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## ANIMATING STATUES: A CASE STUDY IN RITUAL<sup>1</sup>

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In the past fifteen years or so, scholars of antiquity have become newly fascinated with the ritual power of the material image. In a widely praised 1992 book, Christopher Faraone heightened our appreciation of Greek and Roman beliefs in the ability of statues to do things—particularly to ward off demons, diseases, pirates, and all other sorts of evils. In 2001, Deborah Tarn Steiner, starting from an idea that Faraone had touched upon, developed the premise that Greeks and Romans understood statues to be literally filled with that which they represented—that statues of gods were presumed actually to contain the gods. Both Faraone and Steiner assume as well that, although the Greeks and Romans believed the gods might spontaneously enter their statues and animate them, from early times the Greeks and Romans frequently also performed rituals to ensure that animation would take place—rituals to ensure that the god would be present

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1 The ideas presented here were initially developed during a seminar on sacred images led by Mark Fullerton and Fritz Graf at The Ohio State University in 2006, and I thank the faculty and students who participated, especially Fritz Graf and Adria Haluszka, for their critiques. Later versions were presented at the Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi Antropologici sulla Cultura Antica, Università degli Studi di Siena, and at the Universität Konstanz; I am particularly grateful for comments made on those occasions by Polymnia Athanassiadi, Maurizio Bettini, Helmut Seng, and Ilinca Tanaseanu-Doebler. I also thank *Arethusa's* two referees, who improved both the substance and clarity of this article. One of them, David Frankfurter, subsequently became known to me and contributed further insights as I revised the final section of the article. I thank Julia Kindt for sharing with me a chapter of her forthcoming book and for conversations on methodological problems of studying ancient religions. All translations in this article are my own, unless noted.

in the statue at a given moment to hear prayers, receive sacrifices, and perform miraculous actions.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I will look at ancient rituals of animation with two goals in mind. The first is historical. I will examine our ancient evidence and argue that, *pace* Faraone and Steiner, the formal practice of ritualized animation developed only late in Greek and Roman antiquity, under a particular set of circumstances and within a particular intellectual climate—namely the Platonizing religious system called theurgy. Ritualized animation enabled the theurgists to work within a worldview that sharply distinguished between the physical and spiritual realms—a worldview that was not common to earlier, more traditional Greek and Roman religious mentalities. I will suggest that once such a sharply divided worldview was in place, the invention of the animated statue or something like it had to follow, lest the theurgists be cut off from the gods' beneficence. Theurgic soteriology depended both on a stratified cosmos and on interaction between gods and humans; ritually animated statues mediated between these otherwise mutually exclusive *desiderata*.

My second goal is methodological. I will use my reconstruction of ancient rituals of animation and the motives behind their invention as a jumping off point to make some observations not only about how they work, but about how we should study ancient rituals. I will begin with an analysis of the particular ways in which animation rituals act to demarcate the sacred—a task that is performed by many different rituals in many different cultures. I will show that theurgy's unique variation on this activity, as we can reconstruct it through the lens of contemporary theory, is complemented by what we learn about the ritual and its goals from our ancient

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2 Faraone 1992, Steiner 2001. Steiner is straightforward in her assumption that the Greeks used animation rituals from an early period (e.g., pgs. 112–17) and understands late antique sources that explicitly describe animation rituals to reflect a much older tradition (120). For much of his book, in contrast, Faraone stops short of saying that animation rituals were employed during the early periods of Greek history, but he similarly uses the late antique sources to suggest that earlier divine images, such as Hesiod's sacred stone at Delphi, were understood to be empowered by means of "extraordinary rituals" employed by "special individuals" (pgs. 4–7 and n. 12). He further refers to ancient near eastern animation rituals, which he presumes would have been available to the Greeks, and to several myths in which divine craftsmen, such as Hephaestus, create moving statues (e.g., pgs. 11–13, 28, 100–2; chp. 2). In none of the early cases that he discusses, however, as he concedes, are there clear indications of animation rituals.

sources themselves. This situation suggests that we would do well as scholars to listen more attentively to what ancient sources say about their rituals than we have been accustomed. I will close with some remarks on how we might carry this approach forward into the study of ancient religion more generally and the rewards of doing so.

### ANIMATION RITUALS: SOME BACKGROUND

The idea that there were animation rituals already in archaic or classical Greece has been attractive to scholars for several reasons—for one thing, it provides satisfyingly deep roots for a practice that we know was of significant interest to Renaissance intellectuals such as Marsilio Ficino. For another, it seems to validate the comments of early Christian writers, who used the Greeks' and Romans' alleged belief in animated statues as a prime opportunity for mocking paganism. Minucius Felix, for example, scoffingly asks:

When does the god come into being? The image is cast, hammered, or sculpted: it is not yet a god. It is soldered, put together, and erected; it is still not a god. It is adorned, consecrated, prayed to—and now, finally, it is a god once man has willed it so and dedicated it. (*Octav.* 22.5; trans. Steiner 2001.115. Cf. Clem. Al. *Pr.* 4)

Finally, the idea of the ritually animated statue is intriguing in and of itself. Like much of the work on ancient magic of the past two decades, the mental picture of Pericles' or Cicero's compatriots solemnly enlivening and then interacting with what are (in our view, at least) mere pieces of wood, bronze, marble, and gold creates a certain *frisson*—it helps to re-mystify cultures that had, perhaps, begun to seem too rational after centuries of philological dissection.

The problem, however, as both Faraone and Steiner concede, is that outside of a few myths in which Hephaestus and Daedalus create gold or brazen images that move, we find no mention of anything even roughly similar to ritually animated statues in Greece and Rome until very late antiquity. We should be careful to note, moreover, that the mythic instances cited by Faraone and Steiner are not actually examples of calling a soul or anything else that we would normally call a life-force into an inanimate form, but rather, in most instances, examples of causing an inanimate form

to move, typically in order to serve the god who built it.<sup>3</sup> The statues have no personalities or independent volition—no “souls”—far less the souls of separately, previously existing people or gods. In other words, these tales discuss the manufacture of what we might call robots, rather than the process of calling an otherwise independent entity into an inanimate object. The one instance that might seem to be an exception to the “robot” model—Hephaestus’s creation of Pandora as narrated by Hesiod—cannot be read as the ritualized ensoulment of a statue either, albeit for the opposite reason. For although Pandora begins as lifeless materials, once her creation is complete she is referred to as a woman, a *gynê* (Hes. *Erg.* 80 and *Th.* 513). Pandora is never an animated statue, but passes directly from being inanimate stuff into being a fully human female. The correct parallels for understanding her story are not the animation rituals of late antiquity but the tales of Prometheus or other gods creating the first mortals from clay (e.g., Pl. *Prt.* 320d, Heracl. *Pont. ap. Hyg. Astr.* 2.42.1).

In short, we lack any evidence for animation rituals in any source earlier than late antiquity. Notably, moreover, we have very little support even for the assumption that the Greeks or Romans necessarily believed the gods *voluntarily* entered statues on a regular basis. The idea that a god *could* enter a statue was certainly available—Heracleitus’s comment that people who talk to statues are as silly as those who talk to houses suggests that some individuals, at some times, did imagine gods were inside statues (Heracl. frag. 5), as does one of the old Greek words for a statue, *hedos*, “dwelling place.” But we must remember that gods also were imagined to hear prayers, receive sacrifices, and interact with humans in other ways, even when they very clearly were *not* inside their statues. The plot hatched in Aristophanes’ *Birds*, in which a physical barrier between the heavens and the earth easily prevents the gods from receiving the smoke of sacrifices, assumes that gods were often imagined to be far away from their altars and statues when sacrifices and the accompanying prayers were performed. Pelops’ prayer to Poseidon on the seashore, as described by Pindar, similarly assumes that the god, although not incarnate in any statue nearby, can hear what his worshipper says—and indeed, Poseidon immediately appears

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3 In other cases, Faraone’s examples are not clearly statues (e.g., the golden *kêlêdones* that Pindar describes on Apollo’s temple at *Pa.* 8.71–72; Faraone 1992.28) or are not clearly animated (e.g., a statue of Artemis created by Medea and filled with *pharmaka*, according to Dionysius Scytobrachion 4.51.3–5; Faraone 1992.100–1).

in response (Pindar *O.* 1.71–74). These examples could be multiplied several times over.

