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Mary Elizabeth Naples
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Naples, Mary Elizabeth, "Demeter's Daughters: How the Myth of the Captured Bride Helped Spur Feminine Consciousness in Ancient Greece" (2013). *Graduate Master's Theses, Capstones, and Culminating Projects*. 64.
https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2013.hum.02

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DEMETER'S DAUGHTERS: HOW THE MYTH OF THE CAPTURED BRIDE HELPED SPUR FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS IN ANCIENT GREECE

A culminating project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Humanities

by

Mary Elizabeth Naples
San Rafael, California
May 2013

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Greek cult festival known as the Thesmophoria was an exclusively feminine ritual whose purpose was human and agricultural fertility. The festival honored Demeter, goddess of the harvest and her daughter Persephone. Although men held the festival in high esteem, they were expressly forbidden—sometimes to the point of death—from attending the three-day long event. Men's respect for the Thesmophoria was demonstrated by both their financial support as well as the curtailing of certain civic events in the polis on the second day of the Thesmophoria. Considered one of the oldest and most widespread of all Greek religious festivals, the Thesmophoria is believed to have its origins in the Neolithic age—before the advent of patriarchal marriage. This paper explores the ways in which citizen wives in the patriarchal culture of ancient Greece were empowered by both the ritual and its pre-androcentric origins.

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Acknowledgments

To Dr. Leslie Ross, whose invaluable guidance, unwavering support and singular diligence made this project possible.

To Dr. Martin Anderson, for his keen input and helpful insight on the historicity of this study.

In deep gratitude to my husband Tim, for his enduring love and support.

Many thanks to the goddesses for their inspiration.

And most of all to my mother, Priscilla A. Naples, 1919-2011.

INTRODUCTION

"….marriage as the matriarchate recognized, is primarily an abduction, an acquisition—a rape."[1] Erich Neumann, *Amore and Psyche*

In the indigo light of the early morning, wearing white robes and carrying torches, the pious women ascended the hill to the Thesmophorion in observance of their three day long annual festival honoring Demeter, goddess of the harvest, and her daughter Persephone. Were they chanting? Were they singing? We can only guess. They must have numbered in the hundreds, perhaps thousands—a procession—exalting to behold. Throughout ancient Greece from the archaic to the end of the Hellenistic eras (800 BCE-31 BCE), women came from far and wide to gather in their cities to celebrate the Thesmophoria, the oldest and most widespread of all Greek religious festivals. Indeed, scholars believe that its expansive nature within the Greek world is testament to its primeval origins.[2] Primarily a fertility cult, the Thesmophoria ushered in the sowing season and was one of a series of fertility cults devoted to human as well as crop fertility. In Athens it was celebrated in the month of Pyanopsion (October-November) on the eleventh through the thirteenth in the area known as the Pnyx—a prominent hill where the general assembly of the polis met.

Why was a women's fertility festival in hyper-patriarchal ancient Greece, given such prominence in greater society? After all, in ancient Greece, women's place was on the margins of society, away from the public sphere. Could the strict demarcation of gender roles actually have served to empower women in ancient

Greece? My purpose with this paper is to demonstrate how disciples of the Thesmophoria formed an identity around the cult, which served to empower them by promoting a feminine consciousness, uncommon in the androcentric dominion of ancient Greece. Against the backdrop of extreme misogyny, this study reviews the esteem men had for the Thesmophoria and explores the possible reasons for this. As background, Demeter's myth is explored to evaluate how its gynocentric narrative helped emancipate women. Further, the aetiological[3] relationship between myth and ritual as it relates to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the Thesmophoria is analyzed. Primary sources are engaged for investigating the likely provenance of the Thesmophoria, which intriguingly is thought to have preceded the origins of marriage. Finally, a prehistoric feminine cult practice may be shown to have relevance for women in the twenty-first century. While the acclaim for the Thesmophoria may have been at its peak during the archaic era the evidence on the roles of women from that era is sparse. Consequently for the purposes of this study on women's roles in religion, the focus will be on both the archaic (eighth-fifth centuries BCE) and classical eras (fifth-fourth centuries BCE).

Although typically confined to the seclusion of their domiciles, literary and archaeological sources indicate that women in ancient Greece left their homes and families for three days and nights to participate in the Thesmophoria, an occurrence of particular significance by itself. Membership in the Thesmophoria was restricted to citizen wives in good standing; no maidens or female slaves were allowed. Though strictly prohibited from attending the event—sometimes to the point of

death—men, that is to say male citizens, were responsible for expenses related to its celebration.

In addition to their financial support for the Thesmophoria, men's reverence for the cult was reflected by the cessation of certain civic functions on the second day of the festival. The Boule Council—a citizen assembly that made decisions affecting the community—could not meet and law courts were completely suspended. Moreover, all prisoners were released from jail. This last act can be seen as a "magical means" of promoting fertility, as it was believed that knots, chains and confinement in general could hinder fertility.[4] Certainly, there were other feminine festivals devoted to fertility, but none honored as much as the Thesmophoria. To appreciate the significance of a feminine only cult festival garnering esteem from the entire community—including male citizens—it is important to get a glimpse into what life was like for women in ancient Greece.

To be sure, a woman's place was in the home tending to such things as nursing children, weaving clothing and preparing food. Although a wife was able to share in citizenship with her husband, her "citizenship" was patriarchal in nature as it entitled her to bear sons who would in turn become male citizens. Consequently, unless women were priestesses[5] they could not participate in the public life of the polis in any way. Likewise, they were restricted from the simple task of marketing as it was believed that women could not be entrusted with financial transactions as complicated as purchasing fruits or vegetables. Needless to say if a woman could not be trusted with the simple act of making change there was no question of giving them the vote in this newly democratized society. In consideration of the poor

opinion men had of women, how did women's alignment with the natural world serve their better interests?

Salient to this discussion is the place agriculture had within the polis. In his book about the Peloponnesian War titled *A War Like No Other*, Victor Davis Hanson asserts: "…agriculture was the linchpin of all social, economic and cultural life."[6] Ancient Greece, the seat of Western civilization, gave us their genius for philosophy, literature and politics, yet contrary to this cosmopolitan image; Attica was chiefly an agrarian community where most of its residents worked the land. From the seventh through the fourth century BCE, farming was a commonplace occupation revered by the greater polis. In his Socratic dialog titled *Oeconomicus,* the Greek historian and philosopher, Xenophon (431-355 BCE) pronounces: "When farming goes well, all other arts go well, but when the earth is forced to lie barren, the others almost cease to exist."[7] Indeed, the community's health and well-being was contingent on a successful harvest. But success or failure was often determined by factors over which they had no control, often making their lives tumultuous.

The truth is crop fertility was not the only concern of the Greeks. Due to their ever-expanding empire, they needed an ample supply of males to maintain their military commitments and they needed women to produce the much-coveted male citizens. [8] Is it any wonder that the Greeks had such a preoccupation with controlling fecundity, celebrating several fertility cult festivals throughout the year? Representing the changing seasons, each of these cult festivals was associated with Demeter, goddess of the harvest, who represented abundance in all natural things. Their pious respect for a higher power associated with fertility allowed them a

sense of control in their otherwise chaotic lives. With the exception of the Eleusinian mysteries,[9] which included men and hence were more renowned, membership in the fertility festivals was limited to women only. In her opus, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Jane Ellen Harrison proposes that the Eleusinian mysteries issued forth from the more antiquated Thesmophoria. Later this study will touch on some key differences between the two acclaimed festivals.

Did women exploit their gender roles by accentuating their connection with the natural world? Women were associated with the powerful force of fertility, considered all-important in the agrarian culture of ancient Greece. As such, women were the natural agents of fertility cults. Though excluded from the daily activities of citizens within the public sphere, cult activity allowed women agency with organizational processes and religious rites. John J. Winkler in his book *The Constraints of Desire* proposes: " In a sense, the Demetrian feasts were official business of the polis, but carried out with a good deal of autonomy by women."[10] Whereas the Thesmophoria was an autonomous enterprise, citizen wives—women who were married to male citizens—were in charge of running this community, which held elections, drafted proposals, kept accounting and last but not least practiced sacred feminine ritual.

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[1] Erich Neumann. *Amore and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine*, (New York: Princeton University Press, 1956,62-63.

[2] Kevin Clinton, *Myth and Cult: The Iconography of the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Stockholm: Svenska Institute i Athen, 1990), 28-37. H.W. Park, *Aspects of Greek and Roman Life: Festivals of the Athenians* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1977), 82.

[3] Philosophy or study of causation.

[4] H.S. Versnel,, "The Festival of Bona Dea and the Thesmophoria," *Greece & Rome* 39, no. 1 (April 1992): 35.

[5] Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 1-25.

[6] Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War*(New York: Random House, 2005), 8.

[7] Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 5.17 quoted in Victor Davis Hanson, *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc, 1995), 5.

[8] Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 34-70.

[9] Like the Thesmophoria, the Eleusinian Mysteries also honored Demeter and Persephone, celebrated during the sowing season. The major comparisons between the two festivals will be discussed in a later chapter of this study.

[10] John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 1990),194.

CHAPTER ONE: THE MYTH—WHAT WAS ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

Thought to have been composed between 650-550 BCE, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is one of a series of thirty-three Homeric Hymns, which honor individual deities. They are called Homeric, not necessarily because they were written by Homer, but because they employ the same epic meter he used in *The Odyssey* and *The Illiad*.[1] Though there is no record relating to the performance of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter,* many scholars contend that a portion of the hymn was probably recited or sung at the cult festivals honoring Demeter. Although there are twenty-two adaptations of the Demeter-Persephone myth in ancient Greece, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is considered to be of the greatest antiquity and for this reason, thought to be closer to the cult practice of the Thesmophoria.[2]

The antecedent action that leads up to the narrative found in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter,* hereafter called the *Hymn,* is as important as her story. Zeus, lord of the gods, rapes his sister Demeter[3] (see Figure 1); the product of that rape is Persephone (see Figure 2), also known as Kore, the maiden.[4] They never married; indeed Zeus would have been the husband to hundreds if he had to marry every person he raped. The *Hymn* begins with the reciting of Zeus' agreement with Hades. To be sure, his being an absentee father did not stop Zeus from arranging the marriage of his daughter—unbeknownst to either mother or daughter—to his brother—Hades, the lord of the underworld. One day while Persephone was out picking flowers with her friends, the earth cleaved open and Hades, on a horse drawn chariot, charged out violently snatching Persephone to be his wife in the

underworld (see Figure 3). Taken aback by the brutality of the act, Persephone shrieked. Hearing her daughter's scream, Demeter instantly sensed Persephone was in peril. Bearing a torch, Demeter wandered the earth in search of her beloved daughter for nine long days and nights. No one, god or mortal, had the courage to tell her what had become of Persephone. Demeter was inconsolable. Finally on day ten, Hecate—a pre-Olympian goddess—informed her of Persephone's rape which she had seen with her own eyes. Seeking the guidance of Helios—god of the sun—Demeter asked that he use his rays to help her determine who was behind the attack. Upon discovering the truth, she became furious at Zeus for making the perfidious bargain and withdrew from her home on Mount Olympus. Instead "she went among the cities and fertile fields of men" [5] finally settling in Eleusis.

