

A Journey in Pictures through Greek Religion

By Ursula Kampmann, © MoneyMuseum

The respects in which the Western world, characterised by Christianity, and Islam differ and resemble one another are today an almost continuous subject of discussion. But where Christianity has its own roots has almost been forgotten. What is meant here is not, for example, the story of Jesus or the Biblical story of the creation – no, it is the diverse world, bursting with life, of the Greek gods. A good reason, therefore, to recollect them. For although long ago cast out of Olympus, the ritual and ceremonies practised to worship them in earlier times have been preserved in the Christian faith to this day: in every Easter lamb and in every divine service in a church the "heathen" rituals and ceremonies from the time of antiquity reappear ...

What is God?



Domenico Novello Malatesta (*1418, †1465) kneeling before the cross to thank god for rescuing from a battle. A bronze cast medal by the Italian medallist and painter Pisanello (*c. 1395, †c. 1455)

The religions revealed in a book have a very similar answer to this question, even if a Muslim, a Christian and a Jew each calls his god by a different name: god is omnipotent, god is just, god rules heaven and earth and looks down on human beings, judges whether they behave well or badly, rewards and punishes, creates harmony in a world in which the weak are completely at the mercy of the strong.

What is god for an ancient Greek?



An eagle killing a hare. A hemidrachm from Akragas (Agrigento, Sicily), around 410 BC

A Greek at the time of colonisation (7th/6th centuries BC) would have found these demands made on the gods extremely strange. For him a god was not a person, but an experience. Our coin relates in a picture the manner in which the god Zeus could intervene in the lives of men. A person experienced the superior power of the gods in just the same way as the hare that is peacefully nibbling at a blade of grass and is then carried off in the claws of an eagle without any chance of defending itself. The human being feels powerless in god's hands, as powerless as those who today crash in an aeroplane because fire breaks out in an engine. Even today we still believe we can sometimes feel the hand of omnipotence in our life.

The gods give success



A charioteer urging on his victorious team. A gold stater of the Macedonian king Philip II (359-336 BC), minted in Pella

The Greeks did not believe in the justness of their gods. Their own experience taught them something different: they saw people who were successful at everything and others who always had misfortune. From this they concluded that it was not one's own endeavours that brought results, but it was the gods who apportioned success or failure. They had their favourites, whom they helped, so that everything ended happily.

Thus the favour of the gods soon became a political argument. And this favour could be tested quite simply: in a contest the victor was the person a god supported. That is why Philip II of Macedonia here on this coin depicts his victory in Olympia in order to convince the Greeks that they should make him – the man favoured by Zeus – to be their hegemon in the campaign against the Persians.

Encounters with the gods



The head of Athena wearing an Attic helmet with a laurel wreath. A tetradrachm from Athens, around 440 BC

Every god appeared in a different form. The people experienced the divine powers in a variety of ways, and the areas in which a god could help people were completely different. They experienced Aphrodite in the scintillating pleasure the two sexes are capable of giving each other, Apollo appeared in the clarity someone feels when his will is in harmony with that of the gods, Dionysus provided the sexual drive, which the Greeks did not take a negative view of, but which they gave way to from time to time in order to enjoy it to the full.

The favourite goddess of many Greek towns, however, was Athena. She was the constructive force, provided wise thoughts, came up with the answer. Her favourite was someone like Odysseus, who with his agile manner of thinking always found a way out of every dangerous situation.

The diversity of the gods



The head of Athena wearing a Corinthian helmet. A gold stater of the Macedonian king Alexander III the Great (336-323 BC), minted in Babylon

We should not imagine that in Greece there was only one Athena who was worshiped by various towns, no, every town had its special relationship to a very distinct Athena who had helped the town in a mythical or real situation. For this is what constituted the nature of the gods; they were useful to men and revered to the same extent as they had benefited the town.

Athena and Athens



The head of Athena wearing an Attic helmet with a laurel wreath. A tetradrachm from Athens, around 460 BC

A myth relates that Athena and Poseidon had a disagreement about which of them should be allowed to protect the city of Athens. A competition was to be held to decide between them: whoever could give the Athenians the better present was to protect Athens. Poseidon gave a spring and Athena the olive tree, which supplied the Greeks with oil, one of their most important staple foods. Athena had benefited the city more than Poseidon, so the Athenians decided to make Athena their city deity.

Athena and Corinth



The head of Athena wearing a Corinthian helmet, behind it a rose as a control mark. A stater from Corinth, 370-340 BC

The citizens of Corinth also related a myth about how Athena had helped one of their citizens. Bellerophon wanted to ride Pegasus. Only with Athena's help did he succeed, as she gave him the bridle which allowed him to tame Pegasus.

