

The Ancient Greek Esoteric Doctrine of the Elements:

Water

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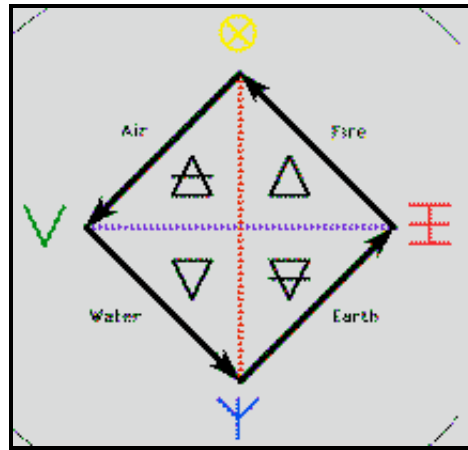
The Essence of Water

As explained in the Introduction, the Elements are spiritual essences that get their character from four Qualities or Powers: the Dry, the Cool, the Moist and the Warm. In simplest terms, the Dry and Moist qualities represent *form versus flexibility*; the Warm and Cool qualities represent *separation versus union*. Earth is Dry and Cool, Water is Cool and Moist, Air is Moist and Warm, Fire is Warm and Dry; in each case the first of the two listed qualities is dominant in the Element. However, each of the Powers and the Elements is a spiritual essence, a constellation of eternal characteristics that cannot be captured in simple definitions. These essences can manifest in the mundane and spiritual worlds in a variety of ways, which yet retain their essential character, and by exploring these manifestations we can deepen our understanding. In this article I will try to circumscribe and illuminate the character of the element Water and the Moist quality. (Coolness is discussed in connection with Earth.)

According to Aristotle (as explained in the discussion of Earth), the Dry power causes things to fix their own form or structure. Its opposite, the Moist quality, represents a lack of self-determination; a Moist thing conforms to its surroundings and may take on any form. (Quicksilver is a good symbol of the Moist quality.) Therefore, we may say that the Moist quality is receptive, adaptive, form receiving, flexible, and pragmatic (because it conforms to circumstances). Psychologically, the Moist quality represents a personality that is flexible, fluid, mercurial, unreliable, indefinite and lacking self-control. The Moist person tends to be agile, gentle, obedient, conforming, passive, yielding, accommodating, weak, sensitive, understanding and kind, and to exhibit empathy, compassion, and a tendency to conformity. The Moist (like the Dry) is a passive power, which is dominated in Water by an active power, Coolness.

By looking at the Elemental Square, we can see that the Warm and Cool qualities correspond to the summer and winter solstices, and the Moist and Dry Qualities correspond to spring and fall equinoxes. Therefore the season corresponding to Water is winter. This may be surprising, since we might expect Water to be associated with spring, the season of fresh, green growth, spring rains and

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Earth

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The Cool and Dry Powers

We have seen (in the [Introduction](#)) that Earth is Dry and Cool, with Dryness dominating, therefore I will begin the discussion of Earth with a more detailed explanation of its Powers. (It will become apparent that they have a much broader meaning than implied by the names "dry" and "cool.")

[Aristotle](#) explains that the Dry power gives things their shape, their rigid structure. Thus we may identify the Dry power with *form* and say that it is formative, determining and solid. In a psychological context Dryness is associated with stubbornness, purpose, dependability, practicality and authority. Because of its rigidity, the Dry Power is unreceptive, inflexible, manipulative, commanding, arguing, domineering, strict, and tends to oppose circumstances. In general, Dryness is concrete and grounded.

The Warm power, according to Aristotle, separates things (e.g. by evaporation or distillation), and therefore its opposite, the Cool power has the effect of uniting them. In essence, Coolness is mixing, joining, synthetic, and relating; in a psychological context it is loving, undiscriminating, indecisive, careless, nurturing, sympathetic, cooperative and creative. Further, whereas the Warm power is expanding, the Cool power is contracting, absorbed, and inward-directed; psychologically it's associated with concentration and quietude. Because of its tendency to join together, Coolness is stable, steadfast and enduring.

The Essence of Earth

Now we may apply our understanding of the Powers to the element Earth. The Cool and Dry powers represent passive mixture and rigid structure, so Earth is *passive form-imposing* (like a mold into which clay is pressed or wax is poured); we may call it *structuring*. Therefore, Earth is the root of structure (inflexible synthesis), materialization (stable synthesis), the physical world, crystallized energy, and the psychological qualities of realism and pragmatism.

Earth represents essentially inert matter (because of the dominance of Dryness); it is primarily fixed, whereas all the other Elements have some mobility. Thus Earth corresponds to the material body of living things, which must be animated by the other Elements in order to be alive. Also, elemental Earth is associated with the time from the Autumn Equinox (peak of Dryness) to the Winter Solstice (peak of Coolness), i.e., our Autumn, which is primarily Dry (the dominant quality of Earth). The foregoing analysis shows that Earth is better pictured as cold, dry ash or as hard crystal than as moist, warm loam. (The latter image is more suited to the mixture of Water and Earth, as will be explained when we come to Water.)

Hera the Earth Goddess

[Peter Kingsley](#) argues persuasively that Empedocles associated Earth with Hera. One reason is that Empedocles calls Hera "enlivening" (*pheresbios*, literally, "life-bringing"), which was a traditional epithet of Earth Goddesses (including Gaia and Demeter). One might expect Earth to be associated with Hades, but in Greek the Earth (*Gaia*, *Khthôn*) is mythically and grammatically feminine, which makes it more likely to be associated with Hera. (When we discuss [Water](#) we'll see why Earth isn't associated with Nêstis, the other Goddess mentioned by Empedocles.) The later, Stoic theory of the Elements associates Earth with Hades, but this has little mythological support, because the Greeks associate Hades with the alien Underworld, not the familiar Earth. Furthermore, the Stoic theory is based on a correspondence between Hera and Air, which seems plausible (Hera is the wife of the Sky God), but has other problems that we'll see when we discuss [Air](#). (In contrast, Diônê, sometimes called Zeus's "first wife," is a Sky Goddess; indeed Her name is a feminine form of "Zeus.")

As discussed above, one of the primary characteristics of Earth is its stability. Therefore, Hera is the protectress of the stable family and home, and the family in turn is the stabilizer of the social order. Furthermore, Hera is a fertility Goddess since She provides the stable foundation of procreation and of the survival of the species, which differs from the less predictable fertility of Aphrodite or Pan.

In this way She is responsible for the fertility of people, but "enlivening Hera" is also responsible for the fertility of the earth, and therefore is connected with Gaia, Demeter and other Earth Mothers. Thus the marriage of Zeus and Hera corresponds to the union of Heaven and Earth; they unify the opposed elements Air and Earth. (Zeus and Hera are the Lord and Lady, which is what *Hērōs* and *Hēra* mean in Greek.) Hera renews Her virginity each year by bathing in the spring Kanathos at Nauplia; so also, the [Elemental Square](#) shows us that Water leads Earth around the (sunwise) cycle of the seasons.

[Plutarch \(On Isis and Osiris\)](#) says that Demeter is the same as Isis, who is called the Recipient, Preserver, Distributor, Material Principle, Gentle Nurse, All-receptive, Earth and Matter; She is the Seat and Place of Generation, and Receptive of Every Form of Generation. Thus, Isis and Osiris are the Preserver and the Creator, like Hera and Zeus. They correspond to the soil of Egypt (Isis) and the Nile (Osiris), which makes the land fertile. So also the opposites Dryness and Moisture are the dominant Powers of the Elements governed by Hera and Zeus (Earth and Air).

Air and Fire ascend, and Water descends, but Earth is fixed at the bottom; it is secure, the solid foundation of being. Therefore the Tarot suit of Pentacles (or Coins) is associated with Earth, since the ground of stable being is Earth and, more generally, substance (as in "a man of substance"). (The only offspring of Hera and Zeus, the Scepter-bearer, were Ares the Sword-bearer and Hebe the Cup-bearer.) In processes of emanation, Earth is the material Effect of the Unification (Air) of the creative Impulse (Fire) with its Object (Water), which is summarized in four-letter name of Jove: IOUE. This emanation is represented in the Tarot court cards, in which Earth corresponds to the Pages (or Princesses). (This is discussed further in the [Pythagorean Tarot](#), in the discussions of the [suits](#) and the [court cards](#).)

The contrast between the immobile Earth and the mobile Elements Water, Air and Fire exhibits a 1+3 structure typical of many spiritual and divine quaternities. Jung explains that "the fourth represents an incommensurable other that is needed for their mutual determination," which is precisely the role played by Earth among the Elements.

The special status of Earth is also apparent in the myth of how the three brothers, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades, divided the world among themselves after They defeated the Titans. Poseidon rules the sea (Water), Zeus rules the sky (Air), and Hades rules Tartaros (Fire), but the Earth is held in common between them. All three recognize the sovereignty of Earth.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Earth is the spiritual principle of stable but inflexible synthesis, the passive imposition of form, and the foundation of physical being. The Element is associated with Hera, as protectress of the stable foundation of fertility, and with the Earth Goddesses Demeter and Gaia.

[Click here to continue on to Water](#)

Sources

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2. Kingsley, Peter, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 1995. (principle source)
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4. Wright, M. R., *Empedocles: The Extant Fragments*, Yale University Press, 1981. (fragments of Empedocles, with interpretations)



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The Essence of Water

As explained in the [Introduction](#), the Elements are spiritual essences that get their character from four Qualities or Powers: the Dry, the Cool, the Moist and the Warm. In simplest terms, the Dry and Moist qualities represent *form* versus *flexibility*; the Warm and Cool qualities represent *separation* versus *union*. Earth is Dry and Cool, Water is Cool and Moist, Air is Moist and Warm, Fire is Warm and Dry; in each case the first of the two listed qualities is dominant in the Element. However, each of the Powers and the Elements is a spiritual essence, a constellation of eternal characteristics that cannot be captured in simple definitions. These essences can manifest in the mundane and spiritual worlds in a variety of ways, which yet retain their essential character, and by exploring these manifestations we can deepen our understanding. In this article I will try to circumscribe and illuminate the character of the element Water and the Moist quality. ([Coolness is discussed in connection with Earth.](#))

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By looking at the [Elemental Square](#), we can see that the Warm and Cool qualities correspond to the summer and winter solstices, and the Moist and Dry Qualities correspond to spring and fall equinoxes. Therefore the season corresponding to Water is winter. This may be surprising, since we might expect Water to be associated with spring, the season of fresh, green growth, spring rains and spring floods. The logic of the ancient arrangement becomes clear when we remember that Water is primarily Cold (so it is associated with winter), and Air is primarily Moist (so it is associated with spring). In fact, the whole left half of the diagram, comprising winter and spring, is Moist, which allows fluid change of form (e.g. growth), but there is a shift from the Cool quality to Warm. As discussed in the [Introduction](#), Warmth brings increased differentiation, in this case, the new life of Spring.

On one hand, Water is primarily Cool, which is the active quality that binds things together, and so Water allows formation and nourishment of composite entities, and its evaporation and absence causes their decomposition. On the other hand, the Moistness of Water permits the dissolution of structure and the loss of form. Thus the essence of Water is to mix and cling together while being changeable in shape; it is characterized by passive change of form (transformation). Therefore Water permits the growth and development of form.

In psychological terms, Water is associated with nimble relating, emotion, feeling, inner flow, the subconscious, relationships and the social dimension. It is associated with emotional relationships, since it is Cool (connecting, relating) and Moist (conforming, empathetic); therefore the tarot suite of Cups corresponds to Water. Furthermore, Water corresponds to the Queens among the court cards, for they represent the nurturing matrix, the Object of the creative Impulse; the two Unite to engender the Effect. This process of emanation is summarized in IOUE, the four-letter name of Jove: Impulse (Fire), Object (Water), Union (Air), Effect (Earth), which correspond to the court cards.

Persephone's Tears

[Plutarch](#) reminds us that the Elements are not Gods; rather, the Gods are the source of the Powers of the elements. This is how we must interpret the declaration of [Empedocles](#) (fr.7 = DK31B6), the fifth century BCE Greek magician-philosopher who gave us the Doctrine of the Four Elements:

Now hear the fourfold Roots of everything:
Enlivening Hera, Hades, shining Zeus,
And Nêstis, moistening mortal springs with tears.

