

MAGIC CIRCLES: AN APPROACH TO GREEK RITUAL

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This essay attempts to account for the frequent appearance of circular imagery in Greek rituals ranging from church sacraments to local magical rites deemed 'superstitious' by the Church. It is concerned with time, cosmology, ritual form and teleology (sometimes in a very literal sense). The contention that ideological figures of thought such as the circle should be viewed and interpreted against the backdrop of a shared cosmology can be seen as consistent with most of Andrew Duff-Cooper's studies of Balinese life, especially those investigations where he delineated the architectural geometry of Balinese ideology (1986). I think that this similarity of orientation in our research can be traced to a common debt to Rodney Needham, whose studies of ideation (1972) and primordial figures of thought (1978) profoundly influenced us both.

Contemporary Greece

In Athens in 1982 a Cretan taxi-driver described to me how his brother had been bewitched by the evil eye and was unable to consummate his marriage. His family

For reasons of space the number of references in this essay has been seriously curtailed. A fuller version is in preparation. The references to ancient Greek works are given in the form usual in classical scholarship. I would like to thank Juliet du Boulay, Laurie Hart, Renée Hirschon, Gordon Howie and Sarah Iles Johnston for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

took him to a sorceress in Khania who, among other things, recommended that he take seven skulls from an ossuary. She instructed him to take the skulls at night to a crossroads outside Khania and to draw a circle around himself using a black-handled knife. The 'army of devils' passed by, but so long as he remained inside the circle he was protected. This he did for three nights in a row, after which the Turkish woman pronounced him cured. He went on to have six children.

Such stories are legion in Greece.¹ The motif of a 'magic circle that protects against the devil' is in fact common to world folklore, and versions of it are found from Iceland to China. I have even come across variants, collected in English among the Greek-American community of Tarpon Springs, Florida (Georges 1980), that tell of standing inside protective circles while beautiful, but dangerous, fairies dance around on the outside. In many parts of Greece, especially Crete, it is said that good lyre-players are taught by the *neraides* (female fairies, or demons). The lyre-player, however, must have the courage to go to a crossroads and draw a circle around himself with a black-handled knife. The *neraides* will try to coax him to come out and in a last resort they will ask him to pass his lyre outside the perimeter of the circle. They take the lyre and play it expertly. In one account the lyre-player accidentally lets the tip of his little finger protrude outside the protective circle and the *neraides* immediately chop it off (Politis 1904: no. 702).

The theme of circles protecting against demonic forces is discernible in everyday life; it is not just a folkloric story 'motif'. The theme of instituting a sacred boundary is replicated, for example, when ordinary houses are built: prayers are read at the laying of the foundations, and when the house is finished an icon stand is erected inside. The prayers call for the stability of the structure, as well as for the protection of its occupants 'from all harm and evil influence; from being overcome by night-time fear; from arrows shot by day; from the thing which moves in the night; and from the midday demon' (*Evkhologion to Mega* 1980: 494). An exorcistic prayer for clearing a space of evil spirits (found in a cheap booklet of prayers evidently enjoying some ecclesiastical status) describes how the priest's blessing establishes a circular 'boundary of fire' (*phragmon pyros*; Malamas 1986: 9) within which all terrestrial, aerial and astral spirits will be bound and rendered subordinate to Christ and the saints.

A fundamental opposition may be observed between the village (*khorio*), a secure and ordered space (*khora*), and the unsettled wilds surrounding the settlement, the domain of a vast array of demons generically called *exotika* (things outside). The village, with its church at the centre, represents the most fundamental and important oasis of the sacred in everyday life. It is perceived by its inhabitants as a divinely protected enclosure or circle (Campbell 1964: 332). An account from the Greek-speaking south Italian village of Rochudi relates that at

1. I have examined elsewhere various transformations and reflexes of the magic circle concept (Stewart 1991: 165ff.).

night the people would close the gates so that *narades* could not enter the village (Stewart 1991: 278).

Most of these rituals and beliefs belong to the sphere of local, unofficial religion. In some cases they are compatible with Orthodox Christianity proper, while in others, such as the magic circle in the Cretan taxi-driver's story, they are evidently incompatible. In a number of rituals central to Orthodox Christianity itself, however, the symbolism of the circle is also prominent. The censuring of the church, for example, is conducted in a circular counter-clockwise motion, as are the little and great entrances performed at every liturgy. Architecturally, the Byzantine church itself with its central dome was, according to Lazarev (cited in Ouspensky 1992: 41), 'designed to be perceived by a viewer in the process of circular movement during which he moves from one branch of the cross to another'. At Easter, Christ's flower-strewn bier (*epitaphios*) is taken out and carried around the church three times, again in a counter-clockwise direction. Similarly, at *litaneies* (processions) performed on Easter Sunday and on such other occasions as the celebration of a patron saint, the icons of the church are lifted from their position on the icon screen and carried in a wide circle around the village (Stewart 1985).

