

## Ares and Aphrodite

“All that he [Homer] hath said of Venus and Mars his passion, is also manifestly composed from no other source than this science [astrology]. Indeed, it is the conjuncture of Venus and Mars that creates the poetry of Homer.”<sup>1</sup>

“[Venus is] the star which in poetry enjoys a close association with Aphrodite and with the marriage ceremonial.”<sup>2</sup>

“Blessed Queen of Heaven...celestial Venus, now adored at sea-girt Paphos, who at the time of the first Creation coupled the sexes in mutual love.”<sup>3</sup>

Men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Most modern readers are familiar with this adage, but very few, I suspect, are aware that such ideas were already old hat by the time of Homer. Indeed, such conceptions go back to the very dawn of human civilization.

For Shakespeare and other students conversant with the Classics of ancient Greece and Rome, the love affair of Mars and Venus was proverbial (the bard would devote his first major work to Venus’s love affairs). A famous passage in Homer’s *Odyssey* finds the “widely renowned” myth-maker Demodocus singing of the illicit affair between Ares (Mars) and Aphrodite (Venus). In the song in question, the two lovers are entrapped *in flagrante delecto* in an invisible net devised by the lame smith Hephaistos—Aphrodite’s husband, according to Homer’s account—much to the amusement of the other gods, who are witness to the entire scene:

“Then playing the lyre, the man struck up a beautiful song of the love of Ares and fine-crowned Aphrodite, how they first had lain together in the home of Hephaistos, secretly. He gave her many gifts and shamed the marriage bed of her lord Hephaistos...Craving for the love of Cytherea [i.e., Aphrodite] with the fine crown...The two of them went to sleep in the bed clothes. And the bonds fashioned by various-minded Hephaistos were spread about them, so they could not move or raise their limbs at all. And then they knew it when they could no longer escape.”

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<sup>1</sup> Lucian, *Astrology* 22.

<sup>2</sup> J. Diggle, *Euripides: Phaethon* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (New York, 2009), p. 262

In light of the discussion to follow, it is to be noted that Aphrodite is renowned for her crown already in Homer. To continue with Demodocus's story: Upon ensnaring the two lovers, Hephaistos bemoans his lot in life:

“Father Zeus and you other blessed ever-living gods, come see deeds to laugh at that are not be endured, how Aphrodite, the daughter of Zeus, dishonors me always, lame as I am, and loves the destructive Ares, because he is handsome and nimble of foot, while I was born feeble.”<sup>4</sup>

For well over three thousand years now, scholars and laymen alike have been scratching their heads trying to figure out whence Homer derived this bawdy tale, one which the ancients themselves found more than a little disconcerting if not downright blasphemous.<sup>5</sup> Was the love affair between Aphrodite and Ares a product of the blind bard's vivid imagination? Or was this particular episode, like so many others in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, a vestigial remnant of an age-old oral tradition and, as such, a familiar theme deeply rooted in ancient religion and ritual?

The available evidence suggests that the sexual union between Ares and Aphrodite was well established in Greek tradition. Certainly the two gods were thoroughly intertwined in Greek cult and ritual as well as in Homer.<sup>6</sup>

The testimony of the early Greek poets and dramatists confirms this opinion. Pindar, like Aeschylus, refers to Ares as Aphrodite's husband: “Ares, the husband of Aphrodite.”<sup>7</sup> The same poet elsewhere described Aphrodite as “mother of loves in the sky”—

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<sup>4</sup> *Odyssey* VIII:266-311, as translated in A. Cook, *The Odyssey* (New York, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Witness the commentary of Anne Teffeteller, “The Song of Ares and Aphrodite,” in A. Smith & S. Pickup eds., *Brill's Companion to Aphrodite* (Leiden, 2010), p. 137: “Demodokos' song of Ares and Aphrodite in Homer's *Odyssey*, a narrative which delighted Odysseus and the Phaiakians but mortified the ancient moralists and has perplexed many readers of Homer down to the present day.” In his commentary on the *Odyssey*, W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer, Vol. 1* (London, 1947), p. 338 observes: “The following ballad of Ares and Aphrodite has been much criticized by both higher critics and moralists.”

