THE SACRAL KINGSHIP

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CENTRAL THEME
OF THE VIIIth INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS
(ROME, APRIL 1955)

Published with the help
of the *Giunta Centrale per gli Studi Storici,* Rome

LEIDEN
E. J. BRILL
1959

THE EVIDENCE FOR DIVINE KINGS IN GREECE

BY

H. J. ROSE

St. Andrews

I need not spend much time defining a "divine" or as I sometimes say a "Frazerian" king. He is a phenomenon common to many parts of the world and not a few centuries of man's history, and his characteristics are, that he is an incarnate god, that in consequence he can beneficially affect the life of his people, especially by bringing rain and fine weather as desired, that his powers depend upon his bodily vigour, and that in consequence his reign is limited, for either after a fixed period or on the approach of old age he is really or in a ceremonial pretence put to death, or at all events deposed, and his godhead with the concomitant earthly sovranty passes to a younger man. The question is, not whether such kings exist or have existed, for Frazer has proved beyond question that they do, or have done, but simply whether there is any sufficient reason for supposing that they were to be found at any time in classical Greece. If we can find kings who were gods, or who were notable weather-magicians by virtue of their office, or who were not allowed to reign longer than a certain period, we shall be obliged to answer more or less decidedly in the affirmative. If we can find none of these appurtenances to Greek royalty, we must say that either there were never any such kings there, or all trace of them has disappeared from our documents.

The most thorough-going and by far the most learned defence of the proposition that they did exist is found in that gigantic work of the late Prof. A. B. Cook which is entitled simply *Zeus*. I therefore take most of my material from it, feeling that if Cook's case for divine kings in Greece proves unsatisfactory, no other is likely to win favour before any impartial jury. For completeness' sake, I begin by saying a word about the most noteworthy pre-Hellenic kings, those of Minoan Crete. We have abundant archaeological evidence that a Minoan king

was a very important person; the magnificence of his palace shows that. We also know that the palace contained a chapel full of sacred emblems and the like. But further, archaeology does not go. We do not, for instance, find in Minoan art any scene which clearly shows us what Oriental art often displays, the king in company with gods, or even sacrificing to them, or to the great and important goddesses whom the Minoans seem to have worshipped. The one piece of evidence which suggests that Crete may have known divine kings is in the *Odyssey*, where a well-known and often quoted passage tells us that Minos was king for nine years and was the speech-mate of great Zeus (τ 178-79). This may mean that his reign was limited and that he was in some sense divine; it may equally well mean that he was a priest-king in close connection with, presumably, the local "Zeus", the year-god, as he seems to have been, of whose cult we know about enough to tantalise us. In any case, it does not tell us anything about Greek kings proper.

Passing then to them, and trusting for our information partly to surviving kingships in historical times, such as those of Sparta, partly to what Epic and saga generally have to tell us of vanished sovranties, we find at once that kings had, at least in some cases, priestly functions, hence e.g., the priesthoods held by the Spartan kings, and the survival at Athens, not indeed of a real king, but of an annual magistrate who bore the title of king and had sacerdotal duties among others. In particular, his wife took part in the remarkable sacred marriage with Dionysos at the Anthesteria ([Dem.] lix, 76, Arist., Ἀθ. Πολ., 3,5). But as every householder had priestly functions of a kind in his family worship, and priesthood was not a separate status in Greece, but an office which practically any citizen not specially disqualified might fill, this gets us no nearer a divine king. We can only say that when there were kings at Athens, they had not only secular but sacred functions, which is about equivalent to saying that they were Greek magistrates. And if we pass from Athens to Elis and consider the tragic tale of Salmoneus and how he pretended to be Zeus and made imitation thunder and lightning until a real thunderbolt smote him for his presumption, although it has long been recognised that behind the moral legend there lies some ancient piece of weather-magic, nothing in the tradition hints that Salmoneus and no one else had by virtue of his sovranty the right to perform such magic, still less that he had aught of divinity in

his person. The rite was carried out *pro populo*, as a Roman would say; priests who were no kings performed weather-magic on as large a scale for sundry communities (Fiedler, *Antiker Wetterzauber*, p. 13 ff. for exx.), and I have already mentioned that Greek kings had priestly functions. A better example, in the sense of being a rather nearer approach to a Frazerian king, is again given in the Odyssey (τ 109 ff.) in the famous description of the virtuous and godfearing monarch under whom the people prosper and earth and sea yield their fruits abundantly, ἐξ εὐηγεσίης "because of his good leadership", if that and not εὐεργεσίης is the right reading. But here again, the poet insists on the piety and justice of the king, and it is a commonplace that the gods reward such conduct. If one evil man can harm a whole city (Hesiod, *W.D.* 240), it is only fair that one good man, in a position to enforce just and pious dealings in the rest, should bring down the benediction of the gods he zealously worships.

