RECLAIMING THE ROLE OF THE OLD PRIESTESS:
RITUAL AGENCY AND THE POST-MENOPAUSAL BODY
IN ANCIENT GREECE

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the roles of old priestesses in the Greek religious system. In addition to providing a comprehensive survey of the evidence for these priestesses, I present a theoretical model to explain the appointment of old women to these cults. I argue that their post-menopausal identity is fundamental for their selection as priestesses. This conception of post-menopausal identity has two facets—the physiological and the social. In each chapter, I discuss how different aspects of post-menopausal identity were relevant to specific cults and the ritual tasks performed by the priestess. Ultimately, it is their post-menopausal identity that necessitated the selection of post-menopausal women to these priesthoods.

As an introduction to this study of old priestesses, I discuss the history of scholarship on old women and the priestess in Chapter 1. I then explore the ancient conception of the old female body in order to clarify the physiological facet of post-menopausal identity in Chapter 2. I undertake a systematic study of menopause in the Greek world, using both ancient and modern comparative evidence. In subsequent chapters, I examine the different priesthoods to which post-menopausal women were appointed, each of which emphasizes different aspects of post-menopausal identity. In Chapter 3, I discuss the tendency of the Greek religious system to equate young and old women as ritual agents, using the Delphic Pythia as a case study. I propose that post-
menopausal women were able to renew their virginity. With their “renewed virginity,” post-menopausal women were ritually equivalent to physical virgins and were able to attain the same high level of ritual purity. The debates concerning women and sacrifice are addressed in Chapter 4, specifically in relation to the role of the sacrificing and slaughtering priestesses at the Chthonia. These post-menopausal priestesses were exceptional within the Greek sacrificial system as they are the only known example of female cult agents who slaughtered the sacrificial animal. I address the issues of why these women could sacrifice and why they were involved in the Chthonia specifically. I argue that these post-menopausal women were accepted as slaughterers because they were no longer viewed as a threat to the male patrilineal system. In addition, the female focus of the Chthonia as a mystery cult in honor of Demeter prompted the choice of post-menopausal priestesses. In Chapter 5, I utilize the cross-cultural perception of the old woman as the bearer of wisdom and transmitter of cultural traditions to examine the Sixteen Women of Elis and the Gerarai of Athens. Although the cult traditions of these two collective priesthoods differ, they are linked because of their connection to marriage and a younger female generation.

In this study, I offer an explanation for the appointment of old priestesses by focusing on the conception of post-menopausal identity with both its physiological and social facets. Post-menopausal identity, and specifically renewed virginity, is the initial step toward a more complete understanding of the post-menopausal woman’s role in ancient society.
DEDICATION

Dedicated to Mary Gentile and Genevieve Wilson
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1.1 The Old Woman in Ancient Greece

In many of the recent studies of women in ancient Greece, the primary focus has been on the adolescent, the *parthenos*, and the mother and wife, the *gynê*. These two age groups have a considerable amount of ancient evidence that describes them, especially in relation to their ritual activities. This dissertation, however, concentrates on the last stage of a woman’s life, on the old woman, the *graus*. Scholarship on old women in antiquity, or even the elderly in general, is sparse.¹ In his foundational work on the old woman’s place in Greek society, Jan Bremmer collects all the evidence concerning old women’s roles and perceptions in society.² He concludes that these women were freed from the traditional gendered seclusion because male society no longer needed them and were no longer threatened by them.³ This increased freedom, however, was coupled with a negative male perception of women. Bremmer sees a contradiction between this negative male judgment of “old women” as a category and the possibility that old women welcomed old age and its associated freedoms. In response to Bremmer’s arguments, Louise Pratt offers an alternate reading of the evidence in which she refutes the claims

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¹ For a discussion of scholarship on old age in antiquity, see Chapter 2.
about the negative value assigned to old women in Greek society.\textsuperscript{4} While not denying the existence of negative stereotypes of old women in ancient Greece, Pratt rejects that “all women, regardless of their previous social status, experienced a significant drop in social value after menopause.”\textsuperscript{5} While Bremmer may be too pessimistic in his view of old women’s value in Greek society, Pratt reacts too strongly in her opposition and does not give an accurate interpretation of all the available evidence.\textsuperscript{6}

Both Bremmer and Pratt examine all areas of older women’s lives. They use much of the same literary evidence to reach opposing conclusions concerning older women’s increased social freedoms. Because of the difficulties in the evidence, especially its anecdotal nature, quantifying how much freedom old women had in ancient Greece is nearly impossible. Instead of reexamining the same ancient evidence about old women, I focus on a particular group of old women, namely old priestesses.\textsuperscript{7} Through this analysis of old priestesses, the importance of old women in ancient Greece becomes clearer. In particular, I examine and define post-menopausal identity in terms of its physiological and social aspects to enhance the scholarly understanding of old women, and in particular old priestesses in ancient society.

\textsuperscript{4} Pratt 2000.

\textsuperscript{5} Pratt 2000: 43.

\textsuperscript{6} Pratt problematically bases much of her argument on how Demeter is perceived when she is disguised as an old woman in Eleusis in the \textit{Homeric Hymn to Demeter}.

\textsuperscript{7} Throughout this dissertation the terms priestess, sacred officials, ritual agent, cult attendant and female priest may be used interchangeably to refer to priestess in the ancient Greek religious system.
1.2 The Priestess in Ancient Greece

The Greek religious system is distinctive among ancient cultures because it lacked a professional priestly caste. Walter Burkert succinctly summarizes the situation as “Greek religion might almost be called a religion without priests.”\(^8\) In ancient Greece, instead of a priestly class within society, a variety of individuals and institutions held the authority to act in religious matters. The modern study of priests and priestesses in ancient Greece lacks a comprehensive treatment. Scholars have primarily focused on priesthoods in Athens because, as with most areas of ancient culture, there is more evidence for Athenian traditions. Douglas Feaver’s work on Athenian priesthoods, in which he correlates the method of acquisition to changes in political structure, is a prime example of the type of scholarship that dominates the field.\(^9\) In lieu of comprehensive studies, scholars have also chosen to focus on priesthoods associated with individual cults. The work of Kevin Clinton on the numerous sacred officials associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries exemplifies this type of scholarship.\(^10\)

Scholarship on the Greek priest generally ignores the Greek priestess with the a few notable exceptions, such as the priestess of Athena Polias in Athens or the Pythia of Delphi. The history of modern scholarship on the priestess can be traced through three works, Elisabeth Sinclair Holderman’s 1913 treatise, A Study of the Greek Priestess; Judy Ann Turner’s unpublished dissertation, Hiereiai: Acquisition of Feminine Priesthoods in Ancient Greece (1983); and Joan Breton Connelly’s recently published, Portrait of a

\(^8\) Burkert 1985: 95.

\(^9\) Feaver 1957.

\(^10\) Clinton 1974.
1.2.1 History of Scholarship on the Priestess

Perhaps the most visible religious role that a woman can play in the Greek world is that of the priestess. In the most recent accounting of women’s roles as priestesses, Joan Breton Connelly draws attention to the similarity between the activities performed by women in the home and those done in the temple.11 Women weave, bake, and clean both as part of their household responsibilities and as their duties in the temple. Connelly sees this connection as the basis for female agency in the religious sphere of the Greek world. The model of family and home is the foundation for Connelly’s understanding of Greek ritual functions; age-tiered divisions based upon the family model are the core of ritual service.12 Connelly extends her family model theory such that each age group of women has a relationship with a particular deity that depends on age, sexual status and other distinct characteristics. As many scholars have noted, there tend to be gender correlations between religious officials and deities. However, no firm rule binds such relationships, and notable exceptions can be found throughout the Greek world, such as the male hierophant of Demeter at the Eleusinian Mysteries and the female “doves”, *peleiai*, at the oracular shine of Zeus at Dodona.13 Connelly fails to acknowledge the cults where the gender of the deity and ritual agent are inconsistent. Instead, she emphasizes the complete correlation between the goddess’ personal characteristics and

12 Connelly 2007: 29.
the female chosen as priestess. For Connelly, “emphasis on the communality of deity and cult attendant is central to the determination of priestly requirements based on age, gender, and sexual status.”¹⁴ She illustrates this theory with the assertion that “virgin divinities such as Artemis are served by virgin priestesses, while matronly deities such as Demeter by married women.”¹⁵ Exceptions to this theory are countless, most notably the priestess of Athena Polias in Athens, who was traditionally a married woman.

Connelly adapts the “like deity, like priestess” model to explain more than women’s acquisitions of priesthoods. She sees this pattern as just one part of the Greek religious system that “provided role models with which individuals could identify at each stage in life.”¹⁶ Connelly contends that “the Greeks developed a religious system based on the human experience and so it both reflected and sustained the human condition in its fullest realization of sexuality, gender, and the life cycle.”¹⁷ A woman could trace her life course through the different deities she worshipped throughout her life.

Connelly’s work is the latest representation of the “like deity, like priestess” model, which has been the prevalent principle to explain the appointment of sacred officials since the nineteenth century. The model receives its most formal and thorough explanation in Elisabeth Sinclair Holderman’s A Study of the Greek Priestess.¹⁸ Unlike many other scholars, both before and after her, Holderman offers this model as an

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¹⁴ Connelly 2007: 30.

¹⁵ Connelly 2007: 30.

¹⁶ Connelly 2007: 30.

¹⁷ Connelly 2007: 30.

¹⁸ This published dissertation can also be found under the name Elisabeth Sinclair Peck (1913).
explanation for priesthood acquisition. Specifically, she sees an intimate relationship between the priestess and goddess, one akin to impersonation.¹⁹ This close relationship is demonstrated by instances of confusion between priestess and goddess, such as when the goddess of an earlier time was connected to a goddess of a later time as her priestess.²⁰ The mimetic relationship between priestess and goddess could only occur if they had a similar identity. Holderman further suggests that at the “back of this custom lay the idea, often revealed in Greek religion, that the divinity was best pleased with that which was most like itself.”²¹ A close, and even mimetic, relationship may have accounted for the choice of some priestesses, but it is hardly a universal explanation for this model or the diverse cult practices of ancient Greece. Holderman’s lasting influence remains her invaluable collection of ancient sources on priestesses as well as her effort to justify a theoretical model for cult appointment, which is simply assumed as true by the majority of scholars.

In addition to the books of Holderman and Connelly, the only other substantial work on priestesses is the unpublished dissertation of Judy Ann Turner.²² Although she assumes the validity of the “like deity, like priestess” model, Turner focuses on the means by which women acquired priesthoods. She discusses at length the different methods of acquisition, including inheritance, allotment, election, and purchase. She connects to the types of acquisition the necessary qualifications, which she views as twofold: issues of

¹⁹ Holderman 1913: 28.
²⁰ For example, Iphigeneia becomes the priestess of Artemis and Aglauros the priestess of Athena. Holderman 1913: 28-29.
²¹ Holderman 1913: 31.
²² Turner 1983.
family background and of sexual status. For the purpose of this discussion, her examination of sexual status is most relevant. She divides sexual status into the binary categories of virginal and married and does not consider an age component. She attributes much of the choice in acquisition to the “like deity, like priestess” model, to which she also connects the mimetic nature of ancient ritual. Like Holderman, Turner asserts that “the emphasis upon similarities between deity and cult attendant may have had ancient origins in a primitive belief that during the performance of religious rites priestesses entered into a state of unity or ‘oneness’ with the deity.”

The “like deity, like priestess” model, including Connelly’s extension of it to the worship patterns of every Greek female, is flawed because it ignores the last stage of a woman’s life: post-childbearing, that is, old age. In this model, old women would serve an old goddess as her priestess. Furthermore, with Connelly’s extension of this theory that advocates an analogous relationship between the female pantheon and all Greek women, old women should have an old goddess to emulate and worship during this late stage of their lives. Yet, there were no old goddesses in the Greek pantheon, and so there were no divinities to whom older Greek women could equate themselves in terms of their personal characteristics. Despite this flaw in the “like deity, like priestess” model and the incongruence of her own theory, Connelly recognizes that there are indeed priesthoods that were filled by older women in the Greek world. However, all of the deities whom these old women served violate her model, as they include virginal goddesses, such as Artemis, matronly goddesses, such as Demeter and Hera, and male deities, such as

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24 She lists and gives brief descriptions of such priesthhoods. Connelly 2007: 43-44.
Dionysus and Apollo. Because of the inability of existing theoretical models to explain the priesthoods of old women, I propose a new methodology that focuses on post-menopausal identity as a means to explain the appointment of old priestesses.

1.2.2 The Old Priestess

Older women had important roles as priestesses, and yet this age group is often overlooked in scholarship on both priestesses and women. Plato, however, recognizes the importance of the elderly in officiating sacred affairs, as he asserts that both male and female priests should be over sixty years old (Pl. Lg. 6.759d). Aristotle supports Plato’s proposal. In Aristotle’s ideal society, the priestly class is comprised of those who have retired from previous societal roles (Arist. Pol. 1329a). Yet, in the realities of Greek society, priesthoods were not restricted to the old. Other factors and characteristics were important in the choice of a specific individual for a priesthood, whether male or female, young or old, virgin or sexually active, rich or poor. Correspondence between gender, life stage, or sexual status of the ritual agent and deity may have been important in some priesthoods, but other aspects of identity were also taken into account.

To acquire a priesthood, the individual needed to have the right combination of personal characteristics. These qualities differed depending on the priesthoods; some of the attributes were gender, socioeconomic status, age, and sexual status. All of these characteristics are complex features of identity, but a brief look at them reveals that a number of choices had to be made to select a priestess. Perhaps the most basic dichotomy within identity is gender. Cults were generally specific as to whether they required a male or female official. However, gender alone was not sufficient for an individual to be appointed to a priesthood. Many other facets of identity were crucial.
Socioeconomic status played an important part in the acquisition of most priesthoods throughout the ancient world as upper-class individuals had more opportunities to become priestesses than those from other socioeconomic backgrounds.25 Another common category into which priesthoods are divided is age. For women, priesthoods are typically classified as those for pre-pubescent girls, adolescents, adult married women, and old women. Contrary to the previously discussed “like deity, like priestess” model, strict correspondence between the age of the mortal and deity was not a requirement. The choice of an individual from these different age groups depended on both the divinity served and the ritual functions that the priestess performed. Often implied in the issue of age is the sexual status of the women. Both female children and adolescents were presumed to be physical virgins, while adult women, both those of childbearing age and older, were presumed to have lost their virginity in marriage. All of these characteristics of identity, especially age and sexual status, have important implications for the issue of ritual purity. The ability to attain ritual purity and its relationship to the acquisition of priesthoods is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

1.3 The Demographics of Old Age

To discuss old women as priestesses, I first present the demographics of the elderly so that the population from which these sacred officials were drawn can be accurately assessed. In the modern world, the number of people considered to be living in old age grows every year. In 2008, the average life expectancy at birth was estimated

25 Members of the wealthy classes would have been more likely to acquire priesthoods that involved inheritance since they tended to be connected to prominent families. In addition, as purchase became a frequent method of acquisition in the Hellenistic period, the upper classes would have also had an advantage. For a detailed discussion on methods of acquisition and how family status related to acquisition, see Turner 1983.
at 66.6 years.\textsuperscript{26} In the United States, life expectancy at birth has risen significantly over the past century, from 47.3 years in 1900 to 77.8 years in 2004.\textsuperscript{27} This increase in average life expectancy at birth has created a growing elderly population. The U.S. population over the age of 65 constituted 8.1\% of the total population in 1950, 12.4\% in 2005, and is estimated to be 20.2\% in 2050.\textsuperscript{28} As one might suspect, the life expectancy at birth for those living in antiquity was significantly lower.

1.3.1 Ancient Demographic Evidence

Demographic assessment in the ancient world is a complicated task, which involves more extrapolation than calculation. Most ancient historians speak about these statistics in terms of probabilities, not certainties. Antiquity provides little more than scattered literary documents and archaeological remains to evaluate the age and number of people who lived at any given time. Consequently, scholars use a variety of techniques to assess the demography of the Greco-Roman world.

The ancient evidence used to determine demographic statistics is primarily that related to the vestiges of birth and death. For instance, some scholars utilize bones discovered at archaeological sites.\textsuperscript{29} Paleodemography, with its scientific trappings, appeals to many scholars looking for “the” answer, but its problems are often ignored.\textsuperscript{30} Specifically, it is difficult to determine both the sex and age of skeletal remains: two

\textsuperscript{26} Central Intelligence Agency 2009.

\textsuperscript{27} National Center for Health Statistics 2009a.

\textsuperscript{28} National Center for Health Statistics 2009b; U.S. Census Bureau 2008.

\textsuperscript{29} For study of Greek burials, see Morris 1987.

\textsuperscript{30} J. L. Angel has pioneered the field using remains from Greece (1945, 1947, 1969, 1972). Gallant 1991 and Sallares 1991 each question some of his findings, but ultimately accept his basic conclusions and methodology.
crucial elements needed to construct demographic statistics.\textsuperscript{31} With just a few hundred samples of identified remains, which range widely both in chronology and geography, it is quite difficult to develop a life table for all of antiquity. Funerary inscriptions are another common category of evidence.\textsuperscript{32} There are numerous problems with accepting epitaphs as demographic markers of lifespan in antiquity.\textsuperscript{33} Such inscriptions, however, are useful as they record that the people in antiquity were very proud of extreme longevity, a perception that is also evidenced in ancient literature. It is often argued that people in antiquity did in fact reach old age because of the extant literary anecdotes concerning extreme longevity.\textsuperscript{34} Ultimately, these literary documents reveal a fascination with the extremely old, but provide little information about the likelihood of reaching such an advanced age.

Scholars have also used ancient birth and death records. Roman Egypt is particularly fruitful in its supply of official documents that have survived on papyri and ostraka. The extant census and tax documents are useful in examining the composition of elites living in the area, but there are limitations in applying these data to the Roman Empire, and certainly to the entire Greco-Roman world. Roman Egypt is not the only location where records of births and deaths were kept. Throughout the Greco-Roman

\textsuperscript{31} For a thorough explanation of the faults of paleodemography in the ancient world, see Parkin 1992: 41-58.

\textsuperscript{32} Beloch 1886; Macdonell 1913; Hopkins 1966.

\textsuperscript{33} For a detailed accounting of the problems with the epigraphic evidence, see Parkin 1992: 5-19.

\textsuperscript{34} Parkin 1992: 107-111; Parkin 2003: 36-46.
world, fragments survive, but it is impossible to pool these pieces of data into a coherent picture of antiquity.  

1.3.2 Estimations of the Elderly in Antiquity

Despite these challenges, scholars generally estimate that the average life expectancy at birth in antiquity was between twenty and thirty years. However, in ancient Greece, there was an extremely high infant mortality rate, so judging the dynamics of a population from life expectancy at birth can be misleading. A more useful estimate may be determined by evaluating the life expectancy from age five or ten. This approach considers the life expectancy of the individual who survived the difficult periods of infancy and early childhood. It, therefore, precludes the bias created by high infant mortality in a population such as ancient Greece.

To generate more accurate demographic information, scholars have turned to model life tables to determine life expectancy at different ages. Model life tables “provide a succinct description of what is the most prominent aspect of the state of human mortality: they show the varying chances of dying as a function of age.” Scholars of ancient history use these modern tools of demography because they are “intended for use chiefly in situations where no reliable direct evidence is at hand.” These models, therefore, “are essential to understanding phenomena comprising individual events so numerous that they cannot be accounted for—indeed, have no

37 Coale and Demeny 1983: 3.
38 Coale and Demeny 1983: 3.
significance—when taken individually.”  

The model life tables most readily used by scholars of antiquity are those compiled by Ansley Coale and Paul Demeny (Princeton tables). In their calculations, Coale and Demeny assume an “ideal” population; that is, a stationary population, one that is closed and has constant birth and death rates over an indefinite period of time. While no population is entirely stable, using such assumptions allows one to create a complete life table and analyze the structure of the population. From the many tables created by Coale and Demeny, the Coale-Demeny Model West Level 3 Female is argued to best describe all of ancient society.

To consider the size of the elderly population, one must rely on cultural factors that determine when a person is considered old. In his studies of demography and old age in the Roman world, Tim Parkin uses sixty years as the threshold for old age, and he estimates that 6% to 8% of the population of the Roman Empire would have been old. However, as I discuss in Chapter 2, gender differences must be considered in determining old age and estimating the size of the older population. If those over the age of fifty years are considered old, more than 15% of the population would be classified as old. If forty years is the demarcation of old age, 26% of the population would fall into this category. The consideration of either forty or fifty years as the threshold for old age has

40 For alternative life model tables and their applicability to the ancient world, see Woods 2007.
41 Parkin 2003: 48-49.
42 Coale and Demeny identify four main families of model life tables: North, South, East, and West. Each family has 25 variations (or levels) for each gender. For the ancient applications, see Parkin 1992: 67-90; Saller 1997: 22-25; Parkin 2003: 46-53.
43 The perception of old age and how it is determined are discussed thoroughly in Chapter 2.
increased significance when these ages are understood in the context of the average age of menopause in antiquity.\textsuperscript{45}

While the methodology of model life tables and the demographic statistics focus on the Roman world, they are not only applicable to Rome.\textsuperscript{46} Since scholars of both Greek and Roman history agree on the range of twenty to thirty years for life expectancy at birth in antiquity, the figures from the Coale-Demeny\textsuperscript{2} Model West Level 3 Female table are equally applicable to both Rome and Greece. They can be used to estimate life expectancy and the number of elderly in Greek society. For example, Ephraim David employs Coale and Demeny’s model life tables in his work on Sparta to estimate the size of the elderly population within the citizen-body.\textsuperscript{47} The most outspoken voice against the use of model life tables to reconstruct ancient demography is Walter Scheidel. A scholar of both Greek and Roman history and demography, Scheidel initially used the Coale and Demeny model life tables in his work, but more recently he has rejected the value of these tables in ancient history.\textsuperscript{48} He believes these extrapolations are suitable only for historical populations that have already overcome the deadly diseases that destroyed earlier populations and distorted age structures in unpredictable ways.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45} Menopause was the crucial physiological feature that marked a woman as “old” in ancient Greece because it designated the end of the defining feature of Greek “femaleness”—the ability to bear children. The age and social implications of menopause are discussed further in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{46} These methods are used by Keith Hopkins, Tim Parkin and Richard Saller. Hopkins 1966; Parkin 1992, 2003; Saller 1997.

\textsuperscript{47} David 1991: 12. It must be noted that David and others, who are only examining the population of ancient Sparta, typically apply a different model life table—Coale-Demeny\textsuperscript{2} South Level 4—because of the distinct social circumstances of Spartan society.

\textsuperscript{48} Scheidel employs Coale and Demeny life tables in his study of the demography of the Roman army as well as other case studies (Scheidel 1996).

\textsuperscript{49} Scheidel 2006: 3.
While unequivocal demographic statistics cannot be constructed for either Greek or Roman society based on ancient evidence or model life tables, the use of the existing evidence and demographic tools provides scholars information with which to construct a better understanding of the age structure of ancient society.

1.4 Methodology and Sources

This dissertation addresses the topic of women in antiquity and, consequently, must deal with the accompanying methodological concerns. Specifically, I refer to the ongoing difficulties regarding women’s societal roles, identity, and voice. The dominant paradigm for women’s roles in society has been that of seclusion and exclusion. However, recent scholarship has developed a more nuanced view of the female position in society, and her world has been expanded considerably. In no sphere have these developments been shown more clearly than in religious matters and ritual. As Barbara Goff suggests, “since ritual practice afforded women a public presence and a voice, evidence for women’s activities, while still elusive, can be more abundant in this field than elsewhere.” The focus of this dissertation on ritual, and specifically on priestesses, illustrates the activities of old women outside of the oikos.

Issues of identity can be problematic in the study of women in antiquity. As Susan Guettel Cole observes in her work on gender and ritual, identity is a multifaceted collection of characteristics about an individual. These features can include gender,

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50 For example of this line of scholarship, see Cohen 1989.
51 For this view on religion and ritual in women’s lives, see Cole 2004 and Goff 2004.
52 Goff 2004: 3.
race, citizenship, social class, and age. Often in the scholarship of women in antiquity, there is little differentiation in the category of “women,” although the ancient sources primarily refer to aristocratic citizen-wives. This reification of the term “woman” is a problem not only in classics, but has also been addressed by the feminist movement. Goff argues for the possibility of maintaining the category of “women” in relation to ritual “because ancient Greek women are regularly convened by cult practice qua women, to celebrate that which unites rather than divides them, namely their identities as wives and mothers.” Although there are some limitations to the use of these terms, I use both “old women” and “post-menopausal women” to refer to the group of women from which these priesthoods were appointed. I use these phrases interchangeably and define both as women over the age of fifty.

Lastly, in relation to the study of women in antiquity, there has been a renewed focus on recovering the female voice. Opinions differ on the success of this scholarly endeavor. Goff does not consider ritual to provide “authentic, unmediated access to the subjectivities of ancient women.” Alternatively, Laurie O’Higgins uses women’s cults as the basis for her arguments about a separate women’s speech and literary tradition. This present study of old priestesses does not actively engage in the debates about

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54 For a summary of this issue and its relation to the study of women in antiquity, see Goff 2004: 19-20.


56 The choice of fifty years as the threshold connects to the age of menopause, which I discuss in Chapter 2.

57 Goff 2004: 3.

recovering the female voice. Instead, I focus on the priestesses’ actions in order to determine their ritual agency in individual cults.

In the study of women in antiquity, and particularly women and ritual, numerous issues related to the ancient sources arise. It is necessary to acknowledge that the overwhelming majority of ancient sources were written by men and for men. Caution must be used when extracting information from ancient sources because of the pervasive male bias present throughout antiquity. Even if ancient sources cannot be taken as the basis of precise and accurate historical data, they can be understood as reflecting cultural attitudes.

Sources are equally an issue in the study of religion in antiquity. In order to create a coherent picture of Greek ritual, all available literary and non-literary texts, inscriptions, material from archaeological excavations, and visual evidence must be considered. An analysis with this range of sources constructs a more comprehensive representation of ritual in a way that one textual description cannot. The evidence extends across genres and also across time and space. Sources vary from the Homeric epics of the eighth century BCE to the antiquarian lexicographers of the fifth century CE. In the midst of these extremes is the evidence derived from the travel writer, Pausanias. Scholars of classical Greek religion depend on the reliability of Pausanias’ descriptions of local myth and cult, even though he wrote in the second century CE. The use of sources from the entirety of antiquity has been justified because of the stability and

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60 Goff 2004: 24.
continuity of cult practices; “ritual by its very nature relies on tradition, and even though it may accept modifications, it will rarely admit as much.”

1.5 Summary of Chapters

Like others, Connelly fails to consider the role of older women in the Greek religious system, and thus her model concerning the priestess cannot comprehensively encompass all of female agency within Greek religion. The present examination of the role of the old woman as priestess reveals a new model that provides further insight into the complexities of female agency in Greek religion. In the next four chapters, I examine the roles of old priestesses, moving beyond a simple listing of the priesthoods. To explain why old women were chosen as priestesses for different cults, I focus on the conception of post-menopausal identity, which considers both the physiological and social identities of the post-menopausal woman. Within each cult tradition, different facets of post-menopausal identity were central, depending on the ritual roles of the priestess.

In Chapter 2, I explore the conception of the old female body in antiquity. Before the old female body can be fully appreciated for its distinct attributes, it is necessary to understand the ancient conception of old age and gender differences associated with aging. The advent of old age was markedly different for each sex. For men, a change in physical abilities was the event that denoted the beginning of old age. Men’s life stages were defined by their participation in the public sphere. They were judged to be old by a change in their public status. On the contrary, women’s lives were characterized by their roles in the home and within the family, not by the public sphere. Old age for women

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62 Goff 2004: 23.
was a private and individual matter. The advent of old age for women could also be understood as a change in physical ability, but more precisely, a change in her physiological identity. A woman was considered old when she could no longer bear children, i.e., when she entered menopause.

I discuss menopause both as a cross-cultural phenomenon and as it was viewed in the ancient world. The discussions that surround menopause in modern scholarship are polarized. Feminist scholars have harshly criticized both the medical community as well as popular publications that tend to medicalize menopause. Once medicalized, menopause becomes a pathological condition and is no longer viewed as a natural aging process. The medicalization of menopause with its associated list of symptoms and pharmaceutical treatments is not universal; rather, it is limited to those societies with access to Western medicine. Studies of menopause in cultures where Western medicine is not as pervasive show that these cultures have different experiences and perceptions of menopause.

Menopause in the ancient world has not been systematically studied. Because of the gaps in our knowledge of ancient gynecology, I follow the lead of Helen King and utilize medical anthropology to frame my arguments about the ancient understanding of menopause. The Greek conception of menopause did not follow a disease model. Instead, menopause was viewed as a natural occurrence during the aging process. There was a general consensus among the ancient authors that women ceased to menstruate between the ages of forty and fifty. The ancient medical authorities, particularly the Hippocratic corpus and Aristotle, attributed the cessation of menses in old women to

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63 Berger 1999; Sievert 2006.
changes that occurred in their bodily constitutions. As women aged, they became drier and colder. Societal perceptions of menopause and the old female body in ancient Greece supported the general belief that the male body was superior to the female body. However, with the onset of menopause, old women were able to assume new social identities that made them ideally suited for certain priesthoods as are discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Each of the next three chapters examines different priesthoods to which post-menopausal women were appointed and discusses the different facets of post-menopausal identity that were important for the cult. Consideration of both the physiological and social aspects of post-menopausal identity is crucial for understanding the selection of old women as priestesses. In Chapter 3, I focus on the tendency in the Greek religious system to connect young and old women as ritual agents. Frequently, this equivalence was expressed as a substitution within a priesthood, wherein a young priestess was replaced by an old priestess. I argue that this ritual connection was based on the fundamental similarities in the ancient conception of the virginal and post-menopausal body. Post-menopausal women were able to regain the virginity of youth, according to ancient gynecological concepts. With their “renewed virginity,” post-menopausal women were able to achieve the same level of ritual purity as physical virgins. While the ritual purity of young virgins and post-menopausal women was equivalent, differences in the social identities of these two age groups made post-menopausal women more attractive candidates for priesthoods that required high levels of ritual purity and extended lengths of service.
I discuss the implications of renewed virginity using the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo at the Delphic Oracle, as a case study. My discussion of the Pythia resolves the controversies that have surrounded her age and sexual status. Scholars have debated whether the Pythia was appointed as a physical virgin for her entire life or was appointed later in life as an old woman. One of the main points of contention in this debate is the vocabulary of virginity in some of the sources, such as Plutarch. With the conception of renewed virginity, I reconcile the language concerning virginity with the clear references to the Pythia’s old age in other pieces of evidence. I ultimately conclude that the Pythia was indeed a celibate post-menopausal woman who was appointed later in life.

Chapter 4 examines the old priestesses of the Chthonia in Hermione who performed the sacrifice to Demeter Chthonia. The sacrifice described at the Chthonia deviates from what has been identified as typical Greek sacrificial ritual. Mostly notably, the sacrifice and slaughtering were performed by women. While scholars recognize the importance of women in sacrificial ritual, especially as the carriers of the sacrificial basket (kanēphoroi) and performers of the ritual cry (ololygē), female slaughterers were anomalous in the Greek religious system. Even though the scholarship on sacrifice in antiquity is distinguished and extensive, it does not, for the most part, address the issue of women and sacrifice. The significant exceptions are the articles of Marcel Detienne and Robin Osborne, who present opposing arguments on whether women typically were participants in sacrificial ritual. Neither Detienne nor Osborne, however, sufficiently explains the practices of the Chthonia. I address two issues in regard to the

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64 Detienne 1989; Osborne 1993.
post-menopausal priestesses of the Chthonia: why old women were appointed to sacrifice and why in this particular cult.

To examine the role of post-menopausal women as sacrificers and slaughterers at the Chthonia, I utilize the gendered theory of sacrifice of Nancy Jay. Building on the theory of cross-cultural opposition between childbirth and sacrifice, Jay emphasizes how sacrifice enables men to establish patrilineal relationships without a dependence on the reproductive powers of women. Sacrifice allows for social and ritual paternity to replace biological paternity; within this system, women, especially those in the role of mother, are marginalized in sacrificial ritual. As a patrilineal society that formed agnatic communities through sacrificial ritual, ancient Greece limited the role of women in sacrifice and excluded women from the role of slaughterer. The priestesses of the Chthonia were the exception in the Greek sacrificial system. With Jay’s gendered theory of sacrifice as the underlying basis, I argue that the old priestesses of the Chthonia were permitted to act in the role of slaughterer because of their post-menopausal identity. Specifically, they no longer were a threat to the patrilineal sacrificial system because of their non-childbearing state.

The application of Jay’s gendered theory of sacrifice allows for an understanding of post-menopausal women’s ability to sacrifice, but it does not address their appointment to the priesthood of the Chthonia. I propose a possible explanation for the choice of post-menopausal women as the priestesses that is based on the interpretation of the Chthonia as a mystery cult, which the Hermionians positioned to rival the Eleusinian Mysteries. The mysteries of the Chthonia were based on local traditions of the

mythology of Demeter and Kore. Old women were chosen for the Chthonia because of the violent female focus of the cult. The constraints of the Greek sacrificial system and other details of the mythology of Demeter and Kore, which are described in Chapter 4, necessitated the appointment of post-menopausal women to act as the sacrificers and slaughterers at the Chthonia.

In Chapter 5, I examine the Sixteen Women of Elis and the Gerarai of Athens. The Sixteen Women of Elis performed three ritual roles; they wove the peplos for Hera, arranged choruses for Hippodameia and Physkoa, and organized the Heraia. These ritual duties were both explicitly and implicitly connected to the institution of marriage. This connection to marriage is especially prominent in their organization of the Heraia, athletic games in which parthenoi competed in footraces. I propose to interpret this festival as a “ritualization” of the initiatory experience that the parthenoi were undergoing as they prepared for marriage. The intergenerational dynamic between the Sixteen Women and the parthenoi necessitated the post-menopausal age of these women. Fundamental to the appointment of the Sixteen Women was the perception of the old woman as wise and a source of guidance. This facet of social identity was also important to the selection of the Gerarai of Athens.

The Gerarai of Athens were a group of fourteen old priestesses who were appointed each year by the archon basileus. At the Athenian festival of the Anthesteria, the Gerarai served the basilinna as they performed secret rites in the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes and prepared for the hieros gamos, sacred marriage, between the basilinna and Dionysus. Their ritual connection to marriage also prompted an emphasis on the wisdom and counsel of the old woman. The Gerarai can be understood
as a foil to the Sixteen Women. The ritual activities, associated divinities, and locations differ, but these priesthoods are linked by their intergenerational dynamics and the stereotype of the wise old woman. This social aspect of post-menopausal identity in conjunction with their high level of purity necessitated that post-menopausal women be chosen for these collective priesthoods.

In conclusion, I examine these different examples of old priestesses individually within the details of each cult. I do not put forth a universal theory to explain the appointment of all priesthoods; rather, I focus on the specifics of the post-menopausal woman. It is the new conception of post-menopausal identity—both its physiological and social features—that determined the choice of post-menopausal women for these priesthoods.
CHAPTER 2
DEFINING THE OLD WOMAN: OLD AGE AND MENOPAUSE

2.1 The Elderly in the Ancient World

As a group the elderly have often been overlooked in classical scholarship. This stage of life is traditionally considered less exciting to study in comparison with children, adolescents, and certainly the adult citizen elite. There also are challenges with the literary evidence concerning the elderly because it is often recorded from the point of view of a younger generation and, therefore, reflects a generational bias and not necessarily the actual views or practices of society. However, in the past decade there has been renewed interest in the elderly of the ancient world. Several book-length studies have focused on old age in Rome, and several others examine old age more broadly, including in antiquity.\(^1\) Unfortunately, a study of old age in Greece is generally lacking. The most comprehensive treatment in English is still Bessie Ellen Richardson’s *Old Age among the Ancient Greeks* from 1933, which is now outdated both in terms of the available evidence and methodology. The historian of ancient Greece also lacks a comprehensive ancient account of old age, akin to Cicero’s *On Old Age*.\(^2\) It is necessary to piece together clues from a variety of sources to uncover the nature of old age in the


\(^2\) Plutarch’s treatise, *Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Politics*, addresses an important facet of old age, but is not comprehensive (Plu. *Mor.* 783aff.).
Greek world. In this brief discussion of old age in Greece, I do not list every source nor do I lay out all the different aspects of living into old age. Instead, I focus on the body as it aged and how the old body was perceived both by the elderly themselves and by Greek society at large.

