

Historical Context

In ancient agricultural communities, productive soil was of primary importance, and the culture of the community was earth-oriented. Farmers observed that plants and animals were born, grew to maturity, and died, and that others like them were born the following spring. In the same way, people were born, grew to maturity, and died, but not before reproducing and thus continuing the cycle of human life. This cycle became the central focus of the matriarchal religion. Death was an accepted part of the life cycle because it was followed by rebirth or new life. The people worshipped the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess to ensure the fertility of their fields and themselves and, therefore, to ensure the survival of their community.

The Great Goddess functioned in three related forms. As Goddess of the Underworld, she controlled the three-stage cycle of life: first, the period of birth and childhood; then, the fertile period of maturity and reproduction; and last, the sterile period of old age, with its decline and death. As Goddess of the Earth, she controlled the three-stage cycle of the seasons: first, spring (the period of birth or rebirth and budding growth); then, summer (the fertile period of blossoming and harvest); and last, winter (the sterile period of decay, barrenness, and death or dormancy).

As Goddess of the Sky, she was the great Moon Goddess, who appeared in her three-stage cycle of phases: first, as the new and waxing moon (the period of birth or rebirth and growth); then, as the full moon (the period of maturity); and last, as the waning moon (the period of decline and death or dormancy).

Before the Mycenaeans brought their patriarchal religion into ancient Greece and other parts of the Mediterranean region, the agricultural communities worshipped this Great Goddess or Mother Goddess. Different communities called her by different names, and the principal female divinities in Greek mythology were originally worshipped as the Great Goddess. For example, Aphrodite was worshipped on the island of Cyprus; Artemis in Attica, Asia Minor, and on Crete; Athena in Athens; Demeter in Eleusis (in Attica); Gaea in Delphi and throughout Greece; Hera in Argos; Persephone in Enna (in Sicily); and Rhea in Phrygia (in Asia Minor).

Wherever they settled, the Mycenaeans prudently incorporated into their own religion the Great Goddess that the particular matriarchal community was accustomed

to worshipping. They made Zeus their principal divinity, and they transformed every local Great Goddess into an important member of his family. In the process, Gaea became Zeus's grandmother, while Rhea became his mother. Demeter became Zeus's sister, while Hera became both his sister and his wife. Athena, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Persephone became Zeus's daughters.

Then the Mycenaeans gave their gods and goddesses new roles. Zeus now became God of the Sky, and his brother Hades became God of the Underworld. There, Hades became God of the Dead—including the "dead" (dormant) earth, which revived each spring to burst forth with new plant life. Hades also became known as the God of Wealth because the earth contained copper and tin, from which the Mycenaeans made bronze. (Hades' other name, Pluto, is derived from *ploutos*, which means wealth.) Demeter now functioned only in the role of Goddess of the Earth, where, as Goddess of Grain, she taught mortals how to plant, raise, and harvest corn, wheat, and barley.

In contrast, Persephone (also known as Kore, which means "daughter") remained both Goddess of the Underworld and Goddess of the Earth. However, both in the Underworld, where she functioned as Hades' subservient wife, and on Earth, where she functioned as Demeter's loving daughter, Persephone lost her power as the life-giving Great Goddess. Although she still determined the seasons, her place of residence, rather than her life-giving power itself, controlled their cycle. Whenever Persephone lived on earth with her mother, it was Demeter who caused the seeds to sprout and the crops to grow; and whenever Persephone lived in the Underworld with her husband, once again, it was Demeter who caused the seeds to lay dormant within the earth.

The ancient tale of Demeter and Persephone is a fertility myth in that it explains the change of seasons and the annual rebirth of life-supporting nature. However, while the subject is generic, its treatment is truly remarkable. The author depicts the Great Goddess as a very human mother whose beloved daughter has been abducted. So great was his talent that his psychologically realistic narration of a mother's love and loss remains one of the most heart-rending and powerful depictions of motherhood—not only in all of mythology, but in later literature, as well. Therefore, it is not surprising that the hymn that relates this myth was thought to have been written by Homer until

Hellenistic scholars (third centuries and later B.C.) attributed *The Homeric Hymns* to ancient but anonymous professional *rhapsodes* ("one who stitches songs together").

The second of *The Homeric Hymns*, "Hymn to Demeter" (seventh century B.C. or earlier), contains the most complete version of the following myth. This is what is adopted here.