

Persephone gathers three sheaves of wheat and three poppies, takes the torch Demeter has prepared for her, and begins her descent down into a deep chasm into the underworld. After a long journey, she comes to a place where many spirits are milling about, moaning. She moves among them, and after preparing an altar, she beckons them to her, saying, "If you come to me, I will initiate you into your new world." As each spirit approaches, she embraces the form and looks deeply into the eyes, saying: "You have waxed into the fullness of life, and waned into darkness; may you be renewed in peace and wisdom."

After several months, Persephone decides she will return again to the upper world. Her mother Demeter has grown sorrowful, her bountiful energies departing from the earth, leaving it barren, with no crops growing to feed the humans. But as Persephone approaches, the flowers of the earth rise up in joyful song, and as Demeter and Persephone run to embrace each other, the birds and animals begin to sing, "Persephone returns, Persephone returns." And as the mother and daughter dance and dance, new growth springs up in the fields, and the humans join in the rejoicing. And each time Persephone goes back down into the underworld, the mortals share with Demeter the bleak season of her daughter's absence; and as she rejoins her mother in the spring, they are renewed by the signs of Persephone's return.³⁴

This version explains the cycles of earthly abundance, barrenness, and renewal; the life experience of mother and daughter; as well as the seasons of human experience, from birth to maturation to death and beyond. The joyful reunion of the daughter with the mother/Goddess may have symbolized the human soul's return, after the death of the body, to its universal origin or loving source.

Sexuality and Marriage

The ancients also saw sexuality, or marriage, as an initiation into life's mysteries.³⁵ Sexuality has often been described as an embrace which brings death to the ego and renewal of the body and spirit through love. Sometimes sexuality is experienced as a descent into the underworld. Sometimes these rites of passage are voluntarily undertaken. Sometimes they befall us against our will. It appears that women and men of the prepatriarchal epoch had a very different experience of sexuality than during the epoch of patriarchy.

According to the Homeric poet, Demeter was first a goddess in Crete before arriving in Greece. Homer and Hesiod also speak of Demeter as a goddess in Crete.³⁶ The early agricultural rites of Demeter in Crete, according to Harrison, were mimetic, that is to say, the people magically evoked by

³⁴ After Spretnak, pp. 103-110.

³⁵ Meier, pp. 82-83.

³⁶ "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," 2.123-125, in Evelyn-White, pp. 296-297; Hesiod *Theogony* 969, in Evelyn-White, p. 151; Harrison, p. 566.

their own actions the fertility of the Earth. This magic probably included invocations, singing, dancing and lovemaking, the people celebrating their own sexuality in harmony with the creative powers of nature, as natural, human and divine. A story related by Homer in the *Odyssey* tells of the Earth/Grain Mother making love with Iason of Crete:

So too fair-haired Demeter once in the spring
did yield
To love, and with Iason lay in a new-ploughed
field.

In Homer's poetry, Demeter yielded not to Iason, but to her own feelings of love, an experience conveyed by the word *thoumos*, one word translated as "spirit, passion, feeling." "Demeter yielded to her spirit/passion/feeling . . . and mingled with him in lovemaking and sleep."³⁷

Iason, we are told, later takes the Mysteries north to Samothrace (which borders Thrace); his sister, Harmonia, takes the rite of the *hieros gamos* or "sacred marriage" to the Greek city of Thebes, travelling north along the path taken by Demeter across the Aegean islands.³⁸ These stories of the cultural transmission of the Mysteries indicate that the belief in sexuality as an experience both human and divine was fairly widespread around the Mediterranean.

Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, is given special devotion in the rites of Demeter at Eleusis, and she is associated with shrines to Demeter or Persephone in various other regions of the Mediterranean. We learn from the sixth century B.C.E. poetry of Sappho that the Goddess of Love was at home on the island of Crete, from where Sappho calls her favorite goddess to visit her, with these lyrics:

Leave Crete and come to this holy temple
where the pleasant grove of apple trees
circles an altar smoking with frankincense . . .

And here, Queen Aphrodite, pour
heavenly nectar into gold cups
and fill them gracefully
with sudden joy.³⁹

The offspring of Demeter and Iason, according to Hesiod, was a son named Plutus. It seems fitting that Demeter's child be named "plenty," or "abundance"; and that he be held, as he was often depicted in artworks, in the arms of Irene, Goddess of Peace. Abundance is also said to have been one of the names for Demeter. It is ironic then, that "Pluto," the "rich one" or

³⁷ Homer *Odyssey* 5.125, in Harrison, p. 564; Homer 5.126, in Friedrich, p. 161.

³⁸ Harrison, p. 565, n. 3; Diodorus 5.45.

³⁹ Willis Barnstone, trans., *Sappho: Lyrics in the Original Greek* (New York: Anchor Books, 1965), p. 29.

