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The Liminal and Universal: Changing Interpretations of Hekate

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***Abstract:** Hekate is considered one of the most enigmatic figures of Greek religion. In the *Theogony*, she is referred to as a universal goddess. Nevertheless, her figure transforms into that of a chthonic figure, associated with witchcraft and the restless dead. This paper examines how Hekate's role in the Greek pantheon has changed over time, and with what figures she has been syncretized or associated with in order to bring about such changes. In doing so, three images of the same goddess emerge: Hekate the universal life-bringing deity, Hekate the liminal goddess of the crossroads, and Hekate the chthonic overseer of witchcraft and angry spirits.*

INTRODUCTION

Hekate is an enigmatic figure in Greco-Roman mythology, having evolved over the centuries from a universal deity to a chthonic figure. Due to the Greco-Roman practice of religious syncretism, her figure has taken on aspects of other gods. Likewise, other gods have absorbed some aspects originally attributed to her. Consequentially, she has many aspects and is associated with different deities. This is emphasized by the fact that as a goddess of liminality, she not only separates realms lorded over by different gods, but serves as a transition goddess for said realms. Therefore she links gods together, functioning as the sinew of the cosmos. Ergo, Hekate should not be viewed as a single figure but rather as a tripartite figure that has evolved over time.

I will first discuss her origins and her role as an all-giving universal deity in Asia Minor, in the *Theogony*, and in the Chaldean Oracles. Within this section, I will discuss her connections with Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, and Apollo. Next, this paper will describe her role as a liminal figure as evidenced in the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter" and her connection to the Eleusinian Rites. By corollary, it will also introduce Hekate's links to Demeter and Persephone. I will also discuss her overlapping responsibilities with Hermes in this section. This paper will finish with a discussion of Hekate as a chthonic figure: first, her role as the mistress of vengeful spirits, her lordship over magic and crossroads, and through the link between Hekate and the trope of the dying maiden. In this section, I will discuss Hekate's role as *kourotrophos* and her similarities to Artemis.

In doing so, I will show that one of Hekate's many aspects as a universal figure was that of a mediator of boundaries and a liminal figure. Over time, as the archaic period gave way to the classical period and pan-Hellenism increased along with religious syncretism, Hekate's liminal role increasingly defined her aspects and entire nature. Because liminality was deeply associated with boundaries and crossroads as well as the great boundary between life and death, Hekate increasingly transformed from a liminal figure to a chthonic figure associated with vengeful spirits and the unearthly. Hekate's enigma stems from the fact that her aspects were manifold and transformed over time, as she took on other gods' aspects and had certain aspects subsumed by others over time.

HEKATE THE UNIVERSAL FIGURE

Most scholars agree that Hekate originated from Caria in Asia Minor despite limited archaeological evidence. Most of her cult temples are located there and are given names beginning with *hekat-*.¹ More importantly, she was pictured as a single figure instead of a tripartite figure, as she was commonly depicted since the fifth century BCE.² As such, the length and extent of the single-bodied version of Hekate there indicates that she was originally a Carian goddess assimilated into the Greek pantheon via religious syncretism. There, her main epithets included: *megistē* (“greatest”), *epiphanestē* (“most manifest”), and *sōteira* (“savior”).³ WE can conclude that Hekate was the principal goddess worshipped there, similar to how Athena was the principal goddess of the Attican *polis* Athens.

