Kore’s Return

Statuary from the Sanctuary

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The Thesmophoria are a Greek festival containing mysteries... They are celebrated, according to the more mythical account, because when Kore was seized by Plouto while picking flowers, there was a swineherd named Eubouleus tending his pigs in that place and they were all swallowed up in the chasm along with Kore. Women known as Baillei (Antiletriai), who have stayed pure for three days, bring up the rotten remains of the objects that had been thrown down into the pits. Descending into the secret chambers, they bring the material back and place it on the altars. They believe that whoever takes some of it and scatters it along with his seed will have a good crop...

The same [mysteries] also go under the name of Arretophoria. They are celebrated with the same rationale concerning the growth of fruits and human generation. Here too unspeakable (arrhetai) sacred things are carried up; they are replicas of serpents and male genitals, made of dough from wheat flour... They are thrown into the pits, the so-called secret chambers, along with the piglets, as we said earlier, whose proliferation of progeny is a symbol of the generation of fruits and humans; it is a sort of thank offering to Demeter, since her gift of the Demeterian fruits tamed the human race. The previous explanation of the festival is the more mythical; this one is more in terms of nature. It is called the Thesmophoria because Demeter is named thesmophoros, since she laid down the customs or ordinances (thesmous) by which human beings must work and produce food.

Scholiast on Lucian, ed. Rabe 275-6

Figure 1. Slightly larger than life-size marble statue of Kore, dedicated by Helvia Teimareta, a wealthy lady of mixed Greek-Roman parentage at Cyrene, in the late 2nd or early 3rd century A.D. While the head is missing, the inscribed base is luckily still attached to tell us both the name of the statue’s donor as well as the identity and cult title of the goddess.

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The Thesmophoria were one of the oldest religious festivals celebrated in the ancient Greek world. Along with the Eleusinian Mysteries, they were a Panhellenic re-enactment of the story of Demeter and her daughter Kore (see box on Demeter and Persephone in ‘The Sanctuary’s History and Architecture,’ this issue), the goddesses of agriculture. After Kore was abducted by Hades (Pluto), the god of the Underworld, her grief-stricken mother Demeter stopped the growth of all vegetation on earth. Only after the intercession of the other gods was an accommodation reached in which Kore would be allowed to emerge from the Underworld and live a portion of each year with her mother before returning to reside with her husband. Kore’s life cycle, therefore, is an allegory for that of sown crops. Although festivals celebrating the death and rebirth myth go back in antiquity at least to the 3rd millennium B.C., this particular one probably originated in Attica. Certainly Athens had control of two of the most famous celebrations in honor of Demeter and Kore in the ancient world, the Eleusinian Mysteries held in the nearby city of Eleusis and the Thesmophoria celebrated in Athens itself. Athenian practices appear to have influenced those in other Greek cities, such as Cyrene, as will be seen in this essay. The Thesmophoria were celebrated in the autumn, just before the cereal crops were planted. As described by the Scholiast of Lucian, above, their ritual was designed to ensure the success of the next season’s crops by consecrating the grain seed. The special seed, mingled with the remains of sacrificed pigs and other compostable fertility symbols, was distributed to farmers for the new sowing. Any city needs ample supplies of both children and crops in order to survive. The Thesmophoria symbolized these civic aims with its emphasis on the mother-child relationship of Demeter and Kore and on the sanctification of the grain seed. Married citizen women were placed in charge of the festival’s conduct in accordance with the Greek view (one shared by other patriarchal societies) that, despite many societal restrictions, females had one invariable power—control of reproduction. Male participation was not allowed in the Thesmophoria.

The Thesmophoria at Cyrene

The women of Cyrene also celebrated the Thesmophoria. A story related by Aelian and partly quoted in fourth century A.D. Isidore of Seville, the Suidas, may be suspect in certain details but probably contains a core of historical truth. It tells how Batis, avaricious Cyrenean’s founder and first king, in an attempt to observe the festival in secret, was murdered by the female participants for his sacrilege (Dettienne 1989:129-130). If he indeed was slain for his curiosity, the sacred event presumably took place in the extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore (Persephone), which was founded not long after the colony’s foundation.

