

Has the goddess Aphrodite as portrayed in archaic Greek literature undergone a significant transformation from her ancient Near Eastern prototype?

It is argued by Jenny Strauss Clay in her book *The Politics of Olympus* that the longer *Homeric Hymns* fill the gap between the stories of the origin of the Olympian order and accession to power of Zeus in Hesiod's *Theogony* and the complete and stable Olympian pantheon depicted in Homer.¹ While this idea can be applied to the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, it is certainly not able to be proven. If we accept however, that Aphrodite derives from a Near Eastern prototype goddess of sex and warfare, it does seem that there is evidence for a graded succession from the *Theogony*, through the *Hymn*, to epic involving the transformation of Aphrodite from a powerful cosmic force of nature to an unthreatening, comical goddess of love and beauty. This essay will argue that the goddess Aphrodite as portrayed in archaic Greek literature has undergone a significant transformation from her ancient Near Eastern prototype. In order to explore this the essay will begin with an overview of the acceptance by scholars of Aphrodite's Near Eastern origin and an explanation of the characteristics of the Near Eastern goddess that Aphrodite also shares. This will be followed by an assessment of the portrayal of Aphrodite by Hesiod, highlighting the Near Eastern themes evident in the depiction. Next, an evaluation of Aphrodite as represented in the *Hymn* will be covered, focusing on her modification from an all-powerful goddess of sex to the chastised daughter of Zeus. Subsequent to this will be an investigation of her image as described by Homer, the unthreatening nature of which will lead to the conclusion

¹ Jenny S. Clay. *The Politics of Olympus: Form and Meaning in the Major Homeric Hymns*. (Princeton. Princeton University Press. 1989). 15.

that archaic Greek literature has transformed Aphrodite considerably from her ancient Near Eastern prototype.

It is generally accepted that the Greek goddess Aphrodite derives from an ancient Near Eastern predecessor such as the Sumerian/Akkadian goddess of love and war, Inanna/Ishtar. Authors Walter Burkert,² Martin West,³ and Charles Penglase⁴ identify parallels between Sumerian and Greek literature including similarities between the circumstances of Aphrodite's Hesiodic birth myth as part of the Succession Myth theme which also appears in the *Enuma Elish*, and in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* where not only is the character in the passage, in this case Ishtar, similar to Aphrodite, but the activity being performed by her is also very close to later Aphroditean scenes in Homeric literature (VI 80-95; *Iliad* 5.311-430).⁵ Aphrodite also shares cultic similarities such as incense altars and dove sacrifices with the Near Eastern goddess Astarte (a Hellenisation of the name Ishtar) on Cyprus, as authors Stephanie Budin, Nancy Serwint and Bonnie Maclachlan have found in their examination of Cypriot archaeological evidence.⁶ While another group of scholars, Deborah Boedeker, Paul Friedrich, Laura Slatkin and Mary Lefkowitz, contend that Aphrodite derives from an Indo-European Goddess of the Dawn - and there are convincing

² Walter Burkert. *Greek Religion*. (Blackwell. Oxford. 1985). 152. and *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*. (Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 1992). 96-100.

³ Martin L. West. *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*. (Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1997). 57-9, 291-2, 361-2, 382-5.

⁴ Charles Penglase. *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod*. (London. Routledge. 1994). 168.

⁵ Rushing up to heaven to be comforted by a 'female version' of her father after being thwarted or disrespected by a mortal. Andrew George. (Trans). *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. (London. Penguin. 1999). 49.

⁶ Stephanie Budin. "Creating a Goddess of Sex"; Nancy Serwint. "Aphrodite and Her Near Eastern Sisters: Spheres of Influence"; and Bonnie Maclachlan. "The Ungendering of Aphrodite" in Diane Bolger and Nancy Serwint. (Eds) *Engendering Aphrodite: Women and Society in Ancient Cyprus*. (Boston. American School of Oriental Research. 2002). 313-24; 325-50; 365-78.

