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MIGRAINES, MEN, AND MYTHOLOGY

GENDERED IMAGERY IN THE BIRTH OF ATHENA

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Abstract: Based around a classical Greek kylix held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this essay discusses artistic portrayal of the Birth of Athena. Images of Athena's birth represent Zeus in a way consistent with childbirth imagery, so Zeus can be understood as repurposing female imagery for a patriarchal narrative. Comparing this kylix to other childbirth images reveals Greek gender roles and stereotypes, as well as the politics associated with the rise of Athens. Understanding the gender politics in the Birth of Athena image is therefore helpful in understanding Greek society and concepts of gender roles.

One of Greece's most important deities was born as the result of a headache. According to the mythology, Zeus impregnated the goddess Metis and then swallowed her after it was prophesied that her second child, a son, would overthrow him.¹ Later, Zeus suffered from a headache. Another male god, often Hephaestus but sometimes Hermes, broke Zeus's head open with an ax, and out sprang Athena, fully clothed for war.² Consistent with other images of the Birth of Athena, the terracotta kylix attributed to the Painter of the Nicosia Olpe (ca. 550 BC, Fig. 1) modifies the image of a childbirth scene to subvert feminine reproductive roles. The drinking cup's combination of gender roles is a reminder of the ambivalent gender roles played by Athena, as well as her patriarchally-based power over life and death and her important role in Athenian society.

1. Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Kimberly Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), lines 886–924.

2. Norman O. Brown, "The Birth of Athena," *TAPA* 83 (1952): 130–143, here 135.



Figure 1: Terracotta kylix (drinking cup), ca. 550 BC, attributed to the Painter of the Nicosia Olpe. Public domain, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Painter of Nicosia Olpe's terracotta kylix, a black-figure drinking cup, was created by the Painter of Nicosia Olpe, a nameless but prolific artist from Athens.³ Zeus dominates the center of the cup. Athena has just emerged from his head and now stands on his lap. She is in full war regalia and holds a spear and shield. On either side of Zeus is an Eileithyia, goddesses of childbirth. The two Eileithyia raise their hands in the traditional ritual gesture of assistance; according to scholar Maurizio Bettini, this may also be interpreted as an act of supplication, a good omen for the birth, a blessing offered by the goddesses, or potentially their surprise at the unusual nature of the birth.⁴ The white skin of the Eileithyia and Athena, as well as the patterning on their and Zeus's clothing, emphasize them compared to the other all-black figures on the vase. This contrast essentially reduces the composition to the four figures in the center. While the figures on either side could be considered important, given that different Birth of

3. Terracotta Kylix (drinking cup), ca. 550 BC, attributed to the Painter of the Nicosia Olpe (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gallery 155, digital image accessed 19 September 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247515>).

4. Maurizio Bettini, *Women and Weasels: Mythologies of Birth in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 84–87.

Athena images purposefully include different figures and that spectatorship has been previously argued as an important aspect of Greek art,⁵ the most important aspects of the scene for this discussion are the two Eileithyia, Athena, and Zeus.

CHILDBIRTH AND MATERNITY IMAGERY

The image of Zeus giving birth to Athena significantly imitates traditional childbirth scenes in art. Childbirth is often depicted in Greek art on grave stelae and lekythos vases. The woman in labor is shown seated from the side. She is normally depicted as emotionally distressed, her hair and clothing have been loosened, and she is often physically supported by those around her.⁶ In this kylix, Zeus is similarly portrayed from the side, with loose hair and robes. His physical body from the waist down is ambiguous in shape, not clearly marked by either gender. Zeus therefore takes on the role of a childbearing woman, imitating the actual way that most ancient Greek women gave birth in a seated position on a birthing chair.⁷ This portrayal allows Zeus to assume the power of a woman giving birth while still maintaining his male attributes, giving him power derived from both gender roles. This changes the narrative from a simple childbirth scene to politically significant propaganda.