"wealth-giver", becomes one of the names given to Hades, abductor of Persephone and brother of the war-god Zeus.⁴⁰

The archeological record of Crete, during both the Neolithic (ca. 6000–3000 B.C.E.) and the Bronze Age (ca. 3000–1200), indicates that the matrilineal people of Crete lived peacefully for thousands of years. On this water-protected island there were no walled fortifications, weapons of war, or images of war. Nor was there evidence of military violence from Crete's earliest settlement—probably by peoples of Anatolia in the late seventh millennium B.C.E.—until toward the end of the Bronze Age, with the Mycenaean domination, ca. 1450/1400 B.C.E. (The single possible exception is an invasion around 3000 B.C.E.) While knives or daggers, spears, swords and shields increased during the Bronze Age, all these were used in hunting. There continued to be no fortifications, signs of violent destruction (other than by natural calamity), or military colonization overseas until the Mycenaean period.⁴¹

The farmers of Crete cultivated crops of wheat and barley, as well as grapes, olives, figs, apples, plums, dates and other fruit. The main tool used for cultivation, the labrys, or double axe, was also a major religious symbol, and was often stylized as a butterfly. They raised cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. These Goddess-centered peoples developed a rich and diverse cultural, commercial, spiritual and social life. Some of the world's finest art comes from the high civilization of Crete, expressing a great love of nature and human form.⁴²

Bronze Age (or Minoan) Crete was the cultural and commercial trade center of the Mediterranean, with trade goods exchanged between Greece, Egypt, Phoenicia, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia. Rohrllich writes:

In Minoan Crete, trade was not superseded by military conquest as the primary means of gaining access to important resources, and the kin-based clan structures were not radically transformed to serve the state. Thus, the island remained at peace both at home and abroad, and Minoans in the several social strata continued to live relatively independent lives within the class system in which women played

⁴⁰ Harrison, pp. 565–566; Avery, p. 905; Walker, p. 218.

⁴¹ Rohrllich, "Women in Transition: Crete and Sumer," pp. 38–39, 42–43, 46; Eisler, chap. 3; Marymay Downing, "Women and Religion in Prehistoric Crete," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 1, (1984); R. W. Willetts, *The Civilization of Ancient Crete* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 48, 82–84, chaps. 5, 7–9. These are excellent sources regarding the peaceful, prosperous and artistic culture of Goddess-revering Crete.

Farnell identifies the Cretan Mountain Mother/Goddess as a "war goddess," but this is not plausible. See Farnell, p. 296 and Pl. XXXIII; and Downing, p. 18 and n. 51.

⁴² Rohrllich, pp. 42–46; Eisler, chap. 3; Agnes Carr Vaughn, *The House of the Double Axe* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1959), p. 42.

The labrys is also found at Neolithic sites in Anatolia, including Çatal Hüyük, and also in artwork at Eleusis and at Mycenae, where it was held exclusively by women (Mellaart, p. 42; Friedrich, p. 152).

crucial roles. . . . Peace endured for 1,500 years . . . in an age of incessant warfare.⁴³

The archeological record indicates that the communities of Crete gave to women the primary positions of spiritual and social leadership, late into the Bronze Age, as clan mothers, priestesses and goddesses. The male god was represented by the bull, and the horns of consecration were another of the major symbols of Cretan culture. Women and men shared together the economic and spiritual life; for example, we find in the artwork that both women and men were ship captains, and both joined in the acrobatic bull-leaping games.⁴⁴

Burials in Crete typically were in communal "tholos" tombs, were neither costly nor ostentatious (until late in the Palace period), and did not involve animal or human sacrifice.⁴⁵ The ritual sacrifice of animals, however, especially the bull, did eventually enter the collective life of the people of Crete. The animal sacrifice depicted in the well-known sarcophagus from Hagia Triada is dated to ca. 1400 B.C.E., during the period of Mycenaean domination. And the legendary human sacrifices to the Minotaur, during the reign of King Minos, called by Homer a "familiar of Zeus," also occurred during the period of Mycenaean domination.⁴⁶ Theseus of Athens, who with Adriane's assistance was said to have killed the Minotaur, is dated to ca. 1250/1200 B.C.E.⁴⁷

⁴³ Rohrllich, p. 50.

⁴⁴ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 14; Jacquetta Hawkes, *Dawn of the Gods: Minoan and Mycenaean Origins* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 109, chaps. 2, 3; and Burkert, pp. 39–43.

⁴⁵ Colin Renfrew, *The Emergence of Civilization: The Cyclades and the Aegean in the Third Millennium B. C.* (London: Methuen & Co., 1972), pp. 432, 321; Hawkes, pp. 72–73.

⁴⁶ Homer *Odyssey* 19. 178–179.

⁴⁷ Durant, p. 2.

