GREEK WOMEN AND RELIGION, MODERN AND ANCIENT:
FESTIVALS AND CULTS CONNECTED WITH THE FEMALE SPHERE,
A COMPARISON

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The following article is mainly based upon studies in non-Cypriot Greek culture, modern and ancient, but despite of regional variation, Greece and Cyprus belong to the same Greek and wider Mediterranean cultural area. Thus, by way of a comparative theoretical approach, the study seeks to be a contribution to new perspectives on the material from the Swedish Cyprus Expedition.1

Many studies have been occupied with women and religion in ancient Greece. Even if women were conducting important religious festivals and rituals, most researchers claim that their activities were performed under male dominance, since women were circumscribed and constrained by domesticity. From the archaic period, their religious rituals were curbed or "appropriated". The male control of woman was the cornerstone, the social and cultural prerequisite for the construction of civilization, as presented in Aeschylus; the Orestia.2

The cult of the dying god Adonis and Aphrodite was important both in Greece proper and Cyprus, but according to Marcel Detienne’s (1989, originally 1972) ideological patriarchal and puritan view, the Adónia festival was celebrated mainly by courtesans, being lascivious occasions, without any particular importance.

The following article argues that these statements from Western scholars need to be nuanced. It is important to change our approach when working with ancient culture. This may be done, by using a comparative anthropological approach. The article demonstrates how this may be concretised by conducting fieldwork on religious festivals in present-day’s Greece. They are compared with similar ancient festivals through an analysis of the fertility-cult, which is important in the festivals. Based on the importance of this cult, the article tries to consider the female part of society, since women are the central performers of the actual cult which is of focal importance within the official and male value-system, a value-system which the festivals and the society that they reflect, traditionally have been considered from, and which therefore has to be supplied by a female point of view. By taking account of the so-called female sphere, which still exists in the Mediterranean society generally and in Greece and Cyprus particularly, we may also learn a useful way to try to consider the female part of society. But, by so doing the official male perspective, which is very similar to the Western male perspective generally applied within Greek studies, has to be deconstructed.3

Women and the female sphere

In the so-called patriarchal Mediterranean society, women are associated with practical religion. Fertility-cult, healing and death-cult are deeply connected with the domestic sphere, where women are the dominating power. "The female sphere" is important when studying such personal phenomena in life as ideologies and mentalities, represented by religion, behaviour, values, customs, faith, worship, popular beliefs, etc. We discover that what we usually call “macro-” and "micro-society", i.e. the "public" and "domestic spheres", in fact have different meanings to what is generally assumed. In Greece, we do not find the “little” society or “only the family” at home; rather, this is where we meet the “great” society. Therefore, it is important to search out to what extent the official ideology is dependent on these cults, and thereby the female sphere to manifest itself.

The "male sphere" is usually connected with the official world, and the
Greek women and religion, modern and ancient: festivals and cults

female with the domestic world, but as already stated, this does not imply that the female sphere is marginal and the other not, as some researchers have claimed. Marginalization is a spatial metaphor and depends on where you are standing. This means that the centre in a Greek village can be both the central village square, “the man’s world” (cf. Ar. Eccl. 154 f. for a parallel), and the kitchen hearth or courtyard, important spaces that women control. When studying Greek village life, anthropologists have considered the two spheres of male and female importance in terms of “public” and “private”, home and outside home, but there are also public spaces where women dominate, one of these is the graveyard (Fig. 1). So, when working with this material, one realizes that the division in a male and female sphere in Greek society may, under certain circumstances, be blurred. In reality, the world of the domestic and familial or the world of women, i.e. the female sphere, is covering a more extended area and has greater power than generally assumed.

Generally, Greek women and their life have been analysed from a Western (male) standard. Based on these theories, both ancient and modern Greek women have been categorized as unfree, dependent, secluded and not living a worthy life. Accounts of women written by men, and many academic women, may portray them as passive or subservient. But, if the goal is to conduct research from the female sphere in Greece, the picture may change, since Greek women may have other values. In this way, we may get new perspectives on our ancient texts as well.

In Greece, women are connected with birth, nurturance and the care for the dead; they are feeding and nourishing mothers, and by these encompassing activities they manage and control the fundamental course of life. Many symbols and rituals in the festivals illustrate this. These symbols and rituals are usually regarded as, and are female “domains”. By analysing some of their relevant aspects, the hope is to grasp further into the meaning and importance of the mentioned customs and values related to fundamental principles, within the “ideological entirety” a festival often is perceived as, as well as male texts, since their interest and theme is the male ideology.

Women in Greece have a double consciousness about their own existence and about men’s representations of it. Therefore, it is of focal importance to conduct fieldwork among women and men when working with ancient sources, since they with very few exceptions are written by men, and the goal is to represent a whole and not only a limping and partial society.

From the cyclical festivals of the agricultural calendar to fertility-cult

The festival is an important means of communication, an offering or a gift, most often dedicated to a deceased guardian of society, alone or together with a god(dess), for instance to the modern Panagia (the Virgin Mary, cf. Fig. 2) or to the ancient goddesses, Demeter (Plut. Mor. 378e–69, cf. Hymn. Hom. Cer. 273 f.), Athena (Hom. Il. 2.546–551) or Aphrodite. In the festivals, we find fertility- and death-cult as well as healing (cf. also Håland 2005 and 2006a).
The analysis of the fertility-cult demonstrates how fertility is connected to the deceased and the powers in the subterranean world where life begins, according to the cyclical symbolism, which is central in Greek culture. The deceased mediator also receives a blood sacrifice, the ritual slaughter of an animal, which afterwards is consumed as a communal meal by the participants of the festival. The communication is presented on several levels. The dead receives the offering in order to provide for the fertility of the society through the communication with stronger powers, first and foremost, Mother Earth. Her importance parallels the woman’s who is the central performer of the cults, which are important in the festivals, because they are connected to the female sphere. The Greeks perceive the Earth as a woman’s body and the agricultural year as a woman’s life. The Earth is also seen as the female sex organ. But, the Earth represents only one of the two parts of the nature, who has to be invoked to ensure the harvest. Accordingly, rain-magic dedicated to a heavenly god is a generally theme in the festivals, particularly around the most important periods during the agricultural year: sowing (autumn) and sprouting (spring). From this fact follows the significance of the Sacred Marriage, hieros gamos. As the ploughing is about to begin, traditionally a ritualistic ploughing takes place accompanied or followed by a hieros gamos, the purpose of which is to re-enact the union of the Corn Mother or Mother
Earth with her own son, the corn-seed, in order to make the ground fertile. The connection between birth and death is also symbolised through the annual death and resurrection of the lovers of the Mother Goddesses, such as the vegetation god, Adonis.

