Francesco Padovani

“If by This Name it Pleases Him to be Invoked”: Ancient Etymology and Greek Polytheism

Abstract: Is the etymological interpretation of divine names a good way to get to know the divine according to the perspective developed by a Greek intellectual elite (poets, orators, grammarians, philosophers) throughout the centuries? Applying etymology to divine names discloses a dynamic and relational approach to the divine figures within Greek polytheism. It underlines, on the one hand, the decoding of multiplicity in a unitarian direction and, on the other hand, the functionalisation of the divine figures according to the (literary, ritual, performative, local, historical) context. This chapter provides a theoretical overview of possible intersections between ancient etymology and Greek polytheism, corroborated by concrete examples from literary and philosophical texts. It is structured around three main topics: the mutual χάρις between gods and men, the exploitation of onomastic ambiguity and the intersection between etymology and interculturality.

1 Introduction

Is the etymological interpretation of the divine names a way of getting to know the divine, according to the perspective developed by a Greek intellectual elite[1] (poets, orators, grammarians, philosophers) throughout the centuries? The recent scholarly debate has shown how deeply etymology helps understand the way the Greeks shaped their relation with the world through a metalinguistic process – a reflexion upon language conducted through language.[2] In particular, the application of etymology to the divine names discloses a dynamic and relational approach to the divine figures within Greek polytheism: the relationship with the divine takes place in the name itself, since it is supposed to designate the gods to which the human beings appeal, conventionally or in

1 The etymological interpretation of the divine names was also practised by the Egyptians and the Romans. About the Near East see Myerston 2013.

2 In the last decades, many efforts have been made to define properly the ancient etymological practice; on the theoretical side see Pisani 1975, Dawson 1992, Herbermann 1981, Herbermann 1996, Herbermann 1998, Buridant 1998, Belardi 2002, and Del Bello 2007; on the etymological practice in literary contexts, see Arrighetti 1987; Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 1998, Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2000, Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2001, Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2003 and Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007; Nifadopoulos 2003. See also the work-in–progress started with Zucker/Le Feuvre 2021.

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virtue of a direct divine inspiration.[3] The accumulation of denominations is peculiar for Greek polytheism, taking into account the uncertainty that characterises the gods' will and identity. The resort to etymology within theological discourses in poetry or prose underlines actually, on the one side, the decoding of multiplicity in a unitarian direction, and on the other side, the functionalisation of the divine figures according to the (literary, ritual, performative, local, historical) context. Thus, the etymological interpretation of the divine names can alter the perception of the gods' identities, insofar as it basically provides a motivation or a justification for their denominations, which can be further corroborated by the resort to myth, cult practice and rational explanation. Thus, the question "What's in a divine name?" requires that the mutual exchange between the etymological method and its context is taken into account. Since the idea of connecting this practice with Greek religion seemed to me far from unequivocal from the get-go, I have also evaluated the two main risks implied in this approach: on the one side, to overestimate the impact of the etymological interpretation upon the actual cult practice; on the other, to limit the etymological practice to philosophy and abstract thinking, even if it is Plato who in the *Cratylus* provides etymology with its theoretical framework. Thus, this chapter constitutes an experimental inquiry, in order to find the limits of etymological interpretation as a tool for getting to know the divine within Greek polytheism.

2 Dealing with Uncertainty

2.1 Etymology and "Belief"

According to the Greeks,[4] a correct understanding and application of the divine denominations in ritual prayers provides an extraordinary source for getting in touch with the gods and receiving benefits from them. On the contrary, as Xenophon explains, the invocation by a wrong appellative, which leads to a wrong ritual, can imply negative effects against human expectations.[5] Thus, since its very first application in this field, etymology is a tool for dealing with the uncertainty about the correct divine denominations. In absence of a written revelation, the interpretation of the divine names offers a plausible narrative about the divine,[6] alongside myth and rituals,

3 See Palamidis in this volume. In the antiquity the thesis of the natural correctness of the names abundantly prevails over the conventional position; see Padovani 2018, 35–38, with further bibliography.

4 In accordance with Harrison 2015, a comprehensive conception of belief should consider the feelings connected with the participation in a shared configuration of the sacred, as well as the analysis of the formal structure of ancient polytheism. See also Parker 2011, 11–12.

5 X. *An*. 7.8.1–6, with the comment of Pulleyn 1997, 98.

6 For instance, it was conjectured that the name Αὐξησία, clearly connected to the function of the goddess of agricultural growth (from αὐξάνω) could have replaced a more ancient denomination (Danielsson 1896).

and in this sense they are all "integral to religion".[7] Like myths, the different etymological explanations can replace each other according to the tradition they refer to or the context they are related to, since their role is not primarily to rationalise the divine figures, but to create a dynamic theological view within the uncertain space set between tradition and innovation, as the well-known case of the name of Aphrodite shows from Hesiod onwards.[8] Hesiod answers to theological uncertainty by resorting to etymology, the limits of human denomination notwithstanding, in order to satisfy both the mortals' desire for knowledge and the gods' wish to be pleased;[9] from this *consensus* he derives a relational configuration of the divine, which complies with the cults' pragmatic need for stability ("they call the god by this name, because . . . "), but also shapes a dynamic theology, according to which the denominations are flexible containers for a multifaceted content.

