

Womb of the Earth: Caves and the Feminine in the Ancient Greek World

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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates how caves were used to express concerns over female sexuality and reproduction in ancient Greek literature and in lived religion. I contend that rather than merely representing the womb in its birthing capacity, caverns can be read as female anatomy more generally in the expression and policing of female sexuality within patriarchal systems. The dissertation is composed of three primary chapters, each interrogating a theme: maternity, sexuality, and virginity. I first show that caves were depicted not only as proxies for the womb, but in relation to mothering more generally. Archaeological materials from birth cult caves of Eileithyia and the nymphs indicate that this association was understood by female worshipers as well. Next, I analyze literary depictions of couples copulating in caves; in all cases, the female partner holds more social or divine agency than the male partner, prefiguring violent ends to the relationships to maintain normative gender dynamics. I show how this power dynamic is rejected

in nympholeptic cult sites, reaffirming those normative dynamics. Finally, I investigate the use of caves both for testing virginity and for violently defending one's virginity. I interrogate the use of caves in virginity ordeals in both narrative and lived religion to assess the connection between their grottoes, virginal cult figures, and acts of worship. Thus, as depicted in male-authored literature and public religious rites, caves reinforce normative ideals of female sexuality under patriarchy, while women-centric cave cults demonstrate a more positive, cooperative, and empowering relationship between femininity and the landscape.

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Introduction

The connection between the cave and the womb has been observed in the religions and customs of many societies, both ancient and modern.¹ The structural affinity between the two is the most obvious connection: empty spaces embedded within larger contiguous material bodies. The formation of cave systems long before the evolution of proto- and modern humans means that they have always been present alongside our species from the earliest times, and were some of our early shelters from the elements, predators, and each other.² This protective quality also aligns caves with the womb and with maternal protection more generally. We therefore see all over the world and throughout human history an association between these geological and biological structures.

Humans have been visiting and leaving their marks on caves in the Mediterranean basin for upwards of 40,000 years. Accordingly, many examinations of this region's caves focus on

¹ On the association of caves and wombs in paleolithic Europe: Tina Lindhard, "Paleolithic Women's Spirituality and its Relevance to Us Today," *Dialogo* 7, no. 2 (2021): 113–131. In Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica: Keith M. Prufer and James E. Brady, "Introduction: Religion and Role of Caves in Lowland Maya Archaeology," in *Stone houses and earth lords: Maya religion in the cave context*, eds. Keith M. Prufer and James E. Brady, University Press of Colorado, 2005; Sharisse D. McCafferty and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, "Back to the Womb: Caves, Sweatbaths and Sacred Water in Ancient Mesoamerica," in *Flowing Through Time: Exploring Archaeology through Humans and Their Aquatic Environment*, eds. Larry Steinbrenner, Beau Cripps, Metaxia Georgopoulos, and Jim Carr, University of Calgary Press, 2008.

Pre-Columbian North America: Herman E. Bender, "Some Select Vulva Rock Petroglyphs and Forms in North America," in *Anthropomorphic Images in Rock Art Paintings and Rock Carvings*, eds. Terence Meaden and Herman Bender, Archaeopress, 2020. In ancient India: Tarun Tapas Mukherjee, "Archaeology of the Phallus and Shakti: A Search for the Origins of Patriarchy in the Prehistoric Times," *The Chitrolekha Journal on Art and Design* 5, no. 1 (2021): 1–14. In both ancient and modern Ethiopia (the Boreda district): Kathryn Weedman Arthur, "Wombs of the Earth: Preserving and Reconstituting Feminine Prestige and Dignity through Heritage," *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 31 (2020): 41–53. And among Mongolian peoples in modern India and Tibet: Rolf A. Stein, *Grottes-matrices et lieux saints de la déesse en Asie Orientale*, École Française d'Extrême Orient, 1988; and Isabelle Charleux, "The Mongols and the Womb-Cave of Wutaishan: A Ritual of Fertility or of Rebirth?," in *Lieux saints et pèlerinages: La tradition taoïste vivante / Holy sites and pilgrimages: The Daoist living tradition*, eds. Vincent Goossaert and Tsuchiya Masaaki, Brepols, 2022.

² On caves throughout human history, see Clive Bonsall and Christopher Tolan-Smith, eds. *The Human Use of Caves*, Archaeopress, 1997; Knut Andreas Bergsvik and Robin Skeates, eds. *Caves in Context: The Cultural Significance of Caves and Rockshelters in Europe*, Oxbow Books, 2012; Holley Moyes, ed. *Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves*, University Press of Colorado, 2012.

prehistory.³ Research on the historical period is primarily archaeological; while scholars may refer to famous passages about caves from ancient Greek and Latin literature, these texts are rarely examined with critical close reading or stylistic considerations. Likewise, when these passages are examined with philological nuance, they are typically divorced from critical analysis of the archaeological material.

The aim of this dissertation, therefore, is a critical interdisciplinary examination of representations and ritual uses of caves regarding this simultaneously ubiquitous—yet under-explored—connection between caves and femininity in the ancient Greek tradition. I approach this topic thematically, examining three main stages in female social and sexual identities: maternity, sexuality, and virginity. For each of these themes, I perform close readings of several mythographic and literary sources to determine prevalent paradigms in literary depictions of this connection. I then examine the archaeological evidence of specific cave cults from around the Greco-Roman world regarding these issues of maternity, sexuality, and virginity.

Chronology, Geography, and Geology

In this dissertation, my definitions of the “ancient Greek tradition” and the “ancient Greek world” are broadly construed. My earliest evidence is Mycenaean, the earliest documented Greek-speaking group in the southern Balkan region and Aegean islands. There has been extensive archaeological study of Minoan sacred caves,⁴ but because these were not Greek- or even Indo-European-language-speaking peoples, in general those caves fall outside the scope of

³ Andrew J. Lawson, *Painted Caves: Palaeolithic Rock Art in Western Europe*, Oxford University Press, 2012; John Robb, “Prehistoric Art in Europe: A Deep-Time Social History,” *American Antiquity* 80, no. 4 (2015): 635–654.

⁴ The most foundational studies are from Paul Faure, *Fonctions des Cavernes Crétoises*, Editions E. de Boccard, 1964; Loeta Tyree, “Cretan Sacred Caves: Archaeological Evidence,” PhD Dissertation, University of Missouri, 1974. Bogdan Rutkowski and Krzysztof Nowicki, *The Psychro Cave and Other Sacred Grottoes in Crete*, Art and Archaeology, 1996; Donald W. Jones, *Peak Sanctuaries and Sacred Caves in Minoan Crete: Comparison of Artifacts*. P. Aströms, 2000; Elissa Faro, “Caves in the ritual landscape of Minoan Crete,” and Eleftherios Platon, “The Use of Caves in Minoan Crete: A Diachronic Analysis,” both in *Stable Places and Changing Perceptions: Cave Archaeology in Greece*, eds. Fanis Mavridis and Jesper Tae Jensen, Archaeopress, 2013.

my examination. Nevertheless, there is “general agreement” that the Mycenaean Greeks were greatly influenced by the Minoans,⁵ and some Minoan traditions were woven into Greek-speaking cultures.⁶ I therefore do not explore in depth archaeological evidence from the Minoan civilizations except in instances where there appears to have been a clear continuity of tradition between them and their early Greek successors.⁷ Mycenaean Greece is therefore my earliest chronological boundary.

The latest evidence that I examine dates to the fifth century CE: Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*. While at that point, Nonnus was writing within a mostly Christianized religious context, his narrative draws on pre-Christian Greek mythographic and religious traditions.⁸ He is nevertheless clearly influenced by the palaeo-Christian world in which he lived.⁹ On the other hand, Chapter 3, I examine some palaeo-Christian texts from the 2nd century CE which operate within a broader (and still mostly pagan) literary context. These works therefore fall within the ancient Greek tradition while transforming aspects of these traditions for their Christianizing audiences. I therefore end my chronological scope somewhat less strictly due to the plurality of influences and ideas prevalent in the Late Antique Greek-speaking world: I end my examination of pre-Christian Greek myth in the 5th century CE while limiting my early Christian evidence to

⁵ Bryan Feuer, “Being Mycenaean: A View from the Periphery,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 115, no. 4 (2011), 524.

⁶ DNA analysis of 19 Cretan Minoan, mainland Mycenaean, and Late Bronze Age Anatolian individuals shows that there was a degree of genetic continuity between Minoan to Mycenaean populations, with Mycenaean showing the addition of Eurasian-steppe ancestry: Iosif Lazaridis et al., “Genetic origins of the Minoans and Mycenaean,” *Nature* 548 (2017): 214–218.

⁷ Minoan influence is most evident in the cult of Eileithyia; see Chapter 1, pages 53–54.

⁸ For Nonnus’ reception and reworking of pagan literature, see Wolfgang Liebeschuetz, “The Use of Pagan Mythology in the Christian Empire with Particular Reference to the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus,” in *The Sixth Century: End or Beginning?*, eds. Pauline Allen and Elizabeth Jeffreys, Brill, 1996. Also relevant are several chapters from *Brill’s Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis*, ed. Domenico Accorinti, Brill, 2016.

⁹ In addition to his most famous work, the *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus also wrote a *Paraphrasis of John’s Gospel*. On Nonnus’ interactions with Christian theological and literary traditions, see Christos Simelidis, “Nonnus and Christian literature,” in *Brill’s Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis*, ed. Domenico Accorinti, Brill, 2016.

the 2nd century CE in order to determine what the early Christian influences can illuminate about the ancient Greek traditions portrayed in these texts.

My definition of the “ancient Greek world” is likewise broadly construed, encompassing both what we now know as the modern state of Greece and those areas of the ancient world that were colonized, ruled, or heavily influenced by the cultures of Greek-speaking peoples. This therefore includes Magna Graecia from around the 8th century BCE, the areas conquered by Alexander from the Hellenistic period onward, and philhellenic aspects of ancient Rome. This dissertation deals primarily with Greek-language sources, but a few Latin texts are included to illustrate the magnitude of Greek influence in the region as well as the distinctions between the traditions of the Greeks and their neighbors.

Caves are not evenly distributed around the world,¹⁰ nor are all caves formed the same way.¹¹ In the Mediterranean, the two most common are karst caves and sea caves. Sea caves are chiefly formed through mechanical erosion from waves, and as such are typically only accessible from the water. Further inland, caves are typically formed in karst terrain, characterized by water with carbon dioxide causing the dissolution of carbonate rock, usually limestone. This dissolution results in void-like formations such as sinkholes and caves.

43% of the land of modern Greece is karst terrain. Adding to that prevalent type the many sea caves on Greece’s abundant coastlines, the total number of known caves in Greece is around 10,000. Greek mythology was set not only in the Greek world, but all over the world known to the Greeks. The wider ancient Greek world also features regions with cavernous abundance, as can be seen in **Table 1**. The settlement of Greek speakers in areas that housed myriad caves like

¹⁰ Nico Goldscheider et al., “Global distribution of carbonate rocks and karst water resources,” *Hydrogeology Journal* 28 (2020): 1661–1677.

¹¹ Lava tubes are a type of cave created by the flow of lava; as the lava solidifies close to its surface, it continues to flow underneath. If the lower lava continues to flow out, its level of liquid lava underneath the cooled stone lowers, leaving behind empty space. There are other types of lava-formed caves, but lava tubes are the most common.

their homeland ensured the perpetuation of caves' importance to Greek religion and culture. Many of these colonies produced writers whose works will be relevant to the study of the role of caves in notions of femininity and the lived religion of women.

Table 1: Regions of the greater Greek world with a high percentage of karst terrain

Region (e.g. early Greek settlement)	Modern Country/Countries
Caria, Lycia, Pamphylia, Isauria (e.g. Side)	Turkey
Cyprus (e.g. Kourion)	Cyprus ¹²
Southern Sicily (e.g. Syracuse)	Italy
Apulia and Calabria (e.g. Taras/Tarentum)	Italy
Levant/Phoenicia/Syria (e.g. Antioch)	Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine ¹³
Adriatic Coast (e.g. Salona, Epidauros)	Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania
Thrace/Balkan Mountains (e.g. Histria/Istros)	Bulgaria
Libya (e.g. Cyrene)	Libya ¹⁴

Prior Classical Scholarship on Caves

Greek caves have been foci of archaeological investigation for the past century and a half.¹⁵ As natural shelters, many have protected ancient material from the elements over the millennia. A few are even deep enough to house anaerobic environments in which usually-perishable organic material has been preserved.¹⁶ But because they are natural shelters, cave sites are vulnerable to anthropogenic disturbance. Iterative, temporary use by herders and

¹² e.g. the Kafiin Cave: see Chapter 2, pages 210–229.

¹³ e.g. the Nativity Cave: see Chapter 3, page 266–267.

¹⁴ e.g. the Nymphaeum of Cyrene: see Chapter 1, pages 101–113.

¹⁵ For an excellent, up-to-date summary—with extensive bibliography—of the “state of the field” in Greek cave archaeology, see Fanis Mavridis, and Ioanna Efstathiou, “Cave Archaeology in Greece: An Overview,” *Archaeological Reports* 71 (2025): 203–24.

¹⁶ e.g. the wooden finds from the Pitsa Cave near Sicyon: see Chapter 1, pages 97–101.

travelers is an understandable and natural reason for modification. But many visitors to these sites have been agents of intentional damage to cave structures or the objects deposited by ancient people.

One prime example of this is the Vari Cave on Mt. Hymettus in Attica.¹⁷ Christian visitors to the shrine in the late antique or early Byzantine periods intentionally destroyed the ‘pagan’ votives in the shrine: they broke off or otherwise obliterated the heads and faces of every votive plaque at the site and either took the heads with them or discarded them elsewhere. They (or subsequent visitors) then disposed of the plaque fragments in a small room off the main shrine and carved crosses into the cult statue and relief portrait carved from the living rock of the cave. Later, Louis-François-Sébastien Fauvel, the French consul at Athens from 1802 until 1833, lopped off part of an impressive stalactite as a souvenir, “but it was found to be of a friable quality and unable to resist the sculptor’s chisel.”¹⁸ The fragments of the stalactite “were amongst the antiquities sold at the auction of the late Count de Choiseul Gouffier, at Paris, in Sept. 1818.”

With the rise of such antiquities markets in the 19th and early 20th centuries, looting became a major cause of disruption at these sites. In fact, most of the early scientific investigations of cave sites were essentially rescue excavations that garnered attention because of these looting activities. This had two major ramifications for the history of cave archaeology in Greece. First, looting means that the assemblages from these cave sites are even more incomplete than we could usually expect from the archaeological record. The items targeted by looters also tend to be the more complete specimens, which were obviously more coveted by antiquities dealers. In some cases, artifacts have been purchased or confiscated by excavators, museums, or other authorities to be reunited with the materials archaeologically recovered from these caves.

¹⁷ For a full examination of this cave, see Chapter 2, pages 183–198.

¹⁸ Edward Dodwell, *A Classical and Topographical Tour Through Greece, during the years 1801, 1805, and 1806*, vol. I, Rodwell and Martin, 1819: 552, note 1.

Of the caves discussed in this dissertation, the Kafizin Cave on Cyprus has such a distinctive assemblage that a few looted pieces have been rather definitively connected to the site.¹⁹

Anecdotal information about the looting locations of artifacts and their general conformity to the broader corpus of objects from a site has also led to the probable identification of several looted items from the Cave of Eileithyia at Inatos.²⁰

The second ramification is less obvious: because they were early targets of illegal excavations, caves were thus early subjects of archaeological work, meaning that archaeological methodologies that would later become standard were absent from these investigations. Thus, for many cave sites excavated in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, important details such as the specific findspots of objects, the presence of less “flashy” materials, and important features of the stratigraphy were not recorded. These excavations were generally executed over a matter of days, rather than weeks or months allotted to careful excavations presently. Often, the artifacts gathered from sites were poorly catalogued, if at all,²¹ before being sent for storage at museums, and many such assemblages are now reported missing.²² Had these sites been left undisturbed, the hastiness and unscientific quality of many of these early excavations may have been avoided.

Nevertheless, the excavation of cave sites has always been an important part of Greek archaeological investigation, and the vast majority of research into the role of caves in the ancient world has been archaeological. Much less attention has been paid to the roles of caves in Greek literature, especially in any holistic sense. Archaeologists often reference famous

¹⁹ The Kafizin Cave is discussed in Chapter 2, pages 210–229.

²⁰ The Cave of Eileithyia at Inatos is discussed in Chapter 1, pages 52–56.

²¹ The excavator of the Cave of Eileithyia on Paros, Otto Rubensohn, never created a catalogue of artifacts from the site either in his publications or, it seems, his personal notebooks. This cave is discussed in Chapter 1, pages 57–60.

²² One example from this dissertation is the Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus, discussed in Chapter 2, pages 198–210.

mentions of certain caves in ancient texts, but these passages have not yet been investigated as a corpus, nor have they been adequately evaluated as literary artifacts.

The first study on the role of caves in the ancient Greek world to critically consider both literary and archaeological evidence is Yulia Ustinova's monograph *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*.²³ Ustinova's study focuses on the use of subterranean chambers (both natural and artificial) for oracular activity.²⁴ In her phenomenological approach, she argues that the primary mechanism behind the numinosity of caves in Greek culture and, in particular, their connection with divination is due to sensory deprivation inside caves leading to altered states of consciousness:²⁵

Deep caves are pitch black and almost entirely sound-proof. When modern guides leading cave tours switch off electricity, and the visitors find themselves in absolute darkness, with only the gentle plop of distant drops of water or flutter of bat wings breaking the complete silence, even those with strong nerves grow tense... Elimination of external stimuli forces the mind to concentrate within itself, and brings about intensive discharge of inner imagery. This condition is known as sensory deprivation... In a deep cave, under conditions of almost total suppression of sensory input, our mind enters a state of severe 'stimulus hunger', and the subjective self emerges forcefully.

While there are parts of Ustinova's book that I have found helpful, I disagree with her primary emphasis on caves' lack of sensory input and on visitors' sensory deprivation.²⁶ Rather than the absence of sensation or the dulling of senses, I contend instead that cavernous spaces caused

²³ Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

²⁴ The realms of sexuality and fertility fall outside the scope of her examination, and remain underexplored by scholars.

²⁵ Ustinova, *Caves*, 33–34.

²⁶ Ustinova mentions several instances in which people spent prolonged amounts of time in deep caves, which leads to hallucinations: 34, 154, 176, . While I do not disagree with this, there is no evidence that ancient Greek people spent extensive amounts of time isolated in deep caves. Literary evidence of oracles do not mention any length of time spent inside the caves of Trophonius, nor do ancient depictions of the Pythia show her spending a considerable amount of time in a deep cave; instead, her tripod was positioned over a fissure in the rock within a sunken chamber over which the adyton was situated.

states of sensory hyper-awareness. The act of entering a cave—especially as an ancient person without modern technological adaptations—would have been an intense sensory experience, though admittedly one profoundly different from the world of everyday existence. I will now briefly discuss the phenomenology of Greek caves to demonstrate the invalidity of Ustinova’s claim of sensory deprivation and to show how these sensory experiences configure cavernous spaces as something distinct from, though integrated within, the “outside” world.

The Phenomenology of Greek Caves

Exploring the cave was not easy; it is both deep and dark and the surface is slippery. To reach the lower part, where the antiquities had rolled, I had to be tied to ropes and suffered numerous abrasions. We worked at a depth of 20 meters under the light of acetylene lamps, which, illuminating the stalactites that covered the cave ceiling, transported me to an exotic, mythical world, evoking in me a sense of both awe and delight.²⁷

Sight

The darkness of caves is Ustinova’s primary evidence for sensory deprivation, but this claim is problematic. Many of the caves that have yielded material of a religious nature are not incredibly deep, and many are navigably-lit, if dim, during the day.²⁸ The Corycian Cave near Delphi is well-known to have hosted divinatory practices, but this cave is quite well-lit: Pausanias himself comments, “it is possible to make one’s way through the greater part of [the Corycian Cave] even without lights.”²⁹ Sensory deprivation through the absence of visual cues is therefore not a factor in the prophetic powers of this cave. On the other hand, a few caves that

²⁷ Orlandos on his 1934 excavation of the Pitsa Cave near Sicyon: Anastasios Orlandos, “Τα ευρήματα του σπηλαίου Πιτσάς,” *Πελοποννησιακή Πρωτοχρονιά* (1960): 8–10, quoted and translated in Giorgos Kavvadias, “The Painted Panels from Pitsa Cave,” in *In the Cave: Stories from Darkness Brought to Light*, eds. Fotis Georgiadis and Anastasia Gadoulou, Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, MELISSA Publishing House, 2025: 165–166.

²⁸ In addition to the Corycian Cave, the most sacred part of the Vari Cave is well—and very dramatically—illuminated with sunlight; the Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus is likewise well-lit, as is the Kafizin Cave. Ustinova claims the possibility of oracular activity at all three of these sites: *Caves*, 61–64.

²⁹ Pausanias, 10.32.7.

have yielded material from incredibly deep and dark chambers do not show strong evidence for divination.³⁰ So, while some oracular sites may have existed in dark caves, darkness does not seem to have been a prerequisite or key feature for the existence of oracular practice.³¹

In darker and deeper caves, ancient people would have necessarily brought light sources such as lamps in order to reach or maneuver around the darkest areas; the terrain in these places is much too dangerous to do so without visual aid. If one were to reach by firelight the dark part of a deep cave and extinguish the light, it would then be difficult or dangerous for them to return to the cave exit without this light, and they would probably be unable to re-light the flame in complete darkness. In practice, then, it is unlikely that the darkest parts of caves were entered or exited without some source of artificial light. Fire of some sort would therefore have been a necessary accommodation in many caves. Torches have been shown to be the most likely illumination used in caves since they throw light in every direction, including the often-treacherous cave floor.³²

Fire would also have been used for burnt offerings in some settings, evidenced by ash layers which often include animal bones.³³ Within dim or fully dark spaces such as caves, fire has a focalizing function, defining and limiting the visual range. The offerings on the altar are illuminated through combustion and the spectacle of this process forms the climax of ritual

³⁰ e.g. the Pitsa Cave: see Chapter 1, pages 95–101.

³¹ Ustinova nevertheless argues for sensory deprivation leading to oracular practice at this site: Ustinova, *Caves*, 65–68.

³² María Ángeles Medina-Alcaide, et al. “The conquest of the dark spaces: An experimental approach to lighting systems in Paleolithic caves,” *PLOS One* 16, no. 6 (2021), 19. Terracotta oil lamps were also used and have been found in caches inside sacred caves. At the Cave of Pan at Marathon, 40 lamps were recovered including examples from the Archaic period through Late Antiquity. All preserved nozzles of these lamps show evidence of burning, demonstrating that they served the practical function of lighting the cave space; lamps that were unused are generally assumed to have been votive objects, and there is also ample evidence of votive lamps in Attic cave sanctuaries. See Jorge J. Bravo III and Alexandra Mari, “The Cave of Pan at Marathon, Attica: New evidence for the performance of cult in the historic era,” in *Cave and Worship in Ancient Greece, New Approaches to Landscape and Ritual*, eds. Stella Katsarou and Alexander Nagel, Routledge, 2021: 156.

³³ The Vari Cave is one example, as is the Hellenistic evidence from Skotino Cave on Crete, on which see Faure, *Fonctions*, 163.

sacrifice. No matter the type of fire—torch, lamp, or hearth—the flickering flames would have produced dazzling effects with dancing light and shadow, a sight rarely experienced by modern visitors to these sites.

Another aspect of the importance of sight in caverns is the presence of speleothems, mineral-rock deposits inside of caves that are formed over millions of years. Stalagmites and stalactites are the two main types of speleothems, arising from the floor or the ceiling of the cave, respectively. They can range in size from fine spaghetti-like ‘straws’ to behemoth mountain-like deposits, and can come in all types of shapes, dictated by the geological history of the site, its mineral makeup, and the amount of time that passes. Stalagmites in particular may resemble analogous structures in the man-made world beyond the cave, such as columns or pillars, statues, and towers.³⁴ Ash layers and assemblages of votive objects around speleothems at several cave sites show that they often acted as focalizing elements for dedications, as makeshift altars or cult objects. In Skotino Cave on Crete,³⁵ the massive initial chamber is dotted with several large speleothems, which seem to have been altered in antiquity into the forms of a quadruped, a woman, and a child. Abundant ash deposits and votive offerings dating to the Hellenistic period were found at the base of these features, attesting to the ritual significance of these objects.³⁶

Sound

Quiet or the absence of sound is also a feature Ustinova cites within her claim of sensory deprivation. In reality, caves are rarely silent spaces. Sea caves are obviously constantly accompanied by the rushing of waves. Karst caves typically exist in conjunction with springs and

³⁴ Aristotle recalls a certain *Speleon Glaphyron* (“Hollow Cave”) that has “pillars” (κίονες) of stalagmites: *On Marvellous Things Heard* 834b.59.

³⁵ The cave is named after the village of Skotino, but its meaning “dark” is also very fitting for this cave.

³⁶ Faure, *Fonctions*, 163. Likewise, at the Cave of Pan at Marathon, Pausanias comments on “the so-called ‘Pan’s herd of goats,’” which are rocks shaped in most respects like to goats”: 1.32.7.

rivers, whose trickling or even roaring waters would have perfused these spaces. This would have been the case, for example, at the Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus, which Wagman observes would have resounded with the rushing of an abundant spring.³⁷ Chirping birds flock to some as shelter, as at the Idaean Cave on Crete,³⁸ while deeper caves often house chattering bat colonies. In the *Eumenides*, Aeschylus described the Corycian Cave on Mt. Parnassus as φίλορνις, “loved by birds.”³⁹ The groves, gardens, or forests typically surrounding these spaces would also have housed animal life, and the pleasant singing of songbirds is frequently mentioned in ancient *ekphrases* of caves.

Even if a cave were naturally devoid of these features, there are acoustic aspects that would have been markedly different from the outside world. Even inside a naturally silent cave, every single movement would be amplified and possibly distorted by the rocky surroundings. Footsteps echo. Torches and hearths crackle as they combust. Within a dark chamber, rudimentary human echolocation can provide hints as to the size of a space. The awe-inspiring effects of amplification and echo must not be underestimated.⁴⁰ Anthropologists have shown that in many caves and canyons across the world, early human rock art is clustered in the parts of these spaces with the strongest echoes.⁴¹ Yioutsos’ archaeoacoustic study of two Attic Pan and

³⁷ Robert S. Wagman, *The Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus: Studies on a Thessalian Country Shrine*, Brill, 2015: 33–34.

³⁸ Songbirds are frequently mentioned in descriptions of caves, e.g. Diodorus Siculus, 3.69.2. This passage is examined in greater depth in Chapter 1, page 76.

³⁹ Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 23.

⁴⁰ The earliest depiction of a musical instrument in human history is in a painting on the walls of the Trois Frères Cave in southwestern France. A half-man, half-bison figure dances and plays a “musical bow,” Warren D. Anderson, *Music and Musicians in Ancient Greece*, Cornell University Press, 1994: 1–2.

⁴¹ Iegor Reznikoff, “On the Sound Related to Painted Caves and Rocks,” in *Sounds Like Theory: Nordic Theoretical Archaeology Group Meeting in Oulu*, eds. Janne Ikäheimo, Anna-Kaisa Salmi, and Tiina Äikäs, Monographs of the Archaeological Society of Finland, 2014; Stephen Waller, “Intentionality of rock art placement deduced from acoustical measurements and echo myths,” in *Archaeoacoustics*, eds. Chris Scarre and Graeme Lawson, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2006. On the prehistoric Mediterranean specifically: Tomasso Mattioli, Angelo Farina, Enrico Armelloni, Philippe Hameau, and Margarita Díaz-Andreu, “Echoing landscapes: Echolocation and the placement of rock art in the Central Mediterranean,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 83 (2017): 12–25.

Nymph caves has yielded insight into the importance of acoustics for the religious use of caves in the Greek world.⁴² These spaces feature “exceptional clarity for speech and music” in the areas where rituals likely took place; they actually performed better in these respects than the modern religious sites examined in the study.⁴³ Laferrière likewise has shown that the dynamics of room volume, ceiling height, and the shapes of the rock formations inside the cave would have caused sonic distortion.⁴⁴

There is ample ancient evidence for music and dance inside caves. In literature, there are numerous references to Pan (and human herders) playing the syrinx, and he is depicted doing so in many reliefs and figurines recovered from cave assemblages. Also commonly found in caves are dancing nymph compositions,⁴⁵ as well as musicians.⁴⁶ Papalexandrou has shown that at the Idaean Cave on Crete, a large number of votive objects depicted musical instruments or musicians or were themselves noisemakers.⁴⁷ Overall, the performance of music in cavernous

⁴² Nektarios Yioutsos, Gavriil Kamaris, Konstantinos Kaleris, Charalambos Papadakis, and John Mourjopoulos. “Archaeoacoustic research on caves dedicated to Pan and the nymphs in Attica, Greece,” in *Proceedings of Euronoise*, ed. Michael Taroudakis, 2018.

⁴³ Yioutsos et al. compared acoustic data from the Lyncospilia and Vari Caves with data from modern religious architecture: a small orthodox church (Kemiseos Theotokou church, Komotini), a large orthodox church (St. Andreas, Patras), and a mosque (Yeni Tzami, Komotini): p. 2173.

⁴⁴ Carolyn M. Laferrière, “Sacred Sounds: The Cult of Pan and the Nymphs in the Vari Cave,” *Classical Antiquity* 38, no. 2 (2019): 185–216: 193.

⁴⁵ Figurine sets of dancing nymphs have been found in many caves, among them the Mastro and Kouritas Caves in Aitoloakarnania, see Alexander Nagel, “A river ran through it: Circulating images of ritual and engaging communities in a cave in Aitoloakarnania,” in *Cave and Worship in Ancient Greece, New Approaches to Landscape and Ritual*, eds. Stella Katsarou and Alexander Nagel, Routledge, 2021: 121. The Polis Cave on Ithaca has also yielded a terracotta relief plaque with a ring of dancing nymphs. Other caves with these dancing nymph motifs include the Corycian Cave near Delphi, Lechova Cave near Sicily, the Asbotrypa Cave near Leukas, and the Drakaina Cave near Kephallenia, see Theodora Kopestonsky, “The Greek Cult of The Nymphs at Corinth,” *Hesperia* 85, no. 4 (2016): 711–77, 766–767.

⁴⁶ For example, terracotta figurines of female musicians were found at Grotta Caruso in Locri in Magna Graecia: Rebecca Miller Ammerman, “Grottoes and the construction of cult in southern Italy,” in *Cave and Worship in Ancient Greece, New Approaches to Landscape and Ritual*, eds. Stella Katsarou and Alexander Nagel, Routledge, 2021: 231; male musicians are featured on one of the painted wooden pinakes from the Pitsa Cave: on this, see Chapter 1, page 98.

⁴⁷ Papalexandrou, “Caves, Sensory,” a rock crystal seal depicts a woman holding a conch shell in front of her mouth, 54; an embossed bronze disc depicts a central male deity flanked by demons with drums or cymbals, 54–55.

spaces would have “compounded the otherworldly and intensified sensory experience” of the ritual observers.⁴⁸

Touch

The sense of touch is an often ignored but vitally important aspect of cave phenomenology. Surfaces are the most obvious manifestation of this: cave interiors are often treacherous, with irregular slopes, hazards, and varying textures. In many, it is difficult to find a place that is comfortable to sit for longer than a few minutes. The floors are often slippery due to the increased humidity. Another tactile sense is temperature.⁴⁹ No matter the weather or season outside, caves tend to stay quite cool, and deep caves in particular often maintain a stable temperature year-round.

One further possibility for the sensation of touch is injury. As already mentioned, entering caves is sometimes dangerous, especially without proper knowledge, attention, and equipment. Many of the instruments we use today to facilitate our safe visit to cave sites, such as hiking boots with adequate traction or high-powered headlamps, help us to prevent serious injury when journeying inside these spaces. Slippery and irregular surfaces, crevices and speleothems, decreased visual information due to low lighting (and possibly smoke from torches and hearths) all increase the likelihood of an accident. Furthermore, some caves in antiquity were said to emit noxious gases that could lead to illness or death,⁵⁰ and these claims have largely been confirmed by modern scientists.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Bravo and Mari, “Cave of Pan,” 159.

⁴⁹ Humidity is another obvious feature of many caves, especially deep caves and those with active springs.

⁵⁰ e.g. Strabo, 13.4.14, about a Plutonium at Hieropolis; 14.1.11, a Charonium in Caria; 8.3.19, the spring and cave of the Anigriad nymphs; 14.1.44, a cave at Nysa which is deadly to all but healing priests and patients. Plutarch’s description of the oracle at Delphi also mentions a vapor (ἀναθυμίασις) that inspired the Pythia: *Moralia. Obsolescence of Oracles* 437 C.

⁵¹ Sergio Negri and Giovanni Leucci, “Geophysical investigation of the Temple of Apollo (Hierapolis, Turkey),” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 33, no. 11 (2006): 1505–1513; and Toni M. Cross and Sheldon Aaronson, “The

Smell

In addition to fumes that might kill you, many harmless vapors one encounters in Greek caves are also unpleasant. A folk etymology connects the toponym Pytho to the verb πύθω, “to rot,” referring to the putrefaction of the slain Python; this decay was associated with the putridity emanating from the mountain’s crevices.⁵² A musty, mildewy smell is common in deep, “live” caves. The smell of guano would also be prevalent where bats roost, and possibly other types of animal excrement. At the Vari Cave in Attica, an inscription reminds visitors to wash their victims’ entrails and clean out the feces from the intestines,⁵³ suggesting the odor of animal waste in the shrine before the message was written.

On the other hand, fire would have provided a pleasant aroma from the wood itself, but also from incense and the smell of cooking meat. Since perfumed oils were often dedicated in *lekythoi*, certain areas may have had pleasant scents even before the lighting of fires. Ancient writers also note the fragrance of trees and flowers emanating from the groves and gardens often associated with these sites.⁵⁴

Taste

Rounding out the olfactory dimension is the sense of taste. In addition to food and drink consumed inside these caves, visitors would also have drunk from cave springs. The presence of cool freshwater was beneficial in areas where other water sources are scarce, and many fountains were ascribed additional healing properties. Geographers noted potable cave springs and praised

Vapours of One Entrance to Hades,” *Antiquity* 62 (1988): 88–9. The identification of the Plutonium of Hieropolis was made after the Lake Nyos disaster of 1986, which killed hundreds of people.

⁵² Ustinova, *Caves*, 149.

⁵³ On this inscription, see Chapter 2, page 195.

⁵⁴ e.g. Aristotle, *On Marvelous Things Heard* 836b.

some for their “sweet” waters.⁵⁵ Conversely, the spring at the cave of the Anigriad nymphs was unpleasant and toxic to drink and made fish inedible.⁵⁶

Time

In addition to the more “concrete” senses already discussed, there are the perceptions of time and space. In perpetual darkness, the innermost parts of deep caves often have no temporal cues, hemeral or seasonal. Studies have shown that people with significant visual impairments and those living without environmental light-dark cycles experience time differently than those with visual cues. They experience difficulty maintaining sleep-wake, hormonal, and core body temperature cycles. The production of melatonin during nocturnal darkness “provides an internal representation of the environmental photoperiod, specifically nightlength.”⁵⁷ For sighted people, the “vital importance of daily light-dark exposure to entrain circadian rhythms is taken for granted” and only becomes problematic when significant changes such as night shifts or jet lag come into play. For people whose visual sensory input is limited, their perceived time is often longer than expected, demonstrating the importance of visual cues for internal conception of the passage of time. Scientists studying sleep cycles in subterranean environments often refer to these as “timeless spaces.”⁵⁸ In their 1938 experiment, physiologists from the University of Chicago conducted a sleep study to investigate human circadian rhythms in the absence of external cues. Two men spent just over a month inside Mammoth Cave in Kentucky in the following conditions: “There the darkness is an unvarying 100 percent throughout the 24 hours,

⁵⁵ e.g. Pausanias, 3.23.2. Elsewhere, Pausanias discusses the properties of different types of waters, their colors correlating to their potability, e.g. 4.35.8–12.

⁵⁶ Pausanias, 5.5.8.

⁵⁷ Steven W. Lockley, Josephine Arendt, and Debra J. Skene, “Visual impairment and circadian rhythm disorders,” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 9, vol. 3 (2007), 302.

⁵⁸ Kristin D. Hussey, “Timeless spaces: Field experiments in the physiological study of circadian rhythms, 1938–1963,” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 45 (2023).

the temperature remains at exactly 54 degrees Fahrenheit whether it is noon or night.”⁵⁹ The continuity of climate within deep caves is also a contributing factor to the perception of time. Whether winter or summer, most deep caves maintain the same cool temperature, giving the sense that these spaces exist outside the cycles of the year on which so much of ancient life was based.

But this sense of removal from time goes deeper than the individual perception of days or seasons. The formation of caverns began millions of years ago, and most caves have seen relatively little natural or geological change during the entire span of humanity’s blip on the deep timeline of the Earth. They are pre-architectural, stretching deep into the past. The fact that for the most part, they cannot be created or destroyed therefore marks them as primordial spaces that have always been exactly where and what they are. In some cases, to walk into a cave today is to replicate exactly the same processes that ancient, proto-, or even pre-humans made, and for many of the same reasons: shelter, protection, and a sense of profound awe. This leads to a collapse of time on an even grander scale, a coexistence of past, present, and future.

This confusion is seen frequently in mentions of caves in Greek literature in both the mythological and human spheres. We see episodes of absurdly prolonged sleep inside caves that last decades (or, in the case of Endymion, forever).⁶⁰ Odysseus spends seven years with Calypso, a vast temporal dilation comprising 70% of the time he spent journeying home, a period in which he wallows in a *Groundhog Day*-like daily/nightly routine inside her cave and nothing ever changes—until it finally does. In Euripides’ *Ion*, the Cave of Apollo on the Acropolis collapses

⁵⁹ “Need we sleep away 1/3 of our lives?,” *American Weekly*, April 2, 1939, quoted by Hussey, “Timeless.”

⁶⁰ E.g. the philosopher Epimenides of Knossos, who slept in a cave for 40 years: Pausanias 1.14.4.

the distinction between Creusa's past and present, with the god's cave in Athens and cave-like *adyton* in Delphi bookending her maternal journey after a long interval.⁶¹

Space

The spatial experience of cave spaces has several dimensions. Most sacred caves in the ancient Greek world are found outside of settlements, "located at the epicentre of concentric circles of decreasing accessibility and increasing remoteness."⁶² As features not only of the land, but specifically of the wilderness, they were un-manufactured, uninhabited, non-established places. There can be a sense of danger or instability when leaving the relative security of urban or suburban life for the uncertainty of the wilderness. In the ancient world, traveling outside cities was often marked by the threats of thieves and pirates. Hermes was the god of roads, of trade, messengers, traveling, and theft. He was fundamentally a mobile deity, shepherding the souls of the deceased from the land of the living to the Underworld in his position as Psychopomp. Hermes is also one of the Olympian gods most frequently connected with sacred caves.

Most sacred caves in antiquity are associated with mountainous terrain. Once you arrive at the mountain of the desired cave, the real toil begins. Many of the caves that functioned as shrines in antiquity were not conspicuous, but were instead nestled among the surrounding masses of stone. It is for this reason that many caves throughout human history have only been found by accident. In order to safely arrive at some of these remote sites, one must know where they are going or be in the company of someone who does.⁶³ In addition to finding one's way,

⁶¹ Creusa admits that her presence at the Delphi temple reminds her of her rape by Apollo in his cave on the Acropolis: Euripides, *Ion* 249–251.