Even when actions are performed in front of a statue, there is seldom any clear indication that the god is understood to be literally watching or listening from within. Let us examine one of the cases that Steiner uses to argue for gods dwelling in statues in order to demonstrate how indeterminate ideas about this matter could be (Steiner 2001.105). In a story told by Herodotus, a Spartan nurse, hoping to remedy the extreme ugliness of an infant in her care, enters the temple of Helen and lays the baby in front of the goddess's statue (*agalma*); she then prays "to the goddess" (*tên theon*) that the child become beautiful. When the nurse leaves the temple, a female figure appears to her (*epiphanênai*), strokes the baby's head, and declares that it will grow up to be the most beautiful woman in Sparta—and sure enough, Herodotus continues, a change for the better begins to take effect that very same day (Hdt. 6.61.3). So where was the goddess Helen while all of this was taking place? First inside her statue in the temple and then outside the temple, making an epiphany? First in the heavens and then outside the temple? It is not clear from Herodotus's comments where the nurse imagined Helen was when she prayed, where Herodotus or his informants imagined Helen to have been, or where the "average Greek" would have imagined her to be at a given moment. Like many other religious beliefs, beliefs about gods' materiality and location are seldom well or precisely expressed, in part because they are fluid, changing to suit the needs of the situation or the worshipper. The one thing we can say with any certainty is that there is no reason to assume that in this or most other cases the god was unquestionably understood to be inside the statue.

All of this evidence should encourage us to seek other ways of interpreting the prominence of statues in religious ceremonies for most of the ancient period. Two recent articles that apply Peircian semiotics to the problem—one with reference to civically erected statues (Graf 2007) and the other with reference to statues described in the Greek magical papyri (Haluszka 2008, in this volume)—encourage us to do just that. According to these analyses, statues served as what Peirce calls indices, signifying the existence of the god, and at times the presence of the god, without necessarily implying that the god was inside of the statue itself. Although ancient belief in divine presence inside statues is not *excluded* by this etic semiotic reading, the reading allows for a wider variety of emic beliefs concerning the relationship between statues and the gods they represent; thus we are freed from seeking a single, consistent ancient explanation for the relationship

between divinity and representation—much less from pressing for an ancient equation of the two. Certain texts of the so-called magical papyri that are often cited as treasure-troves of ritually animated statues—texts dating between the third and fifth centuries C.E.—also fail to provide clear-cut examples of formally animated statues, as Haluszka shows. Although a few of these spells display an awareness of the general *concept* of animation, the predominant ideology underlying statues and images in the spells of the papyri is the same as that found in earlier Greek sources. That is, the statue is the focus of rituals without any expectation that it will necessarily come to contain the god, much less that it will contain a god who has been called into the statue through the ritual actions of humans.

### THE PLATONISTS AND THEIR READERS

And yet, to return to our earlier topic, there is no denying that Christian critics portrayed the Greeks and Romans as believing that gods dwelt in statues, and that both Christian critics and Renaissance thinkers traced the origin of the ritually animated statue to antiquity. Where, then, were they finding fodder for these ideas? An answer to where they had encountered the idea of gods dwelling in statues is easy to suggest: comments such as the one by Heracleitus and stories such as the one from Herodotus certainly could be interpreted, particularly by those intent on mocking paganism, to mean that Greeks and Romans believed the gods dwell in statues. The second question brings us back to the theurgists.

At this point, I need to pause momentarily on the word “theurgist,” defining the way in which I will use it for the rest of this article. Scholars of antiquity usually apply the term to people such as Iamblichus and Proclus, who combined Platonic philosophy (and especially Platonic metaphysics) with variations of traditional religious practices in order to accomplish their goals, the most important of which was the purification and eventual ascent of their souls. The first theurgists were understood to be the semi-legendary Julian the Chaldean and his son Julian the Theurgist, who, during the late second century C.E., supposedly received from the gods and then recorded the *Chaldean Oracles*, central texts for those who practiced theurgy.

But in modern use, the term theurgist usually does not include some other figures who shared important beliefs with Proclus, Iamblichus, and the Juliani, including a soteriology based in Platonic metaphysics and an interest in animation rituals: I mean those whom we typically call the Hermeticists, that is, those who composed and studied the philosophical and

ritual texts that we subsume under the titles *Corpus Hermeticum* or *Hermetica*. Sharply dividing the theurgists from the Hermeticists falsely represents ancient reality, as Garth Fowden shows; for the milieu we will be considering here, “theurgy” and “Hermeticism” were two names for essentially the same constellation of beliefs and practices (Fowden 1986; cf. Struck 2004.chp. 6). Ancient authors sometimes traced what they called Hermetic beliefs to Egypt, and traced beliefs expressed in the *Chaldean Oracles*, of course, to Chaldea, but even these geographic labels were applied fluidly, and we would be wrong to impose strict divisions between one and the other. Therefore, like Fowden, I will draw on Hermetic evidence side-by-side with theurgic.

Before turning to theurgic animation rituals, I must consider more closely the other half of the hypothesis that I presented earlier. Even if ritualized animation as we know it within the Greek and Roman world can be traced to the theurgists, can we be sure that the early Christians and the Renaissance intellectuals would have encountered such rituals within theurgic sources? It is highly likely. We know that Augustine railed against other theurgic practices in Book 10 of the *City of God* and that he discussed what he called the Hermetic practice of animating statues in Book 8.<sup>4</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite incorporated many theurgic concepts into his exegesis of Christian worship, as recent studies by Gregory Shaw and Peter Struck demonstrate in depth, particularly the theurgic doctrine of *symbola*, which, as we will see, is central to the idea of animated statues (Shaw 1999, Struck 2001; cf. more generally Klitenic-Wear and Dillon 2007). Marius Victorinus also shows knowledge of the theurgic theory of *symbola*, particularly as we know it from the *Chaldean Oracles* and Iamblichus, as does Synesius of Cyrene.<sup>5</sup> Although the extant works of Dionysius, Victorinus, and Synesius do not describe theurgic animation rituals per se, the rituals were so important within theurgy—and *symbola* were so closely associated with

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4 On theurgy, see particularly 10.9–10, 16, 26–28, 32. On the Hermetic ritual of animation, see 8.22–24. Notably, at 10.17, Augustine strenuously argues, in contrast, that in spite of what some say, God was never in the Ark of the Covenant: “Our God did not make a practice of being shut up and contained in a place”—a response to “pagan” ideas that gods could be contained in statues? See also one of the newly discovered sermons of Augustine, where he attacks certain pagans for thinking they can cause their souls to ascend through magical rites (Dolbeau 1996.IV.59–61)—the theurgists?

5 For an overview, see the discussion of all of these figures in Des Places 1971.29–41.



those rituals—that it is hard to believe that these authors had no knowledge of the rituals, given that they had knowledge of *symbola*.

Byzantine writers certainly knew about theurgy, and specifically about theurgic animation rituals. Michael Psellus, who was familiar enough with the *Chaldean Oracles* to quote them frequently, who knew Proclus's commentary on them, and who knew Synesius's works virtually by heart, several times mentions various aspects of ritual animation, some of which will be cited below. A first edition of the *Oracles* with commentary, heavily influenced by Psellus's work, was produced by Gemistus Pletho in the late fourteenth or fifteenth century under the title *The Magical Oracles of the Magi of Zoroaster*. And from Pletho, who saw in theurgic lore the beginnings of a new, universalizing religion, theurgy passed into the Italian Renaissance. Pletho encouraged Cosimo de Medici to found a new Platonic Academy, and within that Academy, Marsilio Ficino began the work of editing and translating ancient theurgic texts, including a key treatise by Iamblichus (to which Ficino was the first to give the title *On the Mysteries of Egypt*), the *Hermetica*, and Proclus's *On the Hieratic Art*, a very important text for understanding theurgic statue animation (also called *On Sacrifice and Magic*).<sup>6</sup> In Ficino's *Three Books on Life*, we find extensive discussion of *symbola* and of how to use them to animate statues. Book 3, in particular, takes up a famous statement of Plotinus on the topic and responds in detail (Kaske and Clark 2002.25–31 and comm. ad loc.). From Ficino, these ideas passed onward to Cornelius Agrippa, Campanella, and others, as D. P. Walker shows (1958).

