

A Long Way from Home: The Pertinence of Pilgrimage to Ancient Greek Religion

It is high time to introduce some professionalism into the study of ancient religion as well.¹

It is with this admonition that Graf concludes his review of Dillon's *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece*. The object of Graf's criticism is Dillon's 'thoughtless' and 'amateurish' usage of the word pilgrimage, with its Christian connotations to describe a phenomenon relating instead to the world of ancient Greek religion. The subject of intra-territorial sacred mobility had been somewhat neglected by scholarship and an analytical survey of its religious motivation and organisation was overdue. Nevertheless, and essentially owing to Dillon's infelicitous choice of words, Graf takes the work apart. Was this academic reaction exaggerated, or was the scepticism justified? Is there indeed a difference between the ancient Greeks travelling to Delphi and modern Elvis Presley fans journeying to Graceland - or are both activities definable as 'pilgrimages'? In the aftermath of Dillon's work, the applicability of the term pilgrimage to the religious practice relating to peoples, sites and phenomena of the ancient world has been put into question by a number of scholars, and two principal issues have been consistently disputed.

The first problem relates to the profusion of connotations, constantly accumulating throughout various histories and cultures, that burden the concept of pilgrimage. Dillon's apparently sweeping definition of the practice as "paying a visit to a sacred site outside the boundaries of one's own physical environment"² is in truth loaded with millennia of habit by different worshipping traditions. Modern ears cannot help instinctively relating the word to personal spirituality, penance and purification: the appropriateness of the modern usage of pilgrimage as applied to ancient sacred mobility is therefore clearly controversial. The second dilemma is the vagueness of the term, since the phenomenon includes a vast number and variety of locally differentiated cult practices. The very lack of a Greek term that encompasses all the motivations and destinations of ancient sacred mobility should act as a warning against loose abstractions. As ever, contextualisation is

¹ Fritz Graf, 'Review of *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece* by Matthew Dillon', *History of Religions*, 42, 2 (2002), pp. 193-196.

² Matthew Dillon, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece* (London: New York, Routledge), p. xii.

of the essence; without it, there is no significance. This study will focus on the religious activity of *theōria* and on the institutions connected to it, for their dynamics and organisation perfectly highlight the problematic application of the term ‘pilgrimage’ to Greek sacred mobility.

***Theōria*: doing justice to diversity.**

Theōria is largely interpreted and translated as a state-delegation of envoys (the *theōroi*) travelling to a place endowed with sacred significance, although it should be noted that this noun and the verb *theōréō* could also be applied to individual visitors to sacred sites. The term *theōros* (state envoy) makes its first appearance in Theognis, *Elegies* 805-808:

τόρνου καὶ στάθμης καὶ γνώμονος ἄνδρα θεωρὸν
εὐθύτερον χρῆ <ἔ>μεν, Κύρνε, φυλασσόμενον,
ᾧτινὶ κεν Πυθῶνι θεοῦ χρήσασ’ ἰέρεια
ὄμοφῆν σημήνην πίονος ἐξ ἀδύτου·

A man sent to consult the oracle must take care, Cynrus, to be straighter than a carpenter’s compass, rule, and square, that man to whom the priestess of the god at Delphi in her response reveals the god’s voice from the wealthy shrine.³

Theognis is reminding Cynrus of the importance of being earnest: the *theōros* is invoked as an example of diplomatic diligence, for he is the custodian of the Pythia’s response as he carries her words back to his *polis*. The aim of *theōria* is to represent the *polis* that sponsored the delegation for the duration of the rituals and cult practices taking place on the specific occasion. The fact that the *polis* is the promoter of this kind of sacred mobility distinguishes the phenomenon from the individual journeys of private citizens. The *theōroi* would undertake *ad hoc* diplomatic journeys to oracles when their *polis* needed an oracular response⁴ and travel on pre-determined occasions to sanctuaries⁵ and Panhellenic festivals to act as spectators or cult officiators on behalf of their *polis*.⁶ Even the athletes participating in the Panhellenic games were included in this category of sacred delegation, as the occasion was endowed with a religious dimension. All these activities took place alongside the travels of private individuals seeking to consult oracles or to participate in the festivals.