By swallowing his wife Metis, Zeus assimilated the female element of birth. Accordingly, this kylix depicts him as both male and female. Other female elements work alongside Zeus, demonstrating the completeness of his gender role assumption. In particular, the female Eileithyia figures on either side of Zeus mark him as a childbearing woman as they assist him in giving birth, blessing him as mother with their gestures.⁸ The scholarship of Shann Kennedy-Quigley claims that all active intervention in the mythological accounts of Athena's birth is male; she argues that the Eileithyia midwives portrayed in Birth of Athena images are ineffectual because they do not physically touch Zeus, meaning that only the male figures of Hephaestus, who appears in other Birth of Athena scenes, and Zeus impact the birth's outcome.⁹ However, this kylix's depiction of the Birth of Athena noticeably excludes Hephaestus or any other intervening male figure, placing a focus instead on the Eileithyia. While the dual goddesses of childbirth do not touch Zeus (as Kennedy-Quigley notes), they do make their traditional gestures, which

5. Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell, *Vase Painting, Gender, and Social Identity in Archaic Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6. Nancy Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 122, 157–166.

7. Bettini, *Women and Weasels*, 55.

8. *Ibid.*, 84–87.

9. Shanna Kennedy-Quigley, "Visual Representations of the Birth of Athena/Minerva: A Comparative Study," *Etruscan Studies* 8, no. 1 (2001): 66–68.

act as both a blessing and an impetus for the birth to move forward.¹⁰ For example, according to Greek mythology, the Eileithyia raising their hands is the catalyst for baby Heracles to be born.¹¹ As indicated in the story of Artemis's birth, the very presence of the childbirth goddesses is enough to cause birth, so physical touch is not necessary.¹² Thus, while Kennedy-Quigley argues that the lack of physical touch between Zeus and the Eileithyia is a sign of their stripped power, the Eileithyia's raised arms can instead be read as the Eileithyia giving the blessing of their female power to Zeus, thereby giving him female as well as male authority.

In assuming the female role, Zeus becomes both male and female, mother and father, active and passive, essentially all-powerful.¹³ He usurps the function of birth to exercise control over women, turning a female mystery into something that a man can also do.¹⁴ The Eileithyia on the vase give Zeus their female blessing, accepting him as a childbearing woman, which role he fulfills visually. However, the distinctions between common depictions of childbirth in artwork and this Birth of Athena image indicate that Zeus is, in essence, upstaging childbearing women by fulfilling both female and male roles.

MALE ADAPTATION OF FEMALE ROLES

Despite being portrayed as a childbearing woman, Zeus is still undoubtedly male. His birthing chair is throne-like, and he appears in a position of power. He is still king of the gods. His beard also marks him as a man. Furthermore, this kylix shows Zeus as completely calm and collected, as is consistent with other classical depictions of Zeus at the Birth of Athena.¹⁵ This is in direct and clear contrast with funerary depictions of childbirth, which visually depict mothers in labor as highly emotional and distressed because the labor process killed them.¹⁶ This lack of emotion identifies Zeus as male, less emotional than his female counterparts in labor. It also marks him as powerful and in control of the events around him—attributes that were associated strongly with men in the Greek culture of the time.¹⁷ Returning to the lack of physical touch in the work of art, Zeus does not need the physical support of other figures, even though he is empowered by

10. Bettini, *Women and Weasels*, 84–87.

11. *Ibid.*, 38.

12. “Homeric Hymn 3 to Delian Apollo,” in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation*, trans. and ed. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 89–115.

13. Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood*, 127.

14. *Ibid.*, 134.

15. Karim W. Arafat, *Classical Zeus: A Study in Art and Literature* (New York: Clarendon, 1990), 38.

16. Kennedy-Quigley, “Visual Representations,” 66.

17. Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood*, 147.

their blessing. He channels the feminine power of the midwife goddesses, but on this particular kylix, he does not physically rely on any other figures for help in giving birth. Other scenes of the Birth of Athena include Hephaestus and his ax, but this scene depicts Zeus as separate and in control of his own labor narrative. The supernatural elements of the birth scene thus divorce it from the actual pain and gore of childbirth by emphasizing Zeus's masculine power and control.¹⁸

Besides the changed birth narrative evident in the lack of emotion on Zeus's face, Zeus giving birth from his head is a narrative choice that allows for a hygienic, orderly birth. Greek culture saw childbirth as polluting because of the bodily fluids involved.¹⁹ Similarly, a woman's womb was considered a point of weakness and a source of illness.²⁰ The use of Zeus's head as a womb allows him to give birth without any bodily fluids and without a uterus. This substitution of the male head for the female womb allows Zeus to adopt a procreative feminine role without any of the associated aspects of femininity that would be culturally considered weaknesses. Because the Greeks believed that a father contributed all of the genetic material to a child and a mother's sole contribution was as an incubating womb,²¹ Zeus has become the sole creator of Athena.

