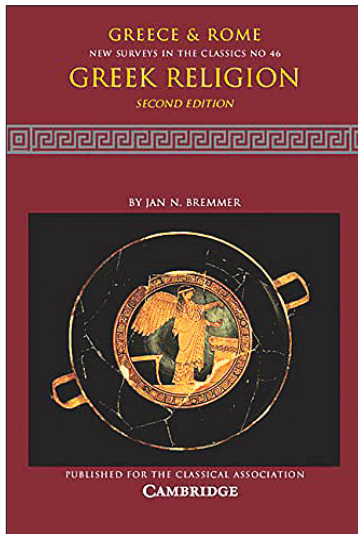


GREEK RELIGION



BREMMER, JAN N. (2021) (2nd ed.). *Greek Religion*. New Surveys in the Classics 46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 188 pp., 20,62 € [ISBN: 978-1-0090-4879-8].

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THE FIRST EDITION OF THIS BOOK BY JAN N. BREMMER was published in 1994. For various reasons, including its clarity, discussion of all the central issues in Greek religion and extensive documentation, it became a key reference text for anyone undertaking research on the religion of the ancient Greeks. Given the subject matter, another laudable characteristic was its brevity, enabling the book to be used as a reliable source for any consultation, but also to be read and enjoyed in one sitting, as a

monograph, something which is less typical and distinguishes it from other authoritative texts such as the equally indispensable *Greek Religion* by Walter Burkert.

While working on an updated edition of a significant number of articles and papers previously published,¹ Professor Bremmer (Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Groningen) also decided to update this classic work on Greek religion, now published by Cambridge University Press.

Formally, this second edition is very similar to the first. It is somewhat longer (mainly due to an updated bibliography, but also, as I shall indicate below, to an expansion of some of the sections) but contains a similar index, and the only notable difference in this second edition is the location of the footnotes at the bottom of the page rather than at the end of each chapter, which makes the text easier to read.

Chapter I. Introduction: General Characteristics. The structure of the first edition is maintained in this chapter, as it is in all the others. The various sections discuss 1) the public rather than private nature of Greek religion and the lack of a strict division between the sacred and the profane; 2) the notions of polytheism, piety, and pollution; and 3) the absence of a religious establishment and the importance, by contrast, of poets, priests (who never became institutionally organised or monopolised access to the divine) and seers. There are two brief additions to this chapter, one in the second section, referring to recent studies on theology and notions such as “belief”, which have long been overshadowed by studies devoted to ritual,² and another in the third section, introducing nuances to the idea of a *polis religion*, which has been very much in vogue in recent decades. Without denying the importance of the latter in governing cult activity, other areas are mentioned where such control was much less significant, such as magic, mysteries, mythography and oracles, and the reader is also warned against the excesses of Athenocentrism. In this chapter as in the others, all these points are accompanied by a bibliography updated to 2020.³

Chapter II. Gods. The sections in this chapter examine 1) the Greeks’ understanding of what a god was and the difference they drew between gods and heroes; 2) how to study the Greek pantheon; and 3) the various gods’ perceived spheres of influence and the kind of hierarchy established between them. The first section in-

1. Bremmer, 2017, 2019, and 2021.

2. The main reference given is Eidinow, Kindt and Osborne, 2016.

3. Footnote 10 contains a reference to Bremmer, 2015 which does not appear in the final bibliography. Given the subject under discussion (atheism and the origin of the term *atheos*), the correct reference is almost certainly Bremmer 2018a, in which the author reviews a book published in 2015 (hence the confusion). I point this discrepancy out merely to note that, despite the enormity of the task of updating the vast bibliography provided, this is the only error that I have found.

cludes new material on the etymology of Greek *theos* and recent studies examining the theriomorphism of the Greek gods and their association and occasional identification with animals, an aspect of Greek religion that has sometimes been overlooked due to the success of Homeric anthropomorphism.⁴ Another new addition in this section is a discussion of the meaning of the gods' epithets, a question that remains open to debate: were these used to distinguish between the different places where the gods were worshipped, such as Athena Nike in Athens, or to underline a particular function? Were Artemis Agrotera and Artemis Lochia different deities? A new contribution to this issue is the recently created database *Mapping Ancient Polytheisms. Cult Epithets as an Interface between Religious Systems and Human Agency*, edited by Corinne Bonnet.⁵ The second section, on the study of the pantheon, mentions recent research questioning the division between Olympian and chthonic deities that used to appear so clear-cut in the past.⁶ In the third section, the reference to Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf in the first edition, when discussing Artemis in rites of passage, is now replaced by one to Jean-Pierre Vernant; in this case, only time will tell who was more deserving of this place of honour.

Chapter III. Sanctuaries. This third chapter considers 1) information about the sanctuaries, the cult images they contained and the personnel responsible for their care; 2) the spaces in which the temples are located; and 3) their secular and religious functions. It is the first section that contains the most new additions. Bremmer has reworked it by updating the information through the inclusion of recent studies on what is known as the "cult image", a subject which has aroused considerable research interest in recent decades.

Chapter IV. Ritual. At the beginning of this chapter, Bremmer observes that, although recent years have witnessed a shift in the study of Greek religion towards cognitive analyses and notions such as "belief", ritual retains its primacy and continues to constitute "the heart of ancient Greek religion". The chapter includes: 1) a definition and categorisation of the term "ritual"; 2) ritual acts: prayer, procession, sacrifice; and 3) a discussion of some specific rituals in particular. The very short first section remains largely unchanged, except for a bibliographical update in the notes, and retains all of its interesting, clear explanation that "ritual" is not a native category but emerged around 1900 and encompasses various religious manifestations for

4. The reference cited is Kindt, 2020.

5. <https://map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr/?lang=en>

6. On this particular question, about which Walter Burkert had also expressed doubts, the bibliography given by Bremmer does not include Deacy, 2015, which too challenges the Olympian/chthonic division.

which the Greeks had a very fragmented vocabulary. The second section contains a more detailed critique than appeared in the first edition of a key subject in the study of ritual, namely animal sacrifice, ranging from Meuli through Burkert to Vernant.

Chapter V. Mythology. This chapter covers the following topics: 1) a brief history of mythology; 2) the origins and uses of myth; 3) relationships between myth and ritual; and 4) iconography. Despite its necessary brevity, the first section gives a useful synthesis of the schools of myth interpretation and contains a new reference to the study of mythography, which has witnessed growing interest in recent decades. Bremmer observes that with their focus on “history” rather than “theogony”, authors such as Hekataios and Akousilaos offer surprises for the mythological scholar. In the section on myth and ritual, this new edition includes a more detailed discussion of Versnel’s argument that some myths and rites were formed *pari passu*, in particular those related to Kronos and the Kronia. Bremmer points out the weaknesses of Versnel’s conclusion that Kronian ritual is just as ambiguous as Kronian myth, which overlooks the fact that “in the cases of human sacrifice, Kronos is usually the *interpretatio Graeca* of a Carthaginian or Semitic god, whereas, in the case of abundance, Kronos is sometimes the Greek interpretation of Egyptian god Geb” (p. 75).

Chapter VI. Gender. This chapter considers 1) the myths and rituals that accompanied the female life cycle and daily life; 2) the representation of women in myth and art; and 3) women’s festivals. As might be expected, this is one of the chapters with the newest theoretical and bibliographical content, given the intensity of production in women’s and gender studies in recent decades. The first section contains an expanded discussion of the images and stories in which young women are the object of more or less violent domestication, which clearly differentiate female from male rites of passage. Missing from this analysis is Claudia Montepaone’s study of this specific question,⁷ and Lillian E. Doherty’s authoritative text on interpreting Greek myth from a gender perspective,⁸ which also explores the topic of rites of passage in depth. Another aspect that has been expanded in this second edition is the role of priestesses, the study of which has been greatly advanced by the ever-growing collection of epigraphic documentation.

Chapter VII. Transformations. This final chapter considers 1) the Eleusinian mysteries; 2) Orphic ideas and Bacchic mysteries; and 3) structural changes during the transition to the Hellenistic period. In the first section, the description of the Eleusinian mysteries has been reordered and expanded, while the third section contains

7. Montepaone, 1999.

8. Doherty, 2002.

a new discussion of deities such as Asclepius, whose growing importance Bremmer relates to the burgeoning interest in the body evident in the fourth century and to increasing individualism.

This second edition updates the short Appendix entitled “The Genesis of Greek Religion” which concluded the first edition.

Throughout this review I have tried to indicate those aspects of Greek religion that have received significantly new treatment in the more than two decades that separate this edition from the first and have accordingly been revised and updated in the body of the new text. In addition, the notes and final bibliography have been exhaustively updated. References to the synthetic nature of this book are not intended as a criticism but rather as a description of this and all other volumes in the *Greece & Rome. New Surveys in the Classics* series. The aim has been to present a synthesis of studies on Greek religion, not to compete with other works such as Walter Burkert’s *Greek Religion* (1985, 1977 German edition), to which Bremmer acknowledged his debt in the preface to the first edition.

The second edition of *Greek Religion* by Jan N. Bremmer, one of the undisputedly leading figures in current Greek religious studies, retains every single iota of its relevance and usefulness. The reasons why the first edition of this book was received with unanimous critical acclaim and was translated into German, Italian, Dutch, Spanish and French still hold, rendering it a classic text that is also easy to read and surprisingly informative given its synthetic nature. In sum, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in Greek religion, classical philology, or the ancient world in general.

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