The desire to build a positive relation with the gods never fades from the Greek etymological practice. The name of Zeus, which was interpreted by Hesiod in a cosmogonic sense, as if the god (acc. Δία) was the one through whom (ὅν τε διὰ) the whole of reality took its shape,[10] was at the centre of an intense etymological concern. The Hesiodic interpretation had good fortune, particularly (but not only) among the philosophers;[11] centuries later, it was developed by the pious rhetor Aelius Aristides in his *Hymn to Zeus*. The context is that of a eulogy, which is intended not only to entertain Aristides' audience, but also to please the god, through the recurse to the traditional etymology of his name: "all things come and have come into being because of him" (δι'αὐτόν).[12] The desire to appeal to the gods correctly, which is reflected in the usage of traditional etymologies, spreads mostly from the uncertainty about the possibility of establishing a positive connection with them as they actually are, which is unknowable, as it is shown in the so-called "hymn to Zeus" in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The "hymn" could barely have been employed within official rituals,[13] but it highlights in a literary refined formulation the concern about the right invocation to be dedicated to the mightiest god: Ζεὺς ὅστις ποτ' ἐστίν, εἰ τόδ' αὐ-/τῶι φίλον κεκλημένωι, / τοῦτό νιν προσεννέπω.[14] Greek tragedy constitutes a space for the negotiation of the

7 Parker 2011, 29.

8 Hes. *Th*. 188–202; see Pironti 2005.

9 Hes. *Th*. 197.

10 Hes. *Op*. 2–4.

11 Pl. *Cra*. 396b; Chrysipp. *SVF* ii p. 312; A. *Ag*. 1485.

12 Aristid. *Or*. 43.23 (transl. Behr). See Goeken 2005.

13 At variance with the opinion of Fränkel 1982[5], 99 ("the formula itself is traditional"), influenced by the study of Norden 1913, see the more cautious explanation by Medda 2017, I, 56 (with further bibliography).

14 A. *Ag*. 160–2: "Zeus, whoever he may be – if by this name it pleases him to be invoked, by this name I call to him" (transl. H.W. Smyth).

perception of the divine within the community of the *polis*,[15] and represents on the stage, in the performative dimension, some intellectual issues typical of the philosophical speculation about the ὀρθότης τῶν ὀνομάτων ("correctness of names").[16] As the examples cited make clear, the Greek intellectuals show an ambivalent attitude towards the divine when they interpret the gods' names. While the desire to question the traditional configuration of the gods emerges, they feel the need to safeguard their deities from a too radical rational critique. This becomes evident in the recurse to "precautionary formulae"[17] like the one adopted by the chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* – apparently, a concern which is not extraneous to the religious belief of his time – but also in the recurrence of the same (Hesiodic) etymological patterns through the centuries.

The application of etymology within literary genres such as epics, tragic poetry and oratory does not confine its impact to the mere sphere of abstract thinking. As an act of interpretation, it presupposes a high level of religious awareness and could appear to be eminently an intellectual concern. The objects of the interpretation are nonetheless mostly derived from cult practice and poetic tradition, according to the conviction that the first poets, particularly Homer and Hesiod, were the first imposers of the divine (poetic) appellatives (*eponumiai*).[18] Even though etymology, particularly when it cooperates with allegoresis (as in the case of the Derveni papyrus), alters the perception of the gods themselves, it is precisely the acknowledgment of what is commonly believed that enhances the success of the interpretation.[19] In order to reach the target of the ὀρθότης τῶν ὀνομάτων ("correctness of names") regarding the divine names, the interpreter is confronted with names which are not merely denotative, but need to be in tune with what is commonly accepted about the gods' identity, and also with the possibilities that the juxtaposition between formally consonant words displays in order to determine a new image of the deities, starting from the way they are usually called. Etymology is often intended as an analogical process, but it is never arbitrary. We could state that if the ancient research for the correctness of names generally follows three principles (analogy, literary tradition, common use),[20] etymology applied to divine names shares almost the same pattern, insofar as it works by analogy, but finds its terms of comparison in the poetic and mythical tradition and in cult practice. No etymological interpretation of divine names prescinds from such terms, even when it aims to put them into question.

15 For an overview of the close interchanges between cult practice, literature and performance see Bierl 2007; Bierl 2018.

16 E.g. E. *Tr*. 988–990 about Aphrodite (see Tsistsibakou–Vasalos 2003; Mirto 2016); *Ba*. 274–327 about Demeter and Dionysus (see Mirto 2010).

17 See Rowett 2013.

18 Hdt. 2.53.

19 See Most 2016, 58.

20 Siebenborn 1976, 56–139.

2.2 Towards a Philosophical *Charis*

Quite evidently, etymology derives its subject directly from cult practice and authoritative texts – mostly from the interpretation of epics – through a bottom-up dynamic. In the ritual invocations, the adoption of the most appropriate appellation stimulates the god's favour by building up a reciprocity in pleasure (*charis*): in order to obtain the god's benevolence, the worshipper pleases him by invoking him by the right name(s),[21] since "the gods can be persuaded and diverted by sacrifices, 'soothing prayers' and votive offerings", as Plato puts it.[22] Etymology plays its role in this. In the *Homeric Hymns*[23] the etymological interpretation of some epithets puts the stress on local versions of cult and regional sanctuaries of the god, in order to increase the prestige of the cult seat and gain the god's favour.[24] These kinds of etymological connections mainly aim at explaining and glorifying the specificity of a local divine identity, rather than exploring the nature of the gods. Hymns basically constitute offerings in words, and that is why etymology can contribute to the amplification of the gods' glory within these texts.[25] It could sound quite surprising that Plato himself showed that he was aware of this aspect in his dialogue about human language and the correctness of names, the *Cratylus*.[26] In fact, the caution Socrates shows when he approaches the delicate matter of the etymological interpretation of the divine names (*Cra.* 400d-401a) is to be considered neither ironic nor purely rhetorical.[27] Since, according to the Homeric

21 See the study by Pulleyn 1997.

22 Pl. *R.* 365e (transl. Emlyn-Jones/Preddy).

23 The discussion about the actual employment of poetic hymns in rituals has led to controversies in the course of the decades. Càssola 1975, XIV recalls Thuc. 3.104.4, where the *Hymn to Apollo* is defined a προοίμιον to be sung in the course of the festivals which accompanied the rituals in honour of the gods. Furley–Bremer 2001, 1–49 makes a distinction between cult hymns and literary hymns which would exclude the latter from any cultic value. Abritta 2015 has questioned the distinction, by stressing that the Homeric hymns shared a common pattern with "cult hymns" and also clearly represented the intention to please the gods. Furthermore, "the Ancients classified them as hymns together with their lyric counterparts, and there is little evidence that a division existed in any way in Antiquity" (2015, 8).

