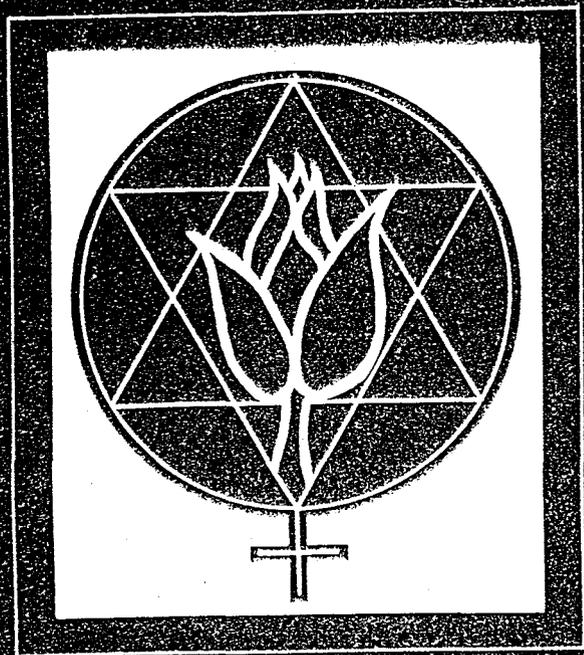


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## THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES OF DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE:

Fertility, Sexuality, and Rebirth

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The story of Demeter and Persephone, mother and daughter nature goddesses, provides us with insights into the core beliefs by which early agrarian peoples of the Mediterranean related to "the creative forces of the universe"—which some people call God, or Goddess.<sup>1</sup> The rites of Demeter and Persephone speak to the experiences of life that remain through all time: the most mysterious—birth, sexuality, death—and also to the greatest mystery of all, enduring love. In these ceremonies, women and men expressed joy in the beauty and abundance of nature, especially the bountiful harvest in personal love, sexuality and procreation; and in the rebirth of the human spirit, even through suffering and death. Cicero wrote of these rites: "We have been given a reason not only to live in joy, but also to die with better hope."<sup>2</sup>

The Mother Earth religion celebrated her children's birth, enjoyment of life and loving return to her in death. The Earth both nourished the living and welcomed back into her body the dead. As Aeschylus wrote in *The Libation Bearers*:

Yea, summon Earth, who brings all things to life  
and rears, and takes again into her womb.<sup>3</sup>

I wish to express my gratitude for the love and wisdom of my mother, Mary V. Keller, and of Dr. Muriel Chapman. They have been invaluable sources of insight and understanding for me in these studies. So also have been the scholarship, vision and/or friendship of Carol P. Christ, Charlene Spretnak, Deena Metzger, Carol Lee Sanchez, Ruby Rohrlich, Starhawk, Jane Ellen Harrison, Riane Eisler, Alexis Masters, Richard Trapp, John Glanville, Judith Plaskow, Jim Syfers, Jim Moses, Bonnie MacGregor and Lil Moed. Carol Christ and Ruby Rohrlich gave this article close editorial readings and made helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> This simple way of naming the essence of life was shared with me by Dr. Muriel Chapman.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *The Laws* 2.14.36, in C. Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Aeschylus *Libation Bearers* 127, in Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903; reprint ed., London: Merlin Press, 1980), p. 267.

This Earth/Mother-centered religion stands in marked contrast to the male-centered Mystery religions of Osiris, Dionysus, and Orpheus; or to the Hebrew and Christian stories of Isaac and Jesus; all of which involve a ritual sacrifice or agonizing death of a young male son and/or god. The Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone embodied the values of the relatively peaceful farming and trading mother-clan societies of the Goddess-preeminent Neolithic, before the sacrifice of sons in war became common practice as patriarchal warrior clans forced their way to power.

Several scholars speculate that the "secret" core ritual of the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone was the actual murder, or actual rape, of a maiden/daughter. There is no evidence for this at Eleusis, Crete or other sites devoted to these goddesses.<sup>4</sup> It may be that in the later patriarchal period, when the myth and ritual had become contaminated by patriarchal class culture, there was some dramatization of Persephone's abduction and rape; and that this symbolized death. If so, it may be seen as a change in what had earlier been celebrated as the sacred procreative union of earth and heaven, woman and man. My reading of the testimonia and archeological data finds that the Mysteries of the mother and daughter goddesses were essentially mysteries of love. Their main purpose was to bring an experience of love to the most important life passages: birth, sexuality and death/rebirth.

