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# The Early Greek Religion and the Coming of the Age of Iron

Jan Bouzek

## 1. Sources and methods used

Though the Nilsson surveys are still very important,<sup>1</sup> we should also use for this paragraph more recent books, most notably Burkert's,<sup>2</sup> and confront the results with what can be gained from the observation of artistic representations, their style and structure. Our approach should also be *comparative*, i.e. based on the method developed by M. Eliade and G. Dumézil.<sup>3</sup> In Greece, we are in a particular position having narrative visual art of specific qualities. E. Auerbach in his *Mimesis*<sup>4</sup> compares two scenes as characteristic of two different attitudes in telling stories. One example is Abraham ascending the mountain to sacrifice his son Isaac, in which he is later prevented by the Lord. There is no scenery, no description of details of the landscape or of the persons acting (Gen.22). This passage he compares with the description of Odysseus returning home and being recognized by his old nurse Eurykleia from an old scarf (Od. xix, 386-508) The story is full of small concrete details and the imagination of the reader or listener is flooded with concrete information, as against the abstract scenery of the story of Abraham and Isaac. The Greeks depicted even their abstract ideas in concrete pictures taken from the sensual world, their creative spirit changed their environment into artistic products. They expressed their views, their feelings, their ideas even in many objects of everyday use, where other civilisations had no aspirations, they projected their ideals into material forms more than any other nation in human history. Therefore their art is a good source of information on their attitudes, their inclinations, their views, their spirit and also their religion. Much has already been attempted and even attained in this field,<sup>5</sup> but much can still be done.

- 1) M. P. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion*, 2nd ed. Lund 1950; Ibid., *Die Geschichte der griechischen Religion I*, 2nd ed. München 1955.
- 2) Esp. W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche*, Mainz 1977.
- 3) Cf. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, New York 1958 (= *Traité d'histoire des religions*, Paris 1953); G. Dumézil, *Les dieux des indo-européens*, Paris 1952.
- 4) E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Bern 1946, ch. 1-2.
- 5) Cf. B. Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, Hamburg 1955; B. Schweitzer, *Die geometrische Kunst Griechenlands*, Köln 1969; Q. Kaschnitz v. Weinberg, *Ausgewählte Schriften III. Mittelmeerische Kunst*, 1965, 252-260; N. Himmelmann, *Bemerkungen zur geometrischen Plastik*, Berlin 1964.

Any art reflects the aesthetic, philosophical and religious views of the artists and their society, the consumers of this art, but it also influences these views by its accomplished products. Iconography opened one of the new doors to this field, but even non-representational art, when studied deeply enough, can provide much information, and this also concerns the archaeological discoveries of non-artistic character.

## 2. The prelude

In many ways, the close of the Bronze Age in the East Mediterranean and the contemporary rise of the Urnfield cultures can both be understood as a preparatory period to what happened later during the earliest Iron Age. We can first start with Egypt. After the reform trial of Echnaton in Egypt with his solar deity Aton, comparable to Ahura Mazda of Avesta, which only enjoyed short-time success, Moses founded there the religion of the Old Testament initiated by the message of Jahve in the burning bush which again might remind us of the role of the fire in the Zoroastrism. What is less well known is the development in northern and central Europe. One of the aspects of the European Urnfield civilisations is that of a religious movement. The first of the most apparent features gave to this culture its name: the particular burial rite. In early cultures, cremation was usually meant to draw a clear, sharp boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead. It was also intended to prevent dangerous forces abiding dead bodies, something feared in all early societies. The human soul should go on its postmortal way faster, not clinging to his or her former relationships - a clear opposite to what was intended in the Egyptian culture. The Egyptians intended to keep their dead in close touch with the earth, so they not only embalmed them, but also brought them meat, a substance forbidden in this respect in most religions. In more rigid societies (like with the Romans), even wine was forbidden for libations on the graves, but not with the Greeks. Nevertheless, the offering of blood on the graves was already part of black magic there. For the Persians, fire was too sacred to be used for burning dead bodies, but cremation with dispersing burned bones was usual in India and in other cultures, which intended the opposite to the Egyptians. The bearers of the European Urnfield culture did not go that far: they placed the burned bones in pottery urns or other containers and then in graves. The human sacrifices attested by skeletons of killed people in many Middle and Late Bronze Age cultures show us that not everyone followed such moral rigidity and that some kind of black magic also had its share in the rituals<sup>6</sup>. This seems

6) Cf. J. Bouzek - D. Koutecký, "Skelettbestattungen in Gruben der Knovízér und Hügelgräberkultur in Nordwestböhmen", *Památky archeologické* 71, 1980, 360-432; J. Hrala - Z. Sedláček - M. Vávra, "Die Problematik der neuen Ausgrabungen auf der befestigten Siedlung in Velim", in: J. Hrala - E. Plesl (eds.), *Die Urnenfelderkulturen Mitteleuropas*, Prague 1987, 167-180.

to be less often the case in the Lusatian culture than with its North Alpine and Carpathian neighbours.<sup>7</sup> In general, the strict funeral rite was apparently part of a movement for moral improvement of society in order to preserve the positive qualities of the old system before the Age of Iron (the worst of all ages according to Hesiod) finally destroyed the old order. We should, however, not consider this single aspect of the burial rite alone being too important for many societies: Greeks, Etruscans and Romans used both cremation and inhumation at the same time, according to the particular familial tradition.<sup>8</sup>

But this is only one aspect. The second is a shift from earthenly vegetation and fertility deities to celestial (in Greek, Olympian) gods. The most important and most frequently represented among Late Tumulus and Urnfield symbolic motifs is the sun in a boat drawn by water birds (Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> In other

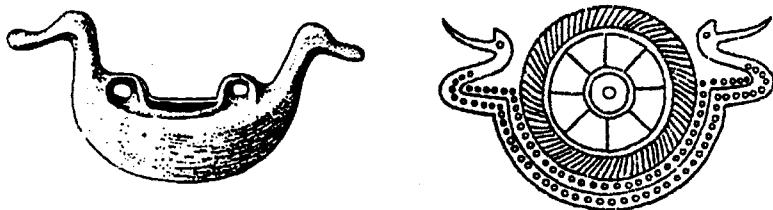


Fig. 1. Left bird-boat: bronze pendants from Hungary, right bird-boat with sun, decoration of a bronze vessel from Siem in Denmark.  
After Bouzek, *The Aegean, Anatolia and Europe*.