⁶² Papalexandrou, "Caves, Sensory," 56.

⁶³ In many instances, secrecy is an important aspect of cave exploration. Many locals are reluctant to reveal the precise locations of caves to researchers (Avril H. Wilson, personal communication, August 21, 2025); in turn, many cavers/spelunkers rely on "conservation by secrecy", protecting sites from harm but also inhibiting research

many sacred caves are high up on mountains and require considerable physical exertion to reach.

In his experience excavating at the Idaean Cave on Crete, Papalexandrou reports:⁶⁴

Traversing this landscape is often arduous and so fraught with various difficulties that adjustment to it demands difficult mental and physical gymnastics... Movement through this terrain entails a continuous negotiation of changing scales, often abruptly ascending altitudes, and gradual immersion in a world apart where nothing but superlatives predominate... What makes this world most formidable, however, is the ubiquitous concrescence of rocks and rocky formations, the cumulative effect of which is impenetrable massiveness and defensive aggression.

The grueling nature of this and many other ascents demonstrates an important observation that cave archaeologists have made: the difficulty of access did not deter ancient people from visiting and worshipping at these remote sanctuaries. In fact, many of the more famous cave shrines are those that are most difficult to get to. The Corycian Cave, for instance, is situated high on Mt. Parnassus, one of the highest and most important mountains in the Greek world.⁶⁵ It is not easy to access.⁶⁶ Hiking there and back from Delphi would take up to seven hours, not including time for ritual activities or breaks.⁶⁷ Having visited the Corycian Cave myself—even beginning midway up the mountain at the modern trail head—I can confirm that it is a moderately difficult

activities: R. A. L. Osborne, “Saving and conserving the caves: reflections on 37 years of listings, disputes, submissions and court cases,” *Australian Journal of Earth Sciences* 66, no. 6 (2019): 767–778. Speleologists Tufts and Tenen discuss their efforts to keep the existence and location of a cave secret for 13 years: “To ensure that the cave was not subjected to vandalism, we kept it secret, even from the local National Speleological Society Grotto. We told only a trusted, small group, so that someone could rescue us without alerting public authorities. To avoid attracting attention to the cave we did not gate it until after we had told the Kartchner family about it and after there had been an unauthorized entry by some local cavers who had heard about the cave via a ‘leak.’ We did not treat the cave we found as a recreational cave. Instead, we marked trails, flagged off passages that did not “go anywhere,” and tried our best to minimize damage from our own visits,” Randy Tufts and Gary Tenen, “Discovery and History of Kartchner Caverns, Arizona,” *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies* 61, no. 2 (1999): 44–48.

⁶⁴ Papalexandrou, “Caves, Sensory,” 56.

⁶⁵ Mt. Parnassus features frequently in myth: it is the site of Deucalion’s landing after the Great Flood: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.316–21; it was also the setting of Odysseus’ Calydonian boar episode: *Od.* 19.406–450; and was the remote setting in which Orestes hid while he was in exile: Pindar, *Pythia* 11.25.

⁶⁶ Pausanias observes that the way to the cave is not navigable for mules and horses, suggesting that the area is precipitous or otherwise difficult: 10.32.7.

⁶⁷ The hike from Delphi to the Corycian Cave reportedly takes between 6.5 to 8 hours, round trip. *AllTrails* labels the difficulty of the journey as “hard”, with a length of 18.3 kilometers and an elevation gain of 911 meters: “Corycian Cave from Delphi,” *AllTrails*.

hike reaching a maximum altitude of about 1,400 meters (4,600 feet).⁶⁸ The final ascent to the cave is particularly taxing. An important aspect of understanding the ancient experience of these sacred caves, then, is acknowledgement of the great expenditure of energy involved just in reaching these places. This sort of effort may have contributed to the acts of dedication and devotion. It may also go partway to explaining what some scholars see as the “humble” nature of many cave assemblages,⁶⁹ where the real resource being dedicated is time and energy.

Another spatial consideration is the structure of caves themselves. As natural shelters with sacred significance, they have an obvious affinity with temples. Greek temples from the Archaic period onward were rectangular and usually featured a colonnade on all four sides. A worshiper could approach from any direction, and there were steps on all four sides to allow access to the temple. Centered within the colonnade was an enclosed structure referred to as the cella (*naos*), which was the home of the temple’s cult statue. Occasionally, the cella also contained a smaller room, the *adyton* (literally the “inaccessible place”) akin to the “holy of holies”.

Pausanias and Strabo tell us that at cave shrines the cult image of the deity was set up inside, thus characterizing the cave as a sort of cella, the house of the god. Greek sanctuaries usually had their altars outside the temple—often in line with the entryway to the cella—and this is often seen in cave shrines as well. The Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus had its altars outside the cave proper, and the Idaean Cave on Crete was equipped with a massive bedrock surface fashioned into an altar with etched channels to drain the various liquids resulting from sacrifices.⁷⁰ However, we also see many shrines that had their altars inside the caves themselves:

⁶⁸ The modern hike is “moderate” and takes about 2–2.5 hours round trip, covering 6.9 kilometers and gaining 273 meters in elevation: “Corycian Cave,” *AllTrails*.

⁶⁹ Ustinova suggests that the Corycian Cave “was perhaps an annex to the sanctuary at Delphi, but intended for humbler people who left numerous but cheap offerings,” *Caves*, 65.

⁷⁰ Nassos Papalexandrou, “Caves, sensory and cognitive enhancement,” in *Cave and Worship in Ancient Greece: New Approaches to Landscape and Ritual*, eds. Stella Katsarou and Alexander Nagel, Routledge, 2021: 57.

the Vari Cave features several interior altars, and many cave-framed marble votive plaques feature small altars in their compositions.⁷¹ As mentioned briefly above, some speleothems inside the caves were treated as altars and show evidence of fire usage around them. This demonstrates a blurring of the distinctions between interior and exterior, a fitting addition to the other aspects that are confused in such settings, such as chronology.

In this section on the phenomenology of Greek caves I have shown that, rather than depriving visitors of their senses, the experience of visiting these spaces in antiquity would have been sensorially intense. This is true even in caves which are believed to have had divinatory properties, such as the Corycian Cave on Parnassus or the Vari Cave on Hymettus. Cave landscapes are profoundly foreign when compared to the world outside, but there is also a glimmer of familiarity in their affinity with human-built spaces. This leads to the understanding of caves as places existing within the world but outside normal life, as sites of blurred boundaries and unusual encounters where the patterns of normative existence can be inverted.

Theoretical Backgrounds

Throughout my investigation of the literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence, I will be engaging with four key theoretical frameworks, which I will introduce briefly here.

Gender and Sexuality

Throughout this dissertation, I will be discussing issues of sexual agency and normative and non-normative sexualities. The notion of sexual agency is broadly familiar in our field by now, but bears mentioning for the sake of clarifying terminology. Most works on sexuality and sexual agency in our field refer back to Foucault's foundational (though prescriptive and

⁷¹ On these, see Chapter 2, pages 191–193.

under-nuanced) *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, volumes 2 and 3 of which deal with ancient Greek and Roman sexuality. In volume 2, “The Use of Pleasure,” he schematizes sexuality, particularly in the ancient world, as a polarity of active/passive, in which maleness or masculine identities play the active (penetrating) role in sexual intercourse, while femaleness or feminine identities play the passive (penetrated) role.⁷² In this paradigm, the activity/passivity within sexual relationships is “a vector of power... an arena of social contestation.”⁷³ While Foucault does acknowledge that the paradigms he outlines are constructed by males for the benefit of males,⁷⁴ he does not suggest alternative paradigms that de-center maleness.

Feminist critics of Foucault were quick to point out this lacuna in his examination. Foucault’s “gender-blind” arguments, they contend, obscure the realities of female sexuality, both in relation to male partners and in non-male partners.⁷⁵ Foundationally, Luce Irigaray argues that female sexuality is wholly different from male sexuality and defies definition within that paradigm of activity and passivity; instead of an active/passive binary, female sexuality is instead a “plurality”. Irigaray thus calls on women to “disconcert the staging of representation according to exclusively ‘masculine’ parameters”, not in order to overturn the society from a patriarchal to a matriarchal one—since this still upholds ideas of hierarchy, power, ownership, and subordination—but in order to rework it entirely outside models of domination.⁷⁶

⁷² Michel Foucault, “The Use of Pleasure,” *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, tr. Robert Hurley, Random House, 1985: 46–47; 215.

⁷³ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. C. S. Vance, Routledge, 1984: 278; Foucault, “Use,” 215.

⁷⁴ Foucault, “Use,” 22: “It was an ethics for men: an ethics thought, written, and taught by men, and addressed to men—to free men, obviously. A male ethics, consequently, in which women figured only as objects.”

⁷⁵ See Sandra Lee Bartkey, “Foucault, Feminism, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” in *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, Northeastern University Press, 1988: 64; and Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender, and the Self*, Northeastern University Press, 1992.

⁷⁶ Luce Irigaray, “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, Cornell University Press, 1985 [1977]: 68.

What Irigaray calls for here is in many ways impossible to read into the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, and for good reason: the paradigms she urges people to topple were in place and in control when our ancient sources were written, and they were written by men who had no real motivation to be rid of phallogentrism. Therefore, the texts that I examine in this chapter do not go so far as to fulfill Irigaray's deconstruction of phallogentrism, but will often complicate the dominant structures in mythic settings. These texts, then, often "do" what Irigaray requests her readers do not: they stage inversions of phallogentric order, presenting scenarios in which women appear to hold power over men.⁷⁷

The power to initiate or terminate, to control or direct sexual encounters, whether through seduction, coercion, or force, is thus what I call "sexual agency," which will become particularly important in Chapter 2. I refer to the intersection of these issues as "gender-power dynamics"; normative dynamics assign a typical Foucaultian distinction, with the male as the more "powerful" party and the female as the less powerful. However, many of the texts examined in this dissertation intentionally complicate these phallogentric models in which the penetrating partner holds "power" over the penetrated. This is a gap in Foucault's and even in some feminist thinkers' assertion of sexuality and power. The so-called "passive" parties in many of the ancient sources I will discuss (that is, the female parties within heterosexual intercourse) thus employ methods of control over the so-called "active" parties, blurring and rendering insufficient the power dynamics described in Foucault's definitions of male and female sexualities.

One work in which Irigaray illustrates the insufficiency of the "Western" philosophical tradition's phallogentrism is particularly fitting for the present topic: her engendered reading of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in *Republic* 7.⁷⁸ She observes that previous interpretations of the

⁷⁷ Irigaray, "Power," 68; and "The Sex Which Is Not One" in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, Cornell University Press, 1985 [1977]: 33.

⁷⁸ Luce Irigaray, "Plato's *Hystera*," in *Spéculum de l'autre femme*, tr. Gillian Gill, Cornell University Press, 1985.

allegory come from an unsexed perspective; that is, because gender difference or plurality is not discussed, there is an inherent assumption of masculine homogeneity which excludes any trace of otherly-gendered individuals within Plato's text or its later interpretations.⁷⁹ Irigaray discusses first the structural affinities between the cave and the womb, which was occasionally described in antiquity as a homologous inversion or incomplete manifestation of male genitalia.⁸⁰ She then invites readers to re-examine Plato's cave "comme la métaphore... de l'antre, ou matrice, ou 'hystera,' parfois terre."⁸¹ As the source from which human life emerges, the interior of the womb is therefore also a place of pre- or non-existence, and therefore (for Plato and Irigaray) of ignorance of both the self and the world. The feminized space—and specifically the "screen" inside the cave which Irigaray reads as an analogue to the hymen⁸²—is therefore the proscenium on which the delusive representations of the puppet show are staged. "The disorientation within the cave is the cave's special feature, one that Irigaray calls both a '*jeu*' (game) and an '*artifice théâtral*' ['theatrical trick'], where 'hysteron-proteron' exist on every level within the cave as upsidedown, topsy-turvy, backward-forward, and against logical reasoning."⁸³ The eventual turning of the newly-unchained prisoner away from the puppetry and ushering him toward the mouth of the cave is therefore, for Irigaray, a kind of birth, with the long hallway acting as the birth canal (the "col de l'utérus"):

So some accomplice, some acolyte-obstetrician, some faceless, nameless hack, of whom we know only that he is male, will with a firm hand forcibly extract the prisoner-child, against his will, from the previous home. Will thrust him out of the den, forcing him along the rocky track.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Kristi L. Krumnow, "Womb as Synecdoche: Introduction to Irigaray's Deconstruction of Plato's Cave," *Intertexts* 13, nos. 1/2 (2009): 72–73.

⁸⁰ Galen, *De Usu Partium* 14.6; Jean-Baptiste Bonnard, "Male and female bodies according to Ancient Greek physicians," tr. Lillian E. Doherty and Violaine Sebillotte Cuchet, *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 37 (2013).

⁸¹ "as a metaphor of the inner space, of the den, the womb or *hystera*, sometimes of the earth," Irigaray, *Spéculum*, 243.

⁸² Irigaray, *Spéculum*, 249.

⁸³ Krumnow, "Womb," 74.

⁸⁴ Irigaray, *Spéculum*, 278.

This turn toward “reality,” the world of truth, is read by Irigaray as a rejection of the feminine. Krumnow notes that “in this pivoted hysteron-proteron, the philosopher abruptly disengages the prisoner-child-*nouveauné* from the ‘matrice’ (as matter, the uterus, and woman) in order to assist in his birth to the outside world of masculine Truth and philosophy.”⁸⁵ By reading Plato’s cave through this lens, Irigaray critiques standard phallogocentric philosophical discourses which ignore considerations of gender difference and feminine perspectives. She reads these considerations into Plato’s text, thereby calling attention to the wide-reaching and long-standing gap in Western philosophical thought.

Irigaray’s use of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is not, of course, intended as an interrogation of the role of caves in Greek literature or even specifically everywhere in Plato. In fact, her reading of Plato here is less about the allegory itself and more about the inadequacy of phallogocentric philosophical discourse’s subsequent understandings of the Platonic text. Her selection of this text is based on its ubiquity in western philosophical education. By offering a critical reinterpretation of this frequently-studied foundational work, Irigaray acts metonymically to demonstrate the phallogocentric confinement of mainstream philosophical thought as a whole. Nevertheless, Irigaray’s “Plato’s *Hystera*” is useful for this dissertation in two ways. First, Irigaray maps aspects of cave spaces onto female anatomy, providing a schematic model that establishes the structural affinity between the two. Thus, without necessarily intending to, Irigaray lays the groundwork for the often-mentioned but rarely-described analogy of cave:womb. Through this characterization, the cave is feminized. Second, her examination shows how ancient conceptions of the feminine as lacking order, logic, and truth are projected onto the canvas of the metaphorical cave. This projection, in turn, reinforces the perception of

⁸⁵ Krumnow, “Womb,” 83.

gendered difference and the hierarchy of mind/soul over body, of truth over falsehood, of masculine over feminine. The notion of the cave as a disorderly, delusive, and uncivilized space where inversions of societal norms are staged is—as we will see—a common strategy in ancient Greek discourse.⁸⁶

Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism

Related to the issues of power and domination inherent in gender and sexuality studies is ecocritical theory.⁸⁷ The past sixty or so years has seen the advent of humanity's critical evaluation of our relationship to our planet, particularly as one of exploitation.⁸⁸ This dynamic, boosted by capitalist-imperialist models of economic globalization, stands in stark contrast, however, to that of many pre-modern societies. Rather than bestowing upon certain entities the power to extract resources and seeing the natural world simply as a means to acquiring material wealth through extraction and destruction, many peoples both past and present have understood humanity's association with the earth as a cooperative, reciprocally-beneficial relationship. This often manifests in various cultures as a parent-child (especially mother-child) model between the Earth and its occupants. Exploitative capitalism and imperialism, however, have scarred the planet in ways that need not be explained in depth here; they are too plentiful to warrant enumeration.

Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, is the convergence of feminist and ecological critical frameworks. While ecofeminism is the conscious coupling of these two approaches, they

⁸⁶ In addition to issues of gender, human/non-human distinctions are similarly depicted, with the non-human cave-dwellers showing behaviors that are seen as antithetical to “civilization” and proper order (cosmos); a prime example is Polyphemus in *Odyssey* 9: in addition to being non-human and a cave-dweller, he partakes in ‘barbaric’ behaviors such as the consumption of humans (e.g. 288–293 and throughout Book 9), the drinking of milk (297), and the rejection of Zeus and proper *xenia* (266–275).

⁸⁷ For a helpful and comprehensive overview of ecocritical theory, see Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, 2023.

⁸⁸ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 27 and throughout.

both spring from a common source: the critical examination of ideologies of domination.⁸⁹ The connection between femininity and nature had become so entangled by the modern period that early feminist movements strove to distance the feminine from nature. Traditionally, eurocentric thought had defined the feminine solely in contrast to the masculine; masculinity involved reason, agency, and domination, while femininity was identified with emotion, passivity, and submission.⁹⁰ The planet, too, lacking (so they believed) rational thought and existing (so they reasoned) to serve humankind, therefore faced a similar plight to that of the feminine. Indeed, male authors from antiquity to the modern world have understood women as being “closer” to nature; both, they would argue, are subordinate to male-kind *per se*.⁹¹

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir describes (then critiques) this dominant paradigm: “woman is related to nature; she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to make the fertile soil, the sap, the material beauty and soul of the world.”⁹² Beyond a mere affinity between women and nature, de Beauvoir here shows how the materiality of femininity was intertwined in the physicality of the environment, to the detriment of women as the complementary opposite of maleness/reason/civilization. Reacting against this dominant paradigm, early feminist movements rejected the “essentialist” idea of natural/biological female inferiority and, by extension, aimed to distance women from “nature” (i.e. the opposite of rational culture/civilization).⁹³ The divorce of the feminine from the natural

⁸⁹ Karen J. Warren, “Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren, Indiana University Press, 1997: 3.

⁹⁰ Sherry Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?,” *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (1972): 5–31.

⁹¹ Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, South End Press, 1991. Biehl provides an overview and thorough critique of psycho-biological ecofeminism, which itself aims to assert the power of women through what it understands as a biologically-based connection between women and nature.

⁹² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, tr. H. M. Parshley, Lowe and Brydone Ltd, 1953 [1949]: 256.

⁹³ Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, Doubleday Press, 1970: 26–33.

would, in theory, would therefore allow for the liberation of women from the social conditioning based on this pseudo-scientific connection between woman and nature.⁹⁴

However, as environmentalism and ecological criticism emerged and developed in the 1970s, the models which feminist scholars and activists contested, in which maleness has dominion over femaleness, were also clearly observable in the dominion of humankind over nature. The (perceived) passivity of the environment and the “hegemonic Euro-American masculine” urge to control and exploit nature became subjects of critique as well.⁹⁵ While some earlier feminist scholars and activists had argued against the identification of the feminine with the natural, the same paradigms of subjugation underlie both these and other socio-economic-political issues (such as slavery, racism, imperialism, etc.). Therefore, the coupling of ecological and feminist lenses under the umbrella term *ecofeminism* was not so much a marriage as a reunion. Sometimes seen as a proto-ecofeminist, Irigaray⁹⁶ sums up this intertwined plight within the dominant culture: “Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of mother earth.”⁹⁷

Ecofeminism thus critically examines models of domination along two axes: masculine/feminine and human/environment. While liberation of the feminine and the natural

⁹⁴ On the tension between the understanding of parallel domination between women and nature, on the one hand, and liberatory feminist attempts to reject models that rely on the perceived subordination and irrationality of women, see Victoria Davion, “Is Ecofeminism Feminist?,” in *Ecological Feminism*, ed. Karen Warren, Routledge, 1994. On the impact and legacy of Davion’s chapter, see Chaone Mallory, “What’s in a Name? In Defense of Ecofeminism (Not Ecological Feminisms, Feminist Ecology, or Gender and the Environment): Or ‘Why Ecofeminism Need Not Be Ecofeminine—But So What If It Is?’,” *Ethics and the Environment* 23, no. 2 (2018): 11–35.

⁹⁵ I borrow this term from Corie Hardy, “Quiet American Imperialism: Euro-American Masculinity, Interracial Desire, and the Logic of Masculinist Protection in *The Quiet American*,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, (2014): 251–68. See also Anne-Marie Sohn, “The European man, a hegemonic masculinity,” in *Encyclopédie d’histoire numérique de l’Europe*, 2020; Johannes Heß and Tobias Klee, “Masculine Nations, Female Personifications – The Gendered Imagery of Nationalism,” *Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)*, no. 9 (2021).

⁹⁶ Christopher Cohoon, “The Ecological Irigaray?” in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, eds. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, University of Virginia Press, 2011.

⁹⁷ Irigaray, “Sex,” 31–32.

from subordinate status is the political aim of ecofeminist movements, in the scope of literary analysis, ecofeminism aims rather to interrogate these paradigms *in situ*, mining texts both for exempla of these models and their implications while also searching for kernels of liberation in which women and/or environment break away from their subjugation by “Man” (i.e. male humanness).

Although there are works that *are* ecofeminist—that is, material produced to provoke critical examination of these socially-dominant structures, often involving and depicting subversion of these paradigms—ecofeminist readings need not examine only those texts in which these models of domination are overturned. Many texts rely on correlations between the feminine and the environment for the purpose of perpetuating, asserting, and reinscribing models of domination, rather than subverting them. Such texts may invoke and then swiftly rebuke attempts at resisting the control of “Man”. The texts I examine in this dissertation typically belong to this latter type. They are written by (elite) men for consumption by other men; the models of patriarchal and anthropocentric (or, combining the two, androcentric) domination are upheld as the ideal, and deviations from these norms are seen as dangerous and worthy of suppression. Thus, my reading of these texts is ecofeminist, involving both gendered and human/non-human axes and interrogating correlations between them, but it is pessimistic in outcome: these ecofeminist understandings do not typically involve liberatory readings of women and nature, but rather work to reinforce and justify the paradigms that existed (and continue to exist) in ancient and modern cultural and literary traditions.

Within the environmental humanities’ ecocritical approach, less consideration has been given to geological agents than to biological agents. While caves are not organic, they are natural. Most studies of ecocriticism focus on organic non-human life: plants, animals, fungi.

Indeed, the verdancy of many natural spaces has become applied to all “green” environmentalist movements and critiques, foregrounding the vegetal. Oceans and other bodies of water are not themselves alive, but play host to ecosystems of biotic life, and much of the recent environmental and ecocritical literature has examined aquatic lifeways in the “blue humanities.” It is time, I believe, to include other inorganic nature in the discussion. My present study on the use of caves in ancient Greek myths and rituals of femininity offers a preliminary foray into the karstic dimension of the environmental classical studies. Geological features, like other inorganic environments, offer the environmental humanities the opportunity to look deeply through time. While species migrate, humans extract, and climates change, the geological underpinning of our world remains relatively stable for centuries, millennia, epochs. The groves and homesteads of antiquity survive to us only in remnants, but the caves visited by ancient people are still visited by us today. This connection to the deep past is therefore a unique perspective offered primarily through trustworthiness of stone.

Wilderness Theory

Another subfield of ecocriticism that has gained traction over the past few decades is wilderness theory. This framework aims to define the chronologically-, demographically-, and culturally-prescribed distinctions between wilderness and its apparent antithesis: ‘civilization.’ Most scholarship in wilderness theory focuses on developments in human history since the

Industrial Revolution.⁹⁸ Of the comparatively little wilderness theory conducted on the ancient world,⁹⁹ almost all of it is centered on the conceptualizations and depictions of wilderness in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.¹⁰⁰ There is still much work to be done on wilderness theories and the intellectual history of ecology before “Modernity.” I will outline here some of the predominant threads of inquiry in discussions of wilderness that are important for the study of ancient religions generally and the study of ancient Greek religion in particular.

In his 1991 monograph *The Idea of Wilderness*, Oelschlaeger defines “wilderness” as:¹⁰¹

ecosystems... identified by such characteristics as having little or no economic value and consequently un-humanized or developed; also an unsettled or unpopulated region suited only to beasts; and a rugged, primitive area that lacks

⁹⁸ This is largely due to the focalization of ecology on the temporal scale of the “Anthropocene,” that is, the age of anthropogenic impact on the geologic, biological, and ecologic record of the Earth. There are three main schools of thought about what marks the beginning of the Anthropocene: A) Atomic Age (ca. 1945 to present); see Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “When did the Anthropocene begin? A mid-twentieth century boundary level is stratigraphically optimal,” *Quaternary International* 383 (2015): 196–203. For an interesting study on atomic testing’s chemical and physical effects on speleothems and cave environments supporting this hypothesis, see Ian Fairchild and Silvia Frisia, “Definition of the Anthropocene: a view from the underworld,” *Geological Society London Special Publications* 395, no. 1 (2013): 239–254. B) Industrial Revolution (latter 18th century to present); see Paul J. Crutzen, “Geology of mankind—The Anthropocene,” *Nature* 415 (2002): 23; Will Steffen et al., “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration,” *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1–18. This is the most popular benchmark; I cite only a few of the most-cited articles on the subject. C) Agricultural Revolution (ca. 10,000 BCE to present); see Kees Klein Goldewijk, Arthur Beusen, Gerard van Dreht, and Martine de Vos, “The HYDE 3.1 spatially explicit database of human-induced global land-use change over the past 12,000 years,” *Global Ecology and Biogeography* 20 (2011): 73–86; Erle C. Ellis et al., “Used planet: A global history,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110 (2013): 7978–7985; Bruce D. Smith and Melinda A. Zeder, “The onset of the Anthropocene,” *Anthropocene* 4 (2013): 8–13.

⁹⁹ Laura Feldt has published the most work on wilderness theory in the ancient world, particularly regarding ancient religion: Laura Feldt, *Ancient Mythologies of the Wilderness: Narrative, Nature, and Religious Identity Formation from the Babylonians to the Late Antique Christians*, Cambridge University Press, 2025; “Wilderness in Mythology and Religion,” in *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*, ed. Laura Feldt, De Gruyter, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ e.g. Laura Feldt “Ancient wilderness mythologies: the case of space and religious identity formation in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16 (2014): 163–192; Feldt, “Wilderness and Hebrew Bible Religion — fertility, apostasy and religious transformation in the Pentateuch,” in *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*, ed. Laura Feldt, De Gruyter, 2012; Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, “‘The mountain, a desert place’: Spatial categories and mythical landscapes in the *Secret Book of John*,” in *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion: Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature*, ed. Laura Feldt, De Gruyter, 2012; Graham I. Davies, *The Way of the Wilderness: A Geographical Study of the Wilderness Itineraries in the Old Testament*, Cambridge University Press, 1979; George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament*, Abingdon Press, 1968; Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness. The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and its Basis in the Biblical Tradition*, SCM Press, 1963.

¹⁰¹ Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*, Yale University Press, 1991: 356, n. 10.

the amenities of civilization... Wilderness areas are often viewed as wasteland, barren, uninhabitable, desert, or otherwise distinguished from land suited to human development in the name of economic progress and civilization.

The sole requirement for the designation of a natural area as a ‘wilderness,’ then, is the absence of human habitation. Oelschlaeger identifies the Neolithic Period (beginning with the Agricultural Revolution) as the earliest kernels of disjunction between humans and their environment.¹⁰² Whereas Paleolithic hunter-gatherers sought harmony with the environment and followed the ebb and flow of seasonal food sources, Neolithic agriculturalists cast themselves in a conflict between ‘man’ and ‘nature’ in which, for their own survival, they needed to become conquerors of and masters over the natural world. Logical contrasts between human settlement and places void of human settlement arose.

In some instances (especially in the modern post-industrial conception), wilderness can be seen as purity, as an unadulterated and uncontaminated oasis. This is the logic behind, say, the establishment of national parks and other federally-protected swaths of land. The conception of nature—particularly very remote spaces—as more “pure” than human-inhabited spaces is also reflected in the language of environmentalist movements and environmental protection rhetoric, such as the Clear Air Act. ‘Natural’ spring water is marketed as the most pure and healthy water that one can ingest, and bottled water companies rely heavily on images of rivers and springs in their marketing to suggest their products’ relative ‘purity.’ While the conception of the pristine—rather than impure or mangled—wilderness is generally not prevalent in ancient Greek religion, it is present in ancient Greek and Roman medicine. Galen was particularly concerned with the purity of the water and air in his treatise on *Hygiene*,¹⁰³ and “pure” air was regularly prescribed as treatment for illness.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Oelschlaeger, *Idea*, 31–41.

¹⁰³ Galen *Hyg. I.* 56K, 58 K.

¹⁰⁴ e.g. Celsus, *On Medicine* III.7.2.A

Foucault's *Heterotopia*

As a space distinct from the inhabited realm of civilization, wilderness is frequently the stage for myths, legends, and other folklore from around the world. In this way, wilderness functions as a Foucault-ian *heterotopia*, the final theoretical concept I will be discussing here. Heterotopias are “counter-sites... [in which] all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”¹⁰⁵ Heterotopias are physical manifestations of liminality, uncertainty, and alterity, places that are “absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about.” In their simultaneous reflection and confrontation of societal norms,¹⁰⁶ heterotopias “ultimately lead to questions of power, not as the expression but as the problemization of resistance and transgression.”¹⁰⁷ Crucially, however, heterotopias offer an outlet for confrontation while “offer[ing] no resolution or consolation,... no promise or space of liberation.”¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, the heterotopias do not overthrow the status quo, but merely offer glimpses into alternative ways of being. Because they are wholly removed from the “real world,” the implications of subversion do not bleed into mainstream lived experiences; the societal norms that are challenged in heterotopias remain dominant in the “real world”.

By applying a heterotopic lens to cave scenes from Greek myth, I aim to show how caves' semiotic matrix shapes characters and events that refract cultural norms, particularly those regarding gender, sexuality, and power. In the realm of myth and literature more broadly, caves are heterotopias of the feminine: simultaneously natural and cultural, nurturing and threatening, sites of both reproduction and entrapment. I analyze how they function as heterotopias for

¹⁰⁵ Michel Foucault, “On Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” Tr. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* 5 (1984): 46–49.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Johnson, “Unravelling Foucault's 'Different Spaces,’” *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2006): 76.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, “Unravelling,” 86.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, “Unravelling,” 87.

negotiating anxieties around female sexuality and the female body in three main spheres: childbirth, sexual activity, and virginity.

“Lived (Ancient) Religion”

“Lived religion” emerged in religious anthropology 25 years ago as a methodological approach to interrogate how ordinary people understand, engage with, and reify their religious cultures. The primary aim is to shift the focus of religious studies away from organized religious establishment and orthodoxy.¹⁰⁹ The specific methodologies of the study of lived religion are chiefly sociological and cultural-anthropological, relying on surveys, interviews, and observation of everyday people.¹¹⁰ The interpretive focus of “lived religion” is the connection “between social structures and individual agents,” centering unmediated interactions between worshipers and divinity; that is, ritual actions taken without a cultic “official” acting as an intermediary.¹¹¹

Because it is impossible for us to wholly recreate or fully understand ritual action removed by millennia, the subfield of “lived ancient religion”¹¹² relies on alternative sources: ancient attestations to sites, beliefs, and customs, votive assemblages and the archaeological record, and phenomenological interpretations. Thus, “the paradigm of ‘lived ancient religion’ provides the stimulus to integrate ‘the’ evidence on a new basis, invoke new types of evidence, challenge existing classifications of material, and focus on neglected types of religious action.”¹¹³ Part of this endeavor involves examination of the ritual intentions and actions of marginalized groups, those whose concerns are not typically addressed in the public religions of the ancient

¹⁰⁹ Heinz Streib, Astrid Dinter, and Kerstin Söderblom, eds. *Lived Religion: Conceptual, Empirical and Practical-Theological Approaches*, Brill, 2008. The first book-length scholarly presentation of this concept and approach is David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

¹¹⁰ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion*, New York University Press, 2021.

¹¹¹ Valentino Gasparini et al., “Pursuing lived ancient religion,” in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics*, eds. Valentino Gasparini et al., De Gruyter, 2020: 2.

¹¹² Janico Albrecht et al., “Religion in the making: the Lived Ancient Religion approach,” *Religion* 48 (2018): 1–26.

¹¹³ Gasparini et al., “Pursuing,” 3.

world. In this dissertation, the primary marginalized demographic is the female population of the ancient Greek world. Thus, the primary worshipers and ritual actors discussed in this dissertation are girls and women, whose experiences are, for various reasons, not typically described or presented in ancient texts.

Each chapter of this dissertation includes a section on the “lived ancient religion” of certain cult caves that pertain to women’s religion.¹¹⁴ Because cave cults existed primarily beyond the reach of official state religions, taking a “lived religion” approach is necessary. There are a few cult caves that were said in antiquity to have been served by priestly officials, but the majority of our evidence comes from worship at the family- or individual-level.¹¹⁵ My analysis in these sections is predominantly “archival archaeology,”¹¹⁶ due in no small part to the inaccessibility of many of the sites and their materials. Without autopsy of some caves or their assemblages, I instead “excavate” the records of many of these archaeological projects. While I primarily draw on this archaeological material (including, when available, epigraphic sources), at times I supplement this evidence with ancient texts which discuss these or similar sites or rituals in order to fill out a more complete picture of these cave cults.

Outline of Chapters

The first chapter examines maternal aspects of caves in myth and cult. There are several manifestations of maternity, as I will show. These include the staging of labor and childbirth inside caves, links between caverns and breastfeeding, and situating other aspects of “mothering” in caves, such as bathing and dressing. Occasionally, these associations foreshadow mothers’

¹¹⁴ While the longer phrase specifies the demographic and chronological scope of this study, the interpretive focus is sufficiently communicated in the phrase “lived religion,” so throughout this dissertation, I will refer to this “women’s lived ancient religion” simply as “lived religion”.

¹¹⁵ Chapter 3 has some exceptions to this.

¹¹⁶ Emilia Oddo, “Futures for Archive Archaeology: Struggles, Successes, and Methodologies,” in *Trends in Archive Archaeology*, Brepols Publishers, 2024.

neglectful or even malicious behavior, offering glimpses at the “dark side” of maternity or failures of motherhood. In cult practice, there is a more cooperative relationship between motherhood and caves, as is seen in the caves of Eileithyia and in some nymph cults.

Chapter 2 looks at the origin of maternity: sexual activity. First I show how myth—particularly in epic—stages the consummation of non-normative sexual relationships in caves and thus prefigures the eventual failure of the relationship. I contend that the cave settings aim to highlight the transgressive nature of relationships in which the female partner holds greater agency (whether social, political, or divine) over the male partner. I then problematize prior scholarship that equates these dynamics with the phenomenon of nympholepsy, or “being seized by the nymphs.” I show that scholars’ insistence on a sexual dynamic between nymphs and their mortal male devotees is unfounded in the literary evidence before the Hellenistic period and also has no basis in the epigraphic and archaeological evidence of the three “nympholept” cave cults from antiquity. I aim therefore to divorce the phenomenon of nympholepsy from notions of female-dominant subversive sexuality. Instead, I show that what little evidence for sexuality there is in these caves points, rather, toward normative gender-power dynamics.

My final chapter investigates virginity’s relationship to cavernous settings in myth and lived religion. While virginity had always been tied simultaneously to both purity and danger, in the second century CE, the growing concern for sexual abstinence in proto-Christian contexts combined with extant traditions staging issues of female sexuality in caves. This resulted in a sudden proliferation of both pagan and proto-Christian narratives in which young women are made to defend or prove their virginity inside or by means of caves. Finally, I look at three cave cults from the ancient world (two in Greece and one in Italy) which were specifically tied to

issues of virginity. These cults demonstrate a connection between virginity and community-wide (especially agricultural) fertility, though the specifics of the rituals are often difficult to discern.

Chapter 1: Caves and Paradigms of Maternity

Before delving into individual examples of the thematic connection between grottos and maternity, I will sketch the web of associations that link the two. Fundamentally, there is an inherent correlation between the cave and the womb: an empty chamber within a solid body that can offer shelter and protection. Ancient theories of reproduction frame the father as the sole creator of solid form, while the mother is characterized “as a mere housing, receptacle, or nurse of being rather than a coproducer,” which “provided the formless, passive, shapeless matter which, through the father, was given form, shape, and contour.”¹¹⁷ The mother therefore could be viewed primarily in relation to her womb, rather than her personhood or her acts of nurturing. The womb and, by extension, female sexuality generally, was therefore characterized “as a vessel, a container, a home empty or lacking in itself but fillable from the outside.”¹¹⁸ In finding parallel forms in nature, and therefore apt metaphors for the womb, geological features such as the earth and the sea were encoded with symbolic associations to both maternity and mortality.¹¹⁹ These identifications will be key to understanding all three thematic sections of this dissertation.

Being in the womb is associated with darkness,¹²⁰ and birth with entering the light. The word φάωσδε is used only in archaic epic and only in two contexts: childbirth and emergence from underground.¹²¹ The darkness of the cave, then, is contrasted with the light of the outside world; obscurity and concealment convey pre-, post-, or simple non-existence. Both caverns and wombs can be seen as sites of relative safety and protection; caves have always been an obvious

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1994: 5.

¹¹⁸ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 206.

¹¹⁹ Theresa Krier, “Mère Marine: Narrative and Natality in Homer and Virgil.” In *Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Theresa Krier, Taylor & Francis, 2004; Sheila Muraghan, “Maternity and Mortality in Homeric Poetry,” *Classical Antiquity* 11, no. 2 (1992): 242–264.

¹²⁰ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 104–107.

¹²¹ Of birth, see *Il.* 16.188; 19.103–104 and 118; *HH Apollo*, 119; cf. *Il.* 2.309, in a portent, a serpent appears, which Zeus “had sent into the light”; Hesiod, *Theogony* 669 in reference to emerging from the chthonic realm of Erebus, οὓς τε Ζεὺς ἐρέβessφιν ὑπὸ χθονὸς ἦκε φάωσδε. In his journey to the Underworld, Odysseus’ mother tells him to hurry toward the light, *Od.* 11.223.

source of shelter for humans and other animals. There is emphasis on the mother's body as the site of generation, but also as a site of safety; the death of the child (external to the uterus) thus emphasizes the doom that a child faces upon emerging from the womb. Inside, the fetus is protected; outside, the child's only certain fate is death. In this way, concealment is also associated with motherhood. The concealment of both infant Zeus (from Cronos) and infant Dionysus (from Hera) inside caves, where they are nursed by nymphs and/or goats, thus demonstrates the protective aspect of the cave and the womb that it represents.

Beyond mere structural affinities, liquid is also a defining feature of both; the karst grottos of the Mediterranean basin were formed by underground water and many, perhaps most, of these caves had springs either inside or in the vicinity. The springs often found in or near inland caves at the very least provide freshwater for drinking,¹²² but also for healing purposes.¹²³ The connection between water or liquid and female reproduction is both clear and well-attested.¹²⁴ Throughout antiquity, the constitution of females of all species was understood as wet and cold.¹²⁵ The fluidity associated with women was likely also due to the normal vaginal secretions and discharges associated with childbirth, as well as the generation of breastmilk. As Elizabeth Grosz has observed,¹²⁶

Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a

¹²² According to Li Vigni et al., 85% of the freshwater karst springs within the territory of the modern Greek state are potable; the other 15% have chloride and boron levels that exceed limits set by European Council, though these caves show signs of "strong anthropogenic stress" that likely did not apply in antiquity. See Lorenza Li Vigni et al. "Hellenic karst waters: geogenic and anthropogenic processes affecting their geochemistry and quality." *Scientific Reports*, 13, no. 1, 2023.

