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LITERACY AND THE ORIGINS AND LIMITATIONS OF GREEK ATHEISM

J. Bremner

In the Archaic and Classical Ages Greek religion was the subject of a growing amount of reflection and criticism which resulted in rather outrageous statements about the nature of the Greek gods. We only have to think of Protagoras' well known "Concerning the gods I am unable to discover whether they exist or not, or what they are like in form; for there are many hindrances to knowledge, the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life" (tr. W.K.C. Guthrie) to realise that in some circles religious thought had progressed almost beyond recognition since the time of Homer. This development did not, of course, leave the traditional myths untouched, and already in the fifth century we find the word μυθος being used for tales which are untrue, as is apparent from Pindar's lines:

"There are many wonders, and it may be
Embroidered tales (μυθολ) overpass the true account
And trick men's talk
With their enrichment of lies"

(Pindar OI. 1.19, tr. C.M. Bowra)

How and why did this criticism develop? In a very interesting study the English social anthropologist Jack Goody has recently drawn attention to the consequences of literacy for modes of thought. Drawing upon a wide range of source materials he has argued persuasively that the introduction of literacy gradually transforms people's mode of perception and encourages the growth of a critical outlook. Following Goody, we offer some observations on the rise of Greek religious criticism from this particular point of view. We will look first at the prominence of classificatory thought in the Archaic Age, the initial consequence of literacy, and then discuss the influence of literacy on myth, since the earliest attacks directed themselves against the traditions about the gods. We will then note the necessity of learning to criticize, and also look at other factors which can be singled out as contributing towards the Greek 'rise of reason'. Finally, we will try to answer a question which, curiously enough, never seems to be posed; why, after the growing criticism of the tra-
ditional body of myths, did so few Greeks take the final plunge and become practising atheists?

For the Greeks literacy started in the first half of the eighth century when they developed their own alphabet, which descended from a Phoenician prototype to be dated about 800 B.C. This does not mean that the Greeks had always been illiterate. In Mycenean times they employed the so-called Linear-B, a syllabic script the content of which was predominantly Greek. It was a typical product of a palace administration and with the fall of the Mycenean ruling elite the script inevitably disappeared. From the texts we have left we can judge that their content was remarkably like the great majority of the texts of the Ancient Near East. Unlike the Near East, however, the Linear-B tablets have not given us a Gilgamesh epic, and they furnish only list after list of different items. The following is a fair example:

- three amphoras
- fourteen cooking bowls
- seventeen water jars

(uncertain number of lines lost)

The Near Eastern scribes did not only make lists for practical purposes. We also find onomastic lexica and lexical lists with all kind of encyclopaedic knowledge, appropriately called Listenwissenschaft. With these lists man in the Ancient Near East moved into the realm of restricted literacy, restricted because the complicated character of this script prevented widespread proficiency in writing. Very soon after these particular lexical lists started, the scribes began to systematise them; they introduced order into their listings, just as the Egyptian scribes would arrange some of their lists in a certain hierarchy, starting with the gods and ending with the contemptible herdsman.

This process of classifying also took place in Modern Africa when writing was introduced and is evidently, as Goody argues, a feature typical of early writing. Somehow lists invite their scribes to re-order them, to create a cosmos out of the jumble of entries. The introduction of literacy therefore promotes classificatory thought, in itself a forerunner of methodical, critical thought.
Did the same process occur also in Archaic Greece? In other words, do we, in precisely the period in which writing was introduced, find also a prominence of classificatory thought? I suggest that we can give an affirmative answer to this question by paying attention to the place of genealogies in the literature of the period. Of course, genealogies are older than writing; they are frequently found in Homer and their social use has often been commented upon. Yet when we look at the literature of the Archaic Age we cannot but be struck by a preoccupation with the genealogy of the gods. The best known work of this nature is Hesiod's Theogony, but a theogony was also composed by Alcman (Fr. 5 Page); works with the same title have been recorded for the miracle-worker Epimenides and the enigmatic but interesting Pherecydes; and the tradition was continued in Akusilaos' Genealogies. Recently, the Derveni-papyrus has even given us a commentary on a theogony of 'Orpheus'. The early philosophers, it is true, were not so interested in the gods but nevertheless concentrated on 'genetic' aspects of the world. The facts are too well-known to need elaboration at this point.

