



FROM APHRODITE TO APHRODISIACS



MYTHS AND SUPERSTITIONS AROUND FERTILITY

Deanna Beckett, BS, MSS

The tiny oyster carries with it a gigantic reputation that has been propagated for centuries. Roman emperors would pay its finders in gold equal to the oysters' weight for the supposed aphrodisiac. Their belief in the oyster's power came from its connection to Aphrodite, the goddess of love.¹ According to ancient myth, Aphrodite was born from sea foam when Cronus overthrew Uranus, castrated him, and cast his genitals into the ocean.² The goddess is often depicted rising out of a shell by the sea. Although oysters aren't associated with Aphrodite today, their connection to love and lovemaking has survived.

Aphrodite was only one of the many deities who became connected with fertility. Gods associated with the abundance of crops were believed to influence the fecundity of the people. Gods of war and power were associated with virility, and gods of healing invoked to cure impotence or barrenness. Even today, some of the most popular myths and superstitions surrounding fertility are connected to mythology, legends, and traditions that began hundreds, even thousands, of years ago.

Formation of myth

In an effort to explain what they could not control, Neolithic man (6000–3000 BCE¹¹) associated natural and biological phenomenon with spirits that inhabited the sky, mountains, water, trees, meadows and other aspects of nature. They summoned these spirits to influence everything from the weather to healing. (The belief that these gods controlled illness was prominent until Hippocrates, 460–370 BCE¹⁰, began to associate disease and its cures with biological factors.³) By about 850 BCE, some of these local spirits had been personified into deities whose power and influence became more refined over time.^{3,7,8}

For example, historians believe that the Greek goddess of war, Athena, originated as a mountain spirit who inhabited the Akropolis rock, then called the Athene. As this spirit, she was the protector of the Minoan and Mycenaean palaces (3000–1100 BCE¹¹), but as the guardian of these warring barons, she naturally took on a similar reputation. When the Greeks settled the area, they adopted the local spirit as their own, personifying her as Athena and building temples in her honor.⁸

The Earth Mothers

During her manifestation as a mountain spirit, Athena was considered responsible for the region and its people. Local Athenians prayed to their “mountain-mother” for protection and productivity. In agricultural regions, the mother spirit was embodied in the crops as the Corn Mother, Harvest Mother, or the Great Mother. In the Western Hemisphere, she was associated with corn, oats or barley; in the East, with rice.^{3,7,8}

These primitive agrarian societies relied heavily on the fertility of the land, its animals and its people; therefore, they trusted the mother spirits for abundance in this area. This dependence gave rise to various rituals, customs, and superstitions designed to appease the spirits.

In time, the connection between the earth’s fruitfulness and that of man’s became intimately intertwined. Two thoughts prevailed. Humans could either transfer their vigor and virility to

crops and animals through their own sexual union, or they could transfer to them the energy saved by their sexual abstinence. Through these rituals, they would please the spirits and influence their future. The timing of this varied by region. In Russia and South Africa, intercourse often had to take place in the newly planted field. In parts of Europe, it was prescribed at the sowing and at the harvesting of the fields. Some Central American and Australian tribes, as well as some parts of Eastern Europe, forbid sexual union while the seed was sown so their members would eagerly appease the fertility gods once the restrictions were lifted.^{3,7} The Baganda tribe of Central Africa believed so strongly in this connection that barren women would be sent away to prevent loss to the village. And, the parents of twins were assumed to be so prolific that they were released from tribal duties and required to perform rituals to transfer their bounty to the tribe and its orchards.^{3,7}

Often, the last sheaf of any harvest was believed to contain the fertility spirit. The sheaf was cut and formed into the shape of a woman, then used in a harvest festival and, at times, kept until the sowing of the next year’s crops. In some cases, the person who cut the last sheaf received special rights or blessing and would marry or produce offspring before the next harvest.³

Another aspect of these festivals was the real or pretend marriage between a man and woman, who represented the male and female aspects of nature. In the May Day ritual, a king and queen were chosen to lead a ritualistic parade through the village. The queen is showered with gifts to ensure the givers’ blessings during the upcoming year. In Scotland, the people celebrated St Brides Day. In the festival, the bride was called Bridget or Brigit, after the Celtic goddess of fertility, and symbolized union between man and the gods.⁷ During other festivals, villagers dressed as earth gods or spirits and performed a mock marriage ceremony or drama symbolizing union.⁷