The Thesmophoria must have been an especially important agrarian festival in a city like Cyrene, whose economy depended heavily on the production of grain and livestock and for whose people a continued good harvest meant the avoidance of famine, always a source of concern in antiquity. Despite the importance of agriculture to Cyrene, Demeter was not the principal deity of the city—Apollos was. Demeter, in fact, is rarely the major deity of a Greek city and her main sacred spaces are typically located on the outskirts of the city. Both the timing of the foundation of Cyrene’s extramural Sanctuary to Demeter and the choice of its location conform to what is known about the sitting of Demeter sanctuaries elsewhere in the Greek world. The one at Cyrene was founded about the time that the young colony was expanding its territory into the surrounding countryside. It is on a hillside, near a spring, but most particularly it is in a peri-urban location (at the base of the city walls but outside them, near the rich farmland surrounding the city). The Sanctuary was intended to be a transitional element between city and country, partly to link the two areas and partly to assert the power of the city over that of the countryside (de Polignac 1984). Its location also is symbolic of the women who celebrated the Thesmophoria within its walls—they are on the fringes of society but yet essential to its survival. Even when within or near the “inner space” of the city, Demeter and her worshippers are “remote” and “exclusive” in their ritual.

Sculptural Finds in the Sanctuary

Ten years of field work by the University Museum expedition have unearthed a significant portion of the extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore where the rites of the Thesmophoria and other festivals were celebrated. Among the many types of votive objects that have been found to date are 724 catalogued pieces of stone sculpture. These include large-scale statues, statuettes, heads, reliefs, statue bases, and other fragments. The sculptures span the entire life of the Sanctuary, from the Archaic Greek through the Roman periods (6th century B.C.-3rd century A.D.). Like the other finds from the Sanctuary, these sculptures provide evidence for both secular and religious life in Cyrene. They are vivid material reminders that the Sanctuary was once an active place of worship and that throughout the year people congregated there for religious festivals and to dedicate gifts to the two goddesses. The varying quantities and quality of the votive sculptures reflect the changing economic and political life of the city. Their location and the condition in which they were found inform us about the activities and events of the Sanctuary. Some of the sculptures can also shed light on the conduct of the Sanctuary’s worshipers and the cultic role of its deities.

Four images of Demeter and Kore will be discussed here from the point of view of what they specifically reveal about men and themes associated with the Thesmophoria: first, the importance of human fertility as manifested symbolically in the mother-daughter relationship of the two goddesses, and second, the importance of the germative power of the grain seed. In addition, we shall also look at how the statues were intended to serve the two goddesses through their dedication and possible ritual uses.
two were discovered at Eleusis, and one in the Agora at Athens. The Cyrenian example can be dated to the 2nd century A.D. on the basis of comparison to the two from Eleusis. It may have been carved in Athens and exported as a finished product to Cyrene, since Athens was the source of both the raw material and iconography and the work is small in scale.

The presence of this group at Cyrene underscores the continuing close relationship of the city with Athens, already established as early as the 6th century B.C. through trade links and here reaffirmed in the 2nd century A.D. At this time Cyrene was an active member of the Panhellenion League. The Panhellenion, based in Athens, was a congress of Greek cities created by the Roman emperor Hadrian to extol the old traditions of Hellenic culture. Among other activities, its members made dedications in the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis. Cyrene sent representatives to the league on a regular basis, and one of its best known citizens, Tiberius Claudius Jason Magnus, even served as the league’s archon (president). The small Sanctuary statue may have been brought back to Cyrene by one of these representatives.