¹²³ Examples of cave springs used for healing: Strabo, 8.3.19; 14.1.44; Pausanias, 3.24.2; 5.5.11; 8.18.7; Apollodorus, 2.5.4

¹²⁴ For an examination of the "wetness" of the female body, see Anne Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place: Women, Dirt, and Desire," in *Women in the classical world: critical concepts in classical studies*, ed. Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon, Routledge, 2017: 137–145.

¹²⁵ The association is common; see, for example, Hippocrates, *Reg.* 1, 27; *Reg.* 1, 34; Galen, *De Sem.* 2.4, ὑγρότερον μὲν οὖν τὸ θῆλυ καὶ ψυχρότερον. Hesiod's depiction of the creation of Pandora from earth and water demonstrates an early connection of these qualities with femaleness, *Works and Days* 61. See also Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 775b.

¹²⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 203.

lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment—not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order? My hypothesis is that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage.

The matrix of qualities that make up the feminine constitution therefore evoke certain qualities that also apply to caves. Typical cave settings are voids within geologic bodies, characterized by the qualities of cold, wet, and dark. The apparent coldness and fluidity of the female (and therefore, maternal) body has a very physical analogy with these cavernous spaces.

The generative associations of maternity and grottos are, however, marred by danger. Rather than being idealized as uniformly protective, nurturing, or benevolent, the cave/womb entity also evokes the risk of death. This therefore comes to illustrate the “dark side” of maternity that is often explored in Greek literature, especially in Athenian tragedy. The mothers of tragedy need not themselves be “evil” (they are often troubled by fate or the faults of the gods), but there is an implication that through their maternity they foreshadow or even bring about the death of their children.¹²⁷ Occasionally these instances of bad mothering are staged in caves, especially in the act of exposing an infant. This is the case, for instance, when Creusa abandons newborn Ion in the cave of Apollo to be devoured by birds.¹²⁸ Antiope exposes her twin sons by Zeus in a cave in several sources.¹²⁹

In her astute recognition of the connection between maternity and mortality, Murnaghan observes two identifications: that of “the mother's body from which the child originates with the place of death to which he must return; and the identification of both these places with the

¹²⁷ Bad mothering is a feature in Greek drama also without cave settings, e.g. Medea's murder of her and Jason's children. On this, see Robert Cowan, “When Mothers Turn Bad: The Perversion of the Maternal Ideal in Sophocles' *Eurypylus*,” in *Female Characters in Fragmentary Greek Tragedy*, eds. P. J. Finglass and Lyndsay Coe, Cambridge University Press, 2020; and Jeffrey Henderson, “Older Women in Attic Old Comedy,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 117 (1987): 112–113.

¹²⁸ Euripides, *Ion* 492–506; 897–904.

¹²⁹ Pausanias, 1.38.9. Euripides seems to refer to the cave in his (very fragmentary) *Antiope* as a place in the rock: πέτρᾱν, fr. 223, line 19.

earth.”¹³⁰ The cave as the womb of the earth fits within this paradigm as the locus of several divine births. Being born of the earth—moving from beneath the soil to atop it—one returns to the soil upon death. Thus, Euripides’ chorus in *Chrysippus* hymns.¹³¹

Euripides, *Frag.* 839, 1–10.

Γαῖα μέγιστη καὶ Διὸς Αἰθήρ,
ὁ μὲν ἀνθρώπων καὶ θεῶν γενέτωρ,
ἡ δ’ ὕγροβόλους σταγόνας νοτίας
παραδεξαμένη τίκτει θνητούς,
τίκτει βοτάνην φῦλά τε θηρῶν,
ὅθεν οὐκ ἀδίκως μήτηρ πάντων νενόμισται.
χωρεῖ δ’ ὀπίσω
τὰ μὲν ἐκ γαίης φύντ’ εἰς γαῖαν,
τὰ δ’ ἀπ’ αἰθερίου βλαστόντα γονῆς
εἰς οὐράνιον πάλιν ἦλθε πόλον·

*Earth, greatest one, and Aether, realm of
Zeus—he the begetter of human kind and gods,
while she, receiving his damp moisture-
spreading drops, bears mortals, bears vegetation
and the families of beasts, and so is rightly
considered mother of all. Those things that were
born from earth return to earth, and those that
grew from ethereal seed go back to the heavenly
region.*

The association is only natural, as the two correspond to the complementary opposites of beginning and end, creation and destruction, existence and nonexistence. Murnaghan has shown this connection with regard to archaic Greek poetry: since mothers are responsible for birth and creation, and creation/existence is a necessary precondition for death, then by a simple syllogism, mothers are responsible for death.¹³² Thus, in an extremely literal interpretation of the “femme fatale” motif, archaic Greek poetry had a “widespread tendency to identify mortality, the necessity of dying, with women.”¹³³ There are mothers in myth who are credited with killing their children—Medea, Ino, and Agave being the most famous—but childrens’ deaths need not be met through a mother’s violence to nonetheless be blamed on her. As Murnaghan shows,

¹³⁰ Murnaghan, “Maternity,” 244.

¹³¹ Unless otherwise specified, the texts and translations for all Greek and Latin passages in this dissertation come from their latest Loeb editions. At times, I amend the translations to more accurately render the original text, and these instances are double-bracketed in the English text and are explained in footnotes.

¹³² Murnaghan, “Maternity,” 242.

¹³³ Murnaghan, “Maternity,” 242.

“mourning is essentially continuous with motherhood, an experience that begins with the pain of childbirth”.¹³⁴

But perhaps it begins even earlier. Death and parturition have been and continue to be innately linked in human history due to the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth for both mother and fetus. Death in childbirth is depicted visually on grave stelai of several women.¹³⁵ A number of magical protective amulets¹³⁶ from the ancient world aim to protect women against miscarriage¹³⁷ and other complications during pregnancy.¹³⁸ Laws about the purity of sacred spaces usually treat birth and death in the same breath. As Susan Guettel Cole observes, “both are transitional states, both involve risk, and the outcome of both is not easy to predict... boundaries of the body are breached, identity is ambiguous, and the individual can be imagined to inhabit two realms.” Thus, “females, being intimately involved with both birth and death, were also associated with the hazardous and polluting aspects of both.”¹³⁹

While it is impossible to estimate with any degree of certainty maternal, fetal, or infant mortality rates in the ancient world, it is reasonable to assume that mortality rates for all three groups were likely quite a bit higher than in the modern world. Infant mortality rates in the

¹³⁴ Murnaghan, “Maternity,” 261.

¹³⁵ On stelai for women who died in childbirth in classical Greece (particularly Laconia and Athens), see Nancy Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994; in particular the chapter “The Attitudes of the Polis to Childbirth: Putting Women into the Grid,” 121–140. For a similar discussion of maternal epitaphs in the Roman Empire, see Anna Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans: Childbearing and Its Risks in Imperial Rome*, Princeton University Press, 2024; examination of maternal epitaphs are sprinkled throughout the book, but for in-depth examination of the link between fertility and mortality in epitaphs, see the chapter “Veturia at Scale: Kinship, Community, and Empire,” 19–72.

¹³⁶ Jean-Jacques Aubert, “Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30 (1989): 421–449.

¹³⁷ There is no lexical distinction in Hippocratic texts between induced abortions and spontaneous abortions (i.e. miscarriages). They are both referred to by the terms τρωσμός, ἐκτρωσμός, ἄμβλωσις, and διαφθορά. In epigraphic sources (such as votives from Asclepeia), the more common term is διάφθερμα.

¹³⁸ Accounts of women suffering miscarriages or stillbirths in antiquity are extremely frequent in Hippocratic gynecological works. A few examples include: *Superfetation* 10, 17, 27, *Diseases of Women* I.25, 47, *Barrenness* 25, 26, 28, 30.

¹³⁹ Susan Guettel Cole, “The Ritual Body,” in *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space: The Ancient Greek Experience*, University of California Press, 2004: 105–106.

ancient world are estimated to be around 20% before a child's first birthday,¹⁴⁰ while today the rate of infant mortality in the United States is 0.56%.¹⁴¹ While there have been no reasonable estimates for incidence of miscarriage in the ancient world, it is currently estimated that approximately 26% of all pregnancies in the modern world end in miscarriage.¹⁴² These rates were likely much higher in the ancient world due to issues such as malnutrition and lack of modern-standard prenatal care. Maternal mortality rates today are less than 0.02%¹⁴³ but in the ancient world they were likely as high as 2%.¹⁴⁴

Death in childbirth was treated as something different than death attributed to disease;¹⁴⁵ in Laconian grave stelai from the classical period, there seems to have been an equation of death in childbirth with death in battle.¹⁴⁶ Thus, pregnancy was “the object of unique forms of anxiety and anticipation: birth can carry the prospect of new life, of health and increase. Birth is quintessentially ‘risky’, in that it has high stakes, characterized by danger” for both the mother and the fetus, with death being a familiar outcome for one or both parties.¹⁴⁷ Several passages in Hippocrates' gynecological works refer to instances in which a patient has an incomplete abortion or miscarriage; in these instances, the unviable fetus is not expelled from the uterus, which is extremely dangerous for the patient.¹⁴⁸ In this instance, the uterus acts as both the source of life and the place of death; it is a tomb of sorts. Thus, the connection between maternity and

¹⁴⁰ Freidin, *Birthing*, 32, citing Perkin.

¹⁴¹ Danielle M. Ely and Anne K. Driscoll, “Infant Mortality in the United States: Provisional Data from the 2022 Period Linked Birth/Infant Death File,” *Vital Statistics Surveillance Report, Rapid Release* 33, 2023.

¹⁴² Carla Dugas and Valori H. Slane, “Miscarriage,” *StatPearls*, 2022. Accessed through the National Institute of Health's National Library of Medicine.

¹⁴³ Donna L. Hoyert, “Health E-Stat 100: Maternal Mortality Rates in the United States, 2023,” National Center for Health Statistics, *Health E-Stats*, 2025.

¹⁴⁴ Freidin, *Birthing*, 54–56; Freidlin argues that between 5 and 20 out of every 1,000 births resulted in the death of the mother (0.5-2%), with higher rates of mortality in urban settings possibly exceeding 2%.

¹⁴⁵ Freidin, *Birthing*, 55.

¹⁴⁶ Demand, *Birth*, 121–122. See also Medea's assertion that she would rather die in battle than in childbirth, Euripides, *Medea* 250–251.

¹⁴⁷ Freidin, *Birthing*, 55.

¹⁴⁸ For example, Hippocrates, *Superfetation* 9, *Barrenness* 37.

death begins before the “pain of childbirth” that Murnaghan marks as the beginning of mourning. Even before giving birth, the mother is already inherently linked to death.

Upon giving birth, the focus in maternal responsibility shifts from one of physical shelter to one of nourishment, wherein the bodies of mother and child are re-joined for breastfeeding. The nourishment offered by the mother in the form of breastfeeding is also an indicator of the infant’s mortality.¹⁴⁹ With breastfeeding, the acknowledgement that the child is dependent on the mother and the implication of the child’s death without being fed are indicators of the infant’s vulnerability. Although Murnaghan does not discuss it, something that strengthens her identification of breastfeeding with mortality is the fact that infant gods are generally not nursed by their mothers, but by some surrogate nymphs or animals; only mortals are nursed by their mothers.¹⁵⁰ The myths of Zeus and Dionysus always feature caves as divine nurseries, where they are breastfed by either goats or nymphs.¹⁵¹ In the case of Zeus and Dionysus, the link between caves and breastfeeding relies on their concealing and protecting qualities.

Elsewhere, the materiality of the land itself is said to breastfeed infant gods. Hesiod’s account of the birth of Zeus describes how after being born, he was hidden away in a cave on Crete where he was nursed by the Earth (i.e. by his grandmother rather than his mother).¹⁵² In Callimachus’ *Hymn to Delos*, Leto’s ordeal of finding a place to give birth comes to an end and the newborn Apollo suckles not her breast, but that of Delos itself, the physical island thus providing nourishment in place of a mother.¹⁵³ In an overt ecologization of the female body, the

¹⁴⁹ Murnaghan identifies in Hecuba’s pleas to Hector that “Hector’s mortal heritage is identified specifically with his nursing as his mother’s breast, as if he had taken in mortality itself along with his mother’s milk,” Murnaghan, “Maternity,” 245.

¹⁵⁰ Murnaghan argues that the difference noted by Hera at *Il.* 24.56–62 is the difference in the divinity of Hector and Achilles’ respective mothers’ divine status. Hector, as the son of a mortal woman, is less deserving of honor than Achilles, the son of a nymph. Murnaghan, “Maternity,” 245.

¹⁵¹ Zeus: Apollodorus, 1.1.6; Callimachus, *H. Zeus* 34–35, 48–49; Dionysus: *HH Dionysus* 26.3–6;

¹⁵² Hesiod, *Theogony* 479–484.

¹⁵³ Callimachus, *H. Delos*, 274. cf. *HHymn Apollo*, where he is fed nectar and ambrosia by Themis, rather than breastfed by the island of Delos. However, there is indeed an emphasis on the fact that he is *not* fed by his mother:

production of breastmilk is likened by Plutarch to subterranean springs; in the same passage, he refers to making “the uterus a fertile ground for ploughing and sowing” (τὴν δ’ ὑστέραν οἶον ἀρότω καὶ σπόρῳ γῆν ὀργῶσαν ἐν καιρῷ παρέχειν) and refers to the umbilical cord either as the new growth “taking root” (ρίζωσέως) or as a “vine” for the new “fruit” (κλήμα τῷ γεννωμένῳ καρπῷ καὶ μέλλοντι).¹⁵⁴ Likewise, in Philostratus’ *Imagines*, a painting of Semele’s destruction in the birth of Dionysus reveals a “cave for Dionysus” inside which one could “take wine from springs and draw milk from clods of earth or from a rock as from living breasts.”¹⁵⁵

With the generative capacity of the earth for creating and sustaining life, the earth itself is one of the oldest and most obvious manifestations of motherhood. The creation of humanity from the earth itself in various myths of autochthony and in stories of people being molded from the mud strengthen this association.¹⁵⁶ Thus, generative powers are attributed to the dirt; but dirt is also the place to which the body is returned upon death, whether literally through interment or metaphysically through the descent of the soul to the Underworld. The cycle of birth and death is thus dependent upon and illustrated by connection to the ground; a linear lifetime is bookended by emergence from and return to the earth.

In this chapter, I examine the uses of caves for maternal purposes. This includes pregnancy and childbirth, but also the “kourotrophic” activities of nursing and raising an infant.¹⁵⁷ Some myths and cults will involve the biological aspects of maternity and parturition in

οὐδ’ ἄρ’ Ἀπόλλωνα χρυσάορα θήσατο μήτηρ, / ἀλλὰ Θέμις νέκταρ τε καὶ ἄμβροσιν ἐρατεινὴν / ἀθανάτησιν χερσὶν ἐπήρξατο, “Apollo of the golden sword was not breastfed by his mother; Themis served him nectar and lovely ambrosia with her immortal hands,” *HH* 3.123–125.

¹⁵⁴ Plutarch, *Moralia. On Affection for Offspring* 2.495d–496a, 495e.

¹⁵⁵ Philostratus, *Imagines* I.14, 4–5, οἶνον ἀφύσσειν ἐκ πηγῶν δώσει γάλα τε οἶον / ἀπὸ μαζῶν ἔλκειν τὸ μὲν ἐκ βώλου, τὸ δὲ ἐκ πέτρας.

¹⁵⁶ In the Greek tradition, Prometheus forms humankind from earth and water (Apollodorus, 1.7.1); Hephaestus forms Pandora the same way (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 59ff.). Other traditions in which humankind is formed from mud or clay include several accounts from ancient Sumerian and Babylonian sources.

¹⁵⁷ “Kourotrophy” stems from the divine epithet *kourotrophos*, referring to the rearing (*troph-*) of children (*kour-*); in various contexts, it was applied to: Demeter, Athena, Eileithyia, Artemis, Aphrodite, and several other male and female deities. For a catalogue of deities related to childrearing and many assigned this epithet, see Susan Wise, “Childbirth Votives and Rituals in Ancient Greece,” PhD Dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2005: 29–47.

conjunction with caves, and some involve the “mothering” activities of nursing, feeding, bathing, dressing, protecting, instructing, and everything in between.¹⁵⁸

Eileithyia

Eileithyia in Literature

Childbirth was the domain of the goddess Eileithyia,¹⁵⁹ sometimes identified as an aspect of or in association with other goddesses such as Demeter,¹⁶⁰ Artemis,¹⁶¹ or Hera.¹⁶² The cult

Kourotrophy includes acts of parenting—mostly but not exclusively mothering—such as feeding (especially breastfeeding), clothing, bathing, and instructing. Kourotrophic figures may be male or female; an example of a male *kourotrophos* is Chiron, who raises several youths in his cave on Mt. Pelion and educates them in hunting, music, divination, and medicine. For more on representations of kourotrophy, see Theodora Hadzisteliou Price, *Kourotrophos: Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities*, Brill, 1978. Kourotrophic imagery and cult is therefore not limited to infants, and frequently occurs with adolescents. However, in this chapter I primarily discuss kourotrophy as it pertains to infants.

¹⁵⁸ These activities, particularly in the cases of divine birth, are frequently not performed by the infant’s mother. Likewise in the mortal world, elite-born infants were also frequently nursed and reared by nursemaids and nannies: C. W. Marshall, “Breastfeeding in Greek Literature and Thought,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2017): 185–199.

¹⁵⁹ I use the most common version and transliteration of the name here, but there are several Greek variations: Εἰλειθυία (IG IV 699 [Hermione]), Ἐλείθυια (Pindar, *Olympic Odes* 6.42, *Pythian Odes* 3.9, *Nemean Odes* 7.1; Callimachus, *Aetia* fr. 7.10, *H.Delos* 257, *H.Demeter* 131; SIG 602 [Delphi]; and IG iii 1320), Ἐλείθυα (IG XII.3 192 [Astypalaia]), Εἰλήθυια (Callimachus, *H.Delos*, 132, *Epigrams* 53.1; Leonidas, *AP* 6.200; IG XII.5 197 [Paros]), Ἐλευθία (Sammlung der griechischen Dialekt-Inschriften, 4584 [Hippola]; IG XII.5 187 [Paros]), Ἐλευσία (IG V.1 236, 868, and 1118); Εἰλειθεία (IG vii 2228, 3410), Ἰλιθύα (Gonnoi II 175bis), Ἰλειθυία (Gonnoi II 192), Ἐλεύθυια, and Ἐλευθώ, as well as the pluralized Εἰλειθυῖαι (IG II² 5001 [Attica], XII.5 865; SEG 24.226 [Athens], 27.816 [Bithynia]). This list is combined from my own research, R. F. Willets, “Cretan Eileithyia,” *The Classical Quarterly* 8, no. ¾ (1958): 221–223, note 9; and Athanasia Konta and Kostas Davaras, eds. *Ελευθία Χαριστήμιον. Το Ιερό Σπήλαιο της Εἰλειθυίας στον Τσοῦτσουρο*, ΗΡΑΚΛΕΙΟ, 2011: 22–23. The inconsistency and variety of her name could happen even within the same text, e.g. Callimachus, *H.Del.* line 132 cf. 257.

¹⁶⁰ As an aspect of Demeter, e.g. *IThesp.* 252 (Δαματρίαν Ἐλειθυῖαι) and 259 (Δήμητρι Ἐλευσεινίᾳ). Hesychius also defines the epithet Ἐπιλυσμένη, “she having been loosened”, as “freedom” (ἐλευθερία) and mentions that it is used as an epithet of both the (plural) Eileithyiae and of Demeter in Magna Grecia: καὶ μία τῶν Εἰλειθυῶν. καὶ ἐπώνυμον Δήμητρος, παρὰ Ταραντίνους καὶ Συρακουσίων, Hesychius, *Lexicon*, s.v. Ἐπιλυσμένη: epsilon, entry 4950.

¹⁶¹ As an aspect of Artemis, e.g. SEG 28.450 [Chaeroneia], *IThesp* 236–251 [Thespiai], *Gonnoi* II 175–196 [Gonnoi], *Lindos* II 697 [Rhodes], etc.; in conjunction with Artemis: IG ii² 5001 [Attica]. For more on the relationship between Eileithyia and Artemis, particularly “Artemis Orthia,” see Imma Kilian, “Weihungen an Eileithyia und Artemis Orthia,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 31 (1978): 219–222. Antoniou has suggested that the association of Artemis and Eileithyia occurred in the first millennium, given the apparent distinction between them in the Mycenaean tablets: Athanasios Antoniou, “Minoische Nachwirkungen im Kult der Artemis der historischen Zeit,” *Platon* 32 (1980): 226–231 and “Minoische Elements im Kult der Artemis von Brauron,” *Philologus* 125 (1981): 291–296. For a more recent synthesis of scholarship on Mycenaean Artemis worship, see Marie Louise Nosch, “Approached to Artemis in Bronze Age Greece,” in *From Artemis to Diana: The Goddess of Man and Beast*, eds. Tobias Fischer-Hansen and Birte Poulsen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009: 21–39.

¹⁶² Hesychius attests to the worship of “Hera Eileithyia” at Argos (Hesychius, epsilon entry 862, s.v. Εἰλειθυίας); this may also be attested in a boundary stone from Thorikos: Semeli Pingiatoglou, *Eileithyia*, Würzburg : Königshausen + Neumann, 1981: 93–94. Although epigraphically and literarily unattested, it has been suggested that Aphrodite, too, was occasionally worshipped in a childbirth capacity with the epithet Eileithyia. Pesce has proposed that a late

worship of Eileithyia is attested from at least the Mycenaean period, evidenced by a Linear B document from Knossos with her name on it—spelled *e-re-u-ti-ja*—designating a dedication of honey to her.¹⁶³ The non-Greek origin of her name, however, suggests a pre-Greek, probably Minoan, origin.¹⁶⁴

While she appears a few dozen times in our extant mythographic sources, she is never the focus of myth, but rather a helper or protector of other characters (mortal or immortal) in their birthing ordeals. In Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus* (discussed more below), she is evoked simply to describe women in labor:

Callimachus, *Hymns*, 1.10–13

ἐν δέ σε Παρρασίῃ Πρεῖ τέκεν, ἧχι μάλιστα
ἔσκεν ὄρος θάμνοισι περισκεπές· ἔνθεν ὁ χῶρος
ἱερός, οὐδέ τί μιν κεκρημένον Εἰλειθυίης
ἔρπετον οὐδέ γυνή ἐπιμίσγεται...

In Arcadian Parrhasia Rhea bore you,
where there was a hill sheltered completely
by shrubs. Hence the place is holy; no
creeping thing or woman in need of
Eileithyia approaches it...

Here, then, she is understood as a figure who provides aid during birth. Interestingly,

Callimachus frames her here as the aid of both pregnant women and pregnant animals¹⁶⁵ (οὐδέ τί μιν κεκρημένον Εἰλειθυίης / ἔρπετον); in fact, the participle indicating “in need of” Eileithyia is grammatically modifying the female animal, rather than the human female.

Hellenistic statue in Pentelic marble found in Reggio (Calabria) depicts one such “Aphrodite-Eileithyia.” Pingiatoglou, *Eileithyia*, 139, citing G. Pesce, NSt 1936, 441ff. Abb. 3., which I have been unable to locate.

¹⁶³ KN Gg(3) 705. See Georgia Flouda, “Η Θεά Εἰλειθυία στις Κνωσιακές πινακίδες γραμμικής Β,” in *Ελουθία Χαριστήιον. Το Ιερό Σπήλαιο της Εἰλειθυίας στον Τσούτσουρο*, ed. Αθανασία Καντα and Κώστης Δαβαρας, ΗΡΑΚΛΕΙΟ, 2011; Stefan Hiller, “Amnisos in den Tontafelarchiven von Knossos,” in *Amnisos: Nach den archäologischen, historischen und epigraphischen Zeugnissen des Altertums und der Neuzeit*, ed. J. Shafer, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, 1992. Eileithyia is one of a handful of deities mentioned in Linear B tablets who is attested only on tablets from Crete, not from the Greek mainland, Joann Gulizio and Dimitri Nakassis, “The Minoan Goddess(es): Textual Evidence for Minoan Religion,” in *KE-RA-ME-JA: Studies Presented to Cynthia W. Shelmerdine*, eds. Dimitri Nakassis, Joann Gulizio, and Sarah A. James, INSTAP Academic Press, 2014: 120, Table 10.1.

¹⁶⁴ Betancourt speculates that the Greeks’ many variations of her name are due to its non-Indo-European origin, which thus “sounded foreign” to the Greeks. Philip P. Betancourt, “Introduction,” *The Shrine of Eileithyia, Minoan Goddess of Childbirth and Motherhood at the Inatos Cave in Southern Crete*, vol. 1, INSTAP Academic Press, 2022: 3. Pausanias, however, mentions that some ancient people considered her name to be of Delian origin: 1.18.5.

¹⁶⁵ For the specific meaning of ἔρπετον, see below, note 250.

There are a few instances where Eileithyia is said to cause or increase labor pains. In one of Theocritus' *Idylls*, an unnamed girl tells Daphnis "I'm afraid of the pain of childbirth: sharp are the arrows of Eileithyia," and he tells her that Artemis is the one who soothes them.¹⁶⁶ Though probably unrelated, the imagery of the "arrow" (βέλος) of Eileithyia recalls Medea's equation of childbirth to battle.¹⁶⁷ More typically she is said to "loosen" labor pains, as she does in a Euripidean fragment from *Telephus* in which Eileithyia "freed" (ἔλυσεν) a birthing mother from pain.¹⁶⁸ This understanding relies on the folk etymology of her name with the Greek stems λυ-, meaning "loosen, release," ἐλευθ-, meaning "free", or even the verb ἐλήλυθα, "I have arrived."¹⁶⁹

Several gods of the main pantheon were born under her supervision, including Apollo (and sometimes Artemis) and Heracles.¹⁷⁰ In art, she is nearly always depicted at the head-splitting birth of Athena,¹⁷¹ though the peculiarities of the scenario mean that Eileithyia in this instances is not providing traditional midwifery duties, but is present because of her associations with generation, even when the entity being born is fully-grown, emerges not from the womb but from the head, and not from a female but from a male.¹⁷²

Eileithyia is mentioned on four occasions in the *Iliad* and once in the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon's wound and physical pain are likened to the pangs brought on by the

¹⁶⁶ Theocritus, *Idylls* 27.29–30.

¹⁶⁷ Euripides, *Medea* 250–251.

¹⁶⁸ Euripides, fr. 696.6–7: μητέρ' ὠδίνων ἐμὴν / ἔλυσεν Εἰλείθυια, γίγνομαι δ' ἐγώ.

¹⁶⁹ Hesychius relates the name Ἐλευθώ, an alternative or "abbreviated" form of Eileithyia, to ἔρχομαι, *Lexicon*, s.v. Ἐλευθώ, epsilon, entry 2025.

¹⁷⁰ However, in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, Hera in her jealousy prevents Eileithyia from aiding Leto in her labor before Iris finally summons her to Delos, *hH* 3.97–116.

¹⁷¹ Pingiatoglou, *Eileithyia*, 14–19.

¹⁷² e.g. a blackfigure amphora in the British Museum, inventory number B147; and a blackfigure amphora at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inventory number 330.

Eileithyiae.¹⁷³ Later, he addresses the assembled Achaeans after the death of Patroclus and speaks of the time when Hera delayed the birth of Heracles by holding off the Eileithyiae from Alcmene.¹⁷⁴ She is thus variously understood as both the instigator and the alleviator of birth pangs, similar to how Apollo is both the cause and the remedy for plague. In Odysseus' Third Cretan Lie in Book 19 of the *Odyssey*, "Aethon"/Odysseus tells Penelope:

<i>Od.</i> 19.188–189 στῆσε δ' ἐν Ἀμνισῷ, ὅθι τε σπέος Εἰλειθυίης, ἐν λιμέσιν χαλεποῖσι, μόγις δ' ὑπάλυξεν ἀέλλας.	So [Odysseus] anchored his ships at Amnisus, where is the cave of Eileithyia, in a difficult harbor, and hardly did he escape the storm.
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This cave of Eileithyia at Amnisos, which will be discussed further below, functions here as a geographic landmark, lending credence to Odysseus' lie. Furthermore, Levaniouk has shown that the reference can be read as a symbol of rebirth, a theme which is intimately connected to Odysseus' *nostos* and to the island of Crete more generally.¹⁷⁵ This fits within a prominent motif of caves being linked to rebirth in the *Odyssey*, as will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2 with the cave of Calypso in Book 5.

Overall, Eileithyia has a very limited function in myth. She exists only in the context of divine childbirths, and most of these are mere mentions of her, rather than a narrative of her participation in events.

Cult Caves of Eileithyia

In lived religion, however, Eileithyia's active role as a guardian and aide of childbirth is attested at several sanctuaries in the ancient Greek world, including at least three cave shrines: those of Amnisos and Inatos on Crete and one on Paros.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ *Il.* 11. 264–273. Eileithyia is also mentioned briefly in a genealogical excursion, *Il.* 16.187.

¹⁷⁴ *Il.* 19.100–119.

¹⁷⁵ Olga Levaniouk, "Crete and the Poetics of Renewal," in *Eve of the Festival: Making Myth in Odyssey 19*, Harvard University Press, 2011: 93–108.

¹⁷⁶ Despite this dissertation's focus on Greek mythology and religion, not Minoan prehistory, most scholars believe that the Greek cult of Eileithyia was a continuation of a Minoan cult, e.g. Martin P. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenean*

Amnisos, Crete

The cult cave of Eileithyia at Amnisos is attested in *Odyssey* 19 (above) and was mentioned in antiquity also by Pausanias and Strabo. Pausanias names Amnisos among a small group of Eileithyia's cult centers:

Pausanias, 1.18.5

πλησίον δὲ ὠκοδόμητο ναὸς Εἰλειθυίας, ἣν ἐλθοῦσαν ἐξ Ὑπερβορέων ἐς Δῆλον γενέσθαι βοηθὸν ταῖς Λητοῦς ὠδίσι, τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους παρ' αὐτῶν φασι τῆς Εἰλειθυίας μαθεῖν τὸ ὄνομα· καὶ θύουσί τε Εἰλειθυίᾳ Δῆλιοι καὶ ὕμνον ᾄδουσιν Ὡλῆνος. Κρητὲς δὲ χώρας τῆς Κνωσσίας ἐν Ἀμνισῷ γενέσθαι νομίζουσιν Εἰλειθυίαν καὶ παῖδα Ἥρας εἶναι· μόνοις δὲ Ἀθηναίοις τῆς Εἰλειθυίας κεκάλυπται τὰ ξόανα ἐς ἄκρους τοὺς πόδας, τὰ μὲν δὴ δύο εἶναι Κρητικὰ καὶ Φαίδρας ἀναθήματα ἔλεγον αἱ γυναῖκες, τὸ δὲ ἀρχαιότατον Ἐρυσίχθονα ἐκ Δήλου κομίσαι.

Hard by is built a temple of Eileithyia, who they say came from the Hyperboreans to Delos and helped Leto in her labour; and from Delos the name spread to other peoples. The Delians sacrifice to Eileithyia and sing a hymn of Olen. But the Cretans suppose that Eileithyia was born at Amnisos in the Cnossian territory, and that Hera was her mother. Only among the Athenians are the wooden figures of Eileithyia draped to the feet. The women told me that two are Cretan, being offerings of Phaedra, and that the third, which is the oldest, Erysichthon brought from Delos.

While Pausanias describes other, non-cavernous Eileithyia shrines in greater depth,¹⁷⁷ his references to the shrine at Amnisos are sparse. The mention of Amnisos falling within the Knossian realm is corroborated by Strabo, whose reference is even more brief:

Strabo, 10.4.8

Μίνω δὲ φασιν ἐπινείῳ χρήσασθαι τῷ Ἀμνισῷ, ὅπου τὸ τῆς Εἰλειθυίας ἱερόν.

But Minos is said to have used as seaport Amnisos, where is the temple of Eileithyia.

Notably, neither of these geographers mention the shrine being in or near a cave. In Nonnus, the river Amnisos—assumed to be physically associated with the unmentioned cave—is described in conjunction with kourotrophy.¹⁷⁸

Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion, Oxford University Press, 1927: 67; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Harvard University Press, 1985 [1977]: 26.

¹⁷⁷ e.g. Paus. 2.36.11, 3.17.1, 4.31.9, 6.20.2–6, 7.23.5, 7.25.9, 7.27.8, 8.21.3, 8.48.7–8.

¹⁷⁸ e.g. Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 8.115, 13.251. cf. (more frequently) the river's association with Artemis, with an emphasis on the nymph daughters of Amnisos as her attendants: Callimachus, *Hymns* 3.15, 162; *Iambs* 12.1; Apollonius Rhodius, 3.877, 882.

Based on these few, brief, and uninformative references, scholars have identified a certain cave on the northern coast of Crete near Knossos as this cave of Eileithyia *Amnisia*. However, this identification is likely spurious.¹⁷⁹ Most of the materials excavated were lamp and vessel fragments, and the few votive objects found, though suitable for women dedicators, do not generally suggest a cult of fertility, childbirth, or childrearing.¹⁸⁰ The firmest basis for its identification as a worship site of Eileithyia is on the dubious interpretation of a few speleothems inside the cave, which have variously been described as a pregnant woman's torso, the breasts and legs of a woman, a woman carrying an infant, or a seated woman or enthroned goddess.¹⁸¹ The subjective nature of these speleothem identifications, combined with the paucity of material evidence for childbirth ritual at the site, suggests that the true cave of Eileithyia *Amnisia* (as mentioned in our ancient sources) has not been identified.

Since the cave at Amnisos is not a cave of Eileithyia, and the items excavated do not suggest a cult centered on women's health, sexuality, or fertility, I will not discuss it further. I mention it merely because a study of the archaeology of possible Eileithyia caves would be incomplete without acknowledgement of prior archaeological hypotheses and results on the subject.

¹⁷⁹ Proponents for the identification of the cave near Palaichora as the cave of Eileithyia *Amnisia* include Paul Faure, *Fonctions des cavernes cretoises*, Editions E. de Boccard, 1964: 82–83; and Spyridon Marinatos in his initial excavation reports, 1929, 1930. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenean*, 54. In 1996 Nanno Marinatos' new study of the material from her father's excavations concluded that the excavated cave should not be identified with the cave of Eileithyia mentioned in the *Odyssey*: "Cult by the Seashore: What Happened at Amnisos?," *The Role of Religion in the Early Greek Polis: Proceedings of the Third International Seminar on Ancient Greek Cult*, ed. Robin Hagg, Swedish Institute at Athens, 1996: 135–139.

¹⁸⁰ Wise, "Childbirth," 62.

¹⁸¹ Faure, *Functions*, 1964: 84–85, and Nikolaos Platon, "Περὶ τῆς ἐν Κρήτῃ λατρείας τῶν σταλακτιτῶν," *Αρχαιολογικὴ Εφημερίς* (1930): 160–168.

Inatos

Another cave on Crete is much more soundly identified with Eileithyia: the cave of Eileithyia *Inatia*, in the ancient town of Inatos (modern Tsoutsouros) [Fig. 1.1]. Excavation of the cave took place over two short stints in March (by Nicolas Platon and Costis Davaras) and then September (by Davaras) of 1962 after reported looting of the site since 1959. The discovery of an inscription earlier in that decade indicated the existence of a shrine to Eileithyia in the vicinity of modern Tsoutsouros.¹⁸² For public safety, the cave was sealed with concrete in 1971 and covered with iron bars in 2009 [Fig. 1.2]. Despite excavations taking place within two months in 1962, the results of the excavations were not published until 2022 with the publication of the “Egyptaica” and the terracotta finds.¹⁸³ Some notable finds from the cave had been already examined and published,¹⁸⁴ the previously most comprehensive report being published in 2011.¹⁸⁵ The artifacts of other materials, including stone, metal, and bone/ivory, have not yet been published. The majority of the finds from the cave are housed at the Heraklion Museum.

Human use of this cave spanned late prehistory and all of antiquity, with cult practice beginning in the Early Minoan period and surviving into the early Roman period. Despite prolonged looting before scholarly intervention, the excavations and confiscation of looted items nevertheless yielded over 2,000 items.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² SEG 45:1296, (=KretChr 10 (1956) 421: Ἐλευθυῖα χαρισ/τήριον, “a little gift for Eileithyia.” It has been dated to the first century BCE.

¹⁸³ Philip P. Betancourt and Athanasia Kanta, eds. *The Shrine of Eileithyia: Minoan Goddess of Childbirth and Motherhood, at the Inatos Cave*, Volumes I and II, INSTAP Academic Press, 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Notably, Stylianos Alexiou, “Ἀρχαιοτήτες καὶ μνημεῖα Κρήτης: Νομοὶ Ἡρακλείου καὶ Λασιθίου. Σκαφικαὶ ἔρευνα καὶ περισυλλογὴ ἀρχαιοτήτων: Τσοῦτσοῦρος,” *ArchDelt* 18 (1965): 310–311; Nikolaos Platon, “Ἡ ἀρχαιολογικὴ κίνησις ἐν Κρήτῃ κατὰ τὸ ἔτος 1956,” *CretChron* 10 (1956): 403–422. Faure, *Functions*, 1964, 90–94; Pingiatoglou, *Eileithyia*.

¹⁸⁵ Athanasia Kanta and Kostas Davaras, eds. *Ελευθυῖα Χαριστήριον. Το Ἱερό Σπήλαιο τῆς Εἰλειθυίας στον Τσοῦτσοῦρο*, ΗΡΑΚΛΕΙΟ, 2011.

¹⁸⁶ Betancourt, *Shrine*, 3.

There were very few finds from the Early Minoan (EM) period, and some of these likely predated the use of the cave as a shrine,¹⁸⁷ which likely began around EM III.¹⁸⁸ Among the Minoan cult objects are some 197 miniature vessels, ranging from EM III to Late Minoan (LM) III,¹⁸⁹ one of which carries a short, two-sign Linear A inscription (AB 55-02).¹⁹⁰ Many of these miniatures have holes in the vessel body, suggesting that they may have been hung or otherwise displayed.¹⁹¹ While miniatures in domestic contexts are usually understood as children's utensils or even toys, their abundance in a cave shrine and their inability to hold commodities due to the holes in their walls, combined with the suggestion that they were displayed in the cave, all suggest their identification as offerings to the deity, rather than for practical purposes of dining in miniature. Diminutive vessels, tools, furniture, ships, and weapons are attested in caches elsewhere in the Minoan and Greek world both within and without sacred contexts.¹⁹² Compared to other sites sacred to Eileithyia, however, the amount of post-Minoan miniature vessels at Inatos is small.

Full-sized vessels suggesting feasting are present only in the first phase of the site, in the Late Bronze Age. Evidence for small-scale communal dining is present in other Cretan caves, including Melidoni, Psychro, Skoteino, and Kamares.¹⁹³ After the decline of dining ware in the

¹⁸⁷ Inatos (INA) 385 (bridge-spouted jar, EM IIB-III); 756 (ring-shaped pendant, EM I-II); 252 (conical cup, EM IIB-III). See Philip P. Betancourt, Alessandra Giunilia-Mair, Susan C. Ferrence and James D. Muhly, "Ring-Shaped Pendant," and Philip P. Betancourt, "Minoan Pottery," in *The Shrine of Eileithyia*, 5–10 and 13–26, respectively.

¹⁸⁸ Betancourt, "Minoan Pottery," *Shrine*, 13–14.

