From Water in Greek Religion, Ancient and Modern, to the Wider Mediterranean and Beyond

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The Life-giving Spring at Athens

In Greece, springs in caves have traditionally shaped religious beliefs and practices. In ancient times springs represented Water-Nymphs. Today springs are dedicated to the Panagia (the Virgin Mary), under her attribute of Zodochos Pege (the Life-giving Spring). Ancient and modern believers have expressed their beliefs in rituals connected to purity and water by fetching holy water from the caves dedicated to these female divinities. Panagia’s Athenian chapel is situated inside a circular Spring House hewn in the rock on the southern slope of the Acropolis.

Water is a significant topic both in the humanities and social sciences and might be studied from a comparative civilizational perspective, such as in relation to comparative civilizations of water. Every aspect of human life and divine interferences on earth is possible to express with water symbolism, and religious rituals and beliefs in connection with water are found cross-culturally, be that in Asia, such as in Japan, in the Middle East and Mediterranean areas, as well as in Latin America. In other words, rituals in connection with the religious significance of water recur across several civilizations and religious groupings.

With this in mind, the article will compare the importance of the spring in the modern rituals in the Acropolis cave to the ancient cult of the spring in the actual cave. The comparison will also exploit the cult of springs in other Greek caves and similar cult found in non-Greek contexts. Thus, by bringing ancient and modern worlds into mutual illumination, also by making comparisons with material from the rest of the Mediterranean area and the Middle East, the article has relevance beyond the Greek context both in time and space.

Cleaning the Acropolis Caves

Saturday 4 April 1992, Eirine Melas carries out the monthly cleaning of the Acropolis caves. In the morning, I arrive together with my visiting mother and Eirine’s daughter Maria to the cave, which is called...
the Life-giving Spring, due to the Sacred Spring. Eirine says that it is dedicated to Agioi (cf. Agios, i.e. Saint) Anargyroi, the patron saints of healing. Eirine has been cleaning the caves regularly since her deceased husband worked at the Acropolis. Today, two other women also arrive, and a young man, Panagiotis. During our stay, he presents several newspaper cuttings about the “cave-churches.” I always have regarded the two caves as caves, but my informants always refer to them as churches. Despite Panagiotis’ participation, the main performers of the rituals in the caves are women. When they reach the cave this morning, everyone washes in the spring and drinks the water. The two women assert that the water is miracle-working and healing. They also state that, since childhood they have been brought to the Life-giving Spring to fetch holy water along with their mothers: “It has always been like this”. The first declaration is a clear instance of how Greek children are socialised. The comment about “how it always has been” is a general remark that most informants give when a researcher asks how old a custom is. This may very often be a problem when conversing with Greek informants who do not necessarily always think, or “see,” in a “European historical linear” way, but have their own, very often, local history.

They explain that among the many icons in the cave, the most holy represents the Panagia and the Child. In front of the icon, one of the women arranges a bunch of flowers. So, even if we have just learned that the cave still is dedicated to Agioi Anargyroi, the Panagia is the one who gets the gifts. Further, the icons of the Panagia are mainly dedicated in the tamata (i.e. metal plaques depicting a vow or request, votive offerings), even if the icon of Agioi Anargyroi still is in the cave. The most common offering is a silver- or gold-plated ex-voto representing the person who has been miraculously cured by the icon in combination with the water, or the cured limb itself or the person or limb wanting to be cured. They light candles in front of the icon and they light the olive-oil lamps. They fill water in bottles, while saying that, “even if it is not raining, there will always be water in the cave.” The cave is situated within the archaeological quarter, and generally the entrance is locked up with bars and padlocks. Therefore, it was necessary to obtain a special permission from the representatives of the Ministry of Culture to do research in the two caves situated on the southern slope of the Acropolis, a task which was not easy. Even though the representatives of the authorities were very helpful, it took some time before they understood my request. Several found it quite incomprehensible that I was not interested in only talking with the archaeolo-
gists who work at the site, but also with the woman who regularly is cleaning the caves and with people who have been used to fetch water there since childhood. That I was as interested in establishing contact with living people practicing their religion in the same caves where particularly the Water-Nymphs once were worshipped, as in all the archaeological ruins, which are mute compared to the traditional cult practiced in the cave with Life-giving water, was incomprehensible. One may add that, certainly, the archaeologists do unearth the Ancient Greatness, but I would claim that it also had a fundament, people’s traditional rituals.  

