


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The anthropomorphism of Hestia: reconsidering the early Greek sources

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Abstract

This article revisits the mainstream scholarly view that the Greek Hestia is the least anthropomorphic deity among the Olympians, an idea that owes much to a short reference to her in Plato's *Phaedrus*. The analysis is based on textual and visual sources from the Archaic period: I first review two references to Hestia in early hexameter poetry, in Hesiod's *Theogony* and in the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite*, before turning to the depiction of her in two early Attic black-figure vases, the Sophilos dinos at the British Museum and the François vase, which have been neglected in discussing Hestia's anthropomorphic nature in early Greek thought. While the study of individual Greek gods has returned to the fore in the field of Greek religion in the last 20 years, it seems that not enough has changed in the current conceptualization of Hestia.

Keywords: Hestia; anthropomorphism; Greek gods; text and image

1. Introduction

Hestia is the Greek goddess related to the hearth, symbolically located in the middle, as the fire at the centre of the house. She is sometimes regarded as one of the 12 Olympians; sometimes, as for example on the east frieze of the Parthenon, Dionysus takes her place.¹ Hestia is quite unique among the Olympians in that her name invokes at the same time the hearth as an object and the goddess. This might at times lead some editors to disagree as to whether 'Hestia' should be printed with a capital letter or not, depending on whether they understand the word as referring to the hearth or the goddess.² While it would appear that because of her connection to the hearth Hestia has a significant role in Greek religion, she is at the moment the most poorly studied of the 12 Olympian gods. Often enough the reason given for this neglect is that she is the least anthropomorphic god in the Greek pantheon.³ Hestia is undeniably a goddess with very little mythology. From small pieces of information about cult practices in both civic and private settings, what mostly characterizes Hestia is precisely the hearth's symbolic location in the centre. But is she really the least anthropomorphic Greek god?

¹ On the 12 gods and the many local variations, see Long (1987); Dowden (2007); Rutherford (2010).

² As, for example, on whether to capitalize Hestia in Eur. Alc. 162.

³ On the anthropomorphism of Greek gods see Henrichs (2010), and on the conflict between seeing the gods as powers (Vernant) or persons (Burkert), see Versnel (2011) 23–36. The comparative work of Bonnet et al. (2017) takes Vernant's view as its starting point to further explore Greek (and other) divinities.

This article will review and revisit the assessment that, in the Archaic period, Hestia is the least anthropomorphic goddess, little more than an immobile personification of the hearth, which, as we shall see, is currently a standard view. For my purposes, I understand personification to mean ‘the anthropomorphic representation of any non-human thing’.⁴ In Hestia’s case, the ‘non-human thing’ is an object, the hearth. The term ‘anthropomorphic’ should be further explained in this context as indicating something with human form, personality or characteristics. Seen as such, ‘anthropomorphic’ can at times be juxtaposed to the category of animal (as in ‘zoomorphic’ or ‘theriomorphic’), particularly in now mostly outdated conceptions about the evolution of Greek gods from theriomorphic to anthropomorphic. At other times, and especially in relation to Hestia, ‘anthropomorphic’ often implies a contrast to more abstract, inanimate or aniconic forms of the divine. Needless to say, personification is quite varied in Greek contexts and can in fact serve as an umbrella term for similar but not identical phenomena.⁵

My analysis will first draw attention to how 20th-century scholarship on Hestia owes much, one might say even too much, to a short reference in Plato. Such texts are often considered definitive, to the extent that scholars neglect other equally significant and earlier sources, whether texts or images. In what follows, I review some textual and visual sources on Hestia from the Archaic period, beginning with two references to her in early hexameter poetry, in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. From there I turn to the visual material and focus on the representation of Hestia in two Attic black-figure vases from the early sixth century, which to my mind have been neglected in discussing Hestia’s anthropomorphic nature in early Greek thought.

The discussion of textual and visual sources side by side, without assuming the precedence of the former over the latter, is intended to make a point about the methodology of primary sources in the study of Greek gods and their myths.⁶ Also, the focus on sources about Hestia from the Archaic period provides support for the idea that Greek gods do not remain unaltered over time. On the contrary, there is something to be gained by combining a synchronic and a diachronic analysis. I use the term ‘Archaic period’ to mark a point in time, so to speak, with the texts and vases providing a *grosso modo* synchronic view of Hestia, even if they are about 100 years apart. With Plato we are clearly in the Classical period and therefore moving to a diachronic analysis, but also, as I shall argue, to a source that is apparently quite unique in its representation of the goddess. Furthermore, the discussion about Hestia’s anthropomorphism draws on, and aims to contribute to, the ongoing discussion about the nature of Greek gods as either powers or persons. In Hestia’s case, too, variety and not opposition is suggested as the way forward, or, to put it differently, ‘different forms of representation coexisted peacefully in any given epoch’.⁷ Therefore, the allegedly ‘least anthropomorphic Greek goddess’ might have something to say about personification more generally and about the variety and lack of a canon in how Greek sources imagine the divine.

