

BOOK REVIEW

The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Religion. Edited by ESTHER EIDINOW and JULIA KINDT. Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xxii + 708. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-964203-8.

This handbook contains 43 chapters, each a free-standing piece of scholarship, accompanied by its own brief bibliography. They range widely in topic, demonstrating the multi-faceted nature of the study of ancient Greek religion. Staples such as sacrifice and myth are discussed, but the diverse and interesting subject matter also includes areas such as papyrology, hero cult, healing, and the influences of the ancient Near East. The overall quality of the chapters is quite high, striking a balance between accessibility and the necessary level of detail required to explore the 'problems' in each sub-field (e.g. the hazards of relying on etymology as genealogy when discussing the origins of the gods).

Most, but not all, chapters offer a concise history of scholarship and theory in each sub-field, with significant works of scholarship foregrounded for the reader. This discussion often includes a considered critique of prior methods/assumptions, culminating in an expressed need for future work using new approaches. Knowledge and critique of earlier scholarship is of utmost importance, as the contemporary state of the field is one of *reaction*: challenging the centrality of sacrifice, reconsidering the largely artificial category of *lex sacra*, and re-examining the lines drawn between prayer, cursing, and magic. It has become trendy (but also quite necessary) to wonder if *Greek* and *Religion* are the right words to be using at all.

Chapters typically include several brief illustrative case-studies, demonstrating the sort of work that is currently being done by outstanding scholars in their respective areas of interest; in these sections, readers are exposed to a rich trove of materials that have often lain neglected (e.g. Hellenistic cult in Bactria, India, and the Bosphoros). The best chapters provide an excellent summative document that would serve well as a starting point on any given topic, provided that the reader is willing *also* to familiarize themselves with fundamental works—both those that established/represent the dominant critical theories, as well as any Greek primary sources and materials under discussion. Herein, I think, lies the greatest weakness

(likely unavoidable) of this handbook, and indeed *any* handbook—there is no room for this material, and the reader must supplement to a degree dependent upon his or her prior expertise.

It might be helpful to think of each chapter as a sort of pro-seminar on a given topic. The value of the handbook lies here, in that it offers a fantastic resource for anyone needing to teach a graduate course on Greek Religion, or to bring their personal knowledge of the field up to date. Many university libraries will have access to Oxford's online collection of handbooks, allowing for easy class assignment of specific content. Specialists will find themselves familiar with much of what they read—but the sheer breadth of content and diversity of approaches will surely bring awareness of new materials and suggest innovative theoretical models (e.g. the use of *network theory* to describe the dissemination and transfer of new cult).

On a more theoretical note, the chapters are grouped into nine roughly delineated sections: “What is Ancient Greek Religion?” “Types of Evidence,” “Myths? Context and Representations,” “Where?” “How?” “Who?” “When?” and “Beyond?” Question marks have been appended to most sections, adroitly reminding the reader that much of scholarship is an act of interpretation—a search for answers and explanations. We should begin by querying our questions, seeing as the nature and character of our search has significant impact upon our findings. It is noteworthy that the single section devoted to evidence, both textual and material, lacks this gesture, and the section on myth signals an intrinsic degree of ambiguity as to its nature. Much of the scholarship in this handbook calls for a questioning of our interpretive practices and assumptions, responding to issues raised and explored in Kindt's recent and important work, *Rethinking Greek Religion*,¹ *et alia*. There is concern that the grand theories for ‘explaining’ ancient Greek Religion have been too successful for their own good. The *Introduction* and first set of chapters directly engages with this matter.

Models do us the service of helping to interpret the data we observe, but they run the risk of pre-determining which data we choose (or are able) to see. They certainly shape our conclusions. When we move from description to explanation, we need models, but we must refrain from allowing them to *normalize* our observational and interpretive practices. Therefore, it is not a matter of whether or not we should employ, say, the *polis religion* model, the sequence of *three-step*

¹ Kindt, Juilia. *Rethinking Greek Religion*. Cambridge University Press (2012).

initiation, a *structuralist* interpretation of pantheons and myths, the *shared guilt* of ritual sacrifice, a *political-geographical* rationale for sanctuary location, etc. These models have been, and are, productive and useful; however, they prevent us from asking whole sets of questions, and they privilege certain kinds of evidence or data over others.

It is necessary to ask, “How Else?” How else can we theorize and approach our materials? Eidinow and Kindt remind us that we must continue to search out other ways with which we might visualize and imagine this ‘thing’ that we are in the habit of calling Greek Religion. We need more models—not just different, but *more*. This is the theme of the handbook.

COREY HACKWORTH

The University of Iowa, corey-hackworth@uiowa.edu