1

Gods and Religion

The gods of the Greeks are probably known to the modern world, if at all, primarily through their myths. But mythology, although important (it is the subject of Chapter 2) was not necessarily the first thing that occurred to the Greeks when they thought about their own gods. The gods' presence as the recipients of cult, their interaction with human lives, the puzzle of their true nature – all of these contributed to the total picture. There was of course no doctrinal orthodoxy on the subject, and indeed many Greeks were prepared to concede that ultimately the divine is unknowable; the Greek texts even down to the end of the fourth century indicate a great diversity of views, interests and emphases present in the societies that produced them. None the less, it is possible to establish a few preliminaries to bear in mind when we consider passages where Greek writers talk about the gods – the subject of the first section of this chapter.

The most usual Greek word which we translate as 'god', *theos*, is of uncertain origin. It may be used to indicate a particular named deity (Zeus, Athena, and so on) or more vaguely in Homer as *theos tis*, 'some god', when the speaker feels that an event has suggested divine input. Prose writers often use *ho theos*, 'the god', when speaking about the divine in general, and indeed *to theion*, literally 'the divine', is also used in this last context. The plural form 'the gods' is of course another common phrase, often (but not exclusively) used when the speaker or writer wishes to invoke the divine apparatus as a guarantor of morality. The word *daimōn* (probably meaning originally 'divider', 'disposer') is a common one, and sometimes it is hard to see it carrying a meaning different from *theos*; but it can also suggest besides a named deity a specific but uncertain divine power. In poetic texts, the gods are often designated as *athanatoi*, 'immortals', just as humans may be called 'mortals', and this indicates perhaps the most consistently important characteristic of the gods: they are not subject to death.

The gods are then a collectivity, but they are also individuals, with distinctive characteristics which may be related to the particular motive for their worship (healing gods, deities connected with marriage, and so on) and to the way they appear visually as cult images. Passage 1.3.5 attempts to put a historical perspective on the distinction between 'the gods' and the gods as individuals. But the position is more complicated than this, for each god has also many epithets, some unique to a particular location, others more common. Zeus, for instance, is often Sōtēr (the saviour), Eleutherios (of freedom), Horkios (of oaths), Herkeios (of the enclosure – that is, the household plot), Olympios (the Olympian), Ktesios (of possessions), Meilichios (the kindly one), and many others; he seems to appear uniquely as Apomyios ('fly-repeller') at Olympia, and Lecheates (apparently 'brought to bed', explained as referring to the birth of Athena from his head) at Aliphera in Arcadia. While each epithet can substantially modify the god's character – Zeus Meilichios is usually depicted as a snake, for instance – the forms of the god usually show consistency between occurrences of that epithet. But there is another sense in which each sanctuary can be said to house a 'different' god; the Zeus Meilichios in my village is different from the Zeus Meilichios in yours. None of these ways of reckoning what an individual deity is excludes any other; the same person can use them all at different times, just as one may use a word in different senses. There are some parallels to this way of thinking in, for instance, Hindu contexts and in the Orthodox and Catholic cults of the saints and the Virgin.

Dividing the gods into two main groups, Olympian and chthonian, is a much more controversial procedure, but it is a model which ancient authors may sometimes have followed. This schema is considered in section 1.2, along with those not quite divine beings who round out the groups worshipped by the Greeks, principally heroes and nymphs. The material here is mainly of a less abstract kind than that of the preceding section, and is chosen to exemplify things done and things accepted, rather than to indicate the range of conscious speculation.

Abstract thought resurfaces when we look at what the Greeks had to say about religion. It is difficult, of course, to make a clear division between passages which talk about the gods and those which have something to say about religion, and some texts in section 1.3, while starting from human conventions, move on to discuss the nature of the gods themselves. The Greeks had no word that exactly corresponds to our 'religion', using instead descriptive phrases, of which perhaps the closest to our own usage is *ta theia*, 'things to do with the gods'; but even this could mean either almost 'theology', things to do with the nature of the gods, or things to do with their worship. Faced with what may seem rather imprecise terminology, the modern reader can feel confused when confronting something like Herodotus' words at the opening of his description of Egypt (*Histories* 2.3): 'I am not keen to expound the explanations I heard about divine matters (*ta theia tōn apēgēmatōn*), except just the names of the gods.' How does this make sense, when religious custom is so conspicuous in the description of Egypt that follows? What Herodotus

means, of course, is that he will not repeat what he has heard (or implies that he has heard) from his Egyptian informants in the way of theological explanation, and he will not use his treatment of Egyptian religion to lead into a discussion of what the gods are really like, along the lines of some of the passages in section 1.1, since 'I consider that all people know an equal amount about (the gods)'. The divine is hard to know, and no one has any advantage in this regard. This is a not uncommon thought, but a great number of writers none the less have recorded often widely divergent views on religion and on the gods.

1.1 About the Gods

Not every aspect which strikes us today as interesting or distinctive about the Greek gods was described or discussed explicitly in ancient writers. By contrast, some of the things that they did have to say about the gods are relevant also to theistic systems other than their own. The passages which follow include various views of the gods which come up as it were in passing (1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.1.6) as well as more focused treatments and discussions, in which (to a greater or lesser degree, and for a longer or shorter time) the nature of the divine is itself the central subject. Unsurprisingly, while some passages present a positive view, praising divine power (1.1.6), or showing the gods as reasonable (1.1.1), many engage with the gods' perceived harshness or injustice to humanity (1.1.2, 1.1.4), perhaps defending their fairness or benevolence (1.1.3, 1.1.8), or on the other hand moving from anger towards the gods to the equally angry assumption that they do not exist (1.1.5). The conventional anthropomorphic depiction of the gods (cf. 1.3.3) is rejected in a famous passage of Xenophanes (1.1.7), which, however, builds on well established positions such as that expressed by Pindar in 1.1.6, and is in turn partly followed by Xenophon's practical Socrates (1.1.8), who assumes that his interlocutor must agree that divine thought can encompass everything at once. Diverse as these passages are, they demonstrate that discussion and speculation about the gods was an integral feature of the Greek religious framework.

1.1.1 The gods can change their minds

Source: *Iliad* 9.496

But master your great anger, Achilles; you ought not to have a pitiless heart. Even the gods themselves can change their minds, and they are stronger and better and more honoured than we are. People pray to them, and with sacrifice and soothing offerings, and libations and smoke from roasting meat they turn them from wrath, whenever someone oversteps the mark and does wrong.

Figure 1 'Sacrifice and soothing offerings': a sacrificial procession. The female figure at the front is carrying equipment for the sacrifice; she is followed by a smaller figure leading a sheep to the altar and by musicians. The wooden tablet (*pinax*) was dedicated by Euthydika and Eucholis to the Nymphs. From the village of Pitsa near ancient Sikyon, dated *c.* 540–530. Athens, National Archaeological Museum (EAM) 16464.

From the famous speech where the old family retainer Phoinix tries unsuccessfully to persuade Achilles to be reconciled with Agamemnon and return to the war. The argument depends upon the normal Iliadic perception that the more powerful you are and the more status you have, the more you can insist on others deferring to you and pleasing you. No human can compete in status with the gods, who therefore can be expected to come down extremely harshly on those who offend them – as indeed they often do (see 2.3). But they do not always insist on their prerogatives, and can often be appeased by offerings; therefore, Achilles should do the same (Agamemnon has sent him a handsome offer of reparation). For the argument, compare the appeals to divine mythology at 2.5.6 and 2.5.7.

The view that the gods can be propitiated is of great importance for normal cult relations between humans and the divine, and was surely a belief generally held. Plato, however, objected strenuously to the opinion that the gods could be swayed from perfect justice, once citing this passage, in a slightly different form, as its most concise expression (3.4.7, where the citation is omitted; cf. 3.5.4).

On libations, see 3.1.3; on sacrifice, 5.2. The gods are not generally pictured as eating human-style food, but are frequently said to appreciate the sweet savour of grilling or roasting meat (*knisē*).

1.1.2 The jars of Zeus

Source: *Iliad* 24.527–33

There are two jars on the floor of Zeus, full of what he gives, one of bad things, one of good. When thunder-loving Zeus mixes the two and gives them to someone, that person has ill luck at times, and at other times good. But when he gives the bad, he makes that man despised, and evil famine drives him over the bright earth, and he is honoured neither by gods nor by mortals.

Achilles himself gives this less cheerful perspective on the impact of the gods on human life, in his meeting with Priam at the end of the *Iliad*. It shows, perhaps, not so much a view of the gods in themselves, but rather how the gods and especially Zeus are used to explain certain things about human life – often of a pessimistic sort.

1.1.3 It's not the gods' fault

Source: *Odyssey* 1.28–43

The father of men and gods began to speak to them. He was mindful in his heart of excellent Aigisthos, who was killed by Orestes of far-flung glory, son of Agamemnon, and thinking of him he spoke to the Immortals: 'Alas, how mortals lay blame on the gods! They say their misfortunes come from us, but it is through their own folly that they suffer beyond their allotted fate. Just so now Aigisthos, beyond his fate, united with the wedded wife of the son of Atreus, and killed him on his return home, though he knew that he would perish dreadfully; we told him beforehand, sending Hermes, the keen-sighted, slayer of Argos, to tell him not to kill Agamemnon nor to woo his wife. For vengeance would come for the son of Atreus from Orestes, when he grew up and felt desire for his own land. Thus Hermes told him, but he did not convince Aigisthos, good advice as it was. And now he has paid the full penalty for everything.'

