

“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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Hellenistic religion(s)

Revisiting Martin P. Nilsson's *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* vol. 2. *Die hellenistische und römische Zeit*

Abstract

This paper seeks to assess the significance of Martin P. Nilsson's *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* vol. 2. *Die hellenistische und römische Zeit* (1950, 1961²) which, after 70 years, is still the only monograph on Hellenistic religion. In a first step, I will outline Nilsson's holistic narrative of the history of religion in that period by putting an emphasis on his methodological premises. In a second step, I will use case examples to analyse some of the difficulties that modern scholarship still faces in accounting for religious changes and in the search for defining what Hellenistic religion is.

Writing the history of Hellenistic and Roman religion was for Martin P. Nilsson a “great and difficult task”.¹ The subject was not only vast and the research polarized, but it was also far removed from his main field of expertise. According to the initial plan for the *Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft*, it was first Otto Weinreich and then Arthur Darby Nock who were supposed to write the second volume.² When both authors resigned, the task was offered to Nilsson, who, late in life, took up the challenge: the volume was published in 1950, followed in 1961 by a second

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¹ Nilsson 1943, 251.

² Nilsson 1961, v–vi (‘Vorwort zur ersten Auflage’).

edition. Since then no attempt has been undertaken to offer a similar synthesis comprising the history of religion both in Hellenistic and Roman Imperial times, and, although there are treatises on the history of Roman religion,³ comprehensive studies on the history of religion in the Hellenistic period are rare.⁴ By concentrating on the latter-mentioned period, the following questions will be addressed: What was new about Nilsson's concept of the history of Greek religion in the Hellenistic period? What ideas did he put forward, and how is his study assessed in the light of current research? Nilsson's main legacy was to rehabilitate the history of religion in the Hellenistic period as a history in its own right. Although he anticipated the *communis opinio* that considered the Hellenistic period as a period of transition and portrayed it either as a period of decay of the Classical *polis* or as the prelude to Late Antiquity, Nilsson emphasized the need to reveal the transformative potential of this period, which was, in his opinion, based on new ideas and "external influences":

*Die hellenistische Zeit war eine Übergangszeit. Das hat die Schätzung ihrer schöpferischen Kräfte geschädigt, indem sie entweder als Auflösung und Verfall der klassischen oder als ein Vorspiel der spätantiken Kultur hingestellt wurde. Sie hat, wie die veränderte und erweiterte Weltlage, das Leben, tatsächlich die griechische Kultur, Wissenschaft und Religion auf eine neue Grundlage gestellt durch Schöpfung von neuen Ideen und unter Heranziehen fremden Gutes.*⁵

³ E.g., Beard *et al.* 1998, and most recently Rüpke 2018.

⁴ Martin 1987; Mikalson 1998 (on Hellenistic Athens) and 2006 (more generally on the continuity and changes between the Classical and Hellenistic periods); Potter 2003. Regarding the use of the term "Hellenistic religion", Potter (2003, 407–408) rightly remarks that the transfer of the adjective "Hellenistic" from the context of the political history to that of religion is, not unlike the term "Classical religion", problematic. For Nilsson 1961, 1–3, who was aware of that issue, such terminological questions are nothing more (and nothing less) than larger heuristic intentions. For that reason, he decides to keep the conventional terms of "Hellenistic" and "Hellenistic–Roman" period, although he considers them as one period.

⁵ "The Hellenistic period was a transitional period. This has hampered the appreciation of its creative powers, since it was either presented as the dissolution and decay of Classical culture or as a prelude to Late Antique culture. It has, like the changed and expanded world situation, put life, indeed Greek culture, science and religion on a new basis through the creation of new ideas and by drawing on foreign elements." (my translation): Nilsson 1961, 292; cf. also Nilsson 1943, 275.

The issue of “foreign elements” (*fremden Gutes*) was, however, the subject of an intense debate. The studies by Albrecht Dieterich on magic papyri,⁶ by Richard Reitzenstein on mystery religions⁷ and, above all, by Franz Cumont on Mithraism and the Oriental religions had raised the problem of syncretism by highlighting the influence of Oriental, and especially Egyptian, religions and ideas on Greek religion.⁸ The term “syncretism”, already introduced in the History of Religions in the mid-19th century, was used to describe phenomena of the interpenetration of cultures and religions after the time of Alexander the Great, but, associated with more or less deliberate pejorative overtones, religious syncretism was often considered as a decadent stage between the “pure” Classical period and Christianity.⁹ The new studies not only opened up novel fields of research in the history of ancient religions, but also sparked heated debates. As Nilsson remarked, they “pressed their views so zealously that for a time it seemed as if Greek and Roman religion would be obliterated in this emphasis on syncretism.”¹⁰ Yet, opponents of the term syncretism and its associated connotations have not remained silent. Johannes Geffcken, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Otto Kern, Arthur Darby Nock and André-Jean Festugière took a rather critical stance towards syncretism, albeit with slightly different positions.¹¹ While, according to Nilsson,¹² Geffcken, von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Kern did not comment on syncretism, directing their chief attention to Greek religion, Nock and Festugière accepted those forms of syncretism “which were fully hellenized, at least fully hellenized in matters of fundamental thought and above all in their expectations of the hereafter.”¹³ Only those cults from the Near East obtained a certain importance “which were substantially translated into Greek and remade with Greek elements into cults which retained an Oriental flavour but were divorced from their original

⁶ Dieterich 1891; 1903.