Not much, I think, can be made of sundry legends to the effect that this or that king of old days was called by a divine title. It is to be noted that such stories mostly are of Hellenistic date, that is, of a time when the deifying of kings was a commonplace, often hardly more than a piece of formal loyalty. Let us examine one or two. Periphas, of whose legend Cook makes a great deal (*Zeus* II, p. 1121 ff.), we know only from Antoninus Liberalis 6, who presumably got his information either from Boios, the source of the preceding and following items, or from some such author as Nikandros, therefore from a Hellenistic source. Ovid knows of the story, but just mentions it in passing, *Met.* vii, 399-400; again his source is very likely to be Alexandrian. Periphas then was, so to speak, a pre-Adamite king, for he was so very ancient that Kekrops had not yet been produced from the Earth. He was a pattern of justice and also extremely devoted to the worship of Apollo. His loving and admiring subjects made over to him the festivals and some at least of the titles of Zeus (the shadow of Euhemeros lurks somewhere in the background of this), and the real Zeus was minded to stop this impiety with a thunderbolt. However, at the instance of Apollo he compromised by turning Periphas into an eagle and his wife Phene into the bird of that name, a sort of vulture or lammergeyer, which is a bird of good omen to men. Now a king whose name means something like Very Brilliant and who ends by passing into the well-known Minoan avatar of a bird has certainly some claim to be

considered divine, if the story really goes back to any old tradition. But the connection is, to my mind, anything but Frazerian. So far from seeing a divine king in Periphas, I incline rather to suppose him a faded god whose cult was later absorbed by that of Zeus or perhaps of Apollo. All conjectures, however, must be uncertain, for we have nothing but the myth, no trace of this Periphas surviving in cult.

I have next to consider the fairly long list of figures, ranging, roughly, from Agamemnon to Asklepios, to whose names that of Zeus is reported on one authority or another to have been appended. For these I see no one explanation. Some probably are due to syncretism. For example, since Zeus is (among other titles) Soter and Soter is also a favourite title of Asklepios, I see no reason why the minor, but enormously popular god should not have been on occasion identified with the greater one. It makes no difference whether we assume Asklepios to have been originally a god or, what I consider more probable, a hero. In the former case we may compare Zeus Meilichios, certainly chthonian (like Asklepios) and certainly called Zeus wherever he was worshipped, in Greece and out of it. I would here remember that according to Aeschylus, for instance (*Supp.* 230-31) there is another Zeus in the lower world who judges men's sins after their death. The father of gods and men was, I think, early grown so great that, like the Hebrew Yahweh, the heaven of heavens could not contain him and his power spread to the lower world, where indeed, as art and literature alike testify, his grim brother Hades much resembled him in features: *uoltus est illi Iouis sed fulminantis* (Sen., *H. F.* 724-25). It would be easier still for the sky-god, whose titles include that of Georgos, to take within his scope a chthonian whose epithet of "kindly" suggests that he could and did bestow on men the benefits of the earth's increase. If on the other hand Asklepios was a hero to begin with, he was not the only one to have so great a title attached to him. Agamemnon, with much less reason, got the same honorific epithet in Hellenistic days; our first intimation of it is in Lykophron (*Alex.* 335, 1124, 1369) and Staphylos (*ap. Clem. Alex., Prot.* p. 28, 17-18 Stählin). How this came about, I do not know. If we had any real reason to suppose that early Greek kings were seriously taken to be divine (not merely "honoured even as a god", as Homer repeatedly says), the matter would be quite clear, of course, and that is how the supporters of that view do explain it. But this hypothesis does not account for the late date of our tes-

timonies, which if it were correct ought to be early and supported by writers less open to the suspicion of judging other kings by the frequently deified Ptolemies than the historian and poet in question. But give their evidence its fullest possible weight; suppose that Zeus-Agamemnon not only was worshipped, as both Staphylos and Lykophron say, in Sparta, but had been worshipped there for centuries when they wrote; I still have never been convinced of the falsity of a suggestion I made many years ago (*C.R.* xxxv, pp. 147-59) that as the conception of Zeus broadened and gained in majesty in superior minds, the vulgar tended to make the name lose definite content and become little more than an epithet meaning something like "superhuman", "non-human", or the like. But be that as it may; our earliest evidence of how kings were regarded, written in days when kings still had real power and were highly honoured, gives us no authority whatever for supposing that they were then considered divine, nor that they ever had been.

And here I would pass to a recurrent fallacy, as it seems to me, which the spread of anthropological knowledge has not yet eradicated from all classical scholars, a naïve misapplication of the Comparative Method. All civilised peoples have, beyond doubt, a savage past; from this truth it has been, and for some still is, far too easy to go on to the tacit, even unconscious, assumption that all civilised peoples have in their past any and every savage custom or belief which can be shown to exist, or lately to have existed, among existing backward cultures. A rather glaring instance is the readiness which is still shown in some quarters to assume the former existence of totemism for districts, such as Europe, from which there can be produced no sort of proof that it was ever in vogue. In like manner there have been and still are researchers, by no means lacking in either erudition or ingenuity, who blithely assume for Greece the former existence, and consequently the more or less fossilised survival, of practices which belong not only to a much lower level of culture than the classical Hellenic but also to a kind of culture the existence of which anywhere in the Greek area at any time is a thing to be cogently demonstrated, not lightly assumed. I quote as an example a recent work (it appeared in 1944 as one of the publications of the Faculty of Philosophy at Liège), by Marie Delcourt, entitled *Oedipe ou la légende du conquérant*. This work explains Oidipus as a "ritual" hero, an embodiment of a

