

The Unplanned Rise of the Ancient Greek Religion: From Mainland Greece to the Mediterranean World

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1. Introduction

Ancient Greece had woken up from its Dark Age slumber by 700 B.C. and was moving into what we now call the Archaic Age. Around this time there began a massive colonization movement that would last for two centuries, until roughly 500 B.C.¹ It occurred out of necessity. Greek farmland, unfertile to begin with, was increasingly crowded and deteriorated. The cities were becoming overpopulated. Setting out in search of fresh land, these colonists explored the Mediterranean coast as far West as Eastern Spain and as far South as Tunisia looking for fresh lands to settle. Uninhabited areas were rare, so the colonists typically had to settle down where other people were already living. Sometimes the settling Greeks and these *barbaroi*² got along, and sometimes they didn't. But somehow, almost without exception, the natives converted to

¹ For discussions of this period, see Sarah Pomeroy, Stanley M. Burstein, Walter Donlan, and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 82-131, Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Volume II: The Life of Greece*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1939), pp. 127-58, Charles Freeman, *Egypt, Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 76-114, and Mary E. White, "Greek Colonization," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 21, No. 4. (Dec., 1961), pp. 443-454.

² Ancient Greeks referred to all non-Greek speakers as *barbaroi*, because to Greek ears their speech sounded like bar-bar-bar – gibberish. This is where we get the English word "barbarian." Alluded to in Robert Hendrickson, *Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins, Third Edition*, (New York: Checkmark Books, 2004), p. 53

the Greek religion. This paper will attempt to explain just why and how the Ancient Greek religion was able to become so dominant.

The tool for the job is an economic framework based on Robert Sugden's 1989 article "Spontaneous Order."³ His ideas are rooted in F.A. Hayek's concept of spontaneous order, and he uses evolutionary game theory to test the veracity of hypotheses. It applies perfectly to the problem of explaining Greek religious hegemony. First, the Greek religion had to evolve the characteristics needed for it to be able to spread within the Greek world. This evolution was an unplanned process that happened spontaneously over time. Later, as Greeks came into contact with other cultures via colonization, they could play a number of different strategies that had varying rates of success in spreading their religion. This combination of the right religious doctrines and the right foreign policy strategies are what enabled the Greek religion to dominate the Mediterranean until the time of Constantine, over eight hundred years later.

Section 2 looks at *why* it was possible for the Greek religion to spread within Greece in the first place. Certain characteristics are necessary; Sugden's framework will be used to explain why the Greek religion evolved precisely those characteristics. Section 3 will look at *how* the Greek religion spread to new lands. The colonial movement is what put the Greeks and their faith in contact with new populations, but it required certain strategies on their part to successfully gain converts. Section 4 concludes by tying up loose ends and briefly summing up matters.

2. The Greek Religion Spreads within Greece

³ Robert Sugden, "Spontaneous Order," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Autumn, 1989), pp.85-97.

Religions that spread widely tend to have three common characteristics: a common text, some doctrinal flexibility, and an adaptable moral code. Religions that did not evolve these characteristics were unable to spread, and died out over time. Let us look at each of these in turn.

The Greek religion had no formal scriptural text, but there were two universally revered poets, Homer and Hesiod, whose works served the same purpose.⁴ On one hand, their writings are different from the Bible, the Torah, or the Koran. They wrote verse, not prose. They were meant to be sung aloud over music, not read silently. They had no Decalogue, no *sharia*. The extent of their moral precepts was *virtu*, a vague, hyper-masculine notion of martial honor that lives on in English words such as “virtue” and “virile.” Strength, skill, and piety are praised. Hesiod advocated a kind of rural pre-Stoicism in *Works and Days*; good things come to those who work hard. Behavioral, sartorial, and dietary requirements are absent from both men’s writings. They were not intended to be guides to holy living.

But they did serve as a unifying cultural force. Every child knew about Achilles’ rage and Helen’s beauty, and the trials Odysseus faced on his long journey home. Every Greek could recite the origins of the gods in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, or the simple homilies from *Works and Days*. Homer and Hesiod became something that every Greek had in common.

They arrived at just the right point in history. Homer was thought to have lived around the 8th or 9th century B.C., and Hesiod was either a contemporary or lived a generation later. By the time the great migration began around 700 B.C., Homer and

⁴ See Homer, (trans. Robert Fagles), *The Iliad*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), Homer, (trans. Robert Fagles), *The Odyssey*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), and Hesiod, (trans. M.L. West), *Theogony, Works and Days*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Hesiod were well established in Greek lore. Enough time had passed for them to give all Greek-speaking *poleis* the feeling, if not the reality, of shared heritage and culture. The political and military importance is obvious.

