

HOMERIC HYMNS

(various dates, composed in Greek)

The Homeric Hymns, so-called because in antiquity they were attributed to Homer (they recall his language and are written in dactylic hexameter, the meter of epic poetry), are in fact a collection of anonymous hymns that were composed at different times. Most are thought to have been composed between the 7th and 5th centuries BC, though the Hymn to Ares (8) is almost certainly much later. The collection as we have it (aside from Hymn 8) was perhaps assembled as early as the 1st century BC and contains thirty-two hymns that can be divided according to the simple criterion of length into long Hymns (1–5, though most of 1 is missing) and short Hymns (6–33). We have included separate introductions for the long Hymns and Hymn 8.

The purpose of the Homeric Hymns seems originally to have been to serve as preludes to other, longer poems. A parallel can be found in the eighth book of the Odyssey, where the bard Demodicos sings a prelude to the god before setting on a formal piece about the Trojan horse. The Hymns themselves often conclude with words suggesting this function, for instance the common “I will be mindful of you and of another song.” But while the short Hymns do seem perfectly suited to being preludes or invocations to gods before a longer piece, it is more difficult to say the same of the long Hymns, which reach several hundred lines and can stand on their own as complete pieces. These were perhaps composed for performance at religious festivals. Later hymns by Callimachus (3rd c. BC), for example, who was imitating the poems in the present collection for purely literary reasons, were explicitly meant to stand on their own.

The most striking difference between the long and short Hymns is the amount of narrative material. The long Hymns include extended narration of important aspects of the god’s myth: in the Hymn to Demeter (2), for instance, we have the extended story of Persephone’s abduction and the establishment of the Eleusinian mysteries. In the Hymn to Hermes, there is the delightful exposition of Hermes’ essential nature as a clever, thieving god and his relationship to another young god, Apollo. By contrast, the short Hymns contain little or no story, but invoke and describe the gods in short compass.

1 To Dionysos

This Hymn, originally among the longest in the collection, has been heavily damaged and is preserved only in fragments found in later authors and on some papyrus remains. Translated below are the two sections of the Hymn that are mostly whole and not heavily reconstructed. These two parts contain 1) the controversy over the god’s birthplace and 2) his acceptance on Mount Olympus by Zeus. Papyrus fragments suggest that between these two parts there was the story of Dionysos’ role in reconciling Hephaistos with his mother Hera, who had cast him from Olympus. In revenge, he built a throne that held her fast

and suspended her in midair. Dionysos then got Hephaistos drunk and triumphantly led him back to Olympus, where he freed his mother. Dionysos was rewarded by Hera with admission into the company of the Olympian gods.

< . . . >¹ For some say that in Dracanos Semele conceived and bore you to Zeus, who delights in thunder, and some in windy Icaros, and some in Naxos, you seed of Zeus, Eiraphiotes; and others by the deep-swelling river Alpheios, and others, O Prince, say that you were born in Thebes. Falsely they all speak: for the father of gods and men begat you far away from men, while white-armed Hera did not know it. There is a hill called Nysa, a lofty hill, flowering into woodland, in a distant part of Phoenicia, near the streams of Egypt < . . . >.²

< . . . >³

“And they will raise many statues to you in the temples: as these your deeds are three, so men will sacrifice to you hecatombs every three years.” So spoke Cronion and nodded with his dark brows, and the ambrosial hair moved lightly on the lord’s immortal head as he made great Olympus tremble. So spoke Zeus the counselor and nodded approval with his head. Be gracious, Eiraphiotes, you who drive women mad. From you, beginning and ending with you, we singers sing: in no way is it possible for him who forgets you to be mindful of sacred song. Hail to you, Dionysos Eiraphiotes, with your mother, Semele, whom they call Thyone.

2 To Demeter

This Hymn consists of two seemingly separate stories that are interrelated and center on Demeter and her daughter Persephone’s role in the Eleusinian mysteries. The first story, comprising the beginning and end of the Hymn, is an aetiological myth that explains the creation of the seasons: Demeter’s daughter is abducted, with Zeus’ consent, by Hades, and in mourning over her Demeter refuses to let things grow: “Then the most dread and terrible of years did the goddess bring for mortals upon the fruitful earth, nor did the earth send up the seed, for Demeter of the fine garland concealed it.” As the gods apparently need sacrifice from men, they finally relent and allow Persephone to return to her mother. But Persephone has eaten food in the underworld, and thus she is forced to remain there for one-third of the year.

