

REVIEW

EUHEMERUS' SACRED HISTORY

Marek Winiarczyk, *The 'Sacred History' of Euhemerus of Messene*. Translated by Witold Zbirohowski-Kośeja. *Beiträge zur Altertums-kunde* Band 312. Pp. xvii + 276. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2013. Hardcover, €109.95/\$154.00. ISBN 978-3-11-027888-0.

It is unusual for a relatively minor author to give his name to an important theory in intellectual history. It is even rarer for that author to be one whose works are not extant. Yet, this is what happened in the case of Euhemerus of Messene, whose name is indelibly associated with a major theory in the study of myth and the origins of religion, Euhemerism: the view that deities originally were human beings, who were deified because of their benefactions and/or achievements.

The bibliography on Euhemerism is vast, so it is remarkable that Marek Winiarczyk's *The 'Sacred History' of Euhemerus of Messene*, a translation and revision of his 2002 German monograph, *Euhemerus von Messene: Leben, Werk und Nachwirkung*, is the first full-length study of Euhemerus' life, work, and influence in antiquity to appear in English. Professor Winiarczyk, who is the editor of the excellent Teubner edition of Euhemerus and the author of numerous studies of ancient utopian and religious literature, is the ideal author of such a study. The extensive bibliography—sixty-two pages long—and notes reveal an extraordinary command of the scholarship concerning Euhemerus dating back to the eighteenth century. As was also true of his Teubner edition of Euhemerus (1991), his approach is conservative, marked by a concern for literary methodology and a strong scepticism toward theories that are not explicitly grounded in the texts.

The 'Sacred History' of Euhemerus of Messene is a clearly written and lucidly organised monograph, treating the principal themes of Euhemerist scholarship in eight chapters. The book opens with two chapters dealing with Euhemerus' life and work followed by four treating his ideas, and one each examining the evidence for Ennius' Latin translation of his book and reviewing his influence in antiquity. The study concludes with an extended summary conclusion and three appendices listing authors who refer to men worshipped as gods, claim that that the gods were originally men, and record the burial sites of gods. The author's method throughout the study is straightforward: summarise the evidence for a topic, review previous

scholarship, and propose an interpretation that holds as closely as possible to the textual evidence and is compatible with the intellectual context in which Euhemerus wrote.

The first chapter treats theories concerning Euhemerus' life and the scant evidence supporting them. As is the case throughout the book, Winiarczyk's conclusions are conservative, accepting only two facts: that Euhemerus was probably born in Sicilian Messene and that Callimachus referred to him in *Iambus* 1.9-11, suggesting that he may have resided in Egypt at some point in his life. His being a *philos* of Cassander and undertaking missions for him, however, Winiarczyk dismisses as probably literary fiction intended to give his account plausibility. Winiarczyk's review of ancient characterisations of Euhemerus as a geographer, historian, philosopher, or poet is similarly inconclusive, leaving us only with the knowledge that Euhemerus was born in Sicily and wrote his book in time for Callimachus to read it, roughly, therefore, sometime in the late fourth or early third century BCE.

Chapter 2 considers the evidence for the character and genre of the Ἱερὰ Ἀναγραφή. Winiarczyk interprets the title of Euhemerus' work as *Sacred History* in the sense of a history or histories of the gods. After restating the basic premise underlying his Teubner edition of the *Sacred History*, namely, that no proper fragments of the book survive, he argues that similarities between the *testimonia* for the *Sacred History* and other similar works should be viewed as literary parallels and not evidence for identifying the sources used by Euhemerus. Winiarczyk argues, for example, that the description of natural conditions in Panchaea has no specific source but reflects the *locus amoenus* convention, which dominated literary depictions of nature from Homer to late antiquity. Less successful is Winiarczyk's attempt to identify the genre of the *Sacred History* because of his inability to escape the paradox implicit in the work itself: it took the form of a first-person account that was supposed to be accepted as true, although it was a fiction in the form of a utopian travel novel in the broad sense of the term, namely, an account of a voyage to a non-existent place.