cases, the sun is sitting on a chariot drawn by horses (Fig. 2) and the wheel itself may often represent the sun, its deity or hero.<sup>10</sup> More often only the

- 7) Cf. J. Bouzek - D. Koutecký - V. Kruta, "Analyses d'antiquité classique et d'ethnographie: un essai d'interprétation des trouvailles du village lusacien de Chabařovice (Bohême du Nord)", *Graecolatina Pragensia* 13, 1991, 167-186.
- 8) Cf. J. Boardman - D. Kurtz, *Thanatos. Greek Burial Customs*, Oxford 1971.
- 9) Cf. E. Sprockhoff, "Nordische Bronzezeit und frühes Griechentum", *Jb. des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz* 1, 1954, 31-71, and J. Bouzek, *The Aegean, Anatolia and Europe: Cultural Interrelations in the Second Millennium B. C.*, Gothenburg-Prague 1985, 176-181.
- 10) For the relation of wheel and sun cf. R. Schmidt-Rüdiger, *Dichtung und Dichtsprache in indogermanischer Zeit*, Wiesbaden 1967, 165-169; for the symbolic representations of the Nordic Bronze Age cf. E. Sprockhoff, "Nordische Bronzezeit und frühes Griechentum", *Jb. des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz*, 1, 1954, 37-71; P. Galling and H. E. Davidson, *The Chariot of the Sun and Other Rites and Symbols of the Nordic Bronze Age*, London 1969.

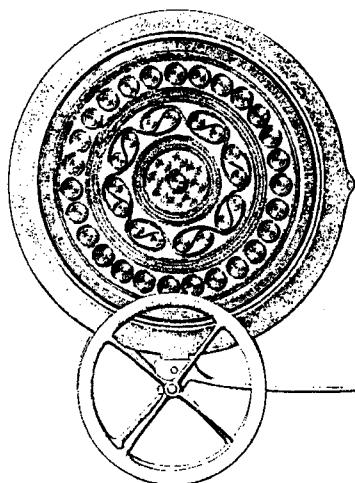


Fig. 2. Sun wagon drawn by horse from Trundholm, Denmark.  
After Kersten.

solar disc is represented, but sometimes also the solar god or solar hero himself (Fig. 3). This deity has parallels notably in the Persian mythology (Ahura Mazda or Mithra), and it should be remembered that the Echnaton reform of el-Amarna was roughly contemporary with the rise of the Urnfield

culture. Echnaton's religious reform (c. 1372-1354 B.C.) could also be interpreted as an attempt to bring new life into the Egyptian religious tradition. With the end of the third Sothis (Sirius) period (in 1322 B.C.), the Egyptian culture became, after this unsuccessful attempt, definitely focused towards the graves of the past, and Moses had to separate his followers from this development in order to be able to found the religion of the Old Testament.

Regarded from another point of view, the Urnfield religion seems to show both main "new" religious aspects as defined by the Greeks. The Apolline aspect was represented by the Sun god and/or solar hero, a deity related both to Greek Zeus and Apollo, but more to the second god, who still in Classical times every year visited his Hyperboreans in a chariot

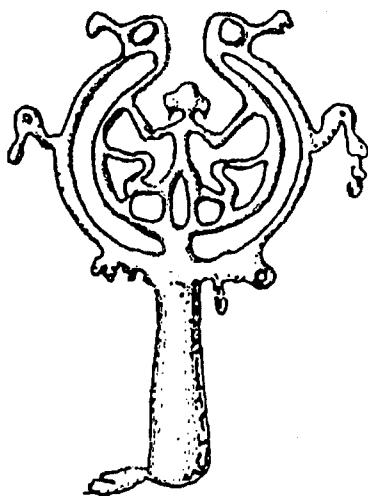


Fig. 3. Sun hero: handle decoration of the Villanovan culture from Bisenzio, Italy.  
After Svoboda-Cončev.

drawn by swans.<sup>11</sup> We should perhaps mention that this tradition lasted long. In Thrace, the Early Iron Age solar peak sanctuaries became later places of worship of the Thracian Rider and, in Christian times, there were usually churches of St. George placed there. On Monte Gargano, where an important solar sanctuary of the Iapygians existed since the Early Iron Age, later the famous monastery of St. Michael was founded. As a divine hero fighting the evil, Michael can well be compared to the pre-Christian Mithra, the Thracian Hero - Rider and even to some aspects of Apollo. Orpheus was considered being the son of Apollo and we find much in orphism that derives from this tradition.

Besides the solar hero we find in all these areas representations of his female counterpart. She has two aspects: mother and maiden. In the Delian triad, they were called Leto and Artemis, in Thrace we find the name Bendis for the maiden goddess, while the mother was sometimes called Hera, as on one of the Trebenishte vessels (Fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> In Ephesus, both aspects were called Artemis. In this way, she comes near to Egyptian Isis and to the Virgin



Fig. 4. Apollo, Hera, Artemis, Nike. Thracian triad on a gold rhyton from Trebenishte, Bulgaria.

Mary or Sophia of the Christians.

11) Cf. now esp. Frederick M. Ahl, "Amber, Apollo and Apollo's singing swans", *American Journal of Philology* 103, 1982, 373-411; D. Hegyi, "Prehistoric roots of the Greek cult of Apollo", *Acta Antiqua Hung.* 32, 1989, 5-21; for later illustrations of the subject V. Lambrouidakis - Ph. Bruneau - O. Pelagia, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae II*, pp. 244, 253, 346.

12) Cf. J. Bouzek - I. Ondřejová, *Eirene* 24, 1987, 67-93.

The Dionysiac aspect seems to be marked in the drinking rituals attested by ceramic hoards<sup>13</sup> and the bronze cups, the sacrificial drinking vessels which sometimes appear in a set of twelve (Dresden - Dobritz, Jenišovice),<sup>14</sup> thus being a "complete" representation of the local human universe, as e.g. the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve city-members of the Ionian or Etruscan league. The finest prehistoric cups and mugs were made for drinking feasts since the Eneolithic. Some alcoholic drinks were known since the Neolithic and, in the old Testament, Noah is the first person getting drunk. Though we hear more about beer from Egypt and Mesopotamia, viticulture was not unknown to the Bronze Age Mediterranean. Even beer drinking had cultic connotations in many areas - e.g. Celtic gods had to drink beer every year to stay young, but wine was in the wine-producing areas the most important alcoholic substance, which kept its significance even in Christian eucharist.