Misrepresenting herself as an old woman, she sat near the Maiden's Well where she met three daughters of Keleos—son of Eleusis—who treated her kindly. They took Demeter home to meet their mother, Metaneira. Upon entering, Demeter's celestial glow filled the home. Although offered a chair, Demeter refused to sit until "knowing Iambe," a servant brought her a stool to sit on. Refusing food and drink, Demeter was despondent over the loss of her beloved daughter. "Until knowing Iambe jested with her and mocking with many a joke moved the holy goddess to smile and laugh and keep a gracious heart." [6] Ultimately, Metaneira allowed Demeter to nurse Metneira's newborn son, Demophoon.

It was Demeter's goal to make Demophoon immortal, thereby stealing a mortal from Hades.[7] "Demeter anointed him with ambrosia like one born from a god and breathed sweetly on him, held close to her breast. At night she would bury him

like a brand in the fire's might, unknown to his own parents."[8] Under her care Demophoon thrived and grew miraculously fast, like a god. One night while coming upon them, Metaneira screamed when she saw Demeter putting her son in the fireplace. Tossing off the vestiges of old age and rising to her full celestial prominence Demeter threw Demophoon from the flames to the ground crying: "Mortals are ignorant and foolish, unable to foresee destiny….I would have made your child immortal and ageless forever."[9] Because of this deep indignity Demeter suffered at the hands of the mortals, she ordered that the Eleusinians build her a grand temple on a rising hill with attendant rites to conciliate her spirit (see Figure 4).

They did as she commanded and soon her beautiful temple was completed. But although Demeter now had a magnificent temple built in her honor along with disciples to praise her, she still lamented the loss of her beloved daughter. It was at this point in the story that she realized her full strength and stopped the seasons; the fertile earth became a barren wasteland: "The ground released no seed, for bright-crowned Demeter kept it buried….she would have destroyed the whole mortal race by cruel famine and stolen glorious honor of gifts and sacrifices from those having home on Olympus."[10] Reluctant to see the planet he shepherds whither away, Zeus pleaded with Demeter to make the earth abundant again. But she would not relent until the release of Persephone. Finally, Zeus interceded on Demeter's behalf and ordered Hades to return Persephone to her mother in her earthly domain. Ever obedient to Zeus, Hades adhered to his instruction but not until he lured Persephone into eating a pomegranate seed. The mere act of eating in the

underworld bound Persephone to Hades as his wife for a few months out of every year.

Did the parable of the kidnapped bride ring true for women living in ancient Greece? Living under their husband's patriarchal thumb, women had become accustomed to being kept ignorant regarding the matrimony of their daughters. As such it was not unusual for a father to bargain with his future son-in-law about the fate of his daughter without the knowledge or consent of either his wife or daughter. In her book titled *Women in Ancient Greece*, Sue Blundell contends: "Marriage to a stranger, arranged by her father against her mother's wishes, and envisaged as a kind of rape, would have been a reality and not a fanciful tale for many Greek women."[11]

Torn from their natal home and forced to marry an unknown man who was—on average—twice or three times their senior, abduction in these cases can be seen as the equivalent of rape. After all the men were taking young girls in order for them be their wives—that is to say—the begetter of their sons. Indeed, some military campaigns were undertaken for the express purpose of rape; many Ionians and Pelasgians[12] were said to have gotten their wives in that manner.[13] Further, in patriarchal ancient Greece, marriage was virilocal. In other words, the young girls—most of whom were not much over fourteen years of age—were forced to reside in their new husband's family home, which could be a great distance from their natal home. Hence having contact with their family members was a rare occurrence. Consequently, Demeter's sense of powerlessness against the abduction, and the

suffering that ensued at the loss of her daughter could resonate for most women of ancient Greece.

Although males are present in the account, it is a woman's story. All the major roles are played by females, and the areas of concern; marriage, agriculture and sacrifice are indubitably in the feminine domain. Of the *Hymn*, Carl Jung argues:

> Demeter-Kore exists on the plane of mother-daughter experience, which is alien to the man and shuts him out. In fact, the psychology of the Demeter cult has all the features of a matriarchal order of society, where the man is an indispensible but on the whole disturbing factor. [14]

To be sure, the dark bargain made by the male deities is a misbegotten one, as the union produces no child and nearly brings an end to the life of the planet. Indeed, although their actions drive the events, Zeus and Hades are remote shadows, whose dark force propels the dissonance felt by mother and daughter.

At its most fundamental level the *Hymn* is a story about a mother's grief at the loss of her beloved daughter. Told from the perspective of the mother; it is more Demeter's story than Persephone's. At once powerless and inconsolable, Demeter appears more mortal than divine. Suffering profoundly due to the actions of males, Demeter is initially powerless to set things right. It is this sense of helplessness that sets off her sorrow at the loss of Persephone, mirroring the anguish that must have been felt by mortal mothers who lost their daughters to marriage each day. Is it any wonder that women in ancient Greece would have felt engaged with a story like Demeter's that so closely mirrored their own?

Although both are parents to Persephone, Demeter's anguish at the loss of her daughter is in marked contrast to that of Zeus who initiated her abduction. Bargaining with the lord of the underworld, who most would view as an agent of

death; Zeus is indifferent to his daughter's banishment into the land of the dead. In other words, he is disinterested in his daughter's symbolic death. Though immortal, Persephone is spirited away from the living cosmos and is compelled to live in the realm of the underworld for eternity due to her marriage with Hades.

Is her marriage not a sort of death? "It is difficult not to notice the similarity between the myth of Persephone and the typical scheme of the rites of passage. Nor can one not be tempted to interpret the abduction as symbolic death."[15] For Persephone, marriage to the lord of the underworld was as close to death as any goddess can get. Seen as a transition, the marriage of a maiden was also viewed by many to be a symbolic form of death.

Further, literary and archaeological sources indicate that the funereal rites for women and the rites of matrimony were eerily similar. Both used garlands, ritual ablutions, the shearing and dedicating of hair, songs, a feast, and the focus on the transition from house to grave or from parent's house to husband's home. [16] Why was there such a parallel between death and marriage rituals? Marguerite Rigoglioso, in her book *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*, argues that the death-marriage pattern is due to feminine opposition to marriage. "Equating marriage with death represents an embedded grieving over the massive shift that has taken place to reduce women's autonomy."[17]Indeed, the contrast between Persephone's carefree playfulness in the meadow to her violent abduction into the underworld speaks manifestly about women's loss of independence. Harkening back to a period in time before monogamous patriarchal marriage, Rigoglioso discusses how Demeter was one of the great mother goddesses in the pre-Greek world, which

emphasized the bonds between mother and daughter. Although more will be discussed about this topic in upcoming chapters, most scholars agree that Demeter's reign as a divinity precedes that of her rapist, the patriarch, Zeus.[18]

Notwithstanding the parallels between marriage and death, how else is marriage characterized in the *Hymn*? Principally, seen from a feminine perspective, marriage is portrayed as violent, painful and worthy of defiance. The *Hymn* presents mother and daughter divinities struggling against the arbitrary patriarchal arrangement; which is seen as both cruel and unjust. From Persephone's scream at her abduction in the beginning of the story, the women are distraught with the bargain made in which they played no part. When she discovers Zeus is behind the attack, Demeter is justifiably incensed and leaves her home on Mount Olympus. It is only after the Eleusinians build her a temple that Demeter realizes her immense strength. In the final act, by applying her power of fertility—which she possessed all along—she is able to retrieve Persephone from the realm of death. In her book *Citizen Bacchae*, Barbara Goff affirms:

> The *Hymn* does not only display female power and anger and the cost to historical women of maintaining the system of patriarchal marriage, the *Hymn* pretends that the daughter will return to her mother for part of every year, and consequently provides an imaginary solution to real separation among women.[19]

Daring to defy the will of the patriarch, Demeter does something never seen before in Greek mythology, and she very nearly wins. After all, for the majority of the year Persephone lives with her mother in the light of her mother's earthly domain. Though life can never return to the way it was before the abduction, most mortal mothers would envy Demeter's achievement.

In direct juxtaposition to the feminine perspective found in the Hymn, are the Homeric epics with an androcentric mindset entrenched in promoting marriage.[20] Marriages, such as Odysseus' and Penelope in the *Odyssey,* are praised as the greatest source of happiness for humankind: "There is nothing more admirable than when two people who see eye to eye keep house as man and wife, confounding their enemies and delighting their friends."[21] Seen from a male-centric perspective, marriage offers male gods and mortals everything they could want and more. If they are unhappy at home with their wives they can find numerous activities to satisfy them outside the home. After waiting patiently twenty long years for her husband, Penelope was symbolic of the ideal wife who made no fuss while her husband went off on his adventures. In the narrative, Penelope was content raising their son by herself, happily confined to her life of domesticity. It would seem that marriage was of great advantage to Odysseus, though not necessarily so for his wife. If Homer's Penelope represents the ideal wife, what do Demeter and Persephone represent?

On an etymological level Demeter's character is intrinsic to her name. "Da" is the Doric form of earth, and "Meter" is Greek for mother. However she is more than merely an earth mother as she is associated with fertility and the cultivation of crops that allowed civilization to thrive. In an influential article creating heated discussion in academic circles, Nicholas J. Lowe in "Thesmophoria and Haloa," affirms that the Thesmophoria was much more than a mere fertility festival as had been previously believed: "A thank offering to Demeter…crops, because that is what Demeter is being thanked for providing, and humans, because that is who benefited from it. How did they benefit…not by enhancements in their own fertility but by

becoming 'hermeros,' civilized."[22] According to Lowe, in the mind of the ancient Greek Demeter was associated with civilization; the cornerstone of which is agriculture allowing nomadic people to settle, thrive and ultimately become civilized. In the next chapter another of Lowe's fascinating contentions will be addressed.

Similarly, on a purely symbolic level relating to agriculture, Persephone is a metaphor for the seed, which goes underground or lies dormant in the summer months only to be released again for planting in autumn. In ancient Greece the grainseed was buried in bins in the earth, then opened and distributed during sowing season for planting. That being the case, Persephone represents resurrection and the regeneration of life; from life to death and back again each year. For that reason, there is a mythical connection between Persephone's captivity and release with agricultural renewal. Indeed, resurrection myths were often associated with rituals devised to encourage the renewal of vegetation.[23] Therefore, if Demeter represents agriculture and Persephone vegetative regeneration, the mother and daughter dyad are closely linked symbolically.

