

Hestia -- The Overlooked Olympian

When most people think of the Deathless Ones of Olympus, they think of the more well-known deities such as Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Apollo and Athena as well as the others who sit on the golden thrones. Yet, even though Hestia is the eldest of the Olympian Goddesses (with the possible exception of the Foam-Born Aphrodite) she is rarely even mentioned, much less shown for the profound role she truly plays in our lives.

She is the far more than simply Mistress of the Hearth, content to sit in the ashes as if she was the "Cinderella" of the Gods, displaying no real personality of her own. Her role has always been central not just to the family home, but to the greater community. The hearth not only is where the every-day business of life such as cooking and meal-times occurs, but in ancient times was the source of heat and light during the nighttime hours. It was the light and warmth that lead it to be the center of family life instead of merely being an area of lesser importance. The domestic hearth served as both sacrificial alter and gathering-place around which the basic unit of community was formed.

As the Hearth-Goddess she is the guardian of both familial unity and the sacred duty of hospitality providing us with a deep and abiding sense of personal security. Robert Graves in his book *The Greek Myths* even goes so far as to point out that the center of Greek life, even in the city of Sparta where the family was subordinate to the state, was the hearth-fire. When settlers went out to establish new colony cities, they would bring fire from the central hearth of their home city with them. Notable among the Olympians as the only one of the Great Gods who never engaged in war, she fosters a sense of community both in the Divine realm and in the mortal lands. She acts in ways that not only preserves the peace, but actively fosters agreement in conflicting parties.

When (according to some scholars) she cedes her throne to Dionysus upon his ascent to the Halls of the Gods, it is with the knowledge that she would be a welcome visitor in any of the city-states of Hellas. She was granted the right of receiving the first and last offerings at any ritual or feast after refusing to choose between Poseidon and Apollo when both asked for her hand in marriage, preferring to maintain her virginity and her neutrality. This mirrors the importance that was placed on philoxenia, or hospitality, in the Hellenic culture. The traveler was given the place by the fire, the

place closest to the Goddess' domain. But truly, her domain was, and still is, the entire home, the entire community, and the ties that bind us one to another.

Even to this day, she is best remembered in Western society by the name of Vesta, She who in ancient Rome was honored by virgin priestesses sworn to keep her sacred flame, thought of as the living spiritual strength of the city, alight. To seduce, or injure, the one of the Vestals brought with it a death sentence of being whipped to death in the public square as this was seen as tampering with the bonds that made the community whole and strong. The importance of Vesta to the spiritual life of the city was so great that if one of her priestesses encountered a condemned criminal on the way to execution, the criminal was set free as it was held that the Goddess herself had pardoned the person. Also, (at least according to some sources) "Their sacred fire was treated, in Imperial times, as the Emperor's household fire. It burned until 394, when the Emperor Theodosius I's decrees forbade public pagan worship, had the fire extinguished, closed the Temple of Vesta and disbanded the Vestal Virgins. The Vestals were put in charge of keeping safe the wills and testaments of various people such as Caesar and Marc Antony. In addition, the Vestals also guarded some sacred objects, including the Palladium (believed by some to be the same sacred image that was in the main temple of Troy, brought to Rome by Aeneas after the Trojan war), and made a special kind of flour called mola salsa, which was sprinkled on all public offerings to a god.

How is this important to the Modern Wiccan/Pagan communities? Hestia (or Vesta if you prefer Her in that incarnation) brings with her the ability to build bridges between disparate groups both within the Pagan community and with the greater national communities that we live in. If we do not keep Her flame strong in OUR everyday lives then how can we say that we truly say that we understand what it means to be Wiccan and/or Pagan? She is one of the Goddesses that inspires social activism including our efforts to educate others what we do and do not represent. She is the Goddess that allows us to help others overcome their fear and ignorance of our beliefs and practices. She is the Goddess that I pray will bring understanding between Wiccans and other Pagans no matter which of the different paths we walk in the world. We cannot afford to have barriers separating the Wiccans and the Reconstructionists, the "hard" polytheists (who believe that each and every God or Goddess has a separate and distinct personality) and those who believe that "All Gods are One, All Goddesses are One". These barriers harm all of us

in our quest for our Faith to be recognized and accepted in the world around us and not just within our various Circles, Covens, Groves (for the practitioners of Druidry), Eranoi/Demoi (for practitioners of Hellenismos), or Kindreds (for practitioners of Asatru/Heathenry). If we cannot respectfully discuss OUR various beliefs without misusing Hestia's living flame, then what right do we have to teach our Faith to others?

Nowhere in my recent life was this made more clear to me than when I (a Hellenismos practitioner and Hellenic Reconstructionist) attended a Samhain event sponsored by the local ADF (Druid) Grove. Although the main ritual centering around the Celtic pantheon itself was the most important element for a lot of the attendees, I was warmed by both the inclusion of a modified (to include men) Thesmophoria ritual in honor of Demeter and Persephone, and a remembrance rite to our ancestors (and others who have been important in our lives) led by a Heathen. This was made even more clear by a fireside discussion that continued into the wee hours of the morning between myself, the Heathen I mentioned, a Celtic Reconstructionist, and two others who do not (to my knowledge) follow a reconstructionist path. Even though ADF is not strictly reconstructionist in its organizational views, the event this Grove sponsored allowed followers of entirely different pantheons to meet and discuss our views of our various Gods. It was a place where I truly felt the influence of the Lady Hestia and her gift of Community-Building.

The spirit of community she fosters becomes still more evident in the world at large in the modern incarnation of the Olympic Games. At them, "the youth of the world" gather for peaceful competition every four years bathed in the light of the central Flame, that is lit at the beginning and lasts to the end of the festival. What better example can there be for her enduring power?