

# The Domestication of Hera

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## Preface

I first became interested in Hera during my freshman year of college, when I began researching the goddess for a short class paper. I quickly found Hera to be far more complex and fascinating than I had ever realized, and the more that I learned about her history, worship, and role in the Greek pantheon, the more I found that I had to reevaluate my previous opinions concerning the goddess. I especially found myself entranced by her power, and when the time came to choose a topic for my senior thesis, I couldn't think of any other subject that I would rather write on than this magnificent deity. Because my own opinions towards her have undergone drastic changes in the last few years, I hope that the following essay also provides readers with a fresh perspective towards Hera, in order that others might not view her from the same simple and limited angle that I once did.

**Abstract**

Through an analysis of archaeological and literary evidence, my thesis seeks to illustrate that the Greek goddess Hera underwent a process of domestication and ‘remythologization’ that transformed her from a powerful fertility goddess into the muted sister-wife of Zeus. Hera’s transformation fits into a greater movement towards a Panhellenic mythology that is centered on the Olympian family. While there are conflicting views regarding the motivations behind the Panhellenic codification of mythology and its significance, I argue that the Olympian deities gained supremacy at the expense of chthonic (earth) deities like Hera, who suffered a loss of power in order to present less of a threat to Zeus’ reign. Such a reduction in Hera’s chthonic powers explains her shallow (but popular) representation as a petty, vengeful, and wrathful goddess, whose furious outbursts against her husband serve as the only means of rebellion against the rise of the Olympian order that have been left to her.

I begin my study of Hera with an analysis of the archaeological evidence at Hera’s sanctuary on the island of Samos, which clearly indicates that Hera possesses strong connections to the earth and was once worshipped as the island’s primary fertility goddess. Bearing in mind that role as a regional fertility goddess, an examination of Hera’s representation in Homeric epic reveals that the goddess stands at the end of a powerful line of earth goddesses and still retains certain vestiges of her inheritance as a fertility goddess in her own right, even after being subsumed into Zeus’ Olympian patriarchy.

### Disparate Views of the Codification of Panhellenic Mythology

In Classical Greek mythology, the Greek gods and goddesses typically fall into one of two classification categories: one can describe them as either chthonic gods or as Olympian gods.<sup>1</sup> In very broad terms, the chthonic gods belong to the earth, whereas the Olympian (or perhaps, the ‘uranean’, from *ouranos*) gods belong to heaven; the Olympians dwell in the divine *aither* atop Mt. Olympus, very loosely connected to the earth below,<sup>2</sup> whereas the chthonic gods share a more intimate connection with the land. The worship of Chthonic and Olympian gods reflects the distinction between the two: according to Plato’s *Laws*, festivals for the chthonian deities must be restricted to a specific month of the year,<sup>3</sup> and sacrifices for each have certain forms and time frames in which they must be conducted.<sup>4</sup>

However, the tension between the chthonic and Olympian deities necessitates a symbiotic relationship between the two, whereby neither can exist separately and one receives its full meaning from the other.<sup>5</sup> Each provides one half of a whole, for only together do heaven and earth form the universe, and so “chthonic and Olympian ritual are constantly bound up with each other”<sup>6</sup> in the lives of the Ancient Greeks. Rarely does an Olympian deity appear without a chthonic counterpart, and some archaeological evidences suggests that the Greeks may have worshipped one god (primarily Zeus) as both an Olympian and a chthonic power.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Guthrie, 206

<sup>2</sup> Guthrie, 207

<sup>3</sup> Guthrie, 206

<sup>4</sup> Burkert, 199

<sup>5</sup> Burkert, 202

<sup>6</sup> Burkert, 202

<sup>7</sup> Burkert, 202

As Walter Burkert argues, while “the worship of chthonic powers undoubtedly contains much that is very ancient...it is no longer possible to equate the opposition between Olympian and Chthonic with the opposition between Greek and pre-Greek or between Indo-European and Mediterranean” (201). The essential religious contrast between the earthly and heavenly deities developed independently from the development of Greek civilization; evidence for such religious duality appears in both Indo-European and Mediterranean worship, and has little to do with the timeline of Indo-European invasion of the Greek mainland.<sup>8</sup> The way in which the Greeks reconcile the burgeoning Olympians with the ancient chthonic deities does, however, illustrate a religious shift towards favoring the Indo-European sky god Zeus, who rules at the head of the patriarchal order that was brought to Greece by invading Indo-Europeans. As Zeus’ identity solidifies into his role as sole ruler of the heavens, he supersedes the chthonic deities like Hera, Demeter, Persephone, and Hades.

Because the Greek religion that developed in Greece’s Archaic period unifies the chthonic and Olympian deities into one Panhellenic pantheon, it might be classified “as the working out of a right relationship between the dynamic sky and sun gods...and the older lunar agricultural stratum of the pre-Hellenic goddess culture” that was widely practiced in Greece.<sup>9</sup> The marriage of Hera and Zeus therefore symbolizes the unity of the two cosmologies, the Olympian and the chthonic, and a unification of two powerful forces of nature. Indeed, the holy marriage of Hera and Zeus that the Greeks annually

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<sup>8</sup> Burkert, 201

<sup>9</sup> Baring and Cashford, 302

celebrated “went back to the belief in a union of two great spirits of fertility which was re-enacted in ritual to ensure the abundance of the crops.”<sup>10</sup>

However, the unification of chthonic and Olympian deities into one Panhellenic pantheon “was not really conceivable without subordination and hierarchizing”, which the Greeks accomplished through the creation of a family order for their gods. Certain chthonic gods (like Hera) proved too powerful to fit comfortably into Zeus’ Olympian patriarchy, and consequently, they had to undergo a process of ‘remythologizing’ so that they might pose less of a threat to his supremacy. Creating a family structure presents a positive and acceptable metaphor for this subordination of the chthonic figures to the Olympians, and additionally provides a way of understanding the great disparities among the gods and presenting a relatively stable patriarchy.

A closer look at the unification of the two religious orders (and the Olympian family that grew out of it) therefore illuminates how the arrival of Zeus led to the “debasement and trivialization of the vision of the conquered culture.”<sup>11</sup> The “deeply rooted religion of goddess worship that had evolved peacefully...from the Neolithic past” in Greece garnered little respect as the Olympian deities replaced the chthonic deities in supremacy. Hera serves as an exemplary model of how a powerful goddess in the pre-Olympian period had to be ‘remythologized’ in order to pose less of a threat to the Olympian order. Her powers as a native fertility goddess held the potential to undercut Zeus’ power, overthrow him, and even institute a new succession cycle; the Panhellenic pantheon therefore tempers Hera’s chthonic powers by splitting them up and dividing them among several goddesses. As a result, the Olympian mythology (which is seen so

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<sup>10</sup> Guthrie, 68

<sup>11</sup> Baring and Cashford, 302



clearly in Homeric epic) reduces Hera to the role of the jealous and vengeful wife while Demeter takes sole control of earth fertility and Persephone takes up the mantle of death and controls the seasons of mortal lives. Even within the dominion of marriage Hera holds little claim over the realm of lust and seduction, relinquishing those powers to Aphrodite. Zeus' reign almost literally divides and conquers his chthonic opposition. Once she marries Zeus, Hera's main source of power comes from her role as Zeus' wife and lover, and in the context of their relationship as once equally powerful deities, her rages and anger against Zeus "becomes clear as a refusal to submit to Zeus' terms of the merging of the two cultures."<sup>12</sup>

