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The Cult of the Nymphs: Identity, Ritual, and Womanhood in Ancient Greece

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Introduction

The ancient Greek city of Corinth received less than 15 inches of rainfall on average annually, yet it has been described as "well-watered" since ancient times due to the ubiquity of its fountains and springs.[1] This contradiction, coupled with the apparent scarcity of such a vital resource, sparked an interest in the prevalence of water in the ancient world and the culture that surrounded its collection, specifically, the cult of the nymphs. The daughters of Oceanus and Tethys, as well as those of Nereus and various river gods, the naiad nymphs are female deities who were thought to inhabit a body of water as long as it is flowing. The veneration of the nymphs developed at sites throughout Greece, alongside activities as simple as the collection of water or as monumental as ritual events. The identity of the nymphs, however, was cultivated in mythology, which inspired their association with landmarks that defined the *polis* as well as their role in ritual practice. In this thesis, I describe the diverse and profound ways in which the nymphs were integral to Greek culture and daily life, and I argue that the cult of the nymphs was deeply significant to their respective communities due to their mythological connection to the natural world, their representation as the face of the *polis*, and the outlet they provided women through ritual in the community.

Timeline and Terms

In this thesis, I investigate the significance of the nymphs in three areas: their mythological foundations and association with water and transformation, their influence on the identity of the

[1]Simonides is quoted by Plutarch *On the Malice of Herodotus*: "Stranger, once we lived in the well-watered city of Corinth" (LCL 476: 528-529). Consider Landon's "*Beyond Peirene: Toward a Broader View of Corinthian Water Supply.*" In the Corinth volumes, 20. 2003. 43–62, for a further analysis on the renown of Corinth as "well-watered."

polis, and their role in the ritual of Greek women. I focus on cult practice from the Archaic era in Greece into the Roman era:

Archaic (750 - 480 BCE)

Classical (510 - 323 BCE)

Hellenistic (323 BCE - 146 BCE)

Roman (146 BCE - 330 CE)

These periods roughly reflect the arc of Greek history from its ascent through its decline. Across the eras, nymphs were believed to be present at many prominent sites in Greece and are often attested in poetry, sculpture, and dedications in conjunction with their fountains, informing us of how their characterizations have changed over time. To clarify, the nymphs that I am fore-fronting here are classified as naiads–nymphs who specifically govern fresh water—and are essential to the community due to their connection to a vital life resource.[2] Owing to their significance, a variety of data sheds light on the ways that they would have been characterized, represented, and venerated in myth, daily life, and ritual. The mythological stories describing naiads' relationships with waterways and the landmarks of their springs are often central to *polis* identity and important in attracting tourists.[3] In this way springs and fountains in which nymphs reside often grew to have deep significance for their entire communities.

[2] For a discussion on the definition of naiads and their relationship to landmarks and the community see Larson, *Greek Nymphs : Myth, Cult, Lore*. 2001. 4-10

[3] For example, consider the legend of Peirene in conjunction with the fame of Corinth; Pausanias says "along the road to Lechaeum you come to a gateway … After this is the entrance to the water of Peirene. The legend about Peirene is that she was a woman who became a spring because of her tears shed in lamentation for her son Cenchrias," 2.1-4

The terms "spring," "fountain," and "nymphaeum" will be used throughout this study interchangeably. The difference in meaning, however, is nuanced. A spring refers to the landmark with a naturally flowing water supply that is the physical presence of the nymph herself. A fountain is the man-made adaptation of the spring to better serve the community as a source of water. A nymphaeum is a structure specifically consecrated in honor of the nymphs (sometimes one or several) and can be built on the site of a natural spring, containing a fountain.[4] Fountains, thus, are also springs, and nymphaea can contain fountains and springs. What is most important, however, is that the nymph(s) are thought to embody all of these sites. For example, at Corinth, Peirene is considered both a spring and a fountain but not a nymphaeum as it was not dedicated to the nymphs. Conversely, the Kokkinovrysi shrine (also at Corinth) is classified as a nymphaeum in honor of the nymphs due to votive offerings and archeological evidence, but is itself a stele and not a fountain or spring. Finally, a fountain, spring, or nymphaeum can be dedicated to one nymph (such as the Peirene fountain) several nymphs (like the spring at Himera in Sicily) or a group of unnamed nymphs (including the Pitsa cave, also in Corinth). The ways in which different nymphs are attested and celebrated in the community, nonetheless, speaks to the widespread nature of their representation.

Although the focus of this thesis will be on selected sites in conjunction with their particular nymphs, I contend that the cult of the nymphs is integral to Greek culture in a more nuanced and complex way. Nymphs are described by countless Greek and Latin authors in over one hundred different works in many genres including epic (i.e., Homer), tragedy (i.e., Euripides), hymns (Pindar), and travelogs (Pausanias). Sometimes affiliated with Olympian

[4] For further evaluation on the infrastructure of water in the ancient world see Glaser, Franz, "VI.1 Fountains and Nymphaea". In *Handbook of Ancient Water Technology*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. 2000. 185-230

deities, the nymphs are characterized as semi-divine, situated between deities and people. This renders them as often helpless against the whims of gods, but powerful over mortals.[5]

Nymphs are also chthonic, associated with death and the underworld. Two dedications in southern Italy to "the chthonic gods and lady Arethousa (the nymph of Syracuse)" make this connection explicit.[6] Additionally, it places them at a status similar to Greek heroes. Also chthonic, a hero is a deceased person who is able to influence the world from beyond the grave for good or evil, and must be honored accordingly.[7] Like nymphs, a hero is confined to a specific locality and is the center of a local group identity. Furthermore, while the gods are remote, heroes are near at hand and can be appeased through ritual activity in exchange for good luck and protection. In this way, hero cult serves as a comparandum for the cult of the nymphs and informs us of the ways in which local deities were, in fact, deeply significant to their community.

Similarly, in addition to the mythical meaning of nymph, *numphe* refers to a young woman of marriageable age, typically a bride, in the transitional stage between girl and wife.[8] As early as Homer and Hesiod, the term *numphe* describes *both* the bride and the female water or landscape deity.[9] This demonstrates a direct correlation between the way a young woman is referred to in society and the character she turns to for support at pivotal moments in her life. Nymphs are typically linked to bridal and maturation rituals for girls as seen through votive offerings and sacred spaces designed for bridal baths. By studying the ways in which women in

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[5] Consider Alpheus' power over Arethusa, in contrast with Echo's power over Narcissus
[6] (Palermo: *IGL* Palermo 131; southern Italy: *IGUR* II 907)
[7] Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion : Archaic and Classical*. Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 1991. 205-210
[8] McClure, Laura. *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World : Readings and Sources.* Edited by Laura McClure. 1st ed. Oxford, England; Blackwell Science, 2002. 9-15
[9] Larson 2001. p. 21. For example, Penelope is called a νύμφα φίλη (dear bride) by Eurykleia as they discuss her son Telemachos (Homer, *Odyssey*, 4.743). Cf. Hesiod, *Theogony* 129–130, for nymphai as deities

Greece turned to the cult of the nymphs for comfort and reassurance at life events, we begin to discover the ways in which the cult was not only personal but also profound.

Outline, Sources, and Scholarship

My study is organized into three chapters. In the first chapter, I explore the nymph's mythical and ritual associations with water, death, and physical transformation to better understand their identity and role within Greek culture (we understand that there are distinctions between myth and ritual). Mythology and ritual are two foundational pillars of Greek society. While the pantheon of Greek Olympian gods and goddesses remains familiar and accessible in both scholarship and popular culture, the nymphs, who are locally significant but less prominent on the broader stage, are less understood and less studied. I explore the cult of the nymphs as an example of deities who significantly influenced the identity and everyday life of Greek people and their city-states. All forms of water, especially the sea, were deeply important not only to the Greek way of life but also their religious belief system.[10] Ancient Greek mythology reflected the way the Greeks interacted within society: some believed their deities could influence fertility, pollution, fortune, and the afterlife (to name a few). In this way, the natural world and the deities affiliated with the elements were personal and significant to individuals and the community as a whole.

For the first chapter, I found several studies helpful. Among the seminal primary literary sources are Homer and Euripides who each explore how nymphs are represented mythologically and how this mythological representation explains identity and ritual formation. In some cases, the nymphs were also affiliated with an Olympian goddess such as Persephone or Artemis. This

[10] Beaulieu, Marie-Claire. *The Sea in the Greek Imagination*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 22-30

opens a comparative discussion on the depiction of the nymph as both a virginal, wild maiden and an alluring comforting woman. This conversation is informed by Ann-Marie Knoblauch in her chapter "Promiscuous or Proper? Nymphs as Female Role Models in Ancient Greece" (2007) and will be explored further in subsequent chapters.[11] Marie-Claire Beaulieu's book *The Sea in the Greek Imagination* (2015) is crucial in understanding the complexity of water in ancient mythology. Additionally, Walter Burkert's *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (1991) remains essential in understanding how ritual was shaped over time. These sources outline the ways in which myth, ritual, and water are deeply significant to Greek culture in general and the nymphs in particular due to their relationship with all three. Further, Georgia Irby's book *Conceptions of the Watery World in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (2021) surveys the ritual and mythical underpinning of water cult, among other things.

In the second chapter, I investigate the association of local nymphs with integral parts of the city, especially monuments, and I explore how these interconnections informed *polis*-identity via coinage and infrastructure. As city-states became more populated and affluent, their inhabitants took great care in renovating sacred sites that became more accessible and lavishly decorated, indicating a continued usage of places that embody the identity of the nymphs. I examine both historical and archeological sources to better understand the means of veneration and popularity of the nymphs. Primary literary sources include Strabo and Pausanias, in particular, who describe the mythological context of the nymph Peirene. My work also benefits from an extensive scholarly tradition in the Corinth volumes that resulted from the excavations conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens by Bert Hodge Hill. Hill provides a detailed account of the springs and the ancient renovations of the Corinthian

[11] Britt, B., and Cuffel, A. *Religion, Gender, and Culture in the Pre-Modern World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007. 15-18

fountains. Similarly, Betsy Ann Robinson, in *Fountains and the Culture of Water at Roman Corinth* (2001) examines the ways in which the cult of the nymphs had prevailed later into Corinthian history. In *The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth* (2016), Theodora Kopestonsky provides invaluable foundational information on the nymphs. Her scholarship sparked broader curiosity about the nymphs' relationships with other deities (such as Pan) and with the natural world.

In the third chapter, I focus on the votive offerings and spaces sacred to the nymphs designed with female cult practice in mind, and I discuss how these means of veneration contributed to the agency and self-actualization of women in the community. Rituals were an intrinsic part of Greek life, and the cult of the nymphs was strikingly feminine. In a time when women could not vote or hold office, religious practices were their primary form of community influence (consider, for example, Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria*). The ceremonies practiced in the context of the cult of the nymphs are an important component in reconstructing the lives of women in ancient Greece, since women were the primary practitioners of such rituals. Many of these rituals were central to wedding and birth ceremonies, and thus marked major transitions in a woman's life. These rituals would have provided opportunities to gather, celebrate, and further validate moments that were associated with maturation and shifts in the community. In this chapter, I found particularly beneficial Jennifer Larson's *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore* (2001), an expansive study of nymph ritual research. While literary sources offer first-hand accounts that help us to better understand contemporary perceptions and ideologies, they are more reliable when supported by additional resources, including votive offerings, statues, painted plaques, and the manipulation of natural landmarks to be used for ritual purposes.

It is important to remember that the ancient sources are predominantly written by men, and they are consequently less useful in uncovering the unique experiences and perceptions of the women who would have been the primary participants in these rituals. Inscriptions to and about the nymphs help to illustrate the personal relationship that individual women may have had with nymphs. These resources illuminate the cultural aspects of gender, femininity, and womanhood that are not evident in contemporary, male-authored literature. Literature and inscriptions emphasize the visual characteristics of the nymphs that resonate with the followers as seen in Theodora Kopestonsky's dissertation on *Kokkinovrysi: A Classical Shrine to the Nymphs at Corinth* (2009). Her detailed work with the votives found at Corinth helped to elucidate elements of cult practice that are less preserved at other city-states.

