A STUDY OF THE GREEK PRIESTESS

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INTRODUCTION

Writers upon the subject of religious antiquities have long recognized that, according to Greek custom, gods were usually served by priests while goddesses were attended by priestesses. The statement of Fairbanks is as complete as any: "The choice of a priest must conform to conditions which differed with each shrine. Ordinarily the gods were served by men and the goddesses by women, but the opposite was not rare, as at Tegea where a boy was priest of Athena, and at Thespiae where the priestess of Heracles was a young woman."[1] Schömann's words are to the same effect: "Einige Priesterthümer wurden von Männern, andere von Frauen bekleidet, und bei manchen Tempeln gab es Priester und Priesterinnen neben einander. Ohne Zweifel beruhten die Bestimmungen hierüber auf bestimmten Gründen, die wir aber nachzuweisen nicht im Stande sind. Wenn sich auch annehmen lässt, dass in der Regel das Priesterthum der männlichen Gottheiten von Männern, das der weiblichen von Weibern bekleidet worden sei, so litt doch diese Regel manche Ausnahme."[2] Stengel says the same: "In vielen Heiligtümern bekleidete eine Frau das Priesterthum, an andern gab es Priester und Priesterinnen neben einander. Nicht selten wurde das Priesterthum eines Gottes von einer Frau und umgekehrt einer Göttin von einem Mann verwaltet."[3] Adrian, in a treatise upon Greek priestesses, barely touches upon the point.[4]

Farnell has several times considered the subject. In discussing the impress which the matriarchal system left upon ancient religion, he briefly touches upon the priestesses of male and female divinities,[5] and also upon the male ministrants of female divinities,[6] illustrating each case by a few examples. He then says: "But in the Greek and Roman religions, the rule generally held, though with many exceptions, that the god desired the priest, the goddess the priestess."[7] Elsewhere he has

[1] *Handbook of Greek Religion*, p. 78.

[2] Schömann-Lipsius, *Griech. Alterth.*[4], II, p. 440.

[3] *Griech. Kultusalt.*, p. 34, § 18.

[4] *Die Priesterinnen der Griechen.*

[5] "Sociological Hypotheses concerning the Position of Women in Ancient Religion," *Archiv f. Religionswiss.*, VII (1904), pp. 73–74.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

frequently made the same generalization.[1] Farnell has also suggested in a cursory way some possible explanations of the exceptions to the rule.[2]

The purpose of this treatise is to consider more fully the custom of having resemblance in sex between divinity and priesthood, and to show by detailed evidence to what extent such a custom prevailed among the Greeks and upon what underlying principles it was based.

[1] *Cults of the Greek States*, I, p. 320: "As a rule, the Greek goddess was served by priestesses and worshipped with the sacrifice of female victims; but in the ritual of Athena, as of Aphrodite, we find not infrequently the male victim and the priest." *Ibid.*, IV, p. 33 (speaking of the priestess of Poseidon at Thebes): "Certainly this is a singular exception to the usual rule of Greek ritual that a male deity should be served by a male ministrant." Cf. *ibid.*, IV, p. 223.

[2] *Archiv f. Religionswiss.*, VII (1904), p. 81.