



Η ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ

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written and distributed by the Neokoroi

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The Neokoroi* are a group of Hellenic pagans who feel called to a path of service and devotion to the gods. We support mysticism, hard polytheism, and tend to favor Reconstructionism as an approach to developing Hellenismos, while also recognizing the importance of personal experience and local cultus. We are especially dedicated to fostering communities, festivals, and public shrines, and providing guidance and information on religious matters – all to ensure the strength and longevity of the worship of the Greek gods.

The Epistole (a “message” or “letter”) is published four times a year. We offer articles, hymns, prayers, poetry, reviews, information, rituals, community notices, fiction, recipes, and anything else of interest to the Hellenic pagan community. We welcome feedback and submissions from guest writers.

The Epistole is a free publication and can be found in many locations nationwide. If you would like the newsletter delivered to you directly, subscriptions cost \$16 per year – contact us for more information. And please contact us if you would like to distribute copies in your area – in return you receive the issues in electronic format for free. Back issues can be downloaded in PDF form from the website for free.

To contact the editor, email: info@neokoroi.org – or visit the Neokoroi website: www.neokoroi.org
We have even more articles online, as well as information on the gods, photos, links and more!

Our next issue will be coming out in June 2006. The deadline for submissions is May 20th. Advertising space is also available.

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*The word *neokoros* is derived from the Greek words *naos* (temple) and *koreo* (to sweep) and originally meant “the one who swept the temple” or “the temple keeper”. It was a humble position, but an important one, for it was the neokoros’ responsibility to make sure that the temple was kept clean and free of any pollution, and also to tend to the daily service of the god in whose temple he or she served.

Creating Effective Ritual

by Oenochoe

There are many articles about how to carry out basic Hellenic polytheist ritual: the procession, khernips, barley, sacrifice, etc. Most of us are becoming familiar with the exoteric aspects of our religion and its rituals. But are these elements the only things necessary for good ritual? And what *is* good ritual, exactly?

First one must identify the purpose of ritual. Ritual is how we communicate, not only with the divine, but in our other interactions as well – “by ritualizing we make contact with animals, foreigners and gods.” (Driver, 15) Only, with the gods we must first figure out how to dwell in the same space together, before communication can occur. Therefore in a spiritual context, ritual provides the means to do these things, as well as the substance of the communication itself (e.g. asking, giving, praising, etc.).

So good ritual needs to bring a person closer to the gods. Which means that it must take into account certain psychological and even physiological factors involved in being human. Even those of us who are deeply spiritual people cannot simply flip a switch in our minds and be in the right mental and emotional state to perceive the gods. A ritual therefore must be structured in a way that helps us move from our normal state of mind to what is generally called an *altered state of consciousness*. This doesn't necessarily mean we must attain a full trance state or anything of the sort – but ideally our awareness of the spiritual world should be enhanced. Effective ritual “not only presents the invisible but also offers conditions that make the perception possible.” (Shorter, 108)

A certain type of atmosphere is therefore required for a ritual to reach full power. This is in some ways superficial – it may for instance include darkness, candles, music, incense, special clothes, etc. – but the point is that it signifies to the people involved that this is not ordinary experience, this is something special, removed from the mundane worries, joys, and cares of the everyday. Now, of course it is possible to put too much emphasis on this atmosphere and create a ritual-ish feel without any real substance. So along with everything I say, one must not forget that the gods are at the heart of this, and these things are done only to facilitate a meeting with them.

“[Mircea Eliade] called sacramental rituals...‘doors to the sacred’. Every sacramental ritual, he said, is an invitation to a religious or sacred experience. An invitation, which you may accept or not.” (Nichols) I believe it is not only we who must accept or decline this invitation, but the gods as well. Our hope, of course, is that the gods will attend our rituals, accept our thanks, grant our prayers for assistance, and in general just grace us with their presence. Here are a few things that, in my opinion and experience, make a ritual more effective towards that end.

- Holy silence. “Koimeson stoma” is the Greek call for silence at the beginning of the sacrificial rite. There's a good reason for this even today, especially in large groups. Having people chit chatting right before and even during a ritual is

distracting and often ruins the devotional atmosphere. There should be a short period of time between setup and actual start of the ritual for everyone to stop talking and get ready both mentally and spiritually for what's about to happen.

- Preparation. In addition to the period of silence, there should be other preparations made stretching back as much as 24 hours before the ritual, depending on how important it is. For instance, fasting for even half a day beforehand will cleanse the body and clear the mind. Bathing (and dressing in clean clothes) just before the ritual is appropriate both for purification and to indicate the formality of the event. At least an hour before you even begin the setup for the ritual, turn off the tv, radio or computer and turn your mind to religious things. Perhaps read some of the hymns to yourself, or think about your last experience with the god in question. One should also endeavor to keep one's mind lightly on the subject of the ritual all day long, from the time one wakes up. These things will mentally and physically prepare you to truly focus within the ritual itself.

