

“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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Science, evergreen

An introduction

It is an honour for me to introduce this collection of papers, taking the measure, in late 2017, of the breathtaking scientific endeavour of Martin P. Nilsson (1874–1967), the most outstanding Swedish scholar in the field of humanities of the 20th century. This book retraces and places his development in the field of the study of Greek religion, with, on one hand, the elitism of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and, on the other, the “primitivism” of the Cambridge anthropological school as significant contrasts. The authors are historians or archaeologists with a long experience in the field of ancient religion and they have ample occasion in this volume of demonstrating their familiarity with Nilsson’s oeuvre.

For decades, his two-volume *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* has stood out as the very emblem of his evergreen science. It seems to me that the first two contributions in this present volume—by Jon Mikalson and Eftychia Stavrianopoulou—respond accurately to this situation, offering masterly guidance through the landscape of the two volumes, which at the outset in the late 1930s were planned to be authored by Nilsson’s friends Otto Weinreich and Arthur Darby Nock, both of whom declined the offer.

I recall how Marcel Detienne in the 1970s recommended that his doctoral students at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Paris) should establish a good relation with this monumental work, in spite of its al-

leged “positivism” (of bad repute in the heyday of structuralism). Leaving the immense field of these two volumes, significant components of the *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft*, Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, on the other hand, chooses a different angle of approach. She launches a sustained inquiry into the notion of “popular”, central to one of Nilsson’s most significant books, *Greek popular religion*,¹ in order to evaluate its perspective from the point of view of recent approaches in the field of the study of Greek religion. In her uncompromising but careful study, Pirenne-Delforge contextualizes Nilsson’s notion of “popular”, more problematic than a casual understanding of the term would admit.

In his turn, Matthew Haysom examines Nilsson’s groundbreaking work on the prehistory of Greek religion, identifying its shortcomings from the perspective of what the 50 years’ research since Nilsson’s death has brought to light. When reading Haysom’s chapter I was curiously reminded of what Nilsson with surprising frankness wrote to Michael Ventris on 21 January 1951: “My interest centres on a country and a period which are less obscure than the Mycenaean age of Greece.”

Michael D. Konaris also takes context-oriented care to highlight the expression “collective piety” found in Nilsson’s *Greek piety* from 1948; much importance is given to Nilsson’s roots in Swedish peasantry, supposed to have furnished him with a *horizon d’attente* from which the religious beliefs and practices of the Greeks made sense.

In the 1970s I learnt how inadequate the *horizon d’attente* of the student of Greek sacrifice could be, when my colleague and friend Jean-Louis Durand (1939–2016) decided to study Tunisian ritual cuisine in order to ask his Greek material more relevant questions than the ones prompted by the experience of contemporary industrial slaughterhouses. Nilsson did not have to seek out a relevant comparative experience. He had grown up with it.



At this point, I must ask myself: what is left for my Introduction? Initially, I had planned it as a straightforward eulogy. Upon due reflection, however, I would now like to take the opportunity to focus as briefly as possible on the *political Nilsson*, especially as I know from experience that his presence on the board of editors of the *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*

¹ In the book’s second edition the title was changed to *Greek folk religion*, see Pirenne-Delforge’s chapter below.

in the early 1940s has raised the question of his political stance in those years. It is high time, it seems to me, to clarify this question but not, as I have already tried to do, in Swedish, but in a language of global access.²

In his new role as the *Rector Magnificus* of Lund University, Nilsson addressed the student community in October 1936. The subject of his speech is scientific research, the “lifeblood of the university”:

Another danger, menacing the growth of science, which for a person of my generation seemed to belong, irrevocably so, to the past, gives new and forceful signs of life in our present, I am referring to the time when science had to accept the position as the servant girl of religious faith, as its *ancilla fidei*. [...] We believed that the bygone nineteenth century had cut this leash, but it has been tied together in the twentieth. Not too long ago, a prominent representative of an extremist political stance proclaimed: all is fine as long as science agrees with us; if it goes against us, too bad for science!

We have seen this danger take shape in the new political systems which seek dictatorial power not only over the physical persons of their subjects but over their thoughts and reasoning. Science will have to be Marxist or Nazi; if not, too bad for science and in particular for the scientists.³

As a member of the board of editors of the *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, partly funded by Sweden after the First World War, Nilsson had been informed, already in 1934,⁴ that his friend chief editor Weinreich had been harassed by a Nazi *Prokurist* who had required the review to favour articles on Norse paganism. The publishing house of the *Archiv*

² See Svenbro 2007, 263–309, and more recently, Svenbro 2020.

³ Quoted by Oredsson 1996, 41. My translation is made from Nilsson's *Akademiska tal* (Nilsson 1939a): “En annan fara för vetenskapens topphuggning som vi äldre trodde tillhöra en för alltid förgången tid, gör sig i våra dagar påmind med all kraft, jag menar den tid, då vetenskapen hade att intaga ställningen som en *ancilla fidei*, en trons tjänarinna. [...] Vi trodde, att det sist förflutna nittonde århundradet för alltid avklippt dessa ledband, men de har åter knutits i det tjugonde. För inte så längesedan en framskjuten representant för en extrem politisk åsikt fällde yttrandet: det är bra så länge vetenskapen går med oss; om den går mot oss, så mycket värre för vetenskapen. Vi har sett denna fara förverkligas i de nya statsväsen, som pocka på enväldsmakt icke blott över sina medborgares personer utan även över deras tankar och förnuft. Vetenskapen skall vara marxistisk eller nazistisk; varom icke så mycket värre för vetenskapen och isynnerhet vetenskapsmännen.”

