

3. *The Birth of Aphrodite*

(above) *Aphrodite rising from the sea between two attendants*. Detail of marble altar (so-called 'Ludovisi Throne') from Magna Graecia (Italy), c. 460 B.C. Palazzo Altemps, Rome. Cf. Morford, Lenardon, & Sham, Classical Mythology (11th ed.), p. 191.

One of the most peculiar details of Hesiod's Theogony is the genealogy he provides for Aphrodite, goddess of sex. According to the poet, she is the offspring of Uranus by means of that deity's bloody castration at the hands of Cronus. This makes her the half-sister, so to speak, of the Titans (children of Uranus and Gaia), though she herself is motherless. Hesiod's account of her emergence from the sea, where Uranus' genitalia landed after Cronus had cast them over his shoulder, inspired visual artists like the fifth-century sculptor of the 'Ludovisi Throne' (above), the first-century fresco artist who painted the Casa di Venere at Pompeii (see below), and Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), whose "Birth of Venus" remains one of the best-known paintings of the Italian Renaissance. Their depictions of this loveliest of divinities, usually attended by equally beautiful companions, belie the gruesome details of her (Hesiodic) origin.

Literary artists, on the other hand, tended to follow Homer rather than Hesiod, representing the goddess more conventionally as an Olympian daughter of Zeus and Dione (whose parents were Ocean and Tethys). We shall discuss that Homeric legacy in our next lecture. Suffice it to say, Aphrodite's mythology is more tangled than usual, inasmuch as she was not originally Greek at all. Historically, her lineage goes back to near-Eastern divinities like Inanna (Sumerian), Ishtar (Babylonian), and Astarte (Canaanite/Phoenician), each of them goddesses of sex (seductive charm) and war (violence). No wonder Hesiod calls her both 'dread' and 'beautiful' (#1 below).

Her Birth from Castration

1. "When first [Cronus] had cut off the genitals [of his father Uranus] with the adamant / and cast them from the land on the swelling sea, / they were carried for a long time on the deep. And white / foam [*leukos aphros*] arose about from the immortal flesh and in it a maiden [*kourē*] / grew. First she was brought to holy Cythera, / and then from there she came to sea-girt Cyprus. / And she emerged a dread and beautiful goddess [*aidoiē kale theos*] and grass rose / under her slender feet." Hesiod, *Theogony* 188-195

(8th cent. B.C.; cf. Morford, p. 71)



(above) *Aphrodite on a half-shell, with erotes*. Wall fresco from Casa di Venere, Pompeii, 1st cent. A.D.

Ancient Allegories

If Hesiod's version of Aphrodite's origins seems outlandish to us, it did so for many ancient Greeks as well. Allegory (*symbolic reading*), a method of hermeneutics especially associated with the Stoic philosophers, allowed for the sublimation of grisly mythical details into a more palatable interpretive system. Hesiod's *Succession Myth* cried out for allegorization, whereby Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus were no longer warring gods but emblems of the constitutive elements of the universe. Cicero (#2 below) records a Stoic interpretation of Uranus' castration as symbolic of the purity of fire and its capacity (so it was believed) to generate living things by itself, while the late antique poet Nonnus, at a millennium's remove from Hesiod, asserted that Aphrodite did indeed have an elemental mother, namely, water, while her father was the celestial aether or fire (#3). Perhaps her dual heritage might then explain her contradictory qualities.

2. “A great number of gods, clothed in human form [*specie humana*], have supplied the poets with their myths [*fabulae*] and filled the lives of humans with every sort of superstition. Zeno and, after him, Cleanthes and Chrysippus have explained this more fully.* For when the ancient belief [*opinio*] about *Caelus* ['Sky' = Uranus] had circulated throughout Greece, of how he was castrated by his son, *Saturn* [= Cronus], and Saturn himself was overthrown by his son *Jupiter*, a scientific theory [*ratio physica*]—and not an inelegant one—was enshrined in these impious stories. What they truly signified is that the highest celestial and ethereal element, i.e., fire, which by itself generates all things, lacks that part of the body which, through union with another, is necessary for procreation.” Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.24

(Roman, 1st cent. B.C.; tr. J.R. Hume)

*Zeno (c. 334-262 B.C.) founded the ancient Stoic school of philosophy, which made a practice of interpreting ancient myths in allegorical fashion. Cleanthes (331-232 B.C.) succeeded Zeno as head of the school in Athens; Chrysippus (c. 279-206 B.C.) was the latter's pupil.