The *Odyssey*, despite the reservations of some scholars, seems more eager to associate the gods with justice than is the *Iliad*, and this passage has sometimes been seen as, in a sense, a reply to the previous one. The story of Aigisthos' seduction of Klytaimestra (Clytemnestra) and murder of Agamemnon (son of Atreus) is given in the text; it is noticeable that, in contrast to later versions, little prominence is given to Klytaimestra herself and it is Aigisthos who is the prime mover. Zeus uses these events to exemplify the way in which people blame the gods for their misfortune, when in fact it is their own misdeeds

that bring trouble upon them; in this case, the gods have even given Aigisthos explicit warning that he should not embark upon the course he is thinking of. The passage shows a strong desire to vindicate the gods as acting justly.

Hermes frequently acts in the *Odyssey* as go-between for the gods when they wish to communicate with mortals.

1.1.4 . . . or is it?

Source: Theognis 373–82

Dear Zeus, I am surprised at you. You rule over everything, and have honour and vast strength. You are well acquainted with the mind and disposition of every human individual, and yours, O king, is the supreme power over all. Then how, son of Kronos, can your mind endure to keep wrongdoers in the same position as the just man; the mind that turns to decent behaviour and those who put their trust in deeds of injustice and turn to violence?

A succinct statement of the problem of evil. 'Theognis' (the name covers a miscellaneous collection of verse in elegiac metre) does not state that Zeus is actually omnipotent, but the ruler of the gods is surely incomparably the most powerful being in the universe. So why is injustice not punished? Some of Theognis' gripe may be that, as he sees it, the traditionally *agathoi* ('good'), the aristocracy, no longer necessarily receive their due; but however wrongdoing is defined, the point is a potent one.

violence: *hybris*, unjustified and insulting behaviour usually involving physical violence.

1.1.5 There can be no gods

Source: Euripides, *Bellerophon* (*TrGF* 5.1 fr. 286)

Does anyone say that there are gods in heaven? No, there are not, certainly not, if one is willing not to be foolish and to reject the ancient opinion. Think about it yourselves; don't base your opinion on what I say. I maintain that tyranny kills vast numbers, and deprives others of their property, and tyrants break their oaths and attack cities; and as they do this, they are more fortunate than those who live piously and quietly day by day. I know small cities which reverence the gods which are subject to larger and more impious ones, having been overpowered by an army greater in number. If a lazy person prayed to the gods and didn't gather his livelihood with his hands, I think that you would (*the rest is missing*).

The argument is a familiar one: the injustices of the human world disprove the existence of just gods, perhaps of any gods. Not only injustice, but specifically impiety (breaking of oaths, sworn by the gods) goes unpunished. Euripides' play, which survives only in a few fragments, tells the story of the misfortunes of the upright Bellerophon(tes) and his attempt to challenge the gods for their treatment of him by riding the winged horse Pegasos up to Olympos/heaven, but the loss of further context makes it unclear how the situation was resolved. Bellerophon's initial exclamation is the opposite of the Homeric 'you gods still exist!' (e.g. *Odyssey* 24.351–2), as a response to the reassertion of justice in human affairs, and could in itself be a statement of momentary rather than permanent conviction. Certainly we should not identify it as Euripides' own view, however fond the dramatist is of giving his characters provocative words about the gods. But this is a striking passage, and the speaker seems to invite the audience to consider his words seriously, and not just within the context of the play ('think about it yourselves . . .'). Such approaches towards extra-dramatic utterances are not uncommon in Euripides. At the same time, we must remember that the speech is also, and at least as much, that of a character within the play. Further fragments suggest that other characters argued against Bellerophon. One line – 'If the gods do anything shameful, they are not gods' (fr. 292) – suggests that someone had a more positive theology to put forward, though not one that necessarily fully answers Bellerophon's point.

I think that you would: probably 'not expect him to do very well' – that is, we all know really that prayer is not efficacious, showing that the gods don't exist. That would be logical, and in tune with the idea just expressed that the wicked are more fortunate than those who reverence the gods; passage 4.2.7, also by Euripides, supplies a parallel. But another possibility suggested is that seeing such a person prosper would show that the gods are unjust. This is also possible, since accusations of injustice and non-existence commonly though illogically go together ('you don't exist, you bastard').

1.1.6 The power of god

Source: Pindar, *Pythians* 2.50–3

God brings about the accomplishment of all his desires; god, who reaches the winged eagle and passes the dolphin of the sea. He has bent down mortals whose thoughts are too high, but to others he has given unaging glory.

Like many post-Homeric writers, Pindar uses the singular *theos*, 'god', in an indefinite way to indicate 'some god' or 'gods in general'; an alternative used by prose writers is *to theion*, 'the divine'. The power and sublimity of 'god'

includes here the ability to dispose human affairs in ways and for reasons which can perhaps be only partly understood.

1.1.7 One god greatest among gods and men

Source: Xenophanes, frr. 23–6 (DK 21 B 11, 23–6)

One god, greatest among gods and men, neither in form nor in thought like at all to mortals . . . all of him sees, all thinks, and all hears . . . he remains always in the same place, moving not at all, nor is it fitting for him to go from place to place, but without exertion he shakes everything by the thought of his mind.

How the fragments fit together is not quite certain, but that they all belong in the same area is clear, forming part of an uncompromisingly unanthropomorphic portrayal of the divine which is the best known philosophical contribution of Xenophanes of Kolophon, whose career straddled the sixth and fifth centuries. Xenophanes rejected the traditional myths of the poets (see 2.5.1), but this passage shows a corresponding positive proposal. It may seem a radical view of the divine, but by the late fifth century it seems to have been in common currency. Note that although the god is not 'like at all to mortals', linguistically he remains masculine rather than becoming neuter.

1.1.8 The gods care about humans

Source: Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.4.10–18

'No, Socrates,' said Aristodemos, 'I don't despise the divine, but I think it is too great to need any attention from me.'

'Well,' he replied, 'the greater it is, and still deigns to attend to you, the more honour you should pay to it.'

'You can be sure that if I thought that the gods had any concern for humans I would not neglect them,' replied Aristodemos.

'So you don't think they have any concern?' said Socrates. 'But firstly, it was they who made humans stand upright, alone of all animals; and being upright allows us to see further ahead, and to keep a better eye on things above, and our sight, hearing and speech to suffer fewer injuries (*exact text uncertain*). Then again, they gave other land animals feet, which only allow them to walk, but to man they also gave hands, which produce most of those things that make us happier than beasts. And all animals have a tongue, but only the human tongue they made such that by touching different parts of the mouth at different times it could organise the voice and indicate everything we wish to communicate with each other. They have given the pleasures of sex to other

animals, but limited them to a particular season of the year, whereas for us they provided them continuously up until old age. And the god was not content with taking care of the body, but also, most importantly, implanted in humans the soul with the most capabilities. What other animal has a soul that can perceive the existence of the gods, who have so disposed the greatest and the finest things? What species other than the human attends to the gods? And what soul is more capable than the human of taking steps against famine, thirst, cold or heat, or of palliating sickness, or of training to increase strength, or setting itself to learning, or of remembering all that it hears, sees or learns? Don't you see quite clearly that in comparison to other animals, humans live a life like that of the gods, as they are supreme in nature, both in body and soul? A creature with the body of an ox but a human mind would not be able to do what it wanted, and neither would one with hands but no thought have any advantage. You have both of these valuable things: do you really think that the gods have no concern for you? What do they have to do, for you to suppose that they have thought for you?'

'They would have to send advisors, as you say they send, to say what one ought and ought not to do.'

'Well then,' he said, 'when the Athenians wish to learn something through divination, and the gods speak to them, do you not think they are speaking to you as well? And the same when they send portents to the Greeks, or to all mankind, to tell them something in advance – do they make an exception of you alone, and have no care for you? Do you think that the gods would have implanted in men the idea that they are capable of dealing out good or bad treatment if they were not able to do so, and that people would never have realised all this time that they had been deluded? Do you not see how the oldest and wisest of human communities, whether cities or nations, are the most godfearing, and how the most thoughtful stages of life are those which are most concerned with the gods? My dear friend,' he said, 'be aware also that your mind, from within, disposes your body as it wishes. So one must suppose that the thought within the universe also directs the universe as it pleases. You can't think that while your eyesight can extend over several miles, the god's eyes are unable to see everything at once, or that while your mind can conceive both of things happening here and of affairs in Egypt and Sicily, the god's thought is not able to encompass everything at once. Now with people, when you do things for them you discover which people do things in return for you, and by showing favour yourself you find out which people return favours, and by asking advice you learn which people have good ideas. So if in the same way you try out the gods by doing things for them, and see if they are willing to give advice to humans about things that are uncertain, you will find that the divine is so vast and of such a kind that it can at once see everything and hear everything and be present everywhere, and at once concern itself with everything.'