⁴ Stafford and Herrin (2005) xix.

⁵ As Stafford and Herrin (2005) xix note, personification may include: ‘natural phenomena (earth, sky, rivers), places (cities, countries), divisions of time (seasons, months, a lifetime), states of the body (health, sleep, death), emotions (love, envy, fear), and political concepts (victory, democracy, war)’, and these may ‘all appear in human, often female, form’. For the personification of abstract concepts, see Stafford (2000); for personification in relation to the *polis*, primarily but not only in Greek art, see Smith (2011), as well as the introductory comments in Bonanno (2019) 65–68.

⁶ For a similar combination of textual and visual sources in the analysis of Greek myth, following a method that also considers questions of chronology, synchronicity and diachronicity, see Konstantinou (2015a) about the myth of the heroine Io.

⁷ Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel (1999) 215–28, quotation from p. 215.

II. Hestia's anthropomorphism: from the 20th century to Plato

Scholarship on Hestia was heavily influenced over the last 50 years by the analysis of Jean-Pierre Vernant on Hestia and Hermes, and the two gods' relation to space and movement.⁸ Vernant argues that, since their realms of influence were movement and space, Hestia and Hermes formed a couple in the religious beliefs of the Greeks. Hestia is imagined as immobile and stable, fixed at the centre of the house, while Hermes belongs to the exterior and public world of movement and transactions in the *polis*. In the years since its first publication, this work became a classic on how to study Greek gods. At the same time, Vernant's analysis of Hestia has received criticism, particularly from an archaeological perspective.⁹ We now know that in Greek houses dating from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period a fixed (or circular) hearth was often the exception, not the rule, since apparently hearths as cooking places moved around regularly.¹⁰ We must therefore look elsewhere to better understand why Hestia might embody static immobility. One possible avenue is that her ability to centre space is primarily a *timē*, a 'divine privilege'.¹¹ Such a suggestion would disconnect Hestia's fixity from her gender, meaning that the goddess should no longer be understood to exemplify women's domesticity and their supposed lack of mobility in Athenian society. Another alternative, which I hope to explore further in the future, is to understand Hestia's fixity as part of the lived experience of people in relation to the hearth. The hearth itself may move around from time to time, but once ablaze, people often stand fixed, whether as individuals or as a group, *around* a burning hearth. But let us return, for now, to the question of Hestia's anthropomorphism.

Apart from Vernant's study, Hestia has been studied much less than the other Olympians. Therefore, anyone interested in her role and function in ancient Greece turns in the first place to reference works such as Walter Burkert's monumental *Greek Religion* as well as to the shorter encyclopaedic entries about her, such as that by Jon D. Mikalson in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.¹² As we shall see, in such works Hestia is often proclaimed to be the least anthropomorphic goddess and presented as an immobile personification of the hearth. In fact, this is the standard description of Hestia in many 20th-century scholarly works, both recent and older. The textual source often adduced in support of this view is a short reference to Hestia in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

Burkert classifies Hestia under 'lesser gods', in a group designated as 'the remainder of the pantheon'. These gods are distinct from the main Olympians, who are discussed in a separate chapter, where they are analysed separately under the heading 'individual gods'. Hestia receives a single paragraph, which describes quite briefly her connection to the ancient Greek family, since the hearth stands in the centre of the house. Burkert also mentions her presence in the communal hearth at the prytaneion and at the temple of Delphi.¹³ However, his overall analysis of Hestia focuses on the negative, on what Hestia is not: not as anthropomorphic as the other gods and not as mobile. Burkert writes: 'The power worshipped in the hearth never fully developed into a person; since the hearth is immovable Hestia is unable to take part even in the procession of the gods, let alone in the other antics of the Olympians'.¹⁴

We owe this idea about Hestia not being able to take part in the procession of the gods to Plato's *Phaedrus*, which Burkert mentions in his footnote. In discussing the immortality

⁸ Vernant (1963), tr. in Vernant (2006) 157–96.

⁹ On how Vernant's analysis stands in comparison to the representation of space in Greek art, see Dietrich (2011).

¹⁰ See Foxhall (2007) and Tsakirgis (2007). See also Foxhall (2020), especially 93–99.

¹¹ Konstantinou (2016) and (2018) 28–34.

¹² Burkert (1985) and Mikalson (2020).

¹³ I have written on Hestia at Delphi (article forthcoming in *Mouseion*).