⁷ Reitzenstein 1910. Cf. most recently Bremmer 2013 with the previous bibliography.

⁸ Cumont 1894–1896; 1906 [new edition 2006 with Bonnet & Van Haepelen’s introduction]; cf. also Gordon 2014.

⁹ On the history and problems of the concept of syncretism see Motte & Pirenne-Delforge 1994 and Bæspflug 2006.

¹⁰ Nilsson 1943, 253; 1961, 721.

¹¹ Geffcken 1920; von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1931–1932; Kern 1926–1938; Nock 1933; Festugière 1943–1944; 1954.

¹² Nilsson 1943, 253; 1961, 5–10.

¹³ Nock 1933, 268.

cultural and religious setting.”¹⁴ The vividly debated question of Hellenism’s debt to the Orient took a new direction in the 1930s as German scholars aimed to bring the Hellenistic age in line with the *Zeitgeist* of their own time. In this context, Hellenistic religion was instrumentalized for Nazi racial propaganda as the article by Carl Schneider on ‘Die griechischen Grundlagen der hellenistischen Religionsgeschichte’ shows:

[...] *dass gerade hier die rassischen Kräfte des Griechen- und Römertums sich bewahrt haben und gerade in den religionsbildenden Kräften des Hellenismus viel unvermisches und wertvolles, nicht orientales Rassengut lebendig bleibt.*¹⁵

Since the debate on so-called syncretism was directly related to his subject, Nilsson could not and did not want to avoid it. On the contrary, he made clear from the very beginning that “my standpoint is not that of syncretism as a whole but that of Greek religion, which seems to me to be a factor of syncretism at times neglected”.¹⁶ Much as he shared the concerns of the “Greek” side, he was fully aware that the Oriental influences had also to be taken into consideration. In fact, he criticized the dichotomy regarding syncretism in academia, and even more the neglect of taking into account the respective historical context. He argued that not only did scholars who were in favour or against syncretism tend to either ignore or glorify Greek culture, but also that the proponents of the latter opinion exclusively promoted the image of the ideal Greekness (“*Griechentum*”) of the 5th and 4th centuries.¹⁷ For Nilsson, syncretism is about acknowledging the religious flows from the East and the Greeks’ own contributions to this great transformation. It was the mixture of

¹⁴ Nock 1933, 37. Nock’s article of 1928, in which he attacks the idea that the “mystery cults” of Hellenism contributed to the development of Christianity, belongs in the same context. See also the overview of the scholarship on the influence of “mystery cults” on early Christianity in Bremmer 2014, 143–154.

¹⁵ “[...] it was precisely here that the racial strengths of Greek and Roman civilization were preserved and that precisely in the power of Hellenism to form religion so much unmixed and precious, non-Oriental, racial heritage, persisted.” (my translation): Schneider 1939, 346; cf. also Bichler 1991, 375–380. On the impact of the Third Reich on the studies of religion see Junginger 2008; Gagné 2019, 63–65.

¹⁶ Nilsson 1943, 251; 1961, 4–5.

¹⁷ Nilsson 1961, 721.

“the forces which operated among the Greeks themselves” and the influences that Nilsson sought to analyse and evaluate.¹⁸

The subject of syncretism was not the only point in which Nilsson distanced himself from the scholarship of his time. In his opinion, the study of religious innovations presupposed the study of the religious dimension of social, cultural, and political change.¹⁹ Thus, studies on rites and magic, ideas and doctrines were insufficient without considering the social and political structures within which such phenomena took place. Such structures influenced or constrained in various ways the activities and behaviours of the individuals, groups, and communities. It is the *polis* and the larger power structures of which the *polis* became part in the period after Alexander the Great, but equally the social conditions that should form the framework of any investigation. To ignore that background is the same as “to renounce any understanding of religious movements, of the conflict of the various religions and the final outcome.”²⁰

The methodological premises as laid down by Nilsson were undoubtedly not only well considered, but first and foremost well adjusted to the historical conditions of the Hellenistic period. The expansion of Macedonian rule under Alexander the Great and the Graeco-Macedonian elite’s assumption of power across much of the Near and Middle East initiated a new era of encounters between East and West; these were of fundamental and long-lasting importance not only to the political, cultural, and religious landscapes of cities in Greece, but also to the vast geographical area to the east of it that was home to various ethnic groups and political

¹⁸ Nilsson 1943, 253; 1961, 8. See also the remarks by M.D. Konaris in this volume, pp. 104–107.

¹⁹ Nilsson 1943, 274. Because of that methodological approach Nilsson starts this *Handbuch* with an overview of the political, social, and religious context on the Greek Mainland as well as in Asia Minor, Egypt and the Middle and Far East (Nilsson 1961, 10–51).