At baptism, marriage and funeral ceremonies the image of the circle emerges still more clearly. Generally completed three times by proceeding around towards the right, the circle is repeatedly actualized in the administration of the sacraments.² Immediately after baptism the priest leads the sponsor holding the child in a circular procession three times around the font, while at the funeral laying out (*prothesis*) the mourners circle the bier while lamenting (Alexiou 1974). The most impressive and, I think, central instance of circular symbolism occurs at the wedding ceremony. There one may discern a complex progression of ever-expanding circles from the engagement ring, through the wedding crown and the tight circular dance of Isaiah (where the priest leads the newly-weds three times around a table set up in the nave of the church), to the large circular dance involving the whole village.

Two distinct but perhaps interrelated aspects of circles seem to be emerging. First, they may be used to create a sacred space. Circles thus appear prominently in rituals for keeping away demonic and other malevolent forces. An account recorded on Crete some fifty years ago explicitly draws this connection: 'demons fear the circle' (Phrangaki 1949: 43). Secondly, in church sacraments the circle apparently does not serve an apotropaic purpose, instead movement to the right simply amounts to the proper form of movement. The wedding ring and the circular dance of Isaiah have been interpreted by at least one Orthodox theologian as symbols of eternity (Ware 1984), an idea I now consider in greater detail.

2. In Greece, ritual movement toward the right is always understood to be anticlockwise. On Bali (Duff-Cooper 1990: 39), right-handed motion may proceed clockwise. As du Boulay (1982: 237) points out, this motion is foremost of all symbolic (of auspiciousness, 'the right'); the actual physical direction may vary.

Through field research in the hamlet of Ambeli on Evvia, Juliet du Boulay (1982, 1984) has illuminated the significance of the circle in everyday life. She reports that circles formed by a right-handed, counter-clockwise motion represent auspiciousness. Villagers spoke of such motion as being 'like a dance' (*sankhoros*) since this is the form which most Greek dancing takes. During the funeral vigil, nothing may be passed over the body, only around it. Should somebody, or something (especially a cat), pass directly over the body, this disrupts the journey of the soul on its path towards heaven and the deceased may turn into a vampire. Likewise, the rules regarding proper marriage (*katameria*), as opposed to incest, are thought of on analogy with a circle, or more correctly a spiral. Once a family marries off a daughter they must wait three generations before they can receive back a bride. For them to intermarry again too soon would be for the blood to circle back too quickly (du Boulay 1982: 543f.). This is incest (*aimomixia*; literally 'blood mixing'), the consequences of which are disastrous.

What is most interesting here is the elaborate analogy between the models for understanding marriage and procreation on the one hand and ultimate salvation on the other. As women spiral through society across generations, so also does the soul proceed to heaven in a spiral, illuminated by the spiral-shaped candle (*isou*) placed on the deceased's navel and burned over a period of three days (*ibid.*: 228). Du Boulay concludes: 'it appears that the principle of on-going right-handed movement...ensures not only the health of the living community but also the safe passage of the soul into the other world' (*ibid.*: 236). A good life does not only secure a good afterlife; a good life course is conceived as analogous to the course of the soul on its way to heaven.

The action of circling figures frequently and prominently in Greek ritual precisely because it is both an image of the proper flow of life and a means of protecting human welfare, and this is what rituals promote. In understanding ritual in general, and Greek life-cycle rituals in particular, I follow Hocart (1970: 51) who considered ritual 'a technique of life-giving' or 'a life-giving method'. The purpose of ritual in his view was to increase prosperity and well-being, both in the present and in the hereafter. In Greek Orthodoxy, rituals of birth, marriage and death accomplish just this. An unbaptized child, for example, is not inscribed in the Book of Life and is furthermore an invitation to disease and misfortune. To the Hocartian view I would add a straightforward expressivist view, namely that rituals in some manner symbolically represent what they are trying to accomplish. Frazer's delineation of sympathetic and contagious magic makes this point about actors' intentions and the objects manipulated, but I would contend that even the form of physical movement in the ritual emulates what is being hoped for. These rituals are models of desire that restructure the personal view of the world, and this is accomplished even at the level of simple choreography.