The first image is a small-scale group of a seated Demeter holding Kore on her lap (Fig. 2). It is made of Pentelic marble, quarried from Mt. Pentelicus, northeast of Athens. The two goddesses are shown in a pose that seems unexpectedly intimate given the physical maturity of the younger goddess, but that underscores their relationship as mother and daughter. Their rounded squat resembles a kouros, the chest in which their sacred objects were kept. Three other small-scale groups of similar type, all found in Attica and made from Pentelic marble, are known;

The Mother and Daughter: Demeter and Kore

The daughter goddess, the Kore, seems to have had a special prominence in the Sanctuary. In addition to a large number of small-scale statuettes that represent her, one large-scale statue (Fig. 1) deserves special notice because of its inscribed base. It was found in the E14 Mound (529), a construction of debris from the earthquake of A.D. 262 (see “The Sanctuary’s History and Architecture,” this issue). The statue is of life-size, made once again from Pentelic marble, and dates to the late 2nd to early 3rd century A.D. Because its stone, iconography, carving technique, and sculptural type are all Athenian in derivation, the statue may well have been made by an Athenian sculptor, working either in Athens or Cyrene.

"The Kore Who Presides over the Grain"

The ritual plate on the lap of the second seated goddess (Fig. 8), viewed from above. The plate is filled with fruits, breads, and a piglet’s head. The latter was the favorite animal offering to the goddesses and reminds us of the role that piglets played in the rites of the Thermosphoria.
The figure may have held a stalk of grain, as well as a cornucopia or torch (see Fig. 3) in her now missing hands. These symbols would have emphasized her title, "The Kore who presides over the grain," which is inscribed in three lines of Greek on the attached base: "Helvia Teimaretar, having received an oracle in a dream, dedicated to Demeter and Kore a statue of/ Kore—the Kore who presides over the grain."

According to the expedition's epigrapher, Joyce Reynolds, Helvia Teimaretar's claim to have received instructions in a dream to offer a dedication is a common one in Greek religious inscriptions (Kane and Reynolds 1985:482-63). However, Demeter and Kore are not among the more commonly cited divinities in such dream-related inscriptions (healing gods such as Asclepius are more often named). While Plato says that women are more prone to this type of dream, the actual inscriptions name men more frequently as dedicants. This may reflect the greater social and economic status of males in ancient society, who were better able to afford such dedications. But in a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of two goddesses, and one in which the Thesmophoria rites were evidently given prominence, it is not surprising that the majority of inscribed dedications should involve women.

Helvia Teimaretar belonged to a family of mixed Greek and Roman blood. She may have been a descendant of a Roman man named L. Helvius Rufus, a city clerk of Cyrene who died in A.D. 59, since he is the only other preserved example of the Roman family name Helvius found so far in the Cyrenaica. Her other name, Teimaretar, is Greek and a common one for Cyrenaean women. Helvia Teimaretar was a wealthy woman (as we may presume were most if not all of the Sanctuary's female donors), since she was able to afford an expensive statue as a votive gift.

What lay behind Teimaretar's choice to honor the younger of the two goddesses? The title, "the Kore who presides over the grain," is unusual, since, as senior goddess, Demeter normally possessed the greatest authority over grain, but Kore also retained an important role, especially during the celebration of the Thesmophoria. The fact that Helvia Teimaretar saw fit to stress Kore over Demeter may reflect a regional bias in the manner in which the cult was conducted during the late Imperial period at Cyrene. Why was this dedication made? To thank the goddesses for a good harvest or to ensure against a future one? Because there was a famine? There is some evidence that famine occurred in Cyrene after the Jewish Revolt of A.D. 115 and perhaps again later in the 2nd century A.D., i.e., about the time that Teimaretar lived. Whatever the motivation for her dedication, it is clear that the agricultural aspects of the cult still retained their potency in Cyrene until a relatively late time.

Secret Compartments and Sacred Power

One or both of the goddesses are represented in two larger than life-sized statues of seated females found within and near the early Imperial period 58 Sacred House. Dated to the 1st century A.D., both figures, by virtue of their large size, findspears, and unusual construction, may have been used for special rituals. Demeter is often depicted in a seated pose, though not always on the high-backed throne normally viewed as appropriate for divinities. In reference to her mourning for her lost daughter, she is often shown seated on the "mirthless stone" or on a backless chair, both chosen to deny herself comfort during her sorrow, or else on a kiste, the sacred chest in which her sacred objects were kept. Kore is usually depicted in a standing pose, often in the company of her seated mother, as may be seen in a relief found in the Sanctuary (Fig. 3). But, given Kore's shared cultic interest in the germination of the grain seed at Cyrene, she could have been depicted in the same pose as her mother.