While Eirine lights candles and fetches water in the cave, we chat about the annual festival, dedicated to the “Life-giving Spring,” which will take place here in a month’s time. However, it is not yet decided if the festival will be celebrated this year, due to two practical problems, one of them being the actual date of the festival in 1992. Another problem is the relationship between the new parish priest and the celebrants: According to Maria, the old priest in the Byzantine Church of Agios Nikolaos on Plaka always officiated during the festival, but now he is very old, and his successor resists participating at the festival, claiming that it represents a pagan custom. In 1991, he stated that he was ill. Even if there is a close relationship between the official Orthodox religion and popular religion, this situation still is a general problem we also see during other Greek festivals. In 1991, the festival finally was successfully celebrated because they invited a priest from the University of Piraeus to officiate at the ceremony. However, they still do not know what will happen this year.

After a while, Eirine fills holy water into a bucket, and along with a broom, soap, etc., we carry it with us while climbing up to the other cave-church, which opens above the theatre of the ancient god, Dionysos. This is the cave dedicated to the Panagia Crysospeliōtissa, or Chapel of Our Lady of the Cavern. Within, Eirine lights every evening a lamp.

The churches are from the 5th or the 6th century. In both churches we see a newspaper article framed and glazed. Panagiotis tells that he hung it up. He does not remember when and where the article was published, only that he “found it some years ago,” “the year I was on Tinos during the Panagia” (i.e. 15.08.1989). The article describes the legend behind the cult dedicated to the Panagia Crysospeliōtissa in this particular cave. Eirine and Panagiotis recount the article in their own way: “In the beginning of Christianity there was a miraculous icon in this cave. It was painted by Agios (i.e., the Evangelist) Luke (i.e., during Mary’s
Roxanne, the daughter of a pagan medical doctor, dreamt of Panagia who asked her “to set her free.” “She was imprisoned.” In other words, the icon was buried here. After three dreams, she asked the other Christians to go along with her, dug and found the icon. Then, the Panagia appeared to her in a vision. She promised to help Roxanne to liberate Athens. When Alaric came, he wanted to destroy the city. But a light appeared before them, Alaric saw the Panagia on the city-wall, and Alaric departed. According to the article he left because he was a Christian and believed in the Panagia. The article also tells that many of the pagan Athenians interpreted the miracle in their own way, and they thought that the protecting city goddess on the Acropolis, Athena, had appeared on the city-wall. The miracle happened in August 395 and therefore 15 August is celebrated here in commemoration of the miracle. In addition to the problematical dating of the article, we also met the particular interpretation my informants put into the article, i.e. the relation between the pagans and the Christians and their emphasizing of the magical power of the icon. Accordingly, they also say that the icon was bought to the cave when people who did not believe in Christianity were present. The article does not say anything about that, but it tells how the icon was helping the Athenians to save the city against the assault of the Goths.

In the cave dedicated to Panagia Crysospeliotissa, they perform the memorial service called “Nine days after the Dormition”, i.e. on 23 August. Earlier, there were two storeys separated by a wooden-floor in this chapel. Eirine explains that this church “is named after the death or ‘Dormition’ of the Panagia, because the icon depicts her death.” They decorate the icon with lamps and flowers. They also decorate the rest of the cave, leaving all the lamps in front of the icon of the Panagia and the Child.

The first time I was visiting the cave, August 1990, I also saw icons dedicated to the Panagia Athinotissa and Agios Attikos. Several icons were hanging over older Byzantine frescos, which are not restored (i.e. in 1992). It is worth noting that the religious symbols, miracles, etc. are extremely important to the believers, and in the very straightforward way they relate everything: it is self-evident. Hence, during my visit they tell several stories, and Panagiotis supplies me with several pictures of different saints and other gifts. I learn that some years ago, Eirine found all the icons broken when she arrived at the cave-church. By way of helpful people, Eirine managed to repair some of the icons, and she received several new ones. When Eirine has finished sweeping,
she sprinkles water from the Life-giving Spring all over. Afterwards, we return downhill to the first church.

When leaving Eirine and Panagiotis, she wishes us “Happy Easter” and adds, as most faithful Greeks do, “Kalos Anestase,” “i.e. Happy Resurrection.”

“New” Friday in the “White Week:” the Celebration of the Life-giving Spring

In Greece, the first week after the Resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday is known as the “White Week.” On “New” Friday in the “White Week” they feast the Virgin Mary under her attribute of the Life-giving Spring. In Athens, the festival is celebrated in a particular way, since the church dedicated to the Life-giving Spring is situated inside the archaeological site of the Acropolis.