Less widely acknowledged is their religious significance. The gods were everywhere in Homer. Ares fought on the fields beside the Trojans, and Hephaestus made Achilles' famous armor and shield in the *Iliad*. Hera took special joy in making Odysseus' life difficult in the *Odyssey*. As with Homer, even more so with Hesiod. The *Theogony* is the story of creation, a genealogy of the gods, and little else. A shared religion joined the shared language and culture popularized by Homer and Hesiod.

So having some kind of common literature was a key ingredient in the rise of the Greek religion. What else was needed? A certain flexibility in religious doctrine. Ancient Greece, after all, was not a unified nation. The *polis*, or city-state, was the sovereign unit. They could be as different from each other as they all were from the *barbaroi*; think of the contrast between Athens and Sparta. Still, some commonalities were needed. But not too many. So long as they honored the same major gods, the minor ones could differ. Different minor gods were honored from polis to polis, and different festivals were held, but all were part of the same religion. The divine pantheon was not set in stone, as in the Abrahamic religions. Every city and village had its own patron god; Athens' very name honors Athena. Even individual families had their own gods watching over them. An exact tally of all Greek gods is impossible, and could well number in the tens of thousands. The *Theogony* was rather a beginning than an ending.

This theological flexibility was key. Without it, the religious aspects of Homer and Hesiod would have been politely ignored, or else become the pretext for vicious

sectarian wars. Neither option is conducive to spreading a religion. A similar flexibility regarding customs is just as important. Sparta could follow the laws of Lycurgus, and Athens those of Solon, but they were still of the same religion. Commercial, familial, and sexual mores and morals varied widely in the Greek world. Only a religion that tolerated such diversity could possibly be held in common by so many and so different people. Since the common texts were largely silent on morals aside from uncontroversial universals such as the value of hard work and filial piety, the Greek religion was able to seep into every last Greek-speaking polis.

That, in a nutshell, is the story of how one religion rose to dominance within the Greek-speaking world. Now we will open up the economic toolkit to explain why this happened. How do common texts, doctrinal flexibility, and moral tolerance evolve in the first place?

They come about in a spontaneous evolutionary process, not unlike F.A. Hayek's conception of market processes. Hayek himself applied this theory to the origins of religion in the final chapter of *The Fatal Conceit*.⁵ Human beings have an innate disposition toward theism, so we create gods and religions. We evolved such a disposition because the moral orders that accompany religion were conducive to survival in prehistoric conditions.

Thus are religions born. But in a diverse religious marketplace like early Greece, how does one religion triumph over others? It has to have certain traits to successfully compete: the texts and tolerance discussed above. There were many different faiths in prehistoric Greece that time has long forgotten. Each had its own doctrines, morals, and

⁵ F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 135-140.

gods. Over time, what we now call the Greek religion evolved the successful tolerant traits that it needed to grow. Then, toward the end of the Greek Dark Ages, along came Homer and Hesiod to further aid the process.

Tolerance and texts are successful competitive traits because they make converting a low-cost proposition. A common text familiar to everyone lowers the cost of educating people about a religion's precepts. They had to exert very little effort to learn the Greek faith's basic tenets, for they were everywhere. People respond to costs, so this kind of incentive structure was a must for the Greek religion to gain in the religious marketplace. Nor did people have to incur the costs of changing their long-held customs and morals to fit into the new religion. Religions that did not have this flexibility and easy familiarity were unable to spread. In a Hayekian process with obvious parallels to Darwinian natural selection, faiths with high costs and low benefits died out. Zeus reigned supreme.

It helped that, because of Homer and Hesiod's common texts, taking on the Greek faith was one part of a larger package deal. Along with religion came a common language and the inspiring "us against them" mindset that comes with feeling a shared heritage. Nearly everyone who spoke Greek knew Hesiod and Homer; nearly everyone who spoke Greek had those feelings. The Greek religion's spread was a part of this larger zeitgeist.

It is not just costs that matter. Looking to the other side of the ledger, joining the Greek religion had benefits, and not just the ones listed above. It was good for business; people tend to trust people of their own faith more readily than outsiders. Joining an increasingly hegemonic religion was something most people saw as being in their best

interest. Often the desire to fit in probably outweighed any religious ardor. The benefit to Greeks of feeling like they had something in common with each other, a common “Greekness,” is not to be understated.

Game theory sheds further light on this evolutionary process. Think of each of the three preconditions as games with different strategies that religious proselytizers can play. The payoff for each strategy can be measured in converts gained – or lost. Obviously, there is no empirical data from this period. But we can still construct a qualitative framework to illustrate the point.