Ultimately, the biggest difference between the grave stelae and the Birth of Athena kylix is the outcome of the labor, emphasized by the lack of emotion that Zeus shows. He does not need to be emotional because he has the birth under control, and it has already been successful. The grave stelae of childbirth scenes were carved to honor women who died giving birth, so there is a natural element of tragedy in the depictions.²² This is in direct contrast to Zeus, who lives—despite, in some accounts, being struck in the head by an ax. Perhaps this is the ultimate sign of the male ability to supplant female power: Zeus is able to enact a successful birth that is clean, unpolluted, and calm. He therefore performs and even improves the innate ability of women to give birth.

The visual representation of Athena in the kylix illustrates her complicated mixing of gender roles. Athena is caught between the male figure of Zeus and the female figure of the Eileithyia. Her white skin echoes the white skin of the

18. Sian Lewis, *The Athenian Woman* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 14–15.

19. Angela Taraskiewicz, "Motherhood as Teleia: Rituals of Incorporation at the Kouroutrophic Shrine," in *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Lauren Hackworth Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 43–69, here 53.

20. Yuri Hong, "Collaboration and Conflict: Discourses of Maternity in Hippocratic Gynecology and Embryology," in *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Lauren Hackworth Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 71–96, here 82.

21. Hong, "Collaboration and Conflict," 75.

22. Lewis, *The Athenian Woman*, 14–15.

Eileithyia, and the two face each other as if in a mirror. This idea of a mirror reflection is emphasized by their matching outfits and the similar bend of their arms. However, Athena faces the same way as her father Zeus, her spear matches his, and her military bearing distinguishes her from the Eileithyia, whom she seems to challenge with her spear raised, as if ready for battle. Similarly, in the wider Greek culture, the goddess Athena challenged gender roles of both men and women. While a normally-born Athena would have been a threat to Zeus's power, this unusually-born Athena becomes his subordinate, who assists him in maintaining his power.²³ She is a female goddess, but she is also a soldier, which traditionally is a male role. Throughout Greek history, Athena's cult eventually came to replace that of other palace-citadel goddesses, so she fulfilled the role of female deity for a large geographical area.²⁴ In mythological tales, Athena resists the sexual advances of Hephaestus, defeats her male rival Poseidon, and is capable of wielding Zeus's lightning bolts.²⁵ She seems to shun femininity to adopt a more masculine role, but she is still intimately connected to female rites of passage like childbirth. Thus, Athena is a figure that is both male and female, appropriately represented as such in both this work of art and the story of her birth.

The repurposed gender roles in this work of art find their parallel in the literature of the ancient Greeks, and the message of the kylix supports the patriarchal system that Athens maintained. As noted by Greek historian Nancy Demand, one of the best ways to control the female arena of birth was for men to usurp the function.²⁶ Socrates, Plato, and a widespread group of other scholars discussed men as being the midwives for ideas in their students.²⁷ The male narrative of being midwives of the head allowed them to participate in a female-exclusive life ritual while remaining clean from the emotion and bodily fluid normally accompanied by birth. Such narratives would have empowered men while demeaning female reproductive contributions to society.

THE POWER OF ATHENA'S CULT

The Birth of Athena narrative depicted on this kylix strengthens the authority of Zeus, Athena, and the patriarchal structure as a whole. First, this depiction creates a strong association between Zeus and the concepts of birth and war. Previous scholars have suggested that classical Greek culture viewed the death of a woman

23. Brown, "The Birth of Athena," 134.

24. R. J. Hopper, "Athena and the Early Acropolis," *GR* 10 (1963): 1–16, here 5.

25. Hopper, "Athena and the Early Acropolis," 5.

26. Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood*, 134.

27. *Ibid.*, 134–6.

in childbirth as comparable to the death of a man on the battlefield.²⁸ While Nancy Demand has challenged this assertion, arguing that the Greeks preferred the active deaths of soldiers over the more passive deaths of childbirth, even she admits that there is some similarity, since both war and childbirth were ways that Greeks could die in service of their community.²⁹ The pro-comparison scholarship may still hold merit, however, particularly given that gynecological texts used a war-like narrative to describe birth: fetuses were described as fighting their way out of the womb.³⁰ Comparing childbirth to battle seems to honor women and their reproductive role. This makes Zeus's assumption of the role of childbearing woman even more powerful, since it allows him to fulfill the role of soldier in both the male and female spheres.