The fertility-cult is connected with important life-cycle passages, since the festivals are celebrated at important passages of the agricultural cycle, and the agricultural year is represented in terms of the life of a Mother Goddess. All the religious festivals are connected with an important passage in the cycle of nature and a passage in the life-cycle of a divine person. Today, the Panagia is important. In ancient Greece it was particularly manifested through the Homeric Hymn dedicated to the Corn Mother, Demeter.

The cyclical perspective is central in connection with the festivals of the agricultural year. After harvest and the threshing of the grain, the end period of the grains' cycle (cf. Bourdieu 1980) starts in August. At the end of the dog days, by the end of the month, the modern festival dedicated to the Dormition of the Panagia marks a turning point towards autumn, when the transitional period towards the "productive part" of the agricultural year is about to begin again. Roughly at the same time, the ancient Panathenaia dedicated to the goddess Athena, was celebrated by the end of the first month of the official Athenian year. The other festivals deal with other important passages, as the sowing when Panagia's Presentation in the Temple is celebrated, and marks the beginning of the winter-period as the Thesmophoria did in ancient Greece. Now, the "female", wet and fertile period in the agricultural year's cycle replaces the male period, because the woman is looked upon as the productive partner in a relationship in the Mediterranean area. The mid-winter-festivals are celebrated around solstice and the first sprouting of the grains. The end of winter or the birth of spring is celebrated around spring equinox, following are summer solstice, the "first-fruit". The official ideological rituals are adapted to the agricultural calendar.

The “annual calendar”/“cyclical model” of the Kabyles and its relation to the Greek context

The yearly cyclic calendar or "synoptic diagram of pertinent oppositions" which Pierre Bourdieu has drawn upon for the Kabyles in North-Africa, is a Mediterranean cultural pattern which may be used comparatively on Greek material. The male-female division, which he presented earlier, is now represented as a gendered cyclical model, where the elements of the male-female division or opposed principles are placed in layers. The calendar presents the agricultural year, and the relations between humans and nature. It also has importance for the ideal male “honour and shame”-dichotomy vis-à-vis the actual gendered relations in society. By studying the calendar in combination with focal aspects in the ancient Athenian and the modern Greek festival calendars, and from a non-androcentric perspective, the result will differ from Bourdieu’s. There is only a male dominance (as he claims in his article from 1990 and the book from 1998) from a dominant androcentric focus, or male ideology, which will automatically be reproduced, if we only base our research on the male ideological sphere and a male value-system. Most of the scholars working with ancient society present similar male values, for example Detienne (1989) and F. Zeitlin (1984, cf. supra and infra). By transferring ourselves to the female sphere, the picture changes, because we learn that what seemed peripheral from the male sphere, becomes the centre. We also find other values. By taking account of both spheres, we realize that they are complementary. Both have an important share in the processes of sexual reproduction and agricultural production on which their livelihoods depend. Consequently, the one-sided analysis Bourdieu presents of the diagram has to be read from another approach. Men fear the power of women in connection with the realities of life related to death, birth and healing, and this knowledge makes her subordinate to man according to the official male ideology of “honour and shame”. We learn this, by analysing the calendar from a chthonic perspective.

From the honour of masculinity toward a poetics of womanhood, or a chthonic perspective

When reading the works written by most of the Western scholars describing ancient Greek women, I recall the downtrodden and reclusive female creatures presented by several ethnographers. Earlier male and often female ethnographers’ writings on the Mediterranean used to emphasize negative aspects of women because they based their analysis on the androcentric ideology of “honour and shame”
which are conventional male values, centred around cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality. Their male informants presented them to an ideal, which is strikingly similar to the ideal found in ancient sources written by men. Nevertheless, because of the traditional separation between female and male spheres in the area, this means that they were not very qualified to inform us about women. With few exceptions, they were not very interested in women's tasks either, and what they eventually said was often coloured with uncertainty or disdain, most often resulting from ignorance. Therefore, it is important to regard our case from another perspective to try to counteract this history of contempt. It may also be possible to dissolve some of the paradoxes and ambiguities in the male-produced texts.

While carrying out fieldwork among women, and considering their own value-system, the picture may change. Even if Greek women may subscribe to the male ideological “honour and shame” model, they have their own values in addition to, or running contrary to the male view, depending of how the male view suits their own thinking. That women experience the world differently from men is difficult to discern from ancient male-produced sources. Women also have female knowledge. Based on the values of modern Greek women, it may be called a poetics of womanhood, and the point is how women can present public performances of being good at being a woman. Women we meet in modern Greece are often strong personalities and active participants in social life. They are often stronger and more assured than women we know from our own societies, and far from the suppressed, downtrodden and reclusive creatures presented by several ethnographers. They run their households with a firm hand, and exhibit self-confidence. The topics analysed from the festivals: the importance of fertility-cult, and thus the female body, motherhood, sexuality, women’s general activities in the religious sphere, are important means of manifesting “a poetics of womanhood”, according to which the essential thing is to “be good at being a woman” in Greece. These topics have relevance to the ancient material when we try to change our approach.