¹⁴ Burkert (1985) 170.

of the soul, Plato points out that, unlike humans, the gods are able to move their chariots upwards to heaven. Riding on a winged chariot, Zeus is imagined as leading the procession of the 12 gods towards the heavens, where each one of them stands. This procession excludes Hestia, the only deity to stay behind, in the house (*Phdr.* 246e4–247a4):

ὁ μὲν δὴ μέγας ἡγεμὼν ἐν οὐρανῷ Ζεὺς, ἐλαύνων πτηνὸν ἄρμα, πρῶτος πορεύεται, διακοσμῶν πάντα καὶ ἐπιμελούμενος· τῷ δ' ἔπεται στρατιά θεῶν τε καὶ δαιμόνων, κατὰ ἑνδεκα μέρη κεκοσμημένη· μένει γάρ Ἑστία ἐν θεῶν οἴκῳ μόνη· τῶν δὲ ἄλλων ὅσοι ἐν τῷ τῶν δώδεκα ἀριθμῷ τεταγμένοι θεοὶ ἄρχοντες ἡγοῦνται κατὰ τάξιν ἢν ἕκαστος ἐτάχθη.

Zeus, the great leader in heaven, goes first, driving a winged chariot, arranging everything and giving heed; he is followed by an army of gods and daemons, arranged in 11 parts. For Hestia alone stays in the house of the gods; the other gods who are included among the 12, having been appointed as chiefs, lead at the station to which each one was assigned.¹⁵

This short description in the *Phaedrus* becomes over time a source of paramount importance in discussions of Hestia's immobility. Indeed, Macrobius in the fifth century CE understands Hestia in this passage to represent the earth, which remains unmoved in this cosmic order.¹⁶ Yet for Burkert, as well as for others, Plato's passage can also tell us something about Hestia's anthropomorphism. It is precisely Hestia's relation to the hearth (as an object) that allegedly preserves her worship as a power and not as a person, or, to put it another way, Hestia is imagined as little more than the personification of the hearth, an identification that prevents her from acquiring a mythology of her own. The second point Burkert raises in relation to this passage concerns Hestia's mobility: in his view, the hearth as immovable object affects, and in fact reproduces, the immobility of Hestia as an anthropomorphic goddess. In other words, the hearth as a non-anthropomorphic entity, as an object, is conceived as limited in movement.

We find a similar view about Hestia's lack of movement as a personification in Mikalson's entry on her in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*: 'Although one of the twelve Olympians, Hestia has little mythology, unable as she was to leave the house. She is not mentioned by Homer, for whom ἱστία is simply "fireplace"'. Hestia's lack of mythology is, here too, related to her apparent immobility. Yet because Mikalson does not mention the passage in Plato's *Phaedrus*, his treatment creates the impression that this immobility is a constant feature of Hestia. I return to Plato's Hestia in my conclusion.

Burkert and Mikalson are far from exceptional in thinking that Hestia is not quite anthropomorphic. Such views go back to L.R. Farnell's *Cults of the Greek States*, whose fifth volume, first published in 1909, provides a detailed analysis of the cult of Hestia. From the outset, Farnell states that: 'Being the least anthropomorphic of Hellenic divinities, [Hestia] appears to be the product of that period of animistic belief that may everywhere have preceded a more precise anthropomorphism'.¹⁷ This evolutionary model is also evident in the following pages and pervades his analysis, which returns several times to the idea that Hestia retained her presence as a 'pre-anthropomorphic' perception of the hearth and 'not as a personal individual', presumably because 'she could not emerge and develop into a

¹⁵ Here and elsewhere, translations from the Greek are my own. For the translation of the last phrase in the quoted passage, see also Yunis (2011) 140.

¹⁶ Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.23, to which we owe the text of Eur. *TrGF* 944, which also connects Hestia with the earth.

¹⁷ Farnell (1909) 345. For a similar contemporary view, see Allen and Sikes (1904) 417: 'Hestia is one of the divinities of Greek cult which never became completely personified'. For two important mid-19th-century views about Hestia by Fustel de Coulanges (1864) and Preuner (1864), see the discussion in Delthoff (2003) 1–8.

free personality with an individual and complex character or history, like Artemis or Athena'.¹⁸ And while Farnell entertains the idea that Hestia has 'a more real personage' in popular religion than in state cult or ritual, in the end he concedes that 'neither the literature nor the art enables us to affirm that Hestia had a strong personal hold upon the minds of the people'.¹⁹

Similar views about Hestia's anthropomorphism were voiced by other influential scholars from the turn of the 20th century onwards, as is evident in the work of Martin Nilsson,²⁰ and as we have seen this continues to be the consensus view in more recent scholarship of the last couple of decades.²¹ Ultimately, what scholars have to say about Hestia as a goddess is often linked to their assumptions about an alleged evolution of Greek gods towards anthropomorphism, a feature that in their view distinguishes Greek religion from other ancient religious phenomena of the Mediterranean basin. Examining this claim would far exceed the scope of this article; I am only mentioning it insofar as the discussion about Hestia's form and nature seems to echo scholarly attitudes about this fundamental question concerning the nature and evolution of the Greek gods.