- Sensory triggers. Using the same lighting, music, incense, etc. each time you do ritual creates patterns that your subconscious will begin to recognize quickly, making the entrance into altered states easier with each recurrence.

- Repetition of acts/words. The word *ritual* usually implies repetition; a ritual done often should use the same set of acts/words, at least to an extent, to build up associations. So that eventually, all you have to do is X and you're in the right ritual state of mind instantly. Rituals should make internal sense, and follow a basic form each time. “Like language, rituals have a certain grammar, a certain syntax that it needs [sic] to follow, a certain order.” (Nichols) Repetition within the ritual itself is good too (such as a simple chant, call-and-answer, etc.).

- Spontaneity. Repetition does not preclude spontaneity. There should be room for both tradition and for personal experience of the divine, which is naturally going to change somewhat each time. One should be able to add to or even change the ritual if it seems appropriate at the time, within reason (i.e. without compromising the goal or meaning of the ritual).

- Emotional poignancy. “In many rituals strong emotions are engendered and consciousness altered. Not infrequently there is a feeling of ‘loss of self’...and a feeling of union with the other members of the congregation and even more embracing entities.” (Driver, 152) We are human beings and we relate to things emotionally as well as intellectually, spiritually, etc. Ritual has the power to bring joy, sorrow, fear, hope, and to entirely transform a person's heart. Add elements that have emotional resonance with you personally, or with your group, and encourage an emotional response to the gods' presence.

- Familiarity. While respect should always be maintained, a certain level of informality may be appropriate when doing ritual for gods you are on close terms with. For instance, having a meal to which the god is invited, and conversing with him/her in a casual manner (even if it concerns very serious topics) can enhance one's feeling of intimacy with the god.

- Comprehension of participants. Everyone should know what's going to happen, and why, beforehand. Explanations

should not be part of the ritual itself; the meanings of words and actions can be discussed before and even after, but not during. Again, this detracts from the focus and makes it more of a performance than a ritual. Which leads me to...

- No spectators. Everyone should be involved - even if it's just throwing a handful of barley, repeating a prayer, everyone should have some way of participating.

- No scripts - with the possible exception of reading long passages that would be very difficult to memorize. Again, this is not a play, it is a sacred act. How can you be fully in the moment of contact with the divine if you're looking down at the paper in your hand every two seconds? If this means that the ritual is simplified more so that everyone can remember what they need to do and say, so be it. Personally, I think many things can be spoken extemporaneously anyway, and there is rarely need for fancy words (outside of the hymns, of course).

- Simplicity. Oh, there are times for the big pageantry of complex ritual, but for most things simple works best - less room for mistakes, more mental space to actually pay attention to the gods instead of the ritual itself. Brings into focus the real purpose of the ritual.

I truly believe that paying attention to these points will greatly increase the likelihood that the participants of any ritual will reach that state of "ritual consciousness" necessary for a real experience of the divine. Which will then make their offerings, prayers and all other communication that much more powerful and meaningful. And thus we take one more step towards a strong bond of *kharis* between ourselves and the gods.

Recommended Reading

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Driver, Tom. *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.

Eliade, Mircea. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*. Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 1995.

Nichols, Mike. *The Finer Points of Ritual* (facilitated discussion): <http://www.ecauldron.com/finerpoints.php>

Shorter, Bani. *Susceptible to the Sacred: The Psychological Experience of Ritual*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.



Bringing it Home: The Gifts of Hestia

by Aristotimos

I began culinary school in the fall of 2002. For the past several years now I have worked as both a cook and a baker. I wanted to find a deity to whom I could devote my craft to. In my search for hearth deities I kept coming up cold. Although I had stumbled through many pantheons, I found that I could not resonate with the hearth and home deities available. This is, until I met Hestia.

I can't say if it was the Greek goddess Hestia who brought me into Hellenismos or not. When we met, I was still practicing under the title of Wiccan. I had a deep commitment to working with plant and nature spirits. I did not feel that one could cultivate a true connection with cooking until they had first cultivated the land. One needs to know the source of the dishes they prepare. One needs to develop intimacy with the land and what grows upon it.

Hestia was such a quiet goddess. She first greeted me with a smile and an embrace, nothing more. I felt like I had come home in her arms. A whispered, "Welcome" began our friendship. Through prayer, meditation and study I commenced to see that she was much more than just a menial laborer upon Olympus. Hestia eventually drew back her veil of modesty and revealed her shining face.

The Greeks honored Hestia with a libation at the beginning and end of every sacrifice. She was first born of the gods and the last to emerge from Kronos's stomach.¹ Thus she was often called "Hestia, First and Last"² or "Oldest yet last born of the gods." She was never given a temple outright, but the immovable hearth of every home became her sacred dwelling. When Herodotus counts the number of families in a town, he counts the hearths.³ The ever burning hearth at the Temple of Delphi could be seen as the Sacred Hearth for all of the Greeks. Clearly, Hestia did not get short-changed in honors due.

So what has Hestia taught me? I think her truest merits can be summed up in three simple words.

