

Religion in the ancient Greek city



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CHAPTER 7

Rites of passage

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we shall be discussing the rituals and beliefs relating to critical points in a person's life-cycle, that is, transitions from one life-status to another – birth, attainment of majority, marriage, death. 'Domestic (or family) religion' and 'popular religion', the labels usually employed to cover these, do not seem satisfactory to us. The former is inadequate, because the rituals in question are as much civic as domestic, and the cleavage familiar today between private and public life has hardly any meaning in a context where matrimonial and funerary rituals were a matter of concern to the community at large, not just the few individuals immediately involved. As for 'popular religion', despite its currency among historians of religion at the beginning of this century and its recent revival by English-speaking writers, the term both is excessively vague and corresponds to no ancient Greek notion. M. P. Nilsson, for example, lumped absolutely everything concerning religion under this rubric, while other exponents of the 'popular religion' category assert or assume an untenable contrast between the 'spontaneous' actions and rituals of the masses and the sophisticated religious thought of the élite.

It need hardly be added that such a conception of Greek religion is the end-product of centuries of 'Christianocentricity' and has nothing whatsoever in common with our outlook. We have adopted rather an anthropologically inspired approach that brings out the peculiar logic underlying irreducibly alien rituals and beliefs. Hence our choice of title for this chapter, which is

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

Originally published in French as
La Religion grecque

by Armand Colin Editeur 1989

and © Armand Colin Editeur, Paris 1989

First published in English by Cambridge University Press 1992 as
Religion in the ancient Greek city

English translation © Cambridge University Press 1992

Reprinted 1994 (twice), 1995, 1997 (with bibliographical addenda)

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Bruit Zaidman, Louise.

(Religion grecque. English)

Religion in the ancient Greek city / Louise Bruit Zaidman and
Pauline Schmitt Pantel; translated by Paul Cartledge.

p. cm.

Translation of *La religion grecque*.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 41262 5 (hardback). – ISBN 0 521 42357 0 (paperback)

I. Greek – Religion 2. Cities and towns – Greece.

I. Schmitt Pantel, Pauline. II. Title

BL 785.Z3513 1992

292.08-dc20 91-39843 CIP

ISBN 0 521 41262 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 42357 0 paperback

borrowed from Arnold van Gennep's *Les Rites de passage* (Gennep 1960[97]). We shall use as our expository guideline the human life-cycle, beginning with birth and ending with death.

BIRTH-RITES

Immediately following the birth of a baby, an olive-branch was fixed above the main door of the house for a boy, a fillet of wool for a girl. On the fifth or seventh day after the birth the ceremony of the Amphidromia (literally 'the running-around [*sc.* ritual]') was performed. The newborn infant was carried in a circle around the domestic hearth, the seat of the guardian goddess Hestia, and then placed directly on the ground; these rituals served to inscribe the infant within the space of the *oikos* and to attach him or her to the hearth of which s/he was a product. This was the occasion for the newborn to be officially accepted by the father and sometimes also for his or her identity and humanity to be recognized by the attribution of a name. (Not naming the child before then was a realistic response to the fair likelihood that under ancient Greek medical and sanitary conditions the infant would not survive that long.)

This ritual of incorporation within the household had its counterpart in the ritual of exposure, consequent on the father's refusal of recognition. In that event the infant was expelled from hearth and home and exposed in a distant location outside the city's cultivated territory in what the Greeks considered to be wild space (*agros*, 'open field', was cognate with *agriōs* meaning 'wild'). The exposure of neonates was a central feature of numerous Greek myths, that of Oedipus, for example; here the story was set in the territory of the shepherds who pastured their flocks on the margins between different civic territories. The Oedipus story was emblematic in another way too: parents did not usually expose their infants willingly, and those at any rate who left them in an earthenware jar (*pithos*) for protection surely hoped that they might be rescued as Oedipus was. At Sparta, however, it was not the infant's father who decided whether a child should be reared but the tribal elders, representing the community as a whole; if their decision was negative, the infant was 'exposed' by being hurled to its certain death

down a chasm brutally known as Apothetai, or 'the place of the throwaways'.

