“Test Everything”:
Sceptic and Believer in Ancient Mediterranean Religions

A Jointly Sponsored Conference on “Insider Doubt”
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organized by Tobias Nicklas, New Testament,
and Babett Edelmann-Singer, Ancient History

Abstracts

Tim Whitmarsh, Cambridge, UK

Were the atheoi atheists? Religious scepticism and Greek polytheism

It is a truism that there are few exact ancient equivalents to the modern atheist, who denies all and any possible supernatural power. To reach that position, one has to have both a rigid, identifiable line of differentiation between the natural and the supernatural, and a more or less coherent concept of the divine. Neither of these was fully available in ancient Greek polytheism. Nevertheless, I argue in this paper, the Greeks did have a firm concept of the distinctiveness of the sphere of contact between human and divine, a sphere that they named ta theia (‘the divine things’); and once we grasp that point, we can offer a more robust conceptualisation of what ancient Greek ‘atheism’ was, namely a denial not so much of ‘gods’ as of ta theia.

Jan N. Bremmer, Groningen, Netherlands

Atheism in Greek Tragedy and Its Audience

The recent appearance of Tim Whitmarsh’s book Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World (2015) and the massive 2017 Ghent dissertation by Alexander Meert, Positive Atheism in Antiquity: A Social and Philosophical Analysis (500 BC – 200 AD = https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/8513548/file/8513552.pdf2016: supervised by Peter Van Nuffelen), invite a new look at the evidence of the fifth century BC in Athens, our most important, albeit perhaps not only source for early scepticism, even perhaps atheism. In my contribution I will first take a fresh look at the problem of belief in ancient Greece. Recent scholarship has advanced several arguments to accept belief as an important aspect of Greek religion, others have distinguished between a low-intensity and a high-intensity belief, and again others have totally rejected the usefulness of the concept of belief for ancient Greece. Second, I will look at various passages in Greek tragedy that suggest an atheistic current in late fifth-century Athens. I will pay attention to these passages and look especially at their place in the tragedy and their speakers. Finally, I will briefly analyse two famous scandals, that of the profanation of the Mysteries and the mutilation of the Herms, which have long been interpreted as signs of irreligiosity in Athens.
I will weigh these arguments but, especially will connect these scandals with the sentiments in tragedy. In conclusion, I will investigate to what extent we can speak of skeptics and believers in classical Greece.

CV and Key Publications:
His main recent monographs are: Greek Religion & Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East (Leiden, 2008), The Rise of Christianity through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack and Rodney Stark (Groningen, 2010), Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World (Berlin and Boston, 2014) and Maidens, Magic and Martyrs in Early Christianity: Collected Essays I (Tübingen, 2017).

Janet Downie, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

Truth, Credibility and Coherence in Aelius Aristides’ Prose Hymns

Aelius Aristides, a Greek rhetorician of the second century, is well known to modern scholars for his devotion to the healing god Asclepius. Because he wrote extensively about his attachment to Asclepius, and about other gods of the Greco-Roman tradition, Aristides offers a valuable pagan perspective on the relationship between belief and skepticism in this period. Aristides’ personal investment in the traditional Greco-Roman gods is such that it is difficult to regard him as anything other than a “believer,” and when he writes about the gods he embraces the subject with conviction. Yet this is not a matter of naïve religiosity – nor is it, I think, a rhetorical pose.

In this paper, focusing on two of his prose hymns, I argue that Aristides offers an oblique perspective on the notion of belief. In the prologue to his hymn To Sarapis, Aristides proposes his own set of criteria for talking about the gods: truth, credibility and coherence (Or. 45.1). I argue that it is his understanding of the relationship among these three terms – none of which corresponds, precisely, to our notions of belief and skepticism – that guides his assessment and presentation of the pagan gods, both here and in his other hymns. In the second part of the paper I present as an example a passage from his Corinthian Oration: To Poseidon (Or. 46), in which he discusses the relationship between Poseidon and Ino-Leucothea. Keeping in view the principles he sets out in the Hymn to Sarapis, I argue that Aristides gives this mythological episode a prominent place in his hymn for personal reasons, and that he rewrites the story to satisfy the intellectual challenge of his inner skeptic.