²⁰ Nilsson 1943, 254. An insight into Nilsson’s reflections on his own methodology, but also on his attitude towards new theories in academia, is provided by the first of his two famous letters (1949 and 1951) to Nock. Nilsson takes a self-critical stance when talking about the concept of evolution and his own designation as an evolutionist. While rejecting those positions that consider “a logical for an historical series”, he nevertheless recognizes “the logical series, going from lower to higher, but as conceptual, not as historical” (Nilsson 1949b, 73). He also takes a middle position when discussing “the necessity of criticising *le dernier cri*” in religious studies. In his opinion, “if one is of preconceived opinions, one must acknowledge, justly, that none these idols of a day has been vain”, since discussion and constructive criticism “have taught us to understand better the problem of religion and its origin” (p. 106). Cf. Despland 1974, 129–130; Gagné 2019, 71–75. Cf. also V. Pirenne-Delforge in this volume.

systems. Nilsson touched upon this problem and came up not only with a series of conclusions and observations, but with a holistic narrative.

At the beginning of this narrative stands the decline of the *polis*: “It has been truly said that the decay of the ancient city-state, the *Polis*, also brought about the decay of its religion.”²¹ The model of civic decline was already widely accepted both by Classical scholars and historians of religion, as is clearly attested by William Ferguson’s 1928 outline in the *Cambridge Ancient History* of the leading ideas of the Hellenistic age.²² Nilsson, along with Eric R. Dodds and André-Jean Festugière, acknowledged the interrelation between the decline of the *polis* and the downfall of the religious system.²³ However, though the *Verknöcherung* (“fossilization”) of the religion of the *polis* was, in Nilsson’s opinion, the negative aspect of that development, the positive aspect was “that new religious needs existed and had to be satisfied in forms adapted to the conditions of the time.”²⁴ These new conditions included the shift of the centre of gravity from old Greece to Asia and Egypt, the establishment of the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the emigration of the Greeks to remote countries. This led to cosmopolitanism, the rise of individualism, and the search for “a god who reigned everywhere and over all, a god of the Oecumene.”²⁵

It is noteworthy that Nilsson attributes the introduction of religious ideas and changes in the Hellenistic period not to the cities’ élites, but to the broad masses.²⁶ The élites were the ones that kept Greek religion alive,

²¹ Nilsson 1943, 254; 1961, 293.

²² Ferguson 1928.

²³ All three juxtapose 5th-century BC Athens with post-Chaeronean Athens and lament the loss of importance of the old cults and the patron deities of the Greek cities. Drawing emotional pictures, they point out that public worship of the city gods continued but rather out of “more or less a social routine, without influence on goals of living” (Dodds 1951, 242) or “by force of tradition as all empty shell without a kernel” (Nilsson 1949a, 239–240). Even “the feeling of the public toward Athena was quite different in the fifth century, when Athena was the symbol of the Athenian empire” compared to the feelings “in the year 304, when Demetrius Poliorcetes established himself as a living god in the Parthenon as the brother of Athena” (Festugière 1943–1944, 30–44; 1954, 37–38).

²⁴ Nilsson 1943, 254–255; 1961, 293, 724–725; cf. Dodds 1951, 242: “On the other hand, the progressive decay of tradition set the religious man free to choose his own gods, very much as it set the poet free to choose his own style.”

²⁵ Nilsson 1943, 255; 1961, 294.

²⁶ Nilsson 1961, 293: “*Das Geschick der Religion beruht jedoch letzten Endes auf der breiten Masse der Bevölkerung, die in ihr die über das Materielle hinausgehenden Bedürfnisse zu befriedigen sucht und sich auf die Dauer doch zur Geltung bringt, auch wenn Gebildete und Herrschende sich dagegen stemmen.*” Nilsson distinguishes between the religion of

owing to their “literature and concern for the cults of the city-states”,²⁷ but also as a result of their own social and political ambitions. However, they kept alive the static, now secularized religion as its administrators, while the people taking part in cults, festivals and banquets had “no inherent devotion for the great official and literary gods.”²⁸ On the other hand, the inhabitants of the old Greek cities and the inhabitants of the new cosmopolitan cities of the Hellenistic world were, according to Nilsson, the real religious forces behind the changes. Individuals from both categories were confronted with feelings of uncertainty and detachment: the inhabitants of the *poleis* because they had neither the old civic deities or heroes to turn to nor any genuine feelings regarding the cult life in their cities;²⁹ the Greek immigrants because “they took no part in political life, they knew nothing of patriotism, they were uprooted, emigrated to foreign countries or were born there, they mingled with the natives and with people from many countries.”³⁰ This gloomy situation, however, offered, Nilsson argues, an enormous potential. The individuals, free from the bonds of state and family, were now able to choose their own gods, local and Oriental gods included, in which they believed they would find refuge and consolation.³¹ Not only the addiction to foreign or mystery cults, but also the preoccupation with Tyche, the popularity of both magic and astrology, and even the rise of ruler cults should, according to him, be interpreted in the same framework as compensatory phenomena.³² But the individuals were also able and capable of reshaping “according to their ideas the religious material which they took over from non-Greek religions”³³ and forming their own congregations. In this way, “this new atmosphere too was Greek but with an admixture of Egyptian and Oriental elements, for although Greece was not suffocated in the em-

the educated (“*die Gebildeten*”, “*die Religion der Erlesenen*”) and the religious beliefs of the “simple folk” (“*die Massen*”, “*Leute, die aus alter, durch ein einfaches, von der Bildung unberührtes Leben bestärkter Gewohnheit am alten Glauben und den alten Bräuchen festhielten*”) as well as between the cults in the city and those in the country: Nilsson 1961, 730; cf. also the title of ch. 8 in Nilsson 1949a, 263: ‘The religion of the cultured classes and the religion of peasants’.

