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## NOTES AND REVIEWS

### *Book Review: Competing Ideologies in Greek Culture, Ancient and Modern*

Håland, Evy Johanne. 2019. *Competing Ideologies in Greek Culture, Ancient and Modern*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 477 pages.

The book analyses the interaction of official religion and popular belief in Greece from various angles, as expressed in the dynamics of competing ideologies and social classes, different communication styles and symbolic layers, gender roles, and assimilation of old and new rituals and celebrations. The book is based on the author's extensive fieldwork in various regions of Greece over a span of several decades (from 1990 to 2018), which gives the author unprecedented expertise on the subject matter. Evy Håland approaches her topic from a comparative 'post-disciplinary' perspective, which, as she stresses, is rather 'untraditional' because contemporary religious festivals and life-cycle passages have only seldom been viewed against the backdrop of ancient sources, and reinterpreted based on these new insights, and vice versa. For Håland, such an approach is useful to bring to light some components (for example, the vernacular female component) of heritage that have been neglected thus far as they are not much reflected in the historical written sources. The author also stresses that a comparative analysis of Greek examples of religious festivals can function as a springboard to understand better the religious behaviour of further non-European groups who migrate to Europe because these areas share many cultural traits with Greece. She calls such repetitive cultural patterns "Mediterranean language" and cites popular religious

festivals that combine death, fertility, and healing rituals at the same event as examples (for example, as described on p. 9 and 10) that might be unfamiliar in northern or western parts of Europe.

Only one chapter title directly mentions the aspect of gender ("Place, Space, Time and Gender, the Nation and the Foreign: Different Perspectives"), however, gender dynamics and especially women's rituals get much attention throughout the book. As a woman, Håland has had good access to women's religious and magic life worlds and their stories, interpreting related experiences. She notes that several women's cults that are important in the modern society were condemned as 'barbarian' by ancient male writers and their later counterparts or have not been documented at all, thus the perspective that she calls "a poetics of womanhood" can only be reconstructed retrospectively based on the observation of modern ritual outputs. Nevertheless, in some cases a reader who is not familiar with the nuances of Greek women's rituals would be happy to have more detailed explanations of the meaning of certain elements, for example why the woman who is selected to be "the midwife of the year" wears a big onion on her wrist in place of a watch (p. 7), or what the meaning of many female participants being "quite wild" and using "jokes that are often extremely coarse" (p. 8) is, and if this resulted from "unrestrained alco-

hol consumption" (p. 10) or other reasons. Later, the author explains the meaning of the use of obscene language, but it does not become clear if the same meaning has been preserved in the interpretations of modern participants.

Questions related to the value of unwritten sources come up in this and other contexts repeatedly. With unwritten sources the author means not only traditions that have been only transmitted orally but also some unspoken unconscious or even nonverbal or sensory elements (for example, symbolic gestures, emotional expression) of heritage that may seem paradoxical when only analysed based on existing written sources but can, in the best case, be encrypted differently by a researcher who has been immersed in a culture for a long period. The book also offers a case study that focuses on the paradoxes in Greek culture ("Dionysian Ceremonies and Paradoxes in Greek Culture"). One crucial observation is about symbol use. The author points out that important elements of symbolism have been downgraded, diminished or neglected by certain ideologies (for example, in the views of church fathers related to fertility cults) and concludes that "the so-called insignificant rituals and perhaps even more insignificant symbols become very important when trying to obtain a new understanding of ancient culture and history" (p. 215).

Håland's other observations about the intentional or unintentional one-sidedness or bias of some sources are also interesting, for example the tendency of ancient authors to describe religious festivals mainly as events that helped to settle conflicts, unify antagonistic groups, and thus restore cosmic order. However, she points out that such festivals were and still are often also good examples of how conflicts (for example, between various social or ethnic groups or ideologies) arise, are exaggerated, or come to the surface. One chapter ("Popular Cult and Official Ideology") is dedicated to the

contradictions – and symbioses – of popular beliefs and official ideologies. One of the author's research questions is why people continue to perform the same rituals within a society that is changing and when it is clear that these rituals do not always bring only peace and joy, but also carry the potential of disruption and conflict. In her view one of the reasons that becomes visible when looking at the rituals from a long-term mentality perspective is the fact that value norms and ways of thinking in the general population have survived, although the socioeconomic basis has changed. At the same time, Håland is aware that the festivals simultaneously change from year to year while maintaining the same core.

The book offers plenty of interesting fieldwork examples and analysis by the author, but sometimes also historical background information that clearly comes from other sources, thus it would be helpful to have reference to these sources (for example, passages about the history of the Panathenaia festival on pp. 29–30, or ancient women's festivals on p. 33).

The volume is illustrated with a number of black and white fieldwork and archival photos. All in all, the book is useful reading to a broad audience interested in Greek and further Mediterranean religious practices and their outputs and functions in society. However, many conclusions have a rather universal character (for example, about combinations of vernacular beliefs and official religion, group dynamics, use of symbols) and can thus be used as valuable comparative material supporting religious studies conducted in other regions.

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