

# **The Political Cosmology of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter***

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This paper investigates the relationship between the polis and the myth of Demeter and Persephone, specifically as that myth is presented in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. The political realities of the polis are reflected in the narrative of the *Hymn*, and this observation has ramifications for dating certain elements of the myth. Since it is also true that the Greek pantheon represents a heavenly and meteorological order, our thesis can be extended to cosmology: finding polis-politics in the activity of the pantheon provides an interesting basis from which to interpret early Greek conceptions of the universe. Corroborating this view is the evidence of Presocratic cosmologies that show a marked resemblance to the political culture dominating the cities of Archaic and Classical Greece.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* relates the myth of Demeter battling Zeus and Hades over the place of her daughter Persephone. The *Hymn* has received a considerable amount of psychologically and gender-based analysis, but, “while the hymn-poet is by no means unaware of the psychological and sexual implications of his narrative, his attention remains fixed on the larger political and theological ramifications of his story” (Strauss Clay 1989: 210). This paper will defend the thesis that in various ways the myth reflects the political values of polis-period Greek culture, and that such an analysis may serve as a heuristic tool in dating certain aspects of the myth. After examining the political reality expressed in this contest of the gods, the coherence of the general cosmological perspective of the myth with the values of the polis will be considered, broaching the broader topic of how (and why) the Greeks harmonized political values with their understanding of the physical world. Finally, the features of the myth that share aspects of the various cosmologies developed by the Presocratic philosophers will be used to show an underlying theoretical continuity between the mytho-poetic and philosophical

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explanatory systems that develop within the Greek context.

### **The Political Values of the Polis**

In order to show that this *Homeric Hymn* reflects the political values of the polis, it is necessary first to outline what those values are. The collapse of Mycenaean culture leaves the remaining population in a period of deep structural reorganization; this forms the crucible of the polis.<sup>1</sup> While there are differing theories purporting to explain why a culture of consensual politics arises out of such a background, scholars agree that in the polis persuasion plays a major role in community life (Schofield 2007; Vernant 1982; Desborough 1972; Mylonas 1956). Here persuasion is to be read as a system that stands in contrast to the more period-familiar rule of a small elite running a centralized authority able to impose its will without debate or validation from the rest of the community (Vernant 1982: 15-23). Recently authoritarianism in general has been examined in its opposition to persuasion (Lincoln 1994). In contrast to authoritarianism, the polis has its foundation in a broad class of citizens sharing power. Of course outside the citizenry in the normal polis there exists a population of varying size playing a crucial role in the community that does not participate in the political process, and this population is often ruled in just such a disregarding authoritarian manner by the citizens as occurs in any hierarchical system. But within the broad citizenry of the polis, authoritarianism must contend with consensual politics, and the individual, minority-group, or limited interest able to assert itself to the point of being able to disregard the concerns of other groups or classes within the citizenry is the exception, not the norm.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This paper will make use of the discontinuity between the Mycenaean and polis Greeks in their political organization (Finley 1957: 133-159); importantly though, there is a great degree of continuity in religion (Nilsson 1968).

<sup>2</sup>Which is not to say that more typically authoritarian regimes do not appear within this context; "tyrant" and "tyranny" are, after all, Greek words that have their basic meaning developed in this context. In competitive and continually fluid circumstances, it is of course possible that one competitor can gain an exceptional degree of domination. Ideally, interests are relatively balanced and a system of power sharing evolves; realistically, such a system can collapse into single-rule, be this because of great talent on the part of individuals claiming the tyranny or a lack of it on the part of their competitors. What is more interesting about the tyrants is their inability to consolidate power to

In this context consensus politics go hand in hand with the understanding that some form of community is necessary for survival. For the Greeks, consensus politics flows from realizing the social requirements of human nature (Kerferd 1971: 11-130; Ostwald 1986: 260-273; de Romilly 1992: 112-123). One could not simply avoid entering into a political relationship with others. In the literature of the polis writers explicitly realize the need for occupational specialization because individuals are not able to look after all of their own requirements (most famously in Plato's *Republic* 369b). Reliance makes one beholden to a compatriot's interests, and this in turn reveals a concern that fellow citizens remain willing participants in the community (Vlastos 1946: 68-75).<sup>3</sup> On this view, there is a subtle power of veto at work in the decision-making process. Subtle because a limited, minority interest within the polis cannot, or at least should not, simply withhold its contribution to the community following the adoption of a policy that is perceived as against their interests. Such behaviour quickly spells the dissolution of the polis, a result that benefits no one. It is a last stand strategy that exerts a force towards compromise and consensus because of

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the degree of making tyrannies permanent. Rather than undermining the basic political organization being outlined here in favour of something more authoritarian, tyrants often enough have the effect of furthering the interests of some (invariably neglected) latent existing power-base within the polis (Andrewes 1956). An ensuing adjustment occurs that has the effect of stabilizing power-sharing among the plurality of interests within the given polis, following which the tyranny is deposed in favour of a more open political system. Thus the effect of Peisistratus in Athenian history: Solon effects an emancipation of sorts for the poor, but he denies them land, and the struggle between poor and elite continues. As Vlastos notes, "it was Peisistratus the tyrant, not Solon the liberator, who solved the agrarian problem of Attica, giving the people, if not what they asked for, at least enough to transform them into a reasonably prosperous and therefore 'tranquil' part of the state" (Vlastos 1946: 79).

