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## **THE DOUBLE TRADITION OF APHRODITE'S BIRTH AND HER SEMITIC ORIGINS**

In contrast to modern religion, there was no “church” or religious dogma in the ancient world. No congress of Bishops met to decide what was acceptable doctrine and what was, by process of elimination, heresy. Matters of faith could be exceedingly complex and variable. The gods evolved over time and from place to place, dividing and diverging, so that many simultaneous beliefs were possible.

Most students of Greek mythology are familiar with the “pairing” of certain gods and goddesses in the pantheon. Zeus is associated with his wife Hera, and Apollo with his sister Artemis, for example. It is believed that this reflects the introduction of male Sky Gods by Indo-European invaders, which were allowed to co-exist with the Earth-Mother Goddesses already worshipped by indigenous populations. Some scholars believe that Posiedon and Zeus are manifestations of the same Indo-European deity brought to the Greek mainland by successive waves of immigrants. Other aspects of mythological duality include the presence of apparently contrasting attributes within the same deity, and the allocation of opposing aspects of the same activity to more than one God. The example most often cited is Athena, Goddess of Wisdom. While she was patroness of culture and learning, she was always depicted in armor and championed the “positive” aspects of war such as courage and loyalty. The grouping of these attributes would seem strange to us today. Most Classics students will immediately point out that it is Ares who was recognized as the God of War. While he and Athena shared patronage for war, Ares represented its “negative” aspects, carnage and brutality. What is lesser known is that Aphrodite was also shown wearing armor in many Greek cities, and was descended from Near Eastern goddesses of war as well as fertility. Even in her familiar role of “Goddess of Love” in Athens in the classical period, it was said that there were two goddesses called Aphrodite. This assumption is based on the existence of two traditions of her birth, and the reference in Classical sources to two goddesses with very different personalities — Aphrodite Ourania and Aphrodite Pandemos.

The story of the birth of Aphrodite Ourania, as told by the poet Hesiod, dates back to the overthrow of Uranus by his son Kronos.

Hesiod says that Kronos castrated Uranus with a sickle while he was mating with Gaea, the Earth Mother, throwing the genitals into the sea. White foam grew around the floating flesh, from which a goddess was formed. She drifted past Cythera, stepping ashore on Cyprus ( 8-9 [188-206] ):

“Gods and men call her Aphrodite, because she was formed in foam, and Cytherea, because she approached Cythera, and Cyprus-born, because she was born in wave-washed Cyprus...” ( 9 [195-199] )

Aphrodite was thus born of a single divinity and was present at the separation of heaven, earth and sea, making her one of the oldest of the divinities.

Homer, writing in the *Iliad* at around the same time, gives us a completely different impression of the circumstances surrounding Aphrodite’s birth:

“...and now bright Aphrodite fell at the knees of her mother, Dione, who gathered her daughter into her arms’ fold.” (*Iliad* 138 [V.370-371])

“Then the daughter of Zeus, Aphrodite, answered her...” (*Iliad* 299 [XIV.193] )

In the *Odyssey*, Aphrodite is still the daughter of Zeus and Dione, but Homer has Demodokos recite a story of Ares

“...lusting after the love of sweet-garlanded Kythereia. She had lately come in from the house of her father, the powerful son of Kronos.” (*Odyssey* 128 [VIII.288-290])

This is interesting. The son of Kronos is Zeus. Aphrodite’s birth is not only associated with a later generation of gods, but is the result of the sexual union of two parents: an Olympian god and a Titan. But note how Aphrodite is referred to, in the same sentence, as Kythereia - which obviously corresponds to Hesiod’s “Cytherea”. In the same episode, when she is released by Hephaistos,

“Aphrodite, lover of laughter, went back to Paphos on Cyprus, where lies her sacred precinct and her smoky altar...” (*Odyssey* 130 [VIII.362-363])

Again, we remember that Cyprus is the island where the Goddess first came ashore according to Hesiod.

