Research Article

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When God was a Woman: From the Phocaean Cult of Athena to Parmenides' Ontology

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to present a new hermeneutic perspective on Parmenides' theology, which, it is argued, will also have consequences for our understanding of his ontology. The following interrelated hypotheses are presented for consideration: first, that the anonymous goddess introduced by Parmenides in the proem of his poem is identical to the Phocaean poliadic goddess of Elea, Athena; second, that she is the personification of Parmenides' *tò eón*.

Keywords: Neith, Naukratis, Sais, Phocaea, Elea, anonymous goddess, "What is", "being", ancient astronomy, cosmology, Egyptian theology

The modern reinterpretation of Parmenides' poem, privileging certain aspects of its content, has certainly contributed to advancing our knowledge of it, but at the same time has had the effect of further articulating and differentiating the difficulties and ambiguities of its interpretation. On one point, however, scholars seem to agree: the most enigmatic and debated theme of the Parmenidean poem, besides that of *tò eón* (τὸ ἐόν; "that which is"), is the role and function of the anonymous goddess (*theá*; θεά; B1, 21)[1] introduced in the proem, to whose sacred speech (*mŷthos*; μῦθος; B2, 1; B8, 1) Parmenides entrusts the revelation of the poem's truth, of *tò eón*.

The question has been subjected to a variety of analyses and interpretations by readers and commentators of the poem since ancient times, resulting in a plethora of divergent conclusions. In numerous instances, these interpretations of the goddess' identity have been found to be contradictory or inconsistent with the general interpretations of the poem established by the very scholars who formulated them.

A preliminary analysis of the existing studies on this topic reveals four broad thematic areas in which the goddess' identity has been considered by scholars:

(1) as a "literary device" created by Parmenides that would allow him to present, from the outset of the poem, his detachment from any sapiential doctrine developed up to his time;
(2) as a conceptual abstraction present in the poem (such as Necessity, Truth, or Totality), i.e. a new deity not present in any pre-existing pantheon, to which Parmenides would have given a conceptual rather than a religious form;
(3) as a physical abstraction present in the poem, such as genesis, light, night, and aether. As such, she would not be a deity subject to a religious cult, but rather a poetic creation of Parmenides;
(4) as a deity to whom an identifiable cult corresponded and to whom Parmenides assigned the role she plays in the poem by deriving his doctrine from the lore associated with her cult.

1 For the text of the fragments and testimonies of Parmenides, see Diels and Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. 1, 217 ff. I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their useful suggestions for improving and organizing my arguments.

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It seems reasonable to suggest that Parmenides' goddess cannot be a mere literary device: she certainly cannot be reduced to a generic muse or nymph, as some scholars have suggested. None of these deities seems to have the absolute authority and dominion that Parmenides' goddess displays in the poem.

Furthermore, it was not possible for Parmenides to represent a new deity. Such an endeavour would have been anachronistic for a man of the sixth century BC and would probably have led to accusations of *asebeia* from his detractors and political opponents. Indeed, we know that Parmenides was a lawmaker (*nomothétes*; νομοθέτης) of his city and that the magistrates of Elea swore in his name when they were appointed. It is therefore unlikely that he committed sacrilege against the civic pantheon. On the contrary, it seems likely that he played a religious role associated with his political position. It is possible that he was the priest of the anonymous goddess to whom he entrusts the truth of *tò eón* in the poem.

It is also evident that Parmenides' goddess cannot be compared to any of the Orphic deities with which she has been identified, including Persephone, Mnemosyne, and Nyx, among others. This is because they are all chthonic deities, whereas she is a celestial one, as will be shown, and they are not supreme deities. Indeed, each of them has a male counterpart in her pantheon, without whom she would not be what she is. In contrast, Parmenides' goddess is the only supreme goddess of the pantheon to appear in the poem. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that cults related to Demeter or Persephone were introduced in Elea in the second half of the fifth century BC, which is to say after Parmenides' lifetime. This conclusion is supported by historical–archaeological reconstructions.[2]

Nevertheless, as Cerri observes, a theological identification of the goddess was unavoidable. Parmenides had to paint a picture of her in the mind of his audience. If he does not explicitly identify her, it is because he wants to suggest that she represents the epitome of a goddess, an absolute deity.[3]

In light of these considerations, an investigation into the possibility of identifying Parmenides' goddess within the context of the supreme deity of the Phocaean pantheon is warranted. I propose that this deity is Athena, who was the poliadic goddess of Phocaea and Elea.[4] In order to prove my hypothesis, however, this study will not delve into the mythological traditions surrounding the Olympian daughter of Zeus. Instead, I will focus on the cult of the goddess Athena in the Egyptian city of Sais. The aim is to show that Parmenides' goddess exhibits syncretistic traits similar to those of the Egyptian Athena.

While the evidence suggests that the goddess has a cultic character that would have been recognisable to Parmenides' fellow citizens, this does not exclude the possibility that she also represents conceptual or physical abstractions present in the poem, as do the other deities that populate these verses. Indeed, as Cerri points out, an analysis of Parmenides' poem reveals a theological perspective that is still grounded in scientific reasoning to some extent, rather than a fanciful account of ancient and hypothetical events.[5] In line

2 Greco, "Strutture e materiali del sacro ad Elea/Velia," 360; Vecchio, *Elea. Un profilo storico. I. Dalle origini alla fine del V secolo a.C.*, 79 and 109.

3 Cerri, *Parmenide, Poema sulla natura*, 107.

4 It is beyond dispute that the Phocaean poliadic goddess was Athena (cf. Tréziny, "Hyélè ou Athéna sur le monnaies de Vélia?," 80; Morel, "De Marseille à Velia. Problèmes phocéens," 1766; Morel, "Observations sur les cultes de Velia," 35; Greco, "Strutture e materiali del sacro ad Elea/Velia," 351; Vecchio, *Elea. Un profilo storico. I. Dalle origini alla fine del V secolo a.C.*, 83). Indeed, at the time of Parmenides, the cult of Athena Polias was widespread throughout the Mediterranean, particularly in Athens, which was the dominant city. The following cities are documented as using the epithet "Polias" for the goddess: Aigale, Aigeai, Aizanoi, Amorgos, Aphrodisias, Argos, Assos, Atraks on the Peneios, Attaleia, Kallatis, Kolophon, Kos, Kyzikos, Daulis, Delos, Didyma, Dodona, Eleutherna, Epidauros, Eresos, Erythrai, Geraistos, Gonnoi, Halasarna, Halmyros, Herakleia on Siris, Hierapytna, Ialysos, Ikonion, Ilion, Imbros, Ios, Itanos, Kameiros, Knossos, Larissa, Lindos, Megalopolis, Miletus, Mytilene, Naupaktos, Nikopolis ad Istrum, Olympia, Peparethos, Pergamon, Phalanna, Phaselis, Phigaleia, Priene, Rhodiapolis, Rhodos, Schedia, Sinope, Sparta, Stymphalos, Syloi, Synnada, Tegea, Telos, Tenos, Thebai in Pthiotis, Thera, and Troizen. However, it is well documented that each Greek deity (even those with the same name) constituted a singularity in each location, with no second instance of the same deity in another location (see Cassola, "Chi erano i Greci?," 9; Léveque, *Sulle orme degli dèi Greci*, 10). It is therefore of primary importance to identify the specific characteristics of the Phocaean cult of Athena in order to ascertain whether and to what extent it may have influenced Parmenides' thought.

