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Ancient Greek Religion

SECOND EDITION

JON D. MIKALSON

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ANCIENT GREEK RELIGION

Jon D. Mikalson

Second Edition

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This second edition first published 2010 © 2010
Jon D. Mikalson

Edition history: 1e (2005, Blackwell Publishing Ltd)

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148–5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Mikalson, Jon D., 1943–

Ancient Greek religion / Jon D. Mikalson. — 2nd ed.

p. cm. — (Blackwell ancient religions)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-8177-8 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Greece—Religion. 2. Religion— History. I. Title.
BL783.M55 2010
292.08—dc22

2009005597

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PREFACE

This book is intended to serve as a first introduction to the fascinating subject of ancient Greek religion. It will be, I hope, a place to begin but certainly not to end. The study of Greek religion is wondrously complex, involving hundreds of deities of several different types who were worshiped over a period of nearly two thousand years in hundreds of ancient Greek city-states. The deities, their myths and rituals, and even the beliefs about them varied, in greater or smaller degrees, from city to city and from century to century. The complexity of Greek religion is understandably daunting for those first approaching it, and I attempt here to make the subject more intelligible initially by a variety of strategies. First, I limit my descriptions largely to Greek religion as it was practiced in the Classical period, from about 500 to 323 B.C.E. I do not attempt to describe the developments over many preceding centuries that led to its form at this time, and I devote only Chapter VIII to distinctive features of religion in the Hellenistic period (323–30 B.C.E.). Secondly, I center much of the discussion on Athens because the evidence – literary, artistic, archaeological, and epigraphical – is many, many times more abundant for Athens than for any other one Greek city–state and this allows us to see better the coherency of the Greek religious system. But even a full account of religion in classical Athens would require several volumes, and for this introduction I have chosen to direct attention first to some basic concepts, then to a select group of deities and cults which, each in its own way, represent important aspects of Greek religious life, then to the religion as practiced in the context of the family, the village, and the city–state, and, finally, to the religious

life of the individual. For each deity, ritual, belief, and myth I have attempted to concentrate on what seems to me essential for the purpose at hand, leaving aside many of the questions and uncertainties, variant ancient accounts, and details that accompany many of these topics. Also, we intend to give a general account, and to virtually any general statement about Greek religion some exceptions may be found. In addition, readers should be forewarned that many of the statements made on every page have been challenged at one time or another by one modern scholar or another. And, finally, this book is largely descriptive, based on the ancient evidence that survives, and it limits discussion of modern theoretical interpretations of these complex subjects. Over the last hundred and fifty years a number of theoretical systems to explain major elements of Greek religion have come and sometimes gone. These theoretical approaches hold great interest in themselves, but one needs to know what the Greeks themselves did and said about their religion before one can adequately apply or evaluate the various theoretical systems to explain it all. The books and essays suggested in **Further Reading** at the end of each chapter will begin to open up for readers the full complexity of these subjects, but we need a place for those interested in the subject to begin, and I hope that this book offers that.

An excellent place to pursue further the topics, deities, and religious practices introduced in this study is the third edition of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1996) which offers concise discussions by experts along with some basic bibliography. An abbreviated version of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* which collects the entries on Greek and Roman religion and myth is *Oxford Dictionary of Classical Religion and Myth* (Oxford, 2003), edited by E. Kearns and S. Price. For more advanced study I offer, at the end of each chapter, suggestions for **Further Reading.** These include

references to other general accounts of Greek religion, and they include especially J.N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (GR) (Oxford, 1994), W. Burkert, *Greek Religion (GR)* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), S. Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks (RAG)* (Cambridge, 1999), and L.B. Zaidman and P. Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City (RAGC)* (Cambridge, 1992). Each of these books is valuable in quite different ways, and in **Further Reading** I give references to them when they offer a fuller account or a different interpretation of the topic at hand.

