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## **In memoriam Walter Burkert (February 2, 1931 – March 11, 2015)**

With the passing of Walter Burkert, all of us who study ancient religions and myths have lost a scholar to whom we are indebted for important paths forward, and a colleague and teacher of seemingly boundless enthusiasm and generosity. It truly seems as if an epoch has ended.

Walter Burkert began his studies in Erlangen, where in 1955 he wrote a dissertation under the direction of Otto Seel, entitled *Zum altgriechischen Mitleidsbegriff*. His Habilitation was awarded in 1962, and his Habilitationsschrift was published that same year under the title *Weisheit und Wissenschaft. Studien zu Pythagoras, Philolaos und Platon*. Its translation into English ten years later (*Lore and Learning in Ancient Pythagoreanism*) marked the beginning of a pattern: almost every book that Burkert wrote was translated into English, as well as into other languages in many cases. The pattern reflects the eagerness with which a world of scholars awaited Burkert's insights. His other major books (I give here their English titles, followed by the year of original publication and year of translation) were: *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (1972; 1983), *Greek Religion* (1977; 1983), *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (1979), *The Orientalizing Revolution* (1984; 1992), *Ancient Mystery Cults* (1987), *Savage Energies: Lessons of Myth and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (1990; 2001), *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religion* (1996), *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (2004).

Nor was it only through books that the impact of Burkert's explorations of ancient religion was felt; he was the master of the tide-turning essay: 'TOHΣ: Zum griechischen "Schamanismus"' (1962), 'Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual' (1966), 'Apellai und Apollo' (1975), 'Orphism and Bacchic Mysteries: New Evidence and Old Problems of Interpretation' (1977), 'Itinerant Diviners and Magicians: A Neglected Element in Cultural Contacts' (1983), and 'Oriental and Greek Mythology: The Meeting of Parallels' (1987), for example, changed the ways we look at the ancient world, its rituals, and its beliefs. Luckily for us, his students edited eight volumes of *Kleine Schriften*, published between 2001 and 2011 as supplements to *Hypomnemata* (volumes I and VI include a complete bibliography of his publications through the year 2000). Four of these are dedicated to his work on religions and myths.

But no one's work can be represented by titles alone. What Burkert gave us was new ways of looking at ancient Greek religions and myths that forever changed our ideas about who the Greeks were. Three contributions stand out in particular. First, under the influence of Karl Meuli, who had brought classics into contact with ethnology, and of ethologist Konrad Lorenz, who had studied animal behavior, Burkert offered us models for how ancient Greek sacrifice and other rituals had developed that were anchored in what he argued was basic human nature (*Homo Necans*, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, and a host of articles). Especially striking were his proposals that much of Greek religion had deep roots in the communal need

to turn innate aggression outwards, towards an ‘enemy’ that could be represented by the animal on the altar, and that the shared guilt that was felt following the animal’s death helped to bind the community together. Burkert’s interest in sociobiological approaches to religion continued throughout his career, and was later expressed, for example, in *Creation of the Sacred*. In 1998, the journal *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* devoted part of an issue to scholars’ responses to *Creation of the Sacred*.

Second, Burkert revived and reformed the myth-and-ritual approach that had been introduced by the Cambridge Ritualists, especially Jane Ellen Harrison. Burkert proposed that both myths and rituals are symbolic expressions of ‘programs of action’ that have deep roots in biologically-determined events such as puberty and the seeking of a mate, or in basic social realities such as the hunt. Given this, he suggested, myths and rituals usually arose independently from one another, although they sometimes ended up functioning in tandem. In *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, as well as a number of articles, Burkert used his ‘programs of action’ model to offer a particularly captivating revival of Harrison’s argument that the initiation paradigm underlay many Greek myths and rituals.

Thirdly, together with his friend Martin L. West (who passed away on July 13, 2015, just as I was finishing this homage to Walter Burkert), Burkert was one of the earliest and most persuasive voices urging us to study Greek religions and myths within the broader context of other Mediterranean religions and myths. It was through reading Burkert’s *The Orientalizing Revolution* and West’s *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (1971) and *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (1999) that hundreds of classicists first came to accept the idea that numerous elements in Greek religious practice and myths had parallels—if not origins—in the civilizations of the ancient Near East.

Of course, one should not forget that in addition to these new ideas, Burkert also gave us the best general reference book on ancient Greek religion since Martin P. Nilsson’s *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*—and a reference book that, in its relative brevity and affordability, has proven much more readily available to students as well as scholars around the world. *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* has been translated into Italian, English, Greek and Portuguese, and a second German edition was published in 2010.

Burkert’s teaching career began with a professorship at the Technische Universität Berlin, but in 1969 he became the professor of Greek at the Universität Zürich and remained there until he retired in 1996. Not only did he direct the doctoral work of several students who have themselves contributed much to the study of ancient religions and myths—Aphrodite Avagiannou, Fritz Graf, Eveline Krummen, Christoph Riedweg, Katharina Waldner—but he also welcomed and mentored many visiting students who stayed in Zürich for shorter periods, including myself and, earlier than me, Robert Parker, who worked on the doctoral dissertation that would become *Miasma* while there. I will never forget his kindness, his willingness to offer his time, and his valuable insights on my own doctoral topic. In addition to his frequent lec-

tures at universities all over the world, Burkert served as the Sather Lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley in 1977, as the Gifford Lecturer at St. Andrews and as a visiting professor at a number of other universities. In 1990, Burkert received the prestigious Balzan Prize. He held many honorary degrees, was a member of several Academies, and won many other prizes, as well; none of them gave him as much satisfaction as the Gauss Medal (1982), named after the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss and rarely given to humanities scholars.

In 1988, Burkert was interviewed about his life and scholarship by Robert W. Cape in *Favonius* (vol. 2:41–52); in 2007, Daniel Barbu published another interview with him in *Asdiwal* (vol. 2:7–15). Both make fascinating reading for the many who admire his work. At one point, Cape asked Burkert what advice he'd have for graduate students and he replied, 'just do what you are interested in, follow your own interests, but follow them very thoroughly. One question will lead to another and then you will probably find out something'—a statement behind which we can glimpse Burkert's inherent modesty, his mode of work, and the zeal with which he pursued it to the end.

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