

“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, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* vol. 1

Abstract

I briefly trace the origins of Martin P. Nilsson's *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* from his lectures in Swedish at the University of Uppsala in 1920, 'On the history of Greek religion', through some interesting twists and turns to the publication of volume 1 in 1941 when he was 67 years old, to the publication of the third edition in the year of his death, 1967. After some comments on how Nilsson himself conceived of the book, I outline briefly its structure and topics. Central is a discussion of some leading ideas and themes of the book, and how they were received then and how they stand up today. I close with some examples of scholars' use of the *Geschichte* today and with some personal reflections on the book's early and deep influence on my own work on Greek religion.*

In 1920 Martin P. Nilsson gave a series of eight lectures, in Swedish, at the University of Uppsala, 'On the history of Greek religion'. They were published, in Swedish, in 1921.¹ In 1925 they were translated into English

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¹ Nilsson 1921. For a bibliography of the nearly 1,000 of Nilsson's publications from 1897 to 1967, see Knudtzon & Callmer 1967–1968. For Nilsson's "*Autobiographie*" of

and published by Oxford University Press.² The laudatory preface was written by no less a person than Sir James George Frazer. The lectures are titled: ‘Minoan-Mycenaean religion and its survival in Greek religion’; ‘Origins of Greek mythology’; ‘Primitive belief and ritual’; ‘Gods of nature and of human life’; ‘The Homeric anthropomorphism and rationalism’; ‘Legalism and mysticism’; ‘The civic religion’ and ‘The religion of the cultured classes and the religion of the peasants’. In these titles we can see the skeleton of volume 1 of *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, which was to appear 21 years after the lectures.³

Nilsson was 46 years old when he gave the lectures, 67 when he published volume 1 of the *Geschichte* in 1941, and 76 in 1950 when he published volume 2. (Pardon my interest in his age: I am at that stage of life when it becomes important to see what old people can do). When Nilsson was 81, in 1955, he published the second, revised edition of volume 1, with updating on new finds and studies, with a couple of new topics, and with six sections—including some major ones like “philosophy”—rewritten. In 1960, looking back, he viewed these two volumes of the *Geschichte* as the culmination and conclusion of his life’s work in the area of Greek religion. Here you may recall his claim, also made in 1960, that “the pen fell from my hand when I was in my eighty-sixth year.”⁴ But that, happily, was not to be true. When Nilsson was 87 he published the revised edition of volume 2. Then, in the early 1960s, it was decided to undertake a third edition of volume 1, and it was entrusted to Nilsson’s colleague at Lund, Erland Ehnmark. But Ehnmark died, early and unexpectedly, and Christian Callmer, the head librarian at Lund, Nilsson’s former student, completed the task, and this amounted to adding 22 dense pages of notes that Nilsson had written in his copy of the second edition. Martin P. Nilsson died in April 1967, at the age of 92, and a month later Hermann

his academic and scholarly career, see Nilsson 1960, ix–xi. Perhaps the best contemporary appreciation of Nilsson’s wide-ranging work is by Gjerstad 1967–1968 and 1968. For very recent studies and evaluations of his work in the light of modern scholarship, see Bremmer 2010, 11–15 and Konaris 2016, index under Nilsson.

² Nilsson 1925. For this translation by F.J. Fielden, Nilsson revised and rewrote some of his lectures. A second edition was published in 1949 = Nilsson 1949, and a third revised edition with a new preface in 1952 = Nilsson 1952.

³ The various volumes and editions of the *Geschichte* are: vol. 1, Nilsson 1941; vol. 2, Nilsson 1950; vol. 1, 2nd edition, Nilsson 1955; vol. 2, 2nd edition, Nilsson 1961; vol. 1, 3rd edition, Nilsson 1967.

⁴ “*Stilus manui meae excidit annum octogesimum sextum agentis.*” Nilsson 1960, in the ‘Praemonendum’.

Bengtson wrote the foreword to the third, final edition of volume 1 of the *Geschichte*, with a moving tribute to Nilsson.

