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The Function of Mythology and Religion in Ancient Greek Society.

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ABSTRACT

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The ancient Greeks are prime subjects of study for those wishing to understand the roles that religion and mythology play in a society and how the two interact with each other. This paper covers what I feel after my study of Greek mythology and religion are the eight functions of mythology: history, education, explanation – both of the natural world and the culture of each society, legality, genesis, what happens after death, and entertainment; as well as the two function of religion: civic and spiritual. In the first chapter, in order to show each of the mythological functions, I summarize and explain a myth that falls primarily into each category. The second chapter discusses and illustrates Civic Religion and the third examines the three major Mystery Religions. The goal is to offer a basic understand of some of the myths, religious beliefs, and cult practices of the ancient Greeks.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

To understand the functions that religion or mythology serve in any given culture they must be looked at both separately and together for they are intimately bound. A large portion of mythology explains religion, just as much of religion is mythology put into practice. This is especially true in a culture as rich in these traditions as the Greeks were. The Greeks are prime subjects of study for those wishing to understand the roles that religion and mythology play in a society and how the two interact with each other because, to the Greeks, mythology and religion were inseparable from the mythos of society.

This paper looks at mythology and religion and their roles in society as separate and interrelated issues. It covers the eight functions of mythology: history, teaching, explanation – both natural and cultural, legality, genesis, eschatology, and entertainment; as well as the two function of religion: civic and spiritual. The two overlap at many points such as the spiritual function of religion and the eschatological function of mythology. They both deal with the same pantheon of deities. This pantheon encompasses

hundreds, but only the Olympians will be discussed as they are the major players in the pantheon.

The goal is to offer a basic understand of some of the myths and religious practices of the Greeks as well as to show that not that much as changed in the functions that myths and religions serve in the over two millennia since those discussed in this paper were common practice despite the overwhelming differences in the types of religions and the subjects of myths present today.

There are several works that I found indispensable when writing this thesis. The first, and I feel the most helpful to anyone studying any aspect of the Ancient Greek cults, is the five volume set *The Cults of the Greek States* by L.R. Farnell. While not a series designed for practical pleasure reading, these books contain a vast wealth of knowledge that has been vital to my research. Another highly knowledgeable source is Martin P. Nilsson. His books, like Farnell's, are filled with information vital to Ancient Greek and pre-Greek studies.

The second, perhaps the most enjoyable, is *The Greek Myths* by Robert Graves. Graves' book is a retelling of most of the major Greek myths, some in their many different forms, followed by an analysis and explanation of the myths told. The third, another helpful and highly enjoyable book,

is *The Twelve Olympians* by Charles Seltman. Seltman's book is a great source of information about the twelve main deities and their place in Ancient Greece.

A fourth is *Ancient Mystery Cults* by Walter Burkert. Burkert discusses what makes mystery religion different from the other religious practices in ancient Greece as will as the major mysteries themselves. Other useful authors are Jan Bremmer, Jean-Pierre Vernant, H. J. Rose, Richard Caldwell, Marcel Detienne, and M.I. Findley.

There are also many ancient sources that are essential. Herodotus, Thucydides, and Hesiod, as the major ancient Greek historians, are vital to an understanding of the practices of that time. The major playwrights are also very important as most of their plays are retellings of the Greek Myths. Among the most important of these for this paper have been Euripides, Aeschylus, Homer, Aristophanes, and Sophocles. Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato are also good sources of information for the time.

CHAPTER 2

THE FUNCTION OF MYTHOLOGY IN GREEK SOCIETY

Greek mythology has long fascinated humankind. Stories of gods and monsters and the men and women who lived and interacted with them have caught the attention of children and adults alike for generations. As captivating as these stories are, they present a unique problem to the historian. Much can be gleaned from ancient mythology about the society from which the Greeks came, how they lived and what they thought about the world around them for example; but because of the nature of myth, it cannot be taken completely at face value. Myth deals with the fantastic, the supernatural, and the divine. Because of this, the function that mythology collectively played in the ancient world becomes historically more important than the interpretation of each individual myth. This discussion will be aimed at answering three basic questions about Greek mythology:

1) What is mythology, 2) What problems arise when studying mythology, and 3) What are the functions of mythology?

What is Mythology?

Whenever one speaks of mythology, visions of epic battles and quests of heroes and gods in a time when monsters roamed free and terrorized humankind immediately spring to mind, but myth is much more than just a fantasy story. Myth differs from fantasy in many ways. A myth, from the Greek word "*mythos* meaning 'word, tale'" is a story meant to be told aloud.[1] When studying myth one must always bear in mind the essential triad of "Narrator – *Mythos* – Audience."[2] The narrators, or poets as they were called, were always playing to their audience and "new myths or unacceptable versions of old ones would be rejected by the public and, surely, not repeated in further performances."[3]

Myth can be told with the intent of being allegorical, symbolic, rational, romantic, theoretical, or analytical.[4] A myth can take on a single form or it can serve all of these types at once. However, it is necessary at the forefront of the study to set the myths apart from the writings that were meant to be factual records such as Herodotus'

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[1] Jan Bremmer, ed. *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*. Princeton: Barnes & Noble Books, 1986, 4.

[2] Bremmer, *Interpretations* 4.

[3] Bremmer, *Interpretations* 4.

[4] H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology,* New York: E.P. Dutton& Co., Inc., 1959. 1-16.

Histories or the writings of Thucydides and Hippokrates.[5] Though they are from roughly the same culture and time, the writings of Homer are clearly of a different type than the works of these men.

One of the things that set myth apart from other types of folk tales is the necessary auditory element, but that is not the only thing. Myths are tied to a specific time, a place, and a people; and for the Greeks they are never isolated, as each "myth evokes further myths… it is almost true that every Greek myth is ultimately connected in a chain of association with every other Greek myth."[6] This difference sets myths apart from fairytales because they are about a land far away and a time long ago. Fairytales are also told as pure entertainment.[7] While entertainment is also a function of myth, myth encompasses much more.

The poets who wrote each myth were also considered to be divinely inspired by the Muses.[8] The Muses, Zeus' nine daughters by the goddess of memory, were the goddesses of artistic inspiration.[9] These Muses were thought to whisper

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[5] Rose, Handbook. 1-16.

[6] Bremmer, *Interpretations* 6.

[7] Bremmer, *Interpretations* 6.

[8] Bremmer, *Interpretations* 4.

[9] Bergen Evans. *Dictionary of Mythology.* New York: Random House, Inc. 1970. Reprint 1991, 178.

to the poet of the adventures of the gods. Thus, myths held a revered place in ancient Greece as they were seen to be divinely inspired and were meant to convey some important message about life or the gods to the people.[10] Simply put myths can be seen as "traditional tales relevant to society."[11]

What Problems Arise When Studying Myth?

One of the first major problems in studying mythology is determining to which field it belongs. Myth can be seen as history in that it chronicles an event that happened in the past.[12] Myth can also be grouped with religious documents because it was divinely inspired and dealt with the "attributes… roles… and relationships" of the gods.[13] Or, myth can be viewed as literature.[14] Before historians, or theologians, or literary critics, can successfully study mythology they must determine of which field it is a part. It is useful when setting out to assume that any given myth

[10] Evans, *Dictionary,* 187.

[11] Bremmer, *Interpretations* 7.

[12] Bremmer, *Interpretations* 215.

[13] Robert M. Seltzer, ed*, Religions of Antiquity*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987, 164.

[14] Seltzer, 164.

can simultaneously belong to all three; however, one must be wary not to take the myth at face value.

This gives rise to the second problem and returns to the poet–myth–listener triad. Myth, especially Greek myth, is ever changing and "open-ended."[15] Poets have certain guidelines within which they must remain for each myth; however, they are constantly playing to their audience, changing and adapting the myth to please the listener.[16] Thus there are many versions of each myth. This raises another problem when studying mythology and that is, is the accurate version recorded? Or if multiple versions are available, which version is the original and which reflect changes that have taken place in society more than the original events?

Because myth was all originally spoken, it is safe to factor in the human tendency to distort into the myth. For example, if a fisherman caught a trout and told his son about it, by the time all of his son's friends heard about the fish it might be a shark. This problem can be more easily applied to the myths about heroes rather than those about the gods because the gods were grandiose figures that had supernatural abilities anyway, whereas many heroes were

[15] Bremmer. *Interpretations* 3-7.

[16] Seltzer, 167. Bremmer, 4-6.

at least based on actual historical figures.[17] There may once have existed men whose deeds inspired the myths started, but it is doubtful that they actually did all the things attributed to them.

