

# DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

*Charlene Spretnak, M.A.*

From *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths*

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**F**or thousands of years before the classical myths were recorded by Hesiod and Homer, the Goddess was the focus of religion and culture. Here, Charlene Spretnak re-creates the original, goddess-centered myths and illuminates the contemporary emergence of a spirituality based on our embeddedness in nature. The author begins by explaining the genesis of this project.

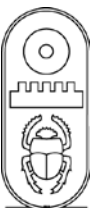
“The seeds for this book were planted in the early seventies when I began reading of certain archaeological and anthropological discoveries. In the summer of 1975, I attended a weekend gathering on Women and Mythology conducted by Hallie Iglehart. She showed slides of ancient Goddess statues and artifacts from the Mediterranean area and the Near East, and she talked about the numerous clues that indicate an earlier stratum of matrifocal mythology and culture preceded the patriarchal order we call ‘ancient civilization.’ I knew of the evidence from my reading, but Hallie’s slides and art books brought the subject to life. The images stayed with me. The rest of the weekend was spent on explorations into our personal mythology, on recognizing recurring symbols and events, and on seeing in our lives the ancient mythic themes of transformation and rebirth.

“The impetus for the book came some three months later when I was riding in our car with my daughter, Lissa Merkel. Her eye

was caught by the logo of an oil corporation and she cried, ‘Look, Mama, a horse with wings!’ She became very excited about the idea of a flying horse. I said, ‘Yes, his name is Pegasus and he’s part of a myth. Myths are very, very old stories. Maybe we can find a book of myths in the library and I’ll read them to you.’ Then I drove on farther and thought aloud, ‘...but the oldest ones have been changed.’ A trip to the public library confirmed what I suspected from my readings in archaeology and anthropology: There were no collections of myths other than engaging editions of Hesiod’s and Homer’s revisionist works. I went home and took my high school edition of Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology* from the shelf. I leafed through it and read that ‘Zeus had punished men by giving them women’; that Pandora was ‘that dangerous thing, a woman’; and that from Pandora ‘comes the race of women, who are evil to men, with a nature to do evil.’ In the interest of mental health and a positive self-concept, this did not seem the best way to introduce an impressionable, four-year-old girl to the riches of mythology. (Later, while researching the pre-Olympian myths, I discovered that my daughter’s name, Lissa, is derived from the Greek *Melissa*, a title for the priestesses of Demeter.)”

Demeter is the Grain-Mother, the giver of crops. Her origins are Cretan, and she has been strongly connected to Gaia<sup>1</sup> and

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to Isis.<sup>2</sup> Demeter's daughter, Persephone, or Kore, is the Grain-Maiden, who embodies the new crop. Every autumn the women of early Greece observed a three-day, agricultural fertility ritual, the *Thesmophoria*, in honor of Demeter. The three days were called the *Kathodos* and *Anodos* (Down-going and Uprising), the *Nesteia* (Fasting), and the *Kalligeneia* (Fair-Born or Fair Birth).<sup>3</sup> The *Thesmophoria*, the *Arrephoria*, the *Skirphoria*, the *Stenia*, and the *Haloa* were rites practiced by women only and were of extremely early origin. They were preserved "in pristine purity down to the late days and were left almost uncontaminated by Olympian usage"; they emerged later in the most widely influential of all Greek rituals, the Eleusinian Mysteries.<sup>4</sup> Isocrates wrote that Demeter brought to Attica "twofold gifts": "crops" and the "Rite of Initiation"; "those who partake of the rite have fairer hopes concerning the end of life."<sup>5</sup>

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter, assigned to the seventh century B.C., is a story written to explain the Eleusinian Mysteries, which honored Demeter.<sup>6</sup> The tale became famous as "The Rape of Persephone," who was carried off to the underworld and forced to become the bride of Hades. However, prior to the Olympian version of the myth at a rather late date, there was no mention of rape in the ancient cult of Demeter and her daughter, nor was there any rape in the two traditions antecedent to Demeter's mythology.

Archaeology has supported<sup>7</sup> what Diodorus wrote concerning the flow of Egyptian culture into Greece via Crete: "the whole mythology of Hades" was brought from Egypt into Greece and the mysteries of Isis are just like those of Demeter, "the names only being changed."<sup>8</sup> Isis was Queen of the Underworld, sister of Osiris, and passed freely to and from the netherworld. Demeter's other antecedent was Gaia,<sup>9</sup> the ancient Earth-Mother who had power



Alessandro and Francesco Sanguinetti, *Ceres (Demeter) with Torch and Corn Spike*, 1848-1859, Neues Palais, Potsdam, Germany. Photo © 2008 by Suse.

