
Antje Kuhle, *Hermes und die Bürger. Der Hermes kult in den griechischen Poleis*, Stuttgart (Franz Steiner Verlag) 2020 (Hermes Einzelschriften 119), 437 S., ISBN 978-3-515-12809-4 (geb.), € 83,-

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‘Hermes und die Bürger’ is a slightly revised and shortened (although still 437 pages strong!) version of the author’s PhD dissertation and a welcome addition to the growing number of studies on individual deities.¹ The book’s publication is motivated – so the author – by the lack of a systematic analysis of cult practice related to Hermes, as well as by the question of why the god was associated with his particular

1 The focus on individual deities as subject of research has a long tradition in the study of Greek religion especially among the French structuralist scholars of the 20th century and currently Vinciane Pirenne Delforge as perhaps the most important current scholar to follow this: V. Pirenne-Delforge, *L’Aphrodite grecque: Contribution à l’étude de ses cultes et de sa personnalité dans le panthéon archaïque et Classique*, Athen – Lüttich 1994; V. Pirenne-Delforge – G. Pironti, *L’Héra de Zeus: Ennemie intime, épouse définitive*, Paris 2016.

powers by the citizens of Greek *poleis* (20).² There follows a brief discussion of the relationship between *polis* and religion. The author adopts a promising approach in situating the book within the debate on *polis*-religion vs. individual religion by arguing that Hermes ideally serves as a deity to discuss the question of the relationship between the *polis* and the individual since 'Hermes (w)as the god of the *polis* and more importantly, the citizens' (23). This approach, namely the focus on the citizens rather than all inhabitants of a *polis* is in line with its title and premise. Indeed, the book assumes a relationship between Hermes and a *polis*' citizens and chooses its evidence accordingly. The final section of the introduction nods to the history of institutions which, it is promised, will be 'applied to religious history for the first time', meaning a move away from microhistory (i.e. Hermes in Athens) to a macrohistorical perspective through a comparative approach and focusing roughly on the period between the eighth and third centuries BCE. The book is intended, according to the author, as an exploration of Hermes in a Greek *polis* through a fictional topographical journey, starting at the *polis*' borders and ending up at the agora. This fresh approach is a great way to lead the reader through the evidence which is brilliantly diverse and not easy to navigate. Indeed, the inclusion of literary, epigraphic and archaeological material truly sets this study apart from earlier publications.

The first chapter surveys Hermes' involvement in the creation and maintenance of borders, entrances and exits at the example of border sanctuaries, the role of physical borders and their protection through *strategoï* with the help of Hermes (Hegemonios). The chapter, while working well as a whole, focuses mostly on Athens, home of much of the evidence for such military links. The author argues that this particular connection was not purely an Athenian phenomenon, citing a personal dedication from Paros and a *diagrapha* from Kos, which mentions the sacrifices by *strategoï* to Hermes Enagonios. The evidence is, however, overwhelmingly brought forward from Athens, and so one might wonder whether it is possible to draw such generic conclusions, or whether we are misled by Athens' overbearing presence in the evidence of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, a problem that is evident throughout the book. Much more interesting and telling are the case-studies that are characterised somewhat as outliers, for instance the Hermes who is worshipped locally as protector of the fishermen and sea travels in Ainos.

Particularly enjoyable in this chapter is the analysis of Hermes' role as a thief in which the author adduces a pleasing example from the island of Samos, where Hermes Charidotēs is worshipped with a festival in which social norms are rever-

2 Surprisingly, the author, while occasionally referring to it, does not engage in any depth with the recent publication of a monograph on Hermes by A. Allen, *Hermes (Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World)*, London 2018.

sed and during which thievery was permitted, especially of clothing. Such role-reversals in religion are discussed next, ending in a comparison with the Athenian Anthesteria. Since only a few rather different examples of such festivals (thievery, dead/living and gender role reversal) are known, it is again difficult to generalise this part of Hermes' character. We are left with what feels like a missed opportunity to discuss the implications of such role-reversals for Hermes as a god of those whose roles were reversed, i.e. the non-citizens.

The next section is dedicated to the extra-urban sanctuaries of Hermes. Here (123) the author points to the diversity of the cult in each locality based on Henrichs' 1990 study of Dionysus and the city,³ and one wonders why this nuance was not present in earlier examples. The section moves on to caves, which were often shared between Hermes, nymphs and other deities. The cave of Pantalkes is a case in point: one is surprised that the author does not contextualise this wonderful example within the realms of embedded and personal religion as set out in the introduction. The choice of deities here, and the role of Pantalkes (whether historical or fictional) as guardian of the nymphs, should at least be briefly discussed. Hermes' association with grottos, woods, springs and rivers primarily through his mother Maia and the nymphs that raised him, rather than having an emphasis on his own qualities, is nicely illustrated. Guidance in travel, on roads and pathways, on the other hand, and mobility more generally are intrinsically linked to the god himself, as the next chapter shows with Hermes as the god of travellers, merchants, shepherds and hunters (151) but also on metaphorical journeys such as the way into marriage (170). The argument brought forward here, namely that Hermes had an important role in marriage rituals and is seen as leader of the bride into marriage is persuasive, in particular, as his relationship with his female worshippers is less obvious.