The first documented incident of human sacrifice in Crete is dated to ca. 1700 B.C.E. by Greek archeologists Yannis Sakellarakis and Efi Sapouna-Sakellarakis. They interpret their recent discovery as indicating a bloodletting sacrifice of a young man about eighteen years old by a wealthy male priest in his late thirties. The archeologists think the sacrifice may have been an extreme attempt to appease a deity and stop the earthquakes. But an earthquake collapsed the temple, and the scene of sacrifice was preserved. The temple was found at the base of Mount Juktas, considered the legendary tomb of the Cretan Zeus. It is possible then, that the priest who performed the sacrifice was a worshipper of Zeus, and not a follower of the Cretan Goddess. Sanctuaries honoring the Cretan Goddess were typically on mountaintops or in caves, in groves or homes or palaces, and not at the base of a mountain; and religious ceremonies of the Goddess on Crete were typically celebrated by a priestess. Perhaps some followers of Zeus had begun to settle in Crete by 1700 B.C.E., prior to the final Mycenaean takeover ca. 1450–1400 B.C.E. (See Y. Sakellarakis and E. Sapouna-Sakellarakis, "Drama of Death in a Minoan Temple," pp. 205–222, and Joseph Alsop, "A Historical Perspective," p. 223, both in *National Geographic* 159 [1981] [thanks to Riane Eisler for this reference]; and see also Burkert, pp. 20–22, 150 and n. 16.)

Crete's cultural preeminence in the Mediterranean world endured until subsumed by the Mycenaeans, after an earthquake and tidal wave from the volcanic eruption at nearby Thera devastated Crete ca. 1450 B.C.E. Crete was struck another devastating blow by the Dorian invasions from the Greek Peloponnese around 1100 B.C.E.

In the "Homeric Hymn," Demeter says to those she first meets at Eleusis, "I am come from Crete over the sea's wide back—not willingly; but pirates brought me thence by force of strength."⁴⁸ This reference may well point to the takeover of the female-preeminent culture of Crete by the Mycenaeans, occurring approximately the same time as the first shrine to Demeter was built at Eleusis.

In later versions of the story of Demeter and Iason, the retelling includes Demeter's "forceful violation" by Iason.⁴⁹ Other stories say Demeter was raped by Zeus, or by Poseidon. The seventh century B.C.E. "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," written relatively late in the establishment of male dominance in Greek social, political and religious life, emphasizes the abduction and rape of Persephone by Hades. According to Hesiod, "Zeus . . . granted it."⁵⁰ This patriarchal version of the myth can be interpreted as mirroring the transition from the mother-rite clan cultures of Neolithic Crete and Greece to the city-state societies of the Greek Bronze Age, based on military might and father-right—a process of domination enforced in sexual and marital as well as economic and martial practices.

Persephone's abduction into the underworld still explains the cycle of seasons and crops. It also shows that the male gods of the Hellenic kings and warrior-aristocracy had not only taken over Mount Olympus, but had begun to force rape and patriarchal marriages on the goddesses—and women—of the preexisting culture.

As related in the "Homeric Hymn," Zeus makes Earth create the beautiful narcissus,

to be a snare for the bloomlike girl. . . . And the girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely toy; but . . . the lord, Host of Many, with his immortal horses sprang out upon her. . . . He caught her up reluctant on his golden chariot and bare her away lamenting.⁵¹

"The verb used here, as in all Greek sources, to describe Hades' action," a classicist explains, "is *harpazein*, meaning 'to seize, snatch, carry off,' a term usually reserved for acts of war or thievery, but always acts of violence." "In

⁴⁸ "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," 2.122–125, in Evelyn-White, pp. 296–297.

⁴⁹ Friedrich, p. 161.

⁵⁰ Hesiod *Theogony* 912–914, in Evelyn-White, pp. 144–145.

⁵¹ "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," 2. 10, 15–21, in Evelyn-White, pp. 288–291.

Latin texts, another word connoting violence is found: *raptu*, meaning abduction, seizure, rape."⁵²

Demeter searches for her daughter for nine days without rest or food, until Hecate directs her to the Sungod Helios who tells of the abduction.

Anguish more piercing and savage now entered
the heart of Demeter,
Enraged by perfidious, black-clouded Zeus son
of Cronos,
She forsook the assembly of gods and lofty
Olympus
and dwelt in the cities of man and among
their rich fields
disguised in form for a very long time.⁵³

Dressed as an old woman, Demeter is found one day at the well of Eleusis by three sisters, who take her to their parents to care for the new son, Demophoon. Demeter tenderly nurses the infant boy by day and places him in the hearthfire by night to make him immortal.⁵⁴ But she is discovered in this effort and thwarted by the fears of the boy's earthly mother. Having lost first her daughter and now a son, Demeter becomes inconsolable and withdraws from the company of humans as well as the gods. The fertile fields wither into drought and famine. Finally Zeus orders Persephone's return to Demeter; otherwise the barrenness of the fields would have deprived him of the votive offerings from the people. But before Persephone can depart, Hades, "taking thought for himself, secretly [gives(?)] her a sweet seed of red pomegranate to eat."⁵⁵ Having experienced this food, symbolic of sexuality and fertility, Persephone must return to the underworld for one third of every year. Always after this, the daughter and mother are reunited.

