



Greek Religion

Walter Burkert, John Raffan (Translator)

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In this book Walter Burkert, the most eminent living historian of ancient Greek religion, has produced the standard work for our time on that subject. First published in German in 1977, it has now been translated into English with the assistance of the author himself. A clearly structured and readable survey for students and scholars, it will be welcomed as the best modern account of any polytheistic religious system.

Burkert draws on archaeological discoveries, insights from other disciplines, and inscriptions in Linear B to reconstruct the practices and beliefs of the Minoan–Mycenaean age. The major part of his book is devoted to the archaic and classical epochs. He describes the various rituals of sacrifice and libation and explains Greek beliefs about purification. He investigates the inspiration behind the great temples at Olympia, Delphi, Delos, and the Acropolis—discussing the priesthood, sanctuary, and oracles. Considerable attention is given to the individual gods, the position of the heroes, and beliefs about the afterlife. The different festivals are used to illuminate the place of religion in the society of the city-state. The mystery cults, at Eleusis and among the followers of Bacchus and Orpheus, are also set in that context. The book concludes with an assessment of the great classical philosophers' attitudes to religion.

Insofar as possible, Burkert lets the evidence—from literature and legend, vase paintings and archaeology—speak for itself; he elucidates the controversies surrounding its interpretation without glossing over the enigmas that remain. Throughout, the notes (updated for the English-language edition) afford a wealth of further references as the text builds up its coherent picture of what is known of the religion of ancient Greece.

Greek Religion Details

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From Reader Review Greek Religion for online ebook

Art Killings says

Wonderful work on the many different aspects of ancient Greek religion and mythology.

C.W. Roe says

tl/dr: x-post of an old Amazon review I wrote for this book. To this day, it's a must-have resource. -c.

Walter Burkert's "Greek Religion" is an intense survey of Hellenistic religious beliefs from their earliest Minoan and Mycenaean antecedents. This review will summarize the material contained within the study, extrapolate the central themes of the text, and finally shall offer an analysis of the text with regard to its presentation of data, use of archaeological and primary sources, and its intended audience.

The scope of the material is as ambitious as it is diverse. Whereas other survey-type texts only include an overview of the basic Olympian Gods, and perhaps a marginal mentioning of some of the major festivals, Burkert's text provides the reader with an in-depth look at all of those issues as well as giving the reader the, "why", as best as he could surmise through his research. He is blunt about stating the lack of comprehensive written resources, and does not speculate too far beyond the scant information he does possess. To the researcher this is valuable, as massive leaps are not made from what does exist to what may possibly have been the case.

As previously mentioned, the first few chapters of the text offer a brief chronology of what was happening spiritually in the pre-Hellenistic Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations. This provides the reader with an appropriate historical context within which to frame the discussion of later spiritual beliefs. The scope of the text covers a vast time period of that prehistory, from approximately 1500-1200 B.C., then continues on to describe the formation of a distinctly Greek religion developing from those antecedents at or about the ninth/eighth century. The chronological scope concludes at or about the time of the conquests of Alexander and the rise of religious philosophers who attempted to rationalize the world around them, usually without employing polytheistic spiritual beliefs.

The people whose belief systems are studied are all of those who fell within the geographic scope of this text, which includes all of those who spoke the Greek language and had Greek literature at their disposal. In what or who did those peoples believe? Burkert is quick to tell us that there is a great deal of speculation, but scant evidence to actually confirm the full scope of Minoan and later Mycenaean belief systems. From what archaeological and scant written evidence exists in the forms of Linear A and Linear B, as well as referencing the work of his predecessors, Burkert is able to reconstruct a basic set of deities and holy places. Minoan civilization seemed to heavily favor female goddesses to include but not limited to, the Snake Goddess, who was essentially a house goddess. Evidence of the existence of male deities is limited, at best. The "Minoan Tree and Pillar Cult," which was a set of sanctuaries at which worship was conducted were also important. The trees and pillars, although sacred sites, were not themselves worshipped. Also important, especially on Crete not only in Minoan and Mycenaean traditions, but with elements carried over into the later Hellenistic tradition was symbolism related to the bull. Although there is no evidence that the bull was worshipped as a god, the sacred symbols and festivals celebrating the bull persist. Mycenaean Gods are discussed, and for the first time the reader is introduced, based upon archaeological evidence, (specifically

Linear B tablets recovered from Knossos and Pylos on Crete,) among others, to the gods and goddesses that would become the familiar Olympian deities.