After a birth the household, and especially the mother and any other women who had been involved directly with the process of giving birth, had to be ritually purified. For the blood that had been shed was considered to be in this case a source of pollution (*miasma*), which is why it was forbidden to give birth in a sanctuary (chapter 6). Often it was the city which laid down regulations for purification by law, on the grounds that the pollution of one household might infect the entire civic community. The most frequently used purificatory rituals included sprinkling the mother with lustral water, bathing her in the sea or drenching her with the blood of a piglet, and the burning of incense and sulphur.

Certain deities were especially associated with childbirth: Artemis, Eileithyia, and Demeter Kourotrōphos among others; to these it was customary to consecrate the clothing soiled in childbirth and the special belts worn by pregnant mothers. On the tenth day after the birth a sacrifice was held, followed by a banquet, which brought together all the members of the family and was sometimes an occasion for giving presents to the child.

ENTRY INTO THE WORLDS OF THE ADULT AND THE CITIZEN

A distinction must be drawn between the sexes here, since it was only boys who could acquire the rights of full, that is politically active, citizenship. The ceremonies marking the passage from adolescence to maturity varied from city to city. Their true significance can only be understood by placing them within a wider context of ritual practices than that of religion proper, a context usually described as 'initiation' (La Fontaine 1985[105]). But so as not to overstep the limits of this book, we shall concentrate on the religious aspects of initiation by taking the Apatouria festival as a case-study.

The Apatouria was a peculiarly Ionian festival: 'truly all are Ionians who keep the Apatouria' (Herodotus 1.147). Celebrated by those who 'have the same father' (i.e., putative common ancestor in the paternal line), it was the occasion on which new

members were formally integrated into the community. In its Athenian version the festival is pretty well documented. The social framework within which it was conducted was that of the phratry, a religious and political corporation of alleged kinsmen ('blood-brothers'). Prior enrolment in a phratry was an indispensable condition of a boy's being admitted to a deme and thereby to full Athenian citizenship on reaching the age of majority (eighteen).

The festival lasted for three days during the month of Pyanop-sion (roughly October–November: see chapter 10). On the first day, called *Dorpia*, the fellow phratry-members feasted together. The second day, *Anarrhysis*, was given over to sacrificing, especially in honour of Zeus Phratrios and Athene Phratia. Finally, on the third day, *Koureōtis*, young boys were admitted to their father's phratry, their change of status being celebrated by sacrifices (*koureion*, *meiōn*). The nature of the latter sacrifice is obscure, but the *koureion* sacrifice we know to have accompanied the boy's dedication of a lock of his hair to Artemis to signify his passage out of childhood. If an adult phratry-member had married since the last Apatouria, it was the custom for him to hold a wedding sacrifice (*gamēlia*) to inform his fellow-members of his new status and of the identity of his bride (see further below).

The difference of ritual treatment accorded to an adolescent boy and a young girl on the threshold of their adult lives was therefore blatant, and there was a corresponding difference in the myths dealing with this important transition. So far as boys were concerned, their access to the world of the citizens was marked by rituals of, on the one hand, segregation (dedication of hair to Artemis, for instance, which marked the boundary between young adulthood and childhood) and, on the other, incorporation (participation in certain communal post-sacrificial feasts, which integrated him in the civic community). The phratry acted as intermediary between family and state.

Once a young man had been enrolled on the register of his father's deme and ritually endowed with the status of 'ephebe' (literally 'on the threshold of majority') at the age of eighteen, his first action was to make a tour of all the sanctuaries of Athens. That and the oath he was obliged to swear (witnessed by no less

than eleven deities: Tod 1948[63]: 204 = Harding 1985[65]: 109A) are exemplary proof of the fact that religion and civic life were mutually and inextricably implicated.

THE OTHER HALF: YOUNG GIRLS

A point-by-point comparison of the ritual treatment of boys and girls would be senseless, since no daughter of a (male) citizen became a (full) citizen, whereas, other things being equal, every son did. There were no collective rites of passage prescribed for the young girls of any city (with the possible exception of Sparta). Rather, what one does find is that a tiny and select handful were given the temporary privilege of being in the service of a deity. A famous and not in itself obviously funny passage of Aristophanes' sex-war comedy *Lysistrata* succinctly describes this privileged engagement. It is placed in the mouth of the leader of the chorus of Athenian wives who have gone on a sex-strike and occupied the Akropolis in an attempt to force their husbands to make peace with Sparta; she urges the audience of citizens to 'listen, all, for we have good advice for you':

At the age of seven I served as one of the *arrhēphoroi*;
at ten I pounded barley for Our Lady (Athene);
then, shedding my dress of saffron, I served as a Bear
for Artemis in the Brauronia festival;
finally, having grown into a tall and comely young girl,
I served as *kanēphoros* and wore a necklace of figs.