The origin of the rituals honoring Demeter, Earth Mother and Grain Mother, can be traced back to the agricultural revolution of the third millennium B.C.E. or even earlier in the Neolithic, with links to religious practices in Crete, Egypt, Anatolia and Mesopotamia. The proximate origins of the Eleusinian rites are disputed: some say Egypt, some Crete, some Thrace. It is possible that Demeter's rites could have arrived in Greece from all three directions and become intermingled at Eleusis: from the daughters of Danaus from Egypt to the early Pelasgians (Herodotus); from Crete, with the interchange of culture between Crete and the Mycenaeans (Homer, Hesiod, "Homeric Hymn to Demeter"); and from Thrace (where Mysteries of the Earth Goddess Cybele, and of Orpheus, were practiced), with the arrival of Eumolpus (Askesidorus). A complex of interwoven traditions seems to me to explain more adequately the rites of Eleusis than trying to trace a single site of origin. After all, these regions and cultures were interconnected by trade, travel, migration or military expansionism for several thousand years.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Louis Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, 5 vols. (New Rochelle, New York: Caratzas Brothers, Publishers, 1977), 3: 142; Harrison, p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> Because archaeological dating methods have been revised several times in recent years, and will likely continue to be refined, dates used in this paper are to be considered approximations.

Religious antecedents of the Eleusinian Mysteries are discussed by: Farnell, chap. 1; Marija Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500-3500 B.C.: Myths and Cult Images* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 214-215; Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from*

Demeter's rites flourished for almost two thousand years at Eleusis, a small town fourteen miles northwest of Athens. The people of Eleusis built the first shrine to Demeter over a small underground chamber, or *megaron*, ca. 1450 B.C.E. Such underground chambers, in the earliest ages of settlement, were typically used for storing seeds, the grain harvest, or for burials of the dead.<sup>6</sup>

The first shrine at Eleusis, from the middle Mycenaean era, is considered by some scholars to be the earliest evidence for the practice of this religion. However, as classicist Carolyi Kerenyi believes, perhaps the earliest archeological evidence of the Demeter-Persephone story comes from a cup found at Phaistos, Crete, dated to just before 2000 B.C.E., with the image of a young girl and "dancing" girlfriends around a cavelike or vulva-shaped opening, which Kerenyi interprets as depicting the myth of Persephone's descent into the underworld.<sup>7</sup>

The earliest written record of the Demeter and Persephone myth in the Greek language comes from the eighth century B.C.E., in three lines of Hesiod's *Theogony* (912-914). A more extensive account, from the seventh century B.C.E. is the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter."

The Eleusinian Mysteries were the greatest of all ancient Greek religious festivals. During the Archaic period (ca. 800-480 B.C.E.) celebrants journeyed to Eleusis from all around Greece. Following Athens's military and political domination of Eleusis (dated variously from the fifteenth or thirteenth to the seventh century B.C.E.), Solon (650-600 B.C.E.) enlarged

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*Goddess to Saint* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), chap. 1; Harrison, pp. 564-567; Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Mythology* (Berkeley, Calif.: Moon Books, 1978), pp. 98-100; Carol P. Christ, "Lady of the Animals" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1986); Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), chaps. 1-4; Merlin Stone, *When God Was A Woman* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), pp. 14-18; Paul Foucart, *Les Mysteres d'Eleusis* (Paris: Auguste Picard, Editeur, 1914), chap. 1; Will Durant, *The Life of Greece* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), pp. 68-69; see Herodotus *History* 2.53, 81, 123; Strabo *Geography* 18.3; Diodorus 1.69; James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: The Roots of Religion and Folklore* (1896; reprint ed., New York: Avenel Books, 1981), p. 330; Gunter Zuntz, *Persephone: Three Essays on Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 7-23; Anne L. Barstow, "The Prehistoric Goddess," in *The Book of the Goddess*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1987); Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, trans. Willard R. Trask, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), chaps. 1-4; and James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, pp. 125-126, 266-267; George Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 41; Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940), pp. 46-48; Eliade, 1: 293.