One important aspect of the anthropomorphism of Greek gods is their movement. According to T.B.L. Webster, who argues that personification is a mode of thought in ancient Greece and that we may find in early Greek thought 'a continuous battle between the tendency to personify and the opposite tendency to schematize', one of the following three human qualities has to be present for a personification to qualify as such: '(a) physical life and movement, (b) mental powers and feelings, (c) bodily appearance as a man or woman'.²² Hestia's alleged immobility as the personification of the hearth, and Plato's story of her staying behind in the house while the other gods ride their chariots up to heaven, produces a seemingly contradictory concept of an anthropomorphic goddess that is nevertheless immobile. How do the sources at our disposal address this apparent contradiction? To tackle this question, I take a closer look at the representation of Hestia in textual and visual sources from the Archaic period.

III. Anthropomorphic Hestia in early hexameter poetry

How far back in time can we trace this idea that we see in Plato that Hestia does not leave the house? In attempting to go back in time we must first turn to early hexameter poetry, to Homer and Hesiod. After all, Herodotus (2.53) refers to them as the religious authority that described the gods, brought forth the stories of their birth, and gave gods their names, honours and fields of expertise.²³ While it appears that Hestia is not presented as a personified goddess in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*,²⁴ Hesiod's *Theogony* preserves her genealogy

¹⁸ Farnell (1909) 363, 362, 364.

¹⁹ Farnell (1909) 364.

²⁰ See Nilsson (1940) 75–76: 'Hestia was never wholly anthropomorphized ... for Hestia herself was not a full-fledged personality but only a pale personification', and his more pronounced opinion in Nilsson (1949) 127: 'Hestia remained attached to the hearth; she was only incompletely anthropomorphized into a goddess'.

²¹ See, among others, Fischer-Hansen (1990) 412: 'V[esta] has early roots in Rome and Latium, and the parallel or juxtaposition between V[esta] and Hestia which is often suggested is not valid in all aspects, although one point should be noted—namely that Hestia also did not achieve a full anthropomorphic conception' (emphasis added); Larson (2007) 161: 'In spite of her great antiquity and her status as an Olympian god, Hestia remained one of the least anthropomorphic of Greek deities, without a fully developed mythology'. Richardson (2010) 227 is more cautious: 'Hestia ... never really acquired a mythological life of her own'.

²² Webster (1954) 10. See also the discussion in Dietrich (1988).

²³ On theology in Homer and Hesiod, see Graziosi (2016). On the gods in Homer more generally, see Pironti and Bonnet (2017) and Gagné and Herrero de Jáuregui (2019).

²⁴ For the word ἱστῖη (*histiē*) mentioned as part of a formulaic oath, see Hom. *Od.* 14.158–59, 17.155–56, 19.303–04, 20.231–32 and the discussion in Gonzáles García (2010), with some caution about his final conclusions.

and the story that Cronus swallowed her together with her siblings, to avoid being overthrown by them (*Theog.* 453–500). The *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, one of the earliest Homeric hymns that we have, dating to some time in the seventh century,²⁵ mentions her together with Athena and Artemis as one of the three goddesses who remain virgin, refusing the famous ‘presents’ of Aphrodite (*Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 21–32).

These two passages might create the wrong impression that early hexameter poetry contains many and rich references to Hestia. Unfortunately, this is hardly the case. Each one of these sources stands out as a rare exception that provides a snapshot, so to speak, of Hestia’s myth, precisely because we do not have many other sources about her. And yet, neither of these two early sources implies that Hestia might be considered less anthropomorphic than the other Olympians.

In Hesiod, Hestia is the firstborn child of Rhea and Cronus. The poet mentions her first, in the same line as two other goddesses: Ἰστίην Δήμητρα καὶ Ἥρην χρυσοπέδιλον (‘Hestia, Demeter and gold-sandalled Hera’, *Theog.* 454). As soon as each of Cronus’ children was born, their father swallowed them in order to preserve his authority (459–62).²⁶ In this textual image, the fact that Hestia is swallowed like the rest of the Olympians creates the impression that her conceptualization as an anthropomorphic goddess is no different from how the poet thought about her siblings Demeter, Hera, Hades, Poseidon and even Zeus. When, later on in the story, Zeus overpowers Cronus and frees his siblings, the stone which Rhea had given to Cronus instead of the newborn Zeus is the one to be vomited first: πρῶτον δ’ ἐξήμησε λίθον, πύματον καταπίνων (‘and he first disgorged the stone, which he swallowed down last’, 497).²⁷ This stone, which we might assume was aniconic and non-anthropomorphic, was later placed at Delphi by Zeus, to be a sign and source of marvel for mankind (498–50). It would therefore appear that, at least for Hesiod, this stone and not Hestia is the aniconic, non-anthropomorphic feature in this story.

