

Extracts from Timothy Gantz regarding 'The Birth of Aphrodite' ¹

The 'Birth of Aphrodite' has two ancient textual origins.² The first from Hesiod begins with Gaia (the Earth), who, as Gantz notes, 'brings into being (1) Ouranos (Sky) to enclose her and be a home for the gods (which could mean that she foresees the coming of the Olympians), (2) the Ourea (Mountains), and (3) Pontos (Sea), all expressly without sexual congress (*Theogony* 126-32). The Ourea are clearly just a feature of the landscape, but Gaia mates with both Ouranos and Pontos to produce further offspring. To Ouranos she bears first twelve relatively normal children, six male and six female, whom Hesiod will later call "Titans": Okeanos, Koios, Kreios, Hyperion, Iapetos, Kronos, Theia, Rheia, Themis, Mnemosyne, Phoibe, and Tethys (*Theogony* 132-38). Of these, Kronos is named expressly as the youngest and "crooked-planning" (probably the sense Hesiod gave to the word, even if originally it referred rather to Kronos' sickle³), the most terrible of the group, who hated his father. Next born are the Kyklopes [Cyclopes], three in number, and like to the other gods in all things save for the single round eye in their foreheads (*Theogony* 139-46). Their names – Brontes, Steropes, and Arges – are connected with lightning and thunder, and indeed they will be the ones to forge the thunderbolt for Zeus.

'Last come three more brothers, the Hundred-Handers, the most monstrous of all with their fifty heads and hundred hands, Kottos, Briareos (or Obriareos), and Gyges (*Theogony* 147-53). What follows in Hesiod is not entirely clear – Ouranos hates his children, perhaps just the last six but more likely all eighteen, and as soon as they are born imprisons them deep within the earth, that is, both underground and in the womb of their mother. The reason for his hatred may be their terrible appearance, though Hesiod does not quite say this (*Theogony* 155 comes close to implying it as the reason). In any event, he delights in the deed, and Gaia in her anger and distress fashions a sickle of adamant, after which she asks her children to take revenge on their father. Only Kronos has the courage to volunteer, and is placed by his mother in ambush (inside her body, we will understand, if he too is a prisoner) to await Ouranos. When the latter comes to lie with Gaia, bringing with him night, and

¹ Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth, A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources, Volume 1*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1993, pp. 10-11, 16, & 99-100.

² Aphrodite was the goddess associated in ancient Greece with love, beauty, pleasure, passion and procreation. She was syncretised with the Roman goddess Venus.

³ So M. L. West, *Theogony*, Oxford, 1966 (at *Theogony* 18), with linguistic and morphological arguments cited for this conclusion.

stretches out beside her, his son reaches out with the sickle and castrates him. The severed testicles are then thrown behind Kronos into the sea, while Gaia receives the drops of blood that fall from them, and thus produces in time the Erinyes, the Gigantes, and the Melian Nymphai. The testicles themselves float past the island of Kythera to Cyprus, where Aphrodite is born and, accompanied from the very beginning by Eros and Himeros (Desire), assumes her role as goddess of erotic encounters (*Theogony* 154-206). In passing, Hesiod makes explicit the derivation of her cult titles ("Kytherea" and "Kyprogenia") from Kythera and Cyprus, as well as the supposed formation of her name from the foam (aphros) surrounding the testicles. This section of the *Theogony* then concludes with Ouranos' prediction that retribution will come to the Titans for their deed (*Theogony* 207-10).

'Homer,' Gantz then notes, 'relates none of this; indeed, in *Iliad* 14, Okeanos and Tethys seem elevated to the status accorded Ouranos and Gaia in Hesiod (*Iliad* 14. 200-210, 245-46), while Aphrodite is throughout the poem clearly the daughter of Zeus (by the Okeanid Dione, *Iliad* 5.370-71). The first of these points is especially difficult to assess: Hera tells Zeus as part of her Trugrede that she is on her way to the ends of the earth to visit "Okeanos the genesis of gods and mother Tethys, they who raised me well in their home, receiving me from Rhea when Zeus cast Kronos down beneath the earth and the barren sea." Mother Tethys here need be no more than a stepmother to Hera herself, and the phrase "genesis of gods" might be simply a formulaic epithet indicating the numberless rivers and springs descended from Okeanos; so, for example, at *Iliad* 21.195-97 he is that from which all rivers and springs and the whole sea derive. But in Hera's subsequent interview with Hypnos, the latter describes the great river as the "genesis for all," leaving us to wonder whether Homer could have supposed Okeanos and Tethys the parents of the Titans (Kronos' father is never specified), for how else can they fit this description? The second part of Hera's statement also seems problematic, for in the *Theogony* she is swallowed by her father and presumably emerges from his belly full grown, ready to aid her brother; even if she is not in that poem swallowed, as might be argued following Hyginus (*Fabulae* 139),⁴ she should be full grown by the time of the overthrow, and have no need of a nurse. Just possibly Homer, in contrast to Hesiod, did think of her as still an infant on re-emerging, and thus needing to be cared for, though if he believed this true of all five siblings he probably did not believe in a general battle between Olympians and Titans ... Elsewhere, for what it is worth, the

⁴ So too Orphic Fragment 58 in O. Kern, *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, Berlin, 1922, where only the males are swallowed.

