

Eileithyia: The Goddess of Labour

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ABSTRACT

Eileithyia was the goddess of birth in Ancient Greek mythology. Daughter of Zeus and Hera, she was considered to be a pre-Hellenic goddess as her name was mentioned in several Linear B tablets from ancient Crete. Eileithyia was initially considered to have two functions, either to further childbirth or to protract and delay the labour. Sanctuaries dedicated to her divinity were found in different places of Greece, proving the importance of her cult in Ancient Greece.

Keywords: Eileithyia, labour, mythology, divinity, Antiquity.

INTRODUCTION

The two principal divinities of labour in Greek mythology were Artemis Locheia (Artemis of the puerperium) and Eileithyia (Εἰλειθυία, in Greek) (1). Eileithyia was considered a secondary goddess of Greek divinity-mythology. However, she was well known as the goddess of labour and protection of the newborn. We present the importance of Eileithyia in the Greek mythology.

Name explanation

Her name derives from the verb “ἐλεύθειν” which means the coming or helping goddess. In ancient Greek, the words “ἐλθέ, ἐλθέ” (meaning

“come, come”) were used by parturient women in order to ask help from Eileithyia, explaining probably in this way the etymology her name (1). Another etymological explanation could be the combination of two Ancient Greek verbs “εἰλέω”, meaning push, and “θύω”, meaning become crazy from the pain, which are forming the name “Εἰλειθυία” (Eileithyia) (2). Furthermore, other common names of Eileithyia such as Eleuthia, Eleutho, or Eleitho could also be found in the Ancient Greek world, depending on the worship territory (2). In addition, in some areas, Eileithyia can be found with the name of Genetyllis and considered to be a member of Aphrodite’s company, which was associated with sex and conception. The Elionia, who was worshipped at

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Article received on the 31st of January 2022 and accepted for publication on the 9th of March 2022

Argos was probably the same goddess (3, 4). The goddess, with the names Vrittomartys and Diktynna, was worshipped even in Minoan era in the island of Crete. Moreover, her fame survived even in the Roman period, when she was known as Lucina ("Light bringer") or Natio ("Birth") (2).

Family and origin

She is considered to be a pre-Hellenic goddess of labour as her name is mentioned in several Linear B tablets from Ancient Crete, where Eileithyia was born by Hera. However, Herodotus claimed that the goddess was not born in Crete but came to Delos from the Hyperboreans (5).

In Homer's *Odyssey* it is mentioned that Eileithyia is the daughter of Zeus and Hera as well as the sister of Ares, Hephaestus and Hebe (6-8). Pausanias refers that she had two offsprings: Sosipolis and Eros (9, 10). More specifically, in an Ancient hymn attributed to Olen, which was sung in the island of Delos, Eileithyia was considered the mother of Eros (10, 11). Similarly, she was referred to be a servant to Moirae (The Fates) and, according to Diodorus Siculus, she was also attended by Artemis.

Bringing life to gods and heroes...

Eileithyia was the goddess of birth, but in the Ancient Greek world she was initially considered to have two characteristics/functions, depending on the difficulty of each individual labour. These two functions were originally assigned to two different Eileithyiai ("Εἰλειθυΐαι", in Greek): the first one, the divinity who furthered childbirth (as assistance to women in labour) and the other as the divinity who protracted and delayed the labour (12, 13). Nevertheless, later on both functions were attributed to the same divinity and for this reason, only one Eileithyia was mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* (13). Such examples include birth of Athena, Apollo and Artemis, Hercules and Eurystheas (14).

The birth of Athena

The first wife of Zeus was not Hera, but Metis (goddess of wisdom and daughter of the gods Ocean and Tithyos). The offspring of their marriage was Athena. Zeus was afraid that, once born, the fetus in the abdomen of Metis would kill him in order to become the new king of gods and he was going to have the same luck as his father Cronus and his grandfather Uranus. When

Gaia (Zeus's grandmother) informed him of this prophecy, Zeus decided to eat Metis. Nonetheless, after nine months Zeus suffered of a terrible headache. Hephaestus – or, according to other sources, Prometheus – used an axe to open his head and give birth to Athena, the goddess of wisdom (15, 16). Eileithyia was present to assist and promote childbirth.

The birth of Apollo and Artemis

Leto was one of the many mistresses of Zeus. The jealous goddess Hera was informed regarding Leto's pregnancy and full of anger she asked Python (a monster with the form of a big snake) to chase Leto all over the known world and prevent her from finding a safe place to deliver her babies. Leto travelled from Athens to the island of Egina, to the Kingdom of Theva, to Mount Pelion, to the Kingdom of Argos in the Peloponnese and to Thessaly, but she could find no safe place to give birth. After all those difficult moments, Leto was begging for help. At this moment, Eileithyia disobeyed her mother Hera and decided to assist Leto. Holding a pine tree, Leto managed to deliver the twins, Apollo and Artemis, in the island of Delos after nine days of travelling around Ancient Greece (16).

The birth of Hercules and Eurystheas

In another fornication of Zeus with Alkmene (mother of Hercules), the powerful god promised that from the family of Perseas (grandfather of Alkmene) an offspring would be born, and his fate would be to become king of the city of Argos. The jealous Hera persuaded Zeus to say that the king of Argos was going to become the first-born offspring from the family of Perseas. Therefore, Eilytheia helped Hera and with her two functions, initially protracted and delayed Alkmene's labour of Hercules and at the same moment, she furthered the preterm labour of Nikippi (cousin of Alkmene) to Eurystheas (17). Based on Zeus's promise, Eurystheas became king of Argos and he was the one to challenge Hercules on performing his twelve labours.

Depictions of Eileithyia in Ancient Greek art

The best-known depiction of the goddess is on an attic kylix, where Eileithyia is attending the birth of goddess Athena from Zeus's head (Figure 1). Moreover, the goddess is often depic-

FIGURE 1. The Birth of Athena, Athenian black-figure kylix, 6th century BC, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA



FIGURE 2. The cave of Eileithya at Amnisus, Crete, Greece



ted carrying torches in order to bring newborn out of darkness and into light.

Places of worship

Places of her worship are found all over Greece, but the majority of them are located in the island

of Crete, believed to be the goddess's birth place. More specifically, she was considered to have been born by Hera in a cave of Amnisus, near Cnossus. That cave is today called "Eileithya cave" (Figure 2). The first excavations started back in 1885 by Joseph Chatzidakis, but the findings came completely to light by the systematic effort of Spyridon Marinatos between 1929-1938 (18). The most important of them included the cave itself as well as the courtyard with the altars (18). Other places of worship in Crete included the caves of Olounta, Diktynnaio as well as Lato and Eleutherna, where shrines to Eileithya were found.

From Crete, her worship spread over Delos and Attica. According to Pausanias, she had a sanctuary in Athens containing three carved images of the goddess, two of them originated in Crete as a present of Phaedra and the remaining one originated in Delos as a present of Erysichton (19).

Sanctuaries were found in different other places of mainland Greece, including Sparta, Olympia, Cleitor, Messene, Tegea, Megara, Hermione, Argos and Aigion (20-22). □

Conflicts of interest: none declared.

Financial support: none declared.

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