Demeter then gives two blessings to the people of Eleusis, her plants and her rites. According to Isocrates, of the fourth century B.C.E.,

Demeter bestowed on us two gifts, the greatest gifts of all: first, the fruits of the earth, thanks to which we have ceased to live the life of

⁵² Bruce Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 75, n. 15: see Hesiod *Theogony* 914; Apollodoros *Bibliotheka* 1.5.1; Diodoros Sikelos 5.68.2; Isokrates *Panegyrikos* 28; Orphic Fragment 49, 1.37, in Otto Kern, *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1965), p. 120. Clement of Alexandria *Protreptikos* 2.14; Nonnos *Dionysiaka* 6.92; and p. 75, n. 16; Claudian *De Raptu Proserpina* 1.27, title et passim; Ovid *Fasti* 4.417; *Metamorphoses* 5.395.

⁵³ "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," 2.90–94, in Sargent, p. 4.

⁵⁴ According to Friedrich, "Fire is . . . the main purifying element, so that we have here a metaphor of the promise of immortality, with Demophoon as a mytonyn of humanity" (p. 173).

⁵⁵ "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," 2. 371–372, 412–14, in Sargent, pp. 11–13.

beasts; and second, the mysteries; and they who are initiated therein have brighter hopes both for the end of their life and for all eternity.⁵⁶

Despite the changes of the new social order, Demeter's rites are never uprooted by the state religion of Olympian Zeus.

While the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter" gives us a mythic account of patriarchal marriage among the gods and goddesses, the institution of patriarchal marriage on the human plane was attributed to Cecrops, first king of Athens, said to have founded the city ca. 1580 B.C.E. Pausanias notes that Cecrops was the first to call Zeus the Highest. Clearchos, a pupil of Aristotle, wrote that "at Athens Cecrops was the first to join one woman to one man; before, connections had taken place at random and marriages were in common . . . before this day people did not know who their fathers were."⁵⁷ We may infer, then, that before this day, the people inhabiting the region were matrilineal and more flexible unions prevailed. Such partner-bonds would have differed significantly from the male-dominant relationships instituted under patriarchal class rule.⁵⁸

Athens and the Athenians, as we know, were named for Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, Patronness of the Arts, Defender of Cities. To her were attributed the household arts of spinning, weaving, and cooking; the art of music; the craft of pottery; gold- and copper-smithing; construction of all kinds; numbers; healing; the gift of the olive tree; the protection of cities; of childbearing; and of agriculture. The owl, who sees through the dark, and the snake, were sacred to her. Homer called her *Tritogeneia* or "triple-woman." She was associated with the goddess Metis of Africa, and with Medusa—whose names derive from the Sanskrit word for "female wisdom." Athena, daughter of Metis, was revered long before the Zeus-worshipping warrior clans turned her into a daughter without a mother, birthed in full armor from Zeus's head, virgin patroness of imperial war and patriarchal supremacy.⁵⁹

According to a legend preserved by Augustine about the incorporation of Athens, when Cecrops called together the women and men to vote for the deity for whom they would name their city, the men voted for Poseidon, who offered warships, the women for Athena, who offered the olive tree; and because there was one more woman than man, Athena won. The men punished the women for their loss in three ways: they took the vote away

⁵⁶ Isocrates *Panegyric* 28, in Richard Trapp, "The Eleusinian and Dionysian Mysteries," unpublished lecture. (San Francisco State University, Department of Classics and Philosophy Colloquium, 1982), p. 5.

⁵⁷ Durant, p. 2; Harrison, p. 262.

⁵⁸ Harrison, p. 262; Foucart, pp. 62–64, 69; Stone, who cites Herodotus about gynocentric marriage in Egypt (pp. 35–38).

⁵⁹ Avery, pp. 186–189; Walker, pp. 74, 628–629; Homer *Iliad* (trans. Richard Lattimore) 20.183; *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, trans. Richard Aldington and Delano Ames (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1959), pp. 30–34.

from women; they no longer allowed children to be named after the mother; and women could not be called Athenians.⁶⁰

If we are to believe this legend, the founding of Athens brought with it the end of genuine democracy; the end of matrilineage; and the political subjugation of the women to men, as men only were to be considered citizens of the new city-state with its new king.