Rituals are not performed or believed to be efficacious in Greece because people *consciously* espouse a philosophy of circles and a conviction in their life-giving effect. My formulation is strictly an analytical one in that it sees such an interpretation as plausible in the light of the ethnographic data. Even so, it is

not at odds with the Orthodox Church's insistence on the performance of the sacraments. It must be admitted, however, that neither clerics nor ordinary people regularly discourse on the symbolism of circles and their significance in rituals. I am not, therefore, examining an expressed folk model, as du Boulay was able to do (1982: 220), but rather a consistency of images, contexts and intentions in Greek life. The circle is here taken as an ideological element, an idea that interprets the flow of life. It is not necessarily the object of local exegesis, nor of conscious reflection, perhaps because it is 'always already there'.

It is perhaps most accurate to consider such elements of ideology as the circle to be implicit rather than unconscious ideas. As Dumont contends (1977: 19f.), the task of the anthropologist is to show the links between this implicit subject and the wide range of manifest, expressed predicates that comprise the apparent social life and culture of a group. So far this is what I have done, collating a series of diverse texts and contexts relating to circles. In order to probe this hypothesis further I turn to examine historical materials in order to see if they help us broaden our understanding of the figure of the circle in contemporary Greek ideology. This is not a search for first origins but for insight into the transmission and transformation of cultural forms that may contribute to an understanding of their structural meaning in the present.

Ancient Greece

In Homeric thought the world was conceived of as a round, flat disc with the River Okeanos flowing around it.³ The world was also depicted as a circle on Achilles' shield, and Okeanos furnished a border for both this world and for the shield itself. In other contexts the ocean was described as *telēeis potamos*, which can be argued to mean not 'perfect river' but 'encircling river' (Onians 1951: 443; cf. Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, 346b 21ff.). The boundaries of the world were also the location of the underworld; it was the place where all dead souls went, whether blessed or accursed. In Book Four of the *Odyssey* (563ff.) there is a description of the Elysian Fields located at the 'edges of the earth' (*peirata gaiēs*). Here life was most easy for mortals because the River Okeanos made the wind Zephyros blow so as to 'refresh souls'. The verb used here is *anapsykhein*, a word that draws attention to the centrality of the concept of *psykhē*, 'soul', in Greek conceptions of death. Nagy (1978: 167) has contended that the usage of *anapsykhein* in this passage might even be translated as 're-animate', and he has further argued for an

3. In this section I have drawn extensively on Onians's fascinating linguistic study (1951: 426ff.) of fate and ritual in antiquity.

archaic concept of metempsychosis in a novel reading of Hesiod's myth of the five generations (*ibid.*: 169).⁴

Evidence for Greek thought on the transmigration of souls is much more substantial from the fifth century onwards. Pindar implies in one of his Olympian odes (*Ol.* 2. 68ff.) that those conducting themselves sinlessly in three consecutive recyclings will be rescued from the round of rebirths and whisked away to the Island of the Blessed and crowned. Ultimate salvation was thus analogous to an Olympic victory. The richest source of evidence for this strain of thought undoubtedly comes from the overlapping cults of Dionysos, Orpheus and Pythagoras. A fourth-century inscription on a gold leaf buried in a south Italian tomb (classed as Bacchic; Burkert 1985: 294) records the speech of the soul supplicating Persephone for merciful reinstatement among the blessed: 'For I too claim to be of your blessed race; but Fate overcame me, and the hurler of the lightning bolt. But I have flown out from the circle (*kyklos*) of heavy grief and stepped with swift feet upon the desired crown'.⁵ To this a response is given: 'Blessed and fortunate one! Thou shalt be god instead of mortal' (West 1983: 23). West (*ibid.*: 22) reads this as indicating that Fate, enforced by Zeus, may punish a soul with consecutive rebirths from which it may eventually be redeemed (presumably through righteous conduct).

In Aristotle, the relation between time and circling was given a precise and formal expression (*Physics*, 223b 22ff.):

And so time is regarded as the rotation of the sphere in as much as all other orders of motion are measured by it and time itself is calibrated by reference to it. And this is the reason for our habitual way of speaking; for we say that human affairs and those of all other beings which have natural movement and are born and perish are, in a way, circular. This is because all of these things are judged with respect to time and they have their beginning and their end, as it were, according to a certain period; for time itself is conceived as a circle.

Again, this is because time and the rotation of the earth mutually determine each other. Hence, to call the happening of a thing a circle is to say that there is a sort of circle of time; and that is because it is measured by a complete revolution.

Clearly, the ancient Greeks did, at least on occasion, explicitly view their lives as a series of circular periods.

