

Olympian versus Chthonian Religion*

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Ancient Greek polytheism was determined by the contrast between Olympian and Chthonian religion. This postulate, coined in the 19th century and still influential today, holds that the antithesis between the Olympians, or the heavenly gods (Ouranioi), and the Chthonians, or the powers of the earth and the underworld, developed into a quasi-archetype in ancient Greece. On this point most scholars in the field agree, at least in general terms. However, which of the gods or cults are to be ascribed to the Olympians and which to the Chthonians is still a matter of debate. But there is another, more general problem that still remains unsolved, namely, the question whether the antithesis Olympian versus Chthonian captures the essence of ancient Greek religion. In fact the ancient testimonies do not provide enough evidence for a clear distinction between Olympian cult and Chthonian cult. The following is a survey of the history of the scholarly debate on the issue in general and on the textual evidence in particular.

Those contemporary scholars who regard the contrast between Chthonian and Olympian gods as of fundamental validity for the re-

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ligion of the ancient Greeks¹ usually refer to the book *Psyche*, written by Erwin Rohde (1845-1898), Friedrich Nietzsche's friend, and published almost exactly one hundred years ago.² Rohde was not the first to elaborate the antithesis systematically, although this is commonly believed.³ Like the famous Apollonian/Dionysian polarity put forward by Nietzsche,⁴ the Chthonian/Olympian polarity originated in the studies of myths pursued by the Romantics and was already regarded as canonical in the early decades of the 19th century. It was Friedrich Creuzer's (1771-1858) concepts that remained authoritative. His arguments are to be found in his monumental work, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, which appeared in 1810. Creuzer's formulation was accepted without reservation even by those scholars who disagreed with his derivation (inspired by Friedrich Schlegel) of ancient religious ideas from the sayings of Indian priests and the "oriental"

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- ¹ See especially W. Burkert, *Greek Religion. Archaic and Classical* (Cambridge, Mass.-Oxford 1985), 199-203, 428f. (= *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* [Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-Mainz 1977], 306-312). Cf. also A. Henrichs, "Namenlosigkeit und Euphemismus: Zur Ambivalenz der chthonischen Mächte im attischen Drama", in *Fragmenta Dramatica. Beiträge zur Interpretation der griechischen Tragikerfragmente und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*, edd. Annette Harder and H. Hofmann (Göttingen 1991), 162f. Jean-Pierre Vernant and his school rather favour the polarity between "political" and "non-political" gods and cults, cf. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne* (Paris 1974), 118f. and 120 (summarizing): "le divin est ambigu et opaque".
- ² E. Rohde, *Psyche. Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* (1st ed. I 1890; II 1894) I-II² (Freiburg i. B.-Leipzig-Tübingen 1898; repr. Darmstadt 1974), especially I, 204-215 ("Der Seelenkult I: Cultus der chthonischen Götter").
- ³ So, for instance, I. Weiler, *Griechische Geschichte. Einführung, Quellenkunde, Bibliographie*² (Darmstadt 1988), 150.
- ⁴ Nietzsche, by the way, found a parallel not between this polarity and the antithesis Olympian/Chthonian, but between the polarity Apollonian/Dionysian and the opposition between "olympische Götterordnung der Freude" and "ursprüngliche titanische Götterordnung des Schreckens" (explicitly recalling K.O. Müller, see below [n. 9], 181f.), cf. *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872), Chapter 3 (= *Nietzsche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* III.1, edd. G. Colli and M. Montinari [Berlin-New York 1972], 32).

doctrine of the “two principles”. Creuzer already spoke of “Olympian religion” and distinguished it from the worship of the “powers of the depth of the earth”, which he regarded as an earlier phase in the development of religion.⁵

