THE NEGLECTED HEAVENS

Gender and the Cults of Helios and Selene in Bronze Age and Historical Greece

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Why did the Greeks not consider Helios and Selene to be major deities, and why did the Greeks characterize the sun as male and the moon as female? Although the Greeks believed the sun and moon were divine, they also (somewhat disdainfully) associated their worship in a large-scale cultic setting with the barbarians. Despite this, it is from the Greeks that our own Western cultural pairings of sun/male, moon/female are descended. And yet, the Greeks stand out when compared with other Aegean and Near Eastern civilizations with whom the Greeks would have had contact during the Bronze Age before their historical pantheon had solidified, such as the Minoans, Hittites, and Ugarit, cultures that not only paid more worship to the sun and moon but also characterized them as the opposite genders. The origins of Greek religion is difficult to trace; we know it is composed of elements from Indo-European culture and from other, non-Indo-European civilizations, but it is not always easy to distinguish which elements came from where. This paper attempts to fill this gap by comparing the cults and mythic roles of Helios and Selene to their counterparts in other Bronze Age civilizations, discussing why the Greeks assigned the genders that they did to the sun and moon, and what may have happened during the Dark Age to deemphasize their place in historical Greek religion.

Helios and Selene first appear in the works of Homer and Hesiod around the 7th century BC. Their genealogy varies between authors; Hesiod lists Hyperion and Theia as their parents, while the Homeric Hymns exchange Theia for Euryphaessa. On vase paintings and bas-reliefs dating back to at least the 5th century BC, Helios and Selene wear gold and silver robes and are crowned with rays of light or a sun disk and lunar crescent. They are usually shown driving their chariots; Selene’s chariot is occasionally drawn by oxen, while in earlier Archaic vases Helios is sometimes shown traveling across Oceanus in a golden cup. In myth and literature, Helios is the more active of the two gods. As the all-seeing sun god and patron of justice, Helios helps Demeter locate Persephone and tells Hephaestus
about his wife’s adultery, and he is invoked in oaths by Agamemnon and Hermes to prove their sincerity. Helios owns several flocks of sheep and cattle on the islands of Thrinakie and Erytheia, fiercely avenging their theft by Odysseus and the Giants. His offspring include Phaethousa and Lampetie (the keepers of his cattle), the Heliades, the Horai, Pasiphae the queen of Crete, Circe and her brother Aeetes, and the infamous Phaethon. Meanwhile, Selene has almost no role in myth besides driving the moon chariot. She is mentioned in the works of many Greek poets including Sappho, Aeschylus and Euripides, but most of these references are very brief. One of the only myths of Selene involves her love affair with Endymion, a handsome shepherd. Selene is occasionally mentioned in relation to childbirth and the months of the year, due to the close connection between pregnancy and the lunar months, and her own status as a mother to her children Pandeia, Mousikous, and the Nemean Lion (among others).

The only two places where Helios was considered a major deity were the cities of Rhodes and Corinth. Eumelos around the 8th century tells how Helios and Poseidon fought over the land of future Corinth, with Helios winning the mountain peak and Poseidon winning the isthmus. Helios’ children Aloeus and Aeetes became the mythic founders of Corinth, while their father was honored throughout the city; Pausanias describes altars to Helios on the Acrocorinthos and the isthmus, while carvings of Helios and Phaethon in their chariots appear on the Propylaea gates. For the Corinthians, Helios was important enough to assume control over thunder, usually the special domain of Zeus. Helios was also considered the mythical founder of Rhodes as well; although cultic evidence only dates to around 408 BC when the city was founded, worship of Helios most likely extends farther back into the past. Pindar relates how Helios chose Rhodes as his own after missing the gods’ dividing of the lands, fathering seven sons with the nymph of the island who became its first kings. The Rhodians commemorated Helios in the great Halieia festival, which drew participants throughout the Greek world and featured chariot races and musical competitions. The Rhodians also sacrificed a quadriga chariot annually to Helios,
which was thrown into the sea. The most famous example of their devotion is the great Colossus of Rhodes, built in 280 BC to thank Helios for defending them against the siege of Antigonus in 304.

Helios does not receive many temples and festivals elsewhere in Greece. Altars to Helios are attested by Pausanias in the towns of Mycenae, Sikyon, Mantinea, and Hermione; he also tells us that a stone image of Helios is carved in the marketplace at Elis, and Helios with his chariot is carved on the great throne of Zeus at Olympia. Pausanias describes the sacrifice of white horses to Helios on the mountain of Taleton above the town of Brysiai. Helios also had sheep dedicated to him at Tainaron and at Apollonia. In Athens, there was an altar and priestess of Helios present in the 3rd century BC, while inscriptions honoring him date back to at least the 5th century BC. Athenians also honored Helios in the Thargelia harvest festival held in late spring with sacrifices to him and the Hours. Unfortunately, Selene has almost no cult at all in Greece. Pausanias mentions a statue in Thalamai bearing the title of Pasiphae, or “shining one”, and implies this statue is of Selene since Pasiphae was one of her titles. Besides this, the two other places where Selene may have been worshipped is Laconia where an inscription mentions a priest in charge of the cults of Selene, Helios, and Zeus Boulaios, and in Elis where a stone image of her is found by the marketplace alongside one of Helios.