Returning to the problem of the distance between when the myth took place and when it was recorded, the most obvious example of this is found in Homer. Homer's epic poem the *Iliad* is roughly set in the Mycenaean period and was an oral tale long before Homer penned the version we have today, which is generally accepted to have been written between the years 800-600 B.C.[18] There is roughly a 500-year gap between the action and the written record.[19] With so much time between the event and the record and with the oral method of passing down information, one must be wary when gleaning any historical information from this poem for Homer, like any other poet, was playing to his audience. This is evidenced by the anachronisms present in his stories.[20] That is not to say that there are not

[17] Seltzer, 173-176.

[18] Homer, *Iliad.* Trans. by Stanley Lombardo. Intro. by Sheila Murnaghan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1997. xlviii-liv.

[19] Homer, *Iliad.* Lombardo. xlviii-liv.

[20] Homer, *Iliad.* Lombardo. xlviii-liv.

historical accuracies to be found; only that these stories must not be taken at face value.

Another problem that arises in the study of mythology is the problem of modernization, that is changing the story to reflect current social ideals or to address current political problems.[21] For example, "The Tragedians freely adjust their mythical plots to illuminate political and social problems of their own day, as Aeschylus does with Zeus and Prometheus, and Sophocles with Antigone and Philoctetes."[22] Using well-known stories to demonstrate current societal problems is a common practice, but it distorts the original point and plot of the myth, making the job of understanding the myth harder on the historian.

The difference in type of myth is another problem. When dealing with Greek myths there are two main types: Divine and Heroic.[23] The Divine myths deal with the gods and their origins and actions, while the Heroic myths deal with the actions of humans. Often the gods have a cameo role in the Heroic myths, but the bulk of the story is about humankind.[24] It is necessary to recognize which type of myth

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[21] G.S. Kirk. "Greek Mythology: Some New Perspectives." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies,* Vol. 92 (1972), 74-85.

[22]Kirk, "*New Perspectives",* 77.

[23] Seltzer, 168- 176.

[24] Kirk, "*New Perspectives",* 74-85.

one is studying, or at least to recognize that there are two different types of mythology to be studied, while at the same time acknowledging that both are valid forms of mythology.

The last major problem the scholar of mythology runs into is not so much related to the myth as it is to the cultural differences between the society of the twenty-first century and that of the ancient Greeks and how that difference affects our understanding of their mythologies. The ancient Greeks were a "shame-culture", meaning that how people in society viewed a particular individuals determined their status regardless of their objective qualifications.[25] If persons were perceived to have done some great deed or possessed some great prize then they were honored whether they actually did or possessed anything. Today we are a guilt-culture, meaning that how we see ourselves is what we project to other people.[26] In this latter type of culture self-worth or lack thereof is what is of the most importance; not necessarily how others see you but how you perceive yourself. This is a subtle difference, but it accounts for much of what the heroes of

[25] E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational.* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964. 28-50.

[26] Dodds, 28-50.

Greek mythology do, and is essential to understanding the differences in ancient and modern interpretations of myths. Myth can be a very useful element to study for the historian, but one must always be mindful of the potential complications.

The Functions Mythology Served in Greek Society

Mythology served many functions in the Greek world, but not every myth served every function. Similarly, few myths served just one function. It is important to look at each function individually, as well as collectively. It is also more expedient to look at the many roles that mythology serves in every culture and society and see if the Greek myths fit this mold instead of looking at each individual myth and trying to deduce its importance to society. I believe that there are eight functions that mythology can serve in any given culture, and the Greek culture is the ideal place to apply this theory.

The first function of mythology is as history. Mythology can be used to relate actual happenings from a time beyond memory.[27] However, it is unwise to rely on

[27] Richard S. Caldwell, *The Origin of the Gods: a Psychoanalytic Study of Greek Theogonic Myth.* New York : Oxford University Press, 1993, 13.

mythology as the only source of information about a given event. For example, the *Iliad* tells the story of a war between several pre-Greek kingdoms roughly united under a single man and the kingdom of Troy. Homer's story is fantastic with the gods appearing on the battlefield and the beginning with an apple on Mt. Olympus.[28] While there may really have been a Trojan War, and in fact Heinrich Schliemann found Troy in the late 1800s,[29] it is unlikely that the war was fought over a runaway wife. One of the main ways that myth can be useful to historians is as inspiration for further study, such as it was for Schliemann who grew up loving the *Iliad* and wished to find evidence that some part of it could be true.[30]

The second function mythology serves in society is to teach the youth of the societal social norms and expectations as well as consequences of actions.[31] Take for example the Bull of Minos. Minos, the king of Crete, claimed that the gods would answer any prayer he sent to

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[28] Homer. *The Iliad.* Trans. and Intro. by Alston Hurd Chase and William G. Parry, Jr. America: The Universal Library, 1950, and Homer, *Iliad.* Lombardo.

[29] Leonard Cottrell, *The Bill of Minos: Discoveries of Schliemann and Evans.* Intro. by Peter Levi. New York: Facts on File Publications, 1953, 44-55.

[30] Cottrell, 36-55.

[31] Caldwell, 13.

them. To this end he asked Poseidon to send a bull to be sacrificed, but the bull that was sent was so beautiful that Minos kept it and offered another instead.[32] As a punishment for Minos' deceit, Poseidon caused his wife to fall in love with the bull and later to bear the Minotaur, a half-man half-bull monster.[33] The lesson learned here is keep you word when your promise the gods something because their revenge is extreme. This is a common theme throughout mythology. Many stories deal with the gods taking revenge on people.

The third function of mythology is to explain the unexplainable, or to serve as an attempt by the ancient Greeks to make sense out of the world around them.[34] An example of this is Core, also known as Persephone, and Demeter. "Demeter [was the] goddess of the cornfield"[35] and Core was her daughter. Hades fell in love with Core and abducted her to the underworld. After this Demeter swore that the earth would bear no fruit until she had her daughter returned to her. Zeus intervened and decreed that

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[32] Apollodorus. *The Library, Book I.* Trans. by Sir James George Frazer, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921. 197-201.

[33] Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths.* New York: Penguin Books, 1955. Reprint 1992. 292-294.

[34] Kirk, *"New Perspectives"*, 75.

[35] Graves, 89.

Core would be returned as long as she had not eaten the food of the dead. On the trip back to Demeter, Core ate some food; therefore, a compromise had to be reached. Core would spend three month with Hades and nine with Demeter each year.[36] When Core was away Demeter would return her curse to the land and it would bear no fruit. This was why during winter nothing grows.[37] This story is an example of the ancient and pre-scientific mind trying to understand why the world works the way it does, in this case the nature of the seasons.

The fourth function is similar to the third in that it is to explain why a culture did certain things.[38] This is one of the functions directly tied to religion. An example is Prometheus and sacrifices. Once, long before the Hellenistic Greek age, the gods lived directly with humans, but when they left humankind the gods took fire with them. Prometheus, a Titan, stole fire from the gods and returned it to humankind.[39] This angered the gods, and in an attempt

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[36] Apollodorus. *Book I.* 35-41.

[37] Graves, 89-96.

[38] Seltzer,179-180.

[39] Aeschylus, *The Suppliant Maidens and The Persians, Seven Against Thebes and Prometheus Bound.* Intro and Trans by Seth Benardete, Intro. Trans and Ed. David Grene. Ed. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956. 139-179.

to appease them Prometheus instituted the concept of the sacrifice. He cut up a bull and filled two bags with its parts. One bag contained the good parts covered in dregs and the other the bones and bad parts covered in choice cuts. The high god Zeus chose the second bag and that is the portion that was sacrificed to them ever since, with mortals getting to keep the first bag.[40] This myth tells both how humankind got fire, and why the sacrificial animals were divided the way they were.

The fifth function of myth is to legitimize a claim to land or right to rule or give importance to a city; these are sometimes called founding myths.[41] An example is Cadmus and the founding of Thebes. Cadmus, a descendant of Poseidon and the same man credited with bring writing to the Greeks,[42] was told by the Delphic Oracle, while questing to find his sister, to give up and found a town where a cow laid down to rest. To this end he bought a cow and pushed her east until she lay down exhausted. There he built

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[40] Graves,143-145, and Seltzer, 179-180.

[41] Martin P. Nilsson. *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology*. New York: W W Norton & Company, 1932. 122-123..

[42] Herodotus. *The Histories.* Trans. by Aubrey de Sélincourt. Intro. A.R. Burns. New York: Penguin Books, 1954. Reprint 1972. 361.

Thebes and sacrificed to cow to Athene.[43] This myth tells how and why Thebes was founded, supporting certain claims to the land by both a specific goddess and group of people.