Evidence for the ascendancy of the Olympian over the chthonic deities abounds in Greek mythology and literature. The transition of Delphi from the control of the Earth's chthonic powers to Apollo serves as one quintessential example of how "a god who was perhaps more Olympian than any Olympian" came into "direct contrast and even conflict with the old sanctities of Earth and her *daimones* at Delphi."<sup>13</sup>

Aeschylus very tidily lays out the transition of power at Delphi in the prologue to the *Eumenides*, crediting Gaia as "the first of the gods to prophesy" and Apollo as the final inheritor, speaking on behalf of Zeus.<sup>14</sup> Aeschylus' sequence of succession reflects a gradual transition from the primal earth goddess to the sun god. In the middle, bridging the gap between Olympian and chthonic, stands Phoebe, goddess of the moon. As a deity connected in nature to a celestial body, Phoebe stands one step above Gaia, reaching towards the status of a heavenly Olympian goddess; however, her connection to the moon smacks of a chthonic connection to the life cycles of the earth and seasons, and to female

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<sup>12</sup> Baring and Cashford, 313

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, 384

<sup>14</sup> *Eumenides*, lines 1-19

fertility in particular. Zeus' overall supremacy at Delphi comes indirectly through Apollo's preeminence under a religious cosmology in which the glory of the son appears as a mere reflection of the father's glory.<sup>15</sup>

The manner through which Apollo becomes master of Delphi also illustrates well how the Olympian gods defeat and supersede the Earth and the chthonic deities. Apollo, having learned the art of prophecy, "came to Delphi...and when the snake Python, which guarded the oracle, would have hindered him from approaching the chasm, he killed it and took over the oracle."<sup>16</sup> The Homeric "Hymn to Apollo" describes how Apollo gained the name "Pythian" by shooting the serpent, "a great bloated creature...a bloody affliction",<sup>17</sup> and instituted the Pythian games in order to honor his triumph (Ovid 1.445-447).

The presence of a great serpent at Delphi symbolizes the presence of chthonic deities associated with life, death, and the seasons; Apollo's conflict with the serpent, then, symbolizes the conflict between the Olympian and chthonic deities. For the ancient Greeks, the snake "is the symbol and the vehicle not of mortality but immortality – of something sacred".<sup>18</sup> It stands for "the perennial renewal of life through death" in a general sense,<sup>19</sup> and as such is frequently associated with the goddesses of the seasons. Hera herself gives birth to a serpent monster, Typhaon, through her ancient powers as fertility goddess (an event which I will discuss in greater length below). The snake is also associated with death and dead men because it "is an uncanny beast, gliding in and out of

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<sup>15</sup> Harrison, 386

<sup>16</sup> Apollodorus, 1.4: ἦκεν εἰς Δελφοὺς, χρησμοφδοῦσης τότε Θέμιδος. ὡς δὲ ὁ φροθρῶν τὸ μαντεῖον Πύθων ὄφις ἐκόλωνεν αὐτὸν παρελτεῖν ἐπὶ τὸ χάσμα, τοῦτον ἀνελὼν τὸ μαντεῖον παραλαμβάνει. (Translation by Sir James George Frazer)

<sup>17</sup> *Hymn to Apollo*, lines 303-305

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, 270

<sup>19</sup> Harrison, 271

holes in the earth. [It] may well have been seen haunting old tombs”,<sup>20</sup> which only strengthens the serpent’s connection to the earth.

When Apollo kills Pytho, the temple at Delphi becomes a tomb for the serpent. The *omphalos* at Delphi is traditionally regarded as “the grave of the daimon-snake”, but religiously speaking, the *omphalos* is also a holy stone resting at the center of the Greek world.<sup>21</sup> Within this context, Apollo’s presence at Delphi can be interpreted in a number of ways. He can, of course, be viewed as the Olympian conqueror, asserting his dominance over the previously reigning earth deities at Delphi. However, Harrison posits that Apollo may represent “the fully humanized form of the ancient fertility cone [the *omphalos*]”,<sup>22</sup> suggesting that he represents the most sophisticated embodiment of the same chthonic powers that have always held precedence at Delphi. Notably, both scenarios give tremendous weight to the chthonic deities, either as worthy opponents to the Olympians or as the basis of the Olympian regime. In the end, however, the Olympian family ‘wins out’ by harnessing the ancient chthonic powers for their own use.

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<sup>20</sup> Harrison, 268

<sup>21</sup> Harrison, 399

<sup>22</sup> Harison, 411

### **Hera in Art and Archaeology: the Samian Heraion**

Hera's transition from pre-Olympian fertility goddess to Olympian sister-wife is most easily tracked through an analysis of local mythology and traditions. Because the idea of the Greek gods (as envisioned in the idealized Olympian family of Homer and Hesiod) "is built up from local myths and differing traditions and forms of cult practices",<sup>23</sup> I turned to local mythologies in order to piece together each Hera's identity and trace the evolution of her worship. A common worship of the Olympian gods may have bound the ancient Greeks to one another, but in truth, no single religious practice ever existed that was universally accepted, practiced, and validated throughout all of Greece. As a result, the pan-Hellenic pantheon is cobbled together by a compilation of local traditions that both share common ideologies and practices and possess individual flavors and characteristics.<sup>24</sup> I have found that Hera's early worship as a fertility goddess shines through in an analysis of her localized mythologies, nowhere more so than on her island sanctuary at Samos. The local traditions belonging to the Samian Heraion outline the worship of a general fertility goddess and civic protectress for the island who at first demonstrates but a few tenuous connections to Zeus and his Olympian family, and who actually exhibits a handful of non-Greek characteristics resulting from the island's proximity to Asia.

Located just off the mainland of Asia Minor, near modern day Turkey, the island of Samos constituted a significant religious and economic center of the Greek East at the height of its power.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, literary sources give the Heraion at Samos little more than a passing glance, a fact that has hindered modern research into the Samian

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<sup>23</sup> Kyrieleis, 134

<sup>24</sup> Kyrieleis, 134

<sup>25</sup> Pedley, 154

cult. Herodotus gives a cursory nod to the Samians, stating that he has “written thus at length of the Samians, because they are the makers of the three greatest works to be seen in any Greek land”<sup>26</sup>, one of which was the construction of “the largest temple ever seen.”<sup>27</sup> He references the temple to Hera specifically several times, usually in the context of sacrifices and offerings made there. Pausanias – whose literary guide to Greece has facilitated archaeological research at other religious sites like Olympia and Delphi – mentions the Heraion only very briefly. Therefore, modern researchers must rely primarily on the archaeological record to understand the significance, history, and character of Samos and of the island’s primary goddess.

Although Hera’s Samian cult held a position of regional importance and enjoyed visits from foreigners, “Samos was not a pan-Hellenic sanctuary such as Olympia or Delphi”; that is, the control of the cult and sanctuary’s administration, funding for building projects, and large-scale dedications were all carried out by the island’s inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> Hera’s incarnation at Samos is therefore primarily that of a local goddess, born out of local traditions and cultivated by the specific needs of the community. With that said, the archaeological record confirms that foreign influences bore a strong influence over Hera’s Samian cult, creating a unique fertility goddess who exhibits traditionally Greek as well as Asian and Egyptian characteristics.