aspects of this argument based on etymological, mythological and iconographic similarities⁷ - it is Aphrodite's resemblance to the Near Eastern goddesses that we will be looking at here. The themes associated with these goddesses are: descent from a sky god, youthful beauty, conspicuous sexuality, influence over human and animal procreation, vegetative lushness, and warfare.⁸ This type of goddess is also a patroness of prostitution and never appears in the role of wife or mother,⁹ perhaps because she is closely associated with men and their interests.¹⁰ In myth she appears as a dominant female whose male consort tends to suffer death or disaster in some form.¹¹

According to Hesiod (*Theogony* 188-206), who Dowden describes as 'an "Orientalizing" author, refreshing Greek mythology with quite a lot of Near Eastern material',¹² Aphrodite is born from the testicles of heaven - the sky god Ouranos – and the sea.¹³ Her birth results when Kronos, son of Ouranos, castrates his father with a sickle and throws the testicles away. The *blood* from the wound falls on Earth and generates the Erinyes, Giants and Ash-tree Nymphs while...

⁷ Deborah D. Boedeker. *Aphrodite's Entry into Greek Epic*. (Leiden. Brill. 1974).; Paul Friedrich. *The Meaning of Aphrodite*. (Chicago. University of Chicago Press. 1978).; Laura M. Slatkin. "The Wrath of Thetis." in *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-). 116. (1986), 1-24.; Mary R. Lefkowitz. "Predatory Goddesses." in *Hesperia*. 71: 4. (Oct-Dec 2002). 325-44. Aphrodite is similar to the predatory Dawn Goddesses Eos in appearance, derivation from the sky, association with clouds, in vase paintings along with their mortal sons, association with edge-dwelling predatory characters like Circe and Calypso.

⁸ Penglase. *Greek Myths*. 15.

⁹ Thorkild Jacobsen. *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. (New Haven. Yale University Press. 1976). 141.

¹⁰ Nanno Marinatos. *The Goddess and the Warrior: The Naked Goddess and Mistress of Animals in Early Greek Religion*. (London. Routledge. 2000). 5-10.

¹¹ Penglase. *Greek Myths*. 39.

¹² Ken Dowden. *Zeus*. (London. Routledge. 2006). 35.

¹³ Hesiod. *Theogony*. Trans. Dorothea Wender. (London. Penguin. 1973).

The *genitals*, cut off with adamant
And thrown from land into the stormy sea,
Were carried for a long time on the waves.
White foam surrounded the immortal flesh,
And in it grew a girl. At first it touched
On holy Cythera, from there it came
To Cyprus, circled by the waves. And there
The goddess came forth, lovely, much revered,
And grass grew up beneath her delicate feet.
Her name is Aphrodite among men
And gods, because she grew up in the foam,
And Cytherea, for she reached that land,
And Cyprogenes from the stormy place
Where she was born, and Philommedes from
The genitals, by which she was conceived.
Eros is her companion; fair Desire
Followed her from the first, both at her birth
And when she joined the company of the gods.

From the beginning, both among gods and men,

She had this honour and received this power:

Fond murmuring of girls, and smiles, and tricks,

And sweet delight, and friendliness and charm.

In Hesiod we have a goddess born directly from Heaven's genitals – there could not a more explicit example of the nature of Aphrodite, as Hesiod saw it, than so literal a birth myth that creates the Goddess of Sex from actual genitals. As Friedrich says in regard to Aphrodite's birth 'You are what you came from.'¹⁴ Appearing at the beginning of time when heaven and earth separated, Aphrodite was obviously considered to be both ancient and primal, a force of nature. In Hesiod she is the keystone cementing the bridge between the sexes, the thing that causes them to be united - the sexual drive - because it was she that appeared when the primordial pair first separated. As we know, ever after she will cause the sexes to re-unite as it is her very nature. Interestingly, Aphrodite is not born from an act of sexual love between embodied deities, but from an act of violence: as a result of the rupture of conjoined heaven and earth. Associating sexuality with aggression and violence has Near Eastern precedents as is depicted on Syrian and Babylonian cylinder seals where erotic encounters between divine females and males are accompanied by scenes of human and animal violence, bringing sexuality and danger together.¹⁵ Ouranos' severed testicles evoke associations ranging from the beginning of time brought about by the separation of the primordial couple, to the two-sided coin of dual compulsion and

¹⁴ Friedrich. *Meaning of Aphrodite*. 72.