2.1.1 Age Classification in Antiquity

To be “old” in the ancient Greek world was not as simple as counting the number of candles on one’s birthday cake. Age was determined not by the number of years an individual had lived, but by one’s membership in an age class. Such age classes were reflected in the vocabulary used to designate and describe an individual within a certain age group. Ephêbê, anêr, and gerôn were a few words that might classify a male over his lifetime; females had a different set of terms, including parthenos, nymphê, gynê, and graus. Like age-class vocabulary in modern cultures, these terms carried not only connotations about age, but also about political, religious, and marital status. Yet, for the most part, these terms did not indicate a specific age, but rather they associated the individual with a general stage of life and the types of activities and life choices that accompany it. In addition to age-class vocabulary, there was also a long tradition of defining the life cycle using divisions based on round numbers. Solon divides the human lifespan into ten groups of seven years (hebdomades), each of which had individual characteristics (Sol. 27 West). Aristotle agrees with the division of the human life into hebdomades, as it accords with nature (Arist. Pol. 7.1336b40-2). For Solon, old age—the

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3 Some funerary inscriptions, however, do record age at birth and death. In addition, Wilhelm Schmidt has collected evidence for the commemoration of birthdays in ancient Greece (1908).

time of physical and mental decline—begins in the ninth *hebdomas*, at the age of sixty-three. There was hardly consensus, however, on the beginning of old age. Various Hippocratic systems of life-cycle division mark the commencement of old age at the ages of forty-two, fifty-six or sixty-three. The multitude of ages that could indicate the beginning of old age is consistent with modern notions, which also tend to shift depending on cultural and social circumstances. Tim Parkin is correct in his assertion that “it is necessary to rid ourselves of too mathematical a definition of old age…we do not use such a universal or exact definition of old age today, and there is even less reason to suppose that the Greeks or Romans ever did.”

2.1.2 Ancient Perceptions of Old Age

Once an exact numerical definition for old age is rejected, it becomes necessary to examine other ways in which the ancient Greeks considered old age. Like any complex social category, views on old age are not uniform throughout the ancient sources. The perceptions of old age were both positive and negative, but a general pessimism concerning the life stage of old age and the process of growing older permeated much of Greek thought. This pessimism was not restricted to disdain and fear about changes in personal appearance and social situation; instead, old age itself took on the Greeks” sentiments of scorn and contempt. Throughout the poetic tradition, old age is qualified with negative epithets, such as painful, destructive, difficult, and hated. In the *Iliad*, for instance, Achilles refers to “grievous old age,” χαλεπὸν...γῆξαο, in a speech to Nestor as

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6 Parkin 2003: 16.
he is distributing the prizes for the funeral games of Patroclus (Hom. Il. 23.623). Achilles laments that old age has prevented Nestor from participating in the games. In another example, Iphis, speaking about himself, proclaims that he hates “difficult to handle old age,” δυσπάλαιστον γῆρας (E. Supp. 1108). This pessimistic sentiment concerning old age was not confined to young and old human beings; the gods also loathed old age. In the *Homerica Hymn to Aphrodite* when Aphrodite attempts to explain why she must forsake Anchises after their lovemaking, she cites old age as the reason (HH Aph. 5.191-290). Old age is the curse to which mortals are subject, and so Aphrodite and Anchises cannot be together. These episodes are chosen out of countless others because they illustrate that these sentiments were not limited to the elderly considering their own situations. These examples from epic and tragedy demonstrate the negative imagery associated with *gēras* and that this negativity pervaded Greek culture.

Mythology also reflects the pessimism that the ancient Greeks felt toward old age. *Gēras* was personified in the Greek pantheon as the offspring of Night and as the sibling of Doom, Fate, and Death (Hes. Th. 211-25). Not only was *Gēras*’ genealogy dreadful, but his artistic representation was also monstrous as personified in a battle with Herakles. *Gēras* is typically represented as a grotesque caricature of a man. He is often nude and

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7 Aphrodite uses the adjectives, “pitiless, deadly, and wearying,” νηρλαξιζ, σολόμενον, and κυματηρόν, to describe old age, in addition to describing it as something “the gods even hated,” στυγέουσι θεοί περ (HH Aph. 244-246). She also uses the same negative imagery of old age when she recounts the myth of Eos and Tithonos (HH Aph. 219-238). This myth is described in a similar negative context in a fragment of Sappho (West 2005).
The negative feelings expressed in these examples towards aging, however, cannot be taken as a wholly anti-elderly stance. Aging is a complex process that elicits many feelings throughout an individual’s lifespan. It is important to recognize that a multitude of sentiments on aging and old age existed in ancient Greek society. These ideas, expressed in both literary and artistic sources, often contradict each other, as one would expect when addressing a complicated social issue. While society articulates pessimism about old age with one breath, with another it praises those who lived long, successful lives. To live a long full life was considered a goal by most Greeks, despite their negative feelings about old age. For instance, one Platonic dialogue describes how people who bury their parents and are buried by their children are considered to live a happy life (Pl. Hp. Ma. 291de).

2.1.3 The Biology of Old Age in Ancient Greece

The ambivalent outlook towards old age may be related to the perception of this life stage as an aspect of human biology. Throughout history, there has been a debate concerning the nature of old age in regard to human health. Some doctors and philosophers view old age as physiological; it is just another part of human development. Others, however, see old age as pathological. This latter viewpoint understands old age as a disease with symptoms and a prescribed course of treatment. In ancient medicine, old age was customarily viewed as a pathological condition. It is not until Galen in the

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8 For the representations of the battle between Herakles and Gêras, see Louvre G234, London 864, and Berlin 1927. For an in depth survey of how old age and old individuals in general are depicted in Greek art, see Richardson 1969.
second century CE that this tradition was broken. Galen deviates from traditional notions, primarily developed in the Hippocratic corpus and literary genres. He understands disease to be contrary to nature, while old age is a natural process of life (Gal. De San. Tuen. 1.5). In his writings about old age, Galen admits that others see old age as a disease, and that this established view dominated scientific writings in the Greek world. For example, the fifth-century BCE philosopher Democritus identifies “old age as complete mutilation that grasps everything and entangles everyone,” γῆξαο όλόκληρός ἐστι πήρωσις· πάντ’ ἐχει καὶ πᾶσιν ἐνδεῖ (296 DK). Democritus does not simply characterize old age as a disease, but calls it a πήρωσις. This term typically refers to the maiming or disabling of the senses or limbs (LSJ s.v. πήρωσις I). By using this specific and graphic term, Democritus, in effect, puts old age in the same category as blindness and amputation; old age is a disfigurement or mutilation of the body. In addition, Democritus emphasizes the inevitability of old age; no human is able to avoid its clutches. Aristotle also judges old age to be a disease in his biological treatises. He sees both disease and old age as causing similar symptoms and often resulting from the same causes. He understands them to be so analogous that he refers to disease as “acquired old age” and to old age as “natural disease,” νόσον γῆρας ἐπίκτητον, τὸ δὲ γῆρας νόσον φυσικήν (Arist. GA 784b33-35).

The consideration of old age as a disease is connected to the perceived causes of aging. Ancient medicine and philosophy use the theory of opposites—hot and cold as well as wet and dry—to explain the onset of old age. The theories related to these opposites, however, are not consistent, and each element has different associations depending on the author and work. In general, hot is connected to life and other positive
opposites, such as the right side and man, while cold is connected to the negative
opposites, such as death, the left side, and female.\(^9\) Dry and wet, on the other hand, have
more ambivalent associations. In biological terms, hot and wet are typically connected
and are opposed to cold and dry.

In ancient Greek medical sources, old age was considered to be a process in
which the human body became progressively colder and drier. The corpus of Aristotle is
consistent about this nature of old age. In his treatise on the length of life, Aristotle
explains that old age by nature is cold and dry (Arist. Long. 466a18-25).\(^10\) He believes
old age embodies these traits because a dead body is cold and dry, and so it must
ggradually become so. Aristotle uses this theory of opposites to explain certain traits of
old age, such as baldness and grey hair.\(^11\) The treatises of the Hippocratic corpus also
employ the theory of opposites to explain disease and the need for certain regimens, but
they do not unilaterally assert that the old body is cold and dry. In Nature of Man, the
author also utilizes the process of cooling and drying to explain old age (Hp. Nat. Hom.
12.30-40). One of the aphorisms also understands innate heat as the difference between
the young and the old (Hp. Aph. 1.14). However, in two other texts, the diets prescribed
depend on the type of individual, and they relate the different ages of man to different
The authors of these texts consider old age to be cold and wet, but this association is
connected with the desire to correlate the inferior element of water with old age and the


\(^{10}\) He describes the same aging process in Generation of Animals (Arist. GA 783b7; 784a34)

\(^{11}\) For example, Arist. GA 782a-784b.
superior element of fire with youth. The association of old age with cold and wet is contrary to the general notion of old age as well as other applications of the theory of opposites.

The notion that old age was a process during which the body became colder and drier is not limited to the scientific texts, but extends to the poetic genres. When literary figures refer to aging, they often use the vocabulary of drying. In the *Odyssey*, when Athena transforms Odysseus into his disguise of an old beggar, she tells him that she “will dry up the beautiful skin on his supple arms,” κάρψω μὲν χρόα καλὸν ἐνὶ γναμματοῖσι μέλεσσι, (Hom. *Od*. 13.398). In this passage from the *Odyssey*, the scientific theory is applied in a “real” world setting. The poetic tradition also uses drying as a metaphor for growing old. In Sophocles’ *Electra*, Electra laments her abandoned state, resolves to live out her life outside of the gates, and never enter the house of her father’s murderers (S. *El*. 814-819). Electra, however, does not use the word for “live” or “spend,” but rather she will dry up her life, using the verb ᾠάινο, “dry up.” These two examples demonstrate how the theory of opposites concerning old age was used in the literary genre. This common conception of old age as cold and dry also affected how the physical features of old age were considered.

2.1.4 The Markers of Old Age in Antiquity

While the scientific understanding of old age, through the theory of opposites, can be seen in literary sources, other markers of old age were more commonly used to represent the elderly of both genders. The customary physical traits of old age were

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12 Lloyd 1964: 103 n.43.

13 Aristotle also mentions the drying of the skin as part of the aging process (Arist. *GA* 785b5-10)
changes in hair, physical ability, and sexuality. These traits related to both genders, although they often had different connotations for each.

Change in an individual’s hair is a common characteristic of old age both throughout antiquity and in the modern world. Hair is often described as grey or white when a person is older.\textsuperscript{14} A depiction of grey hair is a common technique in poetic genres to indicate old age. Simply identifying a character as “grey-haired” is enough to distinguish him or her as an older person. While there are countless examples in Greek literature, two characters frequently described as grey-haired are Priam and Hecuba, the aged rulers of Troy.\textsuperscript{15} Grey hair as a physical feature can be used benignly to mark advanced age in literary texts, but because of the already negative connotations of old age, grey hair can also reveal deviance and danger when it occurs unnaturally, such as at birth.\textsuperscript{16}

The second marker of an old body is a change in physical ability. These changes typically manifest themselves in the form of physical weakness or inability. The association of physical weakness and old age seems intuitive; as the body ages, it becomes frail and less able to perform routine tasks. Such physical limitations are stressed in the generalized accounts of old men and women in medical and philosophical texts. In the Hippocratic corpus, there is no treatise dedicated to gerontology, but descriptions of old patients and diseases of the elderly appear throughout the different

\textsuperscript{14} The Greek color words that typically indicate this type of hair are \textit{polios} and \textit{leukos} and are translated as grey and white, respectively.

\textsuperscript{15} Priam: Hom. \textit{Il.} 22.77-78; Hecuba: E. \textit{Tr.} 1269.

\textsuperscript{16} For example, the babies born with grey hair in the fifth age of man or the Graiai (Hes. \textit{Op.} 181; Hes. \textit{Th.}, 270-76).
texts. Physical weakness and even infirmity are common tropes in these passages.\(^\text{17}\) One of the aphorisms in the Hippocratic corpus, for example, provides a list of diseases that afflict the body of an old person (Hp. Aph. 3.31). Every bodily function and sense is affected by old age, and it is the scope of infirmity that caused old age to be viewed with such negativity.

The same sort of ambivalence about physical abilities surrounds elderly literary figures. The prototypical old man in Greek literature is Nestor.\(^\text{18}\) When Agamemnon comes upon Nestor as he is encouraging the troops, he laments that Nestor is no longer able to fight with the young men (Hom. Il. 4.313-316). Agamemnon notes that while Nestor may still have the fighting spirit, the physical nature of his body prevents him from carrying out such tasks. As someone in his physical prime, Agamemnon only sees the limitations of Nestor’s old body. He sees no positive attributes and can only wish for Nestor to be a young man again so that he could contribute to the war effort. In Nestor’s reply, he too wishes for the young fighter’s body that he once had (Hom. Il. 4.318-325). However, unlike Agamemnon, Nestor is able to see a benefit to old age. He recognizes that both the young and the old have their own distinct abilities. While the old may be limited physically, they are gifted with wisdom and counsel.\(^\text{19}\) Nestor embraces this role of mentor and leader. This exchange demonstrates two key aspects of how the elderly and their changing physical abilities are portrayed. Agamemnon’s discourse shows how the diminished physical abilities of the old are often emphasized by able younger people.

\(^{17}\) See Byl 1983; Pisi 1995; Fontanille 2004 for a more detailed discussion of the treatment of the elderly in the Hippocratic corpus.

\(^{18}\) Silk 1995.

\(^{19}\) Old women are also seen as reservoirs of wisdom and guidance; this feature of post-menopausal identity is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.
In contrast, Nestor’s reply exhibits the ability of the elderly to adopt new strengths that are appropriate to their age, experiences, and skills. While Nestor accepts the physical limitations of his old body, the younger character challenges the physical changes that are occurring and wishes for the retention of youthful strength and prowess.

Old women were also defined by their physical limitations, although not as prominently as men because women were often considered “old” before their bodies were physically weak. However, even when described as frail and feeble, old women can be powerful figures in the literary narratives. In Euripides’ Hecuba, the title character is described as old throughout the tragedy. The deposed queen of Troy is depicted in such a state of weakness that she needs support from her maidservants to walk (E. Hec. 59-66). Through this characterization of her physical weakness and old body, Hecuba’s femininity is not emphasized; only the feebleness associated with her old age is highlighted. Hecuba is not portrayed as frail at the end of the tragedy when she and the other Trojan women rise up to commit murder. She reclaims her lost strength in order to take revenge on Polymestor. Hecuba defies the boundaries of both her age and gender in order to act.

Both men and women experienced changes in their physical abilities as they aged. However, these examples show that physical weakness is not an uncomplicated physical marker of old age. It was seen as a limitation that could be overcome through either the

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20 The physical limitation that truly defines old age for women is the inability to menstruate, i.e., menopause. Clearly, this change is of a different sort and will be discussed in Section 2.3.

21 For example, Eurykleia in the Odysse and various nurse characters in tragedy. Karydas 1998.

22 For instance, she is referred to as a slave in her old age (E. Hec. 495) and as the grey-haired mother of her race (E. Hec. 620).
acquisition of other positive traits or a renewed assertion of strength. Both genders were equally capable of defying the physical limitations of old age.

The third indicator of aging is a change in an individual’s sexuality. This change is twofold: an individual experiences both a change in the ability to procreate and in sexual desire. The latter is an important aspect of the perception of old age, but is not discussed here.\(^2^3\) There is a stark difference both in the age at which men and women are no longer able to procreate and in its physical manifestations. For women, the moment at which they can no longer bear children is indicated by the cessation of menses. This bodily change for women—menopause—is a significant change in their reproductive status. Menopause differs from a man’s inability to father children because of the noticeable physical change.\(^2^4\) There is no unique medical term that marks the time when men can no longer beget children. The age at which this phase of life occurs differs for each gender. According to Aristotle, most women ceased menstruating between the ages of forty and fifty, while men ceased the production of seed between the ages of sixty and seventy (Arist. *HA* 545b; 585a).\(^2^5\) Because of this twenty-year gap in the cessation of procreation between men and women, Aristotle recommends that marriage should ideally occur for women at age eighteen and men at age thirty-seven (Arist. *Pol.* 7.1335a). Marriage would then occur at the height of sexual potency for both sexes, and the

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\(^2^3\) Change in sexual desire is described as a characteristic of old age for both genders, but is typically perceived quite differently. Men were typically represented in a more ambivalent manner, while women were portrayed as lascivious crones. For some examples of ancient sources that discuss old age and sexual desire, see Pl. *R.* 329a-d; Minnemus 1; Ar. *Av.* 1256; Ar. *Ec.* 895-899, 1015-20. See Houdijk and Vanderbroeck 1987 for a treatment of old age and sexuality in ancient Greece.

\(^2^4\) See Sections 2.2 and 2.3 for a more detailed discussion of the menopause in general and in antiquity.

\(^2^5\) There are a variety of ages given for the age of menopause in the ancient sources, although there is some basic consensus. A detailed discussion of all the relevant sources is undertaken in Section 2.3.
cessation of the couple’s ability to procreate would coincide. A woman’s inability to bear children is marked physically by the cessation of menses, and so it is more frequently discussed in the ancient sources. In addition, because a woman’s role in society is more closely tied to her reproductive capabilities, the end of menses is a more notable event.

With this examination of these three characteristics of the old body, changes in hair, physical ability, and sexuality, it is now possible to draw some conclusions about the gendered old body. Each of these physical characteristics was applicable to both genders, but they were often perceived and portrayed differently through literary representations. For men, changes in physical abilities were the most significant for marking the beginning of old age as male life stages were largely defined by their social participation in the public sphere. Changes in their participation in public life, such as the military and politics, often marked advanced age.26 Women’s lives were not defined by the public sphere, but rather by their roles in the home and within the family. While the advent of female old age could also be considered a change in physical ability, i.e., an inability to procreate, it was more literally a change in physiology, the significance of which is explored in Chapter 3. Old age for women in ancient Greece was marked by a private and individual moment—the cessation of menses. This change in the female reproductive status paralleled the change in social participation for men as the marker of old age. The advent of old age for men was public and social, but for women was private, individual, and physiological. The remainder of this chapter discusses menopause in general and in antiquity.

26 Plutarch’s treatise, Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Politics, addresses this aspect of men’s aging (Plu. Mor. 783aff.)
2.2 Menopause: An Overview

Menopause is a complex condition that often provokes strong responses from women when they experience it. There are two primary ways to consider menopause: as an event or as a process. When menopause is viewed as an event, one is interested in the timing of the last menstrual period. The last menstrual period marks the menopausal event, which can be viewed as both a one-time life history and a medical event.\footnote{Sievert 2006: 4.} Menopause can also be regarded as a process. Research shows that women themselves are more likely to see menopause as a transitional process.\footnote{Sievert 2006: 4.} When menopause is viewed as a process, it is often described in stages: premenopause, perimenopause, and menopause.

Premenopause is the time when a woman’s menstrual cycle is regular.\footnote{This description of the menopausal transition and menopause itself is based on the definition in Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary (Venes 2009 s.v. menopause).} Perimenopause, also called the climacteric, starts when a woman’s menstrual cycle becomes irregular, and she may begin to experience some physical symptoms associated with menopause. This stage is characterized by unpredictability and may last for several years. Because of the erratic nature of a woman’s menstrual cycle at the end of her reproductive years, it is necessary to wait at least one year after her last menstrual period before classifying her as post-menopausal. The irregularity during the perimenopausal stage reflects the hormonal changes that are taking place as she approaches the menopausal event. Menopause is defined as the cessation of menses and is due to the loss of ovarian follicular activity. During a woman’s lifespan, there is a gradual decrease
in the number of follicles due to menstruation and degeneration, and menopause occurs when the number falls below the level necessary to maintain monthly hormonal cycles.\textsuperscript{30}

Even though menopause is part of female biology, there are cultural differences in the manifestations of menopause. One cultural variation is the age when menopause occurs. Scholars often make generalizations about the mean age of menopause, such as Gabriella Berger’s assertion that the majority of women reach menopause by the age of fifty, but these assessments are complicated by both biological and cultural explanations.\textsuperscript{31} Biologically, the age of menopause is determined by the number of eggs with which a woman is born, the rate at which the eggs and their follicles are lost, and the threshold number of ovarian follicles necessary to maintain a menstrual cycle.\textsuperscript{32} Since there is no reliable or noninvasive way to measure ovarian function, it is difficult to determine when a woman is approaching menopause. Most studies depend on a woman’s ability to recall her last menstrual period, which can be unreliable. Research has been conducted to determine the average age of menopause in different societies, and the results vary cross-culturally. Comparing these studies can be problematic as they may use different definitions of menopause, include women experiencing surgical menopause (hysterectomies), or analyze the data differently.\textsuperscript{33} In Lynnette Sievert’s survey of studies that assess the age of menopause, she reports a range of forty-two years to

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{30} Sievert 2006: 37.
\bibitem{31} Berger 1999: 2.
\bibitem{32} Sievert 2006: 82-83.
\bibitem{33} See Sievert 2006: 90-101 for further analysis of this issue.
\end{thebibliography}
fifty-three years.\(^{34}\) The median age of menopause in the United States is fifty-one years.\(^{35}\) In a comparative study between modern Mayan and Greek women, the Mayan women reach menopause at the average age of forty-two, and the Greek women at the age of forty-nine.\(^{36}\) This difference of seven years is directly comparable since the studies were conducted by the same researcher using the same definitions and methods. It is notable that age of menopause is so different between these two rural cultures. Sievert concludes that the average age of menopause is generally earlier in developing countries than in highly Westernized ones.\(^{37}\)

With such a broad range of ages for the advent of menopause among populations, the biology of menopause must be affected by culture. Because of the differences between the ages of menopause in non-industrialized and industrialized countries, scholars have looked at the relational effects of childhood nutrition, socioeconomic status, and level of education on menopause.\(^{38}\) The findings from these studies have been inconclusive. Smoking, however, has definitively been shown to lower the age of menopause.\(^{39}\) A woman’s reproductive history and marital status also affect it.\(^{40}\) Having no children or being single both lead to an earlier age of menopause. Factors that occur cross-culturally, such as marriage, childbirth, and smoking, can help to explain some of

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\(^{34}\) It is necessary to remember that these studies were not conducted with the same scientific methodology or parameters. Sievert 2006: Table 4.2, 84-86


\(^{36}\) Beyene 1989.

\(^{37}\) Sievert 2006: 94.

\(^{38}\) Sievert 2006: 102-106.


the variations in the menopausal age. Notably, the age of menarche does not affect the age of menopause and cannot be used to predict the latter.\textsuperscript{41}

Similar to the average age of menopause, the symptoms of menopause are biologically and culturally determined. A multitude of physical and psychological conditions have been linked to menopause. These conditions extend to all systems of the body and include joint pain, back pain, headache, vaginal dryness, painful sexual intercourse, hot flushes, night sweats, urinary incontinence, palpitations, depression, fatigue, insomnia, loss of libido, weight gain, and others.\textsuperscript{42} The range and severity of these symptoms vary, as do their perceived causes. Researchers believe that only the vasomotor symptoms—hot flushes and night sweats—and vaginal dryness can be directly attributed to the decreasing amount of ovarian estrogen associated with menopause.\textsuperscript{43}

Across cultures, only the primary external marker of menopause—the cessation of menses—is commonly shared. The frequency of menopausal symptoms varies across cultures. Some studies have shown that up to 80\% of women in Western countries experience mild to severe physical and psychological symptoms for which medical attention is required. On the contrary, women in some non-Western cultures report no symptoms related to menopause.\textsuperscript{44} Gabriella Berger has posited a convincing theory that cultural beliefs about women’s roles in society, women’s bodies, and the aging process have a profound effect on a woman’s physical, psychological, and social experience of

\textsuperscript{41} Sievert 2006: 108.

\textsuperscript{42} Berger 1999: 2-5.

\textsuperscript{43} Berger 1999: 2; Sievert 2006: 116.

\textsuperscript{44} Berger 1999: 39.
Menopause.\(^{45}\) Berger’s theory on the influence of culture helps to explain the differences in menopausal experiences. The loss of estrogen or the change in ovarian function alone cannot explain individual or cultural variations in the type, number, or severity of symptoms.

While geography does not affect whether or not a woman undergoes menopause, it certainly affects how she may experience it. The symptomatology and social perceptions of menopause differ by culture. This cultural effect is clearly evident regarding the issue of medicalization of menopause.\(^{46}\) With the publication of Robert Wilson’s *Feminine Forever* in 1966 and with the availability of hormone replacement therapy (HRT), menopause became a deficiency disease that was both curable and preventable.\(^{47}\) The menopausal body became a diseased body that could be treated and restored to its healthy premenopausal state. HRT is marketed as a treatment for the unpleasant, and expected, symptoms of menopause, especially hot flushes. Women are also urged to take this medication because it prevents other diseases associated with old age, such as cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, and some cancers. However, long-term studies have cast doubts on the safety of HRT for many women.\(^ {48}\) In addition, there is a growing body of literature by feminist scholars criticizing a disease model of menopause.

\(^{45}\) Berger 1999.

\(^{46}\) Conrad 1992 discusses the use of medicalization in general. Its application to menopause is explored by many scholars, but Meyer 2003 provides a useful summary of the issues.

\(^{47}\) Granville 2000: 75. Menopause was first described as an estrogen deficiency disease in 1965 by F. P. Rhoades, see Rhoades 1965.

\(^{48}\) The Heart and Estrogen/Progestin Replacement Study (HERS) and the Women’s Health Initiative (WHI) found that HRT increases the risks of coronary heart disease, stroke, and breast cancer in many women. Hulley, *et al.* 1998; Rossouw, *et al.* 2002; Sievert 2006: 157-8; Ussher 2006: 128-134.
and other myths about menopause. These scholars reject the belief that women are the sum of their reproductive parts, making a non-reproductive woman somehow abnormal. These debates concerning the pathology of menopause and its medicalization are the cultural context in which modern Western women experience menopause. If they experience hot flushes or other symptoms, there is an easy medical solution available to them.

Women more removed from the medicalization of menopause often experience the physiological changes differently. In Yewoubdar Beyene’s study of menopausal women in a rural Mayan village on the Yucatan peninsula, Mayan women see menopause as a positive occurrence because of the cultural taboos associated with menstruation. The only recognized symptom of menopause for them is the cessation of menses; they do not report any other physical or psychological symptoms. Mayan women perceive menopause as a time of freedom, and they associate it with the joys of girlhood. They welcome menopause and do not lament the end of their reproductive years because most women have had many children by the time they reach menopause. Mayan women have a positive view of menopause and do not associate negative experiences or unwanted physical changes with it.

49 Weideger 1976; Rogers 1997; Berger 1999; Sievert 2006; Ussher 2006.


52 Beyene 1989: 118.

53 Beyene 1989: 120.
Research on menopause in Nigeria presents another example of the menopausal experience in a non-Western culture. The researchers interviewed post-menopausal women from different sociocultural backgrounds in Ibadan City.\textsuperscript{54} The results were divided on whether the women perceived any social advantage to being post-menopausal.\textsuperscript{55} Their mixed responses perhaps reflect the inconsistent cultural aspects of menopause. For instance, in Nigerian society old women are respected; however, their husbands often leave them for younger women because sexual intercourse with post-menopausal women is discouraged.\textsuperscript{56} When they were asked specifically about physical symptoms, the most commonly reported ones were internal heat (presumably hot flushes), abdominal/waist pain, weakness/tiredness, body pain, headache, shrinking of the body, vaginal dryness, sweating, and happiness without cause.\textsuperscript{57} Most symptoms, however, were rated as mild and not a serious problem.\textsuperscript{58} Most of these Nigerian women did not experience menopausal symptoms or effects that required medical attention.\textsuperscript{59} In another study, researchers learned that most doctors in Nigeria did not recommend HRT for their post-menopausal patients.\textsuperscript{60} This study of menopause in Nigeria reveals that some women may experience physical and psychological symptoms even when menopause is considered a natural part of the aging process. It is not a disease model of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] Fifty Hausa, fifty Igbo, and fifty Yoruba women were interviewed. Olawoye \textit{et al.} 1998: 49.
\item[55] 44.7\% responded yes, 46.0\% no, 9.3\% no response, see Olawoye \textit{et al.} 1998: 61.
\item[59] Olawoye \textit{et al.} 1998: 68.
\item[60] Olawoye \textit{et al.} 1998: 44.
\end{footnotes}
menopause itself that brings on such symptoms, but it may change how women perceive and endure menopause.

Feminist scholars argue that the disease model of menopause and its medicalization were developed as means to control the female body.61 While a conception in modern society, the medicalization of menopause was not necessary in ancient Greece to exert control over the female body. In ancient Greece, medical authorities started from the assumption of male superiority. The medical theories, particularly those of sex differentiation and reproduction, were grounded in such arguments. In addition, the symptomatology of menopause, which is so prevalent in modern discussions of menopause, is absent in Greek medical texts. However, different symptoms and associated diseases emerge in the context of Greek gynecological theory.

2.3 Menopause in Antiquity

The ancient Greeks were very interested in regulating the reproductive cycle of women. They were concerned with menarche, the onset of the reproductive phase, and preferred a girl’s menses to occur at the socially prescribed time. Medical treatises provide numerous treatments and recipes to encourage menstrual flow if it did not appear at the proper time. Once a female reached childbearing age, the medical authors reveal their pro-natalist stance. Women’s diseases were considered primarily in relation to the uterus.62 Diseases seemingly unrelated to the reproductive parts necessitated treatment of the uterus and the female genitalia. Many women were considered treated or cured of a disease if they were able to menstruate (whether for the first time or the return of the

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61 Ussher 2006.

normal menstrual cycle) or if they became pregnant. With so much concern about the ability to menstruate and bear children, there is a contrasting scarcity of attention paid to the end of the reproductive period. In fact, there is not even a Greek word to indicate menopause. As the etymology of the English word hints, the ancient Greeks indicated menopause with phrases, such as “when the menses ceased,” ὅταν τὰ καταμήνια στῶσι (Arist. HA 518a). The verb in the phrase and the actual formulation could vary. To complicate matters, however, not all incidents of stopped menses indicate menopause because authors describe how menses can become blocked due to illness or pregnancy. In general, there is no uniform formula or vocabulary with which the ancient Greeks referred to menopause. The identification of post-menopausal women has to be assumed from the use of age descriptions in the text. Authors often use age-class vocabulary to compare groups of women. Women of post-menopausal age, are often described with the comparative adjectives geraiterai and presbuterai (older women). It is notable that the age-class terms, graus and graia (old woman), are rarely used in medical texts.

2.3.1 The Age of Menopause

Although menopause was not a primary concern of the ancient medical writers, they were interested in marking the boundaries of the childbearing years. There are numerous passages considering the timing of menopause. In the Coan Praenotions, both the age of menarche and menopause are indirectly suggested by a list of diseases to which a woman was most susceptible during her reproductive years (Hp. Coac. 30.502, 7.700.5-7L). The author gives the age range for childbearing as fourteen to forty-two

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63 For example, Hp. Aph. 5.39 explains how the menses are stopped when a woman is lactating.
years. While the age of fourteen does appear in numerous ancient sources as the age for the onset of menstruation, suspicion arises regarding the age of forty-two as the end of the reproductive phase.\textsuperscript{64} Both fourteen and forty-two are multiples of seven and, therefore, fit neatly into the philosophy of dividing the lifespan into hebdomades, groups of seven.\textsuperscript{65}

Fortunately, other ancient sources discuss the timing of menopause with greater specificity. Aristotle understands that there is some individual variation in the time of menopause. In book five of the \textit{History of Animals}, Aristotle provides both the average age at which male and female reproductive function ceases and the maximum age.

\textit{Γελλάδ' ἄνθρωπος ἐν τῷ ἔσχατον μέχρι ἐβδομήκοντα ἐτῶν ὁ ἄρην, γυνὴ δὲ μέχρι πεντήκοντα. Ἀλλὰ τούτῳ μὲν σπάνιον· ὀλίγοις γὰρ γεννᾶται ἐν ταύταις ταῖς ἡλικίαις τέκνα· ώς δ’ ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ τοῖς μὲν πέντε καὶ ἐξήκοντα ὅρος, ταῖς δὲ πέντε καὶ τετταράκοντα.} (Arist. \textit{HA} 545b27-31)

The male of the human species procreates until the age of seventy at the very latest, while the female until the age of fifty. But these extremes are rare. At these ages, few people procreate. The average age limit for the ability to procreate is the age of sixty-five for men, and forty-five for women.

Aristotle here correctly observes the typical variation that occurs in the age of menopause. The seventh book of the \textit{History of Animals} gives a similar age range, but lowers the average age to forty (Arist. \textit{HA} 585b5). In addition, Aristole adds that women who continue to menstruate into their forties are able to have children, but no women can conceive after the age of fifty. The inconsistency in menopausal age within this text may

\textsuperscript{64} See Amundsen and Diers 1969 for a survey of the ancient sources on the age of menarche.

\textsuperscript{65} This tendency to divide the human lifespan into groups of seven is also seen in discussions concerning the onset of old age. Similar problems about the reliability of these numerical divisions also arise in this instance.
be due to the spurious nature of the seventh book.\textsuperscript{66} Regardless of this book’s authenticity, it can still be dated, at the latest, to the third century BCE and provides another example of a maximum age of menopause of fifty and an average age in the forties. In addition, while discussing the appropriate circumstances for marriage, Aristotle gives fifty years old as the maximum age for conception in females (Arist. Pol. 1335a10). Aristotle and the author of the \textit{Coan Praenotions} are the only classical Greek authors who address the age of menopause, but several later authors reiterate these age ranges and provide some additional information.

The influence of Greek medical writers and philosophers on their Roman counterparts has been well documented by scholars, and this influence on the perceptions of menopause is no exception.\textsuperscript{67} In his \textit{Natural History}, Pliny the Elder gives virtually the same age range as Aristotle. Pliny the Elder asserts that women can no longer bear children after the age of fifty, while most women cease menstruating at the age of forty (Plin. Nat. 7.14.61). Dionysius of Halicarnassus also describes the upper boundary of a woman’s reproductive ability as the age of fifty (D.H. 4.6.5). However, the reasons for this age of menopause may have less to do with biology and more to do with genealogy in early Roman history.\textsuperscript{68} In his \textit{Gynecology}, Soranus also confirms the age range of forty to fifty years for the cessation of menses, but he adds some additional information about menstruation over the course of a woman’s life.

\textsuperscript{66} See the introduction to the Loeb edition for books seven through ten of the \textit{History of Animals} for the arguments for and against authenticity. Balme 1991: 1-50.

\textsuperscript{67} Flemming 2000; Nutton 2004.

\textsuperscript{68} He is attempting to lay out the family tree of Tarquinius, one of the kings of early Rome. His scenario has the wife of Tarquinius giving birth to her last son at the age of fifty so that all the family members are the right age when Tarquinius dies at the age of eighty.
The amount of menstrual flow begins as a little amount, increases to more, and then for some time it remains the same. It decreases again, and then finally stops completely. The end of menstruation occurs not sooner than the age of forty, usually, and not later than the age of fifty. Now the adverb, “usually” has been added, for in some women, menstruation continues until the age of sixty.

Soranus recognizes that menses do not flow at a constant rate throughout the life of a woman. At menarche, the menstrual flow increases gradually until it reaches the amount of flow that will be normal for a woman’s reproductive years. Towards the end of her reproductive years, usually as she approaches the age of forty, her menstrual flow begins to decrease. This description of the sporadic nature of the menstrual flow reflects the physiological nature of the menstrual cycle. Soranus explains what in modern medicine is the perimenopausal stage. In addition to his recognition of the variation in menstrual flow, Soranus also gives a higher maximum age of menopause. He qualifies his original statement with the expression, “usually,” κατὰ τὸ πλεῖστον, in order to indicate that most women cease menstruating between the ages of forty and fifty, but some do in fact continue until the age of sixty. In addition to this passage, Soranus also mentions the age of menopause indirectly in another section of his Gynecology. When he discusses the characteristics that determine whether a woman is capable of conception, Soranus asserts that most women in the age group of fifteen to forty years are able to conceive (Sor. Gyn. 1.34). This upper limit of forty years for the reproductive period of women confirms his earlier passage that most women’s menstrual flow begins to subside at the age of forty,
and they then enter what is now understood in modern Western medicine as perimenopause.