The third chapter treats the sources of Euhemerus' theological views. Winiarczyk stakes out his position clearly. 'Euhemerus did not create a religious theory. What is more, he was not being original because he referred to previously known views' (p. 28). In other words, in composing the *Sacred History* Euhemerus drew on an eclectic selection of archaic and classical Greek themes that were known to most educated Greeks instead of basing his work on specific and identifiable literary sources. Winiarczyk identifies four such themes that he claims account for the bulk of the *Sacred History*: hero cult which familiarised Greeks with the idea that humans could become gods; euergetism which justified the deification of commanders and

rulers because they had conferred great benefits on Greek cities and their subjects; rationalistic interpretation of myth which transformed myths into a kind of quasi-history by stripping them of their marvellous elements; and sophistic speculative accounts of the origins of culture. At the same time, Winiarczyk strongly rejects theories that identify Hecataeus of Abdera's *Aegyptiaca* as the source of Euhemerus' distinction between the eternal heavenly gods and deified former humans such as the Olympian deities, and view the *Sacred History* as a justification for Hellenistic ruler cult.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the evidence for the socio-economic structure of Euhemerus' utopian islands and his description of the sanctuary and temple of Zeus on the island of Panchaea. As in chapter 3, Winiarczyk strongly argues against the idea of Egyptian influence on these aspects of the *Sacred History*, maintaining that, while Euhemerus probably possessed a general knowledge of Greek accounts of Egypt and Egyptian and Greek temples, both his accounts of the islands of Hieria and Panchaea and the sanctuary of Zeus were his inventions intended to give credibility to the narrative of the history of the dynasty of Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus allegedly inscribed on a golden stele in the temple of Zeus that formed the core of the *Sacred History*. In chapter 6 Winiarczyk critically reviews seven theories about Euhemerus' purpose in writing the *Sacred History*, arguing that he most likely wished to propose an explanation of how people came to believe in gods, and that its attractive literary form accounts for its influence among later Greek and Roman intellectuals.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the ancient reception of the *Sacred History*. In chapter 7, Winiarczyk analyzes the evidence for Ennius' Latin translation of Euhemerus' work, arguing three theses: (1) that Lactantius' quotations are not true fragments since he probably relied on a now unidentifiable intermediary source for his knowledge of Ennius' translation and not the original text; (2) that Ennius' version was a free prose rendering of only part of the text; and (3) that Ennius produced his translation ca. 200–194 BCE in order to prepare the way for the deification of Scipio Africanus. Finally, in chapter 8, Winiarczyk identifies the pagan, Christian, and Jewish authors who can be shown to have read the *Sacred History* and summarises the evidence for how they used it in their works.

Winiarczyk's monograph constitutes a solid foundation for future work on Euhemerus, providing scholars with a comprehensive bibliography and a critical review of the current state of scholarship. Winiarczyk's insistence on the importance of traditional Greek religious ideas and his scepticism concerning proposed identifications of sources for the *Sacred History* are welcome reminders that writers of fiction like Euhemerus are more likely to draw on general cultural knowledge in creating their works than the works of other writers. At the same time, Winiarczyk's emphasis on the

unoriginality of Euhemerus' ideas and their traditional roots tends to obscure the novelty of his account of the history of the gods and its relation to contemporary issues. So, for example, while it is certainly true that hero cults had long familiarised Greeks with the idea that human beings could become gods and had done so in the distant past, Euhemerus' extension of that principle to include Zeus and the other Olympian gods was new and startling and aligns his ideas with theories that the heavenly bodies were the only true gods. Again, while Winiarczyk is rightly sceptical of theories relating Euhemerus' ideas to Hellenistic ruler cults, making Zeus not only the author of his own deification but also the creator of monuments such as the pyramids connected his version of early cultural history to debates about the priority of Greece to Egypt and other cultures that can be traced back to the fifth century BCE. Examples could easily be multiplied, but the conclusion is clear: *The 'Sacred History' of Euhemerus of Messene* will be the essential starting point for research on Euhemerus but not its end.

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