



HAL
open science

What's in a Divine Name? Religious Systems and Human Agency in the Ancient Mediterranean. Introduction

Sylvain Lebreton, Christophe Nihan

► **To cite this version:**

Sylvain Lebreton, Christophe Nihan. What's in a Divine Name? Religious Systems and Human Agency in the Ancient Mediterranean. Introduction. Alaya Palamidis; Corinne Bonnet. What's in a Divine Name? Religious Systems and Human Agency in the Ancient Mediterranean, De Gruyter, pp.141-146, 2024, 9783111326276. 10.1515/9783111326511-008 . hal-04490520

HAL Id: hal-04490520

<https://hal.science/hal-04490520>

Submitted on 5 Mar 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Introduction

When dealing with divine onomastics, the problem of the relationship between mononymy and polyonymy as well as its implications on the broader issue of the unity and diversity of the divine – labelled here as the “One and Many” issue – appears to be a *passage obligé*, since names are, along with images, one of the most direct ways to address this question. Given that polyonymy is a usual feature of ancient deities, an obvious dialectic emerges: does a god have unicity despite his polyonymy on the one hand, and is there divine diversity despite onomastic similarity or equivalence on the other? And subsequently: how did ancient people cope with these issues?

Coping with the gods is precisely the title of Henk Versnel’s 2011 monograph – an important, albeit provocative, milestone in the One and Many controversy. In this book, in the continuity of his previous works, Versnel advocates the inconsistency of ancient Greek religion by emphasising the contradictions between different figures of the same deity. Among other examples, he evokes the paradigmatic case of the three Zeuses in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, in which the Athenian author and protagonist is protected by Zeus Basileus (King) and by Zeus Soter (Saviour), but has Zeus Meilichios (The-mild-one) against him. It is thus striking that Jean-Pierre Vernant, in the mid-1960s, used precisely the same case study to introduce his concept of *puissance divine* which Versnel explicitly intends to counteract.¹ This is perhaps the reason why the One and Many debate remains so tenaciously controversial: being a very theoretical issue, it is highly sensitive to the ideological anchorage of scholars, be it conscious or not. If we move from theory to actual historical contexts, things start to look a bit different. Coping with the gods in ancient societies often implies the use of *bricolage*. This concept has of course been borrowed from *La Pensée sauvage*, in which Claude Lévi-Strauss defines this *bricolage* as the combination of real as well as virtual elements taken from a limited and heteroclitite repertoire.² Following Lévi-Strauss, we understand, albeit in a broader sense, this *bricolage* as an invitation to see onomastic configurations as complex objects which cannot be understood without their contexts of use. This implies paying careful attention to their function in these contexts, without excluding the possibility of other levels of reference (history, literature, poetry, erudition . . .) or a certain diachronic complexity.

Among the many examples available, an inscription from 3rd century CE Bithynia shows how the articulation between unity and plurality could be expressed and how

¹ Versnel 2011, 62–63. Vernant [1965] 1990, 363, note 23 and 1974, 110. See also Brulé 1998, 19; Parker 2003, 182; Pailler 2011. In fact, the articulation of Xenophon’s three Zeuses is consistent if we take a closer look at the cultic as well as narrative framework in which they take place (Lebreton, *forthcoming*).

² Lévi-Strauss 1962, esp. 26–32 for *bricolage*.

the One and Many dialectic was obviously not a problem in day-to-day cultural practice. This dedication from the region of Nikaia is addressed to Zeus Bronton (Thundering) and Zeus Karpodotes (Giver-of-fruit) and Zeus Eucharistos (Gracious) by a family group who go on to state that they erected the altar and a (single) bust for the god (*ho theos*).³ Here, therefore, three functionally adjacent Zeuses are effortlessly merged into a single deity without any problem, obviously. Yet, in other documents, the articulation between the one and the many is not so fluid, as in the case of this 1st-century CE Athenian altar of Apollo with many epithets, namely Aguius Prostatarios Patroos Puthios Klaros Panionios.⁴ Some of these onomastic attributes are functionally adjacent, thus understandable as a precise declination of the same function: Aguius, “Of-the-streets”, that is to say at the doors, is the topic counterpart of the Prostatarios, “Who-stands-before”, thus “Protector”; but others pertain to different “great” sanctuaries (Delphi and Klaros), and thus point to different Apollos. Yet all of them are associated with only one image, depicting the god standing and leaning his left hand on a cithara. Thus, one or many? That is a thousand-drachmae question.