Some of today’s wedding traditions originated with these beliefs. In Germany, Scotland and Ireland, the bride and groom will loosen knots in their clothing to prevent the obstruction of conception or childbirth.^{3,7} Throwing rice or seed at

a wedding is intended to impart fertility on all who are touched by the grain. Even the wedding cake originated as a fertility symbol. The bride must be the first to cut a piece or she will remain barren.⁴

Fertility gods and goddesses

As ancient Mediterranean civilizations became more sophisticated, their mother gods evolved—gaining power and dominion over other aspects of life. Just like Athena, these spirits were later personified into deities. To gain favor, their followers built enormous temples and worshiped them in ways that varied from daily rituals to elaborate festivals.

Demeter

In mainland Greece, the Corn Mother was worshipped as Demeter. She is best known for the tale of her daughter Kore (later called Persephone), who was kidnapped and taken to Hades. Demeter's sadness caused the earth to lose its fruitfulness. Kore was eventually returned to her mother, but because she had eaten seeds from a pomegranate, she is forced to return to Hades for three months each year (winter).^{2,7}

The idea of a lost love causing the earth's seasons was common in mythology. In Egypt, a similar tale was told of Isis and Osiris; in Rome of Ceres and Proserpine; in Syria of Aphrodite and Adonis; in Sumeria of Inanna and Dumuzi; in Babylon of Tammuz and Ishtar; and in Phrygia of Cybele and Attis.^{2,7,12} The first part of each harvest was often sacrificed to these gods to honor the earth's return to life.⁷

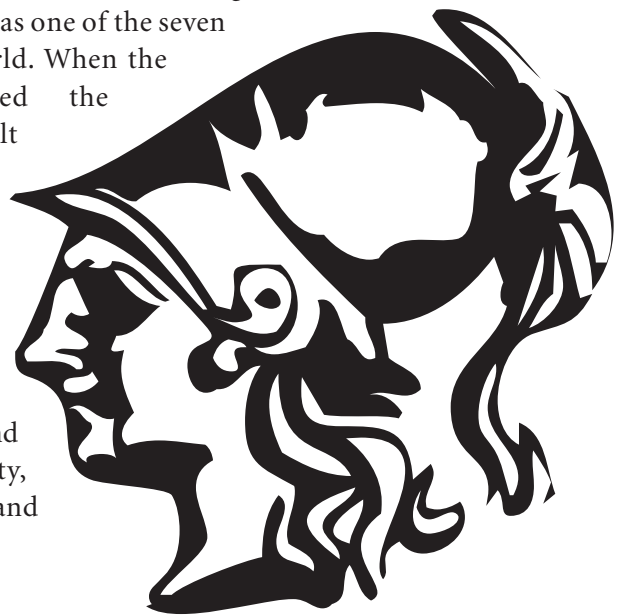
Aphrodite

As a goddess of fertility and motherhood, Aphrodite was worshiped throughout Western Asia early in antiquity, possibly beginning as the cult of Astarte. Romans later associated her with Venus. Temple prostitution was a common practice of her followers. Every woman in Babylon was required to sell herself before marriage and donate the earnings to her worship. Similar practices were widespread at her temples in Cyprus, Phoenicia and Syria.^{2,3,7}

Aphrodite's most famous lover was the young, handsome Adonis, who was also adored by Persephone. The two fought over him and appealed to Zeus to settle the argument. He decided that Adonis should spend half the year with each. Each year, Aphrodite mourns while Adonis stays with Persephone (in Hades) supposedly contributing to winter's barrenness.²

Artemis

Artemis was another mother spirit who was personified in Greek culture. She was considered the giver of fertility and the goddess who aided women in childbirth. She eventually became associated with wild beasts and hunting. Her temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the world. When the Romans conquered the Greeks, Artemis' cult was overtaken by her more popular Roman counterpart, Diana. Diana originated as a woodland mother spirit, inhabiting forests and groves, and presided over fertility, childbirth, hunting and the moon.²



