

Underworld Gods in Ancient Greek Religion: Death and Reciprocity

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Underworld Gods in Ancient Greek Religion: Death and Reciprocity presents a case for how and why people in archaic and classical Greece worshipped Underworld gods. These gods are often portrayed as malevolent and transgressive, giving an impression that ancient worshipers derived little or no benefits from developing ongoing relationships with them. In this book, the first book-length study that focuses on Underworld gods as an integral part of the religious landscape of the period, I will show that Underworld gods are, in many cases, approached and 'befriended' in the same way as any other kind of god.

Traditional approaches to religious practice in archaic and classical Greece have tended to compartmentalise Underworld gods, representing them as less central to the religious landscape than their 'Olympic' counterparts. Scholars have described the practices associated with Underworld gods as being outside the scope of 'everyday' civic religion, perhaps because such practices are side-lined by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood's influential '*polis*-religion' model. Even scholars who focus on marginalised or (so-called) 'chthonic' practices, such as Christopher Faraone, Daniel Ogden, and Sourvinou-Inwood herself, have tended to do so in isolation from 'mainstream' religion practices. This book will remedy this division by situating Underworld gods into the wider religious landscape, and showing that they should not be considered separately, nor should they be thought of as outside the scope of public religion.

What we find in this landscape are gods of all types, who exhibit varying degrees of connection to the Underworld itself, and who were worshipped in positive ways in both public, in both communal and private spaces. The relationships that people built with these gods did not differ in any meaningful way from how and why they maintained relationships with other gods. For the most part, worshippers looked for more direct, tangible gains. For instance, initiates at Eleusis may have hoped to secure themselves a better afterlife, but they were also concerned with ensuring more immediate and tangible benefits – like rich harvests. When Underworld gods are placed into this context, we can reassess their place in more widely studied religious practices. This book, therefore, presents the case for the integrality of Underworld gods to 'mainstream' religion, while investigating several dominant issues central to the study of Underworld gods. Integrality is directly related to the reciprocal nature of ancient Greek religion: if a god is not integral to the religious landscape, people will not seek to develop ongoing relationships with them. But, there is much and varied evidence that people did form such relationship with a vast array of Underworld gods, and elucidating these relationships is my primary aim for this book.

The secondary aim of this book is to undertake a broader re-examination of the relationship between people and gods, using these gods that tend to be marginal (even when they should be included in the landscape, their Underworld or death-related functions are still often on the periphery). That is, by looking at gods who superficially have nothing to offer to the people who worship them. In undertaking this analysis, I will assess the model of divine-mortal reciprocity within ancient Greek religion.

The religious practices discussed in this book will come from the Greek mainland and involve looking at cults, practices, and myths associated with Hades, Persephone, Demeter, Hekate, Hermes, Thanatos and Hypnos, Charon, the Moirai, the Keres, and 'Nameless' gods. I will examine, for example, the mystery cult of Demeter and Persephone in Eleusis, the so-called 'Orphic' gold tablets, Arkadian agricultural cults of Demeter, and the cult of Hades in Elis. Although other 'Underworld' citizens, such as spirits of the dead, will not be specifically covered, where they are necessary for the reciprocal relationship between people and Underworld gods to form they will be included.

The ancient sources used to (re)construct these religious practices will include archaeological and material evidence, including epigraphic evidence. Alongside this, period-specific literary evidence, including epic, didactic, and other poetry, drama, and historiographical works will be examined and incorporated. Later works, such as Pausanias's *Geography of Greece*, will also be used, but with explicit acknowledgement of the limitations of using such sources. Many of the issues inherent in ancient sources, both contemporary and later to events, will be critically discussed in chapter one.

The time-frame for this book will be roughly 'archaic and classical Greece', but with an understanding that these art historical terms have limited use for historical enquiry. Therefore, the study will specifically range from the epic poetry of Homer, and the 'rise of the polis', to the decline of 'Greek' supremacy and the rise of Alexander the Great. I do not intend to tackle Alexandrian changes even though these fall within the traditional range of the 'classical' period.

Annotated Table of Contents

Front matter

The front matter for the book will include a glossary, a table of names, and list of abbreviations. Names used in this book will be transliterations from Greek, and the table will give concordance to standard Latinised spellings where that will provide disambiguation. It is necessary to put this material at the front, rather than the back, to increase the accessibility of the work to non-scholars and undergraduates. It is my preference that all ancient sources should be provided in both the original language and in translation, this has been considered in the projected word count.