¹⁸⁹ Philip P. Betancourt and Amie S. Gluckman, "Miniature Minoan Vessels," in *Shrine*, 27–50; see also Athanasia Kanta and Danai Z. Kontopidi, "Δείγματα της κεραμικής του σπήλαιου," in *Ελουθία Χαριστήιον. Το Ιερό Σπήλαιο της Ειλειθυίας στον Τσούτσουρο*, eds. Athanasia Kanta and Kostas Davaras, HPAKΛEIO, 2011, 44–79.

¹⁹⁰ Massimo Perna, "Linear A Inscription," in *Shrine*, 51–52.

¹⁹¹ Betancourt and Gluckman, "Miniature Minoan Vessels," in *Shrine*, 49.

¹⁹² See Amy C. Smith and Marianne E. Bergeron, eds. *The Gods of Small Things. Pallas: Revue d'études antiques* 86 (2011); and Rachel Dewan, "Two Sized Too Small: Two Categories of Miniature Pottery in Minoan Crete," *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 118 (2023): 1–34.

¹⁹³ Loeta Tyree, Athanasia Kanta, and Harriet Lewis Robinson, "Evidence for Ritual Eating and Drinking: A View from Skoteino Cave," in *Dais: the Aegean Feast, Proceedings of the 12th International Aegean Conference, University of Melbourne, Centre for Classics and Archaeology, 25-29 March 2008*, eds. Louise A. Hitchcock, Robert Laffineur, and Janice Crowley, *Aegaeum Annales d'archéologie égéenne* 29, 2008; and Loeta Tyree, Athanasia Kanta, and D. Sphakianakis, "The Neopalatial Chalice: forms and function in the cave of Skoteino," in

cave came the emergence of figural votives and objects and vessels for ritual, rather than banqueting, a trend that continued and ballooned into the Iron Age.¹⁹⁴ The votive figurines from the Protogeometric and Geometric periods include kourotrophic females **[Fig. 1.3]**,¹⁹⁵ pregnant females **[Fig. 1.4]**,¹⁹⁶ and pairs of figurines in birthing configurations **[Fig. 1.5]**,¹⁹⁷ as well as eight pairs of embracing couples, one of which contains a pregnant woman **[Fig. 1.6]** and two of which feature an ithyphallic male partner **[e.g. Fig. 1.7]**.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, accoutrements such as gold rings, gold appliqué plates, silver jewelry, beaded jewelry, bone tubes, bronze fibulae, and bronze omphalos vessels were dedicated from the protogeometric through archaic periods, though the details of these finds have not yet been fully published.¹⁹⁹

Of particular interest at the cave are a large number of Egyptian or Egyptian-style votives, the “largest single assemblage of Aegyptiaca found in Crete.”²⁰⁰ While Egyptian objects have been found across the Greek world from the Bronze Age onward,²⁰¹ Gunter Holbl has observed that Egyptian scarabs, amulet figurines, and object amulets proliferated in the Aegean (including votive deposits at Rhodes, Samos, Miletus, and Eretria) in the Geometric and Archaic

Krinoi kai Limenes: Studies in Honor of Joseph and Maria Shaw, eds. P. P. Betancourt, Michael C. Nelson, and H. Williams, INSTAP Academic Press, 2007.

¹⁹⁴ Betancourt, “Discussions and Conclusions,” *Shrine*, 173.

¹⁹⁵ Female figurines without pregnant bellies: INA 644, 513, 517, 519, 521, 523, 527, 533, 534, 536, 538, 543, 547, 576, 578, 589, 593, 600, 604, 610, 612, 614, 617, 634, 645

¹⁹⁶ Pregnant figurines without evidence of a partner or helper: INA 113, 554, 549, 556, 567, 570, 605, 607, 622, 629, 1101, 1106.

¹⁹⁷ Pairs of figurines where the birthing mother is seated with a partner or helper standing behind her: INA 107, 110, 111, 114, 115, 649A and B, ; pregnant figurines of a pregnant woman missing the figure of a partner or helper: INA, 109, 112, 590, 594, 631, 633, ;

¹⁹⁸ Embracing couples: INA 100, 103, 105, 106; embracing couple with pregnant female: INA 102; embracing couple with ithyphallic male: INA 101, 104.

¹⁹⁹ A full report of this material is expected in Volume III of *The Shrine of Eileithyia*, forthcoming. A small selection of objects is provided by Athanasia Kanta, “Μικροαντικείμενα - Κοσμήματα - Χαλκινες Φιαλες,” *Ελουθία Χαριστήριον. Το Ιερό Σπήλαιο της Ειλειθυίας στον Τσούτσουρο*, eds. Αθανασία Καντα and Κώστης Δαβαράς, ΗΡΑΚΛΕΙΟ, 2011, 155–167.

²⁰⁰ Nancy Joan Skon-Jedele, “*Aegyptiaka*: A catalogue of Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects excavated from Greek archaeological sites, ca. 1100-525 B.C., with historical commentary,” PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1994: 1768.

²⁰¹ Cave sites that have yielded Egyptian material include the Idaean, Amnisos, Liliano, Psychro, and Trapeza caves, all on Crete: Kyriakos Psaroudakis, “The faience finds of the Idaean Cave,” *Athenische Mitteilungen* 127/128 (2012/2013): 92–142.

periods.²⁰² The majority of Egyptian and Egyptianizing finds from the cave have been dated to the seventh century.²⁰³ Furthermore, “it must be emphasized that the Aegyptiaca named here consistently related to sacrificial and votive gifts to female deities, in particular for the goddess of motherhood and childbirth, Eileithyia.”²⁰⁴ Speaking specifically of the assemblage at Inatos, Skon-Jedele, too, has noted that “a high proportion of [the Egyptianizing finds] would have been appropriate... as offerings to a goddess whose special function was the protection of mothers in childbirth,” including amulets of Egyptian deities connected with sexuality, birth, infancy, children, and the like.²⁰⁵

I will now discuss a few votive types found in the cave that demonstrate the cave’s association with fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth. Because the finds of metal, stone, and bone/ivory have not yet been published, I will focus only on the terracotta finds, which are by themselves very illustrative of the cult’s primary concerns with maternity.

Eight examples of copulating couples were found [Figs. 1.6, 1.7], usually with the figures attached to the inside of a bowl (or *kalathos*).²⁰⁶ They all date from the Protogeometric and Geometric periods. The standing male and female figures face each other in an embrace; two examples depict an ithyphallic male; one example depicts a pregnant female. While typically in the Greek world sexual intercourse was a polluting activity barred from sacred areas, the repetition of these figurines and the stylistic consistency within the group indicate a unique concern not only with maternity, but with the sexual acts that precede it. Hsu suggests that the intimacy of these figurines further indicates that the relationships between the worshipers and the goddess may have been “more private and more personal” than other early Greek cults.²⁰⁷ We

²⁰² Gunter Holbl, “Introduction to the Aegyptiaca from the Inatos Cave,” *Shrine*, vol. 1, 23–27.

²⁰³ Skon-Jedele, “*Aigyptiaka*,” 1772–1774.

²⁰⁴ Holbl, “Introduction,” 24.

²⁰⁵ Skon-Jedele, “*Aigyptiaka*,” 1778.

²⁰⁶ INA 100–106, 542. See Florence S. C. Hsu, “Embracing Couple Figurines,” *Shrine*, 115–117.

²⁰⁷ Hsu, “Embracing,” *Shrine*, 117.

therefore see that activities that are forbidden at other shrines as “polluting” factors are elevated to a sacred status at the Inatos shrine.

Another action that is barred from sacred places as a source of pollution is the act of birthing itself. Given this general taboo, some of the most exciting finds from the Inatos cave are the 55 “scenes of parturition” hand-molded in clay [Fig. 1.5].²⁰⁸ Dating from the Late Bronze Age to the Geometric periods, these arrangements involve two figures: a seated pregnant female and an attendant behind her, usually with female gender identifiers, interpreted as a midwife. There is one terracotta figurine of a baby inside a wicker crib, dated to the archaic period.²⁰⁹ It demonstrates remarkable care in the modeling technique with details of the infant’s ears, nose, chin, and eyes. The baby’s body is covered with a flat piece of clay interpreted as a blanket. This is the only individual infant figurine found at the site; all other depictions of infants are in kourotrophic compositions. There are four such compositions from the cave at Inatos. Kolonauski notes that the depiction of breastfeeding infants is uncommon on Crete.²¹⁰ The assemblage shows a variety of depictions of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, though there are very few depictions of infants and children, which are commonly found at other shrines focused on childbearing, suggesting that the cult at Inatos was more centered on ensuring fertility and healthy pregnancy and birth than on kourotrophic roles or the protection of children more generally.

²⁰⁸ For a discussion of this large collection, see Leanna Kolonauski, “Scenes of Parturition,” *Shrine*, 101–114.

²⁰⁹ See Philip P. Betancourt, Leanna Kolonauski, Sydney R. Sarasin, and Florence S. C. Hsu, “Miscellaneous Protogeometric to Early Archaic Figurines,” *Shrine*, 119.

²¹⁰ Kourotrophic figurines from the cave of Eileithyia at Inatos: INA 116, 117, 129, and 621F. See Leanna Kolonauski, “Kourotrophoi,” *Shrine*, 135–138.

Paros

The only other securely-identified cave sanctuary of Eileithyia is on the Cycladic island of Paros. The cave high on the south slope of Mt. Kunados was excavated in 1898 by Otto Rubensohn; he did not record any specific findspots (e.g. ‘cave entrance, in the middle of the cave, in front of the cave’) or stratigraphic data from the site. We therefore do not know the spatial distribution of objects within the sacred precinct of Eileithyia, which encompassed both the cave and a spring inside an adjacent cave. The cave collapsed some time between its 1898 excavation and the present day, making safe visitation to the interior impossible, but the cultic infrastructure outside the cave (a spring and rock niches for votives) are still visible [Figs. 1.8, 1.9].²¹¹ Additionally, the finds from the cave have never been fully published.²¹² Thus, compared to the cave at Inatos, the one on Paros is much less thoroughly documented. The identification of the cave cult of Eileithyia was made based on inscriptions found at the cave,²¹³ mostly consisting of dedications. In addition, two inscriptions not excavated from the sanctuary itself were found and collected by modern inhabitants of Paros; these inscriptions document endeavors to repair

²¹¹ Yannis Kourayos in his archaeological guide to the island says that on the rock face outside the cave, in addition to the votive niches there are several pairs of women’s feet carved into the stone. He does not cite previous literature for this (though the text is public-facing, rather than academic) and does not provide further data or photographs of these carvings; I myself do not see evidence of such carvings in the photographs from the site, and the site’s excavator, Rubensohn, does not mention any carvings in his published excavation reports (1900, 1901, 1949) or his excavation notebook (Alušík and Dostalíková, 2025). Subsequent literature on the topography of Paros cites Kourayos’ claim, but these publications include Kourayos himself as a co-author. Yannis Kourayos, *Paros - Antiparos - Despotiko: From Prehistoric to Contemporary times*, Paros Municipality, 2020 [2015]. Kourayos says that “they can be interpreted as believers’ footprints who visited the sanctuaries for prayers and by carving their footprints they immortalized their visit,” page 51. On carved feet in sacred contexts, particularly for Egyptian deities, see Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, “*Ipsa deae vestigia...* Footprints divine and human on Graeco-Roman monuments,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3 (1990): 85–109. Dunbabin recognizes some contexts in which the feet may represent those of the deity, and thus act as a record of epiphany: 86–88.

²¹² Rubensohn’s 1949 publication “Paros” discusses the dozen or so cults on the island without providing in-depth information about individual objects or contexts. According to the editors of his excavation notebook for the Kounados hill on Paros, Rubensohn seems to have intended to continue with this work, but ultimately abandoned the endeavor in favor of his excavations at Delion, the results of which he published at age 94. For his excavation notebook on ceramic finds, as well as some written correspondence, see Tomáš Alušík and Pavla Alušíková Dostalíková, *Otto Rubensohn’s Excavations on Paros I: The Sanctuaries on Kounados Hill*, Archaeopress, 2025.

²¹³ Again, due to the lack of spatial data, it is unknown how many of these votives were from inside the cave versus hung in votive niches outside the cave. There are certainly more inscriptions than there are (extant visible) niches.

“the spring, the altar, and the chamber” of the sanctuary,²¹⁴ along with a list of approximately 60 donors, all of whom were women.²¹⁵

The finds from the cave include several statue bases, relief fragments, life-sized sculptures of children’s heads, numerous clay female figurines and marble statuettes of children, vase fragments, fragmented masks, and a few bronze items, along with 19 inscriptions.²¹⁶ The 14 votive inscriptions date from the early 4th through 2nd centuries BCE [Fig. 1.10].²¹⁷ These dedications thank or request favor (εὐχήν) from the goddess and are mostly dedicated by mothers or pairs of parents for their (living or yet unborn) children.²¹⁸

Five relief sculptures were found.²¹⁹ One dating to the Roman period is extremely fragmentary; only the upper head and raised right arm of a female figure survive [Fig. 1.11].²²⁰ Some scholars have read incisions around the figure’s head as a diadem, thus identifying the figure as a divinity. Pingiatoglou doubts the existence of a diadem and argues instead that the composition is indicative of a worshiper raising her arms in prayer.²²¹ Three of the reliefs are

²¹⁴ IG XII.5 186, εἰς ἐπισκευὴν τῆς κρήνης καὶ τοῦ βωμοῦ καὶ τοῦ θαλάμου; 5-6. The use of the word θάλαμος—“bedchamber” or “inner room”—is interesting. While, based on its context, it is clearly one of the sacred structures of the sanctuary, it is not usually used for religious architecture at all. The one known exception is in Lucian’s 2nd century CE treatise *Dea Syriae*, in which he describes an inner part of a temple as a θάλαμος; I argue that this could be due to the fact that it is inhabited by the cult images of the archetypal divine spouses, Zeus and Hera, and thus could be a tongue-in-cheek reference to the divine marital bed: Lucian, *Dea Syriae* 31. There is also the caveat that since this is not obviously a satire, that its ascription to Lucian is spurious. Some modern archaeologists have taken Lucian’s note here to mean that any inner sanctum may be called a θάλαμος, and therefore they use this to describe the *adyton* of some temples in the vicinity of ancient Syria. See M. Gawlikowski and M. Pietryzkowski, “Les sculptures du temple de Baalshamîn à Palmyre,” *Syria* 57, fasc. 2/4 (1980): 421–452. To my knowledge, θάλαμος is never used for a cave in Greek literature. The closest analogue I can find is θαλάμη, usually an animal’s “den” or “lair,” which is used by Euripides to describe the cave oracle of Trophonius: *Ion* 394.

²¹⁵ IG XII.5 186, 7–38.

²¹⁶ Pingiatoglou, *Eileithyia*, 52.

²¹⁷ Votive inscriptions from the cave of Eileithyia on Paros are: Paros 261 (=IG XII.5 206), 262 (=IG XII.5 187), 297 (=IG XII.5 189), 304 (=IG XII.5 185), 312 (=IG XII.5 200), 313 (=IG XII.5 208), 315 (=IG XII.5 203), 327 (=IG XII.5 188), 334 (=IG XII.5 191), 335 (=IG XII.5 195), 336 (=IG XII.5 196), 337 (=IG XII.5 202), 338 (=IG XII.5 201), and 339 (=IG XII.5 207).

²¹⁸ Rubensohn, “Paros,” 1949, 1848.

²¹⁹ Only four can be securely assigned to the cave of Eileithyia on Paros. A fifth relief is likely from the same place, given its similarity with three other votives from the sanctuary and the uniqueness of this votive type in shrines of Eileithyia. Its provenance is, however, unknown, and the object itself is now lost. Pingiatoglou, *Eileithyia*, 123.

²²⁰ Paros 550, though the *Arachne* object database provides the museum inventory number as A 30.

²²¹ Pingiatoglou, *Eileithyia*, 123.

anatomical votives of breasts, two with short dedicatory inscriptions [Fig. 1.12].²²² Rubensohn also recovered a marble anatomical relief of a female torso with the pubic triangle exaggerated, similar in execution to early Cycladic female figurines. Nine relatively complete clay protomes were found, eight of which can be firmly identified as female forms.²²³

A marble statuette of an enthroned female was also found at the sanctuary of Eileithyia, though it is heavily worn and missing the upper torso and head of the figure [Fig. 1.13].²²⁴ While Baur speculates that this and several fragmentary clay offerings of the same type all copy the original cult statue of Eileithyia at the sanctuary, the form is rather common.²²⁵ This does not rule out that they were inspired by the cult statue, as the statue itself could have likewise been of a generic type. There are close parallels at the Delion sanctuary also on Paros; the motif and execution therefore appear to have been rather standardized.

In-depth analysis of the votive assemblages from these two caves of Eileithyia reveals that even within the specific concern of maternity there could be considerable diversity in the types of images used to express a handful of related but distinct intentions. The placement of these cults inside grottos demonstrates a link between this type of landscape feature and ancient Greek concepts of maternity, a link which is likely due to structural and practical affinities between the womb and the cave. As “empty” spaces embedded within a larger contiguous body—whether that of a human woman or that of the nourishment-producing earth—they are both connected with concerns of fertility and reproduction, but also with aspects associated with acts of mothering, such as protection or the provision of life-sustaining liquid.

²²² Paros 307 (=IG XII.5 198), 544, and 557; IG XII.5 193.

²²³ Paros 729–735, 760, 761; fragmented protomes include Paros 762–771; 773. Only Paros 732 cannot be gendered based on the extant object.

²²⁴ Archaeological Museum of Paros, inventory number A 31.

²²⁵ Paul V. C. Baur, “Eileithyia,” *The University of Missouri Studies* 1, no. 4 (1902): 40.

The two identifiable cave shrines of Eileithyia on Crete and Paros show a diverse assemblage of votive types, which is surely due in part to their differences in context (geographic and chronological). Worship at Inatos spanned several hundred years, with the earliest evidence of a childbirth cult arising in the Mycenaean period. Eileithyia worship at the cave on Paros, by contrast, seems to date only to the 4th–2nd centuries BCE. This chronological gap can explain in part the lack of inscriptions at Inatos when compared to the 19 from Paros. Geologically, Paros is much more abundant in high-quality marble, which explains the proliferation of marble votives at that site compared to Crete. We therefore find at the Parian cave several types of marble votives alongside terracotta figurines, while at Inatos terracotta is much more common.

These two sites also seem to have had slightly distinct primary concerns. At Paros we see a large number of statues and statuettes of infants and children, statue bases whose statues do not survive, enthroned figures, and anatomical votives. These finds—particularly the votive breasts—suggest kourotrophic concerns. At Inatos, we see a much higher proportion of the votive material referring specifically to the maternal body, such as pregnant figurines, scenes of parturition, and embracing couple compositions. Eileithyia’s concerns for maternity are therefore broadly construed to include both the biological act of giving birth and the kourotrophic roles in acts of “mothering”. Both of these activities, moreover, are deemed appropriate for worship inside natural caves, suggesting a correlation between cavernous spaces and women’s health, reproduction, and motherhood, as is also clear in the literary evidence I will examine next.

Caves and Divine Birth Stories

Earth Mothers: Gaia, Rhea, and the Birth of Zeus

As is well known, in archaic Greek mythography the earth, Ge/Gaia, was a maternal figure.²²⁶ By mapping the environment onto the female body, subterranean spaces such as caves, underground rivers, and inaccessible crevices were the “womb” of the Earth. Her Hesiodic offspring included Rhea, the mother of Zeus, though she is often referred to as the mother of the gods more generally. Frequently, however, Gaia and Rhea are conflated with each other, and the mother of Zeus and the other gods therefore becomes identified with the earth itself.²²⁷

Rhea’s most well-known act in mythology is her hiding Zeus in a cave on Crete and deceiving his father Cronus into swallowing a swaddled stone rather than his son. Rhea’s maternity is her entire mythic identity. Outside of birthing the first generation of Olympians, her biography is minimal. According to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, she is the daughter of Gaia and Uranus,

²²⁶ On the myth and cult of Ge/Gaia, see Jenny Elisabeth Wallensten, “*Karpophoroi* deities and the Attic cult of Ge: notes on IG II² 4758,” *Opuscula* 7 (2014): 193–203; Alice Landi, “Forme e strutture del culto di Gaia nel mondo greco,” *Archeologia Classica*, (2012): 127–167; Stella Georgoudi, “Gaia/Gê: entre mythe, culte et idéologie,” in *Myth and symbol. 1, Symbolic phenomena in ancient Greek culture: papers from the first international symposium on symbolism at the University of Tromsø, June 4-7, 1998*, ed. Synnøve Des Bouvrie, Papers from the Norwegian Institute at Athens 5 (2002): 113–134; and Christian Cappelletti, “Il culto di Gê in Grecia: testimonianze epigrafiche e letterarie,” *Ad limina. 2: Incontro di studio tra i dottorandi e i giovani studiosi di Roma* (2004): 3–20. On the etymology of Ge and Demeter, see Andreas Willi, “Demeter, Gê, and the Indo-European word(s) for «earth»,” *Historische Sprachforschung = Historical Linguistics* 120 (2007): 169–194. Most scholarship on Gaia revolves around her role in autochthonous myth: Miriam Valdés Guía, “La revalorización de la Tierra y de la «autoctonía» en la Atenas de los Pisistrátidas: el nacimiento de Erictonio y de Dioniso órfico,” *Gerión* 26, no. 1 (2008): 235–254; and Claudine Leduc, “Autochtonie et maternité à Athènes (époques archaïque et classique),” *Cahiers Mondes Anciens* 6 (2015). On Gaia’s role in the origin of rites at Delphi, see Ángel Luis Casquillo Fumanal, “Edipo y Gaia: el tema de la Madre Tierra en el oráculo de Delfos,” *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma: Revista de la Facultad de Geografía e Historia*, Serie 2, *Historia Antigua*, 23 (2010): 91–119.

²²⁷ They were often aspects of the “many-named” (πολυώνυμε, *Orphic Hymns* 27.4) mother goddess; see, for example, the Derveni Papyrus, 22.7–10: Γῆ δὲ καὶ Μήτηρ καὶ Πῆα καὶ Ἥρη ἡ αὐτή. ἐκλήθη δὲ / ‘Γῆ’ μὲν νόμῳ, ‘Μήτηρ’ δ’ ὅτι ἐκ ταύτης πάντα γίνεταί, / ‘Γῆ’ καὶ ‘Γαῖα’ κατὰ [γ]λῶσσαν ἐκάστοις. ‘Δημήτηρ’ [δὲ] / ὀνομάσθη ὥσπερ ἡ ‘Γῆ’ Μήτηρ, ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων ἐ[ν] ὄνομα / τὸ αὐτὸ γὰρ ἦν.—ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς Ὑμνοῖς εἰρ[η]μένον· / ‘Δημήτηρ’ [Π]ῆα Γῆ Μήτηρ Ἑστία Δηϊώ. καλεῖται γὰρ [ρ], “Earth and Mother and Rhea and Hera are one and the same. ‘Earth’ (Gê) was given as a name by convention; ‘Mother,’ because all things are born from her; ‘Gê’ and ‘Gaia,’ according to each one’s dialect. She was named ‘Demeter’ just like ‘Gê-meter’ [i.e. ‘Earth-Mother’]: one name made out of both of them, for they were the same. And it is said in the Hymns too: ‘Dēmêtêr Rhêa Gê Mêtêr Hestia Dêiô.’” *Early Greek Philosophy, Volume VI: Later Ionian and Athenian Thinkers, Part I*, ed. André Laks and Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library 529: Harvard University Press, 2016.

earth and sky; Uranus is in turn the eldest son of Gaia.²²⁸ By hiding her youngest child in a cave, Rhea prevents Zeus from being swallowed by Cronus, and therefore allows the linear progression of the theogonic succession myth to proceed.

As has been identified by many scholars,²²⁹ many aspects of the myths of the latter Titan and earliest Olympian generations have parallels in Near Eastern succession myths. The succession anxiety inherent in the Uranus/Cronus and Cronus/Zeus myths has parallels in the Hurro-Hittite²³⁰ *Song of Emergence* (also known as the *Song of Kumarbi*, *Kingship in Heaven*, and *Theogony*, recorded ca. 1400 BCE) and the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* (ca. 1100 BCE²³¹).²³² While they differ in a few details, the main points are similar: Kumarbi overthrows Anu as king of the gods; in the struggle, he bites off Anu's genitals and thus becomes pregnant with the storm god Teshub. Upon giving birth via his head,²³³ he attempts to swallow Teshub, but is given a rock instead and breaks his teeth.²³⁴ Since Teshub is now a threat to Kumarbi's throne, Kumarbi attempts to create offspring who will help him defeat Teshub. He ejaculates on a rock and

²²⁸ Other traditions identify Rhea as the daughter of Oceanus and Tethys, such as Plato, *Timaeus*, 40e.

²²⁹ Foundationally, Walter Burkert, "Oriental and Greek Mythology: The Meeting of Parallels," in *Interpretations of Greek Myth*, ed. Jan Bremmer, Routledge, 1987: 19–24; and Martin West, *East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford University Press, 1997: 276–286. More recent comparisons between the *Song of Emergence* and Hesiod's *Theogony* include Christian Zgoll, "The Hittite 'Theogony' or *Song of Going Forth* (CTH 344): Stratification of Mythical Traditions," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 21, no. 2 (2021): 208–227; Jenny Strauss Clay and Amir Gilan, "The Hittite 'Song of Emergence' and the *Theogony*," *Philologus* 158, no. 1 (2014): 1–9.

²³⁰ The Hittite empire was the contemporary sometimes-friend, sometimes-foe of multiple Hurrian kingdoms. The Hittites' vacillation between friendly relations and conquest of various Hurrian kingdoms over several centuries led to the incorporation and adaptation of several Hurrian traditions and myths into Hittite culture (analogous to Romans' relationship to Etruscan culture). Hurrian myths were recorded in the cuneiform script in both the (non-Indo-European) Hurrian language and the (Indo-European) Hittite. Hurrian-language myths were kept at the Hittite capitol at Hattusa, as well as at satellite power centers such as Ugarit. These myths are thus dubbed Hurro-Hittite, and include, among others, the Kumarbi Cycle mentioned above.

²³¹ For the dating of the *Enuma Elish*, see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *A History Of Babylon 2200 BC–AD 75*, Wiley Blackwell, 2018: 161–163.

²³² Gary Beckman, "Primordial Obstetrics: 'The Song of Emergence' (CTH 344)," *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 391 (2011): 25–33; Mary Bachvarova, "Towards an Understanding of the Gendered Hittite Landscape: What Does it Mean When Mountains Give Birth?," in *Acts of the IXth International Congress of Hittitology, Çorum, 08-14 September 2014*, ed. A. Süel, Dumat Ofset, 2019.

²³³ cf. the birth of Athena from Zeus' head.

²³⁴ cf. Cronus' attempt to swallow the infant Zeus.

impregnates a mountain, which then gives birth to a “bone-hard (*ḥaštaliya-*) volcanic creature,” Ullikummi.²³⁵ This massive phallic stone is no match for the wisdom of the storm god Teshub, however, who defeats Ullikummi and Kumarbi once and for all. Hurro-Hittite myths thus frequently characterize mountains as birthing bodies, and the interior of these mountains as wombs with the capacity for gestating and birthing gods and monsters.²³⁶ As Arum Park has noted, Hesiod’s account relies heavily on female or feminized entities for the proliferation of kingly succession and even for parthenogenesis, while the male deities do not wield independent reproductive powers.²³⁷ Female figures do not figure into the Hurro-Hittite succession myths at all; male gods either themselves become pregnant, or impregnate what we would consider inanimate objects such as stones and mountains. Elements of the natural world thus serve in place of typical reproductive roles. It is clear that within the succession myths of both the Hurro-Hittite and Greek traditions, the insides of mountains—which in the geology of the Greek world almost always harbored caves—provided the maternal functions of gestation, birthing, and protecting the offspring of gods.

The connection of mountain caves with giving birth is therefore well-attested in the traditions of the Greeks’ Bronze Age and Iron Age neighbors. The influence of these peoples’ traditions on Greek myth can be seen in Hesiod’s equivalence of caverns with the womb. In the *Theogony*, Uranus hides some of his hated children in the hollow inside their mother, Earth:

Hesiod, *Theogony*, 156–160

And thus whenever any one of them was born, Uranus hid them all away in the

²³⁵ Mary Bachvarova, “Survival of ‘Popular’ Mythology: From Hittite Mountain Man to Phrygian Mountain Mother,” in *Religious Convergence in the Ancient Mediterranean*, eds. Billie Jean Collins and Sandra Blakely, Lockwood Press, 2019: 205.

²³⁶ Bachvarova, “Towards,” 82.

²³⁷ Arum Park, “Parthenogenesis in Hesiod’s *Theogony*,” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 3, no. 2 (2014): 261–283. The most famous Greek tale of male parthenogenesis is Athena emerging from Zeus’ head (*HHymn Athena*, 4–5); in Hesiod, she is not parthenogenically born from Zeus, but is the daughter of Zeus and Metis: *Theogony* 886ff.

καὶ τῶν μὲν ὅπως τις πρῶτα γένοιτο,
πάντας ἀποκρύπτασκε καὶ ἐς φάος οὐκ ἀνίεσκε
Γαίης ἐν κευθμῶνι, κακῷ δ' ἐπετέρπετο ἔργῳ,
Οὐρανός· ἢ δ' ἐντὸς στοναχίζετο Γαῖα πελώρη
στεινομένη.

hollow of Gaia/Earth and did not
allow/release them into the light and he
delighted in his evil deed; but massive
Gaia/Earth, filled up/burdened, was
groaning within.

She then uses the concealment of Cronus and her other children to her own advantage, devising an ambush against Uranus. In line 178, Hesiod uses the *hapax legomenon* λοχός²³⁸ to describe Cronus' hiding place:

Hesiod, *Theogony*, 176–182

ἦλθε δὲ νύκτ' ἐπάγων μέγας Οὐρανός, ἀμφὶ δὲ Γαίῃ
ἱμείρων φιλότιτος ἐπέσχετο, καὶ ῥ' ἐτανύσθη
πάντῃ· ὁ δ' ἐκ λοχέοιο πάς ὠρέξατο χειρὶ
σκαίῃ, δεξιτερῇ δὲ πελώριον ἔλλαβεν ἄρπην,
μακρὴν καρχαρόδοντα, φίλου δ' ἀπὸ μήδεα πατρὸς
ἐσσυμένως ἤμησε, πάλιν δ' ἔρριψε φέρεσθαι
ἐξοπίσω.

And great Sky came, bringing night with him;
and spreading himself out around Earth in his
desire for love he lay outstretched in all
directions. Then his son reached out from his
ambush with his left hand, and with his right hand
he grasped the monstrous sickle, long and
jagged-toothed, and eagerly he reaped the
genitals from his dear father and threw them
behind him to be borne away.

While traditionally translated as “ambush”, O'Bryhim has shown that Hesiod probably uses word-play here to connote both a hiding-place and the womb of Gaia.²³⁹ λόχος can refer to both a “hiding place before an ambush” and a “childbed”, deriving from a more general meaning of “a place to lie down”. In the somaticization of natural phenomena, the cavity in the earth thus becomes the womb of the earth.

In the next generation, Hesiod uses an alternative form of κευθμῶν to describe Rhea's hiding place for Zeus:²⁴⁰

²³⁸ λοχέοιο is a “curious and unique equivalent of λόχοιο”, M. L. West, ed. *Hesiod, Theogony*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1966, *ad loc.* This is the o-grade nominal form from the same root as λέχομαι, “to lie down”; cf. λέχος, “couch, bed” and λεχώιον, the childbed of Rhea: Callimachus, *Hymns* 1.14.

²³⁹ Shawn O'Bryhim, “Hesiod and the Cretan Cave,” *Rheinisches Museum Für Philologie* 140, no. 1 (1997): 95–96.

²⁴⁰ Scholars both ancient and modern have discussed κευθμῶν and its variations κεῦθος and κευθμός: Eustathius, Scholia on *Il.* 13.28a1, a2; Aristonicus, Scholia on *Il.* 13.28b, both of which concern the correct form (ὀρθή) of the word. On this, see Lara Pagani, “Eustathius' Use of Ancient Scholarship in his Commentary on the *Iliad*,” in *Reading Eustathios of Thessalonike*, eds. Filippomaria Pontani, Vassilis Katsaros, and Vassilis Sarris, De Gruyter, 2017: 93, 104.

Hesiod, *Theogony*, 477–484

πέμψαν δ' ἐς Λύκτον, Κρήτης ἐς πῖονα δῆμον,
 ὀππότ' ἄρ' ὀπλότατον παίδων ἤμελλε τεκέσθαι,
 Ζῆνα μέγαν· τὸν μὲν οἱ ἐδέξατο Γαῖα πελώρη
 Κρήτη ἐν εὐρείῃ τρεφόμεν ἀτιταλλέμεναί τε.
 ἔνθά μιν ἵκτο φέρουσα θεὸν διὰ νύκτα μέλαιναν
 πρώτην ἐς Λύκτον· κρύψεν δέ ἐ χειρσὶ λαβοῦσα
ἄντρον ἐν ἡλιβάτῳ, ζαθέης ὑπὸ κεύθεσι γαίης,
 Αἰγαίῳ ἐν ὄρει πεπυκασμένῳ ὕληεντι.

[Her parents] told [Rhea] to go to Lyctus, to
 the rich land of Crete, when she was about to
 bear the youngest of her children, great Zeus;
 and huge Earth received him in broad Crete to
 nurse him and rear him up. There she came
 first to Lyctus, carrying him through the swift
 black night; taking him in her hands she
 concealed him in a deep cave, under the hidden
places of the holy earth, in the Aegean
 mountain, abounding with forests.

While not used as the site of Zeus' actual birth, the quick association of his birth story and
 infancy with the Cretan cave, along with the continuity of the detail in later sources, strengthens
 the connection.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ e.g. Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, 1.508–509, 3.132–134; Aratus, *Phaenomena* 30–34; Moero, fr. 1, quoted
 by Athanaeus, *Learned Banqueters* 11.491b; Pausanias, 2.15.3; Diodorus Siculus, 5.70.2, 4.80.1–2; Dionysius of
 Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 2.62.2; Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, 28.312–314, 46.12–14.

Zeus' birth story always involves a cave.²⁴² The pervasiveness of this detail in our sources may indicate its antiquity.²⁴³ In a few versions, the actual birth of Zeus takes place inside a cave as, for example, in Apollodorus' account:

Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.1.6–7

ὀργισθεῖσα δὲ ἐπὶ τούτοις Ῥέα παραγίνεται μὲν εἰς Κρήτην, ὀπηνίκα τὸν Δία ἐγκυμονοῦσα ἐτύγχανε, γεννᾷ δὲ ἐν ἄντρῳ τῆς Δίκτης Δία. καὶ τοῦτον μὲν δίδωσι τρέφεσθαι Κούρησί τε καὶ ταῖς Μελισσέως παισὶ νύμφαις, Ἀδραστεία τε καὶ Ἴδη. αὐταὶ μὲν οὖν τὸν παῖδα ἔτρεφον τῷ τῆς Ἀμαλθείας γάλακτι, οἱ δὲ Κούρητες ἔνοπλοι ἐν τῷ ἄντρῳ τὸ βρέφος φυλάσσοντες τοῖς δόρασι τὰς ἀσπίδας συνέκρουον, ἵνα μὴ τῆς τοῦ παιδὸς φωνῆς ὁ Κρόνος ἀκούσῃ.

Enraged at this, Rhea repaired to Crete, when she was big with Zeus, and brought him forth in a cave of Dicte. She gave him to the Curetes and to the nymphs Adrastia and Ida, daughters of Melisseus, to nurse. So these nymphs fed the child on the milk of Amalthea; and the Curetes in arms guarded the babe in the cave, clashing their spears on their shields in order that Cronus might not hear the child's voice.

More typically, however, most accounts do not place the actual birth inside the cave, but rather use the cave as an incubator for the infant until he is strong enough to leave the cave and defy his

²⁴² There was also widespread disagreement in antiquity regarding *which* cave Zeus was hidden in. The following include the most prominent accounts of the birth of Zeus: Apollodorus (1.6), Diodorus Siculus (4.80.2, citing Aratus, *Phaen.* 30–35; 5.70.2–6), Athenaeus (9.376), and Vergil, among others, supported the view that he was born and/or raised in a cave on Mt. Dicte, while Pausanias (5.7.6), Pindar (*Olympian Odes* 5.18–19), and Aeschylus (fr.162, from *Niobe*) support Mt. Ida. While the more ancient tradition places both these options on Crete, there are also attestations for mountains with both names in Asia Minor, causing confusion in antiquity, as is mentioned by Strabo (10.3.20–10.4.12) who points out that the two mountains are a thousand stadia apart. Even when the two caves are not discussed in the context of the birth of Zeus or contain mention of Zeus at all, they are frequently either equated or confused, as is the case in the various tellings of Epimenides and Pythagoras descending into a Cretan cave; Maximus of Tyre places them in the Dictaeon cave (*Oration* 10.1), while Diogenes Laertius chooses the Idean cave (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.10 and 8.1). Hesiod locates the site of Zeus' birth and concealment on Mt. Aegaeon (= Dicte) on Crete (*Theogony* 482–484). Another, rarer claim is that Zeus was born and/or raised on Mt. Lycaon in Arcadia (e.g. Pausanias 8.36). All three mountains are mentioned by Callimachus, alluding to the dispute of this detail: *πῶς καὶ νῦν, Δικταῖον ἀείσομεν ἢ Λυκαῖον; / ἐν δοτῇ μάλα θυμός, ἐπεὶ γένος ἀμφήριστον / Ζεῦ, σὲ μὲν Ἰδαίοισιν ἐν οὐρεσὶ φασὶ γενέσθαι, / Ζεῦ, σὲ δ' ἐν Ἀρκαδίῃ*; “And how will we sing of him? As Dictaeon Zeus or Lycean? My heart is much in doubt since his birth story is disputed. Zeus, some say you were born on the mountains of Ida; others, Zeus, in Arcadia,” (Callimachus *Hymns*, 1.4–7). Of course, Zeus was actually worshipped at all of these locations, and each likely believed that theirs was the original cult and site of Zeus' birth or infancy. For a more in depth analysis of the confusion, see Charles Crowther, “A Note on Minoan Dikta,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 83 (1988): 37–44.

²⁴³ It has long been speculated that the Cretan cave cults of Zeus, particularly that on Mt. Dicte, are of Minoan origin. See M. L. West, “The Dictaeon Hymn to the Kouros,” *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 85 (1965): 149–159; Martin P. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, Oxford University Press, 1927: 392–394; and R. C. Bosanquet, “The Palaikastro Hymn of the Kouretes,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 15 (1908/1909): 339–356.

father. The placement of Zeus in a cave thus demonstrates its protective and nurturing nature, as well as its adolescent-kourotrophic role, functioning as a crucible for forging effective rulers.²⁴⁴

The most extended account of Zeus' birth story is from Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus*.

