

The Adonis Festival in Alexandria

by R.A. Faber

Adonis was one of the most widely worshipped gods of antiquity. The Greeks and Romans imported him from the east, where he was known in Assyrio-Babylonian religion as Tammuz. Tammuz was the consort of Astarte, the mother goddess of fertility and vegetation. Adonis became popular throughout the Greek world in Hellenistic times, when annual festivals in his honour were held in the major cities. Though little is known of the nature and purpose of the cult of Adonis, we are able to make a few observations.

One recurring theme in ancient religion is that of the great mother and her lover (or son), whose relationship reflects the changing seasons. According to one school of thought, the death of the lover symbolizes the death of vegetation, while his annual resurrection points to the new growth in spring-time. One story involving Adonis suggests that he is the lover whose death represents the end of the agricultural year. According to this little known myth, Aphrodite gives Adonis to Persephone, the queen of the Underworld, for temporary safekeeping. But Persephone is so enchanted by the beauty of the young Adonis that she refuses to return him to Aphrodite. The ensuing fight is settled by Zeus, who decrees that Adonis must spend one third of the year with Persephone in the Underworld, and the rest with Aphrodite. Parallels to the myth of Demeter and her daughter suggest that this story of Adonis may be interpreted as a tale explaining the changing seasons. Like Astarte and Tammuz, or Isis and Osiris in Egyptian religion, the legend of Adonis and Aphrodite concerns the fertility of the fields in due season.

The best known myth of Adonis concerns his love affair with Aphrodite, the Greek equivalent of Astarte. According to Ovid's version (*Metamorphoses* 10), Aphrodite falls in love with Adonis, the handsome young son of Myrrha and Cinyras. Adonis is an avid hunter, who frequently risks his life to catch his prey. Aphrodite repeatedly warns him of the dangers of the hunt, fearing that she may lose her lover. One day Adonis strikes a wild boar, which in turn gouges him in the groin. The wound is fatal. The moans of the dying lover reach the ears of Aphrodite, who rushes to the scene in sorrow. In Ovid's tale Aphrodite complains to the Fates of the cruel death of Adonis, and vows that his name will not die with him. To fulfil her vow she establishes an annual festival in his honour, the Adonia. Every year the scene of Adonis' death would be recreated.

Alexandria was one city which held annual festivals in honour of Adonis. The court of the Ptolemies in the first decades of the third century BC was eager to maintain a good rapport with its citizens, and it did so in part by means of lavish public displays. There is some evidence to suggest that Queen Arsinoe herself organized an exhibition of Adonis and Aphrodite in or about 274 BC. One of the poems of Theocritus, who lived and wrote in Alexandria at that time, celebrates this festival of Adonis and the exhibition which the queen had staged. *Idyll* 15 is a "day in the life" of two Syracusan women living in Alexandria, Gorgo and Praxinoa, who pay a visit to the royal palace.

It appears that the exhibition was open to the general public. In the courtyard or garden of the palace there was a large display, depicting Aphrodite and Adonis. On a couch were seated effigies of Adonis and Aphrodite, perhaps newly married. The scene is that of a wedding banquet, and the happy couple forms the centrepiece. The lovers are surrounded by bowers of greenery, and by couches and chairs (apparently Arsinoe had planned a private party after the public levy). In addition to the effigies, there was a large tapestry which portrayed another scene: the death of Adonis, and the sorrowful Aphrodite. The people of Alexandria could filter past these displays and marvel at the beneficence of the court. And while Gorgo and Praxinoa are in the courtyard, a woman prepares to sing the "Adonis song", a dirge lamenting the death of the young lover. Theocritus records the song, of which these lines are perhaps most memorable: "In Adonis' rosy arms Aphrodite lies, and he in hers. The young man is eighteen or nineteen - the golden down still on his lips, his kisses are not rough. And now farewell to the Cyprian goddess, as she clasps her lover." Like the displays, the song recalls the main events in the simple story.

The celebration may have lasted four days, each day being dedicated to some phase of the myth. The first concerns the union of the goddess and the mortal. On this day the women offered perfumes and cakes to the happy

couple. Another day was dedicated to mourning and lamentation, recalling the death of Adonis and the sorrow of Aphrodite. It was on the second day also, or on the third, that the effigy of the young man was brought to the water's edge, as a symbol of Adonis' journey to the Underworld. This was a day of fasting and purification for the women. It may be that the last day of the festival recalled the resurrection of Adonis from the dead, and a performance of sorts recreated Adonis' return to life. It is not certain on which day the so-called "Gardens of Adonis" were brought out, but it was probably on the first day that women brought small pots of flowers to rooftops or street-fronts. The flowers in these seed-pots were destined for a short life, for on the final day these pots were tossed into wells or into the sea, reminiscent of the death of Adonis.

With the "burial" of Adonis, the festival in Alexandria ended for another season. The women had celebrated the love and life of the great goddess and her lover, and acknowledged the inevitability of death for all living things. It was hoped that through the cult the cycle of life might be continued for yet another year. The final words in the song of the woman at the palace of Arsinoe say it all: "O Adonis, happy did your coming make us now, and when you come again, your coming will be dear to us."