<sup>7</sup> C. Kerenyi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), p. xix. Thanks to Eleanor Cleveland Anderson for discussion and references regarding the origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Demeter's sanctuary and surrounded it with a high enclosure; Peisistratus (550–510 B.C.E.) extended the walls to accommodate more visitors and built the *Telesterion* (hall of initiation) to hold several thousand; then, after the destructive fires of the Persian Wars, and the return to peace in 445 B.C.E., Pericles personally directed the rebuilding of the sanctuary. During Hellenistic (323–146 B.C.E.) and Roman times (146 B.C.E.–ca 400 C.E.), celebrants gathered from around the known world, and the Romans enlarged Demeter's temple again (138–161 C.E.). Other sanctuaries for Demeter and Persephone were widespread around the Mediterranean world.<sup>8</sup>

The rites were open to all, women and men, young and old, slave and free. There were only two requirements: that initiates be able to understand the Greek language used for the ceremonies; and, more importantly, that they have no unatoned blood guilt on their hands.<sup>9</sup>

In 389 C.E., the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I issued an edict forbidding women and men from worshipping any deities but the Christian Father and Son. A few years later (in 395 C.E.) Demeter's sanctuary was destroyed by Goths under the leadership of Alaric. Still, during the subsequent Christian era, people throughout Greece continued to pray to Demeter as Saint Demetra, patron saint of agriculture, or (since the Middle Ages) to the canonized male saint, Demetrius. At Eleusis a statue of Demeter was found, as late as the nineteenth century, still being ritually decorated to ensure the fertility of the field. In recent years, groups of women have returned to Eleusis, reenacting the sacred story of Demeter and Persephone amidst the temple ruins.<sup>10</sup>

My interpretation of the Eleusinian Mysteries brings a woman's experience and feminist point of view to the subject which highlights the distinctions between the pre-patriarchal and patriarchal epochs in the ritual and artwork. Such an approach has become possible because of recent archaeological, anthropological and feminist research that illuminate striking cultural and religious differences between the relatively peaceful agrarian, female-prominent and Goddess-preeminent Neolithic communities, and the subsequent patriarchal class societies with their warrior ruling classes and dominant male gods.

I see the primary significance of the Mysteries of Demeter and Per-

<sup>8</sup> Mylonas, pp. 40–42; Farnell, p. 153; Katherine Kanta, *Eleusis: Myth, Mysteries, History, Museum*, trans. W. W. Phelps (Athens: N.p., 1979), pp. 19–20.

<sup>9</sup> Farnell, p. 166; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Rattann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 286 and n. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Portable Gibbon: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Viking Press, 1952), pp. 547, 555; Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 153–154, p. 219 and n. 1; Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 2, *From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 415; Barbara Walker, *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), pp. 220–221; Carol P. Christ, *The Laughter of Aphrodite* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 100–105.

sephone as focused on three interrelated dimensions of life: (1) fertility and birth, (2) sexuality and marriage, and (3) death and rebirth.

### *Fertility and Birth*

The rituals of Demeter were essential to the survival of farming people and were fundamentally agricultural fertility festivals honoring Demeter the Earth and Grain Mother, giver of crops, and her daughter Kore, or Persephone, the Grain Maiden who embodies and in turn will bear the new crop. During the ritual, the farming community fervently invoked the creative forces of nature by calling to the sky, *HYE!*, "rain," "pour down," and to the earth, *KYE!*, "conceive," "bring forth." It was said that whoever used the seeds which had been placed by the women on their altars to Demeter would have a good crop.<sup>11</sup>

Eleusis itself was on the Rarian (Thrasian) plain, the most fertile agricultural soil of the Attic region. The knowledge and use of domesticated cereals and other plants spread through the Near East and Greece, ca. 9000–7000 B.C.E., following the end of the last Ice Age. According to the *Cambridge Ancient History*, it is "likely . . . the inhabitants of Greece received from Anatolia or farther east the benefits of a . . . knowledge of agriculture and the raising of domesticated animals, permitting permanent settlement." Remains of domesticated grains have been found in central Greece beginning approximately 7000 B.C.E., and at sites in the Eleusinian region dating from around 6000 B.C.E.<sup>12</sup>

Some archeologists and anthropologists conclude that plant domestication and thus the gift of agriculture came through women. This theory is corroborated by the mythic core of the Eleusinian Mysteries, where Demeter is said to give the gift of grain to the people and instruct them in the rites to be continued in her name. Other sacred stories of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world ascribe the gift of agriculture to the goddesses Isis in Egypt, and Ninlil in Mesopotamia.<sup>13</sup>

Demeter is the Earth, and of the Earth. As she was invoked by farming and then urban peoples in different times and places, her attributes varied. Other names given Demeter were *Carpophorus*, "fruit-bearer"; *Thermasia*, "warmth"; *Chloe*, "green"; *Anesidora*, "sender-up of gifts"; and in her aspect of healer, *Phosphoros*, "lightbearer."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Eliade, 1:297; Harrison, p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> I. E. S. Edwards et al., eds., *Cambridge Ancient History, Part I: Prolegomena and Prehistory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 570–571, 572.