During the years 1824-40 this antithesis was most systematically elaborated by Karl Otfried Müller (1797-1840), who unfortunately is almost forgotten today, although his work still provides an inexhaustible store of innovative ideas.⁶ Unlike Creuzer, Müller did not believe that the key to understanding the Greeks was to be found in the “Orient”. He was the first to devote his life’s work to the study of the distinctiveness of ancient Greek local cults and myths. The conviction that myths originate in rites can also to be traced back to him.⁷ The only overarching synthesis that he recognised embodied the contrast between the cult of the Olympians and that of the Chthonians; he explicitly called the latter “Chthonic religion”.⁸ Again unlike Creuzer and later scholars, he thought that both cults dated back to the same remote time and in fact were “originally” unseparated. He claimed, however, that these cult forms, in the course of their historical development, were practised in different places and times, and were attributed to different deities and rites. Müller

⁵ Cf. G.F. Creuzer, *Deutsche Schriften* (1836-1858) II.2, 188f.; *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen I-IV*³ (1837-42; repr. Hildesheim-New York 1973 = *Volkskundliche Quellen. Neudrucke europäischer Texte und Untersuchungen V: Sitte und Brauch*, ed. H. Bausinger), 137 (1st ed. 1810-12).

⁶ On K.O. Müller’s impact on later scholarship cf. A. Momigliano, *Settimo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome 1984), 271-286; G. Arrigoni, “Il maestro del maestro e i loro continuatori; mitologia e simbolismo animale in Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger, Karl Otfried Müller e dopo”, *Annali Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 14 (1984), 937-1019; W. Unte, “Karl Otfried Müller”, in *Classical Scholarship. A Biographical Encyclopedia*, edd. W.W. Briggs and W. M. Calder III (New York-London 1990), 310-320.

⁷ K.O. Müller, *Geschichten hellenischer Stämme und Städte I: Orchomenos und die Minyer* (Breslau 1820), 161ff.; *idem, Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie* (Göttingen 1825; repr. Darmstadt 1970), 235 [179].

⁸ K.O. Müller, “Eleusinien” (1840), in *Kleine deutsche Schriften über Religion, Kunst, Sprache und Literatur, Leben und Geschichte des Alterthums II*, ed. E. Müller (Breslau 1848; repr. Hildesheim 1979), 291.

argued that the cult of the Olympians, especially that of Zeus, Athena and Apollo, was directed towards the “bright upper world” (*lichte Oberwelt*)⁹ and could be characterized as “serene, simple, uniform” (*heiter, einfach, gleichmäßig*). The cult of Chthonian gods, on the other hand, was concerned with the earth and its interior, as well as with the growth and decay of plant life. This would account for the expression in chthonic cult practices of such contradictory emotions as “melancholy and delight” (*Wehmuth und Entzücken*), the mingling of “sadness” and “bliss” (*Trauer, Wonne*), and the “unity of death and life”, the most powerful representation of which was to be found in the mystery cults of Demeter and Dionysos and their orgiastic ecstasy.¹⁰

Erwin Rohde, then, was not the first¹¹ to recognise the “dual nature”¹² — nowadays the term “ambivalence” is used — of the Chthonians and their cults. But unlike Müller, Rohde accepted Creuzer’s doctrine of historical sequence in which the chthonic cult represents an earlier and the Olympian cult a later phase of development. According to Rohde, after the “Homeric age” the worship of the Chthonians, and with it the worship of the dead, returned in full force. The adoration of the “distant” Olympians was no longer emphasised, but what was important was service to the local gods of the earth and the underworld who were felt to be “close”. Despite the attempts of the poets and philosophers to reflect upon religion in a universal manner, Rohde argued that it was service to the Chthonians that formed the basis of religious practices, both for in-

⁹ *Ibid.*, 289. Cf. K.O. Müller, *Aeschylos Eumeniden. Griechisch und Deutsch. Mit erläuternden Abhandlungen über die äussere Darstellung, und über den Inhalt und die Composition dieser Tragödie* (Göttingen 1833), 189.

¹⁰ Cf. Müller (n. 8), 289-291; see also Müller’s review (1830) of Lobeck’s *Aglaophamus* of 1829 in *Kleine deutsche Schriften* II, 64: “... und überhaupt die Extreme der Empfindung von dem Cultus der Olympischen Götter ausgeschlossen, dem der Chthonischen Gottheiten ... zugetheilt waren”.

