ABSTRACT. Kostuch Lucyna, Pantes theoi, Polemos and Ares on the Battlefield. The Greek Concept of the War Deity.

The Hellenes created a concept of potential military engagement by all the gods. In martial contexts, Greek authors often included the concepts of “all the gods” (pantes theoi), “the gods” (theoi), “god” (theos), divine being (daimonion) and holy power (hieros), which signify interference by unidentified divine forces. The relationship between war and gods may thus be defined ex definitione. The question arises as to the basis of this way of thinking. It seems that the answer should be sought in the basic definition of war — polemos. War is only occasionally personified. The answer to the question of why Polemos never became a clearly defined divine figure and mythological hero can be found in Homer. In the Iliad many deities, although not all, have military might (polemos) at their disposal and participate in directing martial activities. It is for this very reason that this force never became an independent one — war arises as a result of what can be termed a divine “chain reaction”. The existence of war is thus dependent on the gods who make it active as the result of a stimulus. It is significant that Ares, just like Polemos, is not fully autonomous. Other deities also carry out the “work of Ares”.

Keywords: Greeks, War, Religion, Pantes theoi, Polemos, Ares.


2 Hom. Il. 5, 430.
domain of the god called Enyalios or Stratios. This picture is complemented by Lucian, who adds that the gods have no quarrel with the honours allocated to them and thus, for example, Athena, the commander of wars does not fight with Artemis over hunting, and she yields to Athena in military matters.

At the same time the source materials, starting from Homer himself, argue that the concept of war as the domain of Ares and Athena remains merely an antique declarative form, and that all of the gods are engaged in military activities.

Attempting to introduce some order into the complex Greek polytheistic system, contemporary analysts point to two sacred characters of war – brutal military force, as personified by Ares, and “civilised war” under the patronage of Athena, while acknowledging the role of Zeus and the guardian deities of poleis as the givers of military victory. There is also a division between fighting deities, deities bringing salvation from the oppressions of war, and those personifying it. All of these divisions are, however, simplifications. R. Lonis is right to point out the lack of a deity defined as the god of war in the classical Greek era. Such a deity does not exist, as war is the common domain of all the gods. The Hellenic military sacrum turns out to be a system in which all of the gods are potentially patrons of war, while this function may be fulfilled, according to time and place, by a group of deities, single deity or even a nameless god. If a list were created of divine beings participating at least once in a war or battle, or present in military ideology, it would be extremely long and would not lack even nymphs and muses.

In the Iliad Zeus, the leader of the gathering of gods, is referred to significantly in the phrase “Zeus and the other immortals” (Zeûς και ὁθάνατοι θεοί ἄλλοι). The father of the gods wants to make a decision as to the fate of Troy, taking into consideration the pleasure of all the gods. As Hesiod writes, “all the gods” (pantes theoi) took part in the struggle against the Titans. Theognis asks

\[\text{\footnotesize 1\textsuperscript{st} Plut. De tranq. anim. 12; Erot. 14.}\
\[\text{\footnotesize 2\textsuperscript{nd} Luc. Charid. 10.}\
\[\text{\footnotesize 3\textsuperscript{rd} Greek polytheism is indescribable: R. Parker, Polytheism and Society at Athens, Oxford 2005, 387 ff.}\
\[\text{\footnotesign{th} R. Lonis, Guerre et religion en Grèce à l'époque classique, Recherches sur les rites, les dieux, l'idéologie de la victoire, Paris 1979, p. 199.}\
\[\text{\footnotesign{th} Hom. Il. 2, 49; 3, 298; 3, 308; Hes. Th. 624.}\
\[\text{\footnotesign{th} Hom. Il. 4, 14–18.}\
\[\text{\footnotesign{th} Hes. Th. 667.}
Zeus and the other gods to defend the city together. In Plato’s *Phaedrus* we also see Zeus leading an army consisting of all the gods, except for Hestia, organised into units led by allocated deities. The entirety of the gods is also defined by the phrase “gods and goddesses”. Zeus forbids the gods to take part in the battle, using the expression “all the gods and all the goddesses” (πάντες τε θεοὶ πάντες τε θεόνειαι). Hesiod states clearly that both male and female deities participated in the fight against the Titans. The concept of “all the gods” appears often in literature in a military context. Herodotus, describing the battle of Salamis, states that a decision was taken to pray to “all the gods” (πάντες θεοῖς). In the Spartan polis, according to Plutarch, all the gods and goddesses are connected to war and carry spears to signify this. In the epigram of Leonidas of Tarentum, Eurotas reminds Aphrodite that in Sparta everyone must carry a weapon, including her. The people of Rhodes made an offering of nine hundred stone missiles, dedicating them to “all the gods”. As it turns out, such a “collective deity” is not only typical of the Hellenes, but for the Indo-European way of thinking in general, and the expression “all the gods” (*pantes theoi*) is found as early as in Mycenaean texts as *pa-si-te-o-i*, meaning all of those gods who are required at a given moment.