¹⁵ Marinatos. *Goddess and the Warrior*. 7-10.

trepidation toward sex. While Aphrodite is undoubtedly the goddess of sexuality, one wonders if this very literal birth myth was not a transparent allusion to Hesiod's own attitude to sexual relationships which we know was not particularly positive (*Works and Days* 58-104)?¹⁶ Both Aphrodite and the Sumerian Inanna/Ishtar were daughters of the sky god and goddesses of sexuality,¹⁷ in Aphrodite's case Hesiod has her born right out of Ouranos' testicles, whereas while there is a parallel for the castration of Inanna's father Anu by Kumarbi in the *Enuma Elish*, it does not result in her birth.¹⁸ The combination of Sumerian literary parallels in the *Theogony*, the mention of Aphrodite's Cypriot birth place and her very primal, rather threatening birth myth indicate that Hesiod perceived her as a pre-Olympian independent 'Eastern' goddess. As the daughter of Ouranos, the Hesiodic Aphrodite is two generations older than Olympian Zeus and, we can assume, independent from him.

The fifth *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, while explicitly mentioning her Cypriot origin and hinting at the goddess's Near Eastern characteristics such her power over all creatures including wild animals and her association with the Phrygian mountain and hence the goddess Kybele¹⁹ (2, 5, 58, 68-73), also involves a subduing of this once-dangerous goddess of sex.²⁰ While the first five lines of the *Hymn* tell us how all beings are under the sway of Aphrodite's power, we then find

¹⁶ Hesiod. 61.

¹⁷ Jacobsen. *Treasures of Darkness*. 136.

¹⁸ West. *East Face of Helicon*. 290-2.

¹⁹ An Anatolian Great Goddess who fits the pattern of the dominant goddess with dying lover, as above. Walter Burkert. *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*. (Berkeley. University of California Press. 1979). 103.; Robert Mondi. "Greek Mythic Thought in the Light of the Near East" in Lowell Edmunds (Ed). *Approaches to Greek Myth*. (Baltimore. Johns Hopkins University Press. 1990). 147.

²⁰ Martin West. (Trans). 5. "To Aphrodite" in *Homeric Hymns Homeric Apocrypha Lives of Homer* (Cambridge. Harvard University Press. 2003). 159-83.

that three goddesses – Athene, Artemis and Hestia - are not actually able to be swayed by her because they do not involve themselves in sex (6-33). The *Hymn* seems to be a turning point in Aphrodite's sphere of influence: up until now she has been able to cause whomever she chose to couple, disregarding the bonds of marriage and the vertical hierarchy between immortals and mortals: 'nothing has escaped Aphrodite, either of the blessed gods, or of mortal men. She even led astray the mind of Zeus...' (34-7). Whereas in Hesiod, Aphrodite preceded Zeus and was independent of him, in the *Hymn* she becomes a 'daughter of Zeus' and is thus subject to his power (81). Somehow, perhaps simply because Zeus is the god 'who is the greatest and has the greatest honour' (37), he is able to use Aphrodite's own *time* against her to teach her a lesson – to subdue her and reign her in under his control so that he is not under hers.²¹ 'He wanted to bring it about as soon as possible that not even she was set apart from a mortal bed...' (47-8). This corresponds with Clay's idea that the *Homeric Hymns* fit between the *Theogony* and epic and concern the adjustment of roles and subordination of deities to Zeus's Olympian family.²² Whether or not this is the case, still, Aphrodite's demotion in the *Hymn* is extreme. It is not toward one of her own kind - an immortal - that Zeus causes Aphrodite to yearn, but to a mortal: the Trojan, Anchises – she even becomes pregnant to him ('for the beds of the gods are not unproductive' (*Catalogue* frag. 31.2-3)).²³ While the goddesses thought to be Aphrodite's Near Eastern counterparts had mortal love interests who died, such as Adonis who later became associated with Aphrodite as well,²⁴ these were not forced upon them nor did the goddesses

²¹ Clay. *Politics of Olympus*. 165.

