

The Transformation of Corinthian goddesses¹

The force of the flexible form

Concerning religious iconography, Albert Moore (1977: 96) points out that

“in the polytheistic religions of ancient Egypt and Greece we can study two rich but very different developments ... The Greek gods ... are conceived and portrayed anthropomorphically; they are therefore more involved in and dependent upon the changing ideals of human culture.... Just as the surviving Greek images have come through the vicissitudes of history mainly in broken or derivative form, so their anthropomorphic vision itself has been more vulnerable to change.”

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However, this divine ‘vulnerability to change’ could also be perceived as flexibility, a faculty of metamorphosis, i.e. an ability to transform and adjust to new cultural paradigms and ideologies without losing the ability to capture the

imagination of sympathisers. We will ask how Demeter and Kore, the Greek goddesses of grain, agricultural and human fertility, fared when transformed into the Roman goddesses of Ceres and Proserpina. More specifically, since cults varied locally, how did the transformation materialise in Corinth, a city located in the northeastern corner of Peloponnese, and re-founded as a Roman colony in 1st century B.C.E.?

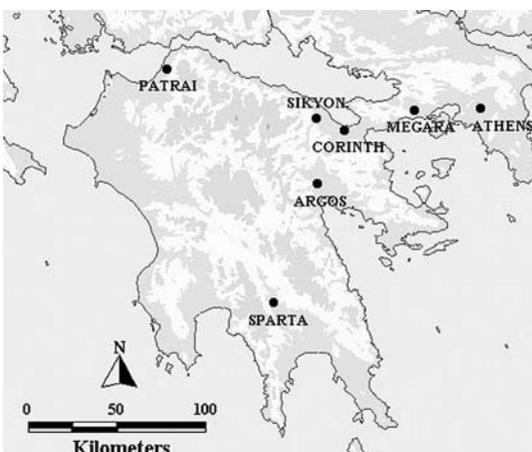


Figure 1: Map of Peloponnese showing the location of Corinth

1: This essay is a highly abridged version of an article by the same name that appeared in *Corinth in Context: Comparative Perspectives on Religion and Society* edited by Steven Friesen and Daniel Showalter. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Demeter and Kore in Corinth

The centre of Demeter/Ceres' cult in Corinth was always the sanctuary located on the northern slopes of Acrocorinth.² Located outside the city, this sanctuary is typical of how Greek Demeter sanctuaries reproduced an environment of spatial isolation, even if they were located inside the city walls (Cole 1994: 213). This is important because the location of the sanctuary was the one thing that it was difficult for the Romans to do anything about. They could perhaps transform the space and its 'inhabitants,' but not the location.

The votive offerings, numerous terracotta trays with fruits of the earth, show that Demeter was very much perceived as the goddess of grain and agriculture in the Greek period. Central in her cult was ritual dining by women worshippers, an activity that celebrated the fruits of the earth but also promoted human fertility. More than 40 dining rooms have been excavated from the Greek period. Other excavated remains allude to the myth of the goddess of grain whose daughter Kore/Persephone was raped by Hades, the king of the Underworld, when she was out in the fields picking flowers. For revenge, Demeter did not let anything grow until she got Kore back at least part of the year (Bookidis and Stroud 1987: 8). This myth also established Kore as goddess of the Underworld and Hades' wife.

The meanings of names are also interesting when studying transformation: *Kore* means just 'the girl', while her other Greek name, *Persephone*, means she who beats the sheaves during threshing. Thus in her Greek hypostasis she was seen either as Demeter's daughter, and/or as her helper in the process of producing grain, i.e. food. Thus, both Kore and Persephone refer to Demeter as the central deity, but an interesting complication is that threshing and transforming natural grain to cultural food are human activities, which providing grain and fertility are not. Thus, Persephone was somehow viewed as easier to identify with for human farmers. All they could do with Lady Demeter was to pray for her goodwill. *De-meter* further includes the 'mother'-term, so the name not only reflects the mythology, representing her as 'the mother' of 'the girl' Kore, but also that she is a goddess of human fecundity. In the Greek sanctuary, this aspect of the goddess is confirmed e.g. by dedications of grotesque figurines representing pregnant women (Merker 2000: H357–361 p. 195 and Plate 53). The dedications of miniature (flower) baskets also allude to the myth of the flower-picking Kore.

