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POMEGRANATE IMAGERY: A SYMBOL OF CONQUEST AND VICTORY

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Abstract: Pomegranate seeds tied Persephone to her fate as queen alongside Hades in the Underworld. Typically pomegranates were commonly known symbols of fertility and marriage. However, they were also viewed as protective in the Greek romance of Leucippe and Clitophon. The pomegranate, often transported from Israel and Syria into Greece, had Judaic symbolism behind it as well, where it alluded to victory and battle. Accordingly, Hades's use of the pomegranate can be seen as the last move in a manipulative conflict played between gods and goddesses.

INTRODUCTION

Fruits such as grapes, apples, and olives can be found woven into the myths and narratives of ancient religious and cultural traditions. They took on significant symbolism and meaning in these civilizations. One particular fruit that captured the attention of several ancient societies was the pomegranate. Many of these communities shared similar ideas regarding the symbolism of the pomegranate, with most ideas associated with fertility, and in some cases, funerary rites and connections to the underworld.¹ The latter was especially so in the Greco-Roman world, with pomegranates being used in the infamous myth of Hades and Persephone. In *The Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter and Zeus, is captured by Hades and, after eating pomegranate seeds, is forced to stay in the underworld for a third of each year.

By partaking of the pomegranate seeds, Persephone was no longer able to return completely to her mother and had to descend to her husband Hades for a fraction of the year, thus creating the seasons. Why exactly was it chosen as the

1. David M. Whitchurch and C. Wilfred Griggs, "Artifacts, Icons, and Pomegranates: Brigham Young University Egypt Excavation Project," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 46 (2010): 226–29.

fruit that bound Persephone? For the purposes of this paper, a survey of pomegranate symbolism throughout the various cultures in the Mediterranean and Levant areas will be taken and compared to those associated with the Hades and Persephone myth. Even though the earliest connotations of both funerary and fertility rights have more or less been fastened to the pomegranate, the following will propose an alternative reading of pomegranates in the story, allowing this fruit to become a symbol of conquest and victory.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF POMEGRANATES

The pomegranate icon began to appear in the Late Bronze Age but found most of its significance in the Iron Age.² Native to Syria and Israel, the pomegranate became popular in other areas through trading. For the Egyptians, the pomegranate symbolized nobility, as only higher members in social circles had access to the fruit.³ In Greece, however, it was more accessible to all members of society, and there its ties to the underworld were cemented.⁴ The association the pomegranate had with the underworld was apparent through chthonic votive offerings of the fruit in ancient tombs and later in temples to the goddess Persephone.⁵ The pomegranate became both a representation of binding marriage and later the symbol of the bridal couple Hades and Persephone.⁶ In some areas, eating and drinking in a man's home constituted the act of binding a woman to a man in marriage.⁷ The pomegranate was used in several marriage ceremonies to bless the bridal couple with abundance and many children—in some places pomegranate seeds were thrown after them.⁸ Thereafter, in various areas of Greece and its territories, Persephone became a goddess associated with marriage—Locrian brides often gave offerings to Persephone on their wedding day, bringing their bridal peplos to be blessed by her.⁹

2. Cheryl Ward, "Pomegranates in Eastern Mediterranean Contexts during the Late Bronze Age," *World Archaeology* 34 (2003): 530.

3. Whitchurch and Griggs, "Artifacts, Icons, and Pomegranates," 225–26.

4. Whitchurch and Griggs, "Artifacts, Icons, and Pomegranates," 226.

5. See Patricia Langley, "Why a Pomegranate?," *British Medical Journal* 321 (2000): 1153–54. The pomegranate was also symbolic of rebirth because of its connotations of death—it became an image for a reawakening in nature. Cf. Hildegard Schneider, "On the Pomegranate," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 4 (1945): 120.

6. Langley, "Why a Pomegranate?," 1154. See also Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Persephone and Aphrodite at Locri: A Model for Personality Definitions in Greek Religion," *JHS* 98 (1978): 109.

7. Campbell Bonner, "Hades and the Pomegranate Seed (*Hymn to Demeter* 372–4.)," *Classical Review* 53 (1939): 3–4.

8. Ward, "Pomegranates in Eastern Mediterranean Contexts," 532.

9. Sourvinou-Inwood, "Persephone and Aphrodite at Locri," 114–15.

Pomegranates also appear in other Greek, Israelite, and Syrian sources.¹⁰ In the romance about Leucippe and Clitophon, the two protagonists give thanks for their safe travels before a statue of Zeus holding a pomegranate. The Hebrew word *Capthor* means both “Cappadocians” and “pomegranate.” Graham Anderson argues that the pomegranate became symbolic of Zeus protecting and guarding the Cappadocians, holding the pomegranate in his hand.¹¹

Ancient Judeo-Christian texts also give us cultural interpretations and symbols of the pomegranate. The pomegranate symbolized fertility in both ancient Hebrew (c. 1200–445 BCE) and Jewish beliefs.¹² The fruit of Eden was traditionally a pomegranate,¹³ an image that conjured symbols of hope and everlasting life that continued into early Christianity.¹⁴ Pomegranates figure as icons of hope and prosperity in Num 13:2, 23, being a fruit brought back when the twelve Israelite spies returned from Canaan.¹⁵ Saul, resting under a pomegranate tree, waited while Jonathan fought and defeated the Philistines (cf. 1 Sam 14:2). Here the pomegranate represented hope and served to demonstrate the approaching victory of Saul’s military campaigns.