Similar questions regarding the relations between the divine names associated with one deity have been asked from the perspective of Western Asian and Egyptian materials, most recently by scholars like Mark Smith, Spencer Allen, and others.⁵ We should note, however, that both the nature of the Western Asian sources and the methodological and epistemological coordinates of this discussion are clearly distinct. In particular, these studies should caution us against the notion that concepts of “polytheism” developed in the study of ancient Greek religion can be transposed straightforwardly to the Western Asian world. In many instances, we see tendencies at work that escape any simplistic division between “polytheism” and “monotheism”, as Hornung, for instance, had already remarked in the case of ancient Egyptian religion. Nonetheless, taking this caveat into account, the phenomenon of divine polyonymy and the relation between one deity and its many names in the Western Asian world presents several features which encourage comparison with Greek and other Mediterranean evidence.

Thus, the One and Many issue can still be a relevant tool in order to investigate ancient conceptions of the divine. Several sub-issues are at stake: the question of shared and exclusive elements in onomastic sequences and the networks they create; the application of different elements to the same theonym; the combination of several theonyms in complex onomastic sequences; the use of the same onomastic element to identify gods distant in space or time; the articulation between “individualised” divine names and divine communities. And finally, the question of how to combine the emic

3 *I.Mus. Iznik* 1085 (Yumaklı, 3rd c. CE) = *DB MAP* S#17187: Διὶ Βροντώτι καὶ Διὶ Καρ|ποδότῃ καὶ Διὶ Εὐ|χαρίστῳ (l. 2–4); τὸν | βωμὸν σὺν τῇ προ|τομῇ εὐχῆς χάριν τῷ | θεῷ ἀνεστήσαμεν (l. 10–13).

4 *IG II³* 4, 1764 = *DB MAP* S#5059: ἀγαθῆι [τύχηι] | Ἀπόλλωνος Ἀγυιέως Προστατηρί[ου] | Πατρῶου Πυθίου Κλαρίου Πανωνίου. On the iconography, see Marcadé 1977, 403–406 and fig. 12–14.

5 Smith 2012; Smith 2016, 71–98; Allen 2015. For Egypt, see Hornung [1971] 2005⁶; Assmann 1993.

and pragmatic local scale of actors practicing a specific cult, and our etic and over-arching vision.

These and other related questions have been addressed in the four contributions within this section, by Spencer Allen, Herbert Niehr, Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge and Clarisse Prêtre. All four papers present case studies on the relationship between unicity and multiplicity in the representation of a given deity (set): the goddess Ishtar in Assyria (Spencer Allen); the god Hadad in Syria (Herbert Niehr); the goddess Demeter, especially under her name “Thesmophoros” (Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge), and the healing deities in Greece (Clarisse Prêtre). It becomes immediately obvious that there are important differences not only in the cultural contexts addressed, but also in the sources used and the types of deities discussed. Nonetheless, several converging trends do seem to emerge from these papers. We would like to point out four aspects in particular, although the list is certainly not exhaustive.