<sup>6</sup> W. Burkert, “The Song of Ares and Aphrodite,” in L. Doherty ed., *Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, 2009), p. 29 observes: “Admittedly, the connection between Ares and Aphrodite is firmly rooted in cult and myth.”

<sup>7</sup> *Pythian Odes* 4.87ff.

compelling evidence that he was fully cognizant of the fact that the celebrated love affair of Aphrodite and Ares had its origin *in the sky*.

For Euripides, as for Apuleius and other learned writers of antiquity, Aphrodite was a principal catalyst in Creation. This idea is most clearly expressed in *Hippolytus*: “Everything is generated by her, she is the one who sows and gives desire, from which all of us on earth exist.”<sup>8</sup> This tradition finds a striking echo in the aforementioned Skidi memory of the planet Venus: “Through her it is possible for people to increase and crops to mature.”<sup>9</sup> The Sumerian goddess Inanna/Venus, likewise, was invoked as the “Divine source of all life.”<sup>10</sup>

In his play *Phaethon*, preserved today only as a collection of fragments, Euripides describes Aphrodite as a cosmic power. For Euripides, as for Greek tradition in general, Aphrodite was the goddess of holy matrimony: “We sing the heavenly daughter of Zeus, the mother of loves, Aphrodite, who brings nuptials to maidens.”<sup>11</sup>

Our earliest and likely most reliable witness of ancient Greek marriage practices is the melancholy poet Sappho, who wrote around 700 BCE from her island homeland Lesbos.<sup>12</sup> For Sappho, it was Aphrodite herself who represented the archetypal bride. The raging war-god Ares, in turn, she describes as the divine prototype of the bridegroom. Thus a recently discovered fragment reads as follows: “A bridegroom will come equal to Ares, *hymenaios!* Bigger by far than a big man (fr. 111 Voigt).”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Hippolytus* 448-450.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 112. See also B. Hruška, “Das Spätbabylonische Lehrsagedict ‘Inannas Erhöhung,’” *Archiv Orientalni* 37 (1969): “In der sumerischen Zeile wird ‘ištar-kakkabi mit dem Namen ti-mú-a ‘Leben erzeugende’ wiedergeben.”

<sup>11</sup> Lines 229-230.

<sup>12</sup> According to L. Reitzammer, *The Athenian Adonia in Context* (Madison, 2016), p. 46 “Although Sappho’s poetry is removed in space and time from Classical Athens, her *epithalamia* [wedding songs] fragments are our best-preserved examples of songs sung at weddings. In general, the images and metaphors associated with Greek weddings remain relatively consistent over time.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

A singular detail in the Greek marriage ritual, according to Sappho, found the bridegroom being infused with the divine charisma of the celestial goddess. Gregory Nagy summarized the available evidence as follows:

“In the wedding songs of Sappho, the god Ares is a model for the generic *gambros*, ‘bridegroom’, who is explicitly described as *isos Areui*, ‘equal [*isos*] to Ares,’ in Sappho Song 111.5. Correspondingly, there are many instances of implicit equations of the generic bride with the goddess Aphrodite: in Sappho Song 112, for example, the bridegroom is said to be infused with the divine charisma of Aphrodite evidently by way of his direct contact with the bride.”<sup>14</sup>

A number of questions present themselves at this point. The most obvious, perhaps, is the following: To what extent, if any, were such traditions inspired by the actual appearance or behavior of the planets Mars and Venus? To even pose such a query is to risk ridicule in classical circles—not to mention in astronomical departments around the globe.

Sappho’s peculiar report regarding Aphrodite’s gifting her Ares-like bridegroom with charisma offers a decisive clue for, as we have documented in a number of publications, analogous traditions will be found from around the globe, typically in connection with the planet Venus.<sup>15</sup> If this claim can be substantiated, we will have gone a long way towards establishing the fact that Sappho was likely conveying ancient conceptions of planetary phenomena when she mused on the archetypal roles of Aphrodite and Ares in Greek marriage rituals.

The testimony from ancient Persia is especially instructive here: According to the *Aban Yasht* from the *Zend-Avesta*, the planet Venus was identified with the goddess Anahita.<sup>16</sup> Anahita, much like the Greek Aphrodite *Urania*, was intimately associated with ancient conceptions of sovereignty, kingship, and fertility. Indeed, the planet-goddess’s connection with kingship was so close that Persian coronation scenes depicted her

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<sup>14</sup> G. Nagy, *The Greek Hero* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> E. Cochrane, *Starf\*cker* (Ames, 2006), pp. 70-72.