A proselytizer seeking converts can play either a rigid or a tolerant strategy on adhering to doctrinal details, and also to a specific set of morals and customs. These different strategies have different payoffs. With conditions as they were in the Ancient Greek world, tolerant strategies had higher payoffs. When the Greek religion was still competing with other faiths in the Greek-speaking world, its tolerant strategy gave it an edge over religions playing a rigid strategy. Playing the strategy was probably not a deliberate choice. Most likely it evolved in a Hayekian way through the years and simply became custom.

Tolerance eventually became what Robert Sugden calls an Evolutionarily Stable Strategy (ESS), which he defines as “a pattern of behavior such that, if it is generally followed in the population, any small number of people who deviate from it will do less well than the others.”⁶ An ESS also represents “a state of rest in the evolutionary process.”⁷ Evolution never actually ends, because circumstances change; many centuries later, the medieval Catholic Church would have success with rigid strategies, for

⁶ Sugden, p. 91.

⁷ Ibid.

example. But for over a thousand years of Mediterranean history, tolerant strategies were the more successful. Proselytizers who played intolerant strategies had to change course. The ones who did not would continue to fail to spread their faith.

There is also the strategic choice of having a common text, or not. Like the tolerant strategies, this choice was almost certainly not deliberately made. If Homer and Hesiod were like most artists, they were moved more by their muses than religious fervor. But planned or not, the strategy was still played. It had a high payoff for the Greek religion. As their works became more and more famous, they lowered the costs and raised the benefits of converting to the Greek religion, and so aided its spread. This strategy still has high payoffs today. Almost all modern faiths have their common texts, from the Abrahamic faiths to Hinduism's *Veda* and *Upanishads*, to the Confucian *Analects*.

But we digress from the topic at hand. The Greek religion arose within the Greek world because it played the right strategies. After this process had taken place, a new one began. The Greek world itself began to expand. Around 700 B.C., a nascent colonial movement spread Greeks throughout the entire Mediterranean region. The colonists took Greek language, customs, and religion with them. The next section will tell their story, look at the strategies they played, and attempt to explain their success.

3. The Greek Religion Spreads Outside of Greece

The Greek religion was exported to foreign lands through a long-running colonial movement. A number of factors were behind it. One was agricultural. Greek soil is not known for its fertility, and by 700 B.C. centuries of use had sapped much of the

farmland's productivity. A second factor was economic. Foreign trade was growing steadily year after year, and was increasingly crucial for Greek prosperity; colonization was both a cause and an effect of economic growth. More colonies (*apoikia*) ringing the Mediterranean meant that there were more places for Greek traders to peddle their wares, to Greeks and foreigners alike. Having recourse to Greek laws and courts also meant more security for Greek traders against fraud by their *barbaroi* trading partners. For Greek trading ships, this was a decided improvement over being at the mercy of locals, hundreds of miles away from home.

Once the Mediterranean was thoroughly Hellenized, colonization continued inland to the North and East as far as the Black Sea. This was a boon for inland traders. A third factor was civic pride. Residents of Miletus bragged of having spawned 70 colonies, almost certainly an exaggeration.⁸ Even landlocked, isolationist Sparta was goaded into founding a colony, Taras.

The other reason the colonial movement happened when it did is that the Greeks were finally ready for it. It was not until about the middle of the 8th century B.C. that the *polis* system was firmly in place. By then the texts-and-tolerance strategies had been played long enough to become established tradition. This helped to give mainland *poleis* a feeling of unified Greekness, even without political unification.

This is reflected in the colonization process, which was geared to keeping Greek colonies Greek. After finding a suitable location, the mother city, or *metropolis*, appointed an *oikist* who would head the new colony. Farmland was promised to all who would join him. Great freedom and opportunities were promised, though at the price of ending one's citizenship in the *metropolis*. The *oikist* ruled the new colony. He (it was

⁸ Pomeroy, et al, p.94.

always a he in those days) was responsible for ensuring security, industry, and piety without protection from the *metropolis*. In short, his job was to see to it that the Greek colony remained that way.

Goods and colonists were not the only Greek exports. They brought their language, culture, and customs with them. More important for our purposes, they also brought their religion. Just as it spread within Greece, the Greek religion soon took over almost the entire Mediterranean region, and even worked its way up to the Black Sea. This success was not inevitable. Costs, benefits, and proselytizing strategies had to be just right to gain converts. In most cases, they were. Greeks applied strategies similar to the ones that allowed their faith to take over mainland Greece, but adapted to the new circumstances.

The most important of these new circumstances was that most of the new *apoikia* were in locations already populated. The Greeks had a number of strategies in how to deal with their new neighbors. They could forcibly remove the *barbaroi* from their homes and take over choice locations for themselves. Or they could allow the natives to stay, but force them to adopt Greek ways. These strategies were rarely played. The norm was a more tolerant strategy: meld the two cultures through intermarriage and commingling of faiths and customs. It is unlikely this strategy was intentionally played; by this time it was tradition, and simply the way things were done. Tolerant assimilation was a natural evolution of the strategy played within the Greek mainland back in the Dark Ages.