The second part concerns another aetiological story, that of the foundation of the worship of Demeter and Persephone (also called Kore) in the city of Eleusis, some 22 kilometers west of Athens. This is the earliest literary account of their cult there, and since there is no mention of Athens in the poem, it was probably composed for the Eleusinian celebration in the early part of the 6th century BC before the Athenians took control of the mysteries and instituted the annual procession from Athens to Eleusis.

The mysteries at Eleusis, held annually in autumn, were among the most celebrated in antiquity, and many from all parts of Greece traveled to take part in them. We know very

¹ It is uncertain how many lines are lost from the beginning.

² A papyrus contains 14 more lines, most of them heavily damaged.

³ The bulk of the poem is missing.

little about them, however, because they were shrouded in secrecy and only those who were initiated into them could participate in the most important aspects of the ritual. The secrecy of the rituals is hinted at at the end of the Hymn, where Demeter “showed the care of her rites . . . and taught Triptolemos, Polyxeinos, and Diocles her fine mysteries, holy mysteries that none may violate or search into or noise abroad, for the great curse from the gods restrains the voice.” Mystery religions offered initiates a more pleasant existence after death, and those at Eleusis were no exception: “and he who is uninitiated and has no lot in them never has an equal lot in death beneath the murky gloom.” The Mysteries at Eleusis survived until the site was destroyed in the late 4th century AD.

2a The Rape of Persephone (1–89)

Of fair-haired Demeter, Demeter holy goddess, I begin to sing, of her and her slim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus snatched away, the gift of far-seeing, loud-thundering Zeus. But Demeter knew it not, lady of the golden sword, the giver of fine crops. For her daughter was playing with the deep-bosomed maidens of Oceanos and was gathering flowers—roses and crocuses and fair violets in the soft meadow and lilies and hyacinths and the narcissus that the earth brought forth as a snare for the fair-faced maiden by the counsel of Zeus and to please the lord of many guests. Wondrously bloomed the flower, a marvel for all to see, whether deathless gods or mortal men. From its root grew forth a hundred blossoms, and with its fragrant odor the wide heaven above and the whole earth laughed, as did the salt wave of the sea. Then the maiden marveled and stretched forth both her hands to seize the fair plaything, but the wide-wayed earth gaped in the Nysian plain, and up rushed the prince, the host of many guests, the many-named son of Cronos, with his immortal horses. Against her will he seized her and drove her off weeping in his golden chariot, but she screamed aloud, calling on Father Cronides, the highest of gods and the best.

But no immortal god or mortal man heard her voice (in fact, not even the rich-fruited olive trees heard her), none except the daughter of Persaios, Hecate of the fair veil, as she was thinking delicate thoughts. She, along with Prince Helios, the glorious son of Hyperion, heard the cry from her cave, heard the maiden calling on Father Cronides. But he sat far off apart from the gods in his prayer-filled temple, receiving fine victims from mortal men. By the design of Zeus the brother of Zeus led the maiden away against her will, the lord of many, the host of many guests, with his deathless horses, he of many names, the son of Cronos. Now, so long as the goddess beheld the earth and the starry heaven and the tide of the teeming sea and the rays of the sun, so long as she still hoped to behold her dear mother and the tribes of the eternal gods, just so long, despite her sorrow, hope warmed her high heart. But then rang the mountain peaks and the depths of the sea to her immortal voice, and her lady mother heard her. Then sharp pain caught at her heart, and with her hands she tore the veil about her ambrosial hair and cast a dark mantle about her shoulders, and then she sped like a bird over land and sea, searching. But there was none who would tell the truth to her; neither god nor mortal man, not even a bird, a soothsaying messenger, came near her. Thereafter for nine days Lady Deo roamed the earth with torches burning in her hands, nor ever in her sorrow did she taste ambrosia and sweet nectar, nor bathe her body. But when at last the tenth morning came to her with the light, Hecate met her, a torch in her hands, and spoke a word of tidings, saying:

Lady Demeter, you who bring the seasons, you giver of glad gifts, which of the heavenly gods or mortal men has ravished away Persephone and brought sorrow to your heart? For I heard a voice, but I saw not with my eyes who the ravisher was. All this I say to you truly.