Hestia is also mentioned in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. The poet presents Hestia sitting in the middle of the house and receiving offerings (καί τε μέσῳ οἴκῳ κατ’ ἄρ’ ἔζετο πῖαρ ἐλοῦσα, ‘and she sat in the middle of the house taking the fat’, 30), but she is first mentioned together with Athena and Artemis, as one of the goddesses who maintain their virginity and avoid Aphrodite.²⁸ The text marks this digression with a ring composition (7, 33) which separates the three virgin goddesses from Aphrodite and her sexual allure, yet in essence does not differentiate between them. All three remain outside the realm of Aphrodite. The hymn also mentions that Hestia was courted by Poseidon and Apollo (24). While this is possibly an ad hoc innovation,²⁹ the very idea of courtship strengthens the argument that the poet had in mind an anthropomorphic goddess, even if, ultimately, she sits immobile in the middle of the house. Accordingly, the hymn does not imply that Hestia is somehow less anthropomorphic than Artemis or Athena.

To sum up, Hesiod’s *Theogony* and the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* provide no indication that Hestia might be in any respect different from her siblings or even from the rest of the 12 Olympians in her conceptualization as an anthropomorphic goddess. Nor is her mythology in this early hexameter poetry inferior or lesser in terms of content in comparison to that of the other gods mentioned in the same passages. Hestia may be virtually absent as a goddess from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but so are certain other gods,

²⁵ Whether the hymn should be dated to the first or second half of the seventh century is a matter of controversy, ultimately related to the (relative) dating of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. See discussion in Faulkner (2008) 47–50; Richardson (2010) 30; Douglas Olson (2012) 10–15.

²⁶ For the text and its Near Eastern origins, see West (1966) 290–93, while Kajava (2004) 1–3 also discusses Hestia’s anthropomorphic nature in Hesiod.

²⁷ See also West (1966) 302–03.

²⁸ The hymn mentions the three goddesses as follows: Athena appears first in *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 9–15, Artemis second in ll. 16–20, Hestia third, in ll. 21–32.

²⁹ Faulkner (2008) 107–09; Richardson (2010) 227.

such as Demeter and Dionysus. The reason for Hestia's absence is therefore not necessarily related to her alleged lack of anthropomorphism. The following section will turn to two early black-figure vases and their anthropomorphic representation of Hestia.

IV. Anthropomorphic Hestia on the move in early black-figure vases

In addition to the references to Hestia in Archaic poetry, Haiganuch Sarian mentions that the goddess is depicted on four black-figure vase paintings,³⁰ to which we can now add a fifth: a Nikosthenic pyxis found at the sanctuary of Artemis on Samos and now at the Vathy Museum in Samos.³¹ This is a small number of vases, yet my argument rests not on quantity but on Hestia's anthropomorphic representation therein. The following discussion will focus on two of these black-figure vases that depict the goddess at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. The wedding between a goddess and a human represented a good opportunity for early artists to present the divine family and their entourage.³² The scene probably represents the *epaulia*, conducted on the day after the wedding, during which the wedding presents were given, accompanied by songs and dances.³³ Hestia is depicted as one of the deities who take part in this procession. We can identify her with certainty because the name Hestia is inscribed on both vases.³⁴ As in the case of hexameter poetry discussed above, the artists of these two famous vases give no indication that Hestia's anthropomorphism is in any respect different from that of the rest of the deities depicted in the scene. Yet it is not only the claim regarding anthropomorphism that is at issue here. It is of equal importance that the artists who painted these vases had no trouble depicting Hestia in a procession that is imagined as taking place outdoors and moving towards the house of Peleus. Hestia on the move, so to speak, is not an idea they found in the least troubling or contradictory.

The first vase is the dinos signed by Sophilos (the Erskine dinos), housed today at the British Museum, and dated ca. 580–570 BCE (fig. 1).³⁵ Sophilos is the earliest Attic vase painter whose name we know.³⁶ Hestia appears on the register which shows the procession in honour of the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. At the far right stands Peleus, at the entrance to a house watching the procession that approaches him. This is one of the earliest representations of a building in Attic black-figure painting. The goddess Iris, the messenger of the gods, leads the procession, followed by Hestia and Demeter, and Chariclo and Leto. A variety of other deities follow, some in a chariot. Hestia appears on another dinos signed by the same artist probably depicting the same procession scene. It was found on the Acropolis and is now at the National Museum in Athens;³⁷ yet since that vase also depicts the wedding of Peleus and Thetis but is now preserved only in fragments that do not allow reliable inferences, it will not be further discussed here.

The other early vase depicting Hestia at the wedding of Thetis and Peleus is the so-called François vase, today at the Archaeological Museum in Florence, dated to about a

³⁰ Sarian (1990) nos 3–6.