In 1992, Friday after Easter coincided with May 1st, or the Workers Day. This is a general holiday also for the guards working at the Acropolis area. This is important, because of the location of the cave. In March, the guards told me that the Acropolis area would be closed for visitors on May 1st. It seemed that the Curator of Antiquities of the Acropolis found it difficult to decide whether the festival would be celebrated and people would be allowed to come into the area and fetch holy water.

So, how will it turn out? Will the ideology related to the “holiday of the workers,” as it is adapted to the Greek nation-state, submit to the traditional popular custom, or will the new ideology related to Western Europe be the winner?13 Both festivals represent “the people,” but one is related to a nationalist ideology conforming to a Western ideology, while the other represents the inward-facing identity, the “Roman” image of Greece that “echoes” the Byzantine Empire and hence the Orthodox Christian tradition to which the majority of Greeks still adhere (cf. Herzfeld 1992).

Finally the Acropolis authorities decide to keep the area open, and the popular religiosity triumphs. The festival is celebrated from 8:30 until 11:00. The guards are on duty at the entrances to the Acropolis. Here, the Greeks from the neighbourhood are separated from the rest of the people outside the gates. To the many frustrated tourists, waiting outside the gates, the message given is clear: “only Greeks are admitted, since it is their festival.”14 The “Roman” tradition gains the victory over the “Hellenic,” the Roman identity is not placed at the disposal of foreigners, as the Greeks do with the “common Ancient heritage,”
which is “outward-directed.” Consequently, one may claim that the “ideology of the workers” became “subjugated” by the traditional religious custom, which is connected with deep-seated values, the lasting mentalities: people’s need to fetch Life-giving water from the spring on this specific festival, when the water is thought to be particularly healing and purifying. However, the faithful did not only have to compete with the political ideology, but also the religious, since the parish priest declined to officiate. Accordingly he had to be replaced by another.

During the celebration many people are present. The officiating priest is the same as the year before. Outside the entrance to the cave-church several tables are set up. They are laid with a variety of breads and cakes brought by the participants, particularly the round holy bread, prosphoro, which always is offered to the church and blessed by the priest. Inside the church several candles are lit. At the altar, in front of the wall behind which is the spring, the priest is officiating. When he concludes the mass, he starts to assemble the rest of the holy bread, which he has blessed and distributed to the participants. He also packs up his briefcase, which is situated in the middle of the altar.

But, people are still flowing into the cave to fetch water, although most of the participants stream downhill from the cave carrying small bottles with holy water, holy breads and pieces of cakes, as soon as the service is finished. An old priest leaves, carrying with him a bottle with holy water for the following year. People who flow into the cave-church are not only fetching holy water. They also wash in the spring and drink from the water.

The water scoop is repeatedly used during the festival. A man on crutches sits next to the spring, occupied with drawing water. Supplied with the water scoop, he continually receives empty bottles, which he fills and returns to people who are queuing up to obtain holy water. Other people sprinkle their heads. In the middle of the ground floor, a basket filled with pieces of bread is placed on the ancient column, i.e. the former “holy table.” When the last slice of bread is taken, one of the faithful seize the basket and pours the rest of the crumbs over himself. While people are occupied with their own water-fetching ritual, the guards working at the Acropolis become more and more impatient: They are shouting that we have to get out.

But, people don’t bother at all, they continue to fetch water and bread; they drink, eat, kiss the various icons and make the sign of the cross. Eirine becomes angry, and argues ardently with the head of the guards. At 11 o’clock, we are more or less thrown out, but the Acropolis
authorities have had to open up the church and let people in, and keep several guards on duty for more than three hours on 1st May 1992.

By giving this “thick” description of a contemporary Greek popular ritual, I hope I have managed to give some indications of the importance of water in Greek religion, seen “from the grass-roots.” Perhaps it may help enlightening similar ancient popular rituals, since our ancient source material is very scattered.

The cults in the Acropolis Caves at Athens: Continuity and Change

In ancient Greece, in most of the grottoes, a cave full of water, even several droplets was thought to be a manifestations of the divinity. Later, most of the caves were transformed into churches, as in Athens, where the Panagia has taken over the healing power of the ancient Water-Nymphs. As parallels to ancient votive offerings dedicated to the Nymphs, today we find many icons with ex-votos attached to them.

