

Roubekas, N. 2017. *An Ancient Theory of Religion: Euhemerism from Antiquity to the Present*. London: Routledge. Pp. xiv + 188. ISBN: 9781138848931. £120.

This book provides an important contribution to the understanding of Euhemerism, a subject which has been obscured by an uncontrolled expansion in the use of the term in the modern period. Euhemerism in a broad sense, as used by most scholars, is applied to the theory that some gods were merely divinized human beings. We may accept such a broad label provided we remain conscious that the original theory of Euhemerus' lost text (from the first half of the 3rd century BCE) was far more specific and complex (for example, it also included heavenly gods who had never been human), and that a fascinating process of modifications and additions from Antiquity to the present day has fabricated a simplified construct that differs considerably from its foundational core. In a much-revised version of his doctoral thesis, Nickolas Roubekas provides a rigorous study both of Euhemerism in its original sense, and the cultural history of its reception, for an audience of both Classicists and students of religion.

The targeting of these two groups of readers is the result of a sustained and successful attempt to keep a productive tension between both disciplines, too often separated in recent decades, due among other factors to the language deficiencies among many scholars of religion, and the lack of interest in theory among Classicists. The necessary bridge is competently built here. Roubekas' analysis of ancient texts is based on a strong philological foundation, and at the same time he boldly applies theoretical questions to the ancient evidence, while remaining cautious about the risks of projecting our concerns and concepts too far. From the outset he distinguishes his study from those of Marek Winiarczyk, the recent editor and commentator on Euhemerus' fragments.¹ Winiarczyk's textual work remains an essential pillar of Roubekas' research, but the issues he tackles are different. The result is a study that sheds much new light on the complexities of Euhemeristic tradition, from the lost work of Euhemerus to the contemporary period.

The book has eight thorough chapters, plus introduction and afterword. The first five chapters form a consistent block dealing with early Euhemerism. The Introduction and Chapter 1 ('Euhemerus' Euhemerism' pp.15-32) set the stage in justifying why it can be considered a theory of religion, not merely an account of the nature of the gods. This approach means siding with recent trends in the study of ancient Greek religion which abandon the use of a traditional dichotomy between ritual and belief which focused only on the former. Drawing on some precedents like Prodicus (briefly reviewed in Chapter 2, 'Before Euhemerism', pp. 33-50), Roubekas argues that Euhemerus did focus on belief in the gods and theorized about how that belief came to be, addressing the issues that have worried modern authors: the origin, function, specificity, and structure of religion. Euhemerus addressed these issues in the *Hiera Anagraphē* (*Sacred Inscription*), an account of a utopian land (Panchaea), whose general content has been preserved, mainly by indirect quotations in Diodorus Siculus, whose work was in turn transmitted through Eusebius of Caesarea. Another important path of transmission is through Ennius' Latin translation, extensively quoted by the Christian Lactantius. The stele that, according to Euhemerus' fictional tale, would have been in the temple of Zeus Triphyllius and would have offered a full explanation of the origin of the gods, differentiates the 'celestial gods' – for example, the astral bodies, which are eternal and immutable entities – and the 'earthly gods' like the kings Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus, later deified across many lands in gratitude for their contributions to mankind. The inconsistency between different testimonies presents some difficulties in the reconstruction of Euhemerus' account, which are clearly explained by Roubekas (pp. 24-26, 51-67) in Chapter 3 ('Returning to the Sources', pp. 51-72). His main focus is on the relevance of the section of the Panchaeian stele on heavenly gods, which directly refutes the later classification of Euhemerus as one of ancient atheists – a fashionable issue discussed in Chapter 4 ('Euhemerism and Atheism', pp. 73-92), in which the attacks on Euhemerus as an 'atheist' by Cicero, Plutarch, and Sextus are carefully analysed and contextualised. But it is in Chapter 5 ('Euhemerus, Divine Kingship, and Irony', pp. 93-114) that this book makes the clearest contribution to the study of ancient religion, by convincingly dismantling the popular idea that a purpose of the *Hiera*

¹ M. Winiarczyk (ed.) 1991. *Euhemeri Messenii Reliquiae*. Stuttgart and Leipzig; M. Winiarczyk (tr. W. Zbirohowski-Kościa) 2013. *The Sacred History of Euhemerus of Messene*. Berlin and Boston.