Thus far, we have examined the cults of Helios and Selene as established in historical Greece. The next question to consider is how these two deities solidified themselves in the Greek imagination. Greek religion did not appear in a vacuum; it was influenced in part by other cultures in geographic proximity with whom they would have traded and potentially fought against. For these reasons, during the Bronze Age, the people most likely to have influenced the early Greeks were the Hittites, the people of Ugarit, and the Minoans – all of whom honored female sun goddesses. During the height of the Hittite empire, the Sun-Goddess of Arinna was the national patroness of the Hittites and was often identified with the Hurrian goddess Hebat. She is sometimes the wife of the Sun-God of Heaven Istanu, sometimes of the Storm-God of Hatti. Both sun deities concerned themselves with justice and oaths,
but the Sun-Goddess of Arinna held special significance as the protector of the king in battle. The Hittite king Hattusili I called himself her beloved and offered major sacrifices to the “Land of Hatti’s Torch”; in return, the Sun-Goddess rode before the king into battle to ensure his protection and ultimate victory. The primary moon deity of Anatolia was Men, worshipped throughout Asia Minor, and especially in Antioch in Pisidia. Men oversaw healing processes, fertility, avenged injustice, guarded tombs and protected soldiers. He was depicted on vase paintings with a pointed cap and lunar horns on his shoulders. Men was associated with horses as his mode of travel, and with the bull whose crescent horns appear on his shoulders and was the chief sacrificial animal of his cult.

The Hittite Sun-Goddess of Arinna was not the only powerful solar goddess in the Near East. The city of Ugarit in northern Syria also honored a sun goddess, named Shapash. Like the Sun-Goddess of Arinna, Shapash deals with divine justice and also acts as the messenger of El and Baal, the storm god. When Baal and Mot fight, Shapash decides the outcome of the conflict in Baal’s favor. She has firsthand knowledge of the underworld from her nightly crossings, and advises Baal on how to travel through it safely; when he does not return, Shapash travels with his sister Anat down to find him, casting her light in the darkness. Upon finding Baal dead, she helps Anat carry him back and bury him. These myths show her relationship to the fertility of the crops; the dead god represents the seed going into the earth, while the heat of the sun represents the growth and life of the seed. Shapash also resembles the Sun-Goddess of Arinna in that she has particular connections to the birth of the king; the mother of the queen of Ugarit in correspondence letters shares the epithet “Great Lady” with Shapash, and in the myth The Gracious Gods, Shapash, separated into two goddesses Athirat and Rahmay, gives birth to the morning and evening stars Shahar and Shalem after spending the night with El, her father/husband.

The Hittites and the Ugaritics certainly had contact with Bronze Age Greece. The Mycenaeans were skilled traders; Mycenaean pottery has been found at Ugarit, and a scattering of Mycenaean figurines have been found along the coasts of Asia Minor. It is entirely possible that these sun and moon
deities could have influenced the early development of Helios and Selene, but the most likely candidate to influence the Mycenaeans would have been the Minoans. The Minoan “pantheon” was orientated around a set of goddesses rather than male gods; many scholars have claimed that they were worshippers of a pre Indo-European Great Mother Goddess, but their deities are too varied and there is not enough evidence for this to be the case. The Minoans were nature and sea worshippers; they practiced a tree cult, a pillar cult, venerated goddesses of the sea and naval technology, and emphasized the sun in terms of death and rebirth; the orientation of their “tholos” tombs pointed the doorways east towards the rising sun and aligned with the sun perfectly at the solstices, equinoxes, and during early April and late August. This association was also reflected by grave goods with solar symbols inscribed upon them. Besides the rebirth of the dead, the sun was honored for its role in causing the crops to grow; compare this to how Helios was honored at harvest festivals in Athens and the Peloponnesus. Images on seals show women with raised arms running or dancing with a solar symbol (typically a circle of some kind with a cross or spokes, sometimes with rays emanating from it) above or between them. Other seals depict what appears to be a goddess of some kind with a sun disk or a split rosette, another solar symbol. Despite a lack of textual evidence, the scenes depicted on these seals have caused some scholars such as Nannos Marinatos and Lucy Goodison to claim that the Minoan sun deity was also a goddess; when considered against the backdrop provided by Shapash and the Sun-Goddess of Arinna, this theory seems to have some credence.