It was the duty of another category of *theōroi* to announce officially a sanctuary’s festivals throughout the Greek world on behalf of the home-community festival organisers.⁷ Evidence for festival-announcing dates to at least the beginning of the fourth century BC, peaking in the Hellenistic period when newly instituted festivals flourished (especially in

³ Trans. by Douglas Gerber, *Greek Elegiac Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴ As just seen in Theognis, *Elegies* 805-808.

⁵ See Plato, *Phaedo* 58β.

⁶ The verb *theorein* used of festival-goers: Thucydides, 3.104 and Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1188-1189. *Theōroi* as cult-officiators: Plutarch, *Demetrius* 11.1.

⁷ Except in Athens and Olympia, where festival-announcing delegates were called *spondophoroi*: Nora M. Dimitrova, *Theōroi and Initiates in Samothrace: the Epigraphical Evidence* (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2008), p. 13.

Asia Minor). *SEG* 51 1056 (242 BC) offers us a rich example of the practice. Inscribed on both sides of the marble opisthographic stele discovered at the Asklepieion in Kos are the decrees of the cities of Istron, Phaistos, Hierapytna, and another unidentified Cretan *polis*. Three *theōroí* are mentioned: Charippos, Dion and Platon (epigraphical evidence leads us to believe that sacred delegations usually comprised two or three agents led by an *architheōrós*). It was the duty of these *theōroí* to proclaim the sacrifice and festival in honour of Asklepios taking place at the sanctuary in Kos (side A, lines 2-4). Furthermore, they also declared the sanctuary's inviolability for the entire duration of the festivities (*asyllia*). The decision is accepted by the cities and the inscription commemorating it is to be affixed in the *prytaneion* (the sacred centre of the *polis*), guaranteeing it good visibility. It is important to note how the *theōroí* are assigned ten staters *es aparchan* (the sacrifice to the god honoured by the celebrations): financial officers (*tamiai*) were to provide the money from the sum set aside for the funding of the festival.⁸

Rutherford has laid particular stress on the importance of the etymology of the word *theōrós*: the word is not connected with the word *theós* (god) but with the proto-Indo-European stem *dheyH₂-* from which the word *theaomai* (to watch) derives.⁹ *Theōroí* are thus the 'watchers', the overseers of ritual performances or events, who have travelled a small or great distance to be eye-witnesses on behalf of their home community. *Theōría* gradually became more associated with the concept of travel than with that of sacred contemplation. It then finally came to signify the travelling sacred delegation itself.

Further insight into the dynamics of *theōría* can be gleaned from Plato's account of the Athenian pilgrimage to Delos (Plato, *Phaedo* 58β). He speaks of the ships specifically designated for this kind of sacred mobility being crowned with garlands and of the cessation of public executions observed by the *polis* in the absence of its *theōroí*. The delegation thus appears to have benefited from a sacralised status. Propitiatory sacrifices might be made upon the delegates' departure, but also divination (Euphron, *PCG* 5.288 fr.7), sacrifices (Philochorus, *FGrHist* 328 F75 and *LSCG* 156b) and rituals were performed in advance or *en route* by both the sacred ambassadors and by their *polis* to guarantee their safe and smooth passage. Were the *poleis* to neglect the religious observance, it was their delegates abroad who would pay the price.¹⁰ Sacred truces (*spondai*) were announced by sanctuaries to safeguard the delegates' security and guarantee their free-passage by stressing their sanctity and inviolability.¹¹ The delegations therefore seem to have faced the same dangers as any ancient traveller - and ultimately, as modern pilgrims.¹² The sacredness of the *theōroí* is possibly the reason why the etymology of the term has sometimes been erroneously linked to *theós*.