Research Foundations and Scope

Originally, my research focused exclusively on the nymph and spring Peirene at Corinth. I then broadened my scope to investigate whether this relationship was unique and to explore a comparison with the nymphs of other city-states. Situated on the Peloponnese as a trade port with easy access to the Ionian sea via the Corinthian Gulf, Corinth is a prime example of a prosperous and thriving Greek city-state. Corinthians also established settlements at Syracuse and Corcyra (among others) that forefront the nymphs Arethusa and Corcyra, respectively.[12] Kopestonsky posits that it is possible that Corinthian settlers brought their nymph rituals to new settlements, as the earliest evidence of caves associated with the nymphs, pre-dating the classical period, are connected with Corinthians.[13] Literature into the Roman era, nonetheless, continues to describe and reinterpret the nymph, and the use of nymphs as eponymous for their *poleis* became

[12] Corinthian migrants settled Syracuse in 734 according to the chronology of Thucydides (6.3.2). For more discussion see *Ancient Waterlands,* 2019. 159-181 by Sophie Bouffier

[13] Kopestonsky, Theodora "*Kokkinovrysi: A Classical Shrine to the Nymphs at Corinth*" 2009. 212-240

established across Greece. Aegina and Thebe (daughters of the Asopos River: Herodotus 5.80.1), among others, are two *poleis* named after the nymphs residing at the local spring.

Although my material is selective, I aim to explain how nymphs were understood throughout Greece in three different manners: myth, *polis* identity, and ritual. The confluence of these topics makes my research unique within the current scholarship of nymph worship. While it is a largely understudied topic, most scholarship tends to approach it from a more specific lens of a single nymph within her *poleis*, or with the intent of developing an overview of information on all known nymphs. My goal with this study was to refine the scope in a way that would allow comparison between nymphs and would encourage dialogue between different types of information (mythological, archeological, and literary) in a manner that shapes a clearer vision as to how the cult of the nymph impacted society at different levels.

This research, nonetheless, is limited by several important details. As an undergraduate student, my understanding of primary sources is limited by my rudimentary understanding of Latin and lack of knowledge of Ancient Greek. All primary sources have been analyzed in translation and interpreted alongside the arguments and opinions of other scholars. As the topic of nymph worship is narrow with limited extant information, I am aware that scholars can overinterpret details in attempts of reconciling literary and archeological evidence with their own scholarly agendas. This is complicated by the fact that myth was reinterpreted by different authors throughout antiquity and language translation is never exact. For example, my research on nymphs in conjunction with local identity included Io at Gaza. Aeschylus (*Prometheus Bound* 589) calls her the daughter of Inachus, a river god in Argolis. This should classify her as a nymph. Io, however, is not solidly linked to any one body of water herself. In other works, she is referred to as a "*numphe,*" but it is possible this is meant to signify instead that she is simply a

young woman. It is thus unclear if Io is a nymph according to our definition on page 6. In spite of this confusion, other scholars who specialize in nymph worship consider her in their research but she is excluded here. Similarly, Hesiod presents a Calypso among the oceanid daughters of Oceanus and Tethys (*Theogony* 359). According to Homer, Calypso was the daughter of Atlas (*Odyssey* 1.50). Is Hesiod's Calypso identifiable with Homer's? In the *Odyssey*, nonetheless, Calypso behaves in a way that is consistent with the nymph paradigm, so I have elected to cite her here. It is my opinion that these examples, although complex, only speak to the ways in which the nymphs have been reinterpreted throughout antiquity.

Because Corinth continues to be our best example of the earliest and longest archeological record of nymph cult worship, it is featured heavily within my study. With respect to *polis* identity, I will discuss sites in Corinth such as Peirene, the Sacred Spring, and Pitsa Cave to use as referentials when investigating other locations. Other sites will be considered to varying degrees based on their archeological remains and comparative scholarship. These include the Fountain of Arethusa in Syracuse, the Corycian Cave at Corcyra, and Juturna's spring in Rome, among others. What is most important, however, is how these sites—in conjunction with myth and evidence of ritual—inform us as to the ways in which nymphs were perceived and venerated. Through the synthesis of literary and archaeological sources, I seek to demonstrate the cult of the nymphs had a profound and widespread impact on the culture of Ancient Greece.

Chapter I: Water, Death, and Physical Transformation

Introduction

The cult of the nymphs is deeply rooted in the ancient Greek understanding of water, life, and death. Water is a life-sustaining resource but also a source of terror, in the case of the sea, that invites exploration of the unknown and its great depths.[1] Several of the naiad nymphs—each affiliated with her own body of water—were mythologically thought to be connected to other bodies of water such as Arethusa and the Alpheus river.[2] Their embodiment as springs was typically linked to a conflict or transitional moment with a major deity and can be interpreted as a death/rebirth of the nymph's identity.[3] Thus, the nymphs themselves mythologically embody the Greek's perception of water, the divine, and physical transformation. As water separates the human world from the divine, it can also be inferred that ritual and ceremony involving water brought humans closer to the deities they worshiped, most intimately in the case of the nymphs. It is no coincidence then that many of the rituals affiliated with the nymphs, such as bridal, birth, and death ceremonies, involve water that symbolically fosters purity and fertility. In this chapter, I will explore the nymph's association with water and its symbolism, their affiliation with greater deities in the Olympian pantheon, and their mythological connection to transformation.

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[1] See Hamish Williams and Ross Clare, edd., *The Ancient Sea: The Utopian and Catastrophic in Classical Narratives and Their Reception*, Liverpool University Press, 2022, a collection of twelve articles that explore various aspects of Greco-Roman ambiguity toward the sea

[2] The myth states that the river god Alpheus relentlessly pursued the nymph Arethusa, mingling their waters underground when she was turned into a river to escape to Syracuse (Pausanias 5.7.2)

[3] Consider Daphne, who was turned into a laurel tree to escape the affections of Apollo. Subsequently, Apollo adopted the laurel tree as his sacred plant (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1. 452-567)

The Sea and Olympian Association

Homer describes the sea as "bright and divine" (*Iliad* 1.141) and portrays beautiful Nereids who live in the water. When Achilles comes to the seashore to lament his trials, he is comforted by his Nereid mother, Thetis, who comes out of the sea. Beaulieu argues that both the sea and Thetis as its personification provide reassurance and comfort in a time of conflict. This can be paralleled with the nymph's role in ritual as a source of solace for young women embarking on a transitional period in their lives. Nymphs are seen in affiliation with Olympian deities (such as Artemis, protector of women in childbirth) and in ritual, to be discussed further. In this same way, the nymph Thetis is described as a kourotrophic divinity, one who nurtures the young.

Oceanus and his wife Tethys are the parents of six thousand children (three thousand sons, three thousand daughters), the largest single source of nymphs in mythology (Hesiod, *Theogony* 346-70). The oceanid nymphs presided over the world's fresh water sources and are featured prominently in mythology. Especially when seen in association with greater deities, they can be perceived as a comforting presence, and they are featured in ceremonial ritual. In the *Prometheus Bound*, the Oceanid nymphs comprise a sympathetic chorus, who sang the marriage hymn at Prometheus' wedding, and now console him in his punishment:

> [The chorus of Okeanides address Prometheus:] This song, which, about your [Prometheus'] bridal bed and bath, I raised to grace your marriage, when you wooed with gifts and won my sister [the Okeanis] Hesione to be your wedded wife. (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 555)

A voyage to the sea is often symbolic of death (such as Odysseus in the *Odyssey*) and can lead either to the Underworld or to the Islands of the Blessed. The sea, because it is between the

Underworld and Olympus, mediates between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the gods.[4] In Greek literature, the sea is described as "boundless" (e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 1.350; *Odyssey* 10.195), or "broad" (e.g., *Iliad* 6.291). The nymphs are also associated with the goddess of the underworld, Persephone, and they were Persephone's companions when she was abducted by Hades and carried off to the underworld:

> She [Persephone] was playing with the deep-bosomed [Okeanides] daughters of Okeanos (Oceanus) and gathering flowers over a soft meadow, roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, irises also and hyacinths and the narcissus. (*Homeric Hymn* 2 *to Demeter* 4-15)

This passage connects the nymphs with Persephone, the daughter of two major Olympian deities, but also represents them as her companions through a major life event. They attend her through her transitional experience into marriage, setting a precedence of nymphs as comforting role models for mortals during coming-of-age events, specifically marriage.

The Oceanids nymphs, among others, however, are not always presented as a collective. Thus, nymphs could be worshiped on their own individually, in conjunction with other major deities, or as a collective sum.[5] Many ritual sites are simply dedicated "to the nymphs", even at a site where a figurehead nymph holds an eponymous title. For example, the nymphs at Himera sought to please Athena:

> Each one of them [the goddesses] received for her portion a territory, Athene receiving hers in the region of Himera, where the nymphai (nymphs), to please Athena, caused the springs of warm water to gush forth on the occasion of the visit of Herakles to the island,

[4] Beaulieu, Marie-Claire. *The Sea in the Greek Imagination*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 22-30
[5] Other groups of Greek female deities who are worshiped collectively include the Muses, Graces, and Seasons.

> and the natives consecrated a city to her and a plot of ground which to this day is called Athene's. (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 5. 5. 1)

Himera became renowned for its hot springs, and the "nymph's warm baths" became a metonym for the *polis*:

> But now, having won a crown at Olympia, and twice from Pytho and at the Isthmus, Ergoteles, you exalt the nymphs' warm baths, living by lands that are your own. (Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 12.16-19)

Although the nymph Himera became identifiable with the city, many unnamed nymphs were also thought to inhabit the site and personify the city's most iconic feature. For example, Figure 1 shows three nymphs representing the *polis*. According to Larson's analysis, the nymph is identified as Himera in part due to her veil and turreted crown (a common symbol of a personified *polis*, representing the city's defensive walls). Simultaneously the eponymous Himera was honored collectively with other nymphs. She appears on the reverse of Himeran coin types, pouring a libation onto an altar as a small figure bathes in the stream of a lion's head fountain spout (Figure 2). On other coins, Himera is given the epithet Soter, "Savior," showing that she was regarded as a protector of the city's safety and prosperity or perhaps as a deity of healing.[6] (*Soter* is also a common epithet for demi-gods who receive hero-worship: more below).

[6] For an in-depth discussion on the nymphs at Himera, see Larson, Jennifer. *Greek Nymphs : Myth, Cult, Lore*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2001. 4.10.4

Left: Figure 1: Coin from Thermai Himereiai: three nymphs

Right: Figure 2: Coin from Himera: nymph Himera sacrificing by fountain

Coinage and literary references speak to how mythological and Olympian affiliation contributes to the renown of a nymph and its respective site. Additionally, coinage highlights the complexity of eponymous nymphs as a figure-heads for their location, with the understanding that many unnamed nymphs might also reside at the site. I will explore this subject further in the second chapter with a discussion on the identity of a *polis* coalescing around one nymph, and in the third chapter with respect to ritual practice in honor of collective nymphs.

Pure versus Promiscuous

Nymphs are variously depicted as helpless virgins, crafty seductresses, or both. This is evident in countless myths in which nymphs are irrevocably transformed as they attempt to escape the clutches of a stronger and passionate male deity (e.g., Daphne, Arethusa). Other myths, however, affirm the strength and capability of the nymph, such as Calypso:

> Only Odysseus was held elsewhere, pining for home and wife; the nymphe Kalypso (Calypso), a goddess of strange power and beauty, had kept him captive within her arching caverns, yearning for him to be her husband. (Homer, *Odyssey* 1. 14)

Calypso detained Odysseus on her island for seven years until she was obliged by the gods to allow him to return home. While Homer's Calypso is a daughter of Atlas (and not Oceanus), her actions within the *Odyssey* are consistent with the sometimes obsessive, troublesome, capricious nature of nymphs. In some myths, men are cursed by nymphs for rejecting them and experience serious retribution. For example, when the young man Narcissus rejects the nymph Echo's affections, he is cursed to fall in love with his own reflection:

> Thus had Narcissus mocked her; others too, nymphae (nymphs) of Hill and Water and many a man he mocked; till one scorned youth, with raised hands, prayed, 'So may he love—and never win his love!' And Rhamnusia [Nemesis] approved the righteous prayer . . . [and caused Narcissus to fall in love with his own reflection and waste away in grief.] (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.402-406)

In this same manner, the youth Hermaphroditus rejects the nymph Salmacis, and he is punished by having his body blend into hers in one form:

> [Hermaphroditus] fought back, denied the nymph her joy; she strained the more; her clinging body seemed fixed fast to his. 'Fool, fight me as you will', she cried, 'You'll not escape! Ye Gods ordain no day shall ever dawn to part us twain!' Her prayer found gods to hear; both bodies merged in one, both blended in one form and face. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.368-375

These myths exemplify the ways in which oversexed nymphs can be retaliative when scorned. We also note the Hylas myth as an example of the abduction of a young man with whom the nymph is obsessed (see page 25). A hierarchy is thus established through these examples. Gods overpower and tame nymphs, while nymphs overpower and tame mortals. In the case of Odysseus, the nymph was able to prevail even over a Greek hero, providing another interesting parallel with Greek hero cult (see Chapter II). This dichotomy between virginal and alluring, weak and strong, nonetheless, informs the perception of the role that the nymphs play in the world as well. Affiliated with bridal and birth cults (Chapter III), while also thought to be the perpetrators of abduction, nymphs walk an interesting line between purity and promiscuity. I posit, however, that the foundations of this dichotomy are rooted in the mythological connection to purity with respect to fresh and salt water, and the concordant rituals associated with them.