In recent years lonely travelers in the ancient world have been given many companions, collections of essays on numerous topics, each entitled *Companion to,* and in many there is an essay on Greek religion suitable for the readers of this volume. Some are focused on periods, as *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles* (Samons II, 2007), with an essay on “Athenian Religion in the Age of Pericles” by Boedeker. Two, so far, treat the Hellenistic period: *The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World* (Bugh, 2006), with “Greek Religion: Continuity and Change in the Hellenistic Period” by Mikalson and A *Companion to the Hellenistic World* (Erskine, 2005), with “Hellenistic Religion” by Potter and “The Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers” by Chaniotis. Some treat individual ancient authors, such as *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus* (Dewald and Marincola, 2006), with “Herodotus and Greek Religion” by Scullion or *Brill’s Companion to Herodotus* (Bakker, De Jong, and Van Wees, 2002), with “Religion in Herodotus” by Mikalson. There are many other such companions, some published and some forthcoming, on topics such as Greek tragedy and tragedians, Greek philosophy and philosophers, Greek law, and a wide range of other topics, and the essays in them on Greek religion can be read with profit. T.J. Smith and D. Plantzos are preparing A *Companion to Greek Art,* which will have several essays placing the various genres of

Greek art into their religious contexts. A *Companion to Greek Religion* (ed. D. Ogden, Oxford, 2007), is devoted entirely to Greek religion and has a wealth of valuable essays, and references to it hereafter will be abbreviated to Ogden, *Companion.* I give references to these companions and similar writings second rank in the suggestions for **Further Reading.** And under **Further Reading** I offer lastly some references to more detailed accounts of the individual topics to be found in scholarly articles, books, and other collections of essays. Of special note here is R. Parker's *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford, 2006) (abbreviated as Parker, *Polytheism),* a new and very valuable study of many aspects of religion in Athens. Also new in this edition are references to M. Robertson, A *History of Greek Art* (Cambridge, 1975), abbreviated as Robertson, A *History,* a venerable and exceptionally valuable work, well illustrated and still in print, treating in two volumes the history and development of the various forms of Greek art, often in their religious context. New, too, are references, for sculpture, to the two volumes of A. Stewart, *Greek Sculpture* (New Haven, 1990), abbreviated as Stewart, *Greek Sculpture.*

The suggestions for **Further Reading** form in no sense a complete bibliography for each topic, but each item will lead the reader to many further treatments of the topic. The reader will also find now and in the future much of use and interest in a new series, "Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World," published by Routledge Press. So far have appeared K. Dowden, *Zeus* (2006); E. Griffiths, *Medea* (2006); L. Edmunds, *Oedipus* (2006); C. Daugherty, *Prometheus* (2007); and R. Seaford, *Dionysus* (2007), and many more are promised. Finally, those interested in the religious environment in which Greek religion developed and thrived and in shared and distinctive features among the religions of Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, Israel, Anatolia, Iran,

Minoan Crete, and Etruria will find most helpful *Religions of the Ancient World:* A *Guide* (Oxford, 2004), edited by S.I. Johnston. Virtually all of these books have appeared since *Ancient Greek Religion* was first published in 2004, and they are but one of several indicators of the strong and growing interest in all aspects of ancient Greek religion.

Some discussion in the text is based on quotations or summaries of important ancient writings, and I strongly suggest that some of these be read in their entirety. These include the *Homeric Hymns* to Demeter and to Apollo, Euripides' *Bacchae* and *Ion,* Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae,* and Pausanias' descriptions of Olympia in Books 5 and 6 of his *Description of Greece.* For the *Iliad, Odyssey,* and the poems of Hesiod and Pindar I use the translations of Richmond Lattimore *(The Iliad of Homer,* Chicago, 1951; *The Odyssey of Homer,* New York, 1965; *Hesiod,* Ann Arbor, 1959; *The Odes of Pindar,* Chicago, 1947); for the *Homeric Hymns,* the translations of Apostolos N. Athanassakis *(The Homeric Hymns,* Baltimore, 1976). All other translations are my own.

I throughout offer what would seem proximate equivalents in dollars for the ancient Greek monetary sums, at the rate of one drachma to $100. In fifth–century Athens one drachma was roughly the average daily wage, and by our conversion a lower– to middle–class Athenian would earn approximately $30,000 a year. For the English spelling of ancient Greek names I follow, with the exception primarily of epithets of the gods, the conventions of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*[3].

Alfred Bertrand at Blackwell Publishing first suggested this book to me, and he and his colleagues Angela Cohen and Simon Alexander have contributed much to making it a reality. Robert Garland read the whole of this manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions and corrections, as did the anonymous reader for Blackwell Publishing. Kevin

Clinton kindly commented on the Eleusinian material. I am especially indebted to my colleague Tyler Jo Smith who helped me find, select, acquire, and properly describe the illustrations. For assistance with the new, final chapter (Chapter IX, Greek Religion and Greek Culture), I am most grateful to John Camp, Jenny Clay, Carol Lawton, and, again, Robert Garland and Tyler Jo Smith. Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to the many undergraduate and graduate students of the University of Virginia who over the years have, quite unbeknownst to them, shaped the form of this book even before it was thought of as a book.