There are many references to decisions about war and victory, and also about the possibility of occupying a defined territory, being taken simply by “the gods” (*theoi*), which in many cases must correspond to the phrase “all the gods” (*pantes theoi*), and in others may be a form of literary simplification.

The Hellenes believed that local gods and heroes, connected with a particular territory, took part in battles, while there was no custom of listing these deities, and it is thus difficult to define the idea of a divine patron of the polis. Crossing the natural boundaries such as mountains and rivers which most often formed the boundaries of the polis involved sacrifices and augury. The boun-

---

12 Theognis 757 West.
13 Pl. *Phaedr.* 246 E – 247 A.
14 Hom. *Il.* 8, 5 ff; 8, 20.
15 Hes. *Th.* 667
16 Hdt. 8, 64; Hom. *Il.* 7, 411–412.
18 *Anth. Pal.* 9, 320.
daries themselves had a sacred character.\textsuperscript{25} Seas, rivers, mountains and other natural elements were inhabited by gods who allowed passage, or not, and therefore these also had an involvement in military conflicts.\textsuperscript{26} In the event of a city being threatened by siege, all the local gods were called upon for help and, as Aeschylus shows, their statues were even embraced.\textsuperscript{27} Another example distant in time, that of Selinunte, confirms this rule. The text of an inscription from this city indicates that an innumerable amount of local gods was engaged in military matters, and there is the additional phrase “other gods”.\textsuperscript{28} This expression is surely a reference to the unnamed divine patrons of the polis. In the Hellenistic period the idea also appears of deities being patrons to the army as an institution seemingly separate from the polis.\textsuperscript{29}

In martial contexts, Greek authors often included the concepts of “god” (\textit{theos}), divine being (\textit{daimonion}) and holy power (\textit{hieros}),\textsuperscript{30} which signify interference by unidentified divine forces.

Victory, on the other hand, could depend on a specific deity.\textsuperscript{31} In inscriptions from the Hellenistic period many divine beings appear in the role of separate patrons of war.\textsuperscript{32} References to Zeus in this case may often mean a generalisation of divine will, as represented by Zeus, in the form of the father of the gods.\textsuperscript{33}

These selected examples allow us to conclude that the Hellenes created a concept of potential military engagement by all the gods. The relationship between war and gods may thus be defined \textit{ex definitione}. The question arises as to the basis of this way of thinking. It seems that the answer should be sought in the basic definition of war – \textit{polemos}. It is easy to notice that this is cannot be grasped simply in the context of Greek cosmology. The source records do not even allow us to give war (\textit{Polemos}) an ontological status. Hesiod does not include war in the divine genealogy, thus Polemos has no parents. It is not