So spoke Hecate, and the daughter of fair-haired Rhea did not answer, but swiftly rushed on with her, bearing burning torches in her hands. So they came to Helios, who watches both gods and men, and stood before his horses, and the lady goddess questioned him:

Helios, have pity on me who am a goddess, if ever by word or deed I gladdened your heart. My daughter, whom I bore, a sweet plant and fair to see—it was her clear voice I heard through the air that bears no crops, like the voice of a woman being forced, but I saw her not with my eyes. But you who look down with your rays from the bright sky upon all the land and sea, tell me truly concerning my dear child, if you did behold her. Who it is that has gone off and ravished her away from me against her will? Who is it of gods or mortal men?

So spoke she, and Hyperion's son answered her:

Daughter of fair-haired Rhea, Queen Demeter, you shall know it; for I greatly pity and revere you in your sorrow for your slim-ankled child. There is none other responsible of the immortals but Zeus himself, the gatherer of clouds, who gave your daughter to Hades, his own brother, to be called his lovely wife. And Hades has ravished her away in his chariot, loudly wailing, beneath the dusky gloom. But, Goddess, cease from your long lamenting. It is not fitting for you vainly to hold onto anger unassuaged like this. No unseemly son-in-law among the immortals is Aidoneus, the lord of many, your own brother and of one seed with you. For his share he won, when the threefold division was first made, sovereignty among those with whom he dwells.

So spoke he, and he called upon his horses, and at his call they swiftly bore the fleet chariot away like long-winged birds.

2b Demeter Withdraws from the Gods and Travels in Disguise to Eleusis (90–168)

But grief more dread and bitter fell upon her, and thereafter she was wroth with Cronion, who has dark clouds for his dwelling. She kept apart from the gathering of the gods and from tall Olympos, and, disfiguring her form, she went among the cities and rich fields of men for many days. Now no man that looked on her knew her, nor any deep-girdled woman, till she came to the dwelling of Celeos, who then was king of fragrant Eleusis. There sat she at the wayside with sorrow in her heart by the Maiden's Well from which the townsfolk were wont to draw water. In the shade she sat; above her grew a thick olive tree, and in appearance she was like an ancient crone who knows no more of childbearing and the gifts of Aphrodite, the lover of garlands. She was like the nurses of the children of verdict-pronouncing kings, like the housekeepers in their echoing halls.

Now the daughters of Celeos of Eleusis' line beheld her as they came to fetch the fair-flowing water, to carry it in bronze vessels to their father's home. There were four of them, like goddesses, all in the bloom of youth, Callidice, Cleisidice, charming

Demo, and Callithoe, the eldest of them all. Nor did they recognize her, for it is hard for mortals to know gods, but they stood near her and spoke winged words:

Who are you, old woman, and of what ancient folk? And why were you wandering apart from the town, not drawing near to the houses where in the shadowy halls there are women of your own age, and younger too, who may treat you kindly in word and deed?

So spoke they, and the lady goddess answered:

Dear children, whoever you are of womankind, I bid you hail, and I will tell you my story. It is proper to answer your questions truly. Deo is my name, for my lady mother gave it to me. But now I have come here from Crete over the wide ridges of the sea by no will of my own; no, by violence pirates brought me here under duress and thereafter touched with their swift ship at Thoricos, where the women and they themselves disembarked onto land. Then they were busy about supper beside the hawsers of the ship, but my heart did not desire pleasing food. No, stealthily setting forth through the dark land, I fled from these arrogant masters, so that they might not sell me, whom they had never bought, and gain my price. Thus have I come here in my wandering, and I do not know at all what land is this nor who dwells here. But to you may all those who have houses in Olympos give husbands and lords, and such children to bear as parents desire. But pity me, maidens, in your kindness <tell me> to the house of what husband and wife am I to go, where I might work zealously for them in such tasks as befit a woman of my years? I could carry in my arms a newborn babe, nurse it well, keep the house, make my master's bed within the well-built chambers, and teach the maids their tasks.

So spoke the goddess, and straightway answered her the unwed maiden, Callidice, the fairest of the daughters of Celeos:

Mother, men must endure whatever things the gods give, though they are sorrowing, for the gods are far stronger than we; but I will tell you clearly and truly what men here have most honor, who lead the people and by their counsels and just verdicts safeguard the bulwarks of the city. Such are wise Triptolemos, Diocles, Polyxenos, noble Eumolpos, and Dolichos, and our lordly father. All their wives keep their houses, and not one of them would at first sight scorn your appearance and bar you from their halls, but gladly will they receive you, for your aspect is divine. So, if you will, abide here, so that we may go to the house of my father and tell out all this tale to my mother, the deep-girdled Metaneira, if perhaps she will bid you come to our house and not seek the homes of others. A dear son born in her later years is nurtured in the well-built hall, a welcome child of many prayers. If you would nurse him till he comes to the measure of youth, then whatever woman saw you would envy you. Such gifts would my mother give you in return for raising him.