While fresh water is fertile, sustaining either biological life on earth or the eternal life of the gods, salt water is sterile. Moreover, while both freshwater and salt water are considered pure, salt water promotes purity because it eradicates life itself.[7] Thus, the water of the sea is strongly associated with death in Greek mythology. Homer calls the sea *ἀτρύγετος* "fruitless" or "unharvested" throughout the *Odyssey.* This epithet contrasts the sterility of salt water with the fertility of the fields on the earth and the fresh water that irrigates them. Even the numerous fish that inhabit the sea (the Homeric epithet "the fish-filled sea") evoke death rather than sustenance, as sailors worry that their bodies will be mangled by fish in case of shipwreck.[8] Conversely, ritual baths for weddings (with the aim of fertility) always used fresh water. This distinction, the contrast between salt water and fresh water, is extremely important, and it is emphasized by Euripides:

[7] Beaulieu, Marie-Claire. *The Sea in the Greek Imagination*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 25-34
[8] *Odyssey* 14.135– 36.

> Now you, my aged handmaid, take a pitcher and dip it in the salt sea and bring it here, that I, for the last time, may wash my child, an unwed bride, a ravished virgin, and lay her out, as she deserves. (Euripides, *Hecuba* 609 - 614)

After Polyxena's death, Hecuba requests salt water instead of the typical freshwater to prepare her daughter's body for the funeral. The salt water bath emphasizes Polyxena's eternal sterility and her incapacity to bear children as a bride of Hades. In Euripides, the salt water funeral bath replaces the fresh water nuptial bath that the girl will never receive. Although the nuptial bath has funerary connotations because of the use of underground water (or the underground location, such as nymphaeum or springs) and the symbolic death of brides upon their wedding, Beaulieu suggests that the objective of the nuptial bathing ritual is clear. The nuptial bath aims to promote the purity and fertility of the bride. Accordingly, fresh water is always used.[9]

The waters affiliated with a nymph and her spring were typically thought to be pure and intended only for certain purposes, due to the fact that the water could be contaminated if exposed to pollution. The cult of the nymphs at Kos was near a sanctuary of Asklepios, and a fourth-century inscription from the Asklepieion is intended to safeguard the purity of the water:

> Philistos, son of Aischines, said, "Whoever sacrifices in the sanctuary of Asklepios to the nymphs, let him sacrifice on the altars, but nobody is to throw either a cake or anything else whatsoever into the springs in the sanctuary. If anyone does throw something in, he must purify the sanctuary of the nymphs as is customary." (Franciszek Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées des cités grecques* 1962, no. 152)

[9] Beaulieu, Marie-Claire, *The Sea in the Greek Imagination*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. page 33

Philistos discouraged practices that were otherwise common in the cult of the nymphs, particularly in rural shrines, such as the use of cheap sacrificial cakes in preference to more expensive blood sacrifices and the tossing of offerings into springs. The treatment of fountains and springs were not necessarily consistent across Greece. In this same way, water could be defiled by *miasma*, a term most closely associated with moral pollution such as hubris or other moral transgressions. Apollonides of Smyrna (first century CE), imagined a sacred spring bemoaning its victimization by an act of miasma:

> Pure (for the nymphs have gifted the name to my spring, preeminent over all dripping things), when a pirate had killed some men reclining nearby and washed his bloody hands in my hallowed waters, having reversed my sweet flow, and it no longer bubbles up for travelers. For who will still call me "Pure?" (*Greek Anthology* 9.257)

In this passage, the pollution from miasma has caused the water to stop flowing and be rendered impure. Similarly, Antiphanes of Megalopolis describes another stream and another nymph:

> Having streamed once upon a time with well-watered flows, I am now deprived of all my nymphs, even to the droplets. Defiling me with gore, a man-killer has washed his hands in my streams. From that time my maidens have fled the sunlight, saying, "we are nymphs who mingle only with Bacchus, and not with Ares." (*Greek Anthology* 9.258)

In each epigram, it is both the physical bloodshed and moral offense that results in the stoppage of the water.[10] Most importantly, this miasma has resulted in the expulsion of the nymphs who

[10] Irby, Georgia L. *Conceptions of the Watery World in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021. page 158

once resided at the site, underscoring the important connection between the nymph and purity as seen in the quality of the water.

Transformation

Abduction by a god or goddess is conceptually similar to death. The abductees undergo transformations (heroization/immortalization) that are analogous to the death of their previous forms.[11] The (attempted) abduction of a nymph, as previously discussed, typically results in a transformation into an element of nature (such as a tree) or a rape.[12] This accounts for many stories about nymphs affiliated with their fountain or spring. Abduction *by* the nymph, however, can suggest the nymph's sexual desire since the most common victims in literature are young men, notably Hermaphrodite and Narcissus (see page 21). Abduction in the fulfillment of sexual desire is the prerogative of the more powerful being over the weaker: Olympian over nymph, immortal over mortal, older over younger, and male over female. Abductions of mortals by nymphs, thus, fit the expected pattern in one way (immortal over mortal) and reverse it in another (female over male).

One of the best examples of this motif is the account of Herakles' friend and companion Hylas who joined the Argonaut expedition. Hylas was a beautiful youth who went to gather water from a spring during a journey through the woods:

> The water nymph was just rising from the fair-flowing spring. She noticed him nearby, flushed with beauty and the sweet graces, for the full moonlight struck him as it shone from the sky. Kypris excited her heart, and in her confusion, she could scarcely keep her

[11] For a discussion on abduction and heroization see Vermeule, E. *Aspects of death in early Greek art and poetry*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1979. 23-29

[12] For further discussion of nymphs in relation to abduction and the Hylas myth, see Larson, Jennifer. *Greek Nymphs : Myth, Cult, Lore,* Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2001. 142-148

> spirit within her. But as soon as he dipped his pitcher in the stream, touching the surface crosswise, and the brimming water sounded loudly on the ringing bronze, she quickly put her left arm up and around his neck, longing to kiss his tender mouth, and with her right hand she pulled down his elbow. And he plunged into the pool's midst. (Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonauts* 1.1228-1239)

Hylas called out for help but was not heard. Nor was he ever found, and his companions were later told that a nymph abducted him and made him her husband.[13]

The popularity of the Hylas myth might have been a major influence upon a tradition that those who died young may have been carried off by the nymphs. Nymphs are a frequent motif in funerary art and verse in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Children who died by drowning in a river or spring were also said to have disappeared at the hands of naiad water nymphs (a poignant way to deny the reality of death). Several epitaphs offer consolation to the bereaved in the belief that a loved one was "snatched by the nymphs" because of his (or her) beauty. For example, a second-century CE epitaph of a five-year-old girl states: "Not Death, but the naiads snatched the excellent child as a playmate."[14] Similarly, the first or second-century CE epitaph of a two-year-old reads: "The spring nymphs snatched me from life."[15] It is impossible to know whether these deaths were due to drownings, but this is a reasonable assumption considering the emphasis on water nymphs. Such epitaphs usually involve very young children, and the majority were written for girls. The epitaphs belong to a cosmopolitan, probably widespread funerary tradition that draws upon the abduction myths.

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[13] For evidence of the sustained popularity of the Hylas myth, see Zanker and Ewald, *Living with Myths*, pages 90-91 for an analysis of the myth depicted on a Roman sarcophagus

[14] *IG* XIV 2040 = *GVI* no.1595 (Rome)

[15] *IG* XIV 2067 = *GVI* no. 952 (Rome)

Death and Underworld

Nymphs have long been connected with ceremonies associated with death and mourning. In his funerary epigrams in honor of Homer and Hesiod, Alcaeus of Messene portrayed the nymphs and Nereids as mourners who have physical contact with both corpses and tombs. In the first (Alcaeus 11, *Palatine Anthology* 7.1), the Nereids anoint Homer's body with nectar and bury it beneath a rocky outcropping.[16] In the second, nymphs care for Hesiod's body:

> In the shady grove of Lokris, the nymphs washed the body of Hesiod from their own springs, and heaped up his grave. (Alcaeus 12, *Palatine Anthology*. 7.55.1– 3)

Both poems emphasize the handling of the body and the intimate services that are normally performed by the women of the family: anointing with oil (here, nectar) in the first case and bathing in the second. Additionally, the nymphs in each poem prepare the tomb and lay the body to rest. The nymphs' role as a sort of mortician also highlights their unique status as semi-divine, as Greek gods traditionally have an aversion to contact with the dead.[17] This provides a compelling comparandum between nymph and hero-cult, which is also intimately intertwined with death ritual.

Beyond the Oceanids, many nymphs such as Orphne and the Lampades, specifically associated with the underworld, were affiliated ritually with the deceased. The Lampades are torch-bearing nymphs in the retinue of Hekate, goddess of crossroads and witchcraft. Among these are the naiad nymph Minthe from Ellis (Southern Greece):

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[16] Larson, Jennifer. *Greek Nymphs : Myth, Cult, Lore*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2001. 90-94
[17] Ibid.

> Near Pylos, towards the east, is a mountain named after Minthe, who, according to myth, became the concubine of Hades, was trampled underfoot by Kore (Core) [Persephone], and was transformed into garden-mint, the plant which some call hedyosmos. Furthermore, near the mountain is a precinct sacred to Hades. (Strabo 8.3.14)

Beyond the mythological association, mint (together with incense) was used in funerary rites to offset the smell of decay[18] and offer hope in the afterlife for initiates.[19] The herb was highly valued due to its aromatic properties and was thought to be an aphrodisiac, possibly owing to Minthe's role as a lover of Hades. Minthe was said to have been taken with Hades prior to his rape of Persephone. Jealous and enraged, Minthe spoke against Persephone and was trampled by Demeter for her hubris. Physically crushed, she now rises from the earth as the aromatic leaves. The plant was also used as a contraceptive, perhaps paralleling the relationship between Minthe and Hades (and Hades and Persephone) as barren: Hades fathered no children.[20] In this way, nymphs such as Minthe, affiliated with death and the underworld, are able to subvert the typical association between nymphs and fertility, and instead represent the inverse.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the association of water nymphs with death and the underworld. We have discussed their association to Olympian deities, which served to characterize nymphs alongside more prominent figures and further shape their identity. We have examined the distinction between salt and fresh water and the various uses of each. Like most

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[18] The first-century CE pharmacological writer Dioscorides of Anazarbus discusses the medicinal uses of pennyroyal (3.31), green mint (*huduosmon*: 3.34) and calamin (3.35)

[19] Kerenyi, Karl. *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York City, New York: Princeton University Press: Bollingen. 1967. page 40, 179f

[20] For contraception in antiquity, see the second century CE gynecological writer, Soranus of Ephesus, *On Midwifery and the Disases of Women* 1. 60-65. Cf., John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, Harvard 1992

Greek deities, nymphs are ambiguous, and our water nymphs vacillate between purity and promiscuity. I assert that this has mythological foundations in the purity of their spring, that extends into the rituals that occurred at a nymph's fountain. Closely tied to scenes of transformation, the mythology of nymphs primes them to be associated with foundational myths of *poleis*, and to accompany young Greek women through defining moments in their lives in ritual.

Chapter II: Local Identity and the Face of the *Polis*

Introduction

Nymphs were closely associated with the mythological foundations of their respective city-states and were thus a point of pride for their *poleis*. Nymphs are consequently represented with statues erected throughout the city as well as on widely-distributed and highly mobile coins. Since the nymphs were associated with elements of nature, they were often tied to important aspects of daily life, and acts of visiting their sacred sites were both habitual and traditional. In the city of Corinth, Peirene, the most plentiful spring, which provided the city with all of its fresh water, was thought to be inhabited by the eponymous nymph, and it was consequently named in her honor:

> [In Korinthos (Corinth)] is the entrance to the water of Peirene. The legend about Peirene is that she was a woman who became a spring because of the tears shed in lamentation for her son Kenkhrias (Cenchrias), who was unintentionally killed by Artemis. (Pausanias 2.3.3)

The Peirene spring became not only the sustaining life force of the town but also its heart, spotlighting the mythological traditions of the community who frequented it daily and worshiped there. The cult of the nymphs was foundational to Corinthian identity, and the surplus of evidence (coins, literary references, inscriptions, statuary, and the archeological record) at Corinth can help us better understand the ways in which nymphs impacted comparable *poleis*, such as Syracuse, where evidence is less robust. We explore these elements to explain the

significant and enduring impact of the cult of the nymphs on Ancient Corinth and as comparanda for other cities and other nymphs in this chapter.