During the Classical Period, Plato wrote a story called the *Symposium*. The setting for the narrative is a banquet attended by a

small group of very famous friends who are engaged in a lively discussion on, among other things, the subject of love. One of the participants, Pausanias, introduces the concept of Aphrodite and her dual nature:

“For we all know that Love is inseparable from Aphrodite... as there are two goddesses there must be two Loves. And am I not right in asserting that there are two goddesses? The elder one, having no mother, who is called the heavenly Aphrodite—she is the daughter of Uranus; the younger, who is the daughter of Zeus and Dione—her we call common...” (309 [180d])

Pausanias goes on to explain that Aphrodite Ourania represents pure spiritual love while Aphrodite Pandemos represents physical love.

Other Classical sources seem to be in general agreement that Aphrodite came to Greece by way of Cythera and Cyprus. The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite opens:

“Muse, tell me about the deeds of Cyprian Aphrodite, the golden goddess...all these are touched by beautifully crowned Cythera.” (150 [1-5] )

In his History, Herodotus relates that the most ancient temple of Celestial Venus (Latin for Aphrodite) was at Ascalon, in Syria. It inspired two similar temples in Cyprus and Cythera to be built by the Phoenicians (41 [1.105]). Pausanias, in his Description of Greece, relates that the first people to worship Aphrodite were “... the Assyrians, and next to them the inhabitants of Paphos in Cyprus and the Phoenicians of Ascalon in Palestine. The Cytherians learnt the worship from the Phoenicians.” (21 [1.14.7]) Athenaeus introduces an intriguing twist to the plot, as he describes how many of Aphrodite’s sanctuaries in the Greek world were inhabited by temple prostitutes. They were known to practice sexual rites in Magnesia, Samos and Corinth. He writes: “These women were dedicated to pray to Cypris, with Heaven’s blessing” (97 [XIII.573e]). One man, offering a sacrifice at the Corinthian temple of Aphrodite, begins his prayer: “O Queen of Cyprus! Hither to thy sanctuary Xenophon hath brought a troupe of one hundred girls to browse, gladdened as he is by his vows now fulfilled.” (99 [XIII.573f]) Note again the reference to Cyprus.

Even the Roman poet Ovid, when he relates the story of Pygmalion in the *Metamorphoses*, sets the location of the tale in Cyprus. Pygmalion’s bride, thanks to Venus (Aphrodite), has a son named Paphos (232 [X.270-297]). As we have seen, Paphos is the city where Aphrodite’s temple was built, copied from a Phoenician predecessor. A subsequent story in the same work, that of Adonis, also takes place on

Cyprus. Mention is made that “[t]he goddess of Cythera...ceased to visit seagirt Paphos...” (239 [X.529-532]), when she fell in love with Adonis.

To summarize the facts so far, Aphrodite is generally associated with the islands of Cythera and Cyprus and is frequently worshipped through the participation of temple prostitutes. Only one source, Homer, asserts that she is the daughter of Zeus and Dione — and then in the same sentence calls her *Kythereia*! This brings us back to the story of how she sprang from Uranus’ genitals near Cythera, which seems to be in agreement with all the other Classical sources. Homer is known to have altered mythology when it suited his purpose. A well-known example is his replacement of Chiron the centaur (Morford & Lenardon 396 ) with Phoenix (Homer *Iliad* 210 [IX.438-443]) as the tutor of Achilles in the *Iliad* because it better suited the plot. In addition, Homer generally avoided the fantastic and grotesque in his mythological allusions. The castration story would certainly qualify. (Reinhold 102) It is also possible that the epithet *Pandemos* was intended simply to confer Olympian status on this foreign goddess; to adopt her as a Greek goddess “of the people” (Kerenyi 68).