Section III of the text delves into a discussion of the Olympian and related gods and goddesses. It relies heavily on the work of Homer, Hesiod, and Xenophanes for the purpose of providing the reader with general genealogical information, then moves into archaeological and historical evidence which paints a broader picture of the gods and goddesses in several different contexts, specifically, how the deity evolved from different influences, an overview of how cult was paid, and how the individual regarded the deity. Interesting to note is the evidence Burkert provides stating that most all of the Greek deities had much earlier influences, some more important than others. For example, he points out how earlier researchers, "sought to connect Athena with the Snake Goddess" from earlier Minoan civilization, then continues to show her with antecedents in Syrian culture, at Troy, and at other sites in and around the Mediterranean. Although this text is traditionally regarded as a survey by many critics, it covers each of the traditional Olympian gods and goddesses in significant detail, as well as some of the lesser deities and spirits, such as nature deities including the rivers, nymphs, Gaia and Helios. The final section discusses the availability if not importance of foreign gods in the polytheistic Pantheon, divine and/or semi-divine figures such as Heroes and the Dead, to whom cult was also paid by the Greeks.

How did the Greeks worship their Gods and Goddesses? This question is answered in great detail by Burkert, usually by referring to an in-depth examination of each individual deity. Many chapters of the text, however, are devoted the discussion of specific festivals and what went on there. For example, the Anthesteria festival is discussed at length. Within the context of that chapter the reader is offered the time of year when the festival happened, (springtime), the length of the festival, (three days), what the festival was for, and what manner of activity took place there. A detailed account, based upon what sparse information survives, is offered to the reader for several different festivals. Interesting to note is that several smaller festivals are discussed, setting this text apart from general survey texts.

The final section of this section of the text provides the reader with some of the reasons why the Greeks practiced their beliefs in the manner that they did. It is one of the more illuminating portions of the book, as it offers ideas such as initiation into manhood, crisis management in the polis, and the establishment and maintenance of social mores as motivating factors behind worship.

Section VII of the text, which chronologically comprises the end of the era discussed in the scope of the text, discusses philosophical religion, and the break that some major philosophers of the era had with polytheism. Many philosophers, such as Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Leukippus, and Democritus developed systems that offered rational explanations for nature. The interplay of earth, water, fire, and wind are offered by as explanations for the creation of the tangible world, and the events which took place in it; opinions which stand in stark opposition to the belief system established by the early Greeks who believed that all were the result of the deeds of some anthropomorphic deity. The text concludes by offering the opinions of Plato, Aristotle, Xenocrates as they debate atheism and polytheism.

This book is more than a general chronology of Greek Religion, which attempts only to find a well-defined "beginning" or an ending. Instead, its central themes focus on explaining, in great detail, everything that can be covered within the scope for which written or archaeological evidence exists in support. The main theme of the text states that it is interested in a "...focus on an ahistorical structuralism concerned with formal models and confined to presenting in their full complexity the immanent, reciprocal relationships within the individual myths and rituals." This exploration of the those relationships is explored at length as it related to the interactions between the Greeks on the both a large scale, as demonstrated with the extensive discussion of beliefs practiced by the polis, and on a smaller scale by the family and individual.

This text was originally published in 1977 in German by Walter Burkert, a scholar who has published numerous other texts and articles on the subject to include, but not limited to *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, (1972), *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, (1979), *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*. (1983), among others. Based upon the body of work produced by Burkert, coupled with the fact that said body of work remains relevant and utilized by scholars to this day, it is safe to assume that Burkert was an authority on not just one specific area, but had as great an understanding of Greek Religion on the whole as any of his contemporaries, if not a better one. Sources include primary material from Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, and Xenocrates, but also delves into the archaeological record as interpreted by Evans and Nilsson. Burkert, with his employment of the archaeological discoveries of his day, obviously appreciated the value that archaeology could lend to the researcher in helping him to better understand his subject, rather than relying solely on written primary and secondary sources.

The book is divided with some attention to a chronology of events in Minoan and Mycenaean times, but then moves thematically into a discussion of the Gods, what role polytheism played in the Polis with specific attention to festivals and discussions of the bases upon which those belief systems were predicated. Mystery sanctuaries, festivals, and Asceticism are discussed, with the final division of the text returning to a thematic examination of how many philosophers of the day viewed polytheistic traditions and subsequently broke from it.

Considering these factors, the text could be interpreted as best being utilized as a reference that is inclined toward the scholar or serious historian, rather than the general reader. It can become very dense at times and needs to be read from start to finish to place events, people, and places in their appropriate context. Without a basic understanding of the societies which predated Classical Greece as covered in the early chapters, the reader may find themselves easily confused with the later discussions. That considered, the text may be a bit intimidating to the general reader, which goes further to establishing this as a research text, and not one that the general reader may pick up for simple pleasure reading.