<sup>3</sup>Here we can track the historical and constitutional development of one aspect of this intradependence. From the concept of pollution (*miasma*) whereby the whole community is affected by the presence of an impious member to Solon's judicial reforms allowing citizens to take legal action against crimes that they are not directly victimized by, an awareness of the overlap between private and public spheres develops. Thus "a direct injury to any member of the *polis* is indirectly, but no less surely, an injury to every member of the *polis*; for, though the initial injustice affects only one or a few, the eventual effects on the common well-being imperil everyone's welfare" (Vlastos 1946: 69).

its own disastrous ramifications. Groups in the polis come together in the knowledge that they share an interest in the polis itself surviving, and this is best facilitated through the health of its constituents.<sup>4</sup>

Members of the polis are thus locked into a frame of reference that perpetually considers the various ways that the relationship between a whole and its parts can play out. The political realities of the polis instantiate a meaningful give and take between the interests of the whole and the interests of the constituent, as it can often be the case that the polis is pulled in a direction that runs counter to the private interests of a constituent, be that constituent individual citizen or an association of some sort (Ehrenberg 1960: 89). Of course constituents do understand themselves essentially to be the polis: at this time “Athens” directly refers to its citizens. But citizens must consider themselves both as isolated individuals and parts of a larger community, and often as not these two personae are at odds with each other in determining a course of action. This is one facet of the famous ‘agonistic’ character of polis culture, a character more obviously the product of direct confrontation between members of a deliberative polity. Indeed, what seems to be an almost pathological need to compete with each other, expressed in various manifestations (such as athletic festivals), may be understood to arise from the open competition championed in the political forum (Vernant 1982: 46). Such adversarial relations heighten the sense of particularity within a broader context.

All of these factors combine to result in a political culture of persuasion (Hansen 2006; Cole 1991; Ober 1989). If there are conflicting interests within the polis, then they can be brought together to some extent by persuasion. It is possible that debate can cause a simple change of perspective such that one voice persuades another to endorse a policy formerly thought to be detrimental, but discursive practice also provides

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<sup>4</sup>And so a possible political motivation for the famous problem in Greek philosophy of “The One and the Many” can be argued for: seemingly running counter to the theoretical heights to which the philosophers take it, more prosaically citizens lived with the knowledge of themselves as both private and public entities, and were in need of a method of harmonizing those interests. That the Greeks were explicit about the political aspect to the problem is apparent in Plato’s discussion of the auxiliaries lacking private property in the beginning of bk. IV of the *Republic* and Aristotle’s analysis in *Politics* II 1261a.

a forum of discovery for a new policy or solution that various interests within the polis can find acceptable. Debate is not only an opportunity to state one's own preference as forcefully as possible; more fundamentally, debate provides an arena for the search for truth by being a space in which ideas are made public and commented upon. Under these circumstances, skill at argumentation becomes a necessity, both from the perspective of making a case and in the need to be able to assess accurately the relative value of various arguments and policies. There is a tendency towards universalism (here a policy good that proves beneficial to all concerned) in this system because universalized solutions are the most politically expedient outcome viable: they meet the needs of all concerned since they are universal in scope. With these conditions in place it is easy to extrapolate the rise of both rhetoric and philosophy as powerful forces at play within the polis.

To summarize, the political values of the polis important to this paper include 1) a lack of a central authority able to disregard other interests in the pursuit of its own goals, 2) a participation requirement for all members, 3) a corresponding form of the "power of veto" that flows from the value of that participation, 4) a politics of consensus that is facilitated through a debate-process centered on persuasion, 5) a mereology whereby preserving the relationship between and interdependency of the whole and its parts is an important factor in determining actions, and 6) an active competition between those parts in the name of limited self-interest. Keeping these values in mind, we may move on to review the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.

### **The Political Values of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter***

The plot of the *Hymn* revolves around the effects of Hades' abduction of Demeter's daughter Persephone. Famously, Zeus "gives" his daughter Persephone to Hades, but Persephone is no willing participant; while she is distracted by a Narcissus flower Hades opens up a rift in the earth and snatches her up, vanishing back into the underworld before any action can be taken. Only Helios and Hecate actually see the kidnapping take place, although Persephone lets out a cry of distress. Demeter, upon realizing the absence of her daughter, searches for Persephone, but cannot find her.

Finally Hecate tells Demeter what has happened, and Demeter, in a rage at Zeus, absents herself from the community of gods. Being the goddess of agriculture, her retreat causes the failure of plant growth, and this in turn prevents mortals from having grains to eat and to make sacrifices. The potential loss of the human race and the honors that humans make to the gods proves to be unacceptable, and pressure is brought to bear on Demeter to stop withholding the first fruits. Zeus tries to reconcile Demeter with events, sending the entire pantheon to Demeter in order to persuade her. But Demeter is uncompromising, and will not take up her place with the rest of the pantheon of gods on Mount Olympus, instead preferring to isolate herself in Eleusis. She will only relent if Persephone is returned. At this point persuasive power is turned on Hades, in an attempt to get him to give up Persephone. Realizing the severity of the dispute, Hades relents, and Persephone is returned to her mother, but not before she accepts some pomegranate from Hades, thus ensuring a return to Hades for a certain portion of time every year.