Iliad on several occasions calls the Olympians "Ouraniones," presumably meaning "descendants of Ouranos" (*Iliad* 570: cf. *Iliad* 5.898, where the same term clearly applies to the Titans). "Ouraniones" is also used twice at the end of the *Theogony*, both times of the Olympians (*Theogony* 919, 929). In Akousilaos, Ouranos certainly seems to hold his Hesiodic position, since he is said to have thrown the Hundred-Handers down into Tartaros, lest they be greater than he (2F8).' (Gantz 1993: 10-11)

Subsequently Gantz notes, 'Turning to Aphrodite's birth, we find that sources after Homer and Hesiod have little to add. The opening of *Homeric Hymn* 6, the only other Archaic evidence, rather supports Hesiod's view of the matter, since it makes the goddess arise from the sea foam near Cyprus (though with no direct mention of Ouranos). One notable change here is that, after the birth, the Horai, rather than Hesiod's Eros and Himeros, come to adorn her and accompany her to Olympos; in Hesiod's account the Horai, as daughters of Zeus, have not yet been born. Oddly enough, nothing we have from Pindar, Bakchylides, or Aischylos commits itself on the subject of Aphrodite's father. In later literature, she is almost universally the daughter of Zeus, though the Epimenides *Theogony* as noted before does make her spring from Kronos (3B19). Artistic representations of her rising up from the sea (in presumably a birth scene) do not begin before the mid-fifth century.' (Gantz 1993: 16)

Gantz approaches the subject again with the Olympians in mind. 'On the birth of ... Aphrodite, he notes, '... we have observed already that Hesiod and Homer offer widely varying accounts: in Hesiod she is born from the severed testicles and foam of the sea after Kronos has castrated his father Ouranos (*Theogony* 188-206), while in both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* she is the daughter of Zeus (*Iliad* 3.374, etc.; *Odyssey* 8.308, 320), and in the *Iliad* her mother is clearly Dione (*Iliad* 5.370-71). Such a descent is for both poems something more than just repetition of the formulaic expression *Dios thugater*; in the *Iliad* Aphrodite goes so far as to call Ares brother on one occasion (*Iliad* 5.359), and in the *Odyssey* Hephaistos threatens to reclaim the bride gifts he paid to her father Zeus after her infidelity with Ares has been revealed (*Odyssey* 8.306-20). Thus her parentage seems well established in the Homeric tradition. On the other hand, her birth from the sea and the seed of Ouranos has a crude, early look, and one can well understand why Hesiod's organisation of the world's beginnings was not satisfied to leave such a primal force to a stage as late as that of Zeus' children. Hesiod gives us all three of the goddess' names Aphrodite, Kyprogene (or Kypris), and Kythereia – and after his account of her birth has little trouble explaining them (though linguists

are not quite as convinced): she is born of the foam (aphros) that drifts past Kythera to Cyprus (Theogony 195-99).⁵ Interestingly enough, the *Iliad* calls her Kypris five times (all in *Iliad* 5, with four of them related to her wounding by Diomedes: *Iliad* 5.330, 422, 458, 760, 883),⁶ but never Kythereia, while the *Odyssey* calls her Kythereia twice (*Odyssey* 8.288; 18.193) but never Kypris (although in *Odyssey* 8 she does go to Cyprus where she has a cult). In the *Homeric Hymns* she is Kythereia five times (*Hymn to Apollo* 6, 175, 287; *Homer Hymn* 6.18; 10.1) and Kyprogene once (*Homeric Hymn* 10.1 again). Her common epithet *philommeides* may or may not mean "laughter-loving" (the Theogony etymologizes it in relation to the testicles [medea] of Ouranos).⁷ (Gantz 1993: 99-100)

⁵ See West, *ibid.*, 1966, pp. 223-24.

⁶ G. S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary 2: Books 5-8*, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 94-95, suggests that this concentration may be due to metrical considerations arising out of Aphrodite's special role here.

⁷ See West, *ibid.*, 1966. 88.