
In this revised PhD thesis, Parisinou surveys the extensive and diverse involvement of light in Greek cult and religion, which goes beyond its practical use as illumination. Using literary and material evidence she investigates light both as a concept (brightness) and in its concrete form as an artifact (torches and lamps). Inevitably she also deals with fire. In other words, she deals with everything that is directly or remotely connected with light, which is why her study fails to achieve tight focus. In fact, the text is overly cluttered with references and fragmented into many small sections dealing with a variety of issues that overlap (e.g., torch-bearing divinities are considered both in isolation and in assemblies), confusing and tiring the reader. There are also some repetitions (e.g., 7 and 11 on Athena’s lamp; 65 and 69 on gephyrismos) and some irrelevant material (104-5 on night-hunting).

Still there are several interesting issues raised and conclusions reached. I single out the use of torches and lamps both as practical illuminating devices and symbolic cult objects; the extensive employment of light in several rituals, such as the lighting of a new, pure fire; and the use of torches in specific ritual gestures, such as the up-and-down movement executed by the Mystai in their procession to Eleusis. Parisinou suggests that this was a purificatory gesture, part of a ritual dance, but there is no evidence to support its association with the use of obscene language during the gephyrismos.

Parisinou shows that brightness, associated with gods especially in scenes of Homeric divine epiphanies, is ‘translated’ into concrete form as a lamp in the hands of Athena. Such an image facilitates the visualisation of Athena’s radiance through a functional and familiar object. She also convincingly argues that the use of such lighting devices continued through the Dark Ages uninterrupted; and that the reason they have not been recognised in the archaeological record is their simple form (open containers with floating wicks). In the seventh century, the first nozzled and thus unequivocal lamps appeared in a variety of costly materials, along with candelabra and torch-holders.
A section is devoted to the miraculous ever-burning golden lamp of Athena on the Acropolis. Its reconstruction as a multi-nozzled and elaborately decorated lamp hanging from the ceiling is well taken, but specifying its decoration as a gorgoneion is pure speculation. Parisinou nicely highlights the political implication of the dedication of the eternal lamp at the end of the fifth century to boost morale after the war and the contemporary political instability. This ties in well with the torch race performed by Athenian ephebes, which, like the ever-burning fires, symbolises religious and political continuity, with the wellbeing and traditional values of the state entrusted to younger generations.

Another chapter examines the use of light in rites of passage. Since birth was thought of as passage from darkness to light, birth divinities were commonly represented with torches. Torches play a prominent role in all stages of the wedding ritual, held in pairs by participants (especially mothers) in wedding processions. Rather than just a necessary source of illumination, the main use of the torches, Parisinou argues, is to transfer the fire to the new oikos. I doubt, however, that torches were used in the gift-bringing ceremony on the day after the wedding; the torches in such scenes were probably added by the artist to signpost them as nuptial. Persephone is especially associated with torches and often depicted holding them. But are the torches held by gods in scenes of her abduction associated with death, as Parisinou believes, or are they taken from the wedding imagery? And couldn’t the torches of Hekate in scenes of Persephone’s ascent be associated more with her ‘rebirth’? Light also played an important role in initiation rituals, especially the Eleusinian Mysteries. The brightness from the torches would have been suggestive of the happy afterlife the initiates had secured. Torches and fire were also used as apotropaic and purificatory devices in situations of contact with the dead, as weapons against monsters, and as a means of divine punishment and justice.

Parisinou also examines the iconography of torch-bearing divinities and other gods especially associated with light, particularly the Eleusinian deities and Artemis. Dionysos, who is especially associated with fire and light as a result of his birth, is surprisingly more commonly associated with divine radiance and torchlight in literature than in art. There are problems, however, regarding the meaning of torches carried by gods: do they play a specific role in the scene (libation, sacrifice, reception of
worshippers, divine assembly—all treated separately by Parisinou), or do they simply function as divine attributes? In other words, are we dealing with torchlit libations or with libations performed by a goddess who holds a torch as her attribute? (This would apply especially in the case of the Eleusinian deities where the ‘torch serves as an abbreviated “code” of the Eleusinian ritual’: 87). And does Persephone carry torches next to baby Dionysos because of his association with fire (as Parisinou argues) or because torches are Persephone’s main attribute?

A separate chapter explores the metaphorical use of fire, light, and brightness to express all kinds of emotions, from burning erositic desire and triumph to anger and madness. Another deals with fire in fertility rituals. Parisinou associates the torches in scenes of Dionysos and Ariadne’s sacred marriage with the image of natural abundance (130-2); a more obvious explanation, however, would be that the torches accompany the wedding or fit into the general Dionysiac context since torches are often held by maenads. She then seems to extend this meaning of torches to weddings as ultimately implying fecundity. This connotation, however, not discussed in the section on the wedding and is contradicted in the conclusion (165) where wedding torches are connected to the transition ritual of the girl who ‘dies’ as a parthenos to be reborn as a woman.

The last chapter examines the archaeological evidence for the cults that made an extensive use of lighting devices in ritual. Torch holders and lamps could function as temple furniture or votive offerings after having illuminated nocturnal sacrifices, sacred meals, processions, and lustration rites. But why would lamps in caves indicate nocturnal feasts (161)? They could have been put to a practical use even during daytime. Parisinou concludes that it was the bright, lighting effect that was offered to the gods as a votive gift rather than the lighting vessel itself.

The text is accompanied by many illustrations but some lack adequate captions or commentary. Several factual mistakes must be brought to the reader’s attention: the statuette of Artemis in plate 22 cannot provide an example of Artemis holding a torch in her right hand because that arm is missing; Hekate in plate 25 cannot be both the figure behind the horses holding one torch (62) and the cult statue with two torches (83-84); we cannot tell that the Mystai behind the Daidouchos in fig. 14 are wearing myrtle wreaths or that they all carry the bakkhos, 264
because the vase is fragmentary. In fact it seems that the woman behind the *Daidouchos* holds another torch not a *bakkhos*. Similarly, Hermes in fig. 27 rides a goat, not a bull (caption) or a ram (163); the same scene, plate 32, cannot represent both the first and the third stage of a torchlit libation (95); Hippolytos was not punished for losing his virginity (103); and the Eleusinian Mysteries were not among the festivals exclusively for women (130). There are quite a few typographical errors of which, however, only two may create confusion: Osiris is not ‘Isis’ son’ (50) but her husband; and for ‘F-shaped figurines’ (169), read ‘Phi-shaped’ or ‘Φ-shaped’.

Despite its shortcomings, this volume provides a good survey of the use of light and fire in Greek cult, and I would certainly consult the text and the references for relevant material concerning this aspect of Greek religion.

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