The Roman Corinthian Ceres and Proserpina

After the re-founding of Corinth as a Roman colony, the *official* names of the deities worshipped in the sanctuary must have been *Ceres* and *Proserpina*. The Latin *Proserpina* has by some been assumed to derive from a term meaning 'to emerge'. Others assume it to be a Latinization of the Greek *Persephone*, and hence not meaningful in itself. The meaning of her Greek name *Kore* was, however, lost in translation. Similarly, the 'mother'-aspect of Demeter's name was also lost, but the connection to the earth that may have been inherent in the prefix, the proto-Indo-European Da/De- (distribution of land/earth), was retained. Her Latin name *Ceres*

2: This presentation is based on the excavation reports, see Bookidis and Stroud (1997); Merker (2000); Slane (1990).

denotes the goddess of grain, which grows out of the earth. If we view ancient pantheons as semiotic universes, it is likely that the translation whereby both ‘the mother’ and ‘the girl’ disappear out of their names’ semantic fields, reflects a pantheon of a different culture. On the other hand, the two deities did not represent women’s life-worlds as authoritatively as they did in the Graecophone pantheon, and where other Roman goddesses filled this function instead.

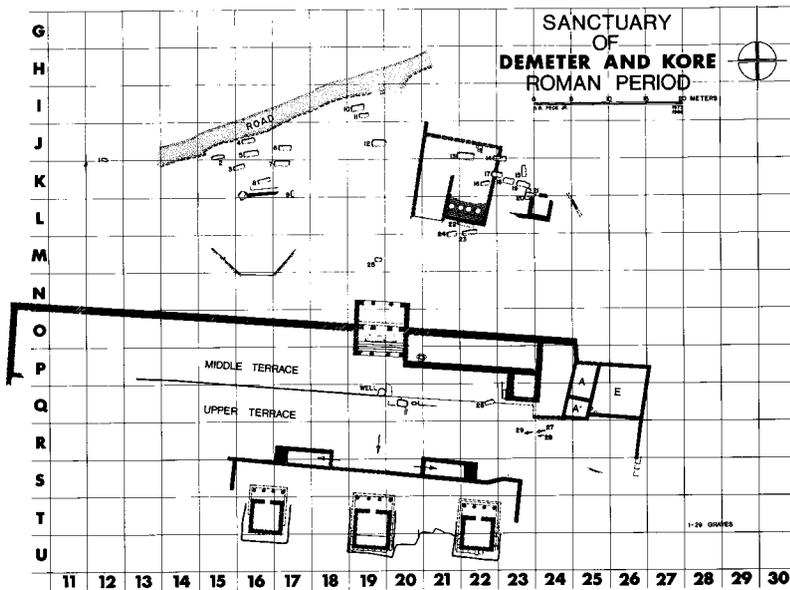


Figure 2: Plan of the Sanctuary in the Roman Period

The question is how pervasively the official Latin names of the goddesses affected the actual cult practices in Roman Corinth. Even if Roman infrastructure meant that cult practices were more assimilated across their Empire than across previous empires that controlled the inner basin of the Mediterranean, there was still considerable room for variation. As Roman marble was placed on top of local stone so that the totality of a building was given a new look, so also the blending of Roman beliefs and cult practices with local ones created new, hybrid phenomena.

