

What is an act of god? Amorphous Epiphanies and Divine Bilingualism.

Georgia PETRIDOU

It is pointless to deny gods when confronted with forces that act as the gods are supposed to act, remarked C. Jung. This paper looks at narratives that account for astounding natural phenomena and extreme meteorological conditions, often of a catastrophic nature, such as storms, avalanches, floods, precipitations, drought, etc., which are interpreted as acts of god and, effectively, as signs of divine manifestation and/or intervention. My primary focus will be a number epigraphic and literary narratives from the Hellenistic and early Imperial times, where extraordinary natural phenomena and disasters of this sort are conceptualized as signs (*σημεία*) of divine presence and intervention (*ἐπιφάνεια*, *δύναμις*, *ἀρετή*, *ἐνέργεια*). Historians of Greek religion often refer to this kind of epiphany as ‘miracles’, a term that does not appear to be free from misleading Judeo-Christian connotations and which, therefore, is to be avoided. Instead, I propose to use the term ‘amorphous epiphanies’ in the sense that the human perceivers of these epiphanies do not encounter the divine in any particular form. On the contrary, the whole of nature, the earth and the sky, become the canvass on which the divine ‘paints’ his/her presence in culturally meaningful terms by means of a variety of natural elements and forces.

These amorphous epiphanies appear to be particularly popular in a siege context, and, consequently, are often perceived by two different communities: the besiegers and the besieged, who, more often than not, are two different peoples with different languages and cultural traditions. The three main parts of the paper will discuss respectively a) the amorphous epiphany of Zeus Panamarios at Stratonikeia in the battle against the Parthians in 39 BC (*IStratonikeia* 10), b) that of Athena Lindia during the siege of Lindos in 490 BC by the Persians in the so-called Lindian Chronicle (*Lindos* II 2), and finally c) the salvific epiphany of Apollo during the siege of Delphi by the Gauls in 279 BC in the so-called Delphic *Soteria* (*FD* III 1:483). The common denominator in all three inscriptions is that by manifesting their presence through extreme forces of nature and severe weather conditions, the local poliadic gods decide to speak a *koine*, i.e. a common language, a common sign system that could be deciphered by both those defending a territory and those attacking. More importantly, in the last two epigraphic sources, the epiphanic deity appears to be ‘speaking two different languages’, the local dialect of the first person/corporeal manifestation to the besieged and the intercultural language of natural disasters to the besiegers.

Finally, comparative material from literary sources of an early or late imperial era will be brought into the discussion to provide further evidence for these remarkably diverse semeiotic strategies employed by the same deity to deliver his/her message across different perceivers, which can also be described as ‘doubly-phrased’ (or is it doubly-painted?) epiphanies. A tentative answer to the obvious question as to why this happens will be provided: different semeiotic strategies are employed where the cultural preconceptions of the perceiver will not allow for the divine message to be fully understood, although one must bear in mind that limitations related to the different moods and registers of the individual generic context of the narratives also apply. Despite the fact that the aforementioned literary and epigraphic sources have been commented on individually, a comprehensive study on this sort of amorphous epiphanies in a military context as a whole is yet to appear.