5 Cerri, "Livello scientifico e livello mitico nei poemi di Empedocle," 125.

with this scholar's view, it can be argued that the poem represents a reinterpretation of the Phocaean pantheon in a physical context and that it espouses the compatibility of physics with this pantheon.

Before proceeding, it seems wise to clarify another methodological premise. According to Aristotle, "of those who first philosophized" – the Greek thinkers whom we now call the pre-Socratics – most thought that the principles of all things were only of the material kind, and that this principle and element must be some nature (*physis*; φύσις), whether one or more than one, from which all beings originate and from which as the first thing they come to be and into which they finally pass, while it persists throughout as the underlying subject while its attributes change.[6]

As Cordero points out

> from the Aristotelian description of the type of research carried out by the first philosophers we can extract the following specific data: (a) the object of study was the φύσις; (b) the φύσις is the element primordial from which all things emerge, which are in perpetual evolution as they inherit the principle of movement from the φύσις; (c) the φύσις is "conserved safe and sound, grazing" …; (d) the φύσις is the οὐσία of natural beings, which are characterised by change, and, in this sense, (e) to reason about φύσις in general is to reason about "being", interpreted as the ever-active source of a dynamic process.[7]

In other words, for those ancient thinkers, "reality" has its own being, characterized by a vital, dynamic force that, even if it is not evident,[8] gives rise to the whole and unfolds in everything that exists, and this principle, element, or substance corresponds to the concept of *physis*.[9] Therefore, it would be inappropriate and anachronistic to understand the *physis* as a matter and to consider it materialistically in modern terms, but also as what we call "nature."

Let us now consider, as Cordero underlines, that "already in the remote Indo-European origins, the root of the term φύσις was related to some forms of the verb 'to be,'" so I agree with the scholar, "that φύσις and being are synonymous is then a reality."[10] In the Parmenides fragments, we find the term *physis* three times: twice in fr. 10 (verses 1 and 6) and once in fr. 16 (verse 3). Perhaps, we could think that the word is not privileged by Parmenides because he uses for its concept, for the first time, the generic singular *eón*.[11]

Indeed, I agree with Cerri's assertion that the doctrine of *tò eón* is not a purely logical–dialectical concoction or a philosophical metaphysics in the post-Aristotelian sense. Rather, it is a cosmological doctrine that is intrinsic to the history of pre-Socratic physics.[12] In this perspective, while we should not consider Parmenides' *tò eón* as matter,[13] and his doctrine as a materialistic system, we can certainly consider *tò eón* to be corporeal.[14]

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6 *Met.* 983b6-18. For this reason, Aristotle, and we after him, called these thinkers *physikoí* (φυσικοὶ; "physicists," *ibid.*), or *physiológoi* (φυσιολόγοι; literally "physiologists," according to a noun probably invented by Aristotle himself), because they possessed a knowledge, and elaborated a discourse, a *logos* (oral or written), about the *physis.* It follows from Aristotle's writings that that the meanings of *physis* are multiple, but we cannot delve into this subject here (the reader interested in deepening this argument can see Cordero, "The Dynamic Conception of Being in the First Philosophers and the Notion of φύσις").

7 Cordero, "The Dynamic Conception of Being in the First Philosophers and the Notion of φύσις," 8–9.

8 The meaning of the term *physis* goes beyond the visual perception. Perhaps this is why it appears only once in the Homeric poems (*Od.* X.302–306)

9 Cordero, "The Dynamic Conception of Being in the First Philosophers and the Notion of φύσις," 17.

10 Ibid., 9.

11 Cf. Cordero, "Les conséquences tragiques pour Parménide d'une erreur d'Aristote," 4.

12 Cerri, *Dall'universo-blocco all'atomo nella scuola di Elea*, 66. Aristotle tells us, not without criticism, that Parmenides "didn't posit anything outside of the substance of the perceptibles" (*Cael.* 298b 21–22). Xenophon includes Parmenides among those thinkers who deal with the nature (*physis*) of the reality as a whole (*Mem.* I, 1, 14) and Plutarch refers to Parmenides as an ancient *physiológos* (*Adv. Col.* 13, 1114 A–B), literally, a physiologist (a noun alluding to people who φυσιολογεῖν, literally, who "physiologize").

13 Although, as Cerri observes, it is not anachronistic to propose that *tò eón* represents the closest terminological ancestor of the term "matter." Indeed, when Aristotle criticizes Parmenides for not positing anything outside of the substance of perceptibles (*Cael.* 298b 19–23), he refers to Parmenides' 'substance' with the term *ousía* (οὐσία), which is the feminine form of the present participle of the verb *eimí* (εἰμί), of which the uncontracted, substantive neutral form is *eón* (Cerri, *Dall'universo-blocco all'atomo nella scuola di Elea*, 61).

14 Ibid., 59–62.

In Cerri's view, the corporeity of *tò eón* is posited by Parmenides in opposition to what we call empty space, the possibility of which is denied. The Parmenidean expression "non-being," as Cerri observes, comes to mean "empty space."[15] The scholar proposes a comparison between Parmenides' physics and Einstein's physics, starting from the above premise. Einstein's theory eliminated the classical distinction between material particles and vacuum. Moreover, it showed that what we call vacuum is the potential dimension of all forms within the world of particles. This dimension is not inhomogeneous with respect to matter; rather, it is equivalent to matter and can be transformed with it according to the parameters of this equivalence.[16]

If we are to understand Parmenides' *eón* as a corporeal reality, as both Plato and Aristotle did,[17] then we must understand its doctrine as a physics. However, it cannot be defined as a physics in the Aristotelian[18] or Newtonian sense. It can more accurately be described as a relativistic physics, in which the content is identical to its container.[19]

Cerri refers to Parmenides' physics as a "cosmological ontology."[20] It seems to me more accurate to view Parmenides' doctrine as a theological cosmology. Indeed, Parmenides' ontology can only be defined as a consequence, or, in terms of complexity science, as an *emergence* from Parmenides' cosmological reflection, rather than as a presupposition of it.[21] Moreover, for Parmenides, as for every other individual who lived at the turn of the fifth century BCE, cosmology and theology were inextricably linked.[22] In a worldview in which the divine was understood as the totality of reality, and the divine and reality were regarded as one and the same, because the divine was conceived of as encompassing everything that exists, the pre-Socratics did not distinguish between *physis* and *theĩon*.[23] This was probably also the case with regard to Parmenides' doctrine. Indeed, Parmenides' theology is "scattered throughout" his poem, to use Cerri's words.[24]

In accordance with this intrinsic relationship between the cosmological and theological realms, it is reasonable to claim that investigating the identity of the goddess who reveals the truth of reality to Parmenides would entail looking for a cult in the Phocaean pantheon in which the worshipped goddess represents the personification of reality in its oneness and wholeness. In other words, the aim of this investigation would be to identify a deity who could be said to represent *tò eón* in person.