Walter Friedrich Otto had been the editor of the monumental series of the *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft* since 1920, and in the 1930s he and others decided it was time for a new, or really the first, ‘History of Greek religion.’ Volume 1 was to cover from the Minoan period to the end of the Classical period, volume 2 the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Martin P. Nilsson was Otto’s second choice to undertake volume 1 and his third choice to prepare volume 2. Otto’s first choice for volume 1 was Otto Weinreich, who at first accepted but then declined. Otto then turned to Nilsson, his fellow editor of the *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*. And so, probably in 1932, after his Sather Lectures at Berkeley,⁵ Nilsson began work on volume 1. It was probably finished by 1939 because when it was finally published in 1941 Nilsson had added six pages of *Nachträge* (addenda) with references to 37 works published from 1937–1940. Weinreich was also Otto’s first choice for volume 2, but again he declined. Then Otto and Nilsson together turned to Nilsson’s friend Arthur Darby Nock, but he too declined. And so, in 1939, after his retirement Nilsson began work on volume 2, and, he says, he devoted himself entirely to it until he finished it in 1947.⁶ “Entirely” is quite an overstatement, because there are 83 other items in Nilsson’s bibliography from 1940 to 1947. Because of the post-war difficulties volume 2 was not published until 1950. Nilsson closes the ‘Preface’ of this volume with this moving and admonitory sentence which I present in his own words:

During the wartime this work was a comfort for me. It made me conscious that there is a unifying bond which stands above and beyond the battles of the time. That bond is scholarly research [*Wissenschaft*], in so far as that scholarly research is true scholarly research and not enslaved by politics. I also realized that the unity of West European culture is founded on the inheritance from antiquity.⁷

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⁵ Published as Nilsson 1932.

⁶ Nilsson 1950, vi.

⁷ “Während der Kriegszeit ist diese Arbeit mir ein Trost gewesen, indem sie mir zum Bewusstsein brachte, dass es ein einigendes Band gibt, welches über den Kämpfen der Zeit bestehe, die Wissenschaft, sofern sie wahre Wissenschaft ist und nicht von der Politik versklavt ist, und dass die Einheit der westeuropäischen Kultur auf dem Erbe der Antike begründet ist.” Nilsson 1950, vi. This and all translations from the German are my own.

In the Introduction to volume 1 Nilsson carefully delineates what his book is and what it is not. “This book does not make the high claim to give a history of Greek religion which is on all sides satisfying. It corresponds to the purpose of the *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft*, which is to be an aid (“*Hilfsmittel*”) for students and scholars, an aid which will give them an orientation on the sources and on modern scholarship.”⁸ It is, of course, much more than that, and I take a moment here to refresh us on what’s really in the 850 pages of the *Geschichte*, volume 1.

Nilsson himself divides the book into two sections: the “static” and the “dynamic”. In the first, “static” part (roughly 250 pages) he describes basic, unchanging Greek religious concepts and phenomena, of sanctuaries, altars, purification, sacrifice, dance, divination, and such things. In the “dynamic” part (most of the rest) he describes changes over history, and he distinguishes five (or really six) historical periods: for volume 1 the prehistoric period includes the Minoan and Mycenaean, separately; if we separate, as Nilsson does, the Minoan and Mycenaean we have six, not five historical periods. He discusses Homer under Mycenaean religion. Then, after the Minoan and Mycenaean periods, he pauses in the historical (dynamic) sequence and presents in 210 pages the major Greek gods with their names, possible origins, attributes, functions, and major cults. After that he returns to history, to the Archaic and Classical periods, and describes new things and changes that occurred in each. In volume 2 he has the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Nilsson introduces each period with a summary of the scholarly literature, gives a general historical, political, and social survey, and then, the major part, gives prominent individual religious phenomena of that period—new or transformed cults, new sanctuaries, and new religious concepts. He concludes each period with a detailed summary, reviewing major points and linking developments in this period to past and future periods.

Nilsson himself and his reviewers expected that the book would be used largely as a reference work, with scholars and students looking up one of the hundreds of individual cults or places or deities.⁹ So it has been, but what especially struck me, though, as I re-read the book, were those introductory sections on political and social history as background for religious developments, and also the insightful concluding sections that tied the whole together. They are masterful and have aged very well. It is a tragedy for our field that the whole *Geschichte* was never translated

⁸ Nilsson 1941, 2 = 1967, 2.