⁸ Paula Perlman, *City and Sanctuary in Ancient Greece: The Theōrodokia in the Peloponnese* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), pp. 49-50.

⁹ Ian Rutherford, *State Pilgrims and Sacred Observers in Ancient Greece: A Study of Theōriā and Theōroí* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 4-6.

¹⁰ See Ian Rutherford, 'Theoric Crisis: the dangers of pilgrimage in Greek religion and society', *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni*, 61 (1995), pp. 276-292.

¹¹ See Thucydides, 5.18.2.

¹² See the fourth-century inscription from Ephesus listing the names of the 45 bandits condemned to death for attacking a *theōría* making its way from Sardis to Ephesus. Franciszek Sokolowski, 'A New testimony of the Cult of Artemis at Ephesus', *HThR* 58 (1965), 427 ff.

Polis and theōría: carrying out a delicate task.

The epigraphical and literary examples so far considered have proved how the performance of shared sacrifices by different communities side by side, the establishment of ‘international’ sacred truces and the state’s ritualised concern for its absent envoys strengthened the bond between *poleis* and Panhellenic sanctuary or festivity. Whilst the missions undertaken by *theōroí* were not expressly endowed with a political purpose, sacred delegations representing their home communities in foreign shrines or celebrations did entail a diplomatic dimension. Essentially, the delegates would act as spokespersons for their *polis*, promoting its authority and role within the Greek political landscape. One could indeed interpret the activity of the *theōroí* as the human counterpart of the role of virtual ambassadors played by the treasuries erected upon the terraces of Delphi. In fact, by being present at an ‘international’ festival, *agon* or sanctuary, the *theōroí* could boost their *polis*’s social status within the political framework of competition or rivalry between communities and establish or reinforce alliances. *Theōría* would therefore appear to be ‘principally concerned with the creation and maintenance of a community through shared ritual’.¹³ The distance from the modern conception of pilgrimage could scarcely be greater. The extent and the dynamics of the formal relationship between the *polis* and ancient Greek sacred mobility will now be illustrated by two emblematic examples.

The first case is the practice of oracle consultation: *theōroí* would journey to an oracle’s shrine to question it on behalf of their community; they would then return to communicate the response to their home cities. Oracular advice could be sought out for several reasons, ranging from guidance in appeasing a god to issues with distinctly political overtones. The Hellenistic *I.Kaunos* 56 inscription (now lost) from the region of Caria records Apollo Gryneios’ oracular response to the *polis* of Kaunos. The delegate whose responsibility it was to consult the oracle was Menedoros son of Sosikles, of the deme of Imbros. The Kaunians inquire which god to honour to secure a fair harvest (lines 7-10). Apollo Gryneios’ answer was to propitiate Phoibos son of Zeus Patroios and Leto. The oracle’s response served as one of the highest conferrable approvals of a *polis*’ actions:¹⁴ oracles could be interpreted as an endorsement of a *polis*’ supremacy to the detriment of another. This proved to be a particularly useful diplomatic aid for competing communities and regions: the interpretation of an oracle could also create consensus and control public opinion.¹⁵ The *polis* is in this case adapting, not manipulating, religion to its own purposes.

The second case I wish to consider is *theōrodokía* (the official reception of *theōroí*). In a context of sacred delegations journeying through the ancient world, the institution of

¹³ Barbara Kowalzig, ‘Mapping out *communitas*: Performances of *Theōría* in their Sacred and Political Context’, in *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman & Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*, ed. by Jas Elsner, and Ian Rutherford, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 42.

¹⁴ Robert Parker, ‘Greek states and Greek oracles’, in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. by R. Buxton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 90.