Although, these verses seem to have been intended as an instructional riddle (*ainigma*), it has been clear since ancient times that Nêstis corresponds to Water. (Hades, Hera and Zeus are Fire, Earth and Air.) Since "Nêstis" was the name by which Persephone was known in Sicily (the birthplace of Empedocles' Pythagorean Craft), I will begin with a discussion of Persephone's connection with Water.

Springs, wells and other sources of water from the earth were central to the Mysteries of Persephone, and the Eleusinian Mysteries grew up around a spring. This is because springs represent entrances to the Underworld, especially in Greece, where it is common for them to reenter the earth after flowing above ground for some distance. When Persephone was abducted, She was taken down the spring called Kuanê, which was said to have been created from the Maiden's tears, and She is virtually identical with Kuanê, the nymph of that spring. Indeed, Persephone is Queen of the Nymphs, the daughters of Ocean who are the spirits of springs and streams. Similarly, Demeter, mourning Her lost daughter, created a spring from Her tears. (The equation of Water and divine tears is a distinctly Pythagorean idea, which will be considered later in connection with the Salt Sea.)

Kuanos (blue) is the color of divine mourning and grief and is associated with the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, which are closely connected with Pythagoreanism and Empedoclean magic; Pythagoreans (especially women) were often the Priests and Priestesses in the mysteries of Demeter and Persephone. Therefore *Kuanos* is associated with Water and the Underworld.; it is also the color of Cocytus, the river of mourning and tears, which is opposite Pyriphlegethon, the river of fire in the Underworld, as Water is opposite Fire on the [Elemental Square](#). (According to Damscius, each of the Four Rivers of the Underworld has an associated Element.)

The Water of Life

Water is also connected with the Milk of Immortality from Persephone's Breasts, for in the Mysteries She is a Goddess of joyous rebirth as well as grievous dissolution. For example, on the Bacchic/Orphic gold tablets ([Zuntz](#) A1-3) from Thessaly (a region known for Witchcraft), which date back to the fifth century BCE, we read:

I have flown out of the Circle of Heavy Grief
and stepped swift-footed on the Circle of Joy.
I have made straight for the Breast of the Mistress, the Queen of the Underworld.
And now I come a suppliant to Holy Persephoneia,
that of Her Grace She send me to the Seats of the Hallowed.
Happy and Blessed One, thou shalt be God instead of mortal.
A Kid I have fallen into Milk.
(tr. after Guthrie with emendations by Zuntz, West & Kingsley)

This alludes to Thrice-Born Dionysos (the "Kid"), who is the horned son of Persephone, according to the Orphics. Therefore the Bacchic initiate emulates the rebirth of Dionysos by sucking the Milk of Immortality from Persephone's breasts. An abundance of milk is a standard symbol in the Bacchic Mysteries, and milk is often involved in immortalization rites. Further, many enlightened individuals are described as consuming only milk.

The Water of Life is found near Persephone's Tree. [Pherecydes](#) (6th. cent. BCE), a mentor of Pythagoras, told how *Khthoniê* (She Beneath the Earth - one of Persephone's names) stretches upward as a self-supporting Winged Oak (*Hupopteros Drus*), with Her Roots in the Underworld, Her trunk climbing through the middle elements, Her crown in Heaven. At the base of the Tree, between Her Roots, is the Outflow (*Ekroê*), the Springs of Ambrosia (*Krênai Ambrosiai*), for the Waters of the Underworld flow out from Her Roots. The Winged Oak, round which the Robe of Earth is wrapped (see below), draws into Her Roots the sap of life, the Waters of the Abyss, conveys it upward to Her crown, from which the golden Ambrosial Dew drips down like honey to feed immortal souls. (Indeed "Ambrosia" means "immortal.") Before a soul can return to incarnation, it must approach one of these rivers and drink the Water of Life from it, for the Outflow of the Rivers is called the Semen of Life. Thus a fourth century BCE Orphic Gold Tablet ([Zuntz](#) B1) is inscribed:

Thou shalt find to the left of the House of Hades a Spring,
and by the side thereof standing a White Cypress.

To this Spring approach not near.
 But thou shalt find another, from the Lake of Memory,
 Cold Water flowing forth, and there are Guardians before it.
 Say: "I am a child of Earth and Starry Heaven,
 but my race is of Heaven alone. This Ye know Yourselves.
 But I am parched with thirst and I perish. Give me quickly
 the Cold Water flowing forth from the Lake of Memory."
 And of Themselves They will give thee to drink of the Holy Spring.
 And thereafter among the other Heroes thou shalt have lordship.
 (tr. Guthrie)

The spring on the left is associated with Forgetfulness (*Léthé*) and dissolution, the spring on the right with Memory and immortality.

The revitalizing Tree of Life belongs to the Goddess and is guarded by the serpent Ophioneus (or Ophiôn) who dwells in the waters around Her roots. (We find this same theme in the serpent guarding the Apples of the Tree of the nymphs Hesperides, which is in the west, the region of death, near the World Axis where Atlas supports Heaven.)

When people die, their breath-souls (*psukhai*) go to the Moon, and during the first two weeks of the month we see Her waxing on the breath-souls of the dead. (See ["Air"](#) for more on the Breath-Soul.) During the second two weeks of the month, the Gods drink Ambrosia from the Vessel of the Moon, and we see Her light wane; during this time souls are prepared for rebirth. Then the Moon and Sun come together, so that the Moon may be renewed. Souls pass through *Mukhoi* (Hidden Places) in their passage to and from mortal incarnation; especially they pass through the Mukhos of Hekate on the Moon, where they atone for their crimes; She is the stern Gate-keeper. (The Moon, of course, is intimately connected with Water, but that topic is beyond the scope of this article.)

An old Pythagorean maxim says, "The Sun and Moon are the Isles of the Blessed," and those who know the Way may go through the Lunar Gate and enter the Isles of the Blessed as Heroes or Gods; those who do not must return to Earth for another incarnation, and their souls rain to Earth as dew. (The Upanishads say the dew is absorbed by plants, which are eaten by animals, and the dew becomes their semen; thus are souls brought back into the world, which explains the importance of dew in alchemy.)

Persephone, corresponding to the element Water, unites the Earth and Air. Indeed, She is the daughter of Demeter (who corresponds to Earth) and Zeus (who corresponds to Air). As we saw in the [Introduction](#), Water can result from the union of Earth and Air, getting its Coolness from the Earth and its Moisture from the Air. So also Persephone was born of the union of the Lord of the Air and the Lady of the Earth, getting Her power to unite (Cool) from Demeter and Her power to transform (Moist) from Zeus. Persephone joins what is above with what is below. Especially, in Her yearly cycle, celebrated in the Eleusinian Mysteries, She joins the Underworld to life above the Earth and mediates between them.

An Orphic Quaternity

Persephone and Demeter occupy a special place in an Orphic Mystery that has been preserved for us. According to this story, Rhea the Mother of the Gods directed Zeus to come as a snake to Her in Her *Mukhos*, the Sacred Cave of Phanês (the Primal God) and three Goddesses of the Night. "She became a serpent, whereupon He turned into a serpent Himself, and binding Her in the so-called Heracleot Knot, copulated with Her. The form of coupling is represented in the Wand of Hermes" (Athenagoras). Demeter was born from the union of Rhea with Zeus, who is Himself the son of Kronos (Time) and Rhea (Flow). Rhea arranged for Zeus and Demeter to mate likewise as serpents in this same cave, and so Persephone was born. Demeter hid Her daughter in the cave, and caused Zeus to take again the serpent's form and to mate with Her daughter, who then bore Dionysos.

Jung has shown us that Gods often form quaternities with a 3+1 structure, such as we see here. Zeus's three wives are the Maiden, Mother and Crone. He is the *fourth*, who differs from the *three*. According to Empedocles, Zeus, Persephone and Demeter correspond to Air, Water and Earth, respectively. This suggests that Rhea corresponds to Fire in this structure, which makes some sense. Rhea, as Goddess of Nature, is the agent of change (indeed She arranged the threefold mating of Zeus), and philosophers, magicians and alchemists, from Heraclitus in the fifth century BCE to those in our own time, have identified Fire as the primary agent of change. (See our discussion of [Fire](#).) Therefore the quaternity has the Sky Father Zeus above and the Earth Mother Demeter below; Persephone the Maiden of the Abyss is on one side, and Rhea the Celestial Crone is on the other.



The great triad of Persephone, Demeter and Rhea is honored in the Lesser Mysteries, which take place in Anthestêrion (the "Month of Flowers"), the month preceding the spring equinox (and thus corresponding to the element Water). We may also note that Persephone, Demeter and Hekate are the important triad of Goddesses of the (Greater) Eleusinian Mysteries (for it was

Hekate who negotiated the return of the Maiden). Hekate is an Underworld Goddess, and thus associated with Fire ([as will be explained when we discuss that element](#)), but was also identified with Rhea, for Hekate was understood as a Goddess of Nature, like Rhea. They are both glittering crones (and [we will see](#) that Their Fire can be located either in Heaven or the Underworld).

From Her union with Zeus, Persephone bore Dionysos, destined to be the successor of Zeus and the fifth ruler of Olympus, who was especially honored in the Orphic Mysteries. Therefore He corresponds to the Quintessence, the Fifth Element, for both define new realms outside the foursquare completeness of the Earth, Water, Air and Fire.

Dissolution and the Underworld

Central to the character of Water is its power to *dissolve*. Dissolution occurs because the Cool (uniting) quality allows the Water to attach to solid matter of all sorts, but the Moist (conforming) quality causes the result to have no fixed form. Further, because Water is Cool, dissolution is a *passive* loss of form. Through dissolution all things lose their rigid structure and identity.

Dissolution is not necessarily undesirable. For example, Water allows the dissolution and reorganization of structure necessary for growth and development; it corresponds to the nutritive faculty of life (the "vegetative soul"). (Water enables passive change of form, and metabolism and growth are passive, from our conscious, mental perspective.) Also, dissolution and dismemberment in the Underworld is a necessary stage of initiation and rebirth in the Mysteries.

Of course, preservation and dissolution are two sides of the cycle of Nature, which are embodied in Demeter and Persephone, the Goddesses of Life and Death, who oversee rebirth in the Eleusinian Mysteries. They correspond to Earth and Water; although they are both uniting (Cool), Earth is form-preserving (Dry), but Water is form-dissolving (Moist).

Nêstis

[Empedocles](#) (fr. 7) calls Persephone by the obscure name "Nêstis," which is probably a pre-Greek but Indo-European Goddess name indigenous to Sicily and southern Italy. Simplicius derived it from *naein*, meaning "to flow," but, according to [Kingsley](#), in ancient times divine names were sometimes subtly refashioned so that they would have multiple etymologies, and thereby embody hidden truths. For example, Nêstis also means "Fasting" and the Nêsteia was a festival of fasting for Persephone.

Fasting is also a central theme of the Mysteries of Persephone. For example, after Persephone was abducted, the Earth was barren and all mortals as well as Demeter fasted. Further, Persephone fasted in the Underworld until She ate the fateful pomegranate seed. Fasting is the opposite of nourishing. Therefore, Nêstis, the Goddess corresponding to Water, represents both flowing and fasting, both feast and famine. (Opposites unite in the Netherworld.)

There is perhaps no etymological connection between "Nêstis" and the Egyptian Goddess Nephthys, protector of the dead, but [Plutarch](#) says, "Nephthys is that which is beneath the Earth and invisible, Isis that which is above the Earth and visible." They symbolize birth (Isis, Earth) and death (Nephthys, Water) and were called the Weeping Goddesses. Like Demeter and Persephone, Isis and Nephthys represent generation and dissolution. (Indeed Demeter and Isis are sometimes identified, for each searched for Her lost child.)

As Persephone is wedded to Hades, so Nephthys is the bride of Typhôn, who is identified with Hades, as we will see when we come to the element Fire. Further, as Persephone mated with Zeus and bore Dionysos, so Nephthys mated in secret with Osiris and bore Anubis, who, like Dionysos, rules the borderland between the Earth (Isis) and the Abyss (Nephthys). Like Dionysos, Anubis was raised by a foster mother.