24 E.g. *h. Ap.* 493–6. For the narrative usage of etymology in *h. Dem.* see Petrovitz 2014.

25 See Herrero de Jáuregui in this volume.

26 As Benitez 2016, 301 has concisely stated, "Plato's involvement in [. . .] secularisation is ambiguous", since to some extent he preserves myth and religion for heuristic aims.

27 After a long phase in which the *Cratylus* was considered of eminent importance with regard to the problem of the correspondence between names and things (see. e.g. Gaiser 1974; Baxter 1992), it was David Sedley (Sedley 1998, Sedley 2003a, Sedley 2003b) who perceptively understood the central role played by the etymological section within the dialogue and acknowledged its substantial credibility for Plato's aims. Later, Anceschi 2007 focused on the etymological analysis of the divine names in comparison with the Derveni papyrus.

distinction between the language of the gods and the language of mortals, the true nature of the gods, as well as their true names, are known only by the gods themselves,[28] the mortals have to conduct their inquiry according to the names commonly accepted in the religious practice (particularly in prayers)[29] and in the literary tradition. Socrates points out that the validity of such denominations within the limits of human rational inquiry is granted by their tangible effects, alongside their origin, which dates back to a wise *onomatourgos* ("coiner of names"):[30] indeed, the gods show that they appreciate and enjoy (χαίρουσιν) the traditional invocations they receive from the humans in the course of the rituals – how they show their appreciation remains unclear. Socrates' attitude towards etymology is therefore ambivalent. On the one hand, the etymological interpretation exploits all the possible meanings suggested by the *facies* of divine names present within Greek polytheism. On the other hand, the interpreter knows that the cult practice and the literary tradition introduce some limitations to the hermeneutic freedom of the philosopher. Socrates provides a concrete example of his attitude when he avoids reporting improper etymologies of Aphrodite's and Dionysus' names, even though he immediately adds that the gods would jokingly accept interpretations of their names too, since they are fun-loving creatures;[31] in other terms, their nature is not restricted to the human preconceptions about them. In the *Philebus*, again with regard to Aphrodite, Socrates confirms that his anxiety and caution about the right appellatives are even "more than that of the common man"[32] and he makes an effort to call her by the name that is supposed to please the goddess the most; however, the formal reverence does not prevent him from searching for an identification between the goddess and the concept of *hedone* ("pleasure").[33]

The general respect Plato gives to the *nomos* ("common usage") in the religious field[34] is a way to keep "unity and diversity together"[35] within the Greek polytheistic perspective. In the *Cratylus*, the systematic application of etymology to the Homeric divine names leads the philosopher to explore rationally even the most sacred domain. Nonetheless, according to Plato, language itself was invented by the god Her-

28 *Cra*. 400d. The acknowledgment of human ignorance before the gods echoes a well-known Protagorean statement (DK 80 B4 = D10 L–M) and puts the etymological section in dialogue with the sophistic Athenian culture, from which Plato distances himself, insofar as he is going to promote a possible integration between philosophy and religion.

29 *Cra*. 400e.

30 About this point in the ancient debate, see Padovani 2018, 35–38.

31 *Cra*. 406c-d.

32 *Phlb*. 12c (transl. Taylor).

33 *Phlb*. 12c1–3.

34 On the limits of human knowledge, see *Cra*. 425c – it is to be read as a precautionary formula after developing the long etymological section. On the respect towards the tradition see also *Ti*. 40d; *Lg*. 886b-e.

35 Pirenne–Delforge/Pironti 2015, 41.

mes: the god's name reveals his primeval association with the act of interpreting (ἑρμηνεύω).[36] The etymological interpretation of the divine names provided in the *Cratylus* thus represents the exhortation to (re)interpret[37] even the most revered and untouchable sort of words. The search for the truth cannot accept names just the way they are, since the truth dwells behind names, but, quite paradoxically, also within them and only a relational approach can disclosure their potential. Plato suggests that the gods themselves would appreciate it as an act of philosophical *charis*, since etymology provides a deeper understanding of their nature, starting from the names by which they are commonly worshipped. Ambiguity is constitutive of this approach. Socrates asserts that he will analyse the gods' names according to their traditional configuration,[38] while suggesting that tradition itself is uncertain and his inquiry into the divine will go beyond the boundaries of common belief.[39] The etymological hermeneutics proves to please the gods, insofar as it searches for unity in the divine nature, without rejecting the plurality of nuances which spread from its multifaceted articulation within the polytheistic system. The acceptance of the fluid plurality of the meanings disclosed by the gods' appellatives is thus coessential to the discovery of their unitarian nature, since it is a feature typical of human language that it attains to knowledge through the accumulation and discussion of all the possible interpretations. Language moves in a circular motion in order to bring to new life what the linear passing of time has altered,[40] and submit the result to new interpretations. The negotiation of the boundaries between cult and philosophy through etymology generates a form of philosophical *charis*, which does not devote to the gods any hymns or libations, but interpretations about their divine nature conducted through language.[41] Thus, a better understanding of the gods' nature provides the right way to honour properly the divine, which proves to be wisdom-loving.

36 Pl. *Cra*. 407e.

37 See also Montgomery Ewegen 2013, 182–190.

38 *Cra*. 400e.

39 As the locution οἵτινές τε καὶ ὁπόθεν ("whatever their names are, wherever they come from") in the same passage makes explicit, by decontextualising the divine names from cult practice and even from literary texts.

40 *Cra*. 414c, 434b.