The first of these is *humble*; as in courteously respectful. Hestia is a builder of community and the goddess who welcomes all to Olympus. She has taught me to be respectful to all I encounter. I may not like certain individuals, but I must always be courteous towards them. I would say "to their face," but Hestia asks me to go further. I should not denigrate others with slander or gossip either. Being the greeting committee, Hestia hears all sorts of things, but she doesn't repeat them idly. You can turn to her for information, but she is going to scrutinize why you are asking.

Hestia's second merit is found in the word *concord*: agreement between things or harmony. Apollon and Poseidon both vied for her hand in marriage, tearing the earth up in the process. Rather than upsetting either of the suitors, she refused them both.⁴ She kept the peace on Olympus by putting the greater good above her own desires. I don't think anyone has ever asked Hestia what she wanted deep in her heart. Whenever I have a large sacrifice to make, I ask Hestia to help me bear it. Whether it is keeping the peace in my home by keeping my mouth shut or dealing with difficult people, I invoke her aid. She always will cool my temper and is there to remind me to put the principle of things before the personalities I am dealing with.

Hestia's third word is *gracious*: merciful and compassionate. She is the great consoler of the human heart. As the center of the household, the hearth also becomes the center of the family. While some scholars state that she was never a fully realized goddess I would argue that she was the easiest of the Immortals to approach. She was found in every home. It is my sincere belief that Hestia bore no children of her own so that she could become the mother of those who need her. One evening my partner did not come home. By three in the morning I was frantic. I had exhausted my own ideas of where to look and who to call. I made a desperate and sincere prayer for help. "Hestia, who sits near the throne of Zeus, you know the coming and going of all. Bring me word of my missing partner and restore peace in this home." Within five minutes my partner called to let me know that he was alright. Hestia has a compassionate heart for all who come to her and desires us to develop the same.

Most of what I am sharing is from a personal working relationship with the goddess over the past six years. I don't claim to have any authority in the area of her worship. I know that I dedicated myself to her through service every day that I

work in the field of food. For the Greeks, piety meant appropriate action rather than specific prayers. In that spirit, these are some of my own ways to honor her.

- Bake bread, a loaf for yourself and another for a friend or neighbor.
- Work in a soup kitchen.
- Write a letter or send a card to those you care about.
- Hold a dinner party for your friends.
- Clean your house!
- Grow herbs and flowers to beautify your home.
- Hold your tongue in anger
- Don't gossip.
- Set up a candle in your kitchen to honor Hestia.
- Offer her a bit of each meal you prepare.
- Feed the birds or animals about you, they are part of your community.

While Hestia may not be the flashiest of the deathless gods, she has her own powers. It is in community, quiet reflection and a warm embrace that you will find her. She demands that we work to make ours home and our hearts more joyful. Hestia never expects great things from us, but small things are to be done with diligence and mindfulness. She will always greet us with a cup of welcome. To sum things up, Hestia has taught me that humility is not thinking less of myself so much as it is thinking about myself less.

Notes

1 Hesiod's *Theogony*, Line 454

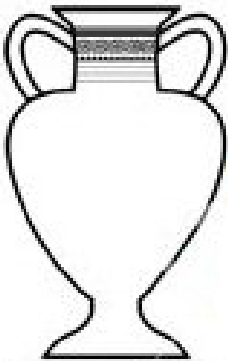
2 Homeric Hymn to Hestia

3 Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 1, Line 77

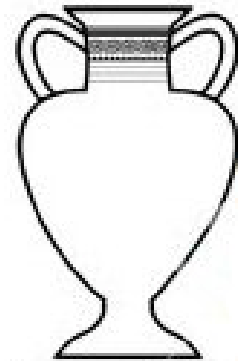
4 Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, Lines 21-32

To Hestia

by Aristotimos



*F*irst honor is given
To you O Hestia.
You, who were first-born
Among the deathless gods.
You sit at the hearth
Of Olympus,
Your hand ready with
The communal cup.
Lady, you greet all
As they come into thy halls
And embrace those
Who depart.
Grant thy gifts
Of community,
Keeping the peace
And a joyful home.



Hellenic Polytheist Networking

by Oenochoe

So many of us remain alone where we live, with no other Hellenic pagans around. But there are now many resources to help you find others in your area, connect with people further away, join or form groups, etc.

The Hellenic Pagan Thiasoi Directory -

<http://www.winterscapes.com/thiasoi.htm>

Listings for Hellenic polytheist groups, both those that exist in the "real world" and those that are exclusively online. Divided into general and regional organizations, e-groups, and thiasoi specific to one deity (or collection of connected deities).

Hellenic Reconstructionist/Polytheist Directory -

http://www.flyallnight.com/khaire_HP/

Listings of individual Hellenic pagans sorted by region, in the US and internationally.

Hellenic Gathering List -

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/hellenic_gathering/

Initially created to bring many Hellenic pagans to PantheaCon (a large pan-pagan convention held in California every February) in 2006, the event was so successful that the list will continue to plan PantheaCon in 2007 and for other Hellenic pagan gatherings.

