Anonymity and Polarity: Unknown Gods and Nameless Altars at the Areopagos

ALBERT HENRICHHS

In the course of the past twenty-five years, his own scholarly inclinations and the chance discoveries of new texts have induced Miroslav Marcovich time and again to revisit the study of Mediterranean religions. On more than one occasion, he has crossed the line that separates and, in some ways, links pagan belief with Christianity. Nearly a decade ago, he produced a new edition of the *Elenchos* attributed to the schismatic Roman bishop Hippolytos. Although a "reckless plagiarist" himself, Hippolytos attacked Christian heretics and Gnostic sectarians alike and accused them of plagiarizing Greek philosophers and Greek religious writings. In Book 6, Hippolytos cites a mysterious Pythagorean dictum: "If you go abroad from your native land, do not look back. Otherwise the Erinyes, the instruments of Justice, will pursue you." The role assigned here to the Erinyes, that of Δίκης ἐπίκουροι, unmistakably recalls a fragment of Herakleitos long known from Plutarch, although a more complete and authentic version of it is now preserved in the Derveni papyrus. This latter text associates the Erinyes, as well as the Eumenides, with the souls of the deceased. But, in his commentary on the saying ascribed to Pythagoras, Hippolytos departs

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1 For a collection of fifteen related papers, see M. Marcovich, *Studies in Graeco-Roman Religions and Gnosticism*, Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 4 (Leiden 1988). He comments in the preface: "Each study concentrates on a religious key-text, trying to interpret it, to discover its sources, and to assess its value." In this paper, I have tried to observe this principle.


3 Hipp. Ref. 6. 26. 1 "ἐκ τῆς ἰδιᾶς ἐὰν ἀποδημήτας, μὴ ἐπιστρέφον· εἰ δὲ μὴ, Ἐρινύες Δίκης ἐπίκουροι σε μετελεύσονται," ἰδίην καλῷν τὸ σώμα, Ἐρινυάς δὲ τὰ πάθη. As Marcovich notes, the closest parallel is Iambli. *Protr.* 21 (pp. 107.14 f. and 114.29–15.1 Pistelli) ἀποδημών τῆς οἰκείας μὴ ἐπιστρέφον· Ἐρινυάς γὰρ μετέρχονται.

4 Herakleitos fr. 94 Diels–Kranz = 52 Marcovich, on the path of the sun: "Ἡλίος γὰρ ὑψὸς ὕπερβησεται μέτρα· εἰ δὲ μὴ, Ἐρινύες μιν Δίκης ἐπίκουροι ἐξευρήσονταιν. The Derveni papyrus offers a superior version of this fragment, making it a continuous text with fr. 3 Diels–Kranz = 57 Marcovich. Cf. K. Tsantsanoglou and G. M. Parässoglou, "Heraclitus in the Derveni Papyrus," in *Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini* III (Florence 1988) 125–33.

5 On this association, see below, at note 144.
not only from Herakleitos but also from the mainstream of Greek tradition when he allegorizes the native land as the body (σώμα) and the Erinyes as the passions (πάθη).

Nothing could be further from the Greek understanding of the Erinyes. As we shall see, Erinyes ("Angry Ones") and Eumenides ("Kindly Ones") are the two names for the polar identities of the same group of powerful divinities who dwell beneath the earth. These names express these goddesses' opposite, yet mutually reinforcing, aspects—one sinister, the other benign. In the prevailing Greek view, the subterranean world was not only the common destination for all departed souls, regardless of their moral conduct on earth, but was also the realm of powerful chthonian deities who were invoked by a variety of regional names and who had the dual power to bless and to curse the living. Other forms of Greek religion recognized an afterlife that assigned separate destinations to the body and to the soul, or different fates to the pious and to the wicked.

None of the pagan beliefs corresponds to the hell, or to the devil, embraced by Christian belief. Derived from Jewish and Iranian tradition, the Christian underworld is a place of punishment, inhabited by sinners and ruled by the Prince of Darkness—the embodiment of evil. Apart from their mutual association with the depths of the earth, the Greek Erinyes and the Christian devil share nothing in common. And since the Erinyes ultimately serve the cause of justice, despite their methods they must be viewed as essentially different from, even morally superior to, the Christian devil. But the ancients appear to have felt that the Erinyes' menacing aspects, chiefly their gruesome appearance and their power to do harm, rendered the goddesses virtually unmentionable under certain circumstances. This being the case, the Erinyes would be best addressed by euphemisms intended to appease their collective appetite for the dark side of justice—revenge. Commencing with St. Paul's Areopagos speech, and proceeding from Athenian altars dedicated to "unknown gods" and from the "nameless...

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6 As far as I can see, this moralizing interpretation of the Erinyes, which treats them as human passions (above, note 3), is unparalleled elsewhere. The Platonizing context in which it appears suggests that Hippolytus followed a middle-Platonic or Gnosticizing source. Unlike Hippolytus, Iamblichus in his interpretation of the same Pythagorean "symbol" (see note 3) allegorizes the Erinyes not as passions, but as the "change of mind" (μετάνοια) associated with the soul's progression from the material world to the metaphysical realm.


goddesses” as a designation for the Athenian Semnai Theai, I propose to explore some of the apparatus—linguistic, ritual, and conceptual—through which the Greeks tried to address and to manage the anxiety associated with the divinities of the underworld and with the powerful presence of the dead.

I. Anonymity: Unknown Gods, Nameless Altars, and Nameless Goddesses

Many places in the Mediterranean world witnessed exchanges of opinion or encounters of one sort or another between the first missionaries of the new Christian religion and the established representatives of the traditional pagan cults. But no single place would have been as famous as Athens, the cultural capital of the Greek-speaking world; no meeting of the minds would have been so significant as Paul’s alleged attempt to convert the Athenians, culminating in the celebrated speech ascribed to him in Acts (17. 22–31). Supposedly delivered “in the middle of the Areios Pagos,” the speech was cast in a bronze plaque erected at the site in 1938. While we need not doubt the historicity of Paul’s Athenian visit, which can be tentatively dated to the spring or summer of 50 B.C.E., the speech as we have it was composed by the author of Acts—Luke—who had no recourse to Paul’s actual words. Luke’s account accurately captures some of the cultural features of Roman Athens—the city is described as being “full of idols” (κατειδρωλος) and frequented by philosophers—but it also creates certain ambiguities, which have given rise to complex questions concerning the location as well as the circumstances of Paul’s speech. In particular, what does Luke mean when he says that the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers “took hold of him [Paul] and led him to the Areios Pagos”


11 On the Areopagos as a pagan and Christian cult site, see E. Vanderpool, “The Apostle Paul in Athens,” Archaeology 3 (1950) 34–37. For more detailed studies of its topography, see below, note 58.


(Acts 17. 19)?

Does he imply that Paul was hauled before the Areopagos Council to defend his "new teaching" (Acts 17. 19 κανὴ δίδαξη), perhaps in the course of a formal trial? And if so, did the Council meet on the hillside of the Areios Pagos on this occasion or, as generations of commentators have suggested on extremely slender evidence, in the Stoa Basileios? Or does Luke use the term Areios Pagos in an exclusively local sense—but not without an awareness of its religious connotations—to conjure an august setting for Paul’s missionary speech? Happily we avoid these problems here. Nor shall we ponder the unorthodox, Hellenizing message attributed to Paul—that of humanity’s natural knowledge of, and kinship with, God—which has no parallel in the Pauline corpus and which comes perilously close to neglecting the Christian doctrine of salvation.

The two details that are relevant to our present purposes are less controversial, concerning, as they do, the locale of the speech as well as its immediate point of departure, which Luke reports as follows:

Standing in the middle of the Areios Pagos, Paul said: "Men of Athens, I can see that you are very religious in every way. For as I was touring the city and visiting your places of worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ That which you worship without knowing, this I proclaim to you."


15 A number of Christian Apologists and Church Fathers from Justin Martyr to Augustine came to the conclusion that Paul was tried before the Areopagos Council because certain Athenian philosophers had accused him of introducing "new gods" (Acts 17. 18), a theory supported by Barnes (previous note). On the authority the Areopagos had in religious matters, see R. W. Wallace, The Areopagos Council, to 307 B.C. (Baltimore and London 1989) 106–12 and 204 f., with 272 n. 88 on Acts 17. 16–21.

16 On this controversy, see Dibelius (above, note 10) 62–64, who emphasizes rightly that the Lukian narrative implies a change of scenery from the agora (Acts 17. 17) to the Areios Pagos (17. 19). Cf. C. J. Hemer, "Paul at Athens," New Testament Studies 20 (1974) 341–50 ("Paul made his defence to a court meeting in or before a colonnade of the Agora," 349) versus Barnes (above, note 14) 407–11 ("Paul was taken before the Areopagus, i.e. before the council sitting on the hill," 410). I have no doubt that Luke is referring to the Hill of Ares, and probably also to the Council of the Areopagos convening on that hill; but I do not believe that Paul stood trial for impiety before the Areopagos.

17 Dibelius (above, note 10) 73; Conzelmann (above, note 14) 219 f.


19 Acts 17. 22–23 σταθεὶς δι' Παύλου ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ Ἀρείου Πάγου ἔφη· ἄνδρες Αθηναίοι, κατὰ πάντα ὡς δεισιδαιμονεστέρους ὑμᾶς θεωρῶν· διερχόμενος γὰρ καὶ ἀναθεωρῶν
The "unknown god" of the Athenians, who epitomizes their piety and whose altar inspires Paul’s message, is hardly less remote today than he was in antiquity.20 He received close scrutiny in 1913, when the German classicist Eduard Norden named one of his best-known books after him, Agnostos Theos.21 Norden’s book is mainly concerned with forms of religious discourse in pagan, Jewish, and Christian traditions—a perspective that proved seminal in the development of New Testament form criticism. The idea of a Greek god whose name was unknown and whose true nature was beyond the reach of human comprehension posed a considerable challenge to the curiosity of scholars during the early decades of this century, when the origins of Gnosticism and the very concept of γνώσις, or secret religious knowledge, received more attention than ever before. Given this intellectual climate, it is not surprising that Norden would devote a whole chapter of his book to the enigma of the unknown god and his altar and to the concept of "knowing god" (γιγνώσκειν θεόν and γνώσις θεοῦ). Norden concludes that the dedication to the unknown god (in the singular) reveals the hand of a monotheistic redactor, perhaps Luke himself, and that the original pagan altar, provided it really existed, must have been dedicated "to (the) unknown gods" (άγνώστους θεοὺς). 22

As Norden pointed out, the actual existence of such altars, each dedicated to a plurality of unknown gods, is confirmed by Pausanias, the ancient traveler and expert on Greek sanctuaries.23 Touring Greece around the middle of the second century C.E., Pausanias saw “an altar of unknown gods” next to the great altar of Olympic Zeus in Olympia (5. 14. 8 πρὸς αὐτῷ δὲ ἐστὶν ἀγνώστων θεῶν βωμός). Pausanias is referring
unambiguously to a single altar dedicated to a number of unknown gods. In his description of Phaleron, one of several harbors that provided Athens with access to the sea, he mentions “altars of so-called unknown gods, of heroes, of the children of Theseus, and of Phaleros” (1. 1. 4 βωμοι δὲ θεῶν τε ὀνομαζομένων ἄγνωστων καὶ ἥρωων καὶ παιδών τών θησεώς καὶ Φαλέρου). There can be little doubt that Pausanias saw four different altars at Phaleron, one of which had been dedicated to the unknown gods. James G. Frazer surely exaggerates the ambiguity of the Greek when he comments: “It is impossible from Pausanias’s expression to determine whether there was one altar or several altars of Unknown Gods at Phaleron; and, supposing there were several, we cannot tell whether each altar was dedicated to the Unknown God (in the singular) or to Unknown Gods (in the plural).” Unable to escape the spell of Acts 17. 23 and of the single altar dedicated to “the unknown god” (to which he refers), Frazer was prepared to ascribe this unlikely worship of a single unknown god to the Athenian contemporaries of Pausanias.