2c In the House of Celeos and Metaneira (169–301)

So spoke she, and the goddess nodded assent. So rejoicing, they filled their shining pitchers with water and bore them away. Swiftly they came to the high hall of their

father, and quickly they told their mother what they had heard and seen, and speedily she bade them run and call the stranger, offering a fine wage. Then as deer or calves in the season of spring leap along the meadow when they have had their fill of pasture, so lightly they lifted up the folds of their lovely dresses and ran along the rutted chariot-way, while their hair danced on their shoulders, in color like the crocus flower. They found the glorious goddess at the wayside, just where they had left her, and immediately they led her to their father's house. But she paced behind in heaviness of heart, her head veiled, and the dark robe floating about her slender feet divine. Speedily they came to the house of Celeos, the fosterling of Zeus, and they went through the corridor where their lady mother was sitting by the doorpost of the well-wrought hall with her child in her lap, a young blossom. And the girls ran up to her, but the goddess stood on the threshold, her head touching the roof beam, and she filled the doorway with her light divine. Then wonder and awe and pale fear seized the mother, and she gave place from her high seat and bade the goddess be seated. But Demeter, the bearer of the seasons, the giver of fine gifts, would not sit down upon the shining high seat. No, in silence she waited, casting down her lovely eyes, till the wise Iambe set for her a well-made stool and cast over it a glittering fleece. There she sat down and held the veil before her face; long in sorrow and silence she sat like this and spoke to no man nor made any sign, but she sat unsmiling, tasting neither meat nor drink, wasting with long desire for her deep-girdled daughter.

So she remained till wise Iambe with jests and many mockeries distracted the lady, the holy one, and made her smile and laugh and hold a happier heart, and ever pleased her moods thereafter. Then Metaneira filled a cup of sweet wine and offered it to her, but she refused it, saying that it was not permitted for her to drink red wine. But she bade them mix barley meal and water with the tender herb of mint and give it to her to drink. Then Metaneira made *kykeon*⁴ and gave it to the goddess as she bade, and Lady Deo took it and made libation. < . . . > And to her fair-girdled Metaneira said:

Hail, lady, for I think that you are not of mean parentage, but nobly born, for modesty and grace shine in your eyes as in the eyes of verdict-pronouncing kings. But the gifts of the gods, even in sorrow, we men of necessity endure, for the yoke is laid upon our necks; yet now that you have come here, such things as I have shall be yours. Rear for me this child that the gods have given in my later years and beyond my hope; and he is to me a child of many prayers. If you rear him, and he comes to the measure of youth, truly each woman that sees you will envy you, such shall be my gifts in return for raising him.

Then Demeter of the fair garland answered her again:

And may you too, Lady, fare well, and the gods give you all things good. Gladly will I receive your child as you bid me. I will raise him and never, I think, by the folly of his nurse shall charm or sorcery harm him, for I know an antidote stronger than the wild wood herb and a fine salve for poisoned spells.

⁴ A drink made from barley that had an important part in the mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis.

So spoke she, and with her immortal hands she placed the child on her fragrant breast, and the mother was glad at heart. So in the halls she nursed the fine son of wise Celeos, Demophon, whom fair-girdled Metaneira bore, and he grew like a god, upon no mortal food nor <on mother's milk. For during the day fair-garlanded> Demeter anointed him with ambrosia as though he had been a son of a god, breathing sweetness over him and keeping him on her lap. So wrought she by day, but at night she was wont to hide him in the force of fire like a brand, his dear parents knowing it not. No, to them it was a great marvel how he flourished and grew like the gods to look upon. And truly she would have made him exempt from old age and death forever, had not fair-girdled Metaneira in her witlessness spied on her in the night from her fragrant chamber. Then she wailed and smote both her thighs in terror for her child and in folly of heart, and lamenting she spoke winged words: "My child Demophon, the stranger is concealing you in the heart of the fire, causing bitter sorrow for me and lamentation."