²² Ibid. 15.

²³ This reference in Mary Lefkowitz. *Greek Gods, Human Lives*. (New Haven. Yale University Press. 2003). 40.

²⁴ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. (Trans) A. D. Melville. (Oxford. Oxford University Press. 1986). 241-2; 247-8.

become pregnant.²⁵ In Greek mythology it was a great hardship for immortal goddesses (and gods) to be parents to mortals as the examples of Thetis and Achilles and Eos and Memnon show, so Zeus is teaching Aphrodite the worst kind of love lesson for a god, the one that involves contact with death.²⁶

Aphrodite's power over wild animals on Mount Ida (68) evokes the Phrygian goddess Kybele,²⁷ 'Mother of the Mountain' (although she was not a mother at all), whose young lover Attis castrated himself.²⁸ Recalling Aphrodite's Hesiodic birth myth with its explicit castration scene and allusions to the Near Eastern idea of the equivalence of sex and danger, it seems more than coincidence that Anchises fears being 'unmanned' after having sex with Aphrodite.²⁹ Whether we think of this state of *amenenos* as being completely emptied of male virility as Giacomelli suggests³⁰ or as literally castrated as was Attis³¹ the general theme of post-sexual debilitation, hence danger and risk for the male, is present. The inclusion of the stories of Ganymede – a boy who will never mature – and Tithonos – a man who is perpetually incapacitated - further emphasise the theme of the male who is unable to achieve or maintain virility and/or generate

²⁵ One of the main characteristics of Near Eastern sex goddesses such as Inanna was that while they were highly sexual, they did not become pregnant. Although Aphrodite in Greek myth does have some divine children, her motherhood is not emphasised. Budin. "Creating a Goddess of Sex." 317-20.

²⁶ Slatkin. "Wrath of Thetis." 1, 14, 16.

²⁷ Mondi. "Greek Mythic Thought". 147.

²⁸ Lynn E. Roller. *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*. (Berkeley. University of California Press. 1999). 241.

²⁹ According to one interpretation of an Ugaritic text, the goddess Anat swallows the genitals of her partner during intercourse, she becomes pregnant, but her partner's sexuality is destroyed forever. Marinatos. *Goddess and the Warrior*. 9.

³⁰ Anne Giacomelli. "Aphrodite and After" in *Phoenix* 34:1. (1980) 16.

³¹ Roller. *In Search of God the Mother*. 241.

children (202-40). While this is the kind of result a mortal male may have risked in an encounter with a Near Eastern goddess of sex such as in the case of Gilgamesh and Ishtar: ‘What bridegroom of yours did endure forever?’ (VI. 40) or with a Hesiodic Aphrodite, in the *Hymn* Anchises obtains the very opposite of this.³² Aphrodite assures him that he will incur ‘no harm from me or the other blessed ones’, in addition he will become the father of ‘a dear son who will rule over the Trojans, as will the children born to his continually’ (94-7). The dangerous, violent, unmanly Near Eastern goddess has done a complete turn about and now bestows fatherhood, progeny and illustrious lineage. Aphrodite has been chastised and controlled by Zeus, in the *Hymn* she is regretful (198), knows that her power has been diminished and that she has been brought to the same level as the other gods whom she used to control (248-55).

In Homer, while Aphrodite sides with Troy (*Iliad* 2.819-21; 3.373-447; 5.311-430; 23.184-7) recalling her associations with Phrygia and the Near East, she is fully assimilated into the Olympian pantheon.³³ At *Iliad* 3: 374; 5: 312 Aphrodite is explicitly the ‘daughter of Zeus’ and instead of being born from Ouranos and the sea, at line 330 we discover a mother, Dione, a female version of Zeus. There is a parallel to Ishtar in Sumerian literature here who, when spurned by Gilgamesh, goes up to heaven and weeps before her father Anu and a female form of her father, Antu (VI 80-3).³⁴ While Aphrodite played a major role in the circumstances that

³² Aphrodite in the *Hymn* does the opposite of ‘castration’ as defined by Taylor (definition 5): “Castration”: ‘... religious sacrifice (at first involving actual genital mutilation, later allegorised to mere celibacy) that seeks to approach the divine by transcending the biological imperatives of reproduction and the social constraints of lineage...’ Gary Taylor. *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood*. (New York. Routledge. 2000). Endpapers. Anchises approaches the divine without needing to abhor the means of reproduction, he is in a state *emphasising* the biological imperatives of reproduction, he remains in that state and is neither castrated (in whatever form) nor forgoes lineage, in fact he receives an illustrious fatherhood.

