

THE IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM OF FIRE IN THE HOMERIC HYMNS AND IN GREEK CHORAL LYRIC

by

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ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the imagery of fire in the Homeric Hymns and in selected works of the Greek lyric poets, with a particular emphasis on Pindar and Bacchylides. It demonstrates how choral lyric authors use the symbolism of fire established in the Greek epic tradition and philosophical reflection, imbuing it with new meanings and painting images which illustrate the ambiguous nature of the element of fire, based on metaphors, similes and ephrases.

In the minds of the ancient Greeks, fire was primarily an attribute of divine power and a symbol of immortality. Zeus, the highest ruler over gods and men, expressed his anger by hurling thunder and lightning. Deceived by Prometheus at the distribution of the meat of sacrificial victims, he took it out on humans by depriving them of using the fire that was originally kindled by rubbing pieces of ash wood together¹. Prometheus stole the divine spark from under the wheels of the chariot of Helios or, in another version of the myth, from Hephaestus' forge, in order to give mortals, who found themselves helpless in the face of nature's might, the "gleam of unwearying fire"², thus granting them power over all the creatures on earth³. Similarly Heraclitus identified fire, in which he saw the first principle of the world (ἀρχή), with a deity manifesting as lightning⁴. Fire, which, so to speak, consumes and creates the whole world, occupies an important place in Heraclitus' concept of the cosmos⁵.

In the works of the Greek lyric poets, fire tends to be associated with four deities – Hephaestus, Zeus, Helios and Apollo. From among them, Hephaestus

¹ Hes. *Theog.* 563.

² Hes. *Theog.* 566, transl. by H.G. EVELYN-WHITE.

³ Pointing out the importance of fire in the process of humanity becoming civilised, KERÉNYI (2000: 107 ff. and 126 ff.) also stresses the destructive influence Prometheus' gift had on mortals resulting from its being part of the realm of the gods.

⁴ Heraclit. fr. B 64 DIELS-KRANZ: "Thunderbolt steers all things" (transl. by G.S. KIRK).

⁵ Heraclit. fr. B 90 DIELS-KRANZ: "All things are an equal exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods are for gold and gold is for goods" (transl. by G.S. KIRK). For an interpretation of Heraclitus' teachings, see REALE (1987: 52 f.)