

Religion and Education in the Ancient Greek World

Edited by
Irene Salvo and
Tanja S. Scheer



*Studies in Education and Religion in Ancient and
Pre-Modern History in the Mediterranean and Its Environs*

Mohr Siebeck

SERAPHIM

Studies in Education and Religion
in Ancient and Pre-Modern History
in the Mediterranean and Its Environs

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ISBN 978-3-16- 159881-4 / eISBN 978-3-16- 159882-1

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16- 159882-1

ISSN 2568-9584 / eISSN 2568-9606 (SERAPHIM)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was typeset by computersatz Staiger in Rottenburg, printed on non-aging paper, and bound by Hubert & Co. in Göttingen.

Cover image: The Apotheosis of Homer. Marble relief c.225 BCE-205 BCE. London, The British Museum no. 1819,8012.1.

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Printed in Germany.

Acknowledgements

In what ways were education and religion interrelated in the Greek-speaking world of the ancient Mediterranean? This research question has been developed within the inspiring interdisciplinary environment of the DFG Collaborative Research Centre 1136 *Bildung und Religion in Kulturen des Mittelmeerraums und seiner Umwelt von der Antike bis zum Mittelalter und zum Klassischen Islam* at the Georg August University of Göttingen. It was the focus of the conference “Religion and Education in the Ancient Greek World,” which we organised within the sub-project C01 “Aufgeklärte Männer – abergläubische Frauen? Religion, Bildung und Geschlechterstereotypen im klassischen Athen” on the 25th and 26th of October 2017 at the Georg August University of Göttingen. The present volume results from this conference.

We are grateful to the colleagues who contributed to the success of the conference. All the attendees have enriched the discussion from the perspectives of ancient history, classical philology, and history of religions, offering a wide-ranging view of the topic. We thank our colleagues for having published their results in this volume and for sharing their expertise, notwithstanding the several commitments of academic life.

We sincerely thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Göttingen Centre Orbis Orientalis et Occidentalis (CORO) for financially supporting the conference. The DFG has also sponsored the publication of the present volume.

We are warmly grateful to the Editorial Board of the SERAPHIM series, especially Peter Gemeinhardt, for accepting the volume in the series. Marte Zepernick and Balbina Bäbler have contributed with unfailing and meticulous assistance in the preparation of the manuscript for the press. At Mohr Siebeck, we would like to thank Tobias Stäbler, Susanne Mang and the program director Elena Müller for their careful help. We are most grateful to all of them for their generous support.

Göttingen/Exeter, August 2020

Tanja S. Scheer and Irene Salvo

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of ancient authors, works, and journals follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and the *Brill's New Pauly* (Leiden: Brill, 2002–2010).

Abbreviations of inscriptions follow the *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (Leiden: Brill 1923–).

I. Introductions

Greek Religion and Education: Key Concepts and Aims

IRENE SALVO/TANJA S. SCHEER

1. Scope of the volume

Around the middle of the 5th century BCE the Athenian assembly decided that a priestess for Athena Nike was to be appointed by lot from all Athenian women. One woman, perhaps the first person to hold this office, was called Myrrhine. She had to administer the shrine (*naos*) and to attend to the cult image (*hedos*) of Athena, as we learn from her epitaph which refers to the duties associated with the priesthood.¹ As a result of this selection by lot, every female Athenian citizen could suddenly face the challenge of having to hold a prestigious office.

How did she know what to do? What religious knowledge and skills were required for such an office? What kind of religious education did the male citizens of the People's Assembly think they could expect from the Athenian women whom they believed were capable of carrying out this job? If we take into consideration the whole Greek-speaking area of the Mediterranean, similar questions arise. How were education and religion related in Greek cities beyond Athens? How can we define their interrelationship and mutual influence? To what extent was religious knowledge accessible across genders and social classes, and how was it conveyed?

Scholarship on the Greek and Roman Mediterranean has tended to examine separately the histories of culture, education, knowledge, and religion. Since the seminal works of Marrou and Jaeger,² that in many respects were a product of their time, studies on educational systems have flourished, especially those trying to reconstruct schooling strategies and how technical and subject-specific content was taught, such as grammar, music, and sport, as well as the wider issue of whether

* This research has been supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) as part of the SFB 1136 *Bildung und Religion*, sub-project C01 "Aufgeklärte Männer – abergläubische Frauen? Religion, Bildung und Geschlechterstereotypen im klassischen Athen."