<sup>16</sup> *Yašt* 5:85. See also *Bundahishn* 5:1.

handing the king his crown.<sup>17</sup> Most significant, however, is the fact that the goddess was believed to invest the king with *charisma*: “She legitimated the enthronement of the king, providing him with charisma.”<sup>18</sup>

As we have documented elsewhere, such ideas were surprisingly widespread throughout the ancient world.<sup>19</sup> Analogous conceptions are common throughout the various cultures of Inner Asia, where the charisma imparted by the planet-goddess was a fundamental theme among the Huns and Turks, among others:

“To become a real ruler, the Hunnic Chanyu had to possess sacral grace. Through it, he ensured the welfare of his people, as well as fertility, successful military campaigns, etc. This supernatural power was passed on by inheritance, and only in the ruling family. Among the Iranians, the notion of sacral grace (*charisma*) is expressed with the concept of *hvarna*, *farn*, and among the Turks—with the concept of *qut*. In ancient Iran and Turan, the rulers fought for this charisma and received it from Aredvi Sura Anahita. Its possession is also related to the Turanian sacred mountain in Kanha, which was probably a religious center and part of the Anahita cult. A similar belief has been preserved among the Turks: *qut* could also be obtained from the sacred mountain Otuken, regarded as a female deity. Thus, the Iranians and Turks both believed that the most important quality a ruler need to have to be able to govern was the result of the blessing and support of the Great Goddess.”<sup>20</sup>

To reiterate: In order to assume the throne and ensure general welfare and fertility, the king must first receive the “blessing” and divine charisma of the Queen of Heaven, Venus. This is getting curiouser and curiouser, as they say. In what sense is it possible to understand the planet Venus as infusing the king or bridegroom with charisma? What, exactly, is charisma?

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<sup>17</sup> Y. Ustinova, “Aphrodite Urania,” *Kernos* 11 (1998), p. 218. See also B. Marshak, “Pre-Islamic Painting of the Iranian Peoples and its Sources in Sculpture and the Decorative Arts,” in E. Sims ed., *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and Its Sources* (New Haven, 2002), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> E. Yarshater, *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. 2* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 846.

<sup>19</sup> E. Cochrane, *Starf\*cker* (Ames, 2006), pp. 152-158.

<sup>20</sup> B. Zhivkov, *Khazaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Leiden, 2015), p. 101.

The word *charisma* derives from the Greek *charis*, a word often translated simply as “grace” or splendor but attested in a wide range of different, albeit related, meanings. Thus *charis* denotes not only the “beauty” of Aphrodite or any other young woman, it can also describe the “glory” or undying fame awarded to the winning athlete after some great contest.<sup>21</sup>

It is possible to be more specific here: *charis* describes an effulgent aura or crown encircling another object. Indeed, according to the insightful analysis of Richard Onians, Homer conceptualized Charis “as a wreath or crown about things.”<sup>22</sup>

The Avestan word *hvarna*—also spelled *Xvarenah*, *khvarna*, and *farn/farr*—is translated alternately as “the charisma of Fortune,” “halo,” or “sovereign glory.”<sup>23</sup> The radiant phenomenon in question is understood to be a divine aura or supernatural force with which the king is invested but which might also be taken away from him, resulting in personal disaster and threatening the world with destruction.<sup>24</sup> In Persian myth, the primordial king Yima is represented as presiding over a veritable Golden Age of riches and prosperity until he began to dabble in falsehood and deceit, as a result of which his effulgent Glory departed from him, thereby plunging the world into chaos. Thraetona, the greatest Persian hero of them all, eventually succeeded in regaining the *hvarnah* and, upon enveloping himself with it, succeeded in saving the world from imminent destruction.<sup>25</sup>

Persian kings, in a purposeful attempt to recreate Thraetona’s heroics, sought to provide themselves with the selfsame “glory” in order to gain the throne and rule in power: “In

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<sup>21</sup> B. MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace: Charis in Early Greek Poetry* (Princeton, 1993), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> R. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 402. In the *Iliad*, the personified Charis, as the wife of Hephaestus, receives the epithet “She of the glistening headband.” See the discussion in L. Wilkinson, *Socratic Charis* (New York, 2013), p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> M. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 2007), p. 271 translates the term simply as “sovereign glory.”