⁹ Nilsson 1960, 3.

into English, but even today those introductions and conclusions merit translation to reach a broader audience. Let me select from this rich treasure-house some leading ideas:

1. That Greek religion must be studied historically. Deities and religious concepts—and less so practices—change over time, and we must recognize this. Greek religion in any one period is an amalgamation of “primitive”, Minoan, Mycenaean, and elements of other prior periods and of new developments in its own time, and we must sort these out as best we can. Greek religion is a dynamic, not static phenomenon. Here I note two points: that Nilsson as a student had studied ancient history on its own (hence the introductions to each section) and that he had probably been strongly influenced by his previous work on Minoan/Mycenaean religions and their relationship to later Greek religion.¹⁰ I would also add here that Nilsson, unlike any before and unlike few since, in volume 2 made the important distinction between Greek religion in the Hellenistic period and in the Roman period. Let me introduce a personal moment here. When I was writing *Religion in Hellenistic Athens* in the mid 1990s, I wanted, as a conclusion, to correlate what I was finding for Athens with more general descriptions of Greek religion in the Hellenistic period. I could not. These descriptions, I realized, were based largely on Roman period sources retrojected into the Hellenistic period, and I found little of what they described in Hellenistic Athens. It all became much clearer, however, when I turned to Nilsson’s *Geschichte* volume 2. There the sources and conclusions and descriptions from them were properly distinguished between Hellenistic and Roman, and a quite different picture of Hellenistic Greek religion emerged.¹¹

I should confess here that Nilsson had a rather idiosyncratic view of the historical development of Greek religion, one not accepted or even mentioned today. That is, that what he viewed as a religion of “rich and manifold currents and thoughts” of earlier periods, linked to the old social ties of race and family, peaked at the time of the Persian Wars (say 480 BC), but then the major gods and their cults were co-opted by the state and its ruling élites for political, nationalistic, and propaganda purposes. The lower classes turned largely to the smaller, local deities while the state promoted the major deities in state cults. Nilsson claims that

¹⁰ Nilsson 1927; 1950a.

¹¹ Mikalson 1998, 315–323. Zeph Stewart, Nilsson’s admirer and my teacher, offered the same good distinctions in Stewart 1977.

these state cults, in the Classical period and the Hellenistic period, do not represent a vigorous, flourishing religion that met the needs of the Greek people. It was “*arm, entleert*” (“poor, empty”),¹² but scholars today, I know, would not agree.

As I was trying to understand Nilsson’s devaluation of what we would call Classical Greek religion, I re-read the correspondence between Nilsson and the great German Hellenist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, all of it from the 1920s, much of it concerning Nilsson’s Swedish lectures of 1920. Von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who read and loved the Swedish language, told Nilsson that his, Nilsson’s, “heart clings to what the first, pre-Homeric chapters offer”, but after that his “inner sympathy (“*Teilnahme*”) declined.” In a return letter Nilsson confessed: “Yes, my heart is in the prehistoric periods.”¹³ For the rest, and for “higher religion” Nilsson felt, in 1922, that he did not have the right instinct and sympathy. He could approach it only as a scholar evaluating evidence.¹⁴ And so, as we shall see, Nilsson saw the development of Greek religion as a movement away from, and then eventually back to, central elements of the “prehistoric religion” with which he sympathized, and, for him, at no time was religion farther removed from “prehistoric religion” than in the high Classical period.

2. Nilsson claimed that the cults, cult artefacts, inscriptions, and rituals are the best approach to understanding Greek religion. He systematically and intentionally avoided statements of “belief”, or of “Greek beliefs”, because he thought such generalizations would introduce too much of our own, anachronistic religious beliefs.¹⁵ And so, quite surprisingly, he does not introduce explicit statements of religious beliefs that can be found, for example, in the Greek orators, historians, and poets.¹⁶ Nilsson does

¹² Nilsson 1950, 694.

¹³ Nilsson’s passion is almost palpable in this quotation from 1925: “The Bronze Age of Greece has emerged in wonderful freshness and splendour from the protecting bosom of the earth, in which it had lain hidden for more than three thousand years.” (1925, 9).

¹⁴ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s letter of 31 December 1921, no. 10 in Bierl & Calder 1991, 86–88; Nilsson’s response, of 3 January 1922, no. 11, 88–92. Nilsson reveals much more about himself and his scholarly outlook in a quite personal way in this letter and in the whole correspondence with von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff.

¹⁵ On this view of Nilsson, see now also Konaris 2016, 279 and Konaris’ chapter in this volume.

