in his study of these cults,<sup>37</sup> a kind of intellectual barrier and contemptuous attitude has kept them out of the discussion in early Christian and medieval scholarship. Considered as a form of popular religion, close to the cult of the “pagan” gods, they have been relegated to the realm of those naïve beliefs sustained by the uneducated masses. As timeless survivals, these cults were associated with an immemorial pagan past which was impossible to eradicate. Just as Nilsson treated Greek rituals inherited from the past, Brown takes these cults seriously. But he does so in a completely different way: for him, these beliefs and cults were not particularly “popular” and are not to be taken as the inert sediment of the past; rather, they constituted a major area of innovation in the social context of Late Antiquity. Newly formed communities in all parts of the Roman Empire, led by educated people, actively promoted relations with the saints, even if inner conflicts and various levels of adherence and expectations were at stake within these communities. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same discourse could be held concerning the mysteries celebrated for centuries in the *telesterion* of Eleusis: attended by a large part of the population, from Athens and elsewhere, actively promoted by educated people, the performance itself was certainly felt and lived in many different manners according to the various expectations, levels of education and individual sensitivity of the initiates. But we can

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<sup>35</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* online, s.v. “popular”.

<sup>36</sup> Nilsson 1961, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Brown 2015.

readily see how difficult it is to encapsulate such a complexity behind the simple label of “popular”. If we push the ideas developed by Nilsson to their limits, the totality of the Greek religious system belongs to the category of “popular” religion, since this system is essentially based on traditional ritual actions, performed by various groups and across many different social circles, from the domestic realm to the whole city.

## The “popular” today: lived ancient religion, the individual, the “personal”

Nilsson’s work was authored just before the Second World War. More recently, Jon Mikalson has published three books respectively titled *Athenian popular religion* (1983), *Honor thy gods. Popular religion in Greek tragedy* (1991), and *Greek popular religion in Greek philosophy* (2010). What does “popular” mean in current scholarship?

The point of departure of *Athenian popular religion* is the following assertion: “The general character of Greek religion and the nature of the ancient sources that happened to survive have made it surprisingly difficult to determine the religious beliefs and attitudes of the ‘ordinary’ ancient Greek”.<sup>38</sup> Popular religion is therefore the religion of the ordinary people. Some evidence informs us about what these ordinary people *did* in cult practice, “but scarcely ever offer[s] any sure indication of what the individual *thought* or *believed* when he performed these cultic acts”.<sup>39</sup> Mikalson investigates “what Nilsson term[ed] the popular religion of the townspeople”, using the evidence of the orators, the inscriptions, and the historian Xenophon.<sup>40</sup> The result is a very interesting book on some representations of the Athenian people in terms of their relation to the gods, their communication with them. But in closing the book, one still wonders: what exactly is an “ordinary” Athenian? The second book addresses the corpus of tragedies, looking for what could be considered to be “popular” in them. This book is built on the conclusions of the first, considering that tragedy can give flesh and blood to the skeletal structure of the belief system of the ordinary Athenian, but only after a strong cleansing of artificial aspects disconnected from real life. The same process was achieved in 2010 in the book on Greek philosophy.

<sup>38</sup> Mikalson 1983, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Mikalson 1983, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Mikalson 1983, 5.



These books are very important to anyone studying ancient Greek religion but the criticism I addressed above to Nilsson's implicit reference to a different or "higher" level of religious experience also applies, though in a different fashion. In the "popular" reconstruction of beliefs about the gods, Mikalson makes a strong distinction between deities honoured in "lived religion" and the deities of poetry—specifically tragedy, in his second book—who could be considered as artificial literary creations bearing little relationship with the gods worshipped by the Athenians. As early as 1997, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood aired some strong objections to this kind of dichotomy, which implies that an Athenian made a complete differentiation between Athena on the stage of the theatre, and the goddess worshipped in the city, not to mention between Athena Polias, Athena Skiras, Athena Hygieia, Athena Nike, and so on. I must admit that I endorse her critical remarks because, if Mikalson is right in his claim that the Athenians—and others—considered each cultic persona of a given deity as a separate deity, then Greek polytheism becomes impossible to understand.<sup>41</sup> This point is too complex to address here.<sup>42</sup> I only want to stress that, for me, there are no such things as "real" or "artificial" religions, the first of which would be "popular", and the other based only on intellectual speculation (such as in tragedy). Tragedy and its audience are placed at the core of an interactive process that encompasses various aspects of the representation of the divine, and which creates multifaceted echoes in the spectators' minds.