Many of these sagas have been lost. But we may assume that every single Greek town had its own sagas and myths which related how the town's deity at some time in the past had intervened in the life of the citizens.

Greek nature deities



The head of Arethusa, the nymph associated with springs, surrounded by dolphins. A tetradrachm from Syracuse (Sicily), around 485 BC

Since the character of the gods was useful for a town, not only the so-called Olympian gods were revered, but also nature deities. After all, a freshwater spring like the Arethusa on the Syracusan peninsula Ortygia was invaluable when a town was beleaguered. Its water bubbling up from the ground could mean survival and its drying up death. No wonder that it was worshiped as a god.

Divine people



The founder of Tarento, Taras, seated on a low chair, holding a spindle in his right hand and a cantharos in his left hand. A nomos from Tarento (Calabria), around 470 BC

Not only were natural phenomena ritually revered. People, too, who had determined the fate of a town could be included in its pantheon. The founder, who had once led the colonists away from their old home, was buried after his death as a tutelary god for the future on the agora, the marketplace, in the centre of his new foundation.

Fortune becomes god



Tyche of Antioch seating on a mountain, on her head wearing a mural crown and holding in her hand ears of corn and the poppy head. Before her swims the river god Orontes. A tetradrachm from Antioch on the River Orontes (Syria), 197-217 AD

Since the beginning of Hellenism, since about the middle of the 4th century BC, the people noticed ever more frequently that their old town deities stood no chance of achieving anything against the war machinery of the rulers; when the Romans had proved to the Greeks that half of the gods could no longer be relied on, many towns introduced the cult of a new deity into Greece.

They began to venerate Tyche, the fortune of the town, like a deity. She was to show herself well disposed towards the town – when their own gods were no longer capable of doing so.

What does a god look like?



Artemis of Ephesus standing facing. A cistophor, minted in Ephesus (Ionia), 41-54 AD

Even though the statues for the temples of these new deities were made by the best sculptors of their time, most of the known sacred cult figures did not resemble the marble gods which we admire in our museums today. The most venerable statues of gods were made of natural materials like wood or stone, and a myth recounted how the cult figure had found its way into the town.

Such cult images were integrated into the religious ritual, they were dressed, washed, anointed and carried round in processions through the town. Once a year the wooden statue of Artemis of Ephesus, for example, was the centre of an ancient oriental fertility rite, in which the testicles of the sacrificed bulls were attached to the upper part of her body – which can be clearly seen in the picture on the coin. A few days later these gruesome attachments were removed, and the cult statue was carried in a ritual procession to the sea in order to wash it.

Where do the cult images come from?



Tyche of Lesbos holding in her arm the cult statue of the Dionysus Phallen. A bronze coin from Mytilene (Lesbos), 197-217 AD

Only in the case of very few cult images do the records indicate how they found their way into the sanctuary. The short staff that Tyche holds in her left arm on this coin is in fact the greatest god in the Island of Lesbos. One day fishermen had found there a strangely shaped piece of driftwood in their nets. They took it on land and sent an envoy to Delphi to hear from the oracle what was behind this piece of wood. Pythia reported to them that this was in truth a god, the Dionysus Phallen, which in future would protect the Island of Lesbos and that they should revere it for this purpose.

Where do the gods live?



The Temple of Zeus in Neocaesarea on the Black Sea. A bronze coin from Neocaesarea, 193-211 AD

If people wanted to venerate a new god the first thing that had to be done was to assign him an area in which he could live. For this purpose a piece of land in the town was marked off from everyday life as a sacred area. There not only one god but also many could be worshiped. The gods were not jealous of one another and lived peacefully together in the same sacred area. This piece of land was set apart from all important human activities: neither death nor birth were allowed to impinge on it.

There could be a temple in such a sacred area, but this was not necessarily so. It mainly served to store the cult objects when they were not being used in a ritual. Unlike a Christian church, it was not at the centre of the ritual, but could only be entered by the believers on certain days.

Where do man and god meet?



The river god Hypsas in heroic nudity, recognisable from the small bull's horn in his hair, sacrificing a libation above an altar from a patera; in his left hand holding a branch, in the field on the right an ivy leaf (a sign of the town of Selinunte) and a crane. A didrachm from Selinunte (Sicily), around 450 BC

The central point of every sacred area was the altar. In the altar and Holy Communion at the centre of divine worship for Christians, we have adopted a direct legacy from antiquity. When the smoke of burnt fat rose into the sky, this was regarded as the food of the gods. A little later people joined together in a holy meal, where together they ate the pieces of meat from the sacrificed animal. For over 1,000 years the various sacrificial rituals were carried out, even if the spiritual content associated with these sacrifices changed.