Dionysus

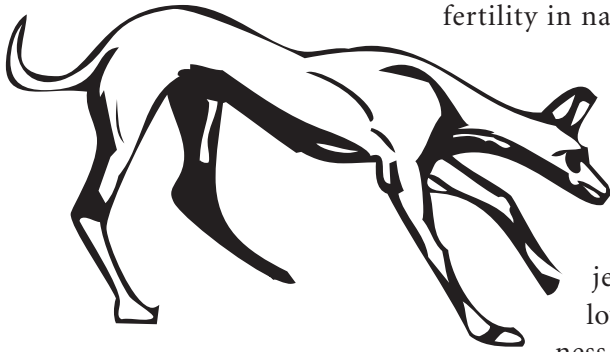
In Northern Greece, the ancient spirit of nature and fertility was personified in Dionysus. Although the myths vary, he is a bastard son of Zeus whose demise is plotted by the jealous Hera. In one tale, Dionysus is pulled from the womb of his mother's burning body and placed into Zeus' thigh until birth. In another, the baby is torn apart by Zeus' enemies, but Athena steals his heart. Zeus feeds the heart to another woman, and Dionysus is reborn. His rebirth story adds to his association with the earth's seasons and its productivity.²

The cult worship of Dionysus was widespread and extremely popular, possibly originating with the Egyptian god Osiris. In Rome, he was called

Bacchus. Dionysus was depicted as having horns growing from his head, so the bull and the goat were sacred to him. His followers believed that to tear apart and eat a child or an animal (mimicking Dionysus' death) was equal to eating the god himself—a true sacrifice. His origin as protector of the vines of Northern Greece stayed with him, and his festivals were renowned as drunken orgies.²

Pan, the god of flocks and shepherds, symbolized unbridled male sexuality, carnal desire, and human nature. He was considered one of Dionysus' attendants and was depicted as part goat, part man. Pan originated as a fertility or earth spirit in Arcadia as early as the 6th century BCE.^{2,13}

Priapus, proposed in some myths as the son of Dionysus and Aphrodite, was the Mysian god of fertility in nature and man. He is depicted as a small pot-bellied man with an unusually large penis. According to some traditions, Hera was so jealous of Aphrodite's lovers and her fruitfulness that she caused Priapus' deformity.² Naturally, his endowment made him highly favored among Greeks—a popularity which survives today.^{2,14}



Hermes

Hermes was originally worshiped as a god of herds, flocks and animals, so he was inevitably associated with human fecundity. He escorted the dead to the underworld, symbolizing death and life of the earth, and he was considered a god of luck. Ancient monuments dedicated to Hermes, Dionysus and Priapus all contained phallic statues and symbols.²

Other fertility deities

Gaia's marriage to Uranus represents the uniting of the earth and sky, and the corresponding fruitfulness of the earth. Cronus and Rhea (parents to Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Hades and Hestia) were also originally worshiped as earth spirits.² Hera, wife of Zeus and the patron of marriage, women, children, and childbirth, is sometimes summoned to cure barrenness.⁸

Mythology and Healing

To the ancients, maintaining a positive relationship with the gods was important to the smooth operation of everyday life; therefore, aspects of their worship permeated all aspects of society. This dependence was particularly evident in their approach to their own fertility or sterility.

Temple sacrifice

Temples to the gods of medicine were often places where the sick gathered to wait for heal-

WATER BABIES

Primitive peoples may not have understood the concept of sexual intercourse as a precursor to pregnancy.⁴ Mythological tales, like the story of Aphrodite's birth, provide various explanations of their perceptions of conception and birth. Helen of Troy was hatched from an egg laid by Nemesis, who had taken the form of a goose to avoid the advances of Zeus.⁵ Centaurs were born of the union between a mortal king and a cloud that had been shaped to look like the goddess Hera.⁶ And, Zeus swallowed the pregnant Metis to absorb her wisdom. Their daughter, Athene, was born later from a crack in Zeus' head when Hephaestus tried to cure him of headaches.² In Greek legend, Danae was impregnated by a shower of gold, which represents a common belief that women could be impregnated by the sun.⁷

