



The Gods of Olympus: A History

Barbara Graziosi

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The Olympians are the most colorful characters of Greek civilization. Even in antiquity, they were said to be cruel, oversexed, mad or just plain silly. Yet for all their foibles & flaws, they proved to be survivors, far outlasting classical Greece itself. In Egypt, the Olympians claimed to have given birth to pharaohs; in Rome, they led respectable citizens into orgiastic rituals of drink & sex. Under Christianity & Islam they survived as demons, allegories & planets. In the Renaissance, they reemerged as ambassadors of a new, secular belief in humanity. Their geographic range, too, has been astounding. In their exile, the gods of Olympus have traveled east to the walls of cave temples in China, west to colonize the Americas. They snuck into Italian cathedrals, haunted Nietzsche & visited Borges' restless dreams. In an original history, Graziosi offers the 1st account to trace the wanderings of these protean deities thru the millennia. Drawing on a wide range of literary & archeological sources, *The Gods of Olympus* opens a window on the ancient world & its lasting influence.

Preface: Simonides Was Wise

Introduction: A Family Portrait

Part I. Birth: Archaic Greece

Part II. Dialogue: Classical Athens

Part III. Travel: Hellenistic Egypt

Part IV. Translation: the Roman Empire

Part V. Disguise: Christianity & Islam

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The Gods of Olympus: A History Details

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Josh says

Very pleasant writing style. More narrative than textbook. Plenty of footnotes and references. A great, condensed overview of the main Greek gods from the earliest Cycladic culture through Classical Greece, then through the adoption by Rome and the rise of Christianity, all the way up to modernity.

Matthew Graham says

I read this after Tim Whitmarsh's *Battling the Gods* (BtG) which covers much of the same material in the first half of this book in a more rigorous and informed fashion, although this has some interesting anecdotes missing from BtG. The second half of this book deals with medieval and later ideas about the Greek gods where it is much better.

James Miller says

Unlike Burkett's study, *Greek Religion* this eschews detailed and dry study of each individual god in favour for a fascinating study of the ways in which the gods have been received and used by successive generations and cultures and the problems all have had with them: be they worried Greeks, traditionalist Romans, or monotheistic Christians. I finished wanting to go back to the Homeric Hymns and read some Petrarch: always a good sign.

Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says

While it wasn't exactly as I expected, I still enjoyed this one. I had anticipated an in-depth look at/discussion of each of the gods and goddesses and their evolution over time. Instead it looked at the gods and goddesses collectively, which worked out fine in the end. The book was strongest at the beginning, but overall I enjoyed it. I would've liked to have seen some color photos, particularly when discussing some of the artwork of the Renaissance.

Shaun says

I enjoyed this though I think it helps that I went in with absolutely no expectations.

Prior to reading this, I was familiar with the Olympian gods and the mythology surrounding them, and this was a nice review.

I've also done some reading on the Greek and Roman empires, and this provided a nice summary of the role

religion and the Olympian gods played in these cultures as well as how these cultures shaped and reshaped the gods.

The second half of the book deals with the preservation and evolution of the myths (primarily through art and literature) as monotheism emerges and slowly replaces the gods of Olympus.

Not sure there is anything new here, but for me the book pulled together a lot of reading I have done on individual subjects, which was a plus. The book was also well organized, which I appreciated.

Iset says

This book is a rather unconventional biography of the ancient Greek gods. Rather than examining ancient Greek cultic practise, which is merely one section of the book, it examines how the Olympians have been thought about and considered by a range of societies over a much wider span of time, up to and including the Renaissance era. It is far less about the layout of temples and the exact rituals that went on, than how people thought about the gods and how they were reconceptualised. Newcomers to the subject may be surprised to learn that classical Greeks debated whether ‘the gods made me do it’ was a viable excuse for evil-doers – if it wasn’t acceptable in their courts, why was it an acceptable explanation for Helen of Troy in their myths? This ties into a whole shift in thought about being responsible for one’s own actions rather than feeling compelled by some outside force upon which blame can be laid. And in the Hellenistic era, Greeks even dabbled with the idea that all anthropomorphic gods had at one time been monarchs, and that the only true gods were the natural forces which had never been anthropomorphised – albeit this idea was encouraged by one monarch in order to discourage another’s divine aspirations. An unusual and fascinating biography of the Olympians.