Some drinking feasts of members of a *Männerbund* may be first represented in European prehistory in the Beaker cultures and, once introduced, this phenomenon never disappeared completely, but only in the Iron Age with the full establishment of the *Gefolgshaftssystem*, the drinking feasts became the backbone of the social organisation of the warrior class. We have this on all representations of banqueting in Oriental, Early Greek, Etruscan, Thracian and Hallstatt (Situla) arts, etc.<sup>15</sup> Also the Greek symposium derived from this tradition. But the Dionysiac force also affected women, as we know well from many Greek stories about maenads. In the story of the death of Orpheus we have one of the testimonies on the polarity between Apollinic and Dionysiac, which marked the whole Greek culture and even later arts.

Apollo and Dionysus were considered new gods by the Greeks; they governed over something inside human beings, not over nature forces like other Olympians (see below).<sup>16</sup>

While the religious movements of this age in the Mediterranean prepared the way for the most important religions of the Classical world, one of them the direct predecessor of the Christianity and the other, through Greek philosophy and art, the second main heritage for us, the Urnfield religious movement contributed to the later religions of barbarian Europe, notably those of the Celts and of Germanic tribes. Still in the Nordic myths, the sun moves across the sky by the daytime in a chariot drawn by horses, while the blue sun of the night is brought back from west to east in a boat drawn by

13) Cf. J. Bouzek - K. Sklenář, "Eine Grube der mittelbronzezeitlichen Hügelgräberkultur in Horní Počáply. *Archeologické rozhledy* 39, 1987, 23-39.

14) Cf. now O. Kytlicová, *Bronzegefäße in Böhmen, Prähistorische Bronzefunde II*, 12, Stuttgart 1992.

15) Cf. J.-M. Dentzer, *Le motif du banquet couché dans le Proche Orient et le monde grec du VIIe au IV. s. av. J. C.*, Rome 1982.

16) For this and for other quotations from Greek mythology cf. K. Kerényi, *Die Mythologie der Griechen*, 7th ed. München 1984.

swans. As we will see even below, Dionysus, Orphism and at least one aspect of Apollo (the Hyperborean one) came to Greece from the north and all seem to have been related to the Urnfield religious movement. Remembering the Gnostic tradition of cosmic Christ coming on his descent to the earth through the sun, both the religions of Echnaton and of the Urnfields may have been understood as a kind of preparation to what later joined in the roots of Christianity and it also may have reflected this particular aspect of cosmic development: a predecessor of what is later reflected in the adoration of the Magi, and in the traditions of the independent rise of the Irish Christianity.

### 3. The continuity and discontinuity from the Bronze Age in Greece

Of the gods known from the Mycenaean tablets, which seem to cover the 13th century B.C.,<sup>17</sup> one half disappeared and the other half remained known to later Greeks. Just this last Mycenaean period of LH III B-C seems for various reasons being the period in which much begins that later becomes part of Greek culture of the Iron Age.<sup>18</sup> As generally known, the Greek sanctuaries show only little Mycenaean tradition and, with few exceptions, from this late period only.<sup>19</sup> The mixture of local, Oriental and ~ European ~ elements (see below), was characteristic of the Sea Peoples period in all domains. Many cult places, like Olympia and Artemis Orthia in Sparta, do not seem to have important Mycenaean forerunners, while in others, like Delos, Delphi and Eleusis, the tradition is slight and the evidence of cult continuity doubtful. The shift of the degree of significance from the Nature goddesses towards the Olympian gods can also be traced in the Linear B documents, and is reflected in Greek mythology as a gradual process, although with some dramatic peaks: even in later times, the old gods did not lose all significance.

Apollo and Aphrodite are missing in Linear B texts. While Aphrodite was a goddess of Oriental ancestry mainly, Apollo had two different roots: one in Asia Minor (Lycia) and the second in the north (Hyperborean). The

17) Cf. for the summary of the discussion J. Bouzek, "The coming of the Greeks and the formation of the Greek nation", in: archaeological perspective, *Festschrift A. Bartoněk, Sborník filos. fakulty Brněnské univerzity* E 36, 1991, 41-46.

18) A "widespread transformation of cult practice" was also noticed at Phylakopi by C. Renfrew, *The Archaeology of Cult - The Sanctuary of Phylakopi*, London 1985, 439 - the Phylakopi sanctuary was one of the new ones, here the new religious movement started. For Oriental elements in Aegean Late Bronze Age architecture cf. Ora Negbi, "Levantine elements in the sacred architecture of the Aegean", *BSA* 83, 1988, 339-387.

19) Cf. esp. the acts of the Swedish conference "Greek Renaissance in the 8th Century B. C.: Tradition and Innovation", Stockholm 1983; H. V. Herrmann, "Zum Problem des mykenischen Ursprungs griechischer Heiligtümer: Olympia und Delphi", in: *Forschungen zur ägäischen Vorgeschichte: Das Ende der mykenischen Welt*, Akten des internationalen Kolloquiums Köln 1984 (1987), 151-172; G. Wickert-Micknat, "Zur Frage der Kontinuität", *ibid.*, 148-150.

smiting god is of an Oriental ancestry, as shown in the tradition of the bronze figurines,<sup>20</sup> but Zeus and his Olympian family is better comparable to Indo-European than Semitic religions.<sup>21</sup>

The unity of temple, altar and cult statue is only known in Greek religion, and, as against all earlier systems, only the Greeks changed the earlier pyramidal attitude to the equality of men and gods, in which the sacrifices meant usually a common feast for both: such a relation was behind most of Greek sacrifices.<sup>22</sup> Also the priests became more equal with other people being officials of the community and responsible to it, not lords of their co-citizens. The oracle sanctuaries were above the level of belonging to one single city-state only, and the even more high-in-rank mysterial sanctuaries were extremely democratic: the initiation was accessible to anyone, even to women and slaves. In Eleusis, the language of the adept had to be "understandable", i.e. he or she had to speak Greek, but other sanctuaries, like Samothrace, did not know even this condition.

