

# Myths of Female Fertility

LW4U1 - GRADE 12 CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION - MR. A. WITTMANN

UNIT 2 - LECTURE 6



## Origins of Fertility Myths

- ◆ These myths & cults developed in the Neolithic Age
- ◆ Symbolized & dealt with all-important agricultural cycles of life & death (fertility worship)
- ◆ Like the creation of the universe, the feminine force of nature is the source of the continual pattern of renewal of animal & plant life (hieros gamos)
- ◆ Importance waned with the rise city-states the during the Archaic & early Classical Ages & the rise of Olympian cults
- ◆ Fertility cults remained at the centre of agricultural rural areas

# Decline of Olympic Religion

- ◆ Influence of the dominant Olympic Cults of the city-states started to decline in late Classical period.
- ◆ Concerned with the good of the community, city & citizenship, not the individual.
- ◆ Rapid globalization made the Hellenistic world a more cosmopolitan place
- ◆ Your city or village was no longer the centre of the world any more.
- ◆ People needed personal gods that addressed their individual spiritual needs in the rapidly changing world.
- ◆ Olympic gods were not concerned with human morality, salvation or afterlife.
- ◆ Zeus & fates controls human beings' lives, people had no free choice.
- ◆ Urban Greeks began to import foreign Near Eastern cults, which influenced the development of Greek religion.

# Rise of the Mystery Religions

- ◆ Mystery Religions were based on the myths of fertility.
- ◆ Provided rules to live by that provide the individual with salvation from the suffering of life
- ◆ If you follow the rules you will know exactly what is going to happen to you.
- ◆ Worship was an emotional & personal experience not intellectual
- ◆ Mystery Cults became more popular than Olympic Cults

# What the Mystery Cults Offered

- ◆ Personal Salvation, individual centred not community centred
- ◆ Thus, you were not spiritual dependent on the city-state
- ◆ Cults were international & not based on geography
- ◆ Order out of chaos of multicultural global village
- ◆ Place of the individual in the big impersonal universe
- ◆ Union of the cult offered sense of community
- ◆ Self-centred & common belief no matter what nationality.
- ◆ Support system & community in the global village.

# Mystery Cults

- ◆ Inanna & Dumuzi (Babylon)
- ◆ Isis & Osiris (Egypt)
- ◆ Cybele & Attis (Phrygia)
- ◆ Aphrodite & Adonis (Phoenicia)
- ◆ Demeter & Persephone (Greece)