ABBREVIATIONS

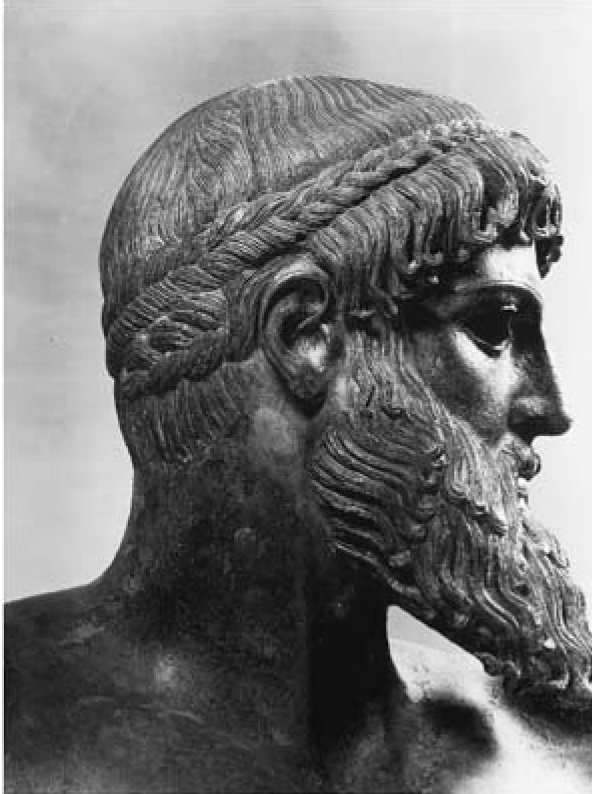
Bremmer, *GR*	Bremmer, J.N., *Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1994)
Burkert, *GR*	Burkert, W., *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA, 1985)
Hansen	Hansen, P.A., *Carmina Epigraphica Graeca* (Berlin, 1983)
IE	Engelmann, H. and R. Merkelbach, *Die Inschriften von Erythrai und Klazomenai,* 2 vols. (Bonn, 1972–3)
IG	*Inscriptiones Graecae*
Ogden, *Companion*	Ogden, D., A *Companion to Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2007)
Parker, *Polytheism*	Parker, R., *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford, 2006)
Price, *RAG*	Price, S., *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge, 1999)
Robertson, A *History*	Robertson, M., *A History of Greek Art* (Cambridge, UK, 1975)
Stewart, *Greek Sculpture*	Stewart, A., *Greek Sculpture* (New Haven, 1990)
Zaidman and Schmitt	Zaidman, L.B. and P. Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the*
Pantel, *RAGC*	*Ancient Greek City* (Cambridge, 1992)

AN OVERVIEW: GREEK SANCTUARIES AND WORSHIP

Location
The Altar
The *Temenos*
Priests and Priestesses
Sacred Days
Dedications
Statue and Temple
Worship

Greeks most often prayed and made offerings to a deity in that deity's own sanctuary. In this chapter we begin by constructing such a sanctuary, first introducing the essential elements and then adding features found in many sanctuaries. In its simpler form, with an altar and a surrounding fence, our sanctuary will be typical of thousands of sanctuaries in the city–state of Athens alone and of many more thousands elsewhere in the Greek world; in its developed state, with a temple and monumental statue of the deity, it will be similar to only about twenty major sanctuaries even in Athens, the richest of the Greek city–states at this time.