3. “Did not water conceive Aphrodite by a heavenly husbandry [i.e., Uranus], and bring her forth from the deeps?” Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 1.86f. (5th cent. A.D.; tr. W.H.D. Rouse)



The Goddess' Names

4. “Gods and human beings call her *Aphrodite*, and the foam-born goddess [*aphrogenēs*] / because she grew amid the foam [*aphros*], / and *Cytherea* of the beautiful crown because she came to [the island of] Cythera, / and *Cyprogenēs* because she arose in Cyprus washed by the waves. / She is called too *Philommēdēs** ['genital-loving'] because she arose from the genitals [*mēdea*].”

Hesiod, *Theogony* 195-200 (*loc. cit.*)

(left) ‘Aphrodite’s Rock’ near Paphos on the western coast of Cyprus

*“Perhaps an intentional play on the word *Philommeides*, ‘laughter-loving’, a standard epithet of Aphrodite.” Morford, Lenardon, & Sham, p. 81

Her Companions

Singular though the goddess was in her (Hesiodic) manner of birth, the Greeks often assigned her companions: *Eros*, the god of sexual desire, who was sometimes multiplied into *Erotes*; the *Hours* ('Seasons'), daughters of Zeus and *Themis* ('Order'); or the *Graces*, offspring of Zeus and *Eurynome* (an Oceanid). In the *Theogony* (cf. #5 below), *Eros* is one of the primordial gods, sprung from *Chaos* contemporaneously with *Gaia* and *Tartarus*, but in later literature he was subordinated to Aphrodite as her son by *Ares*. The *Hours* (#6) were primarily representative of the agricultural cycle, so they are fitting attendants upon a fertility goddess like Aphrodite, under whose feet grass spontaneously grew when she first landed at Cyprus. It is the *Graces*, however, who are, perhaps, the most appropriate of Aphrodite's

companions, though they do not appear as such until relatively late (#7). Like her and Eros, the Graces are renowned for beauty and “loosening of the limbs” (#8).

5. “**Eros** attended her and beautiful desire [*himeros*] followed her / when she was born and when she first went into the company of the gods. / From the beginning she has this honor [*timē*], / and among human beings and the immortal gods she wins as her due / the whispers of girls, smiles [*meidēmata*], deceits [*exapatai*], / sweet pleasure [*terpsis*], and the gentle delicacy of love [*philotēs*.” *Ibid.* 201-206

6. “I shall sing about beautiful and revered Aphrodite of the golden crown [*chrysostephanos*], / who holds as her domain the battlements of all sea-girt Cyprus. / The moist force of West Wind Zephyrus as he blows / brought her there amidst the soft foam [*aphros*] on the waves of the resounding sea. / The gold-bedecked **Hours** [*Hōrai*] gladly received her and clothed her in divine garments. / On her immortal head they placed a finely wrought crown of gold / and in her pierced earlobes, flowers of copper and precious gold. / About her soft neck and silvery breasts they adorned [*ekosmeon*] her with necklaces of gold . . . / Then after they had bedecked her person with every adornment [*kosmos*], / they led her to the immortals, who greeted her when they saw her / and took her in their welcoming hands; and each god / prayed that she would be his wedded wife and he would bring her home, / as he marveled at the beauty of violet-crowned Cytherea.”

Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 6 (6th cent. B.C.?; cf. Morford, p. 192)

The Late Antique poet Quintus Smyrnaeus is our earliest surviving source to explicitly place the Graces (another set of triplets born to Zeus) at the scene of Aphrodite’s birth. He does so while describing the artwork with which Hephaestus (‘the Fire-god’) ornamented armour he had fashioned for Achilles. On the hero’s shield Hephaestus carved the Graces receiving Aphrodite from the sea. These same beautiful goddesses were first introduced to literature centuries earlier by Hesiod (#8).

7. “Thetis the goddess laid down in their midst great-souled Achilles’ arms divinely wrought; and all around flashed out the cunning work wherewith the Fire-god overchased the shield . . . Out of the sea was rising lovely-crowned *Cypris* . . . and [around her] danced the **Graces** [*Charites*] lovely-tressed.” Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Fall of Troy*

5.1ff. and 72ff. (4th cent. A.D.; tr. A.S. Way)

(right) *The Three Graces*. Detail of “*Primavera*” by Sandro Botticelli, c. 1485-7. Tempera on panel. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.



8. “And Eurynome, daughter of Ocean, very lovely [*polyēraton*] in appearance, / bore [to Zeus] three fair-cheeked **Graces** [*Charites*], / Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and lovely [*erateinē*] Thaleia, / from whose eyelids fell love [*eros*] that loosens the limbs [*lusimelēs*]:* / and beautiful is their glance beneath their brows.”