³¹ Beazley Archive Pottery Database (BAPD) 45105, colour photo in Tsakos and Viglaki-Sofianou (2012) 164–65 and 167. The main register depicts the procession of the gods at the apotheosis of Heracles, and Hestia is one of the divinities taking part. She is walking opposite Apollo and looking to the left towards Zeus. Her name is inscribed to the right of her face.

³² Carpenter (1991) 35–48.

³³ Hedreen (2015) 169.

³⁴ On the literacy of Sophilos based on these inscriptions, see Kilmer and Develin (2001) and the linguistic analysis in Hawkins (2012). On the inscriptions on the François vase, see Wachter (1991).

³⁵ London, British Museum 1971.1101.1; BAPD 350099.

³⁶ On Sophilos and his two dinoi depicting the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, see Boardman (1974) 18–19; Beazley (1986) 16–18; Osborne (1998) 88–91.

³⁷ Athens, National Museum Acropolis collection 1.587; BAPD 305074.



Fig. 1. Anthropomorphic Hestia on the Sophilos dinos. British Museum 1971, 1101.1. ©The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 2. Anthropomorphic Hestia on the François vase. Florence, Museo Archeologico, 4209.

decade after the dinos by Sophilos, *ca.* 570 BCE, and signed by the potter Ergotimos and the painter Kleitias (fig. 2).³⁸ The wedding is presented on the main band at the belly, running round the whole vase. The dinos by Sophilos and the François vase are often discussed together, especially regarding their similar depiction of the wedding and the procession.³⁹ Here again Peleus stands at the far right of the composition, between two columns at the entrance to a house, opposite the approaching procession of the gods; and here again Hestia is one of the gods at the head of the procession, which is led by Iris and Chiron. On the François vase Hestia is walking beside Demeter and Chariclo, with the three deities sharing a large mantle.

In discussing these two vases and their representation of the gods, Thomas Carpenter dismisses Hestia's depiction in two short sentences: 'These are two rare appearances of Hestia in ancient art. She has little mythology and almost no iconography'.⁴⁰ True, the mythology of Hestia is sparse and, as Sarian also shows, so is her iconography.⁴¹ But scant as her mythology may be, this does not necessarily imply that Hestia is less anthropomorphic than the other Olympians. After all, when later in the same chapter Carpenter discusses Ares, who also has little mythology and is hard to identify on vase paintings, since he is often depicted as an ordinary warrior, he seems less keen on dismissing Ares entirely as he does with Hestia.⁴² This is a pertinent comparison to Hestia, because in Homer Ares can be a metonym for battle, thus exemplifying somewhat differently the tension between the (name of the) god and the 'thing' (or concept), in his case 'war'.⁴³

Sophilos is the last in the first generation of early Attic black-figure painters. Unlike his predecessors, he shows an inventiveness in the handling of myth, which plays a greater role in his compositions than the mixture of myth and animals that we find in earlier artists.⁴⁴ It has been argued that this procession of gods to the house of Peleus is his own invention.⁴⁵ Almost a decade later, the François vase takes this new tendency in the depiction of myth one step further, by replacing the animal friezes with figures and by showing a rich variety of mythological figures. While the depiction of myth in these two scenes is quite innovative, it is still the case that the overall composition serves as an early introduction to the family of gods. It is therefore not surprising that many of the figures, including Hestia, lack distinguishing attributes here.⁴⁶ And similar to other gods, Hestia will continue to lack such attributes in the art of the following periods too.

More important for my argument, however, is what these early black-figure vases can tell us about how Hestia is conceived in the Archaic period, independently and also in conjunction with the textual sources discussed above. These vases suggest two important points. First, Hestia is depicted in these scenes as no less anthropomorphic than the rest of the divine entourage, as we have seen was the case with early hexameter poetry. In the scene representing the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, she may be less powerful or important than some of the other gods in the procession, who travel by chariot. Indeed, Hestia may have an 'atypical, complex or strained' relationship to Olympus,⁴⁷ yet there is no doubt that she is imagined and depicted as anthropomorphic. Second, the artists show

³⁸ Florence, Museo Archeologico Etrusco 4209; BAPD 300000, together with the updated and thorough discussion of the vase in Shapiro et al. (2013). See also Boardman (1974) 33–34; Beazley (1986) 24–35; Osborne (1998) 91–95.

³⁹ See, among others, Carpenter (1991) 35–48.

⁴⁰ Carpenter (1991) 36.

⁴¹ Sarian (1990).

⁴² Carpenter (1991) 41.

⁴³ On Ares in Homer see Loraux (1986); Wathélet (1992); Purves (2011).

⁴⁴ Boardman (1974) 18–19.

