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A Sanctuary of Artemis the Fertility Goddess

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Artemis has traditionally been described as the goddess of the hunt, as a *potnia theron*, as a moon and warrior goddess, and as a fertility goddess.¹ The Great Goddess of Ephesus and the goddess for whom young girls danced at Brauron are distinctive, but all these divine personalities are called Artemis.² Artemis' characters were varied, which adds complications to identifying sanctuaries of Artemis with the emphasis on her role as fertility goddess. This paper will combine the literary evidence and the archaeological finds from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta to provide a reconstruction of the different aspects of this Artemis cult.

Rites of passage

In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Artemis is depicted as a nurturer of beasts,³ but Artemis is concerned with human children as well.⁴ Artemis presided over rites of passage; she was the handmaiden of girls until marriage and the companion of boys on the path to citizenship. Rites of passage were fundamental to myths and rituals and were a central concept in Greek culture.⁵ Most evidence focuses on rites of passage for boys, which is due to the importance of their citizenship in the polis' development.⁶ Sparta is especially important, because of its unique constitution which emphasized the martial nature of both men and women.

Rites of passage contained a dual nature. One side emphasised the innocence of childhood, while the other inflicted terror by the use of masks, ritual wounding and occasionally death.⁷ Furthermore, Artemis' untamed nature is exemplified by holding

¹ Goddess of hunt: Homer, *Iliad* 5.51ff, *Homeric Hymn 27 to Artemis*; *potnia theron* (Mistress of Animals): Homer, *Iliad* 21.470ff.

² Burkert 1985: 120.

³ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 135-45.

⁴ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990: 197.

⁵ Vernant 1991: 111-112.

⁶ Plato, *Laws* 653a-654e.

Van Gennep 1960; P. Vidal-Naquet 1986; Dowden 1989. See also the papers in Padilla (ed.) 1999; Dodd and Faraone (eds.) 2003; Larson 2007.

⁷ Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 16.4-5, 16.9-17.4 and 18.1-4; Plato, *Laws* 635c; Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* II.

rituals in the wilderness. For example Spartan boys were inducted into the secret service of the *krypteia* away from the city in fields and forests.⁸ The savage character of Artemis Orthia could be explained by a re-interpretation of Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, in which the statue of the Tauric Artemis ends up in Sparta instead of Halae.⁹ The brutal nature of the Tauric Artemis was demonstrated by human sacrifices.¹⁰

Archaeological evidence from Sparta

Excavations at Sparta by the British School at Athens (1906-1910) have revealed important data about the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia.¹¹ The excavations have dated significant changes to the sanctuary c. 570/560 BCE, indicating modifications to the existing structure.¹² However, material evidence emphasises an unbroken usage of the sanctuary grounds.¹³

As aforementioned, Artemis had several characteristics amongst which was that of fertility goddess, *kourotrophos* (protectress of children) and protectress of warriors. In the description by Pausanias, the rites of Artemis Orthia in Sparta involved a rite of passage ceremony for males.¹⁴ Spartan rites of passage contained races, trials and ritual nudity.¹⁵ The rite of passage for young boys was attested at Sparta from the classical period onwards, and it has been possible to reconstruct antecedents of this rite in the archaic sanctuary.¹⁶ During the rite of passage terracotta masks were used. Masks related to the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, were very rare in other Greek sanctuaries and may be the result of some circumstances peculiar to

⁸ Plato, *Laws* 633; Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 28.1-6.

⁹ Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Tauris* 1446-1467.

Pausanias, 3.16.7-9: 'The wooden image there [Sparta] they say is that which once Orestes and Iphigeneia stole out of the Tauric land, and the Lacedaemonians say that it was brought to their land because Orestes was king. I think their story more probable than that of the Athenians. For what could have induced Iphigeneia to leave the image behind at Brauron?'

¹⁰ Herodotus IV.103.

¹¹ Dawkins 1929: the final publication of the site from which I studied the finds in detail, in addition to studying selected objects in the Sparta Archaeological Museum.

¹² The sanctuary was covered by sand; due to the frequent flooding of the River Eurotas the general level of the sanctuary was raised to guard it against further reoccurrence of such a disaster. There is a difference in dating the flood and the preventive measures against it. Dawkins in his final publication of the site dated the sand at the end of the seventh century BCE and Boardman dated it after 570/560 BCE in accordance with the pottery found beneath the layer.

Dawkins 1929a: 5 and Boardman 1963: 4.

¹³ Dawkins 1929.

¹⁴ Pausanias, 3.16.10-11.

¹⁵ Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 24.4. Dance, festivals, exercise and hunt were daily pursuits for Spartan men.

¹⁶ Lonsdale 1993: 169-170.

Sparta.¹⁷ The masks either embodied the model with which the young men had to identify themselves; the youths and warriors, or they were the form of the savage; horrible and ridiculous caricatures like Gorgon and grotesques. The masks, therefore, embodied the threat of chaos and death. It was an important method to test boys' courage, which was one of the basic characteristics of soldiers, and according to the Spartans warriors should be trained as early as possible.

Music and dance were important aspects in the development of youths and of the Spartan community. Both were used in transitions and transformations. Several figurines representing musicians were found, depicting both males and females. The instruments that were represented are cymbals, flutes and lyres. Musical interest played a role in the upbringing, transitions and transformations of children as well. From very early on in their lives, children were taught how to dance. Dance played an important role in the rites of passage during which the children became fully grown adults. After being guarded safely through the transitions it was natural to thank the goddess for her protection and guidance. The sanctuary also yielded bone flutes, illustrating Sparta's musical interest.¹⁸

Spartan figurines include warriors, charioteers, horsemen and bowmen found in lead, pottery and bone. Horses were known as the animals for warriors, more specifically for charioteers and cavalry.¹⁹ Consequently, it is not surprising that the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia at Sparta yielded figurines of horses.²⁰ It was part of Artemis' character as *potnia theron*, but at the same time it could be a reference to the militaristic character of the Spartans. Offering figurines of horses, the warriors may have asked the goddess to protect them or thanked Artemis for her protection. However, the Spartans were best known for their hoplite warriors and being part of the cavalry was a status symbol. The horses therefore could have represented more characteristics of the goddess: fertility and child rearing.²¹ It is not unlikely that the great quantity of horses represent toys for children, offered after reaching adulthood.

¹⁷ Carter 1987: 374.

¹⁸ Dawkins 1929b: 236.

¹⁹ Marinatos 1998: 121.

²⁰ Dawkins 1929.

²¹ Horse figurines are first recorded in the eight century BCE, they were however more common starting with the seventh century BCE. Higgins 1967: 24.

Conclusion

The archaeological finds described for the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta clearly illustrate that she was worshipped as both a *potnia theon* and a protectress of children and for that reason a fertility goddess. There is a strong connection between the character of the goddess of the hunt and the fertility goddess. For both characters animals are suitable votive offerings. The rituals taking place at Sparta are illustrated by the finds of the masks as well as the musician-figurines. The importance of Artemis' sanctuary at Sparta for the rite of passage for boys illustrates her character of fertility goddess.

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