The shift of significance from old to new gods, the Olympian (celestial) deities, started apparently in the Mycenaean times - it seems to be reflected already in the Linear B texts. But Apollo and Dionysus are new gods, both symbolizing new qualities of the Iron Age man, and a similar phenomenon brings Athena, though her name may originally have been that of the old Palace Goddesses in the Aegean. Her birth from the head of Zeus and her support of the new kind of heroes who are able to think on a more sophisticated level, like Odysseus, show her as a kind of "Urgedanke" in our modern language.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the subjects of pictorial representations known to Geometric art had some predecessors during the last two centuries of the Mycenaean age, though these subjects were expressed in artistic formulae taken over from an earlier alien style. The new teaching had to be expressed first in the old vocabulary, like the Early Christian art had to use the Classical artistic means before evolving its own artistic language. The artists educated in the old tradition could not take more than the first steps towards a new style, more appropriate for the new message. This new spiritual world was also first expressed along the periphery of the Mycenaean world. These works, like the Tanagra sarcophagi, show scenes with mourning women and with prothesis of the dead, birds with a wheel, often flanking it, a hero between two birds,

20) Cf. J. Bouzek, "Le origines des bronzes grecs" in: *Actes du IV<sup>e</sup> colloque sur les bronzes antiques*, Lyon 1976 (1977), 35-39; H. Galett de Santerre, "Les statuettes de bronze mycéniennes du type dit de "dieu Reshef" dans leur contexte égéen", *BCH* 101, 1987, 7-29.

21) Cf. W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion...*, 88-98, for the smiting god Ibid., *Grazer Beiträge* 4, 1975, 51-79.

22) W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion...*, 100-140.

23) Cf. also B.C. Dietrich, "Die Kontinuität der Religion im dunklen Zeitalter Griechenlands", in: *Ägäische Bronzezeit* (ed. H.-G. Buchholz), Darmstadt 1988, 478-88.

and other antithetic motifs, similar to those known e.g. on the Pylos diadem.<sup>24</sup> The sphinx also appears frequently in funerary contexts, and the man confronted with a sphinx may perhaps already be called Oedipus. Just as the mediaeval religious world had its roots in Late Antiquity, which emerged more fully expressed again after some "Dark Age" with few and modest artistic representations, these forerunners of Geometric and Early Archaic representations testify to the existence of an identical, though less developed spiritual movement which predominated in the art of the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. Most of the "raw materials" of the new religion established in Early Iron Age Greece were present in the country since the 13th century B.C., some of them even slightly earlier.

As mediaeval civilisation needed several centuries to sprout under the surface before emerging into the full light with its own sophisticated art, Late Mycenaean style, too, unable to express the new message fully, needed a period to grow its roots before evolving artistic expressions of its own. Such ~ Dark Ages ~ of preparation are parts of the natural rhythm of human development, they are as full of potential strength as are seeds.

The first new synthesis in art was achieved with the Protogeometric style, when also the sanctuaries and offerings in them show a new religious world, in many ways different from the old Bronze Age.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Outside relations of early Greek religion

The birth of the new age was a kind of drama in which more actors took part besides the chief protagonist, Greece. Like in any drama, the minor roles are also necessary to accomplish the performance and their contribution should not be forgotten.

Many Greek legends show a special respect for the Phoenicians and Syria. It was the country from which Europa herself came, the Danaids as well. The Perseus story starts the myths of Greek heroes and Kadmos the Phoenician founded mysteries in Boeotia and Samothrace. Besides this, he is mentioned as having visited (and even died in) Illyria, so his activities went also beyond

24) The Tanagra sarcophagi are still only partly published, but well exhibited in the Thebes archaeological museum and in the Tanagra museum. Cf. J. L. Benson, *Horse, Bird and Man: The Origins of Greek Painting*, Amherst 1970; S. Langdon, *American Journal of Archaeology* 93, 1989, 185-201; M. Iacovou, *The Pictorial Pottery of 11th century Cyprus*, Gothenburg 1988; J. L. Benson, "Symptom and story in Geometric art", *Bull. Antike Beschreibung* 63, 1988, 69-76; Ch. Grunwald, "Zur Frage der Tradierung mykenischen Bildguts an die geometrische Kunst", in: *Beiträge zur Ikonographie und Toreutik*, Festschrift N. Himmelmann, Mainz 1989, 27-33; S. Hiller, "The Greek Dark Ages: Helladic traditions, Mycenaean traditions in culture and art", in: *La transizione dal Miceneo ad alto Arcanesimo: Da palazzo alla città*, Roma 1991, 117-132. One of the earliest representations of the solar wheel is on the Circus Pot from Mycenae, cf. F. H. Stubbings, in *Wandlungen (Festschrift Homann - Wedekind)*, Waldsassen 1976, 16-18.

25) Cf. S. Langdon, "Geometric votive figurines and the rise of Greek sanctuaries", *American Journal of Archaeology* 94, 1990, 316-317.

the Greek sphere.<sup>26</sup>

Other legends, partly preserved with Plato, mention a deep respect to the Egyptian religion, where Greek wise men were taught (like Solon), but the eastern relations were more intense, and also for most of the artistic motifs in Early Greek art, there are more forerunners in the east than in Egypt, at least during the 9th, 8th and early 7th centuries B.C.<sup>27</sup>

As Janice Crowley has shown,<sup>28</sup> most of the artistic motifs showing Egyptian and Oriental affinities in the 8th-7th centuries B.C. were more or less known to the Aegean Late Bronze Age already, but some are new, while others seem to have been forgotten for some time and reintroduced later. We shall return to this later, and here only mention how even Greek legends held a high esteem for the east as an area from which the roots of the Greek Early Iron Age culture came. The Trojan War brought to Greece the palladion, which was as necessary for the Greeks as the Golden Fleece from Colchis. Besides this, the Argonauts story also symbolizes the coming of the astrological time of Ram, in which the Greeks had to take over the leading role in the history of mankind.<sup>29</sup>

The Iphigenia story reflects a respect for the religion of Tauris in the Crimea, that of the Golden Fleece for Colchis and there are clear traces of the Greek respect for the religion of the Thracians. Both Dionysus and Orpheus came from Thrace, Samothracian mysteries were more Thracian than Greek and even priestly families in other Greek important sanctuaries claimed being of a Thracian descent.<sup>30</sup> The already mentioned Hyperborean link of Apollo points even to a more northerly situated area. What is even more important is the character of the new gods. As against the Olympceans, who were governors of parts of nature or natural forces, both Apollo and Dionysus ruled over some qualities of human soul. Apollo was followed by