In Corinth, even if the early inscriptions were in Latin, by the time of Hadrian the majority of official inscriptions were in Greek. There may be demographic reasons for this, but it was never a problem for people, least of all in polyglot empires, to speak more than one language if external circumstances so required. In light of this, it is striking that the evidence even from the Roman-period sanctuary is in Greek. If we look at the matter from the perspective of the Roman colonizers, we see that even though they changed the names of the deities into Latin ones, they were still viewed as old Greek deities. In Rome, it was the *Graecus ritus*³ that was observed. However, since the Roman conception of the Greek past was not identical with the Greek past, it rather displayed a very Roman notion of it (Beard *et al.* 1998: 2 n.3; 173); we cannot assume straightforward

3: The Latin technical term the Romans used to denote rites that were *exempt* from following certain Roman religious laws because of their ancient Greek origin.

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continuity from the Greek to the Roman periods. For example, according to the *Graecus ritus*, rituals and festivals were celebrated exclusively by women even if other Roman rituals of Ceres were gender-inclusive.

When the Roman colonists came to Corinth in 44 B.C.E., enough of the pre-Roman structures had survived to ensure certain identification of the deities worshipped there. After only 100 years or so, they started remodelling the old Demeter sanctuary. First, on the upper terrace, some previous buildings were covered over and three small temples were erected and protected by a retaining wall, dividing the former sanctuary space more sharply into two areas. Second, on the lower terrace, none of the former dining rooms was rebuilt in the Roman period as dining rooms.



Figure 3: Roman-period relief of the goddess imitating archaic style

The Roman retaining wall left the Greek dining area outside the protected space, and turned the upper terrace into the ritual centre. Third, there is a drastic fall in traditional votive offerings in the early Roman period. Fourth, the remains of an offering table were found in the central and largest temple. A floor mosaic in this temple carries a dedication to *Neothera*. Stroud's (1993:73 n.7) suggestion that *Neothera* (the younger) was an epithet of Proserpina in the Roman period (like *Presbytera*, the elder, was the corresponding epithet of Demeter) has more or less gained consensus.

Based on this evidence, I want to make three points: First, this means that the main temple in the Roman period might have been dedicated to the daughter and not to the mother.⁴ Second, the name *Neothera* and the symbolism surrounding the inscription integrated Egyptian elements,

4: In a forthcoming study, Barbetta Spaeth argues on the basis of the cult of Ceres elsewhere, that this cannot have been the case. A sanctuary with the daughter rather than the mother as the main cult focus would have been an anomaly. Spaeth is surely correct, but my problem with this view is that Roman religion during imperial times provided a space for conversation and negotiation between imperial centres and margins, ancient Roman traditions and ancient colonial ones. Since religious standards were not reinforced from the top down, there was considerable variation between the Roman pantheon worshipped in today's northern England or Greece, and the Roman pantheon worshipped in Rome.

which is an indicator of syncretism. Third, the mother-and-daughter aspect of the cult that might have been relatively weakened in the cult in its Latin reinvention/re-naming, is re-activated if *Presbytera* and *Neothera* are indeed Demeter and Persephone. These epithets are not only applied to Egyptian goddesses, but also documented in Eleusis. Fourth, it is noteworthy that this inscription is in Greek because, whatever the intention, it shows that by the 2nd century at the latest, a Latin-Roman cult of Ceres was not seen as appropriate. This raises the question of whether it ever was. Indeed, the most ‘Roman’ thing about this Greek inscription is its ambiguity, calling upon and thus integrating the universes of the Egyptian and Greek cults, in a Roman context.

Conclusion

When studying the transformation of the goddesses from Greek to Roman Corinth, we pointed out that their identity was dependent on the language in which they were worshipped, by whom, and the functions they fill within the system that is a pantheon (Staples 1997:8). We have observed continuity in content and perhaps even in the names used within the cult (as different from the names used to describe the sanctuary in official records). However, there was discontinuity in functions and some cult practices. If ‘disambiguation’ is “to remove uncertainty of meaning from” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.), then what the Romans were doing with provincial pantheons to integrate them into their larger system was often the opposite.

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