¹⁵ An example of divination as a means for establishing consensus thanks to its manipulative potential is offered by Plutarch’s account of Themistocles’ stratagem to win over public opinion (Plutarch, *Themistocles* 10.1).

theōrodokía proved to be of fundamental importance to the *poleis* and festivals and of great convenience for the travel-worn *theōroi*. The *theōrodókoi* hosted (θεωρός + δέχομαι) *en route* the sacred envoys who were either announcing to international invitees the festival held by their home community or participating in the festivities or games taking place abroad.¹⁶ The practice seems to have become established at the beginning of the fourth century BC, and continued to operate at least until the first half of the second century BC (once again culminating in the Hellenistic period, as testified by inscriptional evidence, owing to the blossoming of new festivals).¹⁷ The evidence available to scholarship for defining *theodorokia* in greater detail is fraught with problems of quality rather than of quantity (although, other than a brief entry in the *Suda*, no literary reference to *theōrodokía* is known). Inscriptions regarding the hosting of sacred envoys survive in the form of lists of names of *theōrodókoi* (organised in regional groupings following an itinerary order),¹⁸ invitees' responses to invitations referring to the appointment of *theōrodókoi* and honorary decrees.¹⁹

The earliest attestation of the actual institution of *theōrodokía* (in the agentive form *theōrodókos*) is offered by the Pisatan decree *IvO* 36 from Olympia preserved upon a bronze plate. It dates ca. 365-363 BC, a time in which the sacred site was under Pisatan power. Two Sikyonians, Kleandros and Sokles, are awarded the honours of *proxenia* and *theōrodokía* by Pisa. It is interesting to note that Kleandros is also mentioned by Xenophon (*Hellenika*, 7.1.45): elected general by the Arkadians and Argives, he was supposed to lead an offensive against the Spartans in 367 BC. An analysis of all the surviving evidence suggests that a considerable number of *theōrodókoi* were in fact also engaged in public or religious activities for their communities, as general Kleandros' example indeed suggests.²⁰ We know of kings, queens, women, entire families, cities, non-citizens and a great number of men (we know more *theōrodókoi* by name than *theōroi*) who had the honour of *theōrodokía* bestowed upon them.²¹ It would appear that (at least) moderate wealth and international connections in the world of politics (both local and foreign) and religion would have provided excellent credentials for someone seeking appointment as *theōrodókos*. The role was delegated by the host-*polis*, most probably in collaboration with the festival administrators.²² In the *IG* II³ 1 1145 (ca. 225 BC) decree of Gonnoi in Thessaly from the sanctuary of Athena, the selection of a *theōrodókos* for three Athenian festivals is explicitly made by the *polis* of Gonnoi itself (col. I, line 1). Within the same inscription is quoted the Athenian decree which encourages and rewards the cities who appoint *theōrodókoi*: the *demos*, the *ekklesia* and the *boulé* are frequently mentioned in this decree in relation to honours and decisions

¹⁶ Perlman, *City and Sanctuary in Ancient Greece*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁷ "The spheres of activity of *theōrodókoi* and *proxenoi* were fluid and sometimes overlapped."

Perlman, *City and Sanctuary in Ancient Greece*, p. 27.

¹⁸ A personal favourite of mine is *IG* IV² 1 95 from Epidaurus (ca. 365-311 BC), which mentions the regional headings of Italy (lines 41, 46 add.) and Sicily (lines 78 add., 90 add.).

¹⁹ Perlman, *City and Sanctuary in Ancient Greece*, pp. 30-34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-45.