¹⁶ For his most interesting reflections on belief *vs* cult and on several other critical issues, in response to criticisms of the *Geschichte*, see Nilsson 1960a.

describe rituals in some detail, but, we should add, this was a time before rituals were subject to elaborate psychological and social interpretation. Many of these interpretations are highly speculative, and Nilsson would not have liked them. He was deeply sceptical of the hypothetical and speculative and dismissed many scholars' theories for being just that. The *Geschichte*, partially as a product of its times, is packed with factual information but with little theory. As two recent scholars have summarized it, it is "High on facts, and low on theory", with the added comment that "that ... made his books last."¹⁷ Here is one characteristic quote from Nilsson from the end of volume 1:

If we do not want to lose ourselves in speculations—which to be sure can be exciting and in accord with the taste of the times, but also can change and again fall with this—if we do not want to lose ourselves in speculations) we must at first approach the character and works of the gods through patient study and detailed work, to see how they appear in cult in which the religion of the average Greek people found its expression, and we must track with unrelenting and scrupulous observation the changes over time.¹⁸

3. Nilsson expressly claimed, several times, that the "higher thought" of poetic literature and philosophy reflects little of practised Greek religion of its time and had little effect on it. This, of course, was, and still is, a revolutionary thought, but one with which I happen in good part to agree. Nilsson knew this "higher thought" of poetry and philosophy very, very well and devotes well over a hundred pages of volume 1 to "literary" figures such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, the pre-Socratics, and especially Plato, and he quotes hundreds of passages from them. But, as he does, he is aware that he is tracing the development of theology and religious thought, not the nature of practised religion. He terms Plato one of the great religious teachers of all time, but Plato's influence on practised religion was not to be felt until Neoplatonism in the Roman period. By volume 2 Nilsson seems, however, to have changed his position of the impact of philosophy on contemporary religion, because there he has long discussions of the influence of Neoplatonism and contemporary science on the religion of its time.

¹⁷ Bierl & Calder 1991, 74.

¹⁸ Nilsson 1941, 794 = 1967, 844.

4. Nilsson argued that “mythology” was useful only in determining the attributes and functions of the deities. Their personal histories, their genealogies, the countless, wonderful stories told about them are, he claimed, the inventions of the poets. His rejection of mythology as a good source for Greek religion has troubled many. Walter Burkert, for example, grumbled that the only “myth” Nilsson treated in the *Geschichte*, “from which myths are generally banned”, was that of Demeter at Eleusis.¹⁹ Nilsson’s reaction against mythology was probably, in part, a reaction to immediately prior scholarship which, as he details, focused on mythology and treated Greek religion as just a subfield of mythology.²⁰ But like the “higher literature”, Nilsson knew and understood Greek mythology. He had given, of course, in his Sather Lectures just a few years before, one of the best and most lasting accounts of the early origins of Greek mythology.²¹ In the early part of volume 1 he offers a 22-page discussion of Greek mythology, describing its various types and sources. There, quite properly I think, he isolates aetiological myths as the one valuable source for understanding practised religion.

Part of this rejection of mythology was also the rejection of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as good sources for understanding Greek religion. It was for Nilsson, at best, a “side shoot of the tree of Greek religion”. But, again, he knew Homer exceptionally well, he devotes dozens of pages to him, and he makes hundreds of references to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but he thinks that most of what Homer tells us of the gods is poetic fantasy—great fantasy, wonderful fantasy, but still fantasy.

5. Nilsson consciously reflected his own farm and country background when he insisted, throughout his writings, that for “true religion” we must look to the “little people”, the lower classes, the rural peasants, and the people on the city streets. We must study—as best we can, for there are not many sources—the “minor gods” and heroes whom these people worshipped on a daily basis. As I noted before, Nilsson thought that after the Persian Wars the major gods (the Zeuses, Athenas, and Poseidons) had largely been co-opted by the state governments and the governing aristocrats for political and propaganda purposes. True religion, “real”

¹⁹ Burkert 1979, 138; 1987, 73.

²⁰ For a rich account of the study of Greek mythology and religion before Nilsson, see Konaris 2016. Konaris (2016, 279) terms Nilsson “the towering figure in the study of Greek religion in the middle of the twentieth century.”

²¹ Nilsson 1932.

religion, survived, and would long survive, among the rural and lower-class urban populations. Most would today, I think, question whether those major gods had really lost their importance to all the citizens at such an early time. Most current religious studies show just how extensively Greeks of all classes interacted with the “major” deities as well as with the “minor” ones.