That, in the main, is the story of the interaction between gods in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, although in the interest of brevity I have left out substantial episodes such as the raising of Demophoon by Demeter in Eleusis.<sup>5</sup> The myth has been partitioned into three basic episodes by scholars: the abduction, Demeter's withdrawal into the house of Keleos, and the return of Persephone (Beck 2001: 53-74; Strauss Clay 1989: 207; Richardson 1974: 1-3). According to that partition,

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<sup>5</sup>This sequence seems to have a precedent in Egyptian mythology, as Isis goes through travails very similar to those that occur when Demeter first arrives in Eleusis. Unfortunately, our source with the most overlap between the *Hymn* and the Isis narrative is Plutarch's *Moralia* 356b-357d, which is Greek and postdates the *Hymn* by more than half a millennia; the issue of narrative contamination in both directions becomes thorny (Richter 2001: 201-202). Importantly for our purposes, none of the variants of the struggle involving Osiris, Seth, Isis, and Horus, either pre- or post-*Hymn*, invoke a political context that coincides with that of the *Hymn*. So, for example, a withdrawal of Isis from participation in the community of gods has no political ramifications (i.e. no one else suffers for it); Seth in fact wins his battle with Osiris, and this establishes their purview eternally; Osiris now becomes the king of the dead, and does not re-emerge to challenge Seth again. These factors tell against understanding the gods as interdependent on each other, as is the case in the Greek variant.

this paper is confined to the first and third parts. The focus here is the degree to which the community of gods can be interpreted as a manifestation of a polis citizenry. The addition of the human population into the myth complicates the analysis (although the humans of the myth do have an analogue, as there are always non-citizens accompanying and being politically dominated by citizens); if it can be shown that the *Hymn* is informed in an important way by polis-based politics, then a worthwhile extension of the project undertaken here would be the examination of how the human population can be fit into that interpretive rubric.

It bears pointing out that Demeter is in fact a very old god of the Greeks: there is evidence of Demeter-worship from Mycenaean times (Dietrich 1974: 191-273; Nilson 1968; Vermeule 1958: 100). One might object then that it is too anachronistic to impose polis values on a goddess that obviously pre-dates the polis. But the *Hymn* as we have it is assembled somewhere in the period between 675-550 BCE, putting it squarely within the polis period (Richardson 1974: 6-10). Variants of the myth predate the *Hymn* and inform its composition (Foerster 1874; Richardson 1974: 74-86). How far back the origins of the myth can be pushed is debatable, especially when the myth is broken down into constituent features that arise at various points in its history (Suter 2002). As questions surrounding Demeter's relationship to the Egyptian goddess Isis make clear, there is concern over the extent to which elements of the myth are older than "Greek" culture itself.<sup>6</sup> The question of which, if any, elements of the *Hymn* have a uniquely meaningful relationship to the polis era

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<sup>6</sup>Perhaps the most interesting parallel in content is not with the hypothesized Isis narrative, but with the Hittite myth of Telepinus. Telepinus also stalks off from the community of the gods in a fit of anger, and his absence threatens the survival of the community (Pritchard 1955: 126-128; Richardson 1974: 258-261; Burkert 1979: 123-125), and it is difficult to explain the degree of overlap as a coincidence. There are many withdrawal narratives from a plurality of mythological traditions; as Burkert states, "Tales about a god who hides and must be rediscovered, who is angry and must be appeased, are neither very unusual nor difficult to understand. It is not surprising that there should be parallels not only from Egypt but also from Japan" (Burkert 1979: 125). Of course all withdrawal narratives cannot be the product of a context of consensual politics; we know, for example, that the Hittites were an authoritarian society (Gurney 1991). One key task in what follows here then is to show how Demeter's withdrawal differs from the others in politically relevant ways.

of Greek history remains. It is through the lens of political theory that the greatest sympathy between the myth and polis society can be found, and thus provide some grounding for hypotheses as to the origin of different aspects to the narrative. The degree to which the story invokes values consistent with the polis and not with preceding Greek culture (or indeed other, more ancient societies) calls for analysis on this front.<sup>7</sup>

For example, there is a striking degree of competitive power sharing in the *Hymn*. True, in the beginning Zeus is set up to be an authority figure, and he certainly takes pride of place within the pantheon. The usual interpretation of Zeus' political scope is authoritarian in the sense outlined in the beginning section of this paper (Strauss Clay 1989: 247-248). The supposition informing Strauss Clay's reading is of "the supremacy of Zeus in the present encounter" (248), but the reality of events show Zeus as anything but. Zeus' plan to have Persephone married to his brother Hades is accomplished in a highly compromised form: for the majority of the year Persephone will in fact spend her time away from her husband. The achievement of Zeus seems to be a long way from the activity of one whose rule is supreme. Strauss Clay admits that "If the reality of Demeter's first plan failed, her blockade of Olympus will succeed" (247), and it is difficult to square real authority with Zeus' failed diplomacy, inability to compel Demeter's acquiescence (indeed the thought of the use of force or any other form of coercion on Demeter never occurs to Zeus, which is striking, given his nonchalant attitude towards the abduction of Persephone), and eventual capitulation to Demeter's demands to see her daughter. Rather, this looks like the usual back and forth of competing interests that come to some kind of compromise where no one's full wishes are met, but a plurality of aims are brought to partial fulfillment. This point needs to be emphasized: at no place within the *Hymn* is Zeus able to unilaterally impose his will on any of the other gods. "Demeter, Zeus, the father, with

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<sup>7</sup>That the Homeric Hymns are integrated into the fabric of polis culture can be surmised from the performative function of poetry in general in the early period of polis history. The Hymns may have served as preludes to various ceremonies such as symposiums, or at religious festivals (Richardson 1974: 12; Strauss Clay 1989: 7; Parker 1991: 1-2). They were thus widely known and understood as a ceremonial representation of polis culture.



his unfailing knowledge bids you rejoin the tribes of the immortal gods. Go and let Zeus's word not remain unfulfilled," announces the messenger god Iris, but Demeter simply refuses: "Thus she implored, but Demeter's heart was unmoved. Then the father sent in turn all the blessed immortals; one by one they kept coming and pleading and offered her many glorious gifts and whatever honors she might choose among the immortal gods. Yet no one could bend the mind and thought of the raging goddess, who harshly spurned their pleas. Never, she said, would she mount up to fragrant Olympus nor release the seed from the earth until she saw with her heavy eyes her own fair-faced child" (321-330; translations Foley 1994).

