

HESIOD AND THE CRETAN CAVE

A problem that plagued ancient authors who dealt with the birth of Zeus was the plethora of myths that placed his nativity in diverse locations¹). Apollodorus (1.1.6–7) attempted to account for two rival traditions by insisting that Zeus was born in a cave on Mt. Dicte, then naming one of his nurses ‘Ida’, a reference to the myth that placed his birth on Mt. Ida. Callimachus (Hymn to Zeus 33–4) outdid Apollodorus by alluding to three different traditions; he located Zeus’ birthplace in Arcadia, then transported him to Mt. Ida where he was tended by the nymphs of Dicte inside a Cretan cave. Hesiod, too, may have known of divergent traditions, but instead of resorting to the method employed by Callimachus and Apollodorus, he tried to reconcile them in a much more subtle manner by using word-play.

Hesiod’s love of word-play is evident throughout the *Theogony*. An obvious example occurs at line 200, where Aphrodite is called ‘genial (φιλομμειδέα) because she appeared out of genitals (μηδέων)’²). The poet’s predilection for employing words with double meanings was even recognized by the scholiasts, who suggested that his description of Aphrodite as αἰδοῦη (august) in 194 is a play on αἰδοῖα (genitals)³). Subtler instances of word-play may be detected in Hesiod’s use of the words *κευθμών* and the hapaxlegomenon *λοχεός*, which occur in the story of the castration of Ouranos (154–210). Hesiod depicts Gaia and Ouranos as having a dual nature: they are both physical entities and anthropomorphic deities at the same time. Although Ouranos is described as ‘starry’ and Gaia is ‘full of recesses’,

1) The discovery of cave sanctuaries on both of these mountains suggests that variant traditions arose because there was no single cave of Zeus, but a number of them, each the center of a local cult. For archaeological discoveries, see B. Rutkowski, *The Cult Places of the Aegean* (New Haven 1986) 68–71, and R. Willets, *Cretan Cults and Festivals* (London 1962) 141–7. For literary references to these caves, see M. L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony* (Oxford 1966) 297–8 (hereafter West, *Theogony*), and Willets, *op. cit.* 218.

2) Translation by M. L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony and Works and Days* (Oxford 1988) 9. See also G. P. Edwards, *The Language of Hesiod in its Traditional Context* (Oxford 1971) 104.

3) West, *Theogony* 223 rejects this interpretation: “if this had been in Hesiod’s mind, he would have been more explicit.” But see the other examples of this technique cited by B. van Groningen, *Pindar au Banquet* (Leyden 1960) 28, and G. Morgan, *Aphrodite Cytherea*, *TAPA* 108 (1978) 115–20.

they are nonetheless able to engage in sexual intercourse, which implies that they possessed the requisite male and female organs. This is clear in the case of Ouranos, since he is castrated and his testicles fall into the sea (180–9). The anthropomorphic features of Gaia, however, are not so obvious. When she gave birth, Ouranos took the children and put them away Γαίης ἐν κευθμώνι, an act that caused her great pain (156–60). As West noted, κευθμών is ‘conveniently ambiguous’. Translated as ‘recess’, it emphasizes Gaia’s geological nature, but her anthropomorphic aspect comes into play if it is construed as ‘uterus’, thus explaining the pain caused by the forcible confinement of fully developed children inside her⁴). The possibility of a double meaning for κευθμών is strengthened by the hapaxlegomenon λοχεός (ὁ δ’ ἐκ λοχείου πύξ [Kronos] ὠρέξατο χειρὶ σκαίῃ, δεξιτερῇ δὲ πελώριον ἔλλαβεν ὄρπιγν 178–9)⁵). West believes that it is equivalent to λόχος, ‘ambush’⁶). Edwards concurs with this interpretation, adding that Hesiod merely appended an extra syllable for metrical purposes⁷). But another explanation emerges through an examination of the context in which this word appears. After Ouranos confined his children in Gaia’s κευθμών, she persuaded Kronos to castrate his father, gave him a sickle, and hid him λόχῳ (174), ‘in an ambush’. When Ouranos approached to have intercourse with Gaia (176–8), Kronos reached ἐκ λοχείου and castrated his father. Presumably Kronos’ hiding place was outside the κευθμών, or uterus, where his siblings were confined. Furthermore, it must have been a place from which Kronos could reach out and castrate his father before he penetrated Gaia. If λοχεός is another example of Hesiod’s word-play, the location of Kronos’ ambush becomes clear. Λόχος has a dual meaning: ‘hiding place’ or ‘a lying in childbirth’⁸). Hesiod’s creation of the word λοχεός would emphasize this duality, since it appears to be a hybrid formed from λόχος and λοχεία, ‘parturition’. If this is the case, then λοχεός, like κευθμών, would have a double meaning: ‘ambush’ and ‘a place for birth’, i.e., ‘vagina’. This interpretation fits perfectly with the context. After their birth, the Titans are confined in a recess in the earth, which is also the uterus of Gaia. When Kronos agreed to avenge his mother, she sent him out from her uterus to a hiding place whence he could castrate his father before he penetrated her. The most likely location of this hiding place would be her vagina.

If we accept the dual nature of Gaia implied by the ambiguous words κευθμών and λοχεός, we may detect Hesiod’s attempt to reconcile the variant traditions of the location of Zeus’ birth. In lines 477–85, Rhea gives birth to Zeus near Lyctus on Crete, then hands him over to Gaia. Gaia places him in a ‘deep cave’ on Mt. Aigaion that is described as ζαθέης ὑπὸ κεύθει γαίης. Taken at face value, this phrase can mean ‘in the recesses of sacred earth’. But, in light of the double meaning of κευθμών, it can also be construed as ‘in the womb of holy Gaia’. Rhea’s placement of the infant Zeus into Gaia’s κευθμών on Mt. Aigaion and his eventual emergence from it suggest a second birth. Thus, Hesiod skilfully reconciled two contradictory traditions about the birth of Zeus by saying that he was born near the town of Lyctus, then implying that he was born in a cave on Mt. Aigaion.

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4) West, *Theogony* 214: “the Titans were kept in Gaia’s womb by Uranos’ unremitting embrace: that is why she is so distressed . . .”

5) R. Hamilton, *The Architecture of Hesiodic Poetry* (Baltimore 1989) 113 n. 63.

6) West, *Theogony* 219.

7) Edwards, op. cit. 104.

8) Note the cognates λοχεύω, λοχεία, and λόχευμα.