<sup>24</sup> See the informed discussion in J. Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology* (Berkeley, 1987), p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> A. Carnoy, “Iranian Views of Origins in Connection with Similar Babylonian Beliefs,” *Journal of American Oriental Studies* 36 (1917), p. 308.

assuming the throne, however, he [the Great King] took unto himself the mystique, spirit and glory of kingship: tradition has it that he was crowned on his birthday, at which event he was thought to be reborn, and thus, assumed a throne name.”<sup>26</sup> Bendt Alster is more specific: “Where tradition is still more or less a living thing, great monarchs consider themselves imitators of the primordial hero: Darius saw himself as a new Thraetona.”<sup>27</sup>

Additional insight into the luminous charisma associated with the planet Venus can be obtained from the religious traditions of the ancient Near East. For the earliest cultures of Mesopotamia the union of Inanna and Dumuzi symbolized the paradigm of marriage, much as the union of Aphrodite and Ares did for the Greeks. In dozens of Sumerian hymns, Inanna/Venus is represented as the exemplary “bride” and Dumuzi as the prototypical bridegroom.<sup>28</sup> Famously, an archaic Sumerian ritual found the king impersonating Dumuzi and engaging in a sacred “marriage” with the planet Venus (as Inanna) in order to legitimate his hold on the throne and secure fertility throughout the land.<sup>29</sup> According to early literary accounts of the rite in question, a key episode found the planet-goddess imbuing her royal bridegroom with glory. This idea is evident in the following passage from the Old Babylonian hymn BM 96739:

“Oh Inanna, a husband worthy of your splendor has been granted to you... You, oh mistress, you have handed over to him your power as is due to a king, and Ama-ušumgal-anna causes a radiant brilliance to burst out for you.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> T. Young, “The consolidation of empire and its limits of growth under Darius and Xerxes,” in J. Boardman et al eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History IV* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 105.

<sup>27</sup> B. Alster, “The Paradigmatic Character of Mesopotamian Heroes,” *Revue d’assyriologie et d’archéologie orientale* 68 (1974), p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Lines B: 16-17 from “A song of Inana and Dumuzid (Dumuzid-Inana Z), *ETCSL*: “Let us embrace, my bridegroom! Let us lie on my flowered bed!”

<sup>29</sup> Y. Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature* (Jerusalem, 1998), p. 49: “The king’s union with the goddess resulted in her granting a favorable promise of fertility and abundance for the land and its inhabitants.”

<sup>30</sup> Quoted from F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna. La déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 110. For a slightly different translation, see J. Black et al., “A tigi to Inana (Inana E),” *ETCSL*, lines 21-24.

Françoise Bruschweiler, in her masterful analysis of the mythology associated with Inanna/Venus, offered the following commentary on this particular hymn:

“This passage is interesting due to the way in which, in the context of a sacred marriage, the luminous essence of the goddess is passed over to King Ama-ušum-gal-anna, who is identified for the occasion with Dumuzi.”<sup>31</sup>

In another early hymn Inanna boasts that she has imbued the king with ni-gal—a phrase commonly translated as “glory,” “splendor,” or “aura” by leading Sumerologists. In the following hymn ni-gal is translated by the innocuous word “awesomeness”:

“Imbued (?) with my awesomeness! Imbued (?) with my awesomeness! The life of the lord, imbued with my awesomeness! The life of the king, imbued (?) with my awesomeness!”<sup>32</sup>

A recurring theme finds the planet-goddess endowing the king with sovereignty by investing him with a crown. Witness the following passage from *A song of Inana and Dumuzi*:

“May the lord whom you have chosen in your heart, the king, your beloved husband, enjoy long days in your holy and sweet embrace! Give him a propitious and famous reign, give him a royal throne of kingship on its firm foundation, give him the scepter to guide the land, and the staff and the crook, and give him the righteous headdress and the crown which glorifies the head.”<sup>33</sup>

Inanna is here said to invest the king with his glory by providing him with his royal crown. The Sumerian word translated as “glorifies” here is *dalla*, denoting a ring or crown. When used as a verb, the word signifies “to shine” or “to appear” and is commonly employed to describe the rising of the sun or some other brilliant celestial

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>32</sup> Lines B:10-12 from “A šir-namšub to Inana (Inana I),” *ETCSL*.