In conclusion, Burkert's Greek Religion offers the reader an extensive discussion of Greek spiritual beliefs, to include the Gods and their interactions with one another and the polis as well as the individual and family. It offers a chronology of antecedent civilizations and concurrent influences, as a means by which to explain the belief systems of the Greeks. The text relies heavily upon archaeological and primary sources to reach its intended audience of scholars and historians, and succeeds very well at this endeavor.

Seth Holler says

May read just the Introduction and first chapter.

Stopping for lack of time, but I read the first chapter on the Minoans and Mycenaeans, a portion of Chapter 4 on the cult of the dead, and all of Chapter 7 on “philosophical religion.” Fascinating, full of archaeological and literary details, and well written. I want to read the whole book someday.

Mac says

The stories of Greek mythology have been familiar to me from childhood, but I wanted to understand more

about ancient Greek religion. Walter Burkert's "Greek Religion" has now given me a much better sense of how the Greeks practiced their religion. Sacrifice was a major part of their rituals, as it was for many peoples including the ancient Israelites. Thanks to Burkert's explanations, I can appreciate the significance of this practice, which is so foreign to our modern sensibilities. The Greeks also had many different festivals and "mysteries" about which Burkert has assembled all the available evidence. I can now approach Greek literature (e.g. tragedy and comedy) with better contextual understanding. All of these details were fundamental to daily life, so familiar to the Greeks that no one thought to write them down for posterity.

Burkert's text is often very dense. Each sentence can pack a lot of information, making it necessary to read slowly for full comprehension. Most of the book is more like an encyclopedia or textbook, where one can safely skip around to the sections of particular interest without losing the flow. But the last chapter builds a compelling narrative of how ancient philosophers, from the Pre-Socratics through Plato and Aristotle, affected theology and religion. To me this was by far the best part of the book. I wish I had read it while I was studying Greek philosophy in college.

All in all, I highly recommend Walter Burkert's "Greek Religion" to anyone interested in the subject. It is not an easy read, but it is worth the effort.

Bryn Hammond says

Rich and strangely lyrical for a translation from the German.

Xenophon Hendrix says

Greek Religion by Walter Burkert is not a book I can recommend to the casual reader. Assuming he doesn't have to read it for school, the potential reader should ask himself just how interested he is in the subject. His motivation should be strong before he decides to tackle the book.

Walter Burkert appears to be considered one of the greatest living experts on Greek religion. That positive needs to be balanced against several negatives. In short, the author does not try to meet the reader half way. He expects the reader to be familiar with a great deal of background material.

Before anyone attempts to read *Greek Religion*, he should already have read something like *Mythology* by Edith Hamilton. This strikes me as essential; anyone who doesn't have this basic grounding will be lost.

The author also expects the reader to have knowledge of classical Greek geography and a passing familiarity with Greek history. So, if one doesn't have the knowledge, one needs access to a map showing the old Greek cities and regions. For the history, Wikipedia will serve. I suggest that those who haven't studied the subject read the articles on the History of Greece through Roman Greece or so.

Next, the author uses a great deal of Greek vocabulary. I'm not sure that he defines every term on first use. (If he does, I didn't always absorb it, and the index often was no help.) I do know that I had to use the Internet several times as an aid to comprehension. If a person reading this book doesn't know Greek, I suggest that he stay in range of the Internet. It will also come in handy to refresh one's memory of proper nouns and the like.

Finally, there is something soporific about the text. I don't know what it is, but I had to take it in small doses or I would find myself drifting off. Possibly it has something to do with it being translated from German, but I don't know that. Possibly it is wordiness or abstruseness of language. In any case, I did not find the reading itself enjoyable.

My suggestions for improving the book include adding a map and a detailed glossary of Greek terms and proper names.

I can recommend *Greek Religion* for those with a strong interest in the subject. I suspect that anyone else will lack the motivation to finish the book.

Connor says

Incredibly comprehensive. A bit dry at times, but well worth the read for those interested in the more 'practical' side of greek religion.

Nga Linh says

I thought this was going to be longer but the last pages are all index and abbreviations. It was both relaxing and disappointing to know that this book ended.

Ron W. says

This was one of my texts for postgraduate studies in the religions of ancient Greece and Rome. I read it cover to cover and found that Burkert did a good job in covering the major aspects of religion in this fascinating ancient culture.

Matt says

If you have any kind of interest in Archaic and Classical religious practice of ancient Greece. Read. This. Book. It is amazingly informative, and while I have seen people comment on its dense and cumbersome prose, I didn't think it was very hard to read. But you cannot read it for too long at a time, because it bombards you with so much information. It's definitely a book I highly recommend.