6. Nilsson claimed that most Greek gods were originally amoral forces of nature—like rain, thunder—or crop-sustaining, fertility-promoting figures, and that these forces of nature did not respond to some fundamental human needs.

a. One of these needs was for justice, especially among the lower classes in a search for peace in their conflicts with the ruling aristocracies. There developed the sense that the gods, or at least some gods, should be just, and just in human terms. We find this first, of course, in Hesiod, but there was the constant push, beginning in the Archaic period but continuing through time, to make these once “amoral” gods (“amoral”, not “immoral”) just by human standards. As part of this Nilsson introduced what he called legalism (“*Legalismus*”).²² In Nilsson’s legalism one attempted to establish peace with the gods by scrupulously fulfilling all of their commands, even in the smallest details of life. Greeks, Nilsson argued, wanted good relations with the gods, as with fellow men, by carefully following laws. The Greeks did not go as far in this direction as Jews and Romans but still thought along the same lines. The god most responsible for all of this, for human justice and for establishing the religious laws to be followed, was Apollo, Apollo of Delphi. Apollo through his oracle set or validated the religious laws, and if the Greeks followed them, they would have a *pax deorum*. And for Nilsson, throughout both volumes of his *Geschichte*, Apollo remained a central figure. Apollo became the source and representative of Greek “moderation”, “order” and “harmony” in all aspects of life.²³ There is still today much discussion and debate about the justice of the Greek gods, but not much or any of Nilsson’s legalism. It was, I think, one of Nilsson’s least successful interpretive ideas.

²² Nilsson was not satisfied with the German term “*Legalismus*” and would have preferred the Swedish “*lagisk*”, but after consultation with L. Deubner went with the German. Nilsson 1941, 578, n. 1 and 1967, 611, n. 1.

²³ As M. Jameson (1970, 53) notes, F. Jacoby “was exasperated at what he thought was Nilsson’s unjustified attribution of almost papal powers to Delphi.” On Nilsson’s views of Apollo, in the context of the changing views of that god, see Konaris 2016, 292–293.

b. Another human need or instinct was, according to Nilsson, for what he calls ecstasism or mysticism—the physical and emotional “getting out” from oneself and one’s everyday life, an ecstasism which was a more personal, less social, less rational experience. Nilsson thought this was a feature of pre-Greek religion, was largely suppressed in early Greek religion, but then re-emerged with the Delphic Pythia, miracle workers such as Aristaeas of Proconnesos, rituals like the Eleusinian Mysteries, and, especially, with a new god, Dionysos. The violent Dionysiac ecstasism portrayed in Euripides’ *Bacchae* was, however, soon tamed or partially tamed, and at least partially integrated into the traditional form of Greek festivals and rituals, but it did begin to fulfil a long-suppressed need. Nilsson, of course, did not know that Dionysos was, in fact, an early god, that his name would be found on the Linear B tablets and that this affects how, or better how early, we think the Greeks experienced the Dionysiac.

c. Nilsson also strongly believed that there is a human craving for love, comfort, refuge, and care and concern from one’s god(s). I quote here what he describes as “real religion”: “The human needs a god to whom he can turn in his needs and sorrows, to whom he can pour out his heart, in whom he can hope and from whom he can expect help and comfort.”²⁴ Here, I think, Nilsson’s Christian orientation comes out clearly, one that usually lies somewhat hidden in the *Geschichte*. Nilsson claimed strongly and repeatedly that these cravings were not satisfied in Classical Greek religion. These cravings reasserted themselves eventually in the Late Classical period with the appearance of Asclepius, the paternal, caring, healing deity, and then they further developed with the importation of foreign gods like Isis. These “new” gods had a personal relationship with individuals and cared for, comforted, and offered healing to them. These gods could love humans and could be loved. The move to such deities grew and expanded through the Late Hellenistic and Roman periods. Christianity was in many ways the end result, or perhaps better, the culmination of this religious evolution, and, to put words into Nilsson’s mouth, Christianity was a “real” religion that could fulfil the human needs that had not been satisfied by Archaic and Classical Greek religion.



²⁴ Nilsson 1941, 724; 1967, 767.

Nilsson's *Geschichte* was THE book on Greek religion from its first appearance in 1941 until Walter Burkert's *Greek religion* appeared, the German text in 1977, Peter Bing's English translation in 1985. Students and many scholars then and now have thought that Burkert's book replaced Nilsson's. Burkert did not. For Burkert, Nilsson was the "author of the most important and still indispensable standard works on Greek religion." Burkert wrote that his own book was no all-encompassing handbook like the monumental work of Nilsson, but rather a book that presented a variety of evidence (and not all of it) and offered provisional interpretation of that evidence.²⁵ Nilsson would have called much of it speculative but would have approved that Burkert recognized as speculative what was speculative. Burkert's *Greek religion* begins a bit earlier, with the Neolithic, but ends much earlier, in the mid-4th century BC. But the differences are much greater than that and can best be realized by comparing articles on, say, altars, or sanctuaries, or dances, or Apollo in each book. Each book has its own, great value, but Burkert certainly did not, and did not intend to, replace Nilsson. Nothing has replaced Nilsson's *Geschichte*. Burkert, in the 2011, second and revised edition of his 1977 German edition of *Griechische Religion*, on page 1, under 'Greek religion', lists 30 important books. The first one is Nilsson's *Geschichte*, still the "*grundlegendes Handbuch*".

