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LITERARY INFLUENCE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GREEK RELIGION.

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THE student who in college has learned to know the gods of Greece mainly from his Homer finds it difficult to realize that there is any such thing as Greek *religion*. The gods of whom he reads are anything but beings to be worshiped. The occasional description of a real god, such as the Apollo whom Chryses worshiped, is forgotten in the general conception of the gods on Olympos. Beings governed by momentary passion and by personal spite, seeking their ends by underhanded intrigue, now boasting, now fighting, now leaving the affairs of men to take their course while the gods enjoy their banquet — such are the deities we find in the epic. We have no need of our Plato to learn that Homer is not the best teacher of Greek religion. The epic was composed to please, not to "edify," an audience, and it was this æsthetic end which completely controlled its treatment of the gods. While drawing much of its material from actual religious practice, the immediate purpose of the singer was absolutely non-religious. The myths of the gods first took literary form in the epic, and the epic manner of treating the gods determined the literary treatment of myth in later times. The poetic standpoint once established, it continued; Greek literature was dominated by it; it modified Greek worship; the systems of mythology gave it full and final expression.

This influence of the epic in shaping Greek myths is too familiar to need restatement. I wish rather to point out that, much as poetic art has done to rob the individual gods of their essential nature, Greek literature beginning with the epic has

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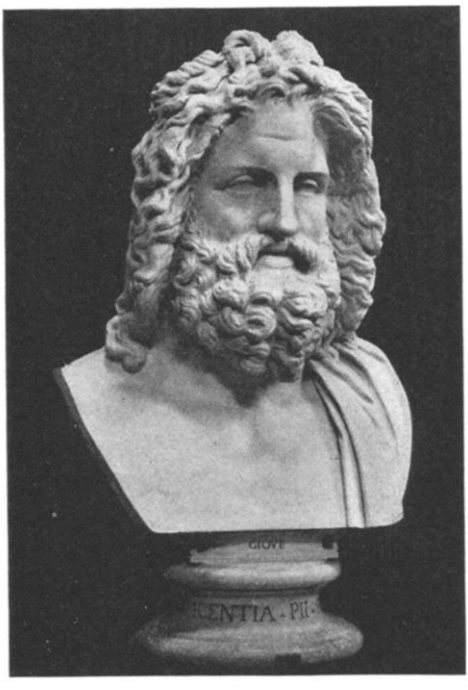
nevertheless exerted a strong influence toward elevating the general idea of God. It was, of course, possible for the epic poet to treat his gods as epic heroes; and, as a matter of fact, in the Theomachy, the battle of the gods, the Olympian deities are just such heroes. The contrast between the Theomachy and much of the remainder of the epic illustrates the purpose of the poet to retain his gods as gods, and even to make them greater, in order to serve his æsthetic end. It is not too much to say that, with this purpose in view, the epic poet really succeeded in elevating the gods to a higher plane than the gods of local worship. In the epic poems the gods became more *human*, and at the same time more truly *universal spirits*, than they had been before.



HEAD OF ZEUS FROM OTRICOLI

This copy, if so it may be called, of the Zeus of Pheidias exaggerates some details so as almost to destroy the effect of the whole. The mass of flowing locks and the heavy eyebrows obscure the original conception, but some of the force, the dignity, the divine benevolence of the original remain.

With reference to the first point — and I speak chiefly of the epic because it did so much more than any later form of literature to shape the ideas of Greek gods — the humanizing influence of literature could not touch the gods without making them more human. The relations of the gods were conceived in the form of the human family; and this was not merely a genealogy of the gods, the crude beginnings of which are found in all but the lowest forms of religion, but, more than this, the social and ethical relations of the family were transferred to the gods. Zeus

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is called "Father Zeus," "the father of gods and men," frequently in the epic. No doubt the phrases have primary reference to the genealogy of gods and heroes, but in the hands of the poet they mean more than this. Athena is the beloved daughter, addressed in terms of paternal affection; when Artemis has been chastised by Hera, Zeus takes her on his knee to comfort her; Apollo is the favorite son, the very embodiment of the will of Zeus in directing the affairs of gods and men. When the appointed hour is come for the death of Sarpedon and again of Hektor, human sons of Zeus, the god is tempted to save them even contrary to fate. In the relations of Zeus and Hera are reflected the ideas which the poet has gained from his intercourse with the families of human rulers. The conception of the goddess mother which later attained so beautiful a development, is found in germ in the epic. The tender care of Thetis, the divine mother, for her human son; the maternal majesty of Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis; the relation of Hera to Hephaistos and in a late passage to Aphrodite, are examples of the mother-idea as it began to create a divine mother.