Alford Wayman says

Walter Burkert is an excellent writer and this book was well researched. Extensive notes in the back and

references to other material on the topic. Burkert shows in many ways not only what the Greek religion was composed of but what influences they absorbed and reprocessed from the Ancient Near East. This study by the end shows how the ground work for Christianity was laid. I will never read the New Testament the same way again. Very few comparisons to Christianity were done, as this is a book on Greek Religion. However, if the reader is acquainted with the literature of the New Testament, the parallels that were absorbed and reprocessed out of the Greco-Roman era will be quite obvious. This book is a slow read with plenty of information on Greek literature, mythology, theology, and archeology and may not appeal to casual readers.

Jim says

Greek Religion is not a particularly easy read, but it is an enlightening one. In fact, I would have a hard time envisioning a more useful one. The problem is in the multifarious nature of Greek polytheism: It's way too easy to get lost in the byways of Greek theogony, as Roberto Calasso demonstrated in his excellent **The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony**. When dealing with the tales of the hundreds of gods and heroes, many of which gleefully contradict one another, one comes up against a brick wall.

Walter Burkert points out that Greek religion is based primarily on the work of epic and lyrical poets:

The peculiar quality of Greek religion is ... [that] there is no priestly caste with a fixed tradition, no Veda and no Pyramid texts, nor is there any authoritative revelation in the form of a sacred book.

And yet, the citizens of the Greek polis actively participated in a rich religious life. It is here that Burkert excels, by describing to the maximum extent possible, the way the Greeks actually worshiped and the way they would act as priests for a while and pass the duty on to others after a given time.

Another interesting point is that the moment that prose made its appearance in Greek literature, the whole structure of religious thought changed:

Previously, speaking about gods in public had been the exclusive privilege of poets. Homer and Hesiod had provided the outlines of the divine personalities, and the lyric poets had elaborated ever more ingeniously on the familiar material, presenting it in new colours and shadings; even the reflections of wise men like Solon were put into poetic form, in the language and concepts of Homer and Hesiod. By keeping to the laws of poetry, each formulation is bound to contain a playful element. This falls away at a stroke in prose writing: the supports and predetermined paths of epithets and formulae disappear and literary tradition remains in limbo for a time, while writers attempt to state in a matter-of-fact manner what is the case.

And it is this matter-of-fact manner which gives birth to philosophy, to the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, and all of Western thinking.

If you are interested in the subject of Greek religion, I would recommend beginning with a highly readable classic such as Gilbert Murray's **Five Stages of Greek Religion**. Where Burkert is useful is as an advanced text and as a jumping-off point for detailed textual research. There are, after all, well over a hundred pages of endnotes, together with excellent bibliography and indexes in both Greek and English.

Barnaby Thieme says

Aptly described by classicist Thomas Martin as an "interpretive catalog," Burkert's masterpiece is a monumental and encyclopedic work that analyzes numerous topics in the religion of Ancient Greece. It is scholarly, schematic, and pointedly synchronic. It is certainly not intended to be an overview or introduction to its subject. Burkert's prose is extremely dense, even for a German scholar. The book analyzes various subjects in densely-referenced article-like brief chapters, treating subjects ranging from mystery to theater to various deities to Bronze Age temples.

Sources and literary material gets little attention *per se*, but are considered along the way as details of the subjects considered. The history and evolution of Greek thought is examined primarily with respect to individual topics.

This invaluable reference is dry as a bone, and makes very tough reading if one attempts to traverse it from cover to cover. It is long on facts and short on poetry. It would be immeasurably improved with the addition of illustrations, pictures, and maps, which would be a welcome replacement for his numerous painstaking descriptions of artifacts and pictures.

Despite these peculiarities and limitations, it is an outstanding and detailed reference with extraordinary depth and breadth. Not for the casual reader, but bound to be a central resource for decades to come.

Momo García says

Morbosear en la religión griega es meterse a un mar espeso. Este libro quiere ser sintético y lo logra a costa de la densidad. Y, aunque contiene mucha información, las notas a pie de página parecen señalar hacia un mundo todavía más profundo. Imagino que se ama más, conforme se use como libro de referencia y consulta.

Tal vez, lo único que pueda criticarse es la ausencia de láminas ilustrativas de las esculturas, cerámicas, bajos relieves y templos que se mencionan en todo el texto. Gracias a Dios, existe google.

Falon Papale says

Very informative. Also the DRYEST book ever. You'll go cross eyed after reading 10 pages. Small bites recommended. Useful for class.