41 Plato cites the case of the Delphic *sententiae* devoted to the god by the seven sages (*Prt*. 343a–b). Plutarch presents his *Pythici dialogi* as primal offerings (ἀπαρχαί) of wisdom consecrated to the god (*De E* 384E; see Bonazzi 2008). See also the end of Cornutus' *Compendium*. It is worth recalling that philosophers deeply concerned with etymology also devoted hymns to the gods: for instance, as in the case of the Stoic hymn to Zeus by Cleanthes. Proclus explicitly asserts that his hymns have the same value as a ritual initiation conducted through words of wisdom (*H*. 4.2–4 and 5.12).

2.3 Ancient Scholarly Etymology: Accumulation, Selection and Reconfiguration

The scholarly approach to divine denominations is not interested in exploring the unitarian nature of the gods, but, on the contrary, it even complicates the situation of uncertainty about their identity. The ancient grammarians face the puzzling multiplicity of the divine manifestations starting from the exegesis of the Homeric text, and provide different explanations for the origin of the divine epithets employed therein. Their use of etymology is mainly etiological and works through accumulation and selection of data, so their accounts frequently register the actualisation of the cult practice happening during their times. When Aristarchus, who was not particularly concerned with the etymology of the divine names,[42] interprets the Homeric epithet of Apollo ἀφήτωρ,[43] "archer" (related to ἀφίημι, "to throw"), as if the ἀ- stood for ὁμοῦ and the real meaning of the word was the otherwise not attested ὁμοφήτωρ, "prophet" (linked to φημί, "to say"),[44] he *de facto* emphasises the mantic function of the god, which had become popular due to his oracle in Delphi,[45] and leaves aside the connotation of Apollo as a bloody warrior, in spite of the fact that the god's domains (represented by the bow, the lyre, and the prophecy) are closely interconnected.[46] Achilles' invocation to Zeus Δωδωναῖος in the *Iliad*[47] – the epithet is related to the oracular seat in Dodona – raises a controversy about the existence of two different cult sites of the god, one in Thesprotis and the other in Thessaly – according to Philoxenus' interpretation, Achilles would appeal to the latter "Pelasgic" Zeus. While the alternative epithet Φηγωναῖος, dating back to Zenodotos, highlights the connection with the φηγός ("oak"), which was supposed to pronounce divination responses, but lacks any geographical connotation, the epithet Βωδωναῖος, related to the city of Bodona in Thessaly, known to the rhetor Cinias, attests the belief in a double version of the Zeus of Dodona.[48] Although there is no evidence for the actual existence of the Thessalian Dodona, the etymological interpretations of the grammarians presumably mirror (or possibly even contribute to shape) a shared conviction about the figure and the cult of the god.[49] Finally, the opaque epithet of Apollo Σμινθεύς[50] was at the centre of an etymological debate, which also affected the cult. According to Palamidis' reconstruction, during the 2nd century BCE the epithet had been interpreted in connection with the Mysian word for "mouse", σμίνθος: the hypoth-

42 Nünlist 2019, 24.
43 Hom. *Il.* 9.404.
44 See Pl. *Cra.* 405d–e, about Ἀπόλλων / Ὁμοπολῶν.
45 See Schironi 2018, 332–333.
46 See Monbrun 2007.
47 Hom. *Il.* 16.234.
48 St. Byz. p. 246, 12–247, 16 Meineke = δ 146 Bill.
49 Pagani 2015, 252.
50 Hom. *Il.* 1.35–39.

esis was known to Aristarchus, who considered the mouse too vile (χαμαιπετής) an animal to be the origin of the god's epithet.[51] Anyhow, the scholarly discussion of this possible etymology presumably led to the "reinvention" of the related cult and to the introduction of some mice to be raised in the sanctuary devoted to the god – even if for a very short period of time.[52] We must admit that it was not a very common case, but it shows the possibility of an actual top-down interaction between etymology and cult practice, starting from the opaque meaning of divine denominations.[53]

3 The Case of Apollo Lukegenes/Lukios/Lukeios: Exploiting Onomastic Ambiguity

Since the true meaning of the divine names was far from unambiguous to the Greeks themselves, Plato suggests that we all have to learn from Homer.[54] When in the *Iliad* the Lycian hero Glaucus prays to the god Apollo so that he will come and help him in the battlefield, he appeals to him directly: κλῦθι ἄναξ ὅς που Λυκίης ἐν πίονι δήμῳ / εἴς ἢ ἐνὶ Τροίῃ · δύνασαι δὲ σὺ πάντοσ' ἀκούειν / ἀνέρι κηδομένῳ.[55] The prayer contains the double concern about the right indication of the god's local domain and the more modern one about his universal power.[56] The god to whom Glaucus appeals, as an inhabitant of the region of Lycia, is Apollo Λυκηγενής, "born in Lycia". The epithet, which has no attestations in the cult, unlike its alternative version Λύκιος,[57] refers to the homonymous region in Asia Minor, where the god originated according to the Iliadic tale.[58] The epithet appears for the first time in Homer's *Iliad* 4.101 (and again in 4.119) where Athena suggests to Pandaros, son of Lycaon, that he should offer a hecatomb to Apollo Λυκηγενής. The *scholia* conjecture that the epithet depends on Pandaros' origin – he

51 Apollon. *Lex*. 143 *s.v*. Σμινθεῦ.

52 See Palamidis 2019.

53 See also Audureau/Galoppin in this volume.

54 Pl. *Cra*. 391d.

55 *Il*. 16.514–16: "Hear me, lord, who are perhaps in the rich land of Lycia / or perhaps in Troy, but everywhere are able to hear / a man in sorrow" (Transl. Murray[2]).

56 See Mirto–Paduano 1997 *ad locum*.

57 Cf. *h. Ap*. 179–181; Pi. *P*. 1.74; Stesich. fr. 198 Page = fr. 109 Finglass; Simon. fr. 519 (55a) Page = fr. 103 Poltera; B. 13.147. About the cult of Apollo *Lukios*: Paus. 2.19.3–4; *Id*., 8.40.5; *Id*., 8.46.3; *MAMA* 5.87 = *I. Knidos* 221 A; *SEG* 46, 828.