8 out of 10

Erik Graff says

Barbara Graziosi (Classics, Durham University) has written what she calls a “history” of the Olympians, defining them by a depiction of the twelve on the Parthenon frieze. The list includes Zeus (Latin, Jupiter), Hera (Juno), Ares (Mars), Demeter (Ceres), Dionysos (Bacchus), Hermes (Mercury), Hephaistos (Vulcan), Poseidon (Neptune), Apollo (Apollo), Artemis (Diana) and Aphrodite (Venus). Her treatment of them is periodized, chapters surveying archaic Greece, classical Athens, Hellenistic Egypt, imperial Rome, Christianity and Islam, and the Renaissance. In fact, however, *The Gods of Olympus* is not quite so neat, the Pantheon serving more as a symbol for classical culture. Her actual discussion ranges more widely than the rubrics suggest. This book is more about archetypes and symbols, their appropriations and re appropriations, than it is about history.

As regards origins, Graziosi depends almost entirely on Homer and Hesiod. Similarly, her treatment of Hellenic beliefs is almost entirely based on literary and artistic evidences. This is not a book about theogony, about the hypothetical origins of religion, nor is it about cultic or ritual beliefs and practices in the Greek-speaking world. Rather, it is about the idea of Greek religion, of classical culture, as retrospectively

reconstructed through the ages—an ideal which, like the gods, never actually existed.

Indeed, in her discussion of the classical Athenian paradigm, Graziosi gives substantial attention to how, even then, the gods and goddesses were contested, criticized, even denied. Such critiques ranged in character. Some of the Presocratics proposed various kinds of scientific naturalism as alternatives to supernatural explanation. Xenophanes treated the gods and goddesses as human projections. Herodotus related them to the deities of other lands, thereby relativizing them. Theogenes allegorized them. Socrates purportedly propounded an alien theology. Protagoras admitted agnosticism. Meanwhile, comics and tragedians played loosely, often quite irreverently, with traditional beliefs.

The treatment of Hellenisticism begins with the conquests of Alexander of Macedon, describing the processes of syncretism, adaptation and globalization which were to profoundly influence, then be extended by, Rome. Conversely, Egypt and the East introduced astronomical factors as well as the belief that living men could themselves, like Alexander, become divine.

Roman religion, ancestor and state oriented, was radically changed by the Greek—a transformation particularly well described in this text. The “Romans did not originally recognize a preeminent group of twelve gods.” That was “itself a foreign import.” So, too, few of the Olympians had “viable Roman counterparts” and Apollo had none. Still, an amalgamation occurred, political and intellectual, old Roman gods and rites coexisting with the more lively and poetically fruitful imports from Greece and further afield. While monotheism was prefigured in Hebrew and pagan henotheisms, it only became hegemonic under mature Christianity and Islam. While this spelled a retreat of the gods, it did not destroy them. Instead, they became the demons--sometimes, covertly, the saints or angels--of the new faiths. They abided also as powerful symbols, in astronomy, in astrology, in alchemy and in the arts.

It is in her handling of the Renaissance that Graziosi becomes enthusiastic, as evinced by her meaty portrayal of Petrarch. Here, of course, the Olympians have been almost entirely shorn of their supernatural power, but not of their glamor, of their symbolic richness and relevance to the new, and apparently perdurant, humanism.

Josh says

Barbara Graziosi does a wonderful job explaining how our understanding of the Olympians has developed over time. From tangible individuals all the way to symbols of scientific and intellectual exploration, Graziosi shows that societies have adapted Zeus and his entourage to fit their needs and value from the time they first entered into the collective consciousness. Although they are immortal, they are certainly not unchanging, but rather are tied to the same ebbs and flows of history as anyone else. The end product is a detailed yet easy to read exploration of the nature of humanity's relationship with the divine.

Daniel Chaikin says

This was fun, but was a little less than what I was hoping. Graziosi traces the history of the Greek gods from their origins within the Greek cultural area through their evolution in time, merging with various Roman, Egyptian and Near Eastern gods, falling out of their religious context then being reinvented anew.

One of the interesting insights was how the Greek pantheon served as cultural unifying force, establishing norms across the Greek world and essentially establishing what was Greek. It was also interesting to see how gods were force-molded in such strange ways, such as how the Romans combined their very important god Mars into the minor and rather pathetic Greek God Ares.

What was missing, I felt, was a good sense of who these gods were in the religious and mythological context.

She not only doesn't bring them alive, but doesn't really even spend much time on them. She walks through the Elgin marbles and gives a short bit on each of the twelve gods there, which I did find of interest. But she pretty much leaves off the biographies at that and moves on to their evolution.

side note - this is the first book for my Homer theme, one of my planned themes for 2016.