<sup>13</sup> Ruby Rohrlich, "Women in Transition: Crete and Sumer," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), p. 38; Eliade, 1:40–41; Isocrates *Panegyricus* 4.28, trans. George Norlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928), pp. 134–135; Stone, pp. 36, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Aevry, ed., *The New Century Classical Handbook* (New York: Appleton-

The ritual objects found in the Eleusinian temple grounds include images of sheaves of wheat or barley; the many-seeded pomegranate, symbol of fertility; poppies, symbol of sleep and death; and the snake. Because it shed its skin, the snake was seen to represent powers of healing and reincarnation. Snakes were associated with waters and the power to nourish life. They also protected grain harvests from rodents, and were welcome around granaries, shrines or temples, homes, and at graves. Snakes were frequently involved in ritual ceremonies of the Goddess religion.<sup>15</sup>

Another spiritual symbol found in the artwork of Eleusis is the sphinx, in whom the artist combines spiritual, psychic and physical elemental powers, which for preurban peoples were not seen as separate or distinct. The sphinx was a great winged creature with a powerful lion's body and, most usually, a woman's head, sometimes crowned by a diadem. Perhaps the sphinx represents the shamanic ability to participate in the bird's power of flying close to the heavens and seeing great distances, and in the feline's power to roam the mountains and plains unafraid. In riddles of patriarchy (as alluded to, for example, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*), the sphinx—like women who give birth, raise children and attend the dying—knew the beginning, middle and end of life. Oedipus could not unseat the great sphinx until he too had begun to understand these mysteries. The great winged creature is probably a direct descendant of the Neolithic Bird Goddess; her image eventually was transposed into that of the Christian angel. I see the sphinx, like the snake, as a major symbol of the early mother-clan or mother-rite culture.<sup>16</sup>

Another animal sacred to Demeter was the pig, whose "prolific character" manifested the abundant fertility and nurturance of nature. In Arcadia, Demeter was also associated with the horse, the peaceful dove and the playful dolphin.<sup>17</sup>

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Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 384; C. A. Meier, *Ancient Incubation and Modern Psychotherapy*, trans. Monica Curtis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 116.

There is some dispute regarding Demeter's name, whether she is Earth Mother and/or Grain Mother. *Meter* is Greek for "mother"; *de* for "grain"; and *ge* for "earth". *Da* is the proto-Indo-European term for earth. And *dēai* is the Cretan word for "barley." The term *da-ma-te* appears in the Mycenaean Linear B, and means either "Demeter" or "an amount of land under grain" (see Friedrich, pp. 152, 155; Farnell, pp. 29–32, Frazier, p. 331; and Harrison, pp. 271–272). As the origins of Demeter and her rites have not been definitively established, it is not now possible to resolve this question. We know, however, (as Farnell, Gimbutas and Harrison point out) that the ancients often did not differentiate between the Goddess and her material manifestations, but saw her and them as One-in-Many, Many-in-One. I see Demeter as both Earth Mother and Grain Mother.

<sup>15</sup> Gimbutas, p. 112; Meier, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Gimbutas, chap. 7; Harrison, pp. 208–212.

<sup>17</sup> Scholiast on Lucian, *Dial. Meretr.* 2.1, in Harrison, p. 123.

According to University of California archeologist, Marija Gimbutas: "through her association with the pig, the beautifully draped Demeter . . . queen of corn . . . and . . .

The priestesses of Demeter at Eleusis were called *melissae*, "bees," "producers of sweetness." Perhaps they saw their role as helping bring forth the fruitfulness of the Earth Mother, drawing from her the sweet sustenance of their living. The bee was also sacred to Artemis of Ephesus; her chief priest was called *Essen*, "bee." Priestesses of Cybele were named Bees. The oracular priestess of Delphi was called Bee. And *deborah*, the Hebrew word for bee, was also the name of the most well-known woman prophet of Israel. Plato likened the souls of lyric poets to bees, as "light and winged and holy," "bring[ing] songs from honeyed fountains." Bee goddesses, priestesses or queens, honeycombs and beehives are found in the artwork of Tiryns, Mycenae, Delphi and Crete. The "tholos" tombs of Anatolia, Crete and Greece are shaped in the form of the beehive. It appears that the lives of nectar-gathering bees, "fed on honey fresh, food of the gods divine,"<sup>18</sup> and housed in well-structured communal societies centered about a queen, were seen by peoples of the ancient Goddess cultures as exemplary of a good life.