- 26) Cf. W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology*, Berkeley 1979; G. Bunnens, *Expansion phénicienne en Méditerranée: Essai d'interprétation fondé sur une analyse des traditions littéraires*, Bruxelles/Rome 1979.
- 27) Cf. J. L. Benson, *Horse, Bird and Man* (note 24); G. Ahlberg, *Prothesis and Ekphora in Greek Geometric Art*, Gothenburg 1972, and Ead., *Fighting on Land and Sea in Greek Geometric Art*, Stockholm 1971.
- 28) Janice Crowley, *The Aegean and the Near East: An Investigation into the Transference of Artistic Motifs between the Aegean, Egypt and the Near East in the Bronze Age*, Gothenburg (Åstroem) 1989.
- 29) Cf. J. Bouzek, *Studies of Greek Pottery in the Black Sea Area*, Charles University Prague 1990, 15.
- 30) Cf. J. Bouzek, *Thrákovié*, Prague 1989, 60-73. For Thracian religion cf. esp. M. Eliade, *Zalmoxis, The Vanishing God*, Chicago 1972; I. Marazov, "Thracian mythology in Indo-European context", in: 4th International Thracian Conference: The Bronze Age in the Thracian Lands and Beyond, Boston 1984, 111-129; Ibid., "Thracian Religion", in: A. Fol - I. Marazov, *Thrace and the Thracians*, New York 1977, 17-37; R. Hoddinott, "Rogozen and Thracian religion: the Indo-European factor", in: *The Rogozen Treasure*, Papers of the Anglo-Bulgarian Conference, 12. March 1987 (ed. by B. F. Cook), London 1987, 50-58.

the Muses, and together with them he inspired the arts and even the philosophy, while Dionysus, the spirit of wine, contributed to the separation of humans as individuals from the blood relations, and he also helped to organize new relations between free men in the system of *Gefolgschaft* and in the Greek symposium (cf. above p. 108).

One more aspect should not be forgotten here: shamanism and animalistic magic, which played a great role in the eastern nomadic cultures participating in the Early Iron Age *koiné* of Geometric styles: parallels have been shown to them both from the Eurasian Animal Art and from recent shamanism.<sup>31</sup> The military success of Cimmerian and Scythian bands both in the Near East and in Europe in the 9th-7th centuries B.C. brought an admiration also to their religious practices: many symbolic ornaments of originally shamanistic character were taken over by their western neighbours. Both the Balkans and Central Europe were affected, and also northern Greece, most notably Thessaly,<sup>32</sup> later famous for its witches and magicians.

## 5. The Age of Iron and the rise of the philosophical mind

There are two myths of the Golden Age. Today, the more popular of two presents it as the promise of a rosy future. Old mythologies knew both, but, unlike us, they often felt closer to the story of the deterioration of the world, while the idea of the final improvement was relegated to a very distant future. From the beginning of the Christian era, the future began to appear more hopeful and most of us, even those who are not religious, share a common feeling that the world may rather be improving.

There is, of course, also the opposite myth as well: the idea of Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes*, of nuclear and ecological catastrophes or entropy. Hesiod and later Lucretius took a pessimistic view of the advent of the Age of Iron. In their eyes, the Iron Age meant another big step downwards from the initial Golden Age after the stepwise deterioration of the Silver and the Bronze Ages. The gods were felt as further away from humans than ever before, the laws lost their force, morals deteriorated.<sup>33</sup> We must admit that Hesiod had good reasons for his position and that he was supported by myths of other European and Mediterranean peoples.

31) Cf. M. Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, New York 1964; Ibid., *Zalmoxis. The Vanishing God*, Chicago 1972, 21-60 (also for orphism); W. Burkert, "Goes. Zum griechischen Schamanismus", *Rheinisches Museum* 105, 1962, 36-55; K. Meuli, "Skythika", *Hermes* 70, 1953, 121-167; J. Bouzek - I. Ondřejová, *La tradition caucasienne, hallstattoise et cimmérienne dans l'orfèvrerie archaïque*, (Thracia Pontica IV), Sofia 1991, 51-58.

32) Cf. J. Bouzek, "Macedonian bronzes: their origins, distribution and relation to other cultural groups of the Early Iron Age", *Památky Archeologické* 65, 1974, 319-335.

33) Hesiod li, 174-8: "If only I did not belong to the fifth generation of men, but had died before, or been born after. For now is an age of iron. By day men know no end to toil and woe, by night they waste away. And the gods will give us hard anxieties."

But more optimistic attitudes towards the new age also existed. Homer envisaged the future greatness of Greece. The acquiring of the Trojan palladium, the happy-end of the *Odyssey* are signs of a better future, and the prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament show another kind of historical optimism.

The human mind underwent changes, which can be traced both in Greece and in Palestine. The last Bronze Age heroes could not combat their passions and they became the main characters of Greek tragedies. In the *Iliad*, Aias is an example of the final Bronze Age heroes. Like these heroes, he cannot control his passions by his intellect, he commits foolish acts and finally even suicide. Achilles and Hector, are good examples of the next stage. Achilles is often torn by his temper [though less so than Aias], but both conscientiously fulfil their duties, their destiny, obeying the old theocratic rules. Hector, in particular, is a very noble character, but both of them have to die, unable to pass the threshold into the new world. Finally only the sly Odysseus, after many difficult situations in which he is helped by Athena, the goddess of clear spirit and logical thought, is able to enter the new age of new wisdom.<sup>34</sup> The story of David and Goliath is a good parallel example of crossing the Iron Age threshold. The victory over Goliath was not according to Olympic standards, in his love affairs and struggle for power David shows a slyness similar to that of Odysseus, but he was favoured by Jahve for similar qualities as Odysseus by Palas Athene.<sup>35</sup>

In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Phoenicians are depicted as morally unclean not only because they were not "us", but because their habits showed the new qualities of the human mind, the qualities which were soon to destroy the aristocratic society of those to whom Homer addressed his songs. Hiram the architect and Phoenician ships bringing raw materials are similar motifs in the Old Testament. For some time, the Phoenicians were more clever than their neighbours and they took the lead of the first stage of the new age.

## **6. The meaning of ornaments in Greek Geometric art and the Dark Age religion of the Greeks**

This is one of the regions where we, with our present way of thought, can penetrate only with great difficulty. Our scientific mind operating with narrow concepts (*Begriffe*) is quite alien to the state of mind and the feeling of the people of old who painted and observed the ornaments. Though those we are studying now mark the beginning of what was then a new philosophical

34) Cf. J. T. Hooker, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 110, 1990, 209: "Athena takes Odysseus' part not because he is righteous, but because his character so closely matches her own."