Three medical authors from late antiquity also provide the age at which menopause occurs. Oribasius, writing in the fourth century CE, places the average age of menopause at fifty years, with the qualification that some women continue menstruating until the age of sixty (Orib. *Eclogae Medicamentorum* 142). In addition, Oribasius adds that some women, especially obese women, begin menopause as early as thirty-five years. He is the first to introduce this lower age of menopause and link it to the constitution of a woman’s body. In his *Tetrabiblos*, written in the sixth century CE, Aëtius gives the ages of thirty-five to fifty as the normal range for menopause (Aët. *Tetrabiblos* 16.4). He, too, claims sixty years to be the absolute maximum for a woman to continue menstruating and also posits a relationship between corpulence and early menopause. In the seventh century CE, Paul of Aegina either quotes Oribasius verbatim or uses the same source because he has an identical description of menopause in his *Epitome* (Paul. Aeg. 3.60). The works of these three late authors are useful because they introduce a new element, the connection between obesity and early menopause, which is not described by the classical Greek authors. However, being overweight in old age is recognized both in the Hippocratic corpus and by Aristotle as being undesirable. The author of *Aphorisms* does not view being overweight as a hindrance for a young person, but says it becomes problematic as one ages (Hp. *Aph*. 2.54). Aristotle sees corpulence as a problem throughout life, particularly in relation to fertility. He links obesity to sterility; overweight men produce no semen, while overweight women do not menstruate (Arist. *GA* 746b25-31). While Aristotle does not make a direct link between early
menopause and weight, his general comments about weight and sterility seem to support the later authors’ assertions. In addition, modern research corroborates the connection between obesity and an earlier age of menopause.\textsuperscript{69} The negative correlation between obesity and fertility has also been well documented.\textsuperscript{70}

In conclusion, there is a general consensus among the ancient sources that women in ancient Greece typically ceased menstruating between the ages of forty and fifty with an age range of thirty-five to sixty years. It is notable that ancient medical writers recognized two key facts about menopause. It is a biological condition that varies among individuals and it is a gradual process, i.e., menses does not occur normally one month and then never come again. Menopause is a prolonged change in the reproductive cycle with erratic and decreasing menstrual flow.

\textbf{2.3.2 \ The Physiological Conception of Menopause}

With this analysis of the age of menopause, I now examine the ancient understanding of the physiology of menopause. Whereas the average age of menopause does not differ much from antiquity to modern times, ancient ideas about gynecology did not reflect modern knowledge of the female reproductive system. In order to understand menopause physiologically, it is necessary first to understand how the ancient Greeks understood two related bodily processes: aging and menstruation. The physiology of aging and old age was discussed in Section 2.1.3 and, in sum, is the process of the body becoming increasingly colder and drier.

\textsuperscript{69} Studies have shown that a body mass index that indicates a woman is overweight or obese at the age of eighteen lowers the age of menopause. Sievert 2006: 104.

\textsuperscript{70} Frisch 2002.
The Greek understanding of menstruation also draws on the theory of opposites, but the authors of the Hippocratic corpus and Aristotle have slightly different views on the accumulation of menstrual blood in women, although each author relates it to an excess of nourishment. According to the Hippocratic corpus, women have loose and spongy flesh, which causes them to soak up the excess nourishment from their stomachs, convert it to blood, and store it as menstrual fluid (Hp. *Mul*. 1.1, 8.12.6-21L). Aristotle sees menses as excess nourishment that remains bloodlike because women lack sufficient heat (Arist. *GA* 726b30-35). As they accumulate, the menses are stored in the flesh and vessels until the time of evacuation. However, Aristotle and the author of the Hippocratic *Diseases of Women* disagree on the innate heat of females. Aristotle insists that women are colder since they do not have enough heat to concoct semen, and he specifically refutes the theory that women are hotter due to the abundance of menstrual blood. He sees a qualitative difference between menstrual blood and other blood. The excess of blood in women does not, therefore, cause an excess of heat because it is a less pure form of blood. For Aristotle, there is clearly an interest in aligning the opposites that he deems positive: male, hot, and right. Both theories are present in the Hippocratic corpus. In *Diseases of Women*, women are identified as hotter because of the abundance of hot blood due to menstruation (Hp. *Mul*. 1.1, 8.12L). However, in *On Regimen*, women are considered colder and wetter both because of the differences in male and female regimens and because heat exits the body during menstruation (Hp. *Vict*. 1.34, 71

71 In men, this excess nourishment is concocted by their natural heat to form semen (Arist. *GA*. 726.b30-35).

72 This phase is not stated explicitly in any Hippocratic text, but Lesley Dean-Jones convincingly pieces together the evidence to establish the sequence of events in the menstrual cycle according to the treatises (Dean-Jones 1994: 62).
This lack of consensus reflects a debate among ancient scientific writers concerning the understanding of menstruation and the gendered connotations of the theory of opposites.

Healthy women were expected to have a heavy flow over the course of their menstrual period. After menstruation, the womb was empty and accumulation began again. The author of Diseases of Women cites the appropriate amount of menstrual blood loss during menstruation as two Attic kotyls, which is estimated to be one pint (Hp. Mul. 1.6, 8.30). This exaggeration in the amount of blood loss during menses points to the very moist condition of reproductive-aged women perceived by Greek medical writers.

Although there are no actual descriptions of the physiology of menopause in the extant sources, the ancient conceptions of aging and menstruation as well as descriptions of the post-menopausal woman allow probable conjectures about it. Two nearly identical passages in the Hippocratic corpus compare the natures of differently aged women.

αἱ μὲν νέαι ὑγρότεραι καὶ πολύαμοι ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πουλῦ, αἱ δὲ πρεσβύτιδες ξηρότεραι καὶ ὀλίγαμοι, αἱ δὲ μέσαι μέσον τι ἁμφοτέρων ἐχοῦσιν. (Hp. Nat. Mul. 1.1, 7.312.6-7L)\(^73\)

Young women are wetter and have more blood, for the most part, and old women are drier and have less blood, while middle-aged women have the middle amount of both.

This passage and a similar one in Diseases of Women suggest that the constitution of women progressively changes as they age. Women become increasingly drier as they age and, correspondingly, the amount of blood in their bodies decreases. As the above analysis of menstruation described, excess blood is perceived to accumulate in women’s bodies over the course of the month, only to be evacuated during the menstrual period.

\(^73\) The same theory is expressed in Diseases of Women (Hp Mul. 2.111, 8.238.22-240.1L).
As women age, the amount of blood decreases, and this change is reflected in the erratic nature of the older woman’s menstrual cycle. As the menstrual cycle becomes irregular, menstrual blood is perceived as not being stored up or trapped inside the body. Instead, there is a reduction in the formation of menstrual blood until women become so dry that they no longer produce any menstrual blood and their menstrual cycles cease.

From this understanding of menopause, it would seem that old women become more masculine in their composition. According to the Hippocratic view, they must become less porous and spongy as they age so that they absorb less nourishment. Their composition, therefore, becomes denser and more compact, making them more similar to men. In the Aristotelian theory, the loss of innate heat is common to both genders. However, despite the seeming equality that arises between old women and men, aging presents an additional example of gender inequality within the medical theories of antiquity. Both the Hippocratic authors and Aristotle believe that women age more quickly than men do. In On the Seventh Month Birth, women are said to age faster than men do “because of the weakness of their body and their way of life,” διὰ τὴν ἀσθενείαν τε τῶν σωμάτων καὶ τῆν διαταγὴν (Hp. Septim. 9, 7.450.10L). While the Hippocratic author does not explain either of these qualities, they seem to be related to the stereotype that women live lives of leisure and do not work their bodies. By this emphasis on the faster aging of women, the Hippocratic author hints at the inferiority of women’s bodies because of their domestic lives. Aristotle is more direct in his assertion that women age more quickly because of their natural weakness and inferiority (Arist. GA 775a15).74 For Aristotle, it is not only the weakness of women, but also the deficiency of innate heat that

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74 Arist. HA 582a23 and Arist. HA 583b26-28 also assert that women age faster than men.
causes women to age quicker than men. Differences in heat are the fundamental distinctions between the sexes in Aristotle’s biological theories. It is a deficiency of heat that causes the production of menses, instead of sperm, and accelerates aging in women. As I discussed in Section 2.1.3, the body is thought to become colder and drier over time. While the female body is considered both colder and wetter than the male body, only the heat aspect seems to affect aging when comparing the sexes. Because the female nature is wetter, one would assume that it would take longer for women to become dry, but this facet of logic is not explored by the ancient medical theorists. Even though the ancient understanding of menopause seems to make the old female body more masculine, the ancient medical writers continue to maintain the superiority of men over women, even if it somewhat undermines their own biological theories.

2.3.3 Symptomatology and Diseases of Menopause in Antiquity

With this understanding of the physiology of menopause, how the ancient Greeks viewed menopause in terms of its associated symptoms and diseases can be discussed. The extensive list of symptoms often attributed to menopause, especially in Western societies, is not mentioned in the ancient medical literature. The ancient Greeks did not employ a disease model of menopause. Much of the Hippocratic corpus deals with pathology, and it is noteworthy that menopause is not considered in this light. The cessation of menses as a result of old age was considered a natural part of a woman’s life cycle. It is possible that Greek women did not experience symptoms of menopause, like the Mayan women in Beyene’s study, or they may have dealt with these discomforts
without seeking medical treatment, like the Nigerian women reported by Olawoye.\(^{75}\) As scholars of modern societies have demonstrated, the symptoms of menopause and perceptions of them seem to be related to the type of life and treatment of older women in the culture. There is considerable debate about whether post-menopausal women in ancient Greece gained personal freedom and status.\(^{76}\) Further analysis of this debate is discussed in the following chapters, with old priestesses as the lenses through which I examine the arguments. Ultimately, the treatment of old women in ancient Greece seems to be both positive and negative, making their situation more akin to that of the Nigerian women.

While the end of the menstrual cycle did not bring about an array of symptoms that are described in medical texts, it did not preclude women from diseases related to their reproductive parts.\(^{77}\) In the ancient world, medical writers are concerned with diseases of the reproductive parts; the end of a woman’s menstrual cycle did not alleviate the risks for uterine disorders. Older women were more likely to suffer from uterine suffocation, *pnix*.

"Ην δὲ πνιξ ἀρσενικῆς, γίνεται δὲ μάλιστα τῆς μὴ ἐξαπάντησιν ἀνδράσι καὶ τῆς ἀρτέρησις μᾶλλον ἢ τῆς νεωτέρης. Κοιφότεραι γὰρ αἱ μήτραι σφέων εἰσὶ γίνεται δὲ μάλιστα διὰ τότε ἐπὶν κενεσθήση καὶ ταλαιπωρήση πλέον τῆς μαθήσιος, αὔσανθεία αἱ μήτραι ὑπὸ τῆς ταλαιπωρίας στρέφονται, ἀτε κενεαϊ ἕοισαι καὶ κούφαι εὐρυχωρίᾳ γὰρ σφῖν ἐστὶν ὡστε στρέφεσθαι, ἀτε τῆς κοιλίης κενεῆς ἑούσης; (Hp. *Mul.* 1.7, 8.32.1-7L)

If uterine suffocation suddenly happens, it occurs much more in sexually inactive women and older women than in younger women. For their wombs are lighter.

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\(^{75}\) Beyene 1989; Olawoye *et al.* 1998.

\(^{76}\) See Chapter 1.1 for discussion of this debate, primarily between Jan Bremmer and Louise Pratt (Bremmer 1987; Pratt 2000).

\(^{77}\) In modern society, the onset of menopause is also associated with the increased risk for some diseases, including osteoporosis, cardiac disease, and some cancers.
And it usually happens for the following reason: when a woman is empty and distressed more than she is accustomed, her womb becomes withered due to the distress and is turned because it is empty and light. For, because it is hollow and empty, there is wide open space in which it can turn.

According to the author of *Diseases of Women*, post-menopausal women are more likely to be afflicted by this condition because of the nature of their wombs. Their wombs become empty and light with the cessation of menstruation because they no longer accumulate blood in the nearby flesh. The empty and lighter nature of the post-menopausal womb permits it to turn because there is ample space in the abdominal cavity. Soranus corroborates the Hippocratic text; he lists post-menopausal women among the women who are prone to suffer from uterine suffocation (Sor. *Gyn.* 3.26). In addition, older women are more likely to suffer from uterine displacement. After the description of the disease and treatment in the Hippocratic *Diseases of Women*, the author states that old women are more likely to experience this condition as well as others; “all these sorts of diseases happen more in older women than in younger women, due to the cessation of menses,” τὰ δὲ νοσήματα πάντα τὰ τοιούτότροπα γεραιτέρησι μᾶλλον γίνεται ἢ νεωτέρησι, πρὸς τὰς ἀπόλειψις τῶν ἐπιμηνίων· (Hp. *Mul.* 2.137, 8.310.10-11L). No reason for post-menopausal women’s susceptibility is given, but the logic must be similar to that in the passage about uterine suffocation. As the womb becomes empty and lighter with the cessation of menses, it is able to move about the body and cause various afflictions. Ultimately, Greek medical writers understand older women’s wombs to be at risk for uterine diseases because of an inability to menstruate. Old women share this risk with sexually inactive women, notably physical virgins, who are presumably young girls who have not yet begun menstruating. This physical similarity between the
post-menopausal woman and the virginal girl has profound implications in the religious roles of post-menopausal women in ancient Greece.  

2.4 Social and Ritual Implications of Menopause

The treatment of menopause in ancient Greece retains the belief that the male body was superior to the female body. Despite the theory of old age in which men and women both became colder and drier as they aged, men remained superior because women aged faster. Unlike in modern Western society, there is no need for a disease model of menopause or medicalization to create an inferior menopausal body. The menopausal body was already viewed as inferior to the reproductive body in Greek theory because of the pro-natalist outlook of Greek medicine. A healthy female body was a fecund one, preferably a pregnant one. Throughout the Hippocratic corpus, women are cured of various diseases when they begin menstruating or become pregnant. Unfortunately, we do not have the outlook of women in ancient Greece on whether they viewed menopause as a relief from menstruation and pregnancy. Despite the perception of an inferior post-menopausal body in ancient medicine, this physiological aspect of the old women is integral to her post-menopausal identity and appointment to particular priesthods. In Chapter 3, I continue this exploration of the old women and the post-menopausal identity in connection with ritual purity.

78 This topic will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

79 The notable exception is the fragments of Sappho in which she describes her response to aging, especially its effects on her sexuality.
3.1 Ritual Purity and the Priestess

The necessary characteristics and qualifications of a female to become a priestess varied according to local cult traditions. I consider two of these characteristics in this chapter—age and sexual status—because of their bearing on a woman’s ability to attain ritual purity. The acquisition and maintenance of ritual purity was important for all individuals who were engaged in sacred practices. Ritual purity highlights the boundaries between sacred and profane times, spaces, and events. It allowed those who performed ritual actions to separate symbolically their everyday activities from their sacred responsibilities. Thus, the same action, such as weaving, may be performed, but it would have a ritual meaning in one context because of the ritual purity of the individual and a traditional domestic meaning when done in the oikos.

In descriptions of priestesses, there is a more explicit emphasis on the need for ritual purity in comparison with their male counterparts. From this difference it should not be assumed that male priests did not have to undergo purifications before they engaged in ritual activities. Rather, the stated requirements for the ritual purity of priestesses are more likely related to the male association of women and the female body.

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1 Parker 1983: 91.
Pollution resulted from a variety of natural life events, including birth and death, with which women were intimately connected. Additionally, pollution was associated with sexual intercourse, and so short periods of chastity or complete sexual abstinence were at times demanded for the sake of ritual purity.

The analysis of the relationship between age, sexual status, and ritual purity shows that females of different ages achieved ritual purity through different means, which were appropriate to their societal roles. Furthermore, the high level of ritual purity that girls and adolescents were able to attain due to their physical virginity was matched by post-menopausal women. This ritual equivalence hinged on the physiological similarities that the ancient Greeks perceived between the virginal and post-menopausal body. According to ancient gynecological conceptions, post-menopausal women were able to regain a sense of virginity, and with their “renewed virginity,” post-menopausal women achieved the same level of ritual purity as young women who were still physical virgins. And yet, despite the similarity in ritual purity between young virgins and post-menopausal women, there are profound differences in the social positions between these two groups of females that made post-menopausal women more attractive candidates for many priesthoods.

I use this conception of renewed virginity and the associated ritual equivalence between these two groups of females to explain the tendency in Greek cult to equate young and old women in their roles as cult agents. An example of this correlation is found at sanctuaries where both a youthful virgin and an old woman were appointed as

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2 Women in ancient Greece, however, did not have to deal with a pervasive taboo against menstrual blood as is the case in some comparable societies, such as ancient Israel and some African cultures. For a further discussion on the lack of menstrual pollution in ancient Greece, see Parker 1983: 100-103; Dean-Jones 1994: 236-253.
the ritual attendants, such as at the temple of Aphrodite in Sicyon (Paus. 2.10.4). More compelling, however, are accounts where a young priestess was replaced by an old priestess. I examine this ritual connection between young and old women using the physiological and ritual similarities of the two groups. Specifically, I use the Pythia of Delphi as a case study to show how this new understanding of the old female body can resolve long-standing scholarly debates.

3.2 Implications of Age and Sexual Status on Ritual Purity

Age, sexual status, and ritual purity were intricately connected concepts in the Greek religious system. Greek females can be divided into three age groups—girls and adolescents, mature adult women, and old women—each with a corresponding means of achieving ritual purity. Girls and adolescents tended to achieve ritual purity through their physical virginity, adult women by varying lengths of chastity, and old women by prolonged or permanent sexual abstinence. Each method was unique to the social and sexual status of the age group, and thus help to determine why different cults chose priestesses of differing ages.

Girls and adolescents were grouped together because their sexual status was essentially the same; both were ideally physical virgins. In addition, these groups shared important social circumstances in that they were both unmarried and still under the control of their fathers or guardians. Because of these characteristics, girls and female adolescents achieved ritual purity through their physical virginity, and were often considered to be “purer” because of their virginal state. These ideas are particularly explicit in post-classical magical rituals. Children, regardless of gender, were considered to be the best mediums for divination because of both their physical purity and
The purity of children participating in the rituals described in the Greek magical texts cannot be assumed, rather the spells often demand the that practitioner ensure that the child was “uncorrupted and pure.” While Sarah Iles Johnston argues convincingly that it is their unimaginative nature combined with youthful susceptibility to suggestion that make children the ideal mediums in ancient divination, other scholars have focused on the innate purity in children. Some scholars have extended this argument connecting sexual purity and youth to claim that physical virgins were required to serve as priestesses in cults where a close connection with the divinity was formed. This line of reasoning has been especially influential in the consideration of virginity and prophecy, where scholars often make arguments about the sexual nature of prophecy and the need for an unattached and open, thus virginal, seer.

The physical virginity of girls and adolescents who were chosen to be priestesses could theoretically manifest itself in two ways: either the individual could be required to make a lifetime commitment to physical virginity or she could be required to maintain her virginity until a set endpoint. The requirement of a lifetime commitment to physical virginity among priestly figures was not common in ancient Greek cults. One occurrence of lifelong virginity in cult is presented as a punishment, not an ideal representation of religious devotion. Pausanias tells of the priestess of Herakles at Thespiae, who must

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3 Johnston 2001 emphasizes children’s susceptibility to suggestion as the key aspect of their nature that makes them ideal mediums in divination. Johnston’s work expands upon earlier scholarship that focuses more exclusively on physical purity, for example, Parker 1983:79.

4 For example, see PGM VII.540-78.

5 For an example of such scholarship, see Parker 1983:79.

6 Guiliana Sissa uses this argument to contend that a parthenos served as the Pythia of Delphi (Sissa 1990a: 9-70). I refute this claim and others by Sissa in Section 3.4.2.
serve for her entire life as a virgin (Paus. 9.27.6-8). In the etiological story, Herakles sleeps with the fifty daughters of Thestius in a single night, but one of them refuses him. On account of this insult, Herakles forces her to become his priestess and condemns her “to remain a virgin for the rest of her life,” μένειν παρθένον πάντα αὐτήν τὸν βίον (Paus. 9.27.6). Pausanias doubts the origins of the story as he does not believe that Herakles would act in such an impious way, insulting both the gods by creating a temple and priesthood for himself and the traditions of friendship by condemning his friend’s daughter to such a life. Whether true or not, it is clear that this type of service to a divinity was not typical in the Greek world. It was seen as a punishment, robbing a girl of what she was born to do—marry and procreate.

Ancient Greek cults more commonly assured ritual purity through physical virginity by restricting the length of service until a female entered puberty or married. Some cults did not make the requirement for physical virginity explicit. Virginity was simply assumed because of the young age of the females who served, as was the case with the arrhêphoroi in Athens, who were typically between seven and eleven years old. Other cults specifically required that a parthenos serve as the priestess until the time of her marriage. For example, both the priestesses of Poseidon at Kalaurea and Artemis at Aegeira in Achaea were described as parthenoi (Paus. 2.33.2; 7.26.5). Pausanias identifies each as a priesthood in which a parthenos served until she reached an age when it was appropriate for her to marry. The practice of limiting the required time for physical virginity reflects the social status and value of the parthenos.

7 The implications of the age and sexual status of the arrhêphoroi, particularly in relation to the sexual undertones of certain ritual aspects, are discussed in Burkert 1966.
Neither social standards nor medical treatises from the Hippocratic corpus support the selection of girls or female adolescents as virginal priestesses who remain celibate for their entire lives. In fact, neither recommends that females remain physical virgins after menarche. In classical antiquity, there was no transitional period between puberty and adulthood, i.e., no adolescence. When they reached puberty, females were supposed to be married. Problems resulting from menarche and what Hippocratic doctors recognized as suppressed menses could be solved through sexual intercourse, but only in the socially sanctioned sexual relationship of marriage. Thus, in *On the Diseases of Young Women*, the author recommends marriage and the concomitant sexual relationship as an appropriate cure for madness and suicide connected with pubescent virginity (Hp. *Virg.* 8.466-471L). In addition to the medical concerns associated with permanent virginity, ancient Greek society saw *parthenoi* as wild and untamed creatures, a state quite unsuitable for mortal women to remain. Girls were often referred to as fillies, who needed to be broken. The verb, δακάδσ, is used to describe animals, meaning “to tame” (LSJ s.v. I), and also maidens, meaning “to make subject to a husband” (LSJ s.v. II). This imagery is explicit in a poem by Anacreon to his beloved, but addressed to his “Thracian filly” (Anacr. 417 Page). Throughout the poem, equestrian vocabulary is used to describe his beloved in order to demonstrate that he has the power to tame this filly, but he is content to watch her run free for now. Marriage was seen as the appropriate yoke to tame *parthenoi* because it integrated women into society. If a woman were to

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8 King 2003: 85; Also Kleiwegt 1991, who argues against the conception of adolescence in antiquity and whose arguments would be enhanced if he had considered female youngsters, instead of only the male elite.

9 Anacr. 417; Hom. *Il.* 18.432; *Ar. Lys.* 1308; and E. *Hipp.* 545-8 demonstrate examples of this imagery. For discussion of equestrian vocabulary in relation to young virgins, see Budin 2008: 123.
remain a lifelong virgin, even as a priestess, her wild state would continue. Most importantly, these women would not fulfill what in Greek society was seen as their natural duty of bearing children.\textsuperscript{10}

Physical virginity, either lifelong or with an intended endpoint, is not described in the extant texts as a typical method through which adult women achieved ritual purity. In Greek vocabulary, there is no term to refer to an adult woman who remained celibate for her entire life. Neither \textit{parthenos} nor \textit{gynê} seem entirely appropriate. In the passage of Pausanias which describes the priestess of Herakles, she is said to remain a \textit{parthenos} (Paus. 9.27.6). However, in this passage, \textit{parthenos} can refer to both the fact that she remains unmarried and to the fact that she remains a virgin. Her unmarried state would have been viewed as anomalous as her lifelong virginity. Permanent physical virginity was a rare method to achieve ritual purity in the Greek world; adult women, instead, achieved ritual purity though sexual abstinence of varying lengths of time.

Unlike girls or adolescents, adult women had no inherent purity. Mature women were ideally to be married and, therefore, engaging in sexual intercourse with their husbands and bearing children. While sexual activity and the sacred were incompatible in the Greek religious system, whatever impurity was incurred through intercourse could be eliminated in most Greek women simply by washing.\textsuperscript{11} For priestesses, however, washing was not always sufficient; they had to remain chaste for short periods of time.

\textsuperscript{10}This societal attitude is further supported by mythological narratives in which remaining a virgin and refusing to move on to the next phase of life is depicted negatively. Such myths include the stories of Atalanta and the Danaïdes. See Scanlon 2002: 175-198 for a discussion of the myth of Atalanta and other untamed females.

\textsuperscript{11}Parker 1983: 74-75.
While there is evidence of many priestly offices to which married women in their sexual prime were appointed, there is scarcely any mention of requirements for prolonged sexual abstinence. One of the most notable examples of such a priesthood is the priestess of Athena Polias in Athens. Evidence shows that she was involved in numerous festivals, including the Chalkeia, Plynteria, Kallynteria, Skira, and the Eleusinian Mysteries. There are no known regulations about any periods of chastity surrounding her religious duties; however, there are extant regulations against the consumption of Attic cheese and the sacrificing of ewe-lambs. Abstinence, however, is associated with the celebrations of the Thesmophoria. Both the women who attended the festival and the officials had requirements of chastity. Notably, the women who served as the antletriai at the Thesmophoria in Athens had to remain chaste for three days prior to the festival as well as during the festival itself. The ancient Greeks recognized the difficulty in prescribing sexual abstinence for married adult women for extended periods of time. When exceptional purity was required, girls and adolescents were chosen because of their innate purity or, alternatively, old women were chosen because of their ability to regain the ritual purity of virginal youth.

Old women were able to achieve and maintain a level of ritual purity that adult women in their sexual prime could not regularly achieve. Old women had already fulfilled their societal roles of marriage and childbearing. Many would in fact have been widows because of the average lifespan in the ancient world and the age differences between husbands and wives at the time of marriage; men married around the age of

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12 For a summary of the evidence about the priestess of Athena Polias, see Connelly 2007: 59-64.

thirty, while women were in their mid-teens. Old women, and specifically widows, would have been expected to live celibately regardless of any desire for ritual purity. When ritual purity was needed, old women engaged in prolonged sexual abstinence, often for the entire term of the priesthood. In this way, they were able to achieve a level of ritual purity that was similar to the ritual purity that was innate to young physical virgins. An analysis of the virginal and post-menopausal body in the following section demonstrates this equivalence.

The priestess of Sosipolis in Elis clearly illustrates the attainment of ritual purity through menopause and prolonged sexual abstinence. She served the god Sosipolis, who was literally the “savoir of the city” and was ritually connected to Eileithyia, with whom he shared a temple. The Eleans appointed priestesses to both deities, although only the age of the priestess of Sosipolis is specified as elderly.

They call Eileithyia Olympian and choose a priestess for the goddess every year. According to Elean custom, the old woman who serves Sosipolis lives a pure life and she herself brings the bath for the god and places before him barley cakes that have been kneaded with honey.

The age of the priestess of Sosipolis is explicitly described with the adjective, πρεσβύτης. In addition, her acquisition of ritual purity is highlighted by the verb ἁγιαστεύω. This verb can simply mean “to perform sacred rites,” but often has the added connotation of being holy and living purely (LSJ s.v. ἁγιαστεύω I.1; I.2). These meanings are not mutually
exclusive; in order to perform sacred rituals, one must first be pure. Pausanias explicitly describes a one-year appointment for the priestess of Eileithyia; in contrast, the post-menopausal priestess of Sosipolis would have served this god and lived celibately for the remainder of her life.

The ritual responsibilities of the priestess of Sosipolis were not exceptional to this priesthood or any priesthood specific to old women; she brought water for the ritual bath of the god, which may mean that she washed the cult statue, and she provided special ritual cakes. The notable feature of her duties is that she alone was permitted entrance to the temple.

ἐν μὲν δὴ τῷ ἐμπροσθεν τοῦ ναοῦ—διπλῶς γὰρ ἢ πεποίηται—τῆς τε Εἰλείθυιας βωμός καὶ ἔσοδος ἐς αὐτό ἐστιν ἄνθρωπος· ἐν δὲ τῷ ἑντὸς ὁ Σωσίπολις ἔχει τιμᾶς, καὶ ἐς αὐτὸ ἔσοδος οὐκ ἔστι πλὴν τῇ θεραπευούσῃ τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλήν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον εἰρείλκυσμένη ύφος λευκόν· παρθένοι δὲ ἐν τῷ τῆς Εἰλείθυιας ὑπομένουσαι καὶ γυναῖκες ὡμον ἄδουσι καθαγίζουσιν<α>· δὲ καὶ θυμίάματα παντοτα αὐτῷ ἐπιστέπεσθαι οὐ νομίζουσιν οἶνον. καὶ ὅρκος παρὰ τῷ Σωσίπολιδι ἐπὶ μεγίστοις καθέστηκεν. (Paus. 6.20.3)

In the front part of the temple—it was divided into two parts—is the altar of Eileithyia and the temple’s public entrance. In the inner part of the temple, Sosipolis receives his honors, and entrance is forbidden to all except for the woman who serves the god, but she must wrap a white veil around her head and face. Parthenoi and gynaikes wait inside the sanctuary of Eileithyia and sing a hymn. They burn all kinds of incense to the god, but it is not permitted to pour libations of wine. An oath is taken by Sosipolis at very important times.

A striking distinction is drawn between the accessibility of the different age groups. Both the parthenoi and gynaikes had ritual roles to perform, as they chanted a hymn to Sosipolis, but they did so outside of his part of the sanctuary. They were relegated to the sphere of Eileithyia, while only the old woman entered the innermost recesses of the temple. The priestess of Sosipolis was required to wear special attire, a white veil over

14 This verb is also used to describe the required lifestyle of other post-menopausal priestesses, including the priestess of Artemis Hymnia and the Gerarai of Athens (Paus. 8.13.1; D. 59.78).
her head and face when she entered the restricted part of the temple. The wearing of white is common in ritual settings as an outward sign of ritual purity. In addition, the veil is reminiscent of bridal attire, which highlights the ritual connection between physical virgins and post-menopausal women. Ultimately, it was the privileged and restricted nature of the ritual responsibilities of the priestess of Sosipolis that prompted the choice of a post-menopausal woman. The high level of ritual purity that she was able to achieve through prolonged sexual abstinence permitted her entrance into innermost part of the temple. Scholars have often considered such intimate relationships between mortals and deities to be possible only through young virginal priestesses. However, as I demonstrate in the next section, through her post-menopausal state and prolonged sexual abstinence, this old woman was able to gain the same high level of ritual purity. Thus, young virgins and old women can be understood as ritual equivalents in terms of their ability to attain ritual purity, but their differences in social identity made old women more suitable as the priestesses in many cults.

3.3 Renewed Virginity and the Old Priestess

In the previous section, I state that young physical virgins and post-menopausal women were able to achieve the same level of ritual purity, although through different means. The ancient conception of renewed virginity allows for this ritual equivalence.


16 Both the color white and veils are linked to the figure of the bride who was the ideal representation of aidos and sôphrosunê. Other females wore veils as well, especially to demonstrate proper modesty and decorum. The use of clothing as a way to represent ritually the connection between the parthenos and post-menopausal woman is also seen in Diodorus Siculus’ description of the Pythia (D.S. 16.26.6), which I discuss in Section 3.4.1.
However, in order to understand renewed virginity, it is first necessary to examine how the Greeks considered virginity within ancient gynecological theory.

### 3.3.1 The Ancient Conception of Virginity

In modern Western society, virginity is defined in heterosexual and physiological terms. Virginity is the state of a female before there has been penile penetration of the vagina; the condition of a female’s hymen is not a factor in determining her virginity.\(^1\) For the ancient Greeks, issues regarding virginity tend to be linked to those related to menarche and defloration; these issues affect primarily adolescents. It is, therefore, necessary at this point to address the term *parthenos* in more detail. This term has already arisen in the discussion of adolescent females and is associated with a plethora of connotations, both ancient and modern. It is a complex concept in ancient Greece with no simple English translation. Traditionally, *parthenos* has been translated as “virgin,” which reflects the English derivative from Latin’s similarly complex term, *virgo*.\(^2\) As part of his study on the choruses of young girls, Claude Calame offers the following elucidation of the term:

*Parthenos*, used in addition to young girls and adolescent girls, should not mislead: in Greece it embodies a concept very different from the one imposed upon our culture by twenty centuries of piety concerning the Virgin Mary. It refers to that particular status of the young woman who is pubescent but not yet married: the many Greek legends about young girls who have a child is proof, among others, that the term παρθένος by no means denotes a physical state of virginity, but simply the status of a young woman who is not yet married.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Carpenter 2005; Stiritz and Schiller 2005.

\(^2\) I do not translate the Greek word, *parthenos*, throughout most of this dissertation. At points when I do refer to this category of females, I use the term “adolescents” despite its own anachronistic connotations because it does not have the same implications of chastity as “virgin” or “maiden.”

\(^3\) Calame 2001: 27.
Calame and others who study women of this age group have argued that being a *parthenos* is a social position, indicative of her civil status within her family and community at large. If Calame’s definition of *parthenos* is accepted, this stage of a woman’s life becomes independent of her sexual experience. It is necessary to recognize, however, that in ideal Greek society, a female surely would have also been a physical virgin during this time of her life, but virginity is not necessarily implied when referring to a female as a *parthenos*. Giulia Sissa counters Calame’s description and insists on an inherent sexual aspect to the *parthenos*.20 This debate over how the Greeks imagined the *parthenos* is relevant to the present consideration of old priestesses because of the frequent comparisons between young and old women in ritual settings. Because priestesses represented the ideal manifestation of a group, I cautiously assume that the term *parthenos* in a ritual context refers to females not yet married and carries with it the implication of physical virginity. However, it is important to remember that *parthenos* does not always carry this implication. A *parthenos* is first and foremost a social position, one in which physical virginity is assumed only in ideal circumstances.

Understanding the Greek conception of virginity hinges upon the modern interpretation of medical texts and beliefs about the virginal female body.21 This debate centers on what anatomical feature was considered to be the impediment for menstrual blood before menarche and defloration. As observed in Hippocratic medicine, menstrual blood can accumulate in adolescent girls and can cause them serious health and mental problems if it is not released (Hp. *Virg*. 8.466-471L). Ann Ellis Hanson argues that the

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20 Sissa 1990a: 73-86.

21 Scholars involved in this debate are Lesley Dean-Jones, Ann Ellis Hanson, Helen King and Giulia Sissa.
Greeks understood a hymeneal membrane to be the source of this impediment. Hanson is responding to Giulia Sissa’s arguments against an ancient belief in the hymen, which Sissa believes to be a Christian conception. Sissa maintains that it was the opening of the veins and the widening of the cervical stoma that allowed menstrual blood to be released. Hanson does not deny that the cervical stoma opened with defloration, but she denies that this first opening could be the signal for “the irrevocable change of a young girl’s body to that of a woman.” The initial opening of the cervical stoma could not mark this change because it was not a permanent change in a female’s body; according to ancient gynecological beliefs, the stoma opened and closed throughout the normal course of a woman’s life, as is discussed below. Hanson sees the perforation of the hymen during defloration as the irrevocable change. However, as both Giulia Sissa and Lesley Dean-Jones have argued convincingly, there is not adequate evidence for an ancient Greek belief in a hymeneal membrane as part of the normal female anatomy. As Dean-Jones points out, the “irrevocable change” was the accumulation of blood in the young girl’s body. This physical change from a girl to a woman was independent of defloration, as is demonstrated by instances in the medical texts when wombs open on their own accord.

22 Hanson 1990: 325.
23 Sissa 1990b.
24 Sissa 1990b: 357.
26 For these extensive arguments, see Sissa 1990a: 105-123; Sissa 1990b; Dean-Jones 1994: 47-55.
Another piece of evidence against a belief in a fundamental change occurring with defloration is the lack of any medical examinations related to virginity in the ancient Greek world. Virginity tests are presented as exotic when they are described in Greek texts. For example, Herodotus describes an annual festival in Libya where groups of *parthenoi* attack each other; those who die of their wounds are declared *pseudoparthenoi*, “fake virgins” (Hdt. 4.180). The girls are not examined in any sort of gynecological way to determine their virginity, but rather, their failure to succeed in a fight establishes their chastity or lack thereof.\(^{29}\) The only evidence for physical proof of virginity is in popular tradition; for instance, the belief that the neck widened after defloration reflecting a sympathetic widening of the sexual organs.\(^{30}\) Unfortunately, the sources for this evidence date from the Roman period, although the sympathetic relationship between the head and oral orifices and the female genitalia is well established in the Greek medical literature.\(^{31}\) In ancient Greece, physical proof of virginity and gynecological examinations were replaced by intense familial supervision; it was the family’s responsibility to ensure that the daughter whom they betrothed was still intact. Failure to protect their daughter from the sexual temptations and hazards of the world could even result in a lawsuit.\(^{32}\)

### 3.3.2 Closed Bodies: The Virgin and Post-Menopausal Woman

In ancient Greece, the first sexual experience of a girl was not viewed as a permanent physical change. The loss of virginity was in fact regarded as a social rite of

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\(^{29}\) For other similar virginity tests, see Sissa 1990b: 343-346.