To be sure, in artwork from the era, the two goddesses are portrayed as double images of each other (see Figure 5), making it nearly impossible to tell them apart. Some scholars have suggested that they are the younger and older aspects of the same woman.[24] Possibly confirming this hypothesis is the double goddess figurine of a mother and a maiden. Although they share the same torso, they have two heads and two pairs of breasts (see Figure 6). This mother-daughter figurine was unearthed during the excavation at Catal Huyuk in southern Turkey. Thought to

date from eighth millennium BCE through sixth millennium BCE, Catal Huyuk is one of the largest and best-preserved archaeological sites from the Neolithic era.[25] The notion is that Demeter and Persephone each represent a phase in a woman's life and the various transitions she endures. In the *Hymn*, Demeter's mother Rhea and grandmother Gaia have contributory roles, encompassing the three phases of a woman's life: maiden, adult and crone. Demeter bemoans her lost youth, which Persephone exemplifies. In mourning for the rape of her daughter, Demeter is also mourning her rape and loss of innocence at the hands of a transgressor—the very male who is responsible for her daughter's abduction and subsequent loss of innocence. Indeed, the *Hymn* comes closer to representing the issues faced by ancient women than any other literary work from the era.[26]

In her book *Playing the Other*, Froma Zeitlin posits: "Greece was alone among Mediterranean cultures in imagining an agricultural scenario of death and rebirth that features an exclusively female relationship."[27] As shown in the *Hymn*, the mother-daughter pairing is noteworthy in its omission of the male, who is seen as an unwelcome interloper. Supplanting the mother-daughter dyad in favor of matrimony, patriarchy sets off the basic conflict. But ultimately, the bond between mother and daughter is seen to be more powerful than the one between husband and wife with the mother-daughter pair triumphing. Yoked to marriages over which they had no control, the *Hymn* was liberating for ancient women because a female archetype subverted the dominant patriarchal paradigm for which marriage played a key role.

[1] Helene P. Foley, ed., *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1994), 28-31.

[2] Foley, 97.

[3] Because Demeter preferred Iason to Zeus, Zeus jealously struck Iason with a thunderbolt while impregnating Demeter. Found in: Kathleen Daly, *Greek and Roman Mythology A-Z,* revised by Marian Rangel. (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2009), 423.

[4] Kore, a common name used for all maidens, was Demeter's daughter's name before she was abducted. It was only after her marriage to Hades that Kore acquired an identity; a means of distinguishing herself, and became known as Persephone.

[5] Foley, 6.

[6] Foley, 12.

[7] Louise Pratt, "The Old Women of Ancient Greece and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 130 (2000):43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/284305 (accessed October 7, 2012).

[8] Foley, 14.

[9] Foley, 14.

[10] Foley, 15.

[11] Sue Blundell, Women in Ancient Greece (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 19950, 42.

[12] Many ancient writers referred to early Greeks as Pelasgians.

[13] David Schaps, "The Women of Greece in Wartime,"*Classical Philology* 77, no. 3 (July 1982), 203. http://www.jstor.org/stable/270245 (accessed December 3, 2012).

[14] Carl Jung, *Essays on a Science of Mythology* quoted in Carl Kerenyi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967) xxxii.

[15] Eva Cantarella, "Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece," *Poetics Today* 6, no. ½ (1985), 96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772123 (accessed January 10, 2013).

[16] Foley, 81.

[17] Marguerite Rigoglioso, *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 12.

[18] The cult of the twelve Olympian gods can only be traced to the sixth century BCE. There is no record of them during Mycenaean times. Whereas the goddess known as Demeter is believed to have her origins with the mother goddesses in Bronze era (27th-17th century BCE) Minoan Crete, if not before.

[19] Barbara Goff, *Citizen Bacchae: Women's Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004),133.

[20] Foley, 80.

[21]Homer *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 185.

[22] Lowe, N. J. "Thesmophoria and Haloa: Myth, Physics and Mysteries," in *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, ed. Sue Blundell and Margaret Williamson (London: Routledge, 1998), 154.

[23] Frazer, James. *The Golden Bough* (London: Summit Classic Press, 2012), 426.

[24] Foley, 101; Harrison, 272; Marija Gimbutas, *The Living Goddess*, ed. Miriam Robbins Dexter (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2001), 161.

[25] First excavated in 1958 by James Mellaart, who led a team of excavators from 1961-1965. Mellart was later banned from Turkey for antiquities smuggling in 1965. Prior to that, Mellart and his team found that most of the figurines they unearthed were female and formed a hypothesis that Catal Huyuk was matriarchal which later came under dispute. The site lay barren for nearly thirty years until it was re-opened in 1993 by Ian Hodder of the University of Cambridge. Hodder and his team believe that Catal Huyuk incorporated neither matriarchal nor patriarchal rule but had social balance between the sexes, which is indicative of a matrilineal culture.

[26] Pratt, 55.

[27] Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11.

CHAPTER TWO: MAGIC, MYSTERY AND MYTHOLOGY—THE RITUAL BEHIND THE NARRATIVE

What is mythology? Although "mythology," in modern parlance, may imply unbelievable or exaggerated stories, the term is here used to refer to stories of deep and abiding cultural significance. While not all myths are associated with religion,[1] most religion has some legend or story associated with it, that makes ritual meaningful for the adherent. When does mythology become religion or cult? As a category, religion is all encompassing; in addition to containing mythology it includes other facets such as rites and mysticism. Robert Graves argues that we may often consider other people's religion to be mythology.[2]

This convention may be most strongly evident in the area of ancient Greek religion. In spite of the fact that the traditional foundations of western civilization are avidly traced back to the Greco-Roman period, the religious practices and beliefs of the ancient classical period differ significantly from the monotheistic belief systems represented by the Judeo-Christian traditions. Perhaps because there is no dogma attached to mythology admonishing adherents on how to behave, ancient Greek religion may appear to be comprised of "doing" as opposed to "believing."[3] Consequently, it might often be supposed that the Greeks were less pious or committed to their religions. But, how can we know that pagan adherents were any less devout than their monotheistic descendents would be?

Notwithstanding, supporters of any faith practice their devotion through ritual. What may be seen as mumbo-jumbo to the observer could be the source of abject adoration from the devotee. In her insightful paper titled "Interpreting the

Athenian Thesmophoria," Allaire B. Stallsmith, proclaims: "Magic almost always carries negative connotation. Put plainly, it is only other peoples' ritual activities which are magical—never our own."[4] As in the case of religion and cult, using the term ritual or magic denotes either respect or disdain depending on point of view.

Indubitably, the transcendent rituals observed at festivals bring the myths to life for the devotee emanating the eternal, which tends to get passed down from one generation to the next. Of this religious experience, Walter F. Otto, in his essay titled "The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries," posits: "On this day the whole memory of the great ancestral experience is again true and present. The gods are at hand, as they were at the beginning of time."[5] Harkening back to the primordial era, the cult practice of the Thesmophoria, accessed some of its appeal from its very genesis. After all, Demeter herself was believed to have formed the woman's only cult. Because the *Hymn* was actually penned in the archaic age, is it possible that the cult of Thesmophoria preceded the *Hymn*? Which came first, the myth or the ritual?

Harrison discusses the aetiological order of myth and ritual. "The myth of the rape of Persephone of course really arose from the ritual, not the ritual from the myth."[6] Arguing that the Thesmophoria was of "immemorial antiquity," Harrison contends that all mythology represents a means for explaining irrational rites passed down through the ages. In other words, writers created the myths after the rituals were formed.[7] Myths give adherents an understanding and acceptance of ancient rituals. As an illustration, the rites of the Thesmophoria follow most closely to the events of the *Hymn*, indicating that the *Hymn* was written with the rites in mind. To be sure, the *Hymn* was "largely an aition of the Thesmophoria" so asserts

Kevin Clinton in his opus *Myth and Cult: The Iconography of the Eleusinian Mysteries*.[8] Indeed, if the Thesmophoria dates back to the Neolithic era, as many scholars contend, there would be no written epic until the *Hymn* was produced in the archaic era, some several thousands of years later. Consequently, women disciples throughout Attica must have practiced their religion long before the narrative known as the *Hymn* was authored.

Nevertheless, the literary and archaeological evidence suggests that adherents were enormously engaged in the Thesmophoria and were considered religious in both the spirit of the myth and its attendant rituals. To illustrate, their being away from their homes and families for three days[9]—in Syracuse it was ten—demonstrated a major commitment in the lives of ancient women, and their families. Although the Thesmophoria took place on the eleventh through thirteenth of Pyanopsian, it was preceded by a precursory nocturnal cult called the Stenia, also a female only fertility cult—with many of the same participants from the Thesmophoria—which began on the ninth. The Stenia set the stage for some of the rituals enacted at the Thesmophoria.

The first day of the Thesmophoria was called the *anodos* or "way up" and is thought to refer to the torch-lit procession, which leads up to the Thesmophorion or Demeter's sanctuary, beginning the festival. In Athens the festival took place in an uninhabited part of the commons believed to be on the hillside of Pnyx, where the general assembly met. Famed classical archaeologist Homer Thompson excavated the area known as the Pnyx and posits that the Thesmophorion must have been situated on its central hill because it meets all the requirements put forth in order to

accommodate hundreds if not thousands of women and their huts. In speaking of the site Thompson argues, "its northeastern slope by which it is usually approached is sufficiently steep to impress one on a hot October day. The top of the hill as appears on Figure 1, is smooth and gently rounded and roomy enough to accommodate a good many tents."[10] (See Figure 7). While there was no evidence of it at the site, a wall or some barrier might have surrounded the Thesmophorion in an effort to keep male intruders at bay.

Encompassing three days and nights women camped in huts or shelters within the open space of the Thesmophorion. The primitive huts are considered to be a token of the great antiquity of the rites; returning to the primeval housing in which ancient agricultural people once lived.[11] Further, they slept on mats made of *vitex agnus castus* defined as "chaste tree."[12] Perhaps ironically for a fertility festival, this herb was believed to be associated with chastity.

The momentous second day was called the fast or *nesteia.* As previously discussed this was the day that certain civic functions were suspended in the polis and all prisoners were released. It is clear that *nesteia* was a day of deep mourning when adherents sat on their mats refusing food and wine as an act of mimesis for Demeter's fast in the *Hymn*. The truth is mourning in groups was a common practice for women in ancient Greece.[13] Collectively, the citizen wives, most of whom were mothers, shared their grief with Demeter for the loss of her beloved daughter. At sunset they broke their fast with a barley drink called *kykeon* again imitating Demeter when she broke her fast with *kykeon* in the *Hymn.*

In discussing initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries in *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, Hugh Bowden suggests: “the *kykeon* drunk by initiates contained psychoactive elements that were produced by the ergot fungus.”[14] The use of entheogenic[15] substances for entering into altered states is commonly used for religious and spiritual practices as a means of communicating with the divine.[16] The fungus induced a trance-like state in the initiates giving them the experience of descending into the underworld. Similarly, did the women of the Thesmophoria drink *kykeon* laced with the ergot mushroom as the participants of the Mysteries did?

