Chapter 3

Athena’s Divine Birth Priestesshood

I begin the exploration of what I propose were specific divine birth priestesshoods with an analysis of Athena and her female priests. In the Greek tradition, Athena was the goddess who most famously bore the cult title *Parthenos*. This is attested, for example, by the self-same epithet that accompanied her massive sculpture housed in the Parthenon at Athens in the classical period. I propose that this title points to an understanding of Athena’s original nature as a Virgin Mother and that this aspect of the goddess served as the model for the fertility practices of her specialized virgin priestesses.

A number of myths associated with Athena speak of figures who may be identified as her female priests engaging in *hieros gamos* unions with gods. I suggest that the resulting “anger” of the goddess indicates this type of activity marked a grave transgression on the part of women in the inner sanctum of her cult, thereby serving as a clue to an earlier, pre-patriarchal practice in which priestesses were devoted to attempting pure parthenogenesis. The goddess’s mythological outrage and the punishments she meted out to her virgin servants for their sexual transgressions with male gods may symbolize the internal conflict that ensued among holy *parthenoi* dedicated to Athena during this transition period. In this chapter, I explore some of the relevant myths and aspects of cult to make the case for these ideas.
Athena’s Origins in the North African Neith

To understand Athena as a Virgin Mother, we must first understand the North African goddess Neith, whom the Greeks widely acknowledged was identical with Athena. It is important to emphasize that Athena was not just the Greek “version” of Neith; rather, she was Neith. This is attested by Herodotus (2.62), Plato (Timaeus 21c), Plutarch (On Isis and Osiris 9/354C), Diodorus Siculus (5.58), and Pausanias (2.36.8, 9.12.2). Correspondingly, according to Origen (Contra Celsum 5.29), the Egyptians themselves also believed that the goddess the Greeks knew as Athena in Attica was also the goddess of Saïs, Neith’s most holy city in Egypt. On Mt. Potinus in Argolis, Athena was known as Athena Saïtis (Pausanias 2.36.8), probably in recognition of her North African origins.

Neith was a parthenogenetic goddess par excellence. A text from the Ramesside period of the New Kingdom in Egypt (1304–1075 B.C.E.) calls her “the eldest, the Mother of the gods, who shone on the first face,” implying that she was considered the original, primordial deity who predated all others (Lesko 1999, 57). Analyzing this and other similar references, Griffis-Greenberg (1999, para. 7) identifies Neith as Egypt’s “deity of the First Principle,” the highest and unmoved mover. As such, she was in fact autogenetic, having created herself out of her own being. We see this aspect echoed in both Egyptian and Greek texts. Plutarch (On Isis and Osiris 9), for example, refers to an inscription on her statue in Saïs, where, as Herodotus affirms (2.59–62), a great and mystical annual festival was held to honor her:

I am everything that has been, and that is, and that shall be, and no one has ever lifted my garment (peplos).

That in the above-noted Saïtic inscription Neith’s “garment” remained perpetually “unlifted” is also a sexual reference (Plutarch 1970, 284–5, ed. Griffiths), as the Greek word used is peplos, a robe typically worn by women. The inscription therefore communicates that Neith never engaged in any kind of sexual union, that is, she was eternally a virgin. Yet, as the primordial Being, she was also generative. Thus, in Neith we have one of the earliest appearances of the archetype of the Virgin Mother, the Holy Parthenos, in her original, unadulterated form.

According to Budge ([1904] 1969, 1:451), Neith’s name may have derived from the root of the Egyptian netet, “to knit, to weave.”