Why then was early Greece so preoccupied with the genesis of both gods and men, and not so much with ontology or ethics? In fact it is not difficult to detect in this preoccupation the same classificatory bias as we met in the early cultures of the Near East. In their theo- and cosmogonies the Greeks created order out of the chaos of their mythological traditions and allocated to gods and men their specific places. Once this order had been created they could move on - as they certainly did.

Literacy, then, enabled the Greeks to bring about a more refined classification of their knowledge8). Before we look into the consequences of this development, we shall first consider another, no less important consequence of literacy for myth. In an oral culture myths are evidently transmitted orally. This has the obvious effect that there can exist no one sacrosanct version of a myth, since myths are not transmitted verbatim. Every time the myth is recited, at least part of it is recreated. This oral character has the advantageous implication that myths can be continually adapted to new situations9). Goody has recorded a
striking example of such an adaptation from the state of Gonya in Northern Ghana. When the Gonya were asked to explain the number (7) of their divisional kingdoms, they told a story about an invading chief with seven sons. At the time the British arrived two of the seven kingdoms disappeared, and when Goody recorded his version of the myth in 1956–7 the invading chief was the happy father of five sons! Similarly, in the first half of the fifth century the Theseus legend in Athens — at that time still a city with restricted literacy — was adapted in a number of details to glorify the Athenian contribution against Persia.

The Attidographers changed the Theseus myth and other ones virtually at will in the fourth century — a time of full literacy — but it is nevertheless clear that once myths are written down, one particular, historically dated, version can become 'frozen' and will, given time, gain weight as the authoritative version. This process is particularly well illustrated by the history of early Christianity where the 'orthodox' gospels prevailed to such an extent over the 'gnostic' ones that the latter accounts would have been irretrievably lost, were it not for the Nag Hammadi discovery.

The oral transmission of myths also prevents their becoming too individually coloured. Elements which are not 'swallowed' by the audience will be dropped in the next performance. In this way oral transmission rules out any excessively individualistic traits such as we often find in the mythographers of late Antiquity such as Dictys or Nonnos. In the case of written myths correction by an audience is much less immediately evident. Of course, for written myths time is a sifting factor: versions that are rejected will be copied either not at all or to a much more modest extent. Yet, with the work of an important author there is always the chance that it will be transmitted in its entirety out of reverence for its creator, irrespective of the appreciation of some individual parts of the work.

The distinction we have made at this point between myths which are orally transmitted and myths transmitted in writing is of importance for the analysis of classical myth, since the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued that we should not study just one version of a myth but all its versions and permutations; recently similar claims have been advanced regarding the study of Greek myth. Yet, we can now realise that not all versions of a myth are equally valuable. This becomes especially
clear in the case of the Alexandrian poets. Their allusive art delighted in the ancient myths and rituals, to which they often gave their own colouring. In practice this means that late accounts of popular myths are more likely to have acquired individualistic stamps than earlier ones.

However, this does not mean that all late sources are late inventions: *posteriores non semper deteriores*. Travellers such as Pausanias and Strabo have rescued many an archaic myth, but, unfortunately, there are no definite rules to prove the early character of the evidence contained in such late sources, although a connection with a existing ritual is often a strong indication of the myth's antiquity. We always have to consider the inherent probability of the tradition, and in some cases a comparative approach can establish an early origin with near certainty, as in the case of Achilles' transvestism. Absolute certainty, however, is always difficult to reach in these cases.

So far we have seen that literacy carries the power to 'freeze a myth or give it a very individualistic stamp. These possibilities are nevertheless negligible compared with another potential consequence, As Goody observes: "Once an utterance is put down in writing it can be inspected in much greater detail, in its parts as well as in its whole, backwards as well as forwards, out of context as well as in its setting; in other words, it can be subjected to a quite different type of scrutiny and critique than is possible with purely verbal communication". However, when an author is not accustomed to weeding out inconsistencies in his oral performance, although naturally striving to evade disturbing mistakes, he must get used to a more critical approach towards his work after it has been put down in writing. Such an attitude can only be acquired over a period of time and does not come naturally. We may therefore expect that our earliest literary texts will be less consistent and less concerned with unity than later ones.