58 Càssola 1975, 85 accepts it as a matter of fact. Walter Burkert has nonetheless persuasively demonstrated, contrary to Wilamowitz's opinion (see also *DELG* s.v. Λυκηγενής), that Apollo was not actually a Lycian god in his origin (Burkert 2011, 224). See also Graf 2009, 12; West 2013; Bierl-Latacz 2017, 55. The history of Apollo's oracles in Asia Minor is scrutinised by Parke 1985.

actually came from Lycia,[59] as his father's name, Lycaon, transparently indicates.[60] Several ancient sources confirm that Apollo was actually honoured in Lycia and that a sanctuary (ἱερόν) was devoted to his cult in Patara at least from the 5th century BCE.[61] Several mythical accounts regarding Apollo's Lycian origin were well known. The ancient *scholia* to the Iliadic passage generally justify the epithet Λυκηγενής on the basis of the local evidence (the existence of the sanctuary in Patara) or, as an alternative, of the mythical tale concerning Apollo's birth in Lycia. According to this account, Leto, trying to escape from Hera's jealousy, found refuge in Lycia, where she gave birth to her son Apollo.[62] Nonetheless, the *scholion* bT 101b1 reports an alternative version of the myth, which shows an interference with another epithet of Apollo, Λύκειος, traditionally linked to the god's identity as λυκοκτόνος, "wolf-slaying",[63] which is linked with the god's pastoral functions.[64] Indeed, the *scholion* asserts that a wolf (λύκος) led Leto to the river Xanthos, in Trojan Lycia, so that she could purify herself after she had given birth to Apollo.[65] It is hard to consider this interpretation just a misunderstanding of an otherwise transparent epithet. Aelianus, who accepts it, stresses that Leto bore the god after changing her aspect into a she-wolf: that is why in Delphi they erected a statue dedicated to a wolf and it is also the reason why Homer called the god Λυκηγενής.[66] This retrospective interpretation of the Homeric epithet has no documentary value, but it tells us much about the Greek etymological mindset, since two different epithets of the same god can be put together by virtue of their phonetic similarity. Myth and cult are then called up to provide evidence for the etymological connection.

The perception of the god's identity was therefore more fluid than we think,[67] as the ambiguous etymological interpretation of the epithet Λύκειος in Greek tragedy proves. Apollo Λύκειος was particularly revered in Argos, which was the setting of tragedies such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, or Sophocles' *Electra*. The divine figure was also familiar to the Athenian audience, since in Athens his sanctuary in the Classical age

59 *Sch.* bT 101a. Nonetheless, Aristarchus identified Pandaros' native land with Lycia in the Troad and not with the region in the south–west of Asia Minor (West 2011, 64).

60 Eust. *In Il.* 354.14.

61 A well attested tradition asserts that Apollo spent the winter months in Lycia (Hdt. 1.182; E. *Rh.* 224–225; Lyc. 920, *sch. ad locum*; Verg. *A.* 4.143–144, 376–377, Serv. *A. ad locum*, Hor. *Carm.* 3.4.61–4). According to Semos (*FGrH* 396 F 20) Apollo's birth was celebrated in Lycia, as well as in other places. *Contra* see Bryce 1991.

62 *Sch.* D101.

63 The god is explicitly denoted in this sense in S. *El.* 6–7 and Plu. *De sollertia animalium* 966A.

64 See Càssola 1975, 83.

65 According to Eust. *In Il.* 448.44, Leto would have dreamt that she was going to give birth to a wolf.

66 Ael. *NA* 10.26.

67 Burkert 2007, 186–194 acknowledges the "grundlegende Ambiguität" of the Greek perception of the two epithets Λύκειος/Λύκιος, with regard to Hdt. 9.92–96, depending on the political context as well. An anthropological and etymological (in the modern sense) study of Apollo as wolf–god is provided by Gershenson 1991.

was used for military exercises.[68] In spite of the traditional perception of Apollo Λύκειος as charged with a defensive function,[69] the tragedians exploit through the etymological interpretation of the epithet the aggressive side of his connection with the wolves, which could be linked to the Athenian cult of the god.[70] Apollo Λύκειος is generally invoked in the context of prayers in which the destruction of the enemy is intensely desired – for instance, in the *Seven against Thebes*.[71] The most significant occurrence though is Cassandra's ambiguous apostrophe to the god in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. As a priestess of Apollo, her words sound particularly incisive to the audience. Cassandra feels abandoned by the god she has served loyally until her last hour: ὀτοτοῖ Λύκει' Ἄπολλον, οἳ ἐγὼ ἐγώ,[72] she cries, by appealing to the god Λύκειος. What is the meaning of this choice among the many possible epithets, leaving aside the fact that Apollo Λύκειος had a temple on the main square of Argos?[73] There is an irreducible ambiguity in the etymology of the epithet, to which Cassandra alludes. Apart from the tragic occurrence of the epithet with an aggressive connotation, Apollo Λύκειος, as the god who defended the flocks from the wolves, was commonly perceived as a benevolent protector of human destinies.[74] Cassandra, in the hard situation she was facing, would have expected the same from her Apollo. Nonetheless, two verses after the invocation, she refers to Aegistus, her killer, as a wolf (λύκωι). In a conflictual moment of the relationship between Cassandra and the god, she catches a glimpse of the destructive side of Apollo, who does not intervene to defend her from the wolf Aegistus, as his name should imply, but even legitimates her killer's action.[75] The etymological interpretation of the epithet within tragic poetry dialogues subtly with the perception of Apollo in Athens and contributes to shaping the perception of the god's identity in the sense of bestiality and aggressiveness according to the context.