In other words, the Athenian chapel is situated on a site already sacred to water-divinities in antiquity. The spring and its surroundings were initially sacred to the Water-Nymphs. The Spring House built over it originally dates to the late sixth century B.C. That the area was sacred to the nymphs is shown by an abundance of votive reliefs with nymphs and other offerings found in this area. Pan was also worshipped there from the 5th century B.C. onward (Hdt. 6.105), and probably also Hermes, Aphrodite and the Egyptian import Isis, judging from the fact that near the Spring House there is an altar-table of Hymettian marble bearing the names of these gods who were jointly worshipped and to whom the altar was dedicated. Before the middle of the first century, a shrine for Isis was established just south of the Spring House, beside a smaller temple of the goddess Themis.

So, the original cult of the spring, followed by the Archaic Spring House, later situated within the Asklepieion, or sanctuary of Asklepios in the City, is much older than the shrine of Asklepios, which was dedicated in 419/418 B.C. Then, the sacred territory of the spring became officially marked off by a marble boundary stone.

Asklepios owes his status and popularity to the healing of sickness. His daughter, who simply is named Hygieia, Health, also illustrates the healing aspect. News of the miracle cures drew hordes of visitors to Epidauros, the original cult centre of Asklepios (cf. Paus. 2.26, 8), and gave rise to a regular health business. Nevertheless, at the time of the “great plague,” the god went to Athens.
The worship of Asklepios was introduced into Athens on the occasion of the plague of 429 B.C. The “cure” followed a ritual, during which patients washed in the Sacred Spring, offered at an altar, and then retired to the stoa (a porch not attached to a larger building) where the mysterious process of incubation was assisted by incense from the altars (cf. Paus. 2.27,1 f.). This and religious excitement produced dreams, through the medium of which Asklepios was supposed to effect his cure. Many ex-voto tablets to Asklepios and Hygieia have been found showing the portion of the anatomy treated. These were affixed to a wall or inlaid in the columns; larger votive stelai, some showing the god visiting sick patients in their sleep, were fixed to the stoa steps. Pausanias, living in the second century A.D., tells about votive offerings he saw when he was visiting the cave (1.21, 4-7). He specifies (1.21,4): “In (side) it there is a spring, by which they say that Poseidon’s son Halirrhothios (“Sea foam”) deflowered Alkippe the daughter of Ares, (...)”.

Around the 5th century A.D. all the buildings were demolished and on the foundations a large Christian basilica was built to the memory of the doctor saints.21 Thus, the sanctuary dedicated to the ancient god of healing became transformed into a Byzantine Church. Here, under the patronage of Agioi Kosmas and Damianos, the process of incubation assisted by incense along with the miracle-working nature of the Sacred Spring continued under Christian aegis.

When the area around the Asklepieion was excavated in 1876, the cave with holy water also became dedicated to the Panagia.22 So, the cult in the cave dedicated to a female divinity and the cure in the spring is not necessarily representing “cult-continuity” but perhaps rather “revival” of cult. According to the Greek scholar, D. Loukatos (1982: 153), who examines the cult-continuity from Asklepios to Agioi Anargyroi, the cave is still dedicated to the doctor saints. But, as already specified, today the ex-votos are mainly dedicated to the Panagia. Accordingly, it may be problematical if we only emphasize the cult dedicated to male divinities simultaneously as the practical cult clearly demonstrates the importance of female divinities.23 According to some, the cave is still dedicated to Agioi Anargyroi, but to most people, at least through their practical rituals, the most important saint worshipped in the cave seems to be the Panagia.

In antiquity the cave that is dedicated to the Panagia Crysopeliotissa today was dedicated to Artemis and Apollo as well as Dionysos. Pausanias (1.21, 3) mentions the cave: “At the top of the theatre is a
cave in the rocks under the Acropolis. This also has a tripod over it, wherein are Apollo and Artemis slaying the children of Niobe.”

Until 1827 the entrance to the cave was masked by the Choregic Monument erected in 320/319 B.C., by Thrasyllos, who dedicated the cavern to Dionysos. From a drawing we learn that around 1750 A.D. a visitor on his way up to the cave might meet people waiting the arrival of the priest, attended by a boy who carries a wax-candle, followed by a man and a woman leading a child, making his whole congregation. Higher up on the rock, next to the Monument, and just outside of the cave, some persons are waiting the coming of the priest. The scene is very similar to the modern cult. So, we have pre-Christian documentation, the Christian legend from 395 A.D., in addition to the drawing illustrating the account given by Western travellers to Athens around the middle of the 18th century. In other words, the cult in the cave must have been very important for people in the neighbourhood. We also learn this when visiting the Christian Holy cave, reading the pencilled graffiti on the gate “for the health of Markos.” This has hardly changed for centuries: in fact the cave now has recovered something genuine which in Pausanias’s time was smothered under art.