The female body provides a significant source for social symbolism: It plays an important role in the “poetics of womanhood”, because bodies have social meanings that may be used in public performances. In Greece, the female body both creates and represents the family and social relations in a variety of contexts. By wearing black mourning clothes when a family member dies, women become highly visible symbols of mourning, hence of the kinship relations between the deceased and the living. This importance of the women’s black mourning clothes is stated in ancient traditional

Fig. 3. A mother crawling on her knees to the church dedicated to the Panagia on Tinos with a sick child on her back in the hope of healing. (Author’s photograph)
sponsors from Homer (Il. 24.93), but is criticized by Plutarch (Mor. 608f4). Complaints about suffering are especially expressed by women lamenting their dead. They also suffer in pilgrimage. But in relation to problems of everyday life, we meet the same complaints, since they call attention to what they must endure in order to carry out their roles as wives and mothers. All the examples are parts of the available “cultural material” upon which women may draw for the creation of “the poetics of womanhood.” Suffering as expressed through verbal complaint, the body, ritual actions, is an expression of social identity among women. This is illustrated by Sappho (Fr. 103) when saying: “The delicate Adonis is dying, Cythera; what can we do? Beat your breasts, maidens, and rend your garments.”

The idiom of suffering is particularly important in the context of women’s roles. For many women, the points of both tension and fulfillment centre around motherhood and familial responsibilities. For women, especially the body plays an important role in these expressions of suffering, whether it is through the wearing of black mourning clothes, or the numerous expressions of the ways women suffer in the process of bodily reproduction. In modern Greece, we meet the importance of ponō, suffering or feeling pain as one of the important ways of expressing the “poetics of womanhood”. In ancient society, ponos described motherly suffering generally, and for Plutarch (Mor. 496d-c, cf. 771b), and Sappho (Fr. 42, cf. 28, 118b). The same word signifies a woman in labour. In contemporary Greece, a woman makes a public performance when crawling on her knees to the church with a sick child on her back in the hope of healing, but the action takes validity through the sacrifice and suffering of the self on behalf of others (Fig. 3).

Through the maternal role, the mother’s own body is constantly offered as a sacrifice, and this sacrifice may be dramatized in women’s pilgrimage to the shrine dedicated to the Annunciation of the Panagia on the Aegean island of Tinos. Actually, many of them are coming from Cyprus (cf. n.1). Arriving at the church, it is important to fetch holy wonderworking earth and water from the chapel dedicated to the “Life-giving Spring”, which is formed as a cave. The black pilgrim-clothes are left as dedications in the next chapel.

Fig. 4. A votive offering (in the form of a doll) dedicated to the Panagia (the Virgin Mary) from one of the many pilgrims arriving from Cyprus to the Aegean island of Tinos. A “scar” on the doll’s head illustrates where the Panagia is begged to heal the wounded child. (Author’s photograph)

The ritual and symbols parallels the tree with offerings of cloth outside of the catacomb of Agios (Saint) Solomon in Kato Paphos on Cyprus, the descent to the cave and the “sacred” water at the bottom. As in connection with other Greek sanctuaries, the sick person leaves the illness (i.e. the cloth) in the tree dedicated to the saint, particularly on the feast-day, thus paralleling the cloth-offerings to Demeter and Kore after the initiation at Eleusis.10

It is important to understand the cultural meaning of emotion (Hom. Il. 22.33–90; Sappho. Fr. 83), which is different from the Western ideological focus on suppressing and hiding emotions and suffering. In Greece, a suffering mother may therefore present public performances in “being good at being a woman”. Her “public” audience most often is other women, who share her “public” space, interests and value-system, and therefore are interested in competing her performance in “being good at being a woman”, as in other respects, when they display, at home or publicly on “their tombs” at the memorials at the cemetery, when displaying their cooking abilities through the sumptuous cakes offered (cf. Fig. 5). They may be compared with the selected women who baked the offering cakes at the Panathenaia. Women seek to outdo each other in “being good at being a woman”. Their “public” audience, competitors and most critical commentators are other women who share the same value-system and interests. We meet the same picture in ancient society when women dedicated offerings on tombs, displayed their clothes and other objects competitively and publicly (Plut. Fal.
Their desired audience was not men, but other women who shared their values. Ancient women going on pilgrimage (Plut. *Mor.* 253f, 953c-d), celebrating the female festival called the Thesmophoria (*Mor.* 378e69) and other festivals, such as the Adônia (Theoc. *Id.* 15; *Men.* Sam. 35–50; Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 18.2 f., *Vit. Níc.* 13.5–7; see also supra and infra) were parallels to the modern women going to Tinos during the Dormition of the Panagia or celebrating the midwife, Babo (*Agía*/Saint Domenika), in the village of Monókkleśia in Northern Greece (Fig. 6). In the festival dedicated to Babo, sexual objects and obscenities are of greatest importance, thus paralleling ancient similar festivals in which women took the leading roles.

A nursing mother demonstrates particularly how to “be good at being a woman”, both in modern and ancient Greece, and she nurses both in life and death. Mothers are nursing and feeding in public in a society where she according to the male ideology of “honour and shame” has to cover her body, which is not always the case either now or in ancient Greece.

There is a female world-view and language, which differs from men’s (Håland 2006b). Traditionally women have used weaving to tell stories, such as Helena (*Hom.* Il. 3.125–128) and Penelope (*Hom.* *Od.* 1.356–358; *ARV*² 1300, 2). The rituals surrounding the loom are parallels to those of the sexual act (marriage), birth, childrearing, and death, since it is the life-cycle which is represented. We meet a world-frame constituted by women within an ostensibly male-dominated society (cf. Messick 1987). Through women’s laments, festivals (Fig. 6) and

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Fig. 5. Women and children rushing to the cemetery with sweets and cakes, in the village of Olympos on the island of Karpathos. (Author’s photograph)
daily life we find a “female universe”, where female activities exclude men, where the frame of reference is not their male relatives’, but rules and criteria established within this female universe.