Firstly, all four papers highlight, albeit in different manners, the way in which the discussion on the relation between unicity and multiplicity in the use of divine names is inevitably framed by the evidence we possess. Niehr concludes his paper by emphasising that all the sources we have regarding the cult of Hadad in first-millennium Syria point either to the royal cult or the cult of local elites, whereas we know nothing about the worship of this god in other segments of the population. Somewhat similarly, Allen begins his paper by noting the importance of privileging what he calls “non-speculative” documents when attempting to understand the distinctive character of localised forms of the goddess Ishtar. Pirenne-Delforge, for her part, reflects on the methodological problems raised by using hexametric poetry when trying to reconstruct the names of the goddess in ancient Greek contexts. Finally, Prêtre’s paper highlights the tension between the categorisation of onomastic attributes (cult epithets vs. bare explanatory qualifications) and the diversity of sources (epigraphy vs. literature, and within the latter, prose vs. poetry). The point made here, that sources inevitably frame our understanding of the functioning of key issues in the study of ancient religions, such as polyonymy, is certainly not new and its importance should perhaps not be overrated. Nonetheless, the question of the limits imposed by our sources remains an important one, even more so when we are engaged in a comparative enterprise: all four papers use sources that belong to different genres and different contexts of usage which, in turn, questions the extent to which a phenomenon like polyonymy in the cult of Ishtar, Demeter, Greek healing deities and Hadad can effectively be compared.

Secondly, all four papers point to broader social logics underlying the relationship between a deity and the names it receives. In Assyria, the gradual identification of local goddesses to a localised form of the goddess Ishtar, as in the case of Ishtar of Nineveh and Ishtar of Arbela, corresponds in part to the development of the Assyrian empire. It corresponds, therefore, to a form of centralisation, in which local deities are subsumed into a supra-regional classification while at the same time retaining their local identity. As Niehr expressly notes at the onset of his paper, a similar process of centralisation is not seen in the case of Syria and Anatolia, where we instead

find a complex mosaic of small kingdoms with cultic centres usually located in the capitals, but sometimes elsewhere as well. Consequently, as Niehr observes, “we must reckon with a diversity of local cults of the storm-god Hadad in Aramean Syria and Anatolia”. Nonetheless, these local cults appear to have been influenced by major central cults, one in Aleppo, the other in Guzana. In this regard, the cult of Hadad also appears to be a multi-layered phenomenon with local, regional and supra-regional components, although the coordinates are clearly different from Assyria. Similar questions can be raised regarding the cult of Demeter and the way in which the epithets of Demeter in the Homeric hymn attest to a mixture of highly localised and more broadly shared names for the goddess. Healing deities, and especially Asklepios, are also subject to similar multi-scale rationales: several cases of combined toponymic and functional attributes can be seen as an onomastic transcription of attributes referring to the widespread healing power of the god, within the framework of the spread of his cults throughout the Greek world in the 4th century BCE (and beyond). In short: the relationship between unicity and multiplicity in the names of a given deity is intrinsically related to the way in which local, regional and supra-regional levels were articulated in a given society and can only be understood against that background.

Thirdly, the four papers also raise an interesting set of questions regarding the way in which the relationship between unicity and multiplicity was effectively articulated by local practitioners. This point is expressly raised by Niehr in his paper when, in his final comments, he observes that, from the perspective of the historian, most of the cults of Hadad in Anatolia and Syria can be traced to one of two “prototypes” attested at Aleppo and Guzana, but that there is very little evidence that this genealogy was apparent to the local worshippers; they were much more concerned with the worship of the local form of Hadad. This point is somewhat consistent with the argument made by Allen in his paper where he shows that, despite the attempts made to interpret local goddesses as forms of the goddess “Ishtar”, in several contexts the localised designation of the goddess was nonetheless preserved and appeared to have been an important aspect of local worship. As Allen aptly comments, it seems that in such cases “the toponymic element is more important than the name Ištar”. In Greece, the situation is somewhat different because the “panhellenic” cultic and poetic tradition gradually provided a shared repertoire of names for a given deity, which could then be used in various local contexts. Even so, there are several instances in which divine names in epigraphic sources point to local forms of the cult of a deity which have no equivalent in poetic or other sources. In short, these observations remind us that there is sometimes a distance between local cults, on the one hand, and theological systems reflecting on the many names associated with a specific deity, on the other. For local cults, the existence (or non-existence) of such systems was not necessarily relevant, as the example of Hadad in Syria and Anatolia clarifies.