²⁷ Nilsson 1943, 273; 1961, 308.

²⁸ Nilsson 1943, 274; 1961, 308.

²⁹ Nilsson 1943, 274.

³⁰ Nilsson 1943, 261; 1961, 299, 301.

³¹ Nilsson 1943, 274; 1961, 301.

³² Nilsson 1943, 274–275; 1961, 301–302.

³³ Nilsson 1943, 274; 1961, 308.

brace of the Orient, it was fundamentally changed, not only by external influences, but by internal development.”³⁴

“The heart of Greek culture ceased to throb,”³⁵ “the ancient gods were tottering,”³⁶ “the old social religion was ousted by an individual religion.”³⁷ these phrases of Nilsson, as rhetorical as they may be, had an enormous impact on scholarship. In discussions on the *polis* under Hellenistic and Roman rule, it became common to read of the corrosion of civic spirit or identity, about interference by ruling authorities and their accomplices, the local élites, or about the hollowness of civic institutions and structures, the supposed degeneration of democracy and the declining role of the assembly, and of course of the degeneration of traditional religious life.³⁸ Moreover, the tendency to unreflectingly impose on the ancient evidence concepts and models of historical development, of individualism and secularism,³⁹ and more generally the tendency to see in the ancient context parallels to the modern era led to a categorization of religious life as artificial and less than genuine.

The mystery religions may serve as such an example. Their prevalent character, often emphasized by scholarship, is based on a Christianizing interpretation of the mysteries, as Walter Burkert and Giulia Sfameni Gasparro have shown.⁴⁰ The earlier interpretation as a separate movement or religion directed against the *polis* and its structures ignored the fact that mystery associations and groups were fully integrated into the complex structures of the family and the polis, the mysteries representing

³⁴ Nilsson 1943, 275; 1961, 309.

³⁵ Nilsson 1943, 274; 1961, 3.

³⁶ Nilsson 1949a, 285; 1961, 539.

³⁷ Nilsson 1943, 260; 1961, 319.

³⁸ For an overview see Harland 2006, 22–28 with the previous bibliography; cf. also in the text below.

³⁹ See the criticism of Martin (1994, 134), who argues that “any concept approaching that of modern, Western individualism was irrelevant.” See also most recently Rüpke (2013, 8), who suggests using the notions of individualization and individuation but “in a heuristic and descriptive manner in order to explore the individual factor in the history of religion in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the dynamic of religious change (including revitalization and invented traditions), the spaces of experience, the limits of individual agency, and the mechanics and forms of religious individuation.” See also the remarks by V. Pirenne-Delforge in this volume.

⁴⁰ Burkert 1987; Sfameni Gasparro 1985; 2011; 2013; see also Bottini 2005; Auffarth 2006; Bonnet *et al.* 2009; Casadio & Johnston 2009, 1–20; Bremmer 2013; 2014; Gordon 2016.

an optional activity in the broader context of religious forms. As Luther Martin argues, “Hellenistic cultural fragmentation did not [...] give rise to any ideology of individualism, but [...] to a plurality of alternative subcultures. These Hellenistic subcultures are well exemplified by the religious formations of the era.”⁴¹

Yet, the model of the decline of the *polis* and consequently of an alleged religious decline did not remain unquestioned in recent, as well as in older, studies of civic religious life. In 1920 Geffcken had put forward in his book *Der Ausgang des griechisch-römischen Heidentums* the opinion that the weight of evidence demonstrates that Graeco-Roman religion, far from already showing signs of decline in the 3rd century BC, flourished at least into the 3rd century AD, even though there were certainly changes, developments and differences from one region to another.⁴² Louis Robert, Christian Habicht, and Philippe Gauthier, to name some of the prominent representatives of the recent reappraisal of the vitality of the *polis* institutions, have demonstrated the continuity of the Greek *polis* as a self-governing entity far into the Hellenistic and Roman periods.⁴³ As Édouard Will epigrammatically made the point: “*il est peu de morts qu'on ait dû re-tuer plus souvent que ceux de Chéronée*.”⁴⁴

The revision of the model of *polis* decline prompted not only a revision of the *communis opinio* of the traditional scenario of Hellenistic religion, but also a reassessment of the categories of continuity and change and of the agents at play.⁴⁵ And yet, we still need to learn to ask different questions about the available evidence and we still need to understand how processes of religious transmission and changes worked.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Martin 1994, 125; cf. also Gordon 2016, who calls for greater consideration of “shifting historical circumstances, local power systems, individual commitments, or the preferences of ritual specialists” when discussing “initiation” (p. 724).

⁴² Geffcken 1920, 11–19, 224–241.

⁴³ Cf. Robert 1969; Gauthier 1987; 2005; Ma 2008; Martzavou & Papazarkadas 2013; cf. also the discussion on the validity of terms such as “rise”, “acme” or “decline of the *polis*” in Vlassopoulos 2007.

⁴⁴ Will 1979, 84.