¹¹ So Henrichs (n. 1), 163; although he refers (166, n. 11) to Müller as well, to whom one would “ultimately” owe the insight concerning the ambivalence of the Chthonians, he does not mention Creuzer’s pioneering role at all.

¹² On this topic see also Creuzer, *Symbolik* (n. 5), e.g. I, 168.

dividuals and for the polis-communities, and that this had the most profound and enduring influence on Greek cultic experience.¹³

The theory of the differences between the Chthonians and the Olympians and their historical sequence was taken up by later scholars, although often in a schematic way.¹⁴ Special mention should be made of Jane Harrison (1850-1928). In her book *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* of 1903 she argued that the transition from Chthonic to Olympian religion (with reference to Bachofen's *Mutterrecht* of 1861¹⁵) coincided with a transition from matriarchy to

¹³ Cf. Rohde (n. 2), 212-215. Similarly Harrison (n. 16), and, explicitly or implicitly referring to Rohde and Harrison, S. Wide, "Chthonische und himmlische Götter", *ARW* 10 (1907), 257-268; W.F. Otto, *Die Götter Griechenlands. Das Bild des Göttlichen im Spiegel des griechischen Geistes*⁶ (Frankfurt am Main 1970), 19-42 (1st ed. 1929).

¹⁴ The Chthonians as originally an exclusive synonym for the beings of the underworld and the powers of death: L. Preller, *Demeter und Persephone, ein Cyclus mythologischer Untersuchungen* (Hamburg 1837), 189ff.; H.D. Müller, *Ares* (Göttingen 1848); *Mythologie der griechischen Stämme* I-II (Göttingen 1857-1861), especially II, 40 and cf. the criticism by Rohde (n. 2), 206n. (recently the "Erkenntnis der Bedeutung des Glaubens an chthonische Mächte für die griechische Religion" has been erroneously ascribed to H.D. Müller by R. Muth, *Einführung in die griechische und römische Religion* [Darmstadt 1988], 4, n. 6); P. Stengel, "Chthonischer und Totencult" (1895), in *Opferbräuche der Griechen* (Leipzig-Berlin 1910; repr. Darmstadt 1972), 126-145 (Rohde [n. 2], 241, n. 2 refers to him); *idem*, *Die griechischen Kultusaltertümer*³ (Munich 1920), 125; cf. also W.F. Otto (n. 13), 21, who pretends that the "Olympian religion pushed aside but left in the background" the elder divine world formed by the gods of the earth and the dead (see, for instance, the criticism of U. Bianchi, *La religione greca* [Torino 1975], 36, n. 1), or L. Gernet, who characterizes the Olympians (in distinction especially to Dionysos) "par une opposition à la mort, par une répulsion pour la mort", in *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique*² (Paris 1976; the article was originally published in 1953), 86.

¹⁵ On Bachofen's concept of the Chthonian as the correlate of the Dionysian cf. A. Baeumler, *Das mythische Weltalter. Bachofens romantische Deutung des Altertums*, with an afterword: "Bachofen und die Religionsgeschichte" (Munich 1965), 195-314 (= "Bachofen der Mythologie der Romantik", introduction to the Bachofen-reader, *Der Mythos von Orient und Occident* [1926]; cf. also *ibid.*, 149-158 on K.O. Müller as forerunner of Bachofen; H.-J. Heinrichs, ed., *Materialien zu Bachofens "Das Mutterrecht"* (Frankfurt am Main 1975).

patriarchy, and she ultimately denied the Olympians any religious significance.¹⁶ Contemporary historians of ancient religions have, on the whole, discarded such theories of origins and avoided descriptions of religion in terms of the theory of evolution. The antithesis between Chthonian and Olympian is hardly used today to describe religious development. As a structural model it does persist, however, perhaps in its most obvious form in Walter Burkert's handbook.¹⁷