Before the Indo-Europeans arrived in Greece and brought with them the Olympian pantheon led by Zeus, most Mediterranean civilizations worshiped a great earth goddess. Prior to Zeus supplanting her role, Hekate was an example of this figure. In the “Hymn to Hekate,” a digression among descriptions of the genealogy of various Titans, the brewing Titanomachy, and the birth of the Olympians, Hesiod spends a good forty lines praising the goddess. No other deity is so honored in the *Theogony* except Zeus.⁴ Hesiod claims that Hekate receives: “A share of the earth as her own, and of the barren sea. / She has received a province of starry heaven as well ... She has a share of the privileges of all the gods / That were ever born of Earth and Heaven.”⁵ Hekate is a singular figure in the *Theogony*: she is a Titan, and yet she is not thrown into Tartaros but allowed to maintain her titles, and have even more titles bestowed upon her by Zeus. Moreover, unlike the other ouranic deities that have a specific domain of their own, she partakes in a share of all the domains that the pantheon rules over. The sky god supplanted the earth goddess as the primary deity of worship when the Indo-Europeans moved into the Mediterranean region, as evidenced from disparate mythologies like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in Sumerian mythos and the *Theogony* itself. In these narratives, an earth goddess serves as a central figure and is opposed by a rising sky god. Eventually, the sky god replaces the previous pantheon and becomes the leader of the new order. Hekate is not part of the Indo-European ouranic pantheon but rather a goddess associated with the Titans, the overthrown pantheon of uncivilized giants. Her pre-Indo-European arrival status was permanently disturbed by the arrival of the new settlers and their gods. Although her importance is diminished in the new pantheon, she is still associated with many aspects of a life giving earth goddess and becomes a more general figure loosely delineating the cosmos. As such, Hesiod fits Hekate’s previous roles as universal goddess and primary deity in Caria into the new Indo-European religious framework.

Her function as a universal goddess results from the fact that she has many aspects and many domains. Hesiod describes eight classes of people she specifically helps: participants in

¹ Berg, William. “Hecate: Greek or ‘Anatolian?’” *Numen* 21 (1974): 128-129.

Marquardt, Patricia A. “A Portrait of Hecate,” *The American Journal of Philology* 102.3 (1981): 250-251.

² Berg (1974) 130.

³ Johnston, Sarah Iles. “Hekate and the Dying Maiden,” in *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2013). 205-206.

⁴ Boedecker, Deborah. “Hecate: A Transfunctional Goddess in the *Theogony*?” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 113 (1983): 80.

⁵ Hesiod, lines 415-416 & 423-424 in the “Hymn to Hecate,” from *Theogony*, in *Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation*, ed. Stephen M. Trzaskoma, R. Scott Smith, and Stephen Brunet. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (2004). Pages 143-144.

sacrificial ritual, kings, warriors, athletes, cavalrymen, fishermen, herdsman, and *kouroi*.⁶ Boedecker uses Dumézil's tripartite system in which society and mythology are divided into three functions to analyze Hekate the trivalent goddess. Firstly, she helps enforce magical-religious and legal-contractual sovereignty. Secondly, she assists warriors and cavalrymen at war, and athletes in competition. Thirdly, she helps fishermen, herdsman, and *kouroi*, all of whom pertain to fertility and productivity for society. Dumézil's tripartite system also extends beyond social groups to cosmic levels: heaven, atmosphere, and earth.⁷ As previously described, Hekate takes a share of Zeus's domain (sky), Poseidon's domain (sea), and Hades' domain (earth/underground). In various Indo-European mythologies, there are structural similarities where a female divinity bridges the separate domains of three male deities, and in doing so, connects them together as to create a single world out of the immense diversity of domains and gods.⁸ As Lyle describes it: "The goddess as trivalent is active in all three functions ... she is active at all three of the superimposed levels of the cosmos, and so the vertical triad is not a simple one of three male components; it consists of the three male components and the female whole interfused in each part."⁹ As such, Hekate is not just a great goddess assimilated into a new structure, but plays an important part in the new Indo-European structure of bridging the cosmos together.

