

The Impact of Indo European culture on the Olympian Religion of the Greeks

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The concept of divinity in Greek thought has its origins in the Indo-European period. A comparative study of Greek, Latin and Sanskrit which flourished at the beginning of this century has convinced scholars that these three languages derive from a common source. Furthermore it has been postulated that those ancient people who spoke these languages had a common origin. It was also assumed that the original stock of these people came from central Asia. (Kochhar R, 2006, p. 36-37)
- 1.2. Around 1700 BC the original stock of these people from central Asia separated and spread to different directions. Some of them moved towards the east and entered India via Iran, the land of the Aryans. Here they built the Avesta culture. A section of these people gradually entered India via the North West frontier and built up the Vedic culture in the Punjab valley. The Vedic culture later spread in various directions. (Kochhar R, 2006, p. 205)
- 1.3. Two other sections of the Indo Europeans moved towards the Mediterranean Sea and entered what is now called Italy. They settled down in this area which is referred to as Latium and developed the Latin language, a sister language of the Vedic languages of India. Here they built up a great culture which is technically referred to as the Italic civilisation.
- 1.4. Out of the two sections of the Indo-European people who moved towards the south of Europe, one entered what we now refer to as Greece. Here they built a superb elegant culture. This Greek civilisation consisted of many and varied achievements of its people. They developed not only politics, arts, religion philosophy and sciences but also a great pantheon of mighty Gods and Goddesses. Most of these divinities had their parallels in the **Rig Veda** of the Vedic Aryans. For example Zeus has his parallel in the Vedic Dyaus, the sky God. Ouranos in the Greek pantheon reminds us of Varuna in the Vedic religion. (Kochhar R, 2006, p. 141)
- 1.5. Thus we see that the Greek gods are of Indo-European Origin. Hence the vast similarity between the Greek Olympians and the gods in the Avesta and Rig Veda. Our aim here is to see how the concept of Greek divinity has gradually developed. In this study I propose to examine the structure and the formation of the concept of Greek divinity.

2. The paper.

2.1 The synthesis of the Indo-European culture and the pre-Greek culture gave rise to the Greek civilisation. THE OLYMPIAN RELIGION as found in the epics of Homer is the religion of this great civilisation. The gods and goddesses of the Olympian Pantheon are generally known to students of classical culture.(Hamilton E. 1969, p. 13ff) However, listing them with reference to their origins as explanations of the unknown phenomena of nature as well as embodiments of inevitable emotions and urges of man and society provides a preamble to our discussion of Olympian religion.

2.2 Among the gods, **Zeus** was the supreme leader whom all had to obey without question. He was also the lord of the sky, the rain god and the cloud gatherer, who wielded the thunderbolt. In this capacity, he naturally made a strong impression on the imaginations of his worshippers. In Greek houses, altars had been dedicated to Zeus, - Kataibates-Zeus who Descends. For in visual representations the thunderbolt is his constant attribute. Sacrifices were made on the altars to appease the god and avert lightening, striking their dwelling. On the other hand, justice was so important that it was considered the function of the supreme god.

Poseidon was the god of the sea and the brother of Zeus. The storms of the sea were under his control. He was also the god of earth quakes. It was said that he could shake and shatter whatever he pleased with his trident. He is also respected for having given mankind the first horse.

Hades was also a brother of Zeus. He was the god of the underworld and the ruler of the dead. He was also the god of wealth and of precious metals hidden in the earth. Though he was regarded as just he was always looked upon with fear. He was the king of the dead but not Death itself.

Apollo was a son of Zeus born to Leto. He is said to be the most Greek of all the gods. he is depicted as a beautiful youth in poetry. He was the god of music and played the golden lyre. He was the god of Archery and was called the lord of the silver bow. He was also the god of healing who taught the humans the art of medicine. He was also the god of light as well as of truth. His name Phoebus meant 'brilliant' and he was often regarded as the sun god. Apollo on the other hand had an aspect that was not so rational. He was the god of Oracles.

Hermes was also a son of Zeus. He is the messenger god of the Olympians. He is depicted as a beautiful youth, who wore winged sandals and had a staff in his hand. He was graceful and swift of motion. However he is also regarded as the god of thieves and, therefore, the shrewdest and the most cunning of the Olympians. He was the god of the

market and of commerce. He protected traders. He was also the divine messenger who led the soul of the dead to the underworld.

Ares was a son of Zeus and Hera. He was the god of war and was therefore disliked even by his parents. War, like love and thunder, seemed to be unavoidable at the time. In the Iliad he is little more than a symbol of war, who is feared and disliked by gods and men alike.

Hephaestus was also a son of Zeus and Hera. But he was a lame god. He was the smith among the immortals, the workman of the gods. He was depicted as a warm hearted kindly god who loved peace. He was popular among the gods as well as men.