Archeologists' first awareness of an understanding of fertilization began in Ancient Egypt. Even then, a woman could be impregnated by man or by a spirit, through the vagina or through the mouth. "Woman was fertilized by water just as the earth was fertilized by the Nile."^{4,10} Even today, barren women travel long distances to bathe in the river Nile. Water as a source of pregnancy existed, and still exists, in cultures all over the world. Barren women may be cured by bathing in the River Elatus, the Thespian well at Helicon, and the well at Pyrna in Greece; dipping in hot springs in Jerusalem or the Child's well in Oxford, England; or visiting various sacred wells or rivers in China, India and Algeria. German folk tales maintain that babies come into the world from rivers, ponds, or wells. And, South American tribes still believe that women can become pregnant from the spirits who dwell in the water or in the forest.⁴

ing. Sometimes the ailing would bring to the temples a votive or offering shaped like the particular body part needing healing.⁴ These members were made from terra cotta, metal and stone, wax or wood. Representations of female generative organs were found in temples to Amyto (a healing deity predating Aesculapius). Similar practices prevailed around temples to fertility gods. Offerings were presented in their honor to seek healing, to ward off evil spirits or spells, and to ensure sexual fulfillment, performance and fruitfulness. They were also used to petition for a safe birth, as gratitude for healing, or for recovery from difficult labor. Models of breasts were supposed to help with lactation. In Greece and Rome, cakes in the form of genitals of both sexes could be purchased for sacrifice to Priapus and Venus.⁹ In Europe, waxen images of frogs representing the “mother” were presented as votive offerings to heal barrenness.⁴

Animal remedies

Humans once believed that the mere association of an animal with a particular deity meant that it carried the god’s power and characteristics—including the power to heal. Humans could absorb these divine features by eating all or part of the animal. This practice began in Egypt and spread throughout ancient world. The Ebers papyrus, which supposedly contained remedies given to the people by the Egyptian god Thoth, shows evidence of this practice. The remedies it contained were often made from the ox, lion, hippopotamus, crocodile, cat, or snake—all animals sacred to Egyptian deities—and included incantations to evoke their power.^{4,7}

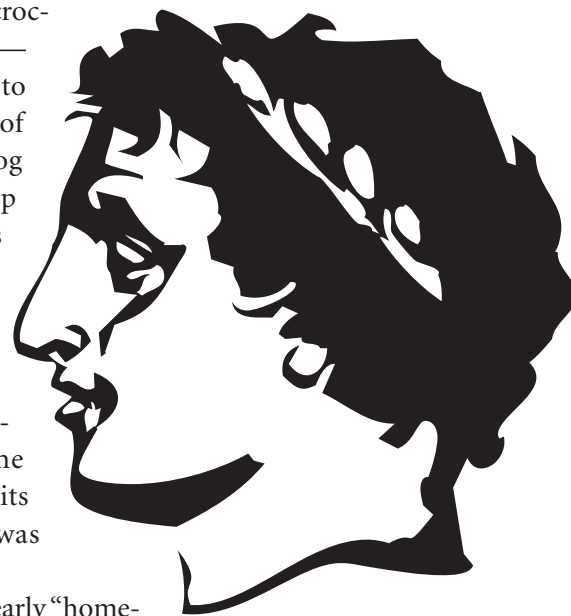
The type of animal and the parts used varied based on what needed to be healed. The Ebers papyrus suggested the use of human and animal excrement, as well as aphrodisiacs such as cantharides (Spanish Fly).³ Animal feces seemed to be a popular healing agent in antiquity, and cow dung is still used today in some countries. Paracelsus (1493–1541)¹⁰ dried and pulverized human excrement to make cures. Greek and Roman traditions held that cow, goat, camel, horse, and mice dung could be used as well.^{4,7}

Ancients believed that blood contained life and life-giving properties, so drinking the blood of a sacrificed human or animal imparted its life to the partakers. The Ebers papyrus prescribed various cures that included the blood of ox, ass, sow, dog, stag, etc. Early medical writers, including Galen, touted the benefits of blood of swine, bats, owls, goats, horses.⁴ Even today, snake and bat blood are considered an aphrodisiac in Eastern Asia. Blood from poisonous snakes, including cobras, are the most effective for enhancing the male libido.¹

An animal’s fat was also held to contain its life or strength. Early Egyptian remedies included fat of sacrificed animals, specifically the lion, hippopotamus, crocodile, cat, snake and ibex—all of which were sacred to their gods. In other parts of the world, human fat, dog fat, hog lard, and sheep lanolin were used as cures. Rubbing the male member with the melted fat from the hump of a camel, was supposed to make it “perform wonders, and the woman will praise it for its work.”¹ (The camel was sacred to the Arabs.⁴)

