

This paper demonstrates how contextualization within a wider framework of Greek medical and philosophical views on the process of childbirth informs the interpretation of Leto's travels and travails in the *Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo*. Evidence of the practice of midwifery suggests that the island of Delos should be understood as midwife to Apollo's birth, while Hippocratic and Aristotelian explanations of the process of childbirth imply that the goddess of childbirth, Eileithyia, symbolizes the paradox of birth: disease and cure.

In the poem, Leto must roam over much of Greece in search of a suitable place to give birth to her divine son. After traveling to many places that were both unsuitable for parturition and that fearfully rejected the honor of hosting Apollo's birth and temple, Leto finally arrives at Delos. She convinces Delos to acquiesce on the grounds that, in the first place, she is an infertile land, and secondly, that the island will be able to nurture its future inhabitants thanks to the dedications from Apollo's first temple. Having found a suitable location for birth, Leto labors for nine days and nine nights, racked with terrible labor pains. Her labor is ineffective until Iris fetches Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth. At this point Leto throws her arms about a palm tree and rests her knees in the soft grass while the earth gapes beneath her. In the next line, Apollo jumps out into the light. This scene of fertility is in sharp contrast with the barren and infertile status of both rocky Delos and the virgin Artemis.

The choice of such an infertile setting for a scene of great fertility may seem incongruous until one considers the requirements for midwifery in the Greek world. Mythical models of midwifery suggest that maidens were preferred to assist in delivery. Yet according to Socrates, midwives should be widows who have given birth or are past childbearing age. In either case, a midwife must be incapable of giving birth herself, possibly to avoid contamination from the *lochia* (King, 1998). And indeed, the personified island accepts her role as midwife on the grounds of her own infertile status.

Eileithyia also lacks fecundity, due to her perpetual virginity, making her a suitable goddess to attend births. Yet if Delos is already playing surrogate midwife to Leto, why must Eileithyia be invoked? The answer may be found in the type of pain Leto experiences, as well as in Eileithyia's epithet, *mogostokos*. The true etymology of the term is unknown, yet the most obvious folk etymology – "pain-generator" (*mogos* + *tiktein*) – points to two antithetical roles for the goddess. She is invoked to relieve pain, yet her epithet marks her as one who *produces* pain. Explanations for the pain of childbirth found in the Hippocratic corpus and Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals* reveal a similar antithesis: the pains of birthing were considered necessarily painful to a woman due to her inferior flesh but also advantageously necessary for the transformation of a *parthenos* into a *gunê*, the preparation of her flesh for future births, and as a cure for the painful effects of menstruation (Dean-Jones, 1994; Hanson, 1990). The pain, *ponos*, of childbirth, perhaps owing to its perceived salutary effects, was not to be treated by a doctor unless, says Hippocrates (*Diseases* 1.8), it progressed to an extraordinary stage, *ôdunê*. In the poem, Eileithyia both relieves Leto of the hopeless pains, *ôdunê*, of ineffectual labor while also engendering in her the pain of delivery, *tokos*. In a sense, like childbirth itself, Eileithyia serves as a *pharmakon* for the very pains she has engendered.

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