In using the language of theology, Parmenides finds himself in a situation analogous, but not identical,[25] to that of contemporary physicists who attempt to describe the origin of the universe by resorting to the

15 Ibid., 61.

16 Ibid., 67. It is not my intention here to engage in a detailed examination of the issue.

17 Cf. Palmer, *Plato's Reception of Parmenides*, 194; Ferrari, "Parmenide «antiplatonico»," 325–8; Fronterotta, "La dottrina eleatica dell'"unità del tutto'," 52. Conversely, the Parmenidean *eón* cannot be regarded as "metaphysical" in any sense. It is not immaterial, nor can it be characterized as 'spiritual' or purely mental. The concept of metaphysics is a later philosophical development that is anachronistic in relation to Parmenides.

18 In his *Physics*, Aristotle provides a comprehensive examination of the doctrine of Parmenides, as well as the tenets of other pre-Socratic philosophers. Nevertheless, Aristotle is unable to reconcile this with his own physical theory. Consequently, he presents a critique of Parmenides' concept of *eón* that is not open to appeal.

19 Einstein realized that things are not in space and time, but are "made" of spacetime, and that is the reason why they exist in space and time. It is this further dimension of reality which constitutes reality itself, and which guarantees that everything exists precisely because it is together with every other thing in the totality of spacetime, forming the continuum which is the universe in its entirety. I believe that Parmenides' *eón* is to becoming beings, to *eónta*, as Einstein's spacetime is to things in space and time. As I have previously observed in other contexts (see Montagnino, "How can Parmenides' τὸ ἐόν be Unending but Non-endless?"), I agree with Cerri's conclusion that contemporary physics has reached a point where its epistemological and cosmological projections are strikingly similar to those of Eleaticism (Cerri, *Dall'universo-blocco all'atomo nella scuola di Elea*, 66).

20 Ibid.

21 It would be inaccurate to suggest that the concept of ontology originated with Parmenides. The fact that this concept emerged as a result of subsequent reflection on his doctrine does not necessarily imply that Parmenides understood his own doctrine in the same terms as those subsequently proposed by Plato and Aristotle. Conversely, "what Parmenides may have meant to say does not necessarily play a role in his subsequent influence" (Palmer, *Plato's Reception of Parmenides*, 13).

22 In the ancient Greek worldview, the divine was omnipresent, manifesting itself in various forms that reflected the multifaceted nature of reality (see Montagnino, "Could Themis be the Deity who «Steers» Parmenides' Cosmos?").

23 Mondolfo, "La natura (*physis*) e il divino (*tò theĩon*)."

24 Cerri, *Dall'universo-blocco all'atomo nella scuola di Elea*, 70.

25 For a more detailed examination of this subject, see the work of De Santillana and Von Dechend, *The Hamlet's Mill*.

metaphor of the Big Bang. Although such a description may seem to offer a rational explanation of a phenomenon, its adequacy is debatable. This is because, prior to the Big Bang, there was no space in which the "explosion" could occur, nor indeed any time, so the idea of a pre-Big Bang state is essentially meaningless, just as "not-being" refers to the "being" in Parmenides' doctrine. This would be the reason that led Parmenides to use the mythological language and the cult of the anonymous goddess to convey his new doctrine.[26]

If the hermeneutical hypothesis presented in this text is correct, there is a cult with which Parmenides could have had contact as a Phocaean, as will be discussed below, which conveys a theo-cosmological system in which an absolute goddess generates herself and the world from herself, without any other cosmological or theological counterpart. Consequently, she is regarded as the genesis, the matter, and the necessity of reality in its totality and in its multiplicity. According to her cult, the world and everything in it are composed of the same substance of her, the unique and absolute goddess, and they exist as a matter of her being, because they are her generation.[27]

The theological interpretation of the poem may therefore prove to be instrumental in resolving the inconsistencies between the different forms of knowledge it encompasses, and in restoring their interconnections. The indirect aim of this article is therefore to present a new hermeneutical approach to Parmenides' theology which, I will anticipate, may also have implications for our understanding of what is currently referred to as his ontology.[28]

This perspective might allow us to go beyond the assumption that Parmenides rejected the reality of the world by reducing it to an illusion, *à la* Berkley – a view that Plutarch (*Adv. Col.* 1114B-C) has already categorically ruled out – and to understand how, in Parmenides' doctrine,

(1) *tò eón* can be understood as both one and multiple, as both the total being and the totality of beings, and as both the absolute body and the unlimited bodies (which are not infinite, however, insofar as the absolute is complete; cf. fr. B4 and B8);
(2) beings are corporeal and real, insofar as they are *tò eón*, i.e. they are of the same "matter" as *tò eón*;
(3) nothing can exist that is not *tò eón*.

1 *Who* is Parmenides' Goddess?

Despite the extensive research into the cultural and cultic contexts within which the Phocaeans, the Greek people to which Parmenides belonged, are believed to have interacted, the question of who Parmenides' goddess is remains unanswered. There is, however, one notable absence from this framework of investigation.

A detailed examination of the history of Parmenides' ancestors reveals that a community of Phocaeans settled in Egypt from the middle of the seventh century BC, near the emporium of Naukratis, which was attached to Sais, the capital of Egypt.[29] The city–state of Phocaea, the Phocaeans' metropolis, was in fact one of the select few to found the *Hellenion* in Naucratis, which was the Pan–Hellenic temple established by the earliest Greek settlers in Egypt. This settlement gave the ancestors of Parmenides with the opportunity to gain access to the Egyptian knowledge held by the priests of Athena–Neith in Sais.

In the book *When God Was a Woman*, which has been described as one of the most iconic texts of the 1970s feminist counterculture, Merlin Stone devotes just one sentence to this Egyptian deity: "The goddess known as

26 I expand upon this topic in Montagnino, "How can Parmenides' τὸ ἐόν be Unending but Non-endless?"
27 The term "generation" is used in this discussion rather than "creation" because the latter implies a distinction between a creator and a creation. (An example of this is the myth of Plato's *Timaeus*, in which the creator and the creation are two different entities, not to mention the *chora*, which is a third, different kind of entity.) In contrast, in a generation the generated and the generator are of the same substance.
28 According to the perspective I am presenting, this ontology should be understood as emerging from a theological cosmology, or, if we prefer, a cosmological theology.
29 See Antonelli, *Traffici focei di età arcaica*.

Neith was attended only by priestesses."[30] This assertion is not only false,[31] but also ignores the fact that the goddess Neith, whom the Greeks called Athena, was considered the supreme deity of the pantheon of the city of Sais, that is, of all Egypt during the reign of the Saitic dynasty. She was worshipped as the personification of reality in its oneness and multiplicity. Indeed, Athena–Neith was not only the genesis and fundamental material of all things, but also the intrinsic necessity and universal norm of all existence.[32]

Historical sources indicate that Parmenides' forefathers were granted the privilege of having officials at the goddess' temple in Sais[33] in order to negotiate trade and political agreements with the Pharaoh.[34] It is possible that trade contributed to the development of a common cultural understanding. Over time, Naucratis established itself as a cosmopolitan intellectual centre where Greeks, Egyptians, and Phoenicians lived and interacted.[35]

The resemblance between the iconography of the Phocaean statue of Athena[36] and the Saitic statue of Athena may not be a mere coincidence. Archaeological findings from excavations of the temple of Athena in Phocaea, Turkey (now Foça), support the hypothesis that the deity Athena worshipped by Parmenides' ancestors in both Phocaea and Elea had cultic characteristics analogous to those of the Egyptian Athena worshipped in Sais.[37]