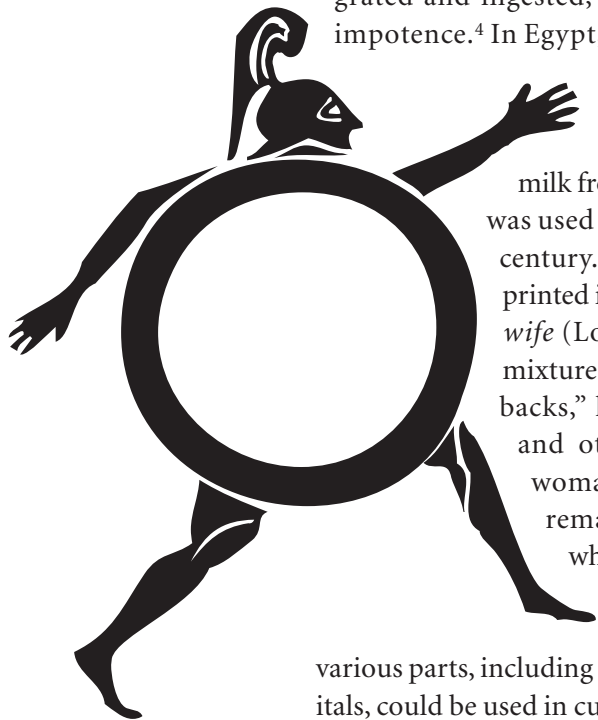
They transferred this early “homeopathic” belief to the parts of the animal. To absorb strength, eat the flesh of a tiger. An animal’s heart was believed to hold wisdom; the gallbladder to hold courage.⁴ According to Pliny (23–79),¹⁰ goat gall would ensure conception. Rubbing the male and female reproductive organs with the bile of a jackal was supposed to make the parts vigorous for sexual intercourse.¹ (The jackal was sacred to Assyrian and Egyptian gods.⁴)

Naturally, then, ancients believed that eating the reproductive organs of a healthy animal could transfer vitality and healing to the corresponding organ in the believer. Therefore, organotherapy became a popular approach to



curing infertility. Apicius (c 400) prescribes various preparations of pig and cow womb to increase productivity. Hippocrates promoted the consumption of deer penis as an aphrodisiac, a belief that was held through the 18th century.¹ Today, a bowl of tiger penis soup in Taiwan and South Korea can cost \$350! And, in America, it is not uncommon to see Rocky Mountain Oysters (bull or sheep testicles) listed as an appetizer.¹

Oxen were considered sacred to Northern European deities and revered in Egypt, Phoenicia, Greece, Rome and India. Bull's horns, when grated and ingested, were thought to cure impotence.⁴ In Egypt, symbolic intercourse



with a bull would “open the pathway to conception.”⁴ And,

milk from sacred oxen or cows was used for cures into the 17th century.⁴ A cure for barrenness printed in *The Compleat Housewife* (London, 1753) touted a mixture of strong ale, with “ox-backs,” herbs, dates, nutmegs and other ingredients. The woman was reminded to remain quiet and cheerful while drinking the tonic.³

Deer were sacred to several deities, and various parts, including hooves, horns and genitals, could be used in cures.⁴ Even today, Canada, Finland, Norway and Sweden export reindeer antlers to Eastern Asia to be used as aphrodisiacs. The popularity of rhino horn as an aphrodisiac and healing agent in those countries has led to the endangerment of all five rhino species.¹

Because of sacredness of the goat to gods, including Pan, throughout Europe and the Mediterranean regions, goat fat, horn, brain, milk, head, dung, skin, blood, and liver were all incorporated into medical treatments through the centuries. Sheep lanolin, clotted milk, lungs, bladder, gall and blood were also mixed in cures.⁴

Pigs were sacrificed to Demeter and Prosperine in Greece and to Osiris in Egypt. Ancients concocted cures from pigs' fat, blood, gall, dung, teeth and eyes. Pig brain was considered an aphrodisiac. In some areas of Germany, the spirit of the corn was made into the form of a pig instead of a woman.⁴

Plant remedies

Many plants and herbs were also considered sacred and, therefore had healing properties. Both the gods and their plants were associated with astrology so medicinal preparations were sometimes based on the position of the stars and planets.⁴

Grapes were highly celebrated as sacred to Dionysus and, therefore, associated with fecundity. Many believed that the buzz caused by wine was due to the spirit that inhabited it.⁴ Dionysus' followers believed they were feeling his spirit upon consumption.²