An inconspicuous piece of information, overlooked by Frazer as well as by Norden, confirms that a plurality of unknown gods was indeed worshiped at Phaleron. According to an entry in the lexicon of Hesychios (ca. 6th century C.E.), a group of Argive heroes tried to land at Phaleron upon their return from the Trojan War. The heroes were killed by the Athenians and, once buried in Attic soil, received cultic honors as “unknown gods” (ἀγνώτες θεοί). Although the entry in Hesychios is heavily abbreviated and breaks off in mid-sentence, it is the only version of

24 On Phaleros, Theseus, and the other heroes worshiped at Phaleron, see E. Kearns, The Heroes of Attica, BICS Suppl. 57 (London 1989) 38–41, who does not discuss the unknown gods.

25 C. Robert, Hermes 20 (1885) 356 reduced the number of these altars to three—two dedicated to the unknown gods, another to “the heroes and youths who accompanied Theseus” (Robert read καὶ ἥρωων καὶ παιδών τῶν μετὸς θησεώς, which he took as a single phrase), and the third to Phaleros, the local eponym. But as U. Kron, Die zehn attischen Phylenheroen: Geschichte, Mythos, Kult und Darstellungen, MDAI(A) Beihft 5 (Berlin 1976) 145 n. 666 and Kearns (previous note) 40 point out, the text of Pausanias is correct as it stands.

26 J. G. Frazer, Pausanias’s Description of Greece (London 1898) II 33. Weinreich (above, note 10) 28 = 276 replied that the proper designation for altars dedicated to the unknown god (in the singular) would have been βωμοὶ ἄγνωστου θεοῦ.

27 The arguments that have been adduced in favor of an Athenian altar dedicated to an unknown god—in the singular—are unconvincing. (1) Ps.-Lucian, Philopatris refers twice to “the unknown (god) in Athens” (9 ἡ τοῦ ἄγνωστου τῶν ἐν Ἀθηναῖς, 29 τῶν ἐν Ἀθηναίς ἄγνωστον ἑφευρόντος καὶ προσκυνήσαντες). Like Luke’s ἄγνωστος θεὸς, however, this unknown god, too, is a literary construct and does not qualify as evidence of actual cult. (2) The Jewish god was anonymous (cf. Bickerman [above, note 20] 279 f.) as well as ἄγνωστος (Jos. Ap. 2. 167). Therefore the altar in question may have been a private altar dedicated by a Judaizing gentile to the Jewish god, a possibility discussed by van der Horst (above, note 20) 35–38. It is extremely unlikely, however, that the Paul of Acts would have ascribed worship of the Jewish god to the Athenians.

28 Hesych. s. 682 Latte ἄγνωτες θεοί· οὕτω λέγεσθαι φασι τοὺς μετὰ τῶν τῆς Ἰλίου πλοίων Φαλέρου προσχύντας καὶ ἀναμεθέντας ὑπὸ Δημοφώντος, ταφῆναι (lacuna). The longer versions preserved in the Atticist lexica of Pollux and Pausanias (below, notes 30 and 32) suggest that Hesychios’ entry, too, derives from an Atticist source.
this myth that records the full cult name of the Argive heroes, viz. ἀγνώτες θεοί, who must be the same as the θεοὶ ἀγνωστοὶ attested at Phaleron by Pausanias in the passage discussed earlier.  29

The Atticist lexicographer Pollux (2nd century B.C.E.) offers a more complete version of the same myth and connects it aetiologically with the foundation of the Athenian homicide court at the Palladion.  30 In the Atticist tradition represented by Pollux, the Palladion myth attempts to explain two seemingly unrelated institutions at once—the cult of the unknown gods at Phaleron and the jurisdiction of the Palladion court, which treated cases of unintentional homicide and of Athenian citizens killing non-Athenians.  31

This tour de force is accomplished with the help of a tedious wordplay on "not knowing" and "unknown." As Pollux has it, the Argives "were killed by the locals in ignorance (ἀγνώτες δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν ἐγχωρίων ἀναμνησθέντως) and (their corpses) were cast out (unburied)." After the intervention of the Delphic oracle, "they were buried and given the name 'Unknown Ones' (ἀγνώτες προσηγορεύθησαν)." Closely related versions can be found in two monuments of Byzantine erudition, the Suda and the Homeric commentary of Eustathios.  32 All three versions reproduce information that derives ultimately from the Attidographer Phanodemos (4th century B.C.E.).  33 It is difficult to tell whether Phanodemos was more concerned with the origins of the Palladion court or with the name of the ἀγνώτες θεοί at Phaleron. Apparently he explained both. If so, a cult of "unknown gods"—in the plural—presumably with an altar dedicated to them, existed at Phaleron as early as the 4th century B.C.E.

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29 In his discussion of the Palladion myth, Norden (above, note 21) 55 n. 1 failed to consider Hesychios. Not realizing that Hesychios refers to the dead Argives as ἀγνώτες θεοί, Norden concluded that they were worshiped as unknown heroes rather than unknown gods and rejected this entire tradition as irrelevant to the Athenian cult of the ἀγνωστοί θεοί.


32 Suda ε 2505 Adler = Eust. Od. 1. 321 ff., p. 1419.53 ff. Stallbaum. The two versions are virtually identical and share a common source, the lost Atticist lexicon of Pausanias (2nd century C.E.), whom Eustathios identifies by name (Pausanias fr. 53 in H. Erbse, Untersuchungen zu den attitischen Lexika, Abh. Berlin, Phil.-hist. Kl. 1949.2 [Berlin 1950] 179). Pausanias in turn used Phanodemos (next note). In the versions of Suda and Eustathios, the aitia concerning the unknown gods is abbreviated beyond recognition: "The Argives ... were killed by the Athenians, who failed to recognize them (ὑπὸ Ἀθηναίων ἀγνωστοίν ἀνημέρισαν)." Even though the ἀγνώτες θεοί are not explicitly mentioned, the use of ἀγνωστοί suggests strongly that they also occurred in Phanodemos' version.

33 Phanodemos' Athis is lost. His version of the Palladion myth can be partially reconstructed from Eustathios and the Suda (previous note), the only source that cites Phanodemos by name (FGrHist 325 F 16). F. Jacoby, Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker IIIb (Supplement): A Commentary on the Ancient Historians of Athens (Nos. 323a–334). Volume I: Text (Leiden 1954) 79–81 comments on Phanodemos F 16 in connection with Kleidemos' version of the same myth (FGrHist 323 F 20).
A Pergamene inscription, discovered in 1909, confirms that the worship of unknown gods—again in the plural—was especially popular in the 2nd century C.E., even though it appears much older in origin. One of numerous altars found in the precinct of Demeter at Pergamon and dating from the second half of the 2nd century C.E. bears a fragmentary dedication that has been convincingly restored to read “to the unknown gods” (Θεοίς ἄγνωστοις). As in the case of Pausanias’ ἄγνωστων θεῶν βωμός at Olympia, this is a clear reference to a single altar dedicated to a plurality of unknown gods in one of the major cult centers of the Greek-speaking world. In the later 2nd century C.E., speculation on the incomprehensibility and ineffability of the divine was growing and renewed efforts were being made to reach and placate “all gods” (πάντες θεοί), especially those divinities who lacked conventional names.

More germane to the genre of Acts than Pausanias or the inscription from Pergamon, and equally elusive as evidence for actual altars, is an episode in Philostratos’ fictional Life of Apollonius of Tyana, the itinerant Neopythagorean sage and charismatic figure whose travels led him to Mesopotamia and India during the reigns of Nero and the Flavian emperors. While on a visit to “the confines of Ethiopia and Egypt” Apollonios remarks upon the appropriateness of “speaking well of all the gods” (περὶ πάντων θεῶν ἐδέλεγε) and praises Athens in particular as a place “where altars are erected in honor even of unknown divinities” (οὗ καὶ ἄγνωστων δαιμόνων βωμοὶ ἀδρανταῖ). Philostratos thus agrees with Pausanias that one or several altars dedicated to unknown gods—yet again in the plural—actually existed at Athens. But unlike Pausanias, who describes the Athens of his own time, Philostratos implies, as does Luke, that altars of this type already

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34 Shortly after its erection, however, the altar was rededicated to the winds personified ("Ἄνεμοι"). See H. Hepding, MDAI(A) 35 (1910) 454–57; Weinreich (above, note 10) 29–33 = 277–80, who defended Hepding’s supplement with compelling arguments against the skepticism of Norden (above, note 21) 56 n. 1; E. Ohlemutz, Die Kulte und Heiligtümer der Götter in Pergamon (Würzburg 1940; repr. Darmstadt 1968) 219 and 280; M. P. Nilsson, Geschichte der griechischen Religion. Zweiter Band: Die hellenistische und römische Zeit, 2nd ed. (Munich 1961) 355; F. R. Adrados (ed.), Diccionario griego-espánol I (Madrid 1980) 30, s.v. ἄγνωστος 1.1; van der Horst (above, note 20) 25 f.


36 Philos. 4 6. 3. Philostratos’ reference to a plurality of altars, βωμοί, of unknown gods has been rejected as a rhetorical exaggeration (Weinreich [above, note 10] 28 f. = 276), but ultimately there is no way of telling whether two or more such altars ever existed in Athens simultaneously (above, notes 25–26). Tertullian, too, refers to (an) Athenian altar(s) inscribed “to the unknown gods” (Ad nat. 2. 9. 4 nam et Athenis ara est inscripta “ignoti deis”; cf. Adv. Marc. 1. 9. 2 invenio plane ignotis deis aras prostitutas, sed Atica idololatria est). It is noteworthy that Tertullian speaks of a plurality of unknown gods (ignoti dei), but it is impossible to tell whether he is merely offering a polytheistic reinterpretation of Acts 17. 23 or whether he had access to independent information like Pausanias and Philostratos.
existed in the city of Athens or in the rural demes of Attica, or both, around 50 C.E. 37

A group of similarly elusive altars in Athens are the so-called “nameless altars” (ἀνώνυμοι βωμοί). Like the altars of unknown gods, the anonymous altars did not survive and are known to us by literary attestation alone. The story of their foundation is recorded by Diogenes Laertios in connection with Epimenides, a legendary seer from Crete whose expertise was ritual purification. 38 This story takes place in the same location as Paul’s speech, namely the Areopagos. When Athens was visited by a plague, Epimenides is said to have put an end to it by purifying the city in the following way. He turned a number of sheep loose on the Areopagos and gave orders that these sheep be followed. Wherever any one of them happened to lie down, that animal was to be sacrificed “to the appropriate god” (θύεν τῷ προσήκοντι θεῷ). The ritual remedy was successful and the plague was driven off. “Whence,” adds Diogenes, “you may find to this day nameless altars (βωμοί ἀνώνυμοι) throughout the demes of the Athenians, a memorial of the expiation which was then accomplished.” 39 The phrasing, especially the keyword “whence,” shows that the story was aetiological, designed to explain the existence of “anonymous altars” not only at the Areopagos but even more so in various parts of Athens or Attica. 40 Unfortunately, none of these altars has come to light so far, nor are they referred to by any author other than Diogenes, whose source remains unknown.