In the course of the last few decades doubts have occasionally arisen, generally unheeded, regarding the usefulness of the terms Chthonic and Olympian for purposes of classification and even whether they can be clearly distinguished.¹⁸ Towards the end of his life, Wilamowitz thundered against "the popular slogan 'chthonic'" (*das beliebte Schlagwort chthonisch*).¹⁹ Arthur Darby Nock warned in 1944 that "the term 'chthonic' should be used with caution".²⁰

¹⁶ See especially Jane E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*³ (1922; repr. New York 1975), Chapter I: "Olympian and Chthonic Ritual", 1-31 (1st ed. 1903). On Harrison's structural model of an antithesis between "Chthonic" (connected with female, religious, elder, local) and "Olympian" (connected with the corresponding oppositions) see Renate Schlesier, "Prolegomena to Jane Harrison's Interpretation of Ancient Greek Religion", in *The Cambridge Ritualists Reconsidered. Illinois Classical Studies Suppl. 2*, ed. William M. Calder III (Atlanta 1991), 210-218 (abbreviated German version: "Prolegomena zu Jane Harrison's Deutung der antiken griechischen Religion", in *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik*, edd. Hans G. Kippenberg and Brigitte Luchesi [Marburg 1991], 220-228). Cf. also, on Harrison's more differentiated position before 1903: Henrichs (n. 1), 164, n. 8.

¹⁷ See Burkert (n. 1).

¹⁸ For fundamental and substantiated doubts regarding the assumption of a specific Chthonian cult in distinction to a specific Olympian cult, see already A. Fairbanks, "The Chthonic Gods of Greek Religion", *AJPh* 21 (1900), 241-259, with the conclusion (259): "we are not justified in describing any one type of worship as distinctly chthonic".

¹⁹ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* I (1931; repr. of the 3rd ed. Darmstadt 1959), 244, n. 3; cf. 1 and 206f. On Wilamowitz' reservation concerning the "chthonic" interpretation cf. O. Kern, *Die Religion der Griechen* III (Berlin 1938; repr. Berlin 1963), 315.

²⁰ A. D. Nock, "The Cult of Heroes" (1944), in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* II², ed. Z. Stewart (Oxford 1986), 576, n. 3.

Jean Rudhardt, in his exhaustive study, *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuse et actes constitutifs du culte dans la Grèce classique* of 1958, found no evidence that Greek cult terms and rites could be applied solely either to the Olympians or to the Chthonians.²¹ In fact, Rohde himself had already noticed that “the competencies of the Ὀλύμπιοι and those of the χθόνιοι were not always strictly differentiated”.²²

II

With such reservations in mind, we now confront the problem of identifying the precise evidence for the alleged predominant antithesis between Olympian and Chthonian in Greek religion. One of the main testimonies is provided by Porphyry, in *The Grotto of the Nymphs* 6 (fourth century C.E.). This evidence, already regarded as canonical by Creuzer,²³ formed the basis of W.K.C. Guthrie’s schematic account in *The Greeks and their Gods* (1950), 221f.²⁴ and can still be seen as influencing Burkert’s refined structural model.²⁵ The Olympian gods, according to Porphyry, have temples (ναοί)

21 J. Rudhardt, *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuse et actes constitutifs du culte dans la Grèce classique* (Geneva 1958); cf. J. Casabona, *Recherches sur le vocabulaire des sacrifices en grec des origines à la fin de l’époque classique* (Aix-en-Provence 1966); see also (on the wineless sacrifices) F. Graf, “Milch, Honig und Wein. Zum Verständnis der Libation im griechischen Ritual”, in *Perennitas. Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich* (Rome 1980), 209-221; *idem*, *Nordionische Kulte. Religionsgeschichtliche und epigraphische Untersuchungen zu den Kulturen von Chios, Erythrai, Klazomenai und Phokaia. Bibliotheca Helvetica Romana* 21 (Rome 1985), 26-29.

22 Rohde I (n. 2), 273, n. 1.

23 See Creuzer III (n. 5), 763f. Rudhardt ([n. 21], 251, n. 9), however, regards the passage as a late and only theoretical classification.