So if there was one Aphrodite, who was born of Uranian foam and came to Greece by way of Cyprus and Cythera, how do we explain Plato? Even a superficial reading of the *Symposium* should convey the obvious, that his “drawing room” conversations are not intended to be taken at face value. I doubt that many scholars accept the premise that they actually took place as described. Even if they did, Plato’s circle of followers represented a small social elite whose views were not necessarily those of the average Athenian citizen, and in his choice of metaphors he was under no obligation to adhere to any modern standard of historical or theological accuracy. Plato staged these hypothetical verbal interchanges and put words in the mouths of his characters in order to give voice to his philosophies and present different points of view for the reader to consider. There is no evidence that the views credited to Pausanias represent the views of the real-life Pausanias (assuming that he was really there) or of Plato or of his contemporaries for that matter. I believe that Plato was simply using two familiar epithets for Aphrodite as a metaphor for his idea of two types of love; that in a civilized society a distinction can be made between spiritual love on one hand, and physical satisfaction and procreation on the other. We misunderstand completely if we assume that he meant this to be taken literally. Unfortunately, some later scholars have done precisely that, using Homer’s “creative” alteration of Aphrodite’s genealogy as confirmation.

According to Herodotus, Aphrodite came first to Cythera and next to Cyprus on her way to the Greek mainland. Pausanias and Herodotus

say that her worship was brought to the Aegean by the Phoenicians. Do the ancient sources have anything to say about where the goddess's worship came from before that? Herodotus gives us a clue. In his description of Babylonian culture, he describes how each woman once in her lifetime, must go to the temple of Venus (Aphrodite) and serve as a temple prostitute (74-75). He closes with "A custom very much like this is found also in certain parts of the island of Cyprus" (75). We have already noted how temple prostitutes were present in the temple of Aphrodite at Corinth by the time of Pausanias. Should we look for the origins of Aphrodite in the Near East?

It is not difficult to detect the antecedents of Aphrodite in the Semitic fertility goddesses known to exist in the ancient Near East. The most ancient of these was the Sumerian goddess Inanna, a goddess of fertility and agricultural prosperity. The ancients equated fertility, the recurring seasonal cycles and the regeneration of crops with human reproductive capability and therefore sexuality. The writings about Inanna feature "...a full and frank eroticism..." (Friedrich 14) but she is never maternal. (Friedrich 50) She was also the patroness of prostitutes as well as the Goddess of War. Inanna's qualities were assimilated into the Akkadian/Babylonian goddess Ishtar, who "...conspicuously patronizes carnal love in the Gilgamesh Epic..." (Friedrich 16). She was also attended by prostitutes and courtesans. There were many regional and local variants of this goddess. The Phoenician/Canaanite Ishtar seems to have evolved into three characters: the Hebrew Astarte or Esther, and the Canaanite Anat and Asherah, who were later fused into one goddess, Asteroth. Their principal defining features appear to have been their identification with sexuality and warfare (Friedrich 16-18). There is reason to believe that temple prostitution or sexual relations with priestesses were a feature of the worship of both Astarte and Asteroth (Friedrich 19). As previously noted, Herodotus credits the spread of temple prostitution *associated with the worship of Aphrodite* to the Phoenicians who disseminated it to Cythera and Cyprus. It is later present as a distinctive feature of Aphrodite's worship and ritual in Corinth and many other Greek cities as well. Another especially convincing piece of evidence of Aphrodite's Near Eastern origin is her association with the morning and evening star. Ourania simply means Celestial or Heavenly. Her predecessors: Inanna, Ishtar, Anat Astarte, and Asherah all bore some variation on the title "Far Shining" or "Queen of Heaven" as well as as being associated with the planet Venus. They shared the seemingly contradictory attributes of Goddess of Love and Bringer of Victory, along with a number of ritual elements besides temple prostitution, such as the burning of incense and the sacrifice of doves. There are striking parallels between Aphrodite's lover Adonis and Astarte's consort Tammuz, and both were occasionally

shown as bearded fertility goddesses. It cannot be overemphasized that the characteristics that Aphrodite shared with her Near Eastern predecessors—and the later Roman goddess Venus— argue in favour of a direct line of descent (*Aphrodite Urania*). Furthermore, Hesiod's story linking the goddess to Cythera and Cyprus coincides, in a symbolic way, with what is known about Phoenician trading and settlement patterns in the eastern Mediterranean.