Norden insisted, rightly, that the Athenian altars for the unknown gods must be differentiated from the anonymous altars. 41 He also assumed that the latter were termed “nameless” because they did not have the name of any deity inscribed on them. But what would have been the point of drawing attention to the fact that these altars lacked inscriptions? As a

37 Norden (above, note 21) 41-55 speculated that Philostratos and the author of Acts depended for their Athenian altar(s) to the unknown god(s) on an identical source, viz. an authentic report of Apollonios’ visit to Athens and of the sermon he gave there—which, according to Norden, was similar to Paul’s—concerning the worship of unknown gods. Norden’s hypothetical source is too good to be true (cf. Haenchen [above, note 10] 461 n. 5), but it illustrates the problems we encounter when the apparatus of actual cult is transposed into the world of fiction.


39 D.L. 1. 110 ὅθεν ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἐστίν εὑρέθη κατὰ τούς δήμους τῶν Ἀθηναίων βωμοὺς ἀνώνυμους, ὑπὸμνημα τῆς τότε γενομένης ἐξέλθεσε. The translation is by Frazer (above, note 26) II 34.

40 On “the syntax of aetiology” and its features, including the aetiological use of ὅθεν and (ἔτι) καὶ νῦν, see H. Pelliccia, HSCP 92 (1989) 71-101.

41 Norden (above, note 21) 57 n. 1. Norden implicitly rejects the view of Frazer (above, note 26) II 33 f. and J. Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion, 3rd ed. (Cambridge 1922) 241, who regarded the two categories of altars as identical, even though they are attested for different periods and dedicated to different groups of divinities.
general rule, Greek altars were dedicated to the worship of one or more particular deities whose identity, or identities, would have been known to worshipers regardless of whether the altar bore any inscription. Furthermore, uninscribed altars were commonly found throughout the Greek world.42 It seems infinitely more likely, therefore, that these “nameless” altars would have been explicitly dedicated to nameless divinities, male or female (θεοί or θεαι ἄνωνυμοι), whose distinctive epithet—ἄνωνυμοι—was transferred to their altars.43

These “anonymous altars,” named after anonymous divinities, were by no means the only altars in classical Athens whose official designation recalled a characteristic feature, if not an epithet, of the deities to whom they were dedicated. A similar nomenclature applied to altars dedicated to gods or goddesses who received “sober” or nameless libations (νηπόθλημα, sc. ἱερό). In Attica alone, “nameless” (ἄνωνυμοι) gods included Zeus Hypatos, Helios, Selene, Eos, Mnemosyne, the Muses, the Nymphs, and the Eumenides.44 Worshiped in Athens under the cult name of Semnai Theai (“Revered Goddesses”),45 their altars were officially known as “sober

42 Cf. C. G. Yavis, Greek Altars: Origins and Typology (St. Louis 1949).


45 Attic prose authors and inscriptions invariably refer to them as Semnai Theai, never as Semnai, a point made emphatically (if for questionable reasons) by Harrison (above, note 41) 239 f.; cf. A. H. Sommerstein, Aeschylus. Eumenides (Cambridge 1989) 10 n. 36 and 284, on Eum. 1041 f. The most recent find is an Athenian roof tile stamped with the phrase "property of the Semnai Theai" (below, at note 108). In tragedy, the predicative adjective σεμνός is occasionally used as a veiled reference to the goddesses and their cult (Aisch. Eum. 383, Eur. El. 1272 and Or. 410 [below, note 120], Soph. OK 41, 100). “Semnai” alone is merely modern shorthand that obscures the explicit divinity of the Revered Goddesses (as in R. Seaford, Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State [Oxford 1994] 94 f., who renders “Semnai” as “Solemn females” and treats them as synonymous with the Furies [see below, notes 48, 50, and 119]). So far I have not come across the simple designation “Semnai,” as opposed to the usual “Semnai Theai,” in any Greek author. A. L. Brown, "Eumenides in Greek Tragedy," CQ 34 (1984) 260–81, at 262 n. 16 cites Diog. Laert. 1. 112 to support his claim that “the ellipse of the noun does occur in Greek”; actually Diogenes Laertios speaks of the Athenian ἱερόν τῶν Σεμνῶν θεῶν.
altars” (νησάλιοι βωμοί), and were thus named for the ritual anomaly that characterized these deities and their cult.\(^{46}\)

The designation “anonymous altars” can thus be understood on the analogy of “sober altars.” Whereas the latter were dedicated to gods who were “wineless” because the use of wine was prohibited in their worship, the former were named after gods who were anonymous because their names were considered “unspeakable” and enshrouded by ritual taboo.\(^{47}\) As far as we know, only one group of gods in Athens was called “anonymous,” namely the divine consortium of the Erinyes/Semnai Theai on the Areopagos, who appear as “nameless goddesses” (θεαὶ ἄνωνυμοι) in two plays by Euripides. In the Iphigenia among the Taurians, probably performed in 414 or 413 B.C.E., Orestes recalls the matricide, his pursuit by the Erinyes, and his eventual trial and acquittal before the Athenian homicide court on the Areopagos. As he relates them, these proceedings correspond intertextually to the trial scene in Aischylus’ Eumenides, in which the Erinyes act as Orestes’ opponents while Apollo and Athena come to his defense. Describing the events, the Euripidean Orestes refers to the Erinyes of his erstwhile Areopagos trial as “anonymous goddesses” (IT 944 δικνὴν παρασχεῖν ταῖς ἄνωνυμοις θεαῖς).\(^{48}\) A papyrus fragment of Euripides’ Melanippe Captive contains a catalog of cults in which women played prominent roles. Reference is made to the oracles of Delphi and Dodona—both of which employed inspired women as mouthpieces of divine will—and to “the holy rites performed for the Moirai and the nameless goddesses” (ἐὰν ἥριτο στὶς Μοῖρας τὰς τ’ ἄνωνυμοις θεαῖς / ἱερὰ τελεῖται).\(^{49}\) Although Euripides does not identify them explicitly, these goddesses cannot be the same as the Erinyes.

While the nameless goddesses had rituals performed in their honor (ἱερὰ τελεῖται), the Erinyes are among the few deities who received no

\(^{46}\) Νησάλιοι βωμοί are attested in Hesych. ν 545 Latte and in IG II² 4962.27–32 (Athens, 4th century B.C.E.) = L. Ziehen, Leges Graecorum sacrae et titulis collectae. Pars II: Leges Graeciae et insularum (Leipzig 1906) 70 ff., no. 18 = L. Sokolowski, Lois sacrées des cités grecques (Paris 1969) 50 ff., no 21. Ziehen 76 took νησάλιοι τρεῖς βωμοί in IG II² 4962 figuratively as referring to three wineless libations rather than to wineless altars; Stengel (above, note 44) Kultusalltämer 104 n. 7 and Opferbräuche 181 followed suit. Both scholars overlooked the explanation in Hesychios, which is unambiguous: “altars on which no wine libations are poured” (βωμοί ἐφ’ ἂν νόος οὐ σπένδεται). Cf. Henrichs (above, note 44) “Sobriety” 91 f. and “Eumenides” 258 n. 11.

\(^{47}\) Cf. E. Rohde, Kleine Schriften (Tübingen and Leipzig 1901) II 243 f.; Henrichs (above, note 7) 163, 176–78; Lloyd-Jones (above, note 7) 207, 209. The “anonymity” of the chthonian divinities is, of course, a cautionary construct. Since downright avoidance of their names was impracticable, euphemistic names often served as substitutes for appellations that addressed their “dark” side.

\(^{48}\) At IT 941, 963, and 970, they are called Erinyes. Cf. Henrichs (above, note 7) 169–79. In the Orestes, Euripides refers to the Erinyes as Eumenides and Semnai Theai; see below, at note 120.

cult anywhere in Greece. The cult of Demeter Erinys in Arcadia and that of the Erinys of Laios and Oidipous at Sparta and on Thera are clearly special cases in which the Erinys piggyback on ordinary recipients of divine cult or hero cult. When experts of the caliber of Erwin Rohde and Carl Robert, or of the thoroughness of Ernst Wüst, represent the Erinys as recipients of cult, such scholars are in fact referring to the various local cults of the Eumenides and Semnai Theai. Although these names refer to opposite aspects of the same group of divinities, these goddesses were worshiped solely in their positive aspect and not in their negative one.

Euripides' anonymous cult-mates of the Moirai must have been the Semnai Theai/Eumenides, who were associated with the cult of the Moirai and who address them as "sisters by the same mother"—Night—in the Eumenides. By subsuming both the negative (Erinyes) and the positive (Eumenides) as well as the mythical and the cultic articulations of the Semnai Theai under the single value-neutral appellation of "anonymous goddesses," Euripides exploited the fact that they lacked a proper name. At the same time, he also paved the way for a more drastic innovation. As we shall see, Euripides was the first tragedian who fully assimilated the Erinys with the Eumenides and used the two name-epithets interchangeably.

The two Euripidean passages provide a possible link between the Semnai Theai of the Areopagos, here addressed as "nameless goddesses," on the one hand and the "nameless altars" allegedly founded by Epimenides on the other hand. It can hardly be fortuitous that the same Diogenes Laertios who connects Epimenides with the story of the "nameless altars"—

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50 The important point—which is too often ignored—that the Erinys qua Erinys, and as distinct from the Eumenides/Semnai Theai, were divinities without cult has been made by O. Gruppe, *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte* (Munich 1906) II 763; Harrison (above, note 41) 238 f.; U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (Berlin 1931–32) I 404–06; L. Robert, "Maledictions funérailles grecques," CRAI (1978) 241–89 = *Opera minora selecta* V (Amsterdam 1989) 676–745, at 247 f. = 703 f.; J. D. Mikelson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy* (Chapel Hill and London 1991) 13 f. and 214–17; and Sommerstein (above, note 45) 10, who adds: "It is a waste of effort and resources to offer prayer and sacrifice to beings who are by their nature implacable."


53 Cf. Wilamowitz (above, note 50) I 406; H. Petersmann, "Die Moiren in Aischylos' Eumeniden 956–967," *WS* 13 (1979) 37–51; Henrichs (above, note 7) 174 f. A joint cult of the Moirai and Eumenides, implied by *Eum.* 961 f. and the Eupireides fragment (above, note 49), is attested for Sikyon by Paus. 2. 11. 4 (quoted below, at note 69). For the related association of Erinys and Moirai, see *I. 19. 87; M. L. West on *Hes. Th.* 217; Epimenides 3 B 19 Diels–Kranz; Aisch. *Th.* 975 ff. = 986 ff., *Prom.* 516; Dodds (above, note 38) 7 f. The two groups are conflated in schol. vet. Aisch. Ag. 70: "[The phrase 'unburnt offerings' refers to] the sacrifices for the Moirai and Erinys, which were also called 'sober offerings' (νηφόλας cf. notes 44 and 46)." Whereas the Moirai and the Semnai Theai/Eumenides were recipients of cult, the Erinys were not, as I argue above.