Although Nephthys is called Finality (*Teleutê*), which associates Her with death, [Plutarch](#) explains that this name also means that She governs the lowest ranks of matter (*eskhata merê tês hulês*). Because of Her marriage with Typhôn (Hades/Fire), the destructive power (*hê phthartikê dunamis*), all plants and animals, and even the earth and sea, suffer dissolution and destruction. However, when She mates in secret with Osiris (Zeus/Air), the productive and preserving power (*hê gonimos kai sôterios dunamis*), Their offspring may survive complete dissolution if preserved and nurtured by Isis (Demeter/Earth). This is a hint into the Dionysian Mysteries.

[Plutarch](#) further equates Nephthys with Aphrodite, who has connections to both Persephone and the element Water.

Sea-born Aphrodite

In later antiquity, especially in Italy, Persephone was identified with Sea-born Aphrodite. The Pythagoreans say that there are two Aphrodites: one in Heaven, one in the Underworld. Therefore She is called *Melaina* (Black One), *Epitumbidia* (Upon the Tombs), *Tumbrukhos* (Gravedigger) and *Pasiphaessa* (Far Shining), which associates Her with the Moon and the Queen of the Underworld. The connection between love and death may be puzzling, but the Love-Death has been a theme since ancient

times: when we fall in love, our old life comes to an end; we are reborn.

Aphrodite has many connections with Water, for She was born in the Ocean, and Her name was derived from *aphros* (foam). She is also called *Anaduomenê* (Emerging from the Sea), the Goddess rising from the salty waters (on which, [see below](#)), and *Pelagia* (She of the Sea). Hesiod's tale of Her birth from the Gonads of Heaven when they fell into the sea, is well known. Other myths say that She is the daughter of Okeanos (Ocean) or of Zeus and Diônê, a Water Goddess. Again, She is said to have emerged from the Primordial Egg floating on the salt sea. She is associated with Water because Her gift is yielding union (Moist, Cool).

The Salt Sea

The Salt Sea represents Water in an especially important form. This is because brine, like the salt in it, both preserves and corrodes. As Heraclitus said, "Sea is the purest and foulest water: for fish drinkable and saving, but for people undrinkable and destroying."

The Pythagoreans identify the bitter Salt Sea with divine tears, especially the tears of Kronos (like Persephone, a deity of the afterlife), and we have seen that Empedocles identified Water with Persephone's tears, which were said to dissolve grief and thereby bring about rebirth. Salt is associated with wisdom and spirit as well as bitterness, which suggests that the bitter tears of grief and disappointment can be transformed into salty wit and sharp wisdom. Instead of being a source of foul corruption, Salt may be used to preserve that which is worth saving.

Similarly, the Salt Sea from which Aphrodite was born is the source of new life, the salty womb of rebirth. But complementing life-engendering Aphrodite (Venus Genetrix) and Persephone Queen of the Underworld, we also have Aphrodite Upon the Tombs and the revitalizing milk from Persephone's breasts. Generation and dissolution are complementary.

Alchemically, the Sea is the vessel of rebirth because its Salt is the spark of the World Soul (*Anima Mundi*), the "Vegetable Spirit" (*Spiritus Vegetativus*). This Spiritual Salt (*Sal Spirituale*) is a conjunction of the opposites Fire and Water, and will be discussed when we come to [Fire](#), but it is worthwhile to say a few words about it here. On the one hand, Sea Water (*Aqua Pontica*) is chaotic primordial matter (see below); on the other, it may be purified (by Fire and Water) into Enduring Water (*Aqua Permanens*), which holds the Salt of Wisdom (*Sal Sapientiae*) and is the Elixir of Rebirth.

Primal Mud

Hesiod's *Theogony* (c. 700 BCE) says, "First Chaos came to be, but then broad-bosomed Gaia." Later the Stoics attributed to [Pherecydes](#) the view that Chaos (*Khaos*) is Watery, deriving it from *kheisthai* (to flow). The Primordial Chaos is considered Watery because it is confused (mixed) and formless (i.e., Cool and Moist). Similarly, according to the Pythagorean Alkman (c. 600 BCE), in the beginning there was a "trackless and featureless" waste of Waters. There is also an Orphic theogony in which the first deities are Okeanos and Tethys, corresponding to the Abyss (sweet subterranean water) and Tiamat (bitter salt sea). Therefore Water (Chaos) precedes Earth (Gaia), which gives matter its form.

As remarked in [the discussion of Earth](#), elemental Earth is Cool (connected) and Dry (form imposing). Thus it is too rigid and inflexible to support life, but can be given this flexibility by Water. Therefore Primal Mud, the fertile loam of our Mother, is a combination of dry, crystalline Earth with moistening Water. This is why Water, which gives to inanimate Earth the ability to develop, transform and adapt, is associated with the "vegetative soul" possessed by all living things. It is also why many cosmogonies begin with Primal Mud.

According to [Pherecydes' cosmogony](#), the living Earth came into being when Zeus and Khthoniê (She Beneath the Earth) married, and on the third day of the wedding, the Unveiling (*Anakaluptêria*), the craftsman Zeus wove an elaborate, variegated Robe (*pepoikilmenon Pharos*), which He gave to Khthoniê as a gift. It was adorned with land and sea, with rivers and trees, with mountains and meadows, with all of Earth and Okeanos, the Primal Ocean, and with the Mansions of Okeanos. (These are the three great divisions of the world: Earth, Encircling Ocean, and the Realms beyond the Rim. Above the three is Heaven and below is the Underworld; all together they are the Fivefold Cosmos.)

When Khthoniê, Queen of the Underworld, had wrapped it around Her, She became Gaia, Mother Earth. Likewise, the Orphic Poems say that the Earth is the Robe of Persephone, of She Beneath the Earth. The Robe, after it had been the cover of the sacred marriage bed, was hung upon the Goddess's Tree of Life. Thus the mantle of our world surrounds Khthoniê's Tree, the Tree of She Beneath the Earth.

As was explained in the [Introduction](#), Earth is overcome by Water, and so the result of combining the two is more Watery than Earthy. That is, the Primal Mud is more like chaotic elemental Water: formless (because Moist) and confused (because Cool, and therefore mixing). Nevertheless, the Primal Mud is both Dry and Wet, corresponding to the elements Earth and Water, and so this "Prime Matter," which is the basis of the Great Art, is called the "Dry Water" by the alchemists.

Primal Mud is not sufficient for *animate* life. Thus Apollodorus (*Library* 1.7.1) says, "Prometheus molded humans out of Water and Earth and gave them also Fire, which, unknown to Zeus, he had hidden in a stalk of fennel." (The Fire was stolen from the Wheel of the Sun; the narthex or fennel stalk corresponds to *Shushumna*, the central spinal channel, which conveys the Kundalini force. The narthex also forms the shaft of the *Thursos*, the wand of Dionysian invocation.) Finally, Athena breathed *Psychê* (Breath [Air], Soul, *Prana*) into the body. (See [Air](#) for more on this.) Thus we are made from all four Elements.

From this perspective, Water and Earth constitute the "gross body"; Air and Fire provide the astral and radiant bodies, respectively. In Empedocles' terms, Earth and Water are the body (*sôma*), Air is the soul (*psychê*), and Fire is source of power (*kinêtikê*). Alchemically, the body is the Salt, which is joined by the Quicksilver (etheric body: Air) to the Sulfur (radiant body: Fire). So also the Stoics say that the (Cool, synthetic) "feminine" elements Earth and Water constitute *Hulê* (Matter or Resource), whereas the (Warm, analytic) "masculine" elements Air and Fire constitute *Logos* (Word or Thought).

Earth and Water are the only tangible (touchable) elements; Fire and Air are intangible. Since Water and Earth are both Cool, their tendency is toward greater mixture; this is the entropy of gross matter. They tend to the cold and dark through the dissolution of form (because the mixture is Watery).

The "igneous spirit" (the Heat residing in both Fire and Air) gives motion to inert matter and makes it active. These Elements tend to warmth and light through the generation of energy. Thus *Menstruum*, the Living Mud, which combines the Cool feminine elements Earth and Water (represented by pubic triangles), is animated by *Semen*, which combines the Warm masculine elements Air and Fire (represented by the phallic triangles). Therefore Warmth and Moisture are the two principles of generation, which animate the sterile Earth and bring it to life.

In conclusion, Water is the spiritual principle of flexible union, which permits both dissolution and transformation. Water provides the Primordial Chaos, which combines with Earth to yield the Primal Mud from which life is born. Water is associated with Persephone, the agent of rebirth in the Underworld, who brings the tears of mourning but also the Ambrosia of immortality.

[Click here to continue on to Air](#)

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The Ancient Greek Esoteric Doctrine of the Elements:

Air

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The Essence of Air

As has been explained in the articles on the other Elements, the characters of the Elements can be understood in terms of four spiritual Powers: Earth is Dry and Cool, Water Cool and Moist, Air Moist and Warm, Fire Warm and Dry (see the [Elemental Square](#)). In each of the Elements the first Power dominates the second, and so in Air the dominant power is the Moistness, the power to *conform* to external circumstances. Since Moistness was discussed in detail in our [discusson of Water](#), we turn now to Air's other power, Warmth.

According to Aristotle (who gave the first systematic analysis of the Elements), Warmth is the power of separation. More specifically, it causes things of the same kind to join, so each seeks its own; in this way it causes a separation of things of different kinds. Conversely the Cool power unites things of different kinds. Cool and Warm are fundamentally the Powers of Love and Strife (*Philia* and *Neikos*), associated with Aphrodite and Ares, and they are the primary agents of change in the cosmos according to Empedocles (the fifth century BCE magician-philosopher who gave us the doctrine of the Four Elements). They are the more active powers (as opposed to Moisture and Dryness, which are more passive), with Coolness giving its power to the "feminine" elements Earth and Water, and Warmth to the "masculine" elements Air and Fire.

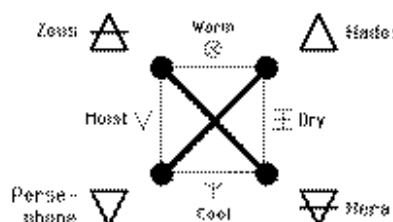
Since Warmth represents the power of separation, it is the cause of all processes of differentiation, discrimination and development of form. It also leads to dissociation and opposition, and the cyclic motion between opposing principles. Because it is an active power of separation, Warmth is expansive, outward directed and energetic in its effects; it is the cause of change. When we put these qualities in a psychological context, we find that the Warm power is associated with the ability to discriminate, analyze and judge, and so it is connected with justice, honesty and critical thinking. Personalities with the Warm quality tend to be skillful, goal directed, diligent, authoritative, strong, energetic, selective, decisive, conscientious and leaders. However, the tendency to active separation can also lead them to be selfish, remote, intolerant, chauvinistic, judgmental, aloof, divisive, willful and domineering.

In Air the Moist power is dominant, although the Warm power is the more active. Thus, in thinking about Air it is more accurate to visualize warm, moist breath rather than cool, dry breezes. The Moist quality represents flexibility and the Warm power causes differentiation; therefore elemental Air represents active change of form (transformation). In a psychological context, Air corresponds to nimble analysis, flexible discrimination, and therefore to ideas, intellect, thinking and knowledge. Thus the Tarot suite of Swords corresponds to the element Air. (The "intellectual" qualities of Air are discussed more [later](#).)

Zeus, Lord of the Air

In the [Introduction to the Elements](#) we saw that Empedocles associates the Elements with four Gods (see [figure](#)): Hera (Earth), Persephone (Water), Zeus (Air) and Hades (Fire), so we will explore the correspondence between Zeus and Air. Of course, Zeus is in origin a Storm God, and therefore associated with the turbulent air; His gift is the fertilizing rain, the Moisture from the Air. Zeus is also known for shape-shifting (i.e., transformation, active change of form), and He exhibits most of the personality qualities that we have seen to be characteristic of Air.

In Empedocles' system, Zeus and Hera, who rule on Olympus, correspond to the opposed elements Air and Earth; Hades and Persephone, who rule in the Underworld, correspond to the opposed elements Fire and Water. Therefore Zeus and Hera represent the Marriage of Heaven and Earth (see [part I on Earth](#) for Hera as an Earth Goddess).