There is a great deal of evidence in the religious practices, myths, legends, art and literature of the Hellenic culture—as in the temple of Hera at Argos—indicating that women and men of the prepatriarchal cultures did not readily submit to violent domination and patriarchal customs. From Arcadia comes the story of the Black Demeter, herself raped by Poseidon while searching for her abducted daughter Persephone. According to Robert Graves, the people of Arcadia worship Demeter to this day as Demeter *Erynes*, Demeter Fury.⁶¹

Women's resistance was expressed in the teachings of Aspasia, teacher of Socrates and beloved of Pericles; and in the great tragedies of Classical Athens, Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Antigone*; also in the image of the snake-headed Medusa whose look was said to turn men to stone. Medusa, according to legend, was finally beheaded by Perseus, with the help of the patriarchalized Athena, who took the image of Medusa's head as an aegis on her breastplate to defeat enemies in battle. According to a different legend, the blood of Medusa was used by Asklepios, God of Healing, to bring persons back to life. Images of Medusa's head are found in the ritual art at Eleusis, and frequently at Athens and elsewhere. Sometimes Medusa's face, surrounded by snakes, is rendered by the artist not as horrific, but still beautiful, and sad.⁶²

Then too, there are the legends of the Amazons from the Goddess-revering lands of Anatolia. They are reported by Homer, Herodotus and Plutarch (ca. 46–120 C.E.) to have fought various battles against men's

⁶⁰ Harrison, pp. 261–262; Durant, p. 40.

⁶¹ Graves, 1:61 and n. 6; see Pindar *Pythian Odes* 6.50; Pausanias 8.25. 3–5, 42; Apollodorus 3.6.8; Nilsson, p. 65; Avery, p. 234. In addition to the statues of the horse-headed Black Demeter at Phigalia, and Demeter Erynes at Thelpusa, Pausanias reports on a fish-legged statue of the primal Goddess of the Pelasgians, Eurynome: all in Arcadia (8.42 and 8.25.4, in Farnell, pp. 50–62; see also Harrison, pp. 94, 266). Apparently the remote mountain region of Arcadia preserved its Goddess-revering culture longer than most other regions of the Peloponnese. Herodotus wrote, "Concerning the feast of Demeter, which the Greeks call Thesmophoria. . . . It was the daughters of Danaus who introduced this rite from Egypt and taught it to the Pelasgian women; but after the upset of the whole of Peloponnesos by the Dorians, the rite died down completely, and it was only those of the Peloponnesians who were left, and the Arcadians who did not leave their seat who kept it up." (Herodotus 2. 171, in Harrison, pp. 120–121).

⁶² Avery, p. 688; Meier, p. 34. See the sardonx cameo of Medusa from Naples, third-second century B.C.E. in Gisela Richter, *A Handbook of Greek Art* (London: The Phaidon Press, 1963), p. 240.

violence, as in defense of Troy against the invading Mycenaeans. The most famous battle against Greek warriors was the *Amazonomachy*, where Amazons fought Athenians to regain their queen, Antiope, who had been abducted by Theseus. The Amazons' struggles were frequently depicted in Hellenic art, and the image of their defeat appears in marble friezes atop many temples of gods around Greece, at Corinth, Delphi, Halicarnassus, Epidaurus and elsewhere, and also atop the Parthenon at Athens.⁶³

When Athens finally defeated its neighbor Eleusis and established political control, adding the Eleusinian Mysteries to its array of state religious ceremonies, it made the rites more elaborate and commercial. Athenian leaders (beginning around 420 B.C.E.) exhorted citizens of other Greek cities to pay tithes, or grain quotas, to the goddesses. During the fourth century B.C.E., initiates were required to pay fifteen drachmas to participate in the rituals, an amount of money representing ten days labor. While the poor or enslaved may have been theoretically welcome, it is unlikely that many were able to pay such an initiation fee.⁶⁴

The injunction against initiating anyone who could not understand Greek was ended by the Athenians in the sixth century B.C.E. Perhaps they also relaxed the injunction against the initiation of anyone guilty of unatoned murder, as militarism engulfed most of Western civilization in continual warfare, and the victorious Alexander and Roman Caesars and soldiers were invited to join in the rituals at Eleusis. A shrine to Mithra—a Persian war god who became extremely popular among Roman soldiers—was built close to Demeter's sanctuary. Eunapius reported that the last *hierophant* ("chief priest") at Eleusis before its destruction was a highly placed initiate into the Mysteries of Mithra.⁶⁵

During the patriarchal epoch, then, the ritual practices and temple precincts as well as the mythic story of mother/daughter goddesses were significantly altered. Demeter was no longer the goddess of divine sexuality and procreation as in Crete: her dual role of lover and mother became dichotomized, and it was the abducted virgin daughter who became the focus of male sexual desire. The "holy marriage" alleged by Christian commentators to have been enacted by the hierophant and high priestess—if in

fact this took place metaphorically or materially—would have differed significantly during the patriarchal class periods from the more spontaneous and earthy sacred union of Demeter and Iason of Crete. To the emphasis on the marriage ceremony was also added an emphasis on the arrival of a "holy son." This son was called by the Thracian name Brimo, "mighty son of the mighty goddess"; or by the jubilant sound of "Iacchus"; or Dionysus.⁶⁶

Dionysus, young male god of the grapevine, wine, intoxication, revelry, frenzy and destruction, as well as of resurrection, was added rather late to the rites of Demeter, probably not before the fourth century B.C.E. To facilitate his inclusion, Dionysus is named the son of Demeter, or sometimes of Persephone. He is also called the son of Zeus.⁶⁷