- 2.3. Among the goddesses **Hera** was the wife and sister of the supreme god Zeus. She was the goddess of married women and the protectress of marriage. For this reason, whatever their other 'habits' were, the Greeks regarded marriage as a sacred union. However the poets depict Hera as a jealous and a nagging wife whose wrath fell on all women who attracted her husband, Zeus.

Athena was the daughter of Zeus. But she had no mother. She was war - like in nature and her mission was to defend the state and the home from her enemies. She was the protector of the city and civilized life. She was also the goddess of handicrafts and agriculture - essential features of a settled life. She was also the embodiment of wisdom, reason and purity.

Artemis was the sister of Apollo. She was a virgin goddess and was the lady of wild things. She was the goddess of huntsmen. She was also the protectress of the young. Artemis was also the moon goddess.

Aphrodite was a daughter of Zeus by Dione. She was the goddess of love and beauty. Love meant both love and lust. She was a laughter loving goddess and was painted as a typical feminine creature. She was so powerful that even the wise could not resist her. It was said that without her there was no joy or loveliness anywhere. However if resisted she became extremely dangerous. Though a soft weak creature, she could become treacherous and malicious, if opposed.

- 2.4. A conquering race does not wipe out all traces of the conquered. An invading race, at the beginning of its conquest does not stamp out the gods of the invaded. On the contrary their conduct is guided by a strong belief in the attachment to the gods to the soil of the country. So it was a matter of great importance for the invaders to win the gods of the land on to their side. When the period of conquest and migration was over, the various cultures continued to make their contribution to the civilization of classical Greece

whether in conflict or reconciled with one another. It is the civilization that arose from this state of affairs that we call the Greek civilisation.

- 2.5. The invaders realised the necessity to recognise the existing gods of the aboriginals. As a result they did not destroy the prevailing gods of the land but subdued them in the sense that they absorbed the territorial gods in to their own religious beliefs.

- 2.6. The new comers to the land were a brave, courageous and powerful people. The male dominant populace loved the outdoor life and everything that was strong and beautiful. They were an invading race and therefore had the characteristics of invading warriors. They did not have to work or worry as they were the rulers. Eating, drinking and enjoying life was their main occupation. They brought with them religious beliefs which were typical to such a people. The gods of the sky and weather were supreme among their gods. However, the essential fusion of the religions of the invaded and invading peoples brought forth not a clumsy and a confused result but a religion greater than either. The splendid unification of the harmonised whole was a result of the "Greek Miracle".

- 2.7. With Greek ascendancy, mankind became the centre of the universe, the most important thing in it. This was a revolution in thought. Human beings had counted for little up to that time. In Greece man first realised what mankind was. The Greeks made their gods in their own image. This had not happened before that. Previously, gods had no semblance of reality. But when the concept of the gods emerged in Greece, so normally and naturally the universe became rational.

The world of Greek mythology was not a place of terror for the human spirit. The whole divine company (with a few exceptions) were entrancingly beautiful with a human beauty. And nothing as beautiful as the Olympian pantheon could really be terrifying. The Greek Mythologists transformed a world full of fear into a world of beauty.

The Olympian religion was a magnificent blend, the remarkable result of the fusion of the old Chthonic religion and the religion of the invaders. It was in other words the religion of the Greek Civilisation which flourished as a result of the situation.

- 2.8. Gilbert Murray (Murray. G. 1946, p.46) says that 'Olympus' is a pre Greek word applied to mountains. And it is clear that the Olympian gods wherever their worshippers moved, tended to dwell in the highest mountains in the neighbourhood, and the mountains

became Olympus. This is the reason for there being more than one Mt. Olympus. There were some twenty odd such mountains according to Murray.

- 2.9. It is the canon of religious study that all gods reflect the past and present social state of their worshippers. This is evident in the Olympian religion. The gods of most nations claim to have created the world. The Olympians make no such claim (Hesoid, line 818). The most they ever did was to conquer the world. Zeus and his comitatus conquered and expelled Cronos and his comitatus, Zeus took the chief dominion and apportioned large kingdoms to his brothers Hades and Poseidon. Apollo conquered Delphi and Athena the Giants.

Having conquered their kingdoms, they did not attend to government, promote agriculture or practice any other trade or industry. It was easier for them to live on the revenues and blast with thunderbolts the people who did not pay their due than do any honest work themselves. They were conquering chieftains; they fought, feasted, and enjoyed themselves. They drank deep and made love. They were never afraid except of their own king. Murray (Murray.G, 1946, p.47) comments that there was only one god who was a craftsman. He was a kind of craftsman that a gang of warriors needed to have by them. And they preferred to have him lame so that he could not run away.