A sixth function of mythology is to answer the question, "Where do we come from?"[44] The creation myth of the Greeks is complex and confusing regardless of how long the explanation. This explanation shall be brief. The world began a one unified thing,[45] then Chaos brought forth Eurynome, the goddess who created all things; she bore the Titans and Titanesses to Uranus and had them govern the planetary powers. Rhea and Cronus governed Saturn. Cronus led a rebellion against Uranus, his father, and castrated him. Drops of his blood fell on the earth and life sprang from them.[46] Uranus cursed Cronus to likewise be dethroned by his son. Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon were the sons of Cronus. Zeus felled his father and defeated the Titans to become the chief Olympian, or the chief god. Prometheus, a Titan who fought on Zeus's side, is said to have made

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[43] Graves, 194-196.

[44] Caldwell, 13.

[45] Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History: Volume I.* Trans. by C.H. Oldfather. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967. 22-29.

[46] Apollodorus. *Book I.* 2-20.

humankind.[47] This is of course a concise, abridged, and integrated version of the four main creation myths.[48]

The seventh function of mythology is to answer the Question, "What happens when we die?'[49] In Greek mythology, the dead descend into the underworld. To get there they must pay Charon to take them across the river Styx. Those who cannot pay can never enter the underworld and must remain near the bank of the Styx. A many-headed dog named Cerberus[50] guards the opposite side of the Styx to insure that once across, the ghost cannot return and no living person is allowed to cross. Once in the underworld, souls can go to one of three places, "Asphodel Meadows, if they are neither virtuous nor evil… Tartarus, if they are evil… [or] Elysium, if they are virtuous."[51] The god of the underworld is Hades and his wife is Queen Persephone. Elysium is ruled by Cronus and the chief judge is Minos.[52]

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[47] Graves, 27-58, 143. and Hesiod, *Theognis*. Trans. and Intro. by Dorothea Wender. New York: Penguin Books, 1973. Reprint 1987. 23-57.

[48] Table 1 is a chart of the Greek creators, Titans and gods beginning with Chaos. The chart is from Ivan Kozik, "Ludios" (05 July 2006) http://ludios.org (accessed 07 December 2006).

[49] Caldwell, 13.

[50] Apollodorus. *Book I.* 233-237.

[51] Graves, 121.

[52] Graves, 120-122.

The eighth function of mythology is entertainment. These myths were meant to be spoken and were crafted to be aesthetically pleasing. While most myths serve one or more of the above functions, they were all meant to be enjoyed. Some of the most popular myths were those pertaining to the Heroes, both those in Homer's *Iliad* and those about heroes such as Heracles,[53] Perseus,[54] Theseus,[55] and Jason.[56]

No Greek myth stands alone. All of the myths are interconnected and each leads to another myth. As stated before, each "myth evokes further myths… it is almost true that every Greek myth is ultimately connected in a chain of association with every other Greek myth."[57] For example, the King Minos of Crete and his brothers are all judges in the underworld, the underworld's Queen, Persephone, is also Demeter's kidnapped daughter Core, the Cronus that rules Elysium is the same Titan who castrated Uranus, and the Prometheus who created man was the same Titan who stole the fire from Zeus and returned it to mortals. This is only an

[53] Graves, 446-514.

[54] Evslin, Bernard. *Heroes, Gods and Monsters of Greek Myths.* New York: Random House, Inc. 1966. Reprint 2005, 109-133.

[55] Graves, 323-366.

[56] Graves, 577-585.

[57] Bremmer, *Interpretations* 6.

example of the interconnection that runs through Greek myths.

This cycle of overlapping and interconnecting makes it hard to isolate a myth for study and is one of the main reasons that each myth serves more than one function in society. Each myth chosen above is representative of the function named before it; however, each also has elements of other functions as well. An example being the Prometheus and fire myth, which serves also to tell how humans got fire as well as why the sacrifices to the gods were done. The myth of Charon and the Styx explained why the dead were buried with a coin. Nothing can be looked at in isolation because if it is then much of the meaning is missed.

Conclusion

The study of mythology is difficult but never dull. The most intrusting part is that to some extent the eight functions above are still a part of American society today. Our myths are not related to the gods in the way that the Greek myth are, but Americans have their own set of demigods that are passed on to their children. American children grow up learning the history of 'Honest Abe,' the ethics of the 'hardworking Puritan,' and why we shoot off fire works on the 4th of July. Each culture has its own

myths, but the Greek myth still continue to enchant those from all cultures thousands of years after that culture had died. In Homer's the Odyssey, Odysseus calls up the shade of Achilles, and Achilles tells him of his choice between a long life of obscurity and a short life ending in eternal honor.[58] Achilles chose eternal honor and sure enough over 4000 years later his exploits are still taught.

[58] Mack, Maynard, ed. *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces: Fifth Continental Edition.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987, 227-245.

CHAPTER 3

THE FUNCTION OF CIVIC RELIGION IN GREEK SOCIETY

When approaching the study of ancient Greek religion one must remember that it is fundamentally different from the common perception of religion today. This is because all Greek religions accepted a polytheistic, meaning many gods, view. The dominant world religions today are monotheistic and exclusive. Before one can begin to understand any ancient religion, this difference must be fully understood. The three most prominent religions in that same area of the world today are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three of these religions are exclusive, meaning that to believe completely in any of them by necessity renders any other religion completely false. They all hold that their God is the only god; and all others are not just lesser, they are false.[59] Greek religion is just the opposite. The Greeks excluded no gods, even when the gods seemed to overlap or contradict each other.[60]

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[59] Holy Bible, Exodus 20; and Qur'An, Surah 2, Ayat 255-56.

[60] Jan Bremmer. *Greek Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. 2-4.

The Greeks had a vast pantheon of gods. Each of their gods ruled over a specific sphere, whether regional, natural, or event based. All gods taken together ruled all things, but no one god ruled everything.[61] The Greek system was meant to be inclusive, meaning that it was a common practice for the gods of other people groups to be added into the Greek pantheon.[62]

Another major difference must be noted. Greek religion, unlike the major religions prevalent today, had no messiah, no creed, and no revelation.[63] This was a religion that relied heavily on tradition, not a faith-based religion that could be denied if one chose.[64] This religion was pervasive in the Greek society, affecting every aspect of life from art[65] and war[66] to the "rules of

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[61] Bremmer. *Greek Religion*. 4-6.

[62] Martin P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion.* New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1971. 1-16.

[63] Robert M. Seltzer, ed, *Religions of Antiquity*. New York: MacMillan Publishing
Company, 1987. 163.

[64] Seltzer, 163.

[65] Luisa Banti, "Myth in Pre-Classical Art" *American Journal of Archaeology,* Vol.58, No.4. (Oct 1954), 307-310.

[66] Homer. *Iliad.* Trans. by Stanley Lombardo. Intro. by Sheila Murnaghan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1997.

communal life."[67] Religion related to everything in Greek society, and everything related back to religion.

A last major difference is that the Greek gods were both anthropomorphic and symbolic. In Greek myths the gods appear to be superhuman playing human-like roles. An understanding of this characteristic of the gods is vital. However, the pantheon of gods is also a system that must be studied in its own right as has been stressed by Jean-Pierre Vernant. It is his belief that the system is more important than the individual gods.[68] Both views must be taken into consideration to reach a through understanding of the Greek pantheon.

Civic Religion

The religion of the Hellenic Greek period can be traced back, to a great extent, to the pre-Greek peoples of the Minoans and Mycenaeans.[69] Because Greek religion was designed to be inclusive, other cultures were also added over the years to form a conglomeration of sorts. Evidence

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[67] Seltzer, 163.

[68] Jean-Pierre Vernant. *The Universe, The Gods, and Men.* Trans. Linda Asher. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

[69] Martin P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1971. 1-11.

suggests that aspects of the religions from the people groups of Asia Minor and from Egypt were introduced and incorporated into the Greek system.[70]

The system of ancient Greek religion was organized prior to the eighth century, and most probably took shape along with the *polis.*[71] The *polis* was the name for the Greek city-states; this civic and religious reorganization hints at one of the main function of the Greek religion. Jean-Pierre Vernant states,

> The Greek religious system was profoundly reorganized during this time in response to the new forms of social life introduced by the *polis.* Within the context of a religion that from then on was essentially civic.[72]

Each city-state had its own patron deity that gave unity to each individual city-state and its inhabitants.

The Pantheon

There were hundreds of deities and otherwise divine beings present in the Greek religion, but the main body of gods present throughout the city-states was the Olympians: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Apollon (or Apollo), Artemis, Hermes, Athene (or Athena), Hephaistos (or

[70] Martin P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion,* 6-12.

[71] Seltzer, 172-173.

[72] Seltzer, 172.

Hephaestus), Aphrodite, Ares, and Dionysos (or Dionysus).[73] The twelve Olympians were the gods that had the most direct relationship and interest in the people. They represented both an aspect of daily life and a location.[74] Two of the ten, Demeter and Dionysus, were the patron deities of the Mystery Cults and as such will be discussed in detail in a later section.