As Plutarch asserts, "practically all the Greeks identify Apollo with the Sun",[76] although with different interpretative nuances.[77] For instance, Stoic philosophy is intensely concerned with the search for physical doctrines hidden behind the divine names transmitted by the poetic tradition. Through the combination of allegoresis and etymology, the Stoics, in accordance with their philosophical principles, provide a systematic reconfiguration of the traditional images of the gods. Although their etymological interpretation of the epithet Λυκηγενής/Λύκιος as if the god were the Sun

68 Jameson 2014.
69 See *e.g.* A. *Supp*. 686.
70 Jameson 2014, 55–61.
71 A. *Th*. 145–7.
72 A. *Ag*. 1257 "Woe, woe! Lycean Apollo, ah me!". (transl. H.R. Smyth).
73 Paus. 2.19.3–4.
74 See e.g. Corn. *ND* 69; *sch*. A. *Th*. 145a.
75 See Medda 2017 *ad locum* (with further bibliography).
76 Plu. *De E apud Delphos* 386B (transl. Babbit). The identification of Apollo with the sun developed at least from the 5th century BCE; see Burkert 2011, 230; Burkert 2007, 188–189; Graf 2009, 120–121.
77 E.g. Plu. *De Pythiae oraculis* 400D.

distances it from the Lycian roots of the Homeric context, as well as from the influence of local cult practices, moving towards the substantial unification of the divine nature, they keep in mind the ambiguity contained within Apollo's denominations and further exploit the connection with the epithet Λύκειος. Apparently, the Stoics were the first who interpreted the epithet Λύκιος in terms of a solar conception of the god Apollo. According to Macrobius, both Antipater of Tarsus and Cleanthes would have explained the epithet as referring to the sun. While Antipater fully allegorises the epithet, by connecting it to λευκαίνεσθαι, "make white", since the sunlight illuminates everything, Cleanthes' solar interpretation starts from the traditional image of the god of the wolves expressed by the appellative Λύκειος: *Cleanthes Lycium Apollinem appellatum notat, quod, veluti lupi pecora rapiunt, ita ipse quoque humorem eripit radiis.*[78] Cleanthes' explanation of the epithet Λύκιος is conducted in allegorical terms (Apollo is the sun), so it gets integrated in the allegorical reading, far from preserving any localistic connotations. The interpretation presupposes the Greek etymological connection Λύκιος/λύκος, since it is said that the Sun/Apollo dries the humidity with his rays like the wolf steals the sheep from the flocks. According to the traditional cult practice, the god of wolves was nonetheless Apollo Λύκειος, and not Λύκιος. In addition, Cleanthes chooses to assimilate the god to the sun in virtue of the aggressiveness depicted about Apollo Λύκειος in Greek tragedies, rather than in consideration of the quality of the white light, as Antipater does. But Macrobius' account goes even further. He affirms that the god's solar epithets share a common root, which is to be found in the word *λύκη, a clear cast from Latin *lux* attested only in Macrobius.[79] The Homeric appellative Λυκηγενής is used to prove that the ancients had already understood the real nature of the god in terms of solar light. The same concern about Homeric authority is to be found in Heraclitus, the author of the *Allegoriae Homericae.*[80] His aim is to demonstrate that the Homeric epithets of Apollo[81] already reveal the awareness about the solar nature of the god. He considers the tale about the Lycian birth of the god to be a recent myth, which was unknown to Homer. Heraclitus refers the epithet Λυκηγενής directly to the sun and connects it to the twilight glow (τὸ λυκαυγές), or, as an alternative, to the origin of the year, which is called λυκάβας. The etymology here displayed does not precisely involve the light, but highlights the phonic affinity between the epithet and the effects of the action of the sun upon the cosmos, according to the scheme of physical allegoresis.[82]

78 Macr. 1.17.36= fr. 541 *SVF* 1.123: "Cleanthes remarks that Apollo is called "Lycius" because just as wolves snatch animals from the flocks so the sun itself takes away dampness with its rays" (transl. Kaster).

79 For the connection with light (λυκόφως) see also Ael. *NA* 10.26.

80 Heraclit. *All.* 7.10–11.

81 Not only about Λυκηγενής: see *All.* 7.

82 Heraclit. *All.* 8.5.

The case of Apollo Λυκηγενής/Λύκιος/Λύκειος shows the tendency to exploit the ambiguity of the divine onomastic attributes through the etymological interpretation, not only in philosophical discourses. Most of all, it shows the flexibility of the etymological interpretation according to the context, which conveys a dynamic theological perspective: Glaucus' prayer stresses the connection between the god and the region of Lycia, so that he comes to help the Lycian hero against his enemies;[83] the tragic interpretation of Apollo Λύκειος highlights aspects of the god's identity which are functional both to the plot and to reinforce the perception of the deity according to the Athenian civic cults of the Classical age; finally, philosophical hermeneutics display an allegorical, universalising reading of the divine, in which the epithets of the god get defunctionalized and abstracted from their original context. It becomes evident that etymology exploits the ambiguity implicit in divine polyonymy, as a reflection of the plural identities of the gods themselves. Thus, the etymological interpretation constitutes the tool for exploring and exploiting the ambiguity of names, in order to set forth a perception of the divine which is strictly connected to factors such as the literary genre, the social context, and, last but not least, the argumentative purposes of the authors. Nonetheless, the process of interpreting the names aims at attaining a deeper knowledge of the divine nature, since the ambiguity implicit in the theonyms is developed in order to reveal new aspects of the same divine figure.