\(^{30}\) Hanson 1990: 328-329.

\(^{31}\) For example, see Catullus 64.376-80. Also see Hanson 1990 328-329 for the sympathetic relationship between oral and genital openings.

\(^{32}\) As is described in Apollodoros’ speech against Neaira (D. 59).
passage, and virginity was a physiological state to which a woman could return, as I demonstrate below. Crucial to understanding the conception of renewed virginity is the ancient Greek belief of the opening and closing stoma of the female genitalia. Because the uterus was understood as an upside-down vessel, it had the ability to open or close and to retain or release its contents respectively.\textsuperscript{33} Throughout a woman’s reproductive years it was necessary for the womb to open and close. These changes were not pathological, but rather were physiologically vital for menstruation, conception and pregnancy. Ann Ellis Hanson argues that “a common medical image for the activities which the uterine mouth in a mature woman routinely performs is that of the opening and closing of pursed lips.”\textsuperscript{34} The uterine mouth was perceived as closed for most of a woman’s life, notably “during periods of extended sexual inactivity.”\textsuperscript{35} The author of \textit{Diseases of Women} describes how prolonged sexual abstinence causes the closing of the uterine stoma (Hp. \textit{Mul.} 1.2; 8.16.1-2L). In addition, the Hippocratic corpus gives examples of how women who are no longer menstruating suffer the same uterine diseases as girls who have never engaged in sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{36} Both of these groups have the same gynecological anatomy: closed stomata. With the uterine mouth permanently closed due to the cessation of menses and prolonged sexual abstinence, a woman was able to return to a physical state similar to virginity before defloration.

This conception of the uterus is not limited to medical texts, but represents popular belief about the functioning of the womb. The opening and closing of the uterine

\textsuperscript{33} Hanson 1995: 286.

\textsuperscript{34} Hanson 1990: 324.

\textsuperscript{35} Dean-Jones 1994: 51.

\textsuperscript{36} Hp. \textit{Mul.} 1.7, 8.32.1-2L; Hp. \textit{Mul.} 2.137, 8.310.10-11L. Also see Chapter 2.3.3.
stoma that have been discussed thus far have focused on ensuring a healthy reproductive cycle and pregnancy. However, uterine magic sought to manipulate the opening and closing of the uterus for both beneficent and maleficent means. Extant spells in Greek magical texts reveal that magical practitioners sought to open the womb with the desire for both conception and abortion. As Jean-Jacques Aubert underscores, the “timely aperture and closure of the womb” was essential to assure both positive and negative results in uterine magic.\(^{37}\) For example, in one spell the practitioner wishes his beloved to be faithful only to him. The spell addresses the womb of the beloved, and commands it to “open and receive the seed,” χάνε καὶ δέξαι τὸ σπέρμα (PGM XXXVI.283-94). This practitioner desires to control the uterus’ ability to open in order to affect a positive outcome, namely to ensure conception and the devotion of his lover. In another spell, the practitioner seeks to manipulate the womb of a woman for malevolent purposes. He recites the spell, “let the genitals and womb of that one open and let her become bloody during the night and day,” ἀνοιγήτω ἡ φύσις καὶ ἡ μήτρα τῆς δεῖνα καὶ αἴμασσέσθω νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας (PGM LXII.76-106).\(^{38}\) The magical practitioner’s objective is to cause an ill-timed opening of the uterine stoma, inducing menorrhagia and ultimately abortion.\(^{39}\)

In addition to the extant examples of uterine magic that manipulate the womb through spells, amulets have been found throughout the ancient Mediterranean that are

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\(^ {37}\) Aubert 1989: 426.

\(^ {38}\) φύσις is typically defined as “origin” or “nature,” but it can be used to indicate the sexual characteristics of both men and women, although infrequently (LSJ s.v. VII).

\(^ {39}\) Both of these spells as well as other instances of uterine magic in the Greek Magical Papyri and other ancient texts are discussed in Aubert 1989.
also believed to be magical attempts to control the uterine stoma.\textsuperscript{40} These amulets typically depict a womb with a key beneath the opening of the uterus. A common image of the uterus on these amulets is that of a jar that can open and close in order for the contents to be kept in the appropriate place. The key represents the wearer’s hope either to lock or unlock her womb, depending on the desired reproductive function.\textsuperscript{41} She may have worn the amulet with the hope of opening the stoma for conception or delivery, or keeping the stoma closed to prevent miscarriage. These magical texts and artifacts demonstrate that the conception of an opening and closing womb did not exist solely in ancient medical texts.

As both medical and popular evidence show, virginity in antiquity was understood to be as much a social condition as a physiological one. These gynecological ideas have important religious implications, especially regarding ritual purity. Through renewed virginity, celibate post-menopausal women were equivalent to young physical virgins in terms of their level of ritual purity. With their renewed virginity, old women were excellent candidates for priesthoods, which required both an extended length of service and a high degree of ritual purity. This conception of renewed virginity is further supported in the mythology of the goddess Hera. Pausanias reports an Argive tradition in which Hera renews her virginity annually.

\begin{quote}
λείπτεται δὲ καὶ τειχών ἐτί ἐρείπια, καὶ Ποσειδώνος ἱερὸν καὶ λιμένες εἰςίν ἐν Ναυπλίῳ καὶ πιγῆ Κάναθος καλομένης ἐνταῦθα τὴν Ἑραν φασίν Ἁργείου κατὰ ἕτος λοιμένην παρθένον γίνεσθαι (Paus. 2.38.2).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} Ritner 1984; Aubert 1989; Hanson 1995; and Dasen 2002.

\textsuperscript{41} Hanson 1995.
And in Nauplia there are the ruins of walls and the temple and precinct of Poseidon and the so-called spring of Kanathos. In that place, the Argives say that each year Hera became a parthenos, after having bathed [in the spring].

Hera, the goddess of marriage and wife of Zeus, is traditionally not identified as one of the virginal goddesses in the Greek pantheon. This Argive tradition that describes Hera’s yearly renewed virginity underscores the ability of mortal post-menopausal women to renew their virginity. While Hera was able to achieve this bodily condition through bathing, mortal women achieved renewed virginity through extended sexual abstinence and menopause.

3.3.3 Ritual Implications of Renewed Virginity

With renewed virginity, old women in ancient Greece were able to attain the same level of ritual purity as young girls and adolescents who were physical virgins and traditionally considered to be the most pure. The description of the sanctuary of Aphrodite at Sikyon exemplifies this equivalence. The sanctuary had two priestly officials: an old woman who served as the νεωκόρος, temple guardian, and a parthenos who served for a year as the λυτροφόρος, water-carrier (Paus. 2.10.4). Their ritual status can be likened as only these two females could enter the temple. In other ritual settings, young and old women did not serve together; instead, old women were believed to have replaced parthenoi as priestesses, often because of sexual scandals. Girls and adolescents were vulnerable to sexual corruption, in the form of both rape and seduction, and so their ritual purity could be compromised. Old women were alternatives to physical virgins without the same sexual complications. Moreover, the renewed virginity

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42 Hera is not included in the list of goddesses, Artemis, Athena, and Hestia, who were not subject to the charms of Aphrodite (HH Aph. 5.7-35).
of celibate post-menopausal women allowed them to replace young virgins without any change in the ritual status of the priestess.

At the sanctuary of Artemis Hymnia near Orchomenus, for instance, the priesthood was first held by a *parthenos* (Paus. 8.5.11). Pausanias describes how a notoriously impious man, Aristocrates, tried to seduce the young priestess of Artemis, but she resisted. He eventually succeeds in raping her, although she fled to the temple for refuge (Paus. 8.5.12; 8.13.5). Once his crime was discovered, Aristocrates was stoned, and the priesthood was no longer allotted to a *parthenos*. An adult woman who “had enough sexual relations with men,” γυναικα ὀμιλίαις ἀνδρῶν ἀποχρώντως ἔχουσαν, was then appointed as the priestess of Artemis (Paus. 8.5.12). Despite this change from a young physical virgin to an old woman with renewed virginity, no change in ritual duties is described. The old woman was able to take over completely for the younger priestess. A similar transition is described as part of the history of the Delphic Pythia. I now examine the Pythia in detail, using her as a case study to demonstrate how the conception of renewed virginity can elucidate areas of previous confusion and contradiction concerning issues of her age, sexual status, and ritual purity.

3.4 The Delphic Pythia as a Post-Menopausal Priestess

Controversy and debate surround virtually every aspect of the Pythia, but I focus on the age and sexual status of this priestess.43 There are primarily two scholarly opinions regarding these issues; one considers her to be a physical virgin who served for life, and the other to be an older woman appointed later in her life. The latter school of

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thought accepts the account given by Diodorus Siculus, while the former is based on a sexualized relationship between the priestess and Apollo. To resolve this debate, I reexamine the ancient evidence and introduce a new methodological approach to the study of the Pythia. I argue that the conception of the post-menopausal body in ancient Greece is fundamental to understanding the age of the Pythia. In particular, the conception of renewed virginity allowed post-menopausal women to achieve the same level of ritual purity as physical virgins. Ultimately, with the ancient evidence, in conjunction with the conception of the post-menopausal body and renewed virginity, I argue that the historical Pythia was a celibate post-menopausal woman when she was appointed to the priesthood.

3.4.1 Evidence in Support of an Old Pythia

Diodorus Siculus’ rationalizing account of the origin of the Delphic Oracle specifically addresses the age and reproductive status of the Pythia. Diodorus identifies a natural chasm that emits vapors as the source of the oracular power of Delphi. This first person to mount the tripod and harness the prophetic vapors was a γυνή whom Diodorus calls a prophêtis (D.S. 16.26.4). Diodorus further explains the establishment of the priesthood by describing a change in the age of the women chosen to be Pythias.

In the late twentieth century, most scholars rejected any notion of noxious vapors rising from a natural chasm to intoxicate the Pythia and thereby inspire her prophetic abilities. However, recent geological work has found new evidence of fault lines and some gaseous emissions in the Delphic sanctuary area. For the technical aspects of the geological find, see de Boer, et al. 2001; Hale, et al. 2003.
It is said that in ancient times *parthenoi* delivered the oracles on account of their uncorrupted nature and their similarity to Artemis. Thus, it was fitting for these females to protect the secrets of prophesying. But at an earlier time, Echecrates the Thessalian visited the oracle and saw the prophesying *parthenos*. He desired her on account of her beauty, and so he stole her away and ravaged her. On account of this terrible incident, the Delphians determined that in the future a *parthenos* would no longer deliver oracles, but a woman, older than fifty years, would prophesy. And she would dress in the attire of a *parthenos*, as a remembrance of the earlier priestess.

The history of the Delphic prophetess, as presented by Diodorus, is one example of a female priesthood that equated young virgins and older women and reflected the similarity in ritual purity between these two age groups. In the case of the Pythia, as in other priesthoods, tradition claims that sexual misconduct prompted a shift in the appointment of young virgins to old women. The age of the priestess given by Diodorus is notable because of its specificity and because it coincides exactly with the age range for menopause in many of the ancient medical treatises.

In the first part of this passage, Diodorus identifies the qualities that initially prompted the selection of a *parthenos* to the priesthood, but these qualities are not necessarily contrary to the nature of post-menopausal women. *Parthenoi* were originally chosen “on account of their uncorrupted nature and their similarity to Artemis,” διά τοῦ τῆς φύσεως ἀδιάφθορον καὶ τοῦ τῆς Αρτέμιδος ὁμογενές. Most scholars assume that...

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45 As I discussed in Section 3.3.3, this pattern can also be seen in descriptions of the priesthhoods at the sanctuary of Aphrodite at Sikyon and of Artemis Hymnia near Orchomenus (Paus. 2.10.4; Paus. 8.5.11-12).

46 For instance, a sexual assault prompts a substitution in the priesthood of Artemis Hymnia as told in Pausanias 8.5.12.

47 For a discussion of the age of menopause, see Chapter 2.3.1.
Diodorus uses both descriptions to allude to the physical virginity of the priestess. While the sexual force of ἀδιάφρορος, “uncorrupted,” cannot be suppressed, it was also important for the priestess to be above bribery, as Herodotus describes several instances of alleged corruption.\(^{48}\) ἀδιάφρορος is in fact used to describe judges, magistrates, and others who may be susceptible to bribery (LSJ s.v. I.2). A reference to physical virginity is also apparent in the similarity between a mortal parthenos and Artemis, but Plato describes how Artemis is also akin to post-menopausal women in his discussion of midwifery in the Theaetetus. A midwife needs to be similar to Artemis because the goddess is the overseer of childbirth. Post-menopausal women are the appropriate choice because they, like Artemis, are childless, i.e., are not in a childbearing state, and yet they know the ways of childbirth, i.e., were not barren (Pl. Tht. 149b-c).

Diodorus also describes how the older women who served as Pythias continued to wear the dress of a parthenos in memory of the earlier custom, but the association of the παρθενική σκευή with purity may have been an additional factor in its retention. Youthful attire for an older woman was also prescribed for the post-menopausal priestess of Sosipolis, as described by Pausanias (Paus. 6.20.2-3).\(^{49}\) In the case of the priestess of Sosipolis, the old priestess covered her head and face with a white veil, which is reminiscent of bridal garb. The wearing of youthful clothing associated with parthenoi or nymphai, brides, further emphasizes the connection between young virgins and post-menopausal women, especially in light of their ritual equivalence.

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\(^{48}\) Herodotus relates potential problems of corruption and bribery at 5.66, 5.90, 6.66, 6.75, and 6.123.

\(^{49}\) For a more complete discussion of this post-menopausal priestess, see Section 3.2.
In addition to the general etiological ideas expressed in this passage of Diodorus Siculus, the ages of particular Pythias are suggested in two fifth-century BCE tragedies. In Euripides’ *Ion*, Ion greets the Pythia as “my dear mother, who did not bear me,” ὦ φίλη μοι μήτερ, οὐ τεκοῦσά περ (E. *Ion* 1324). This form of address does not trouble the Pythia or presumably the Athenian audience who was watching the play. The image of the Pythia created by this interaction with Ion is that of an older woman who could conceivably be the mother of a grown child. While the *Ion* does not clarify the age of the Pythia beyond a doubt, it goes further towards suggesting that she was an older woman.

The opening scene of Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* is also helpful in determining the age and reproductive status of the Pythia. It depicts a scene of abnormal oracular consultation as the Pythia crawls away from the altar after she sees Orestes and the Erinyes there. The Pythia frightfully exclaims, “for when she is afraid, an old woman is nothing, instead she is like a child.” δείσασα γὰρ γραῦς οὐδὲν, ἀντίπαις μὲν οὖν (A. Eu. 38). Aeschylus not only identifies the Pythia as an old woman, but he emphasizes it with this exclamation in which she compares herself to a child. Additional sources of information regarding this scene and the age of the Pythia come from vase paintings that represent Orestes’ visit to Delphi, although with varying degrees of fidelity to Aeschylus’ version. Five of these vases depict a Pythia who was old enough to have grey or white hair; two of the scenes are representations of the Pythia as she flees the temple and three others depict Orestes’ purification.\(^{50}\) The existence of these vases with white-haired

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\(^{50}\) The vases with a white-haired Pythia in flight are Naples 3249 and St. Petersburg 1743 (St 349); the vases with Orestes’ purification and a white-haired Pythia are St. Petersburg 298 (St 1343), Paestum 4794, and a vase in a Milan private collection, (Dyer 1969). There is extensive scholarship on representations of tragedy on vases, see Webster 1967; Trendall and Webster 1971; Kossatz-Deissmann 1978 for more details.
Pythias demonstrates that Aeschylus’ portrayal of the Pythia as an old woman was an accepted convention.51

While it is problematic to formulate generalized statements about the Pythia from the characters in these two tragedies, it is arguable that the playwrights are presenting idealized notions of the Pythia. These two dramatic representations, coupled with the etiological passage of Diodorus Siculus, strongly suggest that the Pythia was an old woman. In addition, Plutarch writes two dialogues about the Delphic Oracle, *The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse* (hereafter “*Oracles*”) and *The Obsolescence of Oracles* (hereafter “*Obsolescence*”), which include passages regarding the Pythia’s age and sexual status. However, the evidence from Plutarch complicates the picture of the Pythia that I have presented thus far because it initially appears to contradict the argument that the Pythia was appointed as a post-menopausal woman. Imagery and language related to virginity influence the passages in Plutarch’s dialogues. A careful analysis of these passages, however, reveals that Plutarch does not specifically indicate that the Pythia is a virgin. Moreover, the vocabulary of virginity takes on additional meaning in the context of post-menopausal women’s renewed virginity.

In “*Oracles,*” through the character of Theon, Plutarch states that the Pythia should not have any particular skills or expertise before becoming the Pythia.

…οὐτ’ ἀπὸ τέχνης οὐδὲν οὔτ’ ἄπ’ ἄλλης τινὸς ἐμπειρίας καὶ δυνάμεως ἐπιφερομένη κάτεισιν εἰς τὸ χρηστήριον, ἄλλ’ ὥσπερ ὁ Ξενοφῶν οἴεται δεῖν ἐλάχιστα τὴν νύμφην ἰδούσαν ἐλάχιστα δ’ ἀκούσασαν εἰς ἀνδρὸς βαδίζειν, οὕτως ἀπειρος καὶ ἀδαίς ὁλίγου δεῖν ἀπάντων καὶ παρθένος ὡς ἀληθῶς τὴν ψυχὴν τῷ θεῷ σύνεστιν (Plu. Mor. 405c).

51 Other representations of scenes from the *Eumenides* depict priestesses with dark hair; these artists may not be as concerned with identifying her specific age. For example, see Berlin 3256 and Lecce 770.
…she does not bring anything either as a result of technical skill or experience or ability when she goes down into the oracle. But just like Xenophon thinks that it is necessary for a bride to go to her husband’s home having seen the fewest things and heard the fewest things, so the parthenos must also be inexperienced and ignorant of virtually all things when she joins her spirit to the god.

Plutarch links the inexperience of the Pythia to Xenophon’s description of a how a bride ought to know nothing when she is first married. In the passage from Xenophon’s Oeconomicus to which Plutarch alludes, Ischomachus wants his new bride to have seen, heard, and said as little as possible (X. Oec. 7.5). Ischomachus, however, goes on to describe the sort of training he expects his bride to have when they marry, and cites spinning as his example. Ischomachus wants his new bride to be inexperienced in her new role of wife, but he also expects her to have some previous knowledge. If this analogy is applied to the Pythia, she ought to be unfamiliar with her new ritual duties as the Pythia, but she should possess life experiences. The inexperienced and ignorant state of the Pythia when she assumed office does not necessarily refer to a virginal state, but instead describes her naïveté regarding ritual and the workings of the Delphic Oracle. Moreover, her ritual inexperience was a crucial element ensuring that she was beyond corruption and undue influence.

In “Obsolescence,” Plutarch more explicitly addresses the subject of the Pythia’s sexual practices.

…τούτων ἔνεκα καὶ συνουσίας ἄγνον τὸ σῶμα καὶ τὸν βίον ὅλως ἀνεπίμικτον ἄλλοδαπαῖς καὶ ἄθυκτον ὑμηλίαις φυλάττουσι τῆς Πυθίας (Plu. Mor. 438C).

…on account of these things, they keep the body of the Pythia entirely pure from social interactions, her life unmixed with foreign associations and holy.

According to this passage, the officials of Delphi were charged with protecting the body of the Pythia from various sources of corruption and pollution. They must keep the
Pythia’s body ἁγνός; often this word is taken simply to mean chaste or virginal in the modern sense. However, in Robert Parker’s extensive discussion of its usage, he concludes that in reference to mortals it more often describes those who were fit to worship the gods.\(^{52}\) It is also frequently used with a modifying genitive to express limitations or specific purities, for instance purity from bloodguilt.\(^{53}\) In Plutarch’s passage, ἁγνός is used with such a genitive; the Pythia’s body is to be kept pure from συνουσία. The primary definition for συνουσία is social intercourse or society (LSJ s.v. I.1), but it can also mean sexual intercourse (LSJ s.v. I.4). Both of these meanings of συνουσία are applicable to the Pythia because both were sources of corruption and pollution. In the passage of Diodorus, there is a similar duality in the adjective, ἀδιάφορος. In addition, Plutarch indicates that the Pythia should live in such a way that she was not involved in foreign associations, ἀλλοδαπαὶ ὀμιλίαι. The noun here, ὀμιλία, also has the dual meaning of general societal interactions and sexual intercourse (LSJ s.v. I.1; I.2). Lastly, Plutarch uses the adjective ἄθικτος to describe how the life of the Pythia ought to be. ἄθικτος literally means “not touched,” but came to mean holy, and is in fact used to describe Delphi in Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus (S. OT 897) (LSJ s.v. I.1; I.3). ἄθικτος can also mean chaste or virginal. Thus, in this word, the Pythia’s piety and fitness to serve Apollo were bound together with her abstinence. From these three statements, it is clear that the Pythia was not to participate in society outside of her role as an oracular priestess. She even had her own house, as described in an extant inscription

\(^{52}\) Parker 1983: 149.

\(^{53}\) For example, E. Hipp. 316. Parker 1983: 149.
(Delph. 3 [5], 50). Notably, none of these prohibitions explicitly extend to the time before her appointment to the priesthood; they only restrict her activities upon selection. In other words, they do not imply that the woman must be a physical virgin in order to become the Pythia.

The evidence from the tragedies and Plutarch’s dialogues do not absolutely confirm Diodorus’ claim that a woman over fifty years old was chosen to be the Pythia because neither the vases nor the passages indicate the age at which these Pythias were appointed to the priesthood. It is possible that they were chosen for the priesthood while *parthenoi*, matured into *grae*, and therefore bypassed the stage during which other women married and bore children. However, as discussed previously, this sort of priestly appointment is inconsistent with Greek societal standards and gynecological beliefs. An inscription, dated from 175-225 CE, helps clarify the issue, at least during that time period (Delph. 3 [1], 553). The dedicator of the inscription cites his grandmother’s position as the Pythia in his list of accomplishments of his life. His grandmother’s priesthood, as well as other relatives who were priests of Apollo, add to his own reputation. Importantly, this inscription confirms that women were appointed to the Delphic priesthood after they had fulfilled their duties as wives and mothers.

3.4.2 The Sexual Model: Pythia as Apollo’s bride

Despite the compelling argument for the Pythia as a post-menopausal woman appointed later in life, some scholars utilize different pieces of ancient evidence to argue

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54 For a reproduction and discussion of this inscription, see Homolle 1896: 720-721.

55 See Sections 3.2 and 3.3.1 for more discussion on the ancient conception of virginity and societal concerns with remaining unmarried.
that the Pythia was a lifelong virgin. This theory hinges upon the model of the priestess and deity as bride and bridegroom. The ancient evidence for a sexualized relationship between the Pythia and Apollo is difficult to accept as a straightforward description of the priesthood.

The theory of the Pythia as Apollo’s bride is not new, but Giulia Sissa addresses it from a different angle in her book, *Greek Virginity*, although, ultimately, her conclusions are flawed. Sissa argues that the Pythia and Apollo were involved in a legitimate sexual union, as if husband and wife; therefore, she concludes that the Pythia must be a virgin for such a union to be respectable in ancient society. She supplements this argument with one in which she claims that virginity was the ideal state for delivering prophecy because it detached the priestess from the outside world. Sissa concludes her arguments by comparing the Pythia’s reception of the god’s *pneuma* to the gynecological fumigation treatments where women stood over a cauldron and received the vapors into their vaginas as a remedy for various ailments. She suggests that the Pythia’s inspiration was induced in a similar manner, thereby impregnating her, and thus the spoken oracles that resulted

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56 Scholars have used various models to explain the mechanism of the Oracle and the relationship between the Pythia and Apollo, but I focus here on the sexual one because it has the most significant implications for the age of the Pythia and the condition of her physical body. Alternative explanations include spirit possession, intoxication by toxic vapors, self-hypnosis on the part of the Pythia, or outright deception on the part of temple officials, the Pythia, or both.

57 Scholars, such as Eugen Fehrle and Kurt Latte, use the priestesses at Patara in Lycia and at Egyptian Thebes as a model for the Pythia. As Herodotus describes them, these priestesses refrain from sexual intercourse with mortals and then sleep in the temple where they have sexual intercourse with Zeus (*Hdt.* 1.182). This analogy does not work well, however, since the Pythia did not sleep in the temple; but rather sat on the tripod. See Fehrle 1910 and Latte 1940 for more discussion of the sexual model.

58 The belief in the necessity of a “pure” priestess-bride was articulated as early as 1910 by Eugen Fehrle in *Die kultische Keuschheit im Altertum*. 
from this process were akin to giving “oral birth.”59 Problematically, this sexualized interpretation of the Pythia’s relationship with Apollo has its origin in Christian accounts of the Oracle. Furthermore, her comparison of Apollo’s possession of the Pythia to gynecological fumigations is flawed as it would have been quite unwieldy for the Pythia to sit on the tripod with her legs spread open, given the position of the tripod’s handles. An Attic red-figure kylix from Vulci depicts how the goddess Themis, imagined to be the first priestess in Delphi, sat upon the tripod to deliver oracles.60 Themis noticeably does not have her legs spread apart.

Much of the evidence for a sexualized relationship between Apollo and the Pythia derives from descriptions of the Oracle by Christian writers, who intended to discredit Greek pagan religious practices, especially methods of divination. In his Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians, John Chrysostom describes how the Pythia sits on the tripod with her legs spread, and an evil pneuma “slips through her genital regions,” διά τῶν γεννητικῶν αὐτῆς διαδύσομενον μορίων (1.29.1). Origen describes a similarly profane scene of oracular consultation in Contra Celsum when “the priestess of Apollo receives the pneuma into her genitals,” ἡ τοῦ Απόλλωνος προφήτης δέχεται πνεῦμα διά τῶν γυναικείων κόλπων (7.3).61 Both of these sources, however, must be viewed with

59 Sissa 1990a: 52.

60 Berlin F 2538. While it is not the Pythia (but Themis) who is depicted, this image can still be seen as evidence for the Apolline tradition in Delphi because of the Greek belief that Themis was the first oracular priestess in Delphi. Her position as an earlier oracular goddess in Delphi connects her to the Pythia, and in particular, the use of the tripod connects this image to the Apollo’s oracular tradition in Delphi. For a more comprehensive discussion of Themis’ connection to Delphi as well as the theory of previous divine ownership of the site, see Sourvinou-Inwood 1987.

61 Although the sufficient cynicism about the source is necessary, Origen does cite as additional evidence for the profanity of the Delphic Oracle the fact that parthenoi were specifically not chosen as priestesses (Origen Cels. 6.6).
skepticism, since each is attempting to disparage paganism and the Delphic Oracle in particular. The motive behind these descriptions is easily distinguished; these authors probably had little direct knowledge of Delphic practices, but instead were sexualizing and exaggerating rumors and anecdotes in order to denigrate rival religious authorities.

In non-Christian sources, a possible sexual link is suggested in a more subtle manner. In *On the Sublime*, Longinus describes how the Pythia “becomes pregnant by a divine power and immediately gives oracles on account of the inspiration,” ἐγκύμωνα τῆς δαμονίου καθισταμένην δυνάμεως παρατικά χρησμοδεῖν κατ᾽ ἑπίσνοιαν (13.2). ἐγκύμων does not only mean pregnant in the physical sense, but it also has metaphorical meanings; for instance, this word is used by Plato to describe the mind (*Smp.* 209b) (LSJ s.v. I). A metaphorical interpretation makes sense here; Longinus is using the sexual vocabulary as an allegory for the relationship, not the actual mechanism of prophecy. Both sexual intercourse and pregnancy are alluded to in another non-Christian description of the Pythia, although the reference is quite discreet. In his *Seventy-Second Discourse*, Dio Chrysostom describes the Pythia as “sitting on the tripod and being filled with *pneuma*,” καθὶζοισα ἐπὶ τοῦ τρίποδος, ἐμπιμπλαμένη τοῦ πνεύματος (72.12). His choice of the verb, ἐκπίπλημι, has multiple connotations. The verb in the passive voice is used to describe sexual intercourse. In addition, the verb without the prefix ἐν- is used of females to indicate pregnancy (LSJ s.v. πίπλημι III.3), such as in Aristotle’s *History of Animals* (Arist. *HA* 76b29; 78b32). Like Longinus, however, Dio Chrysostom’s use of sexual vocabulary is a metaphor for the relationship between the Pythia and Apollo, not the actual way in which the Delphi Oracle was conducted.

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The descriptions of the Pythia and the Delphic Oracle by these first-century CE authors were most likely influenced by the powerful representations of female prophecy in Latin epic. One of the most influential literary accounts of female prophecy in ancient literature is Vergil’s description of the Cumaean Sibyl in book six of the Aeneid. The Sibyl, like the Pythia, receives her prophecies from Apollo, and Vergil’s description bears some similarities to the sexualized accounts of the Pythia. The Sibyl is described explicitly as a virgo, a Roman concept similar to the Greek parthenos. Her oracular consultation begins with the god entering her, adflata est numine (Verg. A. 6.50). Vergil chooses the verb, afflo, which literally means “to blow or breathe into,” and it does not have any sexual connotation (OLD s.v. 3; 7). Authors after Vergil, especially the Christian ones, embellished his description and infused their accounts of female prophecy with unrestrained sexual undertones.

Lucan builds upon the Vergil’s depiction to create a more sexualized prophetess. In a generalized depiction of Delphic oracular procedure, Lucan describes how “the numen is taken in by the maidenly bosom,” virgino conceptum est pectore numen, and then the prophetess begins her prophecies (Luc. 5.97). Lucan also recounts the story of a particular oracular consultation in which the Pythia was forced to prophesize despite bad omens. The described interaction between the Pythia and Apollo involves the language of compulsion and forcible imposition, almost that of rape. The divine spirit entered her, ingressit; Apollo mastered her bosom, potitus pectore; he forced himself into her body, artus inrumpit; he ordered her to yield her whole bosom to him, toto sibi cedere iussit pectore (Luc. 5.165-169). Sexualized violence is clear in this description of the
relationship between Apollo and the Pythia, but it cannot be used as evidence for normal circumstances at Delphi because of the abnormal coercion of the Pythia.

In addition to the sexualized accounts of the Pythia’s interaction with Apollo, the point of contact between mortal and divinity is also used as evidence for the theory of the Pythia as the bride of Apollo. Both John Chrysostom and Origen are explicit in stating that the *pneuma* enters the body of the Pythia through her genitals. It is this understanding of oracular inspiration that Sissa utilizes when she compares Apollo’s inspiration to vaginal fumigation treatments. However, in a less rhetorically charged description of oracular consultation, Plutarch describes Themis as receiving inspiration on the tripod in Delphi “through the bosom,” διὰ τῶν κόλπων (Plu. *Mor.* 566D).63 If we assume a similarity between the functions of the mortal Pythia and Themis on the Delphic tripod, there are no sexual undertones in Plutarch’s description of the prophetess’ divine inspiration. Moreover, the primary meaning of *kolpos* is bosom (LSJ s.v. I. 1.), not vagina or womb (LSJ s.v. 2.a-c.).64 Even when Origen uses it to refer to the Pythia’s genitalia, he adds the attributive adjective, *gunaikeiôn*, to prevent any confusion about his explicitly sexual meaning. Additionally, in the above Latin sources, the word *pectus* is generally used for the point of contact. The *pectus* was the area of the body that was understood to be the source of prophecy (OLD s.v. 3.c.). While *pectus* seems to be sexualized within the ill-omened oracular consultation, it does not generally have a sexual meaning. In sum, the ancient accounts of a sexualized relationship between the

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63 As noted above, evidence concerning Themis and Delphi can be used to help elucidate certain aspects of the Pythia.

64 It typically only refers to female genitals in medical writings. The meaning of “bosom” is further supported because of the connection between prophecy and “breath,” which necessitates a point of contact above the waist; see Johnston 2008: 40 for more details.
Pythia and Apollo need to be understood as a function of their individual textual traditions and authorial intentions, and not as reflections of how the oracular consultation was actually performed.

Sissa and other scholars who subscribe to the sexual model of oracular prophecy insist that the mortal woman chosen must be a physical virgin because no other type of female would be suitable as the bride of a god. This sexualized interpretation of the Delphic Oracle, however, relies heavily on disparaging Christian accounts of pagan prophecy. While I agree with these scholars that the Pythia required and maintained a high level of ritual purity to deliver oracles, their assertion that the Pythia was a physical virgin appointed for life would be highly anomalous in Greek society. The selection of a post-menopausal woman as the Pythia fulfilled the necessary requirements for ritual purity and better suited the norms of Greek society.

3.4.3 Renewed Virginity and the Delphic Pythia

The ritual equivalence between young virgins and old women helps us to understand both the ancient evidence and scholarly debate concerning the Pythia of Delphi. I have shown that a celibate post-menopausal woman was able to fulfill all the requisites of the Delphic priesthood since she was both pure in body and detached from society. One of the primary arguments for the Pythia to be young physical virgin was the innate purity attached to this female age group. However, as I have argued, celibate post-menopausal women were able to achieve this same level of ritual purity. Understanding the post-menopausal body and the conception of renewed virginity also sheds additional light on the passages from Plutarch. These passages use imagery and language related to virginity and, therefore, are often seen as contradicting the evidence that supports a
post-menopausal Pythia. A celibate post-menopausal Pythia with renewed virginity, however, would have been viewed by the ancient Greeks as having a body, which was fundamentally similar to that of a physical virgin. Renewed virginity clarifies these passages of Plutarch and resolves the perceived inconsistencies in the ancient evidence related to the age of the Pythia. In addition, the choice of a post-menopausal woman aligns the selection procedures of Delphi with other cultic sites and is consistent with Greek medical and societal beliefs that females should not remain virgins past puberty. The appointment of a post-menopausal woman as the Pythia allowed her first to have performed her traditional duties of wife and mother, and then, only after her children have grown and her husband died, did she become the Pythia of Delphi.

3.5 Renewed Virginity: Expanding the Identity of the Old Woman

This conception of renewed virginity has implications for the understanding of post-menopausal identity. As I discussed in Chapter 1, post-menopausal identity is comprised of two facets, a physiological one and a social one. Renewed virginity is the primary component of a post-menopausal women’s physiological identity, especially in regard to sacred affairs. The physical nature of the old female body prompts the necessary elements of renewed virginity, notably menopause and celibacy. The ritual implications of a post-menopausal woman’s physiological identity, characterized by renewed virginity, were profound, especially concerning the appointment of priesthods. It allowed the post-menopausal women to be viewed as the ritual equivalents of youthful physical virgins because both age groups could attain the same high level of ritual purity. In this chapter, the application of these new ideas prompted a clarification of the age and sexual status of one of the most controversial sacred officials in the ancient world. The
Pythia of Delphi can now be seen as a celibate post-menopausal woman who was appointed later in life to this oracular priesthood. In the following chapters, the physiological facet of the post-menopausal identity continues to have importance, but I also demonstrate the significance of the second facet of post-menopausal identity, the old woman’s social identity. The integration of these two elements of post-menopausal identity help to explain why post-menopausal women were appointed to particular priestships.
4.1 Women as Sacrificers and Slaughterers

Sacrifice has long been recognized as a key facet of religion and culture and has interested scholars from many academic disciplines. The history of scholarship on sacrifice, including that within the field of classics, is extensive and distinguished. Rituals identified as sacrifice have been seen as some of the central features of the Greek religious system and, subsequently, scholars have sought to analyze, interpret, and classify these rites. All of these scholarly approaches to sacrifice in the ancient Greek world are complicated by the incomplete and inconsistent picture that remains of sacrificial practices. Despite issues with the evidence, I present a reconstruction of the typical animal sacrifice. It is with this understanding of Greek sacrificial ritual that the relationship between women and sacrifice can be examined in greater detail.

While debate surrounds the role of women in Greek sacrifice, scholars agree that women did not act as the actual slaughterers.\(^1\) The noted exception is the sacrifice at the Chthonia in Hermione, a coastal city in the southern Argolid of the Peloponnese. As part of this festival, four elderly priestesses performed the sacrifice (Paus. 2.35.4-10). These

\(^1\) The opposing positions about women’s roles in sacrifice are presented by Marcel Detienne and Robin Osborne, yet they agree on this point. Detienne 1989; Osborne 1993.
women are described as the actual slaughterers of the sacrificial victims. They act as priestesses, sacrificers, and slaughterers, and this priesthood raises the issue of the identities of the individuals involved in sacrifice.

