



The God Eros

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Flying Eros
Asia Minor (Turkey), Myrina
Hellenistic period, ca. 200–130 BCE
Terracotta

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In Hesiod's *Theogony*, an ancient Greek account of creation, the author names Eros among the very first gods. He is lauded as the “most beautiful of all the immortal gods, the limb-loosener, who overwhelms judgment and wise council in the breast of gods and all men.” Subsequent authors drew upon Hesiod, but further embellished the god's overwhelming seductiveness. Aristophanes, in his *Birds*, implies that the god's potency is such that he brings on a frenzy of procreation among the other gods, after he himself couples with dark Chaos. Simply put, from chaos came love, and thus love emerges as a powerful force in ancient Greek creation stories, bringing forth the family of primeval gods. But love was not a one-dimensional concept to the ancient Greeks. In fact, Hesiod's Eros is no romantic being, but rather his power is coercive and uncontrollable. The English word “erotic” derives from the Greek “eros,” and its meaning to the ancient Greeks was one thing only: overpowering sexual desire. The poet Sappho lamented that it was a physical “torture” and others described it similarly. Different forms of love to the Greeks, such as “agape” and “philia,” carried gentler, non-sexual meanings.

It comes as no surprise that the first representations of Eros depicted him as a young male god, the very symbol of reproductive potency to the ancient Greeks, who believed the fetus grew from the *sperma* alone, since there was no knowledge of the human egg. It is surprising, however, that we find no major temples to this god who symbolized something so primal and essential to mankind. Although the author Pausanias claims Eros as the patron god of the ancient Greek city of Thespieae, his worship elsewhere seems to have chiefly taken place before altars and in small shrines, rather than large temples. Why? We might conclude that the cult of Eros was more prominent in early Greece but was supplanted by the introduction of Aphrodite, who seems to be a Greek reimagining of the fertility goddess, Astarte, probably brought to Greece through trade with Phoenicia. Hesiod seems to corroborate the chronology, placing Eros in a primeval era, while Aphrodite's momentous appearance comes later. As time progressed, Eros was reduced to the mischievous son of the great goddess, a comic, capricious character shooting his arrows indiscriminately at the hapless. Like his worship, his very appearance also diminished, and by the Hellenistic period, he is a child, sometimes even a baby, much like the modern Valentine's Day cliché.

The Museum's Hellenistic figurine depicts Eros as androgynous and desexualized, probably prepubescent. Scholars suggest that his function in the graves of Myrina had nothing to do with love, but rather as a guide for souls to the Underworld, a role typically given to the god Hermes. Perhaps a hint of the original concept of the god's seductive beauty remains in the traces of gold leaf on the wings. Indeed, Aristophanes describes the god's body at birth as “glistening with golden wings.” ■