54 Below, at note 120.
which has its beginnings on the Areopagos—also makes him the legendary founding father of the sanctuary of the Semnai Theai (τὸ ιερὸν τῶν σεμνῶν θεῶν) in the same location.⁵⁵ Yet it remains unclear whether the Semnai Theai or Nameless Goddesses of the Areopagos ever had any altars that were called “nameless.”⁵⁶ In any event, their own ritual namelessness cannot be doubted. Equally beyond doubt is the fact that their altars occupied a prominent place on their cult site at the Areopagos. It is to these two features of their worship, their cult location at the Areopagos and their nomenclature, that we shall now turn.

II. Areopagos and Semnai Theai

What we call “Greek religion” was a conglomerate of countless regional cults, each of which bore the unmistakable marks of its physical and cultural environment. The Athenian precinct of the Semnai Theai—their “underground abode”⁵⁷—was located near a cleft in the rocks on the northeast side of the Areopagos, towards the depression that separates that hill from the Akropolis.⁵⁸ To better understand the traditions surrounding this sacred site, we rely on Pausanias to guide us once again. In his brief description of the Areopagos, he refers to two aetiological myths that explain the name of the locality and its role in Athenian society.⁵⁹

The Areios Pagos, or “Hill of Ares,” bears the name of the defendant in the first murder trial recorded in Athenian mythology. In the distant mythical past, Halirrhothios, the son of Poseidon, had raped Ares’ daughter Alkippa. Ares killed the offender, was accused by Poseidon, and then was tried on a hill in Athens before the twelve gods. The god was acquitted and the hill acquired his name. Pausanias (1. 28. 5) adds, surely with Aischylos’ Eumenides in mind, that at some later time Orestes was tried in the same location for the murder of his own mother.⁶⁰

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⁵⁶ According to Harrison (above, note 41) 241, “such an altar [one of the nameless altars] may have become associated with the Semnai, who like many other underworld beings were Nameless Ones.” Kem (above, note 43) 125 f. reserves judgment.
⁵⁷ Sommerstein (above, note 45) 244, on Aisch. Eum. 805 ἐδρας τε καὶ κενθμόνας. The Semnai Theai ranked as θεοὶ ὕπαγοι (Paus. 1. 28. 6, quoted below, at note 65), and likewise the proper realm of the Erinyes was “underground” (ὑπὸ γαίαν, Ἰ. 19. 259, with the note of M. E. Edwards, The Iliad: A Commentary V [Cambridge 1991] 265 f.).
⁵⁸ On the topography of the Areopagos and the location of the precinct of the Semnai Theai, see Frazer (above, note 26) II 365, on Paus. 1. 28. 6 (quoted below, at note 65); Robert (above, note 51) I 38–43, with fig. 12; Vanderpool (above, note 11); Wallace (above, note 15) 215–18.
⁵⁹ Paus. 1. 21. 4 (the myth of Ares and Halirrhothios and the trial of Ares) and 1. 28. 5 (explanation of the name Areopagos; cross-reference to the earlier discussion of the trial of Ares; the homicide trial of Ares as a precedent for that of Orestes).
⁶⁰ The above summary of this myth is based on Pausanias (previous note) and Apollod. Bibl. 3. 14. 2. Additional sources include Eur. El. 1258–72 and IT 940–46, Hellenikos FGrHist 4 F 38 and 169 = 323a F 1 and 22, and Philochoros 328 F 3. Euripides, Hellenikos, and Pausanias refer to the trial of Ares as a precedent for the trial of Orestes, and so do Demosthenes (23. 66;
Historically, the Areopagos was the seat of the so-called Council of the Areopagos, which had been established in the archaic period to decide cases of deliberate homicide. Like its mythical ancestor in Aischylos' play, the real Areopagos court could not completely escape the dark shadow cast by the Erinyes. The judges convened on the three interlunar days at the end of each month, days considered impure and unlucky (ἀποφράδες), and apparently sacred to the Erinyes/Semnai Theai. If Lucian is right, the meetings took place, appropriately, at night. As a homicide court, the Areopagos had mythical connections with the Erinyes and cultic connections with the Semnai Theai. Some of these associations are dramatized in Aischylos' Eumenides.

The play reenacts Orestes' flight from the Erinyes, his trial and acquittal before the Areopagos court, and the foundation of the Athenian cult of the Semnai Theai. As long as Orestes is on stage, the dread goddesses appear in their most frightful aspect, as Erinyes (1–777). After Orestes exits, the polarity of the Erinyes/Eumenides is played out in the alternation of the curses and blessings they pronounce (778–1020). The curses of the Erinyes are more powerful versions of the imprecations called down upon themselves by both parties in homicide cases tried by the Areopagos. Their blessings may not correspond to any known step in the proceedings of the Areopagos court, but by expressing the hope that Athenians not kill one another in reciprocal bloodshed (976–87) the blessings of the Erinyes-turned-Eumenides do address the concerns of that court. It is in these blessings, and in the closing scene which follows, that the benevolent side of the dread goddesses finally prevails.

As Pausanias turns from the Areopagos proper to the cult site of the Semnai Theai, like most students of Greek cult he, too, shows more interest in the goddesses' benevolent aspect than in the terrible one they equally embody:

And near is a sanctuary of the goddesses whom the Athenians call Semnai, but Hesiod in the Theogony calls Erinyes (πλησίον δὲ ιερὸν θεῶν ἔστιν ἀς καλοῦσιν 'Αθηναίοι Σεμνάς, Ἡσίοδος δὲ 'Ερινύς ἐν Θεογονίαι).

see below, note 121) and Deinarchos 1. 87. On the two mythical trials and their aetiological function as foundation myths for the homicide court on the Areopagos, see Wallace (above, note 15) 9 f.

61 For connections between the Areopagos court and the Erinyes/Semnai Theai, see Rohde (above, note 43) 1 268 f. (Eng. trans. 178 f.), whose preoccupation with the vengeful souls of murder victims, however, darkens the picture even more than the evidence warrants.


63 Lucian, Dom. 18 and Herm. 64. Wallace (above, note 15) 122 doubts that the Areopagos ever met at night.

64 Below, at note 88.
Aischylos was the first to represent them with snakes in their hair, but in their images there is nothing frightful, nor in the other images of the underworld gods (θεών τῶν ὑπογαών) that are set up. There is a Plouton also and a Hermes and an image of Ge. And there those who have been acquitted in a suit before the Areopagos sacrifice (θύσωσι). And others besides sacrifice (θύσωσι), both foreigners and citizens, and within the enclosure there is the tomb of Oidipous.65

Pausanias is the only ancient author who comments on the Athenian precinct of the Semnai Theai. Brief though it is, his report touches upon many important aspects of their worship, such as their names, their iconography, the sacrifices they receive, and the close connection between the cult of the Semnai Theai and the homicide cases tried before the Areopagos court. Although the tomb of Oidipous is placed within the precinct of the Semnai Theai only by Pausanias and in the first century C.E. by Valerius Maximus (5. 3. 3), its situation there points to a close kinship between the wrathful Oidipous, who curses his sons, and the “angry” Erinyes, who are associated with oaths and curses.66 Furthermore, the tomb’s location highlights a more general affinity between the polar nature of the Erinyes/Eumenides and the dual power to bless and to curse invested in the cultic heroes. It will be helpful to discuss some of these matters before we examine the conceptual link between the Semnai Theai and the Erinyes, which lies at the heart of the modern discussion of this cluster of traditions.

Pausanias does not comment on the exact nature of the sacrifices for the Semnai Theai, but in another passage he quotes the following four hexameters from an oracle purportedly given by the Dodonian Zeus to the Athenians:

Beware of the Hill of Ares and the altars, rich in incense, / of the Eumenides (βωμοὺς τε θυώδετς Εὔμενίδων), where it is fated that the Lakedaimonians become your suppliants / when hard pressed by the spear. 
Do not slay them with steel / nor treat the suppliants wrongfully: for suppliants are holy and sacred.67

65 Paus. 1. 28. 6 f., trans. Harrison (above, note 41) 241 (adapted).
67 Paus. 7. 25. 1. Cf. H. W. Parke, The Oracles of Zeus: Dodona, Olympia, Ammon (Oxford and Cambridge, MA 1967) 131, who attempts to elucidate the background of this forgery (132–34). The oracle calls these goddesses by their Panhellenic name, Eumenides, whereas Pausanias identifies them more specifically as the Athenian Semnai Theai of the Areopagos (7. 25. 2).
According to Pausanias the oracle refers to the mythical past—"when Kodros the son of Melanthos was king of the Athenians"—and to "the altars of the so-called Semnai Theai," located between the Akropolis and the Areopagos, as a place of asylum for suppliants, a function familiar from other sources and shared by many other Greek sanctuaries. It confirms the existence of altars at the cult site, and thus lends a measure of support to our suggestion that the "nameless altars" would have been dedicated to the Semnai Theai. What is more, the oracle calls the Semnai Theai of the Areopagos not by their official name but by an alternate name, Eumenides or the "Kindly Ones." Under this name, the Revered Goddesses were worshiped in other parts of Greece, especially in the vicinity of Sikyon in the northeastern Peloponnese, as we learn from Pausanias:

If you cross the Asopos river to your left there is a grove of holm oak and a shrine of the goddesses called Venerable Ones (Semnai) by the Athenians, but Kindly Ones (Eumenides) by the Sikyonians. Each year they hold a one-day festival for them, slaughtering pregnant ewes, and making ritual use of a mixture of milk and honey, and of flowers instead of wreaths (μελίκράτωι δὲ σπονδὴν καὶ άνθεσιν άντι στεφάνων χρήσθαι νομίζοντων). They make offerings in much the same way on the altar of the Fates (Moirai), which is in the same grove in the open air.

No other text provides such detailed information on the cult of these goddesses, who were interchangeably, and locally, called Semnai Theai or Eumenides. The pregnant animals, the wireless libations, the absence of wreaths, and the offerings of flowers all mark the sacrifice to the

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71 Μελίκρατα—a mixture of honey and milk or honey and water—was the most common wireless libation (Graf, "Milch, Honig und Wein" [above, note 44] 212). Cf. Harrison (above, note 41) 92 f.; Stengel (above, note 44) Kultusaltertümer 100, 104 and Opferbräuche 180–86; Ziehen (above, note 44) 2483 f.; Graf, Nordionische Kulte (above, note 44) 27 n. 60; Jameson, Jordan, and Kotansky (above, note 44) 14 f. and 72 (new sacrificial lex sacra from Selinous, ca. 450 B.C.E., col. A 13 f. μελίκρατα υπολείβον, "performing a libation of honey mixture," and Α 15 μελίκρατα ἐν καιναῖς ποτηρίδες[ς], "honey mixture in new cups"). On wireless libations in general, see above, note 44.
72 Participants in animal sacrifice would normally wear wreaths; breathless sacrificers were the exception. Cf. Blech (above, note 68) 361–64; Graf (above, note 44) "Milch, Honig und Wein" 218 n. 51 and Nordionische Kulte 28 n. 62.
73 On the use of flowers—especially narcissus—in various local cults of the Eumenides, see Blech (above, note 68) 254, 296, and 318 f. A. 3a.
Eumenides as anomalous. At the same time, these anomalies are consistent with what is conventionally known as the "chthonian" type of ritual. Chthonian cult was ritually marked and sharply differentiated from the unmarked cult of the Olympian gods, even though some Olympians—like Demeter, Hermes, and Dionysos—were also recipients of chthonian rites in certain cults where their connections with the underworld and the realm of the dead were emphasized.