Hesiod, *op. cit.* 907ff. (not in Morford)

*Cf. line 120 of Hesiod’s same poem (*the Theogony*), which describes Eros himself as kallistos (‘most beautiful’) and lusimelēs (‘limb-loosening’).

The Cypriot Connection

Of all the Aegean and Mediterranean islands with which Aphrodite was associated (e.g., Cythera, Melos, Lesbos), none was more important to her cult than the easternmost of these, Cyprus. The copper jewelry with which the Hours adorned Aphrodite (see #6 above) may be a tribute to her early connections with that island, famous for its copper mines. Homer knew of the goddess’ ancient shrine at Paphos, on Cyprus’

western shore (#9 below); she was also associated with ancient Salamis on the eastern coast (#10), where bronze representations of male and female gods (predecessors of Hephaestus and Aphrodite?) have been discovered. Cyprus, then, was a vital hub for the diffusion of the goddess' cult. It likely arrived there some time in the second millennium B.C., transplanted from the Levantine (ancient Phoenicia, modern Lebanon and Israel), where she was venerated as Astarte. Astarte, in her turn, had earlier been worshipped by Babylonians and Sumerians as Ishtar and Inan[n]a (see #11). In other words, Aphrodite is not a native Greek divinity but near-Eastern. As such, she shares the hybrid features of her Asian counterparts, being a goddess of warfare as well as love.



(above) Aphrodite's chief shrines in the ancient Greek world, as well as the principal sanctuaries of Astarte in Phoenicia. While Hesiod's account traces the goddess' movement from west to east, The more likely historical diffusion of her cult was from east to west.

(below left) Remains of the temple of Aphrodite at Paphos (Roman), on the west coast of Cyprus; it overlooks the 'Rock of Aphrodite' (right).



9. “Then laughter-loving [philommeidēs] Aphrodite went to Cyprus, / to Paphos: there her precinct [temenos] and fragrant altar are.” Homer, *Odyssey* 8.362f. (8th cent. B.C.)

10. “I shall sing about Cyprus-born [Kyprogenē] Cytherea, who gives mortals / sweet gifts; on her lovely face, / smiles are always suffused with the bloom of love. / Hail, goddess, mistress of well-built Salamis / and sea-girt Cyprus.” *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 10 (anonymous, 6th cent. B.C.; cf. Morford, p. 191)

A HYMN TO INANNA

Perhaps the oldest surviving hymn to any deity anywhere is that dedicated to the Sumerian goddess Inanna. It is attributed to Enheduanna, Inanna's priestess, who may have lived in the 23rd century B.C. The goddess herself was one of the most powerful in the Sumerian pantheon, a daughter of the god of starry heaven, An[u]. Her emblem, an eight-pointed star (see the cylinder seal below), represented the planet Venus, though a crescent moon also served as the goddess' symbol. I have quoted those portions of the much-longer Sumerian hymn that suggest most clearly a near-Eastern heritage for our Greek goddess, Aphrodite, at least in her Hesiodic incarnation.

11. “The magnificent lady who gathers up the divine powers of heaven and earth and rivals great An, is mightiest among the gods . . . Who opposes the mistress who raises her head and is supreme over the mountains? . . . She stirs confusion and chaos against those who are disobedient to her, speeding carnage and inciting the devastating flood, clothed in terrifying radiance. It is her game to speed conflict and battle, untiring, strapping on her sandals . . . To destroy, to build up, to tear out and to settle are yours, Inan[n]a. To turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man are yours, Inan[n]a. Desirability and arousal . . . are yours, Inan[n]a . . . [M]ercy and pity are yours, Inan[n]a . . . To cause the . . . heart to tremble . . . To have a favourite wife . . . to love . . . are yours, Inan[n]a . . . Your divinity shines in the pure heavens . . . Your torch lights up the corners of heaven, turning darkness into light . . . You exercise full ladyship over heaven and earth; you hold everything in your hand. Mistress, you are magnificent . . .”

Enheduanna, *Hymn to Inanna C*
(Sumerian, c. 23rd cent. B.C.; tr. ETCSL Project, Oxford)



(left) Winged goddess, likely Inanna or Ishtar, from Larsa in Mesopotamia.
Terracotta, 2nd millennium B.C. (centre) Statuette of goddess with lunette
headdress, possibly Ishtar or Astarte, from the necropolis of Hillah, near Babylon.
Alabaster and gold, 3rd cent. B.C. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (right) Armed Inanna,
with wings and horned mitre, astride a lion. Impression from Akkadian cylinder seal,
2334-2154 B.C. Oriental Institute of Chicago.