The identities of individuals involved in sacrifice are ambiguous in the ancient sources. These individuals who are difficult to differentiate and identify include the priest (or priestess), sacrificer, slaughterer, butcher, cook, and meat seller. Much of this ambiguity is the result of scholarly attempts to develop a comprehensive scheme of sacrifice despite local variations. While the sequence of events was relatively consistent throughout the Greek world, the individuals involved varied considerably according to local cult traditions. The debates about these roles concern whether they could be filled by either gender, whether they were considered sacred or not, and how many different individuals were necessary for sacrifice.

The roles of the priest, sacrificer, and slaughterer are most significant for the discussions of this chapter. The first topic of debate is perhaps the most central to the arguments here, yet is the most straightforward to address. Women could be priestesses and sacrificers, but could not be slaughterers. The notable exception is the subject of this inquiry—the priestesses at the Chthonia in Hermione. The debates concerning the sacred nature of the individuals are intricately connected to those concerning whether the same person or multiple individuals performed these roles. A priest would have fulfilled all the functions in some cults; he would have presided over the sacrifice as the ritual agent, he would have presented the sacrifice, and he would have killed the animal himself. These roles become more complex because a priest was not necessary for a sacrifice, especially in those not connected to polis-associated festivals. A private individual could act as
sacrificer and even slaughterer. More probable, however, the role of the slaughterer would have been filled by a hired professional who could even have been a slave. This hired individual often performed the duties of slaughterer, butcher, and cook.² The differentiation and conflation of these various roles are discussed throughout this chapter because of the unique role of the post-menopausal women at the Chthonia who act as priestesses, sacrificers, and slaughterers.

I approach the appointment of post-menopausal women as priestesses at the Chthonia from two angles. First I examine why post-menopausal women were able to sacrifice in the Greek sacrificial system. I use the gendered theory of sacrifice of sociologist Nancy Jay, which understands a relationship between sacrifice and childbirth and between patrilineality and sacrifice, to explain why only post-menopausal women could have the three-part role of priestess, sacrificer, and slaughterer.³ Specifically, I demonstrate that their post-menopausal identity is the basis for their ritual role at the Chthonia because they were no longer viewed as threats to Greek patrilineal society. I then argue that the Chthonia was a festival that was promulgated by the Hermionians as a mystery cult to rival the Eleusinian Mysteries. Because of local Hermionians interpretations of Demeter and Kore mythology and their perceived personal connection with the underworld, post-menopausal women were chosen as priestesses at the Chthonia.

² Berthiaume 1982.
4.2 Theories of Sacrifice

Before an in-depth examination of Greek animal sacrifice in general and, ultimately, the sacrifice of the Chthonia in Hermione can be undertaken, it is necessary that I briefly summarize the extensive development of theories on sacrifice.\(^4\) Theories of sacrifice have been put forth by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and classicists alike. This survey of the development of sacrificial theory is not intended to be exhaustive or all inclusive, but rather representative of the scholarship that has influenced interpretations of Greek sacrifice and particularly the Chthonia.

In the late nineteenth century, scholars began to look at sacrifice as part of their obsession to discover the origins of religion. E.B. Tylor, in his *Primitive Culture*, views sacrifice as a ritual whose primary function is to give a gift to the gods.\(^5\) His ideas are strongly influenced by evolutionary theories concerning the development of religion, but his theory of sacrifice as a gift remains relevant to current understandings of sacrifice. William Robertson Smith’s *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* emphasizes the ritualistic nature of sacrifice; more specifically, sacrifice is an act of communion and fellowship between deity and worshippers.\(^6\) The prominence placed on communion consequently focuses attention on the sacrificial meal, an aspect of sacrifice, which continues to draw considerable attention. In their *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss break away from the earlier evolutionary models of

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\(^5\) Tylor 1924.

\(^6\) Smith 1907.
sacrifice and the search for origins. Instead, they emphasize sacrifice as a means of communication between the human and divine and as a necessary step for sacralization and desacralization. Hubert and Mauss’ sacrificial scheme continues to have an impact on the study of sacrifice because of their recognition of the symbolic relationship that sacrifice creates between the sacred and profane.

The approach of Hubert and Mauss takes a step away from the evolutionary model as do the approaches of the next generation of anthropologists, who begin to examine how a society functions, instead of how it emerged. This functionalist theory of sacrifice is best demonstrated in the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, based upon his fieldwork among African societies. In *Nuer Religion*, Evans-Pritchard stresses the piacular nature of sacrifice in which the animal victim substitutes for the person offering the sacrifice. Unlike many of the scholars before and after him, Evans-Pritchard does not formulate a universal theory of sacrifice that applies to all religions and all types of sacrifice. Instead, he focuses upon one culture, the Nuer, and the ways in which sacrifice functions in that specific society. In many ways, Evans-Pritchard looks ahead to more recent trends in scholarship, which reject universalizing claims and refocus attention on a single religious system.

Walter Burkert’s *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* and René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* propose theories of sacrifice that radically altered the theoretical landscape. Both theories center on the violence of

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7 Hubert and Mauss 1964.
8 Evans-Pritchard 1956.
9 Girard 1977; Burkert 1983.
sacrifice; they each attempt to understand and explain its presence in sacrifice, but their similarities end there. Burkert renews the evolutionary model and search for origins. Taking the work of Karl Meuli as his starting position, Burkert recognizes continuity between hunting and sacrifice, such that sacrifice can be understood as a transformation of Paleolithic hunting rites and the prestige associated with them. \(^{10}\) Moreover, in sacrifice, communal participation in aggression unites and maintains society. Burkert also identifies a sense of guilt that is aroused as a result of killing animals. With the Athenian festival of the Dipolieia as his paradigmatic example, Burkert extrapolates that all sacrifice involves feelings of guilt and the attempt to disclaim responsibility afterward. \(^{11}\) Girard also understands sacrifice as violence that creates community. His theory, however, is couched in psychological terms with a foundation in Freud’s premise of primordial murder. \(^{12}\) Thus, the violence in sacrifice is the necessary and controlled amount of violence that maintains society and hierarchy and, ultimately, prevents chaos. Both Burkert and Girard have been exceptionally influential in the study of Greek sacrifice, but they have also been justly criticized. The theories of each have been challenged for their universalizing nature and their understanding of sacrifice as the origin of all culture and society. Burkert has also been critiqued for his use of evolutionary tendencies since such theoretical models were no longer in fashion in the late twentieth century. Girard too uses methodologies that are considered outdated; he

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\(^{10}\) Meuli 1946.

\(^{11}\) Burkert 1983:136-143.

\(^{12}\) Freud 1950.
ignores the differences between cultures in favor of building a theory of sacrifice from fragments of rituals and literary descriptions.

In direct response to Burkert’s theory of sacrifice, Jean-Pierre Vernant and the “Paris School,” centered at the Centre Louis-Gernet, develop an alternative approach to the study of sacrifice in antiquity; it includes such scholars as Marcel Detienne, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Nicole Loraux, and Jean-Louis Durand. The “Paris School” rejects the comparison of Greek sacrificial ritual and hunting rites; it insists that Greek sacrifice must be studied in the context of the Greek religious system. Specifically, Vernant rejects the focus on violence and killing in the theories of Burkert and Girard, but rather he sees the alimentary aspect as central. While Vernant avoids the criticism of universalizing, his theory remains problematic because it is also built upon the interpretation of a single rite, the Athenian Bouphonia. Continuing the focus on the alimentary aspects of sacrifice, Detienne has developed a theory of women and sacrifice in which women were typically excluded from participating in sacrificial ritual and from partaking in the resulting meat. Despite the criticisms leveled against them, Burkert and Vernant have had a profound influence on the study of Greek sacrifice and religion, and each has developed an impressive lineage of scholars who continue to refine the original theories.

13 For examples of these scholars’ views on sacrifice, see Detienne and Vernant 1989.

14 Vernant 1981.


16 Detienne 1989. His theory of women and sacrifice along with Robin Osborne’s critique of it are discussed in detail in Section 4.4.
4.3 Normative Greek Animal Sacrifice

Scholars of Greek sacrifice have reconstructed the ritual procedures from the countless ancient sources, each of which describes some aspect of a sacrifice.\(^{17}\) No complete description of a Greek animal sacrifice exists in the literary sources, and even the more comprehensive ones omit details that are found in other literary or artistic sources.\(^{18}\) Nevertheless, it is necessary to discuss what is considered the typical sacrificial ritual in order to discuss the Chthonia as “atypical,” “abnormal,” or “anomalous” by comparison.\(^{19}\)

While theories of sacrifice often focus on the violence of the actual moment of slaughter, many important preliminary steps were in fact necessary for that aspect of the sacrifice to occur successfully. The type of sacrificial victim varied in Greek sacrifice, although the vast majority of sacrificed animals were cattle, goats, sheep, or pigs.\(^{20}\) The choice of the animal, including its species, gender, and color, was determined by a variety of factors related to the specifics of the sacrifice. Some aspects that may have influenced the choice of the sacrificial animal include the public or private nature of the sacrifice, the specific deity being honored, local cult traditions, and the economic circumstances of the

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\(^{17}\) Scholarship on Greek sacrifice is extensive; see Yerkes 1952; Burkert 1983; Todd 1991; van Straten 1995; Graf 2002; Bremmer 2007; Petropoulou 2008 for discussion and bibliography of the subject. Because of the range of sacrificial rituals in ancient Greece, the following summary focuses only on animal sacrifice and ignores rituals such as libations and first fruit offerings. In addition, this summary is primarily based on the descriptions of typical sacrificial ritual discussed by Graf and Bremmer, although details from other scholars are also noted. Bremmer 1994; Graf 2002; Bremmer 2007.

\(^{18}\) Graf 2002: 117.

\(^{19}\) The sacrificial ritual described below is one that would have taken place in a festival as part of polis religion. Variations on this description obviously exist, especially in cases of private sacrifice or those not related to polis religion. Pantel and Zaidman 1992: 34-39.

individuals involved. As Fritz Graf has noted, no simple explanation exists for the question of why certain deities receive certain offerings.\(^{21}\)

Once the sacrificial victim was chosen, both the animal and the human participants prepared themselves for the sacrifice. The animal was typically adorned with ribbons, garlands, or even gold.\(^{22}\) Not only were the animals beautified, but also the people involved often wore special attire, such as white clothing or wreaths. These initial physical preparations made them ready to perform the preliminary sacrificial rites. The sacrifice began with a procession, which marked off ordinary from sacred space and private from public space.\(^{23}\) Different members of society played distinct roles in the procession and eventually the sacrifice itself. Men led the sacrificial victim, while parthenoi acted as the carriers of sacrificial objects; for instance, as hydrophoroi and kanêphoroi, they carried the water for the sacrifice and the basket in which the sacrificial knife was hidden among the barley groats.\(^{24}\) Flute players and other musicians accompanied the procession, while a crowd of people, often of mixed genders and ages, followed.

When they arrived at the altar and sacred space, preliminary rites continued before the animal was actually sacrificed. The space, participants, and victim were purified with water; this act marked the sacrificial group as a distinct social grouping, i.e.,

\(^{21}\) Graf 2002: 119.

\(^{22}\) van Straten 1995: 43-46.

\(^{23}\) Graf 1996; Graf 2002: 120.

\(^{24}\) For a more detailed discussion these “carrying” roles that parthenoi typically performed during sacrificial processions, see Goff 2004: 55-56, 113-115; Connelly 2007: 33-39
as separate from the rest of society. Following the purifications, a prayer was recited while the participants threw the barley groats on the animal and altar, uncovering the sacrificial knife. The importance of prayer in sacrificial ritual is often underestimated, but it was “the one unequivocal communicative act with the divinity.”

As the participants threw the barley and the sacrificial knife was revealed, the moment of the sacrifice itself arrived. The sacrificial moment began with the sacrificer cutting a few hairs from the head of the animal and throwing them into the fire. The actual method of slaughter and the person who performed it differed according to local cult traditions and the specifics of the animal. Typically, the animal was stunned, and then its head was lifted to reveal its throat, which was slit with the sacrificial knife. The blood was either spilt directly onto the altar (or hearth or sacrificial pit), or it was caught in a bowl and then poured out onto the altar. Great care was taken so that the sacrificial blood fell only where it was supposed to go. “At this very emotional moment the pipes stayed silent,” and the female participants shouted the *ololygê*. The *ololygê* as a ritual cry was not unique to sacrificial ritual; it was also associated with rituals surrounding

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26 Graf 2002: 121.
27 These initial acts—the sprinkling of the water, the throwing of the barley, and the shearing of the hairs—marked the beginning of the sacrificial act. They have been interpreted as the point at which the “inviolability of the sacrificial animal is abolished” (Burkert 1983: 5). Alternatively, the cutting of the hair is viewed in Homer as symbolically killing the animal (Hom. *Od*. 3.464-469).
28 The conflation and differentiation between the sacrificer and slaughterer is discussed in Section 4.1. For different methods of slaughter based on the type and size of the animal, see van Straten 1995: 103-115.
29 See Ekroth 2005 for details on the role of blood in sacrifice.
30 Bremmer 2007: 136. Bremmer agrees with Burkert who asserts that the *ololygê* “marks the emotional climax of the event” (Burkert 1983: 5).
birth and death. Barbaret Goff notes that women’s participation in sacrificial ritual, especially as the shouters of the *ololygê*, characterizes women’s contradictory roles in Greek ritual. Active participation of the women was required for the ritual. However, the presence and agency of women was defined by uttering a wordless cry, thereby emphasizing them as only partial members of the community. The paradox of the female shouting of the *ololygê* is but one aspect that symbolizes the problematic nature of women’s role in sacrifice and Greek ritual.

Following the moment of slaughter, there was the offering to the gods. Blood was not the only part of the victim offered to the gods; they also received the thigh bones wrapped in fat. The entrails of the animals were then inspected, roasted on spits, and consumed by the sacrificer. The ritual aspect of the sacrifice ended at this point, and the practical concerns of butchery ensued. The meat from the sacrifice was distributed according to the specific customs of the area and cult. A communal meal followed, and the leftovers were sometimes taken home by the participants or sold.

### 4.4 Debates on Women in Greek Sacrifice

In the previous section on typical Greek sacrifice, some roles for women are described, such as participants in the procession and as shouters of the *ololygê*. This simple depiction is much more complicated, as is illustrated by the opposing arguments

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31 Deubner 1941; Goff 2004: 28, 50.

32 Goff 2004: 42.

33 Goff 2004: 42.

34 There were local differences in the parts of the animal that were dedicated to the gods. In addition, some sacrificial victims were burned whole as an offering. For discussions of post-kill procedures and concerns, see van Staten 1995: 115-160.
of Marcel Detienne and Robin Osborne.\textsuperscript{35} Simply put, Detienne proposes that women were typically excluded from participating in sacrificial ritual or partaking in the meat, while Osborne vehemently rejects Detienne’s claims. The arguments of each and the terms of their debate have continued to influence scholars trying to define the role of women in sacrifice and Greek religion in general.

Detienne excludes women from sacrificial ritual on the basis of two homologies; the first is between political power and sacrificial practice, and the second is between woman and sacrificial victim. Detienne’s primary focus is on the first of these homologies; he asserts that “just as women are without the political rights reserved for male citizens, they are kept apart from the altars, meat, and blood.”\textsuperscript{36} In simple terms, women were not citizens and, consequently, they could not sacrifice or even eat the associated meat. He identifies three levels of sacrificial participation, envisioned as increasingly exclusive concentric circles. At the center was the individual, who wielded the knife to slaughter the animal. In the next level were those who ate the viscera, which were roasted on the spit, and the broadest level included those who partook of the meat of the sacrificial victim. Within these confines of sacrificial participation, Detienne does not include women. He considers the examples described in ancient sources where women received sacrificial meat to be the exceptions that prove the rule.\textsuperscript{37}

In his arguments about the exclusion of women from sacrificial participation, Detienne specifically addresses the evidence concerning female slaughterers. He cites

\textsuperscript{35} Detienne 1989; Osborne 1993.

\textsuperscript{36} Detienne 1989: 131.

\textsuperscript{37} Detienne 1989: 132-33.
the two documented instances of women wielding the sacrificial knife: the Ruvo amphora in the Naples museum and the evidence concerning the Chthonia in Hermione. Both are explained as exceptional instances of cult practice to Dionysius and Demeter, respectively. While Detienne offers little explanation for the Ruvo amphora except for its unique nature, the sacrificing old priestesses of the Chthonia prompt his second homology; these women “can shed blood since they are no longer at risk of losing it.”

As slaughterers, menstruating women posed too great a risk; they could use the sacrificial instruments as weapons of war against men, such as in the “horror stories” from the Thesmophoria. If women acted as slaughterers, they were in essence allowed to act as citizens and could become violent. Greek men feared that the violence may not be acted out only against the sacrificial animal, but also against them.

Osborne rejects both homologies that Detienne puts forth since Osborne does not think either political or physiological explanations account for women’s exclusion from sacrifice. Osborne extends Detienne’s two separate arguments to what he understands as the logical conclusion; a physiological explanation for women’s political status and lack of sacrificial participation.

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38 Heydemann 2411, reproduced and discussed in Cumont and Vogliano 1933: 242-3, pl. 31, 1. For the evidence on the Chthonia, see Section 4.5.

39 Detienne ignores the images of maenads who brandish knives and animals, see Detienne 1989: 247 n.79. In addition, van Straten discusses two other vase paintings that depict women holding knives in a sacrificial context (1995: 107-109). All these vases are Dionysian in their ritual context, and I do not discuss them here because they cannot be connected to specific cult practices.


41 For example, see the anecdotes of Battus and Aristomenes who were both attacked by knife-wielding women at the Thesmophoria (Ael. fr.44; Paus. 4.17.1). It should be noted that Detienne’s aim in this article is to explain the possibility of violence at the Thesmophoria.

42 Osborne 1993: 397.
“For, if bleeding, not having political rights, and not shedding blood are causally linked, then whether we take sacrificial exclusion to be a product of having no political rights, or having no political rights to be a product of sacrificial exclusion, the bleeding at least must be the cause and not the product of either sacrificial or political deprivation.”

Osborne is troubled by the privileging of female physiology, although it should be noted that Detienne does not make his arguments in the stark terms of biological determinism nor is he alone in seeing the connection between the categories of shedding blood or bloodshed. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, physiological identity is, in fact, an important element in determining ritual participation. A more nuanced discussion of Detienne’s physiological homology and Osborne’s critique will be undertaken in Section 4.6, especially in relation to Nancy Jay’s gendered theory of sacrifice.

Osborne also critiques Detienne’s categories of sacrificial participation. As Osborne correctly observes, Detienne’s three levels—killing the animal, eating the viscera, and sharing in the meat—suggest a schema, which establishes participation as a hierarchy. Thus, some women could partake in the sacrificial meal, a few acted as priestesses, and none performed the role of slaughterer. While the role of slaughterer was only enacted by males, Osborne insists that the privilege and importance that Detienne attaches to it are misplaced. The prominence of priestesses in “political” cults in conjunction with the evidence that women were typically only excluded from cults

43 Osborne 1993: 397.
45 Osborne 1993: 400.
46 Osborne 1993: 401. Notably, Osborne does not address the evidence for female slaughterers, specifically the Chthonia.
marginal to the *polis* leads Osborne to reject Detienne’s political explanation.\(^{47}\) Although Osborne does not express it in such terms, the critical issue with Detienne’s theory of sacrifice is the importance he attributes to the alimentary aspects of sacrificial practice.\(^{48}\) Because Detienne defines sacrificial participation primarily in terms of killing and consumption, the recognized female roles in sacrifice, such as shouting the *ololygê* are minimized. Osborne is surely correct in concluding that women are, not as a rule, excluded from sacrificial rites and the meal. However, neither of these canonical articles on women and sacrifice provides a satisfactory model to address the position of the old priestesses of the Chthonia.

### 4.5 The Chthonia of Hermione

The ritual system of Hermione exemplifies the issues concerning the role of women in the Greek sacrificial system. The festival of the Chthonia in Hermione involved four post-menopausal women acting as priestesses, sacrificers, and slaughterers. The study of the Chthonia is itself problematic because of the seeming inconsistencies in the surviving ancient evidence, notably in the descriptions of the festival by Pausanias and Aelian. Because of these issues the scholarship on the Chthonia has been limited.\(^ {49}\) The festival has been understood as a combination of Demeter’s agricultural and netherworld associations. It has also been considered as an example of anomalous Greek sacrificial practice. This examination of the Chthonia, however, addresses the questions

\(^{47}\) Osborne 1993: 402-3.

\(^{48}\) With his emphasis on the consumption of the animal, Detienne reveals his relationship to the theories of sacrifice related to the “Paris School” and Jean-Pierre Vernant.

\(^{49}\) The festival drew some attention from late nineteenth-century scholars, such as James Frazer and Lewis Richard Farnell. More recently, see Detienne 1989: 140-143; Perlman 2000: 161-166; Pirenne-Delforge 2008: 201-207.
of why post-menopausal women were able to perform the sacrifice and why they did so at this particular festival. In order to answer these questions, I first examine the ancient evidence concerning the festival of the Chthonia. I then present the gendered theory of sacrifice by sociologist Nancy Jay, which clarifies the issue of why post-menopausal women were able to sacrifice in the Greek sacrificial system. Ultimately, I return to the details of the Chthonia and the ritual system of Hermione to argue that the Chthonia was a mystery cult that the Hermionians promoted in an effort to rival the Eleusinian Mysteries.

4.5.1 The Festival of the Chthonia

The primary account of the events of the Chthonia comes from the writings of Pausanias. He closes his long narration on the landscape, architecture, and religious system of Hermione with a description of the worship of Demeter Chthonia, notably the festival of the Chthonia (Paus. 2.35.5-8). He begins his discussion of the festival by identifying the sanctuary of Demeter Chthonia as “the thing most worthy of mention,” τὸ δὲ λόγου μᾶλστα ἄξιον (Paus. 2.35.4). This festival consisted of a sacrifice and an accompanying procession, and occurred during the summertime.

Before I discuss the procession and sacrifice, it is necessary to establish the advanced age of the priestesses. Pausanias identifies the four women who performed the sacrifice of the Chthonia as γαῖες, old women (Paus. 2.35.7). This age-class term leaves no doubt about the age of these women; they were post-menopausal. The ritual activities

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50 Pirenne-Delforge bases much of her argument on Pausanias’ use of this phrase (2008: 203).

51 Pirenne-Delforge uses the summer date to draw a connection between the Chthonia and the harvest, but, as I argue below, the agricultural associations of the festival were most likely secondary to those of the underworld and mysteries. Pirenne-Delforge 2008: 205.
of these women place them in the category of priestesses, although their role as
slaughterers is unique among known sacred female officials. Their importance in
Hermionian society is highlighted by the signs of honor that they received.

In front of the temple, a few statues of the women who served Demeter as
priestesses were erected, and as one enters inside the temple, there are chairs upon
which the old women wait for each of the cows to be driven inside...

The priestesses of the Chthonia had chairs in their honor that they sat on as they waited
for the sacrificial cows to enter the temple. In addition, they were honored by statues
outside of the temple. It should be noted that Pausanias uses two different descriptors for
these women. He refers to them as gynaikes in regard to the statues and as graes in
regard to the chairs. There is no inconsistency, however, in the identification of their age
because gynê is often used to indicate gender and is not necessarily descriptive of a
specific age group of females. Ultimately, these details about the priestesses affirm
their post-menopausal age and their significance in Hermionian society.

Pausanias’ description of the Chthonia includes a procession and a sacrifice.
Most of the scholarly attention has focused on the sacrifice because of the perceived
importance of sacrifice in the ancient world and because of its unusual details. The
procession, as the preliminary rite to the sacrifice, is described very specifically, although
the account does not include any details that are particularly striking or unusual.

52 Nevertheless, it is possible that Demeter had additional priestesses, who were adult females of
childbearing age. These women may have performed different ritual duties, which did not require the same
high level of ritual purity and the same distinct social identity of the post-menopausal women who
performed the sacrifice.
The priests of the goddesses and as many as hold annual magistrates lead the people in procession, while women and men follow. It is customary now for those who are still children to honor the goddess in the procession. These wear white clothing and have wreaths on their heads. Their wreaths are woven from the flower, which they call the kosmosandalon, but it seems to me to be a hyacinth in size and color. It even has on it the same letters of mourning.

This heterogeneous group of worshippers advanced in procession until they reached the sanctuary of Demeter Chthonia where the sacrifice took place. The leaders of the procession were the priests of some unspecified deities and the annual city officials. The identification of these priests is ambiguous as are the deities whom they served. A masculine definite article is used to describe the priests, oî...iêreîz, but it is possible for priestesses to be included in this group. However, the old women, who eventually perform the sacrifice, mostly likely did not participate in the procession. As the passage cited above describes, there were chairs inside the temple where the old women waited for the sacrificial animals (Paus. 2.35.8).53 The identity of the gods is ultimately impossible to determine, but I suggest that Demeter and Kore are the deities identified by the phrase tŏn theŏn. The gender of the noun theŏn can be either masculine or feminine, but I propose a feminine meaning because of the significance of the mythology of Demeter and Kore in the Chthonia. The use of the plural ai theai, especially in the context of Demeter worship customarily indicated the goddess pair, Demeter and her

53 Although it is also possible that these women participated in the procession as part of the leading group, and then waited in their chairs for the arrival of the animals, which were last in the procession.
daughter Kore. As I discuss in Section 4.7, the mythology of Demeter and Kore and their connection to mysteries are essential to the choice of old women for this priesthood, and so it is not surprising that both goddesses were honored in the procession. After those in official positions, men, women, and children partook in the procession. The children were dressed in white and wore wreathes of a flower, which the Hermionians called the kosmosandalon. Pausanias identifies this flower as the hyacinth because on the petals of each flower the letters AI could be deciphered. Lastly in the procession came the men who led the sacrificial animals.

The whole spectrum of Hermionian society participated in the procession of the Chthonia: people of both genders, in a wide range of ages, and in various levels of official capacity. The large-scale nature of the procession suggests the importance of the festival within the Hermionian religious calendar. This conclusion is supported by the material and epigraphic evidence that demonstrates the identification of Hermione with the Chthonia and the Hermionians’ attempts to increase foreign participation in the festival. An extant coin from the Roman period identifies Hermione with the Chthonia since the coin depicts a cow that is being led by a man with a rope—a clear reference to the procession of the Chthonia and the importance of the sacrificial animals. The coin,

\[54\] Parke 1977: 63; Burkert 1985: 159.

\[55\] The flower is connected to mourning because of the mythology of Hyacinthus from whose blood the flower supposedly grew (Ov. Met. 10.214-219). In addition, the flower is associated with the abduction of Kore who was picking flowers in a field at the time she was taken. The hyacinth is among the flowers in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (HHD 6-8)

\[56\] A parallel can be drawn with the grandeur and size of the Panathenaic procession. Neils 1992: 23.

\[57\] Pirenne-Delforge 2008: 205 n. 130.
engraved with ΕΡΜΙΟΝΕΩΝ, was a local design and indicates the pride that the people of the city had in the festival and the acclaim that it must have had by this period.

Attempts by Hermione to spread their influence through the Chthonia have been discussed by Paula Perlman in her study of the theorodokia in the Peloponnese.\(^{58}\) According to Perlman’s study, the theorodokoi entertained two different types of theoroi: either those who were sent abroad by the organizers of a festival to announce its celebration or those who were invited as an official delegation to participate in the celebration of a festival.\(^{59}\) She has identified two lists of theorodokoi from Hermione, which can be dated to the third century BCE.\(^{60}\) These inscriptions suggest that Hermione organized a system of epangelia in which theorodokoi were used to announce the festival and invite other communities to attend.\(^{61}\) The appointment of theorodokoi by the Hermionians reflects a broader trend in the Hellenistic period in which local festivals attempted “to attract participants and spectators from further afield and to increase the prestige” of their festival.\(^{62}\) An inscription, which describes an agreement between the town of Asine and Hermione, further supports these promotional efforts by Hermione (IG IV 679).\(^{63}\) On it, Asine is portrayed as participating in the festival and perhaps even providing one of the sacrificial cows. The most speculative indication for non-

\(^{58}\) Perlman 2000, especially 161-166.

\(^{59}\) Perlman 2000: 13-29.

\(^{60}\) They are H.1 and H.2 in her catalogue, but she also gives the complete publication histories for the inscriptions (Perlman 2000: 244-245).

\(^{61}\) Perlman 2000: 14-16; 162

\(^{62}\) Perlman 2000: 157-158. The appointment of theorodokoi was common in large-scale agonistic and Panhellenic festivals such as the games at Olympia and Nemea. The Eleusinian Mysteries also had theorodokoi, although Perlman only discusses them in passing because of their Attic location.

\(^{63}\) For discussions of this inscription, see Perlman 2000: 163; Pirenne-Delforge 2008: 205.
Hermionian participation is Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge’s suggestion that Pausanias himself joined in the festival. Because of the minute details that Pausanias provides in this description, unlike in his other examples of processions, Pirenne-Delforge proposes that Pausanias had some sort of active role in the festival. The epigraphic evidence indicates Hermione’s desire to increase the prestige of the Chthonia, and so Pausanias’ attendance is not far-fetched.

As part of Pausanias’ detailed depiction of the procession, he gives a thorough description of the sacrificial animals, including their temperament and course of action.

They follow those who accompany the procession and lead an adult cow from the herd, which is tied up individually with ropes, but still struggles because of its wild nature. After they drive it to the temple, some of them release the cow from the ropes so that it may rush inside, and others who were holding the doors open, when they see the cow inside the temple, they close the doors.

This description of the sacrificial animals is inconsistent with the description of the actual sacrifice in the following section where Pausanias describes the sequential sacrifice of four cows (Paus. 2.35.7). However, the use of the participle from διαλαμβάνω, which can have the implication of individuation, separation, and division, allows for the possibility of multiple animals (LSJ s.v. A.II, III). Throughout the passage, Pausanias is explicit about the sex of the animal—it is a female bovine. In Greek sacrificial practices, the type and sex of the animal was dependent on the particulars of the individual cult, so one can only speculate on the choice of adult female cows. The choice of cows does

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64 Pirenne-Delforge 2008: 203.
indicate the expense of the sacrifice.\textsuperscript{65} Cattle were the most expensive sacrificial animal, but there is little information about the relative value of the different types of cattle.\textsuperscript{66} Adult cattle, however, were large animals that would have spilt the most blood.\textsuperscript{67} The large amount of blood would have added to the violent and horrific scene inside the temple of Demeter Chthonia.

The most notable feature of the sacrificial animals is their unusual combination of wildness and domestication.\textsuperscript{68} The willingness of the animal to be sacrificed has been argued as an important part of the Greek sacrificial ideology, although ideology and ritual practice were not always in sync.\textsuperscript{69} Willingness to be sacrificed was not a trait of the sacrificial ideology at the Chthonia. In fact, the opposite was the case since the cows were characterize by their wildness, ἀγξηοήηεο, and the need for restraints, δεζκνί. The juxtaposition of an uncontrollable nature and the need to be chained or yoked recalls the imagery that is used to describe females who were not yet married.\textsuperscript{70} The chained up state of these wild female cows perhaps reflects the unwillingness of some women to marry. Resistance to marriage is a theme in the mythology of Demeter and Kore, which is the context necessary for understanding the Chthonia, as I argue in Section 4.7.

\textsuperscript{65} Jameson 1988: 95.
\textsuperscript{66} Jameson 1988: 93-98.
\textsuperscript{67} Gunnel Ekroth suggests that the ancient Greek cow would have contained between five and ten liters of blood, as compared to a present-day cow, which has as many as forty liters. Obviously, all of this blood would not have been spilt during a sacrifice (2005: 9).
\textsuperscript{68} For a theory of sacrifice built upon the concept of domesticated animals, see Smith 1987.
\textsuperscript{69} Burkert 1985: 56; Bremmer 2007: 135.
\textsuperscript{70} This imagery of wildness and taming in relation to the parthenos is discussed in Chapter 3.2.
The procession ended when the participants and the sacrificial animals reached the temple of Demeter Chthonia. It was at this point in the festival that the sacrifice “proper” occurred. Pausanias describes the events of the sacrificial ritual explicitly and notes the “marvelous” nature of the sacrifice.

τέσσαρες δὲ ἕνδον ὑπολειπόμεναι γραῖες, αὕτη τήν βοῦν εἰσίν αἱ κατεργαζόμεναι· δρεπάνῳ γὰρ ἦτις ἀν τύχῃ τὴν φάρυγγα ὑπέτεμε τῆς βοῦς. μετὰ δὲ αἱ θύραι τε ἠνοίχθησαν καὶ προσελαίνουσιν οἷς ἐπιτέτακται βοῦν [δὲ] δευτέραν καὶ τρίτην ἐπὶ ταύτη καὶ ἄλλην τετάρτην. κατεργαζόνται τε δὴ πάσας κατὰ ταύτα αἱ γραῖες καὶ τόδε ἄλλο πρόσκειται τῇ θυσίᾳ θαυμα· ἐφ’ ἡντινα γὰρ ἄν πέσῃ τῶν πλευρῶν ἡ πρώτη βοῦς, ἀνάγκη πεσεῖν καὶ πάσας. (Paus. 2.35.7)

Four old women, who remain inside, are the ones who put an end to the cow. For whoever has the opportunity, cuts the throat of the cow with a sickle. Afterwards the doors are opened and those responsible for the task drive in the second cow, and then the third, and after that one the final fourth one. The old women put an end to all the cows in the same way, and there exists another marvel during the sacrifice: on whatever side the first cow falls, it is necessary for all of them to fall.

The ritual activities of the priestesses took place inside of the temple, not at an altar in front of the temple. Because the sacrifice occurred inside the temple, it was secret and unobserved by the throng of processional participants, unlike a typical sacrifice that was observed. The physical act of slaughter also did not follow the normal process in which the blood must flow onto the altar. Gunnel Ekroth has suggested that only a small amount of blood was sprinkled on the altar during a typical animal sacrifice.71 The infrequent depictions of the actual moment of slaughter and the small size of the bloodstains shown on representations of altars support her arguments on the relative insignificance of the spilling of the blood. The Chthonia, on the contrary, seems to emphasize blood. Blood must have drenched the floor of the temple since four cows were being killed in a confined space. Pausanias does not describe any ritual use for the

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71 Ekroth 2005: 19.
blood after it had been shed or for the cows after they had been sacrificed. Pirenne-Delforge argues that the reason for Pausanias’ silence is that he only describes aspects of the festival that were considered strange and unusual.\textsuperscript{72} I would suggest, however, that the choice of a sacrifice that focuses on bloodshed perhaps reflects the female nature of the mythology related to the cult.\textsuperscript{73} In regard to the cows, it is likely that the carcasses would not have been fit for human consumption after the violence of the rite. Therefore, the sacrificial victims may have been burned in their entirety as a holocaust sacrifice.\textsuperscript{74}

Pausanias uses two different verbs to describe the ritual activities of the priestesses: κατεργάζομαι and ὑποτέμνω. The first, κατεργάζομαι, is used twice within this passage; each time with the sacrificial animal as the direct object (Paus. 2.35.7). As it derives from the noun ἔργον, which means “work or deed,” κατεργάζομαι has a rather nondescript definition; it means “to effect by labor or achieve” (LSJ s.v. A.I.). Its specific meanings, therefore, stem from the context of the passage within the text. Some of the meanings include “to prevail, to cultivate, to subdue, and to finish off” (LSJ s.v. κατεργάζομαι A.I.1, 2; II). In the context of this passage of Pausanias, it has the meaning of “finishing off or killing.” When it has this meaning as in this passage and throughout his work, it has the connotation of violence.\textsuperscript{75}

Pausanias also uses the verb ἰποτέμνω, to cut underneath, to describe the actions of the priestesses. The direct object of the verb is φάρυγξ, throat. Berthiaume argues that

\textsuperscript{72} Pirenne-Delforge 2008: 203.

\textsuperscript{73} This idea is explored further in Section 4.7.2.

\textsuperscript{74} Modern scholarship now calls into question the strict dichotomy that correlates participation in the sacrificial meal with the worship of Olympian deities and non-participation with Chthonic gods and heroes. Burkert 1985: 63-64; van Straten 1995: 157-158, 166.