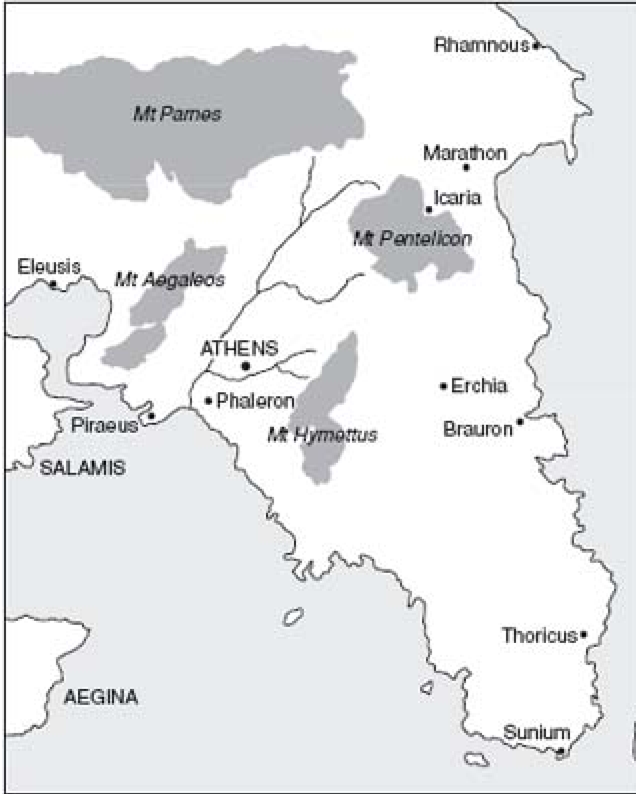
Figure 1.1 Head of a bronze statue of a god, usually identified as Poseidon or Zeus and dated to about 460 B.C.E. For a photograph of the complete statue, see Figure 1.7. It was recovered from the sea near Cape Artemisium off the east coast of Greece in the 1920s and is now in the National Museum, Athens. Courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens, neg. no. Hege 850.



Ours will be a sanctuary of Poseidon, the god who, for all Greeks, was, among other roles, the master of the sea. For Athenians in the fifth century Poseidon was particularly important because their navy was instrumental in establishing and maintaining their empire and because trade by sea, especially the importation of the grain necessary to feed their people, was central to their economy. The Athenians were the most sea–oriented of all Greeks in this period, and for them Poseidon assumed a special importance.

Our sanctuary of Poseidon will be located at Sunium, on the summit of a promontory on the southernmost tip of the Athenian coastline. This promontory overlooks a large expanse of the Aegean Sea which Athenian warships and freighters regularly traversed as they made their way to and from the Athenian harbor at Piraeus. We have chosen this cult site for our Poseidon because the Athenians chose it for theirs. By the middle of the fifth century the Athenians had at Sunium a fully developed sanctuary of Poseidon, with a temple visible still today from many miles out at sea. We re–create, hypothetically, the beginnings and development of this sanctuary, not in an attempt to describe and explain the features of the real cult of Poseidon there but to establish a model for the nature and development of Greek sanctuaries in general. We shall later see many modifications to this model as we examine the cults of Athena on the Athenian Acropolis, of Demeter at Eleusis, of Apollo at Delphi, and several others, but it will be useful to have a model of typical sanctuaries in mind before we turn to the exceptions.

Map I.1 Map of Attica.



Location

Figure 1.2 View of the Aegean Sea from the *cella* of the Temple of Poseidon at Sunium. Photograph by the author.

Why did the Athenians locate a cult of Poseidon at just this spot on the Athenian coast? How were cult sites in general selected? Some sites apparently had a natural mystique. Mountain tops were often sacred to Zeus, the god of the sky and the weather. Springs, the source of the water always in short supply in Greece, and caves almost always attracted cults. Springs and caves were often assigned to the Nymphs. The god Pan, himself often associated with Nymphs, was given a cave on the north slope of the Acropolis when his cult was established in Athens about 490. Artemis preferred rural sanctuaries, also often associated with sources of water. A water source, necessary for medicinal purposes, may have played a role in locating Asclepius' sanctuary on the south slope of the Acropolis in 420/19. Places touched by the gods themselves, as by Zeus with his lightning or by Poseidon with his trident on the Athenian Acropolis, also became sacred. By contrast to these naturally numinous places many cult sites, especially

in urban areas, seem to have been selected based on the deity’s function. Athena, the armed patroness and protectress of Athens, had her major sanctuaries on the Acropolis, the city’s fortified citadel. The cult sites of Zeus Boulaios (of the Council), Zeus Eleutherios (of Freedom), and Apollo Patroos (Ancestral) were clustered on the west side of the Agora (marketplace), in the Classical period the governmental and archival center of Athens. Similarly Hephaestus, the god of fire, shared a temple with Athena in an area of Athens that housed foundries and blacksmiths. The siting of these sanctuaries as well as of many in new cities founded as colonies suggests that often the Greeks were willing to locate sanctuaries, as we do churches, on the basis of land available and to fit them into a larger urban design. These sanctuaries were built in places appropriate to the gods’ activities in civic affairs, not in a place sacred, as it were, by nature. In these cases the site was made sacred by the establishment of the sanctuary. The reasons for choices of sites for cults surely varied widely, and we can see patterns but no one pattern. Myths, as we shall later see for the cult of Apollo at Delphi, sometimes explained that the deity selected the location of a cult site. Many of the smaller cult sites throughout the Greek world also had myths explaining their origins, but these myths do not survive, and we now have no way of knowing why they were where they were.