over the underworld because the earth is the abode of the dead.<sup>10</sup> At certain sites in Greece, Demeter was worshipped as "Demeter Chthonia,"<sup>11</sup> and in Athens the dead were called *Demetreioi*, "Demeter's People"; not only did she bring all things to life, but when they died, she received them back into her bosom.<sup>12</sup> That the maiden form (Kore) of the Goddess would share the functions of the mature form (Demeter), as giver of crops on the earth and ruler of the underworld, is a natural extension. The early Greeks often conceived of their Goddesses in maiden and mature form simultaneously; later the maiden was called "daughter."<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the connections with Isis and Gaia, another theory holds that Persephone (also called *Phesehatta*) was a very old Goddess of the underworld indigenous to Attica, who was assimilated by the first wave of invaders from the north; the myth of the abduction is believed to be an artificial link that merged Persephone with Demeter's daughter, Kore.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the impulse behind portraying Persephone as a rape victim, evidence indicates that this twist to the story was added after the societal shift from matrifocal to patriarchal, and that it was not part of the original mythology. In fact, it is likely that the story of the rape of the Goddess is a historical reference to the

invasion of the northern Zeus-worshippers, just as is the story of the stormy marriage of Hera, the native queen who will not yield to the conqueror Zeus.

Although the exact delineation of the pre-Olympian version of the myth of Demeter and Persephone has been lost, the following version seeks to approximate the original by employing the surviving clues and evidence. This extremely ancient and widely revered sacred story of mother and daughter long predates the Judeo-Christian deification of father and son.

### The Myth of Demeter and Persephone

There once was no winter. Leaves and vines, flowers and grass grew into fullness and faded into decay, then began again in unceasing rhythms. Men joined with other men of their mother's clan and foraged in the evergreen woods for game. Women with their children or grandchildren toddling behind explored the thick growth of plants encircling their homes.

They learned eventually which bore fruits that sated hunger, which bore leaves and roots that chased illness and pain, and which worked magic on the eye, mouth, and head.

The Goddess Demeter watched fondly as the mortals learned more and more about Her plants. Seeing that their lives were difficult and their food supply sporadic, She was moved to give them the gift of wheat. She showed them how to plant the seed, cultivate, and finally harvest the wheat and grind it. Always the mortals entrusted the essential process of planting food to the women, in the hope that their fecundity of womb might be transferred to the fields they touched.

Demeter had a fair-born Daughter, Persephone, who watched over the crops with Her Mother. Persephone was drawn especially to the new sprouts of wheat that pushed their way through the soil in Her

favorite shade of tender green. She loved to walk among the young plants, beckoning them upward and stroking the weaker shoots.

Later, when the plants approached maturity, Persephone would leave their care to Her Mother and wander over the hills, gathering narcissus, hyacinth, and garlands of myrtle for Demeter's hair. Persephone Herself favored the bold red poppies that sprang up among the wheat. It was not unusual to see Demeter and Persephone decked with flowers dancing together through open fields and gently sloping valleys. When Demeter felt especially fine, tiny shoots of barley or oats would spring up in the footprints She left.

One day They were sitting on the slope of a high hill looking out in many directions over Demeter's fields of grain. Persephone lay on Her back while Her Mother stroked Her long hair idly.

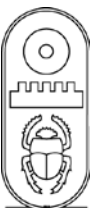
"Mother, sometimes in my wanderings I have met the spirits of the dead hovering around their earthly homes and sometimes the mortals, too, can see them in the dark of the moon by the light of their fires and torches."

"There are those spirits who drift about restlessly, but they mean no harm."

"I spoke to them, Mother. They seem confused and many do not even understand their own state. Is there no one in the netherworld who receives the newly dead?"



Karoly Brocky, *Ceres and Triptolemos*, ca. 1853.





Benno Elkan, *Persephone*. Grave statue, Ostfriedhof Cemetery, Munich, nineteenth century. Photo by Mathias Bigge.

Demeter sighed and answered softly, “It is I who has domain over the underworld. From beneath the surface of the earth I draw forth the crops and the wild plants. And in pits beneath the surface of the earth I have instructed the mortals to store My seed from harvest until sowing, in order that contact with the spirits of My underworld will fertilize the seed. Yes, I know very well the realm of the dead, but My most important work is here. I must feed the living.”

Persephone rolled over and thought about the ghostly spirits She had seen, about their faces drawn with pain and bewilderment.

“The dead need us, Mother. I will go to them.”

Demeter abruptly sat upright as a chill passed through Her and rustled the grass around Them. She was speechless for a moment, but then hurriedly began recounting all the pleasures they enjoyed in Their world of sunshine, warmth, and fragrant flowers. She told Her Daughter of the dark gloom of the underworld and begged Her to reconsider.