Zeus, the king of the gods, most likely came from a blending of the Achæan god Zeus, from which he took his name and affinity for the sky, and the Minyan god *Dān*.[75] While the Achæan and Minyan aspects were dominant, the relationship between Zeus and Hera also suggested Dorian influence.[76] Form this blending came the great god who overthrew his father Cronos to assume leadership of the gods.[77] The main cult of Zeus was located in Olympia.[78] Zeus seemed to at once be the god of everything, worshiped in every city; yet not. Most of his attributes were also

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[73] Charles Seltman, *The Twelve Olympians.* New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1962. 12.

[74] Seltman, 13-30.

[75] Seltman, 37-53.

[76] Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths.* New York: Penguin Books, 1955. Reprint 1992. 53-55.

[77] Bernard Evslin, *Heroes, Gods and Monsters of Greek Myths.* New York: Random House, Inc. 1966. Reprint 2005. 3-5.

[78] Seltman, 13-20.

ascribed to another god or goddess who the people turn to more readily, as if Zeus was an overseer and the other gods were the gods of the people.[79]

Hera, the Queen of the gods and Zeus' wife, had her main cults at Samos and Argos and is the goddess of marriage.[80] There is debate as to whether Hera served as the goddess of any natural or political function or if she was only the goddess of marriage.[81] Hera, meaning Lady, was the name given by the Hellenic Greeks to the Great Goddess, who was found in both the Minoan and the Hittite cultures.[82] She, being the central female deity, naturally became the mate to the central male deity. The Great Goddess was free to take lovers at her whim, but this changed when a strong male deity entered the picture. Because of the societal implications present in the blending of Zeus' and Hera's cultures, that of a matriarchal and a patriarchal society, this blending likely took longer for one to establish dominion over the other than most of the other blending we will discuss. Indeed, the myth says that "Zeus wooed Hera

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[79] L.R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States, Vol. I.* New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1997. 35-101.

[80] Seltman, 13-20.

[81] Farnell, *Vol. I.* 179-204.

[82] Seltman, 31-36.

for three hundred years" [83] before their marriage. It is possible that the three hundred years here could be how long it took for the two societies to fully blend.[84]

These two examples, as well as many of the others, represent societal themes and political implication as well as religious beliefs. Zeus became the head god, thus the society he represents became the prominent society. The anthropomorphic nature of these gods was, in part, a self projection, an idyllic form of what humans could be. Zeus was said to have fathered many children, among whom are those who represent the four seasons and the calendar months as the Hellenes represented them showing their domination over the other cultures as well as over nature.[85] The Great Goddess' survival in the form of Hera was indicative of the inclusive nature of the Hellenistic religion.

Poseidon, god of the sea, and Demeter, goddess of corn, are also examples of the blending of Greek religion with those of other cultures. These deities descended from the same lines as Zeus and Hera at around the same time. The Ionian's and the Minyan's patron deities were *Dān* and

[83] Seltman, 33.

[84] Seltman, 31-36.

[85] Graves, 53-55.

Dā, also called Lord or *Potei Dān* and *Dā Mater* or Mother, these became Poseidon and Demeter.[86] Their main cults were located in Sunium and Poseidonia for Poseidon and Eleusis for Demeter. Poseidon, in addition to being the god of the sea, was also the god of fresh-water. This made him a water deity more so than just the god of the oceans. [87] Any city near an ocean that experiences an earthquake also has an accompanying tidal wave. For this reason, Poseidon was also seen as the earth-shaker and given credit for earthquakes.[88]

The goddess and god most closely associated with the people were Athena and Hermes.[89] Athena was the patron deity of Athens, though it is debated whether she lent the city her name or derived her name from it.[90] Athena was of Minoan origin. She was possibly an aspect of the Great Goddess but was definitely the Triple Goddess of maid, matron, and crone.[91] She was blended with the Achæan and Mycenaean goddess from whom she likely takes her name.[92] After her blending, Athena lost one third of her triumvirate. She

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[86] Seltman, 138-161.

[87] Farnell, L.R. *The Cults of the Greek States, Vol. IV.* New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1997. 1-55.

[88] Farnell, *Vol. IV.* 1-55

[89] Seltman, 54-63.

[90] Seltman, 54-63.

[91] Graves, 96-100.

[92] Seltman, 54-63.

retained the aspect of the virgin maiden and of the wise old crone, but the aspect of her as the matron was stripped and most likely added to the other female goddesses.[93] Ironically, though she retained the young and old persona and was stripped of the adult visage, it is in this manner that she is most often depicted.[94] Few other deities wielded as much power in the political realm as she did.[95] This will be discussed in greater detail later.

Hermes was the messenger of the gods, but this was not his only description.[96] His name is Greek meaning "He of the stone-heap,"[97] which were used as aids to help travelers on their way, thus he is also the god of travel and the protector of travelers. His persona was not so much a blend of deities as of ideas. He was a protector of travelers, thus the Minoan god of animals was added to him, as he protected the traveler from wild animals, or the animals from travelers as the case may be.[98] Hermes was originally a pastoral god depicted as an old man, but as more aspects were added to him his appearance changed to that of a fit

[93] Seltman, 54-63.

[94] T.H. Carpenter, *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1991. Reprint, 1998. 42, 56.

[95] Farnell, *Vol. I.* 258-320.

[96] Evslin, 43-47.

[97] Seltman, 65.

[98] Seltman, 62-78.

youth.[99] He was later considered the patron god of "liars and thieves and gamblers…of commerce, framer of treaties"[100] and "god of luck and fertility."[101] Hermes, unlike most of the other Olympic deities, had no home city. He had a small shrine in most of the cities but no large temple. This is most likely because he was the god of travel and always on the move.[102]

Another god with ties to Athena was Hephaestus. Hephaestus was a fire-god, but he was fire in an untamed sense, gas or lava.[103] He and Athena shared temple space in Athens, giving rise to the notion that they were married.[104] Hephaestus was the patron god of mechanics and smith work. He rose to prominence as the artisans who worshiped him gained prominence in society, and he fell from prominence with them also.[105] Hephaestus, in the image of his acolytes, was seen as a lame god. Some accounts have him lame from birth,[106] and others after having been thrown from Mt.

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[99] Seltman, 62-78.

[100] Evslin, 46.

[101] Farnell, L.R. *The Cults of the Greek States, Vol. V.* New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1997. 25.

[102] Farnell, *Vol. V.* 1-31.

[103] Seltman, 92- 101.

[104] Graves, 86-88.

[105] Seltman, 92- 101.

[106] Evslin, 48-49.

Olympus to earth by Zeus.[107] Due to his lameness he was perceived as the ugliest of the gods. It is ironic that myth should have the ugliest of the gods as the husband to the most beautiful, Aphrodite.[108]

Aphrodite, goddess of love and sex, is possibly the most well known of the Greek gods. She like most of the other goddesses is derived form the Great Goddess.[109] Unlike many of the other goddesses, however, Aphrodite is never associated with virginity, in fact she is seen and even encouraged to be immoral.[110] Aphrodite was seen as many things, but above all she was associated with love, both the healing and the destructive forces of love.[111] Indeed, Aphrodite was as feared as she was loved. Among her epitaphs were, "Goddess of Death-in-Life…Eldest of the Fates… *Melaenis* (Black One)… *Scotia* (Dark One), *Androphonos* (Man-Slayer) and… *Epitymbria* (of the Tombs)."[112] It is possible that the destructive power of love was what led to her association with Ares, the god of war. Ares is the

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[107] Seltman, 92- 101.

[108] Seltman, 92- 101.

[109] Graves, 67-73.

[110] H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology,* New York: E.P. Dutton& Co., Inc., 1959. 122- 127.

[111] Farnell, L.R. *The Cults of the Greek States, Vol. II.* New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1997. 664-669.

[112] Graves, 72.

simplest of the gods to understand. He served no function but that of war-god.[113] He was of Thracian origin[114] and was by far the most disliked deity among the Olympians.[115]

Apollo was second only to Zeus in the Greek pantheon. When discussing Apollo it must be noted that he is in many ways two different deities. There is the Apollo of Delphi and the Apollo of Delos.[116] He is most likely derived from the Dorian *Apellon* and the Hittite god *Apulunas.*[117] Apollo's Dorian roots are evident at Delphi where his oracle was seen as a prophet and his priest were an intelligence agency of sorts.[118] Apollo is a solar deity, but is also seen as the patron of "music, poetry, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine and science."[119] This multiple association with all the things the Greeks loved best is what made Apollo such a well-loved god. His Hittite roots are more visible at Delos where Apollo's role was slightly more primitive, that of a husbandry and animal deity.[120] While myth places both aspects in the role, it is

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[113] Farnell, *Vol. V.* 396-407.