Preface

The short section will detail the origins of the project and changes from the thesis and include acknowledgements.

Chapter One: Considerations of Scholarship and Evidence

In this chapter, I will situate this work within contemporary conversations in the study of Greek religion and will detail my methodological considerations. This will include a discussion of what I mean by 'Underworld' gods, how these gods relate to the more common scholarly category of 'chthonic' (and why I have chosen not to use this term). I will also discuss the interrelationship between the Underworld as a land of the dead and 'under the ground' as a place of agrarian growth. I will elucidate some concepts of belief and the bidirectional relationship with the gods – how I see people 'using' their relationship with the divine, and defining the specific vocabulary I will employ throughout the book to discuss this. Here I will

also address some of the issue and considerations with the evidence itself – the bias inherent in literary sources, how I am going to approach the use of later source material to ‘read’ practices back into the archaic and early classical periods to prevent anachronistic analysis, and discuss my approach to material culture. I will also define the limits of my study geographically. I intend this book to discuss practices widely, but due to the tension between local and panhellenic practices that will necessarily involve region-specific case studies.

Subheadings:

- ☠ Imagined differences? ‘Chthonic’ and ‘Olympic’ Gods
- ☠ The Religious Landscape of Archaic and Classical Greece

Chapter Two: Relationships Between Men and Gods

Here I will look at the way that people formed relationships with the gods, and why this relationship-building is a fundamental aspect of Greek religious practices in the archaic and early classical period. This will involve examining the variety of different ways that people facilitated their relationships with the gods, using studies of various guises of Zeus. This will include both more ‘traditional’ versions of Zeus, such as we might find in a panhellenic sanctuary like Olympia and ‘versions’ that present Zeus as a more marginal or maligned figure, like Zeus Melichios. I will challenge the ‘I give that you might give’ view, and argue that Greeks build relationships with gods in complex ways that were not always designed solely to benefit the individual, group, or city. I will look at some of the material evidence that was given to gods in ‘relationship building and maintaining’ worship, before turning to the question of why people would want to build relationships with gods who are potentially malefic – or at best ambivalent – towards a person’s ongoing success.

Subheadings:

- ☠ ‘I give that you might give’: How Greeks Built Relationships with the Gods
- ☠ Gifts for the Gods
- ☠ Why Build a Relationship with a Malefic God?

Chapter Three: Landscapes of the Underworld

In this chapter, I will present the Underworld as a location, and introduce the Underworld gods themselves. Following on from the discussion of ‘chthonic’ and ‘Olympic’ in the previous chapter, I will discuss what makes ‘an Underworld god’, including addressing some of the ways in which ‘panhellenised’ versions of gods can present as an Underworld god in one location and not another. For instance, why is Hermes shown as a *psychopompos* (‘guide of souls’) in iconography, but this is not an aspect we find well-represented in cult settings. I will argue that ‘Underworld’ aspects of these gods are directly related to their ‘non-Underworld’ cultic functions, and this informs worshipper’s desires to build relationships with such gods. I will also discuss the mythology of the Underworld, including katabasis myths, and present a narrative of how such mythology can inform personal beliefs about the gods, and therefore influence religious practices.

Subheadings:

- ☠ Introducing the Underworld
- ☠ What Makes an Underworld God?
- ☠ Hades as God and Place

☠ How to Get to the Underworld: Katabasis

The following four chapters are based on a series of case-studies and will present various discussions of how individuals and communities interacted with the Underworld gods, how and why they sought to build ongoing relationships with the Underworld gods, and how these gods were articulated in both personal and community-based cults. These discussions will all be framed around the reciprocal relationship that is central to both civic and personal religion in the ancient Greek world.