Again, the relations of the human state were the pattern on which the poet represented the state of the gods. Zeus became a human king, and often the greatness of his power led the poet to represent him as showing so much the more caprice and boastfulness. Still the idea of the human king was the starting point or nucleus around which the conceptions of divine might could gather and crystallize into definite form. To us the bright sky suggests more that is divine than does a human king. And yet, when the epic poet made Zeus the spirit of the sky into Zeus the king of the gods, I believe it marked an advance in Greek religion. Zeus became more human and more real for men; the foundations were laid for that religious conception of Zeus which embodied the highest Greek idea of God, and opened the way for the development of a philosophic monotheism.

Once more the gods of the epic are made human in that human virtues, and indeed human vices, are accredited to them. Justice and its enforcement are lodged in the hands of the gods;

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they rule and judge like human kings, but more justly. The truth—and the deception—that men practice are seen also in their gods. The epic gods are no mere spirits of nature; they are closely connected with human heroes by ties of blood; they are angry at insults offered to their sons, and they pity men in their suffering. The very politeness of the royal court on earth is reflected on Olympos.

In a word, the epic makes the gods more human at whatever point it touches them. The touch often shows but little reverence, and its aim is not religious; the gods are taken away from the limited group of their worshipers, and lose their awfulness and their indefiniteness. Nevertheless, in making the gods more human, and thereby more real and definite persons, the epic did what local worship often failed to do—it gave the people an idea of God that was in harmony with their advance in intelligence. In this way it elevated the general conception of God.

The influence of the epic was not limited to this humanizing effect; in the second place, it elevated the general conception of God by making the gods more universal, and, in a way, more spiritual. The worship of the gods in Greece continued to be distinctly local, in spite of the epic. The whole influence of the epic, however, tended to cut the ties which bound its gods to definite localities; and in the poems themselves this end is so successfully accomplished that not many clews to the origin of these gods are left. For the epic world Apollo and Athena have "houses" at rocky Pytho and at Athens, but themselves live on Olympos, and their sphere of influence is not limited to any one locality. The wandering poet broke through the provincial bounds that separated one city and province from another, and, while listening to him, men felt themselves in a new world, far more extended than any they had realized before. In this world the gods had their place; the universalizing power of the epic which brought different races into one "universe," made the gods also universal. In undergoing this experience the gods were cut off from the religious influences of worship; nevertheless the conception of God was elevated, and the time

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came at length when worship had to adapt itself to the higher conception.

It was part of the same process that the gods were made more spiritual; by which I mean primarily that they were made less subject to the limitations of the human body. The god of local worship acts within the sphere of his worshipers and within their territory, but no farther. The epic extended this first by transferring the homes of the gods to Olympos, and giving them the power of rapid transit to the place where they wished to act. In Olympos they do not at first know what happens on earth — Ares does not know of the death of his son Askalaphos — and when Zeus would turn the tide of battle, he must send Iris with a message to Poseidon to stay him, and send Apollo down to help the Trojans on the field of battle. It is a step in advance when Zeus, and generally the other gods, know what happens on earth when they themselves are in Olympos; and, finally, there are many instances in which the gods determine human events without being themselves present. The epic naturally prefers to represent the gods as present and taking part in the action; nevertheless, the idea of a god not subject to limitations of space is developed in the epic.

It is natural, once more, for the epic to represent the gods as making their will known to men by appearing to them in human form, or, perhaps, by addressing them with human voice. Still, the epic goes so far in the spiritualization of the gods as sometimes to represent them as communicating their will to a man's mind without the use of external means. In this case, as in the last, the epic goes a step farther in the spiritualization of the gods than its immediate literary end demands.