Scholarship implies a succession of trends or even fashions in addressing certain topics. Each field of research generates successive—or contesting—interpretive models and is subject to what may be succinctly defined as "paradigm shifts". The study of ancient Greek religion is no exception to this process, but it can happen that allegedly innovative perspectives end up tasting like old wine in new wineskins. The notion of "popular" is no longer fashionable today and I have explained above why I am not completely convinced by the efficacy of this analytical tool. But something quite similar has surfaced in the past two decades that echoes some of the complaints of Nilsson. This time, the reaction does not consist, at first sight, in regretting the lack of interest in "popular" *versus* "higher" religion, but in

<sup>41</sup> On this specific point, see Versnel 2011, 519–525 *et passim*.

<sup>42</sup> For elements of this discussion, see Pirenne-Delforge & Pironti 2015; Pirenne-Delforge 2020. I thank Jon Mikalson, as a speaker at the 2017 symposium, for patiently and kindly listening to my arguments. We do not agree, but that is the game of scientific debate between colleagues when esteem and respect are held.

deploring the omission, by scholarship in the second half of the 20th century, of concerns for personal and emotional attitudes to divinities, or even the neglect of “belief” in favour of cult performance. In this respect, the *polis* religion model and the emphasis on the collective aspect of religion are criticized for limiting the study to a ritual and collective framework, which was imposed by the city on the remaining sectors of society.<sup>43</sup> The agrarian “popular” religion of Nilsson has been shown the door, but some more sophisticated substitutes, such as “beliefs” and “individualization” are returning through the back door. By labelling these concepts as “substitutes” to popular religion, I only mean that they are invoked in the study of ancient religions for counterbalancing what is considered as the dominant view and the hegemonic impact of collective agency and authority. This parallels how Nilsson emphasized the so-called “popular” side of ancient religion in reaction against what he saw as an inadequate focus only on the “higher” levels of ancient society.

This is not the place to discuss at length the scholarly shift of the past two decades, which has highlighted the need to address individual or personal agency in Greek religion, nor the question of “belief” in ancient polytheism.<sup>44</sup> Instead of theorizing about all these topics, I will take a concrete and telling example to conclude this paper.

In the first chapter of his *Greek folk religion*, titled ‘The countryside’, Nilsson referred to the Nymphs, considered as “female spirits of nature” who were particularly honoured in caves.<sup>45</sup> In 1901, extensive excavations were held at Vari on Mount Hymettus in an impressive cave devoted to the Nymphs,<sup>46</sup> to which Nilsson briefly refers in the following terms: “In the fifth century BC, a poor man of Theraean origin, Archedemos, who styles himself ‘caught by the nymphs’, planted a garden, decorated the cave, and engraved inscriptions on its walls.”<sup>47</sup> In Nilsson’s view, Archedemos was necessarily a “poor man” and the cult he founded was a clear indication of “popular” religion. Today, we know that this cave is a complex sanctuary of the Nymphs, Pan, Charis, Apollo and perhaps the Mother of the gods

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<sup>43</sup> On this controversy, see e.g., the contrasting views of Parker 2011, 57–61; Rüpke 2011; Versnel 2011, 119–137; Kindt 2012; Pirenne-Delforge 2016 (about J. Kindt’s book). On the Roman side, see Scheid 2013.

<sup>44</sup> See Pirenne-Delforge 2020, and, above, the contribution of Stavrianopoulou to the present volume (pp. 48–52).

<sup>45</sup> Nilsson 1961, 13–14.

<sup>46</sup> Weller 1903.

<sup>47</sup> Nilsson 1961, 14.