In this Demeter is absolutely prescient: she does not rejoin the pantheon until her demands are met.<sup>8</sup> Zeus cannot compel Demeter to act in accord with his wishes, and does his share of bending to the will of other gods: since Demeter's ultimatum cannot be met while Persephone is beneath the ground, Zeus sends Hermes to the underworld "to wheedle Hades with soft words and lead back Persephone from the misty gloom into the light" (336-338). Zeus' behaviour here is clearly a result of the demands of Demeter; without the demand, there is no reason to believe that Persephone would ever have made her way out of the underground (Parker 1991: 16). In these events Zeus shows himself to be no powerful central authority imposing his will on others.<sup>9</sup> His limitations manifest the first of our catalogue of polis-virtues: a lack of a true central authority able to exert arbitrarily its will over the rest of the community. Of course no absolute equality between players is present, but it would only be expected in the most sterile versions of an idealized polis (which, arguably, is exactly what we do see in some Presocratic analysis); indeed, if there was absolute equality, then the system would be static of necessity. But we have seen already that the polis is a fluid

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<sup>8</sup>In contrast to this, no conflict between the ruling Storm-god and Telepinus is ever mentioned in the Hittite myth; indeed, the motivation for Telepinus' anger is not explained (although the text is corrupt and there are several lacunae). Given that the Storm-god never expresses any anger with Telepinus, it is difficult to interpret this myth as a contest of power between any of the gods, an element that is crucial for understanding the Demeter myth.

<sup>9</sup>So far as we know, Telepinus makes no corresponding demands on the other gods in order to be pacified; once again, the Telepinus myth lacks an element basic to the consensual background being explored in the Demeter myth.

system, always going through an expansion and contraction on the part of its various members. What is observed is an overall stability, or literally, homeostasis. There is always some stratification of power; the crucial point concerns whether or not those differences accumulate to the point of allowing for the unfettered imposition of one will on another. Seen in this light, Zeus' role in the myth is easily made sense of by an audience of citizens.

Zeus' role as leader is somewhat indistinct: clearly, he is the principle god, but his interest in this narrative seems to be in extending the scope of the community of gods, and, oddly, given the usual reading of the *Hymn*, increasing the level of participation of the members of that community. It has been argued that Zeus is trying to effect a more permanent connection between the various spatial regions that make up the universe: Olympus, the earth, and the underworld (Rudhardt 1994: 189-211; Strauss Clay 1989: 202-204). Prior to the events of the myth, the underworld suffers from isolation, as "between the upper world and the realm of Hades, no communication exists" (Strauss Clay 1989: 212). Thus Zeus' plan to have his daughter married to the lord of the underworld is done in order "to create a bridge and alliance between the upper and the hitherto inaccessible lower world" (Strauss Clay 1989: 213). Zeus is involved in a project of inclusion, making sure that none of the pantheon remains outside of the community. Of course, the immediate effect of Zeus' plan is the alienation of Demeter, and this offsets any benefits accrued from the inclusion of Hades. However, as Strauss Clay indicates, the plan's original intention is to bring Hades into the fold, and seen in this light, Zeus has the effect of strengthening the polis-like nature of the community of gods. More than any of the other gods, Zeus' interests coincide with the interests of the whole, and he forwards this interest through guile and persuasion. The lack of any direct speech on the part of Zeus can be understood as indicative of his "remoteness and his superiority even to the unfolding cosmic drama" (Strauss Clay 1989:248). This goes hand in hand with an impression of paternal remoteness: "it seems probable that Zeus is so represented not simply because he is a god, but as part of the depiction of his behavior as a father" (Beck 2001: 61). To the extent that Zeus can be understood as having global aspirations such as those ascribed to him by

Strauss Clay, it would make sense to keep him as much as possible in the background. However, the temptation for this interpretation is to imbue Zeus with more power than he actually has (witness his continued reliance on persuasion rather than force), and the fact is that Zeus does receive the spotlight on occasion in the myth (313-317; 325; 334-335; 441-448). Of course, the reality is that Zeus is just one more character in the pantheon, and is beset by conflict when identified with both discrete interests and those of the whole; but this is a tension every god of the pantheon faces to some degree (see below). What sets Zeus apart in this context is the extent to which he attempts to align himself with the interests of the whole. In any event, it is an odd performative function for the supposed king and strongest of gods. Seemingly more natural for such a figure would be a display of force that consolidates the new order and overruns any concerns of Demeter. But Zeus himself never uses force in our tale, and his reliance on the power of persuasion sits well with the politics of consent. The myth's narrative of divergent interests asserting themselves and then of necessity being forced to embrace some form of compromise is strongly evocative of the political process found in the working polis.