Settlers from the Greek mainland first introduced Hera’s cult to Samos upon their arrival at the end of the Bronze Age, and as the power of their civilization on Samos rose and fell, so too did Hera’s cult. The archaeological record shows that during the Bronze

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<sup>26</sup> Herodotus, 3.60: Ἐμήκονα δὲ περὶ Σαμίων μᾶλλον, ὅτι σφι τρία ἐστὶ μέγιστα ἀπάντων Ἑλλήνων ἐχειρασμένα. (Translation by A.D. Godley)

<sup>27</sup> Herodotus, 3.60: τρίτον δὲ σφι ἐχειρασται νηὸς μέγιστος πάντων νηῶν τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν. (Translation by A.D. Godley)

<sup>28</sup> Kyrieleis, 129

Age, the later location for Hera's sanctuary supported a large settlement that flourished in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC.<sup>29</sup> After a gap in occupation, the first signs of Hera's cult appear around the 9<sup>th</sup> century, with the first sanctuary dedicated to Hera being built over that of the previous Bronze Age goddess. Hera's sanctuary underwent numerous renovations over the course of several centuries as the cult grew in importance. A simple altar measuring 8ft by 4ft formed the earliest center of worship (built in the 9<sup>th</sup> century), but it was replaced by a *hekatompedon*, or hundred-foot temple, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Further improvements came in the seventh century, when the Samians rebuilt the temple in a similar style, but with new building materials and specific improvements to accommodate more visitors to the sanctuary. The construction of an immense new temple known as the Rhoikos temple – and the construction of an even larger temple a mere 30 years later – formed but a part of a large-scale building project undertaken in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, when Samos reached the height of its power. The Rhoikos temple “was the earliest of the gigantic temples built in Ionia”, measuring 100 meters long and 50 meters wide and having double rows of stone columns on each side of the temple. Its form displays one of the earliest examples of Ionic architecture. Also in the 6<sup>th</sup> century the Samians built a road, the *Via Sacra*, or ‘Sacred Way’, to connect Hera's sanctuary to the ancient city of Samos, some 6 km away. The project constituted a massive undertaking wherein the Samians had to alter the course of the river Imbrasos (which blocked the road's route) and had to fill in a large portion of the intervening marsh area to make the land passable (Pedley 159-160).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Pedley, 156

<sup>30</sup> Pedley, 157

<sup>31</sup> Pedley, 159-160

The sheer size of her temples serves as a basic indication of Hera's cult popularity: "if size and majesty...were our sole indicators of prestige, Hera would have surpassed the other Olympians in the sanctuaries of the early seventh century."<sup>32</sup> Foreign votives and offerings uncovered at the Heraion (discussed in greater depth below) also attest to the regional popularity of Samian Hera, who apparently enjoyed the worship of visitors from Egypt and Asia Minor, and even locations as far away as Babylon. But while modern excavations at Samos have indisputably confirmed that Hera's cult enjoyed a singular popularity, the question remains of why Hera rose to such prominence at Samos and what functions the goddess fulfilled for the island's inhabitants.

Samos' proximity to Turkey and the maritime trade that the island evidently enjoyed helped to cultivate Hera's unique identity on Samos and distinguishes the Samian Heraion from Hera's other Archaic sanctuaries, such as the Heraion at Argos. The rich yield of artifacts uncovered at and around the ancient city of Samos attest to the city's extensive participation in international trade: materials made in Egypt, Cyprus, Phoenicia, and Babylon have all been located near Hera's sanctuary.<sup>33</sup> The presence of foreign and maritime votives at and near the temple suggest that the cult held a regional importance, and that Hera at least bore enough similarities to her foreign counterparts for merchants and visitors to leave offerings for the goddess.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the primary point of access to the temple itself originally came from the southern shore, and not from the ancient city of Samos; the ease of access to Hera's temple from the sea confirms the importance of maritime travel (and travelers) to Hera's cult's worship. The Sacred Way

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<sup>32</sup> O'Brien, 15

<sup>33</sup> Pedley, 154

<sup>34</sup> Pedley, 154

linking the temple to the city via an overland route was not constructed until the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>35</sup>

An analysis of the animal bones found at the Heraion provides another glimpse into the cultural mixture of Hera's worshippers and their sacrificial practices. Bovines constituted the majority of the sacrificial victims, indicating that Hera's Samian cult followed sacrificial practices of the usual Greek type, in which cattle constituted the principle victims. Terracotta votives of oxen and inscriptions that attest to the importance of cattle at Samos also confirm the relative 'Greekness' of Hera's cult.<sup>36</sup> However, excavations at Hera's altar have also uncovered two unique discoveries: the skull fragments from an Egyptian crocodile, measuring approximately 5m long, and the horn fragments of two African antelopes.<sup>37</sup> Neither the crocodile nor the antelope could have survived for very long on Samos, even in captivity (and they certainly were not native), which leaves only the possibility that worshippers brought the animals (or just their heads) from Africa as dedications to Hera's Samian incarnation. The sacrifice of an Egyptian crocodile at Samos may have been meant to draw connections between the Nile and the river Imbrasos, and could therefore indicate parallels in the importance of both rivers to the surrounding land's prosperity. I suspect that the crocodilian sacrifice goes even farther, however, and demonstrates connections between Hera and the crocodile god Sobek, an Egyptian god of creation.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the antelope horns may indicate that Hera bore some similarities to the Egyptian deity Satis, who embodied the flooding of the

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<sup>35</sup> Pedley, 158

<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, 13

<sup>37</sup> Kyrieleis, 138

<sup>38</sup> Morenz, 269



Nile River who usually wore two antelope horns.<sup>39</sup> Both Egyptian deities display intimate connections to the fertility of the Nile, and as such, I expect that Hera exhibited strong enough connections to fertility through her own relationship with the Samian river Imbrasos to justify the sacrifices made by Egyptian travelers.

Even from her mythological origins, the Samian Hera enjoyed a powerful connection to nature and fertility. Kyrieleis succinctly states that “the core of the legend concerning the foundation of the Heraion seems to have been that this place [near the mouth of the river Imbrasos] was regarded as the birthplace of the goddess”, and more specifically that Hera was born underneath a *lygos* tree near the river.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the *lygos* became Hera’s sacred tree and formed a central part of her worship; in the same way, the river Imbrasos also became permanently linked to the goddess.

Numerous pieces of evidence illustrate Hera’s connection to the *lygos* tree and its role in her cult, not least of which are the wooden cult statues of Hera present at the Heraion. Although the archaeological and literary records provide evidence of conflicting types of cult images (both aniconic and iconic representations),<sup>41</sup> the use of both plain wooden planks and more complex anthropomorphic (and still wooden) statuettes to depict Hera indicates that the goddess once bore a strong connection to nature in general and to the *lygos* tree in particular. O’Brien reconciles the aniconic and iconic images by positing that “worshippers believed the goddess had her epiphany in a tree”,<sup>42</sup> thereby explaining the goddess’ initial representation as a treelike figure, prior to her development into an anthropomorphic icon.

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<sup>39</sup> Morenz, 268

<sup>40</sup> Kyrieleis, 135

<sup>41</sup> O’Brien, 22

<sup>42</sup> O’Brien, 25

The annual Samian religious ritual known as the Tonaia also underlines Hera's connection to the *lygos* tree. The Tonaia, or the "Roping", was performed annually at Hera's temple at Samos, and it constituted the main religious rite in a festival that included athletic competitions, musical events, and communal feasting.<sup>43</sup> During the Tonaia, worshipers removed Hera's cult image (the wooden plank) from the sanctuary in order to bind it to her sacred tree. Depending upon the origins of the rite, the ritual binding of the plank can be interpreted as either a remembrance of a mythological theft of the plank (and subsequently the worshippers' wishes to keep the plank from straying again) or, as I am inclined to believe, as an ancient fertility ritual.<sup>44</sup>