In a frieze from a temple wall of Eleusis dating back to the fifth century BCE, Persephone and Demeter are each holding mushrooms, perhaps indicating the importance of the fungus in their cult (see Figure 8). Since drinking *kykeon* was a significant ritual in the Thesmophoria, many scholars believe that the beverage had entheogenic properties for the Thesmophorians as well, though there is some discord about the type of psychoactive substances used.[17] According to the *Hymn*, *kykeon* is composed of barley groats, water and pennyroyal. The ancient Greeks roasted their barley producing malt, which needed little or no fermentation to become alcoholic. The alcoholic beverage coupled with an already fasting state could impact the “doors of perception.”[18] Similarly, pennyroyal oil is known to possess hallucinogenic properties. In large doses it “induces delirium, loss of consciousness and spasms.”[19] In addition to its psychoactive properties, pennyroyal was also known as an emmenagogue(encourages menses) and an abortifacient[20]

(induces abortion), establishing it as a plant with significant relevance for the feminine cult festival.

In her article "Cults of Demeter and Kore," Lucia Nixon intriguingly proposes that the citizen wives had agency in determining the role plants played in their reproductive lives: "Plants could provide an easily accessible way for women to regulate every stage of their reproductive lives (menstruation, conception, abortion, delivery, lactation and menopause)."[21] To be sure, this is another instance where women's restricted roles in ancient Greek society may have empowered them as most men had very little expertise in the use of medicinal plants. Women determined just how fertile they wanted to be based on their sophisticated use of plants and much of this knowledge was imparted at the Thesmophoria. More about women's use of plants will be discussed later in this study.

In an apparent contradiction, although the *vitex agnus castus* has antaphrodisiac qualities the plant is also known to promote fertility by inducing either menses or lactation.[22] The disciples' proficient use of this plant demonstrates knowledge in both suppressing their sexual urge while at the same time controlling their fertility. For example in a tradition known as "blood rites," some scholars[23] assert that by using appropriate plants the women coordinated their menses so that they would all be menstruating at the time of the festival. To that end, the women bled on the mats they sat upon as a magical means of advancing the earth's fertility during the Thesmophoria.[24]

In addition to fasting on the second day, the wives participated in "shameful talk" or *aischrologia*. Iambe's jesting and bawdy talk, which lightened up Demeter's

dark spirits in the *Hymn* is thought to be the aition, that is to say a cause, for this behavior. An ancient source suggests that the *aischrologia* had a sexual component, which may have included the handling of artificial likenesses of genitalia.[25] Further, it is likely that the segregation of women may have led to *aischrologia* at the Thesmophoria. Because the citizen wives were required to be shy and chaste, the "shameful talk" can be seen as subversive by countering appropriate feminine behavior in the dominant culture.[26] The truth is that it was empowering for the women to release their frustrations by speaking in a manner frowned upon in the strongly patriarchal ancient Greece. Once again demonstrating control of their bodies, the bawdy talk was believed to encourage fertility and was often associated with Demetrian festivals, especially when women gathered for secret rites or mysteries.[27]

There were two prohibitions during the festival. In an allusion to Hades of the underworld, the women were not to eat pomegranate seeds that had fallen to the ground, as it was believed to belong to the dead.[28] And they were restricted from wearing flower garlands in their hair because Persephone wore such a garland when she was abducted. It was either after the fast on the second day or on the third day that the women "imitated the ancient way of life,"[29] meaning the state before civilization when primordial people cooked their meat by the heat of the sun. The ancient way of life will be explored more in the next chapter on origins of the Thesmophoria.

The third day was called *Kalligeneia* or "beautiful birth" when the two goddesses are reunited and there was a celebration and feast, presumably with a

sacrificed pig. In her book *Uncursing the Dark*, Betty De Shong Meador imagines the *Kalligenia*: "The women awake singing. They have survived the great trials of the Thesmophoria. They have dared to enter the abode of the snake. They have sacrificed before her…Her awesome power possessed them. She loosened the boundaries of ordinary life and shook the women."[30] By participating in the rites, which enact Demeter's trials and ultimate triumph, the ancient women are reminded of their power in the essential and vital role they play in human and plant generation.

Although restricted from voting in the polis, within the Thesmophoria, disciples elected two prominent women to preside over the rites. They were called bailers or *anteltriai* and their job was crucial to the success of the rituals. The bailers took a vow of celibacy, not only for the festival as the other disciples did, but also for three days prior to its start. Because it was believed to represent the womb of Demeter, the cavern was a common chamber within each Thesmophorion. On the critical fast day of *nesteia*, it was the job of the bailers to climb down into the deep hollow of a cavern to remove "sacred objects." However, before descending the bailers made noises meant to scare away snakes believed to inhabit the space. Was there a real concern for snakes in the cavern or could snakes be a symbolic representation of males?[31] Interestingly, the *vitus agnus castus* mats they sat upon had properties to ward off snakes. So perhaps their premise of scaring away snakes was a practical one. However because *vitex agnus castus* also suppresses sexual desire it is thought that the "snakes" they expelled were symbolic of the male

variety. After all it was males who were responsible for Demeter's anguish, which the disciples mimed on day two and their banishment appears justified.

While in the cavern or *megara* the bailers removed rotted piglets, fertility cakes made from dough and shaped like male and female genitalia, and fir cones. The piglets were sacrificed either days or weeks before the festival then thrown into a deep cavern (see Figure 9). The remaining items were tossed into the cavern during the nocturnal Stenia ritual from a few days prior. In terms of symbolism, the cavern was believed to represent the womb of Demeter. Because of its fecundity, the pig was associated with Demeter.[32] Further, pig or *choiros* was a vernacular term for female genitalia. Finally, the fir cones were used in this rite because the pine trees were known to be prolific.

The rotted piglets, dough cakes and fir cones were all considered "sacred objects" and used in an attempt to renew the fertility of the planet. In a venerable aspect of the women's mysteries, "the women spur Demeter to reproductive energy without male input."[33] The newly born humus the bailers scoop up is symbolic of the power women possess by demonstrating their ability, through Demeter, to generate life in an exclusively feminine cycle. The "sacred objects" were then placed on the altars of the two goddesses and mixed with seed to be used as "sacred compost."[34] In his influential book *Greek Religion*, Walter Burkert attests: "The manipulation of the decomposed remains of the piglets to achieve a good harvest is the clearest example in Greek religion of agrarian magic...unquestionably there is a very ancient tradition here; findings from the Early Neolithic Age already point to a connection between corn and pig." [35] Agrarian magic, also known as the Mannhardt-

Frazer hypothesis found in James Frazer's (1854-1941) *The Golden Bough* states that all religious ritual originates from concerns about fertility. While many scholars would argue the notion that fertility is behind all religious rites, there is very little dispute that it was behind the Thesmophoria. Further, we know that the Neolithic Age is defined by the advent of agriculture, which many scholars attribute to early women.[36] The Neolithic origins of the Thesmophoria will be discussed in the next chapter.

But how do we know the details as to what transpired at the Thesmophoria? After all, the rituals were considered women's mysteries and as such were secret and known only to the female participants. Interestingly, the oldest and best source of the rituals conducted in the Thesmophoria is marginal notes by a medieval scribe found in a thirteenth century manuscript of Lucian's (125-180 CE) *Dialogues of the Courtesans*. But the narrative he uses to describe the rites is from an Orphic version of the *Hymn to Demeter*, which has added characters not found in the *Hymn*. Under this version of the events, upon Persephone's abduction Eubouleus—a swineherd, and his pigs are swallowed into the chasm when the earth opened. The scholiast writes:

> The rotted remains of those things which have been thrown into the chambers below are brought up by women called bailers who after having purified themselves for three days, descend into the innermost sanctuaries and carrying them up, lay them on the altars. They believe that anyone who takes them and mixes them with the seed will have abundant crops.[37]

The text produced by the Lucian scholiast was initially published in 1870 by Erwin Rohde (1845-1898), not too long before *The Golden Bough* was written, perhaps

deeply influencing Frazer's thinking on "agrarian magic," for which he would become well known. [38]

However, who was the infamous Lucian scholiast? Since it was uncovered there have been a number of theories as to whom the scholiast might be. Rohde attributed the writings to Didymus, a first century BCE Alexandrian grammarian. Another name that emerges was the first century BCE Apollodorus, in his discourse on festivals. Finally Theophrastus, a fourth century philosopher, has recently been named. But how would any of these men have access to a closely guarded women's rite? After translating the document, Lowe examined the work done by the above contenders and one by one convincingly eliminates the possibilities of any of these men being the scholiast. Intriguingly he speculates that the author of this "surprisingly sophisticated model"[39] must have been an actor in the ritual. Although he does not come right out and say it—the presumption is that the scholiast may have been a woman participant. After all, only women were its actors. Indeed, who else would know the account with such detail, and more importantly the very reason for the rites: "They believe that anyone who takes them and mixes them with the seed will have abundant crops." At long last, could this be the voice of a Thesmophorian, returning to guide us from the mists of her lost primordial domain? Sadly, as with much else from the ancient world, we can never know for sure.

[1] G. S. Kirk, *Myth:Its Meanings & Functions in Ancient & Other Cultures* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970),11.

[2] Robert Graves, "Introduction" in *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology,* trans. Richard Aldington and Delano Ames (London: Hamlyn, 1968), v.
[3] Lowe, 162.

[4] Allaire B. Stallsmith, "Interpreting the Athenian Thesmophoria," *Classical Bulletin* 84.1 (2009), 43. http://www.academia.edu/2381368/Interpreting_the_Athenian_Thesmophoria (accessed March 13, 2013).

[5] Walter F. Otto, "The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries," in *The Mysteries: Paper from the Eranos Yearbook*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Bollingen Foundation Inc, 1955), 29.

[6] Harrison, 124.

[7] Kirk, 12 "It is undoubtedly the case that many myths, perhaps especially in the Near East, were associated with rituals. And that some of them may have been created to account for actions whose purpose was no longer apparent. Yet it is often difficult to tell, from the form of the myth and the ritual alone which came first and caution is necessary."

[8] Kevin Clinton, 32.

[9] They could be gone for as long as five days if they participated in the precursory cult, Stenia, which lasted for two days.

[10] Homer A. Thompson, "Pynx and Thesmophorion," *Hesperia: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, 5, no. 2, (1936), 185. http:www.jstor.org/stable/146542 (accessed April 20, 2013).

[11] Versnel, 137.

[12] Defined as an anaphrodisiac hence the name "chaste" —somewhat ironic for a fertility festival.

[13] Eva Stehle, "Thesmophoria and Eleusinian Mysteries: The Fascination of Women's Secret Ritual," in Finding Persephone: Women's Ritual in the Ancient Mediterranean, ed. Maryline Parca and Angeliki Tzanetou,(Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007), 165-185, 170.

[14] Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2010), 43.

[15] Any psychoactive substance used to order to promote an inner experience with a divinity.

[16] As practiced by shamans in world religions.

[17] Carl Kerenyi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*. (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 1967), 177-179; Rigoglioso 158-161.

[18] Heinz Gerhard Pringsheim, 1905, quoted in Kerenyi, 179.

[19] Kerenyi, 179.

[20] Rigoglioso, 159; Kerenyi 179.