However, an example of a powerful interest using force rather than persuasion to get its way is not far off: Hades clearly does act as if there are no constraints on his behavior, and it seems that he has no need to respect the interests of Persephone.<sup>10</sup> He simply abducts her. However, to stop interpreting at this stage would be to miss the point of the

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<sup>10</sup>This aspect of the myth is of central concern for much scholarship, and traditionally the narrative has been known as "the Rape of Persephone". Recent interest in women's experience in the ancient world has shown how the myth in fact describes this particular event according to two rubrics; thus DeBloois 1976: 245-248: "when related through the female characters of the *Hymn* (Demeter, Persephone, and Hekate) the emphasis is on violence, rape, and death. The male characters (Helios and Hades) interpret the same event as a marriage" (248). DeBloois' analysis is to be applauded in its exposure of how different characters interpret the same event according to how they understand that event to impact on their own interests. Those who see their own good being forwarded will act to solidify the event; those who lose out work against it. The trick for those characters caught up in such self-interested perspectives is realizing that their own survival depends on being able to understand that satisfying the needs of others is a viable path to their own fulfillment.

myth: showing that Hades in fact cannot act with impunity.<sup>11</sup> Rather, Hades is compelled to return Persephone. And while this is done at the behest of Zeus, the true motivating force for Persephone's return is the withdrawal of both the crops and Demeter's participation in the pantheon. Further than this, Demeter forces reparations of a sort on Hades. As mentioned, at the end of the myth Demeter establishes her own mystery cult, the point of which is to provide its initiates with a better afterlife. "Blessed is the mortal on earth who has seen these rites, but the uninitiate who has no share in them never has the same lot once dead in the dreary darkness" (480-483). In this way Demeter infringes on what is supposedly the natural territory of Hades. Hades has dominion over the dead, but here Demeter takes a role in the afterlife. This action is plausibly understood as payback for Hades' abduction of Persephone. The two goddesses are notoriously associated with each other, and just as Hades has propriety over the dead, so too Demeter can be understood to have at least a mother's propriety over Persephone. Demeter's establishment of her cult also balances Persephone's continued and cyclical return to Hades due to eating the pomegranate seed. While Hades gains some influence over Persephone, so too Demeter gains some control of the underworld; this shows fluidity of competing elements within an evolving system. Similarly in the polis the principle elements wax and wane, depending on the success or failure of their endeavors, and stability of status within the system is difficult to ensure.

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<sup>11</sup>The bulk of the *Hymn* is thus concerned with what happens after the abduction; the abduction itself takes up a relatively small part of the overall narrative. This narrative decision emphasizes the pivotal theme of the complexity of power relationships. Those who seem to be powerless or at least severely disadvantaged turn out to have hidden resources, as has been noticed by other scholars not concentrating on the political meaning of the *Hymn*. Thus Louise Pratt 2000: 41-65, whose review shows the degree to which scholars usually understand the status of old women to be "bleak" at best (41). However, this impression goes afoul of the actual portrait given in the *Hymn* (42-43). In taking on the role of an old woman, Demeter proves how even this seemingly "useless" member of the community can contribute in important (indeed, possibly essential) ways, thus showing the depth of political relationships between members of an interdependent community. The ultimate expression of this point is Persephone, who need not even actively defend herself. Rather, someone else in the community will come to her aid and champion her interests.

We may turn now to a more psychological interpretation of Hades' transgression. For the polis such authoritarianism as Hades' always lurks in the background or, to invoke the image of the myth, beneath the surface. Hades acts with *hybris* or outrageousness, the principal vice of character for a Greek. *Hybris* involves overstepping one's natural place or infringing upon the space of others, and often there is an element of intentional shaming involved (Fisher 1992). What normally prevents *hybris* is the relatively egalitarian dispersal of power between competitors within the polis (and indeed between cities). However, the balance in place is kept precarious because of a continual state of competition and striving after particularized interests. Pursuing one's own interest to the fullest may be the best way of insuring that a balance of power remains in place, if one can be sure that others will also be trying their best to further themselves. But aggressiveness also increases the possibility of a breach of conduct beyond what is considered acceptable, especially in dealing with others, and fierce competition is rarely able to temper itself enough to remain respectful; thus the concern over *hybris*. Violent factionalism within the overall context is one logical conclusion of this setup, and this is a major concern for the polis (Manicas 1982; Vlastos 1946: 69-71), along with the attendant attempt at consolidation of power into the hands of an elite few. In addition to this, the constant inter-polis warfare that occurs in this period is a continual reminder to the Greek psyche of just how precarious a balance of interests can be. Thus the authoritarian model is never far away from the surface of Greek politics. Finally, polis-period Greeks are exposed to true authoritarian systems in various ways; other Mediterranean cultures such as the Persians and Egyptians were organized this way, and presumably some connection to Mycenaean ancestors, however tenuous, gave polis-period Greeks some cultural memory of a hierarchical structure in which a relatively tiny elite rules with impunity. This leads to speculation about the degree to which the *Hymn* reflects a populace transitioning from the unbounded authoritarianism that Hades represents at the beginning of the poem to the fuller balance of interests that is established by its end.

Demeter's withdrawal gives a practical display of the other political virtues mentioned in the summary of the polis, particularly that of the power of veto. The withdrawal bluntly

makes explicit the fact of dependence that community-members share with each other. All gods rely on Demeter fulfilling her function, and so her wishes need to be taken seriously by the rest of the pantheon. Demeter's role over agriculture is clearly equated with her full participation within the pantheon, and she is called upon to join the rest of the gods on Olympus to show her acceptance of events (92, 314-356). Indeed the theme of withdrawal as a means of showing political clout is common enough in Greek mythology (Lord 1994). The message is that her presence in the group shows her willingness to participate in it and fulfill her function. Dependence of the whole on participation by the parts is the second virtue listed in the introductory section above, and it is important to note that Demeter's first action and primary response to her daughter's abduction is retreat from what polis Greeks would have known as the principle meeting place, the *agora*, of the gods (92). Similarly, when the embassies are sent to her, their first task is to ask that she "rejoin the tribes of the immortal gods" (322). When Hermes petitions Hades to release Persephone in order to placate Demeter, Hermes states that "her anger is terrible, nor does she go among the gods but sits aloof in her fragrant temple" (354-355). This repeated equation of the ability to traumatize a community with a withdrawal from it points to the degree to which participation is understood as a necessity in the poem, a virtue that is mirrored in polis culture. Important interests within the polis are understood to make valuable contributions to its continued survival and health.<sup>12</sup> Those interests necessarily then have the means to cause harm to the polis through withholding their participation, and this translates into a share of power.<sup>13</sup> Any Greek of the polis period would have intimate

<sup>12</sup> Without this underlying justification, the evil of stasis loses much of its force. Since the part's participation is necessary for the health of the whole, then an act that undermines the health of the part will have a deleterious effect on the whole, and this is the essence of Solon's criticism of stasis (in fragments 4, 12, 13, etc.; Vlastos 1946: 69-71).