24 G.E.R. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy. Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (Cambridge 1966), 41f., referring to Guthrie, understood the “distinction between Olympians and Chthonic deities” as “fundamental religious antithesis”; see also P.F.M. Fontaine, *The Light and the Dark. A Cultural History of Dualism I: Dualism in the Archaic and Early Classical Periods of Greek History* (Amsterdam 1986), e.g., 56.

25 Burkert (n. 1), 199f.

and high altars (βωμοί), whereas the Chthonian gods and heroes have ἑσχάραι, hearths, low altars. This schematic contrast can hardly be proved by the earlier literary tradition, for instance by some often-quoted passages from the tragedies.²⁶ Nor can this contrast be clearly confirmed by the archaeological or epigraphical evidence.²⁷

The passage in Porphyry has sometimes been associated with another text, Isocrates' *Philippos*, dating to the 4th century B.C.E. It has often been claimed that the antithesis between Olympian and Chthonian is unmistakably expressed in this text. Here Isocrates tries to persuade the Macedonian king of the Athenians' *philanthropia* and assures him that it was customary among the Greeks, both for individuals and for the city-states, to erect temples and altars to the Olympian gods, while the others — whose names are more difficult to manipulate and who are associated with misfortunes and acts of revenge — receive not prayers and sacrifices (θυσίαι), but rather ἀποπομπαί. Nevertheless, the assumption frequently made by scholars that the latter term applies to the Chthonians can nowadays no longer be supported.²⁸ Furthermore,

²⁶ Cf. for instance Aeschylus, *A.* 88-91 (*bomoi*, with fires, for the "upper" gods and for the "chthonioi"). In the Homeric epics only Apollo and Athena have temples, cf. Emily T. Vermeule, *Götterkult. Archaeologia Homerica* Bd. III, Kap. 5 (Göttingen 1974), 106f. Gods designated by the epithets Chthonios or Chthonia (like Zeus, Hermes, Demeter, Ge, Hekate) in historical cult did have temples and altars no less than other gods.

²⁷ Cf. C.G. Yavis, *Greek Altars* (St. Louis 1949); E. Vermeule (n. 26), 38f. (altars in Mycenaean cult), 132-158 (sanctuaries of the Homeric age).

²⁸ For the use of the Isocrates passage as evidence for the distinction between Olympians and (chthonic) "Sühnegöttern", see Rohde (n. 2), 273, n. 1 (referring to K.O. Müller). Harrison (n. 16), 8 regards it as "indefeasible evidence" for the opposition between "Olympian and Chthonic ritual"; for similar dogmatic use ("echter und lebendiger Volksglaube"), see Stengel, *Opferbräuche der Griechen* (Leipzig-Berlin 1910; repr. Darmstadt 1972), 29; Burkert (n. 1), 200 with 428, n. 12. Wilamowitz I (n. 19), 27 is cautious and critical, as are L. Gernet and A. Boulanger, *Le génie grec dans la religion* (Paris 1932), 287f.; see also Nock (n. 20), 599-601; Rudhardt (n. 21), 252. On this issue cf. R. Schlesier, "Apopompe", in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* II, edd. H. Cancik, B. Gladigow and M. Laubscher (Stuttgart 1990), 38-41.

the fact that the passage appears in a political-ideological speech should have warned scholars against regarding propaganda as historical religious fact.

There remain two passages from Plato, dating to approximately the same time as Isocrates' speech, which explicitly refer to the Chthonians and the Olympians (or the heavenly ones) and unambiguously distinguish between them. In *Laws* 828c the Athenian says that one should not mix together the cults of the Chthonians and the Olympian gods. This statement, however, cannot be accepted as evidence for an actually existing distinction between the cults since it prescribes an innovation; it rather implies that the mingling of cults which Plato here as elsewhere denounces most consistently was the general rule.