We find a similar mythological complex in Egypt. For example, in a letter to the Delphic Priestess Clea, [Plutarch](#) (c.50-c.120 CE), who was High Priest at Delphi, explained that Osiris and Isis correspond to the Nile and Egypt, or more generally to Moisture and the Earth, the Moist and the Dry. Likewise Zeus and Hera correspond to the Moist and the Dry, for Zeus's element is Air, which is predominantly Moist, and He brings the fertilizing rains, but Hera's element is Earth, which is predominantly Dry. Secondly, Air and Earth are Warm and Cool, respectively, that is individuating and uniting; life springs from this conjunction of opposites.

Further, according to Egyptian myth, Osiris united with Nephthys, who then bore Anubis, who was raised by a foster-mother (Isis); likewise, in Orphic doctrine Zeus united with Persephone, who then bore Dionysos, who was raised by nurses. Each myth tells of a union of the Moist elements Air and Water (sky and the abyss) to yield a God who is equally at home in Heaven and the Underworld. (See ["Water"](#) for more about Isis, Nephthys and Anubis.)

Hera

Like many spiritual teachers, Empedocles appears to have given his students riddles (*ainigmata*) to work on, and the correspondence between the Elements and the four Gods Hera, Persephone, Zeus and Hades appears to be one of these. From ancient times to our own, many solutions have been proposed, but Peter Kingsley's seems to be best (see his [Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic](#), part I), and it is the one we use in these articles.

Although Kingsley's solution, in which Air = Zeus, is most likely correct, the ancient Stoic solution, in which Air = Hera, is interesting and worth exploring to understand Air better. This solution is based on a pun; since "H" is not written as a letter in ancient Greek, "Hêra" and "Aêr" (which means Air) are anagrams of each other: 'HRA and 'AHR. Of course the Hera = Air equation is supported also by the observation that She is wife to the Sky God (although She is not in Herself a Sky Goddess). ([Part I on Earth](#) presents the evidence in favor of Kingsley's Hera = Earth equation.)

The confusion is partly a result of the evolution of ancient Greek. In Empedocles' time *aithêr* seems to have been the most general word for air, and *aêr* referred more specifically to damp, misty air. Eventually, *aêr* became the more general term, and *aithêr* was interpreted as a special kind of air, the bright, luminous sky above the clouds. Therefore *aithêr* came to be thought of as more akin to Fire than to Air. Eventually, when Plato developed the concept of the fifth, celestial Element (commonly known as the Quintessence or "Spirit" nowadays), it came to be called *aithêr*, and the word *aêr* was reserved for the Moist but Warm element that we call "Air."

Although Aristotle considered *Aêr* to be Warm, for the Stoics it was Cool. Therefore, *Aêr*, the cool lower air could be contrasted to *Aithêr*, the fiery upper air; and Hera could be assigned to earthly *Aêr* (Cool, feminine) while Zeus was given celestial *Aithêr* (Warm, masculine). Therefore, Zeus and Hera can be viewed as complementary Sky God and Goddess, although this does not seem to be Empedocles' intention. (In the Stoic system Hades must be assigned to Earth; but we will see in ["Fire"](#) why that is His element.)

Dionysos

Dionysos, the son of Zeus and in many ways a second Zeus (and destined to succeed Him), was associated with Air by Proclus, a Pagan philosopher of the fifth century CE. We can understand this as follows. The principal Gods in the Mysteries and in the Pythagorean Tradition are Dionysos and the Trinity of Persephone, Demeter and Hekate. We have seen (in [Water](#) and [Earth](#)) that Persephone and Demeter correspond to Water and Earth, respectively, and we will see that Hekate corresponds to Fire, which leaves Air for Dionysos, as for His father. (Compare also the [Orphic Quaternity discussed in "Water."](#)) Similarly, Plutarch equates Dionysos (Air) with Osiris, Earth with Isis, Water with Nephthys, and Fire with Typhon. The assignment of Air to both Zeus and Dionysos may seem troublesome, but it reveals a mystery, for it will come to pass that Dionysos, the "Higher Zeus," is assigned to *Aithêr*, the "Higher Air" or Fifth Essence.

Air as a Mediating Element

A fundamental principle of Greek philosophy and alchemy is that a Conjunction of Opposites requires some mediating factor, a mean to unite the extremes. Air is an important mediating Element because it unites the opposites Fire and Water, the key alchemical process ([discussed with Fire](#)). Here I will simply observe that Air can mediate between them because it has Warmth in common with Fire and Moisture in common with Water, so it forms a bridge between them. This mediating role is also central to the process of emanation represented by the Tarot court cards (King, Queen, Knight, Page), and symbolized by IOUE, the name of Jove: Air represents the Union of the Impulse (Fire) with its Object (Water), which leads to the Effect (Earth). (Earth is the other mediating element; the mediating or mixed elements have crossbars in their signs.)

In the Pythagorean tradition, a *Harmonia* (fusion of parts) is required to join unlike things together, and conversely every *Harmonia* presupposes an opposition. (In myth, *Harmonia* is the daughter of Ares and Aphrodite, and the Derveni Papyrus, which is an interpretation of Orphic scriptures, explains that Zeus, as Divine *Aêr*, brought *Harmonia* into the cosmos.)

Since Air is predominantly Moist, we also need to investigate Moisture as a mediating Power. Moisture is the common Power of Air and Water, and therefore it links them together. However, Air is also connected with Fire, for they are both Warm, and Water is also connected with Earth, for they are both Cool. Therefore, the Moist Radical (embodied in Air and Water) makes an indirect connection between the extremes Fire and Earth. In Platonic terms, the Moist elements unite Form (Fire) and Primary Matter (Earth). Therefore, alchemists call the Moist Radical the Ferment of Nature because it connects extremes of Light and

Matter (light & shadow, heaven & earth). Further, Sun, Moon and Earth correspond to Fire, Moisture and Earth, for the Moon is an intermediary, reflecting the light of the Sun to Earth.

We find the same three principles in the cosmogony of Anaximander (6th cent. BCE), who is credited with discovering the opposed Powers, Warm and Cool, Moist and Dry. In the beginning the Unlimited (the *Prima Materia*) produced the *Gonimon* (Generative Thing), which created the opposites Warm and Cool and the Moist Power capable of uniting them. The Warm elements are Fire and Air (heaven and sky), the Cool are Water and Earth (sea and land). The Moist elements Air and Water form the bridge that connects the extremes. The resulting union of the Warm and Cool gives birth to all living things. In the Orphic version it is Eros (Love) that unites Heaven and Earth and gives birth to Gods and mortals. ([See below on Primal Air.](#))

In alchemical terms, the Moist Radical is Mercury (Quicksilver), which joins Sulfur (the Fiery principle) and Salt (the Earthy principle). From a psychical perspective, Mercury (*Spiritus*, Spirit) joins Salt (*Corpus*, Body) and Sulfur (*Anima*, Soul). ([See below for more on "Spirit."](#)) Thus Mercury is a mediator, and in mythology we find Him as the messenger between Heaven and Earth. As the guide of travelers, Mercury (Hermês) is the Interpreter (*Hermêneus*) and Boundary Crosser who facilitates bridging differences; He is the Spirit Guide (*Psychopompos*) who leads us between this world (Earth) and the Netherworld (Fire).

Air, the Spiritual Element

The connection between Air and the soul is reflected in many languages; the Greek words *psyche* (i.e. *psukhê*), *aura* and *pneuma*, and the Latin words *spiritus*, *anima* and *animus* all refer primarily to breath or wind but secondarily to the soul. Also, in Hebrew we have *rûah* and in Sanskrit, *prâna*, with similar double meanings. For example, in the Greek tradition Anaximenes (6th cent. BCE), who considered *Aêr* the first principle of everything, said that it is the stuff of breath and soul, and therefore the principle of life, sensation and reaction. Also, the Pythagorean Diogenes of Apollonia (5th cent. BCE) identified the soul with Warm (and therefore active, moving) Air and said, "People and other animals live by breathing air, and this is for them both soul and intelligence."

Air's power as a mediator means that it has an essential role as the Spirit (or Mediating Soul), which unites the Mind (or Higher Soul) with the body. (Since the English words "spirit," "soul," "psyche" etc. have a variety of meanings and are used in different ways in different traditions, please beware that I may not be using these terms in the way you're used to; I'll try to make my meaning clear.) For example, Empedocles says the Breath-Soul or Spirit (*Psukhê*, associated with Air), unites the Body (*Sôma*) with the Principle of Motion (*Kinêtikê*). Pythagoras is credited with the idea that the Breath-Soul is a *Harmonia* (conjunction of opposites). ([Recall](#) also Mercury as the mediator that unites Sulfur and Salt.)

Why is this mediation necessary? In "[Water](#)," I said that Water + Earth constitutes the Primal Mud, the "gross body," which is potentially alive, but not animate. On the other hand, Fire is the principle of action, the efficient cause of all motion, but it cannot act directly on Primal Mud (for they are opposed, Primal Mud being predominantly Watery). However, Air can mediate between Fire and Primal Mud, because it has Warmth (active differentiation) in common with Fire, and Moisture (flexibility) in common with Water. Thus Air is the active Spirit, which operates on the passive structure of Earth and the flexibility of Water. We may say that Air conveys the Fiery Power and facilitates its embodiment. In general, as mediator, Air transmits powers and influences, and therefore Air is the vehicle of coordination and communication ([see below, "Air, the Governor"](#)). Thus the Stoics attributed to Heraclitus (6th-5th cent. BCE) the idea that the soul is an Exhalation or Warm Vaporization (*Anathumiasis*) from bodily moisture; as we might say, the Fiery Soul evokes the Breath Spirit from the body's Primal Mud to be the means by which the two can unite. So also, as mentioned in "[Water](#)," Prometheus molded human bodies from Earth and Water, and gave Heavenly Fire to them. But they were not complete before Athena breathed Air into them.

The Spirited Soul

Ancient Greek sages often divided the soul into three parts, an idea credited to Pythagoras. Although there are variations in classification and terminology, they are roughly: (1) Mind or Intellect (*Nous*), (2) Spirited Soul (*Thumos*) and (3) Nutritive Soul (*Epithumia*), which reside in the head, breast and belly, respectively. (There is a more systematic correspondence with the seven chakras, which is beyond the scope of this article.) I have already discussed the Nutritive (or Vegetative) Soul in the discussion of [Water](#), for Water gives the power of growth and development to lifeless matter (Earth), and I will discuss the Mind with [Fire](#); here our concern is the Spirited Soul and its vehicle, the *aerial* or *spirit body*.

The Spirited Soul is responsible for feeling and sensation (both of which are actively discriminating yet conformable to outer circumstances, that is, Warm and Moist). Because of its expansive Warmth, the Spirited Soul reacts to feeling and sensation and is therefore also the source of fortitude, courage, the emotions and opinion. It includes the "irrational will" or "animal will" (for we share the Spirited Soul with all the animals, but not with plants; however we share the Nutritive Soul with all living things). In the Greek tradition, the Spirited Soul is often believed to be mortal (subject to dissolution) like the body (whereas the Mind is considered immortal).

The Spirit Body

In the Neoplatonic doctrine of the Vehicles (*Okhêmata*) of the Soul, each part of the soul has a corresponding "vehicle" (*okhêma*) or body; in addition to the easily perceivable *gross body* (corresponding to Earth + Water), there are two *subtle bodies*: the *aerial body* (Air) and the *radiant body* (Fire). The Spirit (*Pneuma*) is carried by the *spirit body* (*soma pneumatikon*, *okhêma pneuma*) or aerial body (sometimes incorrectly called the *aetheric* or *astral body*). Therefore the aerial body transmits

the powers of the higher soul to the body and vice versa; it is responsible for the functioning of the five senses and conveys the motions of life; that is, it governs animate motion and active perception. Thus the spirit body is closely connected with the nervous system.