Xenophon is concerned both here and elsewhere in his *Memories of Socrates* to refute the impiety charge on which Socrates was condemned and to show that his old associate was actually the most pious of men. So we cannot be sure that the real Socrates put forward such arguments as these, though it is not

inconceivable that he did. The important thing is that they were formed at all. The first point is a somewhat specialised form of the argument from design, a version which reappears throughout antiquity: it is not so much that the existence and good order of the universe indicate a creator, as that the benefits given to the human race (here, particularly the form in which it has been created) give evidence of divine concern for humans. The idea attributed here to Aristodemos, that the gods exist but have no interest in human affairs, is mentioned by Plato in the *Laws* as one of three objectionable beliefs about the gods (see 3.5.4), and was later adopted as canonical by Epicurus and his followers. However, it was probably one that relatively few people held consistently, rather being more often sparked off temporarily by some disappointment or perceived injustice suffered (compare above, 1.1.5, on the non-existence of the gods).

Aristodemos then refers to Socrates' claim to be the recipient of personal communication from 'the divine' (*to daimonion*). For both Xenophon and Plato, this was one of the things that marked Socrates out as special, but 'Socrates' here tells Aristodemos that in fact the gods are in communication with all humans regularly through the medium of oracles and other forms of divination (compare 4.2, 6.2). There follows the argument from authority, another one which Plato flirts with in the *Laws*, though partially acknowledging its inadequacy. Finally Socrates presents us with an analogy which seems to compare the gods or the divine both to humans as a whole and to the human mind: the gods in this latter presentation are the mind within the universe. This is a position which recalls both the system of the philosopher Anaxagoras, making Mind the guiding principle of the universe, with which Plato's Socrates was so disappointed (*Phaedo* 97b–98c) and that elaborated in detail by Plato in the *Timaeus*. Despite this, Xenophon's Socrates is very traditional in his view of human–divine relations, seeing them as articulated primarily by the return of favours (*charis*). Plato might well have had some difficulty with this, espousing as he does a view in which the gods are primarily motivated by justice and reward upright behaviour rather than return favours (see 3.4.7, 3.5.4).

the most thoughtful stages of life: compare Plato's contention that no one ever remained an atheist into old age (3.5.4).

the god's eyes: see above, 1.1.6, on 'god' or 'the god' in a rather vague singular form.

Egypt and Sicily: the Athenians had usually a lively interest in these somewhat distant parts of the Greek world.

1.2 Other Gods; Gods and Others

The gods who are the objects of the more abstract speculation seen in the previous section are also – in a sense – the gods of mythology (the subject of the following chapter), the individual gods: Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Athena and

so on. But 'the gods' are also more than these 'Olympians', and the objects of religious cult are also more than gods. Heroes, nymphs and the so-called 'chthonian' powers are an important part of Greek religion, and a glance at a sacrificial calendar, such as 5.3.1, shows how many (to us) unfamiliar names appear in the regulated worship of a community. Making sense of such conglomerations of deities can look difficult. One way of trying to produce some order out of apparent chaos has been to divide the beings who receive cult into 'Olympian' and 'chthonian' or 'chthonic', the former category containing most of the 'major', mythological divinities, who are said from Homer onwards to live on Olympos, and the latter, deities connected in some way with the earth or the underworld, along with the heroes, who are generally conceived of as the special dead. There is some support for the recognition of these categories in ancient authors, but most of the more schematic evidence is rather later than our period; instead of assuming that the division is a necessary part of the way the gods are viewed, it might be more accurate to say that for the archaic and classical period it is available to be used and elaborated on (thus 1.2.1 and especially Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, of which the conclusion forms 1.2.2), but is by no means mandatory. The epithet *chthonios*, 'earthy', is certainly used in particular cults (for instance, various local cults of Demeter Chthoniē) or to refer to particular deities (thus 'Zeus Chthonios' is a frequent name for the underworld god), and *olympios* also appears as a divine epithet, but this need only mean that in those contexts the epithets express something important about those divinities – not even that 'chthonian' is always and necessarily defined by opposition to 'Olympian' or vice versa. On the issue of chthonian and Olympian in sacrifice, see 5.2.

Heroes are a distinctive part of the Greek religious world, and range from well-known characters in myth like Agamemnon or Herakles (though Herakles could also be worshipped as a god) to anonymous local figures known only as 'the hero' or distinguished by their place of worship. Normally they are thought of as humans who have died (for an indication of a rare exception, see 1.2.7), and this connexion with death sometimes links them with underworld deities. Their shrines are often their tombs, and sacrifice to them may take a different form from that offered to the gods (5.2); as contact with the dead is polluting, so in some circumstances approaching or worshipping a hero may also convey pollution (on pollution, see 3.3). But in the classical period, a hero was not just any dead person; after death, he (or she) had acquired special powers analogous, if perhaps inferior, to those of the gods, and though this specialness was sometimes only revealed after death (as 1.2.6) more often it was somehow connected with a special quality or event in the person's life. This quality is easy to supply in the case of heroes from the mythological age; the mere fact of having lived then guaranteed that a hero or heroine was greater than people of the present day. But heroes continued to be 'made' in historical times; they were typically victorious athletes, the war dead, or founders of cities (1.2.7). The local connexion of heroes is very strong, as their tombs limited the number of places where they could be

worshipped, and their mythical traditions stressed their links with a particular city; thus heroes have often a noticeable political aspect (1.2.5–7; see also 2.4.3). As a group, they can also be unpredictable and malicious (1.2.3).

Another way of looking at heroes is to see them as a group of beings forming a middle term between gods and humans. Nymphs can be seen as belonging to this category as well; indeed, groups of heroines seem often to be closely allied to groups of nymphs. Both heroes and nymphs are local (1.2.8). But unlike heroes, nymphs have nothing to do with death, though according to one text (1.2.10), they are not immortal like gods, but extremely long-lived. And where heroes are often associated with political structures and therefore frequently to be found in city centres (1.2.5, 1.2.7), nymphs are almost always worshipped in country locations, most often caves (1.2.9, 3.4.3–4), and associated with water or sometimes trees (1.2.10); in cult they are associated with Pan above all, but in myth individual nymphs or groups of nymphs are linked with many different gods, both as sexual partners and sometimes as mothers or nurses. For nymphs, see also 3.4.3–4, inscriptions attesting individual devotion to particular nymph cults.

1.2.1 Worshipping earth and Olympos

Source: Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1648–55

We turned round after a little while, and we could see the man nowhere at all any more, but we saw the king holding his hand in front of his face, shading his eyes, as though some awful fear had been manifested, something he could not bear to look upon. But then, briefly and without a word, we saw him reverence the earth and divine Olympos at the same moment.

A messenger reports the disappearance of the aged Oedipus who, realising that the end of his life is approaching, has led his protector Theseus ('the king') away to witness his passing. The play has implied that Oedipus will become a hero, but exactly what happens at the crucial moment is left unspoken; indeed, only Theseus and his successors are permitted to know the mystery of Oedipus' end. The only clue we are given is the king's gesture of worship, encompassing both heavenly and chthonic powers.

1.2.2 The Solemn Goddesses are established in Athens

Source: Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 1033–47

Make your way, o great and honoured children of Night, children who are no children, in this glad procession and you, people of this place, keep holy silence.

In the earth's primeval hollows may you meet with reverence, and with honours and sacrifices. All people, keep holy silence.

Propitious and favourable to this land, come here, O Solemn Goddesses, rejoicing in the blazing fire of torches about your way. Raise a joyful shout now over our songs.

There is peace (*a few words uncertain*) with the townsmen of Pallas. This is the agreement of all-seeing Zeus and Fate. Raise a joyful shout now over our songs.

This is the hymnic conclusion of Aeschylus' great Oresteia trilogy, probably sung by a secondary chorus representing the cult personnel of Athena. The third play in the trilogy has depicted Orestes' trial for matricide in Athens; the prosecutors were the Erinyes or Furies who, on being defeated by the single vote of Athena (here called Pallas), threatened the Athenians with the full onslaught of their sinister powers. But eventually Athena succeeds in persuading them to abandon their anger by promising them cult honours in Athens; they thus become the Semnai (Solemn Goddesses; despite the play's conventional title the name Eumenides is never used) who will retain some of their fearful aspects but also preside over the land's prosperity and fertility. Something of their double aspect is seen in these final lines. The goddesses are 'children of Night', as they have been throughout the play, identified as belonging to a female-dominated race of gods which is older than that of Zeus and the Olympians (compare 2.1 on ancient conflicts among the gods), and they will be established 'in the earth's primeval hollows', suitably for 'chthonic' deities. But they will now be 'propitious and favourable' (literally, right-thinking), and part of an order symbolised by Athena and Zeus; the final procession evokes the torch-light procession of the Panathenaia, the greatest festival of Athens (see 5.3.3), and the honours they will received seem to merge into the honours of Athena.