To better understand how she functions as a goddess in terms of religious practice, she is best thought of an intermediary. As the gods increasingly became transcendent and removed from everyday life in the classical period, the role of transitional and intermediary deities increased.¹⁰ Her role in many domains is to regulate communication between man and god, similar to Apollo.¹¹ Both deities were considered to be the main divinities for divine messages. As such, Hekate was considered to be an ambivalent figure whose good will or ill will determined the success of prayer and other rituals: "I pray to Hermes to increase my flocks or to Zeus for victory. Both Hermes and Zeus surely have the requisite power to accomplish my wish; yet my prayer may or may not be answered. Something has intervened to bring about my success or failure. That something is, in fact, [Hekate]."¹² This transitive function explains further why she has so many domains in the Olympic pantheon specifically, because she has moved away from a goddess who provides things for her people to a goddess who allows people to be provided for via her benevolence.

This transitive function plays strongly into her role in the Chaldean Oracles. To summarize, the Chaldean Oracles are similar to a mystery cult in that initiates use *symbola*, certain mystical objects and tools, to perform three different types of rituals: (1) animation and consecration of magical statues representing the gods, (2) induction of trance state, and (3) invocation of the god's epiphany.¹³ Unlike the goal of a mystery cult, the goal of the Chaldean Oracles is not to reach a blessed afterlife but rather to achieve the ascension of the soul while the

⁶ Boedecker (1983): 83.

⁷ Lyle, Emily B. "Dumézil's Three Functions and Indo-European Cosmic Structure." *History of Religions* 22.1 (1982): 26.

⁸ Boedecker (1983): 88.

⁹ Lyle (1982): 31.

¹⁰ Johnston, Sarah Iles. *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*. Atlanta: Scholars Press (1990). Page 71.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Pages 3-4.

¹² Clay, Jenny Strauss. "The Hekate of the *Theogony*." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 24 (1984): 34-35.

¹³ Johnston (1990): 85-88.

body is still alive and unify with the divine (i.e. spiritual enlightenment).¹⁴ Here, Hekate is the primary deity through whom enlightenment is granted to acolytes; while she is a transitive goddess, she is also a universal one in the sense that she not only connects humanity with the divine, but also embodies the divine as well. Throughout this entire section, we see the transition of an all-giving goddess to a goddess that simultaneously embodies the divine and the connection between man and the divine. Her multiple aspects and domains play increasing importance, which is how she herself transforms from a universal figure to a liminal figure.

HEKATE THE LIMINAL FIGURE

Hekate's liminality is apparent even when she is the primary object of worship in the Chaldean Oracles. In that case, her role as the intermediary between gods and men plays just as important a facet of the Oracles as her role as the savior goddess that brings epiphanies to her acolytes. Nevertheless, her liminal nature stems back before the classical period and the establishment of the Chaldean Oracles. In the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," Hekate's appearances denote the beginning and the end of the main conflict between the gods. After Persephone is kidnapped, Demeter roams the earth to find her daughter. She does not know where to look until Hekate emerges from her cave, bearing torches, to tell Demeter that her daughter has been borne to the Underworld. After Demeter establishes the Eleusinian Mysteries and the conflict between Demeter and Hades has been resolved, Hekate makes her second appearance when she celebrates Persephone's return from the Underworld and becomes Persephone's handmaiden.¹⁵ Hekate's ambivalence is embedded in the hymn. Said goddess lives in a cave, which is by definition neither above ground nor below ground.¹⁶ Structurally, Hekate functions to induce Demeter to go to Eleusis, and to welcome Persephone back into the living world. Given that Demeter and Persephone are paired together in the Eleusinian Mysteries as symbols of life and death, respectively, Hekate functions to link the two of them together. Whereas Demeter represents the life force that the bountiful earth provides and Persephone represents death and rebirth through her marriage to Hades, Hekate as a liminal figure plays strongly into the indubitable connection between life and death, the greatest boundary of them all. More importantly, Hekate was thought to have overseen the transition between life and death.¹⁷ As such, the tripartite theory returns in significance, because Demeter, Persephone, and Hekate all received sacrifices and honors in the Eleusinian Mysteries.¹⁸ In fact, Berg goes so far as to suggest that the tripartite figure worshipped in Pylos, located in the southern Peloponnese, was originally Demeter, Persephone, and Hekate agglomerated into a single trivalent figure.¹⁹ This eventually results in her becoming more associated with the dead and restless spirits, which will be discussed in the following section.