<sup>33</sup> Lines 36-41 in “A song of Inana and Dumuzi,” (Dumuzid-Inana D1),” *ETCSL*.



body.<sup>34</sup> The underlying idea here is that the king is invested with his regal glory or “crown” by the planet Venus itself (as Inanna).

Additional support for our astronomically-based interpretation comes from another early Sumerian epic poem entitled *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, described as “probably the finest piece of storytelling ever produced by the Old Babylonian authors.”<sup>35</sup> In the epic in question, Enmerkar is repeatedly brought into close association with the planet Venus. Most telling for our purposes here is the following passage, wherein Enmerkar’s kingship is explicitly credited to the planet: “The ever-sparkling lady gives me my kingship.”<sup>36</sup> The word translated as “ever-sparkling” here is *mul-mul-e*, “to shine, or radiate,” a verb formed from the Sumerian word for star (*mul*) and hence referring to the luminous splendor of Venus itself. The clear import of this passage, accordingly, is that kingship itself is a gift of the planet Venus. Far from being figurative in nature, the language of *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta* is best understood in literal fashion: It is the planet Venus who “makes” the king by investing him with a luminous crown of “glory” or charisma.

The explicit planetary context here is decisive for the proper understanding of ancient conceptions of kingship and royal power: The royal crown or charisma is nothing other than the glorious radiance of the planet Venus, universally identified as the prototypical female celestial power. So long as the prototypical king has his Venusian crown, all is well and fertility abounds throughout the land. Yet if the universal sovereign’s “glory” should ever depart disaster is sure to overtake the world and darkness and chaos will prevail.

With regards to the specific details of the planetary conjunction commemorated in the ancient traditions of Aphrodite imbuing Ares with “charisma,” it is important to understand that our model requires that the red planet be positioned squarely *in front of* the larger Venus within the so-called polar configuration of planets (see the illustration in figure one). It was this decidedly *extraordinary* conjunction of planetary powers that was

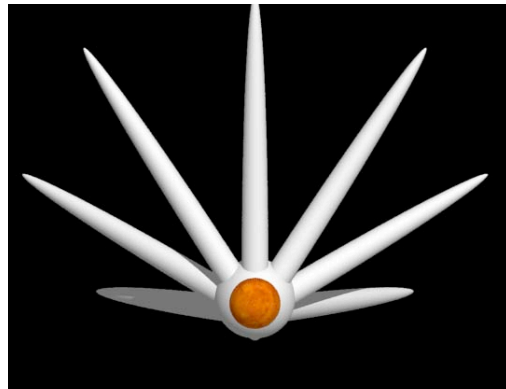
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<sup>34</sup> J. Halloran, *The Sumerian Lexicon* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> H. L. Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings* (Leiden, 2004), p. 49.

<sup>36</sup> Line 632 from “Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta,” *ETCSL*.

conceptualized as Aphrodite gifting her charisma to Mars during their sacred “marriage” or, alternately, as Inanna’s imbuing of Dumuzi or Enmerkar with the luminous crown of kingship.<sup>37</sup> As a result of these spectacular natural events, the red planet was viewed as having gained “Sovereignty” as King of the Gods. Indeed, it is precisely because the marriage of Venus and Mars is functionally and structurally analogous to the “crowning” of Mars that we would understand the indissoluble connection between the sacred marriage rite and sovereignty or kingship. Thus it is that, from the standpoint of historical origins, to be “King” meant nothing less than to be “married” to or conjoined with the planet Venus. For it was solely by means of his union with the planet Venus that the King of the Gods acquired the radiant “crown” and ascended to the throne.



**Figure one**

It goes without saying that the unique conjunction of planets depicted in figure one is quite impossible in the current solar system due to the fact that Mars, as a superior planet, can never appear “in front” of Venus, an inferior planet. Hence the bold challenge to the central tenets of modern astronomy presented by our radical historical reconstruction based largely on the written testimony of the ancient skywatchers themselves.

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<sup>37</sup> D. Talbott, *Symbols of An Alien Sky* (Portland, 1997), pp. 92-102.