⁴⁵ In favour of a continuity of the religious practices between the Classical and the Hellenistic period are the arguments put forward by Stewart 1977, 503–529; Mikalson 1998, 283–323; 2006; Deshours 2011. For a nuanced approach, see the study by Paul 2013 on the religious life of Kos who shows on the one hand the vitality of the “*polis* religion” during the Hellenistic period and on the other the limitations of the role of foreign cults in a *polis*.

⁴⁶ Cf. Martzavou & Papazarkadas 2013; Melfi 2016.

If we pose the question of what is typically “Hellenistic” in the religion of the Hellenistic period, some answers will inevitably be the same as in the time of Nilsson, namely the ruler cult,⁴⁷ the spread of the so-called Oriental cults, the popularity of the mystery and salvation religions,⁴⁸ the proliferation of magical practices,⁴⁹ the dissemination of private cult associations,⁵⁰ and finally the search for the one God who does not exclude the existence of others.⁵¹ We may also refine that list by adding elements such as the emphasis given to the staging of rituals and, more generally, the growing aestheticization,⁵² the multiplication of festivals—in particular of those founded in commemoration of historical events—and of contests (*agônes*),⁵³ the political instrumentalization of myth and religion in politics;⁵⁴ we may even go so far as to define, with Angelos Chaniotis, the history of Hellenistic religion as the history of experiences and practices.⁵⁵

A thoughtful answer to that key question would emphasize continuity, not so much change, since almost none of the above-mentioned phenomena is genuinely new. As David Potter put it in the style of a fairytale:

If seven Athenians who had gone to sleep in a cave on Hymettos in 336 to awaken in 100 BC they would not have been greatly confused by the religious structures that they confronted. Athena Polias was still in charge, the Eleusinian Mysteries were still revered, great festivals of the past still would run their course through the city. They might well

⁴⁷ Nilsson 1961, 132–185; for recent discussions with references to the older bibliography see Pfeiffer 2008; Iossif *et al.* 2011; Caneva 2012; 2016; Gnoli & Muccioli 2014; Iossif 2014; Caneva & Paul 2015; Erickson 2018.

⁴⁸ Nilsson 1961, 90–103, 119–131, 242–249; see above nn. 40–41.

⁴⁹ Nilsson 1961, 218–231; cf. Graf 1996; Gordon 1997; Dickie 2007.

⁵⁰ Nilsson 1961, 113–119; cf. Arnaoutoglou 2003; Belayche 2003; Kloppenborg & Ascouh 2011; Fröhlich & Hamon 2013; Harland 2014; Gabrielsen & Thomsen 2015.

⁵¹ Nilsson 1961, 294–299, 569–578; cf. most recently the articles in Mitchell & Van Nuffelen 2010; Versnel 2011, 280–307.

⁵² Chaniotis 1997; 2013a; Chankowski 2005; Beck & Wiemer 2009; Porter 2010; Zanker 2015.

⁵³ Chaniotis 1991; 1995; 2011; Parker 2004; Wiemer 2009; van Nijf & Williamson 2015; 2016.

⁵⁴ On the increase of mythological diplomacy and the creation of fictive kinship in Hellenistic times cf. Scheer 2003; Chaniotis 2007; 2013b; Gehrke 2010; Stavrianopoulou 2013.

⁵⁵ Chaniotis 2007, 157: “*Die Geschichte von Religion und Mythos im Hellenismus ist aus diesem Grund nicht an erster Stelle die Geschichte theologischer Erkundung und Glaubens, sondern die Geschichte von Erfahrungen und Handlungen.*”

wonder where some strange new gods had come from, but they would know that the polis had a way of incorporating new cults that was long sanctioned by tradition. They might be a bit taken aback by festivals for kings who had received divine honours, but they might also recall that the city had come close enough to creating such honours before they had gone to their long nap.⁵⁶

Indeed, to discern changes is not easy, but it is equally difficult to determine continuity and tradition.⁵⁷ What do we mean when we speak of continuity? Where is it located? Who are its agents? How do we posit the relationship between continuity and innovation, between vitality, revitalization, and invention of tradition?⁵⁸ Does revitalization of cults signify “return to the past” and “keeping up the tradition” or does it rather conceal discourses of identity, structures, meanings and values?⁵⁹ How we define these terms and how we assess their significance for the Hellenistic religion is a major task of research yet to be pursued. Since tradition is a dynamic and therefore complex phenomenon, an academic approach must take into account the historical and hermeneutical contexts in which it is used and the processes that shape it. This presupposes the study of a variety of factors such as the interactions between various elements (e.g., ritual, belief, writing norms, and institutions), the agency of different social groups, or the different, even conflicting, discourses within communities.

⁵⁶ Potter 2003, 429.

⁵⁷ Cf. Handler & Linnekin (1984, 273) who rejected the prevailing conception of tradition as “a core of inherited cultural traits whose continuity and boundedness are analogous to that of a natural object” and argued instead “that tradition is a symbolic process: that ‘traditional’ is not an objective property of phenomena but an *assigned meaning*. When we insist that the past is always constructed in the present, we are not suggesting that present-day acts and ideas have no correspondence to the past. But we argue that the relation of prior to unfolding representations can be equally well termed discontinuous as continuous” (p. 286–287, my emphasis). The literature on tradition/invented tradition/continuity and change is vast in all academic fields (e.g., sociology, history, archaeology, religious studies) and cannot be discussed here. On religious tradition and change see the articles in Engler & Grieve 2005; see also Hammer 2016.