The Spirited Soul is anchored in the *Phrenes* (roughly, "breast"), which refers to the lungs and heart together, and so when our Spirits are aroused in love or anger or fear, we feel it in our *Phrenes*. The Spirit is considered the point of balance in the soul, the "inner sun" that rules the other planets in our souls. Further, the spirit body assimilates *Pneuma* (Spirit, *Prāna*, the universal life force) from the Sun and infuses it into the gross body, for *Pneuma* is the source of life and of the integrity of the living form; it is the active energy of the self. Since breathing draws *Pneuma* into the *Phrenes*, in the Ascent of the Soul of Chaldean Theurgy, breathing exercises are used in the stage corresponding to the Spirited Soul.

Air, the Governor

The aerial body's connection to the nervous system reminds us that because Air is Moist and Warm, it has the power of flexible discrimination. Therefore Air is associated with information and communication (and hence with the Tarot suit of Swords); as an active principle, Air is associated with computing.

The Aerial Spirit's role as a subtle, invisible governing faculty was recognized in ancient times. For example, Diogenes of Apollonia says, "It seems to me that that which has intelligence is what people call Air (*Aēr*), and that all people are steered (*kubernasthai*) by this, and that it has power over all things. For the very thing seems to be a God and to reach everywhere and to dispose all things and to be in everything." (It is significant that the word he uses for "steered," *kubernasthai*, is related to *kubernêtikos*, meaning "skilled in steering or guiding," which is the origin of our term *cybernetics*, referring to the principles of intelligence and governance in animals and machines. Air is the Cybernetic Element.) Diogenes' statement also suggests that Air plays a role in the World Soul (*Psukhê tou Pantos*) as well as in individual souls, and that is our next topic.

The World Soul

The Pythagoreans say that there is a divine respiration in the cosmos, and that by its cyclic breathing of the Unlimited, the World Soul infuses Limit into it, and thereby creates Number and Determinate Time (*Khronos*). The ordered cosmos came to be through Air, for it is the element that separates things and thereby creates divisions and distinctions; thus it puts Limit into the Unlimited. However, although Air separates things as individuals, it also unites them into a higher, spiritual unity.

I have [already mentioned](#) that Anaximenes considers Air to be the First Principle (*Arkhê*) of the cosmos; it is infinite, eternal, ever-moving and divine; he calls Air the Father of the Gods (which recalls Zeus's common title: Father of Gods and Humans). Anaximenes also says, "Just as our Breath-Soul (*Psukhê*), being Air (*Aēr*), governs us, so Spirit-Breath (*Pneuma*) and Air (*Aēr*) encompass the whole cosmos." This suggests that the governance of the cosmos is accomplished by the Spirit-Breath of the World Soul. Indeed, Philemon says that Air, who is called Zeus, knows everything done by Gods or mortals, because He is everywhere at once. So also Empedocles points to the God's subtle nature: "He is a Spirit-Mind (*Phrên*), holy and ineffable, and only Spirit-Mind, which darts through the whole cosmos with its swift thoughts." (Note that the term translated Spirit-Mind, *Phrên*, is the singular of *Phrenes*, Breast.) Here again we see Air as a medium of communication and governance, but on the cosmic scale.

However, just as we all breathe the same Air, and the Air in my breast is continuous with that in yours, so also the World Soul is continuous with individual souls (an idea we also find in the Upanishads, where Brahman, the World Soul identified with *Prāna* (Breath), is identical to *Ātman*, the individual Life-breath). As the nervous system integrates the activities of individual organs to work for the sake of the organism, so the Air binds our individual souls into one World Soul. Microcosm and macrocosm unite.

Primal Air

Once we understand Air's role as a World Soul, we are not too surprised to see it taking a central role in cosmogony, the birth of the universe. We looked at [Anaximander's cosmogony](#) when we considered Air as a mediating element. Also Anaximenes (6th cent. BCE) says that Air, the first principle of everything, produced Water and Earth (the Primal Mud) by condensation and Fire by rarefaction. I will describe briefly several other examples, which will illustrate Air's place in the cosmos.

Philo of Biblos (64-140 CE) translated a "Phoenician History," which was supposed to have been written by Sanchuniathon before the Trojan War (which is not unlikely) and to be based on Egyptian scriptures attributed to Thoth. According to this myth, in the beginning there was a Primal Wind, a breath of mist and darkness (i.e. *Aēr*); also there was *Môt*, the muddy chaos of Erebus (*khaos tholon Ereboës*), that is, the formless Primal Mud. The Primal Wind fertilized itself and became Desire (*Pothos*, perhaps corresponding to Semitic *Rûah*, which means Breath but also connotes Desire). Further, *Môt* became the Cosmic Egg, and the cosmos was born when Desire opened the Cosmic Egg (as also in the Orphic cosmogonies), which led to a separation of the Elements.

According to Eudemus (4th cent. BCE), the Phoenicians who lived in Sidon also believed that the universe was born of Air. In the beginning was Time (*Khronos*), Desire (*Pothos*) and Fog (*Omikhlē*). Desire and Fog united, giving birth to *Aēr* and *Aura* (Moving Air).

We find similar ideas in the cosmogony attributed to Mōkhos of Sidon, also supposed to have lived before Trojan War. The universe began with *Aithēr* and *Aēr*, who united to engender Ulōmos, whose name means Eternity. Ulōmos fertilized Himself to

produce the Cosmic Egg and Khrûsôros the Opener, the Divine Craftsman who cracked the Cosmic Egg. He corresponds to Love or Phanês in the Orphic account and to the Demiurge (Craftsman) in Plato's *Timaeus*.

Summary

We have seen that Air is the element of transformation, for it is Moist (flexible) and Warm (differentiating). It is primarily associated with Zeus Lord of the Air, but secondarily with Hera His consort and Dionysos His son. Air is important as a mediating Element, which can unite Fire and Water; similarly the related Moist Radical is a mean uniting the extremes Fire and Earth. Air is the most spiritual element, for it corresponds to the Spirit Breath and Spirited Soul, which unite the mind and body. Air also constitutes the cosmic breath, which unites our individual souls into the universal World Soul.

[Click here to continue on to Fire](#)

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The Ancient Greek Esoteric Doctrine of the Elements:

Fire

Extended Version

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The Essence of Fire

Each of the Elements is characterized by a dominant and a secondary Power or Quality: Earth is Dry and Cool, Water is Cool and Moist, Air is Moist and Warm, Fire is Warm and Dry. Since the Warm and Dry powers have been discussed in detail already (Warmth in "[Air](#)," Dryness in "[Earth](#)"), a summary will do here. As explained by Aristotle, Warmth is the power of separation and Coolness the power of union; they are the more active powers. Dryness is the power to determine its own form, and Moistness the power to flexibly adapt to the forms of other things. Therefore, since Fire is Warm and Dry, it is the agent that actively creates distinctions and imposes forms. We may think of the fiery arts of the smithy, the kitchen and the alchemical laboratory.

Indeed, in alchemy Fire is considered the primary agent of change (more on this later), and Empedocles, the 5th century BCE magician-philosopher credited with the Doctrine of the Four Elements (*Tetrasomia*), distinguishes Fire as the Agent of Action (*Kinêtikê*) among the Elements. Hence the Elements have the typical 3+1 structure in which, as explained by Jung, the Fourth is the principle of determination for the Three. In physics, Fire corresponds to energy, whereas the other three Elements correspond to states of matter (although we must keep in mind that these are just physical manifestations of the Four Elements, which are spiritual archetypes).

Fire in the Microcosm

I will begin by outlining briefly some of the manifestations of Fire in human psychology. First, Warmth is the power of discrimination, and therefore decision, but in Fire the decision is inflexible because of the Dry power. Therefore Fire is most closely connected to Will, which sees its purpose and cannot be swayed from it. Further, we may say that Fire brings a decision, distinction or conclusion that is self-determining, not conditioned by external circumstances; therefore it corresponds to the bright flash of intuition, the "bolt from the blue." Finally, as already mentioned, Fire strives to actively impose a determinate form on things, and therefore represents the creative impulse in all its varieties. Will, inspiration and creativity together associate Fire with the Tarot suit of Wands.

In the [discussion of Air](#) I explained how the Elements correspond to the Vehicles of the Soul described in Neoplatonic lore and Chaldean Theurgy: Earth and Water correspond to the *gross body*, Air to the *spirit body* and Fire to the *radiant body*. The radiant body (*augoeides*), also known as the astral body (*astroeides*) or aitherial body, is the vehicle of the Higher Soul, which is

responsible for the intellect, including discursive reason, but also for the Rational Will. Thus it is the efficient cause of mental activity (corresponding to the *Kinētikē*, or Agent of Action, of Empedocles). The higher soul and its vehicle mediate between the *Gnostic Soul*, which is the highest form of the soul (associated with the Quintessence or Fifth Element), and the lower vehicles of the soul (the spirit body and gross body). (I explained in "[Air](#)" how the Breath Spirit joins the Fiery Higher Soul to the Primal Mud (Earth + Water) of the body; [see "Water"](#) on the Primal Mud.)

As has been mentioned in "[Water](#)" and "[Air](#)," there is a myth that Prometheus created humans by mixing Earth and Water to create the gross body; Athena breathed Air into it, imbuing it with a Spirit-Soul. Prometheus added the Higher Soul, which is the Fire that He took from the Wheel of the Sun and brought to humanity in a *Narthêx* (giant fennel) stalk. (The *Narthêx* corresponds to *Shushumna*, the esoteric spinal column of yoga philosophy, which contains the Fiery Kundalini power.) Recall also that the *Thursos*, the sacred Bacchic wand, is made from the *Narthêx* and holds Promethean Fire.

As implied in the myth of our Promethean origins, the Fire in our souls is akin to the Celestial Fire ("As above, so below"). Hippocrates says that the soul is an Immortal Warmth (*Athanatos Thermon*), which sees, hears and knows everything; most of this Warmth is pushed to the outermost sphere, where it is called *Aithêr*, and forms a kind of Fiery World Soul. (This is different from the Airy World Soul described in "[Air](#)." Also, as explained in "[Air](#)," *Aithêr* may refer to the luminous upper Air, to Fire, or to the celestial Quintessence.) Our souls are akin to this *Periekhon* (Surrounding Thing), the Divine *Aithêr* that embraces and supports the Cosmos. Plato (*Cratylus* 412de) calls it a penetrating power that permeates the whole world. It is also called the Sun (Helios), Warmth (*Thermon*), Justice (*Dikaion*) and Mind (*Nous*). Heraclitus also says that the soul is composed of a Fire that is related to the World Fire, and calls the soul a "spark of the essential substance of the stars" (*scintilla stellaris essentiae*). Thus the Divine Warmth (*Thermon*), as the Power of the Soul (*Psukhês Dunamis*), is analogous to the essence of the stars. This has implications for the destiny of the soul after death, which will be discussed [later](#).

The Central Fire

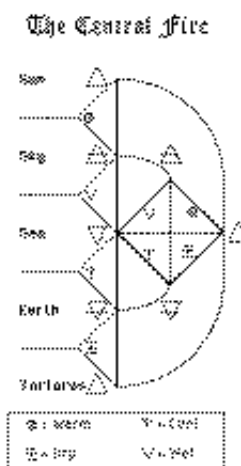
Having considered Fire in the microcosm, we now turn to the macrocosm. According to the Pythagoreans, the Enveloping Fire is balanced by a Central Fire. Indeed, Empedocles says that many fires burn beneath the Earth, that the Solar Fire was born in the bowels of the Earth, and that Volcanic Fire shoots to the Heavens and licks the stars. Thus Fire is the highest and the lowest Element; it is as though the Elemental Square has been unfolded into a line (see [figure](#)). This results in a series of cosmic spheres: Celestial Fire, Air, Water, Earth, and Central Fire; the Celestial Fire mirrors the Central Fire as though in a higher octave.

One might suppose that the "Fires of Hades" is a Christian notion, but it actually has its roots in ancient Greek esoteric doctrine. As explained in the "[Introduction](#)" and in "[Earth](#)," "[Water](#)" and "[Air](#)," Empedocles' "Enigma" associates Earth with Hera, Water with Persephone, Air with Zeus, and Fire with Hades. However, there are many additional signposts to the Central Fire, for Empedocles teaches that the ultimate source of all Fire is Hades, and that the Central Fire is the source of all life, creation and destruction (see "[Hephaistos and Alchemy](#)," [below](#)).