The importance of women’s central roles does not necessarily imply that women are official priestesses. Some ancient women could hold office as priestesses, but as already stated, the point is the importance of changing our perspective and value-system. When dealing with women and religion, we do not necessarily have to refer to priestesses, women do more than that, for example in the home and at the cemetery where they are the performers of the laments, tend the graves and conduct the memorials for the dead. We may get an understanding of the importance of the roles in ancient society through the comparison with modern festivals, where women perform important rituals, for example through the crawling which is important at Tinos to assure the well-being of the family. But also through the other rituals which women only can carry out. Women are still taking care of the cult of the family, both in the home and in connection with the rituals performed at the cemetery and in the church before and after the ceremonies of the priests. By focussing on the meaning of these rituals, we change focus from a man’s world to a woman’s world, considering values and cults, which are important to women, for example fertility-cult. In a broader perspective we realize that this cult also has importance for the official ideology.

On may question the statement that “women participating at festivals are not necessarily representatives
for women's daily life situation". The reason is that it does not seem that the festival is "a change of air" for women generally confined to their own sphere within the "private" houses, living a totally secluded life, as some researchers have claimed. On the contrary, it seems that their daily life situation is intensified during the festivals. Women are the guardians of their family's spiritual health, given the role of prayers and vows in healing and protection. Accordingly, modern women visit the cemetery nearly every day; they light the oil lamp or candle in front of the family icons (images), and thus, parallel ancient women also taking care of the household cult. The relations with the divine powers still are everyday activities. Religion and the rituals represented in the festivals and in connection with the life-cycle passages are an "overdose"/intensification of the rituals performed in daily life.  

Today, this is illustrated by the mother calling her daughter home in the late afternoon, and thus loudly and publicly proclaiming what may be a Greek woman's most significant status, that of a mother. Women are also responsible for the general well-being of their families. During the festivals, their collective ritual performances are important to ensure the food for the community.

From fertility-cult towards an alternative woman- and gender research

Earlier writings on ancient Greek culture have focused their attention on the importance of the phallus (Keuls 1993). On the other hand, the female sex organ is also important to secure the continuity of society through the reproduction, for example as symbolic votive offerings dedicated to the sanctuaries of Mother Goddesses, particularly Aphrodite, also worshipped as Birth-Goddess, by her aspects as Genetrix (giving birth) and Genytillus (goddess of one's birth-hour). Statuettes of Aphrodite showing the goddess raising her dress to display the pubic hair, a gesture known as anasyneme ("exposure") which emphasises women's sexual and reproductive role, were often included in dowries, presumably to symbolize the bride's sexual and reproductive maturity. The female sex organ also has an apotropaic aspect for coping with war and to ward off other dangers. Greek mythology is haunted by the importance of the female body and the female sex organ, as when Zeus needs help from his mother to vanquish his father, and later "swallows" the goddess Metis to be almighty, and subsequently gives birth to Athena from his own head. But, Athena also has another birth-place, at Lake Tritonis. This signifies that she is born from or at a meadow. A meadow (i.e. λίμνη) symbolizes the female sex organ (cf. Motte 1973), and represents a parallel to the cult of the phallus. Several tales tell about brave women exposing their private parts to ward off enemies (Plut. Mor. 246a, 248b), and those who by other means ("cunning", cf. Plut. Vit. Thes. 19,1) solve crises in society, like a typical mother at home. This eventual "vulva-envy" of woman's properties does not necessarily contradict that we most often meet a sort of "vulva-fear", clearly symbolized by the importance of the head of Medusa, i.e. the apotropaic importance of the female sex organ on the walls of the Athenian Acropolis (Paus. 1.21,3) to keep the enemy away. Herakles, the super-hero, also had a Medusa on his shield. One way of explaining what may seem to be a contradiction is the uncertainty, curiosity but also fear men have in front of the general invisibility around the female genital. It becomes an entity hidden for the male culture. In this mysterious cave, a place that is inaccessible to man's sight, life emerges. Accordingly, the enemies are frightened by the life they want to conquer.

We find a physical, ritual counterpart to the secret place of women, from which their fertility secrets derive, in the underground "rooms" (megara), the entrances to the womb of the earth, which are central in several Demetrian festivals, but also in rituals dedicated to other Mother Goddesses, such as Aphrodite. She is particularly connected with female space and symbolism, as illustrated by the temple of Aphrodite Hierokthia of Paphos, the centre and origin of her cult, and her Athenian peribolos in the sanctuary dedicated to "Aphrodite in the Gardens", en Kēpōi (Paus. 1.27,3) also connected with a cave. There is a correspondence between these grottos and a woman's sex organ. Women may be regarded as possessing the "secret" of fertility, as they "know how" to give birth, a process which man inevitably finds mysterious, because he cannot experience it. Feminine anatomy is more "secret" than masculine. That women have knowledge of secrets derives from their anatomy, from the fact that they have a "secret place", the womb, where miraculous things goes on, and of course it is assumed that women understand these miraculous
events better than do men. This idea is still found in the cliché that “a woman always knows”, or “woman’s intuition”.