So spoke she, wailing, and the lady goddess heard her. Then in wrath did fair-garlanded Demeter snatch out of the fire with her immortal hands and set upon the ground that woman's dear son, whom beyond all hope she had borne in the halls. Dread was the wrath of Demeter, and soon she spoke to fair-girdled Metaneira:

O helpless and uncounseled race of men, who know not beforehand the fate of coming good or coming evil. For, behold, you have wrought upon yourself a bane incurable by your own witlessness. For by the oath of the gods, the relentless water of Styx, I would have made your dear child deathless and exempt from age forever and would have given him glory imperishable. But now in no way may he escape the Moirai and death, yet glory imperishable will ever be his, since he has lain on my knees and slept within my arms. But as the years go round, the sons of the Eleusinians will ever wage war and dreadful strife, one upon the other. I am the honored Demeter, the greatest good and gain to the immortals and mortal men. But, come now, let all the people build me a great temple and an altar beside, below the town and the steep wall, above Callichoros on the jutting rock. But I myself will prescribe the rites, so that in time to come you may duly perform them and appease my power.

With that the goddess changed her shape and height and cast off old age, and beauty breathed about her. Sweet scent breathed from her fragrant robes, and afar shone the light from the deathless body of the goddess, the yellow hair flowing about her shoulders, so that the fine house was filled with a splendor like that of lightning-fire, and forth from the halls went she.

But now the knees of the woman were loosened, and for a long time she was speechless, nor did she even pay heed to the child, her best beloved, to lift him from the floor. But the sisters of the child heard his pitiful cry and leapt from their fair-strewn beds. One of them, lifting the child in her hands, laid it in her bosom, another lit fire, and the third ran with smooth feet to take her mother forth from the fragrant chamber. Then they gathered about the child, hugged him, and gave him a bath as he squirmed, yet his mood was not softened, for lesser nurses and handmaidens held him now.

They the long night through were adoring the renowned goddess, trembling with fear, but at the dawning they told truly to mighty Celeos all that the goddess, Demeter of the fine garland, had commanded. Then he called into the marketplace the many people and bade them make a rich temple and an altar to fair-haired Demeter upon the jutting rock. Immediately they heard and obeyed his voice, and they built as he bade, and it increased by the goddess' will.

2d The Sorrowing Demeter Withdraws Fertility from the Earth (302–333)

Now when they had done their work and rested from their labors, each man started for his home, but yellow-haired Demeter remained, sitting there apart from all the blessed gods, wasting away with desire for her deep-girdled daughter. Then the most dread and terrible of years did the goddess bring for mortals upon the fruitful earth, nor did the earth send up the seed, for Demeter of the fine garland concealed it. Many crooked ploughs did the oxen drag through the furrows in vain, and much white barley fell fruitless upon the land. Now the whole race of mortal men would have perished utterly from the stress of famine, and the gods who hold mansions in Olympos would have lost the share and renown of gift and sacrifice, if Zeus had not taken note and conceived a counsel within his heart.

First, he roused Iris of the golden wings to speed forth and call fair-haired Demeter, whose form is beautiful. So spoke Zeus, and Iris obeyed him, the son of Cronos, he of the dark clouds, and swiftly she sped down through the space between heaven and earth. Then came she to the citadel of fragrant Eleusis, and in the temple she found Demeter clothed in dark raiment, and speaking winged words addressed her, "Demeter, Father Zeus, whose counsels are imperishable, bids you back unto the tribes of the eternal gods. Come then, lest the word of Zeus be of no avail." So spoke she in her prayer, but the goddess yielded not. Thereafter the Father sent forth all the blessed gods, all of the immortals, and coming one by one they bade Demeter return and offered her many splendid gifts and all honors that she might choose among the immortal gods. But none was able to persuade her by turning her mind and her angry heart, so stubbornly she refused their appeals. For she thought no more forever to enter fragrant Olympos, and no more to allow the earth to bear her fruit, until her eyes should behold her fair-faced daughter.

2e Zeus Relents; Persephone Is Returned (334–389)

But when far-seeing Zeus, the loud thunderer, had heard this, he sent the slayer of Argos, the god of the golden wand, to Erebus to win over Hades with soft words and to persuade him to bring up holy Persephone from the murky gloom into the light and among the gods, so that her mother might behold her and relent from her anger. And Hermes disobeyed not, but straightway and speedily went forth beneath the hollow places of the earth, leaving the home of Olympos. That king he found within his dwelling, sitting on a couch with his modest consort, who sorely grieved for desire of her mother, who still was cherishing a design against the ill deeds of the gods. Then the strong slayer of Argos drew near and spoke:

Hades of the dark locks, you prince of worn-out men, Father Zeus bade me bring the glorious Persephone forth from Erebus among the gods, so that her mother may behold her and relent from her anger and terrible wrath against

the immortals. For now she contrives a mighty deed, to destroy the feeble tribes of earth-born men by hiding the seed under the earth. Thereby the honors of the gods are diminished, and fierce is her wrath, and she does not mingle with the gods, but sits apart within the fragrant temple in the steep citadel of Eleusis.