CV and Key Publications:
Janet Downie is Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. She specializes in Greek, and her research focuses on literature of the Roman imperial period. She is the author of At the Limits of Art: A Literary Reading of Aelius Aristides’ Hieroi Logoi (Oxford 2013) and has published articles on a range of texts and authors of the imperial period including Philostratus (“Palamedes and the Wisdom of India in Philostratus' Life of Apollonius of Tyana.” Mouseion. Volume 13.1 (2016): 65-84) and Artemidorus (“Narrative and Divination: Artemidorus and Aelius Aristides.” Archiv für Religionsgeschichte 15.1 (2013): 97-116). She has an essay on Aristides’ prose hymns in a forthcoming volume in the SAPERE series (“Literarischer Götterpreis zu Zeiten Lukians: Die Götterhymnen des Aelius Aristides.”
In Lukian, Dialogi Deorum, edited by F. Berdozzo and H.-G. Nesselrath. SAPERE. Mohr Siebeck), and is currently working on a book project on the perception and description of the landscapes of Asia Minor in imperial literature.

**Kai Trampedach, Heidelberg, Germany**

*Plutarch als Apologet des Orakels von Delphi*


In meinem Beitrag möchte ich die Antworten auf diese Fragen, die in den delphischen Dialogen Plutarchs gegeben werden, mit Befunden der klassischen Zeit konfrontieren, um besser einschätzen zu können, aus welchen Quellen sich Unglaube und Skepsis speisen und welche Argumente Plutarch als Apologet des Orakels von Delphi dagegen und gegen die eigenen inneren Zweifel aufbieten konnte.

**CV and Key Publications:**

“Believe the Lie”: The Letters of Paul, Trust, and the Mask of Authenticity

Paul’s genuine letters address people (οἱ πιστεύοντες) who trust, with varying degrees of confidence, his message about the past, the present, and the future (1 Thess 1:6–10). Paul describes a person—Jesus—whom the letter recipients never met, a place few (if any!) have visited (Jerusalem), and events they did not witness (e.g., crucifixion [1 Cor 1:23]). Paul’s motives (1 Thess 2:3–8) and his message were impugned (perhaps rightly? [cf. Rom 3:7; 2 Cor 12:16–17]). In response, Paul famously avers, “I am telling the truth in Christ; I am not lying” (Rom 9:1; cf. 2 Cor 11:31; Gal 1:20). Separated by distance, Paul defends himself and the veracity of his message with letters. These documents often carry an explicit affirmation of genuineness: marks from Paul’s own hand (1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; Phlm 19). These signs of authenticity were copied by those who wrote in Paul’s name to secure the trust of readers: “The greeting is from Paul, in my own hand, which is the mark of authenticity in every letter. This is my handwriting” (2 Thess 3:17; cf. Col 4:18). The author of 2 Thessalonians composed, in the words of Wilhelm Wrede, eine Fälschung (a forgery), a carefully crafted document that successfully concealed its true origin for centuries. The writer, wearing the mask of “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,” secured the trust of readers in order to achieve a particular rhetorical goal, recrafting of Paul’s imminent eschatology in 1 Thessalonians. Remarkably, the unidentified writer crafts a “false letter” (ψευδής ἐπιστολή)—“a deluding influence” [ἐνέργεια πλάνη; cf. 2 Thess 2:11]—while warning about possible deception (2 Thess 2:3). In fact, the activity of the author in crafting 2 Thessalonians mirrors the depiction of the two divine actors, σατανᾶς and θεός, as dueling eschatological deceivers. The former effects false signs and wonders (2 Thess 2:9–10); the latter causes people to trust falsehood (2 Thess 2:11). Both the author and his θεός need a credulous populace “to believe the lie.”

CV and Key Publications:

MA University of Chicago, Department of New Testament and Early Christian Literature, Fall 2007

Ephesus as a Religious Center under the Principate. Editor with A. Black and C. Thomas. WUNT. Mohr Siebeck, Forthcoming.


“Paul and the Jaws of Death (1 Cor 15:32): Animals and the Pathology of Illness.” In Ephesus as a Religious Center under the Principate. Edited by A. Black, C. Thomas, and T. Thompson. WUNT. Mohr Siebeck, Forthcoming.


Belief and Scepticism in Emperor Cult? The case study of Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis

Seneca’s satire *Apocolocyntosis* is a highly disputed and debatable manuscript. Regarding emperor cult, Seneca’s text is far from being easy to interpret. Despite this caveat, this piece of Neronian literature, which denies the divinity of emperor Claudius in a satirical form (Sen. Apocol. 11, 3: “God! Who will worship this god, who will believe him?”) is one of the rare documents that can give us a glimpse of how emperor cult was dealt with – at least by some members of the Roman elite.