Pan-Hellenic List -

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/pan-hellenic/>

Designed to coordinate the planning and execution of a pan-hellenic festival for all Hellenic and Roman pagans.

Hellenion Demoi and Proto-Demoi -

<http://www.hellenion.org/Demoi.html>

These groups are governed by Hellenion members but are not necessarily restricted to members. (Neokoroi also has plans in the works for Eranoi and Thiasoi, two types of Hellenic groups.)

HellenicPagan Yahoogroup -

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HellenicPagan/>

The largest internet discussion group for Hellenic polytheists, with 441 members as of this writing. While much of the list activity is chat, sharing of news, theological discussions, etc., it is also a great place to network with other Hellenic pagans, find folks in your area, and build the foundation for future friendships and religious partnerships.

Want to find others in your area to meet, study, and/or worship with but don't know where to start? Well, one way is to become a distributor for He Epistole – print up copies and leave them at bookstores, coffee shops, New Age or occult shops, libraries, colleges, etc. and include an insert with a request that those interested contact you for more information. Or make up some flyers to post on bulletin boards in similar places, with an invitation to join you in Hellenic ritual, or just get together and chat. Or put an ad in a regional pagan publication, if one exists. Perhaps you'll find that there were others just like you, hidden in your community, waiting for someone to come out of the woodwork and start a group. You won't know until you try.

Orphic Hymn #52

translation by Gitana

*To the god of the triennial festival
incense of sweet herbs*

I invoke you, blessed, of many names, frenzied, Bakkhos,
bull-horned, god of the wine-press, fire-sown, Nysian, deliverer,
thigh-bred, god of the winnowing-fan, with first initiates in the fire
of nighttime, Eubouleus, wearing a headband, shaking the thursos,
threefold, with secret unspoken rites, the hidden child of Zeus,
first-born, Erikepaios, father and also son of the gods,
raw, wand-bearer, leading the band of revelers into a manic dance,
celebrating the Bakkhic rites, the sacred triennial festival, gives calm to all,
breaking up from the earth, in fire-light, you foam up, a child of two mothers,
mountain-haunting, horned, draped with a fawn skin, of annual festivals,
Paian of a golden spear, under the folds of a robe, grape-adorned,
Bassaros, delighting in ivy, with many maidens and followers,
come, blessed one, always bursting and joyous, to the initiates.

Faith and Doubt

by Sannion

I have been talking with a friend who is interested in Hellenismos, but still a little skeptical, and this is what I had to say to him.

I have certainly gone through that - I think if you never experience any doubt, you're in a very dangerous place. That leads to fundamentalism, and it's also sort of a hollow faith. I feel that having gone through the doubt, really deeply questioned everything that's important to me, and still come through it, has only reaffirmed and strengthened those things that I do hold to. However, as with all things, you can take it too far, and end up talking yourself out of some really good experiences. So, the question is, how do you know? How do you really know?

You don't. You can't. You can't even really prove that anything outside of yourself actually exists and isn't just a figment of your imagination. I mean, for all you know, I might not exist. This e-mail could just be magically appearing to you out of nowhere, or perhaps you've got multiple personality disorder and one of your other selves is writing this to you. I know that that's not the case, because I'm sitting here typing it myself, but really, how do you know that? You don't, but that seems rather improbable, now doesn't it? Occam's razor comes into play. The simplest explanation is probably the truest. And that's really something that I've noticed. It's much simpler to take things at face value. It requires less effort, less mental juggling, less trying to explain away all these coincidences. Because once you start down the skeptic's path, and really start questioning everything, it all unravels, and your questions never end. Now I'm not saying that believing everything is the best - a small dose of skepticism is a good thing - but there has to be a balance. And that's really one of the fundamentals of Hellenismos - at Delphi, there were a series of maxims or wise sayings inscribed, and one of the foremost of those was "Everything in moderation" or "Nothing to Excess".

Now, I could give you a bunch of theological and philosophical proofs for the existence of the gods - the Greeks loved to do this - but really, do those work? They don't for Christians, as you and I both know all too well. They like to think that you can reduce it down to a mathematical proof, but you can't. You just can't. That's not how spiritual things work. They have their own laws, their own type of existence, and therefore the laws that govern our meat bodies don't apply to them. What I've always found to be a much surer proof than pretty sounding words - and paradoxically, less certain - is one's experience. When you begin to experience the gods, have encounters with them, feel them as an intimate part of your life, the junkyard dog of doubt that lives in your heart begins to curl up and go to sleep. Not at first, of course. You get into such a habit of doubting everything that it's natural, reflexive. But eventually, over time, you'll begin to see that you don't need that armor, that all these weird and wonderful things are happening, things that you can't explain in any other way than but to assert the existence of the gods.

So that's really my advice - start slow and work your way up. Read about the gods, try to get an understanding about them. Then go out into the world and see if you can find them there.