¹ On the priesthood of Athena Nike, see the two decrees on the same stone *IG I³ 35* (establishment of the priesthood) and *IG I³ 36* (details on the salary for the office) as well as *IG I³ 1330* (grave epigram of Myrrhine); for further details compare, e.g. Blok 2014; Lougovaya-Ast 2006.

² Marrou 1948; Jaeger 1934–1947. On Marrou and Jaeger, see Auffarth 2019.

schools in the modern sense existed at all.³ Insights into the everyday practice in ancient schools have come from the study of papyri and ostraca (inscribed potsherds) from Graeco-Roman Egypt.⁴ Similarly productive has been the field of childhood studies, which has examined ancient children's upbringing and their role as social actors.⁵ The investigation of how literate the wider population was in antiquity has also been an object of research interest, alongside asking on which occasions writing was used and by whom.⁶ The heterogeneity of sources and contexts which have emerged overall is far too diverse to be ascribed to a monolithic 'Greek' culture and education. Instead, we must take account of the wide variety of experiences which occurred across the Greek-speaking world, without privileging one typology of sources or city over the others. Greek cultures must henceforth be discussed in the plural.⁷

These studies, however, have often left aside the analysis of religious aspects of education. The absence of this perspective is particularly remarkable given the prominent function of religion in antiquity. While religion was embedded in Greek societies, instruction in religious subjects has yet to be at the centre of scholarly attention. Recent studies of ancient Greek religion have investigated individual experiences.⁸ This interest in individual agency, however, has not yet led to an exploration of the extent to which the practice of religious activities related to the degree of knowledge and education possessed by the agents participating in rituals and festivals. Occasionally, the study of the interrelationship between religion and education from a socio-historical perspective has come to the fore, as in the works on girls and boys in choral performances.⁹ Moreover, a line of enquiry has brilliantly investigated the ideas of knowledge (in the sense of *Wissen*) in its infinite sub-disciplines, such as medicine in the sanctuary, philosophy, science, and technology.¹⁰ Beyond the remit of Ancient History, however, other disciplines like Bible and Christian studies have examined at a deeper level the link between education and religion as well as their crisis in the concept of 'religious education'.¹¹ A much-needed comparative perspective has been developed and fostered by the Collaborative Research Centre 1136 *Education and Religion* at the University of

³ Legras 2002; Christes/Klein/Lüth 2006; Grubbs/Parkin 2013; Bloomer 2015.

⁴ Cribiore 2001. See also Holder 2020 on *Bildung* and politics in Alexandria.

⁵ See, *ex plurimis*, Harlow/Laurence 2010; Beaumont 2012; Grubbs/Parkin 2013; Gregory 2018.

⁶ See Kolb 2018; Blok in this volume.

⁷ See Salvo 2019: 167–168 for further references on the debates about the unity of Greek culture.

⁸ On the discussion about embedded and *polis* religion, see, *ex plurimis*, Kindt 2009; Eidinow 2015. On recent approaches to Greek religion, see Eidinow/Kindt 2015. On individuals and 'lived' religion, Gasparini *et al.* 2020.

⁹ See, e.g. Brelich 1969; Calame 1977; Budelmann 2018.

¹⁰ Bibliography is of course vast. Here it suffices to point to Freitag 2019, who examines medicine, philosophy, intellectuals, and libraries in panhellenic sanctuaries.

¹¹ See Tanaseanu-Döbler/Döbler 2012.

Göttingen: it explores the relationships between educational processes together with religious practices and identities highlighting the multifarious constellations of education and religion in the ancient Mediterranean from antiquity to the Middle Ages, from the Graeco-Roman world to the Christian, Coptic, and Jewish traditions and Islam.¹² The present volume stems from the work at Göttingen and aims to start a discussion and fill a gap in the study of ancient Greek history, since the interrelationship between Greek education and Greek religion is still an understudied research topic.

The essays in this volume approach the connection between religion and education from different perspectives. They focus on different periods, from early classical times to Late Antiquity, and take into account a wide range of sources. They all move away from privileging the opposition between the Athenian and Spartan systems and highlight clusters of evidence from several regions. Without attempting to offer a comprehensive overview, we do not treat in detail literary works like Homer, Isocrates, and Plato, nor the stages on the path of secret knowledge in mystery rites, while we cover to a greater extent the contribution from inscriptions and visual media.