²² Paula Perlman, "'Theorodokountes en tais polesin': Panhellenic Epangelia and Political Status', in *Sources for the Ancient Greek City-State. Acts of the Copenhagen Polis Centre vol. 2*, ed. by M. H. Hansen, (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1995), pp. 126-127.

concerning sacred envoys and their hosts. In return for their services, *theōrodókoi* would be rewarded with favours and rights (see col. II, lines 10-33).²³ *Theōrodókoi* would offer material and even moral assistance to the *theōroí*. Board, lodgings, means of transport, pecuniary aid and connections to the local religious and political authorities would be provided.²⁴ As previously seen in the case of *theōroí*, the expenses associated with *theōrodokía* would not be sustained by the *theōrodókos*' wealth as a form of liturgy, but by the public funds of their own cities.²⁵

It is important to understand that *theōrodokía* was not a mere appendage of the political community managed by the *polis*. It must rather be considered organic to *theōría*, and therefore an institution bridging festival organisers and receiving *polis*. The aforementioned epigraphical examples do however assert the *polis*' prominent role in matters concerning sacred delegations and their hosts. One must in fact consider the political implications a visit from a *theōría* must have had for a community's political life: "the appointment of *theōrodókoi* was not a response to the serendipity of travel, but was an integral element in the network of reciprocal obligations which linked Panhellenic sanctuary, festival organisers and invitee".²⁶ It has been argued that for a community to receive a sacred delegation was an acknowledgement of its status as a *polis*.²⁷ This significance and resonance was not a fleeting moment of pride or an inconsequential concession: by nominating a *theōrodókos* to welcome and provide for the foreign sacred envoy, the presence of a Panhellenic dimension in the self-definition of the community was being officially displayed.

Conciliation: between local and Panhellenic space.

Theōriai and *theōrodokíai* are instances of the typically Greek ambivalence towards the spheres of the 'sacred' and 'secular', for the *polis* acted as a mediator of almost every manifestation of the religious sphere. As is becoming increasingly clear, the affinities with the modern conception of pilgrimage are tenuous. The acts of sacred devotion, the spiritual and material transformation of the individual or the rites of passage between stages of personal identity all so fundamental to (for example) Christian pilgrimage are conspicuous by their absence from the situation outlined so far. Oracle consultation by *theōroí* on behalf of the *polis* and the significance of *theōrodokía* for its host community have demonstrated how the formal relationship between *polis* and sacred mobility was indeed not only a vibrant bond bearing implications for the 'international' recognition and the self-perception of a *polis* within a religious and political network, but also has no qualifying parallel in the modern conception of pilgrimage. *Theōriai* and *theōrodókoi*

²³ Cf. *SEG* 24 379.

²⁴ George Daux, *Listes Delphiques de théarodoques*. *REG* 62(1949), 2.

²⁵ "This does not, of course, preclude the possibility, even the likelihood, that *theōrodókoi* voluntarily undertook some or all of the expenses on behalf of the state or contributed sums in excess of the amount provided by the state as prescribed by law". Perlman, *City and Sanctuary in Ancient Greece*, p. 50.

²⁶ Perlman, "'Theorodokountes en tais polesin': Panhellenic Epangelia and Political Status', p. 182.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-117.

worked as spokes in the wheel of Panhellenism, connecting the politically autonomous *poleis* to the hub - a religious venue or occasion.²⁸

Greek religious geography has in fact been perceived as a network connecting *poleis* and cults to sanctuaries and ritual occasions from a local up to a Panhellenic level. The Greeks were aware of themselves as an integral part of this network of religious microcosms, a framework of common shrines and cults in different geographical locations. It is no surprise then that the ritual workings and the sacred mobility laid claim to by Panhellenic religious networks fostered a degree of common identity and cohesion among the Greeks.²⁹ Participating in the above mentioned ritual activities as a spectator, delegate or announcer implied taking part in a collective and communal cult whose outreach and relevance extended far further than the sacred precinct of the sanctuary. This idea is especially significant for ancient Greece as it never achieved (or indeed ever aimed to achieve) political unity: actively engaging with this vibrant and expansive cult network (from which, it must be stressed, foreigners were excluded) must have been instrumental to the expression of Greek religious, civic and cultural identity.