The cult of the Athenian Semnai Theai was not very different from that of their Sikyonian counterparts. In addition to wineless libations, especially of milk, offerings to the Semnai Theai of the Areopagos included honey cakes. Similar sacrificial cakes were typically offered in regional cults of the Eumenides, and of other chthonian divinities as well. Significantly, the Athenian Eumenides were worshiped in complete silence (ήσυχία or ἐφημίω) —another mark of their anomalous ritual status. In charge of the polis cult of the Semnai Theai was the Athenian genos of the Hesychidai, suitably named after the eponymous cult hero Hesychos, "The Silent One," to whom a "sacred ram" (κρυός ἱερός) was offered as a preliminary sacrifice prior to the official sacrifice to the Semnai Theai, and whose name euphemistically epitomizes the silence paid to these goddesses in their

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74 Graf (above, note 44) "Milch, Honig und Wein" 218 and Nordionische Kulte 27 f. has emphasized the marked nature of the Sikyonian ritual, as opposed to the unmarked worship of the Olympian gods. According to Graf, wineless libations accompanied "marginal" rituals relating to death, magic, and purification from bloodshed; such anomalies had more to do with the "inner logic of the ritual" than with the chthonian status of the divinities. But divinities did matter more to the Greeks than to modern historians of Greek religion. In the Sikyonian cult of the Eumenides as well as in many other cases discussed by Graf, the Greeks did not separate the recipients of the libations from the ritual process.

75 On this distinction, see Burkert (above, note 8) 199–208 and S. Scullion, "Olympian and Chthonian," CIAnt 13 (1994) 75–119.

76 Female members of the Hesychidai (below, note 79), appointed to serve as priestesses of the Semnai Theai, pour wineless libations over honey cakes (Kallim. fr. 681 Pfeiffer); the Semnai Theai receive sacrificial cakes and milk poured from clay pitchers (schol. Aischin. 1. 188); ephebes from distinguished families (the Hesychidai?) prepare cakes (πέμυματα) for the Semnai Theai (Philo, Prob. 140); triple libations of water and honey are poured for the Eumenides of Kolonos (Soph. OK 481). On the ritual details, see Rohde (above, note 47) II 243; Stengel, Kulturnaltertümer (above, note 44) 125 f.; Harrison (above, note 41) 239–53; L. Deubner, Attische Feste (Berlin 1932) 214; Henrichs (above, note 44) "Sobriety" 88–93 and "Eumenides" 259 nn. 14–15; Graf, Nordionische Kulte (above, note 44) 218.

77 According to the Derveni papyrus, sacrificial cakes (πόσπανα) were offered to the Eumenides (below, at note 142). Cf. Stengel (above, note 44) Kulturnaltertümer 100 and Opferbrücke 181; Henrichs (above, note 44) "Sobriety" 92 f., 96 and "Eumenides" 258–61; Jameson, Jordan, and Kotansky (above, note 44) 14 f. and 69. On sacrificial cakes in general, consult the bibliography in Henrichs, "Eumenides" 260 n. 20 as well as J.-M. Dentzer, Le motif du banquet couché dans le proche-orient et le monde grec du VIIe au IVe siècle avant J.-C., BEFAR 246 (Rome 1982) 519–24.

cult. The same silence that characterized the dread goddesses and their worshipers also surrounded their potential victims. In Athens and elsewhere, suspected murderers were enjoined from speaking, and no one was allowed to talk to them.

That the Semnai Theai, like other chthonian divinities, were indeed recipients of wineless libations and holocaust sacrifices is suitably confirmed by another inhabitant of the nether realm, the ghost of Klytaimnestra in the Eumenides. The slaughtered mother of Orestes appears on stage and urges the Erinyes to wake up from their sleep and to turn against Orestes, who has taken refuge at the altar of the Delphic Apollo. She reminds the Erinyes of her past worship of them and lends force to her point by detailing the rites she once performed while she was still among the living:

> Full many an offering of mine have you lapped up;  
> libations without wine, sober appeasements,  
> and solemn feasts by night upon the hearth that housed the fire  
> I burned, at an hour not shared by any of the gods.

The cultic record contradicts Klytaimnestra’s claim. Unlike the Eumenides and Semnai Theai, who were prominent in cult but had no myths, the Erinyes were mythical figures who received no cultic honors. Anticipating the transposition of the wrathful spirits of vengeance into kindly figures of cult in the second half of the play, Aischylos ascribes the Athenian rites of the Semnai Theai to the Erinyes. Far from offering evidence for a cult of the Erinyes, this passage provides the earliest extant description of the Athenian cult of the Semnai. Its language confirms that the cultic ambience was entirely chthonian, characterized by nocturnal rites consisting of wineless libations and holocaust sacrifices rendered over hearth-like altars of the chthonian type (Eum. 108 ἐπ’ ἐσχάραι τυρός and 806 ἐσχάραι).}

79 Cf. Usener (above, note 20) 265 f.; Robert (above, note 51) 142 f.; Harrison (above, note 41) 247 f.; Kears (above, note 24) 167 f. The bulk of our information on Hesychos/Hesychides derives from the scholiast on Soph. OK 489 (previous note), who quotes Kallim. fr. 681 Pfeiffer and Apollodoros of Athens, FGrHist 244 F 101.


82 Above, note 50.

83 Harrison (above, note 41) 239; Sommerstein (above, note 45) 11.

84 Altars for the Semnai Theai/Eumenides are referred to as βῶμοι by Thukydides (1. 126. 11) and Pausanias (1. 31. 4), as well as in the oracle quoted above (at note 67). Although “altars properly of Olympian type could be used for chthonic deities” (Yavis [above, note 42] 94), it is equally possible that the unmarked term βῶμος was occasionally used for eschara-like altars.
The Erinyes' Homeric, and post-Homeric, role as ministers of vengeance comprised two functions that are directly relevant to the proceedings of the Areopagos court: to punish homicides (especially kin-murderers) and to act as divine guarantors of solemn oaths and curses. By the 4th century B.C.E., belief in personified curses as agents of homicide victims—a possible source of this particular aspect of the Erinyes—had largely disappeared from the religion as practiced, although it enjoyed a long life in myth, especially in tragedy. But belief in the efficacy of oaths and curses continued to be strong. In the most serious oaths, the swearer called utter destruction upon himself and his children, should he violate his own oath. Both the solemn gravity of such oaths and the dire consequences of breaking them are illustrated by the elaborate oath formula paraphrased by Demosthenes in a speech delivered in 352 B.C.E.:

On the Areopagos, where the law allows and orders trials for homicide to be held, first the man who accuses someone of such a deed will swear an oath invoking destruction (εξολεια) on himself and his family and his house, and no ordinary oath either, but one which no one swears on any other subject, standing over the cut pieces of a boar, a ram and a bull (στὰς ἐπὶ τῶν τομίων κάπρου καὶ κριῶν καὶ ταῦρου), which have been slaughtered by the right persons and on the proper days, so that every religious requirement has been fulfilled both as regards the time and as regards the executants.

Demosthenes, who had close ties to the Areopagos and the cult of the Semnai Theai, does not say which divinities witnessed this oath, which was taken by both parties at the beginning of each murder trial before the Areopagos. It is hard to imagine, however, that this extraordinary oath could have been unrelated to the Erinyes/Semnai Theai, who are mentioned by Demosthenes in the same context, albeit under a more auspicious

85 Rohde (above, note 47) II 229-44; Wüst (above, note 51) 112-17; Lloyd-Jones (above, note 7) 204 f.; Parker (above, note 62) 107-10 and 196 f.; Sommerstein (above, note 45) 7-10; cf. Seaford (above, note 45) 95-98.
87 Cf. Mikalson (previous note) 31-38; Parker (above, note 62) 126, 186 f.
88 Dem. 23. 67 f., trans. MacDowell (above, note 30) 91. Cf. Burkert (above, note 8) 250-54; MacDowell 90-100. On oath sacrifices involving a triad of male animals (τριττοῦς or τριττους) and on the "cut pieces" (τομίων, the testicles of the victims), see Stengel (above, note 44) Kultusaltertümer 119, 136 f., 153 f. and Opferbräuche 78-85, 195 f.; Burkert 251-53. For a representation of a sacrificial procession including a bull, boar, and ram on a band cup, ca. 560 B.C.E., in a private collection in London, see E. Simon, Festivals of Attica: An Archaeological Commentary (Madison 1983) 63, with pls. 16.2 and 17.2, and Die Göter der Griechen, 3rd ed. (Darmstadt 1985) 193, with pl. 176.
89 Demosthenes reports (21. 115) that in 347/6 he was "chosen from among all the Athenians as one of three hieropoioi for the Semnai Theai." These particular hieropoioi were appointed either by the Areopagos Council (Wallace [above, note 15] 109) or the Ekklesia (D. M. MacDowell, Demosthenes. Against Meidias [Oxford 1990] 338 ad loc.). On the numerous boards of hieropoioi in Athens, see Stengel, Kultusaltertümer (above, note 44) 48 f.; Rhodes (above, note 30) 605-10; R. S. J. Garland, ABPA 79 (1984) 117 f.

name—that of Eumenides, the "Kindly Ones."90 This euphemism suggests, but does not prove, that the divinities who witnessed this oath included the Semnai Theai rather than the Erinyes.91 We know of at least one oath sworn by the Semnai Theai and administered by the Areopagos. Deinarchos informs us that when Demosthenes testified before the Areopagos Council in the Harpalos affair (324 B.C.E.)—which concerned corruption, not murder—he swore an oath "by the Semnai Theai and the other gods by whom it is the custom to swear there" (1. 47).92 We are left wondering who those "other gods" might have been, and whether the Semnai Theai of this oath were held to be identical with the Erinyes.

III. Polarity: Erinyes and Eumenides

Whether associated with curses or solemn oaths, the Erinyes presided over matters of life and death and embodied a distinctly primitive concept of justice older than any legal procedure or court of law and based on the principle of absolute retaliation: violence for violence, blood for blood, a life for a life. In their archaic role as instruments of vengeance and punishment, the Erinyes were considered frightful and abominable by the Greeks. Nevertheless, as portrayed in literature and art, they are ubiquitous in Greek myth. In real life, however, the Erinyes would have been invoked on rare occasions and for sinister purposes, not only in curses but also in binding spells and other magical texts as well as in inscriptions designed to protect tombs and burial places from potential violators.93 In all these cases, the Erinyes occupy an ambivalent position in the twilight zone where the dark world of the dead encroaches upon the social order of the living.

As recipients of chthonian cult, the Semnai Theai/Eumenides must be distinguished from the Erinyes, who had no cult.94 Yet all three entities share characteristics associating them with the chthonian world and pointing to their common origin in the Greek conception of the dead. Their genealogies are strikingly similar.95 Hesiod's Erinyes are daughters of Earth (Ge), who "received the bloody drops" of Ouranos after he was castrated by Kronos (Th. 183–85). Thus, the Erinyes are engendered by the same sort of kindred bloodshed that would become their major

90 Just before he quotes the oath, Demosthenes invokes the trials of Ares and Orestes as mythical precedents and refers to Orestes' divine prosecutors euphemistically as Eumenides rather than Erinyes (Dem. 23. 66; cf. below, note 121).
91 So Mikalson (above, note 50) 215 f., whereas Rohde (above, note 43) I 268 (Eng. trans. 178) and Lloyd-Jones (above, note 7) 208 waver between the two names.
92 Frazer (above, note 26) II 365 refers to the divinities who witnessed this oath as "Furies," thereby obscuring the difference between the mythical Erinyes and the cultic Semnai Theai.
93 T. B. Mitford, The Inscriptions of Kourion, Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society 83 (Philadelphia 1971) 411, Index 6(a) s.v. Ερινύες; Robert (above, note 50) 248 = 704, esp. nn. 42–43.
94 Above, note 50.
95 Wüst (above, note 51) 84 f.
preoccupation in the course of the archaic period and would define their function in tragedy. In Aischylos, the Erinyes are—like Hesiod’s Keres—daughters of Night (Nyx); at the end of the play they return to their dark hiding places beneath the earth, to be worshiped as Semnai Theai.\(^{96}\) In the *Oidipous at Kolonos*, Sophokles expands upon the Aischylean assimilation of myth (Erinyes) and cult (Semnai Theai/Eumenides) by exploring the associations between Oidipous as a cult hero and the local cult of the Semnai Theai in the poet’s native deme of Kolonos, where the goddesses are known as “daughters of Earth and Darkness” (*OK* 40; cf. 106).