Anagraphē would have been to legitimize the divinization of Hellenistic rulers. Roubekas' arguments converge from different points: Euhemerus' place at the side of Cassander, known for his opposition to ruler-cult; Callimachus' attack on his impiety as a probable answer to his mockery of a Ptolemaic key institution; and the description of Panchaea's political system as a utopian rejection of monarchy. All these details support an ironical reading of his work as a satire on a rapidly expanding ideology, a stance which is not uncommon within the utopian genre.

The second part of the book dwells on the later reception of Euhemerus' theory. Chapter 6 ('Citing the Citations: Anti-'Pagan' Euhemerism and Identity Formation', pp. 115-38) deals with Christian and Jewish apologetic attacks on Greek religion as an idolatrous cult of dead men. These arguments have traditionally been called Euhemeristic, but, as Roubekas shows, the reductionist presentation of the theory for apologetic goals heavily mutilates Euhemerus' system, though seldom if ever through direct knowledge of his work. The same can be said of Celsus' arguments against the Christians as devotees of a dead and deified man, dealt with in Chapter 7 ('Turning the Tables: Anti-Christian Euhemerism in Celsus', pp. 139-54). Chapter 8 ('Seeing Euhemerism Everywhere', pp. 155-78) aims to cover the modern use of the term in designating other phenomena as different as Snorri's *Edda*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, and studies on African, Mesoamerican, and Asian religions as Euhemerism. As the afterword says, using this label indiscriminately is an abuse of the term and downplays differences not only with Euhemerus' theory but also between very different phenomena. This second section contributes both to a better comprehension of the texts by avoiding a superficial categorization, and to liberating the understanding of Euhemerus from imprisonment within an '-ism' that has been imposed by scholarly tradition through a mixture of religious apologetic interest and scholarly inertia.

Of course the last chapter can only be selective in its examples. However, the earlier ones are quite thorough in their selection of ancient texts and only a few omissions of relevant authors may be spotted. For example, among the Hellenistic sources of Diodorus Roubekas should have considered Dionysius Scytobrachion (edited by J. S. Rusten in 1982), whose account of Argonautic and Dionysiac mythology in the early 3rd century is a central stage of the early reception of Euhemeristic ideas (the brief reference to K. S. Sacks' opinion on p. 63 about the lack of information on Diodorus' sources is not enough to justify the omission of this text). Among the Christians, one misses Firmicus Maternus (whose account of the Zagreus myth offers a parallel with the *Wisdom of Salomon*, pointing to a common source, as W. Burkert detected long ago).² Granted, Firmicus does not refer to Euhemerus, but as Roubekas himself demonstrates when dealing with other authors, mentioning him in a list of atheists or similar passages would not establish direct knowledge either of his work nor his theory. Therefore, Firmicus' account (or other Christian passages which do not mention Euhemerus like Clement of Alexandria *Protr.* 2.13-14 on Aphrodite as Cyniras' lover) could well be analysed in the chapter of early Christian (distorting) reception of Euhemerism.

I spotted no factual errors, though perhaps the comparison between Plutarch's imagined trial on impiety and Socrates' real one (p. 82) is too anachronistic to be called a debatable issue. The book is well edited, with only a few minor errata, and is written in a fluent style which does not betray the fact that the original language of the thesis was not English but Greek. However, the format of the Routledge series requires a separate bibliography for each chapter, which, given the Harvard system of bibliographic references, is inconvenient for the reader and causes many unnecessary repetitions in an otherwise unified book.

The study of Euhemerism deals with a lost original and thus it is necessarily a study of reception, as Roubekas acknowledges. However, this does not merely entail an easy deconstruction of a label that has come to be used repeatedly in exactly the same way, albeit often within inverted commas (as so often happens with paganism, Orphism, magic, and many other terms). One must distinguish each stage in the process of reception that shapes the Euhemeristic tradition, and take into account the different interests, sources, and context of each 'redefinition' from the earliest readers to the present. 'Whose Euhemerism?' is the right question to pose, as the conclusion states (p. 182). Apart from contributing several different insights to particular issues that will appeal to classicists and students of religion, and achieving a most helpful overall presentation of the

² cf. M. L. West. 1983. *The Orphic Poems*. Oxford. p. 172

Euhemeristic tradition, this book is important above all because it will force every future user of the term, of whichever discipline, to pose that question and weigh carefully how to answer it.

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