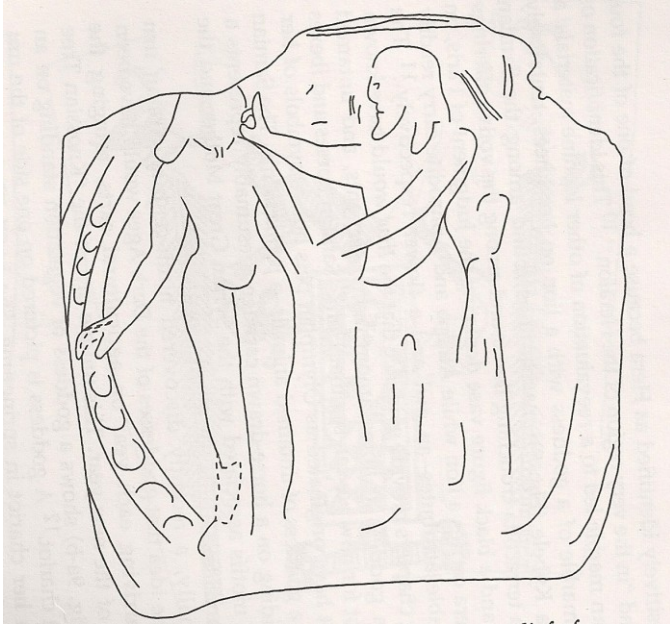
Support in favor of the Tonaia as a fertility ritual comes from numerous sources. A seventh-century terracotta image of a naked couple, framed by bushes, found at the Samian temple suggests that the Tonaia was both a vegetative and human fertility ritual. The man in the relief appears to be feeding the woman, and both appear to be human, rather than divine: none of the typical indicators of divinity appear in the scene, and the two figures seem too casual, or undignified, to be a god and a goddess. The fact that bushes frame the standing couple could also indicate the couple's participation in the roping of Hera's plank to her sacred tree. As such, the ritual may have been performed to ensure the fertility of the couple in the coming year; the later release of the plank (and its ritual bathing in the river) could then symbolize the sexual release of the participants and their renewed fertility, as represented by the fertilization of the earth through water.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> O'Brien, 56

<sup>44</sup> O'Brien, 55

<sup>45</sup> O'Brien, 57



**Figure 1: Samian terracotta relief of a naked couple**

Parallels among other fertility cults also support the interpretation of the Tonaia as a fertility ritual. The pattern of the “disappearance and retrieval” of a cult statue (in which “the restoration [signals] the return of prosperity”) is common to the

ancient cults surrounding Demeter and Artemis near Asia Minor.<sup>46</sup> As a result, Walter Burkert has drawn connections between the three goddesses and the Anatolian goddess of plenty, suggesting that among them all there exists “basically one tradition, with the anthropomorphic image evolving from the tree, and various Greek names coming in, Artemis, Hera, Aphrodite, Demeter, and Kore.”<sup>47</sup>

The sacred process of bathing the cult statue (and by extension, the goddess) also held an important place in the early ritual surround Hera’s worship. Many temples to Hera are located near some body of water (often where two bodies of water flow together), which suggests that water played an important part in the goddess’ cult. Symbolically, the bathing process eventually came to represent purification and the restoration of Hera’s virginity in which she became cleansed for a renewal of her sacred marriage to Zeus.<sup>48</sup> However, it seems likely that such an interpretation evolved out of a

<sup>46</sup> O’Brien, 58

<sup>47</sup> Burkert, Walter, 1979, as quoted in O’Brien, 46

<sup>48</sup> O’Brien, 47

seasonal ritual that had more to do with earth fertility than marriage. O'Brien argues that the bathing instead represented a union between Hera and a river god. Because the ritual bath at Samos took place in the River Imbrasos, scholars believe that the Imbrasos river served as Hera's consort long before Zeus entered Hera's cult.<sup>49</sup> The union of the goddess and the river would produce spring, and the roping of Hera's cult image to her sacred tree would ensure "that the goddess and her fertility would not abandon the island"<sup>50</sup> (interestingly, the name 'Imbrasos' suggests Anatolian influence, which strengthens the argument that the Bronze Age goddess shrine was built by non-Greeks from Asia Minor; the Hera who developed out of the remains of this earlier goddess seems to have still exhibited certain influences from Asia Minor.).

Unfortunately, no known Samian cult statues have survived, but archaeologists have gathered information on what would have been the earliest wooden statue from a variety of sources. Most notably, a 7<sup>th</sup> century wooden statuette discovered in the foundations of the Heraion gives an approximation of the characteristics of the goddess' statue, though it never functioned as the cult statue itself. Scholars believe that the miniature statuette was based upon the main cult statue since it too was carved from wood, can be dated to within a few decades of the cult statue, and wears the *polos*, or 'crown', that is common to Samian statuary depicting an immortal figure (as opposed to depicting the daughter of the votive donor).<sup>51</sup>

The *polos* that appears on the statuette (and on numerous Samian coins) effectively identifies the figure as a fertility goddess through its symbolism and meaning. As O'Brien describes it, the *polos* "consists of... a hollow-shaped shield atop an enclosed

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<sup>49</sup> O'Brien, 61

<sup>50</sup> O'Brien, 62

<sup>51</sup> O'Brien, 26

circle at the base” whose height accounts for about one fourth of the entire statue’s height.<sup>52</sup> The shield shape indicates that the wearer is the protectress of the citadel, while the circular base could indicate seasonal fertility; the goddess wearing the crown is therefore clearly marked as the “goddess of seasonal completion.” Indeed, the very name *polos* “has as its first meaning ‘axis of a celestial sphere’, and is a cognate of *telos* ‘fulfillment.’” In controlling the seasons, Hera brings fulfillment to man and nature by completing the natural cycles of both.<sup>53</sup> The annual Tonaia, with its symbolic bathing and cycle of renewal, mirrors the cyclical nature of the goddess that is embodied in her crown.

Hera’s *polos* also crops up on certain Roman imperial coins featuring the “Anatolian sisters”: Hera of Samos, Artemis of Ephesus, and Aphrodite of Aphrodisias.<sup>54</sup> Though the coins are dated very late, between the first and third centuries AD and belong to Rome’s imperial regime, their reliability makes them an important primary source. In a period of artistic imitation and replication, the Roman Empire admired the most ancient and archaic pieces of art, meaning that the imperial coins from Samos do not depict the Classical Hera of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Rather, they show an archaic goddess, with almost non-Greek features, who bears a strong resemblance to her ‘Anatolian Sisters’ and who constituted but one local variation of a central archaic fertility goddess.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> O’Brien, 33

<sup>53</sup> O’Brien, 33

<sup>54</sup> O’Brien, 28

<sup>55</sup> O’Brien, 28

The Imperial coins almost always show a veil coming down from underneath the *polos*, which scholars originally interpreted as a bridal veil.<sup>56</sup> The depiction of Hera as a bride fits in nicely with her role as the sister-wife of Zeus, but O'Brien argues that the idea of the bridal veil emerged from an earlier Samian notion of the veil as a symbol of general fertility. Based on the fact that the Samian coins show Hera wearing the same veil that her counterparts Artemis and Aphrodite wear, and on the lack of any 'marital unveiling' on the coin images, it seems more likely that the 'Anatolian sisters' share a common fertility rather than bridal status.<sup>57</sup>

The knotted fillets that hang from Hera's wrists in the coin images stand in contrast to the veil in that they consistently appear on Hera, but only irregularly on her Anatolian sisters. Connections have been drawn between the rounded beads and knotted fillets and the Delphic

*omphalos*, which would underscore Hera's connection to Gaia and nature, but O'Brien suggests that the hanging strands functioned to secure the cult statue to its plinth, and symbolically bound the goddess to her tree (and the island). By extension,