Because our gods don't inhabit some fairytale heaven, they're right here, with us, in this world. They live in the sky and the earth, in trees and mountains, in old buildings and city streets. You can find them anywhere and everywhere. The mass of people experience them, but no longer have the vocabulary, the worldview in which to place them. They have also come to doubt their senses. They think only the intellectual matters, and that what you feel with the flesh, what you smell and taste and hear is not real. Only the mind. Well, mind is nice, but we're more than mind. We're all of our senses together, and a little something else, a little something that exists beyond the physical. And so is everything else in the world.

So, remember that, and remember that there are many ways to experience things. You aren't always going to experience the gods as seven foot tall blond humanoid beings who come up and have a heart to heart with you. Sometimes it's just a feeling of *presence*, perhaps accompanied by a smell or taste or some odd random occurrence. Sometimes you'll experience them in animal form - a deer that uncharacteristically stops, looks at you, and you see in its eyes a greater than animal intelligence. Sometimes it's as simple as a sudden breeze rustling the leaves to get your attention, or a phrase on a billboard that exactly matches your thoughts at that moment. Sometimes you'll have a dream or a vision, and yes, occasionally you'll get a burning bush, but not very often. That's not usually how the gods choose to act.

But the thing is, they do choose to act, and they can choose to act in any number of ways. So that's part of the religion too - mindfulness. Paying attention to the world around you, instead of contemplating your navel or dreaming of a distant heaven. It's being here, now, and acting in the world. Which is why stuff like prayer and sacrifice is so important. Because the gods aren't just good feelings inside us - they have an independent existence outside of us. And in gratitude for the real things that they do for us, we offer real actions to them. And that's something else that'll help with doubt - finding a regular routine of worship, and doing it, no matter what. Because you aren't always going to feel up to doing it, sometimes you'll kick and scream against it. But those are the times when you need to do something like that the most. And don't always expect that there'll be fireworks kind of experiences when you do that routine - sometimes it's downright boring, but you should still do it, because it's a way of showing respect to the gods.

Also, it occurs to me that the root of skepticism lies in fear. Fear of being hurt, fear of being taken advantage of, fear of putting your faith in something that's going to let you down, fear of looking foolish. So, in order to combat this fear, one actively wars against faith, asserting their independence, insisting that this can't and won't touch their life, and thus they won't be hurt anymore. But what do you get when you base your life on fear? Nothing comes out of nothing, and fear only begets fear, emptiness, and loneliness. It takes real courage to put aside that fear, and embrace life to its fullest. And to really be living, you have to take risks, you have to be willing to get your knees bruised and your heart broken.

And Hellenismos is, above all things, a religion of life. Each of our gods presides over a particular part of it, and in experiencing that part of life to its fullest, you draw closer to them. And really, a lot of the worries that lead to rampant skepticism don't apply in Hellenismos. There's no authority, no one who stands between you and the gods. No one who's going to take advantage of you, steal your money, tell you what to do with your life. At most, our priests lead rituals and offer advice - but even then, there's nothing that says you have to accept what they say as the gospel truth. You are allowed - nay *encouraged* - to argue with them, and think things out for yourself. You're even allowed to disagree with the gods.

And yeah, maybe there's still the fear of looking foolish, because from some perspectives, what we do can look a little silly. Standing in front of a table with pretty bowls and statues and pouring wine to them and scattering barley and reciting poetry - yeah, that can seem a little silly. But really, is that the worse thing in the world? Think about it - how foolish do you look when you dance, or when you have sex? There is nothing more absurd than two people making love - and yet, nothing more intense, more beautiful, more mindblowingly amazing than good sex. Hell, even bad sex is still sex. So really, sometimes you've

just got to let go and let yourself be in the moment, and accept that yup, you're going to look silly afterwards, but that doesn't matter, because right now it feels incredible. And believe me, worship, real worship where you can actually feel the gods present there with you - is the most amazing thing in the world. Yeah, it's even better than sex. Though I don't know if I'd want to have to choose between the two of them.

And another thing that I think really helps - Hellenismos is about gratitude, about deepening your relationship with the gods. It's not about dogma, it's not about fear, it's not about demeaning and humiliating yourself in order to exalt god - it's about simple thankfulness. About honoring the gods as the bestowers of all of life's blessings, and worshipping them by sharing our food, our drink, by reciting pretty words, by making art, by dancing or racing or perfecting our bodies, by simply acknowledging that they're there, that you recognize all that they've done for you, and that you deeply appreciate them. It's as simple - and as incredibly profound - as that. Because in the end, your whole life becomes about thankfulness, because every single aspect of your life has a presiding deity or spirit. So everything you think or do or desire becomes a way to honour and connect with the divine.

A Rose for Aphrodite

by Thista Minai

With the first breath of ocean air
My spirit is filled with You.
Everything so lovely as the sea,
Swelling and pulsing like a vast breathing sapphire,
Is Yours, Lady of Beauty,
Beautiful Lady.