Persephone sat up and hugged Her Mother and rocked Her with silent tears. For a long while They held each other, radiating rainbow auras of love and protection. Yet Persephone’s response was unchanged.

They stood and walked in silence down the slope toward the fields. Finally They

stopped, surrounded by Demeter’s grain, and shared weary smiles.

“Very well. You are loving and giving and We cannot give only to Ourselves. I understand why You must go. Still, You are My Daughter and for every day that You remain in the underworld, I will mourn Your absence.”

Persephone gathered three poppies and three sheaves of wheat. Then Demeter led Her to a long, deep chasm and produced a torch for Her to carry. She stood and watched Her Daughter go down farther and farther into the cleft in the earth.

In the crook of Her arm Persephone held Her Mother’s grain close to Her breast, while Her other arm held the torch aloft. She was startled by the chill as She descended, but She was not afraid. Deeper and deeper into the darkness She continued, picking Her way slowly along the rocky path. For many hours She was surrounded only by silence. Gradually She became aware of a low moaning sound. It grew in intensity until She rounded a corner and entered an enormous cavern, where thousands of spirits of the dead milled about aimlessly, hugging themselves, shaking their heads, and moaning in despair.

Persephone moved through the forms to a large, flat rock and ascended. She produced a stand for Her torch, a vase for Demeter’s grain, and a large shallow bowl piled with pomegranate seeds, the food of the dead. As She stood before them, Her aura increased in brightness and in warmth.

“I am Persephone and I have come to be your Queen. Each of you has left your earthly body and now resides in the realm of the dead. If you come to Me, I will initiate you into your new world.”

She beckoned those nearest to step up onto the rock and enter Her aura. As each spirit crossed before Her, Persephone embraced the form and then stepped back and gazed into the eyes. She reached for a

few of the pomegranate seeds, squeezing them between Her fingers. She painted the forehead with a broad swatch of the red juice and slowly pronounced:

“You have waxed into the fullness of life and waned into darkness; may you be renewed in tranquility and wisdom.”

For months Persephone received and renewed the dead without ever resting or even growing weary. All the while Her Mother remained disconsolate. Demeter roamed the earth hoping to find Her Daughter emerging from one of the secret clefts. In Her sorrow She withdrew Her power from the crops, the trees, the plants. She forbade any new growth to blanket the earth. The mortals planted their seed, but the fields remained barren. Demeter was consumed with loneliness and finally settled on a bare hillside to gaze out at nothing from sunken eyes. For days and nights, weeks and months She sat waiting.

One morning a ring of purple crocus quietly pushed its way through the soil and surrounded Demeter. She looked with surprise at the new arrivals from below and thought what a shame it was that She was too weakened to feel rage at Her injunction being broken. Then she leaned forward and heard them whisper in the warm breeze, “Persephone returns! Persephone returns!”

Demeter leapt to Her feet and ran down the hill through the fields into the forests. She waved Her arms and cried, “Persephone returns!” Everywhere Her energy was stirring, pushing, bursting forth into tender greenery and pale young petals. Animals shed old fur and rolled in the fresh, clean grass while birds sang out, “Persephone returns! Persephone returns!”

When Persephone ascended from a dark chasm, there was Demeter with a cape of white crocus for Her Daughter. They ran to each other and hugged and cried and laughed and hugged and danced and danced and danced. The mortals saw everywhere the

miracles of Demeter’s bliss and rejoiced in the new life of spring. Each winter they join Demeter in waiting through the bleak season of Her Daughter’s absence. Each spring they are renewed by the signs of Persephone’s return.



Patricia Reis, *Drawing from Minoan and Mycenaean Gold Seal Ring*, ca. 1500 BCE. © 1984, Beacon Press.

## ENDNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Lewis R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 28, 48-50.
- <sup>2</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, *The Religion of Ancient Greece* (London: Archibald Constable & Co. Ltd., 1905), 51-52.
- <sup>3</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 120-131; also R.F. Willetts, *Cretan Cults and Festivals*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 152.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 120.
- <sup>5</sup> Harrison, *Religion of Ancient Greece*, 51.
- <sup>6</sup> E.O. James, *The Cult of the Mother Goddess: An Archaeological and Documentary Study* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1959), 153.
- <sup>7</sup> Sir Arthur Evans, *The Earlier Religion of Greece in the Light of Cretan Discoveries* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1931), 8.
- <sup>8</sup> Harrison, *Religion of Ancient Greece*, 52.
- <sup>9</sup> Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, 28, 48-50.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-50.
- <sup>12</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, *Myths of Greece and Rome*, (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1927), 73.
- <sup>13</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 263, 274.
- <sup>14</sup> Gunther Zuntz, *Persephone: Three Essays on Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 75-77.