Demeter's power was both spiritual and earthly, religious and political. She was called *Thesmophoros*, "lawgiver," according to one writer, "inasmuch as she, by providing the grain called by her name, civilized the human race." Demeter's influence was for peace among clan members, neighbors, and foreigners. There is some evidence that Demeter encouraged partnership marriage; and even stronger evidence for her role as protector of childbearing.<sup>19</sup>

In personifying cooperative social ethics, Demeter raised a moral standard against an individual's gaining wealth through theft or slavery: "It was incumbent on men to obtain and provide by labor their nurture."<sup>20</sup> This

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of the dead . . . can be connected with her predecessor, the prehistoric Vegetation Goddess [of Old Europe]," p. 214.

Pausanias writes of a statue of Demeter in a cave at Phigalia in Arcadia, which has a horse's head framed by snakes (a possible connection to Medusa [Farnell, p. 57]) and other creatures, and a dove in one hand and a dolphin in the other (viii. 43.3; Avery, p. 383–384). Graves says this indicates Demeter presided over a horse-cult, oak-cult and dolphin-cult (*The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. [London: Penguin Books, 1955], 2:30). Walker writes that the dolphin and dove symbolize womb and vulva (p. 214). The dove is sacred also to Aphrodite.

<sup>18</sup> Plato *Ion*, in *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Stephen David Ross (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 51. Harrison, p. 442–443; Esme Wynne-Tyson, *Mithras: The Fellow in the Cap* (1958; reprint ed., Surrey, England: Centaur Press, Ltd., 1972), pp. 5–8. (Thanks to Jim Moses for references on the Essen/Bee Priest of Artemis, a possible connection to the Essenes; and on the Hebrew Deborah).

The "Homeric Hymn to Hermes" speaks of the Thriae, three prophetic women who, after eating honeycomb, prophesied truly, but if they received no honey, spoke lies (Meier, p. 109).

<sup>19</sup> Scholiast on Lucian, *Dial. Meretr.* 2.1, in Harrison, pp. 123, 285; Farnell, pp. 75–85; Foucart, pp. 62–63.

<sup>20</sup> See n. 19 above, Scholiast on Lucian.

stood in direct opposition to the increasingly routine patriarchal clan practices of plundering, raping, murdering or enslaving neighboring peoples. In Aeschylus' tragedy *Eumenides*, the female defenders of the early mother-rite culture speak against the aggressive militarism of the new warrior clans:

. . . [we] speak in defence  
of reason: for the very child  
of vanity is violence;  
but out of health  
in the heart issues the beloved  
and the longed-for prosperity.

All for all I say to you . . .  
You shall not  
eye advantage, and heel  
it over with foot of force . . .  
[as] transgressor  
who brings in confusion of goods  
unrightly won . . .

Gods of the younger generation,  
you have ridden down  
the laws of the elder time,  
torn them out of my hands . . .

Great the sorrows and the dishonor  
upon  
the sad daughters of night.<sup>21</sup>

Given this conflict of cultures, the injunction that initiates into the Mysteries of the Goddess must have "pure hands" gains heightened significance.

The most ancient of the Greek goddesses, according to Hesiod, was Gaia, Mother Earth. When the early Greeks prayed to Gaia, or Ge, grandmother of Demeter, they were probably directly addressing the magnificence of the Earth herself. The poet of the "Homeric Hymn to Gaia" praises the primal Goddess with this song:

Mother of us all, oldest of all, of the earth,  
the sacred ground,  
nourishing all out of her treasures—  
children, fields, cattle, beauty . . .

Mistress, from you come our fine children and  
bountiful harvests;  
Yours is the power to give mortals life and to  
take it away  
Hail to you, mother of gods.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Aeschylus *Eumenides* 532–542, 553–554, in *Orestia*, trans. Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

<sup>22</sup> Thelma Sargent, trans., *The Homeric Hymns* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973), p. 79.