In handling the idea of fate the epic laid the foundation for a higher conception of the gods at another point. The Greek sought help from his gods, and if the help did not come, he said "The god is capricious," or "It is fated that I do not receive it." The idea of the caprice and envy of the gods is left by the epic about as it is found in local worship; not so the idea of fate. In saying "It is fated" the disappointed worshiper recognized the great, dark background of his religion, all

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the world outside his city and his gods, all the powers superhuman that lay beyond his ken. He knew no larger world than the little group of fellow-citizens and the gods who were in league with them; but he knew that there was an infinitely greater "outside," both human and divine, and the "It is fated" was the interference of this outside in his own life. This idea of fate—which corresponds to a very common idea of the supernatural today—was the greatest obstacle to a rational, even a poetic-rational, conception of the universe. The idea could not remain in the form in which it had existed. In the first place, the dark outside is in the epic reduced to a definite, distinct order of events. The *Moira* of Homer is not "The power I do not know;" it has become for the poem "The definite order according to which events are to take place." In order to reconcile with it the power of gods and men, it is conceived much as we conceive a human law; *i. e.*, man or God can act contrary to fate (ὑπὲρ μόρον), but he will suffer for it. It is the aim of the gods to realize, so far as they can, this order of events; it leaves them considerable freedom in carrying out their whims, but even when their personal desires would lead them contrary to it, their purpose is always the realization of it. This reconciliation of Fate and the gods may seem superficial; it no longer holds good for a "divine tragedy," a tragedy of the gods, like the Prometheus Bound; but it is an immense advance on the popular idea associated with local worship.

The elevating influence of literature on the conceptions of the gods is by no means limited to the Homeric poems, though in the nature of the case it appears most clearly in this first great product of Greek literary genius. Later literature followed the lines laid down in the epic, but carried farther the work of the epic in this direction. In the hands of later poets the lower, cruder myths of the gods were either wholly rewritten or set aside. In Pindar myth takes approximately its proper place as the true interpreter of the idea of the god (or the gods) on this a high stage of culture. In Attic tragedy deep religious questions are handled in concrete form by the poet, and the idea of the gods is deepened and enriched by the effort

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of literature to present the problems of life to a cultured audience. It is not necessary, for my purpose, to trace this process farther in detail, for it is with reference to Homer that the question is in dispute. Here, as I have tried to show by a few examples, I believe that, in spite of the non-religious character of the poems, they did elevate the general conception of God.

II.

The process of the changes in local worship under the influence of the higher ideas of God that higher culture had embodied in poetry is not one that can be closely followed. We do know something of the transformation of religious festivals in Attica, as they developed under the hands of Peisistratos and of Perikles; we know that worship and religion changed to correspond with the new city life, and the new state life; but we cannot trace in this process the influence of the literary conceptions of the gods. That the literary idea of the gods was an influential factor in the remodeling of worship we cannot doubt, so that it is the more interesting when at one point we find clear evidence of the influence of Homer. I refer to the expression of the idea of God in the new temple art. And here we see that the germs of higher religious truth which were embodied in secular poetry, after lying dormant, perhaps, for centuries, had at last found a congenial soil in the mind of the artist.

For instance, in the marbles from the temple of Athena in Ægina, the Athena on the eastern pediment is not the goddess of some local worship that has been transposed into a wild scene of battle. She is not, on the other hand, the Athena of Homer who stood behind Achilles, and caught hold of his golden hair, and bade him not to draw his sword. Rather this being of calm majesty is a goddess whose true power is recognized by the worshiper, but who has been made more divine and at the same time more humanly real by the influence of the epic. So, too, the Apollo who stands so quietly extending his right hand over the fierce conflict of Centaur and Lapith on the west pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia shows these same influences.