Figure 2: Image of Hera on Roman Imperial Coin

<sup>56</sup> O'Brien, 34

<sup>57</sup> O'Brien, 34-35

worshippers hoped to bind the fertility of the goddess to the island, and thereby ensure the continued fertility of the crops.<sup>58</sup>

The crossbands across Hera's stomach likely served a similar function in binding the goddess' fertility to Samos, considering that the bonds seem to cover her womb. Combined with the ritual binding of the cult image to her sacred tree during the Tonaia, Hera takes on the form of an early earth goddess "whose fertility was tied to her maternal womb"<sup>59</sup> and whose image was tied to the island in the hopes of prosperity. The repeated binding imagery also appears in Hera's portrayal as the sister-wife of Zeus, within the Olympian pantheon. In marrying Zeus, Hera becomes bound again, this time to a sky god who attaches himself to her as a way of controlling her and her powers. Vestiges of this symbolic binding appear in *The Iliad* when Zeus reminds Hera of a time when he literally "strung [her] in mid-air...and lashed both hands with a golden chain" (15.23-25).<sup>60</sup> In that instance, Zeus tied Hera up to punish her for her rebellions against him rather than to bind her fertility to him. However, the punishment illustrates Zeus' ability to control Hera, and by extension, to contain her most potent powers, which revolve around her nature as a fertility goddess.

Significantly, Zeus fails to appear on any of the coins' depictions of Hera. If anything, the coins suggest that the river Imbrasos constituted Hera's earliest spouse, at least on Samos, if their marriage is viewed as a union between the earth goddess and the local river god rather than as an anthropomorphic marriage. It seems likely that the tree that occasionally appears next to Hera on the Samian coins represents her sacred tree, the one to which she is symbolically bound before her bath in the river. Imbrasos appears on

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<sup>58</sup> O'Brien, 36-37

<sup>59</sup> O'Brien, 38

<sup>60</sup> *Iliad*, 15.23-25

Samian coins separately, but often with Hera's peacock accompanying him and with a cornucopia of food, both of which imply a strong bond with fertility and perhaps with the fertility goddess.<sup>61</sup>

The prominence of pomegranates in Hera's imagery and worship on Samos strengthens her connection to fertility as well. "Pomegranates, with their many jellied seeds, their delicious refreshing taste, and their applelike appearance, were natural votives to fertility deities",<sup>62</sup> and they crop up repeatedly in Greek mythology in relation to various gods and goddesses, including Persephone and Demeter. Hera at Samos proves no exception: "pomegranates, found in the Samian Heraion" comprised the offerings that less wealthy gave to the goddess, while clay images of the same objects constituted the offerings of the island's wealthier inhabitants. Multiple statues – not at Samos, unfortunately – depict Hera holding a pomegranate in her hand, and "as late as the second century AD, the pomegranate was known as Hera's tree."<sup>63</sup> Archaeologists have also discovered poppy seeds and pinecones preserved in the wet earth at Samos; these fruits, which "are rich in seeds" just like the pomegranate, "must be seen as a special element of Hera's divinity as a great fertility goddess" as well.<sup>64</sup>

It proves interesting, then, that around 600 BC, the presence of the pomegranate in Hera's sanctuary on Samos sharply declines. In fact, the previously abundant supply of pomegranate offerings appears to drop off entirely. A change in the worshipper's perception of Hera at this time could explain the sudden loss, if the pomegranate no longer seemed an applicable offering.

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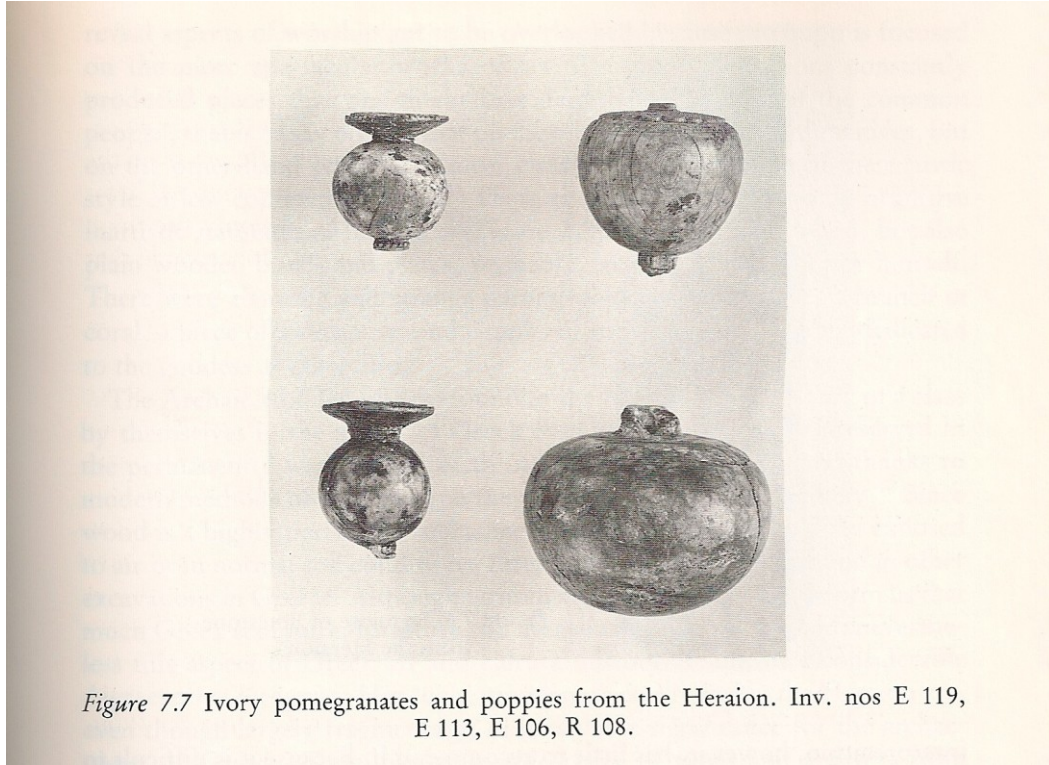
<sup>61</sup> O'Brien, 39

<sup>62</sup> O'Brien, 63

<sup>63</sup> O'Brien, 63

<sup>64</sup> Kyreileis, 138





**Figure 3: Ivory pomegranates and poppies from the Heraion**

Scholars suspect that as a Panhellenic image of Hera grew, in which her fertility and sexuality suddenly belong to Zeus and the realm of marriage, the need for fertility offerings like the pomegranate diminished. Because the pomegranate continued to be associated with Demeter and Persephone, the sudden drop in pomegranate offerings seems to me to support Baring's argument that the powers of one archaic fertility goddess had to be split and divided among the Olympian goddesses to create a Panhellenic pantheon: for the Samian Hera, the abrupt lack of pomegranate votives after 600 BC signifies that the goddess lost her connections to the seasons and the earth's fertility in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Demeter and Persephone, however, retained those connections, and as a result, the pomegranate continued to be associated with both goddesses. The loss of

the pomegranate at Samos must then have coincided with the arrival of Zeus to Hera's cult, at which point the Hera the earth goddess becomes Hera the bridal goddess.<sup>65</sup>

Zeus makes his first appearance in Samian art in the late seventh-century BC, depicted in a wood carving of a couple standing together. The *polos* worn by both the male and female figures indicate godhood, and scholars agree that the carving clearly depicts Zeus and Hera. However, several factors indicate that the carving presents Hera as the dominant (and possibly older) figure of the two. Her *polos* stands taller than his, and coupled with her floor-length robe makes her stature seem greater. While Zeus' face appears youthful (and beardless), the lines on Hera's face mark her as the older of the two, and give her something of a "perennial" look as O'Brien describes it. Additionally, Zeus turns his feet towards Hera, and though he is pictured with one hand around her shoulders and the other on her breast, Hera's arm seems to draw him towards her from its position across his shoulder. Her Cretan garb and exposed breasts "suggest comparison with the seventh-century statuette" discussed previously, which was most likely a copy of a cult statue. Hera, then retains certain aspects of the protective fertility goddess here, while Zeus enters almost as a subordinate side-figure.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> O'Brien, 66