In ancient Greece, the pine tree, which symbolized fertility, was sacred to Cybele, Pan, and Neptune, and was used in festivals of Bacchus and Dionysus. Unopened pine cones symbolized virginity. Pine was used in Russian and Japanese weddings, and used to make torches for Greek weddings.⁴ Apicius advised a concoction of pine nuts mixed with honey, onions, mustard and pepper as a sexual stimulant. Galen (129–200)¹⁰ suggested the use of pine nuts mixed with honey and almonds and taken consecutively for three nights. Today, pine nuts are still considered an aphrodisiac in the Mediterranean and the East.¹

Walnuts were also connected with fertility. The nut's genus, Juglans, translates as the glans of Jupiter. Romans threw walnuts at weddings to ensure the couple's sexual abundance.¹ Other trees were beneficial too. A willow branch placed beneath the marital bed would cure infertility, and fig trees grown in pots around the home encouraged a prolific atmosphere.³

The Ebers papyrus lists “besbes seeds” (fennel seeds) as a potent aphrodisiac. Followers of Dionysus wore crowns of fennel leaves during

his festivals, and used its leaves and seeds as aphrodisiacs.¹

The herbs mugwort and woodworm were sacred to Artemis, and Chamomile was connected to the Egyptians and the Norse god Balder the Beautiful. All were used to enhance fertility.⁴ Mandrake, which is mentioned in the Bible, was believed to stimulate sexual activity and effectiveness.³ A native Mediterranean plant, it was sacred to Egyptians and used in the East to cure sterility.⁴ It could be used fresh for use in love potions, or dried and used to charm. Romans used valerian to prepare an erotic ointment. But Germans later believed that chewing valerian and kissing someone with the herb still in the mouth, would ensure the recipient's love.¹

Conclusion

Although very few people would consider eating animal excrement today, they don't hesitate to order oysters and wine or, in some countries, even snake blood to enliven their passion. Votive traditions still continue in many faiths, combined with prayers to saints for favor or healing. Festivals, such as May Day or the Harvest Festival, continue the traditions of antiquity but have lost their emphasis on worship of an Earth Mother. Why do the practices that began in ancient mythology still affect the behavior of logical, knowledgeable adults in the 21st century?

Our superstitions and traditions may be so familiar that they seem safe and comfortable. People may fear the consequences of ignoring some supposed truth that has lasted throughout the centuries. Perhaps a lack of confidence in modern medicine leads people to search for any alternative, no matter how bizarre, to influence change in their lives. Certainly, the idea of deities is still appealing enough to fuel the recent fad of goddess worship. Regardless of the reasons, an awareness of mythology and its influence helps medical professionals understand the superstitions and traditions that could affect their patients today.

References

1. Johan's guide to Aphrodisiacs. www.santson.com
Accessed 8/17/00
2. Stapleton M. *The Illustrated Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books; 1986.
3. Camp J. *Magic, Myth and Medicine*. New York: Taplinger Publishing Company; 1973: 17-34.
4. McKenzie D. *The Infancy of Medicine*. London: MacMillan and Co, Ltd; 1927: 15, 90, 98-149, 180, 222, 239-244, 290, 298-299.
5. Greek Mythology Link: Helen. Brown University. www.has.brown.edu/maicar
Accessed 5/30/00
6. The Bestiary: Centaurs. www.2netnitco.net/users/legend01/centaur.htm
Accessed 5/30/00
7. Fraser JG. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Vol 1. New York: The MacMillan Company; 1950.
8. Guthrie WKC. *The Greeks and Their Gods*. Boston: Beacon Press; 1966: 21-112, 211, 283.
9. Nuland SB. *The Mysteries Within: A Surgeon Reflects on Medical Myths*. New York: Simon & Schuster; 2000:229-230.
10. Lyons AS, Petrucelli RJ. *Medicine: An Illustrated History*. New York: Henry N Abrams, Inc; 1987:101, 248-250,376.
11. Timeline of Greek History and Literature. University of Victoria. web.uvic.ca/grs/bowman/myth/info/timeline_t.html Accessed 5/10/2000
12. Encyclopedia Mythica: Dumuzi. www.pantheon.org/mythica/articles/d/dumuzi.html
Accessed 7/13/2000.
13. Myth Man's Homework Help Center: Pan. www.thanasis.com/pan.htm Accessed 8/24/00
14. The Invisible Basilica: Priapus. www.hermetic.com/sabazius/priapus.htm Accessed 8/23/00

