The Terrified Face of Alcyoneus: The Religious Character of Greek Warfare, or What about the Vanquished?

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Why I am paralysed by Homer?

JAUME CABRÉ, Confessions

Introduction: Approaching Greek Religion and War

In the case of ancient Greece the subject ‘war and religion’ is a topic both promising as it is challenging. On the one hand, the theme offers a lot of possibilities for a satisfactory study which is due to the fact that religion permeated practically all aspects connected with the conducting of war.1 Many of them were collected and analyzed by Professor Pritchett in his seminal 1979 study.2 There he presented the numerous data and divided the source material into several categories: all of which reveal what Mikalson has called ‘practiced religion’.3 An overview of these activities confirms a strong impression that for the ancient Greeks warfare remained a profoundly religious affair, containing and requiring innumerable rites and rituals, undertaken with regard to the gods in order to win their favour:4 for the Greeks religious character of war and

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warfare belonged thus to the obvious 'order of things', something that needs no special justification or explication.\(^5\)

Accordingly, granted the ubiquity and variety of Greek rituals connected with the conducting of war,\(^6\) the theme used to be analyzed from a traditional viewpoint (let us call it here antiquarian, or ‘descriptive’),\(^7\) and such an attitude and way of interpreting the religious dimension of warfare prevails in modern studies on the subject. It is supported by the rise of sociology and anthropology which are used as analytic tools providing the correct, necessary distance.\(^8\) This approach is strengthened and welcomed by an assumption that the Greeks had nothing similar to a written theology, no ‘Bible’, or another kind of Holy Scripture that would clearly define ‘the divine’. As ‘religion’ was, therefore, a matter of δρώμενα, rather than λεγόμενα,\(^9\) one should deal with


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8 The modern sociological approach was inaugurated by Emile Durkheim’s influential study, yet it really begins in antiquity, with Aristotle’s treatment of ‘religion’ in the Politics. This mode of analysis was accompanied by the rise of historicism, requiring from the historian to describe and, eventually, to understand events, not to judge (blame or praise) them—unless she/he prefers to become an unmasked moralist, or religious devotee; cf. Ch. W. Hedrick Jr., ‘The Ethics of World History,’ Journal of World History 16 (1995) 34.