The female body symbolizes everything connected with conception, nourishment and birth. It is assumed as a container, but also as a micro-cosmos. The so-called “standard Greek representation of fertility” (Pl. Menex. 238a), puts fertility in the hands of woman or in her womb, according to the logic behind the “Life-giving Spring” (i.e. Ziodochos Pige), also one of Panagia’s attributes. In antiquity, the term πιγέ (spring/source) was used for goddesses as Hera and Magna Mater. Nevertheless, most female researchers have regarded the association between woman, jar or terracotta vessels, womb and the earth in ancient sources written by men (Aesch. Eum. 658–666; Pl. Ti. 49a, 51a; Arist. Gen. An. 716a6–24, cf. 765b10–26, 727b31–34; Plut. Mor. 366a, cf. 372e–f, 373f, 374b, 368b–d), as demonstrations of male dominance. The assertions about the central role of man in the procreation process (Aesch. Eum. 658–666), have been labelled the “victory of patriarchy”.16 This may be seen from a new perspective, while compared with the importance of the womb in Greek culture.

In modern Greece, we have the possibility to discern women’s sayings from men’s, and we learn that coming from the same womb, is as important among women as belonging to the same blood amongst men, a clear reference to the fact that only motherhood is publicly verifiable (du Boulay 1984). Perhaps this view found among modern Greek women is more conform with the reasoning of ancient women than the negative or ambiguous view we get from their male contemporaries, a view which naturally has been passed down by men. From this perspective, many sources get new actuality, especially when one may find similar meanings between the lines as the ones modern society presents through the importance of the wombs, the association between woman and the “inside”. In other words, there were several complementary hypothesis of impregnation/fertilization in ancient society.17 That the ancient male writers were concerned with the importance of the womb and its relation to the female body, is indicated by all the explanations of womb and menstruation, or the factors which distinguish women from men, i.e. the way they indicate the female sex.18 Mētrai, womb, is derived from mētēr mother, a term also signifying the matrix. Food is identified with the mother (Eur. Hec. 424) as the earth (Hes. Op. 305–307), and these basic substances are of greatest importance for the paternal race. Accordingly, Demeter taught man grain cultivation (Diod. 5.5.2; Paus. 11.4.2 f., cf. Hymn. Hom. Cer. 473 ff.). In Cyprus the word for harvesting corn (e.g. gather in the fruits of the earth) is damatrizein (Hsch. s. v.). Thus, it was a simple step for Demeter and her daughter to be used as metonyms for corn and flour.19

The thesis claiming that the Western philosophy from antiquity to Lacan has conquered the female body through “the sowing of it” (duBois 1988) needs to be modified, because this “phallicentric” “appropriation” of the female body has to be substituted by the fact that they need the female body to explain everything. It is a parallel to the male god needing the earth to care for his seed: The earth cannot bring forth without rain (Paus. 1.24.3), as the male seed needs a maternal nourishing womb to be placed in. The female functions of reproduction are important for male thinking.

The archaic and later lawgivers (Plut. Vit. Sol. 12.4 f., 21.4 f.; SIG³ 1218, cf. Plut. Mor. 688f–691b) attempted to curb women’s rituals where their connection with birth and death or the mysteries of life was prominent. It has also been claimed that ancient Athenian Democracy was based on the appropriation of the female combined with the subjugation of women.20 The deprivation was especially connected to women’s rituals in the sphere of death-cult. Through the creation of the Epitaphios Logos, the official classical male funeral oration which focused on praise of the dead and tragedy, the Greek polis or “men’s club” appropriated the function of and condemned the excesses of women’s laments.21 Thereby, the importance of the polis was manifested, and the male polis appropriated an important female language, the way women traditionally have addressed the dead. But, when men attempt to appropriate women’s domains, as illustrated through the classical tragedy’s (Aesch. Cho. 23–31, 327–339) and funeral orations (Thuc. 2.34–46) “appropriation” of women’s traditional laments, this demonstrates an acknowledgement of the importance of women’s rituals. Athens (male) attempts to curb women’s festivals and laments which posed a threat to the official society, were probably only partly successful, since it has been stated that the same process happened in the Byzantine and modern periods when new
attempts to curb women's laments became important. The picture from the Christian era is not very different from it's forerunner: women were still lamenting, and the female laments continued to our own days, since women's laments and other rituals remained essential parts of the death-rituals of rural Greece. Comparisons with modern society show that the tragedies demonstrate the importance of women in other areas than politics, for example in rituals connected with the life-cycle passages. The rituals conducted by women plays a central role in most tragedies, demonstrating the importance of the Greek household, 

Adonis appears in Greek literature and art from the beginning of the 6th century B.C. onwards when contacts with Cyprus are certain. The death of the young Adonis and the laments of Aphrodite was celebrated annually (Ov. Met. 10,725–727) in Asia Minor and the Greek cultural area (cf. Luc. Syr. D. 6). The cult was particularly connected with women. According to the late Greek lexicographer Photios, (s.v. Adonis) the Adônia festival is said by some to be in honour of Adonis, by others of Aphrodite, and that it is derived from the Phoenicians and Cypriots (cf. Pl. Leg. 738c). According to two inscriptions (IG II² 1261.9–11, 1290.10), thiasos for Aphrodite and Adônia-procession were organized by Cypriotes (cf. IG II² 1290.3 f.) in Piraeus by the end of the 4th and the middle of the 3rd centuries B.C. The rituals, which the male society has attempted to curb several times during Greek history, are women's rituals connected with the life-cycle passages related to weddings and funerals, and festivals such as the ancient Adônia, thus making obvious the connection between possession, in the Dionysian sense, and laments for the dead god (cf. Ar. Lys. 387–396 [8]). Along with other legislators, Solon (Plut. Vít. Sol. 21.4 f., cf. 12.5) declared that women displayed an "excessive" behaviour through their traditional laments for the dead, which induced "madness"; their grief for the dead god was carried to extremes. Several researchers have also claimed that the establishment of the Thesmophoria and the Eleusinian mystery cults were a calculated compensation for women's lost authority in the rituals of the dead, one, which placed their activities under state control.23 One may challenge this assertion by claiming that this "establishment" (actually an elaboration of existing cults) was an official approval of the power of woman for the maintenance of society, her power over life and death, and the significance of women's rituals for polis' survival. The grief and fury of the Mother Goddess, Demeter, when her daughter has been married off without her consent, threatens to destroy humanity, since she hides the corn and the earth cannot send it back up (Hymn. Hom. Cer. 305 ff., 332, 353, 450–453, cf. Paus. 8.42.2). Accordingly, she has to be "softened up" with several festivals during the agricultural year, in order that polis may survive, and the corn grow (Hymn. Hom. Cer. 460–471, cf. 268–274, 292–298, 470–479). The male society's wish to control fertility by using chthonic goddesses in their service is difficult to achieve in practical life (cf. Aesch. Eum. 990 f., 1018–1031).

