

**“The pen fell from my hand
when I was in my eighty-sixth year.”**

Revisiting the work of Martin P. Nilsson

Edited by Jenny Wallensten & Gunnel Ekroth

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ABSTRACT

2017 marked the 50th anniversary of both the death of Martin P. Nilsson, the eminent Swedish scholar of ancient Greek religion, and the publication of the third edition of his monumental *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*. Nilsson's scholarly output was huge, with a production of around 20 items annually, and he touched upon most aspects of the study of ancient Greek religion, be it in a book or an article, in a footnote or an in-depth argument. This volume constitutes a re-reading of Nilsson in the light of new ancient evidence, and modern methods and theoretical approaches.

Five leading researchers in this field of religion revisit major works of Nilsson's oeuvre—*Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, vols 1 and 2 (Jon Mikalson and Eftychia Stavrianopoulou), *Greek folk religion* (Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge), *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* (Matthew Haysom) and *Greek piety* (Michael D. Konaris)—in order to explore whether his works today are mainly touched upon with just the usual obligatory references or if they still have an active impact on contemporary discourses. Hopefully, this undertaking will stimulate others to explore the vast landscape of Nilsson's work in the future.

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Martin P. Nilsson on his ninetieth birthday, 1964. Photograph by Berta Stjernquist. Photograph in private collection, courtesy of Ingrid Stjernquist.

Initial remarks

In 1967, the Swedish scholar Martin Persson Nilsson (1874–1967) died after a long and prolific career.¹ Seven years earlier, he had declared that “the pen fell from my hand when I was in my eighty-sixth year”, a statement which has provided the title for this volume and which suggests that at that time he felt his scholarly career had come to a close.² However, it was to transpire that this striking claim did not prevent him from continuing to publish or to revise earlier publications. Nilsson’s scholarly output was huge, with a production of around 20 items annually, including everything from small notices and reviews, to popular science and academic papers, as well as major monographs.

Most scholars working on ancient Greek religion have surely had the experience of “Nilsson was here”. No matter what they touch upon, Nilsson has done so as well, be it in a book or an article, in a footnote or an in-depth argument. However, the world of scholarship is not the

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¹ Jesper Svenbro and Michael D. Konaris were not present at Athens, but kindly agreed to contribute to the volume. We are most grateful to Helge Ax:son Johnssons stiftelse and Sven och Dagmar Saléns stiftelse for financial support and to Eleni Androvic from the Swedish Institute at Athens for help in all practical matters. We would also like to warmly thank Dr Ingrid Stjerquist, Martin P. Nilsson’s granddaughter, for allowing us to use photographs from the Nilsson family’s private collection.

² “*Stilus manui meae excidit annum octogesimum sextum agentis.*” Nilsson 1960, ‘Praemonendum’. See also J. Mikalson in this volume, p. 24.

same today as it was when Nilsson was active. New evidence has come to light, primarily archaeological but also groundbreaking epigraphic and zooarchaeological material. New methods and theoretical frameworks are applied to the study of Greek religion, sometimes changing our outlook significantly. Where does this leave Nilsson and his scholarly output today? Are his works now touched upon by just the usual obligatory references, or do they still have an active impact on discussions?

These questions came to us when realizing that the 50th anniversary of Nilsson's death, as well as that of the publication of the third edition of his monumental *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, was approaching. We deemed the time right for a revisiting of his work in the light of important new evidence and also wished to shine new light on the vastness of Nilsson's oeuvre in the context of a scholarly gathering. We therefore asked five prominent scholars each to re-read one of Nilsson's major works, which touches upon their own fields of interest. We asked them to interact with Nilsson's text and analyses from their perspective as scholars active in today's scientific debate, in order to find new outlooks on aspects of Nilsson's output and accomplishment. This book is not a biography of Martin P. Nilsson, nor does it attempt to examine Nilsson's scholarly career and output in its entirety, or offer a full analysis of the development of his ideas. Instead, it presents the perspectives of five scholars of ancient Greek religion, with a background in North American, British, French and German academia in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, in dialogue with one of the most prominent scholars of the same field in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Our colleagues have chosen which questions to ask, following their own interests. The result is a most stimulating discussion, leading the field forwards and showing the creative climate of the discipline today.