⁴⁵ Brownlee (1995) 367–68 on how Sophilos may depict familiar scenes in unusual ways and Alexandridou (2011) 42.

⁴⁶ Alexandridou (2011) 55.

⁴⁷ Hedreen (2015) 170.

that there is no difficulty or conflict in portraying Hestia during a procession, presumably outside the house, beside other gods and goddesses. In fact, Hestia is as mobile as the rest of the gods in the procession, or even more so than those who ride passively in a chariot while she walks. Nevertheless, because the passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* still seems to take precedence in analyses of Hestia's anthropomorphism and her alleged lack of mobility, the Sophilos dinos and François vase have not been examined with respect to what they can tell us about early Greek conceptions of her. Combining textual and visual sources in the analysis of Greek gods can greatly enhance our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

V. Conclusions

The preceding re-examination of Hestia's depiction in Plato's *Phaedrus*, in early hexameter poetry and in early Attic black-figure vases challenges the standard 20th-century view that Hestia is immobile and never leaves the house, because she is identified with the hearth. This idea appears to go back ultimately to Plato himself and should probably be regarded as a sign of his inventiveness in his creation of the chariot myth, as part of his discussion of the immortality of the soul. Webster suggests that in order to make the personification of the soul plausible, Plato colours it with a known legend.⁴⁸ Perhaps the detail about Hestia staying behind is a light-hearted comment made in passing, added to lend plausibility to the description of the celestial procession of the gods.⁴⁹ Indeed, one cannot rule out that Plato might have had in mind another meeting of the Olympians, in which one of them is left behind, such as that mentioned in *Iliad* 20.1–9, where all the gods assemble on Mount Olympus before the Theomachy, all except for Oceanus (*Il.* 20.7 νόσφ' Ὀκεανοῖο). All in all, far from suggesting a vaguely anthropomorphic and immobile Hestia, a primitive or pre-anthropomorphic Hestia as it were, the sources discussed present a different picture altogether, suggesting that in Archaic Greece Hestia can be both anthropomorphic and mobile. And it is significant that this picture emerges in both textual and visual sources, following a methodology that takes into account the full variety of sources available.

This is of course far from arguing that there is nothing in Hestia's relation to the hearth or the aniconic nature of her cult.⁵⁰ This relation is strong and is evident early on. One of the two *Homeric Hymns to Hestia* (24) mentions her in connection to Delphi and her importance there as the hearth. We saw above that the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (30) also places her in an honourable place in the middle, where she receives offerings. And we know from elsewhere that Hestia is the first and last to receive prayer and libation of wine.⁵¹

In the end, it seems that ancient sources may not be presenting a single, univocal conception of Hestia as a goddess. She may sometimes be imagined in anthropomorphic terms and sometimes as not much more than the hearth. The debate about the nature of the Greek gods as either powers or persons, so strongly argued in the past by Vernant and Burkert, must ultimately also include the possibility not only of opposition but of variety. As the re-examination of Hestia shows, aniconic and anthropomorphic notions of the divine can coexist synchronically in early Greek thought. Greek gods are not either powers or persons, they can be simultaneously both. This is in fact the view espoused by Henk Versnel.⁵² In addition to identifying and analysing inconsistencies in Greek religion,

⁴⁸ Webster (1954) 12–13.

⁴⁹ While Yunis (2011) 140 thinks that Hestia's staying at home might be related to her association with the earth, evident in other sources (such as Soph. *TrGF* 615 and Eur. *TrGF* 944), De Vries (1969) 131 does entertain the possibility that this is nothing more than 'a playful remark'.

⁵⁰ On the aniconic nature of domestic gods, including Hestia, see Gaifman (2012) 133–35.

⁵¹ For prayer, see Pl. *Cra.* 401b–d and Ar. *Av.* 864–5 (parody), and for libations, *Hymn. Hom.* 29.5–6.

⁵² Versnel (2011).

Versnel's work also throws light on how, even within the same text, we may find different and even contradictory attitudes about the gods.⁵³

The study of Hestia in the Archaic period thus invites a broader reconsideration of other individual Greek gods, especially those less often studied or considered 'lesser' deities, highlighting the need to re-examine even basic and commonplace assumptions about them. This is particularly important in the case of deities who are often identified as personifications. To take a single but telling example, we may compare Hestia to Gaia, who is frequently identified as 'a Greek personification of the earth as the basis of all existence'.⁵⁴ As Barbara Graziosi has recently argued, Gaia's nature in Hesiod's *Theogony* is rather fluid: 'quite what she is ... remains unclear. From her very appearance, Gaia seems to be both material earth and anthropomorphic goddess (*Th.* 116–18)'.⁵⁵ Further pertinent examples of deities who can be both anthropomorphic and the very 'thing' they signify include Iris, the personification of the rainbow or 'the deified rainbow',⁵⁶ or even Ares, the 'embodiment of the ambivalent (destructive but often useful) forces of war'.⁵⁷ In this respect, perhaps the poorly studied Hestia, commonly considered little more than a personification of the hearth, can point the way forward in the study of less commonly studied Greek gods, and thus lead to a better understanding of how their anthropomorphic aspects sit alongside more abstract ones.