## THEURGIC ANIMATION RITUALS

The practice of ritualized animation is often referred to as *hê telestikê technê*, “the telestic art.” Although modern studies treat this term as virtually synonymous with statue animation, it had broader connotations in ancient texts, which will help us begin to understand the animation rituals. Most importantly, *hê telestikê technê* was also used to refer to rituals that purified the soul of the theurgist.<sup>7</sup> Given that the word *telestikê* liter-

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6 Further discussion of the influences on Ficino is found at Copenhagen 1988 and throughout Kaske and Clark 2002.

7 See, e.g., Proc. *In R.* I.120.12, *In T.* III.5.30–6.15 and III.300.16; Hierocles *In aur. carm.* 482a Mullach; Psell. *PG* CXXII.1129c12–d4. Comments at Lewy 1956.495.

ally indicates a process of “completion” or “perfection,” we can surmise that purification was essential to bringing the soul into its most perfect or finished state—a state in which it could rise into the higher levels of the cosmos, where dwelt angels, gods, and other creatures who were of intrinsically greater purity than an embodied human soul.<sup>8</sup> “Completing” or “perfecting” a soul, then, meant making it as similar as possible to those entities whom it expected to meet once the process was finished. In fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* and other theurgic texts, this act of completion is envisioned as “enkindling the soul with divine fire”—fire being the very essence of divinity according to the theurgic system.<sup>9</sup>

If we apply this concept to statues, we can hypothesize that perfecting a statue that was intended to house a god meant creating a statue that was as much like the god as possible. Proclus is the most explicit and verbose on this topic (as he is on most topics), discussing it in many of his works;<sup>10</sup> we can begin to explain the process and its theoretical underpinnings by looking at three of his passages:

[the masters of the sacred art] often devised composite statues (*agalmata*) . . . having blended separate *synthēmata* together into one and having made artificially something embraced essentially by the divine through the unification of many powers. (*On the Hieratic Art* 150.30–51.5; trans. Copenhagen)

and

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8 Psellus comes close to saying exactly this in the passage cited in the previous note. Quoting *Chaldean Oracles* frag. 100: “Seek the channel of the soul, whence it descended in a certain order to serve the body, and how you will raise it up again to its order by combining ritual action (*ergon*) with a sacred word (*hierôî logôî*),” he explains that the theurgist must raise up and awaken the soul by means of telestic rites, after which the soul might be led back to where it had come from. The telestic science (*epistēmê*), he goes on to say, perfects (*telousa*) the soul by means of material powers—that is, by means of the *symbola* that I will discuss below.

9 See Proc. *In T.* III.300.16–20 and, for further sources and discussion, Johnston 2004.

10 But Proclus is by no means the only author to discuss it. Similarly, see for example *Asclep.* 24 (81), 36 (89–90), 38 (90–91); *Iamb. Myst.* 5.23 (233.9); Psell. *Epist.* 187, *Script. Min.* I.447.8. Additional discussions by Proclus himself are *In T.* I.51.25, I.273.11, III.155.18; *Theol. Plat.* I.19 and I.28; *In R.* II.212.22; *In Prm.* 847.25. See also discussions at Dodds 1951.291–95, Lewy 1956.495–96, and van Liefferinge 1999.88–100 (who, against all other scholars, is hesitant to see any traces of the practice in Iamblichus).

the ensouled statue (*agalma empsychon*), for example, participates by way of impression in the art which turns it on the lathe and polishes it and shapes it in such and such a fashion, while from the universe it has received reflections of vitality which even cause us to say it is ensouled; and as a whole it has been made like the god whose statue it is. For a telestic priest who sets up a statue as a likeness of a certain divine order perfects the *symbola* of its identity with reference to that order, acting as does the craftsman when he makes a likeness by looking to its proper model. (*In Prm.* 847.19–29; trans. Morrow and Dillon, modified)

and


. . . for the telestic art, by means of *symbola* and ineffable *synthêmata*, represents and makes statues suitable for becoming receptacles (*hypodochai*) for the illuminations of the gods. (*In Cr.* 19.12)

Two of these passages mention *symbola*; two mention *synthêmata*. *Synthêmata* are virtually synonymous with *symbola* in theurgic contexts, although *synthêmata* is sometimes used to describe *symbola* that are specifically verbal in nature.<sup>11</sup> For our purposes, the distinctions between these terms are slight, and, for the sake of simplicity, in the rest of our discussion I will use *symbola*, the more general of the two words.

But what are these *symbola* that are so central to the perfection and animation of a statue? To answer, we must first forget the connotations of our own word “symbol.” In contrast to our symbols, the primary purpose of a theurgic *symbolon* is not to imitate and thereby remind us of another reality in the same way that, for example, a crucifix represents the crucifixion of Christ and thereby reminds a Christian who sees it of redemption and eternal life. The theurgic *symbolon* does not aim to evoke, in other words,

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11 Excellent discussions of theurgic *symbola* and *synthêmata* are found at Shaw 1995.chps. 15–17 and Struck 2004.chps. 6 and 7. We also hear about *caractères*, a term that usually refers to *symbola* consisting of letters, names, or words. E.g., Proc. *Theol. Plat.* I.28: “The telestic art, by thoroughly purifying *caractères* and *symbola* and putting them around a statue, makes the statue *empsychon*.”

through verbal or visual metonymy, a story or person and the implications of that story or person. Nor does a theurgic *symbolon* work in the same way as, for example, a sign that one finds on some clothing labels, indicating that the item is safe to wash in water:  That is, *symbola* do not illustrate what they are expected to do.

Or at least, theurgic *symbola* need not do either of these things. If they evoke a sacred story or refer to what they are supposed to accomplish by means of their qualities, then they perform these functions in addition to their primary function, which I will describe shortly. Indeed, Proclus elsewhere tells us that, sometimes, the relationship between a *symbolon* and the entity for which it serves as a *symbolon* may seem obscure or even paradoxical: “symbols are not imitations of that which they symbolize.”<sup>12</sup> How exactly, for example, do a lion or a laurel tree imitate the Sun, for which the theurgists claimed they were *symbola*? Other than telling us that they have an “empyrean essence” as does the Sun, Proclus offers no explanation.<sup>13</sup> Many instances of such puzzling combinations of *symbola* and their associates come from Ficino’s later treatment of the topic, which drew on the works of Proclus, the *Hermetica*, and the *Picatrix* (an eleventh-century Arabic *grimoire* that was also influenced by Hermeticism). A glance at just one group of *symbola* assembled by Ficino will underscore the futility of expecting them to be symbols in our usual sense of the word. Ficino says that when your stomach hurts, you should employ the *symbola* of Jupiter in order to feel better:

Move your body on the day and in an hour when Jove is reigning, and use Jovial things, like silver, amethyst, topaz, coral, crystal, beryl, spode, sapphire, green and airy colors, wine, white sugar, honey, and thoughts and feelings that are very Jovial, too: constant ones, balanced ones, religious and law-abiding ones. Associate with men of this kind, sanguine and handsome, venerable and versatile. . . . The

12 *In R. I* 198.13–24, esp. 15. He is speaking here specifically of the use of *symbola* in Homeric poetry, but the non-mimetic mode of *symbola* is mentioned elsewhere in Proclus’s works as well. See Struck 2004.239–40 and Lamberton 1986.188–97; the translation of the phrase from Proclus is from Lamberton 1986.190.

