

In the first article of this series we set out the general historical background of Greek mythology. In this, the second of five articles, the topic is "myth and ritual". Many theories have been advanced to explain the existence of mythology. One of them is that all myths are somehow connected with the rituals of pagan religions, that is, the ceremonies or rites in which the gods were worshipped. Briefly put, the theory holds that if the ritual is an acting out of various desires (e.g. for a healthy crop this year, for rain, for stoppage of rain, or, the greatest hope of all, for life after death) - that is, if the ritual is a form of doing - then the myth is the verbalization of these desires, a saying of them. Now, not all myths can be explained in this manner; but many can, and often an otherwise obscure myth can be understood once it is realized that there may have been a ritual behind it.

The best example of the myth-ritual connection in the Greek context is the story of Demeter. Her daughter, Persephone, was carried off one day by the god of the Underworld, Hades. Her mother spent nine days looking for her, during which time she ate and drank nothing. When she finally found out where her daughter was, in her anger she used her power as the dreadful earth mother, goddess of fertility, to prevent the growth of all planted things. Mankind would have starved had not Zeus, king of the gods, intervened and told Hades to give Persephone back. But Hades cleverly offered the girl some food - a single pomegranate seed - before she returned. She ate it, thus sealing her fate; part of the Underworld was now part of her, and she could not be rid of it. In the end a compromise was reached whereby she spent one-third of the year in the Underworld and the rest above with her mother.

On the face of it this is a simple explanatory myth for the seasons of the year. The return of Persephone is the arrival of spring. But there is more to it than that. Every year at Eleusis, near Athens, the ancient Mysteries of Demeter were celebrated. The festival lasted nine days and involved fasting for at least part of it. Many other details of the festival correspond to things that Demeter did during her search for Persephone, as recounted in our fullest source, the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. The culmination was a secret ritual, inside the Hall of the Mysteries, about which little is known; after all, it was a secret, and those who participated were very reluctant to reveal anything until the rise of Christianity took away their fear of Demeter's retribution. There seems to have been a sacred drama, possibly enacting the return of Persephone. Holy objects were revealed at critical points in the proceedings, and songs and chants brought the worshippers to a peak of emotional involvement. Those who took part were called "initiates"; after the rites, we are told, they came away with a great feeling of inner peace and a better hope for their treatment in the next world. Perhaps they received no firm promises, but at least a heightened understanding. The Mysteries were very old; perhaps in the beginning they were little more than fertility magic to ensure the growth of the crops. By the classical period, however, they had become a vehicle of deep religious meaning. The worshippers felt that they saw something of the awful Mother Goddess, and were momentarily one with the universe's infinite cycle of life and death.

The story of Demeter's search for Persephone obviously has a lot to do with this festival. On the other hand it is not true that the myth and ritual are identical,

or even related as "doing" and "saying". If I were to set out all the known features of the ritual, and recount the myth fully, you would see that the correspondence between the two is often very tenuous or even non-existent. The birth of a boy "Brimos" seems to have been dramatized in the ritual, for example; but the name is lacking in the myth. In general we might say that, in cases where there is an association of myth and ritual, the two are neither dependent nor independent, but interdependent. Each has something to say on its own but also gains meaning through the other.

However, not all myths are related to rituals; they have many other functions. In our next article the value of myth as an explanatory medium, whether of scientific data or the facts of human history, will be explored.