One of the many myths about Dionysus' origins holds that his mother was Semele, a Thracian Earth goddess, later called the daughter of Cadmus, first ruler of Thebes and great great grandfather of Oedipus. Dionysus' father again, is Zeus—portrayed so often as forcing himself upon regional goddesses where his warrior cult established its rules. Zeus strikes Semele dead with a thunderbolt. Harrison comments: "She that was the Great Mother sinks to be Semele the thunder-stricken."⁶⁸

But in the Eleusinian Mysteries, Demeter prevails. And the holy child—whether Persephone or Plutus, Iacchus, Brimo or Dionysus—is joyfully welcomed and lovingly praised as offspring of the Mother who graciously gives both new crops and new life to the human community. Although Hades of the Olympian religion has become Lord of the Underworld, his domain was for the Greeks one of pale and restless shades, and they built no temples to honor him.⁶⁹ It was to Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, that the people prayed for guidance and courage in their journey into death; as it was to the Great Mother, Demeter, that they prayed for abundance of life on this earth.

Death and Rebirth

One of the central precepts of the ancient Mysteries was "know thyself." According to Socrates, "self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom." While the descent of Persephone into the underworld symbolized the time of the

⁶³ Avery, pp. 86–87.

⁶⁴ Burkert, pp. 67–68; Kanta, p. 19; Mylonas, pp. 237–8.

The initiation fee was used to pay costs of the festivities and the fees of officials. From the records it can be calculated that as many as a thousand were initiated together at this time (Trapp).

Records of expensive and closely controlled rites, the Andanian Mysteries of Messenia of the southwestern Peloponnese, held in honor of Kore, Demeter, Apollo Karneios and Hermes, are detailed by Pausanias (4.33.3–6) and in the "Rule of the Andanian Mysteries," in *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, ed. Marvin W. Meyer (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 49–59.

⁶⁵ Eliade, 2:415.

⁶⁶ Harrison, pp. 273–276, 548–553, 562–566.

⁶⁷ Zuntz, p. 167; Ugo Branchi, *The Greek Mysteries* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), *Iconography of Religions*, XVII, 3: Greece and Rome, ed. Th. P. Van Baaren et al (Leiden: Brill, 1976), pp. 8–9: "Judging from iconographical testimonies, the association of Dionysus with the two goddesses might date from the fourth century B.C." In comparison, a fragment of a calyx-krater, from the third quarter of the fifth century B.C.E., explicitly refers to Iason [of Crete], father of Plutus. In the seventh century B.C.E. "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," Demeter strictly refuses a drink of wine, preferring mint-flavored barley-water—possibly another indication that Dionysus was at that time not yet integrated into the Eleusinian rites (2. 206–207, in Evelyn-White, pp. 302–303).

⁶⁸ Harrison, p. 561.

⁶⁹ Avery, p. 509.

year when the plant seeds remained buried from the light, it may also have symbolized the nightly descent into sleep, into the realm of dreams. Persephone's underworld journey to the restless spirits which had not found peace may also have symbolized the individual's healing journey into the shadowself of the psyche. The sometimes willing, sometimes involuntary passages into underworlds of unacknowledged experience provide opportunities for attaining deeper self-knowledge to be used in self-healing. Many of the ancients believed illness, or death, could bring one closer to the deities or Universal Soul. In Athens, those who had died were called *Demetrioi*, the "people of Demeter."⁷⁰

In the course of some two thousand years and more, Demeter's simple farming community festivals, as we have seen, were significantly changed. At least since Classical Athenian times it was forbidden to speak of the experience of the initiation. We are told that Aeschylus was attacked by a crowd for nearly revealing the rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries; and that the ambitious Alcibiades was exiled for (among other offenses) mockery against the Eleusinian hierophant.⁷¹ It seems to me quite possible that the celebration of Demeter's rites (which for several thousand years were probably celebrated in open fields) first moved into temples and developed an official ritual form, priesthood, restricted access, and secrecy, only when patriarchal class rule became the dominant social norm in Greece. The Greek historian Diodoros (first century B.C.E.) wrote that "the dedication rites which were performed by the Athenians in Eleusis . . . these were all secret, but in Knossos [Crete] it was an old custom to perform these rites openly, and . . . [these were] not hidden by them from anyone who desired to know about it."⁷²

Pythagoras and Plato were said to be among the many initiates, and the playwrights ~~Aeschylus~~ and Sophocles, and Aristotle; and perhaps Socrates. When Socrates was put to death for "corrupting the youth" and "impiety before the gods," perhaps what was condemned as irreverence before the official state gods was at a deeper level an expression of loyalty to the more ancient social and spiritual order of the goddesses.

The most detailed report of the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone comes from the Classical Athenian era, and specifies nine days—the length of time Demeter was said to search for her lost daughter—in the fall at the time of the equinox and the full moon.⁷³ Heralds were sent from Athens and Eleusis throughout Greece proclaiming the festival. All warfare was to cease

⁷⁰ Meier, p. 93 and n. 7; Harrison, pp. 266–267.