After debating which localized version of Zeus to hymn,²⁴⁵ he opts for and recounts an Arcadian version of the story (because "Cretans always lie"²⁴⁶):²⁴⁷

Callimachus, *Hymns*, 1.10–17

ἐν δέ σε Παρρασίῃ Πρεῖν τέκεν, ἧχι μάλιστα
ἔσκεν ὄρος θάμνοισι περισκεπές· ἔνθεν ὁ χῶρος
ιερός, οὐδέ τί μιν κεχρημένον Εἰλειθυίης
ἔρπετον οὐδὲ γυνὴ ἐπιμίσγεται, ἀλλὰ ἐ Πρεῖης
ὠγύγιον καλέουσι λεχώιον Ἀπιδανῆες.
ἔνθα σ' ἐπεὶ μήτηρ μεγάλων ἀπεθήκατο κόλπων,
αὐτίκα δίζητο ῥόον ὕδατος, ᾧ κε τόκοιο
λύματα χυτλώσαιτο, τεδὸν δ' ἐνὶ χρωῶτα λοέσσαι.

In Arcadian Parrhasia Rhea bore you,
where there was a hill sheltered completely
by shrubs. Hence the place is holy; no
creeping thing or woman in need of
Eileithyia approaches it, but the
Apidaneans call it the ancient childbed of
Rhea. There, when your mother
[[delivered]]²⁴⁸ you from her great womb,
at once she sought a stream of water in
which she could wash away the afterbirth
and bathe your body.

The actual birth of Zeus is heavily elided (ἔνθα σ' ἐπεὶ μήτηρ μεγάλων ἀπεθήκατο κόλπων,

15).²⁴⁹ Rather than using a typical verb for giving birth or even for producing something,

²⁴⁴ e.g. Minos, who would retreat to the cave of Zeus once every nine years to receive kingly wisdom from the god: Plato, *Minos* 319 D–E; cf. *Od.* 19.179.

²⁴⁵ Callimachus, *Hymns* 1.4–7.

²⁴⁶ Callimachus, *Hymns* 1.8: Κρηῖτες ἀεὶ ψεύσται, "Cretans always lie."

²⁴⁷ On Callimachus' (probably deliberate) confusion of Arcadian and Cretan geography, see Susan A. Stephens, *Callimachus: the Hymns*, Oxford University Press, 2015: 47–49. On this theme of geographic mobility or fluidity elsewhere in Callimachus, see Julie Nishimura-Jensen, "Unstable Geographies: The Moving Landscape in Apollonius' *Argonautica* and Callimachus' *Hymn to Delos*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 130 (2000): 287–317.

²⁴⁸ Here I have amended the translation by Dee L. Clayman in her Loeb edition, 2022. She translates "There, when your mother received you from her great womb". My "delivered" is a more literal translation of ἀπεθήκατο.

²⁴⁹ For the construction, cf. Leto giving birth to Artemis: μήτηρ, ἀλλ' ἀμογητὶ φύλων ἀπεθήκατο γυίων, Callimachus, *Hymns* 3.25. The use of γυίων—typically "limbs"—as "womb" here is peculiar, though not unprecedented, cf. *hH Hermes* 20: ὅς καὶ ἐπεὶ δὴ μητρὸς ἀπ' ἀθανάτων θόρε γυίων. On the use of γυῖα as "womb," see LSJ s.v. γυῖον; when used in the singular, γυῖον can refer to the entire body. cf. LSJ s.v. γυῖα, "The limbs regarded as the seat of strength, as symbolizing the strength". For Callimachus' use of κόλπος as "womb," cf. Callimachus, *Hymns* 4.214, κόλπου; Euripides, *Helen* 1145, κόλποις; Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 5.195, γονίμων... κόλπων; and the *Orphic Hymns*, fr. 32c.8, κόλπου; as well as several medical treatises: Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.9, 16, 70b; Hippocrates, *Nature of the Child* 31; Galen, *On the Use of Parts* 14.4. As McLennan notes, the use of κόλπος to mean "womb" is not Homeric: G. R. McLennan, *Callimachus, Hymn to Zeus: Introduction and Commentary*, Edizioni Dell'Ateneia & Bizzarri, 1977: 45.

Callimachus downplays (euphemizes?) the act of childbirth to a “setting aside” (ἀπεθήκατο) from Rhea’s body, instead emphasizing the after effects of the birthing process.

Callimachus notes that the site where Rhea birthed Zeus is holy (ἱερός), and that “no creeping thing²⁵⁰ or woman in need of Eileithyia approaches it.”²⁵¹ While Rhea gives birth here, thus earning the site its numinosity, the prevention of other pregnant people (and animals) from approaching the site is in line with Greek conceptions about ritual purity. Birth (whether by humans or by animals) was a polluting activity, and doing so in consecrated spaces was forbidden.²⁵² In contrast, the place where Rhea gives birth to Zeus becomes sacred *because* it is the site of a birth, though it is of course a divine birth, rather than a mortal one. This detail is extremely Callimachean in its reference to varying religious traditions from around the Greek world.²⁵³ It also demonstrates Callimachus’ penchant for collapsing timelines and genealogies and overall playing with linearity.²⁵⁴ By mentioning the custom contemporary with Callimachus

²⁵⁰ The use of the word ἔρπετον (13) has caused confusion, since later Greek speakers seem to have identified it specifically with reptiles, and especially with snakes (e.g. Hesychius, *Lexicon*, epsilon, entry 5990, where he describes ἔρπετα as “footless” (τὰ ἄποδα) creatures). The understanding of “creeping” or “crawling” animals is the meaning inherited for the modern scientific field of herpetology, the study of reptiles and amphibians. However, commentators have tended to understand Callimachus’ meaning as any non-avian land animal, and this definition seems to have been prevalent in Hellenistic poetry; ἔρπετα is contrasted with birds, e.g. Apollonius of Rhodes, 4.1240.

²⁵¹ In other versions, the prohibitions for entering the birth site of Zeus are even more restrictive. Antoninus Liberalis (2nd century CE) records a similar tradition, though he places the actual birth of Zeus inside the cave as Apollodorus does: Ἐν Κρήτῃ λέγεται εἶναι ἱερὸν ἄντρον μελισσῶν, / ἐν ᾧ μυθολογοῦσι τεκεῖν Ῥέαν τὸν Δία καὶ ἔστιν / ὅσιον οὐδένα παρελθεῖν οὔτε θεὸν οὔτε θνητόν, “It is said that in Crete there is a sacred cave of the bees in which they say Rhea bore Zeus, and it is holy, such that no one may enter, neither god nor mortal,” Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* 19.1.3.

²⁵² Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, Clarendon Press, 1983: 33f., 49–52; Louis Moulinier, *Le pur et l’impur dans la pensée des Grecs: d’Homère à Aristote*, Librairie C Klincksieck, 1952: 66–71. Moulinier argues for the polluting quality of childbirth and motherhood: *Ainsi la femme grecque est pure à l’époque classique: elle n’est impure ni quand elle a ses règles, ni dans l’acte de chair légitime, ni si elle est enceinte. Elle ne l’est que par la maternité*, “Thus, the Greek woman is pure in the Classical period; she is impure neither when she menstruates, nor in the legitimate act of carnal relations, nor if she is pregnant. She is impure only through motherhood,” 70. For Callimachus’ various mentions of prohibitions of pregnancy and death in sacred places, see McLennan, *Callimachus*, 43.

²⁵³ On certain Callimachean habits illustrated clearly in this hymn, see N. Hopkinson, “Callimachus’ *Hymn to Zeus*,” *The Classical Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1984): 141 for Callimachus’ display of religious knowledge.

²⁵⁴ Though she does not address this poem in particular, for more on Hellenistic poetry’s playfulness with time, see Evina Sistakou, “« Snapshots » of myth: the notion of time in Hellenistic epyllion,” in *Narratology and interpretation: the content of narrative form in ancient literature*, eds. Jonas Grethlein and Antonios Rengakos, De Gruyter, 2009.

in conjunction with the framing tale of Zeus' birth, and including Eileithyia (who is Zeus' daughter in most traditions) in this story, Callimachus blurs past/present, parent/child, and pure/impure boundaries.

Rhea next needs to cleanse—and therefore, ritually purify—herself and the infant Zeus.²⁵⁵ Here, Callimachus uses his extensive geographic knowledge to list several rivers of Arcadia that were “not yet flowing” at the time of Rhea's seeking.²⁵⁶ This tidbit conveys the primordial nature of Zeus' myth and the primacy of his Arcadian origins in Callimachus' configuration, while again collapsing conventional temporeality.²⁵⁷ The poet then continues his narration of Zeus' birth story:

Callimachus, *Hymns*, 1.28–34

καί ρ' ὑπ' ἀμηχανίης σχομένη φάτο πότνια Ῥεΐη·
 “Γαῖα φίλη, τέκε καὶ σύ· τεαὶ δ' ὠδῖνες
 ἐλαφραί.”
 εἶπε καὶ ἀντανύσασα θεὴ μέγαν ὑψόθι πῆχυν
 πλῆξεν ὄρος σκήπτρῳ· τὸ δέ οἱ δίχα πουλὺ
 διέστη,
 ἐκ δ' ἔχεεν μέγα χεῦμα· τόθι χροά φαιδρύνασα,
 ὦνα, τεὸν σπείρωσε, Νέδη δέ σε δῶκε κομίσσαι
κευθμὸν ἔσω Κρηταῖον, ἵνα κρύφα παιδεύοιο.

And gripped by helplessness, Queen Rhea said,
 “Dear Earth/Gaia, give birth! Yes, you. Your
 labor pains are light.” The goddess spoke, and
 lifting up her mighty arm, she struck the
 mountain with her staff and it split in two for
 her; and from it a great flood poured. There,
 after she washed your body, Lord, she swaddled
 you, and gave you to Neda to carry to a hiding
 place within Crete, so that you would be
 brought up in secret.

²⁵⁵ On the ritual importance of an infant's first bath, see Parker, *Miasma*, 50–51.

²⁵⁶ Callimachus, *Hymns* 1.18–27. As the Alexandrian scholar-poet *par excellence*, Callimachus frequently weaves his knowledge of Hellenistic sciences and fascinations into his vast array of poetic forms; chief among these sciences is geography. For more on Callimachus' incorporation of geography into his poetry, see Jeremy McNerney, “Callimachus and the Poetics of Diaspora,” *Myths on the Map: The Stories Landscapes of Ancient Greece*, ed. Greta Hawes, Oxford University Press, 2017; Evina Sistakou, “Poeticizing natural phenomena: the case of Callimachus,” *Nature and Science in Hellenistic Poetry*, eds. M. A. Harder, R. F. Regtuit, G. C. Wakker, Peeters, 2009; Evina Sistakou, *Η Γεωγραφία του Καλλίμαχου και η Νεωτερική Ποίηση των Ελληνιστικών Χρόνων*, *Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης*, MIET, 2005.

²⁵⁷ Callimachus' selection of the Arcadian myth over the more well-known Cretan versions both belies his affection for marginal or localized cult practices and possibly relates to the poet's origin in Cyrene, where Herodotus purports (4.203) was one of the earliest precincts of Zeus *Lycaeus*, due to settlers from the Peloponnese. See Stephens, *Callimachus*, 48.

Rhea's invocation of Gaia²⁵⁸ and imperative to “give birth” (τέκε καὶ σύ, 29) is the only direct speech in this hymn.²⁵⁹ That Gaia's production of liquid is referred to as “giving birth” demonstrates the connection mentioned above between birth and water in a very literal way.

Like his literary predecessors, Callimachus places the infant's hiding place in Crete. Callimachus does not specifically designate this hiding place (κευθμὸν, 34) as a cave in his poem, though for a few reasons it is clear that this is what he intended. As discussed above, the word is used by Hesiod to describe the cave in which Zeus was hidden;²⁶⁰ Furthermore, a scholion on the word defines it as σπήλαιον.²⁶¹ In the *Odyssey*, the poet uses the term to refer to the cave of the Nymphs in Ithaca, where Odysseus and Athena hide his Phaeacian treasures,²⁶² while in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* it is used of the cave where Hermes was born and raised.²⁶³

Obviously, the cave is not a central focus of Callimachus' account. While it is certainly present, Callimachus does not explicitly use a word for “cave,” relying instead on the assurance that his readership already knows what the hiding place of Zeus is. The fact that he does *not* use σπέος, σπηλαίον, ἄντρον, or some other word and instead is able to refer to the assumed identity of the space (a hiding place), rather than its natural identity (a cave) speaks to the pervasiveness of the details of Zeus' myth and, in particular, the strong identification of Zeus' birth story with a cave, regardless of the geographic or cultic setting a poet chooses.

²⁵⁸ McLennan acknowledges the frequent equation of Rhea and Gaia in Greek literature and Callimachus' learned distinction between the two: McLennan, *Callimachus*, 60–61.

²⁵⁹ McLennan, *Callimachus*, 61.

²⁶⁰ ...κρύψεν δέ ἐ χειρσὶ λαβοῦσα / ἄντρον ἐν ἡλιβάτῳ, ζαθέης ὑπὸ κεύθεσσι γαίης, Hes. *Theog.* 482–483.

²⁶¹ Ψ Scholia, ad loc. in Dee L. Clayman, *Callimachus*, Loeb Classical Library 129, Harvard University Press, 2022.

²⁶² ὥς εἰποῦσα θεὰ δῶκε σπέος ἡεροειδές, / μαιομένη κευθμῶνας ἀνὰ σπέος, *Od.* 13.367.

²⁶³ *hH* 4.229, πέτρης ἐς κευθμῶνα βαθύσκιον.

The cave as the actual site of Zeus' birth is occasionally mentioned as well.

Mythographer Antoninus Liberalis records this version and a peculiar local custom that sprung from it:²⁶⁴

Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* 19.1–2

Ἐν Κρήτῃ λέγεται εἶναι ἱερὸν ἄντρον μελισσῶν, ἐν ᾧ μυθολογοῦσι τεκεῖν Ῥέαν τὸν Δία καὶ ἔστιν ὅσιον οὐδένα παρελθεῖν οὔτε θεὸν οὔτε θνητόν. Ἐν δὲ χρόνῳ ἀφωρισμένῳ ὁρᾶται καθ' ἑκαστον ἔτος πλεῖστον ἐκλάμπον ἐκ τοῦ σπηλαίου πῦρ. Τοῦτο δὲ γίνεσθαι μυθολογοῦσιν, ὅταν ἐκζέῃ τὸ τοῦ Διὸς ἐκ τῆς γενέσεως αἷμα. Κατέχουσι δὲ τὸ ἄντρον ἱεραὶ μέλιται, <αἱ> τροφοὶ τοῦ Διός. Εἰς τοῦτο παρελθεῖν ἐθάρρησαν Λάιος καὶ Κελεὸς καὶ Κέρβερος καὶ Αἰγωλῖος, ὅπως πλεῖστον ἀρύσωνται μέλι· καὶ περιθέμενοι περὶ τὸ σῶμα πάντῃ χαλκὸν ἀρύσαντο τοῦ μέλιτος τῶν μελισσῶν καὶ τὰ τοῦ Διὸς εἶδον σπάργανα καὶ αὐτῶν ὁ χαλκὸς ἐρράγη περὶ τὸ σῶμα. Ζεὺς δὲ βροντήσας ἀνέτεινε τὸν κεραυνόν, Μοῖραι δὲ καὶ Θέμις ἐκώλυσαν· οὐ γὰρ ἦν ὅσιον αὐτόθι θανεῖν οὐδένα·

On Crete it is said that there is a sacred cave of bees in which they say Rhea bore Zeus and it is so holy that no one enters it, neither god nor mortal. And in the designated place, every year fire is seen flashing from the cave. They say that it happens whenever the blood from the birth of Zeus oozes out. And the holy bees, nurses of Zeus, maintain the cave. Laius and Celeus and Cerberus and Aegolus dared to come to this cave, in order to collect most of the honey. And having put armor on around their entire bodies they extracted the bees' honey and saw the swaddling clothes of Zeus and their armor broke. And thundering Zeus stretched out a lightning bolt but Themis and the Fates diverted it, for it is not holy for anyone to die there.

While Rhea's body is not said here to be contiguous with the materiality of the earth (as Gaia's often is), the fire emanating from the cave corresponds to the lochial blood of Zeus' birth in that cave.²⁶⁵ This characterizes the cave as an eternal representation of Rhea's womb and the annual fire as a reification of Zeus' birth day. The maternal aspect of the cave is therefore uniquely literalized here. It is further emphasized by the detail that this is also where Zeus spent his infancy (the episode most frequently staged in the cave) and served as the site of his nourishment by the natural world in the form of bees in this version. The bees act here as midwives (maintaining the womb/cave, κατέχουσι δὲ τὸ ἄντρον) and as wet nurses (τροφοὶ).

²⁶⁴ This translation is my own.

²⁶⁵ The notion of fire emanating from a holy birthing canal has a parallel with the Virgin Mary's womb burning off the hand of a midwife in the Protevangelium of James, examined in Chapter 3, page 271.

The proscription against entering the cave has parallels in both literature and lived religion. Pausanias mentions a similar custom regarding another sacred site regarded as the birth cave of Rhea in Arcadia, into which “no human beings may enter save only the women who are sacred to the goddess,” a less restrictive rule than we see in Antoninus.²⁶⁶ Antoninus’ passage also recalls Callimachus’ hymn, which states that no pregnant entity visits the site of Zeus’ birth (11–13). Callimachus’ account is likewise even less restrictive than Pausanias’ in that it mentions only pregnant animals and women as the possible pollutants.²⁶⁷ Antoninus’ record characterizes this as an imposed rule for which transgression is punished. He does not mention any prohibition of animals and, indeed, bees are allowed inside (though they could hardly be described as ἐρπετά), but he does include both gods and mortals among the banned. A further indication of the site’s supremely holy nature is that even Zeus—king of the gods and the deity whose birth is the reason for its fame—cannot kill the mortals who transgress because dying in sacred places is forbidden as well.

While sources occasionally attest to a reading of the cave in Zeus’ myth as the womb of the earth or the womb of Rhea, more frequently the cave is an incubator and a safe-deposit box to protect the infant god from being devoured by his father. The identification of the cave as having elements of maternity, however, is certainly present. The activity most frequently referred to with regard to the infancy cave is feeding. Following Murnaghan’s line of thinking,²⁶⁸ it is essential that Zeus *not* be nursed by his own mother, as maternal breastfeeding is linked with the mortality of the child. Besides, Rhea has Cronos to trick. Instead, Zeus is nursed variously by

²⁶⁶ Pausanias, 8.36.3: ἔστι δὲ πρὸς τῇ κορυφῇ τοῦ ὄρους σπήλαιον τῆς Ῥέας, καὶ ἐξ αὐτοῦ ὅτι μὴ γυναιξὶ μόναις ἱεραῖς τῆς θεοῦ ἀνθρώπων γε οὐδενὶ ἐσελθεῖν ἔστι τῶν ἄλλων.

²⁶⁷ It is probable that any such site would be forbidden to other humans as well, but this is not specified by Callimachus.

²⁶⁸ See above, pages 40–42.

Gaia,²⁶⁹ the goat Amalthea,²⁷⁰ or bees.²⁷¹ Nymphs are also ubiquitous, though they are not listed as nurses for Zeus as they frequently are for other gods. Overall, it is clear that the cave was an essential and pervasive feature of Zeus' birth myth and that it was the locus of typical maternal activities.

The Birth of Dionysus

Two of Zeus' children also have birth stories associated with caves. Dionysus' story closely resembles his father's in that he was hidden in a cave as an infant to protect him from a violent parent.²⁷² Since Hesiod does not include Dionysus' birth story in the *Theogony* (only that he was born to Zeus by the mortal Semele²⁷³), the Homeric *Hymns* are our earliest source for the origins and infancy of the god of wine. Dionysus is hymned three times in the collection.

Like his father, Dionysus has several conflicting origins and birth stories. The first *Homeric Hymn* reflects the disagreements in antiquity about his various birthplaces:

HHymn 1.1–7

οἱ μὲν γὰρ Δρακάνωι σ', οἱ δ' Ἰκάρωι
 ἠνεμοέσσηι
 φᾶσ', οἱ δ' ἐν Νάξωι, δῖον γένος Εἰραφιῶτα,
 οἱ δέ σ' ἐπ' Ἀλφειῶι ποταμῶι βαθυδινήεντι
 {κυσαμένην Σεμέλην τεκέειν Διὶ
 τερπικεραύνωι},
 ἄλλοι δ' ἐν Θήβησιν ἄναξ σε λέγουσι γενέσθαι,
 ψευδόμενοι·

For some say it was at Drakanos, some on windy Ikaros, some on Naxos, O scion of Zeus, Bull god, and some at Alpheios the deep-swirling river {that Semele conceived and bore you to Zeus whose sport is the thunderbolt}, while others, Lord, say that it was at Thebes you were born. All false!

²⁶⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony* 480.

²⁷⁰ Callimachus, *Hymns* 1.49; Diodorus Siculus, 5.70.3; Apollodorus, 1.1.6; Cratinus, fr. 244 K; Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 46.17. Hyginus does not say that Amalthea is a goat: Hyginus, *Fabulae* 139.

²⁷¹ Antoninus Liberalis, 19.2: Κατέχουσι δὲ τὸ ἄντρον ἱερὰι μέλιτται, <αἱ> τροφοὶ τοῦ Διός.

²⁷² Or step-parent, in Dionysus' case.

²⁷³ Hesiod, *Theogony* 940–942.

It is possible that Callimachus found inspiration for the initial lines of his *Hymn to Zeus* from the beginning of his son's *Homeric Hymn*.²⁷⁴ After settling on Nysa as the hometown of Dionysus, the Homeric poet continues with an idyllic description of its beauty and abundance. The poem is extremely fragmentary and our extant version ends there. Hymn 7, the second hymn to Dionysus, is the longest of the three, but does not mention his birth, focusing instead on an encounter with pirates as a young man. The final hymn to Dionysus in the collection is the shortest of the three, but it is the only extant *Homeric Hymn* to Dionysus that mentions the cave his father hid him in:

HHymn 26.1–6

Κισσοκόμην Διόνυσον ἐρίβρομον ἄρχομ'
ἀείδειν,
Ζηνὸς καὶ Σεμέλης ἐρικυδέος ἀγλαὸν υἱόν,
ὄν τρέφον ἡὔκομοι νύμφαι παρὰ πατρὸς ἄνακτος
δεξάμεναι κόλποισι καὶ ἐνδυκέως ἀτίταλλον
Νύσης ἐν γυάλοις· ὃ δ' ἀέξετο πατρὸς ἔκητι
ἄντρῳ ἐν εὐώδει μεταρίθμιος ἀθανάτοισιν.

Of ivy-haired Dionysus the mighty roarer first
I sing, Zeus' and glorious Semele's splendid
son, whom the lovely-haired nymphs took to
their bosoms from his divine father and reared
and fostered attentively in Nysa's glens; and
he grew according to his father's design in the
fragrant cave, numbered among the
immortals.

In Dionysus' story, as in Zeus', the cave functions as both a site of protection from the violence of a (step-)parent and a nursery for the care, feeding, and raising of the infant god. Dionysus is said to have been nursed by some nymph or nymphs with various names. The nymph Ino is often assigned such a task, and the responsibility of breastfeeding Dionysus is often left to her:

Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.24.4

Βρασιᾶται δὲ καὶ τάδε ἐπιλέγουσιν, Ἰνώ σφισιν ἐς
τὴν χώραν ἀφικέσθαι πλανωμένην, ἐλθοῦσαν δὲ
ἐθέλῃσαι τοῦ Διονύσου γενέσθαι τροφόν· καὶ
ἀποφαίνουσι μὲν τὸ ἄντρον ἔνθα τὸν Διόνυσον
ἔθρεψεν Ἰνώ, καλοῦσι δὲ καὶ τὸ πεδίον Διονύσου
κῆπον

The people of Brasiae add that Ino in the
course of her wanderings came to the
country, and agreed to become the nurse of
Dionysus. They show the cave where Ino
nursed him, and call the plain the garden of
Dionysus.

Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, 9.94–97; 101–106

²⁷⁴ Stephens, *Callimachus*, 49.

Ἰνὼ δ' οὐκ ἀπίθησε, φιλοστόργῳ δὲ μενοινῇ
 παιδοκόμῳ πῆχυνεν ἀμήτορα Βάκχον ἀγοστῶ,
 πῆχεϊ δ' ἀπλώσασα συνωρίδα δίζυγα παίδων
 δίζυγα μαζὸν ὄρεξε Παλαίμονι καὶ Διονύσῳ·

...

ἢ τότε Βάκχον ἐλοῦσα θεοτρεφέων ἀπὸ μαζῶν
 ἀπροϊδῇ ζοφόνει κατεκλήισσε βερέθρῳ.
 καὶ Διὸς αὐτοβόητος ἀπαγγέλλουσα λοχείην
 μαρμαρυγὴ σελάγιζε, καταυγάζουσα προσώπου·
 τοῖχοι δ' ἀγλυόεντες ἐλευκαίνοντο μελάθρου,
 καὶ ζόφον ἔκρυφε φέγγος ἀθηήτου Διονύσου.

With loving care [Ino] held the motherless
 Bacchos in her nursing arm, and laying out
 the pair, the two children, upon it offered
 her two breasts to Palaimon and Dionysos.

...

She then took Bacchos away from those
 godfeeding breasts, and hid him from all
 eyes in a dark pit. But a brilliant light shone
 from his face, [[announcing aloud by itself
 the offspring]]²⁷⁵ of Zeus: the gloomy walls
 of the house grew bright, and the light of
 unseen Dionysos hid the darkness.

In the first century BCE, Diodorus Siculus records several very different versions of Dionysus' birth story.²⁷⁶ In one of these he places great emphasis on the cave in which Zeus (here called Ammon²⁷⁷) hid his son.²⁷⁸ Interestingly, Diodorus tells the story in an almost *hysteron-proteron* manner, beginning with the description of a marvelous cave and then moving on to its mythological significance. He gives this cave a generous *ekphrasis*,²⁷⁹ expounding upon its towering cliffs and rainbow spectrum of stones (μηδὲν εἶναι χρῶμα τῶν ἑωραμένων παρ' ἀνθρώποις περὶ τὸν τόπον ἀθεώρητον), beautiful and fragrant plants, and a choir of songbirds, such that the whole *locus amoenus* is befitting for a god (διὸ καὶ πάντα τὸν τόπον ὑπάρχειν μὴ μόνον θεοπρεπῆ κατὰ τὴν πρόσοψιν). This extended portrait calls to mind the first *Homeric*

²⁷⁵ Here, I have amended the translation of W. H. D. Rouse's Loeb translation, 1940. He translates, "which declared of itself the off-spring of Zeus."

²⁷⁶ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, the majority of Book 3, Book 4.2. Just like with the birth of Zeus, there was, apparently, considerable confusion in antiquity regarding the birth story of Dionysus. Diodorus notes, τῶν δὲ παλαιῶν μυθογράφων καὶ ποιητῶν περὶ Διονύσου γεγραφότων ἀλλήλοις ἀσύμφωνα καὶ πολλοὺς καὶ τερατώδεις λόγους καταβεβλημένων, δυσχερές ἐστιν ὑπὲρ τῆς γενέσεως τοῦ θεοῦ τούτου καὶ τῶν πράξεων καθαρῶς εἰπεῖν: "But since the early composers of myths and the early poets who have written about Dionysus do not agree with one another and have committed to writing many monstrous tales, it is a difficult undertaking to give a clear account of the birth and deeds of this god," 3.62.2.

²⁷⁷ For Diodorus' explanation for the equation of Zeus with Ammon and Dionysus with Osiris, see 1.15.3.

²⁷⁸ This version cited here (3.70) does not have a Theban element, and Dionysus' mother is not Semele but Amaltheia, a maiden in Libya. Elsewhere, Amaltheia is the name of the goat that suckled the infant Zeus, as discussed above. Diodorus seems to be of the opinion that there were in fact three sons of Zeus named Dionysus (3.74.6); he also includes a version in which Dionysus is Zeus' son by Io, while the "third and last" Dionysus, he says, was the son of Zeus and Semele (3.74.1). The latter was supposed by Diodorus to be the latest of the three.

²⁷⁹ Diodorus Siculus, 3.69.1–4. The Greek (prose!) takes up an entire page in the Loeb edition.

Hymn to Dionysus, where Nysa is described as “a mountain most high, burgeoning with forest... a steep cliff encloses it all round to a great height,” that “grows lovely and delicious things in abundance,”²⁸⁰ and where there are vines “luxuriant with their own dark grape clusters.”²⁸¹

After crafting for the reader an edenic scene, Diodorus tells how Zeus deposited his infant son here in the care of the nymphs:²⁸²

Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 3.70.1–2 and 4.2.3

Εἰς τοῦτο οὖν τὸ ἄντρον τὸν Ἀμμωνα παραγενόμενον παραθέσθαι τὸν παῖδα καὶ παραδοῦναι τρέφειν Νύση, μιᾷ τῶν Ἀρισταίου θυγατέρων ... πρὸς δὲ τὰς ἀπὸ τῆς μητρὸς ῥέας ἐπιβουλὰς φύλακα τοῦ παιδὸς καταστήσαι τὴν Ἀθηνᾶν...

ἔπειτα τὸ παιδίον ἀναλαμβάνοντα τὸν Δία παραδοῦναι τῷ Ἑρμῇ, καὶ προστάζει τοῦτο μὲν ἀποκομίσαι πρὸς τὸ ἄντρον τὸ ἐν τῇ Νύσῃ, κείμενον μεταξὺ Φοινίκης καὶ Νείλου, ταῖς δὲ νύμφαις παραδοῦναι τρέφειν καὶ μετὰ πολλῆς σπουδῆς ἐπιμέλειαν αὐτοῦ ποιεῖσθαι τὴν ἀρίστην.

Now to this cave, the account runs, Ammon came and brought the child and gave him into the care of Nysa, one of the daughters of Aristaeus... The duty of protecting the boy against the plottings of his stepmother Rhea he assigned to Athena...²⁸³

Thereupon Zeus, taking up the child, handed it over to the care of Hermes, and ordered him to take it to the cave in Nysa, which lay between Phoenicia and the Nile, where he should deliver it to the nymphs that they should rear it and with great solicitude bestow upon it the best of care.

The cave in the birth story of Dionysus thus performs the same roles that it does in the birth story of Zeus. It is a safe refuge where an infant god can be hidden from a violent parent or step-parent. The nymphs or other beings associated with the cave keep the infant safe while nourishing and raising him to adolescence.

²⁸⁰ *HHymn* 1.9–14: ἔστι δὲ τις Νύση ὕπατον ὄρος, ἀνθέον ὕλη, / τηλοῦ Φοινίκης, σχεδὸν Αἰγύπτιοιο ῥοάων / ἔνθ' οὗ τις σὺν νηϊ] πε[ῖ] μερόπων ἀνθρώπων / οὐ γάρ οἱ ἔστι λι]ήν, νηῶν ὄχος ἀμφιελισσέων, ἀλλὰ οἱ ἡλίβα] πέτρη περιδέδρομε πάντῃ / ὕψηλή, τά τε κα]ῖ φύει μενοεικέα πολλά. This poem is very fragmentary.

²⁸¹ αὐτῇσι σταφυλῆσι μελαίνησιν κομόωντες, an uncontextualized line from *HHymn* 1, quoted by Crates, who is quoted by Athenaeus, 653b.

²⁸² Diodorus Siculus, 3.70.1–2 and 4.2.3.

²⁸³ Clearly, this' account, apparently taken from Dionysius, strays from more widely-purported Homeric or Hesiodic genealogies. Hera here has either been supplanted or syncretized with Rhea, who elsewhere is Zeus' (and Hera's) mother (e.g. *HHymn* 12.1; Hesiod, *Theogony* 453–454), not his wife. Interestingly, it does not seem like Rhea and Hera were conflated frequently in antiquity. They could both be understood as manifestations of other maternal goddesses, such as Gaia, Demeter, Eileithyia, or Isis, but confusion of the two of them, particularly the insertion of Rhea into a distinctively Heran role, is odd.

The Birth of Hermes

Along with Dionysus, Hermes is one of the deities most frequently worshipped in caves across the ancient Greek world. And, like his brother, the myth of his birth typically involves a cave. However, the cave in Hermes' birth and infancy plays a different role than those in the myths of Zeus and Dionysus. Maia's cave in the hymn is a dynamic space that changes along with the social development of the infant god.

The only extended account of Hermes' birth story is his *Homeric Hymn*, which begins:

HHymn 4.1–12

Ἑρμῆν ὕμνει, Μοῦσα, Διὸς καὶ Μαιάδος υἱόν,
Κυλλήνης μεδέοντα καὶ Ἀρκαδίας πολυμήλου,
ἄγγελον ἀθανάτων ἐριούνιον, ὃν τέκε Μαῖα
νύμφη εὐπλόκαμος Διὸς ἐν φιλότῃ μιγεῖσα
αἰδοίη· μακάρων δὲ θεῶν ἡλεύαθ' ὄμιλον
ἄντρον ἔσω ναίουσα παλίσκιον, ἔνθα Κρονίων
νύμφῃ εὐπλοκάμῳ μισγέσκετο νυκτὸς ἀμολγῶι,
ὄφρα κατὰ γλυκὺς ὕπνος ἔχοι λευκώλενον Ἥρην,
λήθων ἀθανάτους τε θεοὺς θνητοὺς τ' ἀνθρώπους.
ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ μέγαλοιο Διὸς νόος ἐξετελεῖτο,
τῇ δ' ἤδη δέκατος μείζον οὐρανῶι ἐστήρικτο,
ἔς τε φῶς ἄγαγεν, ἀρίσημά τε ἔργα τέτυκτο.

Sing of Hermes, Muse, the son of Zeus and Maia, the lord of Cyllene and Arcadia rich in flocks, the immortals' coursing messenger, whom Maia bore, that nymph of lovely tresses, in shared intimacy with Zeus; modest one, who shunned the company of the blessed gods, dwelling within a cave's shadow. There the son of Kronos used to unite with the nymph of lovely tresses in the depth of the night, so long as sweet sleep held white-armed Hera fast, and neither immortal gods nor mortal men knew of it. And when great Zeus' purpose came to fulfilment, and her tenth moon was set in the sky, she [[led him to the light]]²⁸⁴, and notable things came to pass.

While the main subject of the hymn is undoubtedly Hermes, Maia has a fundamental role in both the invocation and birth of Hermes and in the later plot of the hymn.²⁸⁵ In fact, she is mentioned in the first line of the hymn. The only other Homeric Hymns to mention a deity's mother in the

²⁸⁴ Here I have amended the translation of Martin L. West in his Loeb edition, 2003. He translates, "she brought forth." While the subject of the sentence is ambiguous, typically when this phrase is used of birth, it is the mother who "leads to the light" her baby; e.g. Plato, *Timaeus*, 91D.

²⁸⁵ Μαῖα is both the name given to the nymph by whom Zeus begets Hermes and the title given to different sorts of motherly figures: the *Odyssey*'s Euryclea, Odysseus' childhood nurse, is called μαῖα (19.482), as is the housekeeper Eurynome (17.499). Later on, it could extend also to midwives and female physicians (e.g. Galen, *ad Posthumum* 14.641; Soranus, *Gynecology* 2.3), and in the Doric dialect apparently meant "grandmother" (Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 11.56; also epigraphically: *IG* XII³ 1120).

first line are one to Dionysus and one to Hera.²⁸⁶ Maia is named again just two lines later, this time designated as a νύμφη, before the poet zooms in on the setting of the cave. It is the site where Maia births Hermes, literally “leading him to the light” (ἐξ τε φόως ἄγαγεν, 12), an interesting turn of phrase for someone born inside a cave. The phrase is used of birth elsewhere in Hesiodic and Homeric poetry, as well as emerging from the chthonic realms of the Underworld.²⁸⁷ Using it here, when Hermes is born inside a cave, is mildly humorous.²⁸⁸

As this long hymn proceeds, the description and character of the cave changes. Here is a summary: When the newborn Hermes leaves his mother’s cave to steal Apollo’s cattle, he goes οὐδὸν ὑπερβαίνων ὑψηρεφείος ἄντροιο (23), “walking over the threshold of the high-roofed cave.”²⁸⁹ Outside, he encounters a tortoise and tells it, “ἀλλ’ οἴσω σ’ ἐς δῶμα λαβών” (34), ““But I shall take you [i.e. the tortoise] into the house”, since “οἴκοι βέλτερον εἶναι” (36), “it’s better to be in the house.” The infant Hermes, having never been anywhere else before, refers to the cave of his mother as if it were a constructed dwelling. This domestication of the cave reflects Hermes’ exclusively maternal frame of reference: before his encounter with the outside world, the cave is not wilderness or sanctuary, but simply “home.”

²⁸⁶ *hH* 7.1–2: Ἀμφὶ Διόνυσον Σεμέλης ἐρικυδέος υἱόν / μνήσομαι and *hH* 12 1: Ἥρην ἀεῖδω χρυσόθρονον, ἣν τέκε Πείη. In *hH* 19, to Pan, Pan’s father Hermes is mentioned in the first line, while Pan’s name does not appear until line 5. Zeus is given second position in the incipit of *hH* 15 to Heracles and is named first in *hH* 33 to the Dioscouri.

²⁸⁷ Of birth, see *Il.* 16.188; 19.103–104 and 118; *hH Apollo*, 119; cf. *Il.* 2.309, in a portent, a serpent appears, which Zeus “had sent into the light”; Hes. *Theog.* 669 in reference to emerging from the chthonic realm of Erebus, οὗς τε Ζεὺς ἐρέβessφιν ὑπὸ χθονὸς ἦκε φώσδε. In his journey to the Underworld, Odysseus’ mother tells him to hurry toward the light, *Od.* 11.223.

²⁸⁸ On the overall humor of *HHymn Hermes*, see Athanassios Vergados, “Humour in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes,” in *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes: Introduction, Text and Commentary*, De Gruyter, 2012: 26–39; Athanassios Vergados, “The Homeric Hymn to Hermes: humour and epiphany,” in *The Homeric hymns: interpretative essays*, ed. Andrew Faulkner, Oxford University Press, 2011; Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, 2008: 100–103; and S. Eitrem, “Der homerische Hymnus an Hermes,” *Philologus* 65 (1906): 248–282. The humor of the events of the hymn were recognized in antiquity. Philostratus in the “Birth of Hermes”, *Imagines* 1.26, depicts Apollo confronting Hermes with amusement and “restrained laughter”; however, for Philostratus, Hermes is born on Olympus, not in a cave in Cyllene. The only mention of a cave or cave-like space in *Imagines* 1.26 is the “chasm of the earth” (χάσμα τῆς γῆς, 1.26.3) into which Hermes hurls Apollo’s cattle.

²⁸⁹ Vergados notes that the phrase οὐδὸν ὑπερβαίνων is elsewhere used when people enter a temple or palace, Vergados, *Hymn*, 243.

With his new tortoise shell lyre, Hermes hymns himself, recapping the material of the *Homeric Hymn*'s introduction (52–62) and celebrating “the splendid home of the nymph, the tripods and unending cauldrons throughout the house” (ἀγλαὰ δῶματα νύμφης / καὶ τρίποδας κατὰ οἶκον ἐπηετανούς τε λέβητας, 60–61). Now craving meat, Hermes leaves the cave, referred to as a “fragrant *megaron*” (εὐώδεις ἐκ μεγάρου, 65). Once he finds and steals Apollo's cattle (68–105), he ushers them into another “high-built cave” (ἐς αὔλιον ὑψημέλαθρον, 103).²⁹⁰ After cooking two cattle, Hermes decides he actually cannot eat the meat, and he returns to his mother's cave in Cyllene (138–43).

During a quarrel with his mother, Hermes complains that Maia is infantilizing him (163–163) and that their home is a “gloomy cave” (ἄντρον ἐν ἡρόεντι, 172)²⁹¹ that pales to the splendor of the realm of the gods, where, he believes, he belongs (167–181). Hermes' characterization here is a complete reversal of earlier descriptions of the cave, both by himself, to the tortoise and in his hymn, and by the narrator.