So spoke he, and smiling were the brows of Aidoneus, prince of the dead, and he did not disobey the commands of King Zeus, as speedily he bade the wise Persephone:

Go, Persephone, to your dark-mantled mother, go with a gentle spirit in your breast and do not be disconsolate beyond all others. Truly I shall be no unseemly lord of yours among the immortals, I that am the brother of Father Zeus. And while you are here, you shall be mistress over all that lives and moves, but among the immortals you shall have the greatest renown. Upon them that wrong you shall be vengeance unceasing, upon them that do not solicit your power with sacrifice and pious deeds and every acceptable gift.

So spoke he, and wise Persephone was glad. Joyously and swiftly she arose, but the god himself, stealthily looking around him, gave her a sweet pomegranate seed to eat, and this he did so that she might not abide forever beside revered Demeter of the dark mantle. Then openly did Aidoneus, the prince of all, get ready the steeds beneath the golden chariot, and she climbed up into the golden chariot, and beside her the strong slayer of Argos took the reins and whip in hand and drove forth from the halls, and gladly sped the two horses. Speedily they devoured the long way. Neither sea nor rivers nor grassy glades nor cliffs could stay the rush of the deathless horses; no, far above them they cleft the deep air in their course. Before the fragrant temple he drove them and checked them where Demeter of the fine garland dwelled, who, when she beheld them, rushed forth like a Mainad down a dark mountain woodland.

2f Persephone Reveals That She Has Eaten the Pomegranate Seed (390–469)⁵

But Persephone on the other side rejoiced to see her mother dear, and leapt to meet her. But her mother said,

Child, have you eaten any food in Hades? For if you have not, then with me and your father, the son of Cronos, who has dark clouds for his dwelling, shall you ever dwell honored among all the immortals. But if you have tasted food, you must return again and beneath the hollows of the earth dwell in Hades a third portion of the year. Yet two parts of the year you shall abide with me and the other immortals. When the earth blossoms with all manner of fragrant spring flowers, then from beneath the murky gloom shall you come again, a mighty marvel to gods and to mortal men. <Now tell me how he stole you down to the misty darkness, and> by what wile the strong host of many guests deceived you.

Then fair Persephone answered:

⁵ The text of what follows down to the words “. . . fragrant spring flowers” in Demeter’s speech is heavily reconstructed.

Well, Mother, I shall tell you all the truth without fail. I leapt up for joy when good Hermes, the swift messenger, came from my father Cronides and the other heavenly gods with the message that I was to return out of Erebos, so that you might behold me and cease from your anger and dread wrath against the immortals. Then Hades himself stealthily compelled me to taste a sweet pomegranate seed against my will. And now I will tell you how, through the crafty device of Cronides my father, he ravished me and bore me away beneath the hollows of the earth. All that you ask I will tell you. We were all playing in the lovely meadow, Leucippe and Phaino and Electra and Ianche and Melite and Iache and Rhodeia and Callirhoe and Melobosis and Tyche and flower-faced Ocyrhoe and Chryseis and Ianeira and Acaste and Admete and Rhodope and Plouto and charming Calypso and Styx and Ourania and beautiful Galaxaure and battle-rousing Pallas and the archer Artemis. There we were playing and plucking beautiful blossoms with our hands: mingled crocuses and iris and hyacinth and roses and lilies, a marvel to behold, and the narcissus, which the wide earth grew forth like a crocus. Gladly was I gathering them when the earth gaped beneath, and from it leapt the mighty prince, the host of many guests, and he bore me very much against my will beneath the earth in his golden chariot, and greatly did I cry. This all is true that I tell you.