2. Concepts

Cultural education was at the core of rearing citizens in Ancient Greece. The ancient Greek word for education, *paideia*, is among the most celebrated terms in the modern reception of the Greeks, alongside *eros* (love), *philosophia* (philosophy), and *demokratia* (democracy). It has been paired by Jaeger, analysing Plato, with the German term *Bildung*.¹³ This term combines elements of ‘upbringing’ and ‘education’ (*Erziehung*) as well as ‘self-study’ (*Selbst-Bildung*) and ‘socialization’ (*Sozialisation*).¹⁴ The aims of education include the acquisition of knowledge as well as of competences that are considered necessary or socially desirable in a given culture. Similarly multi-layered is the term *religion*. Among a myriad of interpretations, a praxeological definition is offered by Martin Riesebrodt: religion entails processes of communication between humans and superhuman powers that are thought to exist; this communication is aimed at warding off evil, managing crises, and procuring salvation.¹⁵ Thus, religions prove to be complexes of practices that relate to (generally invisible) superhuman beings.¹⁶ When exam-

¹² See Gemeinhardt/Tanaseanu-Döbler 2018; Gemeinhardt 2019: 449.

¹³ Plato, *Letter vii*; Jaeger 1934–1947. See further references in Salvo 2019: 170–171, with a brief overview of the Greek terms of education, knowledge, and ignorance.

¹⁴ See Gemeinhardt 2018; Gemeinhardt 2019: 452–456. See Holder 2020 on concepts of *Bildung* and higher levels of education and culture.

¹⁵ Riesebrodt 2007: 12.

¹⁶ Riesebrodt 2007: 13.

ining these complexes of practices in the Greek-speaking world of the Mediterranean, “Greek religion” appears as a social embedded and embodied religion.

In this volume, both education and religion are seen as socially embedded and embodied phenomena. Accordingly, both concepts do not prove to be two separated areas, but they are rather intertwined in a variety of ways. When elements of education are specifically geared towards religion, the concept of *religious education* becomes a useful analytical tool. It allows to detect how individuals were actively brought up and instructed on the knowledge which enabled them to participate in the religious rituals of the community. This knowledge was crucial to be integrated in the complex of practices that a community used to communicate with the gods.

Knowledge is not just the knowledge of the intellectuals and elite authorities but it includes the know-how of any field of expertise.¹⁷ As for *religious knowledge* in the ancient Greek world, it can be described as consisting of four main components, the importance and function of which must be examined in individual and local contexts. Firstly, it entailed mythological knowledge concerning the gods and heroes whose character was expressed in the deeds ascribed to them, offering a description of the divine but invisible partner of communication. The common knowledge of the mythological tradition (and its critical examination) helped to define the community as a social group (that was in this sense a community of tradition, *Überlieferungsgemeinschaft*). It also provided examples about what to expect from the gods. A second area of religious knowledge is the knowledge of local traditions.¹⁸ In the hundreds of Greek poleis, different priorities were set in the worship of specific gods, the knowledge of which could have been important for actively participating in the cults and at the same time for demonstrating social belonging. Closely related to this, a third aspect of religious knowledge is manifested in ritual competences,¹⁹ which were the ability to correctly perform the practices deemed necessary for the community as well as the accessible and memorable information behind the performance of cults. A fourth component can be identified in the knowledge of what was the right behaviour to be directed towards the gods and to be shown to the other members of the community as a display of piety.²⁰

Religious education, then, can be further defined as the processes, contexts, and places from where one could learn about religious knowledge, mythological

¹⁷ See Burke 2000: 13–17 on the “plurality of knowledges.”

¹⁸ See Parker 2011: 45 on the *exēgētai* and their role as advisers on religious matters and ancestral laws. On authoritative figures, see Scheer 2020.

¹⁹ See Dillon/Eidinow/Maurizio 2017 on ritual competence and gender. See also Dillon/Eidinow/Maurizio 2017: 5 on competence as “the explicit and implicit internalization of a number of cultural scripts that practitioners are able to maintain, manipulate, innovate, or even distort in their ritual performances.”

²⁰ See Parker 2011: 36–39 on the existence of an “orthopraxy” in the “right doing” of Greek religion but not of an “orthodoxy” in the “right belief,” and the issues around the trial of Socrates.

stories, and ritual acts. There is no fixed definition of its forms. It could have happened as formal training or informal intergenerational exchanges between older teachers and children as well as a lifelong process of acquisition of religious knowledge. Alongside a more individual dimension from the perspective of a learned single person, the collective dimension of religious education plays a significant role in the ancient Greek world.²¹ Shared knowledge and identities were conveyed through socialization, i.e. the experiential knowledge in the religious sphere acquired by growing into social practices, by watching and imitating.