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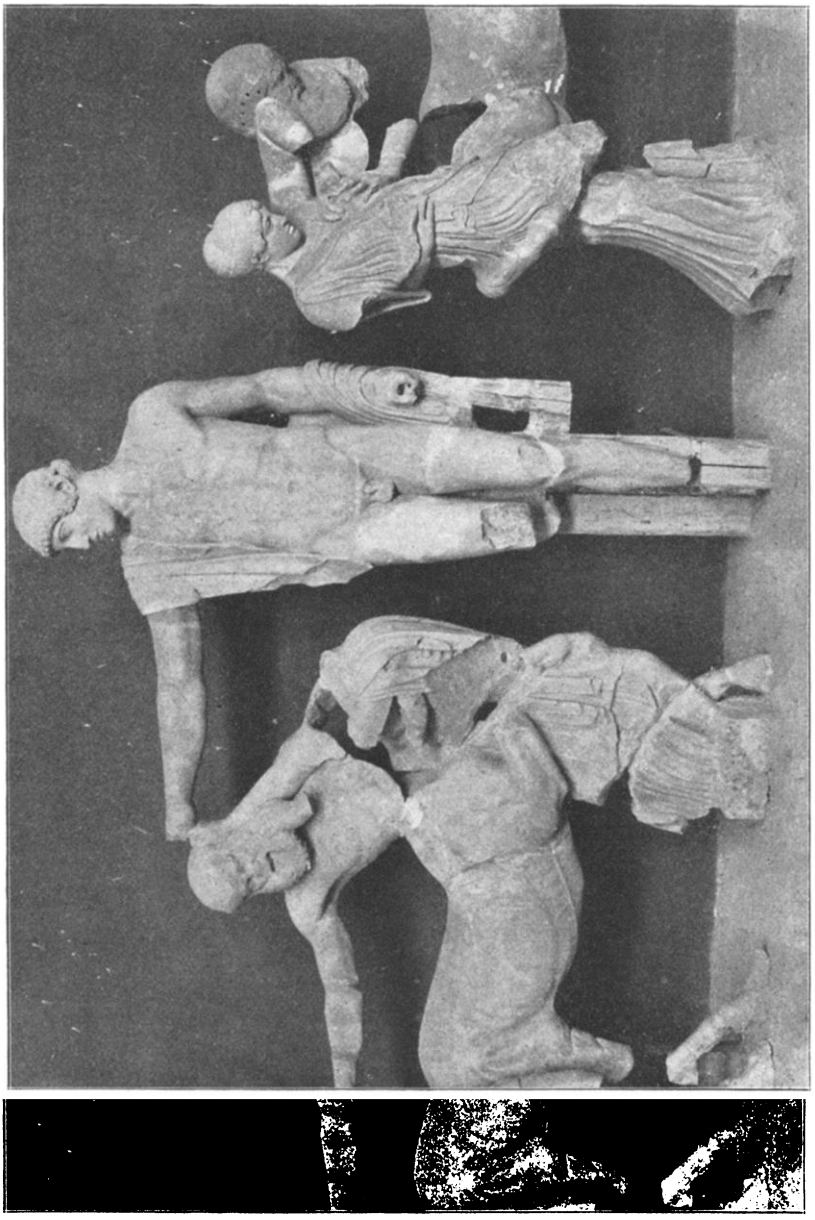

APOLLO ON THE WEST PEDIMENT OF THE TEMPLE OF ZEUS AT OLYMPIA

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He is not the Apollo as he is commonly represented in the epic, snatching away Agenor from the pursuit of Achilles and taunting the baffled pursuer, or standing beside Hektor in the form of a brother to stir up his spirit for battle. Nor does this seem to me to be the face of the prophet-god at Delphi, whose spirit possessed the Pythia, and chanted by her voice oracular response to eager questions. Rather this is the Apollo, invisible to combatants but present in the combat, who is the true son of Zeus carrying out the will of Zeus on earth — a god with human feelings and human passion and the *realness* of a man, yet a god far superior to all that is human in beauty and in majesty, in wisdom and in strength, a god such as the poets of Greece have taught men that the gods are.

Again, if we look at the gods on the Parthenon frieze, or as they sit in assembly on the occasion of the birth of Athena on the east pediment of the Parthenon, the influence of literature, and in particular of the epic, cannot be overlooked. The form of Iris — if it be Iris that still keeps her gaze fixed on the wonderful scene of Athena's birth as she hastens to bear to the world the good tidings of a goddess of wisdom born from the head of Zeus himself — is a direct reminiscence of the messenger of the gods in the *Iliad*. Or, again, on the frieze that massive form of Poseidon sitting at his ease, the long locks clinging to his neck as if they were still wet from the dampness of the sea, the trident or some other symbol in his raised hand — this is the god in the Homeric poems who perhaps comes nearest to Zeus himself in power and majesty.