35) Cf. B. Snell, *Entdeckung des Geistes* (note 5), and K. Raaflaub, *Die Entdeckung der Freiheit: Zur historischen Semantik und Gesellschaftsgeschichte eines politischen Grundbegriffes der Griechen*, Bad Muhr 1985; C. Gill (ed.), *The Person and the Human Mind Issues in Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Oxford 1990.

mind, their roots go back to a more ancient world. In this field, the parallel studies of African and Indian ethnographic sources by some New or Behavioral archaeologists may be of some importance,<sup>36</sup> especially when combined with the studies of African scholars, whose relations to the world from which they started their life is much more intimate. Mircea Eliade's and Jung's studies of symbols and the symbolonics of B. Nuska,<sup>37</sup> besides some principles used in children's psychology, can be useful, but we have to bear in mind that the symbols stemmed from an earlier age than Iron Age Greeks and their neighbours. The abstract Geometric language was only a short phase in Greek art. The meaning of the ornamental abstract motifs was not only less fixed than e.g. with the Egyptians, but their meaning also changed in different contexts. They also went out of use soon: with the advent of pictorial representative art, the Geometric symbols became second-rate signs for most of the users (cf. below p. 119).<sup>38</sup>

One of the tasks of early Greek art was to restore the order of things, the order between man and the universe. An ideal example of magical artistic re-creation of the world is Achilles' shield,<sup>39</sup> but it already shows representations mainly unknown to the earlier phases of the Geometric art.

In our present approach, we have to respect two general rules. The first of them is that the really *sacred* symbols are rarely depicted in applied art, and that their common frequency usually means loss of their meaning, their descent to the level of folklore beliefs in their beneficent function, to witchcraft etc. The second rule concerns Greece in particular. As W. Burkert has shown for the Greek borrowing of Oriental myths and as it has long been known for Archaic Greek art, the ancient Greeks were eager to absorb foreign impulses so rapidly into their own culture that they soon became *graecized* almost beyond recognition. We must also bear in mind that Greek Geometric religion is a new synthesis of three different elements: the Myce-

36) Cf. e. g., I. Hodder, *The Archaeology of Contextual Meaning*, Cambridge 1975.

37) Cf. N. Totten, "The life force in ancient symbols", in: *Boston Thracian Conference* 1984, 177-201, for the interpretation of Jung's theory of the symbols, for B. Nuska's symbolonics, esp. "Treatise of the sense of order", *Umění* 34, 1986, 193-201, and "Grundformen der Symbolonik", *Umění* 35, 1987, 548-555, from M. Eliade's works esp. *Image et Symboles. Essai sur le symbolisme magico-religieux*, 2nd ed. Paris 1952.

38) For this development I found an interesting parallel during my Ceylonese excavations at Anuradhapura, where the footprints of Buddha were reused in later constructions as building materials at the time, when Buddha's statues were erected. Cf. also E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, New York 1969; Ibid., *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Art*, Oxford 1979; Dorothy K. Wasburn (ed.), *Structure and Cognition of Art*, Cambridge Univ. Press 1983.

39) Cf. K. Fittschen, "Der Schild des Achill", *Archäologia Homerica*, Bildkunst Teil 1, Göttingen 1982; F. Canciani, Bildkunst Teil 2, Göttingen 1983; N. Himmelmann, "Über einige geeständliche Bedeutungsmöglichkeiten des frühgriechischen Ornamentes", *Abhandlungen Akademie Mainz*, Geistes-sozialwissenschaftliche Reihe 1968, no. 7 and Ibid., Über bildende Kunst in der homerischen Gesellschaft, ibid. vol. 1969, no. 7.

naean tradition, Oriental and European influences, and that we have to look in all three directions.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 5. Left Late Geometric kantharos from Ialyssos, Rhodes: birds and rosettes.  
Right: swastika on an Attic Geometric skyphos.  
After Schweitzer, *Geometrisches Griechenland* and S. Hiller.

The rosettes have an old tradition in Aegean Bronze Age art, and they may often have the meaning of flowers, more specifically flowers from the Tree of Life.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes we even have the Tree of Life itself, notably in Late Geometric times, or perhaps two trees, one of Life and the other of Wisdom, as we know from several oriental traditions. Here the inspiration may be mainly Oriental, though we also know this in Celtic and Nordic mythologies (notably Ydraggasil) and from India.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes, however, the rosette becomes a solar symbol, especially in its more abstract varieties, and this is the domain where European influence seems to be predominant (cf. above, p. 107 - 8), though parallel meaning is also known from the Persian tradition.<sup>43</sup>

40) J. Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of the Classical Civilisation*, vol. 1 New Brunswick 1987, vol. 2 New Brunswick 1991, is a poor book, but important as a challenge to look more properly after the non-Greek sources of Greek Iron Age culture. Cf. J. E. Colema, "The case against Martin Bernal's Black Athena", *Achaology* 45, 1992, 77-81.

41) Cf. K. Schefold, *Die Griechen und ihre Nachbarn*, Berlin 1967 (Propyläen Kunstgeschichte), 55-59.

42) Cf. E. O. James, *The Tree of Life*, Leiden 1966; P. P. Kahane, *Antike Kunst* 16, 1973, 114-137.

43) Cf. e. g. the rosettes on the Submycenaean shield rings from Athens and Crete, J. Bouzek, *Eirene* 8, 1970, 98-101.

More often, however, the concentric circles and semicircles acquire solar significance. We find them in nearly all provinces of the Early Iron Age



Fig. 6. *Pferdeführer*. Left from a Late Mycenaean, right from a Late Geometric vase.  
After Schweitzer, *Geometrisches Griechenland* and S. Hiller.

artistic koine, first isolated or in the context of the *Sonnenbarke*, later often as arbitrary ornaments. They often mark the sun or the Solar Hero, as in the Urnfield symbolism or in Thrace.<sup>44</sup>

The swastika and multiple swastika were solar symbols in probably all Indo-European cultures. On Protogeometric shield rings, the swastika alternates with a dotted rosette of similar meaning. On painted Geometric potteries, it also seems to be the sign of the solar hero and of the sun. The wheel had a solar meaning since the Late Mycenaean times (Fig. 5).<sup>45</sup>

Of the animals, the sun hero (or the solar symbol) is flanked or accompanied with birds or horses. Birds are more significant in earlier times, and this religious koine with representations of birds includes also Cyprus and the Philistines.<sup>46</sup> Later in Geometric art the *Pferdeführer* (Fig. 6) may have represented both the solar divinity and Poseidon, but the solar connotations more often appear. The bird askoi, known from Late Mycenaean Greece, Crete and Cyprus, also belong to this koine of symbolic representations

44) Cf. also B. Borell-Seidel, "Spätgeometrische Kreisornamente", in: *Tainia* (Festschr. R. Hampe), Mainz 1980, 39-67, notably for the Assyrian models of the Geometric rosette.

