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Maria Mili: Religion and Society in Ancient Thessaly

Maria Mili’s *Religion and Society in Ancient Thessaly* amasses, organizes, and interprets a powerful amount of data on Archaic to early Hellenistic Thessalian religion and history. While not thesis-driven in a conventional sense, the book demonstrates how regional histories of Greek religion might be written. Earlier such histories were often so preoccupied with individual cults and sanctuaries and so encyclopedic in presentation that the fabric of religion was lost and the perspective of an individual worshipper muted. In Chapter One, "Three Questions for a Regional Study of Religion," Mili promises "to reconstruct the religious life of the area as a coherent, vital thing within a real and living society" (5). Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood's model of polis religion influences Mili's decision to use Thessalian poleis, rather than ethne, the central unit of analysis. For Mili, religion cut across distinctions that may have laid beneath the region's complex social and political geography. Mili views the region's fragmentary evidentiary record through a structuralist lens and attempts to generate a holistic view of Thessalian religion that reveals a series of relationships between "cult, society, and ethos" in the region.

Many earlier studies of Thessalian history assume the existence of a strong regional state in the Archaic period that progressively disintegrated throughout the Classical period. In Chapter Two, "Oligarchic Constitution and Religion in the Thessalian Poleis," Mili offers a granular, bottom-up approach to Thessalian politics and society. There is welcome focus on cities and their subdivisions, beginning with gene, phratries, and phylai, as well as some hazy groups like prostatai and hippotai who may have extended beyond or across the confines of poleis and acquired a more pronounced regional orientation. Mili moves successfully beyond public/private and elite/non-elite dichotomies when discussing the role of religion in oligarchic Thessalian poleis; she emphasizes instead the ability of religion in the region to stratify and unify simultaneously.

In Chapter Three, "Polis Cults," the most significant chapter of the monograph, Mili generates an inductive model of the cults of a normative "Thessalian polis". Beginning on the acropolis, Mili works her way down its slopes to the agora and city walls, covering en route a host of prominent divinities in Thessaly, including: Athena Polias, Zeus Thaulios, Dionysus, Demeter, Herakles, Themis, Hestia, Apollo Kerdoios, Asklepios, and Ennodia. Mili's treatment of the acropolis is illustrative. Poliarchoi/politoto)phylakes charged with keeping safe the city's wealth are at home here, as are the cults of Athena Polias and Zeus Thaulios. Mili imagines a festival for the goddess in which men marched in arms and women dedicated fine clothing amidst somewhat humble architecture. Suprafamilial groups are prominent as dedicators to this Zeus. The acropolis in
Thessaly is thus a space to assert difference within the city. The chapter conclusions are circumspect and Mili judiciously notes the advantages and limits of her model. While local distinctions may be flattened out as a result, there is unquestionable value in remaining close to the putative experience of individual worshippers. Chapter Four, "Thessaly through the Kaleidoscope," throws into high relief some distinctive variations in cult among Thessalian communities, like Amphanai, Pagasai, Pheraí, Pharsalos, Kranòn, Skotussa, and Larissa. Mili reasserts the centrality of using Thessalian myth to understand Thessalian cult, but it is not immediately clear that any regionally significant logic drives these local idiosyncrasies. The second half of the chapter is stronger and offers a profound study of religion in Demetrias. Mili stresses how the process of synoikism and the diversity of the city's new inhabitants impacted earlier cults in the region.

In Chapter Five, "Panthessalianism and Religion," Mili focuses on cultic expressions of Thessalian regional identity. Athena Itonia, Poseidon Petraios, and Zeus Pelorios receive extended treatment, as does the Thessalian relationship with the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. The emphasis on a range of possible forms of panthessalianism and its varied expressions in myth and cult is well-placed, although what qualifies as "panthessalian" remains quite subjective and can become too vague to be useful as a term of analysis: "Like the rivers of Thessaly, permanent features of the landscape but always moving through it, their ever-changing waters swamping the land and then, at the god's stroke, finding exit to the sea and through that to other lands, Panhellenic, creating at its passing a world ordered à la Thessalien" (257).