13 These and other examples of solar *symbola* are found in Proclus’s short treatise *On the Hieratic Art* (= J. Bidez, *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques grecs* VI.148–51); an excellent English translation can be found at the end of Copenhaver 1988.79–110.

Jovial animals are the lamb and the peacock, the eagle and the calf. (*Three Books on Life* 3.1.110–18; trans. Kaske and Clark 2002, modified)

Although we may not be surprised to find the eagle, wine, or sanguine and handsome men among the Jovial things—these seem like “logical” *symbola* for Jupiter as we know him from myth and cult—it is hard to say why sugar should be there, or lambs and calves, which are young, defenseless animals. Spode (ash or the dross left behind after metals are refined) might have some alchemical connection with the planet Jupiter, and there might be reasons that coral and the color green represent Jupiter as well, but they are not obvious enough that we can now recover them, even by studying similar treatises.<sup>14</sup>

But let us return to late antiquity, and to the question of what theurgic *symbola* were understood to be, ontologically. According to theurgic cosmology, the highest god, who is often called the Father, had sown *symbola* throughout the cosmos at the time of its creation; this act was one of his ways of manifesting his goodness and creative energy within the world while still remaining transcendent from the world himself.<sup>15</sup> These *symbola* depend from the ontological ranks that lie between the Father and the material world in which humans dwell—ranks that include the gods, the angels, the *daemones*, and the planets, for example—but that also include all kinds of creatures and objects in the material world itself. As Proclus, and later Michael Psellus and Ficino tell us in detail, there are in fact whole “chains” (*seirai*) of creatures and objects depending from the Father, each of which includes, near its top, a god familiar from traditional cult, and most of which include a planetary body as well.<sup>16</sup> From the chain that includes the Sun depend lions and laurel, as I have already mentioned, and also various other plants, animals, and minerals such as gold, heliotrope, roosters, a mineral called “sun-stone” (*hêlitên*), and another stone called the “Eye of Belos” (Proc. *On the Hieratic Art* passim). Divine names and *caractères* also depend from these chains. All of these chains and their component *sym-*

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14 Procl. *On the Hieratic Art* 151.7 mentions that coral is useful when invoking manifestations, but he does not say of which god(s).

15 E.g., Ch. Or. frag. 108, Iamb. *Myst.* Book 1 (ad fin.). See also Struck 2004.218–21.

16 The idea is frequently mentioned: e.g., Proc. *In T.* I.11.9ff. and III.271.1; Psell. *Hyp.* 28, pg. 76.2.

*bola* participate in and help to sustain the *sympatheia* or *philia* that binds together different levels of the cosmos.<sup>17</sup>

Proclus tells us that each of these *symbola* used as ingredients for animated statues partakes of—*metechein*—the god from which it depends (the same verb is often used in Platonic descriptions of a material object partaking of an Idea or Form). Thus, for example:

The telestic art establishes oracles and statues of the gods on earth and through certain *symbola* makes them capable (*epitêdeia*), they being made of portions of the perishable material world, to partake of (*metechein*) the god and to be moved by him and to speak the future. (*In T. III.155.18*)

And similarly, in the passage that immediately precedes and includes one that I cited above on page 453, Proclus says:

So it seems that properties sown together (*synespeiramenas*) in the Sun are [also] distributed among the angels, *daemones*, souls, animals, plants and stones that share them (*metechousin*). From this evidence of the eyes, the authorities on the priestly art have thus discovered how to gain the favor of the powers above, mixing some things together and setting others apart in due order. They used mixing because they saw that each unmixed thing possesses some property (*idiotêta*) of the god but is not enough to call that god forth. Therefore, by mixing many things they unified the aforementioned influences and made a unity generated from all of them similar to the whole that is prior to them all. And they often devised composite statues (*agalmata symmixta*) and fumigations, having blended separate signs (*synthêmata*) together into one and having made artificially something embraced essentially by the divine through the unification of many powers, the dividing of which makes each one feeble, while mixing it

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17 The point is implicit in much theurgic doctrine, but is explicitly stated, e.g., at Proc. *On the Hieratic Art*. See also Struck 2004.219–26.

raises it up to the idea of the exemplar. (*On the Hieratic Art* 150.23–51.5; trans. Copenhaver, modified)<sup>18</sup>

Thus we should understand gold, roosters, and lions, for instance, to partake of the same essence as does the god of the Sun. Note that I am not saying that gold or lions are “made from” the Sun or are “parts of the Sun” in the same way as, for example, a person’s fingernails are part of that person or in the same way that wine is made from grapes. Rather, gold and lions each partake in the same portion of cosmic reality descending from the Father—the same chain—as does the Sun, even if the Sun is higher up on that chain than gold or lions and more completely represents its essence. A *symbolon* of a god, then, is not *part* of the god himself in the same way that fingernail parings were once part of the person from whom they are taken for use as *ousia* in mainstream magical practices. Rather, the god and the *symbolon* share a common ontological origin. An analogy that draws on familiar modern “scientific” knowledge might make this clearer. I could say that my teeth share a common origin with oyster shells, given that both of them are composed mostly of calcium; I could say that my teeth also share an origin with chalk, which is a form of calcium; with spinach, a plant high in calcium; and with milk. If there were such a thing as a “calcium chain,” then each of these things would comprise a separate link upon it and would therefore be joined to one another without any of them actually having been created out of or taken directly from one another.

But my calcium analogy differs from the theurgic situation in an important respect. In my analogy, all of the items I mentioned—oyster shells, spinach, milk, chalk, my teeth—exist in the material world and are connected to one another through a shared physical characteristic. The theurgic chains, in contrast, also include gods—who exist on a ontological level above the material world that is less distant from the Father’s emanations and therefore purer in its participation in those emanations; there is no necessarily shared physical characteristic. The material *symbola* we find here in our world are connected by their chains to entities that lie outside of normal human reach.

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18 Cf. *In Prm.* 847.19–29, cited in English above p. 454. Along the same lines, he says, “Just so, placing the *symbola* of the telestic art around statues (*agalmasi*), [the theurgists] render them very suitable for participation (*metousian*) in the higher powers” (*In T.* I.51.25).

## CROSSING BOUNDARIES

And this is where the ritualized use of the *symbola* becomes crucial. Traditional Greek myth and ritual practice assumed that gods and humans existed within the same ontological space. The gods might dwell in a different part of it—a part not normally accessible to humans given their physical limitations—but it was nonetheless part of the same space. Myths such as the one in which Bellerophon tried to fly up to Olympus on Pegasus—and came close enough to alarm Zeus, who violently interrupted the journey—articulate this unity of space, as does the assumption that the gods can enjoy the smoke rising from a sacrifice. Traditional beliefs and practices also assumed that the gods can pass between earth and heaven without any trouble at all. Not only do we encounter this idea frequently in the poets, but also (and increasingly during the period in which theurgy developed) in inscriptions that commemorate visits from the gods, as Robin Lane Fox discusses (1986.chp. 4). Indeed, the principle underlies the very concept of epiphany as the Greeks and Romans understood it (Graf 2004).

The theurgists, in contrast, posited firm boundaries between each of the different ontological realms of their cosmos—in fact, Iamblichus spends considerable effort defining how the inhabitants of each realm (which he calls *taxeis*) differ from one another, due in part to each realm's closeness to or distance from the Father (*Myst.* Book 2, see esp. chp. 7 [85.1–86.3]). The boundaries between the realms could be bridged by humans, but it took special knowledge—and this was a large part of what the theurgists spent their time acquiring. Moreover, special preparations had to be made to ensure that something that normally belonged in one realm would be able to reside, even temporarily, in another. Thus, for example, the theurgist who wanted to experience *anagôgê*—that is, psychic ascent into a higher realm—had to make his soul full of light because those realms were themselves full of light. One way that the theurgist did this was to inhale sunlight—the portion of the divine light that was accessible here below (Johnston 2004).