Apollo identifies Hermes as the cattle thief and decides to confront him:

HHymn 4.227–234

ὧς εἰπὼν ἦϊξεν ἄναξ Διὸς υἱὸς Απόλλων,
Κυλλήνης δ' ἀφίκανεν ὄρος καταεῖμενον ὕληι
πέτρης ἐς κευθμῶνα βαθύσκιον, ἔνθα τε νύμφη
ἀμβροσίη ἐλόχευσε Διὸς παῖδα Κρονίωνος.
ὁδμὴ δ' ἡμερόεσσα δι' οὔρεος ἡγαθέοιο
κίδνατο, πολλὰ δὲ μῆλα ταναύποδα βόσκετο
ποίην.
ἔνθα τότε σπεύδων κατεβήσετο λάϊνον οὐδὸν
ἄντρον ἐς ἡρόεν ἑκατηβόλος αὐτὸς Απόλλων

With these words Zeus' son, lord Apollo, sped on, and came to Cyllene's wooded mountain, to the deep-shadowed cavern in the rock where the divine nymph gave birth to the child of Kronos' son Zeus. An enchanting fragrance pervaded the holy mountain, and numerous long-shanked sheep were grazing the grass. There it was that he then came hurrying, and went down over the stone threshold into the gloomy cave, far-shooting Apollo in person.

²⁹⁰ That the phrase αὔλιον ὑψημέλαθρον refers to a cave is confirmed at line 401.

²⁹¹ Vergados points out that elsewhere in early epic, ἡρόεις refers to the darkness of the underworld in particular. Hermes' use here thus further defines the distinctions he draws between his cave home and Olympus.

The poet paints the cave of Maia and Hermes here as a *locus amoenus* with the secluded location, its abundant plants and animals, and its sensory delights. The passage has much in common with the *ekphrases* of other cave sites,²⁹² and the framing of the cave *ekphrasis* by the arrival of a god recalls especially the cave of Calypso in *Odyssey* 5.²⁹³

Apollo's infiltration of the cave of Hermes and Maia further transforms the cave setting:

HHymn 4.246–252

παπτήνας δ' ἀνὰ πάντα μυχὸν μέγαλοιο δόμοιο
τρεις ἄδύτους ἀνέωιγε λαβὼν κληῖδα φαεινὴν
 νέκταρος ἐμπλείους ἡδ' ἄμβροσίνης ἐρατεινῆς·
 πολλὸς δὲ χρυσὸς τε καὶ ἄργυρος ἔνδον ἔκειτο,
 πολλὰ δὲ φοινικέοντα καὶ ἄργυφα εἵματα
 νύμφης,
 οἷα θεῶν μακάρων ιεροὶ δόμοι ἐντὸς ἔχουσιν.
 ἔνθ' ἐπεὶ ἐξερέεινε μυχὸς μέγαλοιο δόμοιο

[Apollo] peered round every cranny of the great house; he took the shining key and opened three closets, full of nectar and lovely ambrosia. There was much gold and silver stored within, and many of the nymph's purple and white garments, such things as the blessed gods' holy houses contain. When Leto's son had investigated the alcoves of the great house

Martin West's English Loeb translation of this passage does not fully convey the implications of the Greek. He translates *μυχός* as “cranny” and “alcove” (lines 246 and 252, respectively), but while the cramped implications of these are valid, they lack the aura of concealment that the Greek word has. *Μυχός* is frequently used for hiding places or sites of private activities.²⁹⁴ It is also used to refer to the recesses inside caves²⁹⁵ and the chthonic realms.²⁹⁶ West's translation of *ἄδύτους*²⁹⁷ as “closets” is even more troublesome. As the term for the “inner sanctum” or “holy of holies” in a temple, the *ἄδυτος*, etymologically means “must not be entered”, and therefore the translation of “closets” trivializes what is an important part of sacred architecture. While there is

²⁹² See Vergados, *Hymn*, 403 for a full list of correspondences and dissimilarities.

²⁹³ On the *ekphrasis* of Calypso's cave, see Chapter 2, pages 118–119 and following discussion.

²⁹⁴ For example, the inner (private) parts of homes, *Od.* 7.87 and 96; when doors are opened, the space is no longer a *μυχός*, as at Sophocles, *Antigone* 1293, ὅρ' ἂν πάρεστιν· οὐ γὰρ ἐν μυχοῖς ἐτι, “You can see it! It is no longer ἐν μυχοῖς.”

²⁹⁵ For example, Calypso and Odysseus have sex in the recesses of her cave, *σπείους γλαφυροῖο*, *Od.* 5.226; Odysseus hides treasures in the nooks of a cave, *ἄντρον θεσπεσίοιο*, *Od.* 13.363;

²⁹⁶ e.g. *Τάρταρά τ' ἡερόεντα μυχῷ χθονός*, Hesiod, *Theogony* 119; *κελαινὸς Ἄιδος ὑποβρέμει μυχὸς γᾶς*, Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 433; *ἐπεὶ θανὼν γῆς ἦλθ' Ἀλέξανδρος μυχούς*, Euripides, *Trojan Women* 952.

²⁹⁷ This is a rare substantive masculine form of the adjective; gender of this noun is fluid, though more typically neuter.

a substantial part of the poem where the cave is “domesticated”, this portion of the hymn clearly aims to fashion the cave as a sacred space filled with the types of riches typically found in Greek temples. The fact that this “temple” has not one but three *adyta* adds to the perceived holiness of the cave and, by extension, the prestige of Maia and Hermes.²⁹⁸

While the hymn has several layers to it, one interpretation of the poem is as a coming-of-age story. Other hymns might condense several years into one poem (like more typically-human timelines), but the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* condenses years of development into one day. Cattle theft, a common theme in depictions of male adolescence, is here made humorous, as is most of the poem, by the fact that Hermes is less than one day old.²⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the social function of Hermes’ sojourn is one of maturation.

Now, why is the cave of Maia indicative of the connection of maternity and grottoes? Apart from the obvious—that she gave birth there—it is clear that the cave holds great significance for the character of Hermes, who first sings its praises and then rebukes it as beneath his godly status. In his hymn (57–61), he sings about his mother and father and his “splendid home” (ἀγλαὰ δώματα, 60), along with his “famous” birth (αὐτοῦ γενεὴν ὀνομάκλυτον, 59). In reality, he seemingly has not met his father, and is being kept secret (λήθων ἀθανάτους τε θεοὺς θνητούς τ’ ἀνθρώπους, 9), living in a cave with his mother, isolated from the other gods (μακάρων δὲ θεῶν ἡλεῦαθ’ ὄμιλον, 5).

Since feeding is a major marker of maternity, it is significant that Hermes does not eat in this hymn. In the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, the infant god consumes his nectar and ambrosia and miraculously metamorphoses into a young man.³⁰⁰ Hermes, despite playing up his appearance as

²⁹⁸ Verdagos, *Hymn*, 415.

²⁹⁹ On cattle theft and its role in coming of age stories, see Peter Walcot, “Cattle Raiding, Heroic Tradition and Ritual: The Greek Evidence,” *History of Religions* 18 (1979): 326–51 and Sarah Iles Johnston, “‘Initiation’ in Myth, ‘Initiation’ in Practice: The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* and Ancient Athletics,” in *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives*, eds. David B. Dodd and C. A. Faraone, Routledge, 2003.

³⁰⁰ *hH* 3.123–132.

a baby and saying all he cares for is his mother's milk, is not said to have been nursed by Maia nor fed the nectar and ambrosia stowed in the *adyta*.³⁰¹ Nevertheless, from the beginning of the poem, Hermes has an appetite, and his theft of Apollo's cattle is done partly to satisfy it.³⁰² He leaves home, steals the cattle, and nearly eats the food of mortals.³⁰³ His ultimate rejection of the meat he cooked marks his acceptance of the limitations and rules of his divine nature. When he returns from the world outside the cave, his self-identity has fundamentally shifted, even if he is still in the body of an infant. Hermes, once satisfied with the cave as the only home he knew, now understands it to be insufficient for getting what he wants: material prosperity and social distinction.

During Hermes' tantrum, he makes a clear distinction between the cave of his mother and the heavenly abode of his father:

HH 4.166–172

αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ τέχνης ἐπιβήσομαι ἢ τις ἀρίστη,
βουκολέων ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ διαμπερές· οὐδὲ θεοῖσιν
νῶϊ μετ' ἀθανάτοισιν ἀδώρητοι καὶ ἄλιστοι
αὐτοῦ τῆιδε μένοντες ἀνεξόμεθ', ὥς σὺ κελεύεις.
βέλτερον ἤματα πάντα μετ' ἀθανάτοισι δαρίζειν
πλούσιον ἀφνειὸν πολυλήϊον ἢ κατὰ δῶμα
ἄνθρωποι ἐν ἡερόεντι θαασσέμεν·

I am going to embark on the finest of arts,
keeping the two of us in clover forever. We
won't put up with staying here and being without
offerings or prayers alone of all the immortals, as
you would have us do. It's better to spend every
day in pleasant chat among the gods, with wealth
and riches and substance, than to sit at home in a
gloomy cave.

Outside the cave, they would enjoy the offerings and prayers of the mortals, the company of other gods, and material luxury. In contrast, throughout the hymn, Maia's cave is characterized by darkness.³⁰⁴ There, she is segregated from the other gods and, seemingly, does not leave the cave. In normative understandings of gendered space, as discussed in this dissertation's

³⁰¹ *hH* 4.267.

³⁰² *hH* 4.64, ὃ δ' ἄρα κρειῶν ἐρατίζων

³⁰³ In some versions of the myth, Hermes does in fact eat the beef. e.g. Apollodorus, 3.10.2.

³⁰⁴ e.g. παλίσκιος, "shadowy," 6; ἡερόεις "murky," *hH* 4.172, 234, 359; βαθύσκιος "deep-shaded," 229.

Introduction, interiority is tied to femininity, exteriority to masculinity.³⁰⁵ The feminized space of the cave thus houses and represents pre-social existence. Having left it and entered the unbounded world outside the cave thus functions for Hermes as a microcosm of socialization or initiation. Knowing the end-result of who Hermes will have to be—"resourceful and cunning, a robber, a rustler of cattle, a bringer of dreams, a night watcher, a gate-lurker"³⁰⁶—the core of the hymn is Hermes' transition, his maturation, and his crossing the threshold to leave the cave and enter the realm of adult men. Indeed, after Apollo confronts Hermes, Hermes is taken up to Olympus and a trial begins before Zeus (327ff). After exchanging musical instruments and cattle, Apollo and Hermes reconcile, thus completing Hermes' initiation with full social integration in the realm of his father.

Maia's cave in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* is a dynamic space whose characterization changes depending on where Hermes is in his "coming-of-age" journey. Within this paradigm, it functions as the "feminine" pole, symbolizing obscurity, safety, and maternal tending, while the wealth, comfort, and recognition that come from social integration are provided by the cave's "masculine" polar opposite, Mount Olympus.

In Sophocles' fragmentary satyr play *Searchers*, Silenus and a semichorus of satyrs search for the cattle of Apollo and their captor Hermes (76ff.). After finding some tracks (102) that lead into a subterranean cave, the group are all too scared to enter due to a loud noise (which is later revealed to be the sound of Hermes' tortoise shell lyre, 312); finally, they decide to find out "who is beneath the roof" (212) by stomping on the roof of the cave to get its inhabitant to come outside (217–220). The eponymous nymph of the mountain, Cyllene, emerges to complain about the racket (221–242). She then tells the group:³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ See page 24 in the Introduction.

³⁰⁶ *HH* 4.13–15.

³⁰⁷ Sophocles, fr. 309–318, *Searchers*, 265–278.

καὶ γὰρ κέκρυπται τοῦργον ἐν [θ]εῶν ἔδραις,
 Ἥραν ὅπως μ[ὴ πύ]στ[ι]ς ἴξεται λόγου.
 Ζ[εὺς] γ[ὰρ] κρυφ[αίως εἰς στέ]λην
 Ἀτλαντίδος
 τήνδ' ἦλθε Μαίας, διὰ δ' ἐπαρθεν]εὔσατο
 (about 22 letters)] υ [φί]λας
]λήθη τῆς βαθυζώνου θεᾶς.
κατὰ σπέ]ος δὲ παῖδ' ἐφίτυσεν μόνον.
 τοῦτον δὲ] χερσὶ ταῖς ἐμαῖς ἐγὼ τρέφω·
 μητρὸς γ[ὰρ] ἰσχυρὸς ἐν νόσῳ χειμάζεται.
 κάδεστ]α καὶ ποτῆτα καὶ κοιμήματα
 πρὸς σπ[αργάνοις μένουσα λικνῖτιν τροφήν
 ἐξευθ]ετίζω νύκτα καὶ καθ' ἡμέραν.
 ὁ δ' α]ῦξεται κατ' ἡμαρ οὐκ ἐπεικότα
 ἀγα]στός, ὥστε θαῦμα καὶ φόβος μ' ἔχει.

The matter is a secret, guarded in the seats of the gods, for fear that knowledge of it should come to Hera. Zeus came secretly to this dwelling of Atlas' daughter, Maia, and took her virginity . . . forgetting the deep-girdled goddess. In the cave he begot one son, whom I am nursing in my arms, since his mother's strength is being wasted in storms of sickness. So night and day I stay beside the cradle, and look to his infant needs, food and drink and rest. Every day he grows, more than seems possible, astounding; I am amazed and frightened by it!

Sophocles makes explicit the fact that Hermes is being nursed and raised not by his mother, but by another nymph. The potential wrath of Hera presented here has obvious analogues with many of Zeus' other children, though it is not mentioned in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. So, while the Homeric version of the myth fashions the cave as merely a domestic space and, then, as a sacred space, Sophocles' version draws more explicitly on characterizations of caves as a secret hiding place for an infant god, in the same vein as the stories of Zeus and Dionysus. It is also, of course, characterized as a nursery, the safe place where Cyllene breastfeeds and watches over the prodigious infant god.

The "Salmakis Inscription" or the "Pride of Halicarnassus"

One final poetic source bridges the literary and the archaeological, thus offering a fine segue between the two foci of this chapter. In 1995, Turkish authorities happened upon an inscription carved into a stone block embedded in the wall of a Hellenistic period building in Halicarnassus.³⁰⁸ The text turned out to be an epigram composed of 30 elegiac couplets that

³⁰⁸ The inscription was first published by Signe Isager, "The Pride of Halikarnassos. *Editio Princeps* of an Inscription from Salmakis," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 123 (1998): 1–23. See also the edited

speak to the “pride of Halicarnassus,” a phrase which became one of the two names by which the text is referred.³⁰⁹ The inscription itself dates to the mid-Hellenistic period, around the 2nd century BCE, though the poem may have been composed earlier.

Vital to understanding the importance of this epigram is its physical context. It was displayed indoors at roughly eye-level, a deftly executed adornment to this building. Little else is known about this and the surrounding structures, since excavations have never been undertaken at the site. What is known is that this structure is situated at the base of a hilly promontory overlooking the bay of Halicarnassus, a site which was said in antiquity to contain the famous spring of the nymph Salmacis. Archaeological survey of the area has identified a possible location for the cave spring, directly adjacent to the Hellenistic building in which the inscription was found. The size of the building suggests some public function, though whether that is civic, religious, or both is uncertain.³¹⁰ It is possible that this structure was part of the sanctuary of Aphrodite and Hermes that we know existed on this promontory.³¹¹

The epigram begins with an invocation to Aphrodite and the question, ‘What is so special about Halicarnassus?’ (1–3). Aphrodite then answers this inquiry over the remainder of the poem, apparently in one long quote (line 5 onward). This includes the two sections relevant to the present study: an account of the birth of Zeus (5–12) and the local myth of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (15–22). Much of the second half of the poem consists of a catalogue of Halicarnassus’ most eminent residents, beginning in the mytho-historical past and proceeding up

volume resulting from a 2000 symposium, Signe Isager and Poul Pedersen, eds. *The Salmakis Inscription and Hellenistic Halikarnassos*, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004.

³⁰⁹ τῆς Ἀλικαρνασσοῦ τί τὸ τίμιον; “Salmakis Inscription,” line 3.

³¹⁰ Isager, “Pride,” 11–12. Poul Pedersen, “The Building Remains at the Salmakis Fountain I,” in *The Salmakis Inscription and Hellenistic Halikarnassos*, edited by Signe Isager and Poul Pedersen, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004: 20.

³¹¹ Vitruvius, 2.8.11–12: *In cornu autem summo dextro Veneris et Mercuri fanum ad ipsum Salmacidis fontem*, “On the right wing at the top is a temple of Venus and Mercury against Salmacis’ fountain itself.”

till the Hellenistic period (23–56). I will not deal much with that portion of the inscription here; I present, then, the first 22 lines of the epigram.³¹²

“Salmakis Inscription,” 1–22

ἔννεπέ μοι, Σχοινίτι, φίλον τιθάσε[υμα μεριμνῶν,
 Κύπρι, μυροπνεύστων ἐμπελάτειρα Πό[θων
 τῆς Ἀλικαρνασσοῦ τί τὸ τίμιον; οὐ γὰρ ἔγωγε
 ἐκλυον ἢ τί θροεῖ γαῦρα φρυασσομένη;
 5 γηγενέων μέγαλαυχον ἐτέκνωσε στάχυν ἀνδρ[ων]
 Ἀκραίου πάρεδρον κυδαλίμοιο Διὸς
 οἱ πρῶτοι κοίλην ὑπὸ δειράδα θέντο νεογνὸν
 παῖδα Ῥεῆς κρύφιον Ζῆν ἀτιταλλόμενοι
 Γαίης ἀμφ ἄδυτοισιν, ὅτε Κρόνος ἀγκυλομήτης
 10 οὐκ ἔφθη λαιμῶι θέσθαι ὑποβρύχιον.
 Ζεὺς δὲ πατὴρ Γῆς νῆας ἀνακλέας ὀργειῶνας
 θῆκεν, οἱ ἀρρήτων πρόσπολοί εἰσι δόμων.
 οὐδ' ἄχαριν μόχθοιο παρὰ Διὸς ἔ[σ]χον ἄμοιβὴν
 ἔργων ἀντ' ἀγαθῶν ἐσθλὰ κομιζόμενοι.
 15 τὸν τ' ἐρατὸν μακάρεσσιν ἀειδόμενον παρὰ χεῦμα
 Σαλμακίδος γλυκερὸν νασσαμένη σκόπελον
 Νύμφης ἱμερτὸν κατέχει δόμον, ἢ ποτε κοῦρον
 Ἠμέτερον τερπναῖς δεξαμένη παλάμαις
 Ἑρμαφρόδιτον θρέψε πανέξοχον, ὅς γάμον εὗρεν
 20 Ἀνδράσι καὶ λέχεα πρῶτος ἔδησε νόμοι.
 αὐτὴ τε σταγόνων ἱεροῖς ὑπὸ νάμασιν ἄντρον
 πρηῦναι φῶτων ἀγριόεντα νόον.

Tell me, Schoinitis, dear tamer of our cares, you, Kypris, who bring close to us Desires scented with myrrh, what is it that brings honour to Halicarnassus? For I have never been told this. What words does she utter when she proudly boasts? “She brought forth an illustrious crop of earth-born men, to lodge beside mighty Zeus of the Height, who first in secret placed the new-born child of Rhea, Zeus, beneath the hollow ridge, caring for him, in the shrine of Gaia, when Kronos of the crooked counsels had failed to get him into the depths beneath his throat in time. And Zeus made the sons of Ge his honoured priests, who care for his awesome house. Nor was the reward they got from Zeus one of ingratitude, for they got good things in return for their good deeds. And Halicarnassus settled the delightful hill beside the stream of Salmakis, sung of as dear to the immortals, and her domain includes the desirable home of the nymph, she who once received our child in her kindly arms and reared Hermaphroditos the all-excellent, he who invented marriage and was first to bind together wedded couples by his law, and she herself beneath the holy waters in the cave that she pours forth makes gentle the savage minds of men.

Since its discovery 30 years ago, this epigram has become highly valuable to scholars’ understanding of Hellenistic civic identity formation. Chiefly, then, scholars have read this poem through the lens of colonization and the formulation of hybrid identities developed between Greek settlers and local populations. Others have focused on the epigram’s presentation of sexuality and fertility, pointing to the emphasis on Aphrodite as the voice singing the city’s praises. Both of these points of view are valid and clearly prevalent in the inscription. Little

³¹² Greek text and translation from Lloyd-Jones, “Pride,” 1–3.

attention has been paid to this text's portrayal of and enmeshment within the physical landscape, particularly the obvious importance that the poem places on the role of the cave spring. In this section, I show that the caves in this poem are crucial to the formulation of these themes, especially in the nexus of ideas regarding acts of mothering. In other words, the poet uses the cavernous features of the local landscape to convey the maternal nature of the land (and its autochthonous people), which facilitated the enmeshment of Greek and Carian populations into the hybridized civic identity of Hellenistic Halicarnassus. My analysis of the first half of this poem will proceed thematically, rather than sequentially, dealing first with the now-familiar cave birth of Zeus before discussing the central features of Hermaphroditus and the cave spring of Salmakis.

“Salmacis Inscription,” 5–10

γηγενέων μέγανυχον ἐτέκνωσε στάχυν ἀνδρ[ων]
 Ἀκράϊου πάρεδρον κυδαλίμοιο Διός,
 οἱ πρῶτοι κοίλην ὑπὸ δειράδα θέντο νεογνὸν
 παῖδα Ῥέης κρύψιον Ζῆν ἀτιταλλόμενοι
 Γαίης ἀμφ' ἀδύτοισιν, ὅτε Κρόνος ἀγκυλομήτης
 οὐκ ἔφθη λαιμῷ θέσθαι ὑποβρύχιον.

She [i.e. Halicarnassus] brought forth a grand crop of Earth-born men, assistants of mighty Zeus of the Height. It was they who first under a hollowed crest placed Zeus, newborn, the son of Rhea, so that he was hidden, and who fostered him in the innermost recesses of Earth, when Kronos crooked of counsel, was too late to place him far down in his throat.

In this version of events, Zeus is hidden and raised not by nymphs on Crete, but by mortals in Halicarnassus. The positioning of Zeus' birth story in Asia Minor, rather than Crete, is rare but attested elsewhere in antiquity.³¹³ Like Hesiod's account of the births of Cronos and Zeus discussed above, the author of the “Salmacis Inscription” fashions the hiding place of the infant Zeus not only as a cave, but as an *adyton*—literally, an inaccessible space—deep within the

³¹³ Eumelus, the 8th century BCE epic poet of the *Titanomachy*, apparently asserted that Zeus was born in Lydia, Eumelus fr. 2, in *Greek Epic Fragments: from the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BCE*, edited and translated by Martin L. West, Loeb Classical Library, 2003. The conflicting accounts of Zeus' birth alluded to above and by Callimachus and Pausanias becomes more confusing when taking into account the existence of a Mt. Ida near Troy (*hH Aphrodite*, 5.65–68; Strabo, 12.8; Quintus of Smyrna, 1.10) at which apparently there were indeed rites of Zeus (at Euripides, *Trojan Women* 1066, the Trojan Women chorus sings to Zeus about his sacred precinct at Ilium, including the vales of Mt. Ida).

Earth herself (Γαίης ἄμφ' ἀδύτοισιν, 9). The term *adyton*, in architecture used for the inner sanctum of a temple, is occasionally used to refer to sacred caves.³¹⁴ The detail that the Corybantes-like men who nurtured Zeus were a “grand crop of Earth-born men” (γηγενέων μέγανυχον ἐτέκνωσε στάχυν ἀνδρῶν, 5) provides a strong localizing effect that connects the physical environment and its inhabitants with Greek identities, a theme that will be played up further in the Hermaphroditus passage.

The association of Halicarnassus with the birth and concealment of Zeus is the reason why the city was favored by the gods, with the result that “the main reward from father Zeus to the Halikarnassians was the cave where the nymph Salmakis lived with the son of Aphrodite and Hermes.”³¹⁵ The local myth about this famous spring is provided in four couplets:

“Salmacis Inscription,” 15–22

τὸν τ' ἐρατὸν μακάρεσσιν αἰειδόμενον παρὰ χεῦμα
 Σαλαμκίδος γλυκερὸν νασσομένην σκόπελον
νύμφης ἱμερτὸν κατέχει δόμον, ἥ ποτε κοῦρον
ἡμέτερον τερπναῖς δεξαμένη παλάμαις
Ἑρμαφρόδιτον θρέψε πανέροχον, ὃς γάμον εὔρεν
 ἀνδράσι καὶ λέχεα πρῶτος ἔδησε νόμῳ
 αὐτὴ τε σταγόνων ἱεροῖς ὑπὸ νάμασιν ἄντρου
 πρηύνει φώτων ἀγριόεντα νόον.

Halicarnassus settles the lovely hill beside the stream of Salmacis, called dear to the immortals in song, and she occupies the lovely home of the nymph, who once took our boy in her sweet embrace and raised him. Hermaphroditus, to be outstanding, he who discovered marriage and was the first to bind the marriage bed in law. And she herself [Salmacis] beneath the holy streams dripping in the cave tames the savage mind of men.³¹⁶

This is now our earliest version of the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmakis. The episode is most famously narrated in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where the lusty nymph combines forms with

³¹⁴ e.g. of Pan’s cave on the Athenian Acropolis, Euripides, *Ion* 938; of the cavern-palace of Maia and Hermes in the *HHymn* 4.247. The latter is particularly curious because the cave is not used as a shrine of any sort in the hymn, so the association of sacred spatial restrictions inherent in the understanding of *adyton* is absent, and must simply refer to an inner recess.

³¹⁵ Isager, “Pride,” 12. Although the site has never been excavated, archaeologists believe they have identified the location of the cave spring, which was monumentalized with the adjoining building complex within which the inscription was installed. Pedersen, “Building,” 22, fig. 11. If Pedersen’s identification of the entrance to the cave is correct, the inscription would have been inside the room directly adjacent to the cave anteroom.

³¹⁶ Translation by Allen J. Romano, “The Invention of Marriage: Hermaphroditus and Salmacis at Halicarnassus and in Ovid,” *Classical Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2009): 543–561.

the chaste youth, resulting in a single androgynous individual.³¹⁷ In Ovid, this serves as an *aetion* for the negative reputation of the spring of Salmacis, which was said in many ancient texts to have had various mollifying or even emasculating effects, ranging from a vague “softening”,³¹⁸ the loosening of one’s morality,³¹⁹ or, for Vitruvius, “civilizing” “barbarian” tendencies.³²⁰ Since the discovery of this inscription, many scholars have therefore endeavored to recover the “real story” of the spring and its mythology and how they relate to the identity formation of Halicarnassus in the poem.

Since the epigram’s publication in 1998, several scholars have examined the relationship between this passage and varying versions of the myth elsewhere, particularly in the *Metamorphoses*. Most scholars argue that the Salmacis/Hermaphroditus episode emphasizes the “colonizing” or “civilizing” focus of the poem.³²¹ Romano and Pirenne-Delforge, on the other hand, argue that the focus of the poem is fertility, and by extension, marriage and sexuality.³²² I will briefly discuss the notions of sexuality presented in the epigram’s invocation of Aphrodite (1–3) and in Aphrodite’s own account of the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmakis. Overall, I agree with the assessment of Sourvinou-Inwood that the original Halicarnassian version of the myth does not portray a sexual relationship between the two figures and that it presents a positive

³¹⁷ Ovid, *Met.* 4.285–388. Much of the literature on Hermaphroditus refers to him as “bisexual,” but due to the modern use of this term in referring to sexual attraction to both male and female individuals, I have opted instead for “androgynous,” which etymologically includes both male and female. Within the Salmakis Inscription, there is no mention of Hermaphroditus’ androgynous nature, and I therefore refer to him in the masculine, as in the Greek.

³¹⁸ Strabo, 14.2.6, μαλακίζουσα.

³¹⁹ Festus, 152, *vitio inpudivicitiae mollesceret*, [whoever drinks from the spring] “softens with the vice of immodesty”.

³²⁰ Vitruvius, 2.8.12: *humanitatis dulcedine mollitis animis barbarorum*.

³²¹ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Hermaphroditus and Salmakis: the voice of Halikarnassos,” in *The Salmakis Inscription and Hellenistic Halicarnassus*, eds. Signe Isager and Poul Pedersen, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004; Hugh Lloyd-Jones, “The Pride of Halicarnassus,” *ZPE* 124 [1999] 1–14; Corrigenda and Addenda,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 124 (1999): 63–65; more recently, Marco Santini, “A multi-ethnic city shapes its past: the « Pride of Halikarnassos » and the memory of Salmakis,” *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 5a, 8, no. 1 (2016): 3–35.

³²² Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, “La voix d'Aphrodite, le rôle d'Hermaphrodite et la « timè » d'Halicarnasse: quelques remarques sur l'inscription de Salmakis,” in *Dans le laboratoire de l'historien des religions: mélanges offerts à Philippe Borgeaud*, eds. Francesca Prescendi, Youri Volokhine, Daniel Barbu, and Philippe Matthey, Labor et Fides, 2011.

view of the spring's mollifying powers. Nevertheless, I do admit that there is certainly a concern with sexuality in the poem; however, this sexuality seems to be divorced from the context of the cave. Instead of the paradigms of cavernous copulations that will be the focus of Chapter 2 (and which more closely align with Ovid's account), this inscription instead characterizes the cave as a site of maternal nurturing. The sexuality present in the poem is employed as a representation of the city it celebrates: as a hybridized Greek-Carian city, Halicarnassus represented the result of the combination of two distinct entities and, crucially, the productive, cooperative, and fruitful nature of that result.

From the outset, this epigram places an importance on sexuality.³²³

“Salmakis Inscription,” 1–3

ἔννεπέ μοι, Σχοινῖτι, φίλον τιθάσε[υ]μα μεριμνῶν,
 Κύπρι, μυροπνεύστων ἐμπελάτειρα Πό[θ]ων
 τῆς Ἀλικαρνασσοῦ τί τὸ τίμιον; ...

Tell me, Schoinitis, dear tamer of our cares,
 you, Kypris, who bring close to us Desires
 scented with myrrh, what is it that brings
 honour to Halicarnassus?

Aphrodite is invoked here in a few capacities. She is *Schoinitis* (1) a previously unknown epithet that seemingly pertains to marshy reeds, the meaning of which has caused scholars much grief.³²⁴

Pirenne-Delforge has proposed a convincing interpretation of the epithet that relies on the practical uses of the plant as both an ingestible aphrodisiac and a material for making rope, thus as a binding or tying agent, therefore pertaining to both sexuality and (marital) bonds.³²⁵

Aphrodite here is also the “tamer” (τιθάσευμα, 1) of something or someone, whether it be

³²³ Transcription and translation after Lloyd-Jones, “Pride,” 1–3.

³²⁴ Battista D’Alessio provides a few of the most prominent proposed readings. Giovan Battista D’Alessio, “Some Notes on the Salmakis Inscription,” in *The Salmakis Inscription and Hellenistic Halikarnassos*, edited by Signe Isager and Poul Pedersen, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004: 45.

³²⁵ Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, “La voix d’Aphrodite, le rôle d’Hermaphrodite et la « timè » d’Halicarnasse: quelques remarques sur l’inscription de Salmakis,” in *Dans le laboratoire de l’historien des religions: mélanges offerts à Philippe Borgeaud*, eds. Francesca Prescendi, Youri Volokhine, Daniel Barbu et al., Labor et Fides, 2011: 341–342.

‘cares,’ ‘Loves,’ or ‘mortals,’³²⁶ and she “bring[s] close to us Desires scented with myrrh” (2).

When the anonymous speaker asks what is so special about Halicarnassus, Aphrodite is the one who literally begins to sing its praises. She is a fitting interlocutor here due to the inscription’s proximity to (or even existence inside) the sanctuary of Aphrodite and Hermes on this promontory.

Aphrodite’s sexual identity then shifts to her maternal identity as she regales us with the story of her son in lines 15–22, quoted above. For someone familiar with the Hermaphroditus myth, the most surprising aspect of this passage is the lack of the “defining” feature of the Hermaphroditus myth as we know it: his androgyny. Isager points out that “the Hermaphroditus of the Halikarnassian poem seems to have remained himself in the physical sense of the word.”³²⁷ Indeed, the Hermaphroditus of the “Salmakis Inscription” seems unambiguously male³²⁸ and is not said to join essences with Salmakis; likewise, he himself is not said to be affected by the “softening” power of the spring.

Although Hermaphroditus is not androgynous in this epigram, there is still the throughline of his connection with yoking, joining, binding. The poem ascribes to him the role of the inventor of marriage (ὃς γάμον εὔρεν, 19), taking the sexual domain lorded over by his mother and “binding” it with the law (ἔδησε νόμῳ, 20). This role recalls aspects of the poem’s invocation of Aphrodite: she is a tamer (τιθάσε[υμα, 1) and the goddess of the ropes (Σχοινῖτι, 1). Even his name, a portmanteau of his parents’, reflects his role in yoking things together. This aspect becomes literalized in the version Ovid portrays, where Salmacis’ desperation to be joined

³²⁶ Isager reconstructs φέρουσα instead of μεριμνῶν. Her translation therefore instead reads: “Tell me, *Schoinitis*, you [provider of] cherished balm...” Isager, “Pride,” 9. Merkelbach instead provides the reading τιθάσε[υτρί] Ἐρωτων], thus “tamer of Erotēs,” though Lloyd-Jones notes that we would then expect φίλον instead of the transmitted φίλον. Lloyd-Jones, “Pride,” 3. Battista D’Alessio proposes τιθάσε[υμα βροτοῖσι, “tamer of mortals,” referring to Aphrodite’s role in pacifying military matters: Battista D’Alessio, “Some Notes,” 44.

³²⁷ Isager, “Appendix,” 233.

³²⁸ Sourvinou-Inwood believes that Hermaphroditus is already androgynous by the time he is received by Salmakis.

(in marriage) with Hermaphroditus³²⁹ leads to the fulfillment of her wish that they be joined together.³³⁰ The “Salmakis Inscription” displays none of the violence that is inherent in this and other Ovidian accounts of rape. Salmakis here is not sexually aggressive or even, at first glance, sexualized at all.

This discrepancy and, more specifically, the question of how we should “read” the myth of Salmakis and Hermaphroditus here, is disambiguated earlier in the poem with the narration of Zeus’ birth story. To state it more plainly, Zeus’ passage directly preceding Hermaphroditus’ myth functions as a cue to the reader for how to read the role of Salmakis’ cave and, by extension, her relationship with Hermaphroditus. As we have seen in several hymns by now, a nymph is credited here with the act of rearing a divine boy inside a cave. More typically, nymphs are said to share these duties, as was the case with Zeus and some instances of Dionysus. In Ovid’s account of Hermaphroditus’ myth, a group of naiads is credited with raising him in a cave,³³¹ before the nymph Salmakis separates herself from the group and rapes him.

While the poem does not detail specific acts of mothering as we have seen elsewhere, such as feeding and bathing, these actions are implied. Water can act as an environmental metonym for breastmilk or vaginal secretions;³³² it is also used for bathing. This epigram does not include the method by which the Salmakis spring “tames” the mind, and other sources disagree as to whether this mollification came about through ingestion of or submersion in the water.³³³ Either nourishment or bathing could be implicated in this poem. If we imagine Salmakis

³²⁹ Ovid, *Met.* 4. 327–328: *haec tibi sive aliqua est, mea sit furtiva voluptas, / seu nulla est, ego sim, thalamumque ineamus eundem*, “If there be any such [bride], let mine be stolen joy; if not, may I be thine, thy bride, and may we be joined in wedlock.”

³³⁰ Ovid, *Met.* 4. 371–2: *ita, di, iubeatis, et istum / nulla dies a me nec me deducat ab isto*, “Grant me this, ye gods, and may no day ever come that shall separate him from me or me from him.”

³³¹ Hermaphroditus is raised by naiads in the caves of Mt. Ida: *Met.* 4.289.

³³² On this, see Chapter 1, pages 39–40.

³³³ Vitruvius mentions mollification through ingestion, 2.8.12, while Ovid says merely touching the water can cause it, *Met.* 4.388.

in spring-form, the fact that she “took Hermaphroditus in her sweet embrace” (τερπναῖς δεξαμένη παλάμαις, 18) may suggest entering the water rather than imbibing it. Along with this motherly embrace, the domestic nature of the cave (νύμφης ἱμερτὸν... δόμον, 17) also suggests its protective and sheltering function, though Hermaphroditus is not threatened in the same way that Zeus or Dionysus were.

As mentioned, this inscription was discovered *in situ* in what might have been the temple of Aphrodite and Hermes near the Salmakis cave spring. The importance of the physical proximity between these holy sites is communicated through the Hermaphroditus myth as it is delivered in this epigram. As a native nymph, inherently tied to the landscape of ancient Caria, Salmakis’ welcome reception of this Greek divine son into her embrace mythologizes the actual settlement of Greek people in the area. The water of the spring acted as the mediating factor between the autochthonous native people, represented by the nymph herself, and the Greek colonists, represented by Hermaphroditus. It is impossible to say for certain the extent to which the intermingling of these two populations actually reflected the ease and apparent passive acceptance portrayed in the poem, though this is most likely itself a mollification of the actual events. By the second century BCE, the hybrid Greek-Carian city seems to have developed a broadly cohesive identity that is reflected in the myth of Salmakis and Hermaphroditus portrayed here. The focus of this cooperative spirit is nurturing: the autochthonous Halicarnassians nurtured the infant Zeus, and in turn they received another cave with a local nymph, who then welcomed and nourished a Greek child with a hybrid identity reflected in his name.

This epigraphic reference demonstrates that the correlation between caves for matters of birth and infancy extends beyond the purely literary and into local myths embedded within the context of physical lived space. How exactly the myths mentioned in this inscription relate to

cult practice, if they do at all, is, however, still a mystery. Thus, the etiological focus of this brief passage, combined with the complete lack of archaeological work on the site and its cave, prevents me from using this inscription as evidence of lived religion. Later Roman sources about the spring and its myth have been proven to be problematic: Roman perceptions about “eastern” effeminacy denigrated the reputation of the spring’s civilizing properties and apparently inspired Ovid to completely reconfigure the myth. We therefore see in the Roman period a tale of aggressive female sexuality resulting in the feminization of a young man. The Halicarnassian version seems not to have had an erotic dimension to the relationship between Hermaphroditus and Salmakis. Instead, it featured the nymph’s cave and spring as a source of maternal nurturing.

Cult Caves of Pregnancy and Maternity

While the actual cult cave mentioned in the Salmacis inscription has not been excavated, there are several caves sacred to the nymphs which seem to have specifically held rites pertaining to pregnancy and maternity. Cults of the Olympian gods generally showed slight regional variation but overall coherence to specific myths, symbols, and modes of worship. In contrast, the hyper-localized nature of nymphic worship—inextricably tied to their association with the physical environment—is reflected in the wide diversity of sacred activities that took place in their honor. It can be said that in general, nymphic worship typically corresponded to some type of fertility. Beyond this, the cultic milieu represented and responded to the concerns of local populations. We therefore see cults of the nymphs associated with various concerns such as healing, divination, the procurement of game, or the protection of livestock.³³⁴ Furthermore, as Larson notes, “The nymphs in various contexts could represent the wild prepubertal girl, the chaste chorus member, the bride before and after consummation, and even the mother.”³³⁵ This

³³⁴ Larson, *Nymphs*, 191 and 229.