Sea spray on my face adorns me,
A diamond veil,
A glittering attestation to glamorous allure.
Wind and water mingle in austere grace,
And, wading into the sea,
I am a part of that azure enchantment.
Like this, with You,
I can revel in my own beauty,
I can thank You for Your gifts.

This rose,
Soft and pink as lovers' flesh,
Is for You.
Laid upon the golden sand,
It waits for foaming waves to carry it into Your embrace,
For You to hold it as You held me.



A Religion of Experts: Why Reconstructionism Must Destroy Itself

by Sarah Hekateia

Where there are Reconstructionists, there will be books. If we are going to claim to be following in the hallowed tradition of the ancient Greeks, we had best make sure that we are representing that tradition faithfully and accurately. Since none of us has first-hand knowledge of religious life in ancient Greece, that's always meant reading through scholarly tomes and ancient works of philosophy and literature to discover what the ancients did and thought about their Gods.

I am not going to bash Reconstructionism, at least not in this sense. I'm assuming that anyone who believes in the Gods as existing independently of human consciousness will eventually come to the conclusion that it's important to pay attention to what has been learned about their character in the past, and the only reliable way to do this is by consulting the literature. (If that seems like a bit of a logical leap, think of it this way: If you're trying to find a birthday gift for a new friend, and it's really important that you get her something she'll like, what do you do? You ask the people who already know her well. If it is important to us that our devotions are pleasing to the Gods, what can we do but consult those who knew them best?) I will, however, suggest that we not become too secure in our Reconstructionist identity, but instead see Reconstructionism as a means to an end - an end that includes its own destruction.

The self-destructive nature of Reconstructionism is easily understood. If we are willing to assume that the goal of Reconstructionism is to create a modern religious tradition that

follows the ancient Greek pattern of relating to the Gods as closely as possible, we need only observe that proper worship of the Gods in ancient Greece was never limited to the educated, nor even, to my knowledge, the literate. Ordinary people - peasant farmers, citizen soldiers - could and did honor the Gods in their daily lives. Ordinary people could be priests, could make sacrifices and offerings, could pour libations to the Gods and pray to them. No special study is required to be a temple sweeper, but merely special devotion.

Our religion is not for everyone, but it is for anyone, and if we truly believe that it is something important and valuable, we have a responsibility - as faithful Reconstructionists, as Neokoroi, and as lovers of humanity - to make that available to anyone who desires it. Perhaps valid religions exist that speak only to the privileged or educated, but ours is not one of them. For our reconstructed religion to be complete, we must free it from academia. We must learn to teach it, not through references to Burkert and Kerenyi, but through our rituals, our actions, and our lives.

In other words, we cannot remain a religion of experts, of amateur and professional historians and classicists. We must cease to be Reconstructionists and take up our place as the next generation of Hellenes. When we teach through ritual and song, when we build our temples and make our offerings, when we ultimately pass the torch of our devotion to those who will come after us, we are no longer reconstructing an ancient tradition. *We are* the tradition.



Mantikoi and Exegetai Profiles

The term *mantis* (pl. *mantikoi*) covers all types of diviners and oracles in ancient Greece. People who, through divinatory methods or direct inspiration, ascertain the words or will of the gods and transmit them to other people. Neokoroi is now providing official mantikoi for the benefit of the community - both our group and the larger Hellenic polytheist population. Here are the profiles of the first two Neokoroi Mantikoi:

Name: Kyrene Ariadne
Location: Medford, MA
Email address: kyrene@gmail.com
Websites: <http://kyrene.4t.com>, <http://www.dadoukhoi.org>
Types of divination: Tarot, Limyran Oracle

I have been practicing and studying tarot since I was 12 (I am currently 27), and have also done work involving the Limyran Oracle. The tarot is the tool with which I am the most familiar, and have studied its origins in great detail during my time in

various esoteric fraternities, including the Golden Dawn and the Order of the Celestial Academy.

On the more practical, personal end of things, I have done tarot readings for many people, both personally and professionally, and have done work at psychic fairs in various locations, including NY and VT. I mostly perform oracular work on behalf of Apollon, but have also done it for Dionysos when the occasion called for it. Both gods I serve in an oracular fashion, although it is Apollon with whom I work with most in that particular aspect. I find that my best work is done when I not so much look at the cards as much as I "listen" and allow myself to become receptive to what the gods have to say. Sometimes during readings, I'll start talking and before I know it, I won't have very much control over what I am saying-the gods have their way of getting their messages across, with or without the cards.

Name: Brontosproximo
Location: Greater Boston, MA
Email address: brontosproximo@gmail.com
Type of divination: Runes

I started with the runes over 20 years ago at the suggestion of my then-current lover. Since then I have made divinations for friends, lovers and myself. It is my experience that divination does not "tell the future" per se, but illuminates a path during uncertainty. I am a skeptic. It is my hope is that becoming a mantis and offering my services to others will give me more opportunities to divine. This I anticipate will help me understand this gift better. I am one of the founding members of the Dadoukhoi and a moderator of Thiasos_Ares.