The etymology of the name Athena can also be traced back to a cult practised at Sais. The most widely accepted theory of the origin of the name traces it back to a Linear B tablet from the Bronze Age (ca. 1400 BC) found at Knossos, which contains a list of divine names. Among these is A-ta-na-po-ti-ni-ja, which is generally interpreted as "Athena the mistress," or more precisely "Athena, she who rules."[38] However, Deacy notes that the tablet does not explicitly refer to a goddess named Athena, but rather to a goddess from a place called At(h)ana (which cannot be Athens).[39]

This clarification by the scholar would thus serve to corroborate Bernal's hypothesis that the name Athena, in its more ancient form Athenaie (Ἀθηναΐη), refers to the sacred name of the city of Sais, i.e. "Temple of Neith," because the city was dedicated to the goddess.[40]

In light of the hypothesis that the Phocaean poliadic goddess of Elea is the anonymous goddess referred to in Parmenides' poem, and that her cult shared some syncretistic features with the cult of the goddess worshipped at Sais, we will examine the similarities between the known aspects of the cult of Athena–Neith (designated as Ath.) and the known aspects of Parmenides' doctrine (designated as Par.):

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30 Stone, *When God was a Woman*, 38.

31 For further details, see El Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 163–82.

32 This may seem somewhat unconventional to those steeped in Academic or Peripatetic traditions, but mythological frameworks did not distinguish between the generative, normative, and material dimensions of reality. This is because they espoused the belief that nothing arises from nothing and nothing dissolves into nothing. If one were to translate the term "genesis" with "origin", it would be necessary to disregard the meaning of the latter as expressing a one-time generative burst (as in the case of the Big Bang, for example), and instead picture a continuous flow resulting from an uninterrupted generative process (cf. Kerenyi, *Figlie del sole*, 38). This was also the case with the conceptual framework of the pre-Socratics (cf. fr. DK 12 B1 of Anaximander), before the contributions of Plato and especially Aristotle. In addition, they did not distinguish between the theological and the cosmological (or any other) levels of reality.

33 Herod. II, 178.

34 Möller, *Naukratis*.

35 Naddaf, "Anthropogony and Politogony in Anaximander of Miletus;" see also Wilson and Gilbert, "Sais and its Trading Relations with Eastern Mediterranean," 261.

36 Strab. XIII, 1.41. See Tréziny, "Hyélè ou Athéna sur le monnaies de Vélia?"

37 Arici, "Phokaia'daki Athena Kültü Ve Kökeni Hakkinda Düşünceler."

38 Deacy, *Athena*, 95.

39 Ibid.

40 Bernal, *Black Athena*, 581–2. In the theo-cosmogonic hymn (Esna 206; cf. Sauneron, *Esna V. Le fêtes religieuses d'Esna au derniers siècles du paganisme*) that was sung in honour of Neith on the occasion of her most important festival in Esna and Sais, it is said that the goddess, having arrived in Sais, settled in the "Temple of Neith," which in Egyptian is *Ḥwt Nt*, which could be transcribed in Greek as *Athenaie*. Furthermore, a late testimony by Carace of Pergamon (2nd century AD) suggests that Athena was an Egyptian term for Sais (cf. Bernal, *Black Athena*, 582). In ancient Egypt, it was customary to address a deity by the name of his or her dwelling place (ibid., 580; those interested in pursuing further philological analysis may consult ibid., 579–82).

(1) Both deities were considered to be celestial goddesses.

Ath. Athena–Neith was, indeed, a celestial goddess.[41] Some inscriptions evoke her appearance as a heavenly vault.[42] In one inscription, the deity is referred to as "heaven," while in another, she is described as "the heaven that embraces what is in her."[43] The temple was designated as "the whole sky" and the central door as "the gateway to heaven."[44] The high priestess of the temple was known as "she who enters the sky,"[45] while the initiate of the cult was also referred to as "an initiate into the secrets of heaven."[46]

Par. In the gesture of greeting Parmenides, the anonymous goddess takes his right hand with her own right hand, which would indicate that she is a celestial deity, rather than a chthonic one.[47] Poliadic deities were celestial deities, so this could be an argument in favour of identifying Parmenides' goddess as the poliadic goddess of the Phocaeans.

(2) Both Sais and Elea boasted medical academies.

Ath. Sais had a medical academy specialising in obstetrics and gynaecology, located inside the temple of Athena–Neith.[48] Egyptian gynaecological practices included the diagnosis of pregnancy, the determination of foetal gender, and the study of infertility.[49]

Par. Parmenides' possible interest in the field of embryology is suggested by fragments B17 and B18. In addition, there is evidence that he established a medical facility in Elea, which, as far as we know, was highly regarded until at least the first century AD.[50]

(3) An examination of Athena–Neith's *diakósmēsis* in Plato's *Timaeus* and the *diákosmos* of Parmenides' goddess.[51]

Ath. In Plato's dialogue, Critias claims that the ancestors of the Athenians worshipped the same goddess as the Egyptians who founded Sais, and that when Athens was founded, Athena–Neith "arranged" (διακοσμέω; *diakosméō*) everything in a comprehensive way, as a complete "arrangement" (διακόσμησις; *diakósmēsis*) (24c4–5), which included rules for organising the political life of the Athenians as well as their intellectual life (24a4–b7). This *diakósmēsis* enabled them to study the universe in a comprehensive manner and to apply its divine principles to human affairs, so that they could discover everything that contributes to good health, right down to divination and medicine, and to acquire all related branches of knowledge (24b7–c3).

Par. An analysis of the language used by Critias in relation to the Saitic myth of Athena–Neith reveals that the verb *diakosméō* and the noun *diakósmēsis* are derived from the noun *diákosmos* (διάκοσμος), originally used by Parmenides (B8.60). There are two testimonies indicating that for ancient scholars the concept of *diakósmēsis* was closely associated with the Parmenidean doctrine. Simplicius (*in* Cael. 558.5) uses the term *diakósmēsis* to

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41 El Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 69–71.
42 Ibid., 19.
43 Ibid., 69.
44 Ibid., 172.
45 Ibid., 168.
46 Ibid., 172.
47 Pugliese Carratelli, "La θεά di Parmenide," 340.
48 Ronco, "Donne e Medicina," 15.
49 Griffith, *Hieratic Papyri from Kahun and Gurob*, 5–11.
50 Vecchio, *Elea. Un profilo storico. I. Dalle origini alla fine del V secolo a.C.*, 100–14.
51 Indeed, an important account of the goddess Athena–Neith can be found in Plato's *Timaeus*. This dialogue has already been studied in relation to specific cosmological theories of Parmenides that attracted Plato's interest (cf. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*; Palmer, *Plato's Reception of Parmenides*; Burnyeat, "ΕΙΚΩΣ ΜΥΘΟΣ;" Mourelatos, "The Epistemological Section (29b–d) of the Proem in Timaeus' Speech"). However, no scholar before me had ever undertaken a comparison between Critias' account of the founding of Athens and the available evidence concerning Parmenides' doctrine and the Phocaean cult of Athena. In my presentation at the 2024 World Congress of Philosophy, I offered an account of this comparison and contributed a paper entitled: "The Saitic Goddess Athena in Plato's *Timaeus* and the Anonymous Goddess in Parmenides' Poem."

describe Parmenides' arrangement of the universe, which encompasses the Earth, the sun and the other stars, and biology (B10–B18). This terminology corresponds exactly to Plato's use of the term in the *Timaeus*. Plutarch recounts that Parmenides established an "arrangement" (*diákosmon pepoiētai*; *Adv. Col.* 1114B6) to justify all phenomena (*ibid.* 1114B7–C1), which thoroughly covers the Earth, the heavens, the sun, the moon and the other stars, and the genesis of humanity.