In an earlier passage of the same work (717 a-b) Plato says that the purpose of piety (εὐσέβεια) would best be served by first giving honors (τιμαί) to the Olympians and the gods of the polis, and only after them to the Chthonians.²⁹ This sequence with its related vocabulary (τὰ ἄρτια, "the customary", for the Chthonioi, and τὰ περιττά, "the extraordinary", for the Ouranioi), is actually mentioned in Porphyry's *Biography of Pythagoras* 38. Porphyry identifies the sequence in which τὰ περιττά precede (and not, as everywhere else, follow) τὰ ἄρτια with Pythagoras' revolutionary demand, which was practised, however, only by Pythagoras' adherents. In fact the rule in the city-cults was just the opposite: sacrifice was made first to the heroes and nymphs and only afterwards to the polis-gods.³⁰ Hence neither passage in Plato in any way represents a clear separation between Chthonians and Olympians.

²⁹ Previously these passages were taken as canonical testimonies for the real cultic practice (e.g., in K.F. Hermann, *Lehrbuch der gottesdienstlichen Alterthümer der Griechen* [Heidelberg 1846], 54 with 56, n. 6; similarly Henrichs [n. 1], 162f. and n. 2); since Nock (n. 20), 595, they have been understood as "theoretical hardening" and as the expression of a philosophical attempt to construct hierarchies, cf. Rudhardt (n. 21), 252 nn. 1 and 2; Burkert (n. 1), 202 with 429, n. 39; but see already Harrison (n. 16), 349f. with, n. 3.

³⁰ Cf. S. Eitrem, *Opferritus und Voropfer der Griechen und Römer* (1915; repr. Hildesheim-New York 1977), 468; Burkert (n. 1), 202. See also A. Brelich, *Gli eroi greci. Un problema storico-religioso* (Rome 1958).

One more group of testimonies should to be discussed, one which seems to arouse the least suspicion. These are some passages in the Attic tragedies where the Olympian and the Chthonic gods are explicitly distinguished. Yet even in these cases there is no evidence of a *cultic* separation, much less a polarity between the Chthonians and the Olympians. The most important are two passages in Aeschylus. In the entrance song of the *Agamemnon* (89-91), the chorus describes the sacrifices that are just being offered: "to all the gods of the polis, the high ones (ὑπᾶτατοι), the Chthonians, the heavenly ones (οὐράνιοι), and the gods of the market place (ἀγοραῖοι)"³¹ (here, all of them have altars, βωμοί, on which fire is burning). Although this passage enumerates different groups of gods, it does not specify their differences or distinguishing characteristics. The rituals belonging to these groups of gods are not differentiated at all, but rather explicitly identified with each other.

The second passage comes from the beginning of Aeschylus' *Suppliants* (24ff.) where the chorus of the Danaids pray to the divine powers of the city and of the land to which the women had fled. They pray to the upper gods (ὑπᾶτατοι) and to those "highly honored (βαρύτιμοι) Chthonians who inhabit the graves", and thirdly to Zeus Soter.³² This passage, too, provides only a distinction between groups of gods and functions relevant to a particular situation; it does not provide evidence for the derivation of contrasting cults. It may also be mentioned that this passage does not imply, as has occasionally been assumed, that the Chthonians always live in graves³³ — an assumption that is not in accord with other evidence.

III

As a preliminary result of this survey it may be stated that the somewhat puzzling textual evidence sometimes distinguishes between "higher" and "lower" gods, between "heavenly" and "earthly"

³¹ Cf. the commentary of J. Bollack, *Agamemnon* I.1 (Lille 1981), 98-101.

³² Already K.O. Müller, *Eumeniden* (n. 9), 188, interpreted the *Suppliants* passage as evidence for a combination, actually practised, between Chthonian und Olympian cult.