The primary deities of many of the earliest known cultures of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world were female, frequently but not exclusively depicted as the birth-giving mother: as in the many Goddess images in the shrines of the Neolithic town of Çatal Hüyük (ca. 6500–5600 B.C.E.) in Anatolia (now Turkey). This community, for which there is no evidence of ritual animal or human sacrifice, lived at peace for approximately a thousand years. For these farming and herding peoples, the image of the bull was also of great religious significance, probably symbolizing male sexual potency and powers of regeneration. The bull also figured prominently in the religion of Crete, in the bull-leaping ceremonies, and in the "horns of consecration" and other ritual artwork.<sup>23</sup>

In her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, British classicist Jane Ellen Harrison refers to the early agrarian cultures as "matriarchal." Marija Gimbutas refers to them as "matristic" instead of "matriarchal," to avoid the connotations of dominant political power attached to the concept "patriarchy." Marilyn French writes of "matricentry." Riane Eisler refers to these early agrarian cultures as "partnership societies," emphasizing that while mothers were central, women and men were equally valued. I refer to the numerous early farming societies where Goddess religion appeared as the primary spiritual focus as female-prominent and Goddess-preminent; or more simply, as the mother-rite cultures. There is increasing archeological, anthropological, religious, artistic, literary and historical evidence that a mother-centered epoch of human cultural evolution prevailed from at least ca. 6500–3500 B.C.E. and later, until in region after region this way of life was overtaken by patriarchal warrior clans (as documented by the archeology of Gimbutas, James Mellaart, Sir Arthur Evans, Nicolas Platon and others). The evidence for this transition is brilliantly synthesized in Riane Eisler's book, *The Chalice and the Blade*.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mellaart, chaps. 6–9, passim; Gimbutas, pp. 224–230; Axel W. Persson, *The Religion of Greece in Prehistoric Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1942), pp. 94–95.

<sup>24</sup> Harrison, pp. 261–262, 273, 619, passim; see Gimbutas, pp. 9–19; Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985); Eisler, p. xix, chs. 2 and 3; and Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük and Earliest Civilizations of the Near East* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1965). J. J. Bachofen used the term "mother-right."

Gimbutas writes: The "pre-Indo-European culture of Europe [was] . . . matrifocal and probably matrilinear, agricultural and sedentary, egalitarian and peaceful. It contrasted sharply with the ensuing proto-Indo-European culture which was patriarchal, stratified, pastoral, mobile, and war-oriented, superimposed on all Europe, except the southern and western fringes, in the course of three waves of infiltration from the Russian steppe, between 4500 and 2500 B.C. During and after this period the female deities, or more accurately the Goddess Creatrix in her many aspects, were largely replaced by the predominantly male divinities of the Indo-Europeans. What developed after c. 2500 B.C. was a melange of the two mythic systems, Old European and Indo-European" (p. 9).

Harrison notes that "the Great Mother [was] worshipped under diverse names all over Greece," and, she could have said, all over the Old European and ancient Middle Eastern world. "Wherever she was worshipped," Harrison adds, "she had Mysteries."<sup>25</sup>

It is easy to see parallels between the Earth Goddesses Gaia and Demeter and other primal goddesses of the ancient world: Ishtar of Babylonia, "Compassionate Goddess [who] brought us Harmony, who led us out of Chaos and brought us Life by the Law of Love"; or Isis of Egypt, "Oldest of the Old . . . Goddess from whom all Becoming arose." The connections between Demeter and Isis and Ishtar, as well as between Tiamat and Innana of Sumer, Astarte of Phoenicia and Ashtoreth of the early Semites, and other Greek goddesses including Rhea, Themis, Hera, Aphrodite, Athena, Artemis, Selene and Hecate, are important for several reasons. They help show that the Goddess religions of early farming peoples of the Neolithic, and continuing into the Bronze Age and historical periods, were not only widespread but in many ways similar, sharing a profound human understanding of natural, personal, and social relationships, and typically emphasizing abundance and love as well as death and rebirth.<sup>26</sup>

The African Isis was closely related to Demeter, as giver of grain and the laws of civilization, as healer, Queen of the Dead, and the One who provides the mystery of resurrected life. As one of the earliest Egyptian deities dating from before the rise of the Egyptian dynasties (ca. 3100 B.C.E.), Isis was seen as mother or sister or wife to Osiris. In one version of the myth, this young male god-king was killed by his brother Seth so Seth could rule in his stead; Osiris's body was torn to pieces and scattered to the far corners of the earth; Isis searched and gathered the lost pieces together and brought Osiris back to life.

The religion of Isis, like Demeter's, adjusted to the tragedies of the increasingly violent patriarchal class system. While daily enjoyment of life diminished and at times was obliterated for increasing numbers of people pushed into hard labor and warfare, in the Mystery celebrations of the Goddess, women and men continued to renew their belief in the essentially loving generosity of the universe, through life and through death. The emphasis of the Goddess on regeneration of life was eventually eclipsed, however, by the patriarchal religions' jealous and wrathful gods, whose priests increasingly demanded economic support, sacrifices and suffering, as well as warfare against those who refused to believe in the omnipotence of a particular deity. Patriarchal religions reduced the early Earth/Mother re-

<sup>25</sup> Harrison, p. 158.

