A problem that plagued ancient authors who dealt with the birth of Zeus was the plethora of myths that placed his nativity in diverse locations\(^1\). 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 (γενιαλ) because she appeared out of genitals (μηθέων)\(^2\). The poet’s predilection for employing words with double meanings was even recognized by the scholiasts, who suggested that his description of Aphrodite as αὐδοῖα (august) in 194 is a play on αὐδοῖα (genitals)\(^3\). Subtler instances of word-play may be detected in Hesiod’s use of the words κενθυμών and the hapaxlegomenon λοχέως, 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.


\(^3\) 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 γειτόνες ἐν κενθαμάντι, an act that caused her great pain (156–60). As West noted, κενθάμον 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 her

4). The possibility of a double meaning for κενθάμον is strengthened by the hapaxlegomenon λοχέας (ὁ δ’ ἐκ λοχέαο πᾶς [Kronos] ὑφέξατο χείρι σκοινή, δεξιερὴ δὲ πελώριον ἔλαβεν ἄστρυν 178–95). 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 purposes

5). But another explanation emerges through an examination of the context in which this word appears. After Ouranos confined his children in Gaia’s κενθάμον, she persuaded Kronos to castrate his father, gave him a σκελετό, and hid him λόχο (174), ‘in an ambush’. When Ouranos approached to have intercourse with Gaia (176–8), Kronos reached ἐκ λοχέαο and castrated his father. Presumably Kronos’ hiding place was outside the κενθάμον, 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 λοχέας 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 λοχέας would emphasize this duality, since it appears to be a hybrid formed from λόχος and λοχεία, ‘parturition’. If this is the case, then λοχέας, like κενθάμον, 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 κενθάμον and λοχέας, 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 ζώθεν ὑπὸ κενθθείν γαῖας. Taken at face value, this phrase can mean ‘in the recesses of sacred earth’. But, in light of the double meaning of κενθάμον, it can also be construed as ‘in the womb of holy Gaia’. Rhea’s placement of the infant Zeus into Gaia’s κενθάμον 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 Ouranos’ unremitting embrace: that is why she is so distressed…”


6) West, Theogony 219.

7) Edwards, op. cit. 104.

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