

Andreas WEIGELT

Zeus's Promise: The Hymn to Styx in Hesiod's *Theogony*

The hymn to Styx is one of the central pieces in Hesiod's *Theogony* (vv. 383-403) and at the same time one of the most puzzling passages. The report of bringing forth Zelos, Nike, Kratos, and Bia turns into a narrative that deals with Zeus's sovereignty *in statu nascendi*. It is the story of Styx coming to Mount Olympus along with her children. Upon Zeus's promise that all the gods who will fight with him against the Titans will receive due honors, Styx is the first to join Zeus on Mount Olympus and to advise him to take her children as companions. Thereupon, Zeus bestows her with the honor of being the great oath of the gods. In that way Zeus fulfills his promise.

Clearly, Styx plays a key role in Zeus's coming to power. What is not so clear, however, is what exactly her role or her function is. While she is a Titan, she is also attached to the Olympians whose ascendancy to power will come at the expense of the Titans. Some scholars conceive Styx and her children as helpers during the battle against the Titans, others consider the children of Styx as powers that enforce oath-taking in court trials. Thus, scholars have never really made an attempt to determine the significance of institutionalizing Styx as the great oath of the gods in connection with the process of Zeus's path to sovereignty. This gives rise to the following questions: What exactly is the connection between Styx and Zeus's ascendance to power? And what kind of oath is the great oath of the gods? An assertory or a promissory oath? A juridical or a political oath?

Ever since Hirzel, *Der Eid* 1902, 171-75, the Hesiodic narrative of Styx receiving the honor of being the great oath of the gods has been interpreted with respect to assertory or juridical oaths that are taken in court procedure. The hymn to Styx, however, does not depict a trial scene but Zeus's preparations to overthrow the Titans. The outcome of this political conflict decides which party will gain sovereignty. In attempting to win allies, Zeus promises to bestow honors to those who will fight with him. Thus, Zeus's words can not be understood as a means of evidence brought to court but as a pledge or vow, i.e. as a promise with legal implications.

Therefore I argue that the appointment of Styx as the great oath of the gods does not primarily reflect the institution of assertory oaths but more importantly the institution of promissory oaths. In promising honors to the other gods Zeus confers new and special rights to those gods who were previously without honors. Despite the fact that Zeus himself does not take an oath, his promise becomes binding by institutionalizing Styx as the great oath of the gods. In doing so Zeus lays the foundation for a new divine community, a community that is built on trust and guarantees. On the basis of keeping his promise the Olympians elect Zeus as their king or sovereign and put him into office as their supreme god after the victorious battle against the Titans. Thus, promise-giving and institutionalizing the great oath of the gods bring an end to the succession of divine rulers and can be regarded as an important feature of the social contract of the Olympian community.