So, in antiquity the two Acropolis caves were dedicated to the Water-Nymphs and Artemis respectively, and later they became churches where the Panagia is worshipped. In other words, in the caves there have been cults dedicated to female fertility bestowing and healing divinities in ancient and modern times, even if the names of the divinities have changed. The male elements in the Classical (Aklepios and Dionysos respectively, Asklepios nevertheless together with Hygieia) and the Byzantine periods were intermezzos. Even if a social or ideological meaning changes, in the ideological transition from paganism to Christianity, exemplified by Christian saints taking over the fields of responsibilities of the ancient gods, it seems that another unconscious or implied meaning is the same and continues across different ideologies, such as the ritual fetching of holy water in the cave dedicated to the Life-giving Spring.

For some years I was not able to visit Athens, and hence, the Acropolis caves. When I came back to Athens in 2004, I learned that restoration work is being carried out in both caves. When asking what has happened to the churches, I was told that, “they are still open on particular days during the year.” And so the traditional rituals continue.
From the Life-giving Spring at Athens to other Cults of the Life-giving Spring

Taken together, the Acropolis caves represent similarities to the history of the Aegean island of Tinos, the greatest shrine of Greek Orthodoxy. Here, we see a similar account to the one told in the cave dedicated to the Panagia Cryospeliotissa.

In 1823, after several mystical visions of the nun named Pelagia, they found the Miraculous Icon of the Annunciation of the Panagia. According to the tradition, Pelagia saw repeatedly in her visions the Panagia, who ordered her to inform the elders to start excavations in order to find her icon, and to build her "house" (i.e. her church) on that place. The icon, said to be the work of Agios Luke, was unearthed in the field where it had remained since a church built on the ruins of a pagan temple was destroyed by the Saracens in the 10th century A.D. Two years before the icon was found, the great Greek War of Liberation broke out. The finding of the icon, the construction of the church, the enormous crowds of pilgrims and all the miracles contributed to the fact that in 1971 the island was declared a sacred island by governmental decree. Pelagia also became sanctified. In addition to the thousands of pilgrims coming to Tinos on their own, several pilgrimages are organised by representatives of the Orthodox Church, especially in Athens or Larissa, particularly in connection with the most important festival on 15 August.

The sanctuary on Tinos also has a chapel dedicated to the "Life-giving Spring" and rituals connected with water are important, as in all Greek churches.

The first excavations on Tinos brought to light the ruins of the foundations of the Byzantine Church, first and foremost a deep but dry well. On the day of the laying of the cornerstone of the Church, the formerly dry well became filled with water. The source is seen as a miracle, and the water is regarded as sacred. Accordingly, pilgrims from all over the world take bottles of this precious water home.29

Today, it is also important to be baptised in water from one of the many sacred springs dedicated to the Panagia; and on Tinos, particularly during the Dormition of the Panagia, on 15 August, many children are baptised in water from the "Life-giving Spring."

To Western views of causality and of human nature, it may not be so remarkable that an icon should be buried in the ruins of a church, nor that a dry well, once excavated, might be unblocked and begin to flow again. Nor is it odd that in the difficult early days of the Greek War of
Independence both priests and populace would be looking for reassurance and hope. On the other hand, this is not the view of people on Tinos, who believe in this as well as in the other miracles in connection with the finding of the icon and the subsequent history of the sanctuary, and this has to do with Greece’s particular and ambiguous position as both “us” and “them,” i.e. its “Roman” and “Hellenic” traditions.  

Holy water, agiasma, is found in all modern Greek sanctuaries, but some sanctuaries offer particularly miracle-working water with its own legend attached to it, and several caves with springs, which were dedicated to ancient gods and goddesses, particularly Water-Nymphs, are now transformed to chapels dedicated to the Panagia.  

Rituals connected with water are central, in modern and ancient Greece, as seen in the festival dedicated to the Panagia, the Life-giving Spring. In this connection it is important to mention the establishment of the festival dedicated to the Life-giving Spring in Constantinople (i.e., Istanbul) by the Patriarch in 1833. Through the significant blessing of the agiasma, we meet holy water or a very old purification symbol, which, on one level, is “reinvented” in the service of the national ideology during the same year that the Greek struggle for independence came to a successful conclusion. This may be regarded as an example of ideological reuse of old popular symbols in the service of the nation-state. At intervals, this way of utilisation has burst open throughout Greek history, simultaneously as people have, on another level, carried out their own rituals, for example by fetching miracle-working water in the same cave despite ideological changes, and probably not been very affected by what has been introduced from “above”, by official authorities. So, one may suggest that even if the official Orthodox Church or the nation-state, the two institutions traditionally having a very close connection in Greece, sometimes try to dictate to the people, the latter carries out their own rituals as they have always done. Hence the two - sometimes contradictory views -, the official and the popular, are nevertheless both complementary and interdependent.  