Section 2.4 is dedicated to Hermes' character as a liminal god between Hades and the world of the living. Here the author demonstrates that, if anything, Hermes acts as a messenger to Hades and helper of heroines and heroes, often together with other gods rather than a psychopomp, at least in the Archaic period. In fact, the author shows that the epithet only appears in the 5th century BCE and here in conjunction with Charon rather than Hermes as in Greek thought Hermes led bodies, not the soul, to Charon.⁴ There are some excellent observations in this chapter, such as that his epithet Chthonios, interpreted here as connected to the

3 A. Henrichs, *Between Country and City. Dionysus in Attica*, in: M. Griffith – D. Mastronarde (eds.), *Cabinet of the Muses. Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honour of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*, Atlanta 1990, 257–277.

4 This is simultaneously argued by M. Mili – J. Wallensten, *Dedications from the Dead? The Strange Case of Hermes Chthonios*, in: E. Mackil – N. Papazarkadas (eds.), *Greek Epigraphy and Religion*.

earth, the *patris* – ('Heimat', really) equip the god with powers as the protector of patriarchal power and rulership over land and Hermes as the protector of women and children as well as his role as giving emotional support to both the living and the dead. However, there are issues here with the methodology: only very few pieces are preserved that actually show such scenes and whole genres, such as the *lekythoi* from Athens described here. One wonders how much we can actually say about perceptions of Hermes within the cult and care of the dead beyond Athens. The comparison to the tomb of Lefkadia as well as the Hegesippos epigram used to support the argument here are somewhat far-reaching in space and time. Furthermore, images are missing throughout, and so one has to trust the author (or google the scene) if not immediately familiar.

A long section is dedicated to the *Lekythos* of Myrrhine, an important but somewhat unique piece. The discussion of the historicity of Myrrhine and the relation to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is somewhat misleading as the author suggests that Myrrhine 'may have served as a model for his *Lysistrata*' when in fact the priestess of Athena Polias, Lysimache, is usually associated with *Lysistrata* and Myrrhine a woman in her own right, both in the play as well as historically. I mention this here because it would have been a chance to discuss the involvement of women in the cult of Hermes which has so far happened only in passing.

The book then focuses on the representation of the positive deeds of the dead during their lifetime as well as their positive character traits, arguing that Hermes 'only accompanied those who had lived according to civic virtues' (216) – but then, one has yet to come across a grave marker that slanders the dead for the lack of such virtues. A problem with the book is exemplified in this chapter, namely the lack of a comparative framework. Examples are chosen seemingly at random and statistical quantifiers are missing; the book talks about 'few' and 'many' (or, in the case of the Thessalian reliefs 'numerous') but it is unclear what this means 1) numerically speaking and 2) comparatively to other grave markers. What the section does, however, do beautifully is showcase the close relation between Hermes and the 'citizens of a *polis*' (220). The important observation from this section is that Hermes was indeed more associated with the world of the living than the dead.

A good fifty pages are dedicated to Hermes and his role as god of the gymnasium. This is perhaps the strongest section of the book, partly because of the large amount of evidence for *gymnasia* in the Greek world, which here allows the author to showcase the strength of the approach: while in earlier chapters Hermes' role was often vague or somewhat opaque, this does not apply to the gymnasium. Hence

Papers in Memory of Sarah B. Aleshire from the Second North American Congress of Latin and Greek Epigraphy, Leiden 2021, 127–147.

the section beautifully illustrates the relationship between, on the one hand, the young men of the Greek world, their education and preparation for ‘manhood’ and the god on the other, without having to rely too heavily on Attic evidence alone. Among the most interesting cases discussed here is the analysis of Hermes’ role on Crete and the specific character he takes on at the sanctuary of Kato Symi which, strictly speaking, does not exactly fall under the category of *gymnasia* but offers insights into rite of passage activities for young men where Hermes is characterised as a hunter and leader of the *ephebes* out of the *polis* and into the wild. This is a brilliant example of the dynamic character and malleability of the god in differing local societies, an aspect which is rarely highlighted in this book, but showcases exactly this interplay between a ‘standard god for all’ and local interpretations which make this god such a fascinating case study.

Throughout the chapter it becomes clear that while at least in Athens the connection with Hermes and competitions can be traced back to the Archaic period, the evidence for the god’s presence in the gymnasium and festivals dedicated to him increase in the 3rd century BCE – a phenomenon, the book argues, that is linked to the increase in ‘private’ euergetic practices across Greece but equally with an increase in the prominence and importance of festivals. Sadly, though understandably in the context of the book’s framework, only one page is dedicated to Alexander and Ptolemy. The chapter concludes that Hermes was indeed the god of the citizens (283) which does not come as a surprise, given the fact that the book explicitly focused on ‘*gymnasia* exclusive to citizens’ (229).