These characteristics are indeed apparent in the earliest works, the poems of Homer and Hesiod. Although Homer already shows the influence of literacy, even 'unitarian' scholars have been able to point out many inconsistencies and contradictions in his text.
Hesiod's *Works and Days* is a collection, like similar ones from the scribal cultures of the Ancient Near East, of instructions and proverbial wisdom, which is not at all tightly organised. Consequently, all kinds of unifying principles have been proposed. From a methodological point of view this is justified, as long as we realise that the modern preoccupation with unity and inconsistency can hardly have been shared to that extent by the poet himself.

The better organisation of a work is only one aspect of the implications of literacy. Much more important is the possibility which it creates for reflection on the traditional body of belief. Unfortunately, anthropological research has greatly neglected the occurrence of religious criticism in traditional societies. Yet, it seems clear that sustained criticism is widely absent, although sceptics do exist. This is understandable since, besides the 'blocage mental' we will discuss in § 5, in oral societies the preconditions for the development of criticism are absent. Without the material means of preserving one's argument, it cannot be challenged, improved upon and developed. Moreover, we may doubt whether in a small face-to-face community there exists enough critical talent for a fertile dialogue, whereas literacy immediately widens the size of the audience.

Just as organising a literary work has to be learnt, so has religious criticism. And indeed we can observe a transition from the criticism of details to more general statements. Whereas Xenophanes attacked only the anthropomorphic representation of the gods, Protagoras could speculate on whether the gods existed at all. And whereas Xenophanes attacked only the legends of Titans and Giants as 'products of the imagination of earlier generations' (Fr. 1.22 Gentili/Prato), Diogenes of Apollonia (A 8) contrasted speaking truly about the divine with speaking μπαζενές.

Up to now I have followed Goody in ascribing to literacy an overriding influence on the growth of Greek religious criticism. Yet historical developments are rarely to be explained in a monocausal way. And the heavy stress Goody lays on literacy leaves the reader somewhat dissatisfied since the problem naturally arises as to why philosophy and logic did not originate in the
Ancient Near East, where literacy was so much older. Goody's comparison of the Near East with modern Africa also leaves something to be desired, since in modern Africa literacy came in the form of printing, a mode of communication which must have had a much swifter impact by virtue of the sheer volume of modern accessible material, in contrast with the much rarer production in earlier times, but especially since the printed material already contains modes of thought heavily influenced by centuries of literacy.

In Archaic Greece religious criticism is only one aspect of a general 'rise of reason'. Looking upon the problem from this angle we shall have to look for factors which promoted the rise of critical thinking and which were particular to Greek literacy and to the Archaic Age. Within the scope of a single article it is impossible to give an exhaustive analysis, but for a first exploration a number of factors may tentatively be identified.

The introduction of the alphabet and the simplification of the letters enabled more people to master writing and reading within a shorter time. This meant a kind of democratization of literacy in contrast with the restricted literacy of the scribal cultures.

Scholars have pointed to the importance of the democratic revolution of Cleisthenes and the fall of the tyrants in Sicily for the rise of reason and the development of alternative ways of thinking. Curiously enough much less importance has been attached to political developments in Ionia, the home of the first philosophers. But precisely in this area, in Chios, we find one of the oldest testimonies for democratic institutions, and the traditions about στάτους in Miletus (Hdt. 5, 29) indicate that the Chian development can hardly have been unique, even though its final outcome, a kind of democracy, may have been so.

Besides, the Chian development will have been a topic for discussion in the neighbouring cities and islands. In this connection it fits intriguingly well that the subject of our earliest Ionian poem, the Iliad, is an aristocratic 'drop out', a feature which regularly marks the breaking up of the aristocratic order.

The Archaic Age witnessed lively commercial activities in many parts of the Mediterranean. Cities sent out their colonies, and colonists will regularly have returned with news of the outlandish customs of their neighbours the natives, thus widening the mental horizon of the Archaic Greeks.
In one of his subtle studies the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel has argued that the introduction of money greatly contributed to a more rational way of looking at society. Money enables man to make quick profits and to move more independently outside the ruling aristocratic circles. In this way it promotes social mobility, an important factor in the loosening of the traditional social order and, consequently, in challenging traditional thinking. Given this rationalising effect of money it can hardly be chance that the first philosopher, Thales, is also the first known speculator.

