In order to comprehend Greek polytheism, we need to distance ourselves from the stereotypes that sometimes obviate the historical analysis of the figures constituting the divine world of ancient Greece. One of the major difficulties lies in the mistaken belief that the ancient religious imaginaire can be accessed directly using our own categories of thought. Only since the mid-twentieth century have students of Greek religion given attention to the mechanisms of polytheism and the specific language through which it is expressed.¹ In the same vein, we are engaged in reconsidering ways of studying the Greek gods. Mythological dictionaries—fruit of centuries of antiquarianism—have recomposed artificially the biography of each divinity and have reduced their personalities to static labels. But a god is not a person in the narrow sense, even less a personality; rather, a god is a “divine power,” which is a part of a system of multiple deities, and continually reconfigures itself within both cultic contexts and narrative traditions.²

Nor should deities be considered arbitrary forms whose content is determined by chance and contingences alone.³ The Greek gods are indeed plural and polyvalent, but they are not interchangeable. The Greeks did not build innumerable temples and altars, nor invent complex cultic strategies simply for decorative purposes. Even though polytheistic language is not always accessible to us, at least we should acknowledge

¹ In this regard, the contribution of Georges Dumézil is crucial. For its adaptation to the Greek world, see the works of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne. For a critical evaluation of this approach, see Marcel Detienne, “Expérimenter dans le champ des polythéismes,” Kernos 10 (1997), 57–72; Parker, Polytheism and Society, pp. 387–392.


³ See Ken Dowden, “Olympian Gods, Olympian Pantheon,” in A Companion, ed. Ogden, pp. 41–55, who, while criticizing the usage of reductive labels for Greek deities, seems to reduce them to consequences of a “historical accident” (p. 47).
that its articulations make sense. To neglect this language and its meaning would be a major methodological mistake of the historian.

The language of polytheism cannot be understood on the basis of a taxonomy of rigid definitions, all the more so since polyvalence is no doubt one of the most significant traits of Greek deities. This plurality involves not only spheres of competence, but also a deity’s modes of action. Through the multiple figures of a deity, a set of experiences is organized as a complex network. In order to understand the specific representations of the divine world that the Greeks have elaborated in the course of their history and reconfigured according to different contexts and ages, the historian of Greek religion must be able to access an unfamiliar organization of reality. Within such a reexamination of Greek polytheism, the case of Aphrodite is particularly emblematic. I shall begin with an example of difficulty in assessing divine identification and functionality. I will then move on with a few words about methodology, and finally, I will illustrate my approach with specific examples, initially and particularly focusing on the relationship between the Greek Aphrodite and the world of war.

An Aegis for Aphrodite?

The figural decoration on an Attic black-figure amphora in the British Museum has not received the attention it deserves, but is significant with a view to “rethinking Aphrodite” (figure 6.1). On one side, we see a quadriga driven by a female figure, which an inscription identifies as Aphrodite. At her side is a male figure identified as Poseidon by a second inscription. On the other side a frontal quadriga is depicted, with a charioteer and a hoplite. The association of Aphrodite with Poseidon is quite rare on Attic vase representations, where the female deities usually connected with this god are Athena or Amphitrite. Since Amphitrite sometimes appears next to her divine consort on a chariot, it has been argued

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4 Pironti, *Entre ciel et guerre*.
5 Attic black-figure amphora, dated to ca. 520 BC: London BM B254; *CVA (British Museum 4)* pl. 62, 4; *ABV* 673; Erika Simon, in *LIMC 7* (1994), pp. 476–477, s.v. “Poseidon,” no. 266. BAPD 306464.