[114] Rose, *A Handbook,* 157-158.

[115] Seltman, 102-108.

[116] Rose, *A Handbook,* 134-149.

[117] Seltman, 109-125.

[118] Seltman, 109-125.

[119] Graves, 76-82.

[120] Farnell, *Vol. IV.* 113-120.

this Apollo that is most often seen as the brother of Artemis, the moon goddess.

Artemis had her main temple in Ephesus, but she was also worshiped in Delos, Marseilles, and Syracuse.[121] She was more of a rural goddess, being a huntress known as the "Maiden of the Silver Bow" and revered as an animal goddess, more than the other Olympian goddesses. [122] She was also a patron to women during ever stage of life, including playing a sort of angel of death to ease the transition to the underworld for those loyal to her.[123] She is most often connected to the hunt, but she does hold some ties to the sea as well in some cases even sharing temples with Poseidon.[124]

When looking at the Olympic pantheon as a whole, it is easy to see the many similarities amongst the gods and goddess. There are some functions that all of them seem to serve and some of the deities seem superfluous as all of their functions were already served by another god. There are two likely reasons for this. The first is the tendency toward inclusion the Greeks had. Whenever they encountered a new deity, they either added that deity to the pantheon

[121] Seltman, 126-137.

[122] Graves, 83-86.

[123] Seltman, 126-137.

[124] Farnell, *Vol. II.* 425-434.

of their gods or added the attributes of the new god to an already known god. The second is the disunity among the city-states themselves, which despite the many leagues and confederations was by and large not united until long after the gods had been canonized.[125] This disunity causes many of the myths about the gods to have several vastly different versions that change the gods in subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways, changing the way and reason that god or goddess in worshipped.

Cult Practices

Greek cult practices were as diverse as the gods to which they were directed, from as common as supplications to as obscure as ritual castration.[126] Most of the gods were prayed to; however, unlike the popular monotheistic religions of today, those prayers had nothing to do with the confession of sins.[127] They were instead petitions for desires, both private and social. For example, seafarers would pray to Poseidon for a safe voyage,[128] and women would

[125] Hatzfeld, Jean, *History of Ancient Greece*, Revised by André Aymard. Trans. by A.C. Harrison. Ed. by E.H. Goddard. New York: W W Norton & Company, 1966. All(105).

[126] Graves, 71-73.

[127] Bremmer. *Greek Religion*, 38-54.

[128] Farnell, *Vol. IV.* 4-7.

pray to either Artemis or Hera for marriage and childbirth.[129]

Sacrifice was another key element in the cult practices of the Greeks. While many of the Greek gods may possibly have demanded human sacrifices early on, Zeus,[130] Artemis,[131] Poseidon,[132] Ares, and Dionysus[133] among those; that is a practice that was mostly ended very early on.[134] The most common type of sacrifice was animal, but plant sacrifices were occasionally used as well.[135] The type of animal used depended on who and what the sacrifice was to and for. The most common animals used were cattle, sheep, and goats, with pigs, dogs, birds, and fishs also being used on occasion.[136]

Festival and ritual were the other two common types of cult practices. Many of these were based on nature such as the solstices, equinoxes, and the sowing and harvesting of

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[129] Farnell, *Vol. I,* 184-192, and Seltman, 126-137.

[130] Farnell, *Vol. I,* 42.

[131] Farnell, *Vol. II,* 439.

[132] Farnell, *Vol. IV,* 26.

[133] Dennis D. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece.* New York: Routledge, 1991. 136-138.

[134] Hughes, 71-138.

[135] Bremmer. *Greek Religion*, 38-54.

[136] Bremmer. *Greek Religion*, 38-54.

crops.[137] Others had to do with the natural cycle of life, births, marriages, and deaths.[138] Some rituals were political in nature. As a matter of fact, often times "there was no division between the priesthood and the magistracy."[139] In a sense, these rituals were the language the political rulers used to relate to the citizenry.

One of the best examples of a ruler using religious ritual to relate to the people comes from Herodotus in what he calls "the silliest trick which history has to record."[140] Pisistristatus, the tyrant of Athens, in an effort to legitimize his power, dressed up a woman named Phye in the traditional garb of Athena and had her ride with him in to the city where the people received Pisistristatus warmly as their new ruler and worshiped the Athena *doppelganger*.[141] Herodotus criticized the Athenian public for being taken in by this scheme, saying that "the Greeks have never been simpletons" and the Athenians were the "most intelligent" of them all.[142]

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[137] Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion.* Foreword by Arthur Darby Nock. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1940. 22-41.

[138] Bremmer. *Greek Religion*, 38-54.

[139] Seltzer, 178.

[140] Herodotus, 62.

[141] Herodotus, 62-65.

[142] Herodotus, 62-63.

Herodotus is correct in his opinion of surprise that the Athenians could be taken in with such a seemingly obvious political machination. Because of this, many historians avoid discussing the event at all. W.R. Conner takes a different approach to this event calling it an "expression of popular consent"[143] rather than an attempt to fool the citizens of Athens. He claims that Pisistristatus' entrance was a shared drama in which Pisistristatus offers himself to rule as Athena proxy and that the people did not really believe that the woman with him was anything more than a representation of Athena.[144]

Whether the people were really fooled or were just enjoying the festive atmosphere, there are many examples of humans representing gods during festivals or to enforce a point.[145] To the Greeks religion was not just something that could be done once a week or several times a year. It was something the permeated every part of their life and every part of their day. Their whole lives centered on the polis and the god that protected it.

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[143] W.R. Connor, "Tribes, Festivals and Processions; Civic Ceremonial and Political Manipulations in Archaic Greece" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol.107, (1987) 44.

[144] Connor, 42-47.

[145] Connor, 40-50. Seltman 80-82.

Conclusion

This chapter is mainly a look at the deities and their cults individually. While it is important to understand the gods and goddesses of the pantheon individually, it is also important to recognize that almost all of the deities are derived from just two gods. The many goddesses of the Greek city-states are derivatives of the Great Goddess or Mother Earth and the many gods are derived from Lord God or Sky God. Almost all trace back to the same *Dān* and *Dā* worshiped by the cultures of the pre-Greek era.

CHAPTER 4

THE FUNCTION OF THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS IN GREEK SOCIETY

Most religion in ancient Greece was civic in nature, dealing mainly with the social and political relationships of each city's people. There were, however, a few that were more spiritual in nature, those that dealt with the concept of gaining favor in the afterlife. These are commonly called the Mystery Religions or Mystery Cults. There are three main mystery cults of ancient Greek and pre-Greek origin. They are the Eleusian Mysteries, the Dionysian Mysteries, and the Orphic Mysteries. Each cult represents a very different type of religious experience. None of the three are similar to each other or to the previously discussed civic religion, but they are still based on many of the same deities and myths.

The Mysteries

Unlike the many civic cults whose main focus was securing the favor of its patron god in exchange for a service rendered, such as a fruitful harvest, a child, or some other worldly pleasure, the Mystery Religions were focused on securing a pleasant and peaceful afterlife. The Mysteries, however, were not a form of mysticism, meaning

transcendence to a higher plan or deeper understanding. In the case of the Mystery Cults the "mystery" was a hidden secret, an initiation or ritual, that only cult members know and that they are forbidden to tell.[146]

Eleusian Mysteries

The Eleusian Mysteries were the most prominent of the three main cults. This cult was mainly an initiatory cult that had its strongest following near Athens in Attica.[147] Like all Mystery Cults, the Eleusian Mysteries were to be kept secret from any person not initiated into the cult. However, there were at least a few people who violated this. One, a man named Diagoras of Melos,[148] was said to have told the entirety of the mystery in the streets of Athens in such a way as to make it seem "vile and unimportant."[149] Another was a Gnostic writer who Hippolytus called The Naasseni. [150] Aeschylus was said to have shown the

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[146] Burkert, 6-8.

[147] Seltzer, 182.

[148] Marcus Winiarczyk, ed. *Diagorae Melii et Theodori Cyrenaei Reliquiae.* Leipzig : B.G. Teubner, 1981.

[149] Burkert, 91.

[150] St. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*: *Book V.* Trans. by Rev. J. H. Macmahon, Ed. by Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. "Believe" website ed. by Pastor Carl Johnson

people all or a part of a passion-play of sorts that was not to be seen by the uninitiated.[151] These men allow historians a written account other than just archeology and architecture on which to base their research. They provide a contemporary account of the cult and its practices, thus making the Eleusian Mysteries the easiest to study and understand.