In our analyses we have not found a simple and uniform figure of a god. These gods were not real. In fact they never existed. They were only concepts, exceedingly confused, cloudy and changing according to the diversity of their worshippers and non-worshippers. They change every time they were thought of. Even in the time of Achaean wars, the concept of any god would be mixed up with traditions and associations drawn from the surrounding populations and their gods.

- 2.10. The Olympians as described in our texts of Homer (The Iliad + the Odyssey) are mutatis mutandis related to the Olympians of the Heroic age, just as much as the Hellenes of the 6th century are to the Hellenes of the Homeric Age. The historical development of a group of imaginary concepts enshrined in tradition and romance can never be quite the same as that of the people who conceived them.(Murray.G, 1946, p.47)

Herodotus (Herodotus, line 2.53) tells us that Homer and Hesoid 'made the generations of the Gods for the Greeks and gave them their names and distinguished their offices and crafts and portrayed their shapes'. In his view, he dates this, perhaps as much as 400 years before his own time (c. 430 B.C.). E.Y. Rieu (Homer, p. XV) in the introduction to his translation of the Iliad comments that 'at the moment it is fashionable to place Homer as late as 750 B.C.'

2.11. According to W.K.C. Guthrie (Guthrie.W.K.C., 1954, p.3), 'The Greek tales were not the graceful invention of some poet. What in its extent from appeared as purely literary fiction had once been folk poetry, treasured in the hearts of common people, and contained a far off echo of genuine religious belief.' The myths as we have them are the creation of great poets. The first written record (available to us) of Greece is the Iliad. For us, Greek mythology begins with Homer and his two great epics - the Iliad and Odyssey. In Homer we are brought up against the immense formative power of fiction and romance. In Homer the 'confused and cloudy concepts' of the Olympian divinity appears as fully formed, clear cut characters. when Homers genius had done its work upon them, a figure like Athena or Aphrodite had become, for all practical purposes, a definite person, almost as definite as Achilles or Odysseus, Murray (Murray.G, p.42) comments - 'they crystallized hard, they will no longer melt or blend, at least not at an ordinary temperature'. As a result, with Homer, there took place the circle of the twelve gods, which became normative for the Greeks or succeeding centuries.

2.12. The Olympic religion is essentially polytheistic. Though the numerous gods of the older religions had been eliminated or absorbed into a single deity in the Olympian religion, we find as many as twelve gods of importance. However the prominence of the individual deities vary to a greater extent. In the Iliad and the Odyssey, the most prominent gods are Zeus, Apollo and Athene. Next to them in importance are Poseidon, hera, Aphrodite and Hermes, Zeus on the other hand, stands apart. He is the most supreme of the train of gods, the father of gods and men, depicted as a pater familias.

These gods are anthropomorphic. They looked like humans but they were immortal, more beautiful and powerful than men. Their looks vary so that one could be distinguished from one another. They act and behave like humans, but their emotions are greater, as they are more powerful than men. As they have no person to fear or account to, (except Zeus) they do not hide their feelings. They possess human weaknesses such as anger, jealousy and lust. They had the power to direct these feelings at humans as well as fellow gods. These gods dress; eat, drink, make love and fight with each other. They have the ability to move from one place to another and to visit earthlings in disguise.

2.13. The Olympians are grouped in to a divine family, where the father figure of Zeus is the leader of the family. He has two brothers, a wife and children, (both in and out of wedlock). The behaviour towards one another in the divine family is similar to that of the mortal counterparts. The children could be unruly and resentful and would have to be punished. They would run to the father or mother with complaints against one another and they would quarrel with each other. They would even try to hoodwink the father and

indulge in actions of their choice. Zeus himself is depicted as a loving but a masterful father, always keeping a watchful eye and a strict command. But he was hopelessly unfaithful to his wife Hera. He fell in love with mortals as well as divine females. He had several children outside his sacred marriage. He was resentful if his activities were probed. Hera on the other hand is the typical nagging wife whom such a husband could expect to have. She is outrageously jealous and is quick to anger. (Perhaps due to her frustration!)

- 2.14. These Olympians reflected the likes and dislikes of the conquering warriors. They loved outdoors, sunshine and fresh air. They were powerful and brave and delighted in everything that was beautiful. They would not hesitate to enjoy themselves and to satisfy all their five sense.
- 2.15. The relationship between the gods and the mortals was similar to the relationship between the aristocrats and commoners. If mortals accepted them and obeyed them without question, the gods were ready to help them in need. The relationship could be described as 'therapeia' - You serve us, we help you. Respect and fear were essential requirements. Though morally they share our failings, they jealously guard all matters affecting their prestige. Treason and disloyalty are unforgiveable crimes. So when gods punish men, it is not usually on moral grounds. Men are punished for their personal offences against the gods. But mortals do not criticize the gods, just as a commoner cannot criticize an aristocrat. It is in this matter of rank, prestige and power that gods and men are so sharply divided. The surest way to arouse hubris or the jealousy of a god is to forget ones mortality. And in this unbridgeable gulf between the mortal and the immortal lies the difference which gave the gods the right to act as cruelly and capriciously as they shied.
- 2.16. Guthrie (guthrie.W.K.C., p.124) says that in Homer the will of a great man is the law. He does things not because they were right. But because he was an aristocrat, what he did would be right because he did them. For example, the original meaning changed 'will' to 'justice'. At that time, the will of the aristocrat was itself justice.