Groups of more-or-less frightening deities such as Semnai, Eumenides ('Kindly Ones'; cf. 5.1.8) and Maniai ('madnesses') are found quite frequently in the Greek world.

children who are no children: *paides apaides* means both this and '(Night's) children without children.'

glad procession: the word for 'glad', *euphrōn*, echoes a commonly used euphemistic word for night, *euphronē*, appropriate to the origin of the Semnai.

holy silence: as usual at the opening of religious ceremonies. It contrasts with the shouts of joy (*ololygmos*) which are then demanded, but both silence and shouts (in this context) are auspicious, contrasting strongly with the use of both motifs earlier in the trilogy.

there is peace: *spondai*, literally the libations (see 3.1.3) which establish a peace treaty. There is perhaps a contrast with the *choai* (libations to the dead) which form the central scene of the trilogy's second play, *Choephoroi*.

1.2.3 Watch out, heroes at work

Source: Aristophanes, fragment from *Heroes* (fr. 322 Kassel-Austin)

So then, men, be on your guard, and reverence the heroes; for we are the guardians of evil and good. We examine the unjust, the thieves and robbers, and to some we send sickness: spleen trouble and coughs, and dropsy, catarrh, itchy scabs and gout, madness, and skin eruptions, lumps, chills and fevers.

The exact subject of Aristophanes' comedy is unknown, but it is clear that its chorus was composed of heroes, and here, as is traditional in comedy, they speak to the audience in character. Unlike many records of sacrifices and dedications to individual heroes, the passage indicates that the functions of heroes could be significantly different from those of gods and could include rather unpleasant actions. One or two fragments of Menander suggest a similar view of heroes. From the letters remaining in the following line, it seems that the people who receive the sicknesses form one category of wrongdoers, and the passage continued with a list of other nasty things sent to thieves.

1.2.4 Herakles and his sons

Source: Pindar, *Isthmians* 4.52–68

Once there came to the house of Antaios from Thebes, city of Kadmos, a man short of stature but invincible in spirit; he went to wheat-bearing Libya, to fight Antaios and stop him from roofing the temple of Poseidon with the skulls of strangers, he the son of Alkmene; who went to Olympos, after he had explored the surface of the whole earth and the hollows of the grey sea with its deep cliffs, and tamed the straits for sailing. And now he dwells beside the Holder of the Aigis, amidst lovely good fortune, and he is honoured and loved by the Immortals, and has Hebe to wife; he is the lord of golden halls and son-in-law of Hera. For him beyond the Electran Gates we citizens prepare a feast and new-built circles of altars, and we increase the burnt-offerings for the eight bronze-clad dead men, the sons born to him by Megara, daughter of Kreon. For them at the setting of the sun's rays the flame rises up and keeps festival all night, leaping up to the sky in fragrant smoke. And on the second day comes the end of the annual games, an accomplishment of strength.

Although Herakles is something of a special case among heroes, being sometimes considered a god and worshipped as such, Pindar's lines still express the two facets of the hero's existence: the events and achievements of their

lives and the cult they receive after death. Herakles adds a third facet; since his narrative tradition states that he became a god, his glorious life on Olympos can be described, including his acceptance by his old enemy Hera (compare 2.1.3, 2.3.1) and his marriage to her daughter Hebe ('youth'); generally the hero's own experience after death is not imagined.

Unusually, Herakles is imagined as short of stature, no doubt to be like the athlete celebrated in the victory ode, Melissos of Thebes. Comparatively short as he was, Herakles still managed to defeat the Libyan giant Antaios, son of Poseidon, who challenged all comers to a wrestling match, and having defeated them killed them and stored their skulls in order to construct a temple for his father. Herakles is thus typically presented not only as invincibly strong, but as a benefactor of humanity who rid the earth of dangers and made it safe.

Herakles was worshipped throughout the Greek world, but mythology made him a Theban, like Melissos and Pindar himself. There is thus a particular aptness in the description of his cult at Thebes, which adds for us some interesting details. Evidently he was worshipped in connexion with the sons he had by the Theban Megara, whom, in the usual version, he himself killed in a fit of madness while they were still children. For Pindar, however, the sons were men and warriors, and this presumably reflects the general Theban belief of the time; it is very likely that a pre-existing group of heroic warriors, called the Alkaidai, had by this time become attached to Herakles, and were joint honorands at his festival. Evidently the festival lasted for two days and included sacrifices and an athletic contest, such as might be held for either god or hero. The distinctive point is that the sacrifice (*empyra* – fire-offerings) is made in the evening. The more usual practice was to sacrifice early in the day, and night-time offerings are often associated by our more schematic sources with heroic and 'chthonian' recipients, who might have an almost sinister air. But another interpretation is suggested by Pindar himself: the sacrificial flame 'keeps festival all night' (*syneches pannychizei*), thus connecting with the all-night celebration (*pannychis*) which was a feature of some of the greatest and most splendid festivals (see 5.3.3). Further, the flame rises when the sun sets, taking over its light-giving function; the motif of light in darkness is an immensely positive one, exploited to the full in the Mysteries of Eleusis (6.4.1–4), and in later times in the Easter Vigil. See also 5.3 on festivals.

Holder of the Aigis: Zeus, Herakles' father. On the aigis, see 2.1.4

new-built circles: or possibly 'altars with fresh garlands'.

fragrant smoke: the fragrance is that of the sacrificial meat, represented as pleasing to its recipients (compare 1.1.1, and 5.2 on sacrifice). If this is followed to its logical conclusion (but often such things are not), the implication should be that the sons of Herakles are located in the sky or on Olympos, rather than in the earth.

1.2.5 Exchanging heroes

Source: Herodotus, *Histories* 5.67

Kleisthenes had been at war with Argos, and he made an end to rhapsodic contests in Sikyon because of the Homeric epics, which are constantly singing of Argos and the Argives. He also wanted to expel from the country Adrastos son of Talaos, who had and still has a hero-shrine actually in the agora of Sikyon, because he was an Argive. So he went to Delphi, and asked if he could remove Adrastos, but the Pythia replied that Adrastos was king of Sikyon, and Kleisthenes just a thrower of stones. Since the god would not give permission, he went back home and tried to devise a way of ensuring that Adrastos would leave of his own accord. When he thought he had found one, he sent to Thebes in Boeotia, saying that he wanted to introduce Melanippos son of Astakos, and the Thebans agreed. So Kleisthenes brought Melanippos in, and assigned him a precinct in the prytaneion itself, establishing him right there in the most secure place possible. I must now explain the reason that Kleisthenes introduced him: it was because he was a mortal enemy of Adrastos, having killed his brother Mekisteus and his son-in-law Tydeus. When Kleisthenes had assigned him the precinct, he took away from Adrastos his sacrifices and festivals and gave them to Melanippos. It was the Sikyonian custom to pay very great honours to Adrastos; the country had belonged to Polybos, and Adrastos was the grandson of Polybos, who, dying without male issue, gave his kingdom to Adrastos. One of the honours that they gave was to celebrate him with tragic choruses for his sufferings; these were not in honour of Dionysos, but of Adrastos. Kleisthenes instead gave the choruses to Dionysos, and the rest of the cult to Melanippos.

A fine example of the complex mythological politics which heroes are often caught up in. Kleisthenes, ruler of Sikyon in the first quarter of the sixth century, was also known for his relabelling the 'tribes' into which the citizen body was divided, giving prominence to his own, non-Dorian, tribe, and ridiculing the others; he was thus, if Herodotus' account is correct, a master of propaganda, which is one level on which his manipulation of the heroes would work. But we should not discard the idea of a direct effect on Adrastos. Heroes were often thought to be present at their tombs or shrines; Adrastos was buried 'actually in the agora', the heart of the city (ordinary people's tombs were outside the city, to avoid pollution; see 3.3). He might well be thought to be made uncomfortable when his enemy arrived close by, and was given a better position than himself, in the prytaneion – the 'seat of government', where the greatest benefactors were honoured and which also contained the city's own hearth. And the withdrawal of cult would mean that residence would seem less attractive, quite apart from the insult caused by then giving that cult to an enemy. However, Herodotus attests that the heroön of Adrastos remained in the agora at Sikyon and many centuries later Pausanias saw the tomb of Melanippos not at Sikyon but on the road from Thebes to Chalkis

(*Guide to Greece* 9.18.1). Pindar mentions the games of Adrastos at Sikyon (*Isthmians* 4.26); Kleisthenes' changes were eventually forgotten.

Moving heroic bones was something of a preoccupation in the archaic period and the fifth century, with well-known examples including Orestes (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.67–8) and Theseus (Plutarch, *Theseus* 36; *Cimon* 8). Sometimes the bones had a talismanic effect, but the mythology was almost always important, as the hero could express old claims, friendships or enmities and might be considered to continue his interests more powerfully from the grave. In this case, Adrastos was best known for his command of the disastrous expedition of the Seven against Thebes, in which he was accompanied by his brother Mekisteus and son-in-law Tydeus. Hence the choice of a Theban and killer of his companions in order to oust him.

rhapsodic contests: rhapsodes competed at festivals in the recital of Homer and other epic verse.

constantly singing of Argos: as well as *Achaioi* and *Danaoi*, the 'Greeks' in the *Iliad* are called *Argeioi*, Argives.

a precinct: *temenos*. See introduction to Chapter 5.