Correspondingly (at least according to theurgic logic), it would only make sense that for a god to visit the material world some adjustment would have to be made so that either the god became more like the material world or the material world became more like the god. Both strategies were employed by the theurgists, although in very different ways and with very different explanatory justifications. First, because it was considered highly inappropriate, perhaps even impossible, for the god to alter his or her actual essence, diminishing it so as to suit the material world, the theurgists'



primary strategy was to adjust the material world upward, so to speak, in order to make at least part of it more or less equal to the particular god whom they were asking to visit. This sounds like a daunting challenge, but the theurgists met it ingeniously, as we have started to see already, by using the *symbola* that hung from a given god's chain to "re-make" a portion of our world into a place where the god could appropriately reside temporarily—a statue. The reasoning seems to have been that if enough things from the chain of the god were gathered together, the resulting conglomeration, although still material, would be similar enough to the god to serve as an appropriate abode. For instance, recall the words of a passage from *On the Hieratic Art* that I cited above on page 457: "They used mixing because they saw that each unmixed thing possesses some property (*idiotêta*) of the god but is not enough to call that god forth." Iamblichus more fully explains, saying:

And at the same time, nothing hinders the superior beings from being able to illuminate their inferiors, nor yet, by consequence, is matter excluded from participation in its betters, so that such of it that is perfect and pure and of good type is not unfitted to serve as a receptacle (*hypodochên*) for the gods; for since it was proper not even for terrestrial things to be utterly deprived of participation in the divine, earth has also received from [the divine dispensation] a share in divinity, such as is sufficient for it to be able to receive the gods. . . . One must not, after all, reject all matter, but only that which is alien to the gods, while selecting for use that which is akin to them, as being capable of harmonizing with the construction of dwellings for the gods, the establishment of statues and indeed the performance of sacrificial rites in general. (*Myst.* 5.23 [233.2–34.4]; trans. Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell, modified)

This practice of building a home for the god out of elements akin to him nicely *inverts* the theurgist's practice of inhaling sunlight to lighten his soul: in that case, the traveler changes himself to suit his destination, in this case, the destination is changed to suit the traveler.

The theurgic world, then, is quite different from the world in which mainstream religion was practiced, and its statues are correspond-

ingly different. In the mainstream world, gods might sometimes chose to inhabit statues, but the statues need not serve in that function, given that the gods could interact with the human world in ways that did not require it. In the theurgic world, in contrast, the gods would find it easier to visit earth if they had a terrestrial home in which to reside temporarily, created from carefully selected objects from within the material realm. Neoplatonic metaphysics, with its idea of chains and *symbola*, provided the perfect solution to a problem that it had, itself, created by sharply dividing realms from one another.

I should note before we leave this topic that even in theurgy, the gods *could* visit the terrestrial realm without entering a statue—but a look at the alternative methods will underscore how useful a statue could be. The gods might visit by taking possession of a medium; sometimes the gods were even seen to enter or leave the medium in a fiery form. But the medium had to be carefully purified and prepared for this; mediumship was, essentially, a variation of the telestic practice, a situation in which the vessel to hold the god had to be made suitable. Indeed, Proclus closely associates the purificatory preparations of mediums with those of the telestic art (*In Cr.* 100.19–25) and also tells us that mediums had to wear clothing suitable to the deity to be invoked, which was marked with appropriate *eikonismata*—a practice that echoes the construction of statues from suitable elements (*In R.* II.246.23–25; cf. Porph. frag. 350 Sm. and Dodds 1951.295–99). Of course, it is more difficult to purify a human vessel because it inevitably encounters during daily life any number of polluting elements. It is also difficult to identify those rare humans who are fit to serve as mediums in the first place (Johnston 2001). In contrast, any theurgist with the right knowledge could create a telestic statue and, once it had been purified, preserve it in that state.

The gods could also, at times, make direct appearances in front of the theurgist. These direct visions, however, were not suitable for most theurgic aims; they were most commonly experienced in connection with *anagôgê* and the final purificatory processes that immediately preceded it. Nor were they easy to effect or endure: Iamblichus tells us that when the gods appear directly, they shine with a formless brilliance greater than any earthly light that moves more rapidly than the human intellect, although the god himself remains motionless; this brilliance hides the entire sky and all the heavenly bodies and causes the earth to shake—in other words, the terrestrial realm cannot sustain the presence of undiluted divinity. The brilliance of this light, moreover, can be tolerated only briefly by terrestrial

eyes—and even when it enters the eyes, such light is actually “seen” only by the soul. Although a brief encounter with divinity in this form could help purify the soul of the theurgist and enhance his long-term health, he was enfeebled and struggled to breathe while experiencing it.<sup>19</sup> It was scarcely conducive to conversing with the god, as the theurgist could do when the god was in a statue or a medium.

## RECEPTACLES

The second strategy for making adjustments between our world and the gods who visited it brings us to the container itself. Many of our theurgic sources use the term “receptacles” (*hypodochai*) to refer to the divine abodes composed from *symbola*; we have already seen this word used in passages cited on pages 454 and 460. In another example, Iamblichus says:

Observing this, and discovering in general, in accordance with the properties of each of the gods, the receptacles (*hypodochas*) adapted to them, the theurgic art in many cases links together stones, plants, animals, aromatic substances and other such things that are sacred, perfect and godlike, and then from all these composes an integrated and pure receptacle (*hypodochên*). (*Myst.* 5.23 [233.9–13]; trans. Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbelle. This fits into the ellipses of the passage on page 460.)<sup>20</sup>

The word *hypodochê*, like *metechlein*, is borrowed by the theurgists from Plato, specifically from the *Timaeus*, where it refers to the unformed substance that receives the Ideas and participates in them—and in doing so, becomes the “mother” or “nurse” of generation (e.g., *Tim.* 49a–51b). In other words, *hypodochê* describes the raw material that, having received the divine outpouring, made possible the world that we now know. As such, *hypodochê* is an apt term for a physical statue that will receive a god.

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19 In comprising this description, I draw on passages throughout Iamb. *Myst.* Book 2. There Iamblichus makes it clear that lesser entities, such as *daemones* and heroes, might appear in more “user-friendly” guises—but their visits were of considerably less benefit to the theurgist and might even deceive him.

20 There are many other mentions of the term *hypodochai*; a few are Plot. *Enn.* 4.3.11; Iamb. *Myst.* 3.14 (134.1); Psell. *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques grecs* VI.130.3–7; Asclep. 3 (68).

But even when applied to the reception of a divinity, the word *hypodochê* need not imply a statue *per se*—a *hypodochê* could, arguably, be just a box or a vase, for instance. After all, the Hebrew God used the Ark of the Covenant as his earthly abode when he came down to visit, as the theurgists undoubtedly knew. Stories such as Solomon’s incarceration of demons in bottles were also known to the Greeks and Romans of this period, to say nothing of the Hesiodic story of Pandora’s jar.<sup>21</sup>

But the theurgic *hypodochai* were not just boxes or jars; many other passages refer to theurgic objects that are constructed to receive the gods by the terms *agalmata* or *xoana*—as statues, that is, representational images.<sup>22</sup> If the first strategy for fitting the gods into our world was to make a small portion of that world more like the god by mixing together *symbola*, then the second strategy seems to have been to make the visible form of that small portion look like something with which human eyes were familiar.

Why bother to do this? The theurgists would have insisted that it was the gods who had instituted the practice. There are quite a few references to the gods instructing the theurgists in how their *agalmata* should look. According to Porphyry, for example, the gods had informed us “what sort of figure (*schêma*) should be given to their statues (*agalmatôn*), and in what shapes they show themselves, and in what sorts of places they dwell . . . They suggested how even their statues ought to be made, and of what material (*hylê*) . . . Moreover they themselves have indicated how they appear with regard to their forms, and from these their images were set up as they are” (Porph. frags. 316–18 Sm.). Porphyry goes on to provide several oracles in which the gods do exactly what he describes, including a passage that most scholars understand to be a fragment of the *Chaldean Oracles* in which Hecate tells the theurgist to make her *xoanon* out of a mixture of wild rue, resin, myrrh, frankincense, and the kind of small lizard that dwells near the house (*Ch. Or.* frag. 224).