45) Cf. above p. 107 and J. Bouzek, *The Aegean, Anatolia and Europe: cultural interrelations in the 2nd millennium B. C.*, Prague-Lund 1985, 176-178.

46) Cf. M. Yon, "Instruments de culte en Méditerranée orientale", in: V. Karageorghis (ed.), *Acts of the International Archaeological Conference Cyprus between the Orient and Occident*, Nicosia 1985 (1986), 37-46; T. Dothan, *Philistines and Their Material Culture*, Jerusalem 1981, 198-203, cf. pp. 203-4 for fish. These two animals in Mycenaean art J. H. Crouwel, "An Early Mycenaean Fish krater from Maroni, Cyprus", *BSA* 62, 1987, 37-46, bird in Europe A. Roes, "Der Hallstattvogel", *IPEK* 13, 1939, 37-84; G. Kossack, *Studien zum Symbolgut der Urnenfelder- und Hallstattzeit Mitteleuropas*, Berlin 1954, 62-69.

(Fig. 7).<sup>47</sup> Bird and snake (Fig. 7) may be compared to the story of eagles defending the Tree of Life in Nordic mythology, while birds with fishes (Fig. 8) may just underline that water birds are represented, such as swans of Apollo.



Fig. 7. Bird with snake in his beak, from an Attic Late Geometric vase.  
after Schweitzer, *Geometrisches Griechenland* and S. Hiller.

Fig. 8. Bird and fish, from a Philistine vase,  
11th century B.C.  
After T. Dothan.

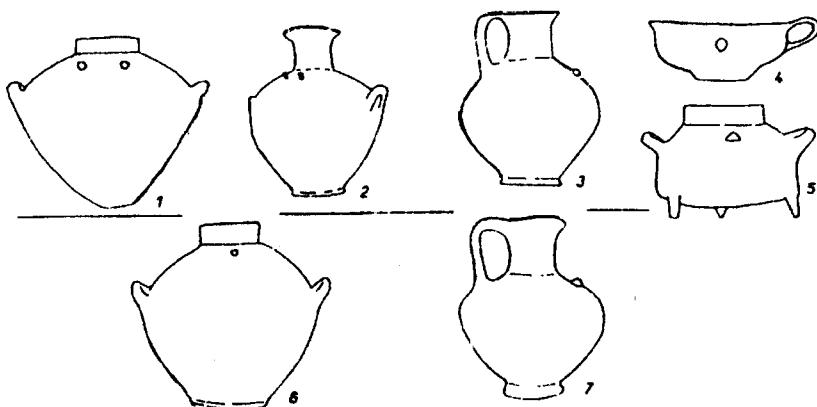


Fig. 9. Breast-like protrusions on Late Mycenaean vases.  
After Bouzek, *Homerisches Griechenland* and Eirene 10 1972.

But concentric circles and semicircles are also used to mark the bosses, i.e. breasts of the vases. We know them in this position on Protogeometric

47) J. Bouzek, *Eirene* 8, 1970, 110-117; J. Papadopoulos, *Archaiologika Analektika ex Athenon* 1980, 166-170; M. Yon, "Ducks' travels", in: *Acta Cypria* 2, Gothenburg 1992, 394-407; J. L. Benson, "Birds on Cypro-Geometric Pottery", in: N. Robinson (ed.), *The Archaeology of Cyprus: Recent Developments*, Edinburgh 1975, 129-150.

pottery, when plastic breast-like protrusions were not used, and there are many parallels to it in Urnfield and Hallstatt pottery styles from various parts of Europe: here they usually symbolize the Mother Goddess (Fig. 9).<sup>48</sup> This goddess later became mainly Aphrodite in Greece, as the Solar Hero's function went to Apollo, and some part of it also to Zeus, while Helios remained a worshipped deity only in Rhodes.<sup>49</sup> But other nations apparently used other names for them.

Besides this, the row of circles and semicircles changed the old spiral having the meaning of life, vitality, immortality<sup>50</sup> into new patterns separated, cut into pieces. Not only is the cyclic repetition of the evolution/involution rhythm broken into separate units with clear individual centres. The semicircles show only one half of the cycle, the lower being invisible (sometimes also, with pendent semicircles, the upper one, but this is rarer). The centre is often marked by a double axe, the former symbol of power of the Cretan and Mycenaean Great Goddess, later a royal symbol at the Macedonian court (Fig. 10).

Sir John Myres derived the Protogeometric motifs of concentric circles and notable semicircles from the Lusatian *Buckelkeramik*.<sup>51</sup> Though the

Fig. 10. Attic Protogeometric amphora decorated with concentric semicircles, with a double-axe. After Bouzek, *Homerisches Griechenland* and *Eirene* 10 1972. motif in the middle.

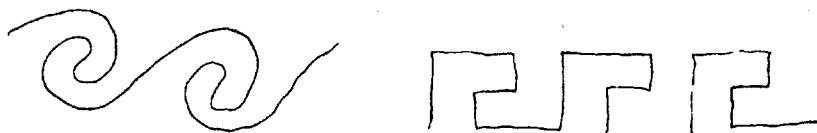
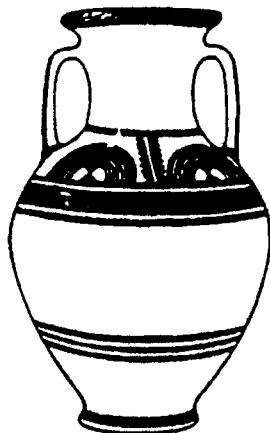


Fig. 11. Spiral and meander.  
After Bouzek, *Homerisches Griechenland* and *Eirene* 10 1972.

48) Cf. J. Bouzek, *Eirene* 8, 1970, 104-110; *Ibd.*, *The Aegean, Anatolia and Europe* (note 39), 195-6.

49) Cf. Roscher, *Reallexikon d. griech. u. röm. Mythologie* I, 1994 ff. (s. v. Helios).