method of succession to kingship supposed once to have existed on Greek soil, which among other things involved the killing of the old king by the new, *le rite de la succession par meurtre*, as the author calls it. We are to suppose, that is, not only that there once was such a rite in Greece, which is the whole question at issue, but furthermore, that some vague memory of it survived long enough to colour the existing tales. But if we look at our material, we do indeed find stories of the deaths of kings, sometimes at the hands of their successors, but no hint that these were the result of anything but conquest or unscrupulous ambition or, as in the case of the death of Laios, a chance quarrel. To allow that now and then, as old stories assert, A killed B and took his throne is to assume what other evidence justifies us in supposing, that in pre-classical Greece there were times of disturbance and that στάσις was no more an unknown phenomenon then than it was in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., or in much more recent days. I can see no grounds for making any further assumption, certainly not for assuming sociological and religious practices totally foreign to everything in historical Greece of which we have clear proof. Nor am I at all impressed by statements, perfectly credible in themselves, to the effect that now and then an old king, feeling incapable of carrying out his ordinary secular duties in peace and especially in war, retired in favour of a younger man, like Laertes in the *Odyssey* and Kadmos in the *Bacchae*. It surely needs no belief in the divinity of kings to hold that a vigorous prince in his thirties or so will make a more efficient head of a little community liable to be at war any moment than one weakened by the oncoming of old age. That the old king was in no way obliged to retire is clear enough from the example of Nestor, who evidently still held the reins of government in his own hands when perhaps seventy years old or thereabouts, although when it came to actual fighting he could do no more than appear on the field to encourage the rest, and now and then to give them the dangerous task of rescuing him, while in peace one may suspect that much of the actual day-to-day business of governing was carried out by his sons under his supervision.

Much the same tacit and fallacious assumption seems to me to be illustrated by any such suggestion as that of A.B. Cook (*Zeus* III, p. 733), that the birth of Athena was in some sense a reminiscence of the killing of an aged king. It contradicts the entire tone of Greek myth,

a fundamental assumption of which is that the gods do not die, and the details of that particular story, which never hints that Zeus was any the worse for the cleaving of his head by Hephaistos or some other skilled operator, or was even for a moment incapacitated for his divine functions. Furthermore, it supposes a vague consciousness (in this case, belonging to certain vase-painters who occasionally show Zeus grey-haired) of the supposed custom, whereof not a word is said in any Greek author, even in places where, if the least recollection of it existed, one would suppose some mention of it inevitable, notably in those few writers who mention the singular ritual of the Rex Nemorensis in Italy, which as is well known furnishes the text for Frazer's greatest and most famous work. And it is to be remembered that Greece, especially Hellenistic Greece, had a number of writers who were full of intelligent curiosity regarding ancient custom and legend, and made extensive and systematic researches, whereof considerable remains survive to this day. There were also numerous theorists who sought to give a rational account of the origins of religion and of the received opinions regarding the traditional gods. Their speculations were of the most varied character, and included the notorious theory of Euhemeros, that Zeus and all his kind were prehistoric kings given divine honours by admirers or flatterers. The *argumentum ex silentio* is I think valid here; why does neither Euhemeros himself nor any of his followers and imitators adduce any characteristic of the divine kings we know from Frazer? The Euhemeristic Zeus has an adventurous and successful career, but he neither controls the weather nor has his reign limited by anything like a ritual killing nor is by nature anything more than a daring and able ruler.

Such are all the serious arguments for "Frazerian" kings in Greece that I have been able to find. Of minor ones I take little account; I am for instance quite unimpressed by the circumstance that the royal (if mythical) name Akrisios resembles Ἀκρισίας, which according to Hesychios is a name (or title) of Kronos in Phrygia. To conclude that Akrisios "was the royal embodiment of a sky-god" (*Zeus* II, p. 1155-56) seems to me merely a piece of unscientific temerity. Still less am I inclined to give any credit to the statement of a puzzle-headed Byzantine (Tzetzes, *Chil.* I, 474) that anciently all kings were called *Dies*, for which he gives an astrological reason, hence one which cannot be of earlier than Hellenistic date at best. Sundry arguments again adduced

from traditional royal costume (e.g., the eagle on the sceptre) point to one thing only, the world-wide tendency to make a god resemble an earthly monarch. As with the Roman *triumphator*, it is not the king or magistrate who dresses like the god, but the god who is thought of as dressed like a king. I therefore hold confidently to the opinion that, whatever may be true for other countries, Greece from the earliest days in which its population was in any sense Greek down to the close of the classical epoch had no kings of the kind made famous by *The Golden Bough*.