³³⁵ Larson, *Nymphs*, 100.

flexibility of identity, encompassing and representing all life-cycle stages simultaneously,³³⁶ distinguishes the cults of the nymphs from the more “fixed” sexual statuses of the major goddesses. Next, I will provide case studies of cults of the nymphs concerned with issues of pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity.

Pitsa Cave, Corinthia

Discovered and excavated in and after 1934, the Pitsa Cave to the west of Sikyon has yielded a fascinating assortment of votive offerings. The most important (and only fully published) find from the cave is a group of four painted wooden votive tablets (*pinakes*) [Figs. 1.14–17].³³⁷ Unfortunately, apart from this most important find, the material recovered from the Pitsa Cave has not been fully published, despite its excavation some 90 years ago.³³⁸ The main source of information for the cave’s finds comes from a brief summarizing article written by the excavator A. K. Orlandos in the *Enciclopeida dell’Arte Antica* in 1965, 31 years after the main excavation.³³⁹ Nevertheless, several aspects of this cave and its contents demonstrate its use as a cult site focused on pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood.

There were several terracotta figurines recovered from the cave, mostly generic standing or seated female types. Apart from these, four groups are worthy of note. There are some standing female figurines with strange head covering surrounded by poppy flowers, which date

³³⁶ Nymphs are typically depicted as maidens, brides, or young mothers, but there is a hint at nymphs reaching old age in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, where mature nymphs die a natural death when their trees die: ἀλλ’ ὅτε κεν δὴ μοῖρα παρεστήκη θανάτοιο, / ἄζανεται μὲν πρῶτον ἐπὶ χθονὶ δένδρεα καλά, / φλοιὸς δ’ ἀμφιπεριφθινύθει, “But when their fated death is at hand, first the fair trees wither where they stand, their bark decays about them, their branches fall off,” *hH* 269–271. There do seem to be few representations of more mature nymphs in cave-framed votive reliefs, on which see Charles Malcolm Edwards, “Greek Votive Reliefs to Pan and the Nymphs,” PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1985, pages 43–44.

³³⁷ On the panels generally, see most recently Giorgos Kavvadias, “The Painted Panels from Pitsa Cave,” in *In the Cave: Stories from Darkness Brought to Light*, eds. Fotis Georgiadis and Anastasia Gadolou, Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, MELISSA Publishing House, 2025: 165–169.

³³⁸ Apart from the wooden *pinakes*, which are in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, the finds from Pitsa Cave are housed in the Archaeological Museum of Sicyon.

³³⁹ A. K. Orlandos, “Pitsa,” *Enciclopedia dell’Arte Antica*, vol. VI, 1965. Unless otherwise indicated, all of the information about the deposit from Pitsa Cave is from Orlandos 1965.

to the first half of 4th c. BCE, as well as some 3rd-2nd century female figurines with characteristic melon-shaped hairstyle (*melonenfrisur*).³⁴⁰ The most obvious find that points to a cult of pregnancy and childbirth are the female figurines depicting pregnant women [Fig. 1.18] and women in “reclining” positions similar to those in the “birthing configurations” at the cave of Eileithyia at Inatos. General fertility concerns can be inferred from the votive terracotta models of various fruits and pine cones, along with several different animal species.³⁴¹ The cave also yielded figural groups of dancing women, a type commonly found in cave dedications to the nymphs, but also in sanctuaries of Hera or Artemis.³⁴²

Male figures are much less frequently attested in the Pitsa cave than female figures.³⁴³ Of the few figurines of male figures, the majority are satyrs or comic characters with a “satyr-like” appearance.³⁴⁴ An unspecified number of brightly colored masks were also recovered from the cave.³⁴⁵ The combination of satyrs and masks could suggest a connection to Dionysus.³⁴⁶ An additional observation, first made by Larson, adds another layer of understanding to the cult

³⁴⁰ On this Hellenistic hairstyle, common on depictions of elite or divine women, see Gabriele Erath-Koiner, “Weibliche Schönheit und männlicher Siegerstolz: Berenike II. und ein Athletenbildnis aus dem hellenistischen Zypern,” in *Junge zyprische Archäologie: Symposium, Berlin 6. April 2002*, eds. Vassos Karageorghis and Sabine Rogge, Schriften des Instituts für Interdisziplinäre Zypern-Studien 2, Waxmann, 2003. On poppies and their use in the ancient world, see John Scarborough, “The Opium Poppy in Hellenistic and Roman Medicine,” in *Drugs and Narcotics in History*, eds. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

³⁴¹ Animals depicted include: roosters, doves, dogs, sheep, horses, goats, turtles, pigs, porcupines, a cicada, and a sphinx. Orlandos 1965.

³⁴² On figural groups of dancers, see Marina Albertocchi, “Shall We Dance? Terracotta Dancing Groups of the Archaic Period in the Aegean World,” in *Figurines grecques en contexte: Présence muette dans le sanctuaire, la tombe et la maison*, eds. Stephanie Huysecom-Haxhi and Arthur Muller, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2015.

³⁴³ Orlandos, “Pitsa”.

³⁴⁴ Perhaps all of them, in fact. Orlandos’ article does not provide any numbers or statistics of the non-pinax finds from the cave. His summary of the male figures reads: “meno spesso figure virili, in particolare satiri o personaggi comici d’aspetto satiresco.” It is therefore unclear whether all of the masculine figurines are of the satyr or satyr-like types, or only a significant number of a larger group of male figures.

³⁴⁵ “Brightly colored” is the only descriptor Orlandos uses for these masks. While masks are, obviously, associated with drama and the cult of Dionysus, Naerebout has shown that other types of masks may have been used in ritual dance of many types. The masks found in the cave, which are presumably terracotta, are likely models made for votive dedication, rather than dance masks that were used and worn, which were probably wood: Frederick Naerebout, “Dance,” in *A companion to the archaeology of religion in the ancient world*, eds. Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke, Wiley Blackwell, 2015: 111.

³⁴⁶ The Dionysian aspect of the votive assemblage was proposed by Konstantinos Zachos: Κωνσταντίνος Ζαχός, “Σπηλαίο Πίτσων,” *Αρχαιολογία* 15 (1985): 23–25.

associated with this cave. She notes that among all of the objects retrieved from the Pitsa cave, there is no indication of the worship of Pan.³⁴⁷

The ceramic assemblage from the cave also points to female-centered activities. A late archaic pyxis depicts a group of dancing women. Vessels for oils, perfumes, unguents, or other cosmetics were found in abundance, such as *lekythoi* and *alabastra*. Two pyxides were recovered, one ceramic and decorated with a continuous scene of women dancing, the other wood (!) with incised ornamentation of both standing and enthroned women. Finally, like other sites that have already been discussed, this site yielded a large cache of miniature vessels, in this case, all *skyphoi* of the same “egg-shaped” type.³⁴⁸ Miscellaneous finds from the cave also point to female-centered worship: loom weights, jewelry, and a bronze mirror were found, all of which are common offerings. Another unique item from the site is a scrap of cloth, which was dyed purple. It is unclear whether the cloth was deposited as an offering or whether it was torn off a garment accidentally.

Finally, a discussion of the “main attraction” is in order. Four painted wooden plaques were discovered in the cave. Orlandos believes that the remarkable state of preservation is due to crystalline mineral deposits from dripping stalactites. Of the four examples, 2 are complete, each of which is 15 by 30 centimeters, with a horizontal orientation for the painting. The painting on these intact panels is mostly preserved on one [Fig. 1.14] and partially preserved on the other [Fig. 1.17]. I will only discuss one in depth, the best-preserved of the bunch [Fig. 1.14, NAMA 16464].

³⁴⁷ Larson, *Nymphs*, 233.

³⁴⁸ I am assuming that the *skyphoi* are “egg-shaped,” because Orlandos’ article calls them, “dei cosiddetti ἔμβρυα” [*sic*] and I am taking that to be a typo for ἔμβρυα, which more correctly is a fetus, rather than an egg. I have not been able to find a *skyphos* shape called this.

The scene depicts a sacrifice at an altar with seven figures. Written at the top of the plaque is the dedication:] ἀνέθηκε ταῖς νύμφαις, “[Someone] set this up for the nymphs.” On the far right is a rectangular single-block altar with a fire burning over red painted bloodstains.³⁴⁹ Facing the altar just to its left is a girl wearing a blue *peplos* and red *himaton* and holding on her head a tray of sacrificial instruments: a small box (*pyxis*) and two wine pourers (*oinochoi*). In her right hand she holds a pouring vessel for libations (*prochos*). Behind her is a boy, the smallest figure in the composition, leading a sheep by a red rope. The dedication of a sheep would have been significant, as it had a value comparable with dedications to the Olympian gods. The dedication of this sheep by a relatively small group of people therefore suggests that the ritual depicted is a special occasion. Behind the boy with the sheep are two youth musicians, one with a lyre and the other with pipes. All of the boys and the girl standing at the altar wear myrtle crowns on their heads. The three male figures wear *himata* with their right shoulders and arms uncovered; the shepherd boy and piper wear red, while the lyrist wears blue.

Finally, behind the musicians are three larger figures. The first two of these are women dressed in tight Doric robes and red *himata*, and on their heads are wreaths and white fillets with a red stripe. In their right hands they grasp leafy branches bound with bands, and hold their left hands in a “sign of veneration”. The figure on the furthest left is badly damaged, and without the head the gender of the figure has been debated since the panel’s discovery. Sartorially, the figure is more similarly depicted to the women and girls in the panel than to the boys, with arms completely concealed under their clothing. Because of this, several scholars have read this figure as female, possibly the mother of some of the younger figures to her right. Her clothing is much looser-fitting than the two women who precede her and covers her almost completely; while the

³⁴⁹ Only the original excavator Orlandos had seen the flames on the altar prior to the investigations of Brecolaki et al., ““Lost Art,”” 46, 42 Fig. 6b.

other two women have their hands exposed, the woman on the far left holds her branch with her hand covered. This combination of observations has led Matthew Dillon and Theodora Kopestonsky to speculate that this woman on the far left is pregnant.³⁵⁰

However, more recent analysis of the panel with Mobile Raman Microscopy (MRM) and Macro X-Ray Fluorescence (MA-XRF) methodologies has revealed previously unseen or uncertain details, including the head of the figure—a bearded man—as well as his name, Μυονίδας.³⁵¹ This identification significantly alters previous interpretations of the scene. Rather than a group of women and children in which only the female figures are labeled, this can instead be seen as a family sacrifice. The labeling of the female figures *and* Μυονίδας suggests that the other male figures, rendered smaller, might therefore not be as involved in this rite. It is possible that sons were not as important in this cult context, but it is also possible that they are meant to be servants. Their assorted but universally shorter statures may indicate that they are indeed still children, but the absence of name labels for them suggests a distinction between them and the others that is not defined by gender.

As far as the rite being depicted in the scene, most scholars go no further than saying that it is a family affair comparable to scenes from Menander's *Dyskolos*. The ritual depicted here deserves more analysis, and I believe that what is being depicted here is a girl's coming of age or prenuptial rite. Most important for this identification is the prominence of the youngest girl in the image. She stands before the fiery altar with ritual implements, decked with a wreath on her head. The two other women in the scene wear both wreaths and fillets or hair ribbons, but the girl does not. The older women also appear to be holding fillets that could perhaps be added to the

³⁵⁰ Matthew Dillon, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion*, Routledge, 2002: 229; Theodora Kopestonsky, "The Greek Cult of the Nymphs at Corinth," *Hesperia* 85, no. 4 (2016): 711–777, page 762. Kopestonsky does acknowledge that the gender of the figure is disputed, 761.

³⁵¹ Hariklia Brecolaki et al., "The 'lost art of Archaic Greek painting: revealing new evidence on the Pitsa *pinakes* through MA-XRF and imaging techniques," *Technè* 48 (2019): 35–54.

girl's head at some point after the moment being depicted by the artist. In depictions of bridal scenes on Greek vase paintings often include a figure providing a fillet or garland for the bride or groom.³⁵²

The girl is also the only female figure here whose hair is not cascading down her back, though it is also not banded into an updo as commonly depicted in classical vase painting. Instead it is either pulled behind her left shoulder or, more likely,³⁵³ has been cut shorter. The cutting and dedicating of hair was a very common ritual action to mark coming of age and marriage rites for both young men and women,³⁵⁴ though this seems usually to have been a single lock of hair, rather than what is depicted here. However, in Sparta, brides' hair was cut short, close to the head.³⁵⁵ Hair was dedicated to a variety of deities, depending on the locale: Artemis, local hero(in)es, and nymphs were all common.

No matter the specific context of the ritual, the girl on the far right is set apart from all the other participants: she is the first in the procession to the altar, she carries the instruments and pours the libation, and she is clearly of a slightly different status than the older women in the image. The three boys who directly follow her are not named, and all serve specific cult functions, providing music and leading the sacrificial victim. She is therefore also separated positionally from the other women and from the adult man at the far left, possibly her father. While there does not seem to be evidence in literary sources for the positions of various people at wedding sacrifices, it is possible that by bookending the procession with the father at the end and

³⁵² John H. Oakley and Rebecca H. Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993: 12. Conversely, the fillets could be meant to adorn vessels, as is often depicted in vase paintings, though the shapes of the vessels in this image are not the *loutrophoroi* typically used for this.

³⁵³ I say more likely mostly because there is typically little variety in women's hairdos within one image if all the women have a similar role or are part of a collective plurality. There is also nothing in the composition of the painting that would necessitate her hair being behind her left side.

³⁵⁴ Katia Margariti, "The Greek Wedding Outside Athens and Sparta: the Evidence from Ancient Texts," *Les Etudes Classiques* 85 (2017): 330–331.

³⁵⁵ Plutarch, *Lygurgus* 15.3; Margariti, "Greek Wedding," 324.

the bride at the beginning, there is meant to be an understanding of the separation of the girl from her father's household.

Other scholars' identification of the scene as a family ceremony is not wrong, since ancient weddings often involved separate rites for the bride's and groom's natal families. Seeing a girl act as the leader of ritual action in this scene is notable and therefore provides evidence of women's religion and worship of the nymphs. The other paintings from the cave similarly focus on women in their (admittedly fragmentary) panels, and many are similarly labeled with the women's given names. Despite previous scholars' misidentification of the figure at the far left of one of the paintings, there is still an indication that the women's cult at the Pitsa Cave was centered on aspects of maternity: female figurines were abundant, including some with swollen bellies and some reclining in manners similar to the parturition scenes from Inatos. We therefore see some connections in the assemblages between a site of Eileithyia on Crete and a site of the nymphs in Corinthia.

Cult of the Nymphs and Aristaeus in Cyrene³⁵⁶

The cult cave of the nymphs at Cyrene is vastly different to that at Pitsa. It is nestled on the slopes of the town's acropolis,³⁵⁷ just outside the Hellenistic-period walls surrounding the sanctuary of Apollo. This large sacred precinct housed temples for several deities in addition to Apollo, including Artemis, Aphrodite, Hecate, Cybele, and the Dioscouri, with a theater of

³⁵⁶ For a summary of the excavations of Cyrene, see Fawzi Al Raeid, Eugenio Di Valerio, Maria Giorgia Di Antonio, Oliva Menozzi, et al. "The main issues of the Cyrene necropolis and the use of remote sensing for monitoring in the case of the eastern necropolis," *Libyan Studies: A Journal of North African and Mediterranean Cultures* 47 (2016): 7–30.

³⁵⁷ This cave has had many names over the years due to the multitudes of peoples and nations who have at various points controlled Libya and Cyrene in particular. It is known as the "sanctuary of the nymphs," the "nymphaeum," and the "sanctuary of the chthonian nymphs," but also the "cave of the priests of Apollo" or the "cave of Apollo".

Dionysus at the west end of the sanctuary.³⁵⁸ Nearby but outside this precinct were the Temple of Zeus Ammon to the east and the so-called “Extramural” Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore to the south of the city. This section argues that the Nymphaeum at Cyrene was a ritual grotto whose spatial logic, material culture, and purity regulations align with maternity and fertility [Fig. 1.19].

Perhaps the most important find from the sanctuary is a 4th century BCE monumental *lex sacra*, a list of guidelines for the regulation of behavior concerning the sanctuary [Fig. 1.20].³⁵⁹

Four paragraphs at the beginning of Face B of the inscription pertain especially to women.³⁶⁰

[νύμφ]αμ μ[έν πρὶν ἵμεν τὸ κοιτατή]ριον, ζ[...c.5..
[δεῖ] ἐς Ἄρτ[αμιν κατενθέν]· αὐτὰ δὲ οὐχ
ὕπώ[ροφ]-
[ος] τῷ ἀνδρὶ τένται οὐδὲ μiasεῖ, μέστα κα
[ἐς] Ἄρταμιν ἐνθῆ· ἃ δὲ κα ταῦτα μὴ ποιήσα[ι]-
[ς] α μιᾷ ἔκασσα, καθάραισα τὸ Ἄρταμίτιον ἐπ[ι]-
[θ]υσεῖ ζαμίαν βοτὸν τέλευν, καὶ τόκα δὴ εἴτ-
[ι] τὸ κοιτατήριον· αἱ δὲ κα μὴ ἐκοῖσα μιᾷ, κα-
[θ]αρεῖ τὸ ἱερόν. *vacat*

[ν]ύμφαν δὲ τὸ Νυμφῆιον ἐς Ἄρταμιν κατ[εν]-
[θ]έν δεῖ, ὅποκα κα δῆληται Ἄρταμίτιοις, [ὥς κα]
[τ]άχιστα δὲ λῶϊον· ἃ δὲ κα μὴ κατένθῃ, ἃ[ποθ]-
[υ]σεῖ τῷ Ἀρτάμιτι, ἃ κ[α δῆλητ]αι· τοῖς [δ’
Ἄρταμίτι]-
[οις] μὴ κατεληλευ[θυῖα, καθαρεῖ τὸ Ἄρταμίτι]-
[ο]ν καὶ ἐπιθυσεῖ ζ[αμίαν βοτὸν τέλευν].

[A bride, before she enters the bridal chamber ... it is necessary (for her) to go down] to Artemis. This woman will not live under the same roof as her husband nor will pollute (herself), until she goes to Artemis. She who having not done these things, willingly pollutes (herself), after having purified the sanctuary of Artemis, will sacrifice in addition as a penalty an adult animal, and only then will she go to the bridal chamber. If she involuntarily pollutes (herself), she will (only) purify the sanctuary.

A bride must go down to the Nymphaeion to Artemis, whenever she wishes during the Artemisia, but better [as] quickly as possible. If she does not go down, she will sacrifice to Artemis as a penalty whatever [she wishes]. She who has not gone down [during the Artemisia will purify the sanctuary of Artemis] and sacrifice in addition [as a penalty an adult animal].

³⁵⁸ For a comprehensive map of all known structures in ancient Cyrene, see Sandro Stucchi, *Architettura Cirenaica*, L’Erma di Bretschneider, 1975, Table 1. For a map of only the Sanctuary of Apollo complex, see François Chamoux, *Cyrene sous la Monarchie des Battiades*, Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d’Athènes et de Rome, 1953: Table XXVI.

³⁵⁹ CGRN 99 “Dossier of purity regulations at Cyrene,” in *Collection of Greek Ritual Norms (CGRN)*, eds. Jan-Mathieu Carbon, Saskia Peels-Matthey, and Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, 2017–, consulted on 5 January, 2026. The inscription was spoliated for use as a bench in the Byzantine baths on the same site, but must have originated in the earlier sanctuary of Apollo. Now in the Cyrene Museum, inv. no. 51.

³⁶⁰ CGRN 99, 83–109.

[γυνὰ κύοισα πρὶν τεκὲν κάτε]ιτι τὸ Νυμφῆι[ον]
 ἐς Ἄρταμι[ν ..4..] τῇ ἄρκωι δώσεϊ πόδας καὶ
 τὰν κεφαλὰν καὶ τὸ δέρμα· αἱ δὲ κα μὴ κατ[έν]-
 θηι πρὶν τεκέν, κάτειτι σὺμ βοτῶι τελέωι· ἃ δ[ὲ]
 κατίαςσα ἀγνευσεῖ ἐβδέμαν καὶ ὀγδόαν
 καὶ ἡνάταν, καὶ ἃ μὴ καταληλευθῦα ἀγν-
 ευσεῖ ταύτας τὰς ἀμέρας· αἱ δὲ κα μιᾷ, καθα-
 ραμένα αὐτὰ καθαρεῖ τὸ ἱερὸν καὶ ἐπιθυσ[εῖ]
 ζαμίαν βοτὸν τέλεον. *vacat*

αἱ κα γυνὰ ἐγβάλῃ, αἱ μέγ κα διάδηλον ἦι, μ[ι]-
 αίνονται ὥσπερ ἀπὸ θανάτοντος, αἱ δὲ κα μὴ
 διάδηλον ἦι, μαιίνεται αὐτὰ ἃ οἰκία καθάπε[ρ]
 ἀπὸ λεχός. *vacat*

[A pregnant woman, before she gives birth, will go down] to the Nympheion to Artemis [...] to the Bear she will give the feet and the head and the skin. But if she does not go down before giving birth, she will go down with an adult animal. She who goes down will keep pure for the seventh and the eighth and the ninth day, and the woman who has not gone down will keep pure for these same days. But if she pollutes herself, having purified herself, she will purify the sanctuary and sacrifice in addition as a penalty an adult animal.

If a woman rejects (her child, i.e. miscarries), if (the child) is recognisable, they are polluted just as from a death. But if he is not recognisable, the house itself is reckoned polluted just as from childbirth.

According to these laws, women were required to go to the “Nymphaeum” (91, 97) at certain key points in their sexual lives: before their marriage (i.e. as a bride, [ν]ύμφαν, 91)³⁶¹ and before giving birth ([πρὶν τεκέν], 97, reconstructed from 100), while they are barred from the sanctuary

³⁶¹ Jennifer Larson understands [ν]ύμφαν here to refer to a woman after her wedding who has just lost her virginity: Larson, *Nymphs*, 108. I find this unlikely. While ritual bathing for brides before a wedding is well-attested in both literature and iconography, it is not attested for after a wedding or for a woman’s loss of virginity. Additionally, various activities after the wedding night are depicted on vases. Therefore, it would be odd to depict ritual bathing scenes before a wedding and various activities after a wedding but not post-wedding night ritual bathing, if this really were a common practice. See Oakley and Sinos, *Wedding*. For evidence outside of Athens, see Margariti, “Greek Wedding.” On artistic depictions of bridal bathing before a wedding, see Viktoria Sabetai, “The Washing Painter: A contribution to the wedding and genre iconography in the second half of the fifth century B.C.,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1993; and Polyxeni Adam-Veleni, “A Red-Figure Pelike with a Nuptial Bath Scene in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki,” in *Η κεραμική της κλασικής εποχής στο Βορειο αιγαίο και την περιφέρεια του (480-323/300 π.χ.)*, eds. Ελένη Μανακίδου and Αμαλία Αβραμίδου (81–90), Democratic University of Thrace University Studio Press, 2019.

for a time after childbirth or miscarriage (106–9).³⁶² Curiously, the women visiting the Nymphaeum at Cyrene were said to “descend” (κατενθεῖν, Doric for κατελθεῖν) into the sanctuary. The prefixed κατ-έρχομαι only occurs in this law code when mentioning the women’s visits to the Nymphaeum, not any of the other visits to parts of the sanctuary.³⁶³ The use of this verb must therefore be inextricably tied to the sacred topography of the area. Rather than being a large fountain cult structure like most nymphaea of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the Nymphaeum at Cyrene was a (partially or entirely artificial)³⁶⁴ cave system hewn into the side of the town’s acropolis. The stipulation that women “descend” into the Nymphaeum at critical points in their sexual lives therefore requires that at certain temporal and identity-bound “thresholds” (marriage, childbirth), women must ritualize the transition by entering and submerging inside an enclosed, feminized space.

In his 1953 monograph on Cyrene, Francois Chamoux provided a detailed description of the *temenos* on the acropolis, into which the Nymphaeum was hewn:³⁶⁵

En outre, la falaise, qui est naturellement à peu près verticale, avait été creusée intérieurement d’installations fort singulières: parallèlement à la façade rocheuse s’alignaient des chambres souterraines communicantes, en certains endroits sur deux rangs de profondeur. Les premières prenaient jour directement sur l’extérieur, celles du second rang s’ouvraient sur les premières. Ces chambres, soutenues par d’énormes

³⁶² Noel Robertson idiosyncratically translates νυμφαῖον in the sacred laws as “bride-place,” connecting it with with the bridal definition of νύμφη: Noel Robertson, *Religion and Reconciliation in Greek Cities: The Sacred Laws of Selinus and Cyrene*, Oxford University Press, 2010: 265. However, I have not found any support for this definition in ancient Greek literature. Hesychius gives only one definition of νυμφαῖον: νυμφῶν ἱερόν (Hesychius, nu, entry 716), while his rough contemporary Philoponus glosses it as τὸ τῶν Νυμφῶν (Philoponus, nu, 5.2). See also: the 8th/9th century lexicography *Συναγωγή λέξεων χρησίμων*, nu 118.1; Photius, nu 279; *Lexica Segueriana*, nu 310.6; and the *Suda*, nu 589. Furthermore, the fact that the inscription does not include the word νυμφαῖον in the first stipulation for a bride (lines 83–90) but does for the pregnant woman (line 98, where the word is preserved almost in its entirety) demonstrates the improbability of a translation of νυμφαῖον as “bride-place.” Robertson likely has conflated the term here with a substantive of the adjective νυμφευτήριος, “nuptial.” Since ancient Greek authors, as well as ancient lexicographers and modern scholars, all understand the word to mean “holy place of the nymphs”, that is the definition I will adhere to.

³⁶³ CGRN 99, lines 83, 91–92, 93, 95, 98, 100, 101, and 102.

³⁶⁴ Chamoux believed the caves to be human-hewn formations, while Bacchelli considers them as heavily modified but originally natural: Chamoux, *Cyrène*; Lidiano Bacchielli, “Un Santuario di Frontiera,” *Libyan Studies* 25 (1994): 47.

³⁶⁵ Chamoux, *Cyrène*, 316–318.

piliers quadrangulaires réservés dans le roc, étaient séparées les unes des autres par de minces cloisons de pierre, également réservées, qui montaient seulement à mi-hauteur. Le rôle de ces cloisons était de maintenir à un niveau constant l'eau qui circulait à l'intérieur des chambres: car celles-ci étaient parcourues par une eau fournie par la même nappe souterraine qui alimentait la source d'Apollon... En réalité, ces deux hautes murailles ne peuvent avoir répondu qu'à un seul dessein, celui d'arrêter les vues afin de protéger contre les indiscretions un emplacement déterminé. Ainsi seulement se justifie la hauteur inattendue des deux murs : il fallait empêcher les regards, non seulement des passants circulant sur la voie sacrée et sur le Chemin de Battos, mais aussi des curieux éventuellement postés sur les pentes des deux collines. Quant aux chambres souterraines, elles devaient servir à des ablutions rituelles qui comportaient des bains complets ; en effet des sièges sont taillés dans le roc, côte à côte entre les piliers, à un niveau inférieur à celui où l'eau se trouvait maintenue par les cloisons entre les chambres. Les cérémonies mystérieuses qui se déroulaient dans l'enclos si farouchement dérobé aux regards comportaient donc des bains que les fidèles prenaient assis dans ces piscines souterraines.

[Furthermore, the cliff, which is naturally almost vertical, had been hollowed out internally with very unusual structures. Parallel to the rock face were interconnected underground chambers, in some places two levels deep. The first level opened directly to the outside, while those of the second level opened onto the first. These chambers, supported by enormous quadrangular pillars hewn from the rock, were separated from one another by thin stone partitions, also hewn, which rose only halfway up. The role of these partitions was to maintain a constant level of the water circulating inside the chambers, for these were supplied by water from the same underground aquifer that fed the Apollo spring. ... In reality, these two high walls can only have served one purpose: to block views in order to protect a specific location from prying eyes. This is the only way to justify the unexpected height of the two walls: it was necessary to prevent the gaze of passers-by traveling on the sacred way and on the Ballos Road, but also of curious onlookers possibly stationed on the slopes of the two hills... As for the underground chambers, they must have been used for ritual ablutions that included full baths; indeed, seats are carved into the rock, side by side between the pillars, at a level lower than that at which the water was held by the partitions between the chambers. The mysterious ceremonies that took place in the enclosure so fiercely hidden from view therefore included baths that the faithful took seated in these underground pools.]³⁶⁶

³⁶⁶ cf. Hellenistic-period Etruscan worship of Artumes at Cerveteri. The site at Vignaccia has terracotta votives similar to the ones found here (though this is not surprising) and there was a hewn underground *nymphaeum* decorated with frescoes depicting "Delian" motifs (palms), which suggest a connection to Artemis, also. Several of the terracottas also feature palm trees. Cristofani and Gregori, who first published (1987) on the *nymphaeum* at Caere (discovered in 1983), connect the site to marriage and fertility rites in the Cyrenian sacred laws: Gian Luca Gregori and M. Cristofani, "Di un complesso sotterraneo scoperto nell'area urbana di Caere," *Prospettiva* 49 (1987): 2–14. The similarities between this structure and the human-modified cave *nymphaeum* in Cyrene are compelling; both feature multiple-level complexes with niches and rooms. For both, one must descend to enter. The Cyrenaean grotto was paved with marble floors, the one in Caere stuccoed/plastered. Of course, the structure in Caere is also similar to the tombs of Tarquinia, which were hewn from tufa bedrock, plastered, and frescoed. Like the Cyrenaean *Nymphaem*, the Caere one shows considerable hydrologic engineering, with hewn channels and basins allowing water to flow to and collect in different rooms.

Just outside the sanctuary of Apollo, then, we have a complex of grottos which have been created or modified to allow spring water to flow into and collect in large basins within. The addition of what appear to be seats suggests pools or tubs for bathing, rather than sites for collecting drinking water for humans or animals. This interpretation is also suggested by high walls, which seemingly serve no other purpose than blocking onlookers' view of the interior of the cave baths. On the walls of the caves and their immediate exterior are niches suitable for hanging votive plaques or cult statues [Fig. 1.21], which is a common sign of a cult cave, though moveable objects such as these have not been recovered. Overall, then, the natural and modified architecture of the caves befits bathing of the sort usually associated with nymphs.³⁶⁷

Some scholars have doubted the identification of the cave complex with the *nymphaeum* mentioned in the *lex sacra*.³⁶⁸ G. R. H. Wright has disputed Chamoux's identification of this structure as the "nymphaeum" to which the law code refers.³⁶⁹ He instead proposes that the "Nymphaeum" in the complex was the "Spring of Kyra," a channel of the aforementioned

³⁶⁷ Larson calls nymphs "enthusiastic bathers," *Nymphs*, 111. They are frequently depicted bathing in black-figure vase painting, as well as on votive relief plaques, 201–202.

³⁶⁸ R. D. Barnett posited the identification of the caves as a Mithraeum in his "Appendix" to G. R. H. Wright, "Cyrene: A Survey of Certain Rock-Cut Features to the South of the Sanctuary of Apollo," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77, no. 2 (1957): 303–304. While it is true that there were natural caves as well as constructed Mithraea, there are many problems with this theory. For an efficient summary of Mithraic worship in the latter Roman Empire, see David Walsh, *The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity: Development, Decline and Demise ca. A.D. 270–430*, Brill, 2018. First, the votives from the caves, which will be discussed below, do not at all align with Mithraic worship, which consists mostly of votive reliefs with Mithraic themes, ceramic vessels (often intentionally broken), statues and heads of Mithras, Minerva, and Serapis, as well as caches of coins (Walsh, *Cult*, 32–39). Chronologically, the figurative votives at the Cyrenian cave shrine date to the 5th–2nd centuries BCE, while Mithraism was adopted in the Roman world only in the late 1st century CE. While it is true that Mithraea feature subterranean spaces with benches on parallel walls, the caves here have individual seats, rather than horizontally-continuous benches. Only in the late 3rd and 4th centuries CE did variations on this basic floorplan emerge (Walsh, *Cult*, 21). Mithraea in the Roman east almost universally featured apertures in the roof to allow sunlight, even those that were situated in caves (Walsh, *Cult*, 7, 21), but we do not find this in the cave complex at Cyrene. Finally, most Mithraea, with very few exceptions, consisted of a main chamber, perhaps with a small anteroom, on a single level (Walsh, *Cult*, 7), while the cave complex at Cyrene consists of multiple connected chambers.

³⁶⁹ Wright, "Cyrene," 300–310. G. Oliverio, an archaeologist with the Italian Regional Superintendency of Antiquities in Cyrene, referred to the cave as "la grotte d'Apollon" because of its setting within the *temenos* of Apollo. G. Oliverio, "La fonte di Apollo," *Notiziario Archeologico a cura del Ministero delle Colonie* 4 (1927): 215–243.

Apollo spring, based on several graffiti inscribed on or around it mentioning the nymphs or a nymphaeion.³⁷⁰ However, all of these graffiti date to the imperial period (1st-3rd c. CE), up to six hundred years after the inscription of the purification laws. Additionally, what he fails to take into account is that the authors of all of these graffiti have male names (or male priestly titles where names do not survive), with no exceptions. Therefore, while Wright is correct that there is no definitive way to identify the grottoes as the Nymphaeum mentioned in the purification laws, his proposition that the “Spring of Kyra” be thus identified neglects the majority of the evidence.

I therefore agree with Chamoux’s (admittedly insufficiently explained) identification of the human-modified grottoes on the acropolis as the Nymphaeum referred to in the text.³⁷¹ The multi-level layout of the caves would have forced worshippers to descend, thus fulfilling the peculiar requirements outlined in the procedure. The presence of not only a natural water source, but one deftly manipulated by modifying natural structures, blends the two understandings on nymphaea in the Hellenistic period, when the natural springs and grottoes of the Greek world met with the monumental public constructions of the Hellenistic and Roman empires.

The votives from the site also support the identification of the cave complex as one dedicated to the nymphs. As is commonly found at other religious sites—both in caves and at constructed sanctuaries—the majority of votive materials were found in large caches outside the main worship space.³⁷² This shows the common practice of clearing offerings from an altar to make room for new ones, depositing the earlier objects near the shrine. These depositions, like the sanctuaries themselves, could be in either natural hollows, such as a crevice or fissure in the rock, or man-made pits. The cache of terracottas at this Cyrenean site lies just below and in front

³⁷⁰ SEG IX 266, 275, 276, 278, 284, 289, and 293.

³⁷¹ “Ill-defined” because Chamoux takes the identification of the cave shrine as the designated nymphaeum as a given without discussing his reasons for such an identification.

³⁷² Maria Elisa Micheli and Anna Santucci, “Il culto,” in *Il Santuario delle Nymphai Chthoniai a Cyrene: Il sito e le terrecotte*, eds. Maria Elisa Micheli and Anna Santucci, l’Erma di Bretschneider, Monografie di Archeologia Libica XXV, 2000: 120.

of the cave openings, further supporting its identification as a secondary deposit. Niches carved into the rock both inside and outside around the cave would have once housed votive plaques, though these do not survive. Excavators also found depressions carved into the rock that could have been made to hold votive stelai, or the “small statues” (ἀγάλματα οὐ μεγάλα) placed in front of cult caves as mentioned by Pausanias of the Themisonion cave in Phrygia.³⁷³ We therefore find evidence for three main votive types at the cult cave above the sanctuary of Apollo at Cyrene: terracotta figurines, hung votive plaques, and votive stelai and/or statues.

Although the votive plaques and stelai or statues are not extant, having possibly been used as *spolia* or otherwise looted from the cave sanctuary (as is the case of the *lex sacra*), the votive pits outside the cave yielded more than 4,000 terracotta figurines. Unlike figurine assemblages at some sites, the types found at this grotto show a high level of localized cult engagement and hint at the concerns which prompted their dedication, even without surviving inscriptions.³⁷⁴ The female figurines which make up a large proportion of the collection typically display local Libyan features in their dress, ornamentation, and associated images. They wear leather cloaks typical of Libyan fashion, and carry items with local significance, especially gazelles (50 extant examples, e.g. **Fig. 1.22**) and the silphium plant (218 extant examples, e.g. **Fig. 1.23**).³⁷⁵

Gazelles are native to the “pre-desert” areas of Africa, and were abundant in Libya. They were often featured on the coinage of ancient Cyrene as an emblem of the city state’s physical

³⁷³ Micheli and Santucci, “Il culto,” 120. Pausanias, 10.32.4–5.

³⁷⁴ The only object from the vicinity of the cave with an extant inscription is a small olla vessel with an inscription. Only three letters of the inscription survive, ιστ, which Micheli and Santucci posit could be the dative plural ending of νύμφη. Although this is pure speculation, it would accord with both the grammatical case of most votives and the grammatical number appropriate for the nymphs.

³⁷⁵ Maria Elisa Micheli, “Le Terrecotte: I Soggetti Femminili,” in *Il Santuario delle Nymphae Chthoniae a Cyrene: Il sito e le terrecotte*, eds. Maria Elisa Micheli and Anna Santucci, l’Erma di Bretschneider, Monografie di Archeologia Libica XXV, 2000.

environment and natural abundance.³⁷⁶ Even more than the gazelle, though, the silphium plant was the representation *par excellence* of ancient Cyrene. It was the city's most valuable export and was also featured on the city's coinage throughout its history.³⁷⁷ The plant's narrow native range, its inability to be cultivated from seeds,³⁷⁸ and its high demand in the Roman empire led to its eventual extinction, the first anthropogenic extinction in recorded history.³⁷⁹ One possible reason for this extinction-driving demand for silphium was its various medical and gynecological uses. In Hippocratic medicine, it was used to "soften," "expand," or "cleanse" the womb to varying degrees.³⁸⁰ One listed use is as an abortifacient.³⁸¹

Overall, silphium could thus hold implications of abundance and power in the natural world, especially given the uncultivated nature of the plant and its apparent abhorrence for human interference. In fact, the silphium plant's character, making it virtually unreproducible elsewhere, speaks to a sense of hyper-local identity and pride, ideologically comparable, by way of analogy, to modern perceptions of ecologically unique landscapes such as the ancient redwood forests' importance to California. Furthermore, its popular demand and widespread utility suggests additional implications of material abundance and wealth. And even further—that utility itself ranged from contraceptives and abortifacients to menstrual and post-birth aids, and even to aphrodisiacs for men! The fertility associations of the plant, then, are not only evident in

³⁷⁶ G. K. Jenkins, "Some ancient coins of Libya," *Libyan Studies* 5 (1973): 29–35.

³⁷⁷ Henry Koerper and A. L. Kolls, "The silphium motif adorning ancient Libyan coinage: marketing a medicinal plant," *Economic Botany* 53 (1999): 133–143.

³⁷⁸ Theophrastus, *Enquiry Into Plants* 6.3: ἴδιον δὲ τὸ φεύγειν τὴν ἐργαζομένην καὶ αἰεὶ συνεργαζομένης καὶ συνημερουμένης ἐξαναχωρεῖν, ὥς οὐ δεομένου δῆλον ὅτι θεραπείας ἀλλ' ὄντος ἀγρίου, "It is a peculiarity of it that it avoids cultivated ground, and, as the land is brought under cultivation and tamed, it retires, plainly showing that it needs no tendance but is a wild thing."

³⁷⁹ Ken Parejko, "Pliny the Elder's Silphium: First Recorded Species Extinction," *Conservation Biology* 17, no. 3 (2003): 925–927.