The monograph's concluding Chapter Six, "The Land Rich in Herbs," assesses some characteristic Attic and Hellenic stereotypes about Thessaly and their often deleterious influence on modern scholarship. Mili demolishes the thesis that Thessalian religion was overwhelmingly chthonian in character and distinguished by cult performed in funerary sanctuaries. The Thessaly of witches and magic has little foundation outside of literature. What, in the final analysis, can be claimed as distinctive about Thessaly and Thessalian religion? Mili's answer may surprise: An emphasis on hospitality.

The volume is completed by three useful appendices that should help to stimulate additional research into Thessalian religion and to make the region's epigraphy and archaeology of cult more accessible: the first is a checklist of 474 Thessalian inscribed dedications; the second consists of sketches of 45 excavated sanctuaries in Thessaly; and the third details associations attested in Thessalian epigraphy. A 42-page bibliography and full subject and source indices round out the volume. Footnotes are required reading throughout, where an extraordinary amount of information gleaned from archaeological reports is presented. Some may find Mili's method overly speculative, but her formidable control of the evidence is everywhere apparent, which fully grounds and authorizes the deployment of an often persuasive and always historically-
informed imagination. In a book that is otherwise innovative, though, the chronological framework of decline sounds a discordant note. Thessalian religion in the second century BCE and beyond is regarded as qualitatively different from what preceded (e.g., the pessimistic envoi on page 302, where Thessalian religion is said to have "lost all salience" in the Roman period). And it is somewhat surprising that comparison often begins and ends with Athens: Macedonia, Epiros, and Aitolia have become much better known in the past generation and can often offer more pertinent comparanda. It is unfortunate that Mili does not offer SEG or BE numbers with any regularity; these would be especially useful for the uninitiated, particularly given how many important inscriptions were first published in regional journals like the excellent Thessaliko Himerologio (e.g., Appendix 1, no. 290-1, a pair of dedications to Herakles from Atrax <SEG 34.487, 498>). In other cases, there is careless treatment of evidence. For example, reference is made on page 115, n. 74 to a fifth-century dedication to Dionysus Karpios from Larisa, where what qualifies as the editio princeps is cited, Theocharis' notice in the Deltion of 1960, but not Kontogiannis' 1985 (SEG 35.590a) reedition; Theocharis had initially dated the stone to the fourth century, which Kontogiannis later redated to ca. 450-425 BCE; Mili's fifth-century date is consistent with Kontogiannis, not Theocharis. In a study like Religion and Society in Ancient Thessaly, where a synchronic frame of interpretation predominates, such slips are of course of little consequence, but others using the work may have different aims. The author relishes polemic and occasionally the carelessness that marks some of her treatment of sources creeps into her citation of other scholars. For example, I was surprised to learn that I had suggested that the several Thessalian dedications offered by women described as nebeusasai were "made ad hoc on the occasion of marriage" (204; no such claim is made in ZPE 162 151-64). There is often a waffly character to the argument (e.g., 239-40: "Although it is impossible to be certain, there is no reason to assume that the Peloria was celebrated only in some parts of Thessaly, i.e. [sic] in the Pelasgiotis in view of the festival's connection with the Pelasgians. That being said, it is possible that some local celebrations acquired more fame than others") verging on vacuity (e.g., 301: "Thessaly, in other words, was a place where lots of politics took place"), and the structuralism, while typically benign, can lead to excess. Let us hope that F will not become a standard transliteration of Greek digamma (e.g., 174-5: The Pharsalan Δάϝον becomes DaFon), nor Q of koppa (e.g., 45: Qolouros renders Θόλουρος). But these are small criticisms of an important work on Thessaly and a critical, thoughtful meditation on how to write a regional history of religion, which every serious student and scholar of Greek religion and history will want to consult. The author deserves our congratulations and gratitude.