³³ Homer. *Iliad*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. (Chicago. University of Chicago Press. 1961).

³⁴ West. *East Face of Helicon*. 362.

brought about the Trojan War (24: 27-30), unlike the Hesiodic Aphrodite or her Near Eastern predecessors, the Illiadic Aphrodite is neither dangerous, nor warlike. Although we know Aphrodite was associated with war in both myth (*Odyssey* 8.266-366) and in iconography,³⁵ in the *Iliad* she is hopeless in battle. A mortal, Diomedes, is actually able to insult and physically injure her (5: 334-351), Zeus explicitly tells her ‘No, my child, not for you are the works of warfare. Rather concern yourself with the lovely secrets of marriage...’ (426-9), and Athene, goddess of war, hits her (21: 423). Aphrodite’s weakness and unsuitability for warfare verges on the comical and she seems destined to be restricted to the role of beautiful Olympian daughter concerned only with attractiveness, sex and deception (3.373-447, 14.187-224). While there is still a theme of sex and death in the background, Aphrodite seems inconvenient and pesky rather than directly dangerous.

In the *Odyssey* as well, the character of Aphrodite appears in a scene that has undertones of the Near Eastern goddess themes of sexuality and violence, but is mixed in with the Homeric comical treatment (8.266-366).³⁶ Ares, the god of war, and Aphrodite who have been having an affair are caught in a net by Aphrodite’s husband, Hephaestus. Having Aphrodite married to Hephaestus in the first place – a very clever but physically deformed god of fire and metalworking – diminishes her somewhat in that the couple are not visually physically compatible – unlike Aphrodite and Ares - although the marriage may refer to her association with copper smelting on Cyprus,³⁷ or her epithet ‘golden’.³⁸ Aphrodite becomes the object of

³⁵ Serwint. “Aphrodite and Her Near Eastern Sisters”. 337-43.

³⁶ Homer. *Odyssey*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. (New York. HarperCollins. 1967).

³⁷ Budin. “Creating a Goddess of Sex”. 321.

³⁸ Boedeker. *Aphrodite’s Entry*. 20.

laughter because of Hephaestus' trap and while it is not derisive laughter and one of Aphrodite's epithets is 'lover of laughter' (362), this is an example of the harmless figure she appears as in Homer. Aphrodite is an object of desire for the other male Olympians and the only threat she offers is to the institution of marriage (306-20).

As we have seen in the above examples of the depiction of Aphrodite in archaic Greek literature, she has indeed been transformed from an ancient Near Eastern goddess of sex and war into a weak and unthreatening goddess associated with sexual desire and beauty. Although the *Hymn to Aphrodite* is compositionally later than Hesiod and Homer, thematically it can be seen to form a bridge between them as Clay suggests, though whether this was the intention of the original author cannot be known.³⁹ The sequence of the transformation from a dangerous, powerful goddess of sexuality to an easily controlled object of men's desire evident in the progression from Near Eastern myth, to the *Theogony*, the *Hymn*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* indicates that while Aphrodite as goddess of sexual love was required for inclusion within the Olympian pantheon, her 'Eastern' characteristics were felt to be unacceptable.⁴⁰ An Olympian Aphrodite needed to be submissive to the authority of Father Zeus, not vice versa, and it is the Hellenisation of Aphrodite and her incorporation into the Pan-Hellenic Olympian pantheon that strips her – as she once stripped men – of her power.

³⁹ West. *Homeric Hymn*. 5.

⁴⁰ Chris Mackie. Pers. comm.

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