Ath. At the end of the dialogue, Timaeus describes the cosmos (92c) as "monogenetic" (*monoghenés*).
Par. It is apparent that Plato is echoing Parmenides, B8.4, at this point.[52]

Ath. Timaeus (29c) asserts that in matters of theology and cosmology one should accept a "likely" (εἰκός; *eikós*) explanation without demanding more.
Par. Again, *eikós* is a term used by Parmenides' goddess with regard to the *diákosmos* which she describes to him (B8.60).

Ath. The organisation of the cosmos in the *Timaeus* unfolds through an intermediary figure: the Demiurge.
Par. In the Parmenidean poem too there is a kind of demiurge, namely the δαίμων of B12,[53] who "steers" the creation of everything.[54]

Ath. According to passage 22c–d of the dialogue, the priest argues that the Greek myth of Phaeton, associated with the rising and setting of the morning star, serves as a purely mythological explanation of the reciprocal motion of the celestial bodies around the Earth.
Par. We have doxographic evidence that Parmenides was the first to observe that the morning and evening stars coincided and were manifestations of the motion of a single celestial body.

Ath. The Egyptian priest explains to Solon that the movements of celestial objects are related to the equilibrium of fire in the lower regions of the sky.
Par. Parmenides' poem describes the cosmos as structured according to concentric zones formed by "fire" and "darkness," with the inner ones containing pure fire (verses B12.1–2). Furthermore, as Aëtius (II 7.1) notes, Parmenides referred to *pyrôdes* ("fiery" [*scil.* region]) as what we call the sky (A37). There seems to be a similarity between the two cosmologies, since both have "fire" in the celestial regions nearest to the Earth.

Ath. The priest divides the Earth into different climatic zones and considers only the temperate ones habitable (22e5–23a1).
Par. Parmenides also classified different climatic zones and held that only the more temperate ones were inhabitable (A44 and A44a).

Ath. There can be no doubt that the Athena to whom the characters in the dialogue offer their speeches as a truthful hymn (20d8; 21a2–3) is not the poliadic deity of the Athenians that we know from the Olympian tradition. Rather, she is the Athena worshipped in Sais, who by no means coincides with the traditional Olympian Athena. Furthermore, Solon's sojourn in Egypt is not proven beyond doubt.[55]

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52 Burnyeat, "ΕΙΚΩΣ ΜΥΘΟΣ," 160.

53 Aëtius (A37) suggests that this *daímōn*, which the poem presents (see B12, 3) as coinciding with an astronomical circle (the exact location of which is debated, with suggestions including the Milky Way, the equator or the ecliptic), was conceived by Parmenides as "the principle and cause of the movement and generation" of everything. It is worth noting that, according to Proclus (*In Plat.* Tim., I 98.19–22), Athena-Neith was the power that moved everything and exercised her demiurgic work from the equatorial circle (*ibid.*, I 98.22–24).

54 Mansfeld, "Parmenides from Right to Left."

55 Lloyd, *Herodotus. Book II. Commentary 99–182*.

Par. On the side of Parmenides, however, we have seen that his Phocaean ancestors had the opportunity to gain new knowledge of nature, the cosmos, and medicine from the ministers of the cult of Athena in Sais,[56] which Parmenides came to know and embrace.[57]

It seems reasonable to conclude from these comparisons that it is not such an odd hypothesis to suggest that Parmenides' anonymous goddess, like the Phocaean poliadic deity Athena, might be related to the Athena–Neith worshipped at Sais.

2 *What* is Parmenides' Goddess?

The second hypothesis that I put forward is that Parmenides' anonymous deity is the personification of *tò eón* itself. In order to substantiate this hypothesis, it is essential to ascertain whether the deity in question exhibits cultic characteristics that correspond to the cosmological and ontological attributes that Parmenides attributes to *tò eón* by Parmenides. In light of the surviving fragments of the poem and the evidence for its doctrine, it is thus necessary to verify that the deity in question is:

(1) the Absolute herself, like *tò eón* (see B4; B7; B8);
(2) neither born nor ever dying (see B8, 3–5, 9–15);
(3) the origin and necessity of reality (see B4; B7; B8);
(4) the coincidence of thinking, speaking, and existing (see B6);
(5) both "light" and "darkness" (see B9).

Conversely,

(6) if *tò eón* were associated by Parmenides with the feminine, this could reinforce the suggestion that the absolute divine, embodied by *tò eón*, should be personified by a goddess rather than a god.

Having established the influence of the cult of Athena–Neith on the Phocaean Athena cult, and consequently on the knowledge expressed in Parmenides' poem, it is now necessary to ascertain whether the theological characteristics of the Saitic goddess correspond to the aforementioned criteria.

(1) The goddess should be the Absolute herself, as *tò eón* is in the words of Parmenides

Ath. In an inscription reported by Plutarch (*Is. Hos*., 354C),[58] placed at the foot of the statue of Neith in the temple of Sais, we could have read this sentence:

"I am all that was, is, and shall be; and there is nobody except me."[59]

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56 For another example of the kind of knowledge preserved in the temple of Athena at Sais, see also Herod. II, 28.

57 It is not my intention to suggest that Plato derived his myth of Athena-Neith from a Phocaean tradition and kept it secret. Rather, it is more likely that he borrowed this myth from another source and adapted it to suit his aim of linking the origin of philosophy in Athens to the cult of this goddess, whom he defines as a "philosopher" (φιλόσοφος; 24d1).

58 The same inscription, though in different words, is also reported by Proclus in his *Commentary* on passages 21e–22a of Plato's *Timaeus*.

59 On the first part of this inscription all scholars agree. Even if it is true that the noun "all" was probably introduced by the Greek translator, according to Assman (Assman, *Moses the Egyptian*, 119) this term perfectly conveys the meaning of the original hieroglyphic writing. Regarding the second part of the inscription, the Greek translation of the hieroglyphics reads "and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle." However, as Assman points out (*ibid*.), it is very unlikely that there ever was such a thing as a veiled statue in Egypt, since the Egyptian cult images were hidden in wooden shrines and could only be seen by the priest who opened the shrine during the daily ritual. It is equally unlikely that the concept of a statue that cannot be seen by mortal eyes could arise in the context of an Egyptian cult. Furthermore, if the last part of the Saitic formula is translated back into Egyptian, the correct translation would be "there is nobody except me." This is a monotheistic formula that occurs twice in Akhenaton's hymns, and would be perfectly appropriate in the context of a phrase like "I am all that was, is, and will be" (which in Egyptian would be something like "I am yesterday, I am today, I am tomorrow," for which there are several parallels). A priest not fully proficient in the classical language might instead have interpreted the word "except" in its literal sense, "open the face," and translated the

In this declaration of the goddess, the totality of all that has been, is, and will be is expressed as a single, total, and absolute divine oneness. She is that totality, and when she asserts that there is no other entity, she is indicating that there is nothing but her.