[21] Lucia Nixon, "The Cults of Demeter and Kore," in *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments,* eds Richard Hawley and Barbara Levick (London: Routledge, 1995), 76-93.

[22] Froma I. Zeitlin, "Cultic Models of the Female: Rites of Dionysis and Demeter." Arethusa 15 no. 1, (1982): 142.

[23] Carl Kerenyi, *Zeus and Hera: Archetypal Image of Father, Husband, and Wife* (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 1975), 157.

[24] Betty De Shong Meador, *Uncursing the Dark* (Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications, 1994), 95; Rigoglioso, 154.

[25] Laura McClure, *Spoken Like a Women: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 215.

[26] Angeliki Tzanetou, "Something to do with Demeter: Ritual and Performance in Aristophanes' Women at the Thesmophoria," *The American Journal of Philology*, 123, no.3, (Autumn 2002), 334. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561692 (accessed October 15, 2012).

[27]Stallsmith,2.

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[28] Walter Burkert, *Greek Mythology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 244.

[29] Diodorus quoted in Burkett, 244.

[30] Meador, 99.

[31] Rigoglioso, 152.

[32] Kerenyi, 1967, 118.

[33] Stehle, 173.

[34] Stallsmith, 7.

[35] Burkert, 244-245.

[36] Erika Simon, *Festivals of Attica: An Archaeological Commentary* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 17.

[37] Scholiast to Lucian quoted in Stallsmith, 3.

[38] Lowe, 149.

[39] Lowe, 156.

CHAPTER THREE: ORIGINS OF THE THESMOPHORIA

Analyzing the background on the Thesmophoria is essential in determining its significance in the devotional lives of the early disciples. In particular, this primordial glimpse may provide insight into the meaning of this ancient festival for subsequent generations to come. To begin this task it is vital to define what the term "Thesmophoria" meant to the early followers. As with much else about the primordial women's festival, there is more than one possible explanation for the name. The simple answer is that *thesmoi* in Greek means law. One of Demeter's titles is *Thesmophoros,* which translates to lawgiver. Why is Demeter, who is associated with agriculture, linked to law as well? To be sure, the average Greek associated agriculture with civilization, after all if it were not for the ability to grow crops, the early Greeks would never have settled as a people. "Demeter…is responsible not just for the gift of corn[1] but for the rise of civilization that it entails."[2] Once the early Greeks developed agriculture, they evolved from roaming nomads to farmers living in a community; hence laws were necessary for the ability to work together as one society.

However, Harrison takes exception to this narrow definition of "Thesmophoria" and suggests that *thesmoi* also meant "the things laid down."[3] In relation to the festival it refers to the sacred objects, which were scooped from the cavern and laid down on the altar before the goddesses as an offering in turn for a successful harvest. She asserts: "The women were called Thesmophoroi because they carried 'the things laid down;' the goddess took her name from her

ministrants."[4] Indeed, the laying down of the consecrated items to the goddesses was integral to the very justification behind the rites. This has inspired many scholars to concur that the term "things laid down" is inherent in the name of the festival.[5] Moreover, the suffix *phoria* indicates, "items carried," signifying physical objects. Indubitably, although many scholars believe that the suffix works with the root of the word "laws," such as in the phrase "carrying ordinances," in Greek—unlike English, this would form an abnormal word combination as laws are non-material items which cannot be "carried."[6]

Nonetheless, depending upon timeframe, both definitions are accurate as in post-Homeric Greek literature—during the archaic era—*thesmoi* was written to reflect the notion of "laws," which can help explain why scholars have associated Demeter as the law-giving goddess. But chronologically it must be considered that the Thesmophoria festival precedes both Homeric literature and the establishment of laws by perhaps as much as several thousands of years. Hence the original disciples of the Thesmophoria would have defined their festival not by the laws of which they had no knowledge but by the sacred objects for which their cult was noted.

What makes a sacred object sacred? Aside from their fecundity, what is the connection between sacrificial pigs promoting cereal and human fertility in the Thesmophoria? According to archaeological and literary sources the Thesmophoria had its origins in the Neolithic era (7000 BCE to 3000 BCE), at which time agriculture cultivation and swine domestication began concurrently. Indeed, the primeval populace saw a connection between the flourishing of both livestock—in

the guise of pigs—and crops, demonstrating to them that the two processes were inexplicably related. Without doubt, human and crop fertility were major concerns for prehistoric humans. That being the case, in order to conjure a successful harvest—ensuring the health and well being of the populace—a link between hogs and crops as demonstrated in the Thesmophoria became inevitable. In discussing Neolithic artifacts related to the Thesmophoria, Burkett affirms:

> Pig sacrifices are a special feature of these festivals, and terracotta votive pigs are frequently found in Demeter shrines. An impressive clay pig figure, once again dating from the Early Neolithic has been uncovered; the clay pigs studded with grains of corn, which have been found in the Balkans, make their connection with agriculture immediately apparent. [7]

Owing to gender roles not being finely demarcated as they would in subsequent eras, agriculture and hog domestication were the domain of women in the Neolithic era.[8] Moreover, women were not only responsible for bearing children but they also bore responsibility for cultivating land; they were ultimately in charge not only of breeding the population but of feeding it as well.

In his book *Primitive Mythology*, Joseph Campbell asserts: "Here it was the women who showed themselves supreme. By realizing that it was possible to cultivate, as well as gather, they had made the earth valuable and they became, consequently, its possessors."[9] As archaeological artifacts from the region attest, women were revered in the Neolithic age, playing a dominant role in the fertility of human, livestock and plant life (see Figure 10). Indeed, anthropomorphic statues in late Neolithic Crete were four times as likely to be female than male.[10] While the rule of matriarchy is unclear during this era, most scholars agree that the social structure was matrilineal; in other words kinship and thereby inheritance was

assumed through the maternal line. It is important to remember that what would become patriarchal marriage did not exist in the Neolithic era.

During this time mother and mother-daughter images are found throughout old Europe while the father image is largely missing, leading Gimbutas to assert: "The role of father in prehistoric antiquity was either not fully understood or not highly valued as that of mother."[11] To be sure, maternity is easier to detect than paternity. In a society that does not mate for life and assumes its ancestry through maternal lines, knowledge of paternity was not only incomprehensible but also possibly not necessary.

This has led some scholars to assert that in the pre-historic era, the female body was believed to be parthenogenetic,[12] in other words the female body was understood to create life from within itself, with no male intervention. If paternity was not comprehended, the notion of female-only birth must have been credible. It must be remembered that Neolithic communities were comprised of small clans or social groups where interbreeding was fairly common amongst clan members perhaps indicating that the populace looked more like each other than unalike.

While we may never know if human parthenogenesis was accepted during this time, from archaeological evidence it appears likely that the female goddesses were parthenogenetic inducing Rigoglioso to propose that the Thesmophoria was originally a parthenogenesis celebrating ritual[13] with Persephone set to play the role of a parthenogenetic goddess who was wrongfully violated by a patriarchal god. Backing up her intriguing claim with some of the same scholarship used in this paper, Rigoglioso makes a convincing case that the Thesmophorians were

celebrating feminine parthenogenesis for the double goddesses as well as for themselves.

Implicit to Rigoglioso's argument is women's authority in the Thesmophoria. For the women of ancient Greece, the Thesmophoria bestowed a link to an era before patriarchy became the law of the land, and the matriarchal role was supreme. In "Cultic Models of the Female," Zeitlin examines the primordial rites, which disciples mimicked in the Thesmophoria:

> The building of temporary huts, the use of acts of woven osier for sleeping on the ground, the curing of meat in the sun instead of roasting it with fire and the inclusion of foods which "predate" those of the grain culture…all point to a primitive state of development consonant with the myth of time when women were in charge.[14]

As a rule, religions tend to grasp at traditions from the eras in which they evolved. It is this resistance to change, both in ritual and belief that is at the heart of the power of the Thesmophoria. Principally, because the origins of the Thesmophoria harken back to an era when women had agency, it offered citizen wives of ancient Greece license that they otherwise did not possess in the hyper-patriarchal era in which they lived.

What then accounts for the twilight of the matriarch in the Neolithic era? Interestingly, the answer to this question can be found in the *Hymn* itself. According to Rigoglioso, Persephone's rape—because it was an act of aggression against a parthenogenetic goddess—signaled an end to matriarchy while ushering in an era of patriarchy[15] where kidnapping-cum marriage became common practice. Based on archaeological sources, not only did the Indo-Europeans invaders (3000 BCE-2000 BCE) bring with them their patriarchal war-like culture to the Greek mainland, they

supplanted the mother goddess with their sky gods[16] and brought virilocal[17] marriage, which they had been practicing for some time.[18] Indeed, from the beginning marriage was a means to control women while at the same time producing—in a martial culture—the much-coveted male heir.

Intriguingly, the earliest extant literary reference for the Thesmophoria alludes to a family of sisters who did nothing to conceal their contempt for the patriarchal bond of marriage. In discussing the Thesmophoria's provenance, ancient Greek historian Herodotus (484 BCE-425 BCE) asserts: "About the ritual of Demeter that the Greeks call the Thesmophoria, let me keep a pious silence, except for how much of the ritual can be piously told. The daughters of Danaus were the ones who brought the ritual from Egypt and taught the Pelasgian women."[19]

Irrevocably forced into marriages with their cousins, forty-nine of Libyan King Danaus' fifty daughters—the Danaids—murdered their husbands on their wedding night owing to a desire to retain their virginity. The legend has them fleeing from Egypt to Greece, setting up the sacred rites of the Thesmophoria upon their arrival. In the tradition of the powerful Amazons who also resisted marriage, the Danaids, harken back to a time when women were overtly opposed to the yoke of marriage. Herodotus rightfully apprehended the link between the Danaids and the cult festival Thesmophoria, each with its own distinct ambivalence toward matrimony. Although the story of the Danaids is considered to be in the realm of mythology, many archaeological and literary scholars[20] argue that the legend has an historical basis.

Drawing from this same story, the playwright Aeschylus (525 BCE-456 BCE) wrote his last trilogy on the Danaids called *The Suppliants*, which ends with the formation of the Thesmophoria as a means of conciliation from the patriarchal powers to women for their compliance in patriarchal marriage. Goff elaborates: "A notion of the Thesmophoria as both commemorating ancient violence and guaranteeing its absence from future marriages by the production of properly successful wives may have proved reassuring to the male community excluded from the ritual."[21] Similarly, observing a time in the old matriarchal order, Harrison contends that in return for exclusive privileges with a particular woman, Neolithic men would have to make peace with the community. Perhaps it is this obligation that is at play when the husbands pay for the expenses of their wives' Thesmophoria. Harrison terms this debt "old matriarchal usages."[22] Indeed, as mentioned earlier in this paper, citizen men willingly bore the expenses of the male-excluded Thesmophoria each year so again perhaps there is some historical accuracy both to Aeschylus' version of the tale and to Harrison's anthropological detection. To be sure, the uneasy relationship between men and the Thesmophoria will be more thoroughly discussed in the next chapter.