From the Greek context to other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Springs  

The accounts from the Acropolis caves and Tinos represent similarities to a history which is probably more famous, at least in the Western world, and certainly within the Catholic Church. This is the account from France, the cave with wonder-working water in Lourdes in Southern France, visited by enormous crowds of pilgrims, and its story
about how the water began to flow.

In 1858, Bernadette Soubirous, had several mystical visions, seeing the Virgin Mary appearing to her in a cave. During the ninth vision, in front of several spectators, Bernadette started to scratch the earth with her fingers, and a jet of water began to pour forth. Later, a sanctuary was built in connection with the cave. Bernadette became a nun and in 1933 she became sanctified. In addition to all the pilgrims coming on their own, “National Pilgrimages” are organised from Paris. Seriously handicapped persons in wheeled chairs also participate, thus paralleling the circumstances on Tinos.

Today, the pilgrims fetch holy water from the cave in bottles as do the pilgrims on Tinos. Another counterpart is that the church sends small bottles of water all over the world to people who cannot get to Lourdes.

In the miraculous cave, a marble Holy Virgin indicates the sacred spot. This particular cave and the Holy Virgin appearing to the kneeling young Bernadette, is reproduced in other places within the Catholic world, such as on the backside of the church dedicated to the Holy Virgin under her attribute of Saver of the port in the South-Italian village of Villammare (Håland 1990). Next to the cave in Lourdes are the fountains and the pools where the pilgrims take their baths.

One may suggest that the health business on modern Tinos and in Lourdes is not very different from the situation in ancient Epidauros, which as the other shrines of Asklepios also served as a sort of hospital.

The baths were important in the shrines of Asklepios, since the ancient Greeks believed that Asklepios would not accept patients who had not been washed. Accordingly, sacred springs are mentioned in all Asklepieia. The clear bubbling water of a spring, rising out of the earth by a power, habitually regarded as a Water-Nymph, was, in the imagination of the Greeks, a gift of the water deities, the goddesses by which all life on earth was fed. Hence, pure water was considered to have therapeutic properties. Ancient medicine employed water treatments in various ways for a great variety of complaints. The physician Galen (approximately A.D. 129-199) gave detailed instructions for particular water treatments, which took place in Pergamon in Asia Minor.

The Asklepian demand for ritual purity has its parallel in Islamic rituals, since prayer is valid only when performed in a state of ritual purity, and therefore has to be preceded by ablution, wudu’. The Koran (5:8-9) ordains: “(...) wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet up to the ankles; (…).” Paralleling
ancient requests, the duty of ablution accounts for the presence of fountains in the mosque courts.

Other places in the Mediterranean also have Holy Springs, even if they are not as famous as those already mentioned. There is, for example, the healing and purifying spring flowing out from the mountain beneath the church dedicated to the holy stone, *Il Santuario Pietrasanta*, in the village of San Giovanni a Piro in Southern Italy.ª

So, springs are often connected to healing and purification both in the ancient Greco-Roman world and the modern Mediterranean and the Middle East. In ancient sources as today, water is often mentioned in connection with exceptional powers.

The Greek ritual carried out on "New" Friday is a part of the spring festivals, and may also be regarded as a purification ritual before the new season, which starts with the Resurrection. It may be compared to other purification rituals, such as rituals carried out in Persia, Iraq, Syria and Egypt, where New Year was for some time celebrated in spring.º

Water has healing, purifying and protecting powers; in the form of holy water, it is central to many rituals designed to ward off evil and to ensure blessings. It is also used in conjunction with different magical remedies. A spring may be a place to which one seeking a cure for illness is directed by a dream; "silent water" is used to cure muteness, rainwater cures warts. According to ancient Hippocratic writings from around 430 B.C. on the medical significance of dreams, some of the "(...) signs that foretell health (...) (are) (...) to see (...) rivers flowing naturally, with water that is pure, and neither higher nor lower than it should be, and springs and wells that are similar."³⁶

An earlier account of sainthood in Islam, where water from a holy spring is central, parallels ancient and modern Greek customs in connection with a death-cult.³⁷