So far, we have discussed the cultures that would have had the most influence on the Bronze Age Greeks. Earlier, I said that Greek religion is composed of elements from Indo-European and non Indo-European cultures. While the religion of the Hittites, Ugaritics, and Minoans are non Indo-European, they are much easier to discuss owing to the large amount of textual and archeological evidence. The ‘original’ Indo-European religion, in contrast, is much harder to discern; current scholarly understanding is a reconstruction based on cross-cultural comparisons and linguistic analysis. With that
said, it appears that the Indo-Europeans had a small pantheon of gods, but the sun figured prominently among them. The sun was generally conceived as male and was addressed as the god of heaven, and the shepherd of mankind. Like the other sun deities, Indo-Europeans seem to have associated the sun with justice, oaths, and all-seeing travel, but they also associated the sun with herds of cattle. Cattle were the main form of wealth and prestige for the Indo-Europeans; in Greek myth, Helios still owns herds of cattle, while Selene is sometimes drawn by oxen and linked with cattle via the connection between cow horns and the crescent moon. It is not surprising that, given their importance to the historical Greeks as wealth and sacrificial victims in religious rites, the old celestial associations would have been preserved.

Ultimately, we know that the Greeks rejected other gender pairings in favor of a male sun and female moon. What can we say about Mycenaean culture that would make it favor a male sun over the female sun of its neighbors? The answer may lie in how the Mycenaeeans constructed gender roles in their society. We know from the Linear B tablets found at Knossus and Pylos that women and men were separated in their work; the only occupations held in common were religious functionary and slave. We also know that women were linked with child-rearing; children are recorded with their mothers in working groups, while men do not appear with children at all with the exception of older boys who are acting as professional apprentices. Mycenaean art hardly ever depicts women; Mycenaean kourotrophic figures have been found at different sites on the Greek mainland, but these only number around 70 in total. Although the Mycenaeeans worshipped a handful of goddesses and employed priestesses as religious officials, their pantheon placed a much greater emphasis on male gods. Finally, the Mycenaeeans were notoriously warlike and fond of mercenary work. In such a militarized, male oriented culture, it is no surprise that women and their roles were downplayed. Compare this construction to their closest neighbors, the Minoans, who emphasized women in their art. Unlike the Mycenaeeans, the Minoans do not appear to have made the same connection between women and childrearing; individual
figures of children have been found at Palaikastro and Psychro, and there are many votive figures of Minoan women found on Crete, but women and children do not appear together in Minoan art. Instead, Minoan art in general depicts women in scenes outside the house, taking part in processions and religious rituals as officials and priestesses instead of being confined to the background. When combined with the already mentioned Minoan preference for goddesses, this suggests that Minoan women held a high place in society.

It is from the Mycenaeans and their Indo-European forefathers that Helios and Selene most likely derived their genders. While Helios and Selene share many characteristics with other solar gods, like overseeing oaths, protecting crop fertility, and watching over the earth from lofty perches in the sky, their gender is not among them. Gender itself is a social construction; societies will have different ways of creating, valuing, and expressing gender depending on their environmental and historical circumstances. The Greeks, from the Bronze Age to the Roman era, generally valued and emphasized men more than women. Only men were allowed to fight, hold office, hold public discourse, or move freely in public at all, while women were mostly confined to the house and domestic work. When combined with the already existing Indo-European idea of a male sun god, it makes sense for the Greeks to have continued that association with the brightest, most visible light in the sky.

As for why the Greeks did not pay as much attention to the sun and moon, this is harder to answer. The cults of Rhodes and Corinth might be explained by the cultural impact of trade in the Orientalizing period, and in Rhodes’ case, its proximity to Asia Minor. Corinth became a flourishing trading center in the 8th century with Asia Minor and Rhodes, exporting its pottery all throughout the Aegean. It is possible that Helios worship was established in both cities to foster a stronger political and economic connection; the poet Eumelos may have invented his stories on behalf of the Bacchaid rulers of Corinth who wanted to enhance the city’s prestige. Helios and Selene’s lack of popularity outside of these cities may be related to the differences in political structure between the Greeks and the Near
East. All throughout the Near East, the sun was linked with royalty. In Homer, it is Zeus that is associated with kings, although the Greeks typically did not care for kingship on a Near Eastern scale, nor did they dedicate worship to their rulers until the Hellenistic period. Perhaps it was this difference that consigned Helios and Selene to the status of minor gods. Ultimately, we can never really know why the Greeks settled on the sun/male, moon/female paring, or why they decided that solar/lunar worship was not for them. All we can do is interpret the evidence as best we can, and perhaps in the meantime, develop a working time machine to settle these and other questions in the future once and for all.