It must now be acknowledged that one may understand ‘pilgrimage’ in a broader and vaguer sense, as a cross-cultural and ‘cross-temporal’ religiously inspired phenomenon entailing the movement of a group of people to a place of sacred interest. This working definition of the term is common in modern anthropological scholarship, which is also more inclined to stress the function of a pilgrimage centre as a place of encounter between pilgrims of different backgrounds - a context therefore for cultural mediation and convergence. The pilgrims invest in and superimpose on their sacred destination a variety of perceptions and meanings, ranging from political to personal, from practical to spiritual. The suggested quality of sacred centres as capable of absorbing and responding to a multiplicity of applications and proposals is undoubtedly a cross-cultural social feature: it is an anthropological perspective retraceable in all religions.³⁰ Does this loose definition however authorise the application of ‘pilgrimage’ to the official activity of *theōroí* representing their *polis*? If the object of the sacred embassy is to promote the exchange of religious perceptions and meanings of the network of different *poleis* within a framework of rituals, sacrifices and other religious practices, then *theōría* satisfies the anthropological understanding of pilgrimage as a religious context for cultural exchange. Having suggested that, in its extended and nonspecific sense, the word ‘pilgrimage’ may be also applied to Greek religion, the original research question undergoes a shift in focus: do we actually *want* to call ancient Greek sacred mobility ‘pilgrimage’?

²⁸ I make use of the term ‘Panhellenic’ with great caution, fully aware of its potentially misleading and arguably illusory power. Suffice it to specify that no political overtones are being implied. Cf. Scott Scullion, ‘Pilgrimage’ and Greek Religion: Sacred and Secular in the Pagan Pólis’, in *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman & Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*, ed. by J. Elsner, and I. Rutherford, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 128-129.

²⁹ As stated by the notorious definition of ‘Greekness’ (Ἑλληνικὸν) given by Herodotus, 8.144.2.

³⁰ John Eade, and Michael Sallnow, *Contesting the sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 10-15.

Conclusion: saying things as they are.

The answer to the question just posed is the subject of ongoing debate in classical scholarship. Its solution depends less, as Rutherford believes,³¹ on how one understands ‘pilgrimage’, than on how one understands *theōría* and its activities within the dimension of *polis*-religion.³² It concerns a methodological contention rather than depending on a personal choice. The multiple and profound differences between Christian pilgrimage and Greek *theōría* have been analysed and explained at length, making it quite clear that in its specific definition the term is too ideologically loaded to be applicable to ancient sacred mobility. However, it has been possible to interpret ‘pilgrimage’ in its looser and more anthropological sense: travelling to a sacred space entails engaging in the cultural mediation of different perceptions and meanings. Cross-cultural connections may hereby be corroborated and appreciated: interpreting the evidence and the mentality of a foreign or ancient culture may be aided by their formal expression into comparative models.³³ However, the risk of this circumspect approach would be the arbitrary application of a label to an extremely diverse and specialised set of practices. By refraining from applying sweeping definitions, one may instead do justice to aspects fundamental to understanding the inner workings of Greek religion: its formal relation with politics. This topical issue persists in current scholarly debate. Its progress is yet another alluring example of how the ancient and the modern world are still capable of engaging in constructive dialectic.

What may be consistently argued in conclusion to this essay is the importance of disciplining conjecture when choosing models through which to read antiquity, lest comparative interdisciplinarity veer out of control. It must therefore be Dillon’s lack of, not flawed, methodology which is to be criticised. To translate cross-culturally an ideologically charged term such as ‘pilgrimage’ without any preceding contextualisation, definition or circumscription is both misleading and dilettante.

Wolfson College, University of Oxford

Thea Sommerschild
thea.sommerschild@classics.ox.ac.uk

³¹ Rutherford, *State Pilgrims and Sacred Observers in Ancient Greece*, pp. 12-14.

³² As outlined by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, ‘What is *pólis* religion?’, in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. by R. Buxton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³³ Sally Humphreys, *Anthropology and the Greeks* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 12-13.

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