Corinth and Peirene

The nymph Peirene, ingrained into the mythological foundation of Corinth, is literally written into important *polis* ritual sites:

> The names of the Corinthian harbours were given them by Lekhes (Leches) and Kenkhrias (Cenchrias) [of Korinthos (Corinth)], said to be children of Poseidon and Peirene the daughter of Akheloios (Achelous), though in the poem called The Great Eoiai Peirene is said to be a daughter of Oibalos (Oebalus). (Pausanias 2.2.3)

Peirene was not only herself the renowned fountain, her sons were the harbors that were essential for Corinthian commerce and identity. It was believed that Peirene cried so profusely over the death of Cenchrias that Artemis turned her into the spring that flows through Corinth. In turn, Corinth's two ports, Lechaion and Kenchreai, are named after her sons. Strabo attested to the prominence of Corinth even in the Roman era and explained some of the geographical features that contributed to the city's success:

> Corinth is called "wealthy" because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other (Strabo 8.6.20)

Strabo's discussion of trade with other regions thus establishes literary evidence of the confluence of ideas and culture. Later in this chapter, we will explore how this exchange led to

the adoption of the cult of the nymphs in other *poleis*. Peirene is an iconic figure for Corinth's mythical foundations, and her face appears on the local coinage. Thus, her cult is thoroughly woven into Corinthian identity and self-characterization. It was also believed that Corinth was the site where Bellerophon tamed Pegasus. When Pegasus stamped of his hooves on the mountainside, springs formed across Greece. Pindar is our earliest source for this tradition:

> [Bellerophon] once strove in vain beside Peirene's spring, and suffered much, seeking to yoke the snake-haired Gorgo's offspring, Pegasos. Till Pallas [Athena], goddess maid, brought him the bridle and golden headband, and behold a dream was truth. (Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 13.63-66)

Pegasus created the Peirene spring, and, consequently, the nymph and winged horse are often represented together on coins and painted pottery from the Archaic period into the 5th century BCE, suggesting the deep importance of myth to the *polis* of Corinth and how these characters, Pegasus and Peirene, became synonymous with Corinth.[1] Peirene's name, moreover, is derived from the Greek word *peirainein*, "to tie or fasten," and may be in reference to Bellerophon's bridling of Pegasus, as Ziskowski believes.[2] By recalling the myth in her very name, "Peirene" further links this regional nymph with the Olympian pantheon and thus connects the local mythology of a city-state with its greater Greek identity. Figure 3, the obverse of a Corinthian drachma (ca. 400 BCE), illustrates the head of Peirene; the reverse represents Pegasus. By the time that the coin was issued, Corinth was already notable for its flourishing springs. This style of coin grew increasingly popular, promoting the identity of the nymph as integral to Corinth,

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[1] Robinson, Betsey Ann. "*Fountains and the Culture of Water at Roman Corinth*". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing 2001. 163-170

[2] Ziskowski, Angela. "*The Bellerophon Myth in Early Corinthian History and Art.*" Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens 83, no. 1. 2014. 81–102

and establishing a trend that would be imitated by other Greek city-states. Nevertheless, these figures were iconic and constant to the design of Corinthian coins throughout the eras.[3]

Figure 3: Corinthian coin featuring head of Peirene, 400 BCE

Coins were highly mobile but also individualized to their *poleis*, making them the ideal media to display recognizable icons of their places of origin. Coins were valued by weight, and their faces were not necessarily programmatic. Early coins, nonetheless, typically featured an Olympian god, such as Zeus, and an identifying symbol, such as Zeus' eagle.[4] Mythical animals are less frequent, and Pegasus is one of the prime exceptions. Mythical and fabricated, nymphs are depicted as human in form, and they are more accessible than Olympian deities. Fulfilling a

[3] Sear, David R. *Greek Imperial Coins and Their Values : the Local Coinages of the Roman Empire*. London: Spink, 2010. 14-32
[4]Ibid.

role that resembles heroes, in myth and ritual nymphs accompany mortals through significant life milestones, such as weddings in ritual (or even transformations in myth).[5]

Hero cults were a distinctive aspect of Greek religion. The heroes of Greek cult were deceased, chthonic figures who could impact the community from beyond the grave (such as Oedipus who, from his secret grave at Colonus, protects Athens: Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 576-577). Like nymphs, they are semi-divine and localized, acting only within the vicinity of their shrines. Community veneration of heroes was thought to be in exchange for good luck, specifically in regard to fruitful fields, healing, and protection during battle.[6] Similarly rituals in honor of the nymphs might involve sacrifice in exchange for a safe birth.[7] Heroes embody their shrines and are connected to them in the same fashion that nymphs embody their natural landmarks and are connected to them helping to shape the identity of the communities that are protected by these sacred sites.

Among the best-known recipients of hero cults are Heracles, Asklepios, and the Dioscuri, who were all considered "saviors" in Greek cult. We focus on Heracles. The mightiest son of Zeus, Heracles earned Olympian status by visiting and returning from Hades, thus conquering the realm of the dead. The myth is complicated. His mortal body was burned on a pyre at Trachis, but his immortal essence ascended to Mount Olympus (Hyginus 36). He is therefore both a hero and a god: "at the same festival, sacrifice was made to him first as a hero and then as a god" (Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 3.22), and he was worshiped as a personal savior throughout

[5] Kopestonsky, Theodora. "*The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth.*" Hesperia 85, no. 4, 2016. 711–777
[6] Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion : Archaic and Classical*. Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 1991. 205-215
[7] See discussion on *Hecuba* 609 - 614 on page 22

Greece.[8] This speaks to the ways in which these chthonic deities were malleable, as seen how nymphs could be at times virginial or alluring, comforting or troublesome. Heracles' cults are widespread, and festivals in his honor include sacrifices and banquets. Aligning with the annual celebration at the fountain of Arethusa (Pausanias 7.24.3, see page 47). Like heroes, nymphs are also important to rituals that are deeply personal and individual (sailors in distress at sea, for example, would call on the Dioscuri for protection: Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 10.51–52; Pliny, *Natural History* 2.101; Pausanias 3.16), but it is beyond our scope to explore this interesting trajectory further.

Coins showing images of nymphs do not originate in Corinth. The tribes of the Mount Pangaion area of Thrace featured nymphs on coinage as early as the Late Archaic and Early Classical Periods (well before Corinthian practice).[9] On these coins, nymphs were usually pursued or caught by lascivious satyrs, with an emphasis on the act as opposed to the identity of the individual nymphs. The myth depicted on the Pangaion coins is missing from literary accounts, but scholars believe the motif may refer to a cult or make a pun on the area of the tribe, since the visual of satyrs suggests "wild beasts of the mountains." Corinthian style coins, on the contrary, featuring the face of the nymph, emphasize the identity and beauty of the nymph as representation of the city. Finally, the longstanding use of nymphs on Corinthian coinage is also unique.

Peirene was more broadly associated with Isthmian victory, and she was celebrated by Isthmian champions due to her relationship with Poseidon as the father of her sons Lechaion and

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[8] Molina Marín, A. I. "Heracles and the Mastery of Geographical Space," in D. Ogden (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles*, Oxford, 2021. 409-417

[9] Hind, John G.F "*Centaurs, Satyrs and Nymphs on the Early Silver Coins of Thasos and the Tribes of Mount Pangaion.*" The Numismatic Chronicle. 2001. 279–82

Kenchreai (for whom Corinth's harbors were named).[10] Peirene was, moreover, a source of poetic and athletic excellence:

> I shall come to know prosperous Corinth, portal of Isthmian Poseidon and city of glorious children. (Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 13.3-5)

Robinson and Lawrence argue that this association of the city with myth and the Isthmian games helped legitimize Corinth as a capital of the Roman-era province. This renown also contributed to Corinth's positive image through its association with a strong and powerful figure-head.

Visiting Corinth's Peirene fountain would have been a practical but pleasant, if not spiritual or monumental, experience. Fountains connect human needs and natural resources, and they have the potential to be evocative and sensorial monuments. Their fundamental construction, however, represented immense and time-consuming labor. In the case of Peirene, the fountain served the local population in perpetuity. This meant that, according to Hill, once the principal features of the water system had been constructed—supply tunnels, the four great reservoirs and the three deep draw-basins—they remained essentially unchanged throughout the whole Greek period of the city.[11] In 146 BCE, Corinth was destroyed by Roman general Lucius Mummius, and the city endured a period of declining population until the foundation of the Roman colony in 44 BCE.[12] The colonists found Peirene in its Hellenistic form with six antechambers and drawbasins under a parapet. The archeological record is dense, and while the

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[10] Laurence, Karen A. "*Roman Infrastructural Changes to Greek Sanctuaries and Games: Panhellenism in the Roman Empire, Formations of New Identities.*" Order No. 3530636, University of Michigan, 2012. 112-115

[11] Hill, Bert Hodge. *The Springs--Peirene, Sacred Spring*, Glauke Princeton, N. J: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1964. 144-167

[12] Robinson, Betsey A. "Playing in the Sun: Hydraulic Architecture and Water Displays in Imperial Corinth." Hesperia 82, no. 2. 2013. 341–384.

finer details of hydraulics and specific period renovations are beyond our present scope, I will offer a discussion on the fountain as it demonstrates continued representation of the nymphs.

At the height of Corinth's success, water from the Peirene fountain flowed to nearly every corner of the town. All locations, from shops to bathhouses, would require some source of water. In the Greek Classical and Hellenistic Eras, as an important center of trade, Corinth was attracting visitors from across the Mediterranean. Nearly a thousand years later, during the High Roman empire, Pausanias visited Corinth, wrote about the city's layout and foundational mythology, and recorded an outsider's perspective. He spoke highly of the town and recalled many of its legends, including Peirene, a beloved mythological founding figure who had not been forgotten. Pausanias thus established Corinth as an intriguing and desirable place to visit:

> The spring is ornamented with white marble, and there have been made chambers like caves, out of which the water flows into an open-air well. It is pleasant to drink, and they say that the Corinthian bronze, when red-hot, is tempered by this water. (Pausanias, 2.3.3)

Pausanias' description not only confirms our understanding of the visual layout of the city, but also affirms the physical elements of nymph worship and customs that we believe occurred at these sites. The Peirene spring was central to the forum and daily life of Corinth, and its beauty and accessibility would have been of chief importance. Figure 4 shows a map of ancient Corinth, highlighting the relevant springs and cult worship sites. The main Peirene fountain sits within the forum and would have been observed immediately by all travelers entering the city.[13] It would have also been in constant use, requiring continued maintenance. Finally, due to its fame and

[13] Robinson, Betsey Ann. "Fountains and the Culture of Water at Roman Corinth". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing 2001. 163-179.

renown, the aesthetic beauty of the fountain was important to glorify this foundational nymph and her mythical origins. The description of the fountain as "ornamented" and cave-like thus expresses some of the ways in which the cult of the nymphs was venerated through the elevation of Peirene.

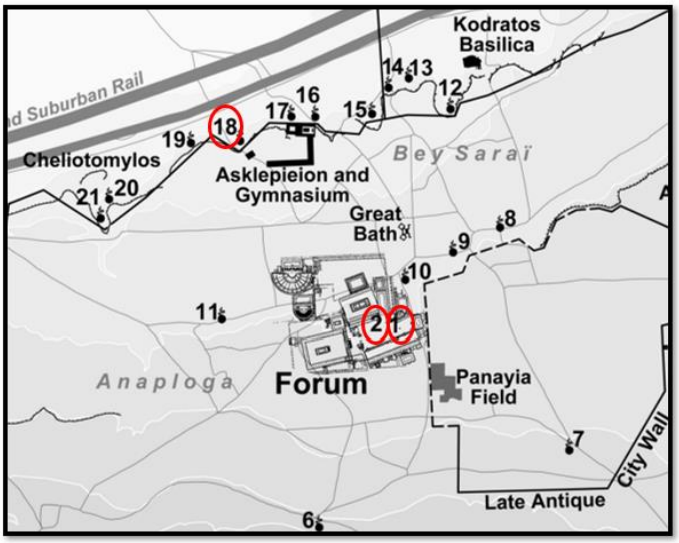

Figure 4: Map showing the springs of Corinth

Archaeological evidence supports literary accounts, informing our understanding of how the fountains and springs would have been decorated. Such evidence includes statues of nymphs found at springs and fountains that provide full-figure artistic representations (Figure 5). Typically nude or lightly draped, nymph sculptures are easily confused with representations of Aphrodite. For example, a fragmented marble statue survives at Corinth, found in Peirene's

supply tunnel, likely removed during Roman Christianization.[14] A carefully bored hole at the midsection suggests that this artifact is a statue of a nymph that would have been used as a fountain, water spilling forth from a pipe where the hole is bored. Found with the statue, a fragmentary shell may have functioned as a water spout or attachment of an ornament.[15]

