Book Review:
THE EARLY GREEK CONCEPT OF THE SOUL

by Jan Bremmer
Princeton UP, 1983. xii + 154. pp.
Two Appendices. Index. Selected Bibliography.
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Reviewed by Jerome S. Arkenberg
Department of History
California State University—Fullerton

While at first glance this study may not seem germane to modern Hellenic polytheists, those particularly interested in reconstructing this ancient religion should find it of particular interest, as Bremmer notes that the ancient Hellenes viewed both the soul (*psyche*) and human psychological makeup entirely differently than we, here in the West, do today. The study is divided into two parts. The first examines the souls of the living—the free soul, the ego souls, and soul animals. The second part examines the conceptions of the souls of the dead. Bremmer includes two appendices, one on the soul of plants and animals, the other on the wandering soul in Western folk tradition.

In sum, the Hellenes, as first enunciated in Homer, conceived of four separate "souls"—"a free soul, corresponding with *psyche,* and body souls, corresponding with *thymos, nous,* and *menos*" (p. 13), a distinction which is common to many pre-modern peoples, including the Anglo-Saxons. The free soul, or *psyche,* is so integral to the human being that without it one cannot survive. For the most part, the Hellenes believed that the *psyche* rarely manifested itself, but would usually flee the body at a time of crisis, causing immediate collapse—a swoon or faint, if it returned; or death, if it did not. However, the *psyche* is not the *aion,* or "life-stuff" (which Bremmer does not adequately or clearly define); nonetheless, when the *psyche* leaves the body and does not return, the body dies. Despite several assertions that the free soul has a non-physical mode of existence in dreams, faints, and various forms of unconsciousness including the trance, Bremmer notes that, as in death, the use of *psyche* in Homer does not support this conception. The Homeric *psyche,* Bremmer contends, is a transitional concept, between the archaic "breath-soul", which wanders away when the body is passive, to a post-Homeric "unitary-soul"—*ie*, both the free soul as the soul of the dead, and the breath soul which wanders away during various forms of unconsciousness. This concept of the wandering free soul persisted for much of the Hellenic Archaic age, as seen in a number of legends related by Pindar, Hippocrates, and Xenophon, including bilocation, not unlike the New Testament stories of the raising of Lazarus or Jesus' appearance to the two disciples travelling on the road to Emmaus.

The ego soul (usually held to represent living consciousness), Bremmer states, most

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frequently occurs in Homer as the *thymos.* The latter is the opposite of the *psyche*; *ie,* it is only active when the body is awake. It is also the source of all emotions, and the force that urges people to act. Thought to reside primarily in the chest (and in the *phrenes*—the lungs or diaphragm), it normally stays in its place and does not wander about—when the body is passive, it does not leave the body, but just shuts down. Another aspect of the ego soul was known to the Hellenes as the *nous*—the mind, or "an act of mind, a thought or a purpose." Though always found in the chest, it is not a material thing—*ie,* it cannot be struck, pierced, or blown out like the *psyche* or *thymos.* Finally, there is the *menos*—the momentary impulse to act, only rarely controllable by the individual, such as the "battle fury" of warriors.

Regarding the dead, Bremmer notes the belief that they "moved and spoke like the living and that the soul of the dead could not move but instead flitted and squeaked" (p. 73). Death occurred when the *psyche* left the body and failed to return. The *nous,* though, is never mentioned in connection with death, though the *thymos* and *menos,* as the *psyche,* flit away. This meant, for the Hellenes, that funeral rites were not simply a means for disposal of the body, but of performing various rites intended to aid the soul in its passage from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Without these rites, the soul could not pass on—thus the emphasis on recovery of bodies for burial, or, as an added punishment, a refusal of burial for those condemned and executed.

Bremmer contends that the ancient Hellenes conceived of their personalities, and their motivational forces, as structured entirely different than the way we, in the post-Freudian West, do today. Only in Classical Athens, in the 5th century BCE does the concept arise that humans can determine their own courses of action—this perhaps may be a consequence of the growth of literacy and political consciousness, as once notably stated by Jack Goody and Ian Watt in their pioneering study "The Consequences of Literacy" (*Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1962-63): 304-345). For all those interested in this subject, in the funerary rites of the ancient Hellenes, or with shamanistic practices, this study should prove richly rewarding.