Furthermore, images like the Birth of Athena were a reminder of Zeus's supreme might. Not only do they show the supremacy of his calm, cool, collected male demeanor, but they also indicate Zeus's superiority over the other gods and the previous regimes. There are strong comparisons between the story of Athena's birth and Zeus's own. In both instances, the reigning monarchs, Zeus and Kronos, attempt to eliminate threats to their throne by swallowing their children. Kronos swallows his children after they are born. He is subsequently tricked by his wife to not eat Zeus, resulting in Zeus's ultimate rise to power and Kronos's defeat. Zeus, on the other hand, swallows his wife. By assimilating the female element into himself, he increases his power and prevents his rival-challenger son from even being born. In contrast to Kronos's story, Zeus is successful in mitigating the threat to his throne because of his assimilation of the feminine. The Birth of Athena is a reminder that Zeus's challenger will never be born, so Zeus will rule forever.

Depicting the Birth of Athena as male-centric created an important father-daughter link between Athena and Zeus that helped solidify the power of the Athenians. As seen in this kylix, the Birth of Athena removes a female mother figure from the narrative of Athena. Instead of father impregnating mother who births child, father births child, thus eliminating the middleman (or, rather, the middle-woman). Athena herself says, "There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth."³¹ Zeus swallows up the role of mother to become both parents, but he maintains a patriarchal role of kingship and control. Athena therefore has a close-knit relationship with Zeus as her singular parent, and she becomes a

28. Scholars who take this position include Nicole Loraux and Ursula Vedder: see Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood*, ix.

29. Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood*, 129.

30. Hong, "Collaboration and Conflict," 82.

31. Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 736–738, trans. Richmond Lattimore, in *Aeschylus I / Oresteia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

strong defender of the patriarchy.³² This close tie between Athena and Zeus was also beneficial for Athens, as it associated their patron goddess directly with the king of the gods. This political advantage has been identified as a likely reason that Birth of Athena scenes became popular in Athens in the sixth century BC.³³

Athenians framed Athena as powerful because she had control over life and death, both of which are alluded to in this kylix. Scholar Robert Luyster, professor of philosophy of religion at the University of Connecticut, has discussed Athena's role as a weaver of fate, a goddess with control over both birth and death—with birth and death being closely intertwined.³⁴ This conception of Athena makes her an incredibly powerful goddess, as is indicated by her key role in Athenian society and her detailed birth story. By emphasizing this story about Athena, the Athenians emphasized her role in birth and death. Just as her birth was accomplished without death, so too could she save Greek women from death in childbirth in her midwife role.³⁵ Even in emerging from Zeus's head-womb, she is ready for the battle against death in favor of life. Furthermore, the inclusion of the two Eileithyia on either side of Zeus act as subtle reminders that the gods could progress or retard birth, so it was important that Greeks call upon Athena for assistance.³⁶ The frequent depiction of Athena's birth and this kylix's emphasis on the Eileithyia therefore indicate to viewers the uncertainty of their lives and the necessity of the gods to ameliorate uncertain outcomes.

The Birth of Athena scene depicted on this kylix thus mixes gender roles to frame a powerful narrative for Athena and Zeus. Zeus is depicted with both female and male aspects as he gives birth to the goddess Athena. Zeus is blessed by female embodiments of birth even as he completes birth in his own male way. This reflects patriarchal ideas in Greek society about the superiority of men and the male body. It expresses the omnipotence of Zeus. It also closely connects Athena with the might of the king of the gods because it removes any middle-woman mother figure that might separate Athena and Zeus in the narrative. Thus, Greek men could establish the supremacy and stability of their gender, their religion, and their goddess.

32. Susan Deacy, *Athena* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 31.

33. Evelyn B. Harrison, "Athena and Athens in the East Pediment of the Parthenon," *AJA* 71, no. 1 (1967): 27–58, here 27; C. John Herington, "Athena in Athenian Literature and Cult," *GR* 10 (1963): 61–73, here 63.

34. Robert Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," *HR* 5, no. 1 (1965): 133–163, here 143 and 161–162.

35. Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," 137–138.

36. "Eileithyia: Greek Mythology," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eileithyia>.