More precisely, the Central Fire is Tartaros, Zeus's Guard Tower (*Zanôs Púrgos*, *Phulakê Diós*, etc.), which is below Hades. According to myth, after the Sun sets, it shines in Tartaros.

Therefore the Central Fire is known as the Dark Sun, the Black Sun, the Invisible Sun, the Subterranean Sun and the Volcanic Sun, and there is a paradoxical unity between the Sun and the Underworld. This is why Parmenides was led by the Daughters of the Sun into the House of Night; it is also the path followed by the dead.

The astrological symbol for the Sun represents the Fire at the center; it was also an ancient alchemical symbol for Sulphur, the Fiery Principle (on which, see below). The doctrine of the Central Fire is the original, mystical Heliocentric theory, which Copernicus borrowed, but has become debased into no more than astronomy. (Copernicus himself called it the "Pythagorean Theory.")



Light-bearing Hekate

As an Underworld Goddess, Hekate has many connections with Fire. Therefore She is called *Purphoros* (Fire-bearing), *Daidoukhos* (Torch-bearer), *Phôsphoros* (Light-bearer, also *Lucifera*), *Puripnon* (Fire-breather) and *Melainê* (Black); She is worshipped in caves and Her image is honored with torches.

As a Lunar Goddess Hekate has a complementary relationship to the Sun. At the New Moon She carries blazing torches (called *selas* and connected with Selene, the Moon), and on the 30th of month, when the Moon is overtaken by the Sun and both rise together, we offer Her the *Amphiphôn* (Shining-All-Around), a flat cake with a circle of candles on it. Both Hekate Enodia (On the Road) and Apollo Agueius (Street Guardian) are Gods of the Journey, who illuminate the Way: Apollo by His Sun during the day, Hekate by Her Torch at night. Apollo was also called *Hekatos* (Distant One), the masculine form of *Hekaté* (also an epithet of Artemis). Similarly Helios and Hekate often appear together in magical texts, and They were the only

witnesses to the abduction of Persephone. They are the Sun and Moon, the Lamps of Day and Night, the Light Sun and the Dark Sun, Celestial and Chthonic Fire. In Sophocles' *Root-cutters* we read,

"O Lord Helios and Holy Fire, the spear of Hekate Enodia, which She bears frequenting Olympos and dwelling in the Three Ways of the Holy Land."

According to the Chaldean Oracles and Neoplatonic philosophers, Hers is the Womb of Nature, which is fertilized by the lightning and thunderbolts of Father Zeus, and by which She gives birth to the natural world (cf. [Semele and Koronis, below](#)). For the lightning bolts correspond to the Platonic Ideas or Forms, which can be embodied only by the mediation of Hekate's Womb, the Coils (*Koilômata*) of the Cosmos. In the Oracles the Goddess Herself says, "These are the Thoughts of the Father, after which is My enwrapping Fire" (fr. 38). This Fire, which envelops the world, was called the Membrane (*Hymên*), and, according to the Oracles, Her Membrane separates the First Fire of the Celestial Father from the Second Fire, which is the *Demiurge* (Craftsman), Hephaistos. Both are intellectual Fires, one celestial, the other chthonic and proceeding from the first. Hekate nurtures the Ideas so that the Demiurge may use them to organize the Elements into our world.

(Hekate is primarily associated with Fire, but as Cosmic Womb She also has connections with Water. Indeed, She unites the opposites, Heaven and the Underworld. Under the name Iphimedeia (= Iphigeneia), She is also a consort to Poseidon. When Hekate is called "Queen" She is being identified with Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, and some call Persephone the lower manifestation of Hekate.)

Hephaistos and Alchemy

The ancient Greeks distinguished the Destructive (*Aidêlon*) Fire, associated with Hades (*Aidês*), from the Creative Fire, associated with Hephaistos, the Divine Smith or Craftsman. In Orphic cosmologies, as in many others, a Divine Craftsman is born from the Cosmic Egg or is responsible for opening it (see ["Air"](#)). Similarly, in Indian tradition the Craftsman Kâla is the Sun, the Golden Embryo (Fire), who upholds Earth, Sea and Sky (Earth, Water, Air). Naturally Hephaistos, the Divine Smith, is closely connected with Creative Fire, and His name is often used as a synonym for Fire. Plato (*Cratylus* 407c) explains that Hephaistos' name comes from Phaistos, Lord of Light (*Phaeos Histora*); like Fire, He is active and form imposing (Warm and Dry).

Eliade (*Forge & Crucible*) argues that alchemy had its origin in the ancient Craft of the Smith, which combined religion, magic and metallurgy. For example, in the Greek tradition, the Daktuloi (Dactyls), Telkhines (Telchines) and Kabeiroi (Cabiri) are magic-working divine smiths; all come from underground to assist the Great Mother Rhea (associated with Fire; see ["Water"](#)). Of the Daktuloi ("Fingers") it is said that the Right-hand ones are smiths and the Left-hand are magicians (*goêtes*). The Telkhines are also sorcerer-smiths, born of Tartaros. The Kabeiroi of Samothrace, who are skilled in meteoric alchemy and instructed Orpheus in Their Mysteries, are called Hephaistoi because They are smiths and are descended from Kabeiros and Kabeiria, that is, Hephaistos and Hekate. Two of them were said to stand on a fire-sprouting rock on Lemnos (Hephaistos' island), brandishing lightning bolts and with sparks streaming from Their eyes.

According to alchemy, metals are incubated by Fire in the Womb of the Earth; alchemists only accelerate their development. Since Hekate is the Fiery Womb who inspires matter with spiritual energy, She is also called Nature (*Phusis*). Alchemists connect the Earth and Sun, because the Fire that comes from the center of the Earth is the key to the alchemical transformation, the Innate Heat of the Womb of Nature. Whereas, as we will see below, Hades governs rebirth through the Mysteries by means of Death, Hephaistos governs rebirth through Alchemy via the Womb (Fiery initiation).

Hestia and the Harmonization of the Center

To the Destroying Fire of Hades and the Creating Fire of Hephaistos we may add the Preserving Fire of Hestia, for "Hestia" is both the word for Hearth and the name of the Hearth Goddess. (Likewise "Hades" is the Land of the Dead as well as its Lord, and "Hephaistos" is the Fire of the Forge as well as its Master.) The Hearth is sacred in Greek tradition, and the house, temple and city each had a Sacred Hearth at its center. She was the only one of the Old Gods not to yield Her place on Olympos when Zeus came to power, and She was honored as the first among the Twelve Olympians. Later, when Dionysos ascended to Olympos, She gave Her place among the Twelve to Him, but retained Her station of honor in the Center of the Heavens. Even the Olympian Gods honor Her before all others.

Naturally, the Central Fire was compared to the Hearth in the center of the house, and as early as the 5th century BCE the Earth was called the Cosmic Hearth (*tou Kosmou hê Hestia*). The central role of Hestia is recognized by Plato (*Crat.* 401cd), who explains "Hestia" as meaning the Essence (*Essia* = *Ousia*) of things. Also, the Neoplatonist Philolaus says, "The first thing to be harmonized - the One - in the middle of the sphere is called Hestia," and Anatolius says, "around the middle of the four Elements lies a unitary fiery Cube." Philolaus also identifies the Hearth in the center with the One and the Cube with geometric Harmonia, which suggests that the Central Fire may be thought of as a cube. ([See below](#) for more on Harmonia. Interestingly, garlanded cubes called *Gulloi* were carried in Hekate's honor in a procession at Didyma.)

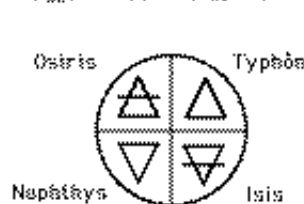
An important alchemical text, the *Turba Philosophorum* (*The Gathering of Philosophers*), which preserves much ancient lore, compares the Earth to an Egg. The Shell corresponds to the Earth itself; the White corresponds to the Water Under the Earth (Abyssal Water), the Yolk to the Central Fire, and the Chick to the Point of the Sun (*Punctus Solis*) at the very center. (As mentioned, this is represented in the astrological and alchemical symbol for the Sun, which was also the original symbol for Sulphur, the alchemical Fiery principle.) Alchemical apparatus was often explicitly patterned after both the Egg and the Earth as Womb, and Pythagorean and Orphic ideas about the Cosmic Egg were later adopted by Egyptian and Islamic alchemists.

Sacred Unions of Fire and Water

Empedocles has Hades corresponding to Fire and Persephone to Water; Their sacred marriage makes Them the King and Queen of the Underworld, and Their union is the alchemical conjunction of the opposites, Fire and Water. Hades is Lord of the Central Fire and Persephone is Lady of Dissolution (see ["Water"](#)). As Zeus and Hera are the Creators (responsible for fertility and birth), so Hades and Persephone are the Destroyers (governing death), who nevertheless bring about rebirth. Concerning Persephone, Plato (*Crat.* 404d) says, "Hades, who is wise, consorts with Her, because She is wise." He added that although the name "Hades" (*Aidēs*) is normally derived from Unseen (*Aeides*), it actually refers to Knowledge (*Eidenai*) of All Noble Things.

The marriage of Hades and Persephone is paralleled by the union of Typhōn and Nephthys in Egyptian mythology, as explained by Plutarch. Typhōn is associated with the scorching Sun, destruction, chaos, difference (separation) and Heracles ([see below](#)). Hesiod tells us that Zeus defeated Typhōn and placed Him under volcanic Mount Etna (i.e. in Tartaros), which is why it burns and quakes. Typhōn is the husband of Nephthys, who corresponds to Water, [as was explained](#) in our discussion of that Element. Therefore Typhōn forms an Elemental Quaternity with Nephthys, Isis (Earth) and Osiris (Air). (See the articles ["Earth,"](#) ["Water"](#) and ["Air."](#)) According to Plutarch, Typhōn, the destructive power, exercises special dominion over the outermost part of matter, for earth, sea, plants and animals all suffer dissolution, except what is preserved by Isis (which is the reason for Her Mysteries). Therefore Osiris is the Creator, Isis the Preserver, and Typhōn the Destroyer; Nephthys holds sway between death and rebirth (destruction and recreation).

Egyptian Quaternary



The union of Fire and Water appears again with Hephaistos, for He is married to Aphrodite, born of sea foam (see ["Water"](#)). According to Empedocles, they are the principal creators of the world (see also ["Love and Strife" below](#)).

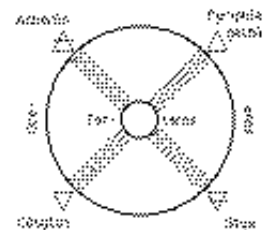
The Crater

The Underworld is a realm of paradox and inversion, where opposites may unite. It is a place of Darkness but also of Fire (Light); it is simultaneously a place of Dissolution (Water) and the Fiery Womb of rebirth; it is the source of the Destructive Fire of Hades and of the Creative Fire of Hephaistos. Here especially may be brought about the union of Fire and Water, the primary Elemental Opposition. Hence the alchemical arts, which seek to unite the opposites in the Great Work, are born in the Underworld.

Four rivers converge in the Underworld, each associated with an Element ([see figure](#)). The Pyriphlegethōn, the River of Fire, is directly opposite Côcytus, the River of Weeping, closely associated with Persephone and Water (as explained in ["Water"](#)). (Plato's *Phaedo* (108d-114d) contains an informative and colorful description of Underworld geography and of the progress of the soul.)

The volcanic crater is filled with rivers of fire, a hint of the union of Fire and Water in the depths. In general, any crater in the earth, whether holding Fire or Water, is considered a place of power and magic, for it is an entry to the Underworld. Therefore, incense is burned for Hephaistos (Vulcan) at the volcanic crater's lip and in caves.

The Greek word *Cratēr* refers to a mixing bowl, especially that in which wine is mixed with water for drinking, and hence to the bowl-shaped volcanic crater. Hellenes attach great symbolic importance to the proper mixture (*krasis*) of wine and water (Fire and Water); it is the central image of balance, proportion and harmony (*Mēden agan* - Nothing too much - as it said on the temple of Apollo at Delphi).