<sup>26</sup> Stone, p. x, chap. 2, p. 36. Harrison cites Plutarch as one who identifies Isis and Demeter; Harrison, pp. 157, 120-121, 128; Foucart, pp. 47-89; John M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), pp. 156-158.

ligions to male-dominated, debased "fertility cults." But the Old Religion was never suppressed entirely.

According to the Greek "Father of History," Herodotus (484?-424? B.C.E.), the knowledge of agriculture was first brought from Egypt to the earliest inhabitants of Greece, called Pelasgians, whose primordial deity was the Goddess Eurynome, believed to live on Mount Olympus. According to legend, Pelasgus, first father of the Pelasgians, is said to have dedicated a temple to Demeter at Argos. The Pelasgians' way of life was in some ways similar to that of the acorn-gathering Indians of California. And the farming communities of the Demeter-Persephone religion in many ways closely parallel the spiritual/agricultural way of life of the Hopi and other Pueblo peoples of the American Southwest. The fate of these tribal peoples in the New World shows a cultural shift similar to that which took place four or five thousand years earlier in the Old World, from relatively egalitarian and peaceful clan communities to urbanized, warring, male-dominant, and slave-based class societies.<sup>27</sup>

While many of the planting and harvesting festivals celebrated in Greece in Demeter's name involved the whole community, some of them were for women only—the *Thesmophoria*, *Arrephoria*, and *Skiophoria*. These were "performed with the same intent concerning the growth of crops and of human offspring."<sup>28</sup> As Demeter was protector of childbearing and the "one who cherishes children," so one of the names given Persephone was "mid-wife."<sup>28</sup>

The autumn planting festival, *Thesmophoria*, for women only, lasted three days, having a major impact on the larger community: "prisoners were released, law courts were closed, and the Boule [Council] could not meet." The *Thesmophoria* included three days: *Kathados* and *Anados*, the Downgoing and Uprising; *Nestia*, a day of Fasting; and *Kalligeneia*, day of the Fairborn or Fairbirth. While the significance of the three days has not been clearly established, late reports connect the second day to Demeter mourning the loss of her daughter. These three days may be seen to parallel the cycle of the crops: from sowing, through the season of waiting, until the harvest; and also as symbolizing the cycle of human reproduction, from sexual union, through

<sup>27</sup> Harrison, pp. 120-121 and 120, n. 2; Graves, *Greek Myths*, I: 27-28; Avery, p. 384; Pat Ferrero, ed., *Hopi, Songs of the Fourth World: A Resource Handbook* (San Francisco: Film Arts Foundation/Ferrero Films, 1986); Diane Lebow, "Rethinking Matrilinearity Among the Hopi," in *Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers*, ed. Ruby Rohrlich and Elaine Hoffman Baruch (New York: Schocken Books, 1984).

E. Karpodini-Dimitriadi writes that the Pelasgians "were followed around 2000 B.C. by Indo-European peoples, the ancient Achaeo-Aeolians and Ionians, who came to the area in great numbers and established themselves in the southeastern, western and northern parts of the peninsula. The Pelasgians, i.e., the pre-Hellenic tribes, retained the central Peloponnese, the Arcadian mountains" (*The Peloponnese* [Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1981], p. 7). See n. 61, below.

<sup>28</sup> Scholiast on Lucian, in Harrison, p. 122; Farnell, p. 81; Hesychius, in Meier, p. 96.

pregnancy, to the fair birth of the fairborn child. According to Jane Ellen Harrison, the Eleusinian Mysteries grew out of the *Thesmophoria* rituals.<sup>29</sup>

The women's festivals were sometimes for maidens only (*Arrephoria*), or for adult (married) women only (probably the *Skira* and *Stenia*), and sometimes for women of different ages. They were to a large part filled with merriment and laughter. Probably through these celebrations, elder women shared with girls and young women what they would need to know about menstruation, sexuality, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing. Most likely these "women's rites" increased the sense of friendship and bonding among women of various generations.<sup>30</sup>

Women's friendship and bonding is depicted in the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter." The hymn, which expresses an exuberant joy in the beauty of nature, begins with a scene of Demeter's daughter playing happily in the fields with her girlfriends.