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{26 For example: Aesch. \textit{Pers.} 497 ff, 745–746; Hdt. 7, 8.}
\item \footnote{27 For example: Theognis 757 West; Aesch. \textit{Sept.} 253 ff; Plut. \textit{Arist.} 11.}
\item \footnote{28 Zeus, Phobos, Herakles, Apollo, Poseidon, Tyndaridai, Athena, Malophoros (Demeter), Paskrateia (Persephone); SIG 1122; IG XIV 268; W. M. Calder, \textit{The Inscription from Temple G at Selinus}, GRBS Monographs 4, 1963.}
\item \footnote{29 R. Parker, op. cit., p. 403.}
\item \footnote{30 For example: Aesch. \textit{Pers.} 353–355; Hdt. 1, 87; 2, 120; 7, 10; 8, 53; 8, 94; Pind. \textit{Pyth.} 8, 76–77; Plut. \textit{De def. or.} 14; W.K. Pritchett, \textit{The Greek State at War}, vol. III: \textit{Religion}, Berkeley 1979, pp. 19–41.}
\item \footnote{31 For example: Hdt. 6, 82; 6, 105; 9, 61; 9, 65; Thuc. 2, 71; 4, 116; Xen. \textit{Anab.} 3, 1, 12; Plut. \textit{Arist.} 18–20; Plut. \textit{De malig. Herod.} 27; Paus. 1, 13, 8; 1, 28, 4.}
\item \footnote{32 For example: Artemis Soteira, Athena Nike, Athena Soteira Nike, Athena Nikephoros, Herakles Kallinikos, Hermes Hegemonios, Zeus Soter; see: A. Chaniotis, op. cit., p. 164; commitment to Zeus Soter and Athena Soteira for protection by both sea and land, see: R. Parker, op. cit., p. 403.}
\item \footnote{33 M. P. Nilsson, \textit{Greek Piety}, Oxford 1948, p. 59.}
\end{itemize}
therefore known when or how war emerged in the cosmogonic process. In the
*Theogony* the word *polemos* appears for the first time along with the information
that Hecate is involved in martial matters. War is a force undoubtedly present
in the world of the gods, but devoid of clear contours and thus is not pictured
so willingly. Apelles immortalised this force as a being with bound hands in
the triumphal carriage of Alexander the Great. War is only occasionally per-
sonified. In the *Iliad*, *polemos* has a snout (*πτόλεμω ενέγαστόμα*). Pindar
gives War (grammatically masculine) a daughter named Alala, making her the
personification of a war cry (*Αλάλα Πολέμου θύγατρι*). Nothing however
is known of the mother of this female figure. Heraclites ascribes Polemos the
function of father and king of everything that exists. Aesop makes him the
husband of Hubris. War also takes on personal characteristics in Aristophanes’
*Peace*, in which it pounds Hellenic cities in a mortar. Much later Polemos was
given a sister – Enyo.

The answer to the question of why Polemos never became a clearly defined
divine figure and mythological hero can be found in Homer. In the *Iliad* many
deities, although not all, have military might (*polemos*) at their disposal and
participate in directing martial activities (*πολέμητα ἔργα*). It is for this very
reason that this force never became an independent one – war arises as a result
of what can be termed a divine “chain reaction”. The mechanism is set in play
by Zeus, often not acting on his own, and the martial forces are transferred to the
battlefield, also appearing in the guise of *neikos* and *Eris*, divine beings subordinate
to the father of the gods. The existence of war is thus dependent on the gods
who make it active as the result of a stimulus, which can be seen at the etymo-
logical level as the word *polemos* is connected with the action of shaking. In
the *Iliad* Zeus dispatches Athena to initiate strife (*neikos*). On another occasion
the god sends Eris with the symbols (devices) of war (*πολέμιο τερας*). In the
*Cypria* Zeus and Themis planned a war, and then Eris inspired *neikos* among
three goddesses, after which Hermes appeared in the role of messenger. Euripides had Zeus send a vision (*eidolon*) of Helen to Ilion as an element necessary

---

35 Plin. *NH* 35, 94.
36 Hom. *Il.* 10, 8.
37 Pind. frag. 78.
38 Diels-Kranz 22 B 53.
39 Esopus 533.
40 Aristoph. *Pax* 228 ff.
41 Quint. Smyrn. 8, 460 f.
to inspire Eris.\textsuperscript{47} The most obvious illustration of the method of initiating the process of war is Zeus appearing in the role of parent to Athena, a goddess drenched in war and battle (πόλεμοι τε μάχαι),\textsuperscript{48} and often its donor (πόλεμο δότηρρα).\textsuperscript{49} The archaic conviction that polemos is a force difficult to grasp and largely belonging to the world of the gods can be found in the fact that up until the 4th century BC this concept referred mainly to war without limits in time, and this term was not used to refer to any specific war.\textsuperscript{50} Such expressions as “the Median War” (ho Mēdikos polemos) or “the Ionic War” (ho Ionikos polemos) appear only occasionally.\textsuperscript{51} It is only in the Hellenistic period that polemos means a specific war– Lamniakos polemos, Symmachikos polemos, Kretikos polemos etc.\textsuperscript{52} Earlier, a specific war was ta Trōika, ta Medika.\textsuperscript{53}