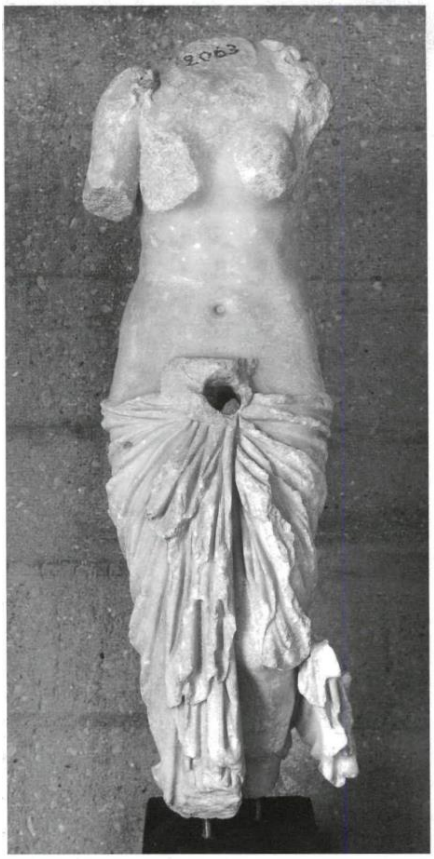

Figure 5: Statue of a nymph with shell pierced for the passage of a water pipe

While the Peirene fountain was the most renowned of the springs at Corinth, smaller Corinthian nymphaea and shrines celebrated significant people and events. The 1st century CE Roman statesman and encyclopedist Pliny the Elder, for example, described a relief crafted by

[14] In Corinth's later Roman period, public depictions of pagan idols were removed, see Robinson, Betsey Ann. "Fountains and the Culture of Water at Roman Corinth". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2001. 127
[15] Johnson, Franklin P. "*Sculpture 1896-1923.*" Corinth 9, no. 1. 1931.: iii–161

the first Greek coroplast working at Corinth, preserved in a shrine of the nymphs until the city was destroyed by Mummius in 146 BCE.[16]

> Butades, a potter of Sicyon, was the first who invented, at Corinth, the art of modeling portraits in the earth which he used in his trade. It was through his daughter that he made the discovery; who, being deeply in love with a young man about to depart on a long journey, traced the profile of his face, as thrown upon the wall by the light of the lamp. Upon seeing this, her father filled in the outline, by compressing clay upon the surface, and so made a face in relief, which he then hardened by fire along with other articles of pottery. This model, it is said, was preserved in the nymphaeum at Corinth, until the destruction of that city by Mummius. (Pliny, *Natural History* 35.151)

Reports such as these, in addition to surviving sculpture, suggest that the cult of the nymphs was far more extensive than previously understood, well beyond Corinth's iconic Peirene spring.

Despite uncertainty regarding the identification of these fragmentary statues (nymphs or Aphrodite), female figures found in groups, especially those depicted with centaurs, satyrs, or Pan, are frequently nymphs. As discussed in Chapter I, nymphs are often worshiped in groups, many of whom are unnamed, in conjunction with other deities. At ritual sites, such as caves, the nymphs are depicted with Pan, a pastoral deity. Sometimes nymphs were depicted as attendants for other divinities, as in a fragmented sculpture group of Parian marble found at Corinth and featuring Dionysus and Pan: in the center Dionysus is seizing the nymph with his right hand, and Pan's face is at the height of Dionysus' hip (Figure 6). The fragment demonstrates that Peirene was not the only nymph depicted in Corinth, although her image was exclusively rendered on

[16] Kopestonsky, Theodora "*The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth.*" Hesperia 85. 2016. 711–777

coinage. This sculpture group was found near the Panagia church, just south of the limits of the Agora,[17] and thus depictions of nymphs were not exclusive to fountains and springs.

Figure 6: Fragment of Dionysus, Nymph, and Pan

In Roman Corinth, an additional site, referred to as "Upper Peirene" on Acrocorinth, was also connected with the Peirene myth. According to Broneer, the name "Peirene" was never applied to the spring on Acrocorinth before Strabo.[18] In Greek mythology, the lower spring alone was called Peirene. It seems, however, the myths about the Peirene spring and its affiliation with Pegasus were confused through a close association with the Hippocrene spring on Mount. Helicon, also associated with Pegasus:

[17] Johnson, Franklin P. "*Sculpture 1896-1923*." Corinth 9, no. 1. 1931. iii–161.
[18] Broneer, Oscar. "*Inscriptions from Upper Peirene*" Corinth 3, no. 1. 1930. 50–93.

> Ascending about twenty stades from this grove is what is called the Horse's Fountain (Hippocrene). It was made, they say, by the horse of Bellerophon striking the ground with his hoof. (Pausanias 8.22-10)

Both myths were sources of poetic inspiration, and Strabo affirmed the interpretation:

> Now the summit has a small temple of Aphrodite; and below the summit is the spring Peirene, which, although it has no overflow, is always full of transparent, potable water. And they say that the spring at the base of the mountain is the joint result of pressure from this and other subterranean veins of water—a spring which flows out into the city in such quantity that it affords a fairly large supply of water. And there is a good supply of wells throughout the city, as also, they say, on the Acrocorinthus (Strabo 8.6.21)

Upper Peirene was thus established as a shrine for Bellerophon and Peirene, important figures of Corinth's founding mythology.[19] The Romans believed that a subterranean channel connected the Upper and "Lower" Peirene, and that the spring on Acrocorinth supplied the fountain in the forum. Archeologists, however, have determined that the water sources were completely separate. Inscriptions found at Upper Peirene, include words such as "with good will" and names in a formulaic manner (Figure 7). These inscriptions, comparable with others seen throughout the Mediterranean,[20] are consistent with a tradition in which travelers inscribe the names of themselves or others to commemorate their journey to the site. Upper Peirene, high atop Acrocorinth, is thus also considered to be a site affiliated with worship of Peirene in the Roman

[19] As testified through writings by Pausanias and numismatics evidence, see Figure 3 on page 32 for more details.
[20] Broneer describes the same formulaic pattern seen at the Royal Tomb of Thebes believed to be the burial place of Memnon. For more details, and images of inscriptions see Broneer, Oscar. "Inscriptions from Upper Peirene" Corinth 3, no. 1. 1930. 50–92.

Era. While nymph cult rituals that may have adopted new forms and locations, they persisted nonetheless.

1. Ἐμνήσθησ(α)ν
Εὔπορ(ο)ς τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ ἀδελφοῦ,
Ἀπελλᾶς Νήψιδος,
Φιλωνᾶς Διονυσίου,
μαρμαράριοι.[2]

FIGURE 51. GREEK INSCRIPTION NO. 1

Figure 7: Inscription at the entrance of Upper Peirene

The springs in Corinth were renovated significantly as the city evolved, and the renovations became more elaborate as the city became increasingly prosperous and renowned. Wealthy Hellenistic Corinth, thus, boasted the most upgraded fountains, with the largest quantity of votive offerings to nymphs thus far. A digital reconstruction presents what Peirene would have looked like in the Hellenistic period (300 BCE) at its most impressive point (Figure 8).[21] This iteration features a marble revetment and statues where other adornments would also have been added. Higher rates of administrative interest in maintaining the site affiliated with the *polis'* founding legend are thus in evidence. According to Robinson, under Hadrian (ruled 117 - 138 CE), large and elaborate marble-revetted nymphaea were constructed at several Greek city-states, many of which dwarfed Peirene. They could not, however, rival the rich history and

[21] "*Peirene Fountain, Corinth - Greece.*" n.d. Artis Graphic Laboratory. Accessed May 9, 2022. https://artisgl.com/peirene-fountain-corinth-greece?msclkid=1809fcf8cf8111ec816c8f4ec4a4a7c1.

continued fame of the Corinthian spring.[22] While other fountains and springs were constructed in Corinth, none compared in size and decoration with the primary Peirene spring. The vast majority of new fountains seems to have been modest, and civic benefaction continued to focus on the largest spring in the city (Peirene). Robinson asserts that the renown and history of the city's oldest spring discouraged the development of competing installations at less popular sites.

Figure 8: Digital Reconstruction of Hellenistic Peirene site

There were also efforts to ensure that Peirene remained practical while also providing a positive experience for visitors who may have traveled great distances to visit the spring. As the city grew, attracting higher numbers of visitors, the fountain also increased in popularity. It was thus important that the quality of the water was fresh and the displays were beautiful. Water would have flowed unabated through the fountain and the deeply cut basins would require

[22] Robinson, Betsey A. *"Playing in the Sun: Hydraulic Architecture and Water Displays in Imperial Corinth."* Hesperia 82, no. 2. 2013. 341–384.

women to lean over parapets to draw water from the spring as cool air wafted from the underground reservoir. Robinson believes it was possible that water from the neighboring *polis* of Stymphalos was routed into Peirene to improve the water quality, which was praised by Athenaeus: "When I weighed the water from what is referred to as the Peirene spring in Corinth, I discovered that it was the lightest water in Greece'' (2.43b). Robinson asserts that this description would better match the water of Stymphalos than that of Peirene, which is hard, salty, and difficult to protect from pollution.[23] Although it may have not been ideal to mix Peirene's sacred water with water from other sources, Peirene's tunnels are large enough to accommodate rerouting water from Stymphalos, and Stymphalan water would have enhanced the flow and quality of the Peirene spring. Regardless of the true reason behind Peirene's reputedly pleasant water, this source, in conjunction with the archeological record of continued renovation, indicates that great care was taken to ensure the sensorial glory of the spring. In turn, the mythology and identity of Peirene and the cult of the nymphs was preserved within the urban fabric of the city.

The Peirene fountain at Corinth is one of the most prominent examples of nymph cult that was developed alongside *polis* identity. Mythically foundational to the city, the nymph was eponymous with the most reliable and central source of water to the town–a fountain which was renovated and ornamented throughout Corinth's history. Further, Peirene's fame was publicized on coinage that advertised the *polis* as identifiable with the nymph. Thus, at the Peirene fountain, the cult of the nymphs was venerated, maintained, and widely promoted.

[23] Robinson, Betsey A. "*Playing in the Sun: Hydraulic Architecture and Water Displays in Imperial Corinth.*" Hesperia 82, no. 2. 2013. 341–384.

Syracuse and Arethusa

Syracuse was founded in 734 BCE by Corinthian settlers, and the settlement at Syracuse promulgated many of Corinthian customs and beliefs, including mythology and an emphasis on nymph lore. The especially renowned nymph of Syracuse is Arethusa who was loved by a river of the Peloponnese, Alpheus. The story goes that the eponymous god fell in love with the nymph while she was bathing in his river. Arethusa, however, did not return his affections. Instead, fleeing from his pursuit, she dived beneath the earth and through the sea, and she resurfaced as a fountain at Syracuse on the island of Sicily, according to Pausanias (5.7.2). Her name, Arethusa, moreover, is derived from the Greek words *ardo* and *thoos,* "swift water," evoking the violent characteristics of the river Alpheus who pursued her. A decadrachm issued from Syracuse features Arethusa accompanied by dolphins, animals that were common in the sea surrounding the *polis* (Figure 9).[24] As Syracuse developed and its economy flourished, the Sicilian city-state became a trade rival of Corinth. Syracuse, however, maintained the mythology and graphic traditions of its metropolis (mother-city), including similar numismatic and programmatic ritual imagery. Arethusa, meanwhile, became engrained with the identity of Syracuse as Peirene had at Corinth. Like Corinth, Syracuse also became a cultural center that was visited by many notable authors including Aeschylus, Simonides, and Pindar who each spent time living in and writing about Sicily.[25] Additionally, the cult of the nymphs prevailed at the fountain of Arethusa, where the naiad was routinely thanked for good fortune. Her face continued to be featured on coinage.[26]

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[24] Dolphins are also associated with Apollo, a god of settlement, and could be symbolic of Arethusa's journey through the sea.

[25]Thatcher, Mark. "*Syracusan Identity Between Tyranny and Democracy"* Bulletin - Institute of Classical Studies 55, no. 2. 2012. 73–90.

[26] "*Decadrachm of Syracuse Depicting a Female Head (probably the Head of Artemis or Arethusa) Surrounded by Dolphins, Signed by Kimon*." Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library, 2014.