⁷¹ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.17, in Eliade, 1:294; Durant, p. 447.

⁷² Diodorus 5. 77, in Harrison, p. 566 and n. 2; Axel W. Persson, *Religion of Greece in Prehistoric Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1942), pp. 148–150.

⁷³ For somewhat differing accounts of the nine days of rituals, see Mylonas, chap. 9; Foucart, part 3; Farnell, pp. 164–191; Harrison, pp. 151–161; Burkert, pp. 285–290; Eliade, 1:293–299; Kanta, pp. 10–17.

for two months, safe travel was to be assured, and no legal proceedings were to be conducted during the festival's nine days.

To begin, the priestesses of Demeter carried sacred objects from her temple at Eleusis along a fruit and flower-strewn road, to her temple in Athens near the Acropolis. The Eleusinian hierophant opened the festival at Athens by inviting those who were prepared to join the initiation into the Greater Mysteries of Demeter—that is, all those who had been initiated the previous February at Agrae (a suburb of Athens) into the Lesser Mysteries honoring Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, who rose again each spring from the dead.⁷⁴

The second day the initiates, or *mystai*, were sent to the sea to bathe and purify themselves in the refreshing salt waters of the Aegean. During the fourth century B.C.E. at Athens, each initiate was given a piglet to sacrifice as part of the purification ritual. This may have been a late addition to the rites, for there are several sources indicating a time when the rites of Demeter, like the Mystery religion of Pythagoras, did not include the sacrifice of meat but instead shared the "gentler foods" of fruits and grains.⁷⁵

The third day was given over to official state sacrifices honoring Athenian leaders, citizens of Attica and other participating regions, and the goddesses; and also to prayers for women and children.

On the fourth day, devoted to Asklepios, God of Healing, initiates were to remain at home. At Asklepios' sanctuary at Epidauros, sick people, to receive healing, awaited a special dream, a visitation by a god or goddess conveying perhaps some heroic deed or artistic creation to be accomplished, some transformation of life purpose. Sometimes the results were enacted for the benefit of the whole community: a composition of music, a paean to the god or goddess, perhaps a dramatization of one's healing vision performed at the adjacent theatre.⁷⁶ At Athens, the fourth day was also devoted to ritual identification with Demeter in her grief, with her sense of inexplicable loss—an experience keenly felt, we might imagine, by Goddess peoples who may have looked upon the period of the patriarchal ruling class takeover, at least in part, as a descent into hell.

On the fifth day, the initiates and the community joined together in an exuberant procession to Eleusis, carrying at the front the boychild Iacchus, beside whom walked great grandmother Hecate. They stopped along the way at a temple of Apollo, then at a sanctuary of Aphrodite, then bathed and refreshed themselves in special waters at the outskirts of Eleusis, before finally gathering by torchlight for all-night dancing and rituals. They be-

⁷⁴ In the words of classicist Richard Trapp: the initiates "see that the kingdom of death had been overcome in the person of Persephone [who] descended into Hades and then rose again."

⁷⁵ Harrison, pp. 85–89, 94, 127, 145, 147–150.

⁷⁶ Devotions to Asklepios were added to the rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries ca. 421 B.C.E.: Harrison, pp. 342–343; Meier, pp. 66, 86–89.

lieved that if these rituals were suppressed, if the collective purpose of the community would no longer find expression, the world would fall apart.

On the sixth day, the *mystai* entered the sacred grounds one by one across the Bridge of Jest, while masked townspeople teased or ridiculed and told secrets about the initiate. These jests combining scrutiny and satire were sometimes hilarious and sometimes excruciating, and were intended to strip away whatever overbearing pride or arrogance might prevent the initiate from opening fully to the insights of the Mysteries. In the "Homeric Hymn," it was the power of jest and laughter in the old woman *Iambe*, mixing the sacred and profane, which first was healing to Demeter lost in her grief.

The next day was a final day of preparation, of resting, purification, fasting and sacrifice. To sacrifice, literally "to make holy," meant giving up, offering over to the Goddess whatever was hindering the soul's journey along its path.

The seventh and eighth nights were the "nights of the Mysteries." The *mystai* entered the *Telesterion*, temple of Demeter. Perhaps in more ancient days they went down into the *megaron*, underground chamber of the Earth Goddess; or perhaps into the cave at the edge of the site, called the *Plutonion*, doorway to Hades. Now the initiates received the central experience of the Mysteries through "what is said," "what is enacted" and "what is shown" or "revealed."