Expanding on the association with the planet Venus, Maggie Mccary notes that the erratic pattern of the morning and evening star alternately rising in conjunction with the moon and setting in conjunction with the sun may explain why the ancients saw Aphrodite as both a celestial goddess and goddess of the underworld. Her association with an older moon goddess during her celestial phase linked her with the tidal cycles and hence her connection with the sea. The violence of her birth through interaction between the elements air (masculine) and water (feminine) through violent agitation (foam) indicates that she was born from both love and violence, and could be a goddess of love and vengeance (Mccary).

The story of Aphrodite Ourania's birth contains celestial, sea, creation and death imagery that marks her as a goddess of great antiquity. Some scholars have attempted to explain her as the neolithic Great Mother goddess who survived, largely unaltered for thousands of years until the classical period. This argument is based on perceived common denominators and similarities among names that emerge from pre-history. Unfortunately, they are speculative and do not explain all the known facts, and so are not generally accepted. We are on safer ground when we note the obvious immediate descent of Aphrodite from the Semitic Near Eastern warrior and fertility goddesses due to the obvious similarities. The mother and sea goddess aspects, among others, were more likely reintroduced into her character in Palestine, a region known as a cross-cultural "melting pot" and disseminator of ideas, and on her journey from one Phoenician colony to the next through the Aegean islands to Greece.

Deborah Boedeker argues that Aphrodite is actually of Indo-European origin while admitting "[i]n certain aspects of cult and iconography, the similarities between Aphrodite and the Great Goddess, especially Astarte, are not to be disputed" (5). She then proceeds with a complex etymological dissertation in which she attempts to establish that the name Aphrodite could have evolved from any one of many known Indo-European as well as Near Eastern phrases (6-14). This game of "scholarly word-association" is not convincing. Despite the complexity of her argument, the fact remains that similarities are inevitable because many goddesses were descended, directly or indirectly, from the Great Mother and were worshipped by many people speaking many lan-

guages. The human voice can produce only a limited number of sounds. It would be astounding if there were not innumerable words and phrases that could conceivably have been corrupted into something that sounds like Aphrodite, but the author has not managed to prove that it was not a Semitic name. Ms. Boedeker also feels that the assimilation of Aphrodite into Greek culture could not have taken place on Cyprus because the Phoenicians did not settle there until after 1000 B.C., by which time the goddess was well established in Greek religion (1-2).

Paul Friedrich disagrees:

“Since there unquestionably was much trade contact and cultural exchange between Phoenicians and Greeks... 1400-1150...one can reasonably assume considerable cross-fertilization of religious imagery, and the specifics of Ishtar and Aphrodite make this assumption virtually mandatory.” (51)

It should be noted that Mr. Friedrich is arguing for a *primarily* Near Eastern origin for our subject, as opposed to a *purely* Near Eastern origin. Obviously cultural assimilation does not take place in a vacuum, and influences can be assumed from many sources including Indo-European.

While not disputing the great antiquity of Aphrodite, W. Burkert points out that she appears not to have been mentioned in Mycenaean linear B tablets; therefore she must have been introduced into Greek religion from outside the Greek world following the Bronze Age. He acknowledges a direct link to Ashtoreth and hence her long history in the Near East:

“It is possible that the name Aphrodite itself is a Greek form of western Semitic Ashtorith, who in turn is identical with Ishtar.” (152, *Aphrodite Urania* n.17 )

If so, it must have seemed significant that “aphoros” was the Greek word for “foam.” The Greeks were fond of puns and double meanings. Surely that had to mean *something!*

One especially imaginative theory suggests that Aphrodite's warrior goddess aspect is a memory of the worship of Inanna by Amazons who once inhabited Asia and the Near East. A more likely theory is that since prehistoric times, young women accompanied armies and used songs and chants to encourage and taunt young warriors during battle and uttered shrill war cries to un-nerve the enemy. (*Aphrodite Urania* n. 78; Roberts 40) As late as the siege of Constantinople in 1451 A.D. a large group of women behind the Arab soldiers sang “if you are victorious we will reward you; if you lose we will foresake you.” The asso-



ciation between female sexuality and lust for battle may have ancient origins for that reason.