Apart from Demeter, lady of the golden [blade] and glorious fruits, the maiden was playing with the deep-bosomed daughters of Oceanus and gathering flowers over a soft meadow, roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, irises also and hyacinths and the narcissus . . . a marvellous radiant flower. It was a thing of awe whether for deathless gods or mortal men to see: from its root grew a hundred blooms and it smelled most sweetly, so that all wide heaven above and the whole earth and the sea's salt swell laughed for joy.<sup>31</sup>

Following a long period of separation of the daughter from the mother, which the mother grieves, daughter and mother are reunited; and then are joined by the "tenderhearted" elder Goddess, Hecate. As described by the poet:

Then all day long, with their hearts in  
agreement, they basked  
In each other's presence, embracing with  
love and forgetful of sorrow  
And each received joy from the other and  
gave joy in return.

<sup>29</sup> Harrison, pp. 127, 120.

<sup>30</sup> Harrison, pp. 120-136. The Scholiast on Lucian reports that "sacred things that may not be named . . . are made of cereal paste, [and] are carried about, i.e. images of snakes and of the forms of men . . . also fir-cones on account of the fertility of the tree." Harrison notes that at the Haloa festival there were "cakes shaped like the symbols of sex" (p. 149). Some commentators have accused the women at such fertility festivals of making "obscene" or "scurrilous jests," but Harrison compares the women's joking to that which formed a regular part of the Eleusinian Mysteries (p. 136). See also Betty De Shong Meador, "The Thesmophoria: A Women's Ritual," *Psychological Perspectives: A Semi-Annual Review of Jungian Thought*, 17, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 35-45.

<sup>31</sup> Hugh G. Evelyn-White, trans., *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homeric* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1914/1950), p. 289. While translators usually speak of Demeter's "sword" or "weapon," Sargent chooses the word "blade," to indicate what she thinks most likely was a reference to Demeter's golden stalks of wheat (p. xii).

Then smooth-coifed Hecate came and  
lovingly kissed  
The holy child of Demeter, and . . .  
from that time on [was]  
Persephone's . . . faithful companion.<sup>32</sup>

The story of Persephone, Demeter and Hecate lets us see the loving bonds of daughter, mother, and grandmother. During the epoch of the Goddess religions, women were honored at all stages of life. This respect found expression in many shrines and images of the triple-aspected Goddess, and also in devotions to the feminine moon, Artemis/Selene/Hecate, seen to pass through the three phases of newness waxing, bright fullness, and waning toward darkness, before beginning another cycle. Women's fertility cycles were closely tied to lunar cycles and the timely planting and harvesting of crops. The triune Goddess was also named the Three Fates, the Three Graces, and as the customs of patriarchy grew, the Three Furies. Pausanias (mid-second century C.E.) wrote that the Three Fates were sisters named Birth, Death and Love; and the eldest sister was Love. So it seems, of the major mysteries of human experience, love was considered the greatest.<sup>33</sup>

Drawing from the classical scholarship of Harrison, Evans, Louis Farnell and others, and by tracing similarities between the myth of Demeter-Persephone and the myths of Isis as Queen of the Upper World and Underworld, and of Inanna's voluntary descent to the underworld, feminist author Charlene Spretnak has created a prepatriarchal version of the Demeter-Persephone myth that does not include the abduction and rape of Persephone.

Demeter and Persephone share the bountiful fields, enjoying the beautiful earth, and watching over the crops together. One day, Persephone asks her mother about the restless spirits of the dead she has seen hovering about their earthly homes. "Is there no one in the underworld to receive the newly dead?" she asks. Demeter explains that she rules over the underworld as well as the upper world, but her more important work is above ground, feeding the living. Reflecting on the bewilderment and pain she has seen in the ghostly spirits, Persephone replies, "The dead need us, Mother. I will go to them." After trying to persuade Persephone to stay with her, Demeter relents: "Very well. . . . We cannot give only to ourselves. I understand why you must go. Still, you are my daughter, and for every day you remain in the underworld, I will mourn your absence."

<sup>32</sup> "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," 2.25, in Evelyn-White; "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," 2.434-440, in Sargent.

<sup>33</sup> Harrison, pp. 286-291; Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series 47 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 230-231; Caroly Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks*, trans. Norman Cameron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1951), pp. 45-46; 67, in Anne Ogonowski, "The Moirai and Fate in the Iliad," unpublished manuscript (San Francisco State University, Department of Classics, 1985), p. 10.