Polybos: a king of Corinth, the supposed father of Oedipus.

1.2.6 An oracle decrees heroic cult

Source: Herodotus, *Histories* 5.114

Because he had laid siege to them, the Amathousians cut off the head of Onesilos and took it to Amathous, where they hung it up on top of the gates. As it hung there, it became hollow, and a swarm of bees entered it and filled it with honeycomb. When this happened, the Amathousians made an oracular consultation about it, and the reply was that they should take the head down and give it burial, and sacrifice every year to Onesilos as a hero; if they did this, things would go better with them. And the Amathousians continued to do this down to my own time.

These events, Herodotus tells us, took place in Cyprus during the wars caused by the revolt of the Ionian cities against Persian rule in 510. Cities more usually worshipped heroes who were thought to have belonged to their own community in the past, but there is a small group of 'enemy heroes' like Onesilos who can be linked with the hero's often paradoxical and unpredictable nature. Bees and honey often carry an implication of something more than human, and so although the event recorded is by no means implausible, we can see how it might have seemed sufficiently portentous to warrant the consultation of an oracle. A lot of the questions posed to oracles were of a

religious or semi-religious nature (see 6.2), and many hero-cults were traced to oracular command. Which oracle was consulted, Herodotus does not say; conceivably Delphi, but the oracle of Apollo at Patara in Lykia would have been much more convenient for Cyprus. It may have been some more local establishment. 'If they did this, things would go better with them' reflects oracular language (see for instance 6.2.5).

1.2.7 Changing the city's founder hero

Source: Thucydides 5.11

Then all the allies followed in arms and gave a public burial to Brasidas, inside the city, just in front of what is now the agora. Afterwards the citizens of Amphipolis fenced off his tomb and offer victims to him as a hero, and began to celebrate games and annual sacrifices in his honour, attributing the colony to him as founder. They took down the buildings of Hagnon and removed any evidence of his foundation that happened to survive; they considered that Brasidas has been their saviour, and as for the present they were trying to get an alliance with the Spartans through fear of the Athenians, and because the Athenians were their enemies they thought that it would be neither as useful nor as desirable to pay honours to Hagnon.

During the Peloponnesian War, there was fierce fighting in Thrace to the north of Greece and the nearby regions, especially round the city of Amphipolis, which had been founded by Athenians and (rather more) others under the leadership of the Athenian Hagnon in 437, on the site of a former failed settlement. In 424 the city was taken by the Spartans, and an Athenian attempt to recapture it in 422 failed, but resulted in the death of the Spartan general Brasidas.

The worship of a city founder – mythical, historical or somewhere in between – as a particularly important hero for the city was commonplace, and his real or supposed tomb, and hence place of worship, was often in the agora (see above, 1.2.5; compare also Battos at Cyrene, 3.3.1). Thus although Brasidas was not actually the founder of Amphipolis, in the circumstances it was not altogether surprising to find him repackaged as such; and Thucydides seldom misses an opportunity to point out how political expediency can override both sentimental feeling and an accurate record of the facts. Evidently Brasidas was given honours very similar to those which first Adrastos, and then Melanippos, had enjoyed in Sikyon. What is rather more surprising is the suggestion that the real founder Hagnon had already received some cult honours – for that must surely be the meaning of the phrase 'to pay honours' (*timan*), echoing what was said about Brasidas in the previous sentence. Hagnon was still alive, and death was a usual prerequisite for heroisation. Given this implication, it seems likely that the 'buildings of Hagnon' were not buildings put up by the founder (it would be an impractical waste to demolish these,

in any case), but cult buildings designed for Hagnon's commemoration and worship. Perhaps whatever cult was paid to a living founder was less emphatic than that to a dead man; then the cult of the truly heroised, because dead, Brasidas, would improve on what had been done before, as Kleisthenes tried to do at Sikyon by placing his new hero Melanippos in the prytaneion.

offer victims: *entemnein*, a form of sacrifice emphasising the spilling of blood when the victim's throat was cut; it was perhaps splashed over the hero's grave. Like *enagizein*, we hear of it generally in the cult of heroes or 'chthonian' beings, but it is by no means a universal word for sacrifice to a hero. Thucydides uses the present tense here, suggesting that the cult continues.

1.2.8 A nymph's sons

Source: *Iliad* 6.21–6

Euryalos . . . went after Aisepos and Pedasos, whom once the naiad nymph Abarbareë bore to faultless Boukolion. Boukolion was the son of glorious Laomedon, his eldest, borne secretly by his mother. When he was herding sheep he mingled with the nymph in love, and she conceived and bore twin children.

Here is one of the main mythological functions of nymphs, to bear (locally) notable children. There are several minor Trojan heroes in the *Iliad* who like Aisepos and Pedasos are the children of nymphs, and similarly in Sophocles the chorus speculate that Oedipus, found as an infant on the mountain, might be the son of a nymph (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 1105–9) – by a god, because the nymphs have sexual relations with both gods and men. In fact, their sexuality is clearly important, as well as their motherhood: the meaning of *nymphē* is after all 'bride', 'nubile woman'.

naiad nymph: the word 'naiad' (*naïas*, or in Homer *nēïas*) is very frequently found paired with, or as a substitute for, 'nymph'. It derives from the verb 'to flow' and links the nymphs with springs, water being their commonest association.

1.2.9 Odysseus greets the nymphs of Ithaca

Source: *Odyssey* 13.102–12, 357–60

At the head of the harbour is a long-leaved olive tree, and near it a lovely shady cave, sacred to the nymphs who are called naiads. In it are stone mixing-bowls

and storage jars, and there the bees keep their honey. And in it are immensely long stone looms, where the nymphs weave cloth dyed with sea-purple, wondrous to see; and in it there is perennially flowing water. There are two doors to the cave, one facing north which humans may enter by; the other, towards the south, is for divine beings. No men enter that way, but it is the path of the Immortals . . .

Then much-enduring, godlike Odysseus was overjoyed, and greeted his own land, and kissed the life-giving earth. Straightway he raised his hands and prayed to the nymphs: 'Naiad nymphs, daughters of Zeus, I thought I would never see you. Now take pleasure in my fond prayers, and we will give gifts, as before, if the daughter of Zeus, driver of spoil, willingly allows me to live and brings my dear son to manhood.'

The cave of the nymphs, which Odysseus encounters very soon after his return home to Ithaca, is described in a mixture of naturalistic and mythological terms, corresponding perhaps to its two entrances, for humans and for its divine inhabitants. In 'real life' nymphs were commonly worshipped in caves (see 3.4.3, 3.4.4), and associated with water and springs, and in this case too the cave is a cult-place. But the stone mixing-bowls and storage jars (objects which would be made of pottery in normal life) and, obviously, the looms are not dedications, but things which are actually used by the nymphs who frequent the cave. The natural inspiration may have been particular rock formations. The whole description is an intriguing one, which prompted much allegorical exposition in later antiquity.

The nymphs are significant in this part of the *Odyssey* story because they symbolise Odysseus' return to his native land, which at first he fails to recognise because of mist deployed by Athena; at the moment of recognition, it is they to whom he first prays. Nymphs are above all local beings, linked inseparably to certain natural features of the landscape. There are many accounts of their origin, or rather the origins of particular types and groups of nymphs; they are not always daughters of Zeus as Odysseus addresses them. The (singular) daughter of Zeus is Odysseus' patron Athena.

sea-purple: the red-purple dye obtained from a species of shellfish was the most esteemed colouring agent throughout antiquity.

life-giving: alternatively, grain-giving.

we will give gifts: when prayer was not accompanied by an offering, the promise of one was usually made. Compare 3.1 on prayer and 5.6 on dedications, including vows.

1.2.10 Nymphs of the mountain

Source: *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 256–73

When first he (*the child Aineias*) sees the light of the sun, the deep-breasted mountain nymphs shall nurture him, those who live on this vast and holy mountain. They follow neither mortals nor immortals, but they live long, eating deathless food, and they join the beautiful dance with the immortals. With them the Silens and the keen-sighted Slayer of Argos mingle in love, in the recesses of lovely caves. When they are born, fir trees or high-topped oaks are born with them on the earth that feeds men, trees that are beautiful and flourishing, on the high mountains. They stand tall, and they are called the sanctuaries of the immortals, and mortals will not cut them with iron. But when the fate of death stands close by, first the lovely trees wither upon the earth, the bark peels away all around, the branches fall, and with these the life (*of the nymph*) leaves the light of the sun. These are they who will keep my son beside them and bring him up.

This rather fanciful description has been influential in defining nymphs, but it is by no means the only way that they are imagined. Most importantly, they are not always subject to death and thus distinct from goddesses; for Homer, Kalypso is both a nymph and a goddess, though certainly one of lesser status than the Olympians. The connexion with trees is not exclusive to this passage, but as we have seen in the previous passage, it is water above all to which the nymphs most commonly relate. On the other hand, the links with mountains and above all caves are quite standard, and so is their role as sexual partners of the *seilēnoi* (below) and Hermes ('the keen-sighted Slayer of Argos', an epic appellation), whose own mother Maia was usually reckoned to be a nymph. On a cult level, the nymphs were linked with many deities including Hermes, but none so consistently as Hermes' son Pan, a rustic god with some resemblance to *seilēnoi* and satyrs (see 3.4.4).