Four Rivers of Hades

Similarly, in Hellenic rituals, a burning brand from the altar fire is plunged into the bowl of lustral water to consecrate it as Holy Water (Greek, *Hudōr Theion*) or Water Inflamed by the Sacred Fire (Latin, *Aqua Igne Sacra Inflammata*). (In ancient Greek, the same word *Theion* means "a sacred thing" and "brimstone," reminding us that alchemical Sulphur is the Fiery Principle.)

The Crater is also an important symbol in the Orphic Mysteries, and a lost Orphic Poem (by Zopyrus the Pythagorean) called *The Cratēr* dealt with Orpheus' descent through a Watery Crater into the Fiery Underworld (a common means of descent). In

the Underworld, rivers of fire (Water + Fire) flow together in the Crater, and the Crater becomes a place of Ordeal, where truth and falsity are separated (by Fire). Also in Greek tradition, one may drink from the Crater or be immersed in it in order to be reborn (as Medea, granddaughter of the Sun, did in her magic of rejuvenation). It's not surprising that, according to [Peter Kingsley](#) (p. 135), the Crater influenced the Grail legends.

Love and Strife

The dominant Qualities of Fire and Water are Warmth and Coolness, which are the powers of separation and union. Therefore Empedocles taught that Love (*Philotês*) and Strife (*Neikos*) are the two primary forces in the cosmos, which bring about all transformation through their mixing and separation of the Roots (Elements). (Although Love and Strife are the conventional English translations, it would be more accurate to say Affinity, i.e. friendship, and Difference, i.e. disagreement.) Empedocles naturally identified these Powers with fiery Ares and sea-born Aphrodite.

Love is associated with the Mixture (*Krasis*) in the Crater, as Strife is with enmity or separation (*Ekhthros*). Indeed, Empedocles (fr. 35) describes the mixing of the immortal Roots by Love and Strife (Cool + Warm = Water + Fire = Water + Wine) in terms reminiscent of the Crater: as they mixed, "countless types of mortal things *poured forth*" (my emphasis), a process described as an "onrush" or "stream" (*hormê*) of Perfect Love. Love and Strife are each responsible in Their own way for a "coming to be" and a "passing away": Strife creates Plurality by dividing the One, and Love creates Unity from the Many. A proper balance of both is necessary in an ordered cosmos.

Love and Strife are also the fundamental governing principles of magic (where they are known as Sympathy and Antipathy). In the tradition of the Root-cutters, Empedocles and later Bolus of Mendes applied Sympathy and Antipathy especially to herbal magic. As Plotinus the Neo-Pythagorean explained:

And how are magical operations (*goêteias*) carried out? By Sympathy, and thanks to the fact that there is a natural Harmony between things that are alike and a natural Opposition between things that are unlike. For many things are "drawn" to each other and enchanted without any third party deliberately working to bring the effect about. And the real magic in everything is the Love in it, along with the Strife. *This* is the primary magician and enchanter; it was when men observed *its* magic that they started using charms and spells on each other.

Zoroastrian Dualism

Although Pythagoras is supposed to have met Zoroaster, this is unlikely (Zoroaster probably lived a millennium earlier), but Pythagoras did study with a Chaldean magus. Therefore it will be worthwhile to consider some Chaldean doctrines.

Zoroaster taught there are two primary principles, which are *Daimones* - Divine Beings or Powers: One is Celestial (*Ouranion*), and associated with the Father, Fire, Light (*Phôs*), Warmth, Dryness, Lightness (as opposed to Heaviness) and Swiftly. The other is Terrestrial (*Chthonion*), and associated with the Mother, Water, Darkness (*Skotos*), Coolness, Moisture, Heaviness and Slowness. Their powers are primarily Warm and Cold (the dominant powers of Fire and Water).

Pythagoras similarly taught that the Cosmos and its Harmonia result from the union of the Male and the Female, the Light and the Dark, for both are necessary; we don't have one good the other evil (as in Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism and some other traditions). This is a more alchemical perspective: spirit needs to be embodied; alchemy recognizes that both Light and Dark are divine and deserving of our respect.

According to Zoroastrians, the cycle of Light and Dark takes place within Time or Space, associated with the God Zurvan; we may compare Him to Kronos (= Khronos = Time). This transcendent Unity differentiates into Light and Dark, which then alternate within It, creating Harmonia and Cosmos.

The Luminous Agent and Primary Matter

In a similar way alchemy distinguishes between the Innate Fire and the Moist Radical in all things. The Innate Fire is the Form of things, for Fire is Dry and Warm (= form-imposing), and the Moist Radical, which represents *cohesion* and *flexibility* (Cool, Moist), is their Matter; it is the purest, most digested form of matter (see ["Water"](#)), the Elixir of Nature, the Mercury of Life. Thus the Innate Fire "inhabits" the Moist Radical, which is called therefore the Laboratory of Vulcan, the Hearth in which burns the Eternal Fire; it is the Innate Heat of the Womb of Mother Earth.

Alchemy explains the cosmos as the result of the Luminous Agent exploding out of the Primordial Darkness and acting on the Primal Mud (which was discussed in ["Water"](#)). Since Fire is separating (Hot) and inflexible (Dry), the effect of Heat on the Primal Mud is to rarefy the Watery part and to condense the Earthy part. That is, through its Heat the Luminous Agent causes separation, so the part of the Primal Mud that retains its Moisture becomes Water, and the part that retains its Coolness becomes Earth; thus the two Elements separate.

So also Empedocles (fr. 73) says, "when Cypris [Aphrodite] was busily producing forms, She moistened Earth in Water and gave it to swift Fire [Hephaistos] to harden." And Anaximander (6th c. BCE) said that living things were generated from the Warming of Earth and Water, and likewise Heraclitus (5th c. BCE) said people are made of Fire, Water and Earth (for in this case Fire means the Warm elements, Air and Fire).

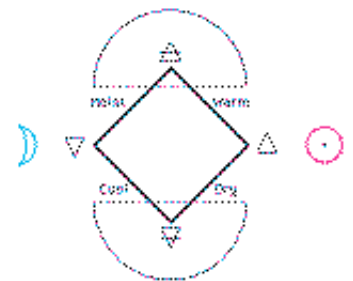
The Harmonia of Fire and Water

Warmth and Coolness are the more active powers, according to Aristotle. Since Warmth is the dominant power of Fire and Coolness is the dominant power of Water, these are the most active Elements, and the primary opposition is between them (as represented in their signs; the signs for Air and Earth each contain a part of the sign of their opposite). Therefore, Fire and Water cannot be united directly, for they have nothing in common. The Two must be joined by a Third, which constitutes a mean linking the extremes, that is, a *Harmonia*, which is often translated Harmony, but more accurately means a seamless union in which the parts form a whole and yet retain their separate identities. In the Greek tradition, Harmonia is a Goddess, the daughter of Aphrodite and Ares (Love and Strife). She may unite any opposites, including the opposed Elements, Fire and Water. Empedocles (fr. 96) says that "the kindly Earth received in Her wide melting-pots" a mixture of Persephone (Water) and Hephaistos (Fire) held together by Harmonia.

Air and Earth as Harmoniai

Fire and Water may unite in Air, which has Warmth in common with Fire and Moistness in common with Water; the other intermediary is Earth, which is Dry like Fire and Cool like Water. However, Air functions more easily as a uniting Element, because it is also intermediate in subtlety between Fire and Water.

Such a union takes place in a *Pyria*, which is the ancient Greek version of a sweat lodge (essentially the same as the Scythian version described in Herodotus 4.73). Woolen blankets are spread over a wooden frame, in the center of which is a cauldron in which red-hot stones are placed. The *Pyria* is a microcosm in which the Elements unite. When Water is thrown on the Fire, it creates steam, which is the Hot-Wet Air that unites the opposites. This all takes place in contact with, or even within, the (Cool, Dry) Earth.

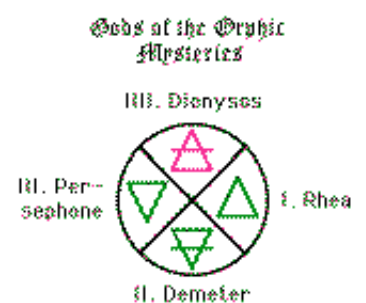


Air and Earth as Harmoniai

In alchemy the essences of Fire and Water are called Sulphur (the Fiery Principle) and Quicksilver (the Watery Principle), the alchemical Sun and Moon. Their union is a major task in the alchemical Great Work, which may be accomplished by means of alchemical Salt (Prime Matter), corresponding to Earth. In this case Salt is the Harmonia uniting the opposites Sulphur and Quicksilver. ([See below](#) for Quicksilver as an intermediate.)

Dionysos and the Union of Fire and Water

As explained in "Air," Dionysos is a second Zeus and, like Him, associated with Air. We can see "Thrice-born Dionysos" as a result of the union of Fire and Water in each of His three births. In the Orphic Mysteries it is said that Zeus and Persephone mated as snakes and conceived Dionysos; this is a union of Persephone, associated with Water, and the Chthonic (Underworld) Zeus, corresponding to Hades and Fire. (As explained in "[Water](#)," Rhea, Demeter, Persephone and Dionysos are four consecutive generations in the Orphic Mysteries; [see figure](#).) Second, it is also told in the Orphic Mysteries that the Titans cut Dionysos into seven parts, which they boiled and roasted (Water + Fire). After They had eaten six parts (a function of Their Watery, nutritive soul), Zeus blasted Them with His Fiery Lightning, vaporizing Them (converting Them to Air). Finally, there is the well-known story of how Semele drank a potion made from the seventh part and became pregnant with Dionysos. When she was tricked into seeing Zeus in His full glory, she was incinerated by His Fire, but the infant Dionysos was protected by her Girdle of Ivy (which is considered Cool and Watery). Semele Herself is in origin a Phrygian Underworld Goddess, corresponding to Persephone, and thus to Water. (We may also compare the Lightning-receiving Womb of [Hekate](#), [above](#), and [Koronis](#), [below](#); [see below](#) for more on Semele.)



The Progress of the Soul

Fire plays a central role in the process of *Heroization* by which a mortal may escape the cycle of rebirth and ascend to the Isles of the Blessed. To understand this we must begin with the normal progress of the soul after death, for similar rituals are used for immortalization in this life and in the afterlife.

The Pythagorean Alcmaeon (c. 500 BCE) and others related the immortality of soul to the immortal, divine stars. Plato also taught that the fiery substance of the stars, which he called *Aithêr*, is divine, and in the *Cratylus* (397c) he connected the term "Aithêr" to the Gods (*Theoi*) and to "run, move" (*thein*), because the Gods, like the stars, move eternally. This Divine Fire is found both outside surrounding us and inside us at the center of our being. Therefore, "man is made of portions of the cosmos, and in death like returns to like" (Burkert, *Lore & Sci. in Anc. Pythag.* 362): the soul goes to heavenly Aithêr, and the body goes to Earth, each returning to its own element. Thus, according to the Orphic golden tablets, when the soul reaches its destination, it should say, "I am a child of Earth and Starry Heaven, but my race is of Heaven alone; this Ye know Yourselves." (See the text in ["Water."](#))

As Plutarch (*The Face in the Moon*, 943-4) explains in detail, at death the soul is separated from the body in the realm of Demeter, and the body returns to the Earth. The mind is separated from the soul in the realm of Persephone, and the soul returns to the Moon. This occurs in the Hidden Place of Hekate (*Hekatês Mukhos*), who lives in a cave that is a mouth of the Underworld ([see below](#) for more on Her). This is the place of judgment, the Infernal Coils (*Bathê Koilômata*) or Passages, the (uterus-shaped) Pythagorean Y, the meeting of Three Ways. Those who are not ready pass through the Gate on the dark side of the Moon facing Earth and there await reincarnation. Those who are sufficiently enlightened pass through the Gate on the light side of the Moon and arrive in the Elysian Fields in the realm of the Sun, and thereby escape the cycle of reincarnation. Some say that the higher mind can be mortal or immortal, depending on how it directs itself, upward or downward. According to the Pythagoreans, you can harmonize your mind with the World Mind by thinking the right thoughts and thereby keep it from dissolution at death.