Because Hekate played a strong role in the transition between life and death, she was connected to Hermes *psychopompos*, the aspect of the messenger god that ferried souls to the Underworld. While Hermes is an ouranic god, he has strong chthonic links and has a mischievous and deceptive nature, as evidenced in the "Hymn to Hermes" where he tricks his

¹⁴ Ibid. Page 89.

¹⁵ "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," in *Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation*, ed. Stephen M. Trzaskoma, R. Scott Smith, and Stephen Brunet. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (2004). 169-178.

¹⁶ Marquardt (1981): 252.

¹⁷ Johnston (2013): 209-215.

¹⁸ Boedecker (1983): 255.

¹⁹ Berg (1974): 140.

half-brother Apollo. Hekate's role as the goddess of transitions meant that she would be the goddess prayed to in the event that people would be crossing major thresholds in their life, such as marriage, childbirth, or death. Because of said association, she inevitably became linked with the ultimate liminal figure in many cultures around the world: ghosts. Since physical liminal points, such as doorways and crossroads, were locations where ghosts allegedly convened, Hekate became known as the mistress of ghosts.²⁰ In fact, she was frequently invoked in curse tablets as the Greeks prayed to the likes of Hermes *psychopompos* and Hermes *chthonios* to bring misfortune upon the living.²¹

Both her connection to Hermes *psychopompos* and the Eleusinian Mysteries were the result of her crucial role as the goddess of the crossroads. Her Roman equivalent was Trivia, named after the *trivium*, the place where three roads meet. It shows how important this role became by the time the Romans conquered Alexander's empire. Before Trivia came about though, Hekate was also associated with the Thessalian goddess Einodia, a goddess of witchcraft, and the Thracian goddess Enodia, a goddess of child-rearing; these are the names from which the epithet Hekate *enodia* comes about.²² Hekate *enodia* is Hekate of the boundaries and crossroads.²³ Her role is that of an *ephoros*, a guardian figure that has an apotropaic function. *Hekataia*, images of Hekate, and *hekataion*, statues of Hekate, were set up in front of households and important city entrances to protect them from evil. In the event that this gateway was the entrance to an acropolis, Hekate would be worshipped in her epithet Hekate *propyleia* instead of Hekate *enodia* to denote the importance of this particular gateway. Most famously, she was worshipped in a tripartite form as Hekate *epipyrgidia* at the entrance to the Athenian acropolis.²⁴ That she has so many epithets to denote the various entrances she protected shows that her main role by the classical period was to function less as a mediator of prayer and divine interaction and more to guide the living between two realms across that liminal area.

HEKATE THE CHTHONIC FIGURE

Finally, we discuss Hekate as a chthonic figure. Because she had an important function of overseeing the transition of the souls from the realm of the living to the Underworld, she was increasingly viewed as a mistress of souls and a vengeful goddess who would unleash the spirits of the unjustly dead if not properly propitiated.²⁵ As previously mentioned, Hekate was frequently invoked on curse tablets, for she supposedly had the power to unleash *aoroi* and *biaiothanatoi*, souls who either died before their time or died violently, upon the living: "She eventually became associated ever more closely with the ghosts themselves, for a mistress who could keep them at bay could also lead them on, and in her wrathful, unsupplicated moments give them free rein to wreak terror."²⁶ As such, two defining features became characteristic of Hekate: (1) she was respected and feared for her power over the dead, for the same power that could aid someone could also be turned on same person, and (2) she was deeply connected to magic and magicians. In order to propitiate Hekate, "suppers," or food sacrifices, were given to

²⁰ Johnston, Sarah Iles. "Crossroads." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 88 (1991): 218.

²¹ Johnston (1990): 145.

²² Marquardt (1981): 252. Johnston (2013): 213-214.

²³ *Ibid.* 23.