4. One modern Greek expression for 'to die' is *xepsykho* (literally 'to give up one's soul'). Du Boulay (1982: 224) contends that this is the expression *par excellence* for describing the moment of death when the individual is thought to release his or her soul, which leaves 'like an infant' with the last breath.

5. The Pythagorean word for reincarnation was *anakyklosis* (literally 're-cycling').

Ritual and Teleology

The standard dictionary definition of *telos* is ‘an end, a completion, a fulfilment or perfection of something’, but it could also refer to a rite of passage. It was frequently applied to stages of life: *telos gamoio* ‘the celebration of marriage’; *telos hēbēs* ‘manhood’ (literally ‘the completion of adolescence’); or *telos biou* ‘death’ (literally ‘the end of life’). A formant, *teleutē*, also meant ‘death’. Partly misled by an erroneous etymology, Onians has argued that *telos* possessed a root sense of ‘turning or circling around’ (1951: 443).⁶ As Onians expresses it, ‘the band, circle, itself naturally symbolic of completeness and continuity would represent the complete phase of fortune’ (ibid.: 444). While this may not be true on strict linguistic grounds, Onians does present a number of contexts where *telos* and the idea of circling coincide and I think his suggestion that *telos* could refer both to phases of life and to encircling is worth considering.

It is well known that in ancient Greece athletic victors were crowned or garlanded. Often this circular garland was called the *telos*; it represented the particular deed or fortune and simultaneously expressed its fulfilment (ibid.: 445). There are also points of contact between *telos* as it applied to Olympian victors and *telos* as it applied to marriage. Both the athletic victor and the person married were said ‘to have reached fulfilment’ (*teleisthai*). According to Pollux, ‘marriage is called *telos* and those married called *teleioi*, and Hera is called *teleia* or *zygia*’ (3. 38).

The adjective *teleios* meant ‘full grown’ or ‘mature’. Its associations with marriage may have harkened back to a time when marriage and initiation occurred almost simultaneously at puberty. In the classical period this appears to have been more nearly the case for women than for men. In any event, marriage and initiation could be viewed as variations on a single theme of social transition; they both conferred a new fate. The words for ‘fate’ in Greek, *moira* and *potmos*, both have root senses of ‘a portion’. To say that initiation was the investment of a new fate, then, was equivalent to saying prosaically that the initiate would henceforth be embarking on a new portion of life.

There was, however, more to it. At the end of the *Republic*, in a section known as ‘The Myth of Er’ (614bff.), Plato presents a picture of the cosmos as encountered by the soul after death. Sitting at the edges of this universe, presiding over the circular spinning motion of the planets are the three fates (Moirai). All souls report to them to select the pattern and destiny of their next life before

6. At the time Onians was writing the word *telos* was believed to stem from an Indo-European root **k^wel-* thus making it cognate with such words as *polos* ‘pivot, axis’, *pello* ‘turning, circling’ and *telson* ‘a place at the end of a field where cattle or chariots turned’. Even the noun *kyklos* itself could conceivably have derived from this root. In the light of the Linear B decipherment in the mid-1950s it is now commonly accepted that *telos* derives from its own separate Indo-European root **tel-*. It is entirely possible, however, that by folk etymology speakers of Ancient Greek may have associated *telos* with words like *telson* or *polos*.

having their memories erased and being returned into the world. The very idea of fate connected ultimate destiny with orbital planetary motion, an idea already encountered in Plato's student, Aristotle. In a concession to his teacher, Aristotle even allowed that there was a fifth element, ether (*aithēr*), the realm of souls which displayed regular circular motion. Interestingly, the fates themselves were sometimes represented as spherical, just like the cosmos they administered (Brendel 1977: 73f.).

The word for ritual, *teletē* (Modern Greek, *teleti*), is a close cognate of *telos*. For Pindar it was the ceremony at the Olympic Games. For later writers it may have referred to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the ceremony of marriage or any other ritual that signified a change in fate. This conferment of a new fate was all important, as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* indicates with respect to the Eleusinian mysteries: 'Blessed is he amongst men who hath seen these things. But he who is without *telos* of the rites, who is without a portion, hath not ever a share of like fate though dead beneath the dark gloom' (480ff.). To fail to receive *telos* was equivalent to ignoring the cyclic progression of life. One stunted one's own growth. The refusal to participate reduced one's possibilities in life as well as in the hereafter. This was precisely the warning that mendicant Orphic priests issued to non-initiated householders, much to Plato's displeasure (*Republic*, 364bff.).