This inconsistency, to use Versnel's term, of the Greek gods also touches upon the fact that Greek religion lacks canonicity, dogma and sacred texts. As the case of Hestia shows, the conception of who the gods are and how they may be depicted in textual and visual sources appears, at least for the Archaic period, to be an open issue that may be explored anew in every single source. This does not mean that poets and artists create their gods *ex nihilo*. But when, as we saw above, the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* mentions in passing that Hestia was courted by Poseidon and Apollo, a story that scholars now consider to be an ad hoc innovation (section III), it means that, theoretically at least, the poet could have mentioned other gods instead of these two, or for that matter, he could have equally created an altogether different aetiological story about Hestia's paramours that would justify her virginity. The audience of the hymn, we may assume, would probably not find this 'new' detail about Hestia in the least troubling or contradictory, for there was probably no 'early', 'original' or 'canonical' version of the story with which this detail could be in conflict.⁵⁸ Likewise in depicting the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the vase painters were presumably free to decide which deities took part.

Recognizing this lack of a canon in early Greek myth goes hand in hand with a more general critique of the idea of the primitive in the analysis of the Greek gods, as well as a steering away from earlier assumptions about their alleged evolution. Especially in critiquing the work of M.W. De Visser from the beginning of the 20th century, Richard Buxton notes:

⁵³ On the history of scholarship about the study of gods, and especially theology, see Kindt (2016) 12–34, with the caveats of Bonnet (2017).

⁵⁴ Graf (2006a).

⁵⁵ Graziosi (2016) 40–41.

⁵⁶ See Graf (2006b), with Xenophanes 21 B 32 DK and Pl. *Tht.* 155d.

⁵⁷ Graf (2012). In Homer, Ares can be a metonym for war as well as the anthropomorphized god whose body is wounded (by Diomedes at *Il.* 5.846–63 and later on by Athena at 21.391–406). For Ares in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, including a short discussion of abstract and anthropomorphic aspects of the god, see Konstantinou (2020a).

⁵⁸ I have explored elsewhere the question of innovation in mythological *exempla*: on Greek tragedy see Konstantinou (2015b), while on Greek comedy see Konstantinou (2020b), which focuses on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* 781–96, 805–20 and the *exempla* of Melanion and Timon. Needless to say, Homeric poetry is overall quite exceptional, on which see Finkelberg (2003).

Instead of the ‘triumph of anthropomorphism’ model ... it is preferable to use a model stressing the *coexistence* of multiple forms of divinity. Even at a late stage in its development, the language and practice of Greek religion could *simultaneously* exploit both anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic modes of representation.⁵⁹

Similar lines of argumentation have been put forward in recent years by other scholars as well, from the perspectives of placing the divine against the background of the primitive/aniconic and the zoomorphic/theriomorphic.⁶⁰ While the idea of the primitive in ancient Greek theology and the notion of the evolution of the Greek gods towards anthropomorphism is no longer prevalent in scholarly thought, the case of Hestia illustrates that once we focus on individual gods, especially the so-called ‘lesser’ gods, it appears that there is still need to revise their interpretation in a way that reflects the current mainstream rejection of evolutionism. In other words, the present study of Hestia highlights the need to reconsider certain basic aspects of the gods, especially ‘lesser’ or ‘minor’ deities, including personifications, where it appears that little has changed in the last 50 years.

In the Archaic period, Hestia not only receives cult as an aniconic figure but is also imagined as anthropomorphic and mobile. She can be the divine power related to the hearth, but she can also be the anthropomorphic goddess whom Cronus swallows, whom Apollo and Poseidon court, and who attends the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. The early Greek textual and visual sources, however meagre, show the variety and lack of a canon in the theological conception of Hestia. What these early sources apparently suggest is not one unaltered conception of Hestia as a divine figure. Instead, they point towards a complex and continuing process during which the early Greeks constantly try to put into words and images what they each imagine a Greek god may ultimately be.

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⁵⁹ Buxton (2009) 189 on De Visser (1903), emphasis in original. See also the discussion in Gaifman (2010).

⁶⁰ See Gaifman (2010) and Bremmer (2021), respectively. Bremmer (2021) 112–13 notes on this issue: ‘Whereas earlier generations of scholars preferred to think of a kind of evolution from theriomorphism to anthropomorphism in the case of the gods, I suggest we should think of an *internal development* in Greek religion that, however, was never *absolute*. *Anthropomorphic and theriomorphic shapes coexisted until the end of pagan religion*’ (emphasis added).

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