(*Lysistrata* 642–7)

This is not, despite appearances, a description of a graded cycle of feminine initiation. Athenian girls never became full adult citizens. Most Athenian women will never even have served as 'Bears' (only a few were chosen for this honorific year of service to Artemis at Brauron), or *kanēphoroi* (basket-carriers in the great festival processions) or *arrhēphoroi* (small girls who helped to celebrate the Arrhephoria in honour of Athene). As the ritual civic functions enumerated in the Aristophanic passage did not mark the attainment of different stages in a girl's life-cycle, they are not a parallel to the male rites of passage. What really did count as a rite of passage for a girl was her marriage.

MARRIAGE

No ancient Greek city devised a precise legal definition of marriage. Certain types of union were privileged, but the boundary between marriage and a non-marital union was often a fine one. The rituals of the wedding-day (*gamos*) in no case constituted a sacrament, and they had no legal standing in themselves. At Athens the legal side of marriage (always *arranged* marriage) was taken care of beforehand, sometimes many years before, at the ceremony of *enguēsis*, whereby the father or other male guardian affianced or rather 'gave away' the future bride to the future bridegroom with the words 'I give you this girl for the ploughing of legitimate children'. The wedding rituals did, however, mark a change of status for both man and woman alike, although it was a far more profound change for the woman who left the paternal *oikos* and hearth for those of her husband, thereby exchanging one *kurios* ('lord and master') for another.

Wedding rituals were diverse in form and not ranked hierarchically; they were directed towards a large number of deities, each of whom had his or her precisely defined function to fulfil towards the individuals, or rather the families, concerned. On the eve of the *gamos*, sacrifices (*proteleia*, *progamia*) were offered by the families of the bride and groom to a range of deities considered to watch over marriage, especially Zeus Teleios and Hera Teleia, and Artemis. The bride now literally 'put away childish things' by dedicating her toys, hair-rings, and other personal tokens of her childhood, usually to Artemis. Both bride and groom took a ritual purificatory bath, for which at Athens the water was drawn from the Kallirrhoe springs in the bed of the Ilissos river southeast of the Akropolis and carried home in specially shaped jars called *loutrophoroi* ('nuptial bathwater-holders'); Attic vase-painters liked to depict the procession of women fetching the water from the fountain on vases of this shape, which might also serve as the wife's funerary urn.

On the day of the *gamos* itself both the bride's and the groom's houses were decorated with branches of olive and laurel, and the father or guardian of the bride held a sacrifice and banquet in his. The girl (usually aged fourteen or fifteen, having just reached puberty) would be veiled and wearing a wreath. In her ambig-

ous and liminal new status as bride (*numphē*) she would be attended by a married *numpheutria* or matron of honour, while the groom had a *paranymphos*, a sort of 'best man', to attend him. The sexes were kept rigidly segregated. A special rôle was allotted to a young boy chosen because both his parents were still living (significantly, there was a special epithet for such a fortunate boy, *amphithalēs*). Wearing on his head a wreath of thorny plants mixed with acorns, he handed round bread to the guests from a basket and formulaically pronounced 'I have banished evil and found good.' In tragic drama this ritual was represented as a harking-back to the Greeks' transition from a thorny to a smooth and cultivated life, from a life of savagery to one of milled grain, and the same agricultural symbolism was implicit in the culinary implements used for the wedding day. The bride had to bring a frying-pan to cook the barley, a child had to bring a sieve, and in front of the nuptial bedchamber there were hung a pestle and mortar. The food served at the banquet consisted of traditional dishes, including sesame cakes which were supposed to stimulate fecundity. Presents were also given.

In the early evening the bride was taken in formal, torchlit procession from the house of her father or guardian to that of her new husband. She was often conveyed on a wagon drawn by oxen or mules, and wedding songs were sung to Hymen god of marriage. At the door of the bridegroom's house his parents stood to greet their new daughter-in-law. She was given a piece of sesame-and-honey cake, a quince or a date (more fertility symbols) and performed an obligatory tour of her new home.