\textsuperscript{75} For instance, it is also used to describe the action of Meleager slaying the boar (2.7.9).
Pausanias uses this phrase, instead of the verb σφάττω (σφάζω), “to slaughter for sacrifice,” to highlight the differences in this female instance of slaughtering. Pirenne-Delforge disputes this interpretation and proposes that the prefix ὑπν- is used with τέμνω to indicate the directionality of the sacrificial blows. In general, she argues that the sacrifice should not be considered “abnormal” because Pausanias is explicit when he describes sacrifices that do not correspond with the typical patterns of the Greek sacrificial system. For instance, in his description of the sacrifice to Despoina of Lykosoura in Arkadia, Pausanias specifically states that the throat is not cut, but the limbs are amputated (Paus. 8.37.8). While Pirenne-Delforge is correct in her assertion that the sacrificial wound was typical, other features of the sacrifice, especially the emphasis on violence, cast it as anomalous.

Pausanias describes the sacrificial instrument that the priestesses used as a δρέπανον, sickle, instead of a machaira, sacrificial knife. This tool can be identified by its slightly curved blade, usually with fastening holes or a recessed handle-tang for a attaching a wooden handle. It is designated in ancient Greece by the terms harpê, drapanê, drapanon, or aichmê. Despite the variations in terminology, there was uniformity in the Greek understanding of this tool. Although it was an agricultural tool, sickles have primarily been found in sanctuaries and tombs, not in settlements.

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were common offerings to a variety of deities including Hera, Poseidon, and Demeter. They may have been offered because of their intrinsic material value—they were made out of metal—or they may have had ritual uses in the sanctuaries. In addition to the archaeological evidence, sickles are prominent in several myths, such as Herakles’ killing of the Hydra, Perseus’ decapitation of Medusa, and Kronos’ castration of Ouranos. In addition, sickles are present in the mythological traditions of Medea and the Thracian women who kill Orpheus. Uta Kron suggests that it is the “liminal and magical quality” of the sickle that prompted its use at the Chthonia. I would also suggest that the violence associated with this tool in mythology explains its use in the festival.

The final detail about the ritual that Pausanias describes also concerns the actual sacrificial procedure. Each cow was led into the temple individually and killed before the next victim was permitted inside. As they were killed, all of the cows had to fall onto the same side. Pausanias describes the manner in which the cows are killed as a θαοντα, marvel. The characterization of the Chthonia as a marvelous rite is also seen in its depiction by Aelian. Aelian, however, has different motives in describing the festival and so does not focus on its violent nature.

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80 Sickles have been found in sanctuaries across the Greek world including Perachora, Olympia, Isthmia, Knossos, and Kyrene. Kron 1998: 195-201.


82 Kron 1998: 190-195 for discussion of these myths and for visual evidence.

83 See Kron 1998: 213 for discussion and sources.


85 Pirenne-Delforge emphasizes the agricultural nature of the drapanon because of her agrarian interpretation of the festival (2008: 204).
4.5.2 Contradictions: Aelian and the Fragment of Aristokles

In the previous section I reconstructed the events of the Chthonia with evidence from Pausanias and inscriptions. I noticeably omit Aelian’s description of the Chthonia from *On the Nature of Animals*. I present the evidence in this order because of the apparent contradictions between the two accounts. These inconsistencies are impossible to reconcile if Pausanias, Aelian, and the quoted fragment of Aristokles describe the details of the same festival. There are, however, some unifying features, such as the occurrence of sacrificial rites, sacrificial victims in procession, and elderly female ritual agents.

Aelian provides a description of how the people of Hermione worship and sacrifice to Demeter in a festival that he identifies as the Chthonia.

Τὴν Δήμητρα Ἐρμιονείς σέβουσι, καὶ θύουσιν αὐτῇ μεγαλοπρεπῶς τε καὶ σοβαρῶς, καὶ τὴν ἑορτὴν Χθόνια καλοῦσι. μεγίσταις γούν ἁκοῦω βοῦς ὑπὸ τῆς ἱερείας τῆς Δήμητρος ἄγεσθαι τε πρὸς τὸν βωμὸν ἐκ τῆς ἀγέλης καὶ θύειν ἑαυτᾶς παρέχειν. (Ael. NA 11.4)

The Hermionians worship Demeter and sacrifice to her in a magnificent and extravagant style, and they call the festival the Chthonia. And I hear that the largest female cows from the herd allow themselves to be led by the priestess of Demeter to the altar and be sacrificed.

Aelian includes his account of the Chthonia among several descriptions about the association of unusual animals with divinities including swans and serpents with Apollo and dogs with Hephaestus and Athena. The narrative context, therefore, suggests that Aelian sees an unusual element within the festival, especially concerning the animal and the deity. Aelian’s reason for including the sacrifice of the Chthonia relates to his overall agenda in *On the Nature of Animals*, which is to illustrate divine providence within the
animal world. In his description of the cows, he attributes to them a willingness to be sacrificed since they themselves allow it, παρέχειν. Presumably, it is Demeter and her divine power that inspires the cows to act in such a manner. This sort of characterization of the sacrificial animals is absent in Pausanias who specifically describes the cows as wild and in chains (Paus. 2.35.6).

Other details of the procession and sacrifice in Aelian’s account differ considerably from those described by Pausanias. In Pausanias’ description of the festival, men led the sacrificial animals in the procession, not the priestesses; his version is confirmed by the depiction on the coin with a male figure leading the cow. Moreover, Aelian describes the sacrifice as occurring on the altar, a ritual space that is never mentioned in Pausanias’ account. Even though Pausanias and Aelian lived at approximately the same time, the late second and early third centuries CE, the account of Pausanias should be viewed as more accurate because he actually visited Hermione and may have even participated in the festival. On the other hand, Aelian supposedly never left the Italian peninsula. Aelian appears to be piecing together information that he heard and the details from a fragment of Aristokles, a Hellenistic peripatetic philosopher.

Aelian supplements his own knowledge about the festival of the Chthonia with evidence drawn from a quote of Aristokles (FGrH 436 F2). However, this fragment of Aristokles is not a straightforward description of the Chthonia, but rather is part of an

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86 Trapp 1999a: 18.
87 These biographic details are according to Philostratus (Philostr. VS 625 )
88 His specific dates are uncertain. Trapp 1999b: 161-162.
aretalogy to Demeter, which borrows features from the dominant cult of Demeter in the area. The practice of composing aretalogies, hymn-like enumerations of the qualities, achievements, and powers of a divinity, became popular at the end of the Hellenistic period, especially in the cults of foreign gods, such as Isis and Serapis. Aristokles is known, in fact, to have written a work on Serapis that may have been an aretalogy. In addition, the known associations between Isis and Demeter may have influenced the composition of this aretalogy to Demeter. Like Aelian, Aristokles also focuses on the power of Demeter over the sacrificial animal, but the details differ considerably.

Δάματερ πολύκαρπε, σύ κήν Σικελοίςιν ἐναργής και παρ’ Ἐρεχθείδαις. ἐν δέ τι τοίνυτο μέγα κρίνετι ἐν Ἐρμονευσί. τὸν ἐξ ἀγέλης γάρ ἀφειδή ταῦρον, δι’ οὐ χειροῦντ’ ἀνέρες οὐδὲ δέκα, τούτον γραῦς στείχουσα μόνα μόνον οὐσατος ἔλκει τόνδ’ ἐπὶ βωμόν, δ’ ὡς ματέρι παῖς ἔπεται. σὸν τὸν Δάματερ, σὸν τὸ σθένος· ἔλαος εἶης, καὶ πάντος θάλλοι κλάρος ἐν Ἐρμιόνῃ. (Ael. NA 11.4)

Demeter, goddess of abundance, you appear to the people of Sicily and to the descendants of Erechtheus. Among the Hermionians this one thing is judged to be great. For there is a bull, exceptional among the herd, which not even ten men can subdue, but an old woman walks alone and leads it by the ear to this altar, and it follows as a child to his mother. This is yours, Demeter, your power. May you be gracious and may the farmland flourish in every way in Hermione.

The Aristokles’ fragment focuses on the power of Demeter, which is demonstrated by the description of this unusual sacrificial rite. Aristokles takes details from the festival of the

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89 Albert Henrichs suggests that the fragment of Aristokles is a lost aretalogy of Demeter. See his unpublished commentary on the Aristokles fragment in Aelian’s *On the Nature of Animals* (11.4) for his views on this theory.

90 Mikalson 2005: 201.

91 Trapp 1999b: 161-162.

92 Isis was equated with Demeter as earlier as the fifth century BCE (Hdt. 2.59). For an example of the ritual implications of this connection, see Henrichs 1984.
Chthonia, but alters them to make the feat more marvelous and thus the power of Demeter more impressive. Aristokles maintains the juxtaposition of wildness and the need for restraint, but exaggerates the idea by changing the gender of the animal and emphasizing the old woman’s ability to achieve this accomplishment. Aristokles changes the sacrificial animal from a cow to a bull because it further emphasizes the remarkable task when the old priestess controls an even larger and fiercer animal. He also adds several details that accentuate the ease at which the old women performed the feat, namely that she did it alone, used only the ear of the bull, and that ten men were not able to do it. The extra details that Aristokles adds make Aelian’s inclusion of this fragment obvious. The power of Demeter over the animal world is unquestionable.

The inconsistencies among the accounts of Aelian, Aristokles, and Pausanias have puzzled scholars in their attempts to unite all the details into a comprehensive description of the Chthonia. However, once the motivations and possible accuracy of each author is assessed, these issues become clearer. Pausanias, with his sincere interest in recording local myths and customs, is the most reliable witness to the events of the Chthonia. If Pirenne-Delforge’s assumption about his actual participation in the festival is correct, his description gains even more credibility. Although they are combined in the same passage, Aelian and Aristokles had different motives and experiences with the festival. Aelian is interested in indentifying the divine in the animal world. The stories he must have heard in Italy about some strange procession and sacrifice, which involved old women and cows must have struck him as an extraordinary example of divine inspiration in the animal kingdom. Aelian uses the fragment of Aristokles to support his argument,

93 In his discussion of the Chthonia, Detienne tries unsuccessfully to merge the two accounts. Detienne 1989: 140-142.
but Aristokles himself had a separate agenda. The fragment is most likely from a lost aretalogy to Demeter that drew on the marvelous details of the Chthonia. Aristokles presents a literary interpretation of the rites of the Chthonia to illustrate the power and grandeur of Demeter.

All three of the ancient sources that discuss the Chthonia in some way mention the involvement of old women. However, the reason why old women were able to act as priestesses, sacrificers, and slaughterers at the Chthonia is not explored in the ancient evidence. To answer this question, I present a new theoretical model, based on the gendered sacrificial theory of Nancy Jay, through which the role of the old women at Chthonia can be understood. With the sacrificial theory of Jay, I argue that post-menopausal women were the only women who could act as slaughterers in the Greek sacrificial system. Because of the physiological and social identity of the post-menopausal woman, she was able to participate in sacrifice without disrupting the male patrilineal sacrificial system.

4.6 Old Women and Sacrifice

The Chthonia is noted not only for its unusual sacrificial practices, but also for the presence of the old priestesses. Explanations of the choice and role of the old priestesses in this sacrifice have been cursory at best. Scholars have predominantly followed the reasoning of Detienne, who provides an explanation for the age of the priestesses among his arguments about the Chthonia as an exceptional instance of female participation in sacrifice. Detienne maintains that “because they no longer have an active part in the

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94 Detienne 1989: 140-142.
female biological cycle and the reproduction of the political body, they have greater access to the instruments that concern the slaughtering of sacrificial victims.”

Detienne ties their ability to sacrifice to the cessation of menses. The connection between political society, sacrifice, and the role of the post-menopausal woman is understood more clearly, however, in the context of the gendered theory of sacrifice developed by the sociologist Nancy Jay.

4.6.1 Sacrifice, Gender, and Social Organization: Nancy Jay

Gendered theories of sacrifice share a foundation with the observed tension between life and death. This tension is most often represented as a contrast between sacrifice and childbirth. Yet, the details of this tension and the meaning of it are linked to the specific cultural context. At the heart of Nancy Jay’s gendered sacrificial model described in Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity, as well as the models of other scholars, lies the “construction and preservation of the male-oriented or male-defined community.”

Jay focuses on the way in which sacrifice affects societal and family structures and, as the title of her 1985 article suggests, ultimately, interprets “sacrifice as remedy for having been born of woman.”

Jay’s gendered theory of sacrifice hinges on the connection between sacrifice and patrilineal social organization. Patrilineal societies are those in which the relationship

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95 Detienne 1989: 142.

96 Jay 1992: xxiii-xxiv, 30-40; Sered 2002


between father and son is the basis for social order and continuity, especially concerning issues such as inheritance. Ancient society expresses descent in two ways: cognation and agnation. Cognition is when descent relationships are traced back through both men and women, while agnation is descent only through men. Agnation is equivalent to patrilineal descent and, therefore, is intricately connected to sacrificial traditions. Participation in sacrificial ritual is a necessary aspect for agnic groups, since sacrificial cult, not birth, creates agnates. Jay understands sacrifice as the mechanism to constitute and maintain the descent system in patrilineal societies.

Ancient Greece recognized both agnation and cognition, but sacrificing was only associated with agnation. Consequently, the societal forms that established community and societal relationships required participation in sacrificial ritual. Burkert identifies these as “all essential forms of community,” and would have included groups, such as the oikos, genos, phratria, and demê.

“Thus it is for religion not just to embellish, but to shape all essential forms of community. The definition of membership is participation in a cult. This begins with the family, for which Greek has no special word: one speaks of house and hearth, thus consciously designating the domestic sacrificial site.”

While the historical development and role of agnic groups in ancient Greece may be debated, scholars generally agree on their existence as a fundamental organizing principle in society. In sum, “agnates are not people biologically related by descent in the male

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99 This twofold descent structure is still common today in many societies.

100 Jay 1992: 41-42.


102 Burkert 1985: 255.
line who occasionally remind themselves of this sacrificially; agnates are instead people who sacrifice together—who know they are agnates because they sacrifice together.”

The development of this connection between sacrifice and patrilineality arises because social structures “idealizing ‘eternal’ male intergenerational continuity meet a fundamental obstacle in their necessary dependence on women’s reproductive powers.” Thus, men have an anxiety about women’s reproductive powers due to their reliance upon women for the continuation of their society. Therefore, in patrilineal societies, men take control and regulate the reproductive power and rights of women by establishing a lineage system to control inheritance and the means of production. The emphasis on sacrifice in patrilineal societies allows for the development of social reproduction, instead of relying on biological reproduction (childbirth); descent becomes social and ritual in nature and, therefore, is no longer dependent on women.

In order to ensure this separation between descent through sacrifice and biological descent, women are generally excluded from direct sacrificial practices. In many cultures, this exclusion is achieved through the establishment of the dichotomy between the purity of sacrifice and the pollution of menstruation and/or childbirth. This opposition between bloodshed in sacrifice and blood shedding by women excludes

103 Jay 1992: 159 n.6. For more discussion of the Greek kinship system, see Connor 1971; Humphreys 1978.
104 Jay 1992: 42.
women from performing sacrificial acts. Typically only adult males—those in the position to be fathers—have the ability to sacrifice. Jay notes the rarity of female sacrificers, and “when women are reported performing sacrifice it is never as mothers, but almost always in some specifically non-childbearing role: as virgins (or dressed as if they were virgins), as consecrated unmarried women, or as post-menopausal women.”

As a patriarchal and patrilineal society, ancient Greece clearly fits into the pattern that Jay finds between sacrificial traditions and social organizations and is in fact one of the eight cultures that she discusses. Moreover, the sacrifice of the Chthonia appears to correspond to the paradigm she sets up for female participation in sacrifice. Jay has been criticized, however, for her lack of discussion about female slaughterers. Nevertheless, her theory illuminates the complicated picture of gender and sacrifice in ancient Greece and establishes a new theoretical basis with which to discuss these issues.

4.6.2 A New Understanding of Women and Sacrifice in Ancient Greece

Nancy Jay’s theory on the necessity of sacrifice for the maintenance and continuity of patrilineal society separates women from sacrificial practices. A superficial interpretation of the work of Jay seems to support Marcel Detienne’s position in the debate about women’s roles in Greek sacrifice. However, as Robin Osborne correctly asserts, women did have roles in sacrifice. The evidence for priestesses having sacrificial duties and claims to portions of the sacrificial meat is definitive and widespread in the Greek world. A more nuanced application of Jay’s gendered theory of sacrifice allows

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110 The others are Hawaiian, Ashanti, Tallensi, Lugbara, Neur, Israelite, and post-Vatican II Christianity.

111 This criticism has been especially aimed at problems with her theory’s application to the issue of female priests and the Eucharist. See Raab 1997 and Raab 2000 for more analysis on this subject.
for reconciliation between the arguments of Detienne and Osborne. As a result, Jay’s theory about patrilineal society and male anxiety over control of reproduction provides an understanding of how and when women participated in Greek sacrifice. Thus, while no absolute rule can govern the entirety of the Greek ritual system because of variations between city-states and individual cult traditions, the relationship between women and sacrifice and the role of women in sacrifice must be viewed as one of restriction, not one of exclusion.

In order to deal with their anxiety over women’s control of reproduction, and consequently lineage, Greek males utilized sacrificial ritual to create a substitute for childbirth and support agnation. Sons were not accepted into a family simply as a result of their birth; only after their presentation at a sacrificial ritual were they considered to be the rightful heirs of their fathers. Questions of paternity were frequently an issue because only the initial virginity and subsequent chastity of one’s wife ensured that one’s heirs were in fact one’s biological children. Male anxiety over paternity, and in effect their future heirs, fueled their fear of childbirth and, subsequently, childbearing women. Therefore, social and ritual paternity through sacrifice, rather than biological paternity, became a more secure method for male Greeks to establish their heirs. Patrilineality and the accompanying opposition between childbirth and sacrifice consequently developed together in the Greek social system.

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112 One example of such a sacrificial ritual is the Ionian festival of the Apaturia. For more discussion on the details of the festival and its relationship to kinship, see Parke 1977: 88-92; Golden 1990: 26.

113 For a discussion about male anxiety about paternity and the introduction of suppositious children, see Lacey 1984: 169-170; Demand 1994.
As a ritual, a state of cleanliness and purity was necessary for participation in sacrifice. In contrast, childbirth was strongly associated with pollution. This inherent opposition between sacrifice and childbirth, which is common in many patrilineal societies, strongly influenced the types of women who could participate in sacrifice and the roles that they could play. Childbearing women, i.e., wives and mothers, may have had some roles in sacrificial ritual, but because of their physiological and social identity, they were not permitted full participation.

In typical Greek sacrifice, females are divided into four age-classes: girls, adolescents, childbearing adults, and post-menopausal women. I consider the role of each age-class in terms of their position in society and their physiological identity. In other chapters, I group girls and adolescents together because they share the same physiological identity, physical virginity. However, in the case of sacrifice, these age classes must be addressed separately because of the distinct roles each plays. Girls, and children in general, had marginal roles in sacrificial ritual. They could participate in the procession, but this involvement was the most distant from the male point of view and, accordingly, less important.

Adolescents, however, played a much more significant role, notably as carriers of various sacrificial objects. In processions, the kanēphoroi, for instance, carried the kaneon in which the sacrificial knife was usually hidden among the barley groats. Among females who did not hold a priestly office, the kanēphoroi had the closest contact to the heart of the sacrificial act. Their proximity to the sacrificial knife was tolerated by the males who participated in the sacrificial rite because of the idealized status of the

Greek female adolescent. The role of the kanêphoros was performed by a parthenos, who is precisely the type of female that men participating in the sacrificial rite hoped to marry or hoped they had married.\textsuperscript{115} Whether the kanêphoros had begun menstruating or not was not relevant to her ability to perform this role. Her physiological identity was not determined by menarche, but by male-presumption of physical virginity. Because she was unmarried and perceived to be a virgin, the kanêphoros was not regarded as childbearing; she was not yet in the role of “mother.” Therefore, she did not threaten the patrilineal community as the “mother” figure did. In contrast to how the Greek male saw the kanêphoros, a woman of childbearing age and status (the “mother” figure) was seen as a potential threat to patrilineality. The roles of “mothers” in sacrificial ritual were limited to participation in the procession and crying of the ololygê. Childbearing women did not have access to the sacrificial animal or instrument.

The roles of females in typical Greek sacrifice, therefore, are given additional meaning when their childbearing status and relationship to patrilineal Greek society are considered. However, as even Osborne admits, women did not wield the sacrificial knife, with the exceptional example of the Chthonia.\textsuperscript{116} For instance, the fourth-century comic poet Pherekrates jokes that no one has ever seen a female mageiros (fr.64 Kock).\textsuperscript{117} Even in the barbaric land of the Taurians, who practiced human sacrifice, Iphigeneia herself does not perform the physical slaughtering (E. \textit{IT} 40-41, 621-624).

\textsuperscript{115} For more detailed discussion about the meaning of the term parthenos and her status within Greek society, see Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{116} Osborne 1993: 401.

\textsuperscript{117} Also in Ath. 612a-b. Detienne 1989: 142; van Straten 1995: 18.
The post-menopausal priestesses at the Chthonia in Hermione are exceptions among the extant ancient evidence. Their ability to carry out this unparalleled ritual responsibility to slaughter hinged on their post-menopausal identity. As Jay has noted, in patrilineal cultures when women participate in sacrificial ritual, they are post-menopausal. In ancient Greece women were allowed to perform more sacrificial roles than other patrilineal societies; only the role of the slaughterer was restricted to men and post-menopausal women at the Chthonia. Sacrifice in ancient Greece substituted social and ritual paternity for childbirth and established an alternate system of creating lineage that was not threatened by the sacrificial role of these post-menopausal women at the Chthonia because these women could no longer bear children. The priestesses’ separation from the spheres of motherhood and childbirth eliminated the pollution associated with childbearing and the male anxiety concerning female reproductive power. However, with an odd twist of logic, these post-menopausal priestesses, in a sense, became more manlike, and thus regained their ability to “give birth” via their roles of sacrificer and slaughterer.

4.7 The Appointment of Old Women as Priestesses of the Chthonia

The theoretical model based on the work of Nancy Jay only answers the question of why old women could act as slaughterers in the Greek sacrificial system. While old women had the theoretical ability to perform this role, they were not typically chosen for it. Yet, in Hermione at the Chthonia, post-menopausal women acted as priestesses,

\footnote{For instance, for a woman to draw water for a sacrifice among the West African Ashanti, she must be post-menopausal. Jay also cites evidence from ancient Greek society in this respect, although not the Chthonia by name. In addition, she misinterprets Detienne’s presentation and conclusions about women and sacrifice. Jay 1992: 153 n.2.}
sacrificers, and slaughterers. The choice of post-menopausal women for all three of these functions appears, according to the extant ancient sources, to be unique in the Greek ritual system. Therefore, the Chthonia and the Hermionian religious system must possess some aspect to warrant such an appointment. Although only conjectures are possible, I suggest that it is the importance of Demeter in Hermionian society along with her daughter Kore that prompts the selection of post-menopausal women as the priestesses at the Chthonia. It is the facet of the Demeter as a goddess of mysteries that is especially influential. I propose that the Chthonia was the Hermionian effort to rival the Eleusinian Mysteries of Attica. They exploited their local traditions and ritual system to create an alternative set of initiatory and secret rites in honor of Demeter and Kore. Like the Eleusinian Mysteries, these rites centered on the myth of the abduction of Kore, but with particular local variations.

4.7.1 The Worship of Demeter in Hermione

The festival of the Chthonia is explicitly described in the ancient sources as a way to worship and honor Demeter. It is, therefore, necessary to understand how Demeter was portrayed in the Hermionian religious system. In Hermione and throughout Greece, Demeter was primarily considered through her associations with fertility, the underworld, and eschatological mysteries. In order to get a comprehensive picture of Demeter in Hermione, these spheres of influence must be considered.

Demeter’s epithet of Chthonia can connect the festival to her both her agrarian and underworld associations. Demeter’s influence in the sphere of fertility, both human and agricultural, is prevalent throughout the Greek world, but this area is not emphasized in the known Hermionian rites. Some interpretations of the Chthonia, however, do focus
on the agrarian realm because they rely on the description of the festival from the fragment of Aristokles. As I described above, Aristokles provides a literary interpretation of the rites of Chthonia in which he emphasizes the aspects of the festival that best suit his overall agenda—the praise of Demeter. In his glorification of Demeter, he highlights the agrarian gifts she granted to mankind; he calls her πολύκαρπε, the goddess of abundance, and asks for her to protect the farms of Hermionians. Pirenne-Delforge relies on the agrarian connotation of her epithet and this evidence from Aristokles to support her conclusion that the Chthonia was a celebration of Demeter’s agricultural contributions.119

While Demeter’s sphere of influence over fertility could not be suppressed, the epithet’s connection with the underworld had more significance given their preoccupation with the underground and underworld divinities. This epithet is often connected to deities associated with the dead.120 Demeter’s connections to the underworld through mysteries and to the god of the underworld through the abduction of Kore are discussed in the following section.

In addition to her epithet as Chthonia, Demeter was worshipped in Hermione as Thermasia.121 There were two temples to Demeter Thermasia in the area of Hermione. One was on the promontory between Troezen and Hermione, while the other was in the city itself (Paus. 2.34.6, 12). Scholars have speculated that the sanctuary on the promontory was the older of the two, as the city-centered sanctuary would have been


120 Fairbanks 1900; Schlesier 1991/2; Scullion 1994; van der Stockt 2005.

121 Croon suggests that Demeter Chthonia and Demeter Thermasia were considered “identical” by the Hermionians, but he has little evidence to support such a claim (Croon 1967: 229).
founded once the population began to congregate in that area.\textsuperscript{122} The epithet of Thermasia is assumed to be derived from the presence of hot springs in the area. Problematically for this interpretation, however, no hot springs seem to have existed in the vicinity of Hermione.\textsuperscript{123} None has been found in excavations nor is any mentioned in ancient sources including Pausanias. Pausanias does describe an ancient well, which never runs dry and whose source cannot be seen (Paus. 2.35.3). This description of the ever-flowing well perhaps leaves open the possibility of the existence of hot springs at some point in the area’s history. J. H. Croon suggests that volcanic springs may have existed in Hermione, as they did in several nearby cities.\textsuperscript{124} Volcanic springs have a greater tendency to appear and disappear over time because of the volatile nature of their source.\textsuperscript{125} It is difficult to dismiss the connection to hot springs completely because of the preoccupation in Hermione with the underground and the underworld. Nevertheless, the worship of Demeter as Thermasia, like her epithet of Chthonia, connects her to the earth and the possible movement of things back and forth: between, above, and below the surface.

4.7.2 The Chthonia as Mysteries

The most renowned mystery cult in antiquity, in terms of both Demeter and the entire Greek religious system, was at Eleusis in Attica. Individuals from across the Greek

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Croon 1952: 85 n.10.
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Croon 1952: 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Croon 1952: 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} The possibility also exists that the chasm, springs, and well were man-made features, which the Hermionians created to foster a connection to the underworld.
\end{itemize}
world came to Eleusis to be initiated into the Mysteries, and its influence can be seen in mystery cults in other Greek cities.\(^{126}\) In Eleusis, the worship of Demeter was joined with that of her daughter Kore and the god of underworld, under the name Plouton. Many of these same elements are seen in the Hermione religious system and specifically in the Chthonia. Paula Perlman has suggested that the Hermionians were actively trying “to establish the Chthonia as a local counterpart to the far more famous Mysteries at Eleusis.”\(^{127}\) These efforts can be seen in the appointment of the theorodokoi, in the local variations of mythology, and in the specifics of the festival. The interpretation of the Chthonia as a mystery cult provides the most likely explanation for the appointment of post-menopausal women as priestesses, but first it is necessary to explore the Chthonia as a mystery cult, akin to the Eleusinian Mysteries.

The rituals associated with Demeter in Hermione involved an element of secrecy. Although Pausanias describes the Chthonia in exacting detail and perhaps even participated in the festival, there were parts that he did not witness.

\[\text{αὐτὸ δὲ ὁ σέβουσιν ἐπὶ πλέον ἡ τάλλα, ἐγὼ μὲν οὐκ εἶδον, οὐ μὴν οὐδὲ ἀνήρ ἄλλος οὔτε ἔξονος οὔτε Ἐρμιονέων αὐτῶν· μόναι δὲ ὀποίον τί ἐστιν αἱ γράμμες ἱστώσαν (Paus. 2.35.8).}\]

But that which they worship more than all others, I did not see, nor has any other man, whether foreigner or Hermionian. The old women alone know what it is.

The sacrifice itself would have been private since the priestesses and cows were inside the temple, but Pausanias reveals the details of the rite. Therefore, there must have been another element of the ritual that was truly secret from observers and could not be discussed. In addition, in the area of the old city of Hermione, “there are \textit{periboloi} of

\(^{126}\) Burkert 1985: 276-304.

\(^{127}\) Perlman 2000: 165.
large unworked stones, and inside they perform the forbidden rites of Demeter,”
περίβολοι μεγάλων λίθων λογάδων εἰσίν, ἐντὸς δὲ αὐτῶν ἱερὰ δρῶσιν ἀπόρρητα Δήμητρι
(Paus. 2.34.10). These rites are described in the traditional vocabulary of Mysteries, ἱερὰ
ἀπόρρητα. Perlman connects the periboloi to the sacred precincts dedicated to the
various underworld deities in Hermione proper. The content of these secret rites are not
revealed in the ancient sources, and so there can only be speculation. I suggest, however,
that the rituals, and perhaps even the eschatology, were connected to those of the
Eleusinian Mysteries against which the Hermionians tried to compete.

Scholars who favor this interpretation of the Chthonia as a mystery cult argue that
the eight lists of nearly five hundred names are initiates to the mysteries of the Chthonia
(IG IV 728, 730-735; SEG XI 382). These lists date to the fourth century to third century
BCE and preserve both male and female initiates, just like the lists from the Eleusinian
Mysteries.128 Alternatively, Pirenne-Delforge denies that these lists contain the names of
initiates or that mysteries even existed in Hermione.129 She argues that the silence of
Pausanias concerning any initiatory mysteries is proof of their non-existence. Pirenne-
Delforge connects the secret rites at the periboloi to agrarian rituals like the
Thesmophoria, which supports her overall interpretation of the festival as the result of a
famine and celebration of harvest.130

A mention of Demeter Chthonia in one of the so-called “Orphic” gold tablets also
associates her with the tangled web of mystery cult figures and language. This “new”

128 Perlman 2000: 165.
130 Pirenne-Delforge 2008: 207.
gold tablet dates to the late fourth or early third century BCE and was found near Pherai in Thessaly. Areas of the text are difficult to reconstruct, but it has been restored: πέμπε με πρός μυστό <νε> θιάσους· ἐξω ὅργια [ Δήμητρος χθονίας ἔτελη καὶ Μητρὸς ὅρεῖ[άς, “send me to the feasts of the initiates; I have the rites and the rituals of Demeter Chthonia and of the Mountain Mother.”

The purpose of the gold tablet was to guide the initiate in the underworld towards a better afterlife. This gold tablet connects Demeter Chthonia to the intricate eschatological system that is associated with these tablets and various mystery cults. While it does not specifically prescribe a set of eschatological beliefs to the worship of Demeter Chthonia in Hermione, it does suggest that Demeter Chthonia is connected to this tradition.

As she was at Eleusis, Demeter was connected to Kore and Plouton in Hermione. In a fragment of a poem by Philicus, possibly a hymn to Demeter, which may refer to cult practices in Hermione, the link is made explicitly: “the secret gifts to Demeter Chthonia and to Persephone and to Klymenos,” τῇ χθονίῃ μυστικὰ Δήμητρι τὲ καὶ Φερσεφόνη καὶ Κλυμένῳ τὰ δῶρα (Suppl. Hell. 676).

As described in the tablet as “new” despite being first discovered in 1904 in a clandestine archeological excavation of a Neolithic settlement at Magoula Mati because it was first published in 2004. Parker and Stamatopoulou 2004; Ferrari and Prauscello 2007; Graf and Johnston 2007.

Numerous emendations have been suggested for the textual problems of this tablet. For the purposes of my arguments here, the mention of Demeter Chthonia in a mystery ritual context is secure. The emendations do not fundamentally alter the meaning of the tablet, although Graf and Johnston’s addition of βάθρυνπ does introduce an additional deity into the picture. See Parker and Stamatopoulou 2004; Ferrari and Prauscello 2007; Graf and Johnston 2007: 38-39 for further discussions of the textual issues.

Another the gold tablet refers to Brimo, an alternative name for Demeter (Graf and Johnston 2007: #27). In addition, Demeter Chthonia has been linked to Orphic mythology (Ferrari and Prauscello 2007: 197-198).

Note that Persephone and Kore are both names for the daughter of Demeter, while Klymenos is the common Hermionian representation of Plouton, the god of the underworld. Parker and Stamatopoulou 2004: 11-12.
local variations about her abduction by Hades, which are discussed below. However, I also suggest that she is present at the Chthonia because of the mention of the priests of the goddesses τῶν θεῶν, who were part of the procession.

Plouton’s role in the Hermionian religious system was much more pronounced. The Hermionians worshipped the god of the underworld in numerous forms to such an extent that they appeared to have a preoccupation with what is beneath the ground. The Hermionians, in fact, contended that they possessed a direct passage to the underworld and, therefore, had a special connection to the deities of the dead. They believed that their privileged connection freed them from the obligation of putting money in the mouths of the dead to pay for passage to the underworld (Str. 8.6.12). Their preoccupation with the underworld extended to their ritual system.

In his description of the architectural structures of the city, Pausanias identifies three sacred precincts associated with the underworld.

ὅπισθεν δὲ τοῦ ναοῦ τῆς Χθονίας χωρία ἐστὶν ἃ καλοῦσιν Ἅρμινεὶς τὸ μὲν Κλυμένου, τὸ δὲ Πλούτωνος, τὸ τρίτον δὲ αὐτῶν λίμνην Ἀχερουσίαν. περιέργεται μὲν δὴ πάντα θρησκεία λίθων, ἐν δὲ τῷ τοῦ Κλυμένου καὶ γῆς χώσμα· διὰ τούτου δὲ Ἡρακλῆς ἀνήγε τοῦ Ἄιδου τὸν κόρα κατὰ τὰ λεγόμενα ὑπὸ Ἐρμιονέων. (Paus. 2.35.10)

Behind the temple of Chthonia, there are places that the Hermionians call the one of Klymenos, the one of Plouton, and the third of these, the Acherusian Lake. All are surrounded by stone fences, and in the one of Klymenos there is a chasm in the earth. Herakles led the Hound of Hell [Cerberus] up through this chasm, according to the stories of the Hermionians.

In close proximity to the temple of Demeter Chthonia were three sacred precincts associated with the underworld. The last mentioned, the Acherusian Lake, is a geographical reference to the underworld, specifically to the Acheron River, which
believed to flow through Hades.\textsuperscript{135} The other two places were dedicated to the god Hades, although euphemistic epithets are used to identify him. Plouton, or “Wealth” personified, became by the fifth century BCE the most common name for Hades in myth and cult.\textsuperscript{136} As the personification of Hades usually associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries, he even had his own temple within the sanctuary complex.\textsuperscript{137} Of these three figures, Klymenos is the most complex in the Hermionian religious system because there were multiple myths about him.

Like Plouton, Klymenos is a euphemistic epithet for Hades, the god of the underworld. The title derives from the adjective κλόμενος and, ultimately, from κλωτός, which both mean “famous or renowned.” However, in Hermionian legend, Klymenos is not only a name for Hades, but also a heroic founder of ritual and cult. The family of Klymenos was in fact responsible for the foundation of the sanctuary of Demeter in Hermione, although Pausanias recounts competing Hermionian and Argive versions of the legend (Paus. 2.35.4). The Hermionians believed that the sibling pair, Klymenos and Chthonia, founded the temple, while the Argive tradition retains the mythic pattern in which punishment ensues after a god is denied hospitality. The Argive version centers on Chthonia, who disapproved of her father’s failure to offer hospitality to Demeter. Consequently, Chthonia was saved from her father’s punishment of being burned alive and was carried away to Hermione, where she set up a sanctuary to Demeter in praise and

\textsuperscript{135} It is at the Acheron River where Odysseus consults the spirits of the underworld (Hom. \textit{Od.} Bk.11) and Herodotus describes an oracle in which dead spirits can be consulted (Hdt. 5.92.7). In the actual geography of Greece, the Acherusian Lake was created in Epirus when the Acheron River of Thesprotia broke through an impenetrable gorge into the Acherusian plain. Murray 1999: 6.