<sup>66</sup> O'Brien, 71

Given that excavators found the wooden piece outside of Hera's sacred precinct

and that it bears no other signs of use in a cult, the piece (and Zeus) most likely did not appear in any part of Hera's cult until a later date.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Zeus first enters into Hera's cult at Samos under the guise of husband – bridal scenes between the two figures appear more commonly than any other depiction. Even the wooden carving discussed above has been interpreted as a depiction of the sacred marriage of Zeus and Hera, although little evidence supports the claim. As the Panhellenic mythology and Olympian family permeated the Greek consciousness (facilitated in large part by the Homeric depictions of the gods and eighth-century epic), Hera quietly transformed into a bride, and her rituals



**Figure 4: Youthful Zeus with a perennial Hera, c. 600 BC**

underwent a subtle process of reinterpretation to facilitate her marriage. Pomegranates

suddenly only appear in offerings related to marriage, and the ritual bathing of the cult statue at the Tonaia becomes part of Hera's "revirginization in preparation for her yearly nuptials, rather than as a rejuvenation of the earth."<sup>68</sup> The veil, which once stood as a sign

<sup>67</sup> O'Brien, 71

<sup>68</sup> O'Brien, 75

of fertility, now becomes a symbol of Hera's role as bride. In two terracottas found in the Samian necropolis, she and Zeus are shown seated under one veil, and though the traditional unveiling of the bride is not depicted in any Samian art, the union of the two figures seems undeniable.<sup>69</sup>

Samos, however, presents an interesting portrayal of Hera and her powers after she slides into marriage to Zeus because Hera still retains much of her sovereignty on the island. Whereas in Homeric epic Hera tends to be defined by her relationship with Zeus (which usually consists of her raging and rebelling against him in some fashion), on Samos local traditions trump the ideology of the panhellenic Olympians and Hera remains regionally preeminent. Zeus never appears on any of the imperial coins of Samos, and the importance of Hera's sanctuary does not seem to have diminished after she becomes the bride of Zeus. As a result, the seemingly petty and vengeful Hera of Homeric epic feels highly incongruent with the Samian portrayal of Hera as a bountiful fertility goddess. However, even in her outbursts against Zeus and her overwhelming fury, the Hera of Homeric epic retains some vestiges of the local fertility goddess that is seen so clearly on Samos.

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<sup>69</sup> O'Brien, 73

### **Hera in Literature: Domestication of the Homeric Queen**

The rise of a written epic tradition sometime during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC in Ancient Greece helped in large part to create the more codified Panhellenic pantheon that has come to dominate our perception of Greek mythology. In doing so, it also helped temper and ‘remythologize’ Hera so that she might fit into the new Olympian pantheon. Superficially, the Hera that appears in Homeric epic seems to be an impotent goddess, demoted to being little more than the muted sister-wife of Zeus. However, in light of the high popularity of Hera’s cult at Samos and upon closer inspection of her role in Homer’s pantheon, I believe that the highly compelling reality of Hera’s position in Homeric epic is revealed: underneath her façade as a “jealous and quarrelsome wife”, she actually represents “the turbulent native princess, coerced, but never really subdued by an alien conqueror.” The conqueror, of course, would be Zeus descending with the Indo-Europeans from the north.<sup>70</sup>

This “turbulent native princess” that Harrison describes shines out clearly in the *Iliad*, where Hera’s violent outbursts and rage represent her rebellion against the Olympian hierarchy. Her relationship with Zeus in particular illustrates a nearly constant power struggle between the two in which Hera continually tries to assert her independence and Zeus strains to contain her. The royal couple continually provoke each other with barbed words, but at several points Hera actually acts out against her husband and encourages other gods to do the same. In book eight of the *Iliad*, Hera voices her wish that “we gods who defend the Argives had the will...to hold off thundering Zeus.”

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<sup>70</sup> Harrison, 491

Of course, her wish never comes to fruition, but her audacity frightens even Poseidon, who reminds Hera that “The King [Zeus] is far too strong – he’ll crush us all.”<sup>71</sup>

Although Poseidon’s words ring true and Hera never reclaims her independence or overthrows the lord of heaven, Zeus’ fear of Hera’s Iliadic wrath certainly attests to her strength. In book one, Zeus chides Thetis for coming to him, fearful that she “will drive [him] into war with Hera” and that Hera might catch him negotiating with Thetis;<sup>72</sup> clearly, he wishes to avoid another argument with Hera if at all possible. Similarly, he complains against Hera criticizing him “in the face of all the immortal gods” where “she harries me perpetually”<sup>73</sup> because she clearly threatens and questions Zeus’ authority when she does so.

In the end, Zeus frequently chooses to compromise with Hera in order to please her and assuage her wrath (and by extension, to save face in front of the other Olympians by avoiding an all-out war with his wife). After a heated argument in book four, in which Hera tells Zeus outright that thwarting her actions will mean that “none of the deathless gods will ever praise [him]”,<sup>74</sup> she actually proposes that she and Zeus compromise on the destruction of their favorite cities. Significantly, once they compromise “all the other deathless powers will fall in line.”<sup>75</sup> I found line 75 particularly striking because it does suggest that both Zeus and Hera lead the Olympians, and that any division between the royal couple creates divisions among the lower ranks of gods. Zeus’ decision to compromise indicates his awareness of such potentially devastating divisions, and by extension serves as a nod of acknowledgement of Hera’s power.

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<sup>71</sup> Iliad, 8.234-241

<sup>72</sup> Iliad, 1.619-624

<sup>73</sup> Iliad, 1.620-622

<sup>74</sup> Iliad, 4.34

<sup>75</sup> Iliad, 1.75

Indeed, Zeus actually admits that he struggles to contain Hera when he tells Ares, “say what I will, I can hardly keep her down.”<sup>76</sup> As a result, Zeus’ status as Hera’s husband – and therefore master – actually accords him a certain amount of prestige and honor. In book ten of the *Iliad*, Zeus takes on a rare epithet when he is described as πόσις Ἥρης ἠυκόμοιο, “the lord of fair-haired Hera.”<sup>77</sup> Immediately, this epithet struck me as odd because for once, one sees Zeus defined in terms of Hera. The reverse is far more common, with Hera’s relationship to Zeus defining her as κασιγνήτη ἄλοχος, the sister and wife to the thunder god; such an epithet clearly subordinates Hera to her husband. Similarly, characterizing Zeus as the lord of Hera places him above her; however, it also suggests something notable about his ability to dominate Hera. Either Zeus actually gains a measure of power from his position as Hera’s master, or else his ability to overcome and control her attests to the great strength of his authority. Both possibilities acknowledge that Hera wields great authority and power.

Perhaps the most well known example of Hera’s rebellion against Zeus – and also of her ancient powers as a fertility goddess – comes from book fourteen of the *Iliad* in Hera’s famous seduction scene. Here Hera actively frustrates Zeus’ will by giving the Argives the upper hand against the Trojans not through an angry outburst or her own personal descent into battle, but rather through the manipulation of her greatest strength: she uses her powers as a goddess of creation and fertility to trick her husband.