In the significant language of myth, Earth, Night, and Darkness are homonyms referring to the chthonian gods’ traditional habitat, which is the same in myth as in cult. At the end of the *Eumenides*, after the Erinyes have agreed to take up residence in Athens as protective deities of the city, Athena sends them off to their subterranean dwelling, which will be located in the heart of Athens from now on. This contributes a downward extension to the towering monuments of Olympian cult on the nearby Akropolis:

> Go, and as this solemn sacrifice is done,  
> make speed beneath the earth,  
> and keep far away what is baneful,  
> but send what brings advantage,  
> that the city may triumph.

...  

> And I will escort you by the light of blazing torches,  
> to your place below, beneath the earth.\(^{97}\)

With their punitive role in abeyance, the dread goddesses are now perceived as Semnai Theai rather than Erinyes. As they are being escorted in solemn procession to their new home, Athena draws attention to the sacrifices—“this reverent slaughter of animals” (*Eum.* 1006 σφαγίων τῶνδ’ ὑπὸ σεμνῶν)—that are already taking place in their honor.\(^{98}\) At the exact moment when the Erinyes are transposed into Revered Goddesses and figures of cult, the patron goddess of Athens pointedly characterizes the first sacrifices performed for them as σφάγια σεμνά, thus alluding to the distinctive epithet that constitutes the official cult name of the Semnai Theai. In the processional song with which the play ends, the full name of the goddesses finally emerges: “Right-minded and well disposed toward our land, come this way, Semnai Theai.”\(^{99}\) It has often been suggested that the Erinyes were formally renamed Eumenides in the lacuna of Athena’s

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\(^{97}\) *Eum.* 1005–09 and 1022 f., trans. Lloyd-Jones (above, note 81) 269 f.


\(^{99}\) *Eum.* 1040 f. θαλασσα δὲ καὶ εὐθύρροφοις γάλα / δεδώρ ἢτε, σεμνὰ <θεῖα>. J. A. Hartung’s supplement, which restores metrical responsibility by introducing the official Athenian cult name of the Erinyes/Eumenides, has been accepted by Lloyd-Jones (above, note 7) 208 f., Sommerstein (above, note 45), and M. L. West, *Aeschylus. Tragoediae* (Stuttgart 1990) 397.
closing speech. However, despite the play’s title, it is more likely that Athena bestowed their official cult title on them, namely Semnai Theai.\footnote{So the hypothesis of Eum., Harpokration p. 140.13 Dindorf, and most recently West (previous note) 396, on Eum. 1028. A. L. Brown (above, note 45) 267–75 rejects the combined testimony of the hypothesis and Harpokration and argues against the alleged name change.} And if the play’s title goes back to Aischylos, as it indeed may, the poet chose Eumenides not only to “indicate the meaning of the whole conclusion of the trilogy, the reconciliation of the Erinyes”\footnote{Macleod (previous note).}—Athena refers to the Semnai Theai poignantly as being “kind” (992 εὐφρονες; cf. 1030 and 1034)—but even more so to honor the Argive alliance (289–91, 673, and 754–77) by adopting the Argive cult title of these goddesses, namely Eumenides.\footnote{On the Argive shrine of the Eumenides, see below, note 122. Unlike A. L. Brown (above, note 45) and Sommerstein (above, note 45) 11 f., I do not believe that the correlation of Erinyes and Eumenides (as opposed to Semnai Theai) was an invention of Euripides.}

The names of the Erinyes, Eumenides, and Semnai Theai are ultimately more revealing than their genealogies. Sophokles makes the important point that the names of the “daughters of Earth and Darkness” vary from place to place. When Oidipous inquires how they are called at Kolonos, a deme of Attica located just outside the city, he gets the following reply from a local informant:

Oidipous: By what solemn name, when I hear it, should I pray to them?
Stranger: People here would call them the all-seeing Eumenides.
But elsewhere other names are considered fine.\footnote{Soph. OK 41–43, trans. Blundell, Oedipus at Colonus (above, note 66) 21.}

Regional differentiation was the hallmark of Greek religion, and different local names and epithets for the same divinities are consistent with the general trend. The same goddesses who were worshiped as Semnai Theai in Athens and Attica were known as Eumenides in the rest of the Greek world.\footnote{Apart from their polis cult near the Areopagos, the Semnai Theai were also worshiped in the Attic demes of Phlya (Paus. 1. 31. 4) and Kolonos (below, at notes 108–09). Cults of the Eumenides existed on the Greek mainland, the Peloponnese, and Sicily, and in places as distant as Cyrene; see Brown (above, note 45) 260 f. for references.} The different regional names may explain why the comic poet Philemon insisted on the difference between the Eumenides and Semnai Theai.\footnote{Philemon fr. 180 Kassel–Austin.} If Oidipous’ informant is to be trusted, at Kolonos the goddesses were called Eumenides. But despite his display of ignorance, Oidipous seems to be at least as well informed as his local source, as he refers to the divinities’ “revered name,” σεμνὸν δόμα (OK 41). The very occurrence of this distinctive epithet in this context suggests that, like Aischylos in the Eumenides, Sophokles, too, is alluding to the Semnai Theai of the
Areopagos, whose full name occurs fifty lines later in Oidipous' prayer to them (89–90 θεῶν / σεμνῶν ἔδραν).

Almost a century ago, Jane Harrison concluded from this scene that the goddesses of Kolonos bore indeed the cult title Eumenides, in distinction from their sister goddesses at the Areopagos, who were called Semnai Theai. What made Harrison so confident was the authority of Sophokles: "We have the express statement of Sophocles, who, as a priest himself and a conservative, was not likely to tamper with ritual titles."107 Sophokles may have held a minor priesthood, but as a playwright he was anything but conservative in matters of religion. In his extant plays he is more unconventional than Euripides in making full dramatic use not only of religious institutions and rituals, but also of divine names and titles. This is particularly true of the name Eumenides, whose root meaning, "The Kindly Ones," is made explicit in a later scene of the same play (OK 486 ἕμυμενιδες ἔξ ἕμυμενῶν). Unlike Harrison, we can no longer be certain that Sophokles put the official cult name of the goddesses at Kolonos in the mouth of the local informant when he reported their name as Eumenides. A new piece of epigraphical evidence has changed the picture. In the deme of Kolonos excavators found a terracotta roof tile stamped with the words ΣΕΜΝΩΝ ΘΕΩΝ, "property of the Semnai Theai."108 The discovery confirms that far from being Sophokles' invention, as some have suggested, the Semnai Theai were indeed worshiped at Kolonos and that their cult site included a permanent structure, perhaps a temple.109 The tile further reveals that the divinities of the deme cult must have been officially known by the same name as the Semnai Theai of the Areopagos. Unofficially they were perhaps also known as Eumenides. By juxtaposing two different names for the same divinities, Semnai Theai and Eumenides—one officially adopted by the polis and uniquely Athenian; the other unofficial, demotic, and at the same time Panhellenic—Sophokles has his cake and eats it too. While playing with different divine names, Sophokles also plays on the difference between country and city, between deme cult and polis cult. Ultimately, this brief scene in which divine names are explored—unique in extant tragedy—leaves the local nomenclature of the Semnai Theai/ Eumenides deliberately ambiguous. One might say that the plurality of their epithets,

107 Harrison (above, note 41) 253 f.
109 Catling (previous note) assumes that the tile "must come from the shrine at Hippios Kolonos" and, on the basis of Paus. 1. 30. 4, that "the sanctuary was probably destroyed in the Chremonidean War (265–261 BC)." The discovery raises new questions about the location and nature of the cult site of the Semnai Theai. Sophokles’ poetic description of their sacred grove—an abaton according to OK 39 and 126 (cf. Parker [above, note 62] 167)—makes no reference to any man-made structure; nor does D. Birge, "The Grove of the Eumenides: Refuge and Hero Shrine in Oedipus at Colonus," *CJ* 80 (1984) 11–17.
combined with the absence of a true theonym, only magnifies their ultimate anonymity as "nameless goddesses" (ἀνώνυμοι θεαί). Emphasis on the lack of divine names (ἀνώνυμοι) as well as on their abundance (πολυ-ονυμικοι) can be seen as opposite but complementary attempts to articulate the ineffability of the divine.\(^{110}\)

In the same dialogue Sophokles describes the Eumenides of Kolonus as "dread goddesses" (39–40 ἔμφοβοι / θεαί), a description that would also fit the Erinyes, who may well have been in the back of his mind. In two earlier plays, Aias and Elektra, he introduces the Erinyes as the "revered-awesome Erinyes" (σεμνατ' Ἑρινύσες), thus assimilating the Erinyes to the Semnai Theai while reminding us of the punitive aspect and latent polarity of the latter.\(^{111}\) This polarity is reflected in the diverse translations of the cult name Semnai Theai, which range from "Venerable Goddesses,"\(^{112}\) "Revered Goddesses,"\(^{113}\) "August Goddesses,"\(^{114}\) and "Solem Goddesses"\(^{115}\) to "Awesome Goddesses,"\(^{116}\) "Awful Goddesses,"\(^{117}\) and "Dread Goddesses."\(^{118}\)

But Sophokles never fully identifies the Erinyes with either the Semnai Theai or the Eumenides. Neither does Aischylos, whose Erinyes are elaborately transposed into Eumenides, a process that preserves their basic polarity and turns it to dramatic advantage. Even though the title Eumenides identifies the Erinyes by the only name that auspiciously emphasizes their benevolent side with certainty, they are never called Eumenides in the course of the play and are referred to only once as Semnai Theai, and this only in the closing scene.\(^{119}\) It was Euripides, that notorious


\(^{111}\) Soph. Aias 837 and El. 112. The Erinyes of the Eumenides certainly retain their punitive power even as Semnai Theai (Eum. 932–37 and 954 f.; cf. Lloyd-Jones [above, note 7] 208).

\(^{112}\) Frazer (above, note 26) II 364 f.; Harrison (above, note 41) 239; H. W. Smyth, Aeschylean Tragedy (Berkeley 1924) 230.

\(^{113}\) Lloyd-Jones (above, note 7) 204; cf. S. Goldhill, Aeschylus. The Oresteia (Cambridge 1992) 79 "the Revered Ones (Semnai)."


\(^{115}\) MacDowell (above, note 89) 157; S. Hornblower, A Commentary on Thucydides I (Oxford 1991) 209.

\(^{116}\) Lardinois (above, note 108) 316; Seaford (above, note 45) 133.