Chapter Four: Rites of Passage and Metaphorical Death (Underworld Gods and Individuals 1)

Here, I will focus on narratives of rites of passage which feature either a metaphorical death or have an aetiological story featuring a mythological death-and-rebirth. I will first discuss the link between death and maturation by looking in detail at the death-and-rebirth narrative of Orestes's purification and maturation, particularly as told in Aischylos's *Eumenides*. This will feed directly into a discussion of Hermes as an Underworld gods more widely, and why he is an appropriate figure for young men to form relationships with at this vulnerable time. I will present the multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory pictures of Hermes as a god who, in the most general sense, guides people through episodes of death-and-rebirth. I will examine Hermes own rite-of-passage as presented in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* as a starting point for thinking through why and how he became a god of transgressing boundaries and how that informs his Underworld-related functions. Finally, I will draw these studies together by looking at the relationships that people, and communities, might form with certain divinities by choosing them to assist with and guide rites-of-passage. Following this, I will look in detail at girls who form imitation-based relationships with Persephone, and potentially faux-intimate relationships with Hades. This will look primarily at the practice of burying young prematurely dead girls in Athens as brides, and I will present the tangled narrative of interlacing of death, marriage, and fertility motifs and ideas in both religious practice and mythological representations. This will include some overlap with Mackin 2017.¹ Finally, I will draw these studies together by looking at the relationships that people, and communities, might form with certain divinities by choosing them to assist with and guide rites-of-passage.

Subheadings:

- ☠ Dying to be Older: Death in Rites-of-Passage
- ☠ Hermes the Transgressor: Mixed-metaphors in Hermes's Cultic Persona
- ☠ Marriage and Death: Persephone at Lokroi and Hades in Athens

Chapter Five: Personal Interaction with the Underworld Gods (Underworld Gods and Individuals 2)

This chapter will focus on how people built direct and personal relationships with Underworld gods, and whether these were necessitated by intermediary agents (for example, ghosts). I will look at the Underworld gods in *katadesmoi* ('curse tablets') and present a narrative of personal, experiential religious practice and examine whether the act of burying a *katadesmos* is evidence for genuine belief (discussed and defined in chapter one). This discussion will be linked to a short study on the intersection between cursing and oath-taking,

¹ (Mackin 2017)

and how this reinforces divine-mortal relationships. I will then look at the practice of necromancy, and I will argue that sensorial study is the key to understanding the act of ‘experiencing’ Hades, and potentially one of the primary avenues for building a personal relationship with the god, though his location (as they are one and the same). Finally, I will discuss the so-called Orphic gold tablets, and examine the (imagined) personal experience of entering the Underworld, and the divinities that are important for this experience. This will include looking at Persephone and Mnemosyne, and discussing whether relationships with these gods are formed before or after death.

Subheadings:

- ☠ Cursing and Self-cursing: Underworld gods in Curses and Oaths
- ☠ How to Get the Underworld to come to You: Necromancy
- ☠ How to Get to the Underworld: The Gods on the ‘Orphic’ Tablets

Chapter Six: The Underworld Gods and the Community

While we most often think of the Underworld gods being approached by individuals, this chapter will examine instances where Underworld gods were worshipped within the community. This will open with a discussion on the intersection between agrarian concerns and the Underworld, and (linking back to the discussion in chapter one) look at gods who are ‘chthonic’ without being ‘of the Underworld’. I will look at some prevailing myths involving Demeter, the rapes of Persephone and Demeter. I will discuss the intersection between sexual violence, death, and fertility, and investigate why communities would take these aetiological stories up as beacons for their religious practice. In my discussion of the Eleusinian Mysteries, I will again refer to the overwhelming sensorial nature of the ritual itself to construct an image of an intense bond felt between the community of worshippers and the two goddesses of the cult. Finally, I will look at the cults of nameless ‘chthonic’ gods in Athens, and discuss how these gods related to Athenian community identity, and why the cooperative relationship between Athens and these gods was significant.

Subheadings:

- ☠ Death and Plenty I: Demeter and the Mysteries
- ☠ Death and Plenty II: Agriculture and the Rape of Demeter
- ☠ Nameless Gods: A Case-study in Athenian (Religious) Identity

Chapter Seven: The Dead – Belief and Reality

In this chapter, I will move slightly beyond the Underworld gods themselves to look at portrayals of the dead, including Heroes (who are often categorised by scholars as ‘chthonic’). It will link with major sections of the four preceding chapters and show how the dead were integrated into the worship of Underworld gods. I will look at contemporary beliefs about the dead, what happens after death and in the Underworld, and the role that the dead play in facilitating the relationship between people and the Underworld gods. I will use curse tablets as a case study for this. Then I will examine the myth of Erigone’s death and the links between the Underworld and the Anthesteria (a festival of Dionysos) in Athens. This will begin concluding the on-going thread in the book examining how fertility is one way that people articulate their relationships with the Underworld.