⁵⁸ Cf. the discussions on change and continuity of cults, particularly in Hellenistic Athens, Mikalson 1998, 288–322; Deshours 2011, 15–18, 303–314; Labarre 2012; see also van Nijf *et al.* 2013; on the correlation between tradition and the continuities, discontinuities or transformations of rituals see Stavrianopoulou 2011.

⁵⁹ On the revitalization of tradition based on anthropological research, see Bräuchler & Widlock 2007.

The challenges we have to face go even deeper, when considering the political and cultural encounters of the wide geographical area we call the Hellenistic world, that was home to various ethnic groups and political systems. The awareness of diversity and interconnection, the need to take the “local” and the “global” simultaneously into account, means practically that analyses have to be pursued on more than one level. The well-known festival in honour of Artemis Leukophryene of the city of Magnesia on Maeander in Asia Minor may serve as an illustration of this point.⁶⁰

In 208/7 BC, the city decided to expand the initially annual local festival, originally established in 221 BC after an epiphany of Artemis, and to establish an even more sumptuous festival with penteteric games equal to an *isopythios* Panhellenic game.⁶¹ In order to achieve widespread publicity, and thus the necessary recognition of the new status of the festival, Magnesian ambassadors were sent to cities, leagues, and kings to invite them to participate in the festival. All invitations were associated with the further request for acknowledgment of the inviolability (*asylia*) of the city and the country of the Magnesians on the basis of friendship (*philia*), familiarity (*oikeiotes*), and kinship (*syngeneia*), which had always (*ek ton progenon*) existed between the Magnesians and all the invited parties. The size of this initiative (20 teams of *theoroi*) and the success of the Magnesian delegations is epigraphically attested in more than 60 answers—in the form of decrees for the cities and leagues and letters for the kings, but the original list must have included at least 200 cities.

Several levels for discussion are here offered: the religious motif, the deity’s epiphany, for the foundation of the festival; the cult of Artemis in the civic context of Magnesia; the content and organization of the festival; the connection between the festival and the inviolability of the city and country of Magnesia; the reasoning behind this large-scale initiative, and possible forerunners. On a supra-local level more questions arise: what was the purpose of the Magnesian diplomatic mission? Was it intended just to promulgate the festival, the city’s devotion to that deity, and to acquire inviolate status? What about the hidden messages of that mission, and how were they communicated? What was the impact of the tailor-made mythical genealogies which the Magnesians presented to the

⁶⁰ Cf. Stavrianopoulou 2013, 183–191 with the previous bibliography.

⁶¹ *I.Magnesia* 16–87.

cities visited, both those concerning their own identity and history and those concerning the history of the communities addressed?⁶²

The reasons why the Magnesian dossier enjoys great popularity among scholars, being cited in almost every handbook of Hellenistic history, now become obvious. However, the festival of Magnesia and all actions undertaken by the city are not used as an example of the history of cults in the Hellenistic cities, nor as an example of the pertinence of civic festivals, but primarily as an example of the politics of inviolability and fictive kinship, as well as of the promotion or augmentation of festivals for political ends.⁶³

Nilsson commented on a further, equally well-known, epigraphical testimony from Magnesia on the Maeander concerning the introduction of the festival of the *Eisiteria* on the occasion of the dedication of a new statue of Artemis Leukophryene (early 2nd century BC).⁶⁴ It contains a detailed regulation concerning the performance of the event, from details of the choirs of girls, the clothing of the magistrates, the procession, the text of the prayer to the participation of the citizens, also in the form of setting up altars before every house and workshop. Nilsson dismissed its religious significance with the short sentence: “*Die Inschrift gibt ein anschauliches und lebendiges Bild von dem Festtreiben in einer Griechenstadt; wenig Religiöses ist freilich darin.*”⁶⁵

In a modified form this comment is still in use in scholarship after Nilsson. Thus, public festivals in the Hellenistic period, though still being celebrated in honour of the gods, are thought to have primarily a political and secular background.⁶⁶ Even if “secularized” cannot be equated

⁶² Cf. Stavrianopoulou 2013, 196–199.

⁶³ Nilsson 1961, 87; cf. also the sober description of the festival in Nilsson 1906, 248–251.

⁶⁴ *I.Magnesia* 100 (*LSAM* 33); Stavrianopoulou 2006b, 120–121; Chaniotis 2007, 155–157; Wiemer 2009, 91–94.

⁶⁵ “The inscription provides an illustrative and vivid picture of the hustle and bustle during a festival in a Greek city; of course, there is little of the Religious in it” (my translation): Nilsson 1961, 87. Cf. also Nilsson 1949a, 260: “Of the ancient festivals nothing was left but the outward show, the agonistic contests with their excesses, and the distribution of food, oil, and money, on which wealthy citizens were driven by ambition to waste their riches.”