<sup>13</sup> As other scholars have mentioned, the overlap between Demeter's behavior here and Achilles' in the *Iliad* is striking (Strauss Clay 1989: 249; Lord 1994: 183). It seems to me that a partial explanation for what amounts to a theme of angry withdrawal in Homeric literature (accepting Lord's project of showing "an epic pattern that is discernable also in the Homeric poems", 181) is its validation as a tactic within the context of polis politics. Both Demeter and Achilles know their participation in the community is absolutely essential to the community's success, and go on to make full use of

knowledge of the workings of the power play that Demeter makes, as this sort of conduct is a standard operating procedure within a consensual context. In this way the myth provides a godly reflection of polis practice.

Finally, there is the above-mentioned peculiar political mereology found in the Greek city-state. The *Hymn* contains a plethora of apportioning going on between the gods, but in a fluid sense; in some ways portions seem fixed, i.e., no one questions whether the role of agricultural deity can just be portioned out to someone else once Demeter withdraws, but notice that when the gods attempt to appease her, they offer her “whatever honours she might choose among the immortal gods” (327-328; see Richardson 1974: 260-264). Presumably then these “honours” are connected in some way to the role she plays within the pantheon, and if she is offered any honor, then it must be the case that she might also take on a new role if she so desires. It must be admitted that the myth presents an indifferent view of the fixity of function among the parts within the whole, the more so when we realize that part of Demeter’s response is directed at Hades in particular; her rites give her a role in the underworld.<sup>14</sup> This attack is of a more personal nature, and Demeter is interested in reducing the scope of Hades’ influence, as her rites will insure a happy afterlife, aloof from the influence of Hades. Their conflict

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the attendant political power (in the furthering of personal goals) incurred.

<sup>14</sup> Again, nothing like this is to be found in the Telepinus myth. Instead, roles are fixed, with no room for movement or negotiation. Neither is there such a developed sense of the necessity of the parts being kept in working order. Demeter threatens the entire race of humans with destruction, but there is no corresponding death-threat for the gods, rather a loss of the (still important) honors that humans might provide them with. *Pace* Richardson 1974: 258, “This Hittite myth shows many similarities with the narrative of the *Hymn*, in particular the references to the gods’ perishing of hunger,” there is no explicit textual evidence of the *gods* starving in the *Hymn to Demeter*; what is mentioned (twice) is the loss of honors because the *human* population will starve (310-313, 352-354). Indeed, were we to extrapolate that the gods too are starving, we would have to square this interpretation with the fact that when Demeter cares for Demophoon in the attempt to make him immortal (i.e. a god), he does *not* eat food or nurse at his mother’s breast (236), but rather is merely “anointed” with ambrosia, the traditional “sustenance” (if we can call it that) of the gods. Compare this with the Telepinus myth, in which both humans *and* gods explicitly die as a result of Telepinus’ withdrawal: “In the land famine arose so that man and gods perished from hunger” (126). Apparently in the Hittite mythology, certain gods are expendable and inessential, a stark contrast to their Greek counterparts.

results in a redrawing of the functional map, as it were, Hades infringing upon Demeter's purview by abducting Persephone, and Demeter striking back by asserting a claim on the dead. Indeed, the cyclical movement of Persephone between Demeter and Hades displays an ongoing alteration in the extent of boundaries.<sup>15</sup> The *Hymn* goes on to make reference to the original apportionment that goes on between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades.<sup>16</sup> Early on in the *Hymn* Demeter confronts Helios and requests that he tell her what he saw. Helios assents, describes Persephone's abduction, and quickly tries to persuade Demeter to accept this new order (82-87). One gambit he uses in trying to persuade Demeter relies on extolling the virtues of Hades, and on this point he states, "As for honor, he got his third at the world's first division and dwells with those whose rule has fallen to his lot" (85-87). Here the world is considered as a whole but then broken down into relatively equal thirds, which are given out to the three original brothers. Notice that the whole of the universe is apportioned out, and done so on an egalitarian basis: each of the brothers gets one third, and this emphasis on equality has already been understood as "amounting to both a political and a cosmic ordering" (Collobert 2001: 9). This division also reflects an idealized version of the polis, in which a whole community is understood to be composed of a plurality of interests roughly equivalent in nature, such that no interest can completely dominate the others.