The term *exegete* (pl. *exegetai*) means a religious specialist, one who dispenses advice about carrying out cultus to different gods. Neokoroi *exegetai* can be advisors relating to a specific god, or of general Hellenic ritual, and are available to help all Hellenic polytheists. Here is the first official *exegete* of Neokoroi:

Name: Thista Minai
Exegete of Artemis
Location: Cambridge, MA
Email address: thista@gmail.com
Temple of Artemis at Cataleos: <http://www.cataleos.org>

I started my classical research with two courses in college, Paganism in Ancient Greece (later retitled as Religion in

Ancient Greece), and Women in Ancient Greece. I continue with academic study on my own, not only by researching Artemis and Her myths and cults, but also by studying Greek religion in general in various city-states, and by studying the particular conditions of women in ancient Greece, which I believe to be intrinsic to the understanding of Artemis's myths and cults.

Artemis fascinated me since childhood, but I'm sure every Hellene called to a God has a similar story. I began to thoroughly explore my relationship with Her when I began training in Wicca. My Priestess/teacher was unfamiliar with Greek deities, and so I turned to the Greek myths to learn more about Her. I took classics courses when my college offered them, and got reading recommendations from the Classics professor to continue research on my own. Eventually I was fortunate enough to see Artemis drawn down in full invocation. By that time I suspected She was my Patron, but when She addressed me as Her daughter, I lost all doubt. I continued to work closely with Artemis and to study Her as She was in ancient Greece rather than taking a Wiccan approach. For unrelated reasons, I later split from the Craft, and then spent a year with Demos Oreiaddon. I held festivals for Artemis with that group, and began work on my current project, the Temple of Artemis at Cataleos. The Demos split up for a number of reasons, but I continue to work on the temple, and hold regular public festivals for those able to attend. I've also begun to implement ways in which people can participate in temple activities from a distance.



The Virgin Goddess

by Thista Minai

*I*n ancient Greece, Artemis was known as a virgin Goddess. Today, as modern Hellenes attempt to revive ancient Greek religion and apply it to the modern world, we must reassess the meaning of Artemis's virginity, and attempt to understand why She chose this state.

It's important to clarify that 'virginity' was a very different thing in ancient Greece than it is for us in the modern world. To them, sexual abstinence was an after effect of virginity, *not* the definition of the word. The ancient Greeks did not believe the hymen existed, and virgin births were a regular occurrence rather than a rare miracle (see Giulia Sissa's [Greek Virginity](#)). *Parthenos* is the Greek word that generally gets translated as "virgin". Determining what it actually meant to be a *parthenos* is incredibly complicated, and one is likely to come up with a different answer for every polis. Luckily for Hellenes and modern scholars, the vast majority of what we know of ancient Greek myth and culture comes from Athens. Furthermore, the other Greek city-states were tremendously influenced by Athens due to its early victory over Persia and its subsequent financial and cultural success. So, while what we conclude about ancient

Greek virgins based on Athenian social structure might not apply to all city-states (Sparta being the classic example), it will hold true to most of them, and will be at least relevant to all of them.

So what did it mean to be an Athenian *parthenos*? Ideally it meant an unmarried young woman who still lived with her father and never had sex. Athenian men wanted to ensure that their wives would bear legitimate heirs, so daughters were kept under strict supervision and seclusion to ensure that they had not been exposed to any other men before meeting their husbands. The one interesting exception was at certain festivals for Artemis, where unmarried women performed dances that the men watched, and this was often men's only opportunity to see their future brides.

There are many situations in which this ideal wasn't quite the same as the reality. Lower class families, for example, often couldn't afford to have their daughters spinning and weaving in seclusion, and so these young women would work the land with the rest of the family. However, even these women were still supposed to remain virgins. In the cases where a young

woman *did* have sex, that did not necessarily end her *parthenia*, or virginity. Sissa writes, "Penetration by a male organ deflowered a virgin, yet the event existed only if it was found out by family and society or revealed by its consequences: the parthenic state depended on sexuality, hence on the body, yet was also a purely negative fact." Thus, if no one knew a woman had sex, she was still a *parthenos*, in contrast to the modern idea where once you've had sex, you're no longer a virgin, regardless of whether or not other people know about it. Unmarried women who managed to conceal a pregnancy, were allowed to give birth under other strange circumstances (usually only applicable in myth), or who bore a child without anyone having discovered the circumstances under which the child was conceived, were said to have had a 'virgin birth', and their sons were known as *partheniai*, or sons of virgins (Sissa, [Greek Virginity](#), 79-83).

All these details considered, the fact remains that the ideal *parthenos* was a virgin in the modern sense of the word. Men wanted to know their children would be theirs, and not sired by some other man their wife had lain with in secret. If we keep in mind the fact that almost all ancient Greek myths we have to study today were written by men, and that the Greeks believed their Gods, especially the Olympians, to be perfect - that is, they embodied ideals, then we can assume that the variety of *parthenia* intended in the myths of Artemis we are familiar with would be the Athenian man's ideal model of a *parthenos*. Therefore, according to ancient Greek myth, Artemis doesn't have sex, never has, and never will.