³³ Cf. above, note 14.

divinities, but in no case are these groups separated into two different *religions*. Rather both groups are worshipped together and can even jointly be the object of the same ritual. Nowhere is there evidence for the practice of two fundamentally different, contrasting cult-forms. Nevertheless, Karl Otfried Müller in his work on Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, published in 1833, maintained his assumption that there actually was such a contrast, and many scholars have followed him since then. Müller gave the following formula: "Whereas the Olympian gods, in their serene sublimity, demand for themselves only the sweet vapours of the sacrificial bones and fat, the Chthonic beings wish to take part in life by feeding on flesh and blood and demanding the whole sacrificial animal for themselves".³⁴ In 1946, this thesis was further elaborated by Karl Meuli, who contrasted "the Olympian food sacrifice" with "the Chthonic sacrifice of destruction".³⁵ Yet we must heed Walter Burkert's reservation of 1966: "This convenient dichotomy must however not be overestimated".³⁶ In the cult of the dead and of the heroes, food-offering is actually the rule, burnt offerings the exception.³⁷ Combinations were frequently made. In his book *Homo Necans* (1972) Burkert writes, with respect to these facts: "we are dealing with an antithesis within the ritual, not with two fundamentally

³⁴ "Während die Olympischen Götter in ihrer heitern Erhabenheit nur den süßen Dampf der Knochen und des Fetts vom Opfer für sich fordern, begehren die Chthonischen Wesen durch Fleisch- und Blutkost am Leben Antheil zu nehmen, und das Opferthier ganz für sich zu haben": K.O. Müller, *Eumeniden* (n. 9), 180, see also 139-147; similarly Rohde (n. 2), 243, n. 1, 273, n. 1; Stengel (n. 14) and H. Diels, *Sibyllinische Blätter* (Berlin 1890), 69ff. especially refer to Müller and Rohde.

³⁵ Cf. K. Meuli, "Griechische Opferbräuche", in *Phyllobolia für Peter von der Mühl zum 60. Geburtstag am 1. August 1945* (Basel 1946), 185-288 (with reference to palaeolithic hunting behaviour) = *Gesammelte Schriften* II, ed. T. Gelzer (Basel 1975), 907-1021.

³⁶ W. Burkert, "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual", *GRBS* 7 (1966), 87-121; the quotation is taken from p. 103; cf. *idem* (n. 1), 428, n. 8.

³⁷ So already (*contra* K.O. Müller, H. D. Müller, Stengel *et al.*) Fairbanks (n. 18); cf. also M.P. Nilsson, *Griechische Feste von religiöser Bedeutung mit Anschluss der attischen* (1906; repr. Darmstadt 1957), 428 with n. 2; Ada Thomsen, "Der Trug des Prometheus", *ARW* 12 (1909), 460-490 (especially 481-490); Nock (n. 20), 575-602; Burkert (n. 36), 103f., n. 36.

different and separate things".³⁸ Similarly, this applies to bloodless or wineless sacrifices on the one hand and animal sacrifices on the other.³⁹ Yet these divergencies do not correspond to the contrast between Olympian and Chthonian gods, but rather belong to the cult of one and the same deity and may even occur during the same ritual.⁴⁰

While most contemporary scholars have finally accepted such a dynamic conception of ancient Greek cults and gods, we should not forget to give the insights of Creuzer and Müller their due credit. They cannot be quoted unreservedly by those who believe in the universal concept of duality. In Müller's *Prolegomena to a Scientific Mythology* (1825), we find the following sentence, which is of fundamental importance: "A consistent dualism, a division of the world into two halves, a good and a evil one, is not known [in ancient Greek religion], at least among the majority of cults".⁴¹ Creuzer, in turn, points out in his book *Symbolik*, that not only were the Chthonians perceived as twofold beings, both mild and awful, but the Olympians as well could be experienced as both pleasing and

³⁸ W. Burkert, *Homo Necans. The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1983), 9, n. 41 (17n. in the German edition [Berlin-New York 1972]).

³⁹ Cf. above, note 21; Stengel's assumption that all bloodless or wineless sacrifices were "chthonic" and the addressees "chthonische Mächte bzw. Gottheiten", was refuted already in 1900 by Fairbanks (n. 18). More recently, referring to Stengel (and others): Graf 1980 (n. 21), 217f., *idem* 1985 (n. 21), 26-29, where he suggests understanding wineless and bloodless sacrifices as "chthonic" deviation from the "Olympian" norm; criticism of this structural approach: A. Henrichs, "The 'Sobriety' of Oedipus: Sophocles *OC* 100 Misunderstood", *HSCP* 87 (1983), 87-100, especially 97.