A fluid apportionment reveals more than just selfish gods making up a community with their own interest and property; instead there is a back-and-forth pull between the interests of the group and the interests of the particular going on within the individual. Demeter is rightly outraged at Hades' actions, and in order to rectify her ill-treatment she combines this

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, polis-period Greeks would have understood what amounts to a topographical metaphor here as a reflection of a literal truth. While there is fluidity within the political makeup of the individual polis, so too the topographical extent of the polis itself was continually changing. The constant border skirmishes between cities insured this being the case, and boundaries between poleis seem to have been demarcated by the placement of rural temples (de Polignac 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Our earliest source for this narrative is the *Illiad*, 15: 185-195, and notice that Poseidon, in describing the equal portions given to the three brothers, is quick to assert that he is "equal in rank" to Zeus. His statement here is at least in part an assertion that his interests will not be over-run by Zeus.



attack with a strike at Hades through the group, making all suffer from the loss of grains. This has the desired effect of harming Hades, but it also brings suffering to all gods and they each go individually to Demeter to plead the case that she should stop. Demeter knows that her actions, while furthering her own private aims, are damaging the community of which she is a part, and possibly she is causing herself some grief as a member of a pantheon that requires sacrifice. Because of the wrong that has been done to her, she is willing to inflict this degree of suffering on others in order to further her private wishes. Hades goes through an inverse process, where he initially acts in accord with his private interests, disregarding the will of his fellow immortals, but then is brought to see the necessity of surrendering his purely private goals so that the community (and himself as a member of that community) might retain its vitality. The two gods understand themselves both as isolated individuals with differing and often conflicting interests and as parts of a whole wherein interests of the parts are common.<sup>17</sup> This is the same perspective at play in the agonistic structure of the polis.

### **The Polis, the *Hymn*, and the Presocratics**

The original sharing out between Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades carries with it a rudimentary physics, and indeed the apportionment reveals a proto-cosmology. Zeus is given dominion over the sky, Hades over the land, and Poseidon over the sea. Making this three-way division primary as the apportionment does provides us with another reflection of the mereology being tracked throughout the myth and which is an essential characteristic of the polis itself. The polis structure of the interrelationship between the whole and its parts can also be extended to encompass an attitude towards the cosmological constitution of the universe, and this through the pantheon that stands in for the elements of the universe in the apportioning. Just as the history of the polis relates the

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<sup>17</sup>Interestingly, this tension may be at work in the different types of speech employed by the *Hymn*. Beck 2001: 73 notes that “direct and indirect speech appear with comparable frequency and have comparable importance”. This contrasts with other Homeric poems, be they hymns or epics, which are dominated by direct speech. Beck goes on to claim that indirect speech is used “where the distancing effect particular to indirect speech *is* desired” (73; emphasis Beck’s), and it is tempting to see this interplay between direct and indirect working in conjunction with the whole/part dichotomy.

playing out of the relationships between its constituents, so too a theogony for the early Greeks involves a history of the interaction between gods, and by extension the cosmological background that they represent.

Cosmogony is an explicit topic of inquiry in the work of the Presocratics, and one supposedly leaven of the anthropocentrism and arbitrariness that the mytho-poetic period infuses its cosmology with. Our analysis so far allows for some observations concerning just how conservative the first philosophers were in their physics: again and again their explications of the universe give a perspective governed by the same principles found in the myth, and which come from the political realities of the polis (Vernant 1982: 102, 119-129). How a polis mentality informs the cosmological thinking of the first philosophers has been explored by others (Vlastos 1947); here we merely wish to demonstrate the continuity of Presocratic analysis with the foundational tenets at work in the mythological background they come out of. This is the earliest extant fragment of Greek philosophy:

Of those who say that [the first principle] is one and moving and indefinite, Anaximander, son of Praxiades, a Milesian who became successor and pupil to Thales, said that the indefinite (*to apeiron*) is both principle (*archē*) and element (*stoicheion*) of the things that are, and he was the first to introduce this name of the principle. He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other indefinite (*apeiron*) nature, from which come to be all the heavens and the worlds in them; and the things from which is the coming-to-be for the things that exist are also those into which is their passing-away, in accordance with what must be. For they give penalty (*dikē*) and recompense to one another for their injustice (*adikia*) in accordance with the ordering of time—speaking of them in rather poetical terms. It is clear that having seen the change of the four elements into each other, he did not think it fit to make some one of these underlying subject, but something else, apart from these. (Simplicius, *Commentary of Aristotle's Physics* 24, 13-21)

Here Anaximander theorizes about the relationship between the actual physical elements of the universe. The overlap between his conception of interacting elements and the play going on between the immortals in the myth is

obvious. His account of the elements competing with each other, causing “injustices” which are paid back in the fullness of time could just as easily be applied to the competition that occurs between Demeter and Hades. For Anaximander no element is stable, but is rather caught in an endless process of expansion and contraction, infringing on the grounds of some other element, but then also receding. In this way an element such as water can for a time expand and it is acceptable for some degree of air and earth to change into water on Anaximander’s view. However, as he makes clear, it can never be the case that any one element overwhelms another in this process, and he asserts that in the fullness of time reparations will be made for the initial transgressions. Thus water will, at some point, be converted back into air and earth. So too Hades and Demeter are caught up in a process of payback for injustices, both making claims on each other’s territory, and it is not too much to say that Hades forces a part of Demeter to change into a part of Hades, and that she in turn forces a part of Hades to become a part of Demeter.

Anaximander is credited with positing the *apeiron*, or “the boundless”; it is this that somehow underlies the elemental struggle. He separates the *apeiron* off as different from the regular elements, going some length in the attempt to keep it from being a quantifiable substance at all: it is unlimited and indefinite (Kahn 1994; Seligman 1962; Gotschalk 1965). The *apeiron* provides a kind of context within or from which the elements arise and conduct their history (Finkelberg 1993: 244-252). Anaximander does this within his system because he cannot logically see how any one of the elements themselves can be given a primal role; that being the case, all the other elements should disappear in the fullness of time as they are gradually converted into the primary element.<sup>18</sup> At this point Anaximander asserts the need for some other, non-elemental constituent in the cosmos, but strictly speaking this may not be a necessary inference. It is at least plausible that the elements themselves are eternal in nature, making the generating role of the *apeiron* superfluous. And if some early physicists were to speculate that the elements are in fact being converted into one primary element, they could face the temporal problem mentioned above by resorting to a cyclical

