

8 Dione, Aphrodite, and Eros

INTRODUCTION

Aphrodite, like Athena, was incorporated into the Olympian religion from the earlier matriarchal religion. Originally, the worship of Aphrodite may have reached Greece with people from Asia Minor. In pre-Mycenaean times, she was a goddess of fertility and love, representing nature and love in bloom. Her love was passionate and knew no bounds. Marriage and other responsibilities did not deter her. Aphrodite was always closely connected with the sea, and some people still believe that eating seafood increases one's ability to love.

When Zeus took control of Dione's oracle at Dodona, he claimed Aphrodite as his daughter.¹ Again, like Athena's mother, under the male-dominated Olympian religion, Aphrodite's mother was not considered important. Aphrodite became known only as her father's daughter. Moreover, given the masculine emphasis of the religion of Zeus, Aphrodite, as the love goddess, became less significant than she had been in the previous matriarchal society when a woman loved as many men as she chose.

THE MYTH

According to one of the writers of the myths, Zeus loved the Titan Dione, sister of Mnemosyne and Themis, and fathered with Dione the gold-wreathed Aphrodite, the goddess of love. However, another writer stated that Uranus's severed parts produced a white foam in the sea, from which Aphrodite emerged fully mature.¹ First she floated over the waves of the dark sea to the island of Cythera, off the southern coast of Greece. Then she floated east to the island of Cyprus, where she stepped ashore. Wherever she stepped, grass immediately began to grow. From the time of Aphrodite's birth, Eros was her companion, and Desire was her ser-

vant. Together they joined the Olympian gods, where they created the sweetness and delight of love for birds and beasts, mortals and immortals. Thus, gold-wreathed Aphrodite supervised young love and weddings.²

Eros represented uncontrollable passion. As they did with many other aspects of the human personality, the Greeks turned an internal process into an external force. Therefore, when a mortal "fell in love at first sight," the Greeks said that he had become the victim of one of the love-inspiring arrows of Eros. The gods, too, were subject to the power of Eros. Consequently, the immortal Olympians feared Eros more than any other god except Zeus, for he was unpredictable and capricious and could make them feel ashamed of their feelings and behavior.³

The tribes who brought the religion of Zeus to Greece created Eros as part of the divine order of the universe. Early classic writers called Eros one of the primeval forces, without which creation, immortal or mortal, could not have occurred. Later writers made Eros a more youthful god and gave him Aphrodite for a mother. Eros never became a part of the council of the twelve ruling gods on Mount Olympus.⁴

1. Although Homer claims that Zeus is the father of Aphrodite, Hesiod claims that Uranus is her father and that she was born from the foam which surrounded his severed parts in the sea.
2. Aphrodite takes an important role in the myths of Pygmalion and Atalanta (Section III, The World of Man) and in Jason and the Golden Fleece (Section IV, The Heroes).
3. See the story of Eros and Psyche (Section IV, The Heroes).
4. For the twelve Olympian gods on the Council, see Section I, In the Beginning—The Rule of Zeus.
Eros may have been omitted because he represented uncontrolled (sexual) passion. This caused conflict in society, and the Mycenaean Greeks valued marriage as a sacred bond between a man and a woman.

REFLECTIONS

1. What function did the Fates serve and what did their tasks explain about the Greek view of death?
2. What did the existence of the Muses, the Graces, and Eros explain about the Greeks who created them?
3. Compare Aphrodite with Athena. Why were both goddesses necessary?
4. Choose one of the gods in this chapter and prepare an interview with one of them. Provide both questions and responses.