Par. The same unity, albeit expressed on an ontological level, is evident in Parmenides' poem on *tò eón*, which represents the absolute whole of all "being." No other entity, nor "what is not," can exist in opposition to it or beyond it (see B4; B7; B8).

Ath. The name Neith corresponds exactly to the description given in the inscription on the statue dedicated to her in Sais. The etymological reconstruction of the name, first proposed by Mallet[60] and based on the phonetic spelling of the letters of the Egyptian alphabet that form it, Nt, would in fact refer to the hieroglyphic signs  , which indicate the existence of a thing in an absolute manner, independently of any attributes.

Indeed, in ancient Egyptian, the feminine form of a word was also conventionally used to indicate the "neuter"[61] (quotation marks are obligatory because the Egyptian language did not provide for the neuter). According to the scholar, in the name of the goddess the meaning of the relative adjective *nt* had been "sacralised" and "absolutised," and thus the hieroglyph Neith meant in an absolute sense "celle qui est, ou: ce qui est."[62]

Ramadan El Sayed,[63] echoing Mallet's argument, explains that the name of the goddess is sometimes written with the noun *nty*, which also corresponds to the relative neuter "ce qui est." Thus, the scholar continues, we can interpret the name nt as "une allusion à l'origine meme de Neith qui personnifie l'être en soi, ce que nous trouvons développé avec abondance à Esna où Neith est considérée comme la substance unique primordial."

More recently, in *The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, Hart[64] has pointed out that the etymology deriving Neith's name from the word meaning "that which is" fits her procreative aspect and seems preferable to other proposed etymological reconstructions.

Par. It is conceivable that Parmenides used the concept of *tò eón* to describe the reality in its totality and singularity, as well as a hyperonym for the entities that exist, as postulated by Bernabé.[65] This would be consistent with the Milesians' practice of coining abstract terms in the singular neuter to define the nature of the whole and of everything, as evidenced by the Anaximandrean concept of *apeiron*.[66] Unlike Ancient Egyptian grammar, which did not allow for a neuter gender, Greek grammar permitted such a distinction. If the hypothesis that Parmenides' goddess, Phocaean Athena exhibited cultic traits analogous to those of the Egyptian goddess is correct, it can be argued that Parmenides could not have devised a more appropriate term than *tò eòn* to express the theological meaning that can be derived from the name of the goddess Athena–Neith: "that which is" in its wholeness and oneness, and in its multiplicity.

(2) The goddess should neither have been born nor should she ever die.

Ath. In accordance with the tenets of her cult, Athena–Neith was considered to have existed even "before creation," since no beginning is attributed to her. She was "the divine being who was in the beginning,"

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whole phrase as "there is nobody who has opened [or: uncovered] my face." It is plausible that the priests were Neoplatonists themselves and saw the alternative interpretation – the deceptive one – as a hidden meaning.

60 Mallet, *Le culte de Neit à Saïs*, 155.

61 Ibid., 154 n. 1.

62 Relative adjectives in the oldest Egyptian (so-called Middle Egyptian) replaced relative pronouns, which did not exist (see Allen, *Middle Egyptian. An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 350). The contemporary texts on Egyptian grammar that I have consulted appear to support Mallet's hypothesis that the word *nt*, which is used as a noun, is the feminine form of the genitive adjective used as a noun and means "that which is" (ibid., 350–1). Hoch (*Middle Egyptian Grammar*, 29) also highlights the special use of the feminine singular adjective alone with the meaning "something that is" of a certain quality. This use is roughly equivalent to the use of the neuter in Latin, but the term "neuter" should be avoided.

63 El-Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 16.

64 Harth, *The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, 100.

65 Bernabé, *Parmenide*, 74–5.

66 Cf. Kraus, "Commento ad Alberto Bernabé, Parménides a través del prisma de la lingüística," 181–2.

"the one who began to exist before those who were to exist, since those who were to exist existed after she first existed," "the mother who was without being brought into the world," and "the one who gave birth to her own birth" when birth did not yet exist.[67] In another inscription, Athena–Neith is explicitly referred to as "she who appeared out of herself." According to Plutarch's account (*Is. Hos*., 376A–B), for the Egyptians, the name Athena meant "I came out of myself" ('ἦλθον ἀπ' ἐμαυτῆς').[68] With regard to the necessity of having no end, Athena–Neith was called "the Eternal"[69] and was credited with the creation of time, eternity, and everlastingness.[70] Consequently, she was beyond the limitations of time and space and was therefore incapable of having an end.

Par. On several occasions in his poem, Parmenides asserts that the *tò eón* is ungenerated and unending (see B8, 3–5, 9–11, 13–14, 19–21). This argument could lend support to the hypothesis that Parmenides had in mind the cult of his goddess, if her theology was syncretistic with that of Athena–Neith, when he developed the concept of *tò eón*.

(3) The goddess should be the origin and necessity of reality.

Ath. Athena–Neith was not only a self-generated deity, but also a parthenogenetic deity. Among the Egyptian deities, like Atum Ra and Amon, she was a self-created "All-One" that generated the world out of herself. As previously discussed, Athena–Neith generated not only time but also space. With the creation of the Earth and the sky, she gave birth to the stars and the moon, and populated the Earth with all that exists.[71] In this context, the universe she generated is a monogenetic universe.[72]

Par. There is a textual account that leads to the conclusion that Parmenides' goddess already existed at the beginning of his cosmos. This is the Platonic passage from the *Symposium* (178a–b), also reproduced by Aristotle (*Met*. 984b 25–28), in which the philosopher refers to the Parmenidean goddess as Genesis.[73]

Ath. Athena–Neith is described as having "filled the heavens and Earth with her beauty and her perfection."[74] The myth thus implies that her creation was not a phenomenon confined to the past, but rather a continuous process. In the context of her cult, the world was perceived as a perpetual creation, and the principle of that creation was understood to be continuously at work, sustaining it through cycles of rebirth.[75] In this perspective, Athena–Neith was present in all things and continued to exist in all things that she had created, ensuring their continued existence.[76]

Par. Parmenides is clear about the fact that it is impossible to cut each *eón* off from every other *eón*, because in its wholeness *tò eón* is not a bunch of things randomly scattered everywhere or collected together (B4, 2–4), but a continuous full *tò eón* in which each *eón* is seamlessly adjacent to every other *eón* (B8, 24–25). Therefore, in Parmenides' doctrine, the *eónta* are not to be understood as discrete parts of the whole, but rather as integral and inseparable constituents of the continuum of *tò eón*, that is to say, as the modes of existence of the latter.[77] It is not implausible that Parmenides, elaborating this cosmology, had in mind the

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67 El Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 58–61.

68 In his 1970 publication (*Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*, 521), Griffiths considers the possibility of an underlying connection between this testimony and the "grandiose self-proclamation" of Athena-Neith, inscribed at the foot of her statue in the temple of Sais, which was already been discussed.

69 El Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 65.

70 Ibid., 62.

71 Ibid.

72 The idea that the universe had only one origin, that it was "monogenetic," was widespread in Egypt. In his 2016 work, Assman refers to this as "cosmogonic monotheism" (*Un solo Dio e molti déi*, 15).

73 Coxon, *The Fragments of Parmenides*, 372.

74 El Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 65.

75 Assman, *Un solo Dio e molti déi*, 16–7.

76 El Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 63.

77 In B9, 1–2, the anonymous goddess informs Parmenides that the two substances, light and darkness, which mortals believe to be the principles of everything, are in fact merely *dynámeis* (δυνάμεις) of *tò eón*. As suggested earlier, in order to gain insight into the

coincidence of *tò eón* with his anonymous goddess, especially if her cult was syncretistic with that of Athena–Neith.