Although men were irrevocably banned from the female-only Thesmophoria, their participation in the Eleusinian mysteries was welcome. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the intricacies of the Eleusinian mysteries, it is important to establish key characteristics of the better-known fertility cult since it is believed to have evolved from the Thesmophoria.[23] Though "unique to the Greek world,"[24] the Eleusinian mysteries was primarily a civic festival that became of wide

renown in Greece and beyond, playing a pivotal role in the nation's concept of "cultural hegemony."[25] In point of fact, people from all over the world came to Athens to participate in the nine day long rituals. Unlike the Thesmophoria, which included hundreds— if not thousands—of local celebrations throughout the Greek world, the Mysteries had adherents from all over the world but was celebrated only in Athens and Eleusis. Indeed, Eleusis was an agricultural town some twelve miles from the city of Athens hence the two cities became central to the cult.

The Mysteries were celebrated in the month of Boedromion, now known as September-October, directly before the sowing season, which heralded the Thesmophoria. Memberships in the Mysteries were unrestricted, open to all women, slaves and foreigners; except for those who committed murder, everyone was welcome. Although women played a role in the cult, their role was inferior to that of the chief male hierophant. Although the Mysteries, like the Thesmophoria, were associated with agriculture, after the sixth century BCE—when Athens became involved in the rites—the focus changed from human and plant regeneration to eternal life for cult members.

Thought to have been founded in the fifteenth century BCE during the Mycenaean period, the bulk of the evidence for the Mysteries dates from the eighth century BCE.[26] When Eleusis was incorporated into the Attic state during the prehistoric period, it had control of its own religious rituals. It was only after the mid sixth century BCE that Athens assumed control of the rites, which became known as the Mysteries.[27] Hence the authoring of the *Hymn* preceded Athens involvement in the rites, which is why Athens was not mentioned in the narrative.

While the rituals of the Thesmophoria were concerned with Demeter's imparting gifts of fertility to women and the cyclical nature of creation, the rituals enacted at the Eleusinian mysteries tended to have more of a masculine appeal, which focused on the eschatological nature of Demeter's story, that is to say, issues regarding life after death. Of the Mysteries, Isokrates (436-338 BCE) an Attic orator asserted: "Those who take part in them possess better hopes in regard to the end of life and in regard to the whole *aion* (lifespan)."[28] Indeed, the Mysteries' main focus was on a happy afterlife, which initiates were promised through membership in the cult. Why was there such a divide between the two similar yet distinct fertility festivals?

Marcia D. S. Dobson, in her article "Ritual Death and Patriarchal Violence," posits that the difference in focus between the two cults could be based on gender, as women are closer to nature therefore more accepting of death. "However, because the male connection to the natural rhythms of life and death are not as immediate, a man experiences his mortality as a devastation of his individuality."[29] Rebelling against nature, men are at odds with the cyclical patterns of regeneration that the two goddesses represent. The assurance of an afterlife helps overcome this dissonance.

While the belief that a gender divide regarding death is compelling it must also be remembered that the Thesmophoria is a much older festival than the Mysteries. Dating back to the Neolithic Era, the Thesmophoria may have preceded the Mysteries by some several thousand years. The cyclical powers of regeneration were pivotal during the Neolithic era, which was the period known to usher in

agriculture. Discussing the changing attitudes towards death, in "Aspects of the Eleusinian Cult," Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood asserts: "There was a shift in attitudes in the Archaic period, from an acceptance of a familiar (hateful but not frightening) death, to the appearance of attitudes of greater anxiety and a more individual perception of one's death, conducive to the creation of eschatologies involving a happy afterlife."[30] Indeed, perhaps the contrast between the two festivals can be explained by the different eras, from which they originated.

From the Neolithic era, the Thesmophoria was a feminine centric agrarian festival with a reverent acceptance that death is necessary in order for the power of life to occur. Additionally, it was practiced by "conservative womanhood,"[31] meaning that through the ages the disciples observed orthodoxy in ceremony and purpose. In referring to the traditional practices of the Thesmophoria, in his play *Ecclesiazusae* Aristophanes (446 BCE -386 BCE) observes: "They keep the Thesmophoria as they always used to do."[32] In marked contrast, perhaps because the Mysteries were a cult whose membership was less exclusive, it continued to evolve and alter in an increasingly masculine oriented society of ancient Greece, evermore obsessed with the notion of an afterlife.

It is interesting to note that by the fifth century BCE, the Mysteries masculinized Demeter's story by diminishing her role in disseminating agriculture to humankind and instead giving it to a minor character in the *Hymn* named Triptolemus.[33] Although he played a more critical role in later versions of the myth, Triptolemus became a well-known icon in Classical art, often seen accompanying the famed mother and daughter dyad (see Figure 11).[34] Ultimately, the Eleusinian

mysteries remained popular well into the Greco-Roman era (332 BCE-395 CE) beginning a period of decline after 170 CE, when the Samaritans sacked the Temple of Demeter. In 380 CE, Roman Emperor Theodosius I (347-395 CE) established Christianity as the state religion, ultimately closing the last Demeter sanctuaries by decree in 392 CE.

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[1] Although the term "corn" is used repeatedly in this paper as the grain for which Demeter is known, it was in reality "wheat" for which she was responsible. The early archaeologists were mainly British and they used the term "corn" and "wheat" interchangeably.

[2] F. Graf "Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens im vorbellenistischer Zeit" quoted in Lowe, 154.

[3] Harrison, 137.

[4] Harrison, 137.

[5] Simon, 19.

[6] H. W. Parke, 83.

[7] Burkett, *GR*, 13.

[8] Simon, 17, Mara Lynn Keller, "The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality and Rebirth," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1988):). http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002068 (accessed November 7, 2012). 31; Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, (Harcourt, Inc: Orlando, Florida 1976), 14.

[9] Wilhelm Schmidt quoted in Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology* (Penguin Group: New York 1969), 320.

[10] Pomeroy, 14-15.

[11] Gimbutas, 112.

[12] Gimbutas, 112, Rigoglioso 100.

[13] Rigoglioso 100-189.

[14] Zeitlin, "Cultic Models of the Female: Rites of Dionysus and Demeter," *Arethusa,* 15 no. 1 (1982): 142.

[15] Rigoglioso 100.

[16] Gimbutas, 118.

[17] Living with or located near the husband's family group; also known as patrilocal.

[18] L. Fortunato, "Reconstructing the History of Marriage Strategies in Indo-European speaking societies: Monogomy and Polygyny," *Human Biology*, 1, no. 83 (Feb, 2011): 87-105.

[19] Herodotus quoted in Jon D. Mikalson *Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 182.

[20]Arthur Bernard Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, quoted in Rigoglioso, 124. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilzation*, quoted in Rigoglioso 124.

[21] Goff, 138.

[22] Harrison, 131.

[23] Clinton, 28.

[24] Clinton, 29.

[25] Clinton, 32.

[26] Foley, 171.

[27] Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries Sourcebook: Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 17.

[28] Kerenyi, 15.

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[29] Marcia W. D-S. Dobson, "Ritual Death, Patriarchal Violence, and Female Relationships in the Hymn to Demeter and Inanna," *NWSA Journal* 4, no.1 (Spring 1992) http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316175 (accessed Jan 10, 2013).49.

[30] Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Aspects of the Eleusinian Cult," in *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos(London: Routledge, 2003), 28.

[31] Harrison, 124.

[32] Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae*, http://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/ancient-greece/aristophanes/ecclesiazusae.asp?pg=14

[33] Blundell, 41; Foley 44.

[34] Eleusis, 440-430 BC. National Archaeological Museum of Athens

CHAPTER FOUR: THE POWER OF THE THESMOPHORIA

According to legend, men who spied on or interrupted the Thesmophoria were subject to life threatening and disfiguring acts of violence perpetrated by the Thesmophorian disciples. Some noteworthy examples demonstrating this include the following stories, drawn from various ancient sources. First there is the lore that the hapless King Battos of Cyrene—famed for founding Cyrene—was cruelly castrated by the furious disciples for surreptitiously observing their sacred and secret rites. Then there is the tale related by Pausanias (110 CE- 180 CE) of the legendary Messenian hero Aristomenes –celebrated for his victories with the Spartans—capturing the disciples in the midst of their secret celebration only to be "knocked senseless"[1] by the disciples' sacrificial knives and spits. Next, there is the legend of unlucky Militiades, who, while in battle to secure the island of Paros, leapt over the wall leading to the Thesmophorian shrine. Once there, he was so overcome with terror that in jumping back over the wall he sprained his thigh from which he developed gangrene and later died. Herodotus (484 BCE- 425 BCE) recounts this as an admonishment, and warms that this mournful outcome was the due to breaching the sacred sanctuary of Demeter Thesmophoros.[2]

Finally we have Plutarch's (46 CE- 120 CE) narrative of Pesistratus (562 BCE -527 BCE), the tyrant of Athens, and the Athenian statesman Solon (638 BCE- 558 BCE), who pulled a trick on the Thesmophorians celebrating in Megara—ten miles from Eleusis—by enlisting two beardless men to impersonate the disciples. Once discovered, the Thesmophorians brutally attacked the wretched mimics. In relating the event Clinton quips: "Whether or not the incident is historical is for our

purposes unimportant; the fact is that a celebration of the Thesmophoria at Eleusis was considered unobjectionable."[3] Indeed, men's profound uneasiness with the Thesmophoria was in direct proportion to their wary respect for it. Summing up men's distrust for the feminine festival, Burkett opines: "Men regard this not without suspicion, but cannot impede the sacred."[4]

A summary of stories about the Thesmophoria would be incomplete without mention of Aristophanes' comedic satire *Thesmophoriazusae* or "Women of the Thesmophoria." In it Aristophanes casts his colleague Euripides as the character for whom the Thesmophorians want revenge. "Today at the Thesmophoria the women are going to liquidate me, because I slander them,"[5] exclaims Euripides. The premise is that the rebellious disciples seek to kill Euripides for characterizing women in his plays as villainous. While the women are mocked in terms of their democratic assembly and their ritual, Aristophanes' depiction of the Thesmophorians as uncontrollable and violent is in keeping with the androcentric mindset towards the festival.

While the common thread in all these stories is the Thesmophorians' unmitigated violence toward men, the lack of trust the patriarchy had for the festival is as notable. In discussing the violent qualities of male exclusion in the Thesmophoria, Versnel quips: "They also most clearly demonstrate that the festival is essentially wrong, disruptive and consequently in the eyes of one half of society, threatening."[6] Drawing a primordial connection between the Thesmophorians and their ferocious Danaid foremothers, do these vignettes, tellingly reveal the fear of ancient Greek men for the Thesmophoria and its disciples?

Against this backdrop it is important to review women's limited rights in ancient Greece. For example, women had no access to instruments of sacrifice such as the all-important knife, kettle or the spit. In discussing the lack of privileges for ancient Greek women in his paper "The Violence of Wellborn Ladies: Women in the Thesmophoria," Marcel Detienne remarks: "Just as women are without political rights, reserved for male citizens, they are also kept apart from the altars, meat and blood."[7] However, in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* the disciples simulate the sacrifice of an infant by using knives (see Figure 12). Detienne notes that this act would have no comic effect if it were inconsistent with the practices of the festival.