It is in the case of the temple image that these influences are most apparent. Nowhere is religion generally more conservative, nowhere was Greek religion more conservative, than in the images of the gods in the temples. Some unformed stone, occasionally, it is said, of meteoric origin; some block of wood, with perhaps a rudely carved human face, that could be clothed and cared for by the priests—these were the "idols," the images that long were held sacred in Greek temples. But such images were out of harmony with the splendid structures that at length were built for Greek worship, and occasionally a

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new temple afforded opportunity for some new likeness of the god who was to be worshiped there.

In the two familiar temple statues by Pheidias, two of the most famous products of Greek art, we see the ultimate expression of the ideals that have gradually been formed under the double influence of worship and of poetry. In the temple of Zeus at Olympia some remains of the base of the statue may still be traced. The god was represented as seven or eight times life size, seated, the scepter in his left hand and a winged "Victory" on his extended right hand.

THE ZEUS OF PHEIDIAS
From a coin of Hadrian

According to an interesting story preserved in Strabo (VIII, p. 354), Pheidias, being asked on what model he was going to make the image of Zeus, said that he should make it on the model proposed by Homer in the verses: "Then in truth did Kronion nod with his dark eyebrows; and the divine locks fell waving from his immortal head, and he shook great Olympos." It is at the least interesting that the Zeus of Pheidias was associated in popular thought with the Zeus of Homer. None of the epic gods was so truly a god as Zeus. He is almost a god above the gods, ruling in his might, directing the general course of events, while other gods are busied with particular details. The lofty mien, the calm majesty, and at the same time the fatherly care for men that mark Zeus in many parts of the epic, still more in later literature, are given artistic form in the temple image at Olympia. The god that is worshiped has been united with the idea of God that has been elevated and purified by the poet, and the result is this masterpiece of temple sculpture. And here, also, it is through the artist that the happy union has been effected.

It is commonly held that the Athena Parthenos of Pheidias, the gold and ivory statue of Athena for the Parthenon, was constructed before the statue of Zeus. In this case, as in the case of Zeus, the artist was dealing with a god that had been a principal figure in the epic. The goddess who received the worship

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of Trojan women, but did not grant their prayer; the goddess ever jealous for the Greeks, and especially watchful for Diomedes and Odysseus; a goddess, but, more than Ares, the real god of war with whom the helmet and shield had become indissolubly associated — this is the Athena of Homer. The influence of the old religion was so strong that the old olive-wood image of Athena was still retained, and still worshiped as most holy. The work of Pheidias was executed under these two influences, the influence of an earnest Athena worship, and the influence of a literary and poetic treatment of the goddess, that had gone on for many centuries.

Athena was represented in repose, standing, the shield by her side, the rested spear in one hand and a "Victory" in the other. She is still the goddess of war, protector of the city; but the shield stands on the ground, and the confidence of victory and peace is apparent in the whole figure. The fire and the strength of this goddess of war, the repose, the quiet majesty of the goddess who is above men and their strife, the kindliness and the wisdom of the goddess that guarded the city — these are some of the qualities that characterize the ideal of Pheidias.

If we ask once more the source of this ideal, it is plain that it cannot have been the product of that worship on the Acropolis which was satisfied with the rude image that marked the presence of the city-goddess. In the human realness as well as in the divine majesty of this statue, in its lofty spiritual tone, in the power and the wisdom and the watchfulness of the goddess, we cannot fail to see the artistic realization of these qualities that had first found birth in the epic, and that had been developed and perfected by the religious insight of later poets.

It is an accepted principle that religious progress is through great personal leaders. In Palestine it was the prophet who grasped clearly the latent truths of the religion of Jehovah, and with fiery energy worked out their realization. In Greece it was first the poet, and indeed the poet whose end was pure poetry, who understood something of the meaning of the gods, and who gave to this meaning a concrete form in his poetry. It was the

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later religious poet who found a deeper meaning in religion, and who conceived the gods in a more truly religious mold. It was finally the reverent artist, who, inspired by these poetic ideals, gave them expression in plastic art, and put before the very eyes of the people a higher conception of the gods than they had themselves been able to reach. In the Greek ideals of the gods, and certainly in Greek worship also, there is a genuine religious meaning that has been partly obscured for us by the æsthetic end of the Homeric poems, and almost hidden by the laborious makers of systems of Greek mythology.

ATHENA
From a coin of Athens

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