In a recent analysis of the 'rise of reason' in the earlier Middle Ages the role played by mathematics has been stressed. Although our sources are rather scarce for the pre-Socratic thinkers we know that a number of them were interested in mathematics, and the analogy with the Middle Ages suggests that this factor will have been of influence in the Archaic Age of Greece too.

Finally, the birth of philosophy has been explained as a product of leisure of the early Ionian society. The argument, which was already advanced by Aristotle (Metaph. 981b 17 ff.), is too monocausal to be convincing, since all feudal orders had their leisure-class but as good as none had philosophers of the stature of the pre-Socratics. Nevertheless the affluence of Ionian society will have been important, since it enabled the thinker to be independent of his audience in expounding his views, in contrast to the poet, who had to please his immediate audience.

When we now look back at the factors identified we note that a number of them - the breaking up of the old aristocratic order, colonisation and growing affluence - must already have been influencing Greek thought towards a more rational outlook before the actual birth of philosophy. Consequently, we suggest that in Archaic Greece literacy was not so much the 'first cause' of critical thought, but most likely intervened in an already ongoing process to accelerate and to deepen it.

After this foray in the more general field of the rise of Greek reason, we now return to the problem of religious criticism. One of the most puzzling aspects of this criticism is the way
it stops just before the brink. After the scepticism of Protagoras one would have expected to find atheism as the next logical step to be taken. To be sure, later generations knew of many ἀθέου in the fifth century, such as Anaxagoras, Diagoras and Euripides, but modern research has shown that these allegations cannot withstand proper critical scrutiny, and really notorious atheists, such as Callicles, only appear in literature as creations of their authors, not as faithful reports of historical figures. However, it can hardly be a coincidence that these 'literary' atheists start appearing at the end of the fifth century. The rise of criticism had made it possible to imagine the possible existence of such persons, although to practise atheism was not yet a 'life option'. And even though a Herculanean papyrus tells us of the sophist Prodicus of Keos that he "maintains that the gods of popular belief do not exist and that they lack knowledge, but that primitive man, [out of admiration, deified] the fruits of the earth and virtually everything that contributed to his subsistence ..." there is nothing in our tradition that indicates that he was known as a practising atheist.

Moreover, in addition to the virtual absence of practised atheism we rarely find the realisation of religious alternatives. This becomes especially apparent in the total isolation in Greek society of the Pythagoreans, the only sect which succeeded in founding a community where an alternative view was actualised. Similarly, the epigraphical and papyrological evidence of Orphism, the other sect with an alternative way of life, has been found only at the margins of Greek society: Southern Italy (the main home of the Pythagoreans!), Thessaly, Crete, Thessalonica and Olbia. The question therefore naturally arises as to why more alternatives were not realised, and why, after the rejection of myths and scepticism about the gods, Greek religion did not die a peaceful death.

We will approach the problem by way of a détour. The absence of atheism is not only a problem in relation to Classical Greece. In 1942 the French historian Louis Febvre published his epoch-making study of Rabelais, in which he noted the absence of atheism in the Middle Ages. Febvre explained this absence as a kind of 'blocage mental'. In the life of society and the individual Christianity was of overriding importance. Its festivals constituted the rhythm of the year; important transitions in the
life of the individual - such as birth, marriage and death - were completely integrated into religious life, as were everyday activities, which were usually connected with different Saints. Even one's place of habitation was normally dominated by the church, whose bells would always remind the forgetful believer of its existence. To think Christianity away from society was simply impossible34).

Febvre concentrated his work on the life of an intellectual, but some fascinating recent investigations into the life of the common people have shown that agnostics and persons who doubted virtually everything that the priest said did actually exist. Yet, their corrections in a way only strengthen Febvre's point, since these sceptics were often marginal to the life of the community, such as shepherds and vagabonds. And even those sceptical about points of dogma nevertheless adhered to rituals such as baptism, marriage and confession35).