For our cult of Poseidon, the site of Sunium seems an obvious choice, with its commanding view over one of the major sea lanes to and from Piraeus, the last such vantage point before the ships disappear from view on the open sea and the first point from which hostile ships would be sighted. It may also be that this site was initially chosen or later developed especially because of its frontier location, with the intent of laying permanent claim to this remote spot and establishing Poseidon as a potent defender against

the form of attack most likely at this border. In the late fifth century, in fact, the Poseidon sanctuary at Sunium was enclosed within a large military fort with considerable naval installations.

The Altar

The altar serves to receive offerings to the deity, and since giving offerings was a fundamental form of worship for the Greeks, the altar was the one essential physical component of cult. An altar may, in fact, serve as the litmus test for religious cult: if a deity had one, we can be sure that he or she was worshiped and was a part of practiced Greek religion. If a deity did not have an altar, that deity was most probably a creation of the literary tradition or of folklore, not of the religious tradition, and did not receive sacrifice, prayer, or dedications. A few figures such as the personifications Eirene (Peace) and Agathe Tyche (Good Fortune) made the transition from literary to religious figures in the fourth century, and we recognize that transformation in Athens when altars are built and dedicated to them.

Some altars were simple pits *(bothroi*) or low-lying structures with openings to the bare earth *(escharai*). Liquid offerings such as water, milk, and honey were poured into these. These altars were for deities and divine figures thought to dwell *in* or *beneath* the earth, and, presumably, the offerings were thought to seep down into the earth to their recipients. Poseidon is, however, an *ouranic* ("of the sky") deity who dwelled and moved about above ground, in the sky. The offerings to these deities are directed upwards, towards the sky. Their altars *(bomoi*) needed to have a flat surface on top to hold the offerings, but otherwise could assume a variety of shapes – usually rectangular but sometimes square or cylindrical. Altars ranged greatly in

size, often in proportion to the size of the sanctuary itself. Simple altars might be waist high, a block of stone a meter square or a cylinder equally tall. Monumental altars were often features of panhellenic sanctuaries. The altar of Zeus at Nemea, for example, was a rectangular structure over 41.5 meters long and 2.42 meters wide and that of Zeus at Olympia was 38.1 meters in circumference at its base and 6.7 meters high. Such were, however, very much the exception.

Since the ouranic deities were in the sky, for the offerings to be visible to them and for the savor of the burnt offerings to reach them their altars had to be outdoors, not within a building and covered by a roof, and so altars within a temple were a rarity. And, finally, altars of the ouranic deities were oriented to the east. The priest, as he made the offerings or sacrifice, stood on the west side of the altar, facing east. Offerings to ouranic deities were made before noon, often at dawn, and as he performed his rituals the priest would be looking towards the rising sun.

Figure 1.3 A marble altar, dedicated by the Athenians to Aphrodite and the Charites in 194/3 B.C.E. It was discovered by the Agora in Athens and is now on display in the National Museum. Photograph courtesy of the National Museum, Athens, inv. no. 1495.

The altar will be the first element of our sanctuary of Poseidon. Let us make it a block of stone. In other cities we might well use limestone, but in Athens, with its mountains of marble, we can make it of this beautiful and durable stone. Let us make it of Pentelic marble, about 1¼ meters high and wide, two meters long, and with a molding around the top edge. We are obliged to carve Poseidon's name on it, so that both the god and visitors know it is his. Each altar is so designated with the god's name or with the name of a specific group of gods because there were no "common" altars to serve all the gods. If one wished to make an offering to Athena, one must offer on her altar. If, as in our case, the offering is to Poseidon, it must be made on his altar. An offering to Poseidon on an altar of Athena would be received by and would influence neither deity. Our altar is of stone because it must endure the elements. On occasion we will want to burn offerings on it, and then we will put on the altar a metal pan to protect its surface from the fire and ashes. We will orient our altar, as always, to the east, but, by chance, in our sanctuary at Sunium it will appropriately