Pieter says

Verwacht geen uitgebreid overzicht van mythes gelinkt aan de Griekse goden. Het is eerder een beschrijving doorheen de eeuwen van de culturele, politieke en godsdienstige impact van de inwoners van de Olympus. Ook al in de tijd van de antieke Grieken kwam het geloof onder druk te staan door filosofen zoals Xenophanes en Socrates (die van een gebrek voor de goden werd beschuldigd) en de Atheense democratie die de aandacht naar het wereldse verplaatste. Onder Alexander de Grote gingen de Griekse goden op hellenistische wereldreis, in Rome kregen ze een Italiaanse jasje aan. Zeus werd Jupiter, Hera Juno,... De oorlogsgod Mars kreeg wel meer aanzien dan zijn Griekse tegenhanger Ares.

Onder het jonge christendom woedde een theologische en culturele oorlog die in dit tranendal werd beslecht. Constantijn gaf het christendom aanzien, maar omringde zich in Byzantium wel met heidense godenbeelden. Erna zouden de Griekse goden nog op cultureel vlak blijven opduiken in schilderijen (Botticelli), gebouwen, beeldhouwwerken,... De nukkige, bonte familie van de Olympus mag dan wel op godsdienstig vlak nog weinig gelovigen tellen, cultureel blijft ze op vandaag inspireren.

Tim Atkinson says

This is a book I feel I should've enjoyed a lot more than I did. It's got everything I like: classical mythology, history, theology, art, culture, literature. But although well-written and wearing its author's learning lightly, it never seems to get going. It doesn't help that it's a short book, ironically. It never really gets under the skin of any of the many areas it covers, leaving one oddly unfulfilled. I feel the concept deserves better, and I wonder how much of a compromise this is between Graziosi's initial pitch and the publisher's subsequent demands. Or perhaps it was written at their (the publisher's) behest, and Graziosi is dancing to their tune? Either way, it falls between two very different stools - a fact even betrayed by the books' footnotes (yes, it's nothing if not scholarly) which unhelpfully appear section by section rather than chapter by chapter, making quick referencing while reading unnecessarily frustrating.

Lauren says

This book claims to be about the Olympian gods from "antiquity to the renaissance" and this is in my opinion a bit misleading.

Graziosi devotes four parts of her six-part book to the ancient world. In fairness her observations are insightful and clearly illustrated with good examples. Graziosi clearly knows her stuff when it comes to the ancient world. And that for me is this book's fundamental problem. The author should have stopped at the rise of Christianity. From this point onwards (admittedly only two parts) she struggles to convincingly make her arguments. Her observations become much more superficial and her evidence is tenuous at best.

Rather than a history of the role of the Olympian gods, this is a very competent introduction to their role in the ancient world with a few general comments about their place in a Christian Europe to finish up. Readers looking for an insight into the reception of classical mythology in the renaissance would be better looking to other writers in reception studies.

That is not to say however that there is not some value for general readers interested in the role of myth. Coming to the subject with no prior knowledge this book would be a gentle introduction to a fascinating subject. More experienced readers will find nothing new it has to be said.

Heather says

A fantastic read. Traces the history of the Olympic gods from their inception through Roman assimilation as well as Egyptian and Babylonian influencing all the way to modern times. Great pacing and flow, and never really got dry, which was wonderful. I wish it was a bit longer so it could go more into depth, but that's just my personal preference.

Nikki says

For me, there weren't many surprises here in Barbara Graziosi's analysis of the Greek pantheon and their afterlife. I already knew how they translated into the Roman world (thank you, Mrs Wilson, for many fascinating lessons in classics!) and I had some idea of how they translated into the medieval and Renaissance world as well (I believe thanks there must go to Richard Wilson, Martin Coyle and Rob Gossedge – I can't untangle in my mind quite who was responsible for this, but I blame my degree all the same).

Nonetheless, it's a good survey of the Greek pantheon and the enormous influence they had on religious thought and, in the end, literature. I could wish for a bit on modern paganism, since I have friends who have revived the worship of the Olympians, but that's probably a little much to ask.

It's an enjoyable read, though not a particularly enlightening one, for me.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

Aaron Carpenter says

At some point you've got to ask, "What WAS Homer talking about? Where did this pantheon come from?" Christianity has its historical points of origin, but the ancient mythologies? What did the ancients - Greeks, especially - think they were worshipping? How does this shed light on man's inherent spiritual orientation? (How does this set a backdrop for the New Testament?)

With respectful treatment of all faiths, Graziosi comes as close as perhaps is possible to answering most of these question. Thorough, engaging, interesting at every turn, and easily read - I really enjoyed this book and found it immensely helpful as I continue my journey through the classics.