³⁸⁰ Hippocrates, *Superfetation* 32.502 and 27.492 (cf. *Barrenness* 26.453), and *Diseases of Women I*, 81.202, respectively. It also had several other medical uses, according to Hippocrates, as it is prescribed for various uses in *Diseases II and III*, *Fistulas*, *Regimen in Acute Diseases*, and *Internal Affections*.

³⁸¹ Hippocrates, *Diseases of Women I* 91.219. This same treatment was also prescribed in the event that the placenta was not expelled after giving birth: *Diseases of Women I* 21.182, 25.183, and 46.106. Silphium was prescribed for certain supposed "movements" of the uterus (i.e. some types of hysteria), *Diseases of Women II* 91.383 and 102.406.

the fact that it is a wild thing that shirks human attempts at cultivation, but also in humans' harnessing its chemical resources for matters related to menstruation, sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth.

In addition to the standing or enthroned female figures, a surprisingly large proportion of the figurines from the Cyrene cave site are male figures (384, 58% of figurines).³⁸² There is considerably more variation (or less standardization) in the male figures than the female figures. 69% of these male figurines are of the "semi-draped" type, with the *chimation* around the neck and shoulders and genitals exposed.³⁸³ 29.75% are draped with the *chimation* over their lower half or whole body, covering the genitals.³⁸⁴ There are also three nude males, one youth and two young boys.³⁸⁵ Unlike the female figurines, which show evidence of local specification, particularly in the silphium plant, the vast majority of the male figurines do not have any distinguishing features at all. 11 of them hold a bag, one a phiale, one a flask. However, another 11 of the male figures carry a bucket, which Santucci and Bacchielli understand as a motif associated with Aristaeus, the son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene.³⁸⁶ In the nearby sacred precinct of Apollo, one terracotta figurine confidently identified as Aristaeus has been found, in which he leans on a herm and holds a cornucopia overflowing with goods.³⁸⁷

From the archaic period, Aristaeus was depicted as holding a small bucket for his associated activities of collecting honey, milk, or silphium.³⁸⁸ As the son of Apollo and the eponymous nymph of the city, along with being associated with rustic activities and tied to the

³⁸² Anna Santucci, "Le Terrecotte I Soggetti Maschili," in *Il Santuario delle Nymphae Chthoniai a Cyrene: Il sito e le terrecotte*, eds. Maria Elisa Micheli and Anna Santucci, l'Erma di Bretschneider, Monografie di Archeologia Libica XXV, 2000.

³⁸³ Santucci, "Terrecotte," described 89–93, shown in Fig. 13 and 14, pages 98–99.

³⁸⁴ Santucci, "Terrecotte," described 82–89, shown in Fig. 11 and 12, pages 96–97.

³⁸⁵ Santucci, "Terrecotte," 89–90.

³⁸⁶ Santucci, "Terrecotte," 113.

³⁸⁷ Serena Ensoli Vittozzi, "L'iconografia e il culto di Aristeo a Cirene," *Libyan Studies* 25 (1994): 61–84.

³⁸⁸ Ensoli Vittozzi, "L'iconografia," 69.

productivity of the land, it is certainly possible that he would have been worshipped at the cave sanctuary of the nymphs. Additionally, some ancient authors say that Aristaeus himself did in fact live in a cave.³⁸⁹ The Hellenistic mythographer Dionysius Scytobrachion of Mytilene recorded myths and stories set in Libya. In narrating the birth of Dionysus, he provides a generous *ekphrasis* for the cave where Aristaeus lives, highlighting its size and rotundity, its beauty and multicolored stones, its surrounding trees, songbirds, and sweet-smelling cinnamon.

Dionysius Scytobrachion, 1a.32.F, fr. 8, lines 70–95.

εἰς τοῦτο οὖν τὸ ἄντρον τὸν Ἄμμωνα
 παραγενόμενον παραθέσθαι τὸν παῖδα καὶ
 παραδοῦναι τρέφειν Νύσηι, μᾶϊ τῶν Ἀρισταίου
 θυγατέρων· ἐπιστάτην δ' αὐτοῦ τάξαι τὸν
 Ἀρισταῖον, ἄνδρα συνέσει καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ
 πάσῃ παιδείᾳ διαφέροντα.

And so, to this cave, (Zeus) Ammon came and handed the child over to Nysa to nourish/raise, one of the daughters of Aristaeus.³⁹⁰ He appointed Aristaeus his overseer, a man distinguished in his intelligence, moderation, and in every skill.

With the combination of the literary Aristaeus living in a cave in his adulthood with his kourotrophic role in some versions of Dionysus' birth story, the identification of the terracottas at Cyrene as Aristaeus and his connection to fertility and kourotrophy therefore seems to be the most likely explanation for the astounding number of male votive figurines. Not only was Aristaeus understood to be the son of Cyrene, the eponymous nymph of the sanctuary's city, but also of Apollo, whose sacred precinct the acropolis cave nymphaeum abuts. A birth cult of Cyrene/Apollo/Aristaeus thus seems likely.

In addition to the deposits of terracotta figurines, it is clear that the shrine once featured several votive plaques hung in the numerous niches carved into the exterior and interior of the cave shrine. This is especially common in sacred grottoes in Attica, where marble votive plaques

³⁸⁹ e.g. Pseudo-Oppian, *Cynegetica* 4.265–272.

³⁹⁰ Translation is my own.

depicting cave worship were common.³⁹¹ Like other moveable objects, such as the *arulae* (small altars typical of Cyrenaica) whose carved recesses have been found nearby, these plaques were not found *in situ* around the sanctuary. A series of cave-framed votive plaques, however, have been found in various places near the site, and it is possible that these were associated with the Cyrenaean nymphaeum in antiquity, though it is also possible that they belong to another nearby cave cult.³⁹²

Speaking holistically about the cave shrine and the sacred laws of Cyrene is difficult. Indeed, no scholar since Chamoux in 1953 has examined the two in conjunction in any depth. While it is clear that there was a Nymphaeum, likely at the site of the cave baths, the material finds from the votive deposits near the caves do not, for the most part, suggest a cult specifically tied to pregnancy or childbirth. However, when considered in conjunction with the *lex sacra* discovered nearby, the nymphaeum's use as a cult site for the fertility concerns of women becomes more clear. In lines 97–105, the law says that a pregnant woman must go down to the Nymphaeum to Artemis and give to “the Bear” the feet, head, and skin of some animal. If she does not do this before birth, she must sacrifice an adult animal. While the purification law earlier (91–96) designated that a bride must “go down” to Artemis in the Nymphaeum, a woman

³⁹¹ Examples have been found at the Cave of Pan in Eleusis (National Archaeological Museum in Athens, inv. no. 1445), the Cave of the Nympholept at Vari (National Archaeological Museum in Athens, inv. no. 2008, 2011), the Phyle/Fyli Cave (National Archaeological Museum in Athens, inv. no. 1448, 1859, 1879), the sanctuary of Pan on the Acropolis (Acropolis Museum, inv. no. EAM 1443). Detailed examinations of votive reliefs for the nymphs, many of which feature caves, include Renate Feubel, “Die attischen Nymphenreliefs und ihre Vorbilder” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 1935; Werner Fuchs, “Attische Nymphenreliefs,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* 77 (1962): 247–249, plate 67; and Charles Edwards, “Greek Votive Reliefs to Pan and the Nymphs,” Doctoral Dissertation, New York University, 1985.

³⁹² Emanuela Fabbriotti, “Rilievi culturali del mondo pastorale Cirenaico,” *Libya Antiqua* 3 (1997): 75–81, Tav. 29–33. Fabbriotti notes that there are niches carved into living rock elsewhere in the area (e.g. the sanctuaries at Budrash, Ain Hofra, and Messa), and cites the Cyrenaean nymphaeum as one example: 76. Given the subject matter of Fabbriotti's plaques (most frequently Zeus Ammon, Demeter, and Kore, though always accompanied by a large retinue of other gods), those probably were not associated with the nymphaeum, but from another context. However, the existence of such plaques in the vicinity suggests the possibility that there were similar cave-framed plaques at the nymphaeum as there were in several caves sacred to the nymphs. On cave-framed votive plaques for the nymphs, see Edwards, “Greek Votive Reliefs,” Chapter 2, section II “Development of the Cave Frame,” 52–59.

who is pregnant is instructed to perform a specific rite in propitiation of Artemis, presumably in her role as a guardian of childbirth. The mention of her here is notable. As Larson notes, the cultic association of Artemis with the nymphs is rare.³⁹³ The association of Artemis with “the bear” in line 98 calls to mind, of course, the cult of Artemis at Brauron in Attica.³⁹⁴ That cult, too, featured a cave as a worship site before its collapse warranted the creation of a constructed temple.³⁹⁵ The Brauron site, while more well-known for rites pertaining to female adolescence, also shows evidence of associations with birth and kourotophy.³⁹⁶ When all aspects of the site are considered together—the *lex sacra*, the grotto and its architectural and hydrological modifications, the votive deposits, and literary sources—it seems likely that the cave functioned as a localized cult site sacred to the nymphs and Artemis in their capacities as childbirth and kourotophy deities.

Analysis & Chapter Conclusion

Comparing the cave cults of Eileithyia, we can observe that while there are aspects of her worship that are consistent across cult centers, there was also room for considerable variation in votive practices between sites. Everywhere, she is a goddess of maternity, invoked for fertility and safe childbirth. This differentiates her from most Olympian goddesses who may have individual cults focused on maternity (e.g. Artemis *Lochia*, Aphrodite *Kolias*, or Demeter *Kourotophos*) but whose identities were overall less fixated on these matters. And in multiple places, worship of Eileithyia took place in natural caves. Beyond these solid points, the cults of

³⁹³ “In spite of the fact that Artemis is regularly associated with woods, lakes, trees, hot springs, and so on, nymphs are not a part of the widespread cults of Artemis Agrotera or Limnaia or any other Artemis cults, with certain important exceptions. Our sources mention numerous sacrifices to Artemis, but the nymphs are never included in these. Nor is Artemis normally honored in nymph cults... Again, in the most prominent cult sites of the nymphs... we find no explicit links to Artemis.” Larson, *Nymphs*, 108.

³⁹⁴ See Elinor Bevan, “The Goddess Artemis, and the Dedication of Bears in Sanctuaries,” *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 82 (1987): 17–21.

³⁹⁵ John Papadimitriou, “The Sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron,” *Scientific American* 206, no. 6 (1963): 115.

³⁹⁶ Paula Perlman, “Acting the She-Bear for Artemis,” *Arethusa* 22, no. 2 (1989): 111–133.

Eileithyia vary widely, as can be seen in the remains of the two cave cults examined in this chapter. The votive assemblages of Inatos and Paros, while intended—we can infer—to produce the same result of safely producing children, are vastly different in types, materials, and morphologies. It is also possible that the two cults may have had slightly distinct targets: at Inatos we see much more of a focus on conception, pregnancy, and birthing than at Paros, and at Paros there is evidence of a stronger focus on the children themselves. The scope of these two cults are also very different. The shrine at Inatos seems to have been internationally-known and attracted visitors by sea from all over the eastern Mediterranean. On Paros, the cult of Eileithyia seems to have been localized and was maintained through the patronage of the island's own inhabitants.

Birth-centered caves of the nymphs also show a high degree of local specificity. Since nymphs were inherently tied to—even comprised—landscapes, there was considerable variation from one cult to another. Often, this individuality was then backed by strong continuity within a given tradition.³⁹⁷ This combination of hyper-locality and mass continuity can be seen in the remarkable consistency of iconography across hundreds of terracotta votives from the cave of the nymphs at Cyrene. Although the number of figurines at the Pitsa Cave near Corinth is much smaller, we nevertheless find distinct groups with very specific shapes not commonly found in other nymph caves, such as the “reclining” and pregnant female shapes that resemble those from Inatos. The idiosyncrasy of these votives when compared with other nymph caves, combined with their occurrence in groups, therefore reveals this type of hyper-local but internally-robust votive tradition.

³⁹⁷ This is not the case everywhere, however. For example, at the cave of the nymph Lerna at Akrotiri on Crete, Faure notes that, among the 50-odd figurines discovered around a stalagmite he identified as a cult statue, he could find “no pairs, no groups” (*aucun couple, aucun groupe*), Faure, *Fonctions*, 141.

From these examples, it is clear that cavernous spaces were symbolically aligned with female reproductive power in both ritual practice and literary imagination. This generative symbolism, however, also opens space to explore the fraught issue of female agency, the ability of women to control their bodies, whether through sexual assertiveness or through the defense of their own virginity. Both forms of agency are treated with ambivalence or even hostility in myth, particularly when they fall outside male-dominated frameworks of marriage and reproduction. In the next chapter, I will examine mythological caves as sites of sexual encounters, arguing that they signal the instability of relationships that lie outside normative marital paradigms. The women in these stories often embody the perceived danger of female sexuality, a danger made more potent by the cavernous setting itself.

Chapter 2: Transgressive Sexualities in Greek Grottos

*Everything is about sex. Except sex, which is about power.*³⁹⁸

Building on the paradigm established in Chapter 1 wherein the cave in many instances symbolizes the womb and its generative capabilities, in this chapter I will examine the use of caves in the expression of anxieties surrounding female sexual agency. This chapter will therefore involve discussions of gender and power. As discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, sexual power dynamics typically align the masculine with power and the feminine with submissiveness or passivity.³⁹⁹ Extrapolating from this gendered paradigm, those with greater social, political, or economic power thus also tend to be represented with masculine models of control. In an overly-simplified deconstruction, then, we see the following paradigm:

<i>masculine</i>	<i>feminine</i>
<i>active</i>	<i>passive</i>
<i>ruler</i>	<i>subject</i>
<i>order</i>	<i>chaos (danger)</i>
<i>civilization</i>	<i>nature</i>

In this chapter, I examine myths involving caves in relation to this paradigm of gendered power. I show that the heterotopic staging of certain sexual encounters within caves offered ancient people the opportunity to consider alternative (often taboo) models of control and sexuality in which the feminine reigned over the masculine. These cave settings offer “safe” contexts to refract these normative conceptions and thus to interrogate the implications and potential

³⁹⁸ This quote is typically ascribed to Oscar Wilde, though it does not actually appear in any of his works. Its true origin remains obscure. A similar phrase has appeared in psychoanalytic discourse: “Everything in therapy is really about sex except sex, which is really about aggression,” Robert Kitzman, “In a House of Dreams and Glass: Becoming a Psychiatrist,” Random House, 1996, 54; and Susan C. Vaughan, *The Talking Cure: The Science Behind Psychotherapy*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997, 160; in both instances, this is referred to as a common saying in psychotherapeutic circles or as a lesson from a supervisor. Please note that I do not necessarily agree with the sentiment of this quote in all situations, but it is fitting for the discussions in this chapter.

³⁹⁹ For a more in-depth discussion, see Introduction, pages 22–24.

outcomes of alternative models, in this instance, the model of domination in the “feminine” column above. However, this staging in myth, I argue, always prefigures detrimental outcomes for these relationships, thereby framing female power as a dangerous possibility and reinforcing the superiority of the male-dominant paradigm.

In addition to the above paradigm breakdown, Greek myth often examines power dynamics along an additional axis: relative divinity. On this spectrum, divine characters obviously have more agency than mortal characters. Within this axis of power, divinity always wins. While the pantheons of Greece, Rome, and indeed most polytheistic religions include both male and female (as well as otherly-sexed) deities, within the framework of domination and agency, divinity typically falls under the “masculine” and mortality under the “feminine.” Thus, relationships which include female divinities and male mortals feature an inversion of traditional power dynamics.

Another key characteristic of the relationships consummated inside caves is the eventual failure of the relationship, usually leading to the death of some party involved (even, in some cases, the more “powerful” party). This goes deeper than the simple acknowledgement that there is seldom a “happy ending” in Greek myth. While that observation is valid, what I refer to here is the “failure” of the relationship's purpose, though the goals or purposes of these relationships differ. None of the couples that will be discussed are still “together” by the ends of their stories; these relationships are thus always temporary. In what follows, I argue that the setting of the cave for sexual encounters thus signals an imminent fracture, usually ending in death. I do not mean to argue that the cave is the reason for the failure, only that it characterizes these already imbalanced relationships as non-normative, and therefore as fundamentally unstable.

Copulation in Literary Caves

Odysseus & Calypso

One of the most well-known examples of the connection between female sexuality and caverns is the famous cave of Calypso in the *Odyssey*. In Book 5, Hermes comes to her island, Ogygia, where she has taken in the shipwrecked Odysseus and kept him as her unwilling sexual companion for seven years. Hermes' mission is to convince Calypso to release Odysseus so that he may continue on his fated journey and achieve his homecoming. Upon reaching the island, Hermes marvels at the cave of Calypso, with the poet giving us the most famous cave *ekphrasis* in Greek literature:⁴⁰⁰

Od. 5.59–73

πῦρ μὲν ἐπ' ἐσχαρόφιν μέγα καίετο, τηλόσε δ' ὁδμὴ
κέδρου τ' εὐκεάτοιο θύου τ' ἀνὰ νῆσον ὁδῶδει
δαιομένων· ἢ δ' ἔνδον ἀοιδιάουσ' ὅπῃ καλῇ
ἰστὸν ἐποιχομένη χρυσεῖη κερκὶδ' ὕφαινε.
ὔλη δὲ σπέος ἀμφὶ πεφύκει τηλεθώσας,
κλήθρη τ' αἰγείρος τε καὶ εὐώδης κυπάρισσος.
ἔνθα δέ τ' ὄρνιθες τανυσίπτεροι εὐνάζοντο,

A great fire was burning on the hearth, and far
over the isle spread the fragrance of split cedar
and citronwood, as they burned. But she within
was singing with a sweet voice as she went to
and fro before the loom, weaving with a golden
shuttle. Round about the cave grew a luxuriant
wood, alder and poplar and sweet-smelling
cypress, in which long-winged birds made their

⁴⁰⁰ The study of *ekphrasis* in both ancient and modern literature first became popular in the 1990s and has continued to be of interest in scholarship on both ancient and modern contexts. On ancient *ekphrasis* generally, see Julie Dainville and Lucie Donckier de Donceel, "Les usages de l'ekphrasis, Introduction," *Exercices de Rhétorique* 17, Special Issue, Sur l'ekphrasis (2021): 1–8; Roberto Romagnino, *Théorie(s) de l'« ekphrasis » entre Antiquité et première modernité*, Garnier, 2019; Niels Koopman, *Ancient Greek ekphrasis: between description and narration: five linguistic and narratological case studies*, Brill, 2018; Ruth H. Webb, *Ekphrasis, imagination and persuasion in ancient rhetorical theory and practice*, Ashgate, 2009; Shadi Bartsch and Jas Elsner, "Introduction: Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis," *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1, Special Issues on Ekphrasis (2007): i–vi; and in the same issue, Page Dubois, "Reading the Writing on the Wall," 45–56; Jan Elsner, "The Genres of Ekphrasis," *Ramus* 31, "The Verbal and the Visual: Cultures of Ekphrasis in Antiquity," Special issue (2002): 1–18; Glanville Downey, "Ekphrasis," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 4 (1959): 921–944; Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne, eds. *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, especially Goldhill, "The Naïve and Knowing Eye: Ekphrasis and the Culture of Viewing in the Hellenistic World." "On *ekphrasis* specifically in ancient Greek epic, see Erika Mayara Pasqual, "A « ekphrasis » das armas de Aquiles na obra « Pós-homérica » de Quinto de Esmirna," *Letras Clássicas* 19, no. 1 (2015): 152–161; Andrew Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis*, Bloomsbury, 1995. On comparative approaches to both ancient and modern *ekphrases*, see Christine Ratkowitsch, ed., *Die poetische Ekphrasis von Kunstwerken: eine literarische Tradition der Grossdichtung in Antike, Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Verl. der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006; Ruth Webb, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre," *Word & Image* 15, no. 1 (1999): 7–18; Gottfried Boehm, *Beschreibungskunst, Kunstbeschreibung: Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Brille, 1995; Jeffrey Morrison and Florian Krobb, eds., *Text Into Image: Image Into Text*, Rodopi, 1997; Efterpi Mitsi, *Writing against pictures: a study of ekphrasis in epics by Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser*, New York University Press, 1991; and Page DuBois, *History, Rhetorical Description and the Epic from Homer to Spenser*, D. S. Brewer, 1982.

σκῶπες τ' ἱρηκές τε τανύγλωσσοί τε κορῶναι
 εἰνάλιναι, τῆσιν τε θαλάσσια ἔργα μέμηλεν.
 ἢ δ' αὐτοῦ τετάνυστο περὶ σπείους γλαφυροῖο
 ἡμερὶς ἡβώωσα, τεθῆλει δὲ σταφυλῆσι.
 κρῆναι δ' ἐξείης πίσυρες ῥέον ὕδατι λευκῷ,
 πλησίαι ἀλλήλων τετραμμέναι ἄλλυδις ἄλλη.
 ἀμφὶ δὲ λειμῶνες μαλακοὶ ἴου ἠδὲ σελίνου
 θήλεον.

nests, owls and falcons and sea crows with
 chattering tongues, who ply their business on
 the sea. And right there about the hollow cave
 ran trailing a garden vine, in pride of its prime,
 richly laden with clusters. And four springs in a
 row were flowing with bright water close by one
 another, turned one this way, one that, and round
 about soft meadows of violets and celery were
 blooming.

Many scholars, both ancient and modern, have discussed this scene and its implications for Calypso. There are two dominant interpretations of the island: as a *locus amoenus* suggesting sensuality and fertility⁴⁰¹ or as a *locus horridus* with connotations of death.⁴⁰² A third strand, the most common today, combines these, seeing Ogygia as an “isle of the blessed,” both idyllic and mortuary in nature.⁴⁰³

The main features of the space are the cave and its great size, an abundance of plant life, fragrant burning of wood, and the roosting of three bird species. Several aspects of this *ekphrasis* resonate with later cave descriptions,⁴⁰⁴ though there are also key divergences. While it is probable that later writers had this and the other Odyssean cave description (13.102–112) in

⁴⁰¹ e.g. Benjamin Stephen Haller, “Landscape Description in Homer’s ‘Odyssey,’” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2007: 81–83; Paul Friedrich, “An Avian and Aphrodisian Reading of Homer’s *Odyssey*,” *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 2 (1997): 306–320; more recently Ruobing Xian, “«Locus amoenus» und sein Gegenstück in *Od. 5*,” *Hermes* 146, no. 2 (2018): 132–148. For an ancient interpretation of the scene as connoting sexual pleasure, see Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 2, *On Kingship* 2.41.

⁴⁰² On Calypso as a goddess or queen of the dead/Underworld, see Hermann Güntert, *Kalypso: Bedeutungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiet der indogermanischen Sprachen*, Halle a.S. M. Niemeyer, 1919; Georg Finsler, *Homer*, B.G. Teubner, 1918, vol. 2: 292, suggested that the birds and trees that we find on Ogygia recall a grove of Persephone. Güntert has a similar interpretation of the plants, following the interpretation of Josef Murr, *Die Pflanzenwelt in der griechischen Mythologie*, Wagnerische Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1890, who says that the “gloomy meaning” (*düstere Bedeutung*) of the plants is fitting for Calypso’s cave, p. 17, and links the violets (ἴου) to the rape of Persephone, 261.

⁴⁰³ See William S. Anderson, “Calypso and Elysium,” *The Classical Journal* 54, no. 1 (1958): 2–11; Gregory Crane, *Calypso: Backgrounds and Conventions of the Odyssey*, Athenäum, 1988. There has been a tendency toward circular argumentation regarding the avian and plant life on Calypso’s island and their implications for her character. Those who consider her to have funereal aspects cite other scholars’ interpretations of certain trees and birds which are said to have funereal aspects *because* of their connection to Calypso. It is therefore quite difficult in her case to separate how she is depicted in the text from interpretive assumptions of other scholars. I will therefore aim in this section to speak generally about the imagery used, rather than claim culturally-specific knowledge of individual species.

⁴⁰⁴ Subsequent cave ekphrases of varying lengths: Theocritus, *Idylls* 11.44–49; Plutarch, *Moralia*, *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance*, 565 E; Oppian, *Cynegtica* 2.34–42; Maximus, *Dissertationes*, 34.7 (describing Calypso’s cave); Diodorus Siculus, 5.3.3; Dionysius Scytobrachion, fr. 8; Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 1.1.4.

mind when crafting their works,⁴⁰⁵ the discrepancies between this passage and later, more “conventional” cave depictions suggest variations on a core poetic motif of a paradise.⁴⁰⁶ In Greek literature, this paradise motif frequently features the trifecta of cave, water source, and vegetation. Certain (benign) animals are also frequent, usually birds.⁴⁰⁷ In some descriptions, the vegetation takes the form of a wooded grove, whether natural or (more often) cultivated, while in other instances the vegetation is a flowery meadow. Given the generative associations of caves as symbolic wombs discussed extensively in the first chapter of this dissertation, the inclusion of water, plant, and animal life—even more obvious symbols of fertility—underscores the cave’s association with reproduction and female sexuality (from which, in the ancient Greek mind, fertility or maternity was inseparable⁴⁰⁸).

As nearly every commentator on this passage has noted, the poet includes as many of the senses as possible in his description: the smell of cedar⁴⁰⁹ and citronwood burning inside the cave (59–61), as well as the pleasant-smelling cypress (εὐώδης κυπάρισσος, 64) all contribute to the olfactory dimension. Although they are not eaten in this passage,⁴¹⁰ the inclusion of grape clusters ripe and ready for picking provides implicit gustatory indulgence (ἡμερὶς ἡβώωσα, τεθήλει δὲ σταφυλῆσι, 69). Calypso sings as she weaves at her loom (61–62), the rhythmic

⁴⁰⁵ Calvin S. Byre, “On the Description of the Harbor of Phorkys and the Cave of the Nymphs, *Odyssey* 13.96–112,” *The American Journal of Philology* 115, no. 1 (1994): 1–13.

⁴⁰⁶ On paradise in archaic Greek poetry and possible influences from the ancient Near East, see Holger Thesleff, “Notes on the Paradise myth in ancient Greece,” *Temenos* 22 (1986): 129–139.

⁴⁰⁷ e.g. Philostratus, *Imagines* 1.23, on Narcissus, “tuneful birds” are depicted at the cave pool of Narcissus (κωμάζουσι τε ἐπ’ αὐτὴν σοφοὶ ὄρνιθες, ὡς ἐκάστου ἁρμονία).

⁴⁰⁸ Thus, “the conflation of female sexuality and the female capacity for reproduction is a patriarchal trick used to justify strict male control over female sexuality,” Victoria Josselyn Wohl, “Standing by the *Stathmos*: the Creation of Sexual Ideology in the ‘Odyssey,’” *Arethusa* 26, no. 1 (1993), 21, n. 3.

⁴⁰⁹ Wherever Calypso’s island was within the Mediterranean, cedar would likely have had to be imported from the Levant, since no species of cedar has been found native to Europe, Russell Meiggs, *Trees and timber in the ancient Mediterranean world*, Clarendon Press, 1982: 6–7; Edward Forster, “Trees and Plants in Homer,” *The Classical Review* 50, no. 3 (1936), 99 Forster says that the *kedros* here is not Lebanese cedar, but prickly cedar, though he does not explain why he makes that conclusion. Meiggs does not mention this or discuss Forster’s claim. I thank Collin Moat for the observation that cedar must have been imported.

⁴¹⁰ The wine that Calypso provides for Odysseus when he leaves Ogygia is certainly made from these grapes; see below, pages 137–138.

action possibly supplying a tempo for her tune,⁴¹¹ with the chattering birds (τανύγλωσσοί, 66) accompanying. The main sense of “touch” is the softness of the meadows (λειμῶνες μαλακοί, 72). The site is, above all, a treat for the eyes, emphasized by the rare beauty that makes even this well-traveled god stop in his tracks:

Od. 5.73–77

ἐνθα κ' ἔπειτα καὶ ἀθάνατός περ ἐπελθὼν
θηήσαιο ἰδὼν καὶ τερφθεῖη φρεσὶν ἦσιν.
 ἐνθα στὰς θηεῖτο διάκτορος Ἀργεῖφόντης.
 αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ πάντα ἐῷ θηήσατο θυμῷ,
 αὐτίκ' ἄρ' εἰς εὐρὺ σπέος ἦλυθεν.

There even an immortal, who chanced to come,
 might gaze and marvel, and delight his soul, and
 there the guide Argeïphontes stood and marveled.
 But when he had marveled in his heart at all
 things, he went straight into the wide cave.

Hermes' delight is prominently connected with visuality in the use of θεάομαι, which is proclaimed three times within three lines at this *ekphrasis*' conclusion. While some *ekphrases* are dropped into a narrative seemingly “by” the narrator or author, others arise organically from the point of view of a diegetic character. In this instance, Hermes is our “way in.”⁴¹² His arrival (5.55–57) prompts the extended description and his awe and entry into the space (73–77) conclude it. This *ekphrasis* also plays a narrative role within the episode, pointing out the remoteness of the site, the woods from which Odysseus will fell raft-building materials,⁴¹³ and the rather alluring and comfortable nature of the space which contrasts with Odysseus' misery, staged on the beach, which gets no such description.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹¹ On the relationship between weaving and singing, particularly regarding rhythm, see Anthony Tuck, “Singing the Rug: Patterned Textiles and the Origins of Indo-European Metrical Poetry,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 110, no. 4 (2006): 539–550.

⁴¹² On the focalization through Hermes, see Irene J. F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey*, Cambridge University Press, 2001: *ad loc.*, 128–129.

⁴¹³ On the connection between the description of the island and Odysseus' raft building materials, see de Jong, *Commentary*, 137.

⁴¹⁴ de Jong, *Commentary*, 129.

The role of extended descriptions such as this one, particularly regarding issues of character, has been extensively studied.⁴¹⁵ Already in antiquity, Dio Chrysostom noted the rhetorical power of ekphrastic descriptions of certain settings and their implications for the characterizations of certain figures:

Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses 2, On Kingship* 2.41.

σχεδὸν γὰρ οὐκ ἔοικεν οὐδὲ τῶν ἄλλων
οὐδὲν μᾶτην ὁ ποιητὴς οὗτος λέγειν ἀλλὰ
καὶ στολὴν καὶ οἶκησιν καὶ δίαίταν πρὸς
τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἦθος πολλάκις
ἀπεικάζει.

Indeed it is fairly clear that [Homer] never elsewhere speaks without a purpose, but repeatedly depicts the dress, dwelling, and manner of life of people so as to accord with their character.

As a prime example of this technique, Dio cites Homer's *ekphrasis* of Calypso's cave:

διὰ τοῦτο τὰ μὲν ἐν Φαίᾳ βασιλείᾳ
ἐκόσμησεν ἄλσεσιν τε καὶ ὀπώρας δι'
ἔτους καὶ κρήναις ἀενάοις, ἔτι δὲ μᾶλλον
τὸ τῆς Καλυψοῦς, ἅτε ὠραίας καὶ
φιλανθρώπου θεᾶς ἐν νήσῳ καθ' αὐτὴν
ἀποκισμένης·

...

This is why [Homer] beautified the palace of the Phaeacians with groves, perennial fruits, and ever-flowing springs; and again, with even greater skill, the grotto of Calypso, since she was a beautiful and kindly goddess living off by herself on an island...

[Dio Chrysostom summarizes the contents of *Od.* 5.55–75]

πάντα γὰρ ταῦτα ὑπερφυῶς ἐρωτικὰ καὶ
ἡδέα, κατὰ τὸν τρόπον οἶμαι τῆς θεᾶς.

Now all these touches are marvellously suggestive of love and pleasure, and to my thinking reveal the character of the goddess.

As far back as the second century CE, then, we see an association between Calypso's characterization and her environment. Dio's interpretation of the *ekphrasis* as emphasizing the erotic affect of the scene (ἐρωτικὰ) also lends credence to some modern scholars' interpretation

⁴¹⁵ e.g. Froma I. Zeitlin, "Figure: *Ekphrasis*," *Greece & Rome* 60, no. 1 (2013), 20–22, 25; Valentine Cunningham, "Why *Ekphrasis*?," *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1, Special Issues on *Ekphrasis* (2007), 63: "*Ekphrasis*, for instance, as *prosopopoeia*, putting a face on, granting presence, the presence of the made object, where there was none; *prosopopoeia* as giving a self, too, to the character or the poet."

of the site as an aphrodisiac paradise.⁴¹⁶ While it is possible that the floral and faunal abundance and easy prosperity merely suggest the sexuality inherent in notions of fertility, it is also possible to read into this *ekphrasis* a direct equivalence between certain aspects of the landscape and Calypso's body.

As explored in Chapter 1, female bodies were (and, according to Elizabeth Grosz, continue to be) understood as inherently tied to moisture and fluids, and this liquidity is especially associated with female sexuality.⁴¹⁷ Calypso's realm features four springs:

Od. 5.70–71

κρῆναι δ' ἐξείης πίσυρες ῥέον ὕδατι λευκῷ,
πλησίαι ἀλλήλων τετραμμέναι ἄλλυδις ἄλλη.

And four springs in a row were flowing with
bright water close by one another, turned one
this way, one that.

The poet emphasizes here an interplay between wild abundance and divinely-controlled artifice: the springs are orderly, “in a row” (ἐξείης), but are also unruly, turned hither and thither (τετραμμέναι ἄλλυδις ἄλλη). The four springs and their divergence in different directions may suggest a correlation with the four cardinal directions. Ogygia is therefore the place where the four directions converge, a place that, while not the center of the inhabited world, *is* the “center of the sea” (ὅθι τ' ὀμφαλὸς ἐστὶ θαλάσσης, *Od.* 1.50), the place furthest from any other land. This accords with Hermes' complaints about the geography of his commute to Ogygia (5.100–101) and the desolate nature of the island, devoid of humans who could offer sacrifice (5.101–102). The four springs therefore communicate the tensions between unbridled, abundant nature and the imposition of control, which is reflected more broadly in the characterizations of Ogygia and of Calypso herself.

⁴¹⁶ e.g. Xian, “« Locus amoenus »”, *passim*.

⁴¹⁷ See pages 38–40, 92–93, and Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 203.

The springs may have another connotation, one more explicitly linked to Calypso's body. The poet does not specify where the springs originate from, but it is probably from inside the cave.⁴¹⁸ Caves were frequent, if not the only, sources of such fountains. The mention of the grapevines limning the cave mouth (68–69) immediately before the mention of the springs (70–71) signals a “zooming in” from the surrounding area to the cave itself. From there, the four springs flow, a number which might seem excessive anywhere except the haunt of Calypso. Calame has shown that in archaic love poetry, arousal was occasionally likened to or suggested through liquid imagery.⁴¹⁹ In Sappho Fragment 2, streams of cold water are invoked within an eroticized *locus amoenus* in a grove of Aphrodite.⁴²⁰ This grove may have included a sacred cave, if a variant reading of the *ostracon*'s text is accurate.⁴²¹ Several erotic epigrams from the *Greek Anthology* allude to vaginal lubrication with various bodies of water,⁴²² including the

⁴¹⁸ This is the interpretation of Haller, “Landscape,” 98.

⁴¹⁹ Claude Calame, *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece*, tr. Janet Lloyd, Princeton University Press, 2013: 14, 57,

⁴²⁰ e.g. Sappho, fr. 2, where she depicts “cold water,” ὕδωρ ψυχρὸν (line 5), flowing through the apple branches in a grove of Aphrodite. For a detailed discussion of the eroticism in the *locus amoenus* painted by Sappho here, see Anne Pippin Burnett, *Three Archaic Poets: Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho*, Harvard University Press, 1983: 257–276. She notes, “Love is physical here, as it must be to be worthy of Aphrodite's notice, and though the song describes no act... we are made to feel that desire and satisfaction work hand in hand in this sacred grove,” 270. Burnett also makes a comparison between Sappho's grove of Aphrodite and Calypso's island: “in its entirety Sappho's sacred spot within a flowery border is strongly reminiscent of the antique landscape of female sexuality. Calypso had her dark cave... with its streams of fresh water, encircled by meadows that were soft with violets,” 266.

⁴²¹ The first line of Fragment 2 is generally rendered δεῦρ' ἐκ Κρήτης ἐπ' ἰ τόνδ] εὐ ναῦον; this has been corrected from what was written on the sherd: .ναῦον. Some scholars, instead of correcting this to ναῦον, read ἔναυλον at the end of the line, which would change the meaning from “here to me from Crete to this temple” to “here to me from Crete to this grotto,” This word is well-attested in reference to caves: cf. Hesiod, *Th.* 129; and AR 1.1226, where it is glossed by a scholiast: ἐναύλους: τὰ σπήλαια νῦν. This reading was proposed by R. Pfeiffer, “Vier Sappho-Strophen auf einem ptolemäischen Ostrakon,” *Philologus* 83 (1937), 117–125 and has been adopted by several subsequent scholars, on this, see Burnett, *Three*, 268 and note 107.

⁴²² On these and other sea and ship metaphors in erotic Greek epigram, see Maria Kanellou, “Unboxing Sea and Nautical Metaphors,” in *Greek Erotic Epigram: A Diachronic Approach*, Oxford University Press, 2025.

sea,⁴²³ rivers,⁴²⁴ bays or harbors,⁴²⁵ or liquid being poured.⁴²⁶ Combining all of these observations, it is reasonable to propose a reading of the landscape here not only as an ecologization of Calypso's body, but more specifically of the cave as her sexual organs, the abundant liquid emerging from within akin to vaginal secretions. The cave-as-womb imagery, as outlined in Chapter 1, was already at work in archaic Greek poetry in contexts of reproduction. I suggest that here, and elsewhere, the descriptions of the caves in which mixed-agency couples copulate can be read as proxies for female genitalia as well.

The womb-cave and springs are not the only way that Calypso's body is ecologized in this passage. We are first introduced to Calypso as a "fair-haired nymph" (ἐυπλόκαμος, 58⁴²⁷), before detailing the arboreal contents of the area. The key feature of the trees is their pleasant scent (ὀδμή / κέδρου τ' εὐκεάτοιο θύου τ' ἀνὰ νῆσον ὀδώδει, 59-60; εὐώδης κυπάρισσος, 64). The association of foliage with hair, particularly women's hair, is seen elsewhere in Greek and

⁴²³ e.g. *AP* 11.220.1 (Anonymous): ἄλμυρὸν ἐς πέλαγος, "salty sea". Nicarchus (1st c. CE) uses the same image, "grey sea," (πολὴν ἄλα) in *AP* 11.328 for the vagina of a woman who is "shared between three men," the other two men occupy other orifices. Nikos Litinas, "The Maculate Muse: A source of sexual arousal in fourth-century AD Alexandria (Palladas, *AP* 9.395)," *Eugesta, Journal on Gender Studies in Antiquity* 7 (2017); see pages 10–11. Additionally, in a particularly vulgar and unflattering epigram about a prostitute, her body is compared with a dilapidated ship, and "below, she is full of [*lit.* waterlogged with] bilge water," νέρθε δὲ πάνθ' ὑπέραντλα νεώς, Meleager, *AP* 5.204.7.

⁴²⁴ *AP* 5.60.5–6 (Rufinus, 3rd–4th c. CE): τὸν δ' ὑπεροιδαίνοντα ... / ... Εὐρώταν, "the swelling Eurotas." The Eurotas was well-known in antiquity for being particularly well-watered, see Euripides, *IT* 399 εὐδροον; *Hecuba* 650 εὐροον; Theognis, *Eleg.* 1.1088 καλλιρόωι ποταμῶι; Euripides, *Tr