Conclusion

This essay began with an account of a magic circle ritual on Crete. It would have been tempting to assert that circles in all Greek rituals arise from the same ideological figure of thought and have a similar significance; ritual circles would thus have furnished another addition to the list of demonstrable examples where the great and the little traditions in Greece, religion and 'superstition', are paradoxically informed by the exact same principles (Stewart 1991: 244). Closer analysis has shown this not to be the case. The Cretan story does indeed typify the use and significance of circles in little tradition rites, especially demonic and magic rituals; this circle constitutes an apotropaic boundary against demons and it too has a history stretching back into antiquity, as evidenced for example in the circling movements one was instructed to undertake before cutting the mandrake plant (Theophrastus, *HP*, IX. 8. 8) or in the circulation of infants around the hearth fire, five or seven days after birth, in a rite called the Amphidromia (cf. scholiast on Plato's *Theaetetus*, 160e).

To a certain extent this significance of circles does manifest itself in such Christian practices as the processions of icons (*litaneies*) around villages in order to sanctify them. However, when we come to more central ecclesiastical rites—the sacraments—this interpretation seems unlikely. Here circular movements appear rather to be emulations of the proper flow of life. The outward form ritual takes

in Christian Orthodoxy and in unorthodox practices may be the same, but we must acknowledge this very real difference in what it signifies. Apparently, 'magic circles' tell us only a limited amount about Greek ritual.

Going on the scant exegesis of the circle in Orthodox practice—the comments of theologians, since I have not heard lay people reflect on such matters—the circle is interpreted as an image of eternity (Ware 1984). Historical research suggests that this Christian interpretation rests on classical conceptions of the circle or sphere as an image of perfection: 'the perfection of the sphere made it not only an image of God and the world (created in this image), but also of the human soul' (Brendel 1977: 32). In the Orthodox sacraments the circle apparently evokes God. This is analogous to what it did in certain ancient rituals that appealed to the gods by imitating celestial movements.

Ritual circling and the cosmological principles that underpinned it were formalized in late antique magical practice, especially among the neo-Platonists who took Platonic philosophical ideas and operationalized them in ritual. The explicit purpose of these rituals was to gain access to and manipulate cosmic forces via straightforward sympathetic magic: everything in the divine world had its symbolon in the earthly realm and objects in the sensible world could be manipulated to effect changes in the noetic world (Johnston 1990: ch. 7). For our purposes, the most interesting of Neo-Platonist theurgic ritual practices was the use of tops (*inyx*, plural *inyges*), which were spun around to invoke cosmic forces because they emulated celestial motion and celestial sounds.

Early Christianity did work, to a certain extent, with Platonic principles and classical philosophical presuppositions regarding God. This common source led to an independent but similar logic of practice in rituals aimed at gaining access to God. The great tradition of Christian Orthodoxy is thus not a reworking of little tradition magic; it does not draw on boundary-inscribing, apotropaic ideas. Instead it proceeds according to ideas arising from what was arguably a high tradition of classical philosophy, ideas that also informed the practice of theurgical magic (itself a high tradition of practice compared to the body of beliefs and practices contained in the magical papyri). Ultimately—and here is an unanticipated irony—'magic circles' do offer us an approach to Greek ritual at all levels, but two very different traditions of magic are involved and thus two different sorts of magic circles are at issue.

Maurice Bloch (1977) has drawn attention to the cyclical (or static) notion of time that rituals comport, in contrast to practical time, which is linear and derived from contact with nature. He contends that for this reason ritual is a prime means by which the past hegemonizes the present; it serves to perpetuate such social structural distinctions as hierarchy. The long historical record regarding ritual and the vocabulary for ritual in Greece has enabled us to see how much of the past has indeed been carried over into the present. But Greek rituals do not seem to have much to do with social stratification. Many of the life-cycle rituals discussed above actually seem to create equality. Baptism, for example, validates all and sundry as human beings with an equal opportunity for salvation.

Bloch has, however, put his finger on something important in recognizing the cyclic imagery of ritual in contrast to the linear imagery of everyday life. But the circular imagery of these various rituals has less to do with the suppression of duration than with its recognition and celebration. In the Greek case, as perhaps in all salvation religions, life-cycle rituals are not crucially about maintaining the past in the present. On the contrary, these rituals picture the future in the present. They are glimpses of eternity periodically available to society as it moves along the inexorable and finite path of existence (Hart 1992: 271). There is, furthermore, no sense in attempting absolutely to distinguish practical time from ritual time since the two are mutually constituting (Gell 1992: 35). Rituals serve the dual role of punctuating duration, thereby rendering it perceptible—a function that they also accomplish by labelling stages of life—and of suppressing anxiety about duration by reminding participants of the escape from time that comes at the end of life.

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