50) Cf. K. Kerényi, "Labyrinth-Unterwelt", *Humanistische Seelenforschung* 1966-78, pp. 266 ff.

51) J. L. Myres, *Who Were the Greeks*, Oxford 1927, 453-61.

influence was hardly immediate, in a more general sense, he may be right. These ornaments, though having several different meanings, gave protection by benevolent forces to all objects, on which they were applied.

Another ornament into which the old spiral changed is the meander. The meander is an angular spiral, its translation accentuating sharp changes from one direction of the line to another at right angles (Fig. 11). In other terms, the sign of a fluent evolution/involution cycle changed to strongly accentuated rhythmic alteration. A more sophisticated stage of space organisation is reached, a phenomenon paralleled in the tests used in children psychology: the shift from curvilinear to angular drawings with small children means a more sophisticated degree of abstract thinking.



Fig. 12. The two Protogeometric amphora shapes, destined for male (left) ad female cremations (right).

After Bouzek, *Homerisches Griechenland* and *Eirene* 10 1972.

In a way, later Mycenaean art and already the Palatial Style in Knossos were the first steps away from a flowing curvilinear (spiraliform) structural system to the new one with its axial symmetry and more static fixing. Late Mycenaean art then developed the field-and-frame structure of zones, modest predecessors of the triglyph-metope spacing system of Geometric art, and it also started the path towards another construction of pottery shape, consisting of different rather independent parts (as against the Cretan one with body and accessories). These tendencies first became apparent in LH III A 2/B 1, but the first accomplishment of these principles, in their yet half-conscious, though freshly minted new artistic language, brought the Proto-

geometric style. It was developed in Athens, a community which now took over from the East Peloponnesian centres the leading position in artistic creativity.

The two amphoras destined to contain male and female cremations, neck-handled and belly-handled, are, in a way, abstract translations of the laws of human proportions into an artistic idiom (Fig. 12).<sup>52</sup> In general, it is an old idea to consider vessels being *like* human beings, but the Proto-geometric style for the first time clearly articulated the zones according to Geometric principles similar to those applied to the human body: thus this geometric structure became conscious.<sup>53</sup> A similar rhythmic structure also developed from observed laws of the space is the vertical division into fields and frames or, more properly, into triglyphs and metopes.<sup>54</sup>

The geometry of Geometric art reflects the more abstract way of thought observed in the previous parts of this paper. It is not without interest that the structural systems used in Middle and Late Geometric art find parallels in the structure of the *Iliad*.<sup>55</sup>

The abandoning of the Geometric abstract idioms first in Greek and Etruscan art, and later also with their more northerly European neighbours, brought as a result their loss of significance, but this development started already by their common use in applied arts, which caused gradually a stepwise loss of their originally sacred meaning, their profanation (cf. above p. 115 f.). But the acceptance of the representational art based on Oriental models, the rise of Greek and Etruscan Orientalizing art, made them to folklore ornaments with only slight memory of their beneficent or apotropaic function on a level comparable with that of the ornamental motifs used in modern folklore art.

### **Conclusions**

The coming of the Age of Iron with its changes of the human mind meant an important threshold also for the history of the religion. The new *philosophical* mind needed new means for transmitting religious messages. Much of the old wisdom had to be translated into the language of philosophy from the earlier *sapiential wisdom* and also, as one of my teachers, Prof. Jindřich Čadík, used to say, the *advents* stage of Christianity started not only with the

52) V. R. d'A. Desborough, *Protogeometric Pottery*, London 1952, 5-6; J. Bouzek, *Homeriche Griechenland*, Prague 1969, 124, 142.

53) Cf. Plutarch, *Mor.* 86A, 636B; Galen, *De plac. Hipp. et Plat.* 245, 11, *De temper.* I, 9 and Vitruv. I, 2, 3-5.

54) Cf. J. Bouzek, "The structure of Minoan representational art", in: *Aegeum* 8, 1992, 175-180.

55) Cf. B. Andrae, "Zum Dekorationssystem der geometrischen Amphora 804 im Nationalmuseum Athen", in: *Studies in Classical Art and Archaeology presented to P. yn Blankenhagen*, New York 1979, 1-16; J. Bouzek, "The legacy of Late Geometric art", in: R. Haegg (ed.), *The Greek Renaissance in the 8th Century B. C.*, Stockholm 1983, 69-73.

Old Testament prophets, but also with Greek philosophers. K. Schefold nicely developed this idea for the later period of Greek art,<sup>56</sup> but here we tried to look at its very beginnings, the *arche* of this path starting chronologically roughly with the exodus of Moses and his folk and with the end of the Mycenaean civilisation, and reaching its first maturity with the Greek philosophy and sophisticated representational art in Greece, and also with the Jewish prophets. Among the Greek contributions for preparing the acceptance of Christianity, at least the humanisation of the gods and the teaching of the *logos* should be mentioned here. As any achievement in human history, the preparation of the new age was, however, not only the work of its two protagonists. Among the minor roles, without whose participation the task could not be accomplished, were other nations, both from Near East and from Europe.

## RESUMÉ

### Rané řecké náboženství a počátek doby železné

Přechod od doby bronzové k době železné znamená mimo jiné i významný předěl v dějinách náboženství ve starém Řecku i v okolních oblastech. Proti uctívání chthonických božstev, spojených s plodností země, zvítat i lidského pokolení, se dostávají do popředí božstva spojená se sluncem s oblohou, ať už jde zpočátku o Achnatonu nezdářenou reformu v Egyptě, či o situaci v pravěké Evropě. V Řecku je tento vývoj reflektován jednak posunem k olympskému náboženství, ve kterém stál na čele pantheonu Zeus, jednak náboženstvím apollinským a dionýsovským: oba tito noví bohové měli vládu nikoli už tak nad přírodními silami, jako spíše nad určitými stránkami lidské duše. I Mojžíšovo založení starozákonného náboženství patří zhruba do téže doby. Společným rysem náboženských hnutí na přechodu od doby bronzové k době železné je nejen pokročilejší abstrakce v pojetí božského světa, ale také osobnější reflexe náboženských principů, daná novou emancipací lidské individuality, současnou s počátkem doby železné.

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56) K. Schefold, *Die Bedeutung der griechischen Kunst für das Verständnis des Evangeliums*, Mainz 1983; Ibid., "Some aspects of the Gospel in the light of Greek iconography", in: W. C. Moon (ed.), *Ancient Art and Iconography*, Madison 1983, 286-298.