10. Notably cited is Whitchurch and Griggs’s “Artifacts, Icons, and Pomegranates,” which has an extensive history of archaeological findings of pomegranates and their meanings throughout Greece, Israel, Syria, and Egypt. For other extensive looks into Greek symbolism, see Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell and Harvard University Press, 1985), 160–61; and Efthymios G. Lazongas, “Side: The Personification of the Pomegranate,” in *Personification in the Greek World: From Antiquity to Byzantium*, eds. Emma Stafford and Judith Herrin, vol. 7 of *Publications for the Centre of Hellenic Studies, King’s College London* (Burlington, VT; Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2005; repr., London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 99. For Israelite or biblical connotations, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews: Volume 3, Moses in the Wilderness*, trans. Paul Radin, rev. ed. (Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 270.

11. Graham Anderson, “The Mystic Pomegranate and the Vine of Sodom: Achilles Tatius 3.6,” *AJP* 100 (1979): 516–17.

12. Asaph Goor, “The History of the Pomegranate in the Holy Land,” *Economic Botany* 21 (1967): 218.

13. Confusion with the Latin name for pomegranate, *pomum granatum* (“seeded/grained apple”), which arose through translating the Hebrew Bible in the fourth century CE, caused readers of the Vulgate to associate the Eden story with an apple. Whitchurch and Griggs, “Artifacts, Icons, and Pomegranates,” 224.

14. Along with these Jewish symbols, the Mishnah describes the use of pomegranate wood in a Passover offering. Whitchurch and Griggs argue that putting a rod of the wood through the animal carcass “from the mouth to the buttocks” meant the pomegranate was associated with the sacrificial lamb and the power it had to save. Whitchurch and Griggs, “Artifacts, Icons, and Pomegranates,” 230.

15. Whitchurch and Griggs, “Artifacts, Icons, and Pomegranates,” 229.

THE POMEGRANATE IN *THE HYMN TO DEMETER*

As previously noted, the pomegranate plays a prominent role in *The Hymn to Demeter*, which came into popularity with the cult of Demeter at Eleusis. The hymn would have been performed at festivals in Eleusis and other areas.¹⁶ As a result, there were many variants of the myth rather than a single canonical text.¹⁷

The beginning of the myth deals with the kidnap and rape of Persephone, followed by her mother Demeter's search for her. Demeter leaves Olympus and wallows in agony on earth among mortals, finally stopping in Eleusis disguised as an old woman. Hermes finds her there and goes to retrieve Persephone, as ordered by Zeus. Unbeknownst to everyone else, Persephone had eaten pomegranate seeds given to her by Hades—partaking of food in the underworld meant she could not leave permanently. Final negotiations between the Olympians eventually settled that Persephone would spend two-thirds of the year in Olympus with her mother and the other third with Hades in the underworld.¹⁸

While pomegranates were mostly associated with hope and abundant prosperity, there are darker connotations that scholars have noted as well. In terms of the pomegranate and its ability to mark marriage and its indissolubility, many contend that it had manipulative power as well. Artemidorus argued that the pomegranate was associated with slavery and subjection.¹⁹ John Myres has noted that there is a hint of such malicious intent, since Hades used the pomegranate as a love spell or charm to trick Persephone.²⁰ He argues that the phrase ἀμφὶ ἑ νομήσας cannot mean anything other than “moving it to and fro about himself,” resulting in not just feeding the seeds to Persephone, but Hades actually anointing himself with it.²¹ Myres argues that Hades's anointing himself with the pomegranate and making physical contact with her bound Persephone to him, recalling the fruit's efficacy in marriage contracts. This phrase not only escapes the notice of the reader, but also the notice of Persephone, who realized she was under a spell of some sort later when, as she was with her mother, she felt a sense of longing towards her husband.²²

16. Robert Parker, “The *Hymn to Demeter* and the *Homeric Hymns*,” *GR* 38 (1991): 4.

17. The particular version of the myth studied in this paper was used at Eleusis by the Demeter cult. See Parker, “The *Hymn to Demeter*,” 4–5.