The process of returning to the Earth, Moon and Sun at death corresponds to the alchemical dissolution into Salt, Quicksilver and Sulphur, for Sulphur, the Fiery Principle, corresponds to the higher mind, which is joined to the body, corresponding to Salt, by the soul or breath-spirit, corresponding to Quicksilver (Moist like Air). In this case Quicksilver is the intermediate Harmonia that connects the extremes of mind and matter. (We have [already seen](#) that the primary opposites Sulphur and Quicksilver may unite in Salt.)

Purification by Fire

There is a very old idea, predating even the Zoroastrians, which is that the soul of the deceased goes first to the nearest Fire, and from there to the stars, Moon, Sun, and finally to Beginningless Light. This path is mimicked in the symbolic death of initiation, which suggests (as in alchemy) that the soul must ascend through the Planetary Spheres before it can come to the Isles of the Blessed, for the Pythagoreans say the Sun and Moon are the Isles of the Blessed (*hai Makarôn Nêsoi*). (This is the cosmology of Anaximander, also known to the Zoroastrians, which places the Sun and Moon above the Planets and other "stars.") Generally Platonists believe that the Planets aid in the ascent, but Plutarch's account suggests that some trial must be passed, and a Pythagorean dictum says, "the Planets are the Dogs of Persephone" (i.e. the Guards of the Underworld, also recalling the Dogs of Hekate; [see below](#)).

However, before the soul can ascend through the spheres, it must be purified by Fire. One must descend into Darkness to find the source of Light; one must die in order to be reborn. Thus heroization occurs through an actual or symbolic death by Fire. This is because Fire is purifying; it burns away the transient and imperfect, thereby freeing the soul and immortalizing it. By descent through the Crater of Rebirth, the initiate arrives at World Axis, which gives simultaneous access to the Heavens and the Underworld. There in the Earth's Fiery Womb he or she may be purified by Fire in preparation for rebirth. The passage through Fire is a means of uniting with the universe, which is a Cosmic Fire according to Heraclitus. Fire rises to the heavens, where it becomes the essence of the stars and of lightning. Since lightning is Celestial Fire, the purest form of Fire, it is the most potent force for heroization, and we read that Pythagoras ascended to heaven after being struck by lightning. (He had been initiated previously in a Cretan cave by means of a ritual *Keraunios Lithos* or Lightning Stone.)

Heat is the Power that Separates and Fire is its Element. Therefore, according to Zoroastrian tradition, the Hero is the one who can make the perilous Hero's Journey and survive an ordeal by Fire and molten metal (flowing fire = Water + Fire). This trial takes place at the entry to the Bridge of the Separator under the oversight of Mazdah, for He is known as The Separator.

Empedocles and the Bronze Sandal

According to tradition, Empedocles ended his last earthly incarnation by jumping into the Crater of Etna, the Sicilian volcano which the Greeks and Romans viewed as a pillar reaching to heaven from the underworld. Diodorus of Sicily (8.75) wrote,

"Thou, Empedocles, didst purify thy body with the Living Flame,
and Fire didst thou drink out from Immortal Craters."

Diodorus elsewhere wonders if in fact "he leapt into the Craters of Fire and drank of Life."

There is considerable evidence (discussed in detail by [Kingsley](#)) that Empedocles was learned in the magic of Hekate, who

grants ritual purification. Her mysteries are said to have been established by Orpheus, and She was key to the process of rebirth in the Orphic Rites on Samothrace. In a scene which borders on comedy, after Empedocles disappeared into the volcano's mouth, it belched out a single bronze sandal. However, a single bronze sandal is a common sign of Hekate and Her devotees, for bronze is closely connected with the Underworld and is used to invoke Hekate. It may be worn or held by magicians as an emblem of their ability to descend into Tartaros; such a sign is given by the Goddess to Her initiates: the "Bronze Sandal of the Holder of Tartaros." Further, Hekate is called by sounding bronze, and bronze cutting tools are under Her auspices; bronze represents the full moon. Therefore it is significant that Empedocles was known as "Bronze Foot," for that shows him to be a devotee of the Goddess. (Pythagoras' Golden Thigh has a similar meaning.) Likewise, Hekate Herself is sometimes said to have a single bronze leg.

Bronze is also connected to the alchemy of smiths, and we are reminded that magical smiths, such as Hephaistos, often have distorted feet, as do the gnomes, who bring forth metals from the Womb of Mother Earth. Like gnomes, the Daktuloi, Telkhines and Kabeiroi are subterranean dwarves. The Kabeiroi are called Crabs (*Karkinoi*) because of Their cockeyed walk, yet the grass beneath Their feet is ignited by Their magical dance. Hekate Herself is called Donkey Foot. Finally Kerényi (*Heroes* 248) remarks that the *Monosandalos* (Man with One Sandal) is an uncanny being, often with an Underworld connection, for he has left one sandal in the Underworld as a sign of allegiance to it. (Recall the myth of Jason arriving *Monosandalos* in Iolkos.)

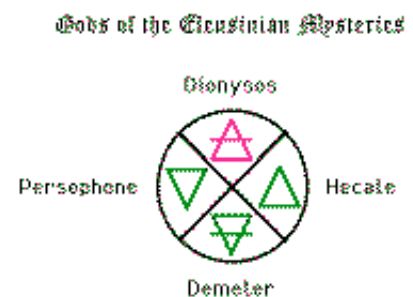
Hekate the Keyholder

In the Descent to the Underworld the Magus must invoke and meet Hekate (Fire) as well as Persephone (Water). Like Persephone, Hekate is a mediator between our world and the Underworld; She is the Keyholder and Gatekeeper of the sacred regions; She is called the Lady of Tartaros, *Phulada* (Guardian), *Propulaia* (Before the Gates), *Kleidophoros* (Key-bearer) and *Kleidoukhos* (Key-holder, Priestess).

Hekate also holds the keys that unlock the uterus and facilitate birth, and the keys to both death and rebirth, which takes place through the *Mukhos* (Hidden Place) of Hekate on the Moon ([see above](#)). Thus She is called "Child-nourishing" in Her role as Nurse of Rebirth. Hekate is the source of souls and their final destination, a birth Goddess and a death Goddess, for She oversees the transition of the soul into the body and back out of it.

Hekate is called *Sôteira* (Savior) and has a prominent role in the Eleusinian Mysteries, for Zeus sends Her to bring the Maiden back from Hades, which happens each year, according to some ancient authors. Thus She is preeminently the Goddess who may lead us back from the Underworld. The principal Gods of the Eleusinian Mysteries are Demeter (Earth), Persephone (Water), Dionysos (Air) and Hekate (Fire).

When Hades seized Persephone He carried Her underground in Sicily, which is hollow and has rivers of fire flowing under it. Therefore Zeus gave Sicily to Persephone as a wedding gift; Their marriage was celebrated there ever after, and there was a sanctuary of Hekate, Demeter and Persephone in Sicily. Hence, Sicily, and especially Mt. Etna, are home to many Underworld mysteries and the source of many Pythagorean magical ideas. Of course, much more could be said about Hekate and Her magic, but this is not the place for it.



Examples of Heroization

I will mention several other examples of heroization in the Greek tradition (there are many). According to Kerényi (*Heroes* 141, 144-5), at least ten of Heracles' Labors represent the conquering of Death, the most obvious being the fetching of Kerberos, the Dog of Hades. By these Labors he earned his name (*Hêra-klês* = *Hêra's Glory*) and proved his worthiness to ascend to Olympus and to be adopted by Her. When his Heroic status was proved, he built his own funeral pyre and ascended it, thus continuing the fiery purification initiated by the Robe of Nessos. The process of divinization was completed by a lightning bolt from his father Zeus, which "burned away the parts different from Zeus" and allowed his ascent. Although Heracles is often viewed as a mindless muscleman, for the Pythagoreans and many other ancient Greeks He was the archetype of the Spiritual Hero, and the "Imitation of Heracles" (*Imitatio Herculi*) was the basic path of spiritual development.

Dionysos is the archetypal Hero in Greek religion. I have [already mentioned](#) how He was cooked by the Titans and later blasted by Zeus's Lightning while still in Semele's womb. After she was incinerated by Zeus's Fire, her Divine Child Dionysos (Lord of Moist Nature) descended into the Underworld through the Lernean Swamp to rescue His mother and raise Her into Heaven. Thus She was called *Herois* (Heroine) in certain secret rites at Delphi, and Dionysos is called the Liberator (Pater Liber - Father Freedom - to the Romans).

Asklepios the Healer was doubly purified by Fire. When Koronis was pregnant with him by Apollo, she took another lover, and so Apollo (corresponding to the Sun's Fire) shot her dead with His arrows; while she burned on the pyre, the God rescued the infant Asklepios from her womb. (Koronis, "Crow," is a dark, Underworld Goddess corresponding to Persephone and therefore

Water. See Kerényi, *Gods of Greeks*, 271.) Later Asklepios brought a person back from the Underworld, for which deed Zeus blasted him with His Lightning and made him a God.

The well-known "Mithras Liturgy" in the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM IV.475-829) is a late example of an immortalization ritual, primarily addressed to Helios and focused on Fire. In the Ascent of the Soul (*Psukhês Anagôgê*) in Chaldean Theurgy, the Purification of the Spirit Body is followed by the Elevation of Soul in five stages corresponding to the Elements: symbolic burial (Earth), dissolution (Water), breathing exercises (Air), ascent on the rays of the Sun (Fire) and immortalization (Quintessence). The Hermetic traditions and Spiritual Alchemy teach similar methods of heroization.

Summary

We have seen that Fire is the primary agent of transformation, for it represents the power to impose a self-determining form. This power has its origin in the Central Fire of Hades, which is associated with Hephaistos, the Craftsman skilled in Alchemy, and with Hekate, who holds the Keys to the Womb of Rebirth. The path to the Central Fire is through the Crater, where Fire and Water are united in Harmonia. For the worthy, Heroization by Fire provides an escape from the cycle of reincarnation and a passage to the Isles of the Blessed.

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The Ancient Greek Esoteric Doctrine of the Elements:

Isopsephia of Elements

[Isopsêphia](#) (Greek gematria) is the practice of computing the number denoted by a Greek word, for each Greek letter has an numerical value. The numerical value of a Greek word can be reduced to a single digit by adding the digits of its value. [Here the Greek Words are transcribed in [Betacodes](#), with accents omitted.]

Earth = 1

The words HRA (Hêra), XQWN (*Khthôn*, Earth) and H GH (*hê Gê*, the Earth) all reduce to 1. (These are all names used by Empedocles for Earth.)

Water = 3

The words NHSTIS (Nêstis), QALATTA (*Thalatta*, Sea Water), O PONTOS (*ho Pontos*, the Open Sea), O OMBROS (*ho Ombros*, the Water), FERREFATTA (Pherrephatta, a poetic form of Persephonê), AFRODITH (Aphroditê), DUNAMIS (*Dunamis*, Power) and NEFQUS (Nephthys) all reduce to 3. (Except for Dunamis, Pherrephatta, Aphroditê and Nephthys, these are all names used by Empedocles for Water.)

Air = 9

The words H AHR (the *Aêr*), O AIQHR (the *Aithêr*), ZEUS (Zeus) and OURANOS (*Ouranos*, Heaven) all reduce to 9. (These are all names used by Empedocles for Air.) Related words that reduce to 9 include PNEUMA (*Pneuma*, Spirit) and TO PNEUMATIKON OXHMA (*to Pneumatikon Okhêma*, the Spirit Vehicle).

Fire = 12 (3)

The words HLIOS (Hêlios, Sun), AIDWNEUS (Aidôneus, Hades), HFAISTOS (Hêphaistos) and HLEKTWR (*Êlektôr*, the Beaming Sun) all reduce to 3. (Except for Hêphaistos, these are names used by Empedocles to refer to Fire). A related words that reduces to 3 is TO AUGOEIDES SWMA (*to Augoeides Sôma*, the Radiant Body).

Notice that the words for Fire reduce to 3 as do the words for Water, which shows their close connection. However, if we sum the digits for the Fire words but do not reduce them, they all sum to 12, which is not in general true for the Water words. Therefore, for the elements Earth, Water, Air, Fire we get one of the forms of the Pythagorean Tetraktus: 1, 3, 9, 12.



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