

## Rain Magic in Ancient Greece

by R.L. Fowler

Greece for most of the year is hot and dry. Especially in ancient times, before the development of modern agricultural techniques, people were very much dependent on the forces of nature for their survival. Against drought, blight, and disease they were largely helpless. In such circumstances, it is natural that they would turn to whatever means they could for help.

The use of magical acts and chants for rain-making is attested the world over. In old Greece, Zeus was the god of rain, and rain-magic is naturally found in his cult. The usual techniques are recognizable as belonging to the class of "sympathetic magic." That is, the magical act in some way imitates the desired result, so that nature will act in sympathy with what you are doing. Thus, if you want it to rain, you should imitate clouds, thunder, and of course rain; the latter can be done by (for instance) soaking a leafy branch in a cauldron of water and then shaking it to produce a thick spray. All such actions must be accompanied by an appropriately eerie atmosphere and plenty of mysterious magic formulae.

To imitate the clouds the best possible instrument is a sheepskin. Theophrastus, Aristotle's pupil, in his book on weather states bluntly that "when the clouds look like sheepskins, it's going to rain." Latin poets accordingly refer to clouds as *vellera*, fleeces. A mountaintop is an excellent place to work the magic, since it's the closest you can get to Zeus. On the hottest day of the year, a group of men would toil to the top of Mount Pelion in Thessaly wearing sheepskins — not a job one would

readily volunteer for! The torrents of perspiration such a hard climb would produce might be an intentional part of the proceedings.

At Krannon, also in Thessaly, drought was cured by shaking a bronze chariot. The city's coins have a picture of this chariot, often with an amphora placed between the wheels. Presumably it would have been filled with water, so that shaking the chariot would cause water to spill out, thus imitating rain. The rattling of a bronze chariot also recalls the myth of Salmoneus, who drove about in a similar contraption and blasphemously claimed to be Zeus. The crashing of the chariot was supposed to be thunder, and he hurled torches in imitation of lightning. For his impiety Zeus incinerated him with a real thunderbolt. Several scholars have suggested that the myth is the "aition" for rain-magic; that is, it is the story told in connection with such a ritual to "explain" its origin to the people.

The aegis of Zeus may also in origin be an instrument of rain-magic. The aegis in poetry and art is Zeus' armour (it is also worn by his daughter Athena), but it is not made of metal; rather, it is a goatskin cloak worn over the upper body ("goatskin" is what the word actually means in Greek). Goats are not as fleecy as sheep, and the use of goatskins is nowhere actually attested for rain-magic in historical cults, but the standard description in Homer of Zeus shaking the aegis in the face of his enemies, who flee in terror at the apparition, makes one think of the sudden onset of a violent thunderstorm. Similarly, when the Greek army is stricken with a plague, the poet says that Apollo is slaying them with his arrows. One of Homer's common ways of referring to Zeus (one of his epic "formulae") is as "the cloud-compeller" or "the cloud-gatherer."

Pausanias, who travelled around Greece in the second century AD and wrote a wonderfully detailed account of what he saw, reports on many out-of-the-way places and practices. In Arcadia (the isolated highlands of the Peloponnesian peninsula), he reports an interesting ritual of rain-magic. In a drought, the priest of Zeus Lykaios would go to a spring called Hagno on Mount Lykaion. There he offers prayer and sacrifice, then takes an oak branch (oak being the tree of Zeus) and rests it on the surface of the pond, being careful not to immerse it completely. He then stirs the water; a misty vapour results, which gradually grows in size until it swamps the whole of Arcadia and welcome rain ends the drought.

At Eleusis near Athens, the site of ancient agrarian mysteries, rain-magic is known. At some point in the ceremony, the celebrants looked to the sky and shouted "rain!" and then to the earth and shouted "conceive!". The two words make a nice chant in Greek, *hye kye*; all good magic formulae have a musical quality. We are told by another authority that at some point in the

ceremony two jugs of water were spilled onto the earth and allowed to flow away in a cleft. Perhaps these two items are really one — the chant followed by the pouring of water as a basic act of sympathetic magic. The Mysteries of Eleusis occurred just at the time that the crops were being sowed — which is when you especially need rain. A similar cleft in the ground at Athens was said to be the spot at which all the waters of the great flood of Deukalion (the Greek Noah) drained away into the earth. Perhaps rain-magic was performed there too; the myth of the flood (the "aition") will have assured the priests of the effectiveness of their action. The earth would drink deep and long of the nourishing waters.

Another Attic myth (Attica being the countryside around Athens) may be plausibly interpreted as an aition of rain-magic. Kephalos, an early king, was in the habit of going to a mountain-top and calling on a certain Nephele. "Nephele" is the Greek word for "cloud." His wife mistook this for a woman's name and thought he was being unfaithful. She hid in the bushes and when she heard him call on Nephele rushed forward to confront him. Startled, he hurled his spear and killed her. I imagine that a ritual existed whereby a priest went up a mountain and used his spear for rain-magic, perhaps by stirring a spring as in the Arcadian ritual described above. The tragic end of the story is meant as a warning not to follow him, but to leave him to do his awesome magic undisturbed.

Many other instances of rain-magic could be cited from ancient Greece. But it may be interesting to close with a parallel from modern Greece. Many ancient practices have survived, particularly in the country; the names of the gods may change, but the idea remains the same. J.C. Lawson, in an intriguing book entitled *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge 1910), tells the following story of an encounter on Thera (modern Santorini):

*I chanced one day upon a very old woman squatting on the extreme edge of the cliff above the great flooded crater which, though too deep for anchorage, serves the main town of the island as harbour — a place more fascinating in its hideousness than any I have seen. Wondering at her dangerous position, I asked her what she was doing; and she replied simply enough that she was making rain. It was two years since any had fallen, and as she had the reputation of being a witch of unusual powers and had procured rain in previous droughts, she had been approached by several of the islanders who were anxious for their vineyards. Moreover she had been prepaid for her work — a fact which spoke most eloquently for the general belief in her; for the Greek is slow enough (as doubtless she knew) to pay for what he has got, and never prepays what he is not sure of getting. True, her profession had its risks, she said; for on one occasion,*

*the only time that her spells had failed, some of her disappointed clients whose money she had not returned tried to burn her house over her one night while she slept. But business was business. Did I want some rain too? To ensure her good will and further conversation, I invested a trifle, and tried to catch the mumbled incantations which followed on my behalf. Of these however beyond a frequent invocation of the Virgin (Mary) and a few words about water and rain I could catch nothing; but I must acknowledge that her charms were effectual, for before we parted the thunder was already rolling in the distance, and the rain which I had bought spoilt largely the rest of my stay in the island.*