\textsuperscript{136} Henrichs 1999: 661.

\textsuperscript{137} Farnell 1977: 3.280; Burkert 1985: 287.
thanksgiving. Notably, both foundational stories include the eponymous mortal woman, Chthonia.

Klymenos is identified in the Hermionian version of the story about the foundation of the sanctuary of Demeter as the co-founder with his sister. Furthermore, he had his own temple that was directly opposite from the temple of Demeter Chthonia, οὗτος ὁ ναὸς ἐστὶν ἀπαντικρὺ τοῦ τῆς Χθονίας, καλεῖται δὲ Κλυμένου (Paus. 2.35.9). This temple was distinct from the sacred precinct, which is described later by Pausanias and is linked with other aspects of the underworld. In the temple of Klymenos across from the temple of Demeter, sacrifices were performed in his honor. There must have been some ambiguity about the identity of the Klymenos who was worshipped in this temple because Pausanias explicitly states that he believes it is the god of the underworld and not the hero who received honors there (Paus. 2.35.9).

In Hermione there was a local mythological tradition about the abduction of Kore that rivaled the versions associated with Eleusis. The myth of the abduction of Kore is often connected to the rituals of the Eleusinian Mysteries. This version of the myth is thought to be recorded in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Local traditions in Hermione, however, refocus several aspects of the story on the location of Hermione instead of Eleusis. One variant is that Hades abducted Kore through the underworld chasm in Hermione. This tradition is reflected in Apollodorus’ version of the myth in which Demeter learns about the abduction of Kore from the Hermionians, and only after that does she go to Eleusis (Apollod. 1.5). In the version narrated in the *Homeric Hymn to
Demeter, the goddess does not receive any such information from the Hermionians nor does she visit them before traveling to Eleusis.\textsuperscript{138}

4.7.3 The Role of the Post-Menopausal Priestess in the Chthonia

The interpretation of the Chthonia as a mystery cult that attempted to rival the Eleusinian Mysteries allows for some conjectures about the appointment of post-menopausal women in the roles of priestesses, sacrificers, and slaughterers at the Chthonia. The sacrifice and accompanying secret rituals would have required a high level of ritual purity, which post-menopausal women would have been able to attain. In addition, the mythological background of the festival suggests that it was not an agnatic sacrifice. Since the establishment of paternity and patrilineality was not the objective, it was less problematic for a female to be the sacrificer and the slaughterer. Moreover, the focus on the female and the bond between mother and daughter made female ritual agents an excellent choice.

In addition, the violence that was emphasized in the description of the sacrifice, perhaps suggests that the rite was not only about the mourning of Demeter for the loss of her daughter, but also about her anger. The proximity of Hades to Demeter in the Hermionian ritual landscape may reflect the unresolved tension between these deities, and in real life between mother and son-in-law. Post-menopausal women were the ideal women to serve as priestesses at the Chthonia because there were able to sacrifice without disrupting the patrilineal sacrificial system. Yet, at the same time, the feminine power that they possessed could be harnessed and expressed as the rage of Demeter.

\textsuperscript{138} In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Demeter learns about the events from Helios and Hekate (HHDem. 47-87).
CHAPTER 5
THE WISDOM AND COUNSEL OF OLD PRIESTESSES

5.1 Old Women in Collective Priesthoods

In the previous two chapters, I presented evidence for three priesthoods to which post-menopausal women were appointed: the priestess of Sosipolis in Elis, the Pythia of Delphi, and the priestesses of the Chthonia in Hermione. These three priesthoods differed in their locations, deities, and ritual activities. However, they shared the common trait of age: the priestesses were all post-menopausal women. Different aspects of their ritual responsibilities necessitated that they be post-menopausal, since each priesthood required a high level of ritual purity, which the post-menopausal woman was able to achieve through renewed virginity. Although their ritual purity was equivalent to that of physical virgins, the social circumstances of post-menopausal women made them better selections for the priestesses in these cults. The specifics of the individual cult prompted what aspect of their social identity was the most important.

I now present two additional priesthoods, which were filled by post-menopausal women: the Sixteen Women of Elis and the fourteen Gerarai of Athens. Both are examples of collective priesthoods, in that multiple individuals served at one time. As with the other post-menopausal priesthoods already discussed, the specifics of these priesthoods were distinct to the local cult tradition. The ancient descriptions of these
collective priesthoods depict old women as the priestesses, but the evidence is not precise about their age. I examine the ancient evidence for the age of these priestesses and conclude that both the Sixteen Women and the Gerarai were indeed post-menopausal women. In addition, I explore the aspects of their ritual roles that necessitated both the ritual purity and the social identity of post-menopausal women. The ritual duties of both priesthoods were connected to marriage and a younger female generation. Because of the intergenerational dynamic of their ritual roles, the association of old women with wisdom is the focal point of their social identity.

5.2 The Sixteen Women of Elis

The Sixteen Women of Elis have been given little consideration in scholarship despite the remarkable accounts of the college’s origin and their extensive responsibilities within the Elean religious system. Multiple features of the Sixteen Women mark them as distinctive and demand further study, including their age, origins, and range of their ritual duties. The majority of the evidence for this college of women is derived from the work of Pausanias. This examination of the Sixteen Women of Elis begins with the etiological stories attached to the group and considers how the dual etiological stories connect their political and ritual roles, especially concerning marriage. I then discuss the administrative and ritual duties of the college, namely the weaving of Hera’s peplos, arrangement of choruses, and organization of the Heraia. These responsibilities are both explicitly and implicitly connected to the institution of marriage. It is the association of the Sixteen Women with marriage, in particular their interactions with the parthenoi who participated in the Heraia that necessitated their post-menopausal identity. The parthenoi were preparing for the next stage of their lives, and so they were undergoing an initiatory
experience through the rituals of the Heraia. The Sixteen Women provided intergenerational support by sharing the wisdom they gained through age and life experiences. It is this facet of post-menopausal identity that was required for the appointment of old women to this priesthood.

5.2.1 Origins: Matrimonial Union and Political Peace

In Pausanias’ primary discussion of the roles of the Sixteen Women of Elis, he provides two different accounts of the college’s creation. Each story presents one of the fundamental associations of the Sixteen Women: matrimonial union and political peace. Both are equally important for understanding the Sixteen Women and their ritual roles within Elean society. The first foundational story that Pausanias recounts involves the heroine Hippodameia. Hippodameia established the college of the Sixteen Women as well as the festival of the Heraia to thank Hera for her marriage to Pelops (Paus. 5.16.4). This etiological account does not reveal anything about the composition of the Sixteen Women; such information is only gained from the second foundational story. However, this account involving Hippodameia and her marriage to Pelops establishes a connection between the Sixteen Women and the institution of marriage. The Sixteen Women were explicitly and implicitly connected to the concept of marriage, especially in their service to the goddess Hera.

The second etiological account involves political union and peace. Pausanias tells the “ancient” history of the region and the political discord that existed between the neighbors of Pisa and Elis after the death of the tyrant Damophon (Paus. 5.16.5). In order for Pisa and Elis to set aside their differences and political disputes, a woman was chosen
from each of the sixteen cities to make peace.\(^1\) Accordingly, “whatever woman was the greatest in age, in honor, and in reputation was chosen,” ἥτις ἡλικίᾳ τε ἦν πρέσβυτάτη καὶ ἀξιώματι καὶ δόξῃ τῶν γυναικῶν προεἶχεν (Paus. 5.16.5). Pausanias’ word choices in his description of the composition of the Sixteen Women are notable. He uses the superlative form of the adjective, πρέσβυς.\(^2\) While the comparative and superlative forms of this adjective can be used to indicate importance, rather than chronological age, the connotation of age cannot be denied (LSJ s.v. πρέσβυς I.2). Pausanias uses the superlative of πρέσβυς with datives of reference, instead of expressing the women’s qualities simply with superlative adjectives. His grammatical phrasing, thereby, puts the greatest emphasis on the age of the women.

While it is highlighted in this etiological story, the political agency of the Sixteen Women was overshadowed by their religious roles. Because of their importance in the religious atmosphere of Elean society, I consider them to be priestesses. The ritual roles in which they participated were those that priestesses performed in other cities, such as ritual weaving. However, their political origins and prominence in festival organization cannot be denied as one of the crucial duties of the college. Because of their organizational role, especially in regard to the Heraia, scholars have observed their similarity to the Hellanodikai, the group of men who oversaw the Olympic Games. As Nota Kaldis-Henderson states in her unpublished dissertation on women in ancient Elis,

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\(^1\) Pausanias identifies the areas in conflict as πόλεις in this passage and later comments that the Eleans continued the ancient custom even after some of the “cities” had been destroyed. Instead, each sent two women so that the total number would remain at sixteen (Paus. 5.16.7). However, in the second passage, he describes the areas as “tribes,” φυλαί. See Scheid and Svenbro 1996: 10-12 for a discussion of the meaning of this change in vocabulary and its connection to the weaving of the peplos.

\(^2\) A form of this word, πρεσβύτης, is also used to describe the post-menopausal priestess of Sosipolis in Elis (Paus. 6.20.2). See Chapter 3.2 for a further description of this priesthood.
the “religious female association in the service to Hera…was the exact counterpart of the Hellanodicae in the service of Zeus.” Some scholars have used this aspect of the Sixteen Women to argue that the Heraia were the female equivalent of the Olympics.

The political role of the college seems to be secondary to their ritual roles. Plutarch, however, recounts a story of the Sixteen Women when they protested against the tyrant Aristotimos in 271 BCE, which reflects their ongoing political influence (Plu. Mor. 251a-253f). In *On the Bravery of Women*, Plutarch describes the outrages that Aristotimos committed against the people of Elis, including the murder of an innocent *parthenos* and the exile of many citizens. When the wives and children of those in exile tried to join the men, they were prevented by force, and some were even killed. The Sixteen Women attempted to petition Aristotimos on behalf of the now imprisoned women. With suppliant branches and fillets, they approached Aristotimos and were allowed to pass by his bodyguards because of the immense respect these women commanded. Aristotimos, however, was enraged that the Sixteen Women were permitted to be in his presence, and he ordered his bodyguards to drive them away and even to strike them. In the end, as punishment for their insurrection, he fined them two talents apiece. This anecdote illustrates several points about the Sixteen Women. First, they continued to have great influence in Elean political society, as they believed they would be able to sway the opinion of the tyrant Aristotimos. Yet, their political power in the city was closely tied to their religious role because they made their protest with sacred and suppliant symbols. Lastly, the women chosen to be members of the college must

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4 For an example of this argument, see Miller 2004: 155-156.
have been from the upper strata of society as a fine of two talents was an enormous sum of money.

The presence of these two foundation stories for the college of the Sixteen Women initially strikes the modern scholar as problematic because it makes it difficult to date securely the origin of the institution. However, the concept of attributing several etiological episodes to the same priesthood or festival is not unique to the college of the Sixteen Women, as is evidenced by the problematic origins of the Olympic Games. In the case of the Sixteen Women of Elis, however, the different etiological stories each serve to emphasize different and important aspects of the college. The mythical origin of the college, centering on Hippodameia and her marriage to Pelops, demonstrates the importance of the women to the institution of marriage. The second, more historical origin, which can be dated to the Archaic period, establishes the dual political and ritual nature of the college. The latter story also sets up the Sixteen Women as leaders within the community on par with men who have similar responsibilities.

5.2.2 Ritual Duties of the Sixteen Women

The ritual roles of the Sixteen Women can be divided into three parts: they wove a peplos for Hera, arranged choruses, and organized the Heraia. The first of these roles, the weaving of the peplos, was performed every fourth year, probably in conjunction with the Heraia (Paus. 5.16.2; 6.24.10). They wove this robe for Hera in a special building in

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5 See Scanlon 2002: 98-120 for discussion of this issue as well as the possible relationship between the Heraia and the Olympic games.

6 Much ink has been spilt concerning the foundation and age of the Olympics; Pausanias himself provides several different accounts of its origins. Golden 1998: 12-14; Scanlon 2002: 28-39; Miller 2004: 20-30; Kyle 2007: 103-105.
the agora.\(^7\) Pausanias gives no additional information about this building, other than identifying it as an οἰκήμα, a generic word for building (LSJ s.v. I.1). The meaning of term is primarily derived from the function of the building, which could range from a brothel to temple to a workshop (LSJ s.v. οἰκήμα II.1, 4, 7). It is notable, however, that the women did this work in the public sphere of the city—in the agora. This Elean example is not unique in Greek ritual; in the Spartan city of Amyklai, the women also wove a ritual garment in an οἰκήμα (Paus. 3.16.2). In this Spartan rite, gynaikes wove a chitōn for Amyklaian Apollo as part of the Hyacinthia festival.\(^8\) The most prominent example of ritual weaving is the weaving of the peplos by the arrhēphoroi and ergastinai for Athena as part of the Panathenaia in Athens.\(^9\) In addition, a more explicit connection between ritual weaving and marriage is the example in Locri Epizephryii, where a peplos was offered to Persephone in her role as the protectress of marriage.\(^10\) An association between women and textile production is not surprising, and examples of wedding ritual exist in many different cults and locations.\(^11\) Moreover, there was no prescribed age for

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7 See Schied and Svenbro 1996: 11; 175 n. 6 for additional scholarship on ritual weaving in the agora.

8 The identity of these gynaikes is ambiguous in the text, and so some scholars have identified them with the priestesses of Hilaira and Phoebe, who were called, the Leukippides, just like the goddesses they served (Paus. 3.16.1). Pausanias describes these Leukippides in the passage immediately preceding the one in which he mentions the ritual weaving. However, this conflation is problematic because the priestesses are called κόραι and παρθένοι in the first passage, while those who did the ritual weaving are called γυναῖκες. As has been discussed, age-identifying terms can have some flexibility in meaning, but to make this semantic change within the span of a few textual lines is strange. It should be noted that both parthenoi and women beyond that age were associated with the Leukippides in their numerous ritual contexts. However, the proximity between the two rites makes a change in age status more difficult to understand. Calame 2001: 174-191.


11 Barber 1992: 102. While Barber states that there are few surviving examples, Graf notes many examples from inscriptional evidence. See Graf 1985: 211-212 for various examples.
the females who engaged in ritual weaving. Evidence suggests that girls, childbearing women, and post-menopausal women were all involved in this ritual practice. Therefore, it was not weaving itself that determined the age of the ritual participants, but some other facet of the local cult tradition.

A greater understanding of the Sixteen Women’s role in weaving the *peplos* for Hera is gained by placing it within the context of the college’s etiological stories and other ritual activities. The activity of weaving unites the political roles of the Sixteen Women and their ritual roles associated with marriage. John Schied and Jesper Svenbro argue that the unification of Elis and Pisa was presented as the result of women’s work, and so it is logical that such unification ought to be represented by collective weaving.\(^{12}\) The process of weaving—producing an organized and beautiful fabric from disorganized wool—parallels the political process of unifying hostile territories. As Scheid and Svenbro also demonstrate, weaving, the creation of order from disorder, corresponds to the experience of marriage.\(^{13}\) Furthermore, the association of the Sixteen Women with marriage is also implicit in the weaving of the *peplos* for Hera because of Hera’s sphere of influence. Hera’s role as the recipient of the woven *peplos* facilitates the comparison between marriage and political unification because “covered in a matrimonial cloak commemorating a royal wedding, Hera enables the spectator to visualize concretely what holds together marriage, whether royal or divine, and the city, in opposing but marvelously ordered threads.”\(^{14}\)

\(^{12}\) Scheid and Svenbro 1996: 12.

\(^{13}\) Scheid and Svenbro 1996: 14.

In addition to their role as ritual weavers, the college of the Sixteen Women also arranged two choruses, one for Hippodameia and the other for Physkoa (Paus. 5.16.6). While the Sixteen Women arranged the choruses, parthenoi would mostly likely have been the performers. The chorus of Hippodameia would probably have been part of the festivities of the Heraia, which are discussed below. Unlike Hippodameia, the supposed founder of the college of the Sixteen Women, Physkoa was not a figure known from Panhellenic mythology. She was a local Elean heroine, who had a son, Narkaios, as a result of a sexual union with Dionysus. Narkaios, consequently, introduced the worship of Dionysus to the people of Elis. Pausanias’ description suggests that the Eleans resisted the new god, but the conflict was ultimately settled with the establishment of a new temple to Athena in addition to one for Dionysus (Paus. 5.16.7). The association of the Sixteen Women with a chorus to a Dionysian heroine may initially seem surprising in light of their ritual connections to Hera and the institution of marriage. However, Plutarch identifies “the Sixteen Women as the holy women devoted to Dionysus,” αἱ ἱπέξη ηλ Δηόλζνλ αἱ ἑθθαίδεθα θαινζηλ (Plu. Mor. 251e). The

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15 Both Claude Calame and Gregory Nagy suggest that parthenoi would have performed the choruses, although nothing explicitly forbade the Sixteen Women from doing so. Nagy 1990b: 364-367; Calame 2001: 115.

16 Calame 2001: 114. However, it is also possible that the chorus of Hippodameia was part of the separate honors that she received annually at her tomb. As Pausanias describes, the bones of Hippodameia were restored to Olympia and honored as a result of a command from the Delphic Oracle (Paus. 6.20.7). Consequently, each year the Elean women entered the Hippodameion in order to sacrifice to her and honor her in other ways (Paus. 6.20.7). Perhaps, these unspecified honors were the choruses, which Pausanias describes here. Regardless of whether the choral performances to Hippodameia were performed as part of the Heraia or at the Hippodameion, their very existence demonstrates the importance placed upon the heroine in the Elean ritual system.


18 The importance of Dionysus to Elis as a whole, and especially to the women, cannot be underestimated. Pausanias goes as far as to say that the Eleans worship Dionysus above all (Paus. 6.26.1). In addition, the
choral performance in honor of Physkoa most likely took place at the festival of the Thyia, which was a festival in honor of Dionysus.\textsuperscript{19}

The ritual responsibility for which the Sixteen Women are best known is the organization of the female athletic festival of the Heraia that was established by Hippodameia. No part of the evidence concerning the Sixteen Women of Elis has drawn more scholarly attention than this aspect of the college. One reason that this festival has aroused modern scholarly curiosities is because of the possibility that it was the female counterpart to the all-male Olympic Games. In most books on the Olympic Games or Greek athletics, there is a section or chapter dedicated to female athletics, with much of the evidence drawn from the Heraia.\textsuperscript{20} The college of the Sixteen Women did not participate in the Heraia as athletes; after all, they were old women. Rather, they were the collective body in charge of organizing the festival. I do not address many of the scholarly debates about the Heraia, particularly those concerning the relationship between the Heraia and the Olympics. Instead, I focus on the understanding of the Heraia as the “ritualization” of an initiatory experience for the \textit{parthenoi} who participated in the games. This experience prepared these young females for the next stage of life, namely marriage and motherhood. The Heraia and their participation in the races created a ritual context for this initiatory experience. Most importantly, the relationship of the \textit{parthenoi} with the post-menopausal Sixteen Women provided support and allowed for the

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\textsuperscript{19} Calame 2001: 114.
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transmission of knowledge and wisdom. It is this intergenerational dynamic that necessitated the choice of a post-menopausal women for the college of the Sixteen Women of Elis.

The college of the Sixteen Women organized these games in service to Hera. Pausanias uses the verb τίθημι, “to manage or administer,” twice to describe the Sixteen Women’s relationship with the Heraia (Paus. 5.16.2; 5.16.6). Their organizational role in the Heraia is further explained by parallels drawn to the *Hellanodikai*, who were in charge of the Olympic Games.\(^{21}\) Pausanias describes the power structure of the Heraian Games by stating that “those serving the Sixteen, who preside over the games, are similarly adult women,” εἰσὶ δὲ καὶ αἱ διακονώμεναι ταῖς ἐκκατάδεκα κατὰ ταῦτα ταῖς ἀγωνοθετούσαις γυναῖκες (Paus. 5.16.3). The college’s authority is confirmed by Pausanias’ use of the participle, ἀγωνοθετοῦσι. It creates a marked analogy between men who oversaw games, such as the *Hellanodikai*, and the Sixteen Women, since the verb ἀγωνοθέτω can be used in relation to both (LSJ s.v. II). Furthermore, a sharp distinction is drawn between the *parthenoi*, who actually participated in the athletic contests, and the *gynaikes*, who oversaw the contests. Pausanias also makes an explicit comparison between purification rituals that both the Sixteen Women and the *Hellanodikai* had to perform (Paus. 5.16.8). It was necessary for both groups to be purified by the blood of a pig and water from the Pieran spring, regardless of their ritual responsibilities.

\(^{21}\) The duties of *Hellanodikai* included supervising Olympic training, presenting victory wreathes, and dictating punishment to rule-breakers. In addition, they held marks of distinction, such as special clothing and seating at the Olympics. They were not, however, considered priests or cult officials as the sanctuary of Zeus had separate priests who were not involved in the Games. For more on the relationship between religion and sport at Olympia, see Golden 1998: 10-23. Although the *Hellanodikai* were not considered religious officials, the Sixteen Women of Elis are discussed as priestesses because of their wide-ranging ritual roles.
That the Sixteen Women organized the Heraia and that the parthenoi participated in them is quite certain from the ancient evidence. However, the relationship between these two groups—organizers and athletes, i.e., the old and the young—is less apparent. Their relationship hinges upon the theory of the Heraia as a “prenuptial initiation rite.” This interpretation of the Heraia is associated most notably with the work of Thomas Scanlon, but has been generally accepted by many scholars who work on the Heraia.\textsuperscript{22} However, as Graf and others have recently noted, the “initiation paradigm” has problematic implications in its application to the rituals and myths of antiquity.\textsuperscript{23} Among their concerns is that the term “initiation” has been used to refer both to the rites of mystery cults such as Eleusinian Mysteries as well as puberty or age-related rituals.\textsuperscript{24} Perhaps most problematic is that few ancient institutions correspond to the sociological and anthropological definition of initiation.\textsuperscript{25} However, it is possible to recognize initiatory experiences in ancient Greek society. As James Redfield has demonstrated, virtually any experience has the ability to be initiatory because through such experiences “we become new persons to ourselves and conceive ourselves as newly represented to the others.”\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, “the initiatory experience is not derived from the ritual; rather the ritual is derived from the experience, which it aims to clarify, motivate, normalize,

\textsuperscript{22} Scanlon 1984, 1988, 2002.

\textsuperscript{23} Graf 2003. See the collection of articles in Dodd and Faraone 2003, especially the contributions of Fritz Graf, Bruce Lincoln, and James Redfield for further discussions on the history and future of this theoretical model.

\textsuperscript{24} Faraone 2003: 43.

\textsuperscript{25} Graf 2003: 20.

\textsuperscript{26} Redfield 2003: 257.
While traditionally the Heraia has been understood as a “prenuptial initiation rite,” it is more accurate to view it as the “ritualization” of the initiatory experience that the *parthenoi* who participated in the Heraia underwent. The *parthenoi* were preparing for the next phase of womanhood, specifically marriage and motherhood. The rituals of the Heraia, mostly notably the footraces and interactions with the Sixteen Women, provided insight and support for this experience.

Pausanias gives many details about the athletics events of the Heraia, but most relevant to the current discussion is the information concerning the participants’ ages and attire.

> ὁ δὲ ἀγών ἐστιν ἁμιλλα δρόμου παρθένοις: οὔτι ποι πάσαι ἡλικίας τῆς αὐτῆς, ἄλλα πρῶται μὲν αἱ νεωτάται, μετὰ ταῦτας δὲ αἱ τῆ ἡλικία δεύτεραι, τελευταίαι δὲ θέουσιν ὅσοι πρεσβύταται τῶν παρθένων εἰσί. θέουσι δὲ οὕτω καθεῖται σφίσιν ἡ κόμη, χιτῶν ὅλιγων ὑπὲρ γόνατος καθήκει, τὸν ὄμον ἄχρι τοῦ στήθους φαίνουσι τὸν δεξιόν. *(Paus. 5.16.2-3)*

The games have foot-races for *parthenoi*. All of them do not belong to same age group. The first group is the youngest, after them are those next in age, and the last ones to run are the oldest of the *parthenoi*. They run in the following way: their hair hangs down long, a short tunic reaches just above the knee, and they expose their right shoulder down to their breast.

While all the athletic participants in the Heraian games were *parthenoi*, Pausanias describes how the running races were divided into three groups based on the ages of the girls. Pausanias is not specific about the actual age divisions. Because Pausanias is silent regarding the age divisions, scholars have attempted to determine them using other known examples of female athletics. For instance, in the Spartan educational system, boys and girls were divided into three six-year age classes, from the ages of six to

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27 Redfield 2003: 257.

twenty-four years. The iconographic and textual evidence concerning the girls’ races at Brauron also suggest a range of ages.\textsuperscript{29} Perhaps with the Attic tradition at Brauron in mind, Plato creates two age divisions for girls’ athletic competition in the laws of his ideal society (Pl. \textit{Lg.} 8.833c-834d). If these examples of female athletics are any indication, a wide range of females would have participated in the Heraia. This range in the ages eliminates the possibility that the games were connected to menarche or puberty.\textsuperscript{30} Instead, the initiatory experience was related to the change in social identity that the \textit{parthenoi} were undergoing, notably their preparation for marriage and motherhood.

Pausanias also provides a specific description of the attire of the \textit{parthenoi}. The dress of the athletes was distinct from that of the Sixteen Women, who organized the festival, and from their own, everyday clothes. Two sculptural depictions of the Heraian costume exist, which depict the short \textit{chitōn} covering only one shoulder, the single bare breast, and the long, loose hair. In the British Museum, there is a bronze statuette of a female runner, probably originating from a Laconian workshop and dating to c. 560 BCE.\textsuperscript{31} The second, known as the Vatican Runner, is a marble statue and is most likely a Roman copy of a bronze Greek original, which dates to c. 460 BCE.\textsuperscript{32} These statues of girl runners exactly reflect Pausanias’ description of the participants’ costume. Many scholars suggest that the Amazons, Artemis, or Atalanta, all of whom wear similar

\textsuperscript{29} Sourvinou-Inwood 1988; Scanlon 2002: 139-174.

\textsuperscript{30} For the distinction between puberty rites and social initiation, see Jeanmaire 1939; van Gennep 1960; Eliade 1965; Brellich 1969; Turner 1969.

\textsuperscript{31} British Museum inv. 208. See Serwint 1993: 406-407 for a detailed discussion and reproduction (Fig. 1).

\textsuperscript{32} Vatican, Museo Pio-Clementino inv. 2784. See Serwint 1993: 408-410 for discussion of the statue and a reproduction of the image (Fig. 2).
“athletic” attire, may have inspired the Heraian costume. Nancy Serwint discusses the possibility that the Heraian attire may have been derived from the dress of these mythical figures, but, for varying reasons, concludes that they were not the inspiration for the costume. Her presentation of the evidence accurately finds fault with these obvious choices; instead, Serwint looks to the male exômis as the source of the Heraian costume. The male exômis is a variation on a short chitôn, which was only fastened on the left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder uncovered and freeing the arm for movement. This garment was the characteristic costume of Hephaestus and was the clothing associated with workers, soldiers, and slaves. The Heraian costume modeled after the male exômis would have allowed for more freedom of movement as the girls ran. It also supports the initiatory status of the parthenoi; a common feature of initiatory rituals is a distinctive costume, frequently drawn from that of the opposite sex. Scanlon presents the logic of transvestitism in initiation rituals from both the psychological and structuralist perspectives. Psychologically, it allows the initiates to experience the “other” and, consequently, all social roles before they take on their own gendered societal role. Alternatively, in the structuralist model, the initiates wear the dress of the “other” to signify their marginal status though the inversion of normal gender categories and markers. Scanlon also emphasizes that the choice of specialized ritual attire, as opposed


34 Serwint 1993: 416.


to nudity, demonstrates that the initiatory element of the Heraia overshadowed the athletic nature of the games.\textsuperscript{37}

In addition to the evidence derived from Pausanias, Scanlon and other scholars who adhere to this theory support it by comparing the Heraia to other female athletic contests that have been, and still are by some scholars, understood via the initiation paradigm. Most problematic is the evidence related to the Arkteia, whose function as an initiation rite has been seriously questioned, mostly recently by Christopher Faraone.\textsuperscript{38} Comparisons to the Spartan races associated with the Leukippides and the Dionysiades have also been utilized, but have not drawn the same scholarly scrutiny as the Arkteia.\textsuperscript{39} The history of scholarship on the Heraia has been plagued by issues concerning initiation ritual. However, Redfield’s understanding of the relationship between initiatory experiences and ritual relieves some of the present difficulties. Within this interpretation of the Heraia, the relationship between the older Sixteen Women and younger \textit{parthenoi} is understood as a ritualized introduction to the upcoming marital role. The initiatory experience concerning marriage and the transition from girlhood to womanhood was facilitated by the rituals of the Heraia and the interaction with the old women of the college. As I demonstrate in the next section, the old woman in antiquity and cross-culturally is understood as a counselor and source of wisdom, especially for the next

\textsuperscript{37} While Scanlon and Serwint may overemphasize the initiatory element of the costume for the \textit{parthenoi} in the Heraia, its distinctiveness in relation to traditional female dress and typical athletic attire, i.e., nudity, cannot be denied.

\textsuperscript{38} Faraone 2003. See Scanlon 2002: 139-174 for the argument supporting the ritual as prenuptial and social initiation.

generation of females. It is this aspect of post-menopausal identity that necessitated the choice of old women for the college of the Sixteen Women.

5.2.3 The Sixteen Women as Counselor and Reservoir of Wisdom

The Sixteen Women’s ritual roles in Elis took three forms: the organization of the Heraia, the preparation of Hera’s peplos, and the arrangement of the choruses to Hippodameia and Physkoa. These roles placed the Sixteen Women in direct relation with the younger generation of Elean females. Because of the Heraia’s connection both mythically and ritually to marriage, the parthenoi can be understood as undergoing an initiatory experience in preparation for marriage through the Heraia. The Sixteen Women acted as guides for the younger females who actively participated in the Heraia. As women of advanced age who had already experienced marriage and motherhood, they were able to mentor the next generation who were preparing for the same life roles. In essence, the Sixteen Women of Elis embodied the positive stereotype of the old woman as counselor, guide, and reservoir of wisdom. In antiquity, this stereotype is most clearly demonstrated in literary representations of old women as nurses. In her study of the nurse in Greek literature, Helen Karydas examines the manifestations of elderly female authority by analyzing speech acts for instances of “advice, approval, disapproval, directions, orders—and their effectiveness on the different characters addressed.”

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40 It has been argued that marriage was the fundamental transition in a woman’s life and that it, and not any development in relation to puberty, marked the transition to adult womanhood. Golden 1990: 48-49; Lewis 2002: 14.

41 See Karydas 1998 for a full discussion of nurse figures in Greek literature, particularly as figures of female authority.

42 Karydas 1998: 5.
paradigmatic example of the nurse is Eurykleia in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Eurykleia exercises authority over characters who are technically in a superior position to her, including Telemachus, Penelope, and Odysseus. As Karydas observes, the characters in the *Odyssey* recognize the multiple roles that Eurykleia fills in their lives, from caregiver to counselor. The variation in her roles is reflected in the ways in which Eurykleia is addressed, whether as “nurse,” *trophos* or *maia*, or “old woman,” *grêus*. When the skills that she uses require more judgment, intelligence, and wisdom, she is addressed as *grêus*, which draws attention to her post-menopausal identity. The narrative exploits the stereotype of the experienced and clever old woman who has the maturity and wisdom to deal with complicated family issues. The character of the wise and clever old nurse is further developed in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. As in the *Odyssey*, the character of the nurse is depicted as a figure of authority, but Phaedra’s nurse is explicitly described in terms of wisdom. She is associated with the sages, literally “wise men,” *σοφοί* (E. *Hipp. 266*). This validation of her wisdom follows her assertion that “her long lifetime has taught her many things,” *πολλὰ διδάσκει μ’ ὁ πολὺς βίον* (E. *Hipp. 252*). Moreover, the chorus of younger women accepts the nurse as an authority figure and as possessing superior wisdom (E. *Hipp. 267-284*). The unnamed, old nurse in *Hippolytus* demonstrates the social standing that old women may have experienced due to their increased wisdom and knowledge.

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43 Karydas 1998: 58. See Table III for a list and summary of all the uses of these words in the *Odyssey* (Karydas 1998: 62-63).


46 It should be noted, however, that the nurse’s advise and wisdom ultimately fail Phaedra who commits suicide.
The model of the old woman as reservoir of wisdom is also prominent in other cultures. In addition, the importance of cultural transmission, especially through intergenerational communication, has been thoroughly studied in modern times. Research has shown that “sociocultural transmission is a necessary ingredient in societal stability, cohesion, and continuity.”\(^{47}\) While not all cultural aspects are transmitted, women’s affairs and traditions often are passed on through intergenerational communication because of the tendency for women’s culture to be oral.\(^{48}\) For instance, in studies of societies that rely on folk medicine, women play key roles as midwives and herbalists, and their intergenerational networking is the most important mechanism for passing on this knowledge.\(^{49}\) In modern Western societies, oral cultural transmission between female generations is also significant, especially when the topics cannot be or are not comfortably discussed in public. One study has shown that African-American women do not receive their knowledge and ability to deal with the difficulties of menopause from medical professionals, but from their mothers or “othermother” figures, such as grandmothers, aunts, or sisters who assist their biological mother in the mothering responsibilities.\(^{50}\) The relationship between the Sixteen Women and the \textit{parthenoi} may have been similar to those described in these modern studies. The Sixteen Women played the role of the “othermother” to the \textit{parthenoi} and counseled them about what their new lives might entail. In an intergenerational setting, female knowledge was


\(^{48}\) Jones 1980; Coates 1998.

\(^{49}\) Examples of such societies in the United States include the Ozarks, Appalachia, and the South. For more evidence on this cultural phenomenon, see Sharp 1986.

\(^{50}\) Agee 2000.
passed from one generation to the next. Laurie O’Higgins has made a similar argument about female cultural transmission during the all-female festival of the Thesmophoria, but at this festival, it would have occurred among adult women.\textsuperscript{51}

The stereotype of the old woman as guide is illustrated, perhaps most vividly, in the figure of the fairy godmother. The fairy godmother is part of a larger motif of the helper figure within the framework of folktale. The helper figure is a well-established pattern in fairytale in which a character provides help to the hero or heroine of the story in order to ensure a happy outcome.\textsuperscript{52} The form of the helper character is specific to the individual folktale and can be an animal, human, supernatural being, or even inanimate object.\textsuperscript{53} The fairy godmother fits into the pattern of the stern, but benevolent female guardian who is present in many fairytale traditions.\textsuperscript{54} The majority of these tales involve the older fairy godmother helping a younger girl make a successful marriage.

When most Americans hear the phrase, “fairy godmother,” they typically picture the plump, white-haired woman, uttering the magic words, “Bibidi-Bobidi-Bu” from Disney’s \textit{Cinderella}.\textsuperscript{55} This elderly lady with magical powers helps Cinderella escape the evils of her stepmother and marry her prince. The fairy godmother in Disney’s \textit{Cinderella}, as adopted from the version of the fairytale written by Charles Perrault,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{51} O’Higgins 2003: 26.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Hilda Ellis Davidson offers a thorough examination of the helper figure, beyond the often cursory mention in books on patterns in folktale (Davidson 2003).
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Davidson 2003.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} In Jacob Grimm’s \textit{Teutonic Mythology}, he connects such figures to mythic female powers, who are associated with agriculture and spinning and assist young wives and pregnant women. Grimm 1976: Davidson 2003:106.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Walt Disney Studios 1950.
\end{itemize}
functions in the role of a helper.\textsuperscript{56} In the Grimm Brothers’ version, however, the heroine receives magical intervention from birds in a hazelnut tree, which grows from a twig that Cinderella planted on her mother’s grave.\textsuperscript{57} The fairy godmother in Perrault’s version of Cinderella replaces the magical intervention from the deceased mother and functions in the role of the “othermother,” just as the Sixteen Women did.\textsuperscript{58} She steps in to guide Cinderella in the absence of her mother. Notably, this guidance reaches its culmination with the marriage to the prince.

In conclusion, the stereotype of the old woman as wise, demonstrated in the ancient figure of the nurse, the constructs of intergenerational cultural transmission, and the fairy godmother, explains the choice of post-menopausal women for the college of the Sixteen Women. Because of their ritual role in guiding and counseling the \textit{parthenoi}, the Sixteen Women needed to be of advanced age so that they would have already experienced the life events of marriage and motherhood.