Subheadings:

- ☒ What Happens to the Dead?
- ☒ Erigone and the Anthesteria
- ☒ Heroes and Community Identity

Chapter Eight: Thin Coherence and the Underworld

In this final, shorter chapter I will elucidate some of the methodological frames developed during my research and writing, which rely heavily on Josiah Ober's concept of 'thinly-coherent communities'², and Julia Kindt's initial suggestion that this model should be applied to the study of ancient Greek religion.³ Thin-coherence is an excellent tool for the study of religious communities, practices, and people in the ancient world precisely because it accounts for the many varied approaches and relationships present. I want to include this chapter for scholars and students who want to pick up thin-coherence, but this is not meant to be a methodological work, and therefore I feel it is best at the end.

Epilogue

This short section will bring together the study and draw out some of the major strands between the different sections. This will involve looking at some of the major differences and similarities between the various ways Underworld gods are presented in religious practice, and how people and communities build relationships with them. I will end with some general conclusions about how the Underworld gods fit into the religious landscape of early Greece more broadly.

Target Market

This book is primarily aimed at scholars and postgraduate students of ancient history and classical studies, and particularly to those with an in ancient Greek religion, or ancient religion more widely.

It will be of interest to a wider informed general readership. Many studies of ancient religion also draw attention from neo-pagan groups, who are generally well educated (Sarah Iles Johnston has written about this interest group's use of scholarly books in their daily practices⁴). Popular works of scholarship among this group tend to include studies with a strong focus on divinities and divine-human relationships, such as this book.

Courses on ancient religion are widely taught at an undergraduate level in Classics and Ancient History departments throughout the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia. Therefore, this book will be useful to advanced undergraduates who may be writing an extended essay or dissertation on Underworld gods (as such, all quoted passages will be provided in both Greek and translation).

² (Ober 2003, 2005).

³ (Kindt 2012, 22)

⁴ (Johnston 2011)

Competing Books

Currently, no monograph-length study addresses the role of Underworld gods in early Greece from a mythico-religious perspective. Sarah Iles Johnston's *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (1999) focuses on the interaction between the living and various categories of deceased persons, and raises many similar issues regarding contact between the mortal world and the Underworld. Johnston does include sections on minor Underworld divinities, prominently including the Erinyes, although in a context of Underworld gods and cultic practices. B.C. Dietrich's *Death, Fate, and the Gods: The Development of a Religious Idea in Greek Popular Belief and in Homer* (1965) presents sections on Underworld gods including Moira, the Erinyes, and Ker. I will address these gods, albeit with more emphasis on their role in the Underworld pantheon. *Greek Sacrificial Ritual, Olympian and Chthonian* (2005), edited by Robin Hägg and Brita Alroth, details 'chthonic' sacrificial ritual, although it does not look more widely at the use of Underworld divinities. While my work will detail ritual practices, this will be in the context of the gods associated with them, rather than seeking to examine so-called 'chthonic' practices as a category of practice separate from the 'mainstream' religious landscape. Other monographs focused on Underworld divinities tend to either also follow this iconography-based approach (for example, Emily Vermeule's 1979 *Aspects of Death in Greek Art and Poetry*), or are now becoming outdated by new research and methodological approaches (for example, Dietrich's *Death, Fate and the Gods*).

My own contracted volume, *Hades*, for Routledge's 'Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World' series, will cover some of the same material, but in a very different format and focused on the religious and mythic presentation of Hades the god, rather than on an historical examination of religious practice in archaic and classical Greece. There is an opportunity for cross-promotion between the two books.

The Project

The total word count (excluding bibliography) will be c. 75,000-80,000 words. It will include 12-15 pictures, I anticipate these will be reproductions of black and white photographs and line-drawings. The completed manuscript will be ready by June 2019.

Changes from the Thesis

The research for this book is based on my PhD, conducted at King's College London and awarded in 2015. I am happy to send a copy of my thesis if required. However, the structure of the book is much changed from the thesis, which was structured with chapters dealing with individual divinities. I have completely restructured the book to deal with the subject thematically. The new structure will result in a more user-friendly and scholarly useful work that aims to contribute both to the understanding of the place of Underworld gods in the religious landscape of archaic and classical Greece and to comment more generally on relationship-building between people and gods. Significant parts of this restructuring have already been conducted.

Cited Works

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