4 Interculturality: Divine Names Abroad and Back Again to Greece

The ancient Mediterranean gods (and their names) were wanderers.[84] The phenomenon has been acknowledged by the Greeks since the archaic age, but it increases significantly, with real effects upon cult practice, by the age of Alexander and finds new blood in the multicultural context of the Roman Empire. Through the search for equivalences among Greek and foreign gods (*interpretatio*)[85] and the juxtaposition of names, the onomastic interchanges get integrated in the religious horizon of the Greeks. The process of international translatability[86] of divine names in the ancient Mediterranean polytheism implies a modification of the perception of the gods. As emerges from cult evidence, the accumulation of appellatives intended to honour the gods overshadows the importance of the single divine name.[87] The appellatives become attributes of the

83 See also Herrero de Jáuregui 2021, 193.

84 See Parker 2017; Bonnet/Bricault 2016; Montiglio 2005.

85 Graf 1998; Ando 2005.

86 Assmann 1997, 23–54.

87 Assmann 1997, 48. See also Graf 1998, 1042: "Wenn die Namen übersetzbar sind, muß hinter den verschiedenen Namen eine einzige göttliche Essenz stehen".

cosmic divine nature, according to the conviction that the same gods are worshipped everywhere under different names. The formula "the god X is our god Y", attested since the times of Herodotus, thus promotes an osmosis among deities from different countries and gets exploited for political issues from the Hellenistic age onwards.[88] Nonetheless, the etymological interpretation of the divine names in the intercultural dimension follows a different pattern from the act of naming, which is obviously the basis for further interpretation. The etymological interpretation accepts intercultural polyonymy as a matter of fact; indeed, it displays a comparative inquiry through language into the unitarian divine nature to which the names from different countries allude. In a sense, the etymological interpretation restricts the field, since it aims at understanding the unitarian truth which lies behind the multiplicity of names, whereas the cult chains of invocation amplify the extent of the gods' spheres of influence.

In spite of the abundant evidence of comparative readings of Greek and foreign deities with regard to their image and related cult practice,[89] the etymological interpretation of the divine names seems to apply only to select cultural areas, basically Egypt and Rome, which had the closest relationship with Greece for historical and political reasons.[90] A reason for this selective approach could lie in the fact that the etymological interpretation requires the direct knowledge of different cult traditions and languages. Although the conspicuous presence of non-native Greek speaking intellectuals in the Hellenistic kingdoms and most of all in the frame of the Roman Empire made it easier to examine in depth foreign religious systems, the possibility to travel and wander and know directly or indirectly other traditions seems to have been the privilege of a few intellectuals. This explanation proves to be quite unsatisfactory, since the evidence of intercultural etymological interpretation generally – though not always[91] – reconducts foreign theonyms to Greek linguistic roots.[92] A perhaps more probable, though quite paradoxical, motivation for the relatively scarce use of the etymological interpretation of foreign divine names is connected with the process of ono-

88 The god Sarapis was "invented" by the Ptolemies in order to favour the integration between Greeks and Egyptians; regarding his wandering to Greece, see Bonnet/Bricault 2016, 119–124.

89 Greek allegorical interpretations of foreign deities are attested as well, e.g. Chaeremon about the Egyptian gods; Philo Byblius about Phoenician theology. An interesting case is represented by the Babylonian mythology under the Seleukids (see Anagnostou–Laoutides 2022).

90 Egypt has traditionally been considered by the Greeks as the ideal partner for religious comparison, and the cradle of religious wisdom; the name of Isis was scrutinised by the Greeks since a very archaic epoch. By the age of Alexander, the osmosis between Greek and Egyptian culture became even closer (see Vasunia 2001; Stephens 2003).

91 Philo of Alexandria and Philo Byblius give the correct translation of Hebrew and Phoenician names, and their interpretation is based upon their considerable knowledge of such idioms. It is controversial as to whether Plutarch actually knew Egyptian and Latin, although it is highly probable.

92 It also depends on the Stoic development of the etymological interpretation, which, in their hands, became a tool to discover the πρώτιστα ὀνόματα ("the very first names") within Greek language, as if it were the universal idiom.

mastic accumulation described above. Jan Assmann has highlighted how the perception of one universal religious truth could lead to the relativity of institutions and denominations.[93] Nonetheless, there actually existed ambitious programmes of religious intercultural translation which often resorted to the etymological interpretation of foreign divine names, as in the case of Plutarch.[94] In any case, the Greek deities remain of the greatest interest for intercultural comparisons.[95]

Religion represents the core of the Greek intercultural approach and the appeal to foreign wisdom is crucial to the Greek theological perspective.[96] By carefully examining foreign rituals and divine names, the Greek authors (mainly philosophers and historians) often look for the legitimisation of their statements through interreligious comparisons, in order to criticise or shed new light upon their own religious tradition.[97] The Greek etymological interpretation of the divine names thus represents an interesting case study in the context of intercultural interchanges within Mediterranean polytheism, insofar as it integrates the universalising tendency implicit in interculturality with the specificity of the Greek theological approach, which is enriched and confirmed by the recourse to interreligious comparisons. The end of Macrobius' argument devoted to Apollo Λύκιος, which was plausibly derived from Porphyry,[98] introduces a comparison with an Egyptian testimony of the cult of the god, which corroborates the derivation of the epithet from λύκος in the context of the solar interpretation of the god.

> Λύκον autem solem vocari etiam Lycopolitana Thebaidos civitas testimonio est: quae pari religione Apollinem itemque lupum, hoc est λύκον, colit, in utroque solem venerans, quod hoc animal rapit et consumit omnia in modum solis ac plurimum oculorum acie cernens tenebras noctis evincit.[99]

It is a matter of fact that the Lycopolitans venerated the wolf as a god, whether he was the jackal-god Wepwawet[100] or, more probably, according to Macrobius' account,

93 Assmann 1997, 53.

94 See Strobach 1997; Padovani 2018; Padovani 2020.

95 An interesting example of etymologization of a foreign divine name is provided by Herodotus (4.59), where he states that Zeus is called *Papaios* by the Scythians, since *pappas* in Greek means "father". On this (unique) case of Herodotean etymologization of a divine name see Munson 2005, 44–45, and Palamidis in this volume (p. 595).

96 See the classic study of Momigliano 1980, who nonetheless leaves aside the relationship with Egypt.

97 There were also cases of criticism of the Greek ignorance in favour of alien wisdom, e.g. Ph. Bybl. *FGrH* 3c.790 F 2 = Eus. *PE* 1.10.9, or Iamblichus' praise of the Egyptian βάρβαρα ὀνόματα ("barbaric names") (*Myst*. 7.4.4; 7.5; see Shaw 2016).