Today, people from all over the world go to Lourdes and Tinos, famous for their healing capacities because of their holy waters. The modern sanctuaries are often situated at places where ancient pre-Christian people also made pilgrimages to springs, as in Greece, where Agia Marina of the Holy Springs has her church next to the ancient site of a temple holy to the goddess, Themis.³⁸

In Pamukkale in Turkey, the curative properties of the waters, known from ancient times in the neighbouring Hierapolis, where the Great Goddess was worshipped, have permitted the construction in modern times of spas, annexed to the hotels in the area. The ancient Romans particularly appreciated this place.
In San Giovanni a Piro in modern Athens, continuing cults are related to natural formations, such as caves and stones; and elements, such as water; continuing cults related to the same formations and elements are illustrated within the Islamic world, as well. The holy city of Mecca is, for example, situated on a place where in earlier times were found a stone and a holy spring.39

Peoples’ worldviews of themselves and their gods are a product of the relationship between nature, society and water. Accordingly, the religious and cultural uses of water to express essential truths of humanity and the relation between humans and gods differ within civilizations and religions. Still, concerning religious rituals and beliefs in connection with water, it is also very interesting to see how many parallels there are between the various civilizations and societies, despite of many differences, both in time and space.

Thus, by taking as a starting point some fieldwork experiences in a Greek context, the article has suggested a way to explore water and religion in a comparative civilizational perspective, by giving some indicators of how particular water landscapes have shaped religious beliefs and practices, how different religions have described and perceived water, and how believers have expressed their beliefs in rituals connected to purity and water.

Notes:
1 The article is based on a paper presented at The 35th World Congress of the ISCSC, Paris 5-8 July 2006, where it was placed under Topoi, climate and migrations: Comparative Civilizations of Water. An earlier version of the paper was presented at The 4th IWHA (The International Water History Association) Conference, Paris, 2005, and a longer version of the following is found on the CD-Rom from the conference, distributed by the IWHA secretariat (post@iwha.net). Since 1985, I have had several periods of fieldwork in the Mediterranean, mainly in Greece where I have also been conducting research on religious festivals since 1990. A six-month period of fieldwork was also conducted on religious festivals in Italy in 1987, cf. Håland 1990. The following is mainly based upon extended fieldwork which was carried out in Greece in 1991-1992, cf. Håland 2004. There, the topics discussed in the following are examined further, as well as the problems and fruitfulness of working with anthropological comparative approaches to
Ancient Society.

2 I have not attempted to disguise the location of my field research, although I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the individuals. To do otherwise would, I think, be a weak attempt to thwart a dialogue between myself, and by extension the society of which I am a member, and my informants. This dialogue is a condition of fieldwork. I had several conversations with Maria Melas particularly in 1991-1992, and I would like to thank her, as well as my other informants for their openness, as will be made clear in the following. In connection with this Saturday-visit to the caves, this situation was, I think, further made particularly easy since my mother also was participating, and I would like to thank her as well.

3 See also Loukatos 1982: 153, cf. nevertheless infra and Håland 2003, 2004, 2005. It may be noted that Saint in Greek is Agios (m.) or Agia (f.), Agioi (pl.).

4 I am particularly grateful for this, because I would probably not have been able to track them down without his help. I learned this when talking with several other persons, who found the ritual quite uninteresting compared to the other materials found in the Acropolis-area.

5 For the problem with different histories, Håland 2004: ch. 2 f., 6. See also infra for the problematical dating of a newspaper article.

6 In this instance, we meet an evidence of Edward Said’s (1979) “Orientalism,” which does not examine rituals that may not be important for “great history” but only connected with the daily tasks of women. The point in mentioning my meeting with the Acropolis-authorities here is to show that even if folklorist studies and archaeology are subjects that enjoy a great prestige within the Greek nation-state, it may lead to misunderstandings when a foreign female researcher wants to compare modern and ancient popular religious rituals, because it is uncommon. “Only ‘survivalists’ do that, and this is a research-area which is despised by foreign (i.e. non-Greek) researchers.” On another level, one may also observe the conduct, which is demonstrated when the guards at the Acropolis-area emphasize to tourists, “this is our culture; it is the other culture that we share with you”, cf. infra. Based on the background to this view, it may be regarded as an answer to Western orientalism.

7 For several months, I was in conversations with the Acropolis-authorities, to find out if the festival was going to be celebrated. In 1992, it was a problem for them, because 1st May or Workers Day, coincided with the festival dedicated to the Life-giving Spring, which is an important celebration for Athenians in the area. The celebrants also had to struggle with another obstacle, cf. infra.