Demeter was the chief goddess of the Eleusian Cults. As discussed earlier she was Dāo[152] or Dā Māter, which translates to "Earth-Mother or Corn-Mother."[153] She gives her name as the collective unity of one representation of the triple-goddess, that of Core, Persephone, and Hecate. Separately they are the Maid, Matron, and Crone and together they are the Mother-Goddess Demeter.[154] Some legends concerning Demeter confuse Core and Persephone, or make the two the same deity. It is possible that the abduction of Core/Persephone by Hades, with Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades being the male triple-god, is a representation of

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(accessed on 20 April 2007) http://mb-soft.com/believe/txu/hippoly4.htm.

[151] Aeschylus, *Volume II: Agamemnon, Libations-Bearers, Eumenides, and Fragments.* Trans. by Herbert Weir Smyth. Ed. Hugh Lloyd Jones. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963. 269-371.

[152] Seltman, 149.

[153] Farnell, *Vol. III*. 29, 28-35.

[154] Graves, 92-93.

the subjugation of the feminine to the masculine in both society and mythology.[155]

"Each divinity of a mystery cult has a specific myth to which he or she is intimately bound."[156] For the Eleusian Mysteries the myth to which they were intimately bound is that of the abduction of Core by Hades that was mentioned in the first chapter. To summarize the myth briefly, after Core was taken Demeter, her mother, refused to let anything grow until she was returned. Hades agreed to return her only if she had never eaten the food of the dead. On her way out of the underworld, Core ate something; some myths say it was a persimmon seed. Eventually, a compromise was reached that Core would spend a portion the year with her mother and portion with Hades, as the queen of the underworld. Demeter continued to refuse to allow anything to grow while her daughter was away, thus causing the barren winter season.[157]

Based on the two contemporary accounts and L.R. Farnell's and Carl Ruck's more modern theoretical reproduction, the following is a rough representation of the Greater Mysteries of the Eleusian cult. The Lesser

[155] Graves, 92-93.

[156] Burkert, 73.

[157] Evslin, 22-29.

Mysteries which took place at Athens were a prequel of sorts to the actual initiation ceremony at Eleusis.[158] The Greater Mysteries consisted of three basic parts: they were the "preliminary Sacrifice, the Purification, and the Encounter with the goddesses."[159] The sacrificial animal was a pig. The only requirements, whether male or female and rich or poor, were to be able to meet this sacrifice and pay the priests. It is estimated that it cost on average a month's pay.[160] Once the sacrifice had been made the process of purification began.

The purification that took place on the journey to Eleusis allowed the worshiper to become "safeguarded against evil influences, purified, fasting, and inspired with that religious exaltation that fasting assists."[161] The journey began in Athens and "Every step recalled some aspect of the ancient myth."[162] The procession followed the Sacred Road first across a bridge, where they were insulted and reviled as they crossed, and then the long road on to Eleusis for what Aristophanes describes to be a drunken

[158] Farnell, *Vol. III*, 173-174.

[159] Burkert, 94.

[160] R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, Carl A.P. Ruck. *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978. 35-50.

[161] Farnell, *Vol. III,* 172.

[162] Wasson, 36.

revel and night of celebrating alfresco.[163] Later, maybe a few days maybe just the next day, the group was lead in to the *Telesterion* to celebrate the Mysteries.[164] Those allowed to go inside were called the *Mystae,* meaning those who know or those who see.[165]

The exact time table after the entering the *Telesterion* is impossible to determine. It is known that there was a play or vision of some kind that all shared that was said to have changed those in attendance.[166] There was some ritual performed in which it is likely each *Mystae* worked some type of grain, ate and drank a ritual meal, and was shown a sacred object.[167] The order of events is as uncertain as what exactly each entailed. However, even if the order and ingredients were known today, it is unlikely that it would make much difference in the understanding of the experience. "The gap between pure observation and the experience of those involved in the real proceedings remains unbridgeable."[168]

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[163] Aristophanes, *Comedies of Aristophanes.* Ed. and Trans. Benjamin Bickley Rogers. London: George Bell & Sons, 1902. 48-69.

[164] Wasson, 35-50.

[165] Farnell, *Vol. III*, 172-176

[166] Farnell, *Vol. III*, 172-176.

[167] Burkert, 89-95.

[168] Burkert, 90-91.

It is unknown what was involved in the purification before the walking of the Sacred Road; however, it is certain that fasting was a part. This fasting would have been closer to the Islamic tradition than to the Christian tradition, meaning that those on the fast were allowed to eat at night, but not during the day.[169] The purification also required an element of sexual abstinence and ritual washing. The Lesser Mysteries were also seen as a part of the purification process. Once the congregation was pure, they could begin they walk down the Sacred Road.

L.R. Farnell speculates that the insults thrown at the procession as they cross the bridge are ceremonial and turn evil away from the holy procession. He extrapolates this based on other rituals of the time using insults for this purpose.[170] The basic assumption is based on deceiving the evil spirits in the premise that if the evil spirits think that the procession was already corrupted then they will leave it alone. The procession was said to be lead down the Sacred Road by the god Iacchos and was to have left on the nineteenth of *Boedromion*, which was probably sometime in

[169] Farnell, *Vol. III*, 165-170.

[170] Farnell, *Vol. III*, 170-175.

August or September. It was Iacchos who held the rambunctious party after the exhausting trek to Eleusis.[171]

Once inside the *Telesterion* the order and nature of the events become much harder to discern. It was most likely that the ritual meal came before the play or apparition. Over the past forty years, scholars have suspected that a natural hallucinogen similar to LSD may have been used. [172] One of the main reasons this was suspected was some of the symptoms that accompanied the revelation included: "fear and a trembling in the limbs, vertigo, nausea, and a cold sweat."[173] The method of delivery used to administer the drug was most likely by mouth during the ritual meal, quite possibly in a drink called *Kykeon*.[174]

For many years the possibility of drug use to induce visions at Eleusis was discounted on the basis that at the time the civilization was not advanced enough to refine the drug. However, that is not the case. After much research Albert Hofmann discovered that the people would have easily been able to create a drink that acted much the way LSD

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[171] Farnell, *Vol. III*, 170-175. and Aristophanes, *Comedies*, 48-69

[172] Burkert, 108-109.

[173] Wasson, 37.

[174] Burkert, 108-109.

does. They most probably used a type of ergot, a fungus that grows on barley, mixed into the drink.[175]

The play that took place was supposed to allow the initiate to experience the return of Persephone and her infant son, Iacchos. Then, in a ceremony not so unlike many religious services and artistic productions today that manipulate emotion through music and lighting, the *Mystae* would see the return of Persephone that Demeter so longed for. The viewers would chant, the priest would chant, the music would rise at the right moment, and the light would become darker; then the ghostly form of Persephone carrying her child would appear in a bright light just as a gong sounded and the priest yelled, "The Terrible Queen has given birth to her son, the Terrible One!"[176]

The possibility of the play being part or all of a shared drug induced vision could account for much of why the Eleusian Mysteries are so hard for us to understand today. No matter how much study and observation is put into the matter, without taking the drug and going through the initiation it is impossible to understand what those who did experienced.

[175] Wasson, 25- 34.

[176] Wasson, 35-50.

Dionysian (Bacchic) and Orphic Mysteries

The scarcity of information on the Eleusian Mysteries makes them hard to study, but the dearth of known facts about the other two Mystery Cults of the time is depressing. Most information about the Dionysian and Orphic Mysteries is speculation or extrapolation, based mainly on the known mythology and possible ties to other contemporary cults, such as Eleusis.

Both the Dionysian Mysteries and the Orphic Mysteries hold Dionysus as their head deity.[177] However, he was not originally one of the Olympians. During the fifth century he replaced Hestia.[178] Before his rise to Mt. Olympus, Dionysus was the Thracian god of the vine and ecstasy.[179] His rise in power was representative of wine's rise in popularity, and the spread of his cult follows the same path through Europe, Asia, and Africa as does the cultivation of the vine.[180] He is known as the Horned One,

[177] Thaddeus Zielinski. *The Religion of Ancient Greece.* Trans. by George Rapall Noyes. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1926. Reprint, 1970. 150-156.

[178] Graves, 103-111.

[179] Seltman, 162- 173.

[180] Graves, 103-111.

though the animal he is associated with varies from region to region from bull to goat to stag and others.[181]

Dionysus was also closely linked to Demeter and Persephone. In some myths he was a lover and in others he was a son, of both or of either. For the Mysteries, he was a lover who died and was reborn as his own son.[182] One possible reason for this connection is that Dionysus and Demeter, in addition to being the main deities of the Mystery Religions, were the main deities of agriculture, Demeter of Grains and Dionysus of the Vine.[183]

Dionysus eventually became the god of creative ecstasy, whether art or drama, and several of the most well-known Greek tragedians were followers of Dionysus. In later years, there were many festivals held in honor of Dionysus at which playwrights would present their works in competition. The greatest of these festivals was the Great Dionysia which the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus established.[184]

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[181] Graves, 103-111. and Apollodorus, *Book 1*, 312- 325.