Figure 9: 5th century BCE Syracusan coin depicting Arethusa with dolphins

Peirene's worship is paralleled at Syracuse, where the nymph Arethusa and her naiad counterpart Cyane are attested in similar ways. Since Arethusa was thought to inhabit a geographical feature that was significant to the city-state, she became a metonym for the *polis* of Syracuse, and she was featured on coins as a figurehead.[27] In addition to the numismatic evidence, Pausanias attests ritualistic celebrations occurring at Arethusa's spring:

> Aigion (Aegium) [in Akhaia (Achaea)] has . . . a sanctuary of Soteria (Safety). Her image may be seen by none but the priests, and the following ritual is performed. They take cakes of the district from the goddess and throw them into the sea, saying that they send them to Arethousa (Arethusa) at Syrakouse (Syracuse). (Pausanias 7.24.3)

[27]Larson, Jennifer. *Greek Nymphs : Myth, Cult, Lore*. Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2001. Accessed April 13, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central. 74-83

The visual representation of Cyane is not nearly as extensive. Her spring, however, was also notable for its ceremonial events:

> Syrakousans each year hold a notable festive gathering; and private individuals offer the lesser victims, but when the ceremony is on behalf of the community, bulls are plunged in the pool, this manner of sacrifice having been commanded by Herakles… (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 5.2.3)

Additionally, nearly identical votive offerings have been found at the springs of both Peirene and Arethusa.[28] This correlation underscores not only the common rituals across Greek city-states as a whole, but more specifically the complex relationship of trade and cultural custom between Corinth and Syracuse itself. This overlap demonstrates that, although each nymph was uniquely connected to the mythology and traditions of her particular *polis*, the way that they were integrated within the cities were similar. Using Corinth as a referent, the data from Syracuse is helpful in articulating how cult worship was universally "Greek" while still strikingly individualized and localized at each community.

Etymology also speaks to *polis* identity and mythological associations. The names of both nymphs (the "fastening" Peirene and Arethusa "the swift water")—powerful, positive, metonyms for their *poleis*—likewise invoke foundational mythology. Both nymphs undergo transformation, one for the sake of freedom, the other for love of children (page 31). Both mythology and etymology elucidate how *polis* identity aligns with local nymphs.

[28] Ibid.

Rome and Juturna

We turn now to one example from Rome, Juturna, sister of King Turnus. Like Peirene, Juturna, whom Jupiter endowed with immortality and oversight of the marsh,[29] was also foundational: her children by Jupiter, according to Ovid, were the Lares who keep watch over the city of Rome and its dangerous crossroads. According to Frontinus (40 - 103 CE), water in Rome prior to 312 BCE was drawn primarily from the Tiber and some springs throughout the city (*On Aqueducts* 1.4). The most significant of these was the spring associated with the nymph Juturna, whose waters, renowned for their healing properties, were used in nearly all sacrifices.

Excavations have uncovered supporting evidence that Juturna's spring was a monumental site as early as 400 BCE.[30] Within a square basin was a marble pedestal that would have supported a statuary group. Archaeological evidence shows a second century BCE restoration of the base. Fragments of the sculpture group seem to have come from a workshop of Greek artists in Rome who crafted the figures in an archaizing style. A dedication inscribed on top of the monument unequivocally confirms that the shrine was for her.

Also attributed to Juturna was a shrine in the Campus Martius where she received annually both public and private sacrifice on January 11 (Ovid, *Fasti* 1.463). Thus, like the Greek nymphs at Corinth, Syracuse, and elsewhere, Juturna was the focus of both community and personal worship. Although Juturna's spring contained potable water, it was not a primary source of freshwater for the Romans, and the water from the sacred spring was restricted for ritual uses. The construction, restoration, and beautification of the spring, nonetheless, aligns

[29] cf. Virgil. *Aeneid* xii, 12.140, 875-8848; cf., Ovid,. *Fasti* ii, 2.585-610, 606.
[30] Coarelli, Filippo. *Rome and Environs : An Archaeological Guide*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. 50-54

nymph worship at Rome with Greek practice, including statuary, shrines, and temples, demonstrating an integration of the nymph into the fabric of the city. The addition of both a temple and spring to the nymphs in a city as significant as Rome demonstrates the enduring presence of the nymphs in the Mediterranean and their continued place in society.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the relationship of individual (figurehead) nymphs with *polis* identity and everyday ritual in honor of the naiads. Through their connection to the mythological foundations of a *polis*, nymphs became significant to local cult rituals in a similar manner to Greek heroes. We considered the archeological development and renovation of the urban fabric, in which sites in conjunction with the reputation and identity of the nymphs were maintained to encourage their veneration and perceived glory. Distributed numismatic attestations and extant sculpture of the nymphs at these sites articulates the deep meaning that the deities held to the community. We have also considered nymph worship as demonstrated at Syracuse and Rome, to examine the ways the nymphs spread to other cities through colonization and trade.

Chapter III: Representation of Women and Ritual Formation

Introduction

The cult of the nymphs was integral to the formation of rituals that celebrated the monumental transitions in a woman's life from girlhood, to bride, to motherhood. As discussed previously (page 9), the Greek word for *numphe* refers to both a nymph and a young woman of marriageable age,[1] thus correlating young, unmarried women with semi-divine nymphs prior to the responsibilities of a married woman.[2] This duality of the nymph, as both virginal and alluring, can be seen at shrines and sacred fountains that were used prominently for bridal and birth rituals. In this chapter, I will first discuss the ways in which nymphs are intimately connected with women's maturation rituals. Then, I will explore how this is attested at sites of ritual, highlighting the nymphs' personal relationship with women in the community. Our case studies include the Kokkinovrysi shrine, Pitsa Cave, and Sacred Spring at Corinth. Additionally, the Corycian Cave is a comparandum for the adaptation of nymph cult at different *poleis*.

Our case-study sites are among the most intensely studied examples with the largest amount of extant ritual evidence. It is, however, by no means an exhaustive list of the sites in Greece where nymphs were a part of women's ritual. For example, over 138 inscriptions in Attica describe the votive location as "sacred to the nymphs"[3] or a "sacred space of a nymph."[4] Similarly, several inscriptions "to the nymphs"[5] are found in non-monumental contexts, most likely left by private individuals. The monumental sites are featured here due to the extensive

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[1] McClure, Laura. *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World : Readings and Sources*. Edited by Laura McClure. 1st ed. Oxford, England: Blackwell Science. 2002. 49-56
[2] Kopestonsky.Theodora. "*The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth.*" Hesperia 85. 2016. 711–777.
[3] IG I^2 798
[4] IGI^3 1064
[5] IG^2 4652

nymph-specific scholarship that they have inspired. The presence of such sites in prominent *polis*-locations, in addition to numerous offerings dedicated there, suggests the significant role that nymphs played in the transition of young women into brides, wives, and, eventually, the mothers of new citizens. While the cult of the nymphs is typically localized and individualized within a *polis*, archeological evidence suggests that there are some common elements of the cult which help to further identify sites of ritual.

Artemis, Heroes, and Kourotrophoi

While the Olympian gods were widely recognized at city-states such as Corinth and Syracuse, cults of minor local deities—such as the nymphs—were deeply ingrained into the rituals and spaces that were unique to the *polis* or more intimately connected to their citizens. Thus, at many sites, we see a merging of the worship of nymphs and other deities, which may have served to synthesize local cult practices with a broader Greek identity. This is exemplified through depictions of the nymphs and Artemis, one of the most important guardians of women in childbirth and therefore also important to rituals preparing for birth.[6] The nymphs' affiliation with Artemis is attested in literature:

> Just about then choruses of nymphs were being formed, for all the nymphs who lived there on the lovely peak made it their concern to hymn Artemis every night with songs. (Apollonius, *Argonautica* 1.1222-1225)

[6] Wise, Susan. "*Childbirth Votives and Rituals in Ancient Greece.*" Order No. 3280131, University of Cincinnati, 2007. 37-55

Burkert asserts that this became the definitive picture of Artemis: seen with a swarm of nymphs, hunting, dancing, and playing on mountains and meadows.[7] Since nymphs and Artemis both oversaw significant events in the lives of women, it is understandable that at many places (such as the Sacred Spring in Corinth) they were worshiped jointly, as attested through votive offerings of female figurines evocative of the dolls that girls dedicated to Artemis before marriage (*Palatine Anthology* 6.280).[8] Similarly, Artemis, "mistress of the animals," was often depicted with dogs and birds that are also common votive objects at nymph sites.[9] Artemis and the nymphs share sacred spaces at shrines and sanctuaries and they also share the same liminal areas (mountains, harbors, and springs). This mix of dedicatory offerings and shared sanctuaries indicate that while deities retained their respective individual temples and fountains, they could be worshiped together for the purpose of a specific ritual or ceremony.

In relation to Artemis, the nymphs serve two functions: semi-divine companions, and mythopoetic representatives of the Greek maiden at adolescence.[10] Artemis is famously a virgin goddess, but, unlike Athena, she is highly sexualized, as girls of marriageable age often are sexualized, even in Greek antiquity.[11] Thus, nymphs in conjunction with Artemis are especially representative of the social rituals by which females come-of-age and take their place in society.[12]

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[7] Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion : Archaic and Classical*. Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 1991, page 150

[8] Although this is a Hellenistic source, the prevailing consensus among scholars is that the practice dates to an earlier time, as part of the prewedding sacrifices (proteleia); see Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, "J.H. Oakley, R.H. Sinos, The Wedding in Ancient Athens", Kernos [Online], 8 | 1995

[9] Rietveld, Kyra. *"Iconography of the Cult of Artemis in the Greek Classical and Imperial Periods."* 2022. 95-123

[10] Larson, J. "Handmaidens of Artemis? + Nymphs in Greek and Roman Literature and Religion." The Classical journal (Classical Association of the Middle West and South) 92, no. 3 (1997): 249–257.

[11] Burkert Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical, 150: "for the virginity of Artemis is not asexuality as is Athena's practical and organizational intelligence, but a peculiarly erotic and challenging ideal."

[12] Larson, J. "Handmaidens of Artemis? + Nymphs in Greek and Roman Literature and Religion." The Classical journal (Classical Association of the Middle West and South) 92, no. 3. 1997. 249–257

Like heroes (above, page 34) nymphs are more approachable than Olympian gods, and the connection is more personal. Consider the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, twin heroes known for intervening in times of crises to save shipwrecked sailors and travelers and invoked as "saviors." Nymphs, likewise, were sometimes *kourotrophoi*, or "child nurturers," for infant divinities/heroes. Nymphs were entrusted to take care of Aristaeus at Celos:

> We are further informed that Aristaeus left descendants behind on the island of Ceos and then returned to Libya, from where he set forth with the aid of his mother, a Nymph (Diodorus Siculus 4.81.1-3)

They also nurtured Zeus at Crete:

> Regarding the birth of Zeus and the manner in which he came to be king… The Curetes bore him off to a certain cave where they gave him over to the nymphs, with the command that they should minister to his every need. And the nymphs nurtured the child on a mixture of honey and milk … but the most astonishing of all that which the myth relates has to do with the bees, and we should not omit to mention it: The god, they say, wishing to preserve an immortal memorial of his close association with the bees, changed the color of them, making it like copper with the gleam of gold, and since the region lay at a very great altitude, where fierce winds blew about it and heavy snows fell, he made the bees insensible to such things and unaffected by them, since they must range over the most wintry stretches. (Diodorus Siculus 5.70.2-3)

Although it is only one facet of their mythic depiction, nymph as *kourotrophos* underscores their role as companions through moments of maturation, further explaining their role in rituals.

Nymphs were naturally the deities whom teenage girls turned to for companionship and guidance as they navigated from one stage of life to the next.

The life of a woman in Greek antiquity was conceptualized through a series of stages that correlated to marriage and reproduction. Many of these events were celebrated with ritual baths to mark the transition from girl, to bride, to mother, and to wife, roles that were important not only to the individual but the community as a whole.[13] Nymphs played a unique role in these events, as their association with water often made them relevant to the watery rituals of transition. Additionally, the character and identity of local nymphs was adaptable, inviting affiliation with many stages of female life. In literature, nymphs often represent the tension between virginity and sexuality. On the surface, nymphs may also have epitomized young women resisting the loss of freedom and innocence as they entered into socially-mandated marriage and motherhood. Many nymphs, Peirene included, however, also exemplify nurture. Peirene was turned into a spring from the copious tears that she shed at the death of her son. The nymph Arethusa, moreover, fled the lascivious river god Alpheus and was changed into a spring far from her homeland. Such transitions are not accidental, and it is likely that these nymphs were appreciated in dual contexts, as civically important natural landmarks and as those who brought solace to women.

Similarly, the depiction of nymphs in myth and ritual further informs our understanding of gender and sex in ancient society. Nymphs oversaw women's maturation rituals, yet they were also characterized as sexualized creatures with the ability to seduce or abduct men. A power imbalance, however, still remains between the mortal and the nymph (see discussion of Narcissus, Hermaphrodite, and Hylas: page 21 and 25). The nymph's desire at the core of such

[13] Kopestonsky, Theodora.*"The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth."* Hesperia 85. 2016. 711–777

narratives offers a unique model of gender-based agency. Tales of the nymph often embody a fantasy of total female independence. Eternally young and beautiful, a nymph enjoys both sexual freedom and the physical freedom that was denied to the majority of Greek women.