3. Key research questions

Within this framework, specific research questions can be articulated to explore ancient Greek realities. Thinking at the spaces of communal interactions, we would like to start to identify which contexts and places could create opportunities for educating the inhabitants in religious matters and transmitting religious knowledge. In these contexts, which figures were considered as authoritative role models? The question of corporeality comes also to the fore: To what extent were gender differences and purity-related rules influential? Through which activities was the body trained for worshipping the gods? Another focal point lies in the media and skills around the altar. Through which media were myths and mythological knowledge made available and transmitted to a civic community? What skills were required for handling the sacred? In brief, following the lines of a famous book by Paul Veyne,²² we can ask: did the Greeks know their myths and rituals?

The volume, therefore, aims to investigate aspects of Greek social and religious practices under a new focused perspective surveying the constellations of religion and education and their functions in the society. These constellations can be multiplied and identified in several typologies of sources and contexts. The selection presented here explores three main overarching levels of analysis. Firstly, the contents and forms of Greek religious knowledge and education are examined highlighting the ways of their mediation and appropriation (Blok, Bultrighini, Scheer, Tanaseanu-Döbler). Secondly, there is a focus on the potential interdependence of education and religion when analysing the skills and requirements that were part of the acquisition of religious knowledge and that were necessary for performing cults (Bocksberger, Cuomo, Wolicki). Thirdly, the volume identifies the aims that Greek societies or certain social groups pursued with religiously connoted knowledge transfer: educational activities contributed to the correct worship of the gods and added social value for the community (Gödde, Horster, Salvo, Stavrianopou-

²¹ See Scheer 2018 on sanctuaries as transmitters of religious knowledge to the community, in particular on the case of Delphi and its oracle.

²² Veyne 1983.

lou). The authors have developed analytical perspectives and theoretical assumptions independently and in different ways. The following paragraph will present more in detail the articulation of questions and topics in each contribution.

4. Topics

The volume is divided in five thematic sections. With her introductory essay, *Educating Citizens: Knowledge, Competence, and Values in Greek Poleis*, Josine Blok offers an overview of the central aspects of ‘polis education’ in relation to religion in the classical period. Defining the Greek polis as a “political and religious community rolled into one,” Blok considers how at the core of the polis there was the idea of reciprocity and the citizens’ mutual obligations among themselves and towards the gods. To fulfill these obligations, intellectual, physical, and artistic skills could have been a prerequisite for female and male polis citizens alike, which contributed to their specific role and integration into the community. How to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills was left to the individual citizen as the polis provided no institutional framework. However, there are testimonies to the successful acquisition of the necessary knowledge in informal contexts, as in the case of Xenokrateia in Athens – a woman who founded a cult and passed on her personal religious knowledge on the local gods of Athens to her fellow citizens, showing familiarity with the correct language typical of honorary inscriptions. Religious and civic education were inextricably intertwined in classical Athens, and they formed a person, female or male, as a suitable member of the civic community.

The second part, *Actors and Models*, focuses on the actors transmitting religious knowledge, the models that they offered, and the values of individual and social behaviour that were deemed central to religiosity as well as civic life. The general aim is to contextualise religious education and knowledge within the framework of social fabrics and orders. In the contribution *Pedagogical Functions of Cult Associations in Late Classical Athens*, Irene Salvo explores how private associative groups could have offered opportunities for the transmission and sharing of knowledge about rituals and worshipped deities. Decrees and honorary inscriptions testify to communal sacrificial banquets and cult activities that allowed the exchange of information in a non-institutionalised way. The involvement of women and children in these occasions in relatively small groups created the ideal space for empowering women as religious teachers and children as recipients of instruction. Cult associations could be considered as spaces for transmitting knowledge among family as well as community members. Pedagogical techniques that could be imagined as taking place were visual memory of the ritual acts observed, unconscious acquisition from the social environment, and experiential learning. The time spent in social gatherings also conveyed modes of behaviour – with praise and reprimands reserved to pious or litigious members. If the associations were not formal places for education (*Erziehung*), they did present elements of it,

and they certainly were a platform to show their members' culture and knowledge of religious matters (*Bildung*) and to share this body of knowledge (*Sozialisation*) across gender and ethnic groups through an intergenerational process.

Religious and social norms prove to be intertwined and interact in the context of an embedded religion. The validity of this statement for the Hellenistic period as well is demonstrated by Eftychia Stavrianopoulou in her essay *Female Role Models in the Hellenistic Period: The Evidence of Religious Norms*. In this epoch, the imparting of religious knowledge takes on a new form, since local cult rules were presented more often via the medium of inscriptions, gaining a new dimension of publicity and demanding authority. She explains how purity rules concerning the body, and subjecting female cult participants to more severe restrictions, affected the perception of gender images and social participation. Religious developments such as the spreading of non-Greek cults might have been the reason behind such new discourses. However, the emphasis on such rules can also reflect attempts to suppress the increasing presence of women in the public space. Stavrianopoulou questions the success of these efforts to establish female role models of restraint and retreat from the public life. Examples of Hellenistic queens rather show the possibility to connect the aspect of purity with family virtues, converting it into new forms of female agency.