\subsection*{5.3 The \textit{Gerarai} of Athens}

The \textit{Gerarai} of Athens shared some characteristics with the Sixteen Women of Elis, such as their collective nature, advanced age, and connection to marriage. Yet, the differences between them are equally significant, especially the deity whom they served and the ritual tasks they performed. In addition, the Sixteen Women seem to have greater political and ritual influence within Elean society. The roles of the \textit{Gerarai} appear to be more limited and, within this ritual, they seem to be more subservient in nature. It should

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{56} Perrault 1982: 14-21.

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{57} Grimm and Grimm 1993: 80-85.

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{58} In Perrault’s versions of fairytales, fairy godmothers often replace dead mothers as the helpers of heroines. For other examples, see Grimm and Grimm 1993; Davidson 2003: 107.
also be noted that the evidence concerning the priesthhoods varies; the information about the *Gerarai* comes from a greater variety of sources, ranging from a fourth-century BCE speech attributed to Demosthenes, the lexicographers of late antiquity, as well as possible iconographic evidence. I draw on the available references and occasionally make inferences based on other post-menopausal priesthhoods, mostly notably the Delphic Pythia, to create as complete and comprehensive a description of the *Gerarai* as possible.

### 5.3.1 Cult Title: Assumptions and Meaning

Since this dissertation focuses on old priestesses, it is first necessary to demonstrate that the *Gerarai* of Athens were in fact post-menopausal women. The ages of the previous priestesses in this study have, for the most part, been indicated in the ancient sources through age-class vocabulary and other age-related expressions. However, in the case of the *Gerarai*, their age has largely been presumed from their cult title. Before the discussion of why their ritual duties necessitated the choice of post-menopausal women can be undertaken, I first demonstrate that the assumptions concerning their advanced age are indeed correct. The majority of scholars presume the *Gerarai* to be old women. For instance, Joan Breton Connelly includes them in her section on old priestesses, while Richard Hamilton parenthetically glosses the cult title as “revered old women.”

Yet, there is a small minority who does not associate old age with these priestesses, including Matthew Dillon in his comprehensive treatment of

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females in Greek religion. A representative statement concerning the Gerarai can be found in H. W. Parke’s Festivals of the Athenians in his discussion of the Anthesteria.

“The title Gerarai by derivation meant ‘reverend’ and implied the respect due to the office held by the fourteen women. Certainly one is not led to picture them as maenads indulging in some licentious ritual. Instead it suggests solemn and elderly priestess, and the little we know of their duties accords with this view.”

While Parke and others who agree with his statement appear to be correct concerning the cult title of the Gerarai, they do not explore the important reasoning behind these claims. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand the name of these priestesses entirely because many assumptions about their ritual roles derive from the connotations of this cult title, as is illustrated by the above quote from Parke. It is, therefore, crucial to understand all aspects of the cult title, Gerarai, before delving into the ancient evidence concerning the priestesses’ ritual activities.

Strictly speaking, the cult title of the priestesses is the nominative plural feminine form of the adjective γεραρός. It has the primary definition of “majestic” or “of reverend bearing” (LSJ s.v. γεραρός 1). However, by the fifth century BCE, it is equated with the adjective γερατός, meaning “old” or “aged” (LSJ s.v. γεραρός 2). The conflation extends to the point that the masculine substantive form of the adjective in the plural, oi γεραροί, is defined simply as “elders” (LSJ s.v. γεραρός 3). It is under this third definition that the feminine substantive adjective used as the cult title, γεραραί, is included.

One of the primary difficulties in assessing the meaning behind the priestesses’ cult title is the multiple spelling variations that occur in the ancient sources. I have chosen the spelling γεραραί in this discussion of the priesthood, but the women are also

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60 Dillon 2001: 103.
61 Parke 1977: 112.
identified by the term γεραιάι. The latter form is recognized as an older variation (LSJ s.v. γεραρός 3). These possible spelling alternatives are further complicated because of the similarity in spelling to the adjective, γεραιός, with which they are conflated in meaning. Ultimately, the variants in spelling among the sources do not change the meaning of the cult title, specifically the implications of advanced age and high esteem.

The confusion that occurs between the two adjectives, γεραιός and γεραιάι, provides additional insight into the double connotation. It can be illustrated by their use in Homer. In the Homeric poems, γεραιός is used frequently, but it is only used in the feminine form in one narrative context: when the Trojan women gather, process to the temple, and make offerings (Hom. Il. 6.87-94, 237-311). In regards to the four uses of the adjective in this passage, the manuscript tradition records all three spelling alternatives, γεραιάι, γεραιραι, and γεραραι. The interchangeability of these words is demonstrated by the scholion on Iliad 6.270 in manuscript Venetus 454, which adds in the margin beside γεραιάο, “καὶ γεραιράο.” When these similar adjectives are used, they have the connotation of an esteemed and elderly individual. This analysis of the

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62 In addition, the lexicographers also use the variations, γεραιράδεο and γεραιράδεο, to indicate similar cultic associations; these usages are discussed below.

63 γεραιάο is used to describe men twenty-one times in the Iliad and four times in the Odyssey. Kirk 1990: 166.

64 In the OCT edition, editors David Munro and Thomas Allen emend the variations to γεραιάι or γεραιάς, but cite the variants in the apparatus criticus (Monro and Allen 1920). γεραιάς: 6.87; γεραιράς: 6.87, 270; γεραιάς: 6.287; γεραιάι: 6.296.

65 Venetus 454 is identified by Munro and Allen with the sigla A and is dated to the tenth century CE (Munro and Allen 1920: xx).

66 In his commentary on book six of the Iliad, G.S. Kirk provides no explanation for the alternative terms; he is more concerned with the narrative inconsistency created by the unusual feminine adjective. Hector seems to envision all the women praying to Athena for a Trojan victory, but the term γεραιάι, or γεραιραι and γεραιραι for that matter, implies a select body of older women. Kirk 1990: 166-167.
Homeric uses shows the emphasis on the venerable aspect of the cult title. After all, the women described as γεραία included the women of the royal household, even Queen Hecuba herself. Hesychius glosses the troublesome Homeric word γεραίας as “honored women, who have a certain privilege,” ἐντίμους γυναῖκας, τὰς γέρας τι ἐχούσας (Hsch. s.v. γεραίας). This definition draws attention to two words that epitomize the concept of venerability and respectability that is inherent in the Gerarai, namely τιμάω and γέρας. Hesychius uses the related adjective, ἐντίμος, to define the essential quality of this group of Trojan women: they are honored. In the second part of the gloss, he ascribes to them γέρας τι, some gift of honor or privilege. The privilege and honor associated with the Trojan women from Homer extends to the Gerarai of Athens.67

The feminine forms of these adjectives, γεραρά, γεραρά, and γεραία, were primarily associated with cultic functions. Whether in the case of the Gerarai of Athens or other priestesses, these adjectives became synonymous with cult titles. In fact, even in their usage in the Homeric scene described above, the women are performing ritual activities, although they are not specifically priestesses. In addition to the association of this cult title with these priestesses of Dionysus in Athens, other priesthoods had similar cult titles. In Hesychius and the Anecdota Graeca, the γεραράδες are described as “the wives of the best men and they dress the statue of Athena in Argos,” αἱ τῶν ἀρίστων ἄνδρῶν γυναῖκες, καὶ αἱ τῷ τῆς Αθηνᾶς ἐν Ἀργεὶ ἁγαλμα ἐνδόομαι (Hsch. s.v. γεραράδες; AB 1.231). While they are not explicitly called priestesses, their ritual activities were dressing the statue of Athena and caring for the statue of the goddess,

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67 It is not explicit in the ancient sources what specifically marks the Gerarai with such status. One can only speculate about the circumstances that would mark an Athenian woman as venerable; perhaps she is married to a prominent citizen, has many children, or lives her life outside of public scrutiny.
which were common ritual duties for priestesses.\textsuperscript{68} It should be noted that the cult title identified in Hesychius and the \textit{Anecdota Graeca} is a variation of the terms already discussed; it has the alternative ending of \textminus αδεο, indicating a feminine group with the characteristics of the adjective, i.e., advanced age and a venerable nature.\textsuperscript{69} In addition, the cult title, γεξαηξάδεο, was used to describe the priestess of the Mother of the Gods in the Piraeus (\textit{IG} II\textsuperscript{2} 6288). An epitaph marked the grave of a woman named Chairestrate, who was “the servant and holy γεξαηξάδεο of the Mother of All,” μητρός παντοτέκνου πρόπολος / σεμνή τε γεξαηξάδεο (4-5). Her title of γεξαηξάδεο was used in conjunction with the more generic term for priestess or servant of the gods, πρόπολος.\textsuperscript{70}

The \textit{Gerarai} can indeed be considered post-menopausal women. These women were chosen due to their advanced age and because of their respectability. These characteristics were necessary because of their ritual activities. In addition, these women required the high level of ritual purity that could be attained by post-menopausal woman through renewed virginity. Their need for ritual purity is explicitly expressed in the ancient evidence. Moreover, because of their presumed role as assistants to the \textit{basilinna} during the Anthesteria, specifically in regard to the \textit{hieros gamos}, “the sacred marriage,” the \textit{Gerarai} needed to possess the requisite knowledge and experience of marriage to guide her through this ritualized marital process.

\textsuperscript{68} For further discussion on ritual care of cult statues, see Dillon 2001: 132-136; Goff 2004: 54-58.

\textsuperscript{69} This same ending is also used for the Athenian priestesses of Dionysus, who are called the γεξαηξάδεο in the \textit{Anecdota Graeca} (\textit{AB} 1.228).

\textsuperscript{70} For more details on the cult of the Mother of the Gods in the Piraeus, see Dillon 2001: 155-156.
The evidence for the sexual status of the Gerarai is derived from a speech attributed to Demosthenes. Because of its importance in providing evidence for the Gerarai, it is first necessary to recount the details of this speech. The speech has been preserved in the corpus of Demosthenes, but is believed to be the work of the orator Apollodoros.\footnote{Carey 1992: 17.} The speech accuses Neaira of marrying the Athenian citizen Stephanos, even though she is a foreigner. While the speech is ostensibly against Neaira, its ultimate aim is to attack Stephanos. To win the case, Apollodoros must demonstrate that Neaira is a foreigner and that she is married to Stephanos, not merely his mistress. He attempts to prove the latter by showing that Stephanos has children by Neaira whom he recognizes as legitimate. Apollodoros’ most compelling evidence involves Neaira’s daughter, Phano, about whom he describes three scandals. It is the last and most salacious of these that is relevant here. Apollodoros reports that Stephanos gave Phano in marriage to Theogenes, who was serving as the basileus and for whom Stephanos was the assistant. This marriage violated the requirements of the basileus, whose wife could not be previously married because of her important religious duties. Phano had been previously married and had been a courtesan; both facts would have prevented her from becoming the basilinna. It is within the condemnation of the marriage between Theogenes and Phano that Apollodoros describes some of the ritual activities of the Gerarai, especially their connection to the basilinna. This brief sketch of the speech’s narrative is intended to provide some context for the ritual details, but other aspects are discussed as needed.
The sexual status of the *Gerarai* is described with similar vocabulary to that of the Pythia of Delphi. In the speech of ps.-Demosthenes, a sacred herald is called as a witness, and he repeats in court the oath, or more likely a part of it, that the *Gerarai* recited (D. 59.78). The oath emphasizes the physical purity of the priestesses; “I live purely and I am unpolluted and pure from others who are polluted and from intercourse with a husband,” ἄγιστεῶ καὶ εἰμὶ καθαρὰ καὶ ἄγνη ἀπό τε τῶν ἄλλων τῶν οὐ καθαρευόντων καὶ ἀπ’ ἄνδρὸς συνουσίας (D. 59.78). Much of the vocabulary in this oath is familiar from previous discussions of ritual purity, such as that concerning the Pythia, and points to the *Gerarai* as being a celibate post-menopausal women. In the oath of the *Gerarai*, two forms of ἁγλόο and καθαρός, one adjectival and one verbal, are used. The chiasmatic word order of this “purity” vocabulary further emphasizes the necessity for the ritual purity of the *Gerarai* and the importance of the oath in proclaiming so.

I first discuss ἁγλόο because the term and a similar usage have already been examined in connection to the Pythia. It is necessary for the body of the Pythia to be kept “pure from social interactions,” συνουσίας ἁγνὸν τὸ σῶμα (Plu. Mor. 438c). Plutarch’s use of ἁγνὸς with a genitive is essentially the same construction as in the oath, although in the oath a propositional phrase introduced with ἀπό replaces the genitive. In passages of Plutarch and ps.-Demosthenes, the adjective, ἁγνός, carries the sense of chastity and a mortal’s fitness to worship the gods. Moreover, the same noun also occurs in each passage. As I discuss in Chapter 3, συνουσία has the dual meaning of interaction within society and sexual intercourse. In the passage from Plutarch that describes the Pythia,

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72 Parker 1983: 149; Chapter 3.4.1.
both of these definitions are relevant, but in the oath of the Gerarai, the conception of συνουσία is limited by the genitive, ἀνδρός. The inclusion of this limiting genitive indicates that the Gerarai must only be pure from sexual intercourse, not general social interactions. The Pythia required broader restrictions because of her need to appear above influence and bribery, whereas the Gerarai did not have such concerns. ἀγνός also appears in its verbal form as the first term of the oath, ἀγιστεύω; this verb is commonly used to assert the ritual purity and celibacy of a priestly figure (LSJ s.v. ἀγιστεύω I.1,2). For instance, it is used to describe the priestess of Sosipolis, another celibate post-menopausal woman (Paus. 6.20.2). This verbal form also bears the dual connotation of leading a chaste life and of being worthy to serve the gods, both of which were prerequisites for fulfilling the duties of the Gerarai.

Continuing the discussion of the expressed need for ritual purity, I turn to the other adjective καθαρός and its verbal counterpart καθαρεύω. καθαρός has numerous meanings, and its specific implication is generally dependent on the noun that the adjective modifies. In the context of the priestesses’ oath, its meaning of “physically clean” and its moral connotations are most relevant (LSJ s.v. καθαρός 1,3b). Physical cleanliness is important to anyone worshiping in a temple, and so this meaning cannot simply be ignored. More important, however, are the meanings with moral and ritual implications, namely being free from pollution, guilt, or defilement. In the oath, καθαρός is not used with a genitive to specify from what the priestess was free. She must be free from all negative things, that is she is unpolluted. The use of the adjective can be seen in

73 Chapter 3.4.1.

74 It is also used of the priestess of Artemis Hymnia (Paus. 8.13.1). See Chapter 3.2.
contrast with the participial form of the verb that follows. The participle is negated and describes the type of people from whom she has purified herself, ἀγνη ἀπό τῶν ἄλλων τῶν οὐ καθαρευόντων. The ἀπό in this phrase is parallel to the other one for which συνοπτιας is the direct object. This phrase creates an opposition between the priestess who is proclaiming the oath and is kathara and the individuals who must be avoided and are not katharoi. The Gerarai were themselves not only to be purified from any pollution, but it was also necessary for them to avoid contact with polluted individuals.

After this analysis of the vocabulary in the oath, it is clear that a high level of ritual purity was fundamental to the ritual duties of the Gerarai. As with the Pythia and the other post-menopausal priestesses discussed, the Gerarai achieved this high level of ritual purity through their renewed virginity. Because of the nature of their post-menopausal bodies and their commitment to celibacy, these old women were able to attain the same high level of ritual purity as physical virgins. However, the social facets of post-menopausal identity, specifically their association with wisdom and counsel, made them attractive candidates for this priesthood.

5.3.3 Ritual Activities of the Gerarai

Advanced age and the high level of ritual purity, which they were able to attain through renewed virginity, were necessary for the Gerarai to perform their required ritual duties. Unfortunately, there are few known concrete details about these activities. The ancient sources, for the most part, use generalized ritual vocabulary to describe what the Gerarai did. However, scholars have attempted to reconstruct their activities in more detail, particularly in the context of the festival of the Anthesteria. First, in this section, I

75 For the complete discussion of renewed virginity and its ritual implications, see Chapter 3.3.
look at the specific language and details given in the ancient sources. In the following section, the Anthesteria and the role of the Gerarai in this festival is explored.

The Gerarai were ritually and administratively connected to the archon basileus and his wife, the basilinna. The Gerarai were appointed and administrated by the archon basileus. Both the Onomasticon of Pollux and the Etymologicum Magnum identify the basileus as the administrator of the priesthood (Poll. 8.108; EM 227.35). Specifically, both texts use the verb καθίστημι to describe the action of the basileus. This verb most likely reflects the belief that the basileus established the priesthood and then continued to appoint the Gerarai (LSJ s.v. καθίστημι II.2.b; II.2.a). As Aristotle points out, the basileus was one of the oldest and most important officials in Athens (Arist. Ath. 3.2). The basileus was originally the civil and religious leader of the polis, but with the development of the democracy, his authority was reduced to religious affairs. The involvement of the basileus with the Gerarai indicates the antiquity of the priesthood. In addition, several lexicographical sources specifically state that he appointed fourteen women to serve as the Gerarai. According to the Etymologicum Magnum, the number of priestesses is significant because it was the same as the number of altars of Dionysus (EM 227.35). No other ancient sources verify this claim and, furthermore, the activities within the sanctuary were secret so this description must be viewed with a degree of skepticism.

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76 It should be noted that unlike many of the entries in the lexicographers, which are virtually identical, those in the Etymologicum Magnum and the Onomasticon of Pollux are considerably different. Therefore, the choice of καθίστημι in both entries is significant.

77 Parke 1977: 110.

78 Poll. 8.108; AB 1.231-232; Hsch. s.v. γεραραί.
It is clear from the sources that the *Gerarai* were priestesses of Dionysus. In almost every lexicographic entry related to the *Gerarai* their relationship to Dionysus is mentioned. For example, Harpocration identifies them as αἱ Διονύσῳ ἱερωμέναι γυναῖκες, “women dedicated to Dionysus” (Harp. s.v. Γεραραῖ). More specifically, they were associated with the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes, ἐν Λίμναις. There is considerable uncertainty surrounding this sanctuary and cult epithet. The location of the precinct has not been identified in the modern reconstructions of ancient Athens. Three hypotheses have been offered concerning the location: close to or south of the theater of Dionysus, the temple precinct excavated by Dörpfeld on the west slope of the Acropolis, or in the Ilissos region.79 One challenge in locating the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes within the Athenian landscape is identifying possible places with marshes or swamps within the city limits. Alternatively, Walter Burkert asserts that there were no marshy places in Athens, and so ἐν Λίμναις was most likely just a cult epithet.80 Burkert does not elaborate on the possible meaning of the cult title, but it could perhaps refer to the perceived outsider status of Dionysus within Greek religion.81 Ultimately, scholars agree on little about the sanctuary except its antiquity, which is based on a statement from Thucydides (Th. 2.15.4-5).

Within the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes, the *Gerarai* performed their ritual activities. These activities are clouded in mystery, not only because of the lack of

79 For a comprehensive discussion of the arguments for and against each hypothesis, see Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 19-25.

80 Burkert 1985: 237.

81 A possibly related epithet, *Limnatis*, was used to honor Artemis in Laconia, Messenia, and Sicyon (Paus. 2.7.6; Paus 3.2.6; Str. 8.4.9).
evidence, but because they were intentionally kept secret, even in antiquity. In his efforts to arouse the piety of the jurors, ps.-Demosthenes emphasizes the secret nature of the rites that took place in the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes throughout his attack of Phano and Stephanos (D. 59.73-74, 76). The activities are described with the adjectives, ἀπόρρητος and ἄρρητος, “forbidden” and “unspoken.” Pollux also uses the adjective ἄρρητος, for the activities of the Gerarai (Poll. 8.108). These forbidden and unspoken activities of the Gerarai are described as ἵερα in all of the sources. The term ἵερα can have multiple meanings within Greek ritual from offerings to sacrificial victims to sacred rites in general (LSJ s.v. ἵερα 1a, b, c). This broad range of meanings suits the ambiguous nature of the ritual responsibilities of the Gerarai, which were intended to be hidden from public knowledge.

The verbs that describe the actions of the Gerarai provide some nuance to the generalized depiction of ritual performance. The lexicographers use the verbs θώω, ἐπιτελέω, and γεραίρω in relation to the Gerarai.82 Neither θώω nor ἐπιτελέω provide much information about what the Gerarai were actually doing.83 Nor does the third verb γεραίρω, yet the similarity in sound and spelling to their cult title is striking. This verb is also used in the oath of the Gerarai (D. 59.78). In the speech of ps.-Demosthenes, two additional verbs, ὑπηρετέω and ἀπτομαι, are used that have less generic meanings. “The basilinna administered the oath to the Gerarai, who ministered to the sacred rites,” ἐξόρκωσέν τε τὰς γεραράς τὰς ὑπηρετούσας τοῖς ἱεροῖς (D. 59.73). ὑπηρετέω derives

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82 θώω: Poll. 8.108; ἐπιτελέω: ΑΒ 1.231-232, Hsch. s.v. γεραρά; γεραίρω: EM 227.35

83 Although the verb θώω is used to describe the ritual actions of the Gerarai, it does not indicate that they were actually involved in slaughtering an animal. See Chapter 4 on the roles of women and sacrifice in ancient Greece.
from the nouns ὑπηρεσία and ὑπηρέτης, a ship’s crew and a rower. It, therefore, has a clear connotation of servitude. With the use of this verb, the Gerarai must be seen as assistants of the basilinna. The second verb ἅπτομαι does not discount this reading; “when she administers the oath to the Gerarai surrounded by baskets in front of the altar before they undertake the sacred rites,” ὅταν ἐξορκοὶ τἀς γεραρᾶς <τὰς> ἐν κανοῖς πρὸς τῷ βωμῷ, πρὶν ἅπτεσθαι τὸν ἱερὸν (D. 59.78). In this second passage, the basilinna is again in the position of authority, which is further confirmed with the repetition of the verb ὑπηρετέω in relation to the sacred herald. This sentence also provides the most information about what type of ritual was actually occurring; with the juxtaposition of baskets and an altar, a sacrifice or libation seems probable. ἅπτω, here in the middle and with a genitive, is used metaphorically to indicate the beginning of an action (LSJ s.v. ἅπτω III). The Gerarai must be sworn into the positions as priestesses before the ritual activities can begin.

The speech attributed to Demosthenes purportedly includes the oath of the Gerarai that was administrated by the basilinna. However, the oath about which the sacred herald testifies in the case against Neaira only reveals “as much as it is allowed for the people to hear,” ὅσα οἱ ὅν τ’ ἐστιν ἄκούειν (D. 59.78). That some of the oath must remain secret is not unexpected due to the emphasis on the secret nature of the rites, which the Gerarai and basilinna performed. As has already been discussed, the first part of the oath reveals the high level of ritual purity that the Gerarai must maintain. The second part of the oath describes additional ritual activities of the Gerarai, but not those that have been discussed thus far or believed to take place during the Anthesteria. Instead, it mentions two different festivals of Dionysus in which the Gerarai participated,
the Theoinia and Iobaccheia. Very little is known about these festivals. The Theoinia is discussed by ancient commentators because of a legal dispute in the fourth century BCE between two rival Eleusinian families, the Krokonidai and the Koironidai. Parke suggests that the Theoinia was originally an Eleusinian festival, which was taken over by the Athenian state along with the other major Eleusinian cults. It was at this point that the basileus, basilinna, and Gerarai became involved. Even less is known about the Iobaccheia in the classical period. An ecstatic religious group who called themselves the Iobacchoi began worshipping in one of the possible locations of the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes in the second century CE. However, the relationship of this group to the festival mentioned in the oath cannot be determined.

Ultimately, an examination of the textual evidence, which specifically describes the Gerarai, does not lead to a very satisfying portrait of the priesthood. They were fourteen celibate, post-menopausal priestesses, who served Dionysus and assisted the basilinna. Scholars, however, have attempted to reconstruct more information about the basilinna, the Gerarai, and their secret rites through their supposed participation in the festival of the Anthesteria. The following section will examine these reconstructions, attempting to clarify the role of the Gerarai within the Athenian religious system.

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85 For the epigraphic evidence on the Iobacchoi, see Ditt. Syll. 1109; Sokolowski 1969: no. 51.
5.3.4 Role in the Anthesteria

The events of the Anthesteria have been analyzed by a number of eminent scholars. While much debate exists concerning the details, there is consensus about the basics of the festival. The Anthesteria occurred on the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth days of the month of Anthesterion. Each day had its own name: *Pithoigia*, “Jar-opening,” *Choes*, “Wine-jugs,” and *Chytrai*, “Pots,” chronologically. One of the main issues on which scholars have agreed when attempting to summarize or make generalizations about the Anthesteria, is the diverse nature of the ritual activities that were a part of the festival. Generally, the Anthesteria is seen as being concerned with two distinct themes, wine and the world of the dead. I do not provide a detailed account of the Anthesteria, as other scholars have already presented such descriptions, and, ultimately, most of the details are not pertinent to the involvement of the Gerarai. Instead, I focus on those aspects in which the Gerarai were assumed to participate, specifically the secret rituals at the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes and the *hieros games* between the basilinna and Dionysus.

In the previous section, I discussed the ritual role of the Gerarai with strict attention to details as presented in the ancient sources. The Gerarai were thought to have acted out their sacred role within the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes. These rites were intended to be kept secret from Athenian society, as was common in certain ritual settings. However, because of the connections between the basilinna and the

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87 Parke 1977: 107. For an attempt to reconcile these seemingly conflicting themes, see Johnston 1999: 63-71.
Anthesteria, scholars have made assumptions and attempted to reconstruct the events of this festival that took place inside the sanctuary from iconographic evidence, especially a group of vases known as the Lenaia vases. These vases depict women drawing wine, drinking, and dancing around a masked idol of Dionysus. They are distinctive in that the women do not seem to have a frenzied or bacchic character, but instead are elegant and subdued as would be expected of priestesses with the venerable quality inherent in the cult title the Gerarai.\(^8\) While it is not impossible that these vases depict the ritual activities of the Gerarai, it would be unusual for rites acknowledged as secret to be displayed so vividly and publicly.\(^9\)

The other ritual in which the Gerarai were thought to participate at the Anthesteria is the hieros gamos between the basilinna and Dionysus, although the evidence for this aspect of their ritual duties is somewhat questionable.\(^0\) This sacred marriage probably occurred on the night between the Choes and the Chytroi. Night was the appropriate time for marital relations, and vase paintings support this supposition.\(^1\) Since it is improbable that Dionysus himself descended to have intercourse with the basilinna, scholars have suggested alternative bridegrooms. There are two categories of suggestions: inanimate objects meant to represent a symbolic union and mortal substitutes who could physically represent the god. The suggested inanimate

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\(^9\) For example, punishment ensued for the revealing of the secrets of the Eleusinian Mysteries as is described in Andocides, *On the Mysteries*. Burkert 1985: 316-317.

\(^0\) For a discussion of the sacred marriage between the basilinna and Dionysus, see Avagianou 1991: 177-197. For skepticism about this ritual, see Hamilton 1992: 53-56.

\(^1\) See Avagianou 1991: 179 n.3 for a list of supporting visual evidence.
representations of Dionysus range from a statue to a herm to a masked idol. Because of the emphasis on both summixis and gamos, it seems more likely that actual sexual intercourse occurred, which necessitated a living representation of the god.92 Suggested mortals include the priest of Dionysus and the archon basileus himself. However, because of the emphasis on the uncorrupt and married nature of the basilinna, the archon basileus is most plausible, although he may have worn a mask during the act. Ultimately, the reenacted sacred marriage was the sexual union between legitimate husband and wife.

The extant descriptions of the sacred marriage do not involve the Gerarai, but these priestesses are presumed to play a role in preparing the basilinna for her sacred wedding night.93 In addition, the Gerarai would have escorted the basilinna in the procession to her “bridal chamber.”94 The preliminary rites and preparation for the sacred marriage occurred in the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes, but the union itself did not.95 Aristotle identifies the location of the “bridal chamber” as the Boukolion, which was the ancestral house of the basileus (Arist. Ath. 3.5).

The choice of post-menopausal women for the Gerarai was twofold. The importance of a high level of ritual purity for the Gerarai is explicit in the ancient sources and most likely relates to the secret rites performed in the sanctuary of Dionysus in the Marshes. As celibate post-menopausal women, the Gerarai would have attained this ritual purity through renewed virginity. In addition, the connection of the Gerarai to

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92 For the meanings of and differences between summixis and gamos, see Avagianou 1991: 194-197.

93 The Gerarai can be seen as acting in the role of the mother of the bride as well as the other female relatives who assisted with the bridal preparations.


95 The change in location may be related to the general prohibition of sexual intercourse in sacred precincts. Parker 1983: 74-103.
marriage, albeit a hieros gamos, reflects back to the ritual role of the Sixteen Women of Elis at the Heraia and their relationship with the younger generation. In the hieros gamos, the Gerarai were not involved with an unmarried, younger generation, but with an individual, adult married woman, who was performing the role of a parthenos. The Gerarai, therefore, were in the position to guide the “bride” through this ritualized wedding. Consequently, the construct of the old woman as counselor was employed to foster the sense of a real world transition into womanhood.

5.4 The Old Priestess as “Othermother” and Guide

The stereotype of the wise old woman and her ability to pass on important cultural traditions prompted the choice of post-menopausal women for the collective priesthoods of the Sixteen Women of Elis and the Gerarai of Athens. In each of these priesthoods, marriage played an integral role in their ritual responsibilities. For the Sixteen Women, their role, most notably in the Heraia, placed them in a position to counsel and guide the younger generation as they moved to the next stage of womanhood. Old women were seen as reservoirs of wisdom and cultural knowledge and, thusly, are in a privileged position to act as “othermother” to the parthenoi of Elis. The Gerarai served in many ways as a foil to the Sixteen Women because they had a similar role, albeit they fulfilled it symbolically. Because the bride in the hieros gamos during the Anthesteria was not a parthenos but a gynê, there was not the same need for counsel. However, the hieros gamos emphasized the connections to actual wedding ritual, and so the Gerarai as post-menopausal women still had wisdom and knowledge to share. The Sixteen Women of Elis and the Gerarai of Athens were both priesthoods that emphasized old women as wise and knowledgeable as the relevant social aspect of their post-menopausal identity.
In turn, consider the matters of the gods.  
I think these things are the essential ones.
We as women have the greatest part in them. 
For women prophesy the insight of Loxias at the oracles of Phoebus. Concerning the hallowed site of Dodona, beside the sacred oak tree, the female sex reveals the insights of Zeus to those from Greece who desire them. Regarding the rituals for the Fates and theUnnamed Goddesses [the Furies], they would not be considered holy under the control of men, but in the power of women, they all thrive. For this reason, women rightly have a share in the matters of the gods.

As this often quoted fragment from Euripides’ tragedy, Captive Melanippe, illustrates, the importance of women as priestesses in Greek religion was recognized in antiquity. The study of the Greek priestess in modern scholarship has not adequately reflected their significance. Most studies of priestesses rely on the flawed “like deity,
like priestess” model to explain the appointment of priestesses to certain cults. While the focus on age and sexual status is not inappropriate, it has resulted in an inordinate amount of attention being paid to certain age groups, namely the young and the middle-aged—parthenoi and childbearing women. Scarcely any scholarship has been written on the old priestess, a problem that this dissertation has hopefully remedied.

I have provided a thorough survey of four post-menopausal priesthoods and their associated cults: the Delphic Pythia, the four sacrificing priestesses of the Chthonia, the Sixteen Women of Elis, and the Gerarai of Athens. As a part of this examination, I have offered a theoretical model with which to determine why old women were chosen for these particular cults. I have argued that the conception of post-menopausal identity is fundamental for the selection of the old woman as priestess. There are two facets of post-menopausal identity: the physiological and the social. The physiological identity of the post-menopausal woman is based on the ancient conception of the post-menopausal body. The ancient Greeks understood the post-menopausal body to be equivalent to the body of a female who had never engaged in sexual intercourse. Because of this perceived gynecological similarity, the post-menopausal woman was able to renew her virginity through the biological process of menopause and celibacy. “Renewed virginity,” as I described in Chapter 3, is the defining feature of the post-menopausal woman’s physiological identity. The social identity of the post-menopausal women is comprised of the ancient societal perceptions of the old woman. These are multifaceted because they reflect the many different ways in which old women functioned in Greek society. The features of the post-menopausal woman’s social identity that I have discussed
include increased freedom, a less threatening status in a male patrilineal society, and wisdom due to life experiences.

Both facets of post-menopausal identity have profound ritual implications and are essential to the choice of old women for certain priesthoods. However, each cult to which an old woman was appointed as priestess focused on the particular aspects of post-menopausal identity that were most relevant to the required ritual tasks of the priesthood. Because of her physiological identity, characterized by her renewed virginity, the post-menopausal woman was understood to be physiologically equivalent to a physical virgin. This physiological equivalence extended to ritual equivalence, since virginity—whether physical or renewed—allowed both of these female age classes to attain a high level of ritual purity. This high level of ritual purity was essential for many priesthoods. The physical and ritual equivalence between parthenoi and post-menopausal women is demonstrated by the correlation between these two age classes in some priesthoods and by the substitution of one age group for the other in certain priesthoods. The paradigmatic example of this substitution pattern is the Pythia of Delphi. The conception of post-menopausal identity clarifies the debate surrounding the age and sexual status of this priestess, as I have proven that the Pythia was a post-menopausal woman who was appointed later in life. The ritual purity afforded a celibate post-menopausal woman was also important to other priesthoods. The secret nature of the ritual activities, in the case of the priestesses at the Chthonia in Hermione and the Gerarai of Athens, necessitated a high degree of ritual purity.\(^1\)

\(^1\) For details about these priesthoods, see Chapter 3.

\(^2\) See Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, respectively, for details about these priesthoods.
Despite the emphasis on ritual purity in many of the examples of old priestesses, their physiological identity alone was not sufficient to warrant appointment to a priesthood. The social identity of the post-menopausal woman differentiated her from the *parthenos*. While the *parthenos* had a high level of ritual purity, she was limited in the length of time, which she could serve because of her need to fulfill the female duties of marriage and motherhood. In addition, the lifestyle and activities of a *parthenos* were restricted because her physical virginity needed to be protected until she married. In contrast, the post-menopausal woman had greater societal freedom; she was significantly less controlled by males since she was likely widowed. She also had already fulfilled her responsibilities as wife and mother, and so was prepared for new life roles. Lastly, because of the longevity of the post-menopausal woman’s life, she was respected for her wisdom and experience, which were only bestowed with age. These aspects of the social identity of the post-menopausal woman made her a better candidate than the *parthenos* for many priesthoods. The different cults that appointed old women as priestesses, focused on aspects of the social identity that were most relevant to the ritual duties of the particular priesthood. In the college of the Sixteen Women of Elis, for instance, the perception of the post-menopausal woman as wise and as a transmitter of cultural tradition was essential for her role as a counselor for a younger generation that was preparing for the next stage of womanhood.\(^3\) In the Delphic priesthood of the Pythia, the ability for the old woman to be separated from society and male influence prompted the selection of a post-menopausal woman as this priestess had to avoid undue influence

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\(^3\) For details on the Sixteen Women of Elis and the perception of the old woman as wise, see Chapter 5.
while delivering the oracles. While all of the ancient perceptions of the post-menopausal woman, which constituted her social identity, were not relevant to each cult, the combination of her physiological and social identity explain the appointment of a post-menopausal woman to particular priesthhoods.

The old woman in ancient Greece has not received the same scholarly attention as females of the other age classes, whether concerning their religious participation or their general societal roles. This study of old priestesses, however, is an initial step towards defining the role of the post-menopausal woman in ancient Greek society. Earlier scholarship on elderly women in ancient Greece focused only on the questions of whether old women had increased freedoms because of their age and whether they were viewed positively or negatively by male society. Through this examination of old women, especially in regard to the new conception of post-menopausal identity, some of these issues have been clarified. In many Greek city-states, old women played important, visible roles within society as priestesses. Their appointment to these priesthhoods depended on an increased independence from male authority, connected to both their probable widowhood and reduced threat to male patrilineal society. This study of the post-menopausal priestess, however, only examines one societal role of the old woman. To address the debate of Bremmer and Pratt completely, additional roles of post-menopausal women need to be explored. Other areas of society with which old women have been associated include funerary ritual, magical practices, ecstatic cults, and midwifery. The examination of these other roles using the conception of

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4 See Chapter 3 for a detail discussion of the Pythia.

post-menopausal identity may expand the understanding of old women and will hopefully clarify the debate concerning the positive and negative perceptions of old women. Nevertheless, understanding additional roles of old women, whether related to the religious sphere or not, will add to the portrait of the old woman presented in this dissertation.
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