Fourthly, and lastly, all four papers also provide materials that force us to complexify the significance of the phenomenon of divine polyonymy in Antiquity. On the one

hand, the paper by Pirenne-Delforge provides a clear example of a multiplicity of divine names associated to a goddess, Demeter, which however appear to circle around a relatively limited number of domains and functions related to that same goddess: agrarian production, the underworld and women, to mention the most prominent ones. One could say, in this regard, that a number of the epithets given to Demeter are variations of sorts built around some key domains and functions of the goddess. This case is made even more clear by Prêtre in her chapter, where she argues that the various onomastic elements associated with Asklepios point nonetheless to a fairly mono-functional profile of the god, who is virtually always associated with healing. A similar point could be made with regard to Egyptian evidence, since in hymns and other documents we find endless lists of divine names which do not all correspond to a specific function but rather are elaborate variations on a number of basic themes associated with that deity.⁶ On the other hand, the paper by Niehr provides an equally clear example of the opposite phenomenon, namely, references to localised forms of the cult of Hadad in various sources which, however, are not associated with a consistent epithet system. In several instances, the god is simply referred to as “Hadad”, without any further epithet, or “this Hadad”, as in the Panamuwa inscription (line 16), a designation which obviously refers to the local god Hadad. Furthermore, even in those instances where the name of the god is accompanied by some sort of predicate, there is hardly any consistency in the various constructions that we encounter. It is here, perhaps, that the concept of *bricolage* introduced by Lévi-Strauss could be most helpful: there is really no fixed system for epithets and, actually, the fact that we should speak of multiple divine names is even dubious itself. Rather, what we see are various ways to express some kind of local and personal relation to the deity, which can take very different forms depending on the dedicant. To put it somewhat provocatively, one could say that polyonymy is not always a marker of the inherent multiplicity associated with the gods in ancient polytheistic societies, and that conversely such multiplicity in a given god was not always expressed through polyonymy.

Bibliography

- Allen, Spencer L. (2015), *The Splintered Divine: A Study of Istar, Baal, and Yahweh Divine Names and Divine Multiplicity in the Ancient Near East*, Boston / Berlin / Munich.
- Assmann, Jan (1993), *Monotheismus und Kosmotheismus: ägyptische Formen eines «Denkens des Einen» und ihre europäische Rezeptionsgeschichte*, Heidelberg.
- Brulé, Pierre (1998), “Le langage des épicleses dans le polythéisme hellénique”, in: *Kernos* 11, 13–34.
- Hornung, Erik [1971] (2005⁶), *Der Eine und die Vielen: Altägyptische Götterwelt*, Darmstadt.
- Lebreton, Sylvain (forthcoming), *Zeus d’Athènes. Polythéisme et paysages onomastiques*, Liège.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1962), *La pensée sauvage*, Paris.

⁶ Some Greek texts, such as the so-called *Orphic Hymns*, present similar features.

- Marcadé, Jean (1977), "Apollon « mitréphoros »", in: *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique Supplément* 4, 389–408.
- Pailler, Jean-Marie (2011), "Zeus ex machina. Le Meilichios ou l'oubli de la troisième fonction. *Quaestiunculae Dumezilianae* 2", in: *Pallas* 85, 43–57.
- Parker, Robert (2003), "The problem of the Greek cult epithet", in: *Opuscula Atheniensi* 28, 173–183.
- Smith, Mark S. (2012), "The Problem of the God and His Manifestations: The Case of the Baals at Ugarit, with Implications for Yahweh of Various Locales", in: Aaron Schart / Jutta Krispenz (eds.), *Die Stadt im Zwölfprophetenbuch*, Berlin / Boston, 205–250.
- Smith, Mark S. (2016), *Where the Gods Are. Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World*, New Haven.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre [1965] (1990), *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs. Études de psychologie historique*, Paris.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre (1974), "La société des dieux", in: *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, 103–120.
- Versnel, Hendrik Simon (2011), *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, Leiden / Boston.