Of course, the fact that Hera must call on Aphrodite’s power of lust and pleasure to carry out her plan illustrates the way in which her powers have been diluted so that she might fit into the Olympian hierarchy. Several Olympian goddesses now share the many

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<sup>76</sup> *Iliad*, 5.1034

<sup>77</sup> *Iliad*, 10.6

powers that originally belonged to one Great Goddess: in “tracing the continuity from Minoan and Mycenaean culture, the original Great Mother Goddess has become many separate goddesses...as though each personify a different aspect of her totality.”<sup>78</sup>

Aphrodite claims the realm of sexual pleasure, while Hera holds sway over the sacred realm of matrimony. Hera asking Aphrodite to “give me Love, give me Longing now”<sup>79</sup> then illustrates a “blend of the old and the new” in the Olympian pantheon in which Hera both reclaims her original sexuality and yet must beg another goddess for permission to use it.<sup>80</sup>

Still, vestiges of Hera’s connection to the earth stand out in the seduction scene. As Zeus and Hera make love, “under them now the holy earth burst with fresh green grass, crocus and hyacinth, clover soaked with dew”,<sup>81</sup> as though the earth itself mirrors Hera’s sexuality and fertility. Aphrodite’s gifts may have helped fill Zeus with desire, but the blossoming of the earth owes nothing to the goddess of love and instead illustrates Hera’s connection to the earth’s fertility and sexual potency.

The *Homeric Hymns* also underscore Hera’s lineage as a fertility goddess and additionally place her on a level with Zeus by emphasizing the strength of the passage of power through the female line. It is important to note that the “Hymn to Hera” introduces Hera as the daughter of Rhea and thereby draws attention to a matriarchal lineage in which power passes from mother to daughter. Of course, the political hierarchy of the Greek gods never features a purely matriarchal order in which females held the central

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<sup>78</sup> Baring and Cashford, 302

<sup>79</sup> *Iliad*, 14.241

<sup>80</sup> O’Brien, 186

<sup>81</sup> *Iliad*, 14.414-415



roles of political authority.<sup>82</sup> Rather, the earliest Greek mythology gives shape to a religion in which women provide a strong “social force or rather central focus, not as woman, or at least not as sex, but as mother, the mother of tribesmen to be” (Harrison 494).<sup>83</sup> One could certainly argue that Rhea’s greatest claim to fame comes from her status as the mother of Zeus, and even Gaia’s powers and influences as a mother constitute her most celebrated strength. But Hera also stands to inherit the authority of motherhood accorded to women in this matrilineal structure, and as is discussed later, she virulently tries to seize it.

The “Hymn to Hera” points out that this matrilineal structure at least parallels the patrilineality that defines Zeus: his lineage may be traced through a line of fathers (hence his epithet as the ‘Son of Cronus’), but Hera traces her lineage through the female line. The simultaneous existence of these parallel lineages suggests that both held and bestowed certain powers onto their respective members, which must in turn create tension between those separate powers of the matrilineal and patrilineal lines – the powers of creation versus the powers of domination.

To begin with, the “Hymn to Hera” places the goddess directly on par with her royal spouse and presents the royal couple as equals:

ἼΗρην ἀείδω χρυσόθρονον, ἣν τέκε Ῥεΐη  
 ἀθανάτων Βασίλειαν, ὑπείροχον εἶδος ἔχουσαν.  
 Ζηνὸς ἐριγδοῦποιο κασιγνήτην ἄλοχόν τε,  
 κυδρήν, ἣν πάντες μάκαρες κατὰ μακρὸν Ὀλυμπον  
 ἀζόμενοι τίουσιν ὁμῶς Δίι τερπικεραῦνφ.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Harrison, 494

<sup>83</sup> Harrison, 494

<sup>84</sup> Hymn to Hera, XII, lines 1-5 (my translation):

I sing of gold-enthroned Hera, whom Rhea bore,  
 Queen of the immortals, her form having eminence above others,  
 Both the sister and wife of thundering Zeus,  
 Illustrious, whom all the Blessed along lofty Olympus,

Right away, Hera's status as queen defines her: even before mentioning her relationship to Rhea the hymn introduces her as "Ἡρην χρυσόθρονον", or "gold-enthroned Hera", who is "ἄθανάτων Βασίλειαν" – the Queen of the immortals. Similarly, the hymn concludes by stating that all the blessed gods stand in awe of and "honor [Hera] equally with Zeus" as their ruler, as no less than Zeus.

Interestingly, the hymn states that even in appearance, Hera's majesty surpasses all others. In the second half of line two, the phrase "ὑπείροχον εἶδος ἔχουσιν" is frequently translated as "surpassing all others in beauty".<sup>85</sup> However, the use of εἶδος in place of καλή indicates that the hymn refers to more than just good looks and attractiveness; all of that which is seen in Hera holds eminence above others (ὑπείροχον), as though her physical stature reflects her royal stature and identifies her as queen.

Of course, the "Hymn to Hera" also identifies Hera as the sister-wife of Zeus, which could suggest that her powers as queen originate in her role as a wife. Certainly, line three of the hymn – which characterizes Hera as the "ἄλοχον" (wife) of Zeus – presents a hint at Hera's main function in the Olympian pantheon: her role as the patroness of marriage. At no point does the hymn directly refer to Hera as a seasonal fertility goddess. However, the emphasis placed on Hera's regal stature (which belongs to her alone and seems completely independent from Zeus' royalty) and the hint at her descent from Rhea illustrates a secondary source of power aside from her position as a wife: Hera also draws authority her bloodlines and from her position as the daughter of Rhea. This dual nature of her power – and all of the tension created by its duality – is

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Standing in awe, honor equally with Zeus who delights in thunder.

<sup>85</sup> Homer, "Hymn to Hera", line 2

explicitly confirmed in *The Iliad* when Hera tells Zeus that she is “the highest goddess” on Olympus “both by birth and since I am called your consort.”<sup>86</sup>

As previously stated, tracing Hera’s lineage through the female line suggests that certain powers have been passed down to Hera that belong to the realm of women in general and to her predecessors Rhea and Gaia specifically – powers to which Zeus has no claim. Superficially, citing Hera’s descent from Rhea affirms that Hera’s ancestry proves her right to rule just as much as her marriage does: “Hera’s claim to the queenship of heaven does not depend upon Zeus [because] her lineage is as august as his.”<sup>87</sup> It seems then that Hera’s ‘eminence above others’, her visible power that she exhibits and that sets her apart from the other gods, cannot be a mere byproduct of her marriage to the king of heaven, but is rather fueled by an inner majesty that was passed down to her from her mother.

However, Rhea passed down a great deal more to Hera than just a claim to royalty: Hera can also lay claim to the might of her mother and grandmother as ancient fertility goddesses, whose greatest strength lay in their powers of reproduction. Mythologically speaking, prior to Zeus’ established reign over the cosmos, a matrifocal structure existed in which female fertility and creation held more power than male powers of creation and domination. According to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, “Earth first of all bore starry Sky, equal to herself,”<sup>88</sup> as well as the mountains and the sea, without the influence of any male figure; in essence, Gaia created her own lover. Later on, only at the bidding and with the assistance of his mother does Cronus castrate and overthrow his

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<sup>86</sup> *Iliad*, 18.425-426

<sup>87</sup> Clay, 67

<sup>88</sup> *Theogony*, lines 126-127: Γαῖα δέ πρῶτον μὲν ἐγένετο ἴσον ἑωτῆ / Οὐρανὸν ἵστερόενθ’ (Translation by Glenn. W. Most)

father, Ouranos. When Rhea later seeks an end to Cronus' despotic reign, she appeals to both her parents.<sup>89</sup> However, the castration of Ouranos has effectively rendered him a moot player, and once again, Gaia provides "very clever suggestions" to overthrow the reigning king.<sup>90</sup> Although they never rule directly, Gaia and Rhea clearly use their fertility powers to wield significant power over the divine political scene. Hera then, just like Rhea and Gaia before her, must also have inherited potentially devastating powers of creation over which her male counterparts have no control. In reading the *Iliad* and the *Homeric Hymns*, I have frequently wondered why Zeus chose Hera (a jealous, turbulent, and unpredictable force) as his queen. However, in light of the previously described potent fertility powers that Hera stands to inherit, an answer becomes clear: it seems that binding Hera directly to himself seemed the only way for Zeus to contain her as his equal and to temper her creative feminine powers in a way that his predecessors did not.