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<sup>18</sup>Or at least so goes Aristotle’s gloss on Anaximander’s reasoning; see *Physics* 204b22-29.

understanding of time, whereby once all matter had been converted into the primary element, the process starts over again; once again, the generational role of the *apeiron* is taken over by the primary element. There is some evidence to suggest that Anaximander himself was a proponent of cyclical time, or at least of a recurring world destruction and generation.<sup>19</sup>

However, to proceed along these theoretic lines would be to negate the naturalism of the polis. Anaximander's cosmology allows for the assertion that the polis is a regular reflection of the organic order of the universe, several elements bound together in a unifying context. Of a necessity this paper touches on issues of historical explanation, and it is clear that correlation does not imply causality, but if there is any causal relationship between Anaximander's cosmology and the makeup of the polis, it must have worked in the other direction, since the polis as an institution predates Anaximander's revelation within it. Rather our only option is to read Anaximander's philosophy as one expression of the polis justifying itself, providing an explanation of the universe that in turn provides secure grounding for the normalcy of the polis.

A similar explanation must at least be possible in the case of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. The *Hymn* describes a competition going on between two elemental gods, with some narrative force being given over to the possibility that such a competition could threaten the pantheon itself. This outcome is not, however, a serious option, and Hades easily capitulates (357-360); indeed it is remarkable just how speedily Hades does give up Persephone, especially since the audience has just witnessed Demeter, a goddess of lesser stature than himself, oppose the will of Zeus so forcefully. But the analysis so far provides an awareness of what refusal on his part would mean: the dissolution of the entire pantheon. In reality individual poleis might be broken apart due to the tensions at play within them, but reading the myth as one manner in which the polis justifies its own being assures that this option is kept impossible, just as within Anaximander's fragment the plurality of elements is not allowed to collapse into

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<sup>19</sup>This seems to be required by the mention in our fragment of the fact that the original sources of things are also what things die back into (Finkelberg 1993: 246-251).

homogeneity. Either option entails the destruction of the polis as its denizens understand it, i.e. a forum of competition between mutually dependant elements.

### **Conclusion**

These findings pave the way to forming some arguments concerning the relationship between the polis, its myths, and Presocratic philosophy. First, the question of the origin of the myth can be dealt with: pushing the elements of the narrative discussed here back to times prior to the rise of the polis causes a great degree of cognitive dissonance between the political norms of the myth and those of the culture that it would find its genesis in. The open competitive structure, the inability of the supposed ruler to enforce his will on the other members of the community, the independence shown on the part of the various players in the myth, all these factors speak directly against the top-down hierarchical structure of previous Mediterranean (or even non-Mediterranean) societies. Any Mycenaean, for example, wishing to take a lesson from the myth would invariably be led to confront the unnatural character of Mycenaean society. This is not to say that there could not be a reason for such a dissonance arising within the other contexts, but if we do wish to give the narrative such an origin, that dissonance begs to be explained. However, if we push the origins of these facets to the myth forward into the polis period, we find a much greater correspondence between the political mores of the myth and those of the society it is embedded in. Any Greeks of the polis period contemplating the myth would find a structure in place that reflects the reality of their own society. In this way the myth can serve as propaganda for the polis way of life.

What then are we to make of the fact that several of the players in this myth are in fact Mycenaean in origin? There is the possibility that this is just a new myth that makes use of old characters, but we must also consider the option that we have here the reworking of an older tale, some of which survives in its new variant. So, for example, Persephone's abduction does, by itself, support a more authoritarian outlook, especially if we consider that palaces are often effectively redistribution centres, collecting up the goods produced in the outlying agricultural areas, bringing them back to the centralized bureaucracies in the palaces, and then distributing them in

the manner the king finds most appropriate. Hades' behavior (and in the background, there does lie Zeus, "giving" away his daughter), collecting up the offspring of the goddess of agriculture and then taking her back to his palace, has suspiciously authoritarian underpinnings. If we can accept that myths do not stay static, especially within an oral community, then it is no great leap to suppose that the early polis peoples took some myth with this basic narrative in place and added on Demeter's ensuing conduct as a way of bringing the myth into line with their newer political sensibilities.

Second we can assess the continuity in the cosmological outlook of the polis period, and notice the degree to which cosmology appears to be the task of projecting social norms onto the workings of the cosmos. Once again we are confronted with the thorny realization that correlation does not imply causal relationship, but we can at least jettison the Mycenaean period from this form of cosmological speculation, and for the same reasons as given above: the kind of cosmology that lies in the background of the *Hymn* clashes too strongly with the norms of the Mycenaeans to be taken seriously as a product of that society. Once we confine ourselves to the polis period, we can see that there is a correspondence at work between the underlying structures of the polis, its mythology, and its cosmology. On this view philosophy accomplishes no real revolutionary leap in the basic thought of the Greeks, as the main principles of philosophy's high-powered and logical analysis of the universe are already in place in the mythology. Rather, both philosophy and mythology are found in a context that reflects itself or expresses its own values in their differing formats. Here the difference between philosophy and mythology is one of genre, not content. Even the much-vaunted revolution in logical analysis given by philosophy can be seen as an effect of the open system that polis Greeks found themselves in. Logic is, after all, a highly specialized form of argumentation, a process crucial to the proper maintenance of the polis. The hypothesis being championed here is that a culture uses its literary and analytic character to justify itself, or at least to provide the theoretical justification for its own existence. Thus mythology, philosophy, and cosmology can reinforce the naturalness of the polis.

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