Ath. In his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* (*In Plat.* Tim., I 84.14–20), Proclus states that Athena–Neith "holds together the whole cosmic organization and holds intelligent lives within herself which she uses to weave together the whole, and unificatory powers which she uses to manage all the cosmic oppositions."

Par. In Parmenides' poem, there is an anonymous *daímōn* (δαίμων) who "steers" Parmenides' cosmos and governs the birth and mingling of all things, not as an external rule that transcends them, but precisely by configuring their internal order, ensuring that every single thing is what it must be.[78] Furthermore, even within Parmenides' doctrine there are cosmic opposites, namely "light" and "darkness." The anonymous goddess informs him that this opposition is merely apparent, since it is in fact the necessary and unique "form"[79] that constitutes *tò eón* (cf. B8, 53–59 and B8, B9).

Ath. The notion of an "All-One" deity responsible for the creation of the universe implies a dependence of the world on that deity. Assman argues that this notion encompasses not only "cosmogonic monotheism" but also "cratogonic monotheism."[80] This dependence can be conceptualised as the dominion of the deity over the world that has emerged from it. Conversely, it means that this deity is also the necessity of the world which it has created. In relation to the cult of Athena–Neith, all things generated by her, material and immaterial (including, for example, political life), were her property and subject to her authority, order, and harmony.[81]

Par. In Parmenides' poem, the concept of necessity is of paramount importance, both in the theological and in the cosmological dimensions. Indeed, as Mourelatos points out, if Themis, Dike, Ananke, Moira, and Peitho are "faces or hypostases" of Parmenides' anonymous goddess, they may represent the "aspects of the modality of necessity that controls" Parmenides' *tò eón*.[82] Furthermore, the idea of ineluctable "necessity" is a recurrent theme in the poem, articulated in various ways (χρῆν, χρέος, χρέων, χρῆ) and "dans des passages essentiels,"[83] as Cordero underlines.

(4) Thinking, saying, and existing should coincide in the goddess.

Ath. As noted earlier, Athena–Neith was born out of herself because there was nothing or no one before her, and she began to generate reality in its multiplicity from within herself because there was nothing or no one outside of her. She created everything from her heart, as is attested to in the Hymn of Esna, which states that all things which her heart conceived became immediately real when she pronounced their names.[84]

Par. As Plato attests in the passage from the *Symposium* that has become fr. B13 of the poem, Parmenides' goddess is said to have created *eros* by "conceiving it" (the verb used is μητίομαι). It is likely that she has also created all other things by "conceiving" them (A37).

Furthermore, the concept of the heart as the organic seat of thought was not confined to the Egyptian tradition. It was also embraced by the Greeks, and it is reasonable to assume that this was also the case for Parmenides. Indeed, Empedocles believed that thought resided in the circulatory system (see DK 31 B105,

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relationship between the *eónta* and the *eón* in Parmenides' doctrine, it would be beneficial to compare it with Einstein's theory of spacetime.

78 Montagnino, "Could Themis be the Deity who «Steers» Parmenides' Cosmos?"

79 In B8, 53–55, Parmenides uses the terms *morphé* (μορφή) and *démas* (δέμας) somewhat indiscriminately in relation to *tò eón*. In Parmenides, there is not yet a Platonic distinction between the form as the "what is" of things and their figure, or what appears to us of things. As I have emphasized, Parmenides' *eón* is still a corporeal entity, a body, which is why I use the term "form."

80 Assman, *Un solo Dio e molti déi*, 20–1.

81 El Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 63–4.

82 Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides*, 161.

83 Cordero, "Les 'opinions des mortels' de Parménide et un éventuel pythagorisme éléatique," 4.

84 El Sayed, *La deesse Neith de Sais*, vol. 1, 64.

A97).[85] It is possible that the promise made by the goddess to Parmenides to reveal to him the unshakable heart of truth (B1, 29) is precisely the promise to reveal to him her own heart, which, as the seat of her thoughts, is also the seat of the truth of reality, if she is the personification of *tò eón*, as I claim.

Ath. The model of the creation of the universe as espoused by the cult of Athena–Neith does not entail that all outcomes are predetermined. Rather, as Sauneron states,[86] it means that creation and its many aspects were present within the goddess's mind. Therefore, in order to predict the future, it was not necessary for the goddess to see what would come into being beyond time; rather, it was sufficient for her to recognise what was present within her, for everything is "now" within her. The mere act of affirming what her heart had conceived was sufficient to give existence to what she affirmed.

Par. In this perspective, it is worth noting that the Parmenidean assertion that *noûs* is identical with *tò eón* in frag. B6 corresponds in frag. B16, 4 with the assertion that the "full," i.e., reality in its totality, is "thought." Parmenides is thus referring to the goddess's thought, since fragment B13 provides evidence of her ability to generate reality through the act of conceiving it. In verses B4, 1–2, where it is stated that absent things are firmly present in the *noûs*, Parmenides could therefore be referring to the *noûs* of the goddess (in a similar way to what happens in the mind of Athena–Neith), which in the poem could coincide with the *noûs* of *tò eón*, i.e. the *noûs* of reality in its entirety and wholeness (see B8, 35–36). Indeed, Parmenides' goddess states that *tò eón* "is now, together, whole" (B8, 5).

(5) The goddess should be both "light" and "darkness."

Ath. In the theo-cosmogonic hymn dedicated to her at Esna, Athena–Neith is said to have been born from the primordial waters, the Nūn, which mythologically represented darkness and was "her (own) body." The narrative goes on to say that "by making the gaze of her eyes bright," Athena–Neith caused "light to come into being." This light was not the sun, as Ra was born later, but rather the primordial light, analogous to the darkness of Nūn.[87] According to this myth, Athena–Neith is thus presented as both light and darkness.

Par. In his poem, Parmenides posits that everything is made up of light and night (darkness), and that without either there would be nothing (B9). They are the *dynámeis* of *tò eón*, which make up the *eónta*. Furthermore, in B12, Parmenides posits at the centre of his universe a divinity composed of light and darkness as the governing principle of the coming into being of all things.[88] In conceiving these cosmological features, Parmenides may have had in mind a theology in which a deity is "made" of both light and darkness, like Athena–Neith.

(6) *Tò eón* should be linked by Parmenides with the feminine.

Ath. Mallet advanced the claim that within Saitic cosmogony, "sous la forme féminine mieux adaptée à la mythologie vulgaire," Athena–Neith thus personified "le premiere être, l'être unique, le τὸ ἓν ὄν des

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85 There is no direct evidence to suggest that Empedocles was a disciple of Parmenides. The evidence provided by Iamblichus (*VP*, 166) regarding their purported connection with Pythagoreanism may indicate a connection between the two, but it does not explicitly substantiate this claim. Nevertheless, it is beyond dispute that Empedocles was intimately acquainted with Parmenides' poem. According to Diels (*Parmenides Lehrgedicht*, 26), Empedocles is identified as the first "witness" (*Zeuge*) of Parmenides. Guthrie (*A History of Greek Philosophy*, 138) notes that Empedocles' poem contains numerous deliberate echoes of Parmenides, most of which are used to emphasize points of agreement. Cordero is unambiguous in his assertion that "il est évident que la problématique d'Empédocle, ainsi que sa terminologie philosophique – et même certaines expression grammaticales – supposent la connaissance approfondie de la pensée da Parménide" ("L'histoire du texte de Parménide," 3). In addition, Palmer posits that "Empedocles evidently studied Parmenides' poem and accepted a number of fundamental Parmenidean principles" (*Plato's Reception of Parmenides*, 14; cf. ibid., 260–317).