Assuming that ancient Greek myth is valuable to modern Hellenism despite the overwhelmingly male point of view from which it was written, the important question becomes why. Why would Artemis choose to be a virgin? She asked Zeus of Her own will to remain a *parthenos* forever, so there must be some reason that She desired to abstain from sex and marriage. What is that reason?

The answer to this question can be found by studying the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. The Pythia was a virgin priestess of Apollo who gave prophecies from the God in His temple at Delphi. Sissa tells us (again in [Greek Virginity](#)) that vapors coming from a crack in the earth induced a hallucinogenic trance in which the Pythia delivered these oracles. The fumes entered the Pythia's vagina as she sat on a tripod perched over the chasm. Sissa goes on to explain how the significance of this lies in the ancient Greek perception of symmetry in the human body: the ancient Greeks believed the body to be symmetrical not only horizontally, but vertically as well. Thus the vagina and the mouth corresponded to one other. Therefore, when the essence of Apollo, in the form of fumes emitted from the earth, entered the Pythia through her vagina, it was logical to the ancient Greeks that this essence would then exit her body through her mouth in the form of divine prophecies. In order for the Greeks to be absolutely certain that all the words escaping her lips were sent by the God Himself and only Him, the Pythia must be completely pure and devoid of outside influences, i.e. chaste. In this way the authenticity of her oracles were guaranteed, because the only things coming out of her mouth were the same things that went into her 'mouth.'

The implications of this are tremendous. This relationship between Apollo and His priestess echoes a widely held belief

about ancient Greek women and their husbands: Not only did a woman belong to her husband, but his essence permeated her. His influence entered her during sex, and so every word she spoke was his word channeled through her. This basic concept also applies to the ancient Greek understanding of men and women in general. Men were considered purely projective (as their penis spews forth their essence, so must their mouths when we apply vertical symmetry) and women were considered purely receptive. Furthermore, a woman's individuality is somehow contaminated by a man's spirit during intercourse. Once he spills his essence into her, everything she says and does has his essence in it.

This is where we find the reason behind Artemis's virginity. As a Goddess of both freedom, independence, and the untouched purity of wild nature, Artemis must preserve an identity that is completely uninfluenced by any other being. She could not allow anyone else to cloud Her individuality. The ancient Greeks believed that the only way for a woman (or Goddess, in this case) to remain purely herself and not have her identity influenced by anyone else was to abstain from sex. In the minds of the ancient Greek men who wrote down the myths we are now familiar with, the only acceptable way for Artemis to avoid intercourse permanently was to remain a *parthenos* eternally, and thus never be bound by the responsibilities of a wife to bear children.

To take all this information one step further and ask how Artemis would manifest Herself in modern society, or if She would still require Her followers to be virgins today (as they were in ancient Greece) is effectively unsolvable. The answer would be dependent not only on the individual person in question, but also on their personal approach to reconstructing ancient Greek religion. For example, for a woman determined to be as authentic to ancient Greek culture as possible in every aspect of their worship, perhaps they would need to abstain from sex with men. Having sex with women is arguably acceptable, for if this woman is working with the ancient Greek understanding of men and women, then two women, both being purely receptive beings, are incapable of contaminating each other's identities. If this were a man instead, the answer might be entirely different. Perhaps they could have sex freely without needing to worry about contamination of their identity, for if men are only projective, then they have no receptiveness with which to receive the identity of another. However, one could also look at the myth of Hippolytos and assume that virginity is the best way to stay close to Artemis regardless of one's own gender, although I would caution anyone determined to abstain entirely from sex, and suggest they take a good look at what ultimately happens to Hippolytos and why. On the other hand, this same question could yield a very different answer for someone who wishes to use a modern understanding of gender and sex. Perhaps sex is less binding to them, and it is instead relationships which have an unquestionable influence on their independence and individuality, or perhaps they are one of those rare and unique people who can keep their individuality and freedom in tact while being romantically or sexually involved with someone. The point is that there is no longer a set rule in this matter. In the modern world it is up to each individual who wishes to be closer to Artemis to approach Her and discover which path is best suited for them.



When

by S. A. Victory

*W*hen darkness descends behind my eyes

When all grows quiet and still
When I stand on the edge of sleep
When dreams beckon
When my mind lies open
When I doubt your love
When my heart lets go its fear
When from my flesh my spirit steps
When your emerald eyes I see
When your hand you do extend
When you take me to your care
When your smile gently mocks
When I behold you in awe
When I feel the warmth you bring
When I hear your words to me
When I acknowledge again your wisdom
When blessed I am by your light
When your love soothes all my sorrows
When you are my friend as always
When I am your priestess
When I sit at your feet
When you hold me in your hands
When for a time I am safe in your charge
When I can be simply me
When the time comes to return again
When forever is not so long
When Dionysos' love is found

www.neokoroi.org

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