

Mother Demeter

Goddess of the earth, agriculture and fertility, Demeter was one of the original Olympians, daughter of Chronos and Rhea. She bore at least one child, her daughter Persephone, to Zeus. Depending on which myths you read, she may also have been the mother of Dionysus, Hecate, and maybe Iacchus. It was Persephone who definitely had her mother's attention. The two were a close-knit pair, until one day, while picking flowers in a field, Hades carried the maiden off to the Underworld. Demeter despaired of ever seeing her daughter again, and for a long time had no idea of what had happened to her. It is what happens during the course of her searching wanderings, plus her reunion with Persephone, that make up the vast majority of information available about Demeter. Much of this time period was also re-enacted in the Eleusinian Mysteries, the cult worship of Demeter centered in Eleusis.

The rape of Persephone is a fairly popular one. Hades lusts after the young girl and persuades her father, Zeus, to let him marry her. The earth opens up and he carries her off to his realm. Demeter laments her daughter's disappearance, but doesn't get really angry until Hecate and Helios tell her what has actually happened. THEN she gets really angry shunning the other gods and wandering the earth in mortal guise. Crops stop growing and horrible famine causes humanity to suffer terribly.

In her wanderings Demeter came to a well in Eleusis. There she met the daughters of King Celeus, who commended her to their mother. Following the maidens home, she refused to even sit down until the antics of a slave-woman named Iambe made her smile. She then accepted the hospitality of the royal home and became wet-nurse of the king's infant son, Demophon. Demeter became quite fond of the boy and decided to bestow immortality on him, holding him each night in the fire to burn away the mortal parts. One night the king's wife, Metanira, came across the pair while this was happening, screaming in terror at the sight of her baby in the flames. The goddess was startled and poor Demophon consumed by the flames. Demeter then revealed her true divine self to the household and as compensation for the death of Demophon gave honors to their eldest son, Triptolemus, making him her messenger to humanity. She commanded the king to build a temple in her honor and instructed him in the proper rites -- what would become the Mysteries.

However, Demeter still mourned her lost daughter and the earth still stood barren. Finally, faced with the prospect of humanity dying out completely, Zeus told Hades to return Persephone. As one source pointed out, while Demeter did abstain from food and drink for the majority of her search and mourning, she didn't do so completely. And yet poor frightened Persephone was condemned to spend each winter in Hades' realm because she had eaten a few pomegranate seeds. (1) It hardly seems fair.

The reunion of mother and daughter was a joyous one that caused the grains to grow and the flowers to bloom. Life had returned to the earth. And yet, each year as Persephone returns to the Underworld and her dark husband, Demeter goes into mourning once more and the plant life ceases to grow.

Notes:

See Bell's *Women of Classical Mythology*, p. 158.

References:

Bell, Robert. *Women of Classical Mythology*. ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, 1991.

Grimal, Pierre. *Dictionary of Classical Myth*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1991.

The Homeric Hymns, translated by Daryl Hine. Atheneum: New York, 1971.

Morford, Mark and Robert Lenardon. *Classical Mythology*. 3rd Ed. Longman, Inc.: White Plains, NY, 1985.

(II) TO DEMETER From The Homeric Hymns

But Demeter whose hair is like ripe corn
Sitting apart from the blessed immortals, from all of her kindred,
Waited and wasted away with regret for her trim-ankled daughter.
Then was a most terrible year over all the inhabited earth she
Caused mankind, and a cruel.