Though the "Hymn to Hera" makes only a brief reference to her ancient matrilineal fertility powers, the "Hymn to Apollo" shows Hera drawing upon her inheritance to front her most serious challenge to Zeus and his inherited (patrilineal) powers: in the "Hymn to Apollo", "Hera, not yet domesticated, offers the ultimate challenge to Zeus' new order by attempting to reproduce the ancient cycle of succession."<sup>91</sup> Her attempt seems logical, given the history of her ancestors. So, Hera responds to Zeus' birth of Athena by calling upon her grandmother, the ultimate earth goddess, to use her fertility powers to grant Hera a child born independently from Zeus:

"[Hera] struck the earth with the flat of her hand and said, 'Hear me now,  
Earth and broad Heaven above, and you Titan gods who dwell below the

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<sup>89</sup> *Theogony*, lines 469-470

<sup>90</sup> *Theogony*, line 494

<sup>91</sup> Clay, 68

earth...grant me a son without Zeus' help...as much superior [to Zeus] as wide-sounding Zeus is to Kronos.”<sup>92</sup>

Significantly, Hera relies on the greater strength of Gaia to induce her pregnancy, which suggests that Hera's own power as a fertility goddess has been diluted throughout the generations. Nevertheless, the success of her independent pregnancy cements her position as an earth or a fertility goddess.

Clearly, producing a son independently would allow Hera to directly challenge Zeus' reign over the cosmos. To begin with, Hera imitates the established pattern for a change of rule by attempting to give birth to a son strong enough to overthrow his father. Given Cronos and Zeus' successes in usurping the throne, it seems possible that Hera's plan could succeed. Additionally, and as it seems to me, even more importantly, Hera calls upon Gaia and the Titans to aid her in her coup and thereby “allies herself with the primordial chthonic powers who have only recently been defeated by Zeus.”<sup>93</sup> In doing so, Hera cements her connections and loyalty to the chthonic deities and underlines the Olympian vs. chthonic dichotomy that exists in the Panhellenic pantheon.

Her speech to Zeus additionally reveals that Hera means to rebel not only against Zeus himself, but also more broadly against patriarchy and her subordination as a female.<sup>94</sup> At first, the birth of Athena appears mainly to be an insult to Hera's wifely honor: Hera venomously states that Zeus has insulted the sanctity of her marriage through his dalliances, and then proceeds to state that she intends to show him up by falling pregnant “without disgracing your holy bed or my own.”<sup>95</sup> But Hera also reveals a hint of

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<sup>92</sup> Hymn to Apollo, lines 334-339

<sup>93</sup> Clay, 69

<sup>94</sup> Clay, 69

<sup>95</sup> Hymn to Apollo, line 328

how she chafes under the patriarchal standards of Olympus, where even if Hera had given birth to Athena the goddess “still would have been called your [Zeus’] child among the immortals.”<sup>96</sup> Zeus also claims Ares as his own, despite Ares being the child of both Zeus and Hera: even as he blames Ares’ rage on his mother Hera, Zeus says, “you [Ares] are *my* child. To me your mother bore you.”<sup>97</sup> The patriarchal standard of attributing a child’s existence and glory primarily to the father effectively rejects Hera’s role as a fertility goddess, and leaving her out of the birth cycle completely (as occurred in Athena’s conception and birth) dispenses with even the powerful fertility symbolism given to mothers. Giving birth to a son without a man would therefore give Hera a child born outside of the patriarchal system, reaffirm her status as a fertility goddess on par with her ancestors, and give her enormous political leverage with the reinstitution of the succession cycle.<sup>98</sup>

However, in spite of the immense power that Hera wields against Zeus in the scenes discussed above, the outcome of her independent pregnancy still illustrates the lesser position that she holds under the great thunder god’s Olympian regime: she continually bears children inferior to those born of the other gods. According to the “Hymn to Apollo”, Hera gives birth to “the dreadful and problematic Typhaon [born] to be an affliction to mortals” in response to the birth of Athena, while Hesiod asserts in his *Theogony* that “Hera...without mingling in love gave birth to famous Hephaestus”<sup>99</sup> after Athena’s birth. Obviously, the monster Typhaon, with his serpent coils and numerous dragonheads and his later brood of monstrous children, fulfills none of the Greek ideals

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<sup>96</sup> Hymn to Apollo, lines 324-325

<sup>97</sup> Iliad, 5.1037

<sup>98</sup> Clay, 69-70

<sup>99</sup> *Theogony*, lines 927-928

for physical beauty, honor, virtue, etc. Indeed, “the violent, disorderly offspring she [Hera] produces on her own will unambiguously demonstrate the validity of [Zeus’] hierarchy.”<sup>100</sup> Even Hephaestus, with all his skill as a craftsman, is defined by his limp and does not dwell on Olympus. The Homeric “Hymn to Athena” describes Athena, in contrast, as a “glorious goddess”, the “reverend virgin, city-saviour”, whose birth inspires both joy and fear among the gods.<sup>101</sup> Clearly, Zeus gave birth to the most noble and admirable of the two children, and thereby defeats Hera in her rebellious act.

### Conclusion

It is clear from a study of the archaeological evidence of Hera’s cult at Samos that Hera did in fact enjoy regional worship as an independent and important earth goddess from the 9<sup>th</sup> century through at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC; it is also clear from a close reading of the *Iliad* and various *Homeric Hymns* that Hera, after becoming the bride of Zeus, no longer enjoyed her high Samian status and independence (although remnants of her connections to the earth and fertility remain visible). However, the question of why Hera and her chthonic allies experienced the debasement and loss of power that they did remains unanswered. Given that the changes made in Hera’s worship can be traced to a relatively specific time period at Samos (for instance, Zeus’ first appearance in art in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, and the disappearance of pomegranate votives in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, discussed previously), it is possible that the religious changes symbolically indicate the re-conceptualization of Samian society and culture. The decrease in emphasis on matrilineal powers in Zeus’ Panhellenic pantheon could, for example, suggest a cultural shift from a focus on female authority to a greater emphasis on male authority and

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<sup>100</sup> Clay, 71

<sup>101</sup> Hymn to Athena, line 211

patriarchy. Unfortunately, that line of inquiry demands a separate study of Greek religion and its relationship to the social structures of ancient Greece.

In the end, for all her rage and rebellion, for all her creative powers and feminine fertility, the dominant image of Hera that has been passed on to the modern day is that of a vengeful wife, subordinate to her husband and jealous of his authority. Hera does not fit very neatly into the familiar Olympian pantheon, as is evidenced by her rage and violent outbursts that are described in the *Iliad* and the *Homeric Hymns*. She chafes against Zeus' authority and freedom, and repeatedly voices her desire for an end to his reign. After studying Hera's worship prior to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC (and prior to the rise of Homeric epic tradition), it seems clear to me that Hera rebels against Zeus and his Olympian pantheon out of a desire to regain her former glory as a fertility goddess and to assert her own majesty as the queen of heaven.



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