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Kalligeneia: Fertility and Feminine Focus on an Athenian Bell Krater

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My initial thoughts about this research paper for Professor Salowey's Myth and Ancient Art class were cloudy, to say the least. Our assignment was to discuss a pictorial representation of an ancient myth, to describe in detail the narrative presentation of the mythological story, and to focus on our interpretation of the work. We had already written two shorter papers for this class. The first required the use of ancient literary sources to reconstruct a particular myth. The second, to write a thorough description of an ancient work of art, demonstrating our comprehension of what we had learned during the semester. This next paper would allow us to combine these skills for use in interpretation.

Without a clear idea of where it would lead, I decided to explore images of Demeter, the Olympian goddess of agriculture and grain. My initial search was assisted by the course guide found on the library's website, created by librarian, Joan Ruelle and Professor Salowey. Ms. Ruelle had visited our class to introduce us to the library's printed reference materials on the ancient world, such as the Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae, as well as to demonstrate how to use more modern sources, such as databases and journal articles available on the internet. Through the course guide, I was able to find an image which intrigued me, a Greek vase from the fifth-century BCE, showing the return of Persephone from the underworld, to her waiting mother, Demeter.

Once I had chosen this work of art, my true research began. I found the library's copy of Helene P. Foley's translation and commentary on The Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the myth's primary ancient source, as well as Finding Persephone: Women's Rituals in the Ancient Mediterranean, a collection of essays edited by Maryline Parca and Angeliki Tzanetou. These two books pointed me to scholarly articles written about the vase, which I was able to access quickly and easily through the JSTOR database. The more I researched, the more curious I became about every aspect of the project. Through the links available to me on the course guide, and the books and reference materials in the library, I was able to answer my own questions about the vase's painter, the myths of Demeter and Persephone, the significance of a figure's posture, dress, gestures, and attributes, ceremonial practices in ancient Greece, and scholars' differing opinions about all of these. I began to realize I had my own opinions about the depiction of the myth on this vase, and the sources available to me gave me the evidence I needed to successfully argue my thesis.

When I turned in my paper, I wondered if I had gone too far out on a limb in proposing a unique interpretation of an ancient work of art. Relief and validation came when Professor Salowey agreed with the connections I had made. Without any previous study of mythology or ancient art, I would have been lost without the tools available through our library. The accessibility of these resources allows for creativity and inspiration to flourish in research, where one idea can spark another, and the path to new ideas is clear.

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A central element of an ancient Greek symposium or religious ceremony was the krater, a wide-mouthed, two-handled bowl, in which wine was mixed with water before serving. The images added by painters to these vessels would often have resonated with the purpose of the occasion. The Persephone Painter earned his moniker from a fifth century red-figure bell krater portraying the return of Persephone from the underworld (Fig. 1). On the front of the vessel, Hermes stands by her, while Torch-bearing Hekate leads the way to Demeter, who waits to receive her daughter. The Persephone Painter draws attention to the tension of the moment right before the reunion, and the intimacy among the three goddesses, emphasized by their postures and attention to one another. Because of this feminine focus, it's possible that this krater was for use at, or an allusion to, the festival of *Thesmophoria*, a rite celebrating Demeter and Persephone, in which women were the sole participants.

The scene on the front of the krater differs from the version of the myth considered to be its primary source, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter.* In the *Hymn*, Persephone is retrieved from the underworld by Hermes, at the direction of Zeus (335). After Hades ensures her return by feeding her a pomegranate seed, he lends Hermes his chariot to carry her (371-76). Hekate did not light the way, but assisted

Demeter earlier in her search for her daughter (52-3). After their reunion, Hekate reappeared and "often caressed the daughter of holy Demeter, from that time this lady served her as chief attendant," (439-40). Instead of portraying the myth as it was written in the *Hymn*, the artist chose to eliminate the chariot, and add Hekate to the moment of Persephone's return. Here, we see Persephone emerging from beneath the ground, her hand raised in surprise as she sees her mother[1]. Hekate is shown on the right, with a torch in each hand. She is clearly moving toward Demeter, who is to the right, but her body is turned to the left and she looks lovingly at Persephone. Demeter stands regally, holding her scepter in her right hand, and makes eye contact with her daughter. This depiction is in contrast to the *Hymn's* account of Demeter's reaction, "With one look she darted like a maenad down a mountain shaded with woods," (385). Instead, the Persephone Painter shows the instant before this action, focusing on the anticipation of the mother and daughter, heightening the tension. In doing this, the artist makes the emotions of the goddesses the subject of the painting, rather than the actions of the characters involved. We see a mother and a friend, helping their lost loved one return, with the only male figure present, standing passively in the background.

Hermes, the one male figure in the scene, does not appear involved in the events taking place. We know from the *Hymn* that he drove Hades' chariot from the underworld, but here, he faces the front, expressionless, standing behind Persephone as she rises from the ground. He is recognizable by his attributes of a herald's staff

[1] Richter, Gisela M. A., "An Athenian Vase with the Return of Persephone," The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, Vol. 26, No. 10 (Oct., 1931): 245-248, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3256119

and winged hat, but also inscriptions confirm his and the goddess' identities. His detachment from the women is notable, in that it further highlights their intimacy with each other. The female figures are each present out of love and compassion, while Hermes was fulfilling orders from Zeus. The king of the gods did so, not out of concern for Persephone, his daughter, but because her mother's wrath threatened to destroy humankind.