[182] Zielinski, 150-156.

[183] Farnell, *Vol. III*, 146-153.

[184] Zielinski,47-49.

The main source available concerning the Cults of Dionysus is Euripides' play *The Bacchae.*[185] *The Bacchae,* taken from Bacchus, another name of Dionysus, tells the story of Pentheus and Dionysus. Dionysus visits Thebes and was scorned by Pentheus, a ruler there. Dionysus tries to reveal his ways to Pentheus, but the man did not understand and had the stranger imprisoned. Pentheus could not even see that the stranger he was talking to was the god himself. However, the prison could not hold them, and the doors open themselves and the chains release Dionysus and his followers of their own accord. In an attempt to catch and re-imprison the god and his followers, Pentheus agrees to follow the stranger out to the place where the Bacchic orgies are being held. Once there the women who follow Dionysus are overcome with an ecstatic madness and attack and kill Pentheus.[186]

The *Bacchae,* of course, is a dramatization and not a history, but Euripides at least based his play on the actually practices of the mysteries. The Dionysian

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[185] Euripides. *Three Plays of Euripides: Alcestis, Medea, the Bacchae.* Trans. Paul Roche. New York: W W Norton & Company, 1974. 78-126.

[186] Euripides. *Ten Plays.* Trans. Moses Hadad and John Mclean. Intro. Moses Hadas. New York: Bantam Books, 1960. Reprint 1981. 279-312.

Mysteries embody the supernatural in Greek religion.[187] His followers received divine revelation from the god as he strikes them mad with ecstasy, literally taking possession of their bodies while the soul learned secrets that were not of the tangible world. Those in this mad trance were called *bacchants*.[188] This type of celebration was limited to only a few times a year because of its complete dedication chaos;[189] however, in a Nietzschean dichotomy, it was seen as a necessary balance to the normal Apollonian, logical and orderly, approach of the Greeks.[190]

In fact, this dichotomy between orderly Apollo and passionate Dionysus was the basis for the second of Dionysus' mystery cults, the Orphic Mysteries.[191] The Orphic Mysteries take their name from a follower of Dionysus named Orpheus. Orpheus himself is somewhat of an enigma to scholars as it is not known whether he was a real man or a mythological character, or if he was supposed to be human

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[187] Seltzer, 182.

[188] Zielinski, 150-156.

[189] Zielinski, 150-156.

[190] Marcel Detienne. "Forgetting Delphi Between Apollo and Dionysus" *Classical Philology*, Vol. 96, No. 2. (April 2001), 147-158.

[191] Marcel Detienne, *The Writing of Orpheus: Greek Myth in Cultural Contact.* Trans. Janet Lloyd. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. 152-164.

or another manifestation of Dionysus.[192] According to the myth of Orpheus found in the *Bassarai* written by Aeschylus,[193] Orpheus was a devout follower of Dionysus. Every morning he would climb up a mount to watch a sun rise and honor it. He eventually named the sun Apollo. In some versions, this angered Dionysus who saw it as losing a follower to his brother. In his anger, Dionysus sent some of his *bacchants*, a group of women called the *Bassarai*, to kill Orpheus. They fell on him and ripped him into seven pieces. [194] In others, it was just an insane group of women, separate from the *bacchants,* that Orpheus stumbled across while worshipping and those women rip him apart.[195]

This myth parallels the myth of the First Dionysus, a child god who was lured into a trap by some Titans and ripped into seven pieces. The skeletal remains of the pieces were buried, but the heart was saved intact and with it Zeus was able to insure that a Second Dionysus was born. After the Titans killed and consumed Dionysus, Zeus struck them dead and out of their ashes came man, according to an

[192] Guthrie, W.K.C. *Orpheus and Greek Religion.* Foreword by Larry J. Alderink. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. xiii-xxxiii.

[193] Aeschylus, *Volume II.* 385-387.

[194] Detienne, *The Writing,* 152-164.

[195] Ovid, *Ovid: Volume II.* Trans. by Dryden, Pope, Congreve, Addison and others. London: A.J. Valpy, 1833. 1-6.

alternate theogony of Orphic origin.[196] Orpheus' death mirrors that of Dionysus and causes some confusion as to whether Orpheus was god or man.

The Apollonian influence had a calming effect on this cult. The Dionysian Mysteries were wild and chaotic, concerned with passion and experience; while the Orphic mysteries were philosophic, focusing on purity and enlightenment.[197] The Orphics believed in the immortality of the soul and transmigration and sought salvation through enlightenment.[198] They were separatist from the mainstream Greeks, seeking to re-unite with 'the One', a force of unity, called the Night, that came "before"; before the creation of man, apparently, before even the creation of the gods when everything was one.[199]

As opposed to the other types of mystery religion looked at before, the Eleusian Mysteries with their ritual initiation and the wild debauchery of the Bacchic Mysteries, the Orphic mysteries have no initiation or festival. They are instead a system, a way of life.[200] There were three levels or types to the Orphic life: the

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[196] Detienne, *The Writing,* 152-164.

[197] Zielinski, 150-156.

[198] Zielinski, 150-156, and Burkert, *Mystery Cults,* 86-87.

[199] Detienne, *The Writing,* 152-164.

[200] Seltzer, 182-189.

tradition, the writings and voice, and the practice. The traditional aspect seems to be little more than iconography, while the writings and voice are philosophy. [201] The Orphic writings include "theologies, cosmogonies, and heterodox anthropogonies."[202] The practice is the way an Orphic was to live; they were to abstain from eating meat and only offer the gods sacrifices of cakes and fruit.[203] The practice comes directly from the myth of the death of the First Dionysus. Humans were created out of the ashes of the Titans who slaughtered and cannibalized the child-god. This made humans vicariously responsible for the death of the deity. It also gave them hope, for within the Titans' remains from whence they were created was also a remnant of the child-god. According to the Orphics, in order to rejoin the unity of the Night, humans must shed everything tying them to Titans.[204]

Another point of divergence between Dionysus' two followings is that the *bacchants* are most often referred to as women; Bacchus himself is, in this sense, always pictured with his *maenads*.[205] Whereas the most well-known

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[201] Detienne, *The Writing,* 152-164.

[202] Seltzer, 182-189.

[203] Detienne, *The Writing,* 152-164.

[204] Seltzer, 182-189, and Detienne, *The Writing,* 152-164.

[205]Carpenter, 37-38, 52.

Orphics are men; in fact, Orphism is very misogynistic. This is most likely due to the way in which Orpheus was said to have died, being ripped apart by women.[206]

Conclusion

As different as the mysteries were from the established civic religion of ancient Greece, they still remained complementary. Vernant insists that "Neither in belief nor in practices did the mysteries contradict the civic religion. Instead, they complement it by adding a new dimension suited to satisfying needs that the civic religion could not fulfill."[207] The revelation of the divine in the form of Persephone returning from the underworld, the Bacchic ecstasy inspired by Dionysus, or the struggle to over come the inner Titan and rejoin the Night are all attempts to satisfy the inner human desire to belong to a power greater than oneself and to insure that power gives you a pleasant and peaceful afterlife.

The mysteries were always on the fringe of Greek society, some more so than others, but those who followed the mysteries constituted a large minority. The inclusive nature of the Greeks allowed them, the mysteries, to

[206] Detienne, *The Writing,* 152-164.

[207] Seltzer, 182.

flourish within the established system. It was the mysteries that introduced concepts such as salvation, the immortality of the soul, and transmigration of the soul into Greek society. The Mystery Religions form a link between the inclusive pantheon of the Greeks and the more modern exclusive religions of today. However, when faced with the persecution that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have faced in the past the "mysteries could not go underground because they lacked any organization. They were not self-sufficient sects; they were intimately bound to the social system of antiquity that was to pass away."[208]

[208] Burkert, 53.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Chapter two covered the problems with studying mythology. It is important to note that just because a myth has been updated or changed in someway from the original version does not mean that it is not important. That updated version, such as many of the plays from the Greek playwrights, can be useful as a commentary on the author's time. Therefore, even changed myths can be an important resource.

The second chapter also covered what I thought were the eight functions of mythology. For each function I included a myth that I felt closely corresponded to each function. Looking at each of the myths used, however, it is easy to see the interconnection that runs through Greek mythology. Many of the major characters from the myths I used were also figures in one of the other myths.

The third chapter looked at the origins of ten of the twelve main gods in the Greek pantheon, the Olympians. Considering that many of these gods and goddesses trace back to *Dān* and *Dā,* and with the Greek tendency to either add every new god they came across into their pantheon or add that god's attributes to a preexisting god, it is little wonder that so many of the Greek deities seem redundant. The second chapter also looked at the Greek

cults as a whole, discussing the civic nature and some of the more common or more well-known cult practices.