Instead of banning native gods, Greeks would point out similarities to existing Greek gods and rename them accordingly, or else inaugurate them as new members to the

pantheon. This is one area where doctrinal malleability was especially useful. Many wars were prevented this way. Without this strategy, the Greek colonists would have had a much harder time coexisting with the *barbaroi*. So long as the major gods were honored, the people could worship whatever additional deities they pleased. In this way many native gods were folded into the Greek religion – one explanation for why Zeus had so many children.

This strategy was not without risks, for Greek tolerance was not always reciprocated. Herodotus writes of a Scythian king who is exposed to Greek ways by his foreign mother and the nearby Greek colony of Borysthenes (incidentally, a colony of prolific Miletus). Fascinated with this new and foreign culture, he takes a Greek wife and is initiated into the rites of Dionysus. The result was popular revolt, and his beheading at the hands of a disapproving brother; Herodotus dryly notes “the importance which the Scythians attach to their national traditions.”⁹

Cases such as these tended to be the exception rather than the rule. As natives became reconciled to their new neighbors, a mutual tolerance emerged. Inter-marriage was common, and cultures mingled. It was in the colonists’ best interest to play strategies that would aid this process, and they knew it. Hindering it carried very real health risks.

They played the common text strategy by bringing Homer and other common texts with them. This was especially helpful since the *barbaroi* took on religion as part of a package deal. To do business with Greeks, it helped to speak their language. Listening to Homeric performances or recitations of Hesiod was an easy, low-cost way to

⁹ Herodotus (trans. Aubrey de Selincourt), *The Histories*, (New York: Penguin, 1996), pp. 240-41 (Book 4, § 78-80).

learn it. Homer and Hesiod also imparted basic Greek customs. Learning them was good for business; offended customers tend not to engage in repeat transactions. This cut both ways, and here the Greek strategy of adaptable, malleable customs paid off.

Dealing with these earthly concerns, the natives also learned about Zeus, Hera, Ares, and the other Greek gods. Some native deities resembled them, and were renamed over time. Others became unique additions to the Greek pantheon; doctrinal flexibility again proved an excellent strategy.

Despite the changed circumstances, all of these strategies fit Sugden's description of Evolutionarily Stable Strategies. They were flexible. There were many different languages and cultures around the Mediterranean, and the mingling-of-cultures strategy proved successful more often than not. Moral and doctrinal tolerance continued to work. The common Greek texts played their role.

These strategies were also popular with all parties involved. The Greeks had to use less force than different strategies would have required, which preserved both lives and resources. The natives were less likely to feel oppressed by Greek ways, and were more likely to adopt them of their own accord, with more sincerity. Greek strategies also filled Sugden's other requirement: they outperformed deviant strategies. Intolerant strategies tended not to work to the advantage of either Greek or *barbaroi*, therefore they were rarely played.

There were exceptions, as a certain unfortunate Scythian king reminds us. The real world is messy, and no theory fits it perfectly. But in the vast majority of cases, tolerance worked over time. It is one of history's ironies that most of what used to be Scythia today uses a Cyrillic alphabet, which descends from the Greek.

These exceptions do not prove Hayek and Sugden wrong. They only prove that their ideas are theories, which necessarily simplify the world so we can make sense of it. By following the right strategies, the Greek faith dominated the Mediterranean until well after Rome reached the peak of its powers. The story of the Greek religion's ascendance is complicated and full of fits, starts, and exceptions. But through this theoretical lens, it makes some sense.

4. Conclusion

Tolerance of different customs and morals. A malleable theological doctrine. Homer and Hesiod. The Greek religion had these things. Its competitors did not. This is why the religion of Zeus took over Greece. When the colonial movement later put Greeks into contact with non-Greeks, the strategies of tolerance and peaceful integration made Zeus lord from Eastern Spain to what is now Western Russia. Pecuniary motives also played a large role. It is almost certain that these strategies were not premeditated, but they were played all the same. Competing faiths did not play these strategies; history has forgotten them all. Under the conditions of the time, tolerance, texts, and peaceful integration can rightfully be called Evolutionarily Stable Strategies.

Remember that Sugden described an ESS as a resting point in evolution, not its finish. Natural selection never finishes selecting. By the time of Constantine in the early 4th century A.D., circumstances had changed enough to end evolution's rest. But over a period of more than a millennium – one that traced the rise and fall of Greece, Roman Republic and then Roman Empire – a single faith ascended and dominated the

Mediterranean world. With the aid of the economic way of thinking, we can make some sense of how such an achievement was possible.

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