# Demeter & Persephonê

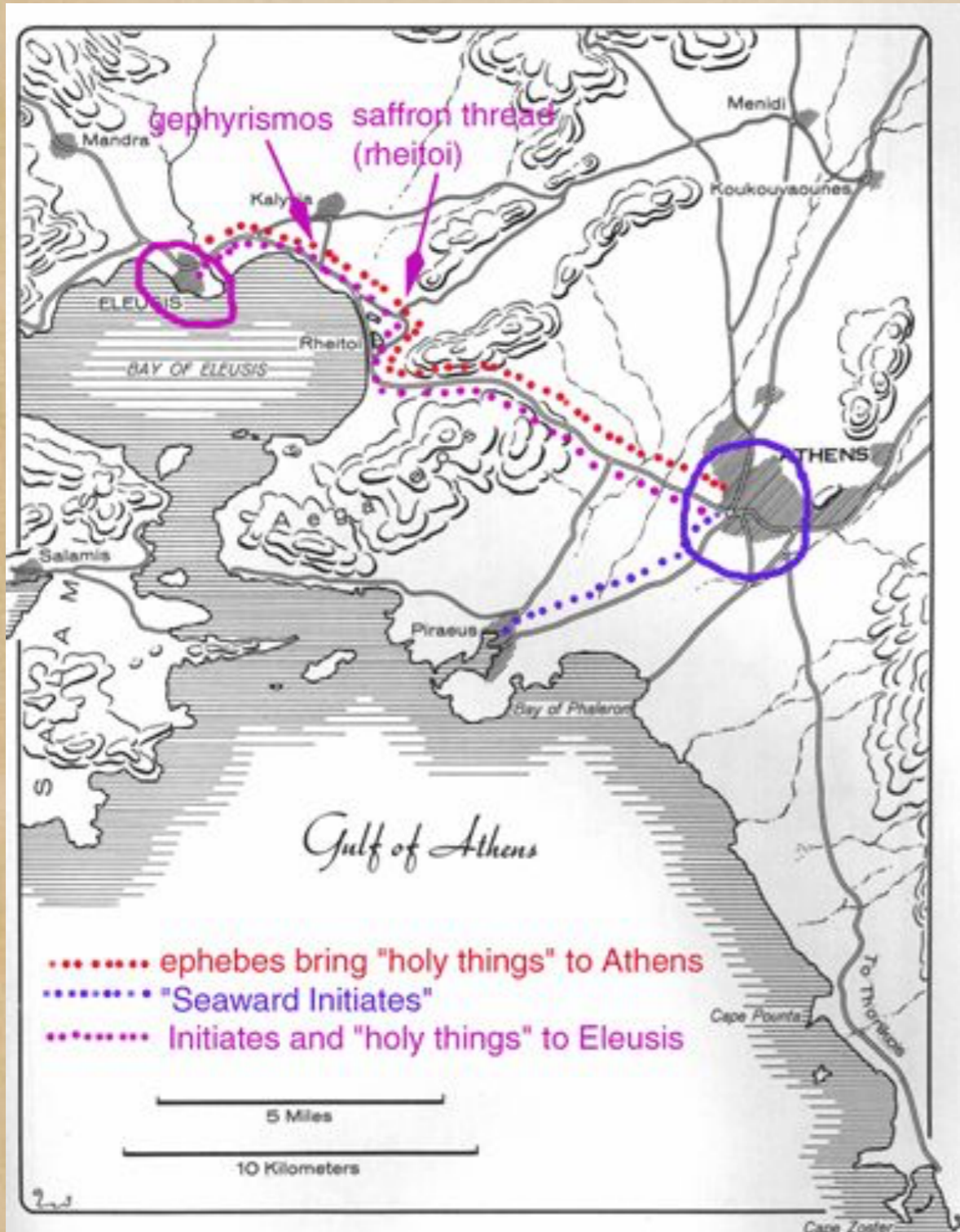


- ◆ Most other cults est. in Egypt.
- ◆ Greeks saw female fertility as a continuing force of creation
- ◆ No one female deity, so aspects of fertility divided among different goddesses
- ◆ Demeter the closest to a single mother goddess
- ◆ De (?) meter (mother)
- ◆ Daughter is Persephonê aka Korê
- ◆ Homeric Hymn to Demeter is the foundation of the mystery cult of Demeter at Eleusis

# Homeric Hymn to Demeter

- ◆ Persephonê is abducted by Hades
- ◆ Demeter travels to Eleusis, where she is found by the daughters of the King & Queen
- ◆ She is brought to the palace & made the nanny of the infant prince, Demophoön
- ◆ Demeter is caught trying to make Demophoön immortal
- ◆ She reveals herself & instructs the people of Eleusis to establish her cult in their city
- ◆ Demeter now withdraws her power from the land
- ◆ Hades offers a deal
- ◆ She is reunited with Demeter but must spend 1/3 of her time in Hades
- ◆ Demeter understands & brings life back to the earth
- ◆ Demeter orders the king of Eleusis, Keleos to est. her cult & kept the secret rights.

# Eleusinian Mysteries



- ◆ Oldest temple to Demeter at Eleusis, dating back to 1000 B.C.
- ◆ Athenian tyrant Peisistratus (c.600 BC) gained control of Eleusis
- ◆ Expanded the temple & made it a Pan-Hellenic cult festival
- ◆ During the festival all fighting in Greece must stop.



Demeter & Persephonê & Triptolemus

- ◆ Cult secrets originally held by 2 aristocratic families of Eleusis, the hierophants (high priests)
- ◆ Secret rituals still mostly remain unknown
- ◆ Public festivals are portrayed in literature & art
- ◆ This cult became the most influential & popular mystery cult

- ◆ Female/fertility symbolism illustrates an older form of religion
- ◆ A mother-goddess agriculture religion
- ◆ This religion changed when the Indo-Europeans grafted their dominant Olympic god Zeus religion onto the older mother goddess religion
- ◆ Mystery religions were a resurgence of this older female/fertility religion
- ◆ But now it's about the rebirth of your soul rather than the Earth

# 3 Themes of the Story of Demeter & Persephonê

1. Fertility Symbolism
2. Woman's Coming of Age Symbolism
3. Spiritual Symbolism

# 1. Fertility Symbolism

- ◆ Agricultural metaphor
- ◆ Persephone dies & goes to the underworld & is resurrected again, representing the agricultural cycle.
- ◆ Women are portrayed the givers of life.
- ◆ During Neolithic hunter-gatherer societies, women perfected agricultural arts.
- ◆ Thus, feminine life cycles & agricultural cycles are linked metaphorically.
- ◆ Illustrates the earlier pre-historical agricultural function of the cult.

## 2. Woman's Coming of Age Symbolism

- ◆ Persephone given to older unknown man
- ◆ New family & household
- ◆ Demeter experiences separation anxiety of a mother
- ◆ Picking flowers common motif of losing sexual innocence

### 3. Spiritual Symbolism

- ◆ Loss of a child/child mortality
- ◆ Inevitability of death
- ◆ Dying god & Resurrection
- ◆ Persephone dies & goes to the underworld & is resurrected again, representing the rebirth of the individual soul
- ◆ Reunion with the mother/god of in the after life

THE END