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*PANTES THEOI*, POLEMOS AND ARES ON  
THE BATTLEFIELD.  
THE GREEK CONCEPT OF THE WAR DEITY

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 (*daemonion*) 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.

The idea of dividing domains or honours (*timai*) in the world of the divine is of Greek provenance and dates back to Homer’s time.<sup>1</sup> The *Iliad* contains the statement that matters of war are the concern of Ares and Athena.<sup>2</sup> The concept of a divine division of spheres of influence must have been very popular in Plutarch’s day, since he cites the view that each of the gods has his own field of action, and according to this principle the urge to fight or make war, all hostility, people who kill or are killed and weaponry, missiles, sieges and loot are all the

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<sup>1</sup>Hom. *Il.* 15, 189–193; 5, 428–430; Hes. *Th.* 203–206, 412, 462, 491, 885, 904; *Hymn Hom.* 2, 86, 328, 365–366, 461; 4, 516; Eur. *Hipp.* 1327–1330; Pl. *Criti.* 109 B–E, 113 B–C; *Callim. Hymn* 1, 60–65; Apd. 1, 2, 1 ff.; Plut. *De tranq. anim.* 12; Plut. *Erot.* 14; Luc. *Charid.* 10.

<sup>2</sup>Hom. *Il.* 5, 430.

domain of the god called Enyalios or Stratios.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> There is also a division between fighting deities, deities bringing salvation from the oppressions of war, and those personifying it.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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” (Ζεὺς καὶ ἄθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι).<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> As Hesiod writes, “all the gods” (*pantes theoi*) took part in the struggle against the Titans.<sup>11</sup> Theognis asks

<sup>3</sup> Plut. *De tranq. anim.* 12; *Erot.* 14.

<sup>4</sup> Luc. *Charid.* 10.

<sup>5</sup> Greek polytheism is indescribable: R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, Oxford 2005, 387 ff.

<sup>6</sup> For example: E. Gardner, *War, War-Gods (Greek and Roman)*, [in:] J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. XII, New York 1921, p. 696; F. Vian, *La Fonction guerrière dans la mythologie grecque*, [in:] J.-P. Vernant (ed.), *Problèmes de la guerre en Grèce ancienne*, Paris 1968; S. Deacy, *Athena and Ares: War, Violence, and Warlike Deities*, [in:] H. van Wees (ed.), *War and Violence in Ancient Greece*, London 2000, pp. 285–298.

<sup>7</sup> M. Jost, *Les divinités de la guerre*, [in:] F. Prost (ed.), *Armées, et sociétés dans la Grèce classique, aspects sociaux et politiques de la guerre aux Ve. et IVe. s. av. J.-C.*, Paris 1999, pp. 163–178.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Hom. *Il.* 2, 49; 3, 298; 3, 308; Hes. *Th.* 624.

<sup>10</sup> Hom. *Il.* 4, 14–18.

<sup>11</sup> Hes. *Th.* 667.

Zeus and the other gods to defend the city together.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 πᾶσαι τε θεάωναι).<sup>14</sup> Hesiod states clearly that both male and female deities participated in the fight against the Titans.<sup>15</sup> 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" (πᾶσι θεοῖσι).<sup>16</sup> In the Spartan polis, according to Plutarch, all the gods and goddesses are connected to war and carry spears to signify this.<sup>17</sup> In the epigram of Leonidas of Tarentum, Eurotas reminds Aphrodite that in Sparta everyone must carry a weapon, including her.<sup>18</sup> The people of Rhodes made an offering of nine hundred stone missiles, dedicating them to "all the gods".<sup>19</sup> 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,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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*),<sup>22</sup> 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,<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> Crossing the natural boundaries such as mountains and rivers which most often formed the boundaries of the polis involved sacrifices and augury. The boun-

<sup>12</sup>Theognis 757 West.

<sup>13</sup>Pl. *Phaedr.* 246 E – 247 A.

<sup>14</sup>Hom. *Il.* 8, 5 ff; 8, 20.

<sup>15</sup>Hes. *Th.* 667

<sup>16</sup>Hdt. 8, 64; Hom. *Il.* 7, 411–412.

<sup>17</sup>Plut. *Constit. Lac.* 28.

<sup>18</sup>*Anth. Pal.* 9, 320.

<sup>19</sup>A. Chaniotis, *War in the Hellenistic World*, Oxford 2005, pp. 146–147.

<sup>20</sup>J.D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy*, Chapel Hill 1991, p. 18 ff; M.L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford 2007, p. 122.

<sup>21</sup>*Pantes theoi*, see: F. Jacobi, *Pantes theoi*, Halle 1930; K. Ziegler RE 1949, XVIII 3, pp. 697–747.

<sup>22</sup>For example: Aesch. *Sept.* 271–279; Hdt. 8, 109; Xen. *Hell.* 6, 3, 6; Xen. *Anab.* 3, 2; Xen. *Cyr.* 1, 6, 2; Diod. Sic. 16, 79, 4; 16, 86, 6; 20, 63, 1; Plut. *Tim.* 26; Arr., *Anab.* 5, 29, 1.