In Greece proper, the Adonis cult was often regarded as "eastern cult" by the male-produced sources, as Plutarch (Mor. 756c) and Aristophanes (Lys. 387–398). The very feature of the cult of Adonis, are the "Adônios kēpoi" or "Adonis gardens". (Hsch. s.v. Adônios kēpoi). According to Hesychios the women bring out images, eîdêla, and gardens in terracotta vessels and they prepare for Adonis gardens with all types of vegetation, such as fennel and lettuce; for they say that he was laid out by Aphrodite among the lettuce. According to Plato (Phdr. 276b61), as well as several other ancient authors however, the seedlings in the gardens of Adonis do not reach fruition, but signifies sterility, they are perishable and useless. Ovid (Met. 10,298–739) also gives an ideological androcentric
presentation of the Adonis myth. Their viewpoint has been taken at face value by researchers, such as Detienne (1989), claiming that the Adonis myth and ritual has nothing to do with fertility, but, on the contrary, announces seduction and sterility. In other words, these clear evidences of Edward Said’s “orientalism” from ancient sources also parallel modern accounts based upon the male “honour and shame” perspective: The cult was imported from Cyprus, a place famous for the cult of Aphrodite and holy prostitution, general oriental practice (cf. further Hdt. 1.199 and Detienne 1989), thus ignoring that already Solon legalized prostitution and founded a temple of Aphrodite Pandemos (Ath. 13.569d), the one who embraces the whole people as the common bond and fellow-feeling necessary for the existence of any state. It should also be stressed that contrary to Detienne’s claims, the only female Adônia celebrant attested in fifth century Athens is a citizen-wife (Ar. Lys. 387–398). As with other festivals, the Adônia was celebrated by different categories of women (cf. Men. 250.35–50). However, in contrast to the aforementioned sources, Sappho’s fragmentary lines as well as vase-paintings (ARV² 1482,1, ARV² 1482,5) present another reality. From these and other sources (cf. Theoc. Id. 15), we learn that the religious ritual which was performed with the gardens, their ingredients, and all the other aspects, such as plants associated with Adonis, are related to fertility, purification and healing. Thus, one may consider the importance of Aphrodite and the vegetative function of Adonis, without ending up with reproducing a “Frazerian ideol-
ogy. The most interesting feature of the cult, the "Adonis gardens" enjoyed a long life in the ancient Mediterranean world, and is still a popular Easter custom of the Greek Orthodox Church (Pilitsis 1985). The Epitaphios (Christ's funeral)-ritual (cf. Fig. 7) and importance of its vegetative decoration also parallels the ancient Adônia. Both hassili (the “gardens of Adonis”) in modern Serres (Northern Greece), the candles and flowers of the Good Friday service – known as “Christ-candles” and “Christ-flowers” – and other symbols are believed to become holy during the ceremony in connection with the spring festival. They are believed to have miraculous power and produce the same fertilising effect as the “gardens of Adonis” on the feast of the vegetation god, Adonis. So, burying the hassili in the fields “is good for the crops”.

In ancient Athens, women celebrated Adonis in late July, by the end of threshing, when the Dog Star Sirius arise, apparently in an informal way. He may have also been celebrated earlier, before harvest, on the 4th of Mumichion (April-May), the day dedicated to Aphrodite, who also was dedicated an offering of a boar, the animal that killed Adonis, on Cyprus around that date (Lydus, Mens. 4.65). Thus, these celebrations of the ripening and reaping of the fruits of the earth, parallel the celebrations of the Corn Goddesses, Demeter and Kore.

Until puberty, Greek boys are still reared in an exclusively female environment (cf. Plut. Vit. Lyc. 14.1). They are moulded and socialized by their mothers, wet-nurses or grandmothers, who exercise influence upon them in ancient (Hdt. 6.138; Pl. Resp. 377c, cf. Leg. 790 and Plut. Mar. 609e), and modern (Gilmore 1987) society. Their experiences from early childhood may have caused that their attempts to appropriate women’s institutions never succeeded: In present-day’s Athens, the ceremony of the official male church during psychosabbata (All Souls’ Day) is followed by women’s rituals on each grave (cf. Thuc. 2.34–46). Similarly, the official ritual on Good Friday in the church of Olympus, on the island of Karpathos, is followed by the ritual performed by the women during afternoon (cf. Fig. 7). Since all the children are present, the boys learn that their mothers perform important rituals to ensure the fertility in the coming year. Neither, the prayers the priest says to the icons and the dead for rain (cf. Håland 2005), nor all the villagers’ ceremonial walking under the Epitaphios before and after the procession, is sufficient. The performance of the women’s “afternoon-ritual” in the church is of greatest importance, and during this ritual not one single man dares to be present. The ritual is a modern parallel to the ritual during the ancient women’s Halos-festival when the archons (the magistrates) stayed outside of the sanctuary, discoursing on their original discovery and dissemination of Demeter’s gift, the domesticated foods, to the populace, while the women were “within”, securing the very food by their magical rituals. Male-dominated rituals are connected with the official male sphere and in ancient Athens the relationship between them was demonstrated with the Thesmophoria, a gathering of women to ensure fertility: If an Assembly was to be held, during the days this female festival was celebrated, it was held not in Pnyx, it’s normal setting, but in the theatre (see Winkler 1990, 194 for IG IP 1096.50–51, cf. Xen. Hell. 5.2.29). So, the men’s political business was displayed by the women’s higher duties to Demeter and her grain, to ensure the food. The polis depends on the fertility of its region for its basic food supply of wheat and barley, so by financing the Thesmophoria, the male polis demonstrates its interest in the successful conduct of women’s magical rites (cf. also IG IP 1261.9–11, 1290.10 for the Adônia), which have to be performed to ensure that the male-dominated sowing and reaping will yield an abundant supply of food. Wee meet the importance of the female womb and its parallel, the womb of the Earth Mother who sends up the corn. The celebrations of the Demetrian festivals were an important way of demonstrating how to “be good at being a woman”, since their collective performance of the rituals were important to ensure fertility for the community. We meet the same picture within other festivals as well. The Panathenaia was the most important ideological festival in classical Athens. In the same way as this festival of All the Athenians was celebrated through the protecting city goddess on the Acropolis, Panagia protects present-day’s Greeks, since their nation is celebrated on the “Day of Military Strength” (Fig. 8), coinciding with the Dormition of the Virgin at Tinos. A virginal mother is still protecting (cf. Hom. Il. 2.546–551, Athena rearing Erechtheus). In both festivals, fertility-rituals performed by women are of local importance.

