CHAPTER FOUR

THE ZENITH OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The Traditional Cult of the Twelve Gods

By the second century after Christ, the Twelve Gods in the guise of the twelve Olympians were a long-established order, recognized by all who shared the Greek and Roman cultural heritage, almost a cliché. Two texts and two representations may serve as illustrations. The Latin author is Apuleius, a native of north Africa, the Greek Lucian from Samosata on the Euphrates, who lived for some time in Athens.

In his popular declamation, De Deo Socratis, Apuleius undertook to distinguish the Olympians from the visible (astral) deities (T 41 A). For him the Olympians are the old, familiar gods, recognized by the intellect (as opposed to the senses) through their devotion to those matters entrusted to them as individuals. Apuleius borrows from Ennius, the earliest Roman poet, a distich which gives their names. Lucian too is looking back to the remote classical past in his Deorum Concilium (T 41 C). The Olympians are the old, genuine gods, whose realm has been overwhelmed by a flood of new divine immigrants. They must authorize which of these newcomers may be accepted. To do so, they establish a committee, and this is done in the form of an Attic decree — the action which the Athenian assembly took back in the days when Athens was one of the chief Greek city-states.

A Hadrianic base in the Capitoline Museum (Rome 5, frontispiece) shows the Olympians clustered about their sovereign, Zeus, who sits enthroned in the heavens (represented by the ledge of clouds below). The orb of the universe nestles within the legs of Zeus’ throne. Ten of the remaining Olympians are well preserved, and the nose and chin of Ares survive next to the break in the upper left corner.¹ Here the gods dwarf the universe. They are all powerful, but they are turned in upon themselves, remote. There is no interaction between the Olympians and the viewer, no hint of a personal tie between god and man such as the contemporary oriental cults offered. Though the gods appear to be living beings, the types used for them are based on the Severe style of the early classical period. This gives them added dignity and the aura of antiquity, but again it detracts from their vitality, their immediacy to the viewer.

¹ My warm thanks to Dr. E. La Rocca, Ispettore, for permitting me to examine and photograph this base in June 1981, when I confirmed the presence of Ares in the top row.
In another instance, the covered altar which stood in front of the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina (Rome 6, figures 92-94), the sculptor’s effort to breathe new life into the Olympians was disastrous. Of the six extant deities, an archaistic Hermes/Mercury pulls along a willing Aphrodite/Venus velificata. On the end two more sedate archaistic deities march along. Poseidon/Neptune with his dolphin followed by a goddess who raises her peplos by her shoulder, the gesture associated with Hera. Finally Hephaistos/Vulcan hotly pursues Athena/Minerva, grabbing her skirt, while the goddess in her haste to escape nearly loses her swallowtail scarf. The dignified procession of the Twelve Gods represented by the Cleveland cylinder (Unknown Provenience 3) and the Albani puteal (Tibur/Tivoli 1) has degenerated into a scramble reminiscent of a bacchic revel.

**Greece**

In Athens, the cult of the Twelve Gods which centered on the altar in the marketplace presumably continued. An inscription in the Theater of Dionysos (T 16 I), which is dated to the second century after Christ, reserves a seat for the priest of the Twelve Gods. When he visited Athens in the middle of the century, Pausanias saw Euphranor’s painting(s) of the Twelve Gods on view in the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios (T 15 A), but he says nothing about their altar.

Elsewhere in his travels, Pausanias observed the statues of the Twelve Gods attributed to Praxiteles in the sanctuary of Artemis Soteira at Megara (T 20). The sanctuary of the Twelve at Theleousa he found in ruins (T 12), and he did not recognize the four double altars which he mentioned in Olympia (T 13 F) as being the remains of the altars of the Twelve Gods supposedly founded by Herakles. There is no evidence of new altars being founded to the Twelve Gods or new dedications. The cult seems moribund.

**Asia Minor**

In Magnesia on the Maeander and Elaia/Pergamon, we earlier found references to priests called stephanephori, who were connected with the cult of the Twelve Gods (T 7, 9). From the second and third centuries after Christ, there are a number of portraits of stephanephori, identified by the crowns they wear, which support anywhere from one to fifteen

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2 Supra, 108, 110.