The paper takes the Senecan text as a starting point for questioning whether the concept of belief and scepticism helps to understand the cults for living or deceased rulers and the reactions to them. For quite a long time ancient historians understood the phenomenon of ruler cult rather as “Loyalitätsreligion”, an instrument of imperial policy that could be manipulated in whatever direction purposes of the central authority might require. Ruler cult was not seen as a “true religion”, not a confession, but rather a mirror of political reality. This idea was later replaced by a rather cultural view that asked for ritual, function and social practice in ruler cult. “Believe” as an individual issue again was of no importance. Seneca seemed to prove ancient historians right. In contrast, the objective of my paper is to show that there was an individual perspective in ruler cult. “Believe” and even “scepticism” can be shown as parameters of the ancient discourse on ruler cult and I will present this concept by re-evaluating the rare examples of texts, inscriptions and images. Finally I am going to put these ideas in the broader context of individual approaches to Greek and Roman religion.

CV and Key Publications:
Babett Edelmann-Singer studied History and German Philology in Regensburg and Leicester; 2001 Research Stay in Rome at Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI), 2005 PhD; 2005-2014 Junior Lecturer at Regensburg University, 2013 Habilitation, Oberassistentin in Regensburg, since 2014 Deputy Professor in Erlangen-Nuremberg and Regensburg, Visiting Professor at the Universities of Osnabrück and Passau. Her research areas are Greek and Roman Religion and Ruler Cult, History of the Roman Provinces in the Greek East, Greek Epigraphy, History and Culture of the Early Roman Empire.


Benjamin Schliesser, Zürich, Switzerland

Johannine Literature

The Gospel of John places Jesus’s encounter with “Doubting Thomas” (John 20:24-29) right before its meta-textual final statement on faith (John 20:30-31). Thus, “doubt” and “faith receive a prominent place in the Fourth Gospel. My paper has three parts: First, I sketch, in broad strokes, the captivating early history of interpretation of this Johannine episode. Second, I argue in line with Late Antique and Medieval exegesis and against the overwhelming majority of current interpretation that according to the narrative logic of the implicit author Thomas actually touched Jesus in order to test his faith. Third, I describe the role and the correlation of skepticism and faith in John’s Gospel and, more generally, in the early Christian identity discourse: If faith is the critical boundary marker of the emerging Christian communities, marking them off from those outside – where is the place of doubt and skepticism?

CV and Key Publications:
Benjamin Schliesser studied theology in Tübingen, Glasgow and Pasadena; 2006 Ph.D.; 2010-2016 Oberassistent in Zürich; since 2016 extraordinary professor for New Testament at the University of Bern.

Loukianos atheos? Humor and Religious Doubt in Lucian of Samosata

Many pre-modern scholars viewed Lucian of Samosata as a bona fide atheist (Suda, scholia), and their depiction shaped Lucianic reception for centuries to come. Since the 1980s alternative interpretations of the author's stance towards religion have come to the fore, and in current scholarship he is understood alternately as holding skeptic, agnostic, or even pious views. This paper will diverge from these biographical attempts to characterise Lucian's own religious attitude, which in fact remains hidden behind his sophisticated authorial masks, to investigate instead how the orator's diverse audience might have responded to his seemingly irreverent humor.

'Atheists' as such occur infrequently in Lucian. The term is used by the charlatan prophet Alexander of his enemies, but can also be applied, in fact, to another charlatan prophet himself: Peregrinus. More interesting than the term atheos are various interlocutors in Lucian's dialogues that explicitly critique aspects of ancient religion. This paper reviews four such characters: the anonymous speaker of On Sacrifices, Demonax in Life of Demonax, Cyniscus in Zeus Refuted, and Damis in Zeus the Tragic Actor. I will argue that in these pieces skeptical attitudes towards religion are displayed, yet not necessarily confirmed. Lucian's destabilising humor prevents a straightforward interpretation. Cyniscus, it seems, is ridiculed just as much as Zeus. The author allows audiences to explore their religious doubts through laughter, but ultimately leaves them to make up their own minds about the gods.

CV and Key Publications:
Inger Kuin works as a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer in the Ancient History Department at the University of Groningen. She received a PhD in Classics from New York University in 2015 for her dissertation on religion and humor in Lucian of Samosata. Inger has published on Lucian and 'otherness', and has written editions of a Homeric papyrus and several Latin funerary inscriptions. She has journal articles forthcoming on Strabo and the Mithridatic Wars, on Sulla's sack of Athens, and on double-sided funerary epitaphs. Inger is also working on a book based on her dissertation, titled Laughing With the Gods: Lucian and the Comic in Ancient Religious Experience. (Full CV available at www.rug.academia.edu/IngerKuin)