Anchises, after being tricked into sleeping with Aphrodite, is here told by her of the future of their child; to act as nurses of divine or special children is another function discharged by certain groups of nymphs. Aphrodite also warns her lover not to reveal the identity of the child's mother, but to claim that she was one of the nymphs, drawing on a common mythological situation (above, 1.2.8). Again, this underlines the relatively inferior status of the nymphs. The union of a mortal man with a nymph does not offend against the proper order of things, whereas that of mortal with goddess does (see 2.2.4–5).

this vast and holy mountain: *this* mountain, because nymphs are local deities who are particularly associated with one area, to which they keep.

Silens: *seilēnoi*, like satyrs, are wild half-animal beings found accompanying certain gods, particularly Dionysos. Sometimes, alternatively, there is one Seilenos (Silenus), leader or father of a troupe of satyrs.

1.3 About Religion

While right from the beginning, in addition to depicting the gods, Greek texts talk about what the gods are like, it is only somewhat later that they discuss religion – that is, the relationship between gods and humans, both how humans organise and articulate their relationship with the gods, and how their conception of the divine is structured. We have indeed seen Homeric preconceptions about how the gods react to human cultivation (such as 1.1.1), but a full discussion of the matter, and its implications for how we should practice religion, must wait till at least the fifth century. The Hippocratic writer in 1.3.2 draws on a tradition of scepticism about individual religious practitioners to make a more radical point about the assumptions lying behind the use of purifications for healing purposes. With a different agenda, Plato uses the dialogue form to discuss the whole question of 'piety', *to hosion*, in this extract (1.3.1) concentrating on the way in which prayer and sacrifice are conceptualised. The religious practices of non-Greek peoples give Herodotus the opportunity to reflect on their possible superiority (1.3.3) and their relationship to Greek religion (1.3.5), while suggesting to Prodikos a possible origin for the concept of the divine (1.3.4). Other writers seem to suggest that trying to understand how the names and traditions about the gods grew up may help us to understand what they are actually like (1.3.6, 1.3.7). That religion as a whole might be a human phenomenon which needs an explanation is also a view which is put forward, in 1.3.4 and, daringly – but in what context? – 1.3.8.

1.3.1 What is piety?

Source: Plato, *Euthyphro* 14b–15b

EUTHYPHRON: But I say simply this to you, that if someone knows how to speak to the gods and how to act towards them in a way that gratifies them (*kecharismena*), by prayer and sacrifice, that is piety, and it is this sort of thing which preserves both private families and the common interest of cities. And the opposite of the things that please them is impiety, which overturns and destroys everything.

SOCRATES: If you had wanted, you could have given a much shorter answer to the main part of my question . . . So now what do you say that the pious, and piety, is? Do you not say that it is a sort of knowledge about sacrifice and prayer?

EUTH: Yes, I do.

SOC: And to sacrifice is to give gifts to the gods, while to pray is to ask from them?

EUTH: Of course, Socrates.

SOC: So from that it follows that piety would be a knowledge of asking and giving.

EUTH: Yes, Socrates, you understand perfectly what I said.

SOC: You see, my friend, I am desirous of your wisdom, and I am paying attention to it, so that what you say does not fall to the ground. So tell me, what is this service to the gods? Are you saying that it is asking from them and giving to them?

EUTH: Yes, I am.

SOC: And would not the right way of asking be to ask for those things that we need from them?

EUTH: Obviously.

SOC: And again, would the right way of giving be to give them in return the things that they need from us? It would not be a properly professional way of offering gifts to give someone things of which he has no need.

EUTH: That's right, Socrates.

SOC: So piety would be a sort of art of trading between gods and human beings?

EUTH: Yes, trading, if that's what you like to call it.

SOC: But I don't like to call it that, if it's not true. Now tell me, what benefit do the gods derive from the gifts they get from us? Everyone can see what it is that they give – we have no good thing that was not given by them. But what is the benefit of the things they get from us? Or do we do so much better than they do in the trade-off that we get everything that is good from them while they get nothing from us?

EUTH: But Socrates, do you think that the gods get any benefit out of what they receive from us?

SOC: Then what would they be, Euthyphron, the gifts we give to the gods?

EUTH: What do you think they could be, apart from honour, esteem and – as I said just now – gratitude (*charis*)?

SOC: So piety is gratifying to the gods, but not beneficial or dear to them?

EUTH: I think it is dear to them above all things.

SOC: So again it seems that piety is what is dear to the gods.

EUTH: Certainly.

The dialogue concerns the nature of *to hosion* or *hosiotēs*, rendered here as piety. Euthyphron is led to offer several definitions of the word, most of which are shown to be unsatisfactory by Socrates. In the previous section, a definition was offered which Socrates does not seem to object to: that the part of what is right (or justice, *to dikaion*), which is concerned with service to the gods is reverent and pious (*hosion*), and the part concerned with human affairs is the remainder of what is right. But Socrates then asks a new question – what are the gods trying to achieve in which our service helps them? – which Euthyphron gives up on, and suggests the definition with which our extract begins, only for Socrates to bring him round once more to a definition which has previously been rejected ('piety is what is dear to the gods').

Both this last definition and that which is given at the beginning of the passage above are common-sense views of *to hosion*, which would have commanded broad assent. From a practical point of view, there is little difficulty in agreeing that to act piously is to act in a way pleasing to the gods. (This has the strange consequence, not considered in the dialogue, that *hosion* can sometimes be opposed to *hieron*, 'holy', and mean almost 'secular', as it refers to any activity which is legitimate and approved by the gods.) Most people would also have assumed that performing prayer and sacrifice in a proper way was the heart of piety; such things established and maintained *charis*, or mutual obligation and good standing, which is central to the way the Greeks conceived the relationship between gods and humans (see 3.1 introduction). Give and take of this sort can, of course, be reduced to 'trading', as Socrates suggests, but Euthyphron, not unnaturally, seems somewhat uneasy with this way of putting it; it would perhaps be fairer to his perception, and that of others, to think of the relationship of mutuality between friends or family members. But Socrates, who is in fine ironic mode throughout the dialogue, obviously finds the whole concept unsatisfactory, though he does not suggest anything to replace it.

The whole dialogue raises problems that are relevant to many religious systems, not only the Greek. In our extract, we may notice particularly the difficult issue of what it is that worship can actually offer to the divine. It is worth noting that Euthyphron, who from Plato's perspective gets so much so wrong, is quite clear that the gods do not receive any material benefit from the material offers made to them. His suggestion of 'honour and esteem' (*timē*, *gera*) corresponds to the common use of the word 'honours' to express the acts of formal worship. But he comes close to self-contradiction in rejecting the idea that the gods get some benefit from what their worshippers give them, when he has just agreed that it would not be 'properly professional' to offer someone things of which they have no need.

1.3.2 Healers and purifiers are impious

Source: [Hippocrates], *On the Sacred Disease* 1.27–32

With this sort of explanation and contrivance they pretend to have some extra knowledge, and they lead people astray by prescribing for them holy abstinences and special purities, and most of what they say is concerned with religious and divine matters. And yet it seems to me that what they say is not consistent with piety, as they think it is, but rather with impiety and the belief that there are no gods, and that their 'pious' and 'divine' is really impious and unholy, as I shall now demonstrate. If they claim to know how to bring down the moon, and make the sun disappear, and cause storms and calm and rain and drought, and make the sea impassable and the land barren (?) and everything else of this sort, whether they say this power comes from special rites or from some other knowledge or technique, then in my view those who practise these things commit impiety, in thinking that the gods do not exist or have no power . . . For if a human

being can use magic and sacrifice to drag down the moon and make the sun disappear and cause storms and calm, then I would certainly suppose that none of these things is divine, but rather human, if the power of 'the divine' is conquered and enslaved by human intellect. But perhaps these things are not so, and rather those in search of a livelihood invent and embroider all sorts of things . . .

The author of this text is a late fifth-century medical writer in the Hippocratic tradition, whose aim is to demonstrate that the 'sacred disease' (epilepsy) is no more sacred than any other sickness, and to investigate its actual causes in terms of contemporary medical theory. He must therefore try to discredit those who attempt to cure the condition by magico-religious means. He criticises their procedures as illogical (compare 3.3.4) and in the above passage attempts to give the *coup de grâce* by showing that they are in fact impious as well as ineffective. There is some logic in his argument: can beings which are relatively easily controlled by 'magic' really be divine and thus superior to humanity? This point enables him to use a favoured strategy, employed by authors as diverse as Pindar (1.1.6) and the author of the Derveni Papyrus (cf. 1.3.6, 2.5.11), when challenging established views or traditions about the gods, to claim superior piety. The view of the gods which healer-purifiers necessarily espouse, he says, is an unfitting one. As for the insinuation that they are charlatans, such accusations are commonly directed against certain types of religious professionals (for instance seers and oracle-collectors, see 4.2.5) and thus on one level they are easily acceptable. The argument in its entirety, entailing that the gods ought not to be approached in this way, may have impressed some, but will have had little effect on society as a whole, since healers and purifiers continued to ply their trade. (See the further extract at 4.2.9.)