Within the institution of marriage the wife was the mobile element: it was she who became attached to a new hearth by being transferred to a new *oikos*. (The only exceptions were those Athenian daughters who had no surviving brothers of the same father and were known technically as *epiklēroi*, 'those who go with the inheritance'; since they acted as surrogate heirs of their father, passive vehicles for transmitting the paternal inheritance, their husbands came to live with them in their paternal *oikos* rather than *vice versa*.) The wife's physical migration and reintegration had to be marked symbolically and ritually, hence the *katakhusmata* ceremony (used also for the induction of newbought slaves), in which nuts and dried figs were showered

on her head as she was led round the familial hearth (rather as a newborn was carried in the Amphidromia ceremony, above). The symbolism of fertility was predominant: the new wife's essential function was to assure the continuity of her husband's *oikos* by producing legitimate children. But the parallelism with the induction ceremonies for slaves and children should not be missed: it was also the wife's legal and political inferiority to her husband that was being ritually enacted. Now at last came the moment for the newlyweds to enter the nuptial bedchamber (*thalamos*).

On the following day further sacrificing and banqueting took place, and the couple received more presents. The final ritual seal was put on the new union, as we saw, with the *gamēlia* sacrifice and feast held during the next Apatouria festival. This was a crucial precaution in case the legitimacy and thus the citizen rights of his male offspring were ever contested. Since most weddings in ancient Greece took place in winter, one of the winter months (roughly January–February) at Athens and elsewhere was called *Gamēliōn*: it was no accident that the month in which the Apatouria fell was exactly nine months after *Gamēliōn*.

The above synthetic account is based mainly on Athenian evidence, but marriage rituals differed considerably from city to city. One of the most interesting cases we know, thanks to Plutarch (*Life of Lykourgos* ch. 15), is that of Sparta. Here brides were typically rather older than at Athens, but this did nothing to diminish the status-gap between bride and bridegroom as expressed symbolically in the wedding ritual. The bride's hair was not just cut but shaved by her *numpheutria*, she was dressed in a man's cloak and sandals, and laid down on a straw mattress in a darkened room of the bridegroom's house to await the arrival of her 'captor'. This is a classic example of what anthropologists call 'symbolic inversion': elsewhere in Greece we find brides wearing false beards, phalloi, even satyr costume, and bridegrooms dressed in women's clothes. These temporary and unique reversals of sexual rôle served to anticipate and confirm the norms of sexual differentiation and hierarchy within marriage.

There was an extremely large number of divinities concerned

with human marriage, but each of them had his or her precise function with its own underlying logic. Artemis, for example, was the goddess selected to receive the symbolic tokens surrendered by young brides as they left behind for good the 'savage' world of childhood and adolescence. Mythical narratives, such as that of Atalante and Melanion, made the point that it was as dangerous to refuse to leave the domain of Artemis as it was not to show one's gratitude towards her on departure: Atalante, an Arkadian mountain-girl and huntress, challenged all her suitors to a running-race on condition that only if she lost would she marry and surrender her virginity. For this she earned the hatred of Aphrodite, until Melanion finally beat her.

Aphrodite's function was to preside over the budding of sexual desire (*erōs*). Without her no matrimonial union could be deemed complete; on the other hand, an excess of sexual passion was thought to threaten the stability and decorum of a marriage from within, so Aphrodite had to be handled with care. Hera, frequently invoked as Teleia ('the Accomplished', 'the Achiever'), was the divine image of the maturity attained by the wife on marriage and of the legitimacy of the union; she stood for contractual reciprocity and protected the status of the lawfully wedded wife. Each of these divine powers was therefore in its own way indispensable and irreplaceable, one more proof of the logic that governed the constitution of the Greek pantheon (see further chapter 13).

In conclusion, it would be wrong to follow those modern interpreters who have seen marriage as an asymmetrical rite of passage into adulthood for the bride alone, a uniquely feminine affair. Rather, the institution of marriage was brilliantly contrived by Greek cities as a way of reproducing the citizen estate; it was a ritualized process in which both boys and girls were equally engaged. Refusal of marriage jeopardized not just the reproduction of the human species but the continuity of the civic community. That was why it was one of the favourite themes of Greek myth, involving boys such as Hippolytos (unreconstructed devotee of Artemis and recusant against Aphrodite in the play of Euripides named after him) no less than girls. In Crete, indeed, the civic embeddedness of marriage was communally and publicly demonstrated by making the initiatory cycle for boys

culminate in the entry of each class of age-mates into both the marital and the civic estate simultaneously (Ephoros *F.Gr.Hist.* 70F149, in Strabo x.4.20, C482).