Yet this only compels us to rephrase our question. Why did the theurgists think that the gods wanted to dwell in *hypodochai* that were anthropomorphic statues? One thing is certain: it was for our own good. “Although we are incorporeal (*asômatoi*),” say the gods, “bodies (*sômata*)

21 On Solomon, see Johnston 2003.

22 E.g., *Ch. Or.* frag. 224; *Iamb. Myst.* 5.23 (233.9); *Proc. Theol. Plat.* 1.28, pg. 70, *In T.* 1.51.25, *In Cr.* 19.12, *On the Hieratic Art* 150.30–51.5; *Psell. Epist.* 187. Cf. *Plot. Enn.* 4.3.11.

have been bound onto our self-revealed appearances, for your sakes.” The passage is from Proclus (*In R.* II.242.812); its second half, he claims, is a fragment of the *Chaldean Oracles*.<sup>23</sup> Part of the idea, looking back to Iamblichus again, seems to be that humans cannot comprehend, perhaps cannot endure, the divine in its true form; Porphyry similarly said that “men have revealed to the senses, through cognate images (*eikonôn symphylôn*), god and god’s powers, and thus have represented invisible things by manifest images” (frag. 351 Sm.).<sup>24</sup>

But the Emperor Julian, a dedicated student of theurgy, adds a different nuance:

For since being in the body (*sômati*) it was in bodily wise that we must needs perform our service to the gods also, although they are themselves without bodies (*asômatōi*); they therefore revealed to us in the earliest images (*agal-mata*) the class of gods next in rank to the first, even those that revolve in a circle around the whole heavens [i.e., the planets]. But because not even to these can due worship be offered in a bodily fashion (*sômatikôs*)—for they are by nature not in need of anything—another class of images (*agalmatôn*) was invented upon the earth, and by performing our worship to them we shall make the gods propitious to ourselves. (*Frag. Epist.* 293b–c Wright = Bidez 89b; trans. Wright, slightly modified).

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23 Frag. 142. Working only from this, it is hard to be sure what these bodies are that the gods bind themselves into. Scholars have often assumed that the fragment refers to the gods appearing directly to the theurgist in the shapes best known from traditional cult, but as we have just discussed, this would contradict an idea that lies at the very heart of theurgy and most Neoplatonic mysticism in general: namely, that the cosmos is stratified and that entities from one realm cannot easily exist in another without either compromising themselves or damaging those whom they are visiting. It may be that the fragment refers to mediumistic possession—being bound into a body would suit a situation in which the god was temporarily encased in a human being. Cf. also frag. 143 and its surrounding commentary in Proc. *In R.* I.39.17–22, and frag. 141, which seems to describe the end of a mediumistic episode.

24 I am grateful to an anonymous referee of this article and to Fritz Graf for suggestions as to how this passage should be read. For a slightly different interpretation, see E. H. Gifford’s 1893 translation of Eusebius’s *Praeparatio Evangelica* III.7 in which the quotation from Porphyry is embedded.

Statues, in other words (telestic or otherwise), provide an avenue through which humans, trapped in the material world, can worship entities who are immaterial.

Porphyry adds yet one more purpose, continuing the passage I cited just above:

. . . men have revealed to the senses, through cognate images, god and god's powers, and thus have represented invisible things by manifest images, [as] I will show to those who have learned to read from the statues as from books the things there written concerning the gods. (frag. 351 Sm.)

Statues could be educational, in other words; by studying them, the theurgist (and even the attentive non-theurgist) could learn more about the nature of the particular god whom he was worshipping. Several fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* that describe the appearance of Hecate allegorize her features (frags. 51, 52, 55).

Statues, then—as opposed to receptacles that might be simple jars or boxes or lumps of mixed materials—helped to join the world of the gods to that of humans in several ways. Of course, I have, in a sense, presented these arguments backwards; I have described the ways in which the theurgists justified using statues as receptacles for the gods, but behind that justification undoubtedly lay another compelling, if unacknowledged, reason that they embraced statues: statues were a well-established part of traditional cult, many aspects of which the theurgists took pains to adopt, adapt, and defend.

## RITUALS OF RELOCATION

Up till now I have concentrated on arguing that it was the theurgists who developed the idea of the animated statue and on explaining why such a statue was necessary within the theurgic worldview. It all ties up rather tidily—and theurgy is often tidy, in fact. As a religious system invented by cerebral people (and whatever else they were, those theurgists whose writings we possess considered themselves to be students of Platonic philosophy), theurgy has far fewer loose ends than other religious systems do. This tidiness is very pleasing; how often do historians of religion get to wrap up such neat packages? If we are to test the premise that I offered

in the introduction to this article—that we need to listen more closely to descriptions of rituals that are provided by those who performed them—then theurgy is an easy place to start.

At this point, however, etic sensibilities rear their heads. If we were to leave the matter as we have it now, we would be accurately reflecting what the theurgists themselves said about animated statues and the way in which they worked—that is, we would have learned a great deal about the self-proclaimed worldview of the theurgists—but might we also be allowing their explanations to cheat us of a methodologically more sophisticated analysis of what was really going on? In closing, it will be useful to step back and look at the matter with twenty-first-century eyes instead of late antique ones. From our outside vantage point, can we identify other things that theurgic statues, and the *symbola* that constituted them, were accomplishing? If so, how might these observations, first, confirm or enlarge our own understanding of how rituals—or at least some rituals—work and, second, align with what the theurgists themselves said that they were doing?

In a 1987 study of ritual and place, J. Z. Smith remarks:

Divine and human, sacred and profane, are transitive categories; they serve as maps and labels, not substances; they are distinctions of office, indices of difference. The same point is made in the *topos* found independently in both Israelite and Latin literatures of the carpenter who fashions a sacred object out of one part of a log and a common household utensil out of the other. Or the reverse, the melting down of a statue of a deity in order to fashion a commonplace vessel: Tertullian scoffs, “Saturn into a cooking pot, Minerva into a washbasin.” . . . The *sacra* are sacred solely because they are used in a sacred place; there is no inherent difference between a sacred vessel and an ordinary one. (Smith 1987a.105–06, quoting Tertullian *Apol.* 13.4)

Similarly in theurgy, the *symbola* are both sacred and ordinary: they are objects from the everyday world that are used to construct a home for a god. The similarity between Smith’s examples and theurgy stops there, however, for telestic ritual does not *turn* ordinary wood into something sacred (as in the example that Smith gives); rather, according to theurgic ontology, the wood is already sacred in its ordinary state. Conversely, the

branch of a laurel tree can become a walking stick and yet remain linked, by its very nature, to Helios, the god on whose chain the laurel tree sits. We are in a situation where (to borrow language from another passage in Smith's book) there is "no economy, no condensation" of sacredness, no limit on the potential sites of sacred significance (Smith 1987a.12).

If the world surrounding the theurgist cannot be divided clearly between things or places that are sacred and things or places that are profane, then it may seem that theurgy has obviated one of the tasks most frequently performed by ritual: the demarcation of the sacred. If the entire world is permeated by the sacred, then how can one create, or even conceptualize, a place or a thing within it that is set apart as sacred? And yet this assumption seems counterintuitive given that telestic rituals are directed towards the creation of an object (and therefore a place) that will be inhabited by a god. To scholarly eyes at least, this suggests that some demarcation of the "sacred," or at least of the "more sacred," must have occurred during the statue's creation. But when and how?