⁶⁶ E.g., Dušanić 1983, 15: “There can be little doubt that the institution of a Panhellenic festival was an act of political consciousness”; Chaniotis 1995, 162–163; 2013a, 40: “All the festivals that were founded in the Hellenistic period—as far as I can see there is not a single exception—had a political and secular background.” For a discussion on the concept of festival and reflections on the distinction between sacred/religious and profane/secular festivals, see now Brandt & Iddeng 2012; Iddeng 2012, 24–27.

with “decline”, we should still beware of underrating the religious significance of the festivals. Admittedly, festivals in the Hellenistic period were founded for various reasons, such as to commemorate a recent political event (a victory in a war, the removal of a foreign garrison, the restoration of freedom and democracy, etc.), to honour a king, or to commemorate a benefactor.⁶⁷ However, instead of interpreting these new occasions as evidence that “religious rituals were now embedded in an explicit political context”,⁶⁸ we should perhaps first consider them as being part or the result of ongoing political, social and religious discourses, thus avoiding futile assessments about degrees of sacredness and secularity (e.g., truly religious, semi-religious and purely secular celebrations).⁶⁹

While still rooted in traditional religious systems and using existing cult forms, festivals during the Hellenistic period become an increasingly valuable medium for conveying contemporary civic discourses, state pagantry, and royal and élite self-presentation through corresponding performance. In this sense, the new festivals represented the contemporary political, social, and religious order, as well as the *Weltanschauung* of the cities, not unlike, for example, the *Panathenaia*.⁷⁰

To return to the example of Magnesia, the contextualization of the festival alludes to the local discourses at stake. Thus, the answers of cities, kings and leagues were not the only inscribed documents on the perimeter wall of the city; two further groups of documents were also inscribed at the same time. The first group narrated the history of the city (*Mag-netika*); the second presented memorable achievements of the Magne-

⁶⁷ Cf. Chaniotis 1995.

⁶⁸ Chaniotis 2013a, 40.

⁶⁹ Cf. Brandt & Iddeng 2012, 5: “Based on the present studies we can maintain that neglect or oblivion towards certain old cults and celebrations, changes in form or even content of others, and the introduction of new cults and festivals is not an apparent sign of secularism or religious pretence. The introduction of ruler-cults and their festivals in Hellenistic Greece and Imperial Rome, however, instinctively *challenge our conception of something truly sacred and religious, and stretch our idea of sacred celebrations*” (my emphasis). The polarity “sacred” versus “secular” has been mainly fuelled by the debate on ruler cults and festivals; cf. in the text below.

⁷⁰ Cf. Potter 2003, 414, who argues that the promotion of civic festivals in the Hellenistic period was not a new phenomenon of “civic aggrandizement” by pointing to the use of the cult of Athena during the period of the Athenian Empire. *Contra* Chaniotis 2013a, 40, who calls attention to the fact that Hellenistic civic festivals, unlike those of the Archaic or Classical periods, very often commemorated historical events: “Not to see the difference, means to ignore the most important element of the new festival and the secular function that was assigned to it by the agents who created it.”

sians in the past.⁷¹ All these documents, constituent parts of Magnesian self-perception, were displayed on the interior walls of the grand stoa that defined the west side of the agora, opposite to the entrance to the sanctuary of Artemis Leukophryene, thus constructing, as Verity Platt notices, “a *milieu de mémoire* in which epiphany provided the catalyst for spectacular ritual, local history and international relations to coalesce.”⁷²

The distinction between sacred and secular festivals has been particularly fuelled by the critical assessment of the ruler cult. Notwithstanding the impact of the ruler cult on religion in Hellenistic times,⁷³ the vexed question of whether the Greeks believed in the divinity of their rulers preoccupied historians of religion at least for the greater part of the 20th century. Henk Versnel in his recent book, *Coping with the gods*, dedicates the sixth and last chapter to that question and suggests to understand the public perception of ruler cult as “sincere hypocrisy”⁷⁴ and an “*Augenblicksglauben*.”⁷⁵

The ensuing question, “whether belief can *ever* be more than ‘belief of the moment’”,⁷⁶ is difficult to answer, but the new types of civic festivals which were co-ordinated or even combined with the ruler cult, the so-called “appended festivals”,⁷⁷ and the role-model of the ruler cult in general for individuals indicate at least a lasting impact. Festivals devoted to more than one deity have always existed in the Greek world. However, as Kostas Buraselis remarks, “it was a novelty of post-Alexandrian times to organize such a festival by not only combining honours for, but also naming

⁷¹ Chaniotis 1988, 34–40 (T5–T6, T8).

⁷² Platt 2011, 153.

⁷³ Nilsson devoted more than 50 pages to the ruler cult despite his strictly negative evaluation of this “*Verfallerscheinung der griechischen Religion* [...], *der es an wirklich religiösem Inhalt mangelt*” (Nilsson 1961, 182).

⁷⁴ Versnel 2011, 477: “[...] if we take the word ‘believe’ in the sense of ‘honest hypocrisy’ as is required from an audience during a theatrical play, the answer (*sc.* to the question did (the) Greeks believe that (some of) their rulers were divines?) will probably be different and certainly less apodictic. The Greek spectators of—and *hypokritai* in—this ‘divine comedy’ may well have reacted like any theatre audience by temporarily ‘believing’ what happens on the stage (= honestly pretending that what they saw and heard is true) and resisting the temptation to look behind the theatrical masks or behind the scenes.”

⁷⁵ Versnel 2011, 480.

⁷⁶ Versnel 2011, 480.