The sacrifice



The envoys of the Ionic towns congregating around the Temple of Poseidon to watch the sacrifice. A bronze coin from Colophon (Ionia), 3rd century AD

Although Greek belief was by its nature tolerant, this tolerance was severely limited. Every citizen was allowed to worship whichever deity seemed the most useful to him personally: the seafarer will have turned to Poseidon, the farmer to Demeter, the merchant perhaps to Hermes, but in the official town procession each was assigned the place that was fitting for him and which he or she had to fill. Taking part in the ritual was as much a citizen's duty as was defending the town in the event of an attack, and being absent or, even worse, speaking disrespectfully about the town's deity could be punished by death.

The priests



The badges of office of the most important priests of Tarsos (Cilicia): the wreath of the demiourgos and the crown of the ciliciarch decorated with busts of the emperors. A bronze coin from Tarsus (Cilicia), 218-222 AD

Being a priest was, in most cults, not a life-long vocation, but a political office which was decided on by the popular assembly. It was bestowed on especially outstanding citizens who at the same time were prepared to defray a large part of the costs out of their own pockets.

Here we can see the insignia with which normal citizens became priests in Tarsus in Cilicia. On the left, the crown of the demiourgos, a high-ranking official in the town, on the right that of the ciliciarch (priest of the imperial cult). He was not only responsible for running the meetings of the provincial parliament, but also had to see to the execution of the imperial cult, as shown by the small heads of the different emperors on his crown.

Competitions in honour of the gods



A charioteer directing his victorious mule-drawn biga. A tetradrachm from Messana (Sicily), around 420 BC

Apart from the sacrificial animal, the greatest expenses for such a priest were for providing the prizes for the competitions, which were part of practically every festival in honour of the gods. Citizens and guests vied with one another in sporting and artistic competitions. The famous Olympic Games, too, were only one of several ceremonies on the occasion of the great festival in honour of Zeus.

Nowhere do we see better than in the competitions that Greek religion also underwent a change: whereas in archaic and classical times participation in Olympia was regarded as evidence of a pious attitude, in Hellenism the Games, like the traditional belief in the gods, passed through a deep crisis. In Roman times there was a renaissance of the competitions, the purely sporting aspect, however, coming to the fore. The competitions turned into nothing but an attraction for the spectators with all its concomitant features, which is what we hate so much about competitive sport in our own times.

The will of the gods



Apollo's tripod, in the field on the left is a laurel branch decorated with ribbons. A nomos from Croton (Lucania), around 320 BC

It was not always sufficient to hold a competition to decide who was favoured by the gods. Sometimes people required concrete answers on how they should conduct themselves in accordance with the will of the gods. For this purpose there were the oracle sites. Many of these were dedicated to Apollo, the god who stood for harmony, not only in mathematics and music, but also in people's behaviour to each other and to the gods. There were many small and large oracles in the Greek world. To this day the best known is Delphi. It was visited by all those who could afford the journey and the expensive sacrifices. Anyone who did not possess the means could find an oracle in the smallest town where he could hope for divine advice on coping with life.

The end of Greek gods

The emperor in full armour holding a long cross in his right hand and, in his left hand, a globe with a small Victoria standing on it who is crowning him with a wreath. With his right foot the emperor is crushing evil in the form of a snake with a human head. A solidus of the Roman emperor Valentinian III (425-455 AD), minted in Ravenna



Greek religion did not end all of a sudden. The Greek gods were slowly ousted by early Christianity. But the "heathen" rituals and ceremonies influenced the divine worship of the Christians. When today the aspergillum is swung over a congregation it recalls that once the sacrificial animal was prepared in the same way for the sacred act. When the churches are filled with the aroma of incense, it is not far removed from the thymiaterion, which was used to cover up the smell of the blood of the sacrificed animals.

The essence of Greek religion was the benefit which the gods brought to men. And so the ancient gods and their devotees did not fight for power. After all, Christianity was spreading and its god had shown that he was more powerful. Pythia is reported to have even wearily prophesied her own end to Emperor Julian, who wanted to turn back the wheel of history once again: "Proclaim to the king: the sublime edifice has collapsed to the ground! / Phoebus no longer possesses either hut or prophetic laurels, / And his spring is silent; the wave that speaks has dried up."