A similar explanation is valid too for Archaic and Classical Greece. In the polis religion determined the course of the year by its festivals; the rites accompanying an individual's life from birth to death were closely connected with the gods of the polis; and temples dominated the space of the polis even more than churches dominated the landscape of Medieval Europe: we have to think only of the Parthenon in Athens. To think this all away would have meant a total revolution in customary life; naturally enough, the average Greek refused to let his life be confused or altered by modernists or sectarians.

This is not to say that the attacks of the sophists on the traditional beliefs had left the position of ritual unaltered. The nature of our sources prevent us to trace this development in detail, but the numerous decayed temples that are described by the travellers Pausanias and Strabo clearly demonstrate that in the end the changing attitude towards the gods had not left the place of ritual undisturbed.

It was the rise of literacy, as we have seen, that enabled the Greeks to formulate and develop the critique of their religious tradition. It would also be literacy that helped the early Christians to replace the traditional Greek religion with their new belief, and the still prominent position of the Bible in our own culture today is just one example of the enormous changes that the introduction of literacy exerted on the age-old beliefs of mankind.

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NOTES

1. I would like to thank the following friends and colleagues for their comments on earlier versions: W. Burkert, R. Buxton who in addition corrected the English, F. Graf, A. Henrichs and Th. Korteweg. The notes have been kept down to the most recent literature; the well-known has not been annotated.


5. A. Alt, Kleine Schriften, II (Munich 1953), 90-99.


7. Considered in this light it can hardly be chance that the scholastic movement followed closely upon the Gregorian reform, which greatly promoted literacy. see A. Murray, Reason and Society in the Middle Ages (Oxford 1978), 215 f.


15. Goody, The Domestication, 44.


18. This becomes especially clear in the effects of printing, a kind of intensified literacy, see the illuminating study of E.L. Eisenstein, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change (Cambridge Mass. 1979).
Since the following enumeration had already been written before I read G.E.R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience* (Cambridge 1979), I have left it unchanged, but it should be stressed that Lloyd is of the highest importance for our subject.


22. Following Gernet, Vernant, Vidal-Naquet and Detienne, Geoffrey Lloyd attaches great value to the discussions provoked by these developments and the argumentative procedures developed in the course of the debates surrounding the different political happenings. Yet, Lloyd, in my opinion, in this way undervalues the importance of literacy. Public debates always imply a certain censorship of the audience and therefore do not lend themselves to the exposition of daring theories. It cannot be chance that the Greeks themselves especially connected the sophists with the book, a medium which is free of preceding censorship. For sophists and books, see R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, I (Oxford 1968), 17 f., 28 f.; 3. Mansfeld, *Mnem. IV* 33 (1980), 94, n. 345.


29. The same conclusion, but along a different line of reasoning, is reached by O. Murray, *Early Greece* (Glasgow 1980), 99.

30. See the perceptive observations by A. Dihle, *Das Satyrspiel Sisyphos*, Hermes 105 (1977), 28-42. It is consistent with this view that the number of asebeia-processes was probably much lower than later tradition suggests, cf. K.J. Dover, *The Freedom of the Intellectual in Greek Society*, *Talanta* 7 (1975), 24-54.

31. *Phere* 1428 fr. 19. This highly important fragment, which was omitted by Diels, has recently been rescued by A. Henrichs, *HSCP* 79 (1975), 107-123 and *The Atheism of Prodicus*, Cronache Er. 6 (1976), 15-21. For Prodicus' thought and influence, see also Henrichs, *The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion: Prodicus as the Spiritual Father of the Isis Aretalogies*, in *Acta VII Congress FIEC* (forthcoming Budapest 1982/3).


33. The marginal character of Orphism has been stressed by W. Burkert, *Neue Fänge zur Orphik*, *Informationen zum altsprachlichen Unterricht* 2 (1980), 27-42. 40. We may compare the marginal character of Catharism: Montaillou!


Il formaggio e i vermi (Turin 1976); G.E. Aylmer, *Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England*, in D. Pennington and K. Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries* (Oxford 1979), 22-46. Thomas, *Religion*, 200 also notes that the sceptics were often aliens and strangers to the district, but he wrongly infers from this to the conclusion that therefore the number of sceptics must have been much higher.