⁷⁷ Buraselis 2012. Such festivals attested under a conjoined name such as “*Dionysia kai Demetrieia*” or “*Dionysia kai Seleukeia*”, were founded in many cities (Athens, Eretria, Erythrae, Ilion, Kyme, Pergamon, Rhodes) in honour of Alexander, members of the Antigonids, the Seleucids and the Attalids.

the festival after both a traditional god of a certain *polis* (or league) and a deified ruler.”⁷⁸ The collected evidence exhibits a variety of forms in which the civic festivals opened up to accommodate the deified rulers in the traditional patterns of civic religious life, from changes in name to changes in content, forms which depended on the respective local context. Common to all these forms is the construction of the appended form, all in keeping with the traditional world order and religion. As in the case of *synnaoi theoi*, gods sharing a common sacred place, the civic gods acted in a way as hosts to integrate the newcomers. Moreover, the play with the traditional religious forms, thus evoking continuity and obscuring innovation, embedded the divine ruler in the civic context, granting him the role of its guarantor on a parallel footing with the civic gods.

What is perhaps of equal importance is the fact that the ruler cults compelled the cities and their citizens to open up to new religious concepts and innovative arrangements. Euhemerus’ declaration that “the gods, they say, had been originally mortal men, but gained their immortality on account of wisdom and public benefits to mankind, some of them having also become kings”⁷⁹ sounds like a manual for kings and élite members alike. Not only does it record the establishment of the idea of a mortal divine ruler, but also that every mortal man (and we should add: and woman) could potentially become a god, or at least a lesser god.

It is within the framework of the civic values of *zelos*, *philodoxia* (emulation), and *philotimia*, that is, “on account of wisdom and public benefits to mankind”, that kings and élite members acted, and they were allowed to act. Thus, what Nilsson interprets as the “*Entfesselung des Individuums*” (“the unleashing of the individual”) from the bonds of the state and the family and the rise of private or personal religion as a response to feelings of deracination,⁸⁰ exciting and in many aspects innovative as it may be, still represents phenomena deeply rooted in the civic context. It

⁷⁸ Buraselis 2012, 248.

⁷⁹ Euhemerus *apud* Eus., *Praep. ev.* 2.2.53 [= Diod. 6.1.2]; cf. Winiarczyk 2013, 27–69, on the sources regarding Euhemerus’ theological views and the theories relating Euhemerus’ ideas to Hellenistic ruler cults. Cf. now Wifstrand Schiebe 2014 and Borgeaud 2017 against the idea that Euhemerus wrote his *Sacred History* to support ruler cult, albeit from a different perspective: Wifstrand Schiebe argues that Euhemerus intended to forward a new theory relating to the emergence of the anthropomorphic image of the divine, while Borgeaud (2017, 606) thinks that Euhemerus’ novel, even though it fits into the context of the Hellenistic political-religious ideology, “*représente très vraisemblablement un courant critique de cette idéologie.*”

⁸⁰ Nilsson 1961, 300.

is the opening of the public sphere thanks to the king's presence with all its political and social consequences that offers individuals the chance to exercise their agency and to make their creations public and visible to all. This chance and challenge were taken up by both men and women, be it the foreigner Artemidoros of Perge⁸¹ or the citizen Epikteta of Thera.⁸²

*Die Bedeutung der hellenistischen Zeit in religiöser Hinsicht liegt darin, dass sie auf alten Ideen und Formen, welche die politische, soziale und geistige Entwicklung unzeitgemäß gemacht hatte, zersetzend und auflösend wirkte, zugleich aber Ideen und Formen schuf, aus denen die Religion wieder aufgebaut werden konnte, als das Vertrauen in Wissenschaft, Technik und Philosophie, in die eigene Kraft des Menschen wieder dem religiösen Bedürfnis wich.*⁸³

It is in the nature of a *Handbuch* to represent the state of research in a particular period from the perspective of a particular researcher. Due to that, changes in the research become all the more apparent in a retrospective reappraisal. Martin P. Nilsson's *Geschichte der hellenistischen und römischen Zeit* is not an exception to this rule, especially because he did not restrict himself simply to reproducing the scholarly debates at that time, but he instead dared to offer a master narrative of the course of religion in those periods. Yet, while Nilsson would probably have been surprised about the sharpness of criticism, even rejection of his narrative, he nevertheless somehow anticipated future criticism by stating:

*Bei der Größe und Schwierigkeit des ungeheuren Themas ist es nicht zu erwarten, daß der Versuch in allem befriedigend ausfallen wird.*⁸⁴

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⁸¹ See most recently Graf 2013; Bing 2018.

⁸² Stavrianopoulou 2006a, 292–302; Campanelli 2016.

⁸³ “Regarding religion the significance of the Hellenistic period lies in the disintegrating and dissolving impact that it had on old ideas and forms, which were made obsolete/outdated through the political, social and intellectual development, but at the same time in the creation of ideas and forms from which religion could be rebuilt when the confidence in science, technology and philosophy, in the own strength of the human being, gave way again to the religious needs” (my translation): Nilsson 1961, 292.

⁸⁴ “Given the size and difficulty of the enormous subject, it is not to be expected that the attempt will be satisfactory in all respects” (my translation): Nilsson 1961, 10.

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