Methods of Cult Worship

Due to a nymph's physical attachment to a spring, the act of engaging in ritual in her honor could be a daily activity as simple as visiting the spring, or a monumental one coalescing around a coming-of-age event. The bridal bath, in particular, is an important part of the nuptial rituals:

> A lad's here [bringing] water for wine or wedding bath—that [is the custom], To fetch spring [water] for the bridal pair And [sing], backed by a piper. (Menander, *Unidentified and Excluded Papyri*. *Fabula Incerta* 9)

The bridal bath was thus a long-standing tradition for pre-marriage rituals. The water was thought to have the power to purify, bestow fertility, and prepare the bride for her future. On the eve of her wedding, a Greek girl would visit the nymphs to offer a *proteleia*, or prenuptial dedication.[14] In many places, including Athens, this dedication included a *loutrophoros*, a long-necked vessel for carrying the bathwater from a fresh running source to the site of ritual. These artifacts are regularly found as votive deposits from the classical period in caves sacred to nymph worship, and thus give context to nymph worship. In the *Phoenician Women*, Euripides refers to the "custom required in marriages, as befits a mother blessed" (350) when describing the pre-marriage rituals involving torches and ritual baths to encourage fertility.

[14] Plutarch, *Moralia* 772b; Larson, Jennifer. *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore.* Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2001. 97-112

Votive offerings, such as lamps and figurines, are valuable resources attesting to the ritualistic practices of women and girls. These artifacts were crucial to rituals in honor of the nymphs since many sacred fountains or caves would be dimly lit, consequently requiring lamps. Representations of female forms would evoke the relationship between nymph and worshiper. Dedicated figurines found at cult sites were predominantly feminine, either dancing or standing. In addition to female figurines, dogs and birds are in evidence (again, connecting the nymphs with Artemis).[15] Kopestonsky, for example, itemized over one hundred votives from the Kokkinovrysi shrine, classifying four types that compose eighty-six percent of the total figurines found (Figure 10). Nature and animal iconography alludes to the pastoral and liminal nature of the nymphs, and it also symbolizes fertility. Although this iconography is not exclusive to the nymphs, the combination of votives in conjunction with particular sites can be illuminating regarding the ritual activity and significance of certain places.

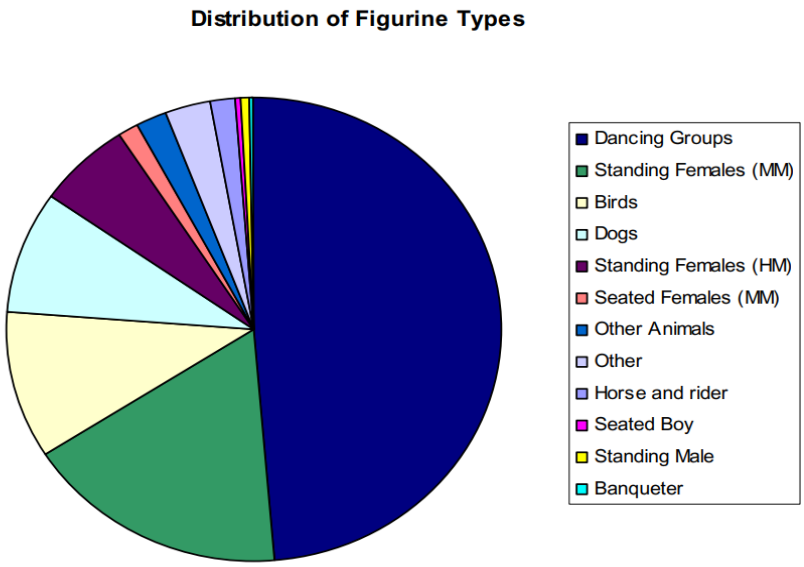

Figure 10: Distribution of Figurine Types at Kokkinovrysi Shrine

[15] *The Figure of the Nymph in Early Modern Culture*, Brill, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central, 97-124

Literary texts, moreover, provide further context and evidentiary support of nymph worship for fertility, birth, and child rearing. In Euripides, the nymphs seem to have been honored either before or after birth with an animal sacrifice.

> Old man: He was preparing a feast for the nymphs, I thought.
>
> Orestes: In return for the bringing up of children or for a coming birth?
>
> Old man: I only know this: he was preparing to sacrifice an ox. (Euripides, *Electra* 625-627)

These literary sources shed light on how and in what ways both men and women may have been involved in cult rituals. Although women would have been the primary beneficiaries of nymph rituals—since nymphs more closely reflected the identity and lived experiences of women—men also had roles in the cult of the nymphs. The offering of libations, food, perfume, and sacrifices is consistent with the worship of chthonic deities, heroes, and Olympian gods.

As discussed above, nymphs participate in overseeing rites of passage for young women, primarily marriage and child-birth. Impending anxiety would be natural for pubescent girls preparing to leave their homes and take on new roles with obligations to a new family (including a sexual relationship with her husband). This is exhibited in myth when Persephone longs to see her mother again after being abducted by Hades:

> Seizing her by force, he began to drive her off on his golden chariot, with her wailing and screaming as she called on her father Zeus, the highest and noblest. But no one heard her voice … Now so long as the goddess could still see the earth and the starry sky and the strong-flowing fishy sea and the light of the sun, and yet expected to see her good mother

> again and the families of gods who are forever, so long her great mind had the comfort of hope, despite her distress (Homer, *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 16-35)

Later in the hymn (365-370), Persephone absentmindedly eats a pomegranate seed in the underworld, which would require her to return as Hades' wife. She later lies to her mother and says she was forced to do so (405-415), demonstrating the internal conflict that young women might have felt about both anticipating and fearing marriage. It is likely that mythological characters could serve as role models to help ease premarital anxiety. Nymphs are appropriate role models for their mortal counterparts as they share many of the same characteristics, yet at the same time they seem to differ rather drastically in their attitudes toward sex. Mythological nymphs are not bound by the same social expectations as mortal Greek women. Nymphs can actively pursue members of the opposite sex (e.g Narcissus and Hylas, page 21 and 25), and they lack the culturally expected modesty of "proper" Greek women. Knoblauch argues that the mythological nymphs are allowed sexual freedom (perhaps even deviance) because of their marginality between deities and humans.[16] Nymphs are committed to the expectations of neither group, they can act independently of both, and they are thus both aberrant and alluring to a Greek male audience, while being accessible to young women in a way that hyper-perfect goddesses from mythology are not. The lustful nymph in mythology bridges the divide between modesty and promiscuity, much the same way a teenage girl might both fear and desire marriage.

Pitsa Cave

Evidence for worship of the nymphs is commonly seen at caves, which have a damp, mysterious, chthonic atmosphere. The sensorial atmosphere of the cave includes the play of darkness and

[16] Britt, B., and Cuffel, A. *Religion, Gender, and Culture in the Pre-Modern World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007. 43-66

light, outside and inside, seen and unseen, and it creates an experience of mystery, conception, and child-bearing. The nymphs, after all, are essentially earthy, natural, fertile, kourotrophic creatures who align with the characteristics of such places. The Pitsa cave has been identified as a cave of the nymphs due to its striking treasure of votive offerings and high-quality plaques preserved at the site. Located near the Gulf of Corinth, it appears to have been popular from the 7th century BCE to the 2nd Century BCE.[17] The entrance to the cave (Figure 11) is identified as an opening in the rock about 2.25 meters high, leading to a steep descent for 20 meters into dark depths of the cave. The cave entrance provides a natural boundary that protects the dark, sacred interior from the bright, outside world. A marked temperature change, echoes, dripping water, flickering shadows, and stalactites all would have contributed to the cave's otherworldly aura.

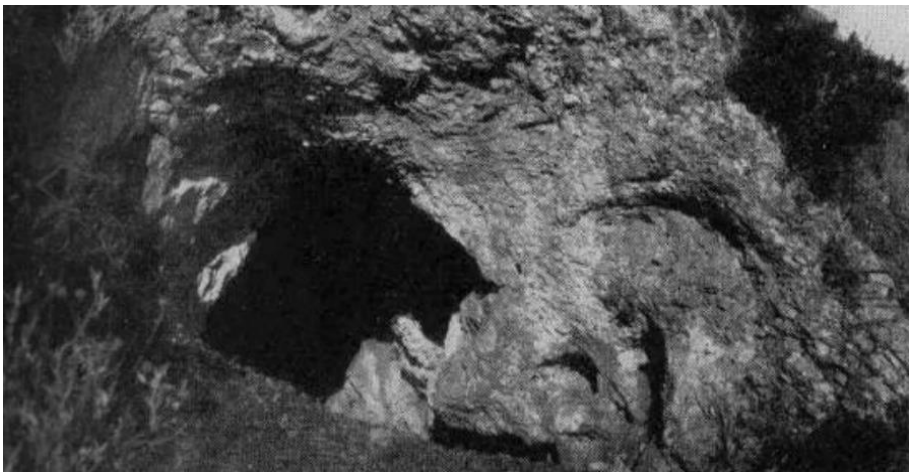

Figure 11: Entrance to Pitsa Cave

Within the depths of the cave, a small opening leads into a large secret cavern that is invisible from the hills below. Found within the cave were several painted wooden plaques, an incredible and rare find due to the fragility of the material. Among the best preserved, Figure 12

[17] Kopestonsky, Theodora Barbara. *"Kokkinovrysi: A Classical Shrine to the Nymphs at Corinth"*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009. 212-243

depicts a family proceeding to an altar with a sheep, presumably to be sacrificed. The procession is led by a woman supporting a basket on her head with a pyxis and two conical oinochoe while she pours a libation from a third oinochoe over the altar. She is followed by three boys who respectively lead the sheep, carry a lyre, and play an aulos. Behind the boys, two female characters carry what appear to be stalks of wheat, and behind them is a bearded figure also carrying a stalk of wheat (presumably the priest overseeing the sacrifice).[18] A painted dedication to the nymphs in Corinthian script, moreover, confirms the presence of their cult in the cave. The depiction of a family on a votive plaque in conjunction with the dedication to the nymphs suggests that the ritual at the cave was likely concerned with children and the preservation of family.[19]

Figure 12: Pitsa Plaque A

Other surviving plaques feature women exclusively in pairs facing each other (Figure 13) and who could be participating in dancing or processions. With lively activity in bright painted

[18] Orlandos, A. K. "Pitsà." in Enciplopedia dell'arte. 1964. 200-206.
[19] Kopestonsky, Theodora. "Kokkinovrysi: A Classical Shrine to the Nymphs at Corinth" 2009. 187-194

colors, these plaques indicate that the cave would have been the site of vibrant a ritual. Many other votives support this, including terra-cotta figurines of pregnant women (Figure 14), a remarkable discovery, since pregnant women are rarely depicted in Greek art.[20] Kopestonsky argues that the fact of pregnancy illuminates some of the stylistic choices, such as the loose fitting, draped garments insinuating that they too, are pregnant. Other ceramic pieces consisting primarily of Corinthian aryballoi, attic black figure lekythoi and miniature skyphoi were found, in addition to several standing, seated, and dancing female figurines.[21] This vast assortment of votives implies that a variety of rituals occurred at the site. Coupled with the understanding that nymphs were thought to ensure the safe nurturing of the young indicates, perhaps, that young brides visited the nymphs here seeking favor from the nymphs and fruitful marriages, and they might have returned again as wives and mothers to offer thanks. No other deity seems to be worshiped here, and the cave seems exclusively dedicated to the nymphs.

Figure 13: Pitsa Plaque D

[20] Kopestonsky.Theodora. *"The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth."* Hesperia 85. 2016. 711–777.
[21] Kopestonsky, Theodora Barbara. *"Kokkinovrysi: A Classical Shrine to the Nymphs at Corinth"*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009. 177-195

Figure 14: Figurines from Pitsa Cave

Kokkinovrysi Shrine

Another site of nymph cult worship in Corinth was the Kokkinovrysi shrine, a modest nymphaeum. Established in the late 5th century BCE, the shrine was a stele placed near a limestone partition just outside the city wall that would have featured a spring by one of the stepped terraces (Figure 15). Votive offerings consist primarily in pottery. The shrine's location and modest dedications indicate that this site was frequented by "ordinary" private individuals.[22] While only the elite may have had exclusive use of the Sacred Spring at certain times of the year, Kopestonsky asserts that the due to the location just outside the city walls and the great quantity of votives, the Kokkinovrysi shrine was highly accessible, often frequented, and the site of circle-dancing owing to the ubiquitous archeological finds of dancing figurines.

[22] Kopestonsky, Theodora. *"The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth."* Hesperia 85. 2016. 742.