In part, demarcation can be said to occur at the moment that the collected *symbola* are modeled into a statue of recognizable form. For, as I noted earlier, it was not felt to be sufficient to present the god with a shapeless lump of mixed *symbola* and expect him to enter it; the divine *hypodochê* had to be given a form that the gods themselves had specified. This is broadly parallel to other acts that contribute to the demarcation of sacred space: the Temple in Jerusalem was constructed not only at a specific place, but in a specific form, according to divine instructions that caused it to mirror the heavenly order.

There is a difference between the shaping of the statue and the building of the Temple, however, which we might describe as one of relative exclusion. In most cases, a sacred place is expansive enough to include one or more humans (e.g., the Temple, a grove dedicated to a god, the *ady-ton* at Delphi), even if it sometimes also includes a smaller area of greater sacredness that humans may not enter (e.g., the Ark of the Covenant). In theurgy, in contrast, there is no Temple but only the Ark, so to speak. If a telestic statue constitutes a point of sacred place within the theurgic world, then sacred place is so condensed, so concentrated in its intensity as to completely exclude humans. And yet, to return to my earlier comments, if the physical world has sacred objects (that is, the *symbola*) scattered throughout it—if there is no economy or condensation of sacredness outside the statue—then the Temple is everywhere; humans are inside of it all the time, if only they recognize this fact. Telestic ritual, and the worldview



that underlies it, insists both upon theurgy's characteristic determination to revalorize the physical world *in toto*, and on an older, inherited urge to divide the world between profane and sacred—an urge that was virtually irresistible within an environment where, for centuries, sacred space had been carefully, ritually divided from non-sacred space and marked as such by boundary stones, walls, or similar features.

Even before they shaped the statues, however, the theurgists performed a more important and (for us) a more interesting act of demarcation: they collocated the sacred. That is: the *symbola* may have been intrinsically sacred wherever they happened to be within the physical world, but the theurgist needed to move the chosen *symbola* together into a single place before they were able to serve, together, as a *hypodochê*.

It is hard to find an exact parallel for this sort of ritual action outside of theurgy. Somewhat similar, for example, is the practice of consecrating a Christian church by sprinkling it with holy water or anointing it with holy chrism. That is, the physical space of the church becomes a sacred place when a previously sacred substance from outside is brought into contact with it. The church's altar may be consecrated in the same way, and if the portion of the altar that has been brought into contact with the substance subsequently breaks off, the altar loses its sacred status, underscoring the fact that we are dealing not with a place making a substance or object sacred (as in Smith's examples), but rather with the opposite.

Telestic ritual is similar insofar as sacredness of substance precedes sacredness of place, but it goes even further. Telestic ritual does not need to have a place waiting to be consecrated by the introduction of a substance; instead, sacred place *consists of* these substances (moreover, unlike the chrism or sacred water used to sacralize a church, which must themselves be sacralized before they are used, telestic *symbola* are sacred in their natural state). This, too, is symptomatic of the tension I mentioned above between the theurgic desire to valorize the physical world and the habit of dividing up its space: even if the theurgists insisted that the world was strewn with *sacra*, they could not completely repress the expectation that some human contribution—some human readjustment of space and thereby some human creation of place—was necessary before *sacra* could do their jobs.

It is interesting that we never hear a word from our sources about *how* the *symbola* are to be gathered from their original locations, or even how the statue is to be fabricated, technically. We are far away from otherwise similar rituals described in later European *grimoires* such as the *Key of Solomon*, where the practitioner is given detailed instructions as to when he

must gather the ingredients of his potions (under which planetary and lunar phases and at which time of day), what he is to wear while doing so, and even how he is himself to forge the knife with which he is to cut a particular plant or pluck the goose quill with which he will write a spell. Arguably, for all that our sources tell us, the ingredients for a telestic statue could have been gathered by the theurgist's servant, and the statue itself could have been created by a craftsman whom the theurgist had instructed, as was the small ebony statue of Mercury that Apuleius carried with him and that his enemies suspected was "magical" (Apul. *Apol.* 61–65). Our sources suggest that the most salient part of assembling the theurgic *symbola* into a statue was knowing which *symbola* hung on which chain—remembering that gold was a *symbolon* of Helios, for example, rather than of Aphrodite. *Knowledge* and *memory* were central to theurgic acts of demarcating the sacred object that would serve as a sacred place. The world was rife with potential ritual power, but the intellectual tasks of *acquiring* and *retaining* information (from the treatises of other theurgists or from the gods themselves) were the keys to releasing it—in fact, it is hard not to understand acquisition and retention of knowledge as ritual acts themselves, in this case.<sup>25</sup>

Which brings me, more briefly, to the second task I set for myself in this section: comparing what we learn from modern studies of ritual to what the theurgists themselves said about their rituals in their learned disquisitions. Embarking from Smith's classic study of ritual and place, I suggested that telestic ritual constituted a striking variation on the acts of emplacement that scholars have identified as being common to many rituals in many cultures: specifically, I argued that telestic ritual worked to collate or relocate the sacred so as to actualize its power. Notably, we can also get at this idea by remembering what the theurgists themselves insisted upon: that no single *symbolon* linked to a god was sufficient to provide an adequate *hypodochê*: a statue made of laurel alone could not sustain the presence of Helios; a statue composed only of smashed domestic lizards could not sustain the presence of Hecate. They themselves asserted that the

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25 Cf. the similar situation described by Smith 1987a.12–13 concerning the way in which the Aranda maintain a ritual connection with their ancestors, who are manifested in features of the surrounding landscape: "The central ritual connection between the ancestor and his 'place,' between the ancestor and the individual Aranda, the central mode of celebrating and signifying objectification, is not dramatization but recollection . . . rupture occurs through the human act of forgetfulness."

various *symbola* had to be gathered together from their original positions in order to serve telestic purposes—that they themselves had to demiurgically participate in the rearrangement of the physical world, geographically realigning the sacred inherent within it before it could serve human purposes. In short, then, we reach approximately the same understanding of at least some aspects of how theurgic rituals of animation “work” and what they “accomplish” by drawing upon a modern study of ritual and place and by listening to the theurgists themselves.

The astute reader may have begun to wonder, however, how often such happy agreements can be found outside of theurgy. As I said above, the theurgists were a cerebral lot; they were prolix as well, writing lengthy treatises about what they did and why they did it. They were also on the defensive, intent on justifying traditional rituals in the face of various challenges; thus they had every reason to be explicit and self-reflective in their discussions. If we have been able to use their expansive cognitive windows to help illuminate one of the ways in which an ancient ritual system worked, this should come as no big surprise. Similarly, we might find interpretative correspondences with contemporary theory within Servius’s comments on Roman religion, or in the Midrashic writings of the late antique rabbis, or amongst the Hindu grammarians.<sup>26</sup> Most religions have their educated and articulate apologists; the diligent scholar might find one who defends a given culture’s rituals in a manner that seems to validate the hypotheses of a J. Z. Smith, a Mary Douglas, a Walter Burkert, or whoever happens to be that scholar’s favorite theorist. By this argument, the rewards of the approach I am promoting are relatively small: the words of either the ancient intellectual or the modern theorist may confirm the scholar’s confidence in the other; the two together may more strongly verify the scholar’s subsequent interpretations.

And yet, it would be a mistake to leave it at this. As classicists, we need to reconsider what we look for in our studies of ritual. Methodologically, most scholars of Greek and Roman religions have remained wedded to the twentieth-century’s functionalist legacy, focusing on the ways in which ritual expresses and validates social structures and social roles (which in recent decades have been expanded to include gender roles)—in other words, studying the ways in which ritual meditates upon and affects the ways in which individuals or groups of individuals position themselves

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26 Patton 1996 has made the case for the Hindu grammarians.

towards one another.<sup>27</sup> Such studies have been important to our comprehension of the ways in which ancient religious systems sustained the societies in which they were practiced, and they have enriched our understanding of the values embraced by those societies; I do not mean to dismiss them.