Moreover, archaeological and literary evidence suggests that full-grown sows killed in a sacrificial manner—in which knives were used—were discovered at various Demeter sanctuaries throughout Attica.[8] The credence of the Thesmophorians' use of tools of violence cues Dillon to opine: "There is nothing in the stories that mitigates against believing that women could slay animals except for the notion that women should not do so."[9] Further, the Thesmophorians' use of piglets as part of their sacred objects likely involved women in the preceding Thesmophoria companion festival—Stenia, cutting the unfortunate animals' throats before throwing them into the caverns. Indeed, most scholars concur that the Thesmophoria was unique in being one of the only feminine festivals where sacrifices were performed, meaning that the Thesmophorians had rare access to the violent instruments of death. Ultimately the disciple's improbable possession of knives, and other objects of violence, coupled with the festival's apocryphal hostility

toward the opposite sex generated fear in men and demonstrates the gender antagonism which these legends substantiate.

As previously discussed, the Thesmophoria represented the last vestige from an era of feminine empowerment. After all, before the patriarchs introduced marriage in an effort to bond women to men, women had led independent and autonomous lives. As such, men were prudently suspicious of the festival's nature. Meeting outside the androcentric social constructs of family; the disciples were at liberty to become autonomous individuals, as they once were in pre-patriarchal times without concerns for their family. Not only had the Thesmophoria allowed the women to become independent agents, but it also empowered a united feminine community without male restrictions—a possibly dangerous combination for the dominant male culture of ancient Greece.

In direct conflict to the gender oppression in the everyday lives of women in ancient Greece, the rituals in the Thesmophoria gave women license; encouraging them to celebrate the multi-faceted reproductive powers of femininity. In discussing how the rituals of the Thesmophoria were contradictory to the mainstream androcentric culture, Goff submits: "Once women have an opportunity to articulate resistance in ritual terms, there will be nothing to prevent them from proceeding to direct action."[10] Indeed, enfranchised men were afraid of the anger of the subjugated female. Of particular concern to them were those females who gathered in ritual observance, had access to knives and whose cult festival had a preternatural history of violence toward the opposite sex. In short, men of ancient

Greece were wary of the disciples of the Thesmophoria. What types of behavior set the Thesmophorians apart from what was considered decent society?

Through both cult festivals and religious observance, the dominant culture sought to promote the critical sphere of fertility on the one hand; but, on the other hand, suppressed activities associated with reproduction in women. Indeed, women's physical processes are the source of much derision in ancient Greek literature.[11] Activities associated with women's reproductive processes were considered unclean, vulgar, and always to be concealed from greater society. Moreover, much ritual practice—to male divinities—excluded women in various states of reproduction, because they were considered "offensive to the gods."[12] In contrast, the Thesmophoria is a festival that celebrated that which dominant culture considered polluted. In other words, the Thesmophoria embraced femininity and the mysteries associated with the powers of reproduction. Processes such as menses, lactating, childbearing, profanity, death and decay, were activities celebrated in the Thesmophoria. Inciting Stehle to acknowledge: "In the Thesmophoria…these are sources of power; pollution correlates with women's sexual autonomy for *aischrologia* or foul speech and bailing both excite Demeter's reproductive vitality."[13] As previously mentioned in this paper, bailing is the process of scooping up the dead material from the deceased piglets.

Intriguingly, the disciples encouraged Demeter to reproduce through the goddess' close association with death. By making contact with death the women become one with Demeter. The main event in the festival concerned the power of renewal; the remains of the dead piglets were mixed with the seeds forming the

thesmoi or sacred objects—that is to say what is known today as composting—which Simon establishes as “a great invention of the prehistoric agrarian culture.”[14] Through the power of death and decay, the goddess’ reproductive energy—notably without male intervention[15]—brought forth life in the form of multitudinous crops, allowing the population to thrive. The disciples rejoiced in all aspects of reproduction in its mysterious loop of birth and death; the magic of the cyclical patterns of regeneration, which spurs living from dead and back again.

It must be remembered that paternity may not have been comprehended during the Neolithic era when the Thesmophoria originated hence the festival was about women’s role in fertility *without* the male agent. The androcentric powers in ancient Greece were threatened by the notion of independent women as it subverted the viability of patrilineal descent in which much of their power rested. After all, unless the bonds of marriage tethered women to men they could be autonomous, as they were once before with no recognition of paternity. In discussing the threat of the Thesmophoria to patriarchy Zeitlin proposes:

> Inherent in this harnessing of the powers of female fecundity which necessitates an active even violent role for women is the anxiety which surrounds the giving of power to women, power that is as close to parthenogenesis as possible….this threat recalls the continuing Greek fantasy, the Amazon complex… which envisions a city, a society, an alternative structure, composed only of women and innately hostile to men.[16]

Time and again legends link the Thesmophoria with women in groups hostile to the bonds of marriage such as the Amazons and the Danaids. Because of its Neolithic origins it is not difficult to see why the power elite eyed the Thesmophoria with suspicion. Indeed, if women had the ultimate control over their reproductive

powers this could embolden them to act independently without their husband's authority. It was their independence from male authority, on the one hand, and their cohesiveness as a feminine community on the other, that bred fear in the hearts of the androcentric elite. In her paper "Persephone's Sacred Lake," Rigoglioso argues: "Thesmophoria was a religious festival, which was one of the last public forms of resistance against the patriarchal norm available to Greco-Roman women."[17] Although the Thesmophoria was supported by the androcentric polis, the power elite must have been cautious about the feminine cult energizing the reproductive agency of its disciples. Ultimately, the Thesmophorians could one day break out from the chains of patriarchal slavery to become the independent women their foremothers were who defined their lineage by maternal descent.

In discussing autonomy, it is illuminating to discover how the Thesmophorians were able to gain control of their reproductive options. Indeed, the comprehension of the disciples' fertility was enhanced by their ability to use plants to encourage or discourage various stages of reproduction. As discussed in Chapter Two of this paper, women of the Thesmophoria understood the fundamental role plants could play in their reproductive health. Because of the feminine community formed around the cult, disciples engaged with each other in sharing information they had each acquired on both human and plant reproduction. Did the disciples have agency in determining how many children they begot? Citizen husbands supported the Thesmophoria in an effort to promote human fertility—especially male descendents—but might the citizen wives have had a different mindset? And

lastly, could the Thesmophoria have some relevance for women living in the twenty-first century?

In discussing the Thesmophorians' use of plants to control their fertility Nixon asserts "Men may have wanted to ensure legitimate heirs, but women knew that fertility was a matter of choice and that they were only as fertile as they wanted to be."[18] While women in ancient Greece could not determine who their marriage partners would be, choosing amongst a variety of reproductive options—unbeknownst to their husbands—was one way in which the disciples took charge of their lives. In an effort to determine their destiny, plants allowed the disciples to manage each stage of their reproductive lives. From menstruation to menopause, including contraception, abortion, delivery and lactation, there was a plant for each facet of a woman's reproductive life.

The ignorance of men in the use of plants was aptly portrayed in the *Hymn* when, in an effort to force Persephone to spend part of each year with him, Hades enticed her into eating a pomegranate seed. Unbeknownst to Hades, the pomegranate seed has contraceptive qualities.[19] Indeed, no child would spring from that unholy union. Without doubt, the *Hymn* and the rites in the Thesmophoria are rife with plant lore, much of it associated with reproductive agency. Plants ranging from pennyroyal and pomegranate in the *Hymn* to Pine and Vitex in the rites suggest that any woman familiar with these plants could control her reproductive life as she chose.[20] What is remarkable is that ancient women, whose lives were severely constrained by patriarchal powers, may have had more agency in matters of reproduction than modern women whose reproductive options have begun

diminishing in recent years. Perhaps modern women can take a lesson from the Thesmophorians and begin wresting control of their destiny from the clutches of patriarchy.

While women may have had agency in their reproductive lives, they had none in matters of the state. Kept from all activities in the public sphere, citizen wives were granted a watered down citizenship, which simply allowed them to bear, ideally, only citizen males. Although, female voting was out of the question in the polis of ancient Greece, through their association with the Thesmophoria citizen wives became politically empowered, albeit provisionally. Indeed, the clout of the Thesmophoria in Athens may have been represented by the location in which it was held each year. In addition to hosting the feminine cult, the Pnyx was the site that the general assembly in the polis met, the main governmental authority from which all women were excluded.

To be sure, the Thesmophoria formed a feminine *demos* or village and was considered a politico-religious cult complete with magistrates whose decisions were voted on by majority rule. Electing council members from amongst the disciples, the Thesmophorians engaged in an ad hoc form of democracy, woefully ending at the festival's conclusion. In speaking of the responsibilities of the Thesmophorians, Detienne announces, "Every year in the demes, women choose from among themselves who will preside over the ceremonies and exercise the power in the Thesmophoria."[21] Normally deprived of political rights; women were autonomous in their three day and night festival to make all decisions pertaining to the

Thesmophoria such as planning, accounting and most importantly practicing sacred feminine ritual—all without male counsel.

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[1] Marcel Detienne, "The Violence of Wellborn Ladies: Women in the Thesmophoria," in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among The Greeks*. eds Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, trans Paula Wissing. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 130.

[2] Matthew Dillon, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 115.

[3] Clinton, 29.

[4] Burkett, 258.

[5] Aristophanes. *Thesmophoriazusae*. (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd: 1994), 37.

[6] Versnel, 42.

[7] Detienne, 131.

[8] Detienne, 130.

[9] Dillon, 115.

[10] Goff, 136.

[11] Stehle, 174.

[12] Stehle, 174.

[13] Stehle, 174.

[14] Simon, 21.

[15] Stehle, 173.

[16] Zeitlin, 1982, 146.

[17] Marguerite Rigoglioso, "Persephone's Sacred Lake," *Journal of Feminist Studies*, 21, no. 2 (Fall, 2005) http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002531 (accessed August 21, 2012). 20.

[18] Nixon, 88.

[19] Nixon, 86.

[20] Nixon, 92.

[21] Detienne, 138.

CONCLUSION

On the morning after the concluding ceremony of the Thesmophoria, the disciples began packing for home; many of them had long arduous journeys ahead of them. The goddesses were pleased, which was a favorable portent for the festival's success insuring the strength of the seeds in the forthcoming sowing season. In pious acts of mimesis to Demeter, the women had mourned and prayed, laughed and cried, cursed and divulged secrets; celebrating their feminine agency throughout. Handling death in order to bring forth life, the disciples helped Demeter fertilize the earth while empowering each other by sharing methods to control their fertility. Moreover, the Thesmophoria united the women in a bond of sisterhood generated by the activities and sacred ritual they shared each year.