Demeter did not wipe out humanity, but went on to give the gift of agriculture to the world, thus allowing the birth of civilization. Each fall, the time of planting in Greece, Persephone would emerge from the underworld and return to her mother. Demeter's joy would ensure the seeds would be productive and provide enough food for the coming year. After the harvest, Persephone would go back to her husband beneath the ground and rule the underworld as queen for three months. She is like a plant, dormant underground until the arrival of spring. Helene P. Foley notes this in her commentary on the *Hymn to Demeter*, "Demeter calls Persephone a *thalos* or shoot (66)…and may here reinforce the association of Persephone with the plant world."[2]

Because Demeter and Persephone's happiness was apparently connected to the nourishment of the human race, the ancient Greeks were eager to keep them content. The goddesses were worshiped in cults throughout many centuries and cultures which predated Greece, and were especially important to the festival of *Thesmophoria*

[2] Foley, Helene P., *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretative Essays*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 40.

and the Eleusinian Mysteries. Herodotus alluded to their secretive aspects and possible foreign origins in *The Histories,*

> "On this lake they enact by night the story of the god's sufferings, a rite which the Egyptians call the Mysteries. I could say more about this, for I know the truth, but let me preserve a discreet silence. Let me preserve a discreet silence, too, concerning that rite of Demeter which the Greeks call *Thesmophoria*, except as much of it as I am not forbidden to mention. The daughters of Danaus were those who brought this rite out of Egypt and taught it to the Pelasgian women…" (*Herodotus* 2, 171, 1-3).

Both the *Thesmophoria* and the Eleusinian Mysteries sought, in part, to bring favor from the goddesses to ensure fertility and bountiful harvests, and both required that their participants keep secret the rites performed. However, the *Thesmophoria* involved only women, while the Eleusinian Mysteries allowed either sex to become an initiate. During the three-day festival, women performed rites evoking key moments from the myth, culminating in a feast on the final day, where the Persephone Painter's krater would have been an appropriate vessel for their wine.

In Athens, each of the three days of the *Thesmophoria* had distinct rituals, corresponding to different phases of the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The three goddesses shown on the Persephone Painter's krater compliment the meaning of each day of the festival. Day one was called the *Anodos,* or "way up", in which women would process up to the festival site.[3] The presence of Hekate on the krater, leading the way out of the underworld, may symbolize this. The second day of the festival

[3] Stehle, Eva, "*Thesmophoria* and Eleusinian Mysteries: The Fascination of Women's Secret Ritual," in *Finding Persephone: Women's Rituals in the Ancient Mediterranean,* edited by Maryline Parca and Angeliki Tzanetou, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007), 167-68.

was called *Nesteia*, or "fasting". On this day, the women ate nothing, and sat on the ground, mimicking the mourning Demeter. Although the krater scene shows a standing Demeter, her depiction may represent this day, as she appears stoic, revealing none of the joy which is about to occur upon her daughter's return. The final day of the festival is the *Kalligeneia,* "beautiful birth", when the women would feast and celebrate. The portrayal of Persephone's emergence from a hole in the ground certainly evokes the image of birth. In addition to this connection, the *Kalligeneia* was the day when the women would descend into pits which held the remains of sacrificed piglets from earlier in the year. They would bring up the remains and humus, mixing it with the seeds to be planted that fall, believing it would aid in the crops' fertility[4]. Again, the krater's image of a woman surfacing from the ground may reflect this moment from the festival.

The above is a simplified explanation of the events of the *Thesmophoria*, as there were many more rituals performed during its three days. However, the division of the festival's days into three parts from the Demeter and Persephone myth harmonizes with the depictions of the three goddesses on the krater. Another interpretation of the scene by Charles M. Edwards suggests that each goddess represents a different age of woman. "Persephone is represented as a bride, richly crowned and draped, a young woman at the height of her beauty and sexuality. Hekate is characterized as a younger girl by her open peplos. Demeter is a matron,

[4] Stehle, *Finding Persephone,* 169.

the archetypal mother."[5] This view of the goddesses does not contradict the idea of their connection to the *Thesmophoria*, but corresponds with the significance of a religious festival exclusively for women, celebrating fertility and motherhood.

The reverse side of the krater contains another view of the practice of religion in ancient Greece, showing three unknown figures in a libation scene (Fig. 2). A bearded man on the left holds out a phiale and faces a woman wearing a sakkos and holding an oinochoe. Beside her is another bearded man, who holds a spear like a staff and faces the first male figure on the left. It is not apparent that a specific story is being told here, but the inclusion of a ceremonial scene on this krater is fitting, given the nature of the events rendered on the front.

There is no way to know if this bell krater would have been used by women participating in the *Thesmophoria* of classical-era Greece. We can only speculate about its purpose beyond its practical use as a vessel for wine. The cults of Demeter and Persephone had many varieties and rituals, but the *Thesmophoria* was the one which involved only women enacting parts of the myth over three days, at the same time of year which Persephone was to have returned to her mother. The artist must have felt there was significance to depicting the three goddesses together. Their attention to each other, to the exclusion of the sole male figure present, gives a possible clue as to the intended setting for this piece, and hints at the secrecy of the rites of women.

[5] Edwards, Charles M., "The Running Maiden from Eleusis and the Early Classical Image of Hekate", *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (July, 1986), 307-318, http://www.jstor.org/stable/505689.

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Figure 1. Image source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art
http://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/gr/web-large/GR180.jpg

Figure 2. Image source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art
http://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/gr/web-large/GR181.jpg