⁴⁰ Cf. W. Burkert, "Opfertypen und antike Gesellschaftsstruktur", in *Der Religionswandel unserer Zeit im Spiegel der Religionswissenschaft*, ed. G. Stephenson (Darmstadt 1976), 181 (summary of his earlier studies on sacrificial sequences); see also Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *La religion grecque* (Paris 1989), 21-25.

⁴¹ "Einen durchgeführten Dualismus aber, eine Scheidung der Welt in eine gute und eine böse Hälfte, kennen wenigstens die meisten Culte nicht": K.O. Müller, *Prolegomena* (n. 7), 356; similarly Vernant (n. 1), 223: the "conscience religieuse" of the Greeks "ignorait tout d'une éventuelle dualité d'origine".

frightening.⁴² For this fact, he found an extremely apt formula: “Alle Gottheiten waren umschlagend (παλίνοτροποι)”.⁴³

In the works of both Creuzer and Müller, such profound understanding of ancient Greek religion, however, forms a strange contradiction to their statements about the assumed contrast between Olympian and Chthonic religion. Their concept of an “Olympian religion” was still entirely based on the classicism of the 18th century and its idealised picture of the “serene Homeric world of gods”; such an odd perspective cannot be accepted any longer. But their concept of the “Chthonic religion” already carries the germ of a variegated picture of ancient Greek religion in general, with its wealth of tensions or inconsistencies and with the obviously manifold meanings of ritual practices and religious representations. This picture increasingly demonstrates the essential distinctiveness of both Olympian and Chthonian Gods and their cults. Hence the terms “Chthonic cult” or “Chthonian religion” should be discarded because they are misleading. They do not describe deviations from some existing norm. They cannot be used to characterize specific cults unrelated to Zeus and Hera, Apollo and Artemis, Ares and Aphrodite, Athena, Poseidon and Hephaistos, or Hermes, Dionysos and Demeter. Each divinity, in each region or city, in the context of each festival or holiday, at each single ritual stage, is worshipped with any one of his or her different epithets in a special form, and yet there are indeed characteristics that transgress locality and time. This was Karl Otfried Müller’s pioneering insight⁴⁴ which made a great impact at the time but which is only now gradually regaining the attention that it deserves. As Madeleine Jost writes in her exhaustive study of the *Sanctuaries and Cults of Arcadia* (1985): “Each deity has its own realm of predilection, neither realm nor function being

⁴² Cf. Creuzer, *Symbolik* I (n. 5), 170-172.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 170; cf. also 171: “Selbst der heiterste Grieche musste vor jedem seiner Götter eine geheime Furcht empfinden; in ihrem Wesen lag etwas Dämonisches. Jede Epiphanie einer ethnischen Gottheit hatte etwas Unheimliches, und die empfundene Götternähe, selbst an den fröhlichsten Festen, etwas Schreckhaftes. Immer fühlte sich der Mensch einer dunkelen unberechenbaren Naturmacht gegenüber.”

⁴⁴ Cf. K.O. Müller, for instance *Prolegomena* (n. 7), 239ff.

exclusive”.⁴⁵ This, she emphasises, corresponds to “the flexibility of the distribution of divine functions in Greek religion”.⁴⁶ Hence crude systems and narrow syntheses are obviously doomed to failure. “It is not reasonable to assume that one can reach a global vision”.⁴⁷

Still, the greatest obstacle for the exact understanding of the complexity and polyvalence of ancient Greek religion is the fragmentary state of our sources of knowledge. We shall never have more at our disposal than *membra disiecta*.

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⁴⁵ Madeleine Jost, *Sanctuaires et cultes d'Arcadie* [École Française d'Athènes. *Études Péloponnésienes* 9] (Paris 1985), 557; similarly already Gernet-Boulangier (n. 28), 269.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 557.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 559.