⁴ Letter from O. Weinreich to Nilsson of 3 October 1934 (consulted in the M.P. Nilsson archive at Lund University Library Special Collections).

für Religionswissenschaft, B.G. Teubner, having sided with the “New Germany”, finally grew tired of Weinreich and fired him in 1939. When Nilsson, in an act of solidarity with Weinreich, left the board of editors⁵ he received a letter from Teubner, asking him, a most prominent member of the board, to reconsider his decision. Nilsson answered that his decision stood firm. With immediate effect his name was to disappear from the list of editors.

This is not the occasion to develop this aspect of Nilsson (I have done so elsewhere)⁶ but before concluding I must address the related problem of what I 20 years ago called Nilsson’s “genetic determinism”.

Let me first resume. As we have seen, Nilsson took an anti-Nazi stance in addressing the student community of Lund University in October 1936, a stance confirmed by an inquiry published by the Social Democrat newspaper *Arbetet* five months earlier.⁷ The two letters to Teubner in February 1939 show how Nilsson’s political standpoint was profoundly different from the political line chosen by Teubner and the *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*. In other words, his political stance during the period in question is unambiguously anti-Nazi.

More difficult to address is the accusation of racism, where the starting point is Nilsson’s notorious *Hereditas* article from 1921,⁸ which for a present-day reader (myself included, in 1968) stands out as a painful case of racial interpretation of history. What is the origin and intent of this article? In the last chapter of his *Social and economic history of the Roman Empire*, Michael Rostovtzeff discusses the possibility of a racial explanation of the fall of the Roman Empire and quotes a number of scholars working in this direction around 1920 (Otto Seeck, Tenney Frank, N.A. Vassiliev);⁹ he could have included Nilsson. The approach was obviously being tested in those years. It is likely that Nilsson wanted to give it a try of his own, no doubt under the influence of his friend the outstanding genetician Herman Nilsson-Ehle, whose innovative work in the field of plant breeding had won his admiration. But in the words of the historian Sverker Oredsson, “in the 1930s, the man who had revolutionized

⁵ Letters from Nilsson to B.G. Teubner dated 7 and 12 February 1939 (consulted in the M.P. Nilsson archive at Lund University Library Special Collections).

⁶ See Scheid 1999–2000, 273–274, with a summary of the “three seminars” presented in Svenbro 2007.

⁷ Oredsson 1996, 38.

⁸ Nilsson 1921, 370–390.

⁹ I have consulted Rostovtzeff 1957, edited by P.M. Fraser.

the Swedish wheat brands considered the science of genetics far more important for the amelioration of humankind than for agriculture.”¹⁰

Rostovtzeff’s epoch-making work appeared in 1926 and we may be confident that Nilsson gave the chapter in question a thorough reading in that same year, five years after the *Hereditas* article: Rostovtzeff coherently argues for a rejection of the racial explanation of the fall of the Roman Empire.¹¹

In my perspective, this opens the possibility of understanding Nilsson’s article as an *experiment* by means of which the historian tested a mode of explanation current among his colleagues. Was this mode of explanation to be accepted or rejected? The fact that the article cannot be seen as a decisive turning point in Nilsson’s scientific development suggests that it was but an isolated effort with little or no consequences for, say, *Homer and Mycenae*.¹²

Such a position displaces the focus to a complementary text, the conference on “genetics and history” of 1938,¹³ quoted by genetics professor Arne Münzing, Nilsson-Ehle’s successor in Lund, as a stand against Adolf Hitler’s racism.¹⁴ Significantly, Nilsson declares that the great nations of antiquity were all *Mischvölker*.¹⁵

Given this background, the insistence on the *Hereditas* article from 1921 as a basis for judging Nilsson appears disproportionate and unfair. True, at one point Nilsson had tried a racial mode of explaining the fall of the Roman Empire, but this does not make his science racist nor the man an anti-Semite.

For how were we to understand the substantial help offered by Nilsson to Jewish professor Eduard Norden, rejected by his former publisher B.G. Teubner and victim of the Nazi *Bibliotheksverbot*, in 1939?¹⁶ Or the

¹⁰ Oredsson 1996, 217.

¹¹ In a surprising letter to Nilsson (of 25 February 1930), who is preparing for a tour of the US, M. Rostovtzeff writes from Yale suggesting that Nilsson use his *Hereditas* article from 1921 for a lecture at the Yale Classics Club. I find it unlikely that Nilsson followed his advice but have no trace of the lecture actually delivered, if Nilsson ever pronounced one. Consulted in the M.P. Nilsson archive at Lund University Library Special Collections.

¹² For further discussion, see now Konaris in this volume, pp. 134–140.

¹³ Nilsson 1939b, 211–223.

¹⁴ See Oredsson 1996, 154–155.

¹⁵ Nilsson 1939b, 221.

¹⁶ When B.G. Teubner, Norden’s long-time publisher, had rejected *Aus altrömischen Priesterbüchern*, the manuscript was accepted, in 1937, by *Kungliga humanistiska vetenskapssamfundet i Lund*, presided by Nilsson, and so the book was finally published

fact that Ada Adler, of the *Souda lexicon*, who was one of the 7,000 Jews that fled from Denmark to Sweden in October 1943, spent the remaining 20 months of the Second World War with the Nilsson family in Lund?

With this question, the moment has finally come for me to conclude this Introduction—by commending the five chapters of this book, with their precision and wealth of information, to the reader.

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in Lund in 1939 (Norden 1939). Nilsson gave much of his time to the preparation of the complex manuscript—at a time when he held the office as the University's *Rector Magnificus*.

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