Scholarship, though, moves on, and it is a sobering thought that the most modern works on Greek religion rarely refer to Martin P. Nilsson and his contributions. In David Ogden's 2007 *A companion to Greek religion*, with 28 essays by 28 authors in 497 pages, I can find only four references to Nilsson, only one, by Kevin Clinton, to the *Geschichte*, and in the bibliography the date of volume 1 is wrong. In the new (2015) *Oxford handbook of Greek religion*, edited by Esther Eidinow and Julia Kindt, with 43 essays by 43 authors in 708 pages, there are only three references to Nilsson, only one of which is to the *Geschichte*, and the author there likes the illustrations. If, however, one reads these modern books after reading the *Geschichte*, one realizes how much of what Nilsson presented or introduced or argued has become the accepted stock and the accepted questions of Greek religious studies, accepted but no longer associated with his name. But Nilsson is there. Michael Jameson in his review of the third edition said, in 1970, "Consideration of his achievement makes us realize how much the existing field of ancient Greek religion is the

²⁵ Burkert 1977, 23, 30–31; 1985, 2, 7.

product of Nilsson's career. For that subject, as he understood it and as he shaped it, he had few peers and he may not have true successors."²⁶ What was true in 1970 is true today.

Let me briefly survey which ideas of Nilsson have become and still are the accepted stock and the accepted questions of Greek religion and are to be found in virtually every new book on the subject. Here I would add that we usually give due credit to those scholars who answer questions, but we also owe much to those like Nilsson who first pose the important questions in our field, however debated and elusive the answers may be.

1. The historical approach and periodization of the study of Greek religion.
2. The extensive application of epigraphic and archaeological evidence to the study. Which, I might add, remains a distinctive and welcome feature of this generation of young Swedish scholars working on Greek religion.
3. The question of the relationship of rites and rituals to religious belief.
4. The question of the relationship of mythology to religion.
5. The question of the justice of the gods.

Each of these last three questions is still vigorously contested today. And I add two more that are of special importance to me:

6. The question of the relationship of "higher literature" (poetry and philosophy) to practised religion.
7. The importance of religion as practised by average citizens and its relationship to the religion of the state.

I first read the *Geschichte*, in its third edition, soon after it appeared, when I was very young and beginning my studies of Greek religion. I innocently thought it was a very useful book, surely the best thing available at the time, but just another book on Greek religion (but very long and in German). Coming back to it after nearly 50 years, I can now properly appreciate what a treasure it is. The vast knowledge and range, of literature, history, philosophy, archaeology, epigraphy, and contemporary scholarship are, quite simply, astounding.²⁷ The reasoned, precise, and objective treatment of each and every topic is unmatched today. André-Jean Festugière, in a review, spoke of Nilsson's "Olympian objectivity".²⁸ But

²⁶ Jameson 1970, 49.

²⁷ J.N. Bremmer, a critic of Nilsson, writing in 2010 (2010, 13), can say "I do not think there has been another historian of Greek religion with such a wide knowledge of all available sources. Yet knowledge is no guarantee for insight."

²⁸ "*Une objectivité quasi olympienne*", Festugière 1942, 133.

much more deeply, I found as I re-read it the roots of my whole approach to Greek religion. I had internalized many of those leading ideas I described today—and only now do I realize this. They became the core of my work and writings on Greek religion. I owe more to Nilsson's book than I ever realized.

Let me close with one statement that took away my breath, a statement from Nilsson's own defence of his *Geschichte* in an essay in the *Opuscula selecta* volume 3, of 1960. He is speaking of his own farm background and his interest in the peasants and lower classes. He is now 86 years old, and he claims there, "from my upbringing, from 70 years ago, I know something of the sacredness (*Heiligkeit*) of bread."²⁹ An amazing statement, "I know something of the sacredness of bread", and it made me wonder if we today can attain the understanding of Greek religion that Martin P. Nilsson had if we cannot turn from our books and computers, and, at dinner, personally feel "the sacredness of bread".

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²⁹ "Ich weiss etwas von der Heiligkeit des Brotes." Nilsson 1960, 10.

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