(attested only by a relief in this case), organized by Archedemos who added a garden and a dance floor to a cult site that had already been frequented a century earlier.<sup>48</sup> The dedicant from Thera must have been a metic, a foreigner residing in Athens, whose skills as a mason or a quarry worker are illustrated by a relief in the cave. Was he particularly poor? Probably not and this evaluation by Nilsson may be the result of his own vision of what “popular” means. But Archedamos’ self-characterization as *numpholeptos*, “seized by the Nymphs”, clearly attests to an individual link to the Nymphs and to a religious experience forming the basis of the transformation of a pre-existing cult cave into a complex sanctuary divinely sanctioned by the goddesses themselves.<sup>49</sup> Failing to find here the mark of the “popular” religion of a poor man, have we instead found a trace of “personal religion” beyond “*polis* religion”? Replying in the affirmative would be tantamount to projecting another culturally determined framework on the evidence. As Fritz Graf rightly wrote it in a paper about the limits of individualization, “whether conscious or not, the choices [of Archedemos and others] had to resonate with the wider group at whose centre, or in whose margin these men were, if they wanted to succeed”.<sup>50</sup> An individual choice, even made on the emotional basis of nympholepsy, was not tantamount to personal religion or even to a personal belief as such. *Polis* religion was full of individual choices but its background was the adherence to a ritual framework shared by the whole community. In this case, the proof lies in the long-lasting frequentation of the shrine of the Nymphs (until the 2nd century AD).

I do not want to underestimate the fact that, in a complex society, religious practices and conceptions are clustered and distributed in different ways across the society.<sup>51</sup> I am perfectly conscious that, for a very long time, the importance of literary texts in the study of ancient Greek religion was overestimated. When I started working on Aphrodite for my Ph.D. at the end of the 1980s, I deliberately chose to focus on cult—exactly the same point of view as Nilsson—because I intuitively felt that the goddess honoured in her sanctuaries was not only the so-called “goddess of love” or “goddess of sexual attraction” evidenced by Greek poetry, epic, lyric or tragic.<sup>52</sup> But this view was still inspired by a strict dichotomy between liter-

<sup>48</sup> *IG* I<sup>3</sup> 974–981 (mid-5th century BC). Cf. Graf 2013, in particular on pp. 123–127, with previous bibliography.

<sup>49</sup> *IG* I<sup>3</sup> 980: Ἀρχέδημος ὁ Θ|ηραῖος ὁ νυμφ|όληπτος κτλ.

<sup>50</sup> Graf 2013, 132.

<sup>51</sup> Stowers 2016, 140.

<sup>52</sup> Pirenne-Delforge 1994, 11.

ary and intellectual culture *versus* everyday life. I progressively changed my mind<sup>53</sup> and, today, I am convinced that strict dichotomies do not do justice to the various intersections between different kinds of material.

Narrative traditions and cults were rooted in a shared knowledge; these were specific languages echoing in the minds of Greek people offering modest sacrifices in their house, attending great festivals, sitting in theatres and viewing tragedies, comedies, or telling stories to their children. Strict dichotomies give us the temporary illusion that we understand the various levels of a polytheistic culture. But they risk detracting and exonerating us from the need to deeply understand another culture, where poetry was deeply involved in ritual performance and where even philosophy was taught in religious associations honouring deities. I take into due account the necessity of searching for the religion of everyday social exchange and the modest attestations of individual piety. But individual agency is not personal religion or the manifestation of a “belief” which would be “beyond the *polis*”. The picture is probably more complicated and certainly much more interesting.

The moral of this long story, from Nilsson’s popular religion to the contemporary search for personal religion and beliefs, is rather simple: strict dichotomies can help when considering some issues that were underestimated and deserve to be studied, but they miss their mark when they apply culturally determined frameworks such as “popular” religion or “personal” beliefs to the ancient evidence.

Let us leave the last word to Nilsson, about fashions in scholarship, brought by every period:

During my long life, I have seen so many theories of the science of religion accepted as a solution of the problems, dominate and even dominate tyrannically, contested, and brought down to their proper proportions, that I have learned the necessity of criticising *le dernier cri* too. I am not inclined to fall down and pay respect exclusively to the idols of the day.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Thanks to successful collaboration with my colleague Gabriella Pironti, whose own book on Aphrodite (2007) attests to the fecundity of an “integrated” method. Cf. Pirenne-Delforge & Pironti 2022, for such an approach to the study of the goddess Hera.

<sup>54</sup> Nilsson 1960, 381.

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