8 Cf. Håland 2004: ch. 3 f., 6 for discussions of the practical problems that may arise, resulting from the (sometimes) difficult relations between the official Orthodox Church and popular religion, i.e., in practical life we meet another reality than the official one given by Alexiou 1974.

9 So, when asking Panagiotis when and where the article was published, because as a researcher I have to produce documents in support of the information I give, the discouraging answer he gives is that, “he does not remember where he found it, only that is some years old.”

10 Cf. Håland 2003, 2004 (see also forthcoming a) for the Tinos-legend, etc., see also infra.

11 Cf. Hdt. 8.65, 8.84 and Clem. Al. Strom. 1.24, 163, 1-3 for other pre-Christian parallels.

12 So, in this instance another meaning is added to the celebration of the 15 August, the Dormition of the Panagia.

13 Cf. Håland 2004: particularly ch. 2, also for the following.

14 Arriving directly with a delayed plane from the island of Karpathos, where I visited the Orthodox Easter celebrations in the village of Olympos, I was late, and the guards would not let me enter: They took me for one of the other tourists who were persistent outside the entrance-gate, even though most of them knew why I was there. They said that, “the festival is only celebrated for the Greeks.” Finally, they admitted me into the area because I was able to present the letter I got from the Acropolis-authorities, giving me permission to visit the caves in connection with my research. Nevertheless, they had difficulties in accepting the letter since it was dated several months
earlier (when I started my research visits to the caves), and did not mention the festival explicitly. I had, in fact, taken up this problem with the authorities during one of our meetings, but I was assured that, “it would not be a problem.”

15 Cf. Herzfeld 1992: for the term “disemia,” a two-way-facing system of meanings that can be part of a public discourse, cf. also the distinction between insider and outsider, dikoi (our own) and xenoi (strangers or foreigners). Cf. Håland 2004: ch. 2 f., 6, forthcoming b.

16 This is not to deny that during the celebration, I also noted that there were frictions between the guards and the religiosity of the devotees, first and foremost represented by Eirine who is a very proud woman, see infra.

17 When talking with him after the service, it appears that he belongs to the great group of Olympians (i.e., from Olympos) from Karpathos living in the Piraeus area. When he learns that I just arrived from Olympos, having celebrated Easter in his own church of childhood, he welcomes me enthusiastically. From childhood he has celebrated “water-festivals,” since the festival dedicated to the Life-giving Spring is celebrated several places on Karpathos. In addition, the icon of the Panagia is immersed in the water during the procession on “White” Tuesday in Olympos, Håland 2005.

18 Cf. also the real meanings of the terms “micro-society” as opposed to “macro-society”, the “domestic” vs. the “public spheres” in Greece, discussed in Håland 2004.

19 Travlos 1971: 127, 138, fig.178, cf. figs.192 f. Fig. 192 is also dedicated to Pan; cf. the following.

20 Travlos 1971: 127. The ancient Athenian calendar year began in the summer of one of our years and ended in the summer of the next; accordingly, ancient dates are often expressed in slashed terms.

21 Travlos 1939/41: 35-68.

22 Travlos 1939/41: 68.

23 Cf. supra. Håland 2004: ch. 6 discusses the problems we encounter when only emphasizing male gods/saints.

25 See Revett/Stuart 1762-1816: 33, and pl.1; Travlos 1971: 565fig.707.
26 Revett/Stuart 1762-1816. Cf. supra for the newspaper cutting (80 f.) hanging in the cave. Cf. further the comment of Levi 1984: Vol. 1: 59n.120, also for the following.

27 For Artemis' connection with springs, Håland 2003.
28 Cf. the cult dedicated to Agia Marina beneath the Hill of the Nymphs at Athens where people fetch holy water from the spring connected to the church sacred to Agia Marina, Håland 2004, 2005.
29 See Håland 2003, 2004, forthcoming (b) for a more detailed account, also for the following.
31 I.e. in a patriotic sense, and this is probably also why the official and popular religion have a close relationship, despite some problematical incidents, cf. supra. For the similarities between lifecycle passages and the rituals performed in connection with important passages during the cycle of nature, see Håland 2004, 2006.
33 Quoted from Grunbaum 1981: 10.
34 Håland 1990: ch. 2 and 7.
36 Hp. Insomn. 90, see also Aer. 7-10; Blum/Blum 1970: 137; Håland 2003.
39 For the relations between traditional popular religiosity and Islam see also for example, Eickelman 1981.

References and Abbreviations:
Blum, Richard and Eva (1970). The Dangerous Hour. The Lore of Crisis


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