The passage continues by turning to the main subject of the treatise, the 'sacred disease', as the writer describes how practitioners attribute differing symptoms of epilepsy to individual deities.

have no power: the text immediately following is uncertain, and the few words omitted may perhaps represent an intrusive explanatory gloss. The sequence of thought makes sense without them.

1.3.3 Persian religion

Source: Herodotus, *Histories* 1.131

The following are the customs which I know are observed by the Persians. It is not their custom to set up statues and temples and altars, and indeed they impute foolishness to those who do so, I suppose because they do not think of the gods in human form as the Greeks do. Their custom is to go up to the highest mountain peaks and there sacrifice to Zeus, and what they call Zeus is the whole circle

of the sky. They also sacrifice to the sun, the moon, the earth, fire, water and the winds. These were the only gods to whom they sacrificed originally, but later they learned from the Assyrians and the Arabians to sacrifice also to Ourania. (The Assyrians call Aphrodite Mylitta, the Arabians Alilat, and the Persians Mitra.)

Although Herodotus does not speculate about theology (what the divine is really like) as do many of the authors represented in this chapter, a major part of his anthropological investigations is the inquiry into the religious practices and beliefs of different peoples. Sometimes, as here, his descriptions reveal his own views and sympathies. Although, as he implies, 'statues and temples and altars' are fundamental to the practice of Greek religion, he seems to have some approval for what he represents as the Persian view with its rejection of anthropomorphic deities. The focus on the 'natural' gods such as the heavenly bodies as the core of religion is typical of the late fifth century (compare 1.3.4, 1.3.8), despite the fact that these entities received relatively little worship in classical times from the Greeks themselves.

Herodotus gives away some of his agenda in the last sentence of the extract, where he admits that the Persians do in fact worship at least one anthropomorphic deity – but in tune with his interest elsewhere in cultural transmission, he identifies the phenomenon as something the Persians have learned from their neighbours, a dilution then of earlier purer forms. Ourania, 'the heavenly (female) one', was identified by the Greeks as a form of Aphrodite with eastern connexions (cf. 6.5.9, 1.3.6 commentary); a number of West Asian goddesses were thus syncretised. But Herodotus is quite wrong in identifying Aphrodite with Mitra, who is actually a male god.

1.3.4 Usefulness makes a god

Source: Prodikos of Keos (DK 84 B30)

The ancients considered the sun and moon and rivers and springs and in fact everything to which we owe our livelihood to be gods, because of their usefulness, just as the Egyptians do the Nile.

Prodikos was a fifth-century thinker who was sometimes labelled an atheist by later antiquity because of statements such as the one above. The passage, quoted by the much later philosopher Sextus, continues in a paraphrased form: 'because of this bread was considered to be Demeter, wine Dionysos, water Poseidon, fire Hephaistos, and similarly with everything beneficial'. But Prodikos is also attested as having claimed that 'gods' such as Demeter and Dionysos were actually the inventors of a means of sustenance or some other helpful and civilising skill – the theory which has come to be called euhemerism, after a hellenistic exponent of the idea, and a very influential view in

the ancient world. Frequently in its later forms the two versions go together, as probably in Prodikos himself, with one group of gods being explained as natural phenomena and another as the great human benefactors of remote antiquity. The position is not in fact necessarily an atheistic one, though it does tend to diminish the standing of the gods as traditionally conceived.

The adducing of another culture as a parallel for the theory is also rather characteristic of fifth-century thought, and suggests comparisons with Herodotus (passages 1.3.3, 1.3.5).

1.3.5 How we know the names of the gods

Source: Herodotus, *Histories* 2.50, 52–3

The names of almost all the gods came to Greece from Egypt. Having made inquiries, I find that it is the case that they came from foreign peoples, and my opinion is that above all they came from Egypt. Apart from Poseidon and the Dioskouroi, as I said before, and apart from Hera, Hestia, Themis, the Graces (*Charites*) and the Nereids, the names of all the other gods have always existed in the land of the Egyptians. In saying this, I am repeating what the Egyptians themselves say. They deny knowing the names of these divinities, and I consider that these were named by the Pelasgians, except for Poseidon, whom the Greeks learned about from the Libyans. For they are the only people to have known the name of Poseidon from the beginning, and they have always paid honour to this god. In addition, the Egyptians have no cult of heroes. (*There follows a short section on Pelasgian contributions to Greek religion, most of which is given as passage* 6.4.5.) I know from what I heard in Dodona that originally the Pelasgians used to sacrifice and pray to the gods, but without giving any of them name or epithet, since they had not yet come across these. But they named them 'gods' (*theoi*), because they 'placed' (*thentes*) everything in order and maintained all proper divisions. Then a long time afterwards they learned the names of most of the gods, which had come from Egypt, but the name of Dionysos they learned much later still. After some time they consulted the oracle at Dodona about these names, Dodona being considered the oldest Greek oracle, and at that time the only one. The Pelasgians then asked the oracle at Dodona whether they should adopt the names that had come to them from foreigners, and the oracle replied that they should. So from that time on they used the names of the gods in their sacrifices, and later on the Greeks picked up the names from the Pelasgians.

But how each of the gods came into being, or whether all of them existed always, and what their forms are like, was not known until 'yesterday and the day before', so to speak – since I consider that Hesiod and Homer were born not more than four hundred years before myself, and it is they who composed a theogony for the Greeks, and gave the gods their epithets, divided up their various honours and skills, and indicated their individual appearances. (The poets who are said to be earlier than these I think were actually later.) Now the first part of this account is from the priestesses of Dodona, but the rest – the part about Hesiod and Homer – is my own. (*The following passage deals with Dodona, and is given as* 6.2.2.)

Herodotus' views on early understandings of the gods in Greece are given in the midst of his book-long treatment of the geography, history and customs of Egypt. Although at times he presents Egypt as a strange, exotic place ('the Egyptians do everything in the opposite way from the rest of mankind', 2.35.2), part of his programme is to challenge easy preconceptions about Greeks and barbarians, and to explore cultural transmissions between different peoples, and it is in this context we should see his claim that the names of the gods are mainly of Egyptian origin.

Like most of his Greek contemporaries, Herodotus assumes that different ethnic groups worship the same gods under different names – a natural assumption if the gods are 'real'. Since he is also fond of presenting changes as occurring through groups 'learning' from other peoples, it is easy for him to suppose that the Greeks could have acquired the names they use for the gods from elsewhere, since very few of these names have an obvious meaning in the Greek language. In fact the process he gives us is more complicated because (again like many of his contemporaries) he assumes that the area which contemporaries called Hellas was once inhabited by a race who were not 'Hellenes', whom he and others call Pelasgians, a name which was commonly associated with foundations of great antiquity. It was this pre-Greek people, in his account, who began the worship of gods in what is now Hellas, and from them comes the Greek word *theos*, god. (It is interesting to note that in fact the etymology of *theos* is a puzzle; it is not related to Latin *deus*, and it has been suggested that Herodotus may in a sense be right in linking it with (the proto-Indo-European equivalent of) the Greek root *the/thē* (*tithēmi*), although with a different meaning from the one he gives. From his own point of view, however, Herodotus is perhaps somewhat illogical in making the connexion, unless he assumes that this root too derives from the Pelasgian language.) The Pelasgians then adopted names for these *theoi* from the Egyptians and Libyans, confirming through oracular consultation at Dodona (see 6.2.2) a usage that was already creeping in and, one must assume, adding others of their own invention. When the Greeks arrived, they simply took over these names from the Pelasgians. Thus although elsewhere (*Histories* 8.144), Herodotus sees religion, in the sense of the style of worshipping the gods, as one of the markers of Greek identity, he conceives of the Greek religious system as having evolved and incorporated non-Greek elements.

One of the paradoxes of Greek religion is the gap between the world of the mythological gods and the often rather different concepts implied in worship. Convincingly, at least as regards the Greeks of later periods, Herodotus sees the early hexameter poets, Homer and Hesiod, as crucial in the formation of the more personal, mythological picture. What he sees as important here is not so much actual mythical narrative as 'facts' about the individual deities: for instance, Athena is the daughter of Zeus, born from his head, and particularly close to him; she is 'owl-eyed' or perhaps has blue-grey eyes, she is virginal and endowed with great practical wisdom, which makes her an appropriate patron of crafts such as textiles and pottery, as well as of military

strategy. Not all Athena cults fit very well with this general picture, but it is one that no doubt every Greek was familiar with, because of the great and panhellenic influence of the poets mentioned by Herodotus. (For Homer and Hesiod, see above, 1.1.1–3, and 2.1.1, 2.1.3–5.)