Lastly, the book turns to the agora – a place often described as a crossroads between citizens, non-citizens slaves and (working) women.⁵ A section dedicated to the actors on the agora, however, seems to reveal that Hermes was only worshipped by citizens. In fact, most dedications to Hermes found in this context are by the *agoranomoi* who dedicated to the god when exiting office together with Aphrodite and Hestia. The relationship between Hermes and these deities is discussed (following mostly Wallensten) and Hermes appears as the protector of the businesses, deals and agreements made on the marketplace which eventually leads to his association with monetary fortune. As part of Hermes’ dwelling on the marketplace, the author considers his oracular role as for example at Pharai. The oracle was characterised by immediacy and easy access as consultation neither included a mediator nor a large fee, true to his spirit as a god of the people. We do not know who made use of the oracle but one can imagine that Hermes in this role was not only a god of the citizens but of all those who frequented the agora.

5 K. Vlassopoulos, Plotting Strategies, Networks and Communities in Classical Athens. The Evidence of Slave Names, in: C. Taylor – K. Vlassopoulos (eds.), *Communities and Networks in the Ancient Greek World*, Oxford 2015, 101–127.

A problem that comes with a macrohistorical perspective while focusing on one deity alone is of course the lack of context in each instance. No wonder then that Athens is either the starting or end point of a discussion or, when no evidence is available, the author concludes that ‘elsewhere we have to expect a similar situation to Athens’ (301). This may well have been the case although not necessarily: the section on Hermes in Tanagra, the only *polis* to have two sanctuaries within its walls dedicated to the god (97–101) shows, that a localised approach is possible and that here, for instance Hermes was worshipped differently and uniquely as Promachos.⁶

The strength of the approach is seen for instance in the chapter on the *gymnasia* (as mentioned above) and name of the month Ermaion, which allows the author to show just how widespread the worship of the god was and his importance to many *poleis*. A generic trait of Hermes in said *poleis* was that he was a truly sociable god, a companion rather than lone traveller; be it around humans, or, as the book demonstrates convincingly, other gods, nodding by implication to the work of the late Jean-Pierre Vernant. Overall, however, it is difficult to see what is generically Hermetic and what is localised ritual theology and practice. This is partly because of the nature of the sources outside of Athens, which tend not to record what is the norm but rather what is exceptional: for instance, Pausanias, a source the book is heavily indebted to, is our only source for the sanctuaries in Tanagra.

The books’ stringent focus on the *polis* and its institutions as the only possible communities for which Hermes was relevant appears, from the outset, to be somewhat artificial and restrictive, if not anachronistic. For instance, Kostas Vlassopoulos, Christy Constantakopoulou and others have shown that the Greek world was more than a compilation of *poleis*. Approaches other than the focus on *poleis* and their institutions alone benefit a holistic study of ancient Greece that includes those at the margins of the *poleis*’ societies, namely non-citizens, and enslaved people whose worship of and involvement with Hermes are indeed lacking from this book.⁷ Whether this is because Hermes truly was a god of the citizens alone, as the book keeps claiming, is doubtful. Indeed, when the book discusses sources which mention the involvement of non-citizens this is glossed over (e.g. 326). The

⁶ This particularity of Hermes as an incredibly localized god was highlighted by Allen (2018, 4) as a specific trait of the god.

⁷ K. Vlassopoulos, *Unthinking the Greek Polis. Ancient Greek History beyond Eurocentrism*, Cambridge 2007; C. Constantakopoulou, *Beyond the Polis. Island Koina and Other Non-polis Entities in the Aegean*, in: C. Taylor – K. Vlassopoulos (eds.), *Communities and Networks in the Ancient Greek World*, Oxford 2015, 213–223; from a different angle also H. Beck, *Localism and the Ancient Greek City-State*, Chicago 2020; H. Beck – J. Kindt, *Local Horizons of Ancient Greek Religion*, Cambridge (in press). J. Kindt’s work on Greek religion is mentioned briefly in the introduction but is not applied, J. Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion*, Cambridge 2012.

false dichotomy between *polis* and non-*polis* (ergo people's?) institutions becomes obvious when the author, with great effort, includes the many *defixiones* mentioning Hermes, which supposedly 'while not being part of *polis*-institutions, were embedded in the *polis*' (334) and hence need to be part of this study.

Overall, however, I can warmly recommend this book to students and scholars with an interest in religious and institutional history. The breadth and wide range of the sources discussed in the monograph, the very high quality and presentation of the text, and the thoroughness of some of the case studies, such as Hermes as a protector of the gymnasium and in the agora are just some of the many highlights. The author can be an excellent observer too, especially when it comes to exploring the relationship between the citizens and the god, and the god's proximity, kindness, and companionship to humans. The author truly shows that Hermes, while being ubiquitous in Greek *poleis*, is indeed a rather understudied god, making this book a timely and much-needed contribution to the field.