The fourth chapter was concerned with the mystery cults of the Greek city-states. The mysteries were in many ways a separate religion, while at the same time being intimately bound to the deities and cultures of the ancient Greeks. Vernant insists that "Neither in belief nor in practices did the mysteries contradict the civic religion. Instead, they complement it by adding a new dimension suited to satisfying needs that the civic religion could not fulfill."[209] Each of the three discussed represents a different form of spiritual expression, and a different type of religious experience for its followers.

Overall, it is impossible to study either Greek religion or Greek mythology without an understanding of the other. All Greek religion, whether civic or mystery, is bound to Greek mythology, and mythology is likewise bound to religion. The two cannot be understood independently of each other. In this paper I sought to offer a basic understanding of Greek mythology and religion, how they are interwoven, and the roles they played in ancient Greek society.

[209] Seltzer, 182.

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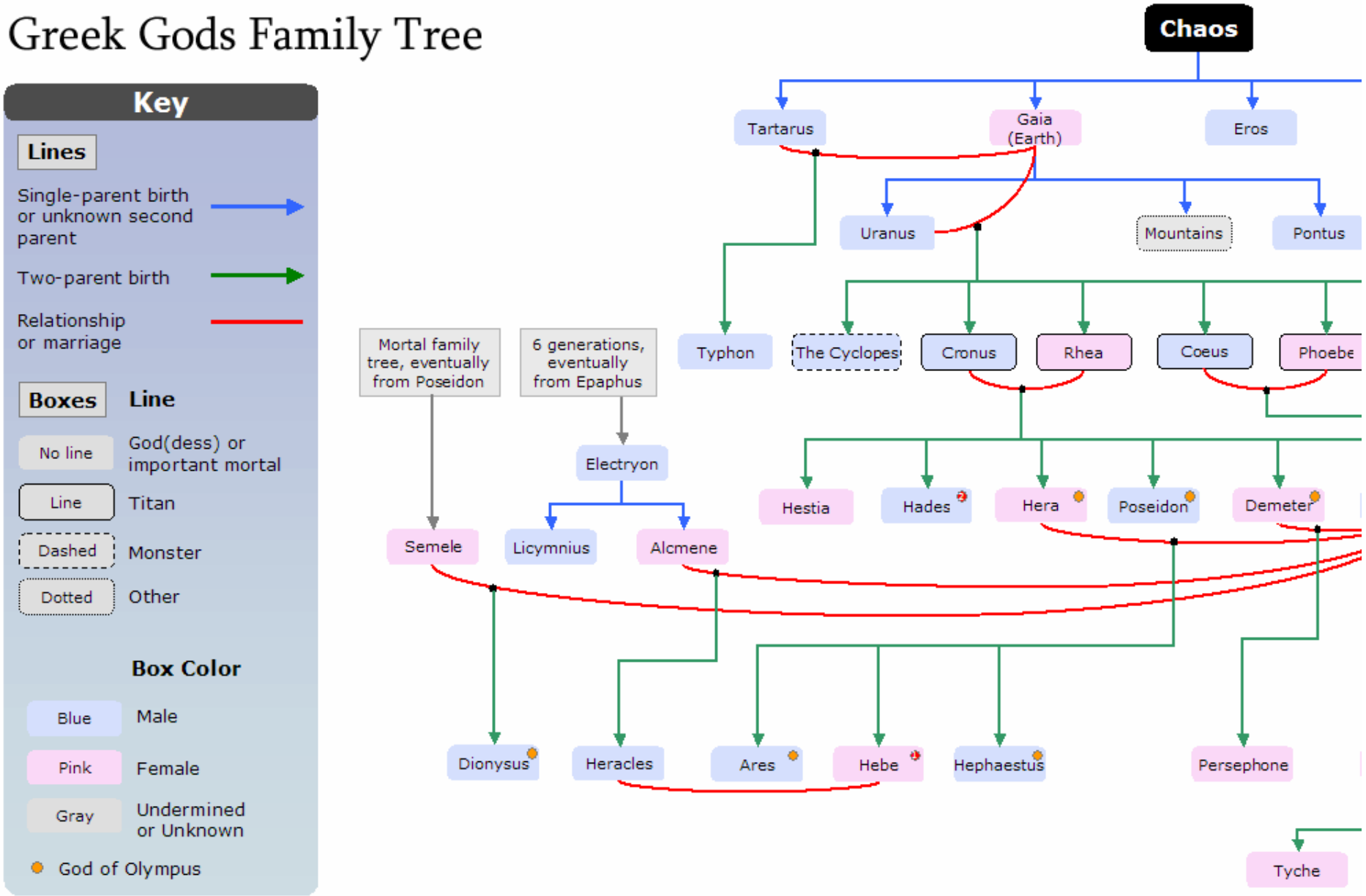
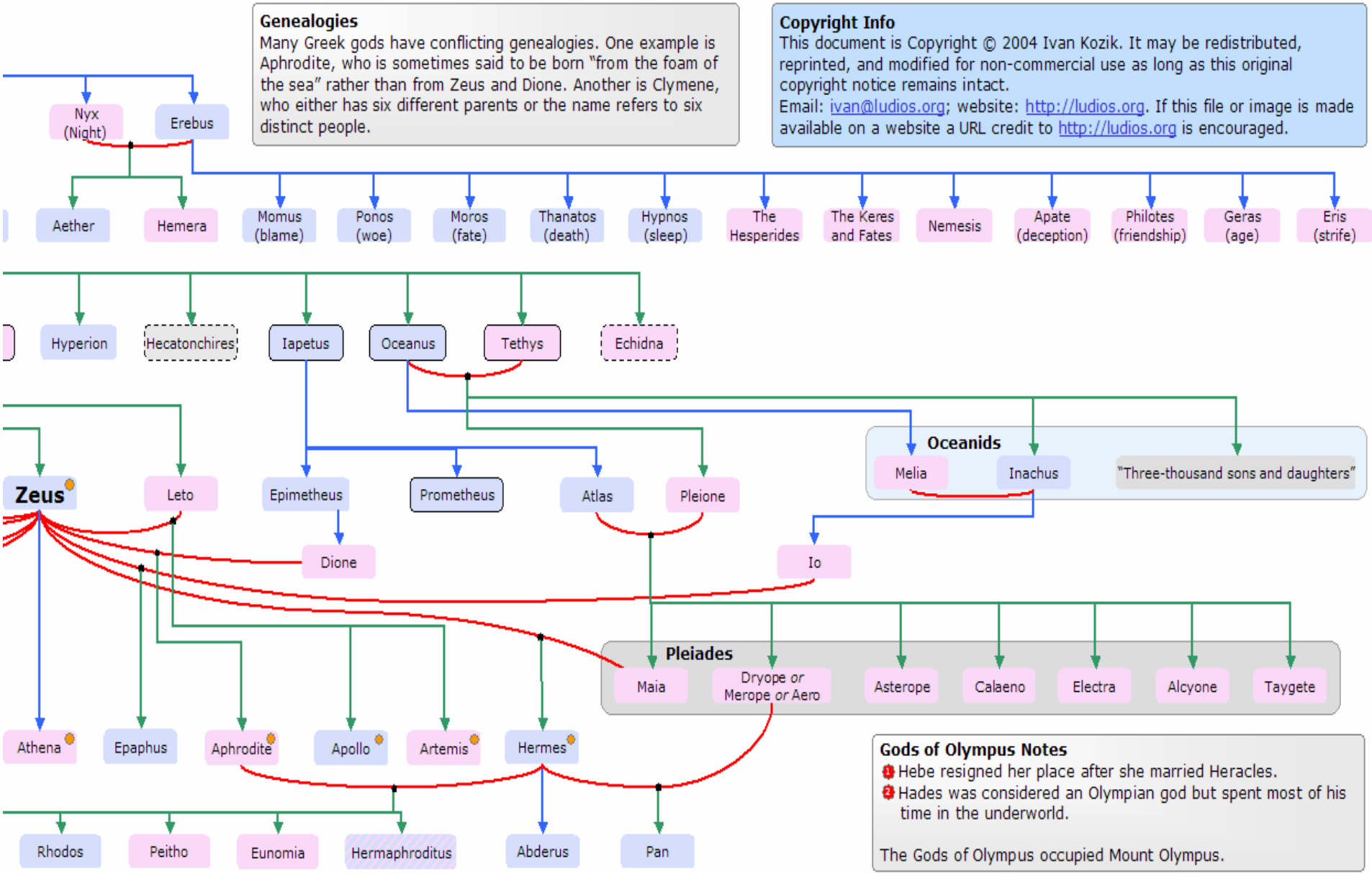
APPENDIX
Greek Gods Family Tree



APPENDIX
Greek Gods Family Tree (cont.)



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