The first revisiting of Nilsson's work took place in the context of a one-day symposium, *A Celebration of the Work of Martin P. Nilsson*, at the Swedish Institute at Athens in November 2017, at which four of the six papers published here were presented. The Swedish Institute was the perfect venue for such an event. Although Nilsson (allegedly) opted for the first Swedish Institute for the study of antiquity to be established in Rome rather than Athens, deeming the latter city "too remote and Oriental", he was indeed deeply involved in the founding of the Swedish Institute at Athens once the opportunity reoccurred.³ His impact on the

³ The Swedish Institute was founded in 1946 at the Royal Castle in Stockholm and opened for activities in Athens in 1948.

work of the Athens Institute is above all discernible from the fact that the two main fields of study of the Institute have always been the Aegean Bronze Age and ancient Greek religion. The importance of this tradition was particularly evident during the long directorship of Robin Hägg (1976–1994), through an extensive series of significant symposia and their subsequent publications.⁴ In 1990, Hägg instituted a biannual lecture in honour of Martin P. Nilsson, whose work he thought had faded so much from academic attention that researchers were once more covering the same ground without knowing Nilsson had already been there. The aim of the Nilsson Lectures was—and is—to invite a prominent scholar of ancient Greek religion to present their current work, thereby giving the audience a unique insight into ongoing scholarly discourse while simultaneously celebrating the work of Nilsson. Some of these presentations have also been published in the series of the Swedish Institute at Athens as monographs or papers.⁵

The one-day symposium and the present volume are part of this tradition. Half a century has passed since the death of Nilsson and we feel it was time for a proper celebration of Nilsson in order to revisit his work, but also to have Nilsson revisit us. Hopefully, this undertaking will stimulate others to explore the vast landscape of Nilsson and his work in the future.

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⁴ Hägg 1983; 1997; 1998; Hägg & Marinatos 1984; 1987; Hägg & Nordquist 1990; Hägg *et al.* 1988; Wells 1992.

⁵ Bremmer 2013; Clinton 1992; Parker 2003; Sourvinou-Inwood 2005.

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Martin P. Nilsson Lectures

- 1990 Kevin Clinton, 'Myth and cult: The iconography of the Eleusinian Mysteries'
- 1991 Michael H. Jameson, 'Greek religion: The public record'
- 1992 Walter Burkert, 'Ikonographie und Ritual im dionysischen Bereich'
- 1993 Fritz Graf, 'Signs for the gods. Ritual and communication in ancient Greece'
- 1994 François Lissarrague, 'Images and rituals: Religious aspects in Attic vase-painting'
- 1997 Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Hylas, the Nymphs and others. Myth, ritual and ethnicity'
- 1999 François de Polignac, 'Ritual contexts and the definitions of "public space" in early Greece'
- 2001 Robert Parker, 'The problem of the Greek cult epithet'
- 2003 Petros Themelis, 'The cults on Mount Ithome at ancient Messene'
- 2006 Gunnel Ekroth, 'The wild, the innocent and the domesticated. They all died in a Greek sanctuary'
- 2008 Stella Georgoudi, 'Blood, dirt and purity. Sacrifice and purification in the Greek world'
- 2010 Jan N. Bremmer, 'The agency of statues: From Homer to Late Antiquity'
- 2012 Henk S. Versnel, 'Implications and complications of polytheism: Three Greek test cases'
- 2014 Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, 'Searching for "popular religion" 70 years after Martin P. Nilsson'
- 2017 A celebration of the work of Martin P. Nilsson. A one-day international symposium: Jon Mikalson, 'Martin P. Nilsson and the *Geschichte*, vol. 1'; Eftychia Stavrianopoulou, 'Hellenistic religion(s): Revisiting Martin P. Nilsson's *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* II: *Die hellenistische und römische Zeit*'; Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, 'To be "popular" or not to be ... Nilsson's *Greek folk religion* and afterwards'; Matthew Haysom, 'Nilsson in the Bronze Age: The place of prehistory in the history of Greek religion'
- 2018 Angelos Chaniotis, 'The sound of ancient religion'
- 2021 Nicole Belayche, '"On the giant's shoulders": The Eleusinian Mysteries in the Roman period. Between historiography, literary traditions and epigraphy'
- 2023 Renaud Gagné, 'How to write a festival? The ritual archive of ancient Greek religion'



Martin P. Nilsson in Lindos, 1907. Photograph in private collection, courtesy of Ingrid Stjernquist.