²⁴ Johnston (2013): 206-207, 214-215.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 204.

²⁶ Johnston (1991): 218.

the goddess on the evening of a full moon.²⁷ Moreover, magicians would frequently go to crossroads in attempts to harness the power of restless spirits to perform magic spells. That is because the corpses of murderers and other violent criminals would usually be dumped there instead of a proper burial.²⁸ As such, Hekate increasingly took on an infernal image as the connections between her and magic, ghosts, and wrath grew.

Hekate the universal goddess was a *kourotrophos* goddess: Hesiod describes her as *kourotrophos* twice, an honor bestowed on no other goddess in the *Theogony*.²⁹ It is suspected that the Carian form of Hekate was strongly associated with childrearing, for out of all of Hekate's honors in her hymn, being a *potnia theron* was not one of them. Insofar as Hekate is associated with natural phenomena, it is with regards to breeding domesticated animals.³⁰ That is odd for an all-giving universal earth goddess, as that trope is deeply associated with the earth and wildlife. The answer is that many aspects of her roles as *kourotrophos* and *potnia theron*, if she was ever associated with wildlife, have been subsumed into the figure of Artemis. Hekate is linked to Iphigenia, the prototype for the dying maiden; in a version of Iphigenia's sacrifice myth, Artemis turns Iphigenia into Hekate.³¹ The dying maiden trope is one borne out of fear of dying in a permanent liminal state: since Hekate oversaw the transformation of girl into woman as *kourotrophos* during wedding nights and the transformation of *parthenos* into *gyne* when wives gave birth to children, she was deeply associated with women who died before they could fulfill their social obligations in ancient Greek society.³² Iphigenia, as the ideal maiden who died before becoming a wife and mother, "had reason to be envious of the living and therefore to deprive them of success if she were not propitiated by the proper rituals."³³ Thus, her association with Hekate allows the latter to take on the mantle of the unfulfilled maiden and the lady of unhappy souls.

That Artemis turned Iphigenia into Hekate shows how religious syncretism sometimes functioned to subsume the figure of lesser divinities by incorporating them into relations with a more prominent deity: "When [Hekate] arrived in Greece with the same interests in women's transitions as Artemis, the sensibilities of the Greek mythic imagination would have demanded that this situation be tidied up, for however much *cult* might tolerate a number of divinities sharing the same functions, *myth* strove to articulate the differences between them, and to impose some clearly defined, recognizable relationship."³⁴ As such, while Artemis oversaw and guided the positive aspects of the transformation from girl into woman, Hekate served as the inversion where the maiden died before she could become a woman. Both figures had to be propitiated for a safe transition, but only one of the two was closely associated with liminality and wrath. Thus, Hekate's association with the vengeful and unfulfilled ghosts increased and became predominant in her mythic and cultic identity as she became incorporated into the Olympic pantheon.

²⁷ Ibid. 219-220.

²⁸ Ibid. 223.

²⁹ Johnston (2013): 212.

³⁰ Marquardt (1981): 255.

³¹ Johnston (2013): 241.

³² Ibid. 215-243.

³³ Ibid. 240.

³⁴ Ibid. 245.

CONCLUSION

Hekate is a difficult figure to summarize in the Greco-Roman mythology and religious framework because her nature and functions have evolved over time. Although she was once an all-giving goddess, Hekate took on many aspects and domains, and the liminal nature of her so ensured that she was increasingly thought of as the goddess of transitions and crossroads. Because crossroads were considered boundary places where the corpses of the polluted could be disposed of, she increasingly became associated with spirits and magic, creating the image of an infernal, chthonic figure. As such, it is not fair to consider Hekate as a singular figure, but rather a tripartite figure in the same way she is commonly depicted in coinage and art. She is the universal figure of the Chaldean Oracles, the goddess that oversees transitions and boundaries, and the goddess that averts evil spirits from bringing misfortune upon the living. Her aspects are manifold as they evolve over time, reflecting different facets of the same face.

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