What about the duality of Aphrodite Ourania and Aphrodite Pandemos? It is a common feature of many of the Olympian gods and goddesses that they were often given epithets to indicate local or regional variations or particular aspects of their personalities. The same goddess who evolved into a matronly symbol of love, marriage and beauty at Athens was the object of a fertility cult and worshipped with sexual rites and imagery as a patroness of prostitutes at Corinth. In this capacity she was Aphrodite Gentryx or Aphrodite Nymphia. She was depicted in armour —like Athena— and worshipped as Aphrodite Enoplios, a goddess of war, at Sparta (Kerenyi 78). She was also depicted armed in Cyprus, Thebes and Smyrna (Seltman 84) as well as Cythera (Cary *et al* 67). At Argos she was called the “Bringer of Victory.” (Saltman 84) These roles much more closely resemble her predecessors in the Near East, where Ishtar and Astarte were goddesses of carnal love, war and fertility. Sometimes she was Venus Genetyllis (Patroness of Childbirth). In other places she was Aphrodite Melaina/Melainis (Black/Dark One), Aphrodite Androphonos (Killer of Men), Aphrodite Anosia (the Unholy), Aphrodite Tymhorychos (the Grave-digger), Aphrodite Epitymbidia (She Upon the Graves) or Aphrodite Persephaessa (Queen of the Underworld) — obviously having absorbed the character of an earlier goddess of death. In another place she was Aphrodite Pasiphaessa (the Far-shining) which may associate her with an earlier moon-goddess, (Kerenyi 78-81) but as we have seen, her worship often involved celestial imagery that connected her with comets, meteors and solar symbolism in addition to the planet Venus. As Aphrodite Pelagia, a marine deity depicted with fishing net and cockle shell imagery, she was appealed to as the protector of sailors and shipping. There were many other epithets, which were added to the list as the worship of Aphrodite absorbed the cults of earlier goddesses or was altered to suit local needs.

As the Athenians came into contact with other areas of Greece and became more dominant, they encountered variations of Aphrodite that more closely resembled their own patroness Athena. Athena began to absorb many of Aphrodite’s former attributes: in particular her association with weaving, wisdom and her warrior aspect. The myth of Athena taking her loom away from Aphrodite was likely intended to explain this transfer of responsibilities. As befits a goddess of wisdom, Athena sprang fully grown from the head, rather than the genitals, of her single divine parent Zeus. What remained of Aphrodite was the spiteful, lazy promiscuous minor goddess that we are most familiar with.

During the First Punic War (264-241 B.C.) The Romans recaptured the temple of Aphrodite at Mount Eryx in Sicily (formerly a Phoenician



temple of Astarte) from the Carthaginians. Since both the Romans and the local Elymi believed themselves descended from the Trojans through the temple's builder Aeneas, a temple to Venus Ericyna was built on the Roman capitol to ensure victory during the Second Punic War (218-201 B.C.), but without the "sacred prostitution" of the original. Julius Caesar later claimed descent from Aeneas, whose mother was Venus, so she became the patroness of the emperors of Rome. Her identity as goddess of fertility and warfare was preserved as Venus Aphrodisias and Venus Victrix (Moon).

So instead of alluding to two Aphrodites, Plato (if he were a historian and not a philosopher) might better have left us with one of two apparently contradictory assertions. He could have said that there were not two Aphrodites, but many Aphrodites; Ourania and Pandemos being simply the two most prominent epithets in Athenian culture. At the same time he could have said that all these epithets belong to one great Aphrodite who, allowing for influences from other cultures, is a direct descendant of the Great Near Eastern Fertility goddesses who found a home on Mount Olympus.

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