98 Filoni 2021, 231–241, with further bibliography.

99 Macr. 1.17.40: "That the sun is called *lukos* is attested by the community of Lycopolis in the Thebaid, which pays cult to both Apollo and the wolf – that is, *lukos* – in both cases worshipping the sun, because the animal snatches and consumes all things, like the sun, and overcomes night's shadows in seeing a great deal with its sharp eyes" (transl. Kaster).

100 Wepwawet was venerated in Lycopolis (modern Asyut) according to the testimony of Plu. *De Iside et Osiride* 380B (although he does not report the name of the god); see Gwyn Griffiths 1970, 547; Str. 17.1.40 refers to the wolf (λύκος) as a god in Lycopolis.

Osiris. According to a myth recalled by Diodorus Siculus, the god came out of Hades having taken on the guise of a wolf in order to help Isis and Horus against Typhon.[101] Osiris was sometimes identified with the sun[102] and on this basis was considered *poluophthalmos*, "with many eyes".[103] In any case, the account does not refer to Apollo's traditional Egyptian counterpart Horus,[104] which makes Macrobius' assertion about the cult of Apollo in Lycopolis quite dubious,[105] even though the presence of the Greek god's appellative in Egypt is not Macrobius' brainwave, but is also based on material evidence. Nonetheless, it regards the appellative Λύκειος (and not Λύκιος) which is attested at Luxor in Thebes: it designates the recipient of a statue portraying a jackal.[106] Macrobius' identification starts from the sound analogy in the Greek language between Λύκιος and λύκος (and, in addition, the name of the city of Lycopolis, the "city of wolves").[107] The point of convergence between the two divine figures is thus first of all identified in their names, interpreted according to the Greek language. The etymological interpretation supports the idea that the same god honoured both by the Greeks and by the Egyptians is actually the sun. Indeed, the wolf consumes its victims like the sun does, and has many eyes, so that it can see well also through the darkness.[108] According to this reconstruction, a) the Egyptians actually worship the same god whom the Greeks call Apollo Λύκιος, b) they associate him with the wolf, which the Greeks call λύκος, and as a symbol of the sun by virtue of an interpretation which is close to Cleanthes' one, but also assumes Egyptian characteristics of the god,[109] not least the allusion to the victory of Osiris over the darkness of the Underworld. Even though the interpretation of the epithet makes reference to cult practice and religious iconography, it is the Greek etymology which makes the whole argument coherent, by freely associating Apollo Lycius, the wolf, Osiris as an Underworld and solar deity, and the sun, in accordance with the aim of validating the philosophical conception of the god Apollo as the sun. Thus, the intercultural comparison conducted through etymology shows the true universal nature that lies behind the names of the god, though the identity of the god had already been determined by philosophical speculation and by the allegorical pattern. Nonetheless, the intercultural comparison contributes to focusing on the aspects of the gods' identities which are apparently shared by other civilisations. In spite of modern perplexity in the face of this argu-

101 D.S. 1.88.6–7 = Hecat. *FGrH* 264 F 25.

102 Plu. *De Iside et Osiride* 371F-372A.

103 Plu. *De Iside. et Osiride* 354F-355A; D.S. 1.11.2.

104 Plu. *De Iside et Osiride* 375F–376A.

105 Nonetheless, the Greek presence in Lycopolis is attested since the Ptolemaic era (see Montevecchi 2000), and we cannot exclude that a cult of Apollo actually existed there.

106 Parker 2017, 102, n. 104.

107 On the origin of the toponym, see D.S. 1.88.7.

108 See also Ael. *NA* 10.27: "And they say that the Wolf is beloved of the Sun" (transl. Scholfield).

109 The Greek description of the sun does not imply that he has many eyes, unlike Osiris, but that he sees and knows everything (Hom. *Il.* 3.277; *Od.* 11.109).

mentative strategy, which shows little respect for the local specificity of the cults,[110] it confirms the basic tension between etymology and cult polyonymy. Whereas the act of naming and creating juxtapositions of intercultural divine appellatives in the cult practice always preserves an important civic or political value for the Mediterranean communities,[111] the Greek etymological interpretation of the divine names proves to be the concern of restricted intellectual elites. Far from merely representing a tool of validation of intercultural intersections, etymology corresponds with the exigencies of a universalistic theological inquiry, which is in a relationship of continuous osmosis with cult practice, but manipulates it according to a perspective which remains firmly anchored within the fold of Greek theology.

5 Conclusions: Etymology and Polytheism

To sum up, if etymology is intended by the Greek intellectuals mainly as a tool for getting to know the divine, in fact it is a way of coping with it. In other words, the main object of the etymological interpretation fails to reach the epistemological truth about the gods, which is unattainable. The question: "What lies behind a divine name?" remains unanswered. Nonetheless, etymology tells us much more about what is in a divine name, in the sense of the possibilities of interpretation the onomastic dimension displays within the theological discourse. Since the resort to etymology implies the concomitant cooperation with cult practice, myth, epic poetry, this tool for (re-)thinking the divine describes more accurately instances which are intrinsic to Greek polytheism more than to the divine nature. Etymology shows the eminently dynamic and relational character of Greek polytheism, since the divine names are not just an object of devotion, but actually the theatre where a challenging relationship with the divine is possible. Indeed, to interpret a divine name means to take part in the linguistic hermeneutic process which constantly shapes anew the gods' identities and offers to the polytheistic system the occasion to critically rethink and renew its features according to the context without cancelling the tension towards a unitarian consideration of the gods and the respect for the religious tradition.

110 Macrobius makes it even clearer in the following case of Apollo πατρῷος, 1.17.42: "They named Apollo Patrôios ["Ancestral"], not because of a belief specific to a single nation or community, but as the source of generation for all things [. . .]". (transl. Kaster).

111 See particularly Parker 2017, 77–112 and 154–172.

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