<sup>23</sup>J.D. Mikalson, *Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars*, Chapel Hill 2003, p. 169.

<sup>24</sup>R. Parke, op. cit., p. 387; S.C. Cole, *Civic Cult and Civic Identity*, [in:] M.H. Hansen (ed.), *Sources for the Ancient Greek City-State*, Copenhagen 1995, pp. 292–325.

daries themselves had a sacred character.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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”.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

In martial contexts, Greek authors often included the concepts of “god” (*theos*), divine being (*daimonion*) and holy power (*hieros*),<sup>30</sup> which signify interference by unidentified divine forces.

Victory, on the other hand, could depend on a specific deity.<sup>31</sup> In inscriptions from the Hellenistic period many divine beings appear in the role of separate patrons of war.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 *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*. 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 (*Polemos*) an ontological status. Hesiod does not include war in the divine genealogy, thus Polemos has no parents. It is not

<sup>25</sup> M.H. Jameson, *Sacrifice Before Battle*, [in:] V.D. Hanson (ed.), *Hoplites. The Classical Greek Battle Experience*, London and New York 1993, pp. 198, 202–203.

<sup>26</sup> For example: Aesch. *Pers.* 497 ff, 745–746; Hdt. 7, 8.

<sup>27</sup> For example: Theognis 757 West; Aesch. *Sept.* 253 ff; Plut. *Arist.* 11.

<sup>28</sup> Zeus, Phobos, Herakles, Apollo, Poseidon, Tyndaridai, Athena, Malophoros (Demeter), Pasikrateia (Persephone); SIG 1122; IG XIV 268; W. M. Calder, *The Inscription from Temple G at Selinus*, GRBS Monographs 4, 1963.

<sup>29</sup> R. Parker, op. cit., p. 403.

<sup>30</sup> For example: Aesch. *Pers.* 353–355; Hdt. 1, 87; 2, 120; 7, 10; 8, 53; 8, 94; Pind. *Pyth.* 8, 76–77; Plut. *De def. or.* 14; W.K. Pritchett, *The Greek State at War*, vol. III: *Religion*, Berkeley 1979, pp. 19–41.

<sup>31</sup> For example: Hdt. 6, 82; 6, 105; 9, 61; 9, 65; Thuc. 2, 71; 4, 116; Xen. *Anab.* 3, 1, 12; Plut. *Arist.* 18–20; Plut. *De malig. Herod.* 27; Paus. 1, 13, 8; 1, 28, 4.

<sup>32</sup> For example: Artemis Soteira, Athena Nike, Athena Soteira Nike, Athena Nikephoros, Herakles Kallinikos, Hermes Hegemonios, Zeus Soter; see: A. Chanotis, 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.

<sup>33</sup> M. P. Nilsson, *Greek Piety*, Oxford 1948, p. 59.

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> War is only occasionally personified. In the *Iliad*, *polemos* has a snout (πτολέμοιο μέγαστόμα).<sup>36</sup> Pindar gives War (grammatically masculine) a daughter named Alala, making her the personification of a war cry (Ἄλαλά Πολέμου θύγατερ).<sup>37</sup> Nothing however is known of the mother of this female figure. Heraclites ascribes Polemos the function of father and king of everything that exists.<sup>38</sup> Aesop makes him the husband of Hubris.<sup>39</sup> War also takes on personal characteristics in Aristophanes' *Peace*, in which it pounds Hellenic cities in a mortar.<sup>40</sup> Much later Polemos was given a sister – Enyo.<sup>41</sup>

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 (πολεμήϊα ἔργα).<sup>42</sup> 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 etymological level as the word *polemos* is connected with the action of shaking.<sup>43</sup> In the *Iliad* Zeus dispatches Athena to initiate strife (*neikos*).<sup>44</sup> On another occasion the god sends Eris with the symbols (devices) of war (πολέμοιο τερας).<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> Euripides had Zeus send a vision (*eidolon*) of Helen to Ilion as an element necessary

<sup>34</sup> Hes. *Th.* 410–452; see: J. S. Clay, *Hesiod's Cosmos*, Cambridge 2003, p. 130.

<sup>35</sup> Plin. *NH* 35, 94.

<sup>36</sup> Hom. *Il.* 10, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Pind. frag. 78.

<sup>38</sup> Diels-Kranz 22 B 53.

<sup>39</sup> Esopus 533.

<sup>40</sup> Aristoph. *Pax* 228 ff.

<sup>41</sup> Quint. Smyrn. 8, 460 f.

<sup>42</sup> For example: Hom. *Il.* 5, 330–333; 5, 428–430.

<sup>43</sup> P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Paris 1968–1980, p. 875.

<sup>44</sup> Hom. *Il.* 17, 544–546.

<sup>45</sup> Hom. *Il.* 11, 3–4.

