

The Neglected Heavens: Gender and the Cults of Helios and Selene
in Bronze Age and Historical Greece

Why is it that the sun and moon held such a small place in cults of the Greeks, and is it that the sun is male and the moon is female in Greek myth? Aristophanes in *Peace* 406-413 claims that “we sacrifice to you [the Olympians], the barbarians sacrifice to them [the sun and moon]”. But if we look at nearby or related civilizations, the situation is quite different. In Ugaritic, Minoan, and Hittite religion (as well as among other Indo-European speaking people), the sun and other celestial deities have much more prominence. However, while the Greeks acknowledged the divinity of the heavenly lights, their deities Helios, Selene, and Eos never achieved the popularity of their Near Eastern counterparts. In addition, the Greeks always associated the sun with the male gender and the moon and dawn with the female. This gender assignment is not always reflected in the cults of the Near East; notable exceptions are the Anatolian moon god Men, the Hittite Sun Goddess of Arinna, and the Ugaritic Sun Goddess (not to mention the large amount of evidence indicating the existence of a Minoan Sun Goddess as well). While modern scholars such as Parker, Goodison, and Marinatos have shed much light upon aspects of Greek and Minoan religion, the question of why the Greeks neglected the sun and moon in their cults and why the Greeks made the sun male and the moon female remains unexplored. This paper attempts to fill this gap by examining what contribution Near Eastern and Minoan culture made to Bronze Age and historical Greek religion, what happened during the Dark Age to deemphasize solar and lunar worship in historical Greek religion, and finally why the Greeks conceived of the sun and moon as male and female in the divinities of Helios and Selene. In this way, I hope to help uncover a missing piece of the puzzle of Greek religion.

Works Cited

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