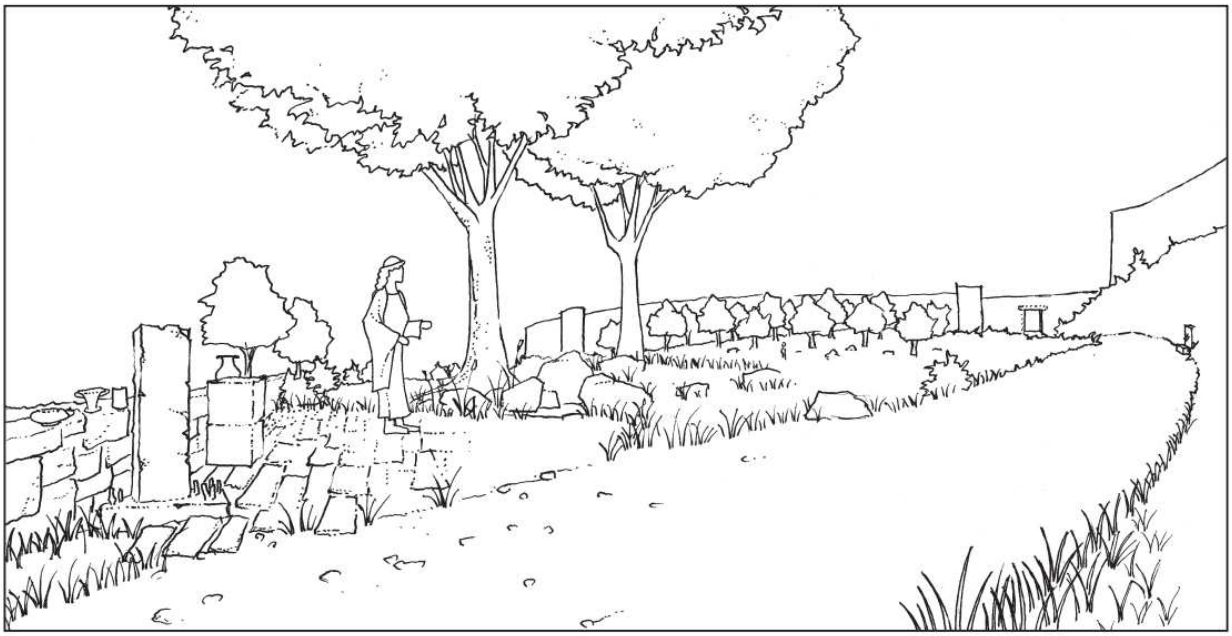

Figure 15: Proposed Reconstruction of Kokkinovrysi Shrine

The separation of the shrine from its spring is uncommon and perhaps indicates that Corinthians wanted to clear the area around the spring to keep that water pure of contaminants and thus prevent pollution of the sacred space.[23] This is consistent with our understanding of ritualistic use (offerings and baths: page 56) and pollution as it pertains to the nymphs (miasma: page 24). While cave sanctuaries would have been ideal for private rituals in a sensorial atmosphere, their hard-to-reach location rendered them inaccessible to many people. It seems that places of worship were consequently developed with the sensorial experience in mind, as with the Kokkinovrysi shrine. The landscape surrounding the stele shrine forces the visitor to step down into the alcove-like area when making an offering. Even the form of the Kokkinovrysi stele, a slender shaft atop a wide base, could evoke the form of a stalagmite. The dedications made by the worshipers—figurines, miniature vessels, and ceramics—would have been placed on the wall or the stele base in much the same way offerings might have been left in a cave in

[23] Kopestonsky.Theodora. "The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth." *Hesperia* 85. 711–777.

niches or by stalagmites. In this case, however, the shrine is much closer to the city and provides easier access than many cave sanctuaries. The evidence of the site's assemblage—its setting, as well as its proximity to a spring—suggest thus that Kokkinovrysi is a suburban stele shrine dedicated to the nymphs whose landscape was meant to evoke a more rural setting.

Votive figurines of female dancing groups are attested across Greece at various shrines to the nymphs, but never in as great of a quantity as at the Kokkinovrysi shrine (Figure 16).[24] Nymphs are charming, feminine creatures who love to dance and play with their human or mythological counterparts. Benevolent deities, the nymphs pervaded the landscape through the construction of practical monuments (fountains) that were central to cities for every-day use, and sites used for ritual (shrines and steles) placed in liminal areas. Van Straten suggests that, because the nymphs were generally benevolent, their shrines were scattered throughout the countryside so that one would always be nearby.[25] Ritualistic dancing was often performed as a part of a traditional celebration associated with brides and weddings, and it was meant to unify the community and honor the significance of the transition to bride. The Kokkinovrysi shrine is another example of the relationship between cult practice and life events that provides evidentiary support for the understood closeness between Corinthians and their nymphs, regardless of social or financial status.[26]

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[24] Ibid.
[25] Van Straten, Folkert. "Gifts for the Gods." in Faith, Hope and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World. ed. H. S. Versnel. Leiden. 1981. 65- 151
[26] Kopestonsky, Theodora Barbara. *"Kokkinovrysi: A Classical Shrine to the Nymphs at Corinth"*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009. 156 - 177

Figure 16: Assemblage of figurines, miniature vessels, and lamps from the Kokkinovrysi shrine

Corycian Cave at Delphi

At Corcyra at Corfu (which, along with Syracuse, was settled from Corinth), the Corycian Cave on Mount Parnassos features another historic site of nymph cult worship. An enormous cavern filled with stalactites and stalagmites, excavators found approximately 50,000 figurines consisting of the typical nymph votives (dancing girls, animals, standing women etc.). In terms of votive offerings, this site becomes the chief example of comparison for nymph worship in Greece (Figure 17).[27] Although some of our oldest examples of nymph worship seem to originate from Corinth and the places it colonized (especially Syracuse and Corcyra), nymphs are seen routinely in conjunction with Pan in caves after the battle of Marathon (490 BCE). The cult is concentrated in Attica (with the most sanctuaries and caves representing the nymphs and Pan),

[27] Kopestonsky, Theodora. "*The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth*." Hesperia 85. 2016. 711–777.

but it spread as a group throughout the Greek world.[28] Among these sites is the Corycian cave above the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, sacred place to the nymphs from the fifth century BCE:

> ... and I worship the nymphs where the Corycian rock is hollow, the delight of birds and haunt of gods. (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 22-23)

The archaeological record, however, suggests that a ritual occurred here at least a century earlier.[29] Sites like the Corycian cave, moreover, with ample epigraphic and archeological evidence of nymph worship, provide an important touchstone for recognizing and interpreting nymph cult where less evidence exists.

Figure 17: Corycian Cave, handmade variety of Dancing Group

[28] According to Herodotus, the courier Phidippides, running back from Marathon, was approached by Pan, who asked why the Athenians did not honor him; Pan promised to be well-disposed towards them if they started to do so, which the Athenians did (6.105).

[29] Kopestonsky, Theodora. *"Kokkinovrysi: A Classical Shrine to the Nymphs at Corinth"* 2009. 90-142

Sacred Spring at Corinth

The Sacred Spring in Corinth is an additional, smaller source of water that was affiliated with the nymphs and was a site of specifically female cult worship. Central to Corinth and its forum, the Sacred Spring contains limited water that would have been ideal for a bridal bath, bestowing fertility and purity (page 58). Less functional than the Peirene spring, and with its dual-level structure and a secret access point, this spring was secluded.[30] Kopestonsky, Larson, and Robinson, thus, believe that the dramatic landscape would have been an ideal location for girls to descend into the cave and reemerge after a transformative experience (Figure 18), just as Artemis, with her retinue of nymphs, also oversaw transformative rites of passage for young women.[31] Such a site would fittingly be predominately used for female ritual (see page 57), as the votive offerings found here include female figurines, called *nymphai,* that resemble the dolls that girls would have dedicated prior to marriage in honor of Artemis. The placement of a site affiliated with a bridal cult so close to the center of Corinth could have conveyed the importance of marriage and family as a cultural priority to the Greeks.[32] It further integrates the nymphs ritualistically and geographically into the fabric of the *polis* while affirming the association of life-events with the nymphs.

[30] Robinson, Betsey Ann. "Fountains and the Culture of Water at Roman Corinth". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2001. 138-162
[31] Larson, Jennifer. *Greek Nymphs Myth, Cult, Lore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 147-169
[32] Ibid.

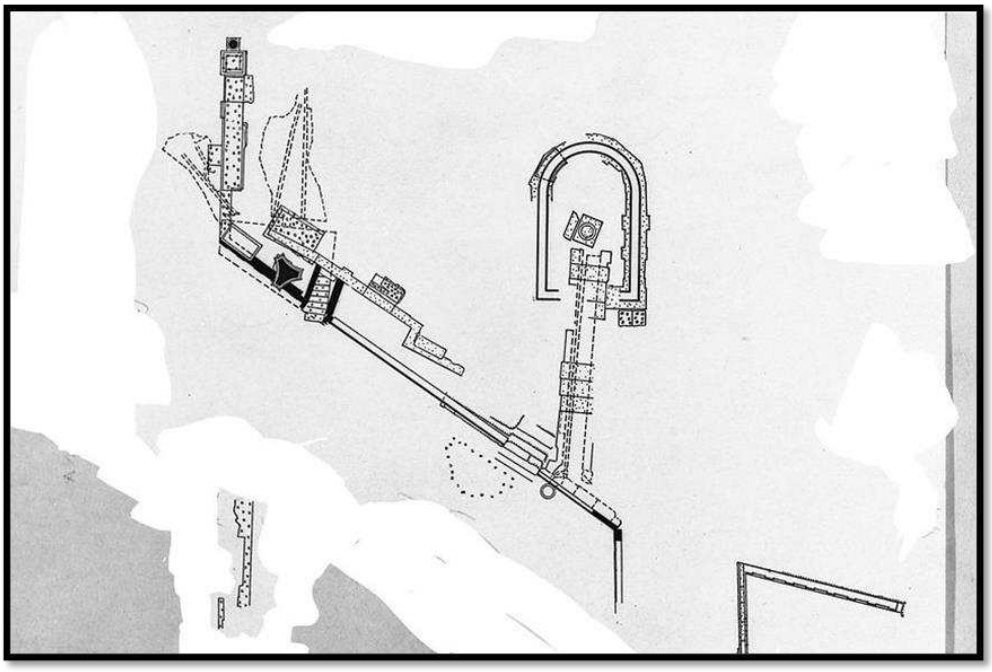

Figure 18: Plans of the Sacred Spring

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered the connection of the cult of the nymphs to ritual and women's coming-of-age events. Through an analysis of myth, we examine the role that nymphs can hold as *kourotrophos*, child nurtures, that informs their role in ritual. We explored the methods of cult worship that were inspired by these myths and considered how young women might have looked to nymphs for comfort with respect to premarital anxiety. Shrines to the nymphs and votive offerings attest to the ways in which girls and pregnant women would have engaged in sacrifice and circle dancing to receive good fortune from the nymphs. These forms of ritual could occur at sites that were centrally located, rural, public, or private and demonstrates the ways in which cult ritual was significant to the lives of Greek women

Conclusion

Through this analysis of nymph worship across Greek city-states from the Archaic to the Roman eras, it is apparent that the cult of the nymphs prevailed because of its mythological and ritual connection to the city-states, its relationship to significant landmarks, and the ritualistic practices that offered women rich ways of validating female experience. This is due chiefly to the mythological and foundational resonance of the nymphs with their home *poleis* and with the natural world, specifically fresh water. Because of their connection to both the natural world and the greater Olympian pantheon, naiads were integrated into both the environment and the spiritual world.

The elevation of a nymph to icon of the *polis* highlights their semi-divine status, yet their human-like nature makes them more approachable to their worshippers. Their affiliation with the Olympian pantheon, balanced by their overlap with hero-cult, establishes the nymphs as inviting a range of ritual activities. From simply visiting the spring to collect water, to participating in bridal rituals or ceremonies, nymph worship could be mundane or monumental. Nymphs were likewise adaptable, both pure and comforting yet also alluring, seductive, and dangerous.[1]

Nymph worship represents the ritualistic activities that forged a personal bond between the worshiper and nymph. The bridal and maturation rituals that occurred at sacred sites marked important events in the lives of Greek women. This personal association with the nymphs endowed the cult with a deep significance to women in particular, providing validating myths and rituals to celebrate transitions. The cult of the nymphs is, moreover, an excellent vehicle by which to consider how artistic representations shift over time, and how cultures interact and

[1] Consider Salmacis and the nymph who kidnapped Hylas

blend. Although it is impossible to know how meaningful the cult of the nymphs was to ordinary Greek women, I feel that the methods used to study the cult help to uncover several facets of Greek culture, activity, and religion. In many ways, the nymphs both challenge and uphold gender roles and stereotypes of women through their deviousness and unwillingness to comply yet their accompaniment of mortal brides through monumental experiences.

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