The first statue consists of both halves of the lower part of a draped female seated on an oval chest (Fig. 4), as well as some non-joining fragments of her veiled head and shoulders (Fig. 5). The oval chest is probably the kiste, its sacred nature underscored by the snake entwined around it. Only one block of the second statue remains, consisting of the right half of a female figure's lower body and seat (Fig. 6). She is seated on a chair, possibly a backless one, and holds a plate in her lap filled with fruits, breads, and a piglet's head (Fig. 7). Both statues were originally constructed from several blocks. Although it was a common enough practice in antiquity to assemble statues from a number of different blocks, the manner in which these two statues were constructed to allow access to their interiors appears to be unique. Made of limestone, they share a complicated piecing technique: their lower bodies were made of two blocks pinned together (Figs. 8-10), while their now-missing upper bodies were made of one or more blocks. The missing head, feet, and hands of the first statue at least were presumably made of marble (Fig. 4). This technique of enhancing the appearance of a cheaper limestone work by the selective use of more expensive and, for Cyrene at least, imported marble was commonly used in antiquity.
"a daimon could reside in a statue of a divinity, which a hostile observer or non-believer might wish to destroy"

of divination, prognostication, protection, or healing. According to Farocone, the use of a statue to hold sacred materials originated in Egypt by the 1st century A.D. The practice could have been easily transferred to Cyrene since the city had long-standing cultural ties with Egypt, ones that were especially close in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Some other cultic practices involving the hiding of objects are associated specifically with Demeter: the use of a kiste to hold sacred objects and the practice of concealing sacred scripts for her mysteries in a bronze hydria (water vessel) or in a hollow rock (Pausanias 4.28.7-8 and 8.15.1-2).

The possibility therefore exists that magical materials, texts, or even consecrated grain seed were inserted into the backs of the Cyrenian statues in order to bring about a transfer of power either from object to divinity or vice versa. Unfortunately, no discernible residues of any kind were found inside the cavities to confirm this hypothesis. While evidence for such insertions had been previously limited to literary and papyrological sources, the two Cyrenian statues may be the first published examples of actual statues constructed for this purpose.

A Mother’s Hope

The role of the women of Cyrene was to bear healthy new citizens for the city. The importance of this duty is echoed in the statues of children that were set up by their parents (especially their mothers) in the Sanctuary. These are often accompanied by dedicatory inscriptions, such as one by a woman named Arris, who commemorates the initiation into the cult of her ten-year-old daughter, Demetria (Fig. 13). The dedication of a statue of a girl or boy following their initiation was a means of placing the child under the protection of the two goddesses in perpetuity. In the case of girls, the statue may commemorate her induction into the cult, her participation in a special cultic office, or it may have been used as a memorial to mark either her coming of age or untimely death. A head of a young girl (Fig. 13), one of several found in the Sanctuary, gives us some idea of what Demetria’s now missing portrait statue might have looked like (White 1973:207-08).

The analysis of the statistics discussed in this article shows that the Thesmophoria at Cyrene, like the festival in Athens, were conducted to ensure the fertility of the grain seed and, through the worship of Demeter and Kore as the archetypal mother and daughter, the corresponding fertility of the city’s women. The rites of the Thesmophoria, with their deeply resonant emphasis on the recurrent cycling of the seasons, symbolize the ancient city’s concern for a secure future. The people of Cyrene hoped to placate the two goddesses—through re-enactment of their story in ritual and by the dedication of votives in their secluded sanctuary—in order to ensure the birth of an abundant number of healthy citizen children and the growth of sufficient crops to feed them.

Bibliography