Women are the most competent performers of the rituals connected...
Fig. 8. A poster proclaiming 15 August as the Day of Military Strength. (Author’s photograph)

with the promotion of fertility in society. This is represented through many of the central rituals in the festivals: Goddesses are dedicated festivals in connection with important phases during the agricultural year. Women are the sole participants, using symbolic plants related to their own fecundity and the earth’s. This demonstrates a religious belief in the identification of the fecundity of earth with that of women. Accordingly, they are given parallel expressions in the cults. The central act of the rites during the festivals dedicated to Mother Goddesses was the descent of certain female participants into underground caverns, i.e. the womb of a fertility-goddess. They bring back fertility-symbols formed as female and male sex organs, which have been thrown or carried down into the chasms. When they have absorbed the power of fertility from the womb of the earth, they are mixed on the altar with the seed corn to ensure an abundant crop. The act of bringing down and up indicate sowing and reaping, thus aiming to promote good offspring generally, human, animal and vegetable. Women’s knowledge of fertility magic means that they also have the power to prevent fertility, through their knowledge of the uses of magical plants, and thus, paralleling their mythical model, the Mother Goddess, Demeter (Hymn. Hom. Cer. 305–307) who controls agricultural fertility.

So, contrary to Detienne’s (1989) masculinist view, Demeter does not negate, but rather supplements another Mother Goddess, Aphrodite, who is important in connection with the rite of passage undergone by girls at puberty to prepare them for marriage: Young girls were the main performers during the Arrēphoria, and the aim of the ritual descent into Aphrodite’s peribolos and ascent with fertility charms (cf. Paus. 1.27.3 and Schol. Luc. Dial. Meret. 2.1, Rabe 1906, 276.13-18) was to promote the fertility of both women and agriculture. A sterile or dead period within the agricultural cycle, after harvest and the threshing, is, in the same way as fast, important to ensure the fertility for the approaching “female” period. Even if myrrh has an ambiguous status, since it is connected with death and perverse persons, as Detienne (1989) is eager to assert in his account of the Adōnīa, while misrepresenting the factual events with a phallocratic bias, myrrh is also related to weddings (Sappho. Fr. 66, see also 63), it is good for the menses and fertility (Papamichael 1975, 78). In this connection seduction is also important, as manifested by Aphrodite’s famous zōnē (i.e. girdle), containing both love and desire (Hom. Il. 14.198–223).26

Women’s role in the processes of production and reproduction is
clearly illustrated by the meaning of the same central rituals during the festivals dedicated to Demeter and prior to the ideological Panathenaia. When the young girls, the Attēphoroi, were performing the ritual connected with Aphrodite. Therefore, the official ideology could not exclude the Adônia, even if it did not become incorporated into the official religious calendar of the Athenian polis. We meet a concrete example of the central importance of woman in connection with life and fertility. A later parallel is found in the modern cult dedicated to Panagia Aphroditsa on Cyprus (Blum/Blum 1970, 271 n.1), "the island of Aphrodite", which may indicate that the puritan division between eroticism and fertility in Detienne's (1989) description, based on his analysis of the ideological sources, may have been quite unfamiliar for the ancients. This indicates the real importance and power of Aphrodite, since she embodies all female aspects.

Conclusion
The cyclical festivals follow a ritual calendar where celebrations are performed in connection with important phases during the agricultural year. The fertility perspective shows how peoples’ values are manifested through religious festivals, and how the fertility-festivals are the foundation of the male value-system. The belief in fertility-rituals is present both in ancient and modern society, and fertility-rituals are connected with women. They are the most competent performers of the rituals connected with the promotion of fertility in society, and their knowledge of fertility magic means that they also have the power to prevent fertility. The female fertility-rituals were of great importance to promote the fertility of the ancient polis, and they are still of local importance in Greek society. In rituals connected with the life-cycle passages, such as birth and marriage, we meet the same relationship both in ancient and modern Greek society. Men are the performers of the public rituals, but the point is that these rituals can not take place before the "women-dominated" rituals have finished. The official rituals where men are agents can not be performed before women have done the preliminary work, and thus manifested their "poetics of womanhood", according to which the point is to show how "to be good at being a woman", for example when performing fertility-rituals in agricultural or procreation contexts, using magic such as in healing contexts, nursing children. As goddesses, women have primary control of the processes of production and reproduction, and women enjoy relative independence from male performance in the basic life processes.