<sup>46</sup> Proc. *Chrest.* 1 ff.

to inspire Eris.<sup>47</sup> 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),<sup>48</sup> and often its donor (πολεμῶ δοτῆρῶν).<sup>49</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> century BC this concept referred mainly to war without limits in time, and this term was not used to refer to any specific war.<sup>50</sup> Such expressions as “the Median War” (*ho Mēdikos polemos*) or “the Ionic War” (*ho Ionikos polemos*) appear only occasionally.<sup>51</sup> It is only in the Hellenistic period that *polemos* means a specific war—*Lamniakos polemos*, *Symmachikos polemos*, *Kretikos polemos* etc.<sup>52</sup> Earlier, a specific war was *ta Trōika*, *ta Medika*.<sup>53</sup>

Another definition of war, Ares (Ἄρης), was initially probably nothing more than an abstract idea.<sup>54</sup> For the Hellenes, war was simply “the work of Ares” (ἔργον Ἄρηος).<sup>55</sup> Even though Ares appears in the divine genealogy, the gods (with a few exceptions) all have a grudge towards him.<sup>56</sup> Sophocles calls Ares a god without honour.<sup>57</sup> His similarity to his mother (Hera) in the *Iliad* gradually developed into the concept of Ares’ parthenogenetic birth,<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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*

<sup>47</sup> Eur. *Elec.* 1282–1283.

<sup>48</sup> Hes. *Th.* 924–926; *Hom. Hym.* 28, 4–12.

<sup>49</sup> Alcaeus 298, 24; *Hom. Hym.* 11, 2.

<sup>50</sup> See: G. Shipley, *Introduction: The Limits of War*, [in:] J. Rich, G. Shipley (eds), *War and Society in Greek World*, London 1993, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Thuc. 1, 90; 8, 11.

<sup>52</sup> A. Chaniotis, op. cit., 171–172.

<sup>53</sup> Thuc. 1, 3; Hdt. 1, 1.

<sup>54</sup> M.P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, München 1967, p. 518; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Harvard 1985, p. 169; the Mycenaean evidence is inconclusive, see discussion: W. Pötscher, *Ares*, “Gymnasium”, 66, 1959, p. 11–14; B.C. Dietrich, *The Origins of Greek Religion*, Berlin 1974, p. 245; W. K. Pritchett, op. cit., p. 158; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion...*, p. 43; W. Burkert, *Hesiod in Context: Abstractions and Divinities in an Aegean-Eastern koiné*, [in:] E. Stafford, J. Herrin (eds), *Personification in the Greek World. From Antiquity to Byzantium*, London 2005, p. 18.

<sup>55</sup> Simonides 107 Diehl = *Anth. Pal.* 6, 50.

<sup>56</sup> *Hom. Il.* 5, 890 ff; see: A. M. Nicgorski, *Interlaced Fingers and Knotted Limbs: The Hostile Posture of Quarrelsome Ares on the Parthenon Frieze*, [in:] A. P. Chapin (ed.), *Charis: Essays in honor of Sara A. Immerwahr*, Princeton 2004, p. 296.

<sup>57</sup> Soph. *OT* 215.

<sup>58</sup> *Hom. Il.* 5, 892–893; *Ov. Fasti* 5, 229.

<sup>59</sup> See: N. Loraux, *What is a Goddess?*, [in:] P. Schmitt Pantel (ed.), *A History of Women. From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, Harvard 1994, p. 39.

*Hymns* claims, the “work of Ares” was chosen by Athena.<sup>60</sup> The goddess’ epithet *Areia*<sup>61</sup> should be analysed in the same context, as should Zeus’ epithet *Areios*<sup>62</sup> and Aphrodite’s *Areia*.<sup>63</sup> Euripides clearly states that even Dionysus contains an element of Ares and can foment the arrays of war.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup>

To conclude, we can recall the thoughts of Plato, who considered the gods to have two common features – beauty and bravery.<sup>66</sup> From the very earliest sources they are not subject to any divisions and are constant rivals in the divine world.<sup>67</sup>

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Summary

The idea of dividing domains or honours (*timai*) 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

<sup>60</sup> *Hom. Hym.* 5, 10.

<sup>61</sup> Paus. 1, 8, 4; 9, 4, 1–2; M.N. Tod, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions*, vol. II, Oxford 1946, 204. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Paus. 5, 14, 6–7.

<sup>63</sup> Paus. 3, 17, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Eur. *Bacch.* 302–305; see: M.G. Lonnoy, *Ares et Dionysos dans la tragédie grecque: le rapprochement des contraires*, REG 98, 1985, p. 65–71.

<sup>65</sup> W. K. Pritchett, op. cit., p. 168; see discussion: E. Bernert, *Nike*, RE XVII, 1936, 1, pp. 185–307, F.W. Hamdorf, *Griechische Kultpersonifikationen der vorhellenistischen Zeit*, Mainz 1964, pp. 58–62.

<sup>66</sup> Pl. *Resp.* 381 C.

<sup>67</sup> *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”.