\(^{117}\) J. O. Burtt, Minor Attic Orators II (Cambridge, MA and London 1954) 219 and 237, in his translation of Deinarchos 1. 64 and 87 (contrast 207, "holy goddesses," for the Semnai Theai at Dein. 1. 47).


\(^{119}\) Above, note 99.
nonconformist among the Attic tragedians, who had the daring to amalgamate the separate mythical and cultic identities of the two groups. In his *Orestes* (408 B.C.E.), he refers to the Erinyes of the Orestes myth repeatedly as Eumenides and equates them with the Semnai Theai.\(^{120}\) For reasons that appear to be dramatic rather than religious, and that amount to a drastic reinterpretation of Aischylos, Euripides thus chose to obliterate the traditional distinction between two antithetical aspects of chthonian power, one destructive and the other benign. Demosthenes and Euphorion followed suit, and so did successive generations of Roman poets from Lucilius to Ovid, who called the mythical Furies by their ritual antonym, Eumenides.\(^{121}\) The Erinyes are again euphemistically called Eumenides on a fragment of an inscribed Apulian vase (4th century B.C.E.).\(^{122}\)

In each of their various manifestations—mythical or cultic, local or functional, Attic or Panhellenic—the Erinyes/Semnai Theai/Eumenides bear a distinct and separate “name.” Their nomenclature has created a good deal of unnecessary confusion among modern scholars. The vast majority of them has always identified the Erinyes and the Eumenides, used the two names interchangeably, and largely ignored the Semnai Theai.\(^{123}\) These scholars have several distinguished Greek and Latin poets on their side, as has been mentioned. But, of course, poets were free to take liberties that may never have occurred to the ancient worshipers of the Eumenides or the

\(^{120}\) Eur. Or. 37 f., 321, 836, and 1650 (Erinyes), 408–10 (σεμναί γαρ; see above, note 45); cf. Henrichs (above, note 7) 171–74. Demosthenes, too, refers to the Erinyes of the Orestes myth as Eumenides (above, note 90), while Deinarchos 1. 87 equates them with the Semnai Theai. Even if Euripides in 408 B.C.E. was the first writer to use the names of the Erinyes and Eumenides interchangeably, it does not at all follow that he was also the first to “identify” the two as opposite aspects of the same set of chthonian deities, as has been argued by A. L. Brown (above, note 45).

\(^{121}\) Dem. 23, 66 (who compares the murder trial of Ares on the Areopagos with the lawsuit between “the Eumenides and Orestes” in the same location [above, notes 60 and 90]; Euphorion fr. 94 Powell: Lucil. fr. 176; Cat. 64. 193; Verg. G. 1. 278 (cf. R. Thomas, *Virgil, Georgics* [Cambridge 1988] I 115 ad loc.: “he has civilized the Erinyes, giving them their cult name, Eumenides”), 4. 483, *Aen.* e.g. 4. 469, 6. 250; Horace, *C.* 2. 13. 36; Ovid, *Met.* e.g. 6. 430 f., 8. 482; as well as in the *Eumenides* of Ennius and Varro. Cf. Brown (above, note 45) 267.

\(^{122}\) C. Aellen, *A la recherche de l’ordre cosmique* (Zürich 1994) I 64 f., II 202 f., no. 6; H. Sarian, “Erinys,” in *LIMC* III.1 (1986) 828, no. 12, and 839. The iconography of the Erinyes and Eumenides is equally euphemistic. Compared to their terrifying appearance in Aischylos (*Eum.* 48 ff.), the Erinyes of Greek art are relatively benign creatures equipped with snakes and/or wings (Sarian III. 1 825–43, III.2 595–606). On more than half a dozen stelae dedicated “to the Eumenides” (*Εὐμενείς*) and found in their sanctuary near Tiryns in the Argolid, the Eumenides are represented as dignified ladies holding snakes and poppies (Sarian III.1 839, III.2 605 f.). Cf. Sarian, “Réflexions sur l’iconographie des Erinyes dans le milieu grec, italioite et étrusque,” in *Iconographie et identités régionales*, BCH Suppl. 14 (Paris 1986) 25–35.

\(^{123}\) Two telling examples of the modern tendency to assimilate the Erinyes and the Eumenides/Semnai Theai: MacDowell (above, note 89) 338, on Dem. 21. 115, explains Semnai Theai as “a name used at Athens for the Erinyes or Eumenides, the avengers of homicide” (a role foreign to the Eumenides); J.-P. Vernant in *Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, rev. ed. (New York 1990) 420 implies that Paus. 1. 28. 6 (quoted above, at note 65) refers to “the sanctuary of the August Erinyes, *Semnai Erinys*, on the Areopagus,” even though Pausanias painstakingly differentiates between the two names.
Semnai Theai. Thus, it is difficult to distinguish when the poets are constructing their own religious world and when they are mirroring the conventions of actual cult. To guard against these pitfalls, some students of Greek religion have gone out of their way to keep the three groups separate. Such a rigorous approach may recommend itself from a purely methodological point of view, but in the end it leads to grave distortion and does more harm than good. By exaggerating their undeniable differences, the conceptual link that connects the three groups is obscured. That conceptual link will occupy us now.

Greek gods derive their distinct identities to a large extent from their names and epithets. In addition to individual gods, the Greeks recognized numerous divine societies, whose members lacked personal features and bore collective names. Such groups could be either male or female, but their membership never comprised both sexes at the same time. Examples of female groups that come readily to mind include the Moirai, Charites, Gorgons, Harpies, Muses, Horai, Eileithyiai, and Nymphs. Individual members of most of these groups can be referred to in the singular—Moirai, Gorgo, Muse, Eileithyia, or Nymph—but the fact remains that each individual always shares the name and characteristics of the whole group. The name of the Erinyes fully conforms to this general pattern. It, too, can be used collectively as well as individually. In fact the single Eriny, attested on some Linear B tablets from Knossos, predates the collective Erinyes of the earliest epic tradition. In the Oresteia, the singular and the plural—Eriny and Erinyes—are interchangeable. The Semnai Theai and the Eumenides, however, are different; they never lose their collective identity and are nowhere referred to in the singular. The lack of individuation within each group is not necessarily a mark “of hoary

124 The most prominent representative of the χωρίζωνες remains Harrison (above, note 41) 223–56, who treats the Erinyes, Eumenides, and Semnai Theai in separate chapters. To her credit, she does recognize the polarity of Erinyes versus Eumenides/Semnai Theai (214, 252 f.) and acknowledges the Eumenides and Semnai Theai as both “kindred figures” (240) and "precisely identical" (253). The most rigorous “separatist” is A. L. Brown (above, note 45), who advocates the complete separation of the Erinyes from the Eumenides/Semnai Theai and of the Eumenides from the Semnai Theai. Brown’s approach has been challenged by Lloyd-Jones (above, note 7) esp. 203 f., 208 f., 211 as well as Henrichs (above, note 7) 167 n. 13 and 176 n. 30.

125 Burkert (above, note 8) 173 f.
126 Rohde (above, note 47) II 240 f.; Gruppe (above, note 50) II 763 n. 10.
128 Wüst (above, note 51) 122; Sommerstein (above, note 45) on Eum. 950.
antiquity,” as Jane Harrison might have argued, but may rather signify strength in numbers. The divinities together may be understood as an expression of collective divine benevolence—a more powerful female version of the male ancestral Tritopatores—and as a counterpart to the numerous collective manifestations of divine wrath such as the personified Arai, Blabai, Erinyes, Keres, Manai, Poinai, and Praxidikai.

More revealing than the occasional fluctuation between singular and plural is the fundamental semantic difference that divides the names on our list into two distinct categories. Most of the names are common nouns or descriptive adjectives which are employed as proper names to describe the basic function or some external property of each god. The two cases that fail most conspicuously to fit this description are the two very designations we are discussing, namely Semnai Theai and Eumenides. Never achieving the status of true proper names, they remained transparent cult names that appealed euphemistically to the ambivalent power of these divinities by addressing them as “Revered Goddesses” and “Kindly Ones.” Once properly placated, the divinities would live up to the promise of their titles and exhibit a kindly disposition commensurate with the awe and veneration they received from their worshipers.

Such expectations were strong and enduring. Had it been otherwise, the cult of the Athenian Semnai Theai would not have lasted as long as it did, from the archaic period to the time of Pausanias in the second century C.E. But the fear of the darker side of these powers persisted too, and so did the Erinyes, who are mentioned more frequently in poetry than in prose. A curse tablet from Hellenistic Athens invokes “chthonian Hekate,” another dreadful goddess, along with the Erinyes, whose name and epithet have poetic resonance—“with the maddening Erinyes” (Ερινύσιν ἡλιθιώνας). The most conspicuous quality of the Aischylean Erinyes, their spiteful anger, still characterized their namesakes in the Roman period. Pausanias connects the name Eriny with the Arcadian dialect word ἔρινυς, to which he assigns the meaning “to be angry” (τὸ θυμῶν χρῆσθαι). Although the Arcadian gloss is merely a denominative verb derived from the name Erinyes—“to behave like the Erinyes”—this confirms that at the time of Pausanias anger was still considered their abiding trait.

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130 Cf. Harrison (above, note 41) 239–43, esp. 240: “It is obvious from the play of the Eumenides that the worship of the Semnai at Athens was of hoary antiquity.”


132 Brown (above, note 45) 262 rightly emphasizes the intrinsic namelessness of the Semnai Theai (“this hardly counts as a name at all”) while denying arbitrarily that the designation Eumenides “arose as a euphemism or ‘antiphrasis’ for some other name (such as Erinyes).”

133 R. Wünsch, *Appendix continens defixionum tabellae in Attica regione repertas* (Berlin 1897 = *IG* III.3) 193, no. 108b, line 2 (3rd/2nd century B.C.E); G. Kaibel, *Epigranna graecae ex lapidibus conlecta* (Berlin 1878) 511, no. 1136.

134 Paus. 8. 25. 6. Cf. Gruppe (above, note 50) II 764 f. n. 8; Wüst (above, note 51) 83 f.

135 Cf. Neumann (above, note 127) 48 f., who derives “Eriny” from ἐρίς, “strife.”
Before the Erinyes could be portrayed as Eumenides, their anger had to be mollified. In Aischylos' play Athena intervenes, and owing to her gentle persuasion their anger turns into benevolence and the fear they once inspired becomes worship—a reorientation of their powers from which both sides benefit greatly. Their cult titles, Eumenides and Semnai Theai, reflect the blessings they now pronounce and the new cultic status they acquire. Perhaps we can now understand why Euripides calls these powers the "Nameless Ones," a title he may have found in actual cult. No single name could adequately express their two opposite yet reciprocal identities, neither of which can function without the presence of the other. The Erinyes require the existence of the Eumenides to achieve their full meaning, and vice versa.

The Erinyes/Eumenides provide the most explicit case of polarity in Greek religion. Elsewhere the two opposite aspects of a given polar concept are subsumed under the overarching umbrella of a single complex deity, for instance Artemis or Dionysos. In this case, however, the two sides have been polarized into two distinct groups of divinities, each of which represents a plurality of identical members, whose mythical and cultic roles determine each other. As happens so often in Greek religion, the mythical aspect represents a worst-case scenario, such as the matricide of Orestes and his persecution by the Erinyes, indeed a sequence of events far removed from real life. The cultic model of the kindly Eumenides presents the opposite picture and emphasizes the flourishing of humans, animals, and plants. The Erinyes/Eumenides dichotomy thus provides a perfect illustration of the polar yet mutually complementary functions of myth and ritual. Through myth, mortals confront the most extreme boundaries of human experience. In this way, myth ultimately reinforces the normal order of things, the preservation of which depends upon the proper reciprocity between the human and the divine world, which is, in turn, maintained in cult.