From a chthonic perspective, we learn that a male ideological or system-oriented approach to the relationship between men and women becomes too one-sided, because it accepts the male value-system’s presentation of the actual relationship. Particularly, the female festivals demonstrate an upheaval of official male roles and male power, and the fertility-cult may be considered as the unifying and underlying in all festivals. Sexuality, reproduction and fertility are central and have explicit importance in the festivals. Therefore, to examine fertility in Greece is to look at Greek society through female eyes.

NOTES

1 Regarding ancient sources, I have for example worked on the material connected with the cult of Adonis and Aphrodite, see infra also for the modern material, cf. Paraskevopoulou 1982. Concerning border areas, as discussed in Håland 2004, Peristiany’s (1966b) presentation of Cypriot village-life was still discernible in 1983 in the Greek Orthodox part of the island.

I would like to add that most of my own fieldworks have been carried out on the Aegean island of Tinos, where pilgrim-ships from Cyprus arrive once a week throughout the year, and up to trice a week during the summer season, particularly in August, cf. fig. 4. My main informant in the village of Monôkkleisìa, one of the women in the organizing committee (cf. infra), is a refugee from Cyprus. Since 1985, I have had several periods of fieldwork in the Mediterranean, mainly in Greece where I have also been conducting research on religious festivals since 1990, cf. Håland 2004. There, the topics discussed in the following article also are examined further. The problems and fruitfulness of working with anthropological comparative

However, the limited space does not permit a detailed demonstration. The following argument is therefore only a very roughly suggestion. An earlier and somewhat different version of the following paper was presented at the seminar on “Gender, religion and change in an historical perspective: Women and Religion in the Middle East and the Mediterranean region”, at the University of Bergen, in 2001. An earlier version was presented at “the Centre for Women and Gender Research”, University of Bergen in 1999. The topic for the lectures was: Gender and Power. A longer version “Greek women, power and the body: from fieldwork on cults connected with the female sphere towards a deconstruction of male ideologies, modern and ancient” (approx. 20 pages, in Norwegian, with English summary), is forthcoming in Tidskrift für genusvetenskap (TGV). See also Håland 2003.

For example Danforth 1982, also cited by Pomeroy 1998. The main problem with his analysis is that he sees the Greek world from the male sphere, i.e. a modern counterpart of ancient male writers? Nevertheless, they were reared in the female sphere and have by definition childhood experiences (even if these often are distorted in a grown up male context, where social identity among men is important, cf. Gilmore 1987; McAuslan/Walcot 1996, see also infra), Danforth does not have.

According to Seremetakis 1991 the problems with Danforth’s analysis derives from his reading of rural Greek death-rites, a reading which relies on Greek Orthodox liturgy. I agree, but the problem with his reading is also that he as a male ethnographer has no possibility to carry out fieldwork in the female sphere.

Even if Seremetakis 1991 has carried out fieldwork in the female sphere (cf. n.4 supra), one may claim that she does not focus adequately on women’s values, as she is still influenced by Western male ideological values, and read her material from a male perspective, cf. therefore Dubisch 1995, who unfortunately only work with modern Greek society.


For ancient male values as in the statements of archaic legislators, the authors of the tragedies, other authors as Homer, Hesiod, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch and late-antique Christian writers, such as John Chrysostom (cf. infra), with the works of ethnographers, as Campbell 1964; Peristiany 1966a and b; Machin 1983. They have been used by several scholars working with ancient women, as Walcot 1970 and 1999. But, by combining ancient and modern male ideological statements presenting extremely negative bias, the result becomes one-sided. Cf. Håland 2004, for an extensive discussion.

Dubisch 1995. Her presentation is similar to my own and other female researchers’ (Seremetakis 1991; Abu-Lughod 1988) fieldwork experiences among women.

Ar. Plut. 844 f. and Schol. to 845. I observed the ritual on Cyprus in 1983. One may wonder if the cave once has been sacred to Aphrodite? Anyway, a similar phenomenon is found in connection with the temple of Athena in Pergamon, Turkey in 1999. See also Loukatos 1981, 141.

Håland 2004, ch. 4 and 6 (also for the following); Rowlandsdon 1998, pls. 11 and 14, cf. Plut. Mor. 375c; Hom. Il. 22.79-83.

Accordingly, this article does not try to find out if and eventually how many ancient women participated at sympo-sia, were educated, participated in the official male political sphere, such as Blomqvist 1995 does. Cf. Håland 2004, ch. 6.


To regard the modern cult as a “protesting-culture”, is an analysis conform with Herzfeld’s (1991) “protest-theory”, cf. also Keuls’ (1993) “countermovement”. Their analyses neglect the purpose of presenting society from another perspective than usually employed, the Greek woman’s.

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A note on Ancient Sources

Abbreviations for ancient authors and titles follow:


In addition, the following abbreviations are employed:

Fr. Fragment
Gal. UP. De usu partium
Hippoc. Genit. Peri gonēs

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Cf. Adonis’ birth from the myrrh tree, Myrrha, following an incestuous relationship between the Myrrh Maiden and her own father, Ov. Met. 10.311–318. cf. nevertheless Apollod. 3.14.4 discussed in Håland 2004, ch. 5 f.

When Hera begs from Aphrodite the zone with which she can seduce Zeus, she says: “dos nyn moi philotēta kai himeron, ( . . . )”. (“give me love and sexual desire”), and the same terms are used to describe what the love charm contains, Hom. Il. 14.198, 216. Cf. Hymn. Hom. Ven. 5.2.45; 53; 57; 73 where the essential nature of the goddess is the power to arouse himeros, a power that threatens Zeus. According to Soph. Fr. 941.1-4, Aphrodite’s unassailable personality is that she is both Cypris and Hades, the indelible power.
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