Another definition of war, Ares (ʼΑρης), was initially probably nothing more than an abstract idea.\textsuperscript{54} For the Hellenes, war was simply “the work of Ares” (ἔργον Ῥήνος).\textsuperscript{55} Even though Ares appears in the divine genealogy, the gods (with a few exceptions) all have a grudge towards him.\textsuperscript{56} Sophocles calls Ares a god without honour.\textsuperscript{57} His similarity to his mother (Hera) in the Iliad gradually developed into the concept of Ares’ parthenogenetic birth,\textsuperscript{58} explaining his lack of a fully rightful place in the higher structures of the divine world, and pushing the deity out onto an abstract level, similar to the descendents of Night, but born of fission.\textsuperscript{59} It is significant that Ares, just like Polemos, is not fully autonomous. Other deities also carry out the “work of Ares”. As one of the Homeric

\textsuperscript{47} Eur. Elec. 1282–1283.  
\textsuperscript{48} Hes. Th. 924–926; Hom. Hym. 28, 4–12.  
\textsuperscript{49} Alcaeus 298, 24; Hom. Hym. 11, 2.  
\textsuperscript{51} Thuc. 1, 90; 8, 11.  
\textsuperscript{52} A. Chaniotis, op. cit., 171–172.  
\textsuperscript{53} Thuc. 1, 3; Hdt. 1, 1.  
\textsuperscript{55} Simonides 107 Diehl = Anth. Pal. 6, 50.  
\textsuperscript{57} Soph. OT’ 215.  
\textsuperscript{58} Hom. Il. 5, 892–893; Ov. Fasti 5, 229.  
Hymns claims, the “work of Ares” was chosen by Athena. The goddess’ epithet Areia should be analysed in the same context, as should Zeus’ epithet Areios and Aphrodite’s Areia. Euripides clearly states that even Dionysus contains an element of Ares and can foment the arrays of war. We should note that it is never stated that any deities contain an element of Athena. The analogy with Ares forms a concept of divine victory – Nike. This divine being basically never achieved full autonomy.

To conclude, we can recall the thoughts of Plato, who considered the gods to have two common features – beauty and bravery. From the very earliest sources they are not subject to any divisions and are constant rivals in the divine world.

THE GREEK CONCEPT OF THE WAR DEITY

Summary

The idea of dividing domains or honours (timaι) in the world of the divine is of Greek provenance and dates back to Homer’s time. The Iliad contains the statement that matters of war are the concern of Ares and Athena. The concept of a divine division of spheres of influence must have been very popular in Plutarch’s and Lucian’s day, since they cite the view that each of the gods has his own field of action. At the same time the source materials, starting from Homer himself, argue that the concept of war as the domain of Ares and Athena remains merely an antique declarative form, and that all of the gods are engaged in military activities. If a list were created of divine beings participating at least once in a war or battle, or present in military ideology, it would be extremely long and would not lack even nymphs and muses. In martial contexts, Greek authors often included the concepts of “all the gods” (pantes theoi), “the gods” (theoi), “god” (theos), divine being (daimonion) and holy power (hieros), which signify interference by unidentified divine forces. The Hellenes believed also that local gods and heroes, connected with a particular territory, took part in battles. They created a concept of potential military engagement by all the gods. The relationship between war and gods may thus be defined ex definitione. The question arises as to the basis of this way of thinking. It seems that the answer should be sought in the basic definition of war – polemos. War is only occasionally personified. The answer to the question of

---

60 Hom. Hym. 5, 10.
61 Paus. 1, 8, 4; 9, 4, 1–2; M.N. Tod, A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions, vol. II, Oxford 1946, 204. 17.
62 Paus. 5, 14, 6–7.
63 Paus. 3, 17, 5.
66 Pl. Resp. 381 C.
67 Cypria 2 ff; Eur. Andr. 278–279; Luc. Charid. 10.
why Polemos never became a clearly defined divine figure and mythological hero can be found in Homer. In the *Iliad* many deities, although not all, have military might (*polemos*) at their disposal and participate in directing martial activities. It is for this very reason that this force never became an independent one – war arises as a result of what can be termed a divine “chain reaction”. The existence of war is thus dependent on the gods who make it active as the result of a stimulus. It is significant that Ares, just like *Polemos*, is not fully autonomous. Other deities also carry out the “work of Ares”.