So the whole day in oneness of heart they cheered each other with love, and their minds ceased from sorrow, and great gladness did either win from one another. Then came to them Hecate of the fair veil, and often did she kiss the holy daughter of Demeter, and from that day was her queenly comrade and handmaiden. But to them as a messenger did far-seeing Zeus of the loud thunder send fair-haired Rhea to bring dark-mantled Demeter among the gods, with pledge of what honor she might choose among the immortals. He vowed that her daughter for the third part of the revolving year should dwell beneath the murky gloom, but for the other two parts she should abide with her mother and the other gods.

Thus he spoke, and the goddess disobeyed not the commands of Zeus. Swiftly she sped down from the peaks of Olympos and came to fertile Rarion, fertile of old, but now no longer fruitful; for fallow and leafless it lay, and hidden was the white barley grain by the device of fair-ankled Demeter. Nonetheless, with the growing of the spring the land was to teem with tall ears of wheat, and the rich furrows were to be heavy with wheat and the wheat to be bound in sheaves. There first did she land from the unharvested aether, and gladly the goddesses looked on each other, and they rejoiced in heart, and thus first did Rhea of the fair veil speak to Demeter:

Come here, child; for he calls you, far-seeing Zeus, the loud thunderer, to come among the gods, and has promised you such honors as you desire and has decreed that your child for a third of the rolling year shall dwell beneath the murky gloom, but the other two parts with her mother and the rest of the immortals. He promises that it shall be so and nods his head in agreement. But come, my child, obey, and be not too unrelenting against the son of Cronos, the lord of the dark cloud. And quickly make grow the grain that brings life to men.⁶

⁶ The preceding section is heavily reconstructed.

2g Demeter Restores Fertility and Introduces the Mysteries to the Eleusinians (470–495)

So spoke she, and Demeter of the fair garland obeyed. Speedily she sent up the grain from the rich soil, and the wide earth was heavy with leaves and flowers. She hastened and showed the care of her rites to the verdict-pronouncing kings, Triptolemos and Diocles, the charioteer, and mighty Eumolpos and Celeos, the leader of the people. She taught Triptolemos, Polyxeinos, and Diocles her fine mysteries, holy mysteries that none may violate or search into or noise abroad, for the great curse from the gods restrains the voice. Happy is he among mortal men who has beheld these things! And he who is uninitiated and has no lot in them never has an equal lot in death beneath the murky gloom.

Now when the goddess had given instruction in all her rites, they went to Olympus, to the gathering of the other gods. There the goddesses dwell beside Zeus who delights in the thunderbolt; holy and revered are they. Right blessed is he among mortal men whom they dearly love; speedily do they send as a guest to his lofty hall Ploutos, who gives wealth to mortal men. But come you who hold the land of fragrant Eleusis and sea-girt Paros and rocky Antron. Come, Lady Deo, Queen, giver of fine gifts, bringer of the seasons! Come with your daughter, beautiful Persephone, and of your grace grant me fine substance in requital of my song. But I will be mindful of you and of another song.

3 To Apollo

It is very likely that this Hymn was originally two separate hymns that were later joined together into a single poem, perhaps in 523 BC when Polycrates of Samos decided to celebrate a combined Delian and Pythian festival to the god. We know from an ancient commentator on the poet Pindar that one Cynaithos of Chios (where the Homeridae, “Descendants of Homer,” were located) composed this poem and recited it in Syracuse at the end of the 6th century BC. The two parts, or rather two hymns, celebrate Apollo’s association with his two major centers of worship, Delos and Delphi.

The first “Delian” part (1–181) details his birth on Delos and the difficulty that his mother Leto had in finding a place to deliver the great god. It is an aetiological myth that explains the origin of Apollo’s cult on the island of Delos, which was a small, barren island. The myth explains how Leto wandered in search of a place to give birth to her son because Hera, in anger over her husband’s affair with Leto, drove her over the earth until she reached Delos (see Apollodorus B5 and Lucian, Dialogues of the Sea Gods 9). The long geographical list (lines 30–50) emphasizes the suffering Leto was to endure.

The second “Pythian” part (182–end) documents his arrival in Delphi and the establishment of his cult there. This account is the earliest literary evidence about Apollo’s oracular seat there. Again, we have aetiological myths explaining the establishment of his temple (the earliest archaeological evidence for a temple is the second half of the 7th century, the temple that still stands is from the 4th century) and the two names for the city, Pytho (“Rot”) and Delphi (“Dolphin”).

3a Preface (1–29)

Mindful, ever mindful, will I be of Apollo the Far-darter. Before him, as he goes through the hall of Zeus, the gods tremble and indeed rise up all from their thrones