But functionalism, by its very nature, ignores another important question that underpins what I have done in this essay: namely, how does ritual work to situate the humans who practice it apropos the *other* creatures who inhabit the cosmos—gods, heroes, demons, ghosts, etc.? By virtually any definition, a religion includes belief in supernatural entities and the performance of actions directed towards them—we ignore them, and the relationships that humans develop with them, at the peril of presenting an only half-informed picture of the system we are studying. This is particularly so for mystical or esoteric systems such as theurgy that encourage the individual to develop his or her own relationship with the divine at the cost of his or her self-exclusion from larger groups; in such systems, the individual's perceived relationship to the gods is more important than any relationship we can recover between him or her and the surrounding society.

Studying the ways in which ritual defines the gods or other supernatural entities and situates humans apropos them will not be only a matter of adjusting the nouns in our queries—of substituting the dyad “human” and “god” for the dyad “insiders” and “outsiders” or any other dyad that functionalist approaches have utilized. Understanding how any group of humans use ritual to express their relationship to the gods will require us to pay closer attention to what the participants themselves say. After all, the gods to whom rituals are addressed exist only in the minds of those participants, and the thoughts of those minds are available to us only through comments made by the participants themselves.<sup>28</sup> We cannot recover anything about humans' relationships to the gods and how ritual worked to construct or address them (in either ancient or modern cultures) from our

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27 Kindt 2008 made similar points in an oral paper that will serve as a chapter of her book (in progress) under the title “Geertz, Gould, and the Symbolic Dimension of Greek Religion.”

28 Already more than a century ago in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Jane Harrison warned that it is “only by a somewhat severe mental effort that we realize the fact that *there were no gods at all*, that what we have to investigate is not many actual facts and existences but only conceptions of the human mind” (Harrison 1903.164). This marked a early stage of her work, however, preceding her deep engagement with Durkheim and the functionalist approach to which he gave birth, an approach that heavily marked Harrison's *Themis*, published nine years after the *Prolegomena*.

own perspective alone; we must, so far as possible, immerse ourselves in the participants' conversations.<sup>29</sup>

Some scholars of Greek and Roman religions already have done this in regard to myth—the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant comes particularly to mind, and especially his excellent work on Hesiodic narrations of myth, which he uses to interpret archaic views of the relationship between humans and gods (e.g., Vernant 1979). Perhaps this approach began to enter the field of classics through application to myth because myth has been understood from early on as a form of discourse—indeed, as scarcely existing outside of the discourse that conveys it. Ritual in contrast, which from the beginning of its study has been portrayed dichotomously as the complement of myth, is prone to being understood as masking some deeper, unspoken reality, which its own participants can seldom, if ever, articulate.

And yet if ritual finds its meaning primarily in performance (as Smith and other recent scholars argue), then its purpose and its goals exist primarily in the activity itself as well. In ritual, “there is no text, it is all commentary; there is no primordium, it is all history” (Smith 1987b.196).<sup>30</sup> Given this, we ignore ancient opinions about the purpose and meaning of rituals at our peril; such statements provide crucial pieces of information from which we will be able to reconstruct the “commentary” that actually constitutes ritual, and thereby reconstruct at least part of the work that ritual is doing. Interestingly, some initial movements in this direction among classicists come from the same circle where similar work on myth has concentrated, namely, Vernant, his students and colleagues. Vernant's 1980 essay on Greek sacrifice (Eng. trans. 1991) is a good example. Listening closely to what the Greeks said (and just as importantly to what they didn't say) about the meaning of this ritual, from Homer to Porphyry, he concludes: “Whatever may have been the origin of sacrificial practices in the remote Indo-European past, whatever their social functions and religious values may be in other civilizations, *the essential point is to understand what*

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29 Buc 2001 takes a similar approach. His aim, as he states it on page 3, is “to explicate what late antique and early medieval authors thought happened when events that historians have identified as ritual occurred. What did they assume rituals did or ought to do?” As I do here, he expresses suspicion as to whether the functionalist approaches of the twentieth century are adequate tools for the understanding of ancient and medieval religious systems, although for somewhat different reasons.

30 A resumé of performative approaches to ritual can conveniently be found at Bell 1997.72–83.

*the Greeks, as Greeks, made of [sacrifice]*" (Vernant 1991.297; emphasis added). Remarks made by Jean Rudhardt in response to the oral version of Vernant's essay, which were printed along with its original publication in French, reflect this sensitivity to ancient discourse about sacrifice as well, as do some aspects of John Scheid's *Romulus et ses frères* (1990). Jean-Louis Durand's contribution to a volume on sacrifice edited by Vernant and Marcel Detienne in 1979 (Eng. 1989) applies a variation of this approach to vase paintings of sacrifice.

It is notable that all of these examples address the same topic as that to which Smith addressed the programmatic statement that I quoted in the paragraph just above: sacrifice. There is something about sacrifice, it seems, that prompts scholars of ancient religions to pay closer attention to our sources. Perhaps it is the characterization of sacrifice as the act that lies at the very center of ancient religion—perhaps we are so determined to understand it that we listen more carefully. But whatever the answer to that question, we need to venture further in this direction—listening to what the ancient writers say about their rituals. To reanimate our study of ancient rituals, we must be willing to reanimate the ancients themselves.

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## **APPENDIX: THE EGYPTIAN "OPENING OF THE MOUTH"**

Some readers might wonder whether the theurgic ritual of animation that I have described in this essay could have been adopted from the Egyptian "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony for statues, which we hear about in sources as early as the Fourth Dynasty. Here I will summarize my reasons for minimizing its significance as a model for the theurgic practice.<sup>31</sup>

Although our ancient Egyptian sources on the topic are copious and detailed, we read nothing in them about special techniques for creating the statues that are to be animated, or about special substances out of which the statues must be made in order to receive and hold the god. The emphasis in the Egyptian rite as we know it, rather, is on the priest's touching of the statue's mouth (and sometimes its other orifices) with tools that were specially designed for "cutting" them, and on the priest pronouncing special phrases. At times, the priest presented himself as

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31 On the Egyptian ritual, see Moyer and Dieleman 2003 and Dieleman 2005.170–83 (which suggest that terminology of the Egyptian ritual was borrowed by practitioners of the magical papyri), Meeks and Meeks 1996.125–26, Roth 1992, Roth 1993, and Otto 1960.

substituting for a creator god such as Ptah or Sokar. These words and actions literally “opened” the statues’ orifices so that the gods might enter and, once inside, receive offerings brought to them. There is no indication that the gods were expected to speak out from their statues or animate them in ways perceptible to human observers; nor is there any indication that the presence of a god in a statue immediately benefited the worshipper. Rather, the logic seems to have been that, given that the god could receive the worshipper’s gifts only when the orifices of the statue had been opened, it was in the worshipper’s interest to ensure that this was done.

We are, in other words, a long way from the rituals we saw in the theurgic sources, where animated statues were constructed out of carefully selected materials, and where the presence of the god in the statue was expected not only to manifest itself to the worshipper but also to immediately and directly benefit him. Although the multi-cultural environment of the late antique Mediterranean world (particularly multi-cultural with respect to its religious *milieux* and even more so with respect to *milieux* that we might broadly call “magical” or “esoteric”) makes it likely that the theurgists were aware of the Egyptian statue ceremonies, the theurgists’ specific means of animating statues were firmly anchored in their Platonic metaphysics. Association with the old Egyptian ritual undoubtedly would have added glamour to the newer theurgic ritual, but it is notable that with the exception of the Hermetic *Asclepius*, none of our ancient discussions of telestic animation rituals connect them with the Egyptians. (Iamblichus follows a conceit of his time by writing *Concerning the Mysteries* under the name of an Egyptian priest, Abammon, and offers his own interpretation of Egyptian theology in Books 7 and 8, but as Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell discuss [2003.xxvi–xlvi], the treatise draws predominantly on Greek philosophy and religious traditions. At no time do Iamblichus’s discussions of matters relevant to statue animation, such as I have analyzed in this paper, reveal even a purported Egyptian background.)

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