What was said may have included the simple invitation to eat and drink the first fruits of the harvest. The Christian Clement of the fourth century C.E. wrote that initiates stated: "I fasted, I drank the *kykeon*, I took from the chest, I put back into the basket and from the basket into the chest." Harrison notes there was no creed one had to repeat to be accepted. What was shown may have included certain objects sacred to Demeter, exemplifying the regenerative forces of nature. What was enacted may have included a simple retelling of the Demeter-Persephone story, a singing of the poet's "Hymn to Demeter"; or a more elaborate dramatization. The first priest at Eleusis, Eumolpus, was said to have had a beautiful voice, like the Thracian Orpheus.⁷⁷

Sometime during the final two days of initiation, before the beginning of the night's ceremonies and the lighting of the great fire, the *mystai* drank *kykeon*, barley-water flavored with mint or pennyroyal. Perhaps the barley was fermented and the drink intoxicating; the barley may have contained ergot, a fungus with hallucinogenic properties; we do not know.⁷⁸ Probably

⁷⁷ Harrison, pp. 155 and n. 3, 156; Eliade, 1:296-297; Burkert, pp. 286. For late accounts of dramatic scenes, see Harrison, pp. 565-571.

⁷⁸ R. Gordon Wasson, *The Road to Eleusis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978).

the fasting, prayers and anticipation of the initiates helped clarify their inner vision.

We are told the initiates experienced a special seeing, the "opening of the eyes." Was this vision the epiphany of the Goddess as Earth Mother? or Persephone returning from Hades? or the reunion of mother and child? or the fair birth of the fairborn child? Was it a vision of the vast sea of love all around, described by Diotima of Mantinea when she instructed Socrates into the Lesser and Greater Mysteries of Love, as related in Plato's *Symposium*?⁷⁹ Or the experience of dying and being reborn, encircled by a flow of love far beyond human ability to translate into words? In all the years of their celebration, the central experience of the initiation was never revealed—perhaps because the mystical insight itself was beyond naming, ineffable.

Perhaps the initiates participated mystically with Demeter and Persephone in their double journey, as training for the journey of the soul through life and through death: from the happiness of early bonding, through the period of separation and suffering, to their joyful reunion. They may have felt abducted into the underworld, experiencing what had been lost to disease, pain or death, and stored in the recesses of the subconscious, or in the collective unconscious of race history: the overwhelming grief, the embrace of the sacred union, and the return, the rising up into the light of a new day, with a sense of renewal and rebirth. Perhaps they simply came out of the darkness at the moment of sunrise into a new day, into the upperworld with its fertile land and a waiting community of family and friends.

The eighth day was spent in revelry and song, further dedications to the goddesses, and in pouring libations to the dead, a special honoring of those who had gone before into the underworld, who perhaps had just been met once again, in reverie, when the initiate ventured into Hades.

The ninth and final day was for reintegration into the community and return to one's home. The poet/singers closed their "Hymn to Demeter" by telling their audience:

the essential gift of the ceremonies
no [one] may describe or utter . . .
blessed is he among men on earth
who has beheld this.⁸⁰

Pindar (518-438 B.C.E.) wrote: "Happy is he who has gone through the Mysteries, he knows the source and the end of life." Cicero, Roman initiate of the first century B.C.E., wrote that if Greece had existed for no other

⁷⁹ Plato *Symposium* 210a-212a, trans. Benjamin Jowett (1948; reprint ed., Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1977), pp. 51-53. According to Pausanias, Demeter was worshipped in Mantinea, home of Diotima. (Thanks to Carol Christ for this reference.)

⁸⁰ Edouard Schuré, *The Mysteries of Ancient Greece: Orpheus, Plato* (Blauvelt, N.Y.: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1971), p. 75.

reason than to have brought into existence the Mysteries of Eleusis, that would have been sufficient reason for her existence.⁸¹

I wish to emphasize here the fullness of the experience of the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone. The whole process involved the initiates as well as the larger community, and included periods of cleansing and purification, healing, commitment, vision, coming forth and reunion with the community. The experience was in the body and in the soul. The mundane and sacred dimensions merged. There was the isolation of the individual in her or his suffering as well as the empathic identification with the suffering of another. And there was the communal sharing by all attending the ceremonies, those already initiated and those who one day hoped to be so. An individual was initiated only once into the Lesser Mysteries, and then into the Greater Mysteries; but these celebrations were repeated in the community life generation after generation, century after century, millenium after millenium.

Finally, we may interpret the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone as a myth for our own time. The teaching of the journey of the soul transcends any particular time and place, age or sex. The Mysteries evoke memories of the early epoch of mother-centered life; and the separating away, the abduction, the death of this primal way of life. That time has been followed by a period of patriarchal class rule, a long dark age reaching until this point where we now stand poised between starwars and starpeace, between the nuclear omnicide of the planet or the emergence of our planetary community into a new world. The renewal I long for is the return of a reverence for Mother Earth and her abundant forces of creation; an affirmation of the natural-human-sacredness of sexuality and enduring love; and the belief in the inevitability of death and the immortality of the soul. It is a longing for the rebirth of the abundant love and nourishment of the ancient Earth Mother Gaia, Demeter, Persephone, Hecate, and for all the great grandmothers so they might be with us now, as comforters and guides, into the next stage of our journey in this life, with one another, on this beautiful planet Earth.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 111; Cicero *Laws* 2. 36, in Trapp, pp. 5-6.