Just as an aristocrat could have several concubines and even have casual sexual relations with commoners, the gods had many mistresses and could, if they desired, 'take' mortal women. The children born out of such unions were not shunned by society. The 'honour' was the mortals', because the mortal could there by be related by blood to the great

Olympians. Curiously enough, this conception of the gods, linking them morally and physically so closely to mankind, is the one which bars the way most effectively to any aspirations after divinity by man. It emphasizes the division between gods and men. What made the gods approach the human level was an element of the human in them and not an element of the divine in us (Guthrie. W.K.C., p.124).

As the Olympians were beings completely and entirely external to man, it was essential that man, in order to get in to a correct relationship with the immortals, should acknowledge his supremacy and placate them with offerings of worship. Prayers were said and sacrifices were made to get the gods on man's side.

2.17. 'Holiness' said Socrates(Plato, line 15) is a sort of science of praying and sacrificing.

Sacrifice is giving to the gods; prayers are asking of them. Holiness then, is a science of asking and giving. If we give to the gods they also want to do business with us. "Do ut des". "I give at some personal 'sacrifice' to you, the god, in order that you may give me a 'quid pro quo' "(Harrison., 1977, p. 134). It is a mode of communication, a means of gaining some aid from the strong and powerful, gods who are willing to help if they are respected and worshipped. It is unlikely that the worshippers pre supposed a personality susceptible to bribery in their concept of divinity.

Jane Harrison(Harrison.J., 1977, p. 137) comments that the sacrifice was a 'handling or manipulation of mana. When you sacrifice, you build a bridge between your mana, your will, your desire, which is weak and impotent, and that unseen outside mana which you believe to be strong and efficacious.

It is significant that these sacrifices are offered to friendly gods. The whole ceremony takes the colour of high festival. There is no atonement of tasting involved. The worshippers participate in the banquet that is given to the gods. It was considered a 'recreation' for the community. Thucydides(Thucydides, line 2, 38) makes Pericles say 'We have provided for our spirit very many opportunities of recreation by celebration of games and sacrifices throughout the year'. There was no holocaust and no taboo. It was a meal shared with the gods(Homer, line 421).

2.18. One of the main functions of the Olympians was to carry out destiny. They were the agents. Destiny was similar to the law, and the gods were the rulers who made sure that the laws were carried out. But the mode of administrating this destiny was entirely in the hands of the gods. Thus the famous opening line of the Iliad "The Wrath of Achilles is my theme, that fateful wrath which is fulfillment of the will of Zeus(Homer1, XVI, 431).

To the questions of justice and morality in their function as agents of destiny. Prof. Nilsson answers. His suggestion is that their function as agents of destiny is something 'left over' from their origin as nature spirits. 'The power of gods, and not its limitations was present to the religious consciousness.

The absence of morality preyed on the vital nerve of religious feelings. In proportion as the gods are nature gods, they have nothing to do with mortals. The rain falls alike upon the just and the unjust. Animism implants in the gods human will and feeling, passion and caprices(Homerxxiv, 518).

2.19. Murray(Murray.G, p. 60) says that Homer had to produce a kind of religious reformation in Greece.

"The world was conceived as neither quite without external governance, nor as merely subject to the incursions of mana snakes and bulls and thunder - stones and monsters, but as governed by an organized body of personal and reasoning rulers, wise, father like, man in mind and shape, only unspeakably higher."

It is the strife, the ultimate victory of human intelligence, reason and gentleness, against what seems at first the overwhelming power of passion and unguided strength. It is Hellas against the brute world.

The aim has been:

- (a) A moral expurgation of the old rites.
- (b) An attempt to bring order to old chaos.
- (c) Adopting to new social needs.

It is evident that religion was an inevitable and basic necessity for humans. Man strove to understand the unknown and the extra ordinary through it. Divinity was the representation or the embodiment of the power that he tried to explain. This power he desperately wanted to obtain or have a harmonious relationship with. Thus the origin of the religious rituals was to bridge the otherwise unbridgeable gap.

Furthermore, the religious concepts of divinity underwent a change with the evolution of society and the various steps of the intellectual development of man. However alien the thought and concepts might be on the surface, deep down, the religions seems to share the basics. The necessity of man to understand the unknown and to obtain a relationship with the divine. In most religions, this is the ultimate aim.

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