Could the older members have taught the younger in utilizing plants to aid their reproductive agency? Might old friends have come together to share child-birthing techniques? By participating in a feminine community, did the women make new confidantes? In an example of art imitating life, perhaps long lost daughters became reunited with their beloved mothers in a bond more enduring than marriage. Certainly stories of deep and cultural significance had been shared, for Demeter's struggles were their own.

In the final analysis religions may tell us more about their adherents than their deities. After all, the characteristics of religions are often determined by the anthropological climate in which they are formed. That is to say early adherents define spiritual inclinations within their respective faiths. This convention is most

strongly evident with the feminine cult of Thesmophoria. Harkening back to an era before being yoked to the patriarchal bond of marriage, women had agency in all facets of their lives; this enabled the disciples to envision a new reality they might otherwise not possess in the hyper-androcentric world in which they lived. The independence of their foremothers empowered the disciples to promote a feminine consciousness allowing them to take license in their reproductive lives. Confined to the margins of society, women had been denied all power except the one—essential power of childbearing—which differentiated them from men. Ironically it was the strict demarcation of gender roles that gave women the opportunity to exploit their fertility in order to harness power on their behalf.

Fascinating as it is, examining a topic that dates back anywhere from three to ten millennia BCE has its distinct disadvantages. While much has been learned from this study on the Thesmophoria much more remains to be discovered. Notwithstanding voluminous scholarship associated with the feminine cult, there are many pieces missing to the puzzle. For example, was the scholiast, who wrote so intricately about the rituals of the Thesmophoria, a disciple herself? Was the anecdote of the Danaids historically accurate as many ancient scholars insist? And if so, were they linked to the origins of the Thesmophoria? Were the legends, which associated the Thesmophorians with violence toward men valid? Without doubt, some of the above uncertainties come from the span of epochs—lost in the primordial haze of prehistory; woefully much in the ancient world is open to interpretation. Nonetheless, with this study it has been my attempt to bring the discussion of feminine empowerment cultivated by the Thesmophoria into greater

focus with the expectation and promise of further scrutiny and more scholarship to come in this area.

Ultimately, their work was done. Filing out processionally, the disciples descended from the Pnyx; many carrying their primordial makeshift huts that served as their homes during the three-day long period of worship in Athens. Spectators lined the streets in order to watch the pious women make their descent from the sanctuary. After all, the citizen-wives played critical roles as the health and prosperity of the polis rested on their shoulders—so important were human and crop fertility to ancient Greece.

Figure 1: Marble figure of Demeter, Knidos, from Anatolia, Turkey.
c. 350-330 BCE, British Museum.

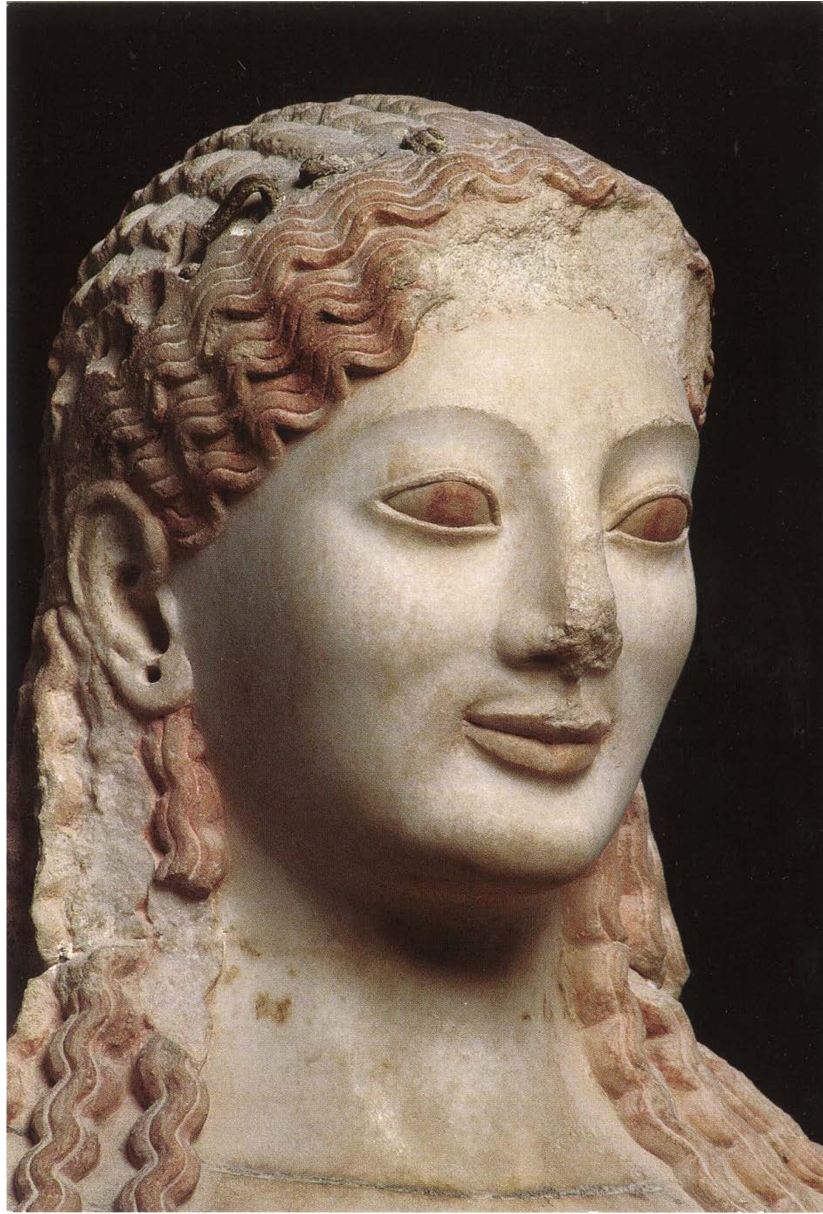

Figure 2: The Peplos Kore, c. 530 BCE, Archaic Gallery, The Acropolis Museum, Athens

Figure 3: Rape of Persephone. Hades with Persephone (bottom left) on horse-drawn chariot. Apulian red- figure volute krater, c. 340 BCE.
Pergamon Museum. Berlin, Germany.

Figure 4: Demeter lectures Metaneira. Detail on Apulian red-figure hydria.
c. 340 BCE. Altes Museum, Berlin.

Figure 5: Demeter drives horse-drawn chariot containing her daughter Persephone.
c. 6th century BCE. Selinunte, Sicily.
Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 6: Double goddess of Catal Huyuk. c. 6000 BCE.
Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey.

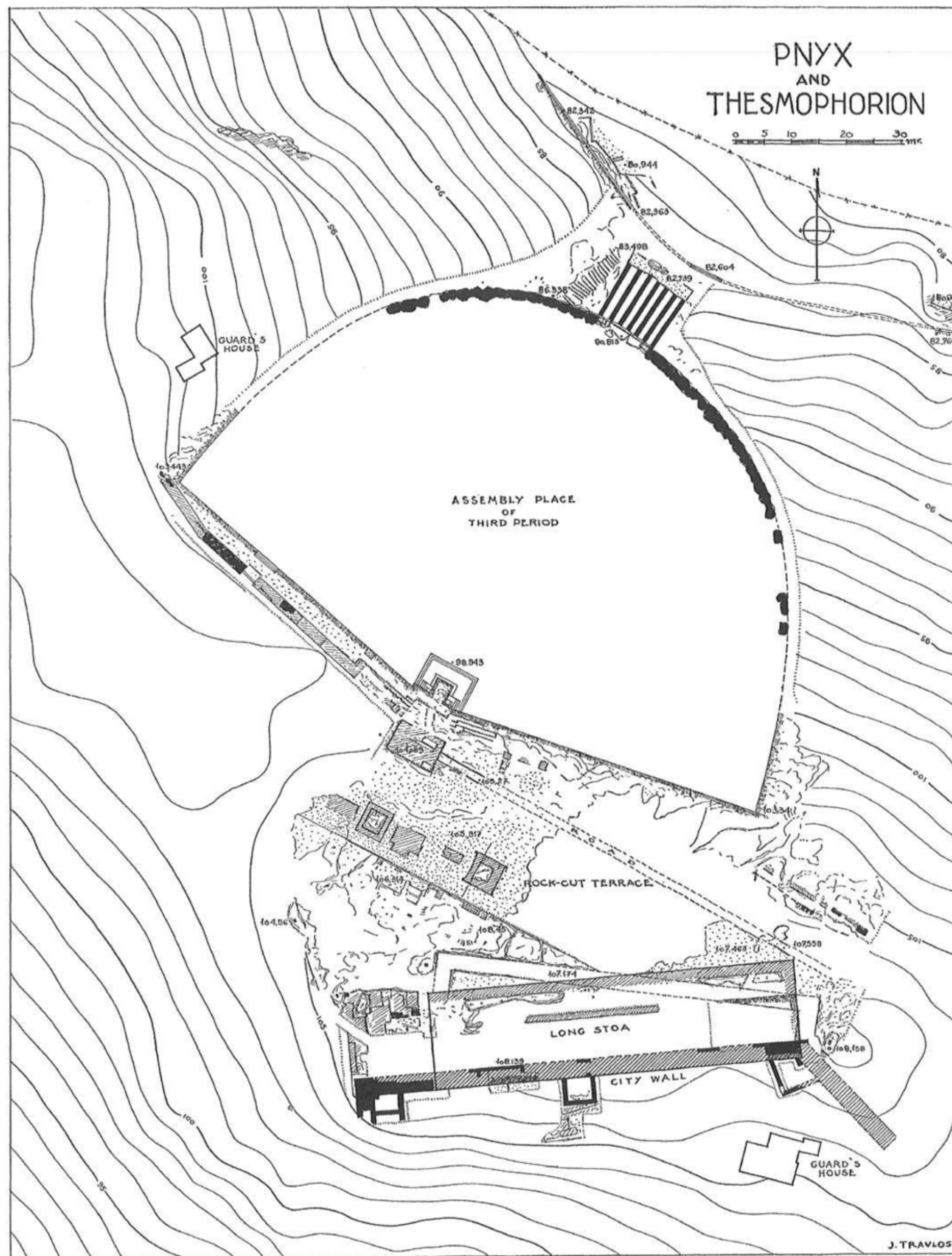

Fig. 7

Figure 7: Thesmophorion, Central Hill on the Pnyx in Athens.
Excavated by Homer A. Thompson, 1934.

Figure 8: Demeter and Persephone with mushroom.
From a temple wall at Eleusis, c. 4th century BCE.
Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 9: Red-figure lecythus showing a young woman about to throw a piglet into the megaron. c. 5th century BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum.

Figure 10: Neolithic era c. 6000 BCE. Seated Mother Goddess of Catal Huyuk.
Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey.
Head is a restoration.

Figure 11: Eleusinian Trio. Persephone, Triptolemus and Demeter, marble bas-relief from Eleusis, c. 440-430 BCE. National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

Figure 12: Apulian bell-crater illustrating a scene from Thesmophoriazusae (753-756). c. 4th century BCE. Martin von Wagner Museum, University of Wurzberg, Germany.

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