18. Parker, “The *Hymn to Demeter*,” 4–5.

19. Anderson, “Mystic Pomegranate,” 517.

20. John L. Myres, “Persephone and the Pomegranate (*H. Dem.* 372–4),” *Classical Review* 52 (1938): 51–52.

21. Myres, “Persephone and the Pomegranate,” 52.

22. Myres, “Persephone and the Pomegranate,” 52.

While there is clear deception evident in Hades's use of the pomegranate on Persephone, this might not be the sole reason why he chose this particular fruit. By reading the *Hymn* with connotations of the pomegranate from other ancient myths, we realize that Hades could have been advancing beyond a simple love spell and exercising more power than initially realized.

REEVALUATING POMEGRANATE SYMBOLISM IN *THE HYMN TO DEMETER*

There are numerous ways to interpret the *Hymn's* use of pomegranate symbolism. For instance, like the protective power of the pomegranate as shown to the Cappadocians by Zeus, perhaps Hades used the fruit to protect Persephone's claim to dominion over the underworld with her husband. If she were to leave the underworld, that claim would no longer hold. Thus, the use of the pomegranate meant he as her husband could secure a way for the originally kidnapped queen and bride to return to him, should Olympus ever act against his wishes.

Likewise, Hades could be seen as a salvific figure. The pomegranate as a symbol of hope and prosperity could signal his giving her pomegranate seeds an allowance to a prosperous future as his consort in the underworld. While moderns might not see this perspective as redemptive or justifying, Hades's actions allowed for her increased social status in the Greek pantheon. Persephone now had a sure future and secured power over the other gods and goddesses.²³ Her death as entrance into the underworld allowed for Persephone to be reborn as Hades's bride. He too experienced a rebirth. Now married, Hades had a queen to rule alongside him. The pomegranate symbolized new life for not only Persephone as a bride and queen but also for Hades as married king of the underworld.

Recall, however, the pomegranate's representing impending success in Saul and Jonathan's battle in 1 Samuel. In *The Hymn*, Demeter is the only opponent to Zeus and Hades. Because she no longer gave sustenance and fertility to the earth, crops and mortals began to wither and die, and Zeus became anxious for her return to her divine duties. He attempted almost everything in order to return the world back to normalcy but failed with each embassy he sent to persuade Demeter. The remaining option was to return Persephone back to her mother. Demeter had now become victorious in her own way. Using her own feminine powers of nurturing and fertility, she overcame the masculine dominance she had been subjected to. Using this tactic in order to

23. Burton Raffel, "Homeric Hymn to Demeter 1-89," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 9 (1970): 420.

defeat them, she reinstated her own power and was on her way to lay claim to the spoils of her victory.

Nonetheless, it was Hades who employed the final battle tactic in this divine war over power. Hades used one final strategy to maintain the power he had acquired. By feeding Persephone the seeds, he himself went up against Demeter, leaving behind Zeus's authority and asserting his own power as well as protecting his own interests. Although Demeter was victorious in getting Zeus to submit to her requests, Hades had not truly acquiesced to her. Zeus, being the father-god in the pantheon, held the most divine control until Demeter fought back. Having lost the fight, it would seem that Demeter then laid claim to her entitled prize, but Hades would not have it. In his own way, Hades proved himself stronger than his brother Zeus as he bested Demeter, outsmarting both of them. Because of the seeds, Persephone would have to return to her husband for a third of the year and live separated from her mother. The pomegranate then symbolized much more than his entrapment of Persephone in the underworld and the binding of their marriage—now it also represented Hades's victory of power over Persephone, Demeter, and even Zeus. This alters the previous reading with the Cappadocian symbolism. Hades did not necessarily use the pomegranate to protect his and Persephone's reign in the underworld, but to protect his authority and power against female resistance.

Demeter's attempt to retrieve her daughter fully employed the use of her feminine powers. Masculine power had dominated the pantheon until Demeter engaged her feminine strengths to face Zeus and demand her daughter's return. At this moment, feminine power not only became equal to that of Zeus's masculine authority but also could prove to be superior to Zeus's control. This feminine supremacy developed into the opposition Hades had to defeat in order to retain his bride. His use of the pomegranate disputed the feminine fight and reinstated his own masculine superiority over Demeter's conquests. As the pomegranate represented protection for the Cappadocians, Hades used the pomegranate to protect himself and his authority from Demeter and her feminine devices.

The pomegranate symbolized so much more than the potency traditionally ascribed to it. Through the ages and cultures that cultivated it, the pomegranate was known as a sign of abundance and hope—but it can also be interpreted as a symbol of dominance, victory, and insurance of that victory. Hades had bested not only Demeter but also Zeus himself, the god over all gods. In his own devious way, he complied with Zeus's demands to return Persephone, knowing that she would not be able to stay away from him forever. Hades's

deceit towards Persephone was not only for his own future life with his bride but also to best Demeter and prove his ultimate power over his brother and the other gods. Demonstrating that Zeus could be defeated, Hades not only kept his wife but also protected his authority, proving to be even more powerful in one respect than the ultimate ruler of the gods.