The conduct of important individuals such as Hellenistic kings and queens may have contributed to shaping the general ideas of the correct religious behaviour. This raises the question about what role models were available to ordinary citizens taking on religious offices with the intention to fulfill their obligations to religious and social reciprocity. In her contribution *Sacred Personnel as Role Models in the Post-classical Period*, Marietta Horster asks whether cultic officials could have acted as role models for the citizen body, given the lack of formal religious educational institutions. Examining epigraphic, visual, and literary sources up to the imperial periegete Pausanias, Horster notes both the absence of a specific priestly code of conduct and a special catalogue of virtues that religious functionaries should have embodied. Instead, the close intertwining of correct cultic behaviour and civil obligations is once again evident: religious officials receive public honours after having fulfilled their duty towards fellow citizens and the *polis* in the best possible way or even surpassing their predecessors. Honoured individuals did not prove to be role models due to personal piety or superior religious erudition that could have been demanded. The office of Greek priesthoods provided the possibility to women and men alike to distinguish themselves by taking on tasks assigned by the *polis*. By being honoured for successfully accomplishing their sacred civic duties, they were presented to their male and female fellow citizens as examples of successful religious socialization, encouraging imitation.

In the third part of this volume, *Performing Knowledge*, the focus is on the public and communal show of acquired bodily and poetic knowledge. Can performative arts be considered as contributing to religion and acculturated education? In what ways did drama and dance enter ancient debates on education and learning

processes? How were ancient Greek bodies educated for ritual aims? How did festivals shape embodied forms of education and emotional behaviour? Susanne Götde analyses in her contribution *Learning by Suffering? Education and Religion in Ancient Greek Theatre* the relationship between forms of education and religious ideas in Attic drama. The performance of Attic tragedies, produced for competitions that were held during Dionysiac festivals at Athens, notoriously took place in a sacred context. Readapting the mythical tradition on gods and heroes, the tragedies made use of streams of traditional knowledge that were widespread in the Athenian society. This knowledge about gods and heroes was not systematically “taught” on stage. However, the elaboration or re-accentuation of recognisable traditions stimulated the audience to further engage with seemingly well-known stories. Both in terms of content and form, ritual competence as an element of religious knowledge played a role in the dramatic performances. On the one hand, the protagonists of the plot often sacrificed or prayed to the gods. On the other hand, the practice of performance included traditional ritual religious forms of citizens’ action like the singing of the chorus. Götde shows how the tragic *choreia* changed and tested the ancient function of traditional choruses, that is telling myths and praising the gods. Furthermore, ancient sources indicate that the influence of poets as teachers was acknowledged in Greek societies. However, whether classical tragedy had a positive impact on the audience’s religious education has been debated in classical Athens, with Plato as the most prominent example rejecting tragedy as a trustworthy resource in favour of traditional pious hymns. Attic tragedies did not offer to its audience – so Götde concludes – any systematic lessons in myth or ritual. Rather, it was a performative place where the Athenian audience could explore their emotionality and dialogue with their religious tradition.

Starting from the concept of the embeddedness of Greek religion in society, the performances of Attic dramas can be assumed as performing acts that did not only address specific religious issues but shaped society in several ways. The question on how and to what extent performative arts could entail pedagogical value is further explored in the essay by Sophie Bocksberger, *Dancing Little Bears*. Her study examines dance and choral performances as part of the educational path of Greek girls and young women in the classical period. Dance was not only intended as an art or a ritual component, since physical exercise was also a tool that helped women to build awareness of their bodies. Education through movement resulted in a process of understanding social competences and personal identities. Bocksberger traces this picture reassessing one of the most difficult Greek rites to interpret, the *arkteia* (of the little bears) at Brauron, Attica. After summing up previous interpretations and old questions – such as the age of the girls or the ambiguity of the expression ‘playing the bear,’ she offers a new interpretative reading. The metaphor of the bear tells the story of a state of wildness, clumsy movements, and lack of musical knowledge, while dance education disciplined gestures, motion, and characters. Bocksberger highlights the educational purpose of the *arkteia* as well as the contribution of dance, music, and embodied rituals in children’s education.

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