IV. The Countless and Nameless Dead

Central features of the nomenclature of the Erinyes and their antonyms, the Eumenides and Semnai Theai, are reminiscent of the ways in which the Greeks—or, rather, some Greeks—of the classical period thought and spoke about the dead and the chthonian powers. According to this view, the ordinary dead—in contrast to local recipients of hero cult—ranked as "countless" (ἀνώριθμοι), while the special dead—those who had died a

137 Henrichs (above, note 7) 164–68; cf. Wüst (above, note 51) 121 f.
violent death, for instance—ranked as “nameless” (ἀνώνυμοι). The Greek tendency to characterize the dead and their world by using negative modifiers is reflected by these two terms. Two extraordinary texts from the margins of Greek literature, and indeed of the Greek world, provide striking evidence for both the anonymity and innumerability of the dead.

The Derveni papyrus, the earlier of these two texts, is a syncretistic commentary, perhaps by Stesimbrotos of Thasos (ca. 425–400 B.C.E.), on an Orphic cosmogonic poem. Discovered in a tomb of the 4th century B.C.E. near Thessaloniki and still awaiting definitive publication, it offers invaluable insights into Orphic poetry, Presocratic philosophy, and allegorical interpretation. In a section that precedes the commentary proper, the author discusses various chthonian rites—prayers, sacrifices, and libations—designed to appease the “souls” (ψυχαί) of the dead and performed by “magicians” (μάγοι)—ritual experts outside the mainstream of Greek religion: “Over the sacrifices they pour (ἐπισενδόνουσιν) water and milk, with which they also perform (chthonian) libations (χοαὶ). The cakes (πόσανα) they sacrifice are countless in number (ἀνάριθμοι) and have many knobs (πολυθμαλα), because the souls (ψυχαί) too are countless (ἀνάριθμοι). The initiates (μύσται) perform a preliminary sacrifice for the Eumenides in the same manner as the μάγοι. For the Eumenides are souls (ψυχαί). These lines touch upon matters of considerable religious interest—the comparison of μάγοι and μύσται; the reference to two different types of wireless libations, σπονδαί and χοαί; the number and shape of sacrificial cakes—discussion of which must await the publication of the final edition and commentary. By identifying the Eumenides as

139 On these two characteristics of the dead, see Rohde (above, note 47) II 240 f. and 243 n. 3. Because the dead were a countless multitude, the Greeks referred to them collectively as “the majority” (ὅι πλεῖσι). Cf. Rohde (above, note 43) II 382 n. 2 (Engl. trans. 570 n. 124) and, in addition to the citations provided there, Ar. Ekk. 1071, Kallim. Hekale fr. 145, 3. Hollis, and Kornoutos, Theol. 35. p. 74.16 Lang. The various categories of the special dead are discussed by R. Garland, The Greek Way of Death (Ithaca 1985) 77–103.

140 In addition to being ἀνώνυμοι (cf. Hes. Op. 154) and ἀνάριθμοι, the dead were seen as “strengthless heads” (ἀμηνηνα καρωνα, for instance at Od. 10. 521) and “lifeless” (ἅψυχοι, Aisch. fr. 273a. 4 Radt; Eur. Tro. 623), the Styx as ἀμέγαρτον ὑδωρ (Aisch. fr. 273a. 11 Radt; cf. Vergil’s palus inamabilis undae) at G. 4. 479 and Aen. 6. 438, describing the Stygian waters), and Hades as “unpleasant” (εὐκορπήσ, Od. 11. 94) and “sunless” (ἀνήλιος, Aisch. Th. 859; Eur. Alc. 436 f. and ἨΦ 607 f.). Cf. A. Henrichs, “Zur Perhorresierung des Wassers der Styx bei Aischylos und Vergil,” ZPE 78 (1989) 1–29, esp. 25–27.


142 Derveni papyrus, col. ii, lines 5–10. A partially obsolescent version of the Greek text of this column can be found in the unauthorized preliminary edition published anonymously in ZPE 47 (1982) after p. 300. Professor Kyriacos Tsantsanoglou of the University of Thessaloniki, one of the two scholars in charge of the forthcoming edition, will present a substantially improved text of cols. i–iv in the Proceedings of the Princeton conference on the Derveni papyrus (April 1993).

143 On wireless libations, see above, notes 44, 46, 53, and 71; on sacrificial cakes, notes 76–77. On the meaning of μάγοι in the context of Greek (rather than Persian) religion, see W. Burkert, “ΓΟΗΣ. Zum griechischen Schamanismus,” RhM 105 (1962) 33–55, at 38 n. 12; M.
“souls” the Derveni papyrus lends modest support to the theories of Erwin Rohde and Jane Harrison, who interpreted the Erinyes as the angry souls of the deceased.\(^\text{144}\) Rohde and Harrison were thinking of a special category of souls—the restless souls of those special dead who died a violent death and haunted the living until vengeance had been achieved. By contrast, the author of the Derveni papyrus embraces a more benign and optimistic brand of animism, which equates the Eumenides (as distinct from the Erinyes)\(^\text{145}\) with the “countless souls” of the ordinary and “kindly” dead who were expected to bestow blessings upon the living and “to send up the good things” (ἀνείναι τά γελάθα).\(^\text{146}\)

The other text illustrates the concept of the anonymous and fearsome dead. An inscribed lead tablet of the type known as binding spells (κατάδεσμοι or defixiones), it was found at Olbia (Pontos) and has been assigned a tentative date in the late 3rd century B.C.E., or, at any rate, one within the Hellenistic period. The curse tablet was first published in 1908 and has been reedited with an important commentary by Benedetto Bravo.\(^\text{147}\) This difficult text invokes unidentified underworld powers as witnesses who will enforce the curse (lines 1–2): “As certainly as we don’t know you, just as certainly Eupolis, Dionysios, Makareus, Aristokrates, Demopolis, Komaios, and Heragores (will) make their appearance (in court) in order to do a terrible thing” ([ὁ]σπερ ἡμεῖς ὑμνώσκομεν, οὕτως—
the list of seven names follows—ἐπὶ [ὅ]εινὸν πράγμα παραγείνονται). Bravo has shown on the basis of similar formulae of the type ὄσπερ/οὔτος on other tablets that the magical procedure used in these cases is that of “Analogiezauber” or “persuasive analogy.”\(^\text{148}\)

In the case of the Olbia text, the purpose of the formula is twofold: to authenticate the author’s claim that his opponents will malign him in court, and to secure the help of the “unknown” underworld power who is asked in the closing lines of the text to “paralyze” (κατασχεῖν) the enemies of the man who commissioned this tablet. Such curse tablets were often “buried

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145 The author of the Derveni papyrus treats the Erinyes (above, note 4) as distinct from, but related to, the Eumenides. On this difference, see Brown (above, note 45) 266 n. 45 (with reference to the Derveni papyrus): “It must anyway be significant that the name is Erinyes in the context of crime and punishment, Eumenides in the context of cult.”

146 Cf. Henrichs (above, note 7) 168 f. and 199.


with the corpse or placed in chthonic sanctuaries.”

According to Bravo, the addressee “whom we don’t know” is just such a dead person. But in all comparable cases, the dead person is known to the author of the curse tablet and is identified by name. To account for this anomaly, I propose to identify the unknown addressee—σε ἴμετι οὗ γινώσκομεν—as a chthonian alter ego of ἄγνωστος θεός: a chthonian power left nameless in observance of the widespread taboo against the naming of chthonioi. This unknown and anonymous denizen of the chthonian realm corresponds onomastically and functionally to the category of the anonymous dead invoked along with the “Erinyes beneath the earth” (Ἐρινύες ὑποχθόνιοι) and various other chthonian powers on several curse tablets of the third century C.E. from Kourion (Cyprus): “You who are buried here, having died before your time and being nameless (ἄνώνυμοι).” Insistence on the anonymity of the chthonioi seems to have served two purposes. First, by invoking the “unknown” and “anonymous” dead, the users of the curse tablets sought to assure that no known or unknown chthonian power was omitted or ignored. Second, and more ominously, by avoiding the names of certain chthonioi the living were attempting to put a safe distance between themselves and the special, dangerous dead.

Perceived as an anonymous swarm of departed souls—All Souls, as it were—the dead had the dual power to do either harm or good. To contain the damage that they could potentially inflict, they were given propitiatory and honorific titles, such as “Blessed Ones” (μακάριοι), “Good Ones” (γρηγοροι), and “Lords” (Ῥωπες), which are comparable to the euphemistic antonyms of the Erinyes such as “Revered Goddesses” (σεμναὶ θεῖαι) and “Kindly Ones” (Εὐμενίδες). The opposite roles of the Erinyes and Eumenides, or of the Erinyes and the Semni Theai, correspond closely to

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150 In two cases underworld gods are expressly referred to as “unknown gods”: (1) In Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Medea while performing magical rites “prays to her unknown gods with an unknown charm” (14. 366 ignosoque deos ignoto carmine adorat; cf. Statius, Ach. 1. 139 ignotis horrenda piacula divis); see Norden (above, note 21) 116. (2) Less certain are the “libations to unknown [gods?]” (θεοίσι jy eminentes άγνωστοις επιλοιψι) mentioned in what appears to be a fragment of a late Hellenistic hymn to Apollo (P. Chicago inv. no. 101, col. vi 26 = P. Lit. Goodspeed 2 = Pack 1620). Cf. E. J. Goodspeed, “Alexandrian Hexameter Fragments,” JHS 23 (1903) 237–47, at 244, with pl. x; J. U. Powell, Collectanea Alexandrina (Oxford 1925) 85; van der Horst (above, note 20) 40.

151 Mitford (above, note 93) nos. 127.36 f., 129.20 f., 131.25 f., 134.24, 135.29 f., 136.23, 137.24, 138.28 f., 139.27 f., 140.23, and 142.24 f. all offer the same invocation: ύμεῖς οἱ Ὀδε κτῶσε κείμενοι ἄφροι καὶ ἀνώνυμοι. On the status of ἄφροι, see Rohde (above, note 43) II 411–13, 424 f. (Eng. trans. 394 f., 603–05) and Garland (above, note 139) 77–88, esp. 86.

152 Cf. van der Horst (above, note 20) 39 f.

153 For a different emphasis, see van der Horst (above, note 20) 40: “The names of the χθόνιοι θεοί, the gods of the nether-world, had magical power in malam partem. To pronounce these names meant the provocation of dangerous powers.” He refers to Rohde (above, note 43) I 206–08 (Eng. trans. 159 f.).
the Greek concept of the dead and their dual power to bless and curse. The Dread Goddesses in their ambivalent role are best understood if we regard them as an extraordinary exemplification of the Greek belief in the opposite gifts of good or ill that may accrue from the dead. Magnified by myth and institutionalized by cult, the sum total of traditions and beliefs that surround the Erinyes and Eumenides constitutes the most complete and consistent record of this concept that has come down to us from antiquity.\(^{154}\)

\textit{Harvard University}

\(^{154}\) Some of the ideas presented here I first developed in a lecture delivered at Wesleyan University in April 1987. I am grateful to the audience on that occasion for their interest and their comments, and to Maura Giles for improving this final product.