Moderns consider that Herodotus, writing in the fifth century, places Hesiod and Homer rather early at 400 years previous to that, however he arrived at the figure; dates between the eighth and sixth centuries are generally thought right for the various poems attributed to these authors. The other poets referred to are no doubt 'Orpheus' and Mousaios', mythological figures to whom were attributed poetry on religious subjects, of which very little survives (but see below, 1.3.6, 2.5.11 on Orphic theogonies, and compare 3.4.7), but Herodotus is likely to be correct in supposing that these works are later than the bulk of those attributed to Hesiod and Homer.

1.3.6 Earth, Mother, Rhea, Hera . . .

Source: *Derveni Pap.*, col. 22

Gē (*Earth*) and Mētēr (*Mother*) and Rhea and Hera are the same. She was called Ge by convention, and Meter because everything comes from her. Ge and Gaia are in accordance with individual dialects. Demeter was named as if *Gē Mētēr*, making one name from both, since it was the same thing. It also says in the hymns 'Demeter, Rhea, Ge, Meter, Hestia, Deio.' She is called Dēiō as well because she was ravaged (*edēiōthē*) in intercourse. He (*the poet*) will reveal that according to the poem she (gave birth excessively?). Rhea, because many different (?) kinds of living thing (flowed out (*ekrheusanta*) and?) came into being from her. Rhea and (Rheie) are in (accordance with individual dialects). She was called Hera because (?) (*the rest is missing*).

The Derveni Papyrus is a fragmentary and enigmatic text found in a mid- to late fourth-century burial in northern Greece; it takes the form of a commentary on an Orphic poem about the gods (on Orphism, see 3.4.7–9 and section introduction), purporting to give its true meaning, but there is no agreement on the author's identity or even viewpoint. The work itself could be older than the burial, but it will scarcely date from before the third quarter of the fifth century and may be considerably later. The parts of the work we have show an author who is interested in finding physical allegories behind the rather outré myths of the gods – the Orphic myths being frequently even more violent and bizarre than the Hesiodic (see also 2.1.1–2, 2.5.3).

Syncretism of the sort found here – the identification of several mythological figures as the same – with or without physical allegory, is characteristic of the fifth century. It is in this period, for instance, that we first meet with the identification of Apollo with the Sun (see also 1.3.7 below). Such viewpoints gain in prominence throughout antiquity, and are perhaps particularly favoured

as an approach to female deities. Already in the fifth century the 'Mother of the Gods', whose cult was believed to be of Asian origin (see 5.5.3), was commonly identified with the mythological figure Rhea, mother of Zeus, and Euripides in a choral ode (*Helen* 1300–68) identifies her with Demeter. Hera, though mythologically the mother of several deities, is less often seen as a mother by her worshippers, though Alcaeus may attest a concept of this sort for archaic Lesbos (see 6.1.1). We cannot know the age of the hymn which lists these deities together with Hestia and Deio as if they are alternative names for the same entity. Our author, however, is prepared to go considerably further than this: in the column preceding this passage, he states that 'Heavenly Aphrodite, Zeus, Sex (*aphrodisiazein*), Leaping, Persuasion and Harmony are names for the same god' (col. 21).

The explanation of divine names or keywords as distortions of normal or other words, which when recognised give a clue to the divinity's nature, is another late fifth-century favourite: compare again 1.3.7, and 2.5.10. But not all thinkers took this line, and Herodotus (above, 1.3.5) may have been closer to what moderns might consider the 'truth' about these names in proposing a non-Greek origin for most of them.

Deio: this name is often used as a shortened alternative to Demeter, so not unlike the dialectal alternatives (Ge/Gaia, Rhea/Rheie) which the author correctly identifies. But since he has explained Demeter as *Gē mētēr*, 'Earth mother', *Dēio* clearly needs another explanation, which he finds in *edēiōthē*, 'she was ravaged, laid waste'. The word he uses for the occasion of this violence is normally used to refer to sexual intercourse, and there is a mythological occasion for this in the tradition of the rape of Demeter by Poseidon. But the author's explanations are usually more natural than mythological, and since the word is occasionally attested as 'childbirth' he may be referring to the supposed origin of living creatures from the earth.

1.3.7 Gods dry and wet

Source: Euripides, *Bacchae* 274–85

TEIRESIAS: Listen, young man: there are two first principles in human life. There is goddess Demeter – she is earth, and whatever name you want to call her, and she gives mortals their nourishment from dry materials. Then there is the one who came later, the son of Semele who discovered the rival to this, the liquid drink of the grape, and introduced it to mankind – the drink which puts an end to poor mortals' sorrow, when they are filled with the stream that flows from the vine, which gives us sleep and forgetfulness of our daily hardships; there is no other remedy for suffering. Himself a god, he is poured out in libation to the gods, so it is through him that people get good things.

In a long and sententious speech, the old seer Teiresias attempts to convince the young king Pentheus that he should give up his opposition to the newly arrived worship of Dionysos, and explains his own views on the new deity. Euripides here introduces some distinctly contemporary-sounding themes into his mythological setting, perhaps with partly parodic intent. The identification of Demeter with earth and the reference to her many names strongly recall the preceding passage and its general approach. (The continuation of Teiresias' speech, given in 2.5.10, uses word-play to 'explain' myth, in a manner akin if not identical to the Derveni Papyrus passage above, 1.3.6.) The interest in physical categories such as 'wet' and 'dry' is also a topical fifth-century concern, echoing those we now call the Presocratics. Finally, Teiresias seems to have been influenced by Prodikos (above, 1.3.4), and presents the gods both as physical things (earth, wine), and as those who introduced benefits (corn, wine) to humans; Dionysos, in his presentation, both invented wine and is wine.

he is poured out: on libations, see 3.1.3. Such offerings could of course be made without wine, using milk or honey (substances which also, however, seem to come under Dionysos' remit in Euripides' play), but wine was by far the most usual medium employed. Since libations always accompanied sacrifice and were frequently offered when prayers were made without a sacrifice, they are seen here as the means of assuring the benefits that the gods may confer on humans when they are asked in prayer. Compare 5.5.4 on the presence of Hestia (fire) and Apollo (music) at the worship of all deities.

1.3.8 A clever man invented gods

Source: Kritias (or Euripides?), *Sisyphos* fr. 1 (*TrGF* 1.43 fr. 19)

There was a time when human life was random, and bestial, and subservient to violence, when there was no reward for the good and no punishment for the bad. Then, I think, people established laws which made punishments, so that justice might rule and have force as its slave, and any who transgressed would pay a penalty. And then the laws kept them from open violence, but they did violent acts in secret; so then, I think, some clever man of great intellect invented the fear of gods for mortals, so that the wicked would have something to fear even if they secretly did or said or thought anything. So then he introduced the divine, saying that there is a god (*daimōn*) who flourishes in everlasting life, who hears and sees with his mind, and who thinks and pays attention to these matters, who has a divine nature and who will hear everything that is said among mortals and be able to see everything that is done. Even if you plot some evil in silence, it will not escape the gods, for they possess thought. In giving this account, he introduced a most pleasant teaching and concealed the truth with a false story. He said that the gods lived in the place that would most impress people, the place he knew gave people fears and also benefits in their hard life – in the wheeling vault above, where they saw the lightning flashes, the fearsome

> rumbles of thunder, and the starry light of heaven, the beautiful decoration of the skilled craftsman Time, from whence proceeds the bright metal of the sun, and the rainy moisture makes its way to earth. These were the awful fears with which he surrounded mortals, and with his story nicely settled the god (*daimōn*) in a suitable place, and through fears extinguished lawlessness . . . (*some lines missing?*) So that's how I think someone first convinced mortals to believe in a race of gods (*daimones*).

This very interesting account of religion as a human construct has puzzled commentators because of its placing in a satyr play, the traditional bawdy and non-serious conclusion to a dramatist's production of three tragedies. Given what we know both of satyr play and of the story of Sisyphos, a notorious god-challenger who was punished in Hades, it might seem likely that the character who speaks these lines, probably Sisyphos himself, eventually gets his comeuppance at the hands of the gods he does not believe exist. The lines might then be some kind of parody of sophistic ideas such as Euripides gives us with Teiresias' account of Dionysos in the *Bacchae* (see 1.3.7, 2.5.10). But the passage itself gives no hint of a humorous or parodic intent, and in fact forms a rather coherent and plausible theory, within the ancient convention of the single 'first inventor' supposed to be responsible for cultural change and technological advance. We can compare the view of the roughly contemporary atomist philosopher Demokritos (DK 68 B30) that the concept of gods arose through fear of the natural phenomena of the heavens; these passages supply one of the few ancient theories of the development of religion (but see above, 1.3.4), as well as giving a theoretical back-up for an atheistic position (on atheism, see 3.5).

they have thought: a word is missing here. The sense must be that they use mind to perceive what is in human minds.

the wheeling vault above: the language becomes notably more 'poetic' here, perhaps to indicate the impressiveness of the innovator's new teaching. Hence 'the skilled craftsman, Time'; this is typical tragic language rather than a lapse into theism.

bright metal of the sun: literally 'of the star/heavenly body', probably the sun. A famous impiety trial in Athens was that of the philosopher Anaxagoras, probably in the 430s, because of his view that the sun was 'a lump of metal' – our sources use the same word, *mydros*, that is employed here.