86 Sauneron, *Esna V. Le fêtes religieuses d'Esna au derniers siècles du paganisme*, 260.

87 It is reasonable to assume that this cosmological moment was commemorated and reaffirmed during the primary festival of Athena-Neith at Sais by lighting lanterns in Egyptian homes for the duration of the night. This practice is documented by Herodotus in his accounts (II, 62), where it is referred to as the "Λυχνοκαΐη" (literally, "festival of burning lanterns").

88 Montagnino, "Could Themis be the Deity who «Steers» Parmenides' Cosmos?"

Alexandrins."[89] In accordance with the theology of the Saitic Athena, as Mallet notes, "l'être au sens le plus general," "la substance primordiale, d'où sortent tous les autres êtres," is an absolute "principe féminin qui produit à lui seul et sans le secours d'un mâle."[90]

Par. It seems reasonable to suggest that the absolute feminine principle represented by Athena–Neith is consistent with the feminine absolute that emerges from what we know of Parmenides' doctrine. An analysis of the verses of the poem and the available evidence leads to the conclusion that Parmenides associated tò eón with the feminine in a theological, ontological, cosmological, and gnoseological way (see A24; A52; A43; A46; A53; Simplicius *In* Phys. 31.3–7).

It seems reasonable to assume that Parmenides had a compelling reason for immediately grabbing his audience's attention with the first verse of his poem. This verse reveals that the horses hitched to the chariot on which he is travelling are female.[91] This is significant in a culture where the mare was regarded as a symbol of the lack of measure and the constitutive imperfection of the feminine.[92]

The proem's narrative thus proceeds to weave a reality that is presented as one and multiple, yet integral and absolute, through a kaleidoscopic complex of female deities that represent the unfolding of the one great anonymous goddess in her manifold functions and aspects, which in turn lead back to the unity of the substratum and nature of the one and the same goddess.

It is evident that there is an intention to stress the feminine aspect of the poem. This is further reinforced by the deliberate use of the definite article after the subject, which serves to reinforce the feminine gender (see B1, 1; B1, 3; B1, 25; B12, 3), in contrast to the lack of emphasis on the masculine identity.

As De Santillana points out, in the feminine element that prevails in the poem we can discern "something which cannot be mistaken for an allegorical dressing, which is actually the intrinsic and living form, the 'entelechy' in the Aristotelian sense, of Parmenides' thought."[93]

Even from these comparisons, it seems that the theology of the cult of Athena–Neith is the only one, among those of which we have any tangible evidence and of which the Phocaeans were aware, that contains a monistic cosmology comparable to that which emerges from Parmenides' poem. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesise that it could be precisely the lore preserved by its priests to which the "stranger from Elea" in the Platonic *Sophist* (242 d4–6) refers when he states that the Eleatic conception that "what people call 'all things' are actually one" derives from ancient wisdom, older than the doctrine of Xenophanes.

3 Conclusions

Although I am aware that the hypothesis I have outlined is only speculative, there are no compelling reasons to reject it out of hand. It is important to bear in mind that – if I may borrow Timaeus' words – when dealing with facts and writings that go back some two and a half thousand years, it may not always be possible to give accounts that are entirely internally consistent and perfectly accurate, so that we too should confine ourselves to acknowledging an *eikṓs* account.

Conversely, the constant effort to assimilate the Parmenidean goddess to an unidentifiable pan-Mediterranean religious figure – whose existence is far from historically plausible – or to an Olympian, Orphic, or Pythagorean deity has led to controversial conclusions and has proved inadequate to fully explain the relationship between the theology that emerges from the poem and the philosophical doctrine of t*ò eón*.

Should my hypothesis prove to be correct, it could be argued that the knowledge that we call "ontology" would have had a "mother," so to speak, before it had a "father," as Plato calls Parmenides in the *Sophist*.

89 Mallet, *Le culte de Neit à Saïs*, 160.

90 Ibid., 188.

91 It is worth noting that the horse was the sacred animal dedicated to Athena in the Phocaean cultic tradition (cf. Greco, "Strutture e materiali del sacro ad Elea/Velia," 316–8; Arici, "Phokaia'daki Athena Kültü Ve Kökeni Hakkinda Düşünceler").

92 Carson, "Putting her in her Place," 142.

93 De Santillana, *Prologue to Parmenides*, 6.

Furthermore, if my hypothesis is correct, Parmenides' goddess, the Phocaean Athena, like the other great goddesses mentioned by Merlin Stone in her book, would also have suffered the fate of being annihilated and swallowed up by the androcentric order of the Olympian religion. Indeed, the cult was subverted and she took on the iconographic connotations of the patron goddess of Athens when this city extended its political influence to Elea from the second quarter of the fifth century BC.

The Phocaean Athena was initially depicted as Athena–Neith, seated on a throne (in the iconographic posture called *ergane*). According to Tréziny, the fact that the Phocaean Athena was depicted without a helmet on the first coins is evidence that she was not regarded as a warrior goddess like, for example, the Athenian *promachos*. Analysing the development of Elea's coinage, the scholar comes to the conclusion that since the coins minted from 460 BC onwards[94] already show an owl on the opposite side of the woman's head without a helmet (previously there was a lion), and since the woman's head appears with a helmet from 440 BC onwards,[95] this would demonstrate the transition "d'une iconographie traditionnelle de l'Athéna phocéenne à une iconographie attique," in which not only the political message is strong, but also the religious and, consequently, the cultural one.[96]

We can see that the poliadic goddess of Elea gradually relinquished the role of Genesis, matter, and ruler of all and everything, and took on the cultic characteristics of the Olympian Athena, the virgin born from the head of Zeus, who, as in the *Eumenides* (vv. 736–740), submits in all respects to the will of her father and "safeguards the patriarchal system that comes into place at the time when she was born."[97]

And it is probably because of the passage of the Phocaean cult of Athena into the Attic cultural area that we have lost all the theological traces of Parmenides' anonymous goddess, who was not really anonymous to Parmenides' audience, and we have lost an important key to deciphering his doctrine. Therefore, given the cultural context in which Parmenides is thought to have been born and lived, I think it appropriate to continue to explore the theology that emerges from Parmenides' poem in comparison with the cult of the goddess Athena–Neith, which seems to be the only pre-existing theology that could have inspired the cult of the Phocaean poliadic deity and, consequently, the monistic ontology that emerges from Parmenides' poem. It seems reasonable to argue that such an approach could contribute to a more complete understanding of Parmenides' ontology, which we have previously argued emerges from a theological cosmology.

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94 Vecchio, *Elea. Un profilo storico. I. Dalle origini alla fine del V secolo a.C.*, 158, figs. 44–45.

95 Ibid., 86.

96 Tréziny, "Hyélè ou Athéna sur le monnaies de Vélia?," 80.

97 Deacy, *Athena*, 31.

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