DEATH

Archaeological evidence (fig. 2), figural representations on vases and on gravestones, and written texts provide a great deal of detailed evidence about death-rituals. A burial, like a sacrifice (chapter 4), was a three-act drama. First came the laying-out ceremonial (*prothesis*). When the corpse had been washed by female kin and anointed with perfume, clothed in white garments, and wrapped in a winding-sheet, it was laid out on a bier in the vestibule of the house. In vase-paintings the head is shown garlanded with flowers and resting on a cushion, the face exposed. All around the bier stood women, relatives of the deceased, making extravagant gestures of lamentation, scarifying their cheeks, tearing their hair, beating their breasts, weeping profusely, and keening a funeral dirge (*thrēnos*). Outside the front door of the house a basin was set, filled with lustral water for mourners to purify themselves before paying their last respects.

The second act was the funeral cortège (*ekphora*), which conveyed the dead person from his or her house to the graveyard (only infants might be buried individually near the house without risking pollution). The bier was either carried by hand or transported on a wagon, the procession being led by a woman, who was followed by the men and then the rest of the women mourners; musical accompaniment was provided by players of *auloi* (a sort of oboe). At Athens, at any rate, the *ekphora* had to take place at night.

Finally, there was the burial of the corpse in the cemetery (*sēma*, *nekrotaphion*), a delimited space outside the inhabited area or city-walls. The body might either be inhumed or cremated on a pyre; if the latter, the ashes would be collected in a linen cloth and placed in a burial urn. Grave-goods of various kinds were deposited in and around the tomb. Their quality, quantity and arrangement provide precious information on social status and religious symbolism, though they are not easy to interpret.



- 2 Plan of a fourth-century BCE tomb near Poseidonia, South Italy. Chamber tomb (stone construction, covered, measuring 2.83 × 2.13 m). The interior of the tomb is divided into two compartments separated by blocks of stone. Analysis of the grave-goods (pots, iron objects, terracottas) allows identification of one male burial (krater, skyphos, kylix, strigil, spear ...) and one female burial (hydria, phiale, lebes gamikos, miniature terracottas). Deposition rituals provide information on both the occupation and the social status of the deceased, in some cases enabling a better understanding of the society of the living. *Bibliography:* A. Bottini and E. Greco, 'Tomba a camera dal territorio pestano: alcune considerazioni sulla posizione della donna', *Dialoghi di Archeologia* 8:2 (1974-75): 231-74

From funerary furniture and, where available, the remains of the corpse itself archaeologists can now tell us quite a lot about age at death, differential treatment of the dead according to gender and social status, and family-groupings.

The grave was covered over by a tumulus of earth and marked by either a large vase or a stone *stēlē* bearing the deceased's name. (Sparta, however, was, as often, exceptional. Only warriors killed in battle and women who died in childbirth were entitled to the honour of a named gravestone.) In Attica in the seventh and sixth centuries some especially grand tombs had been marked by a greater-than-lifesize statue of a *kouros* (nude male) or *korē* (clothed female). In the Classical period sculpted reliefs or large marble *lekuthoi* (translations into stone of the clay oil-jars used both for pouring consecrated oil over the grave and as grave-goods) served the same purpose. The motive for conspicuously marking a tomb was to establish the status of the dead person in relation to the living. Hence, too, the offerings of food or of ornaments such as crowns, fillets and perfume-vases. Back at the deceased's home rites of purification had to be carried out to expunge all traces of death's pollution. The hearth-fire was extinguished and a new one lit.

Finally, on the third, ninth and thirtieth days after the burial special commemorative sacrifices and feasts were held at the tomb. Due performance of these might be used persuasively as an argument in Athenian lawsuits concerning disputed inheritance, as in this fourth-century case:

I the adopted son with the aid of my wife, the daughter of Philonides here, tended Menekles while he lived . . . On his death I buried him in a manner befitting both him and myself, and I set up a fine monument to him and performed the commemorative ceremonies on the ninth day and all the other required rituals at the tomb in the finest way I could.
(Isaios II, *On the Estate of Menekles* 36)

Funerary ritual as a whole was very tightly controlled by edicts passed either by the community as such or by some subsection of it (e.g. a phratry). One of the primary tasks of Archaic lawgivers like Solon of Athens (594/3), for example, was to legislate for this area of communal life. Or consider the following regulations passed and publicly displayed on stone

by the phratry of the Labyadai at Delphi some two centuries later:

No more than thirty-five drachmas' worth of grave-goods may be deposited in the tomb, whether of goods bought or of objects taken from the home. In case any of these regulations are broken, a fine of fifty drachmas shall be payable, unless one is prepared to swear an oath on the tomb [that the prescribed maximum has not been exceeded]. Beneath the corpse there may be placed only a single mattress and a single pillow. The corpse shall be transported enshrouded and in silence; there shall be no stopping on the way, and no lamentations outside the house, before reaching the cemetery. In the case of the older dead, there shall be no dirge or lamentations over their tombs; everyone shall go straight back home, excepting only those who live at the same hearth as the deceased, together with paternal uncles, parents-in-law, descendants and sons-in-law. Neither on the next day, nor on the tenth day after the burial, nor on the anniversaries of it shall there be moaning or lamentation.
(Rougemont 1977[114], nos. 9 and 9 bis)

A third example, from another fourth-century Athenian inheritance suit, demonstrates how strong and close was the interaction between supposedly private, family matters and the interests of the state in a Greek city:

All men, when they are approaching their end, take precautions on their own behalf to prevent their family-line from dying out [literally 'their *oikoi* from becoming deserted'] and to ensure there will be someone to perform sacrifices and all the other customary rituals over them. This is why, even if they die without natural issue, they at any rate adopt so as to leave children behind. Nor is this simply a matter of personal sentiment; the state also has taken public measures to see that adoption is practised, since it entrusts the (eponymous) Arkhon by law with the duty of preventing family-lines from dying out.

(Isaios VII, *On the Estate of Apollodoros* 30)

To complement the schematic, mainly Athenian picture given above we should bear in mind the diversity of local burial customs, though there was thought to be a specifically 'Greek' way of death. This view transpires from literary descriptions of funerary rituals that were clearly considered not just different but alien and deviationist – for example, the burial of Patroklos in the twenty-third book of the *Iliad*, or the funerals of Spartan and Scythian kings in Herodotus (vi.58; iv.71).

Some of the dead were more equal than others in death, notably those citizens who died in battle. A Spartan who died thus was, as we saw, exceptionally allowed a named gravestone; and in democratic Athens a collective burial ceremony was held for the war dead, immortalized for us by the Funeral Speech of Perikles in Thucydides (II.35–46) which was delivered in the late winter of 431/430 over those fallen in the first year of the Peloponnesian War. No less graphic in its non-literary way is the following law of the mid-fourth century from Thasos:

May the superintendent of the *agora* neglect nothing . . . on the day on which the *ekphora* is to occur before it has taken place. Let no one wear mourning for the heroic dead in any way for more than five days; let it not be permitted to pay them any funerary rites under pain of religious pollution; let neither the Wardens of Women, nor the Arkhons, nor the Polemarkhs give proof of negligence, and let them be ready to inflict the penalties prescribed by the laws; let the Polemarkhs and the Secretary of the Council besides have the names of the dead with their patronymic inscribed in the roll of the heroic war dead; let their fathers, mothers and children be invited on each occasion that the city sacrifices in honour of the heroic dead; let the Comptroller pay to each of them an indemnity equal to the salary paid to an official; let their fathers, mothers and children also be given places of honour at the Games; a space shall be reserved and the organizer of the Games shall set aside a bench for their use; for all those who have left male children, when they have attained their majority let them each be given by the Polemarkhs greaves, breastplate, dagger, helmet, shield and spear worth not less than three *minai*; let this equipment be given them at the Herakleia festival; for their female children, for their dowry . . . when they have reached the age of fourteen . . . (Pouilloux 1954[11], no. 141)

Besides these rituals for the exceptional, heroic dead, the cult of the ordinary dead was also a central and obligatory element in the familial and civic religion of every Greek state (except, once more, possibly Sparta). In general, celebration of the dead was included as just one element in an ensemble of complex rituals; the Athenian Genesia, a festival of hoary antiquity held on the fifth day of Boedromion (late September), was therefore exceptional in being a publicly-funded celebration devoted exclusively to the commemoration of the dead. The norm is represented rather by the Anthesteria.

This was a festival of Dionysos which took place over three days on the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth days of the month to which it gave its name, Anthesterion (roughly February–March). On the first day, called *Pithoigia*, there was a ceremonial opening of the vats containing the new wine that had been fermenting since the previous autumn. The second day, *Khoës*, was mainly given over to communal drinking and was named for the three-quart jugs from which the wine was liberally poured and quaffed; but it was also the day of the ritual marriage and sexual intercourse between Dionysos, represented by the King Arkhon, and his ‘Queen’ (*Basilinna*, the King Arkhon’s wife) in the Boukoleion (‘Ox-herd’s hut’). The third and final day was the day of the cooking pots, *Khytroi*, when the mixed vegetables prepared in these vessels were offered to Hermes Psykhopompos (‘Conveyor of Souls’). For this was the ghosts’ high noon, when the spirits of the dead were free to return above ground from the underworld and roam among the living – who were careful to take such precautions as smearing their doorways with pitch and locking up all the sanctuaries to keep them out. When the day ended, the spirits were sent packing back to Hades again, with the cry of ‘Get out, hobgoblins, the Anthesteria is over!’ ringing in their phantasmal ears.

Such a complex festival is susceptible of many different explanations depending on what feature(s) one chooses to highlight. But it is reductionist to claim for it only one overriding function or meaning (fertility, celebration of plant-life), as most interpreters have done. Rather, the Anthesteria doubtless fulfilled several functions at once, social as well as religious, and the cult of the dead was inserted into a larger ritual framework that involved among other things a carnivalesque reversal of rôles.

The deities of death were as many and various as those of marriage. Thanatos (‘Death’), in mythology the son of Night, was the god of death *par excellence*. Yet he was less often invoked than other deities who represented particular aspects of death. Hades, for example, was sovereign of the dead and gave his name to the underworld kingdom over which he ruled (see below). Being inflexible and indomitable he was hated both by men and by the other gods alike. By his side sat his captured bride, Persephone or Kore, daughter of Demeter and Zeus.

Hermes, eternal traveller and crosser of boundaries, was summoned at the moment of death to guide the deceased on his or her last journey. Besides these prominent members of the Greek pantheon, there were numerous other terrifying death-dealing powers to contend with, all of them, revealingly, female; these included the three Fates (Moirai), one of whom cut the thread of life; the Erinyes or Furies who exacted blood-vengeance for murder; and the Gorgon Medousa who literally petrified anyone who gazed upon her.

THE AFTERLIFE

The Greeks certainly had a graphic and often geographical conception of the world of the dead, multiple images of which they created through their rituals, myths and divine powers – Tartaros, a measureless black hole of confused space; the river Styx, the frontier from beyond which there was no return; and, far more cheerful, the Elysian Fields. But it is a quite separate question whether the Greeks believed in a different kind of future life, better or worse than their present life on earth, and whether they constructed a morality of death whereby the dead received their due deserts according to the moral code of the living. Leaving aside the beliefs of certain philosophical sects and the practice of initiates of mystery-cults (chapter 11), the question can be posed in that form only if the Greeks' religion is viewed through the distorting lens of Christianity. Every religious system has its own internal logic, and it is more fruitful to describe and attempt to understand the Greeks' way of representing the after-life in their own terms, as belonging to an alien culture and created at a specific historical juncture, rather than reduce the Elysian Fields to Paradise and Tartaros to Hell.

THE CIVIC LIFE-CYCLE

The significant stages of the life-cycle of a Greek citizen were underlined by rites of passage. Although these did not usually possess any legal force, they symbolically marked the individual's changes of status. The context of these rituals was provided both by the family and by the civic community. Study of them sheds

light on the precise functions fulfilled by the relevant deities and sometimes too on the system of representations that underlay belief in them. The citizen was a member of groups of different kinds, each of which managed its own relationship with the divine world, and within the bosom of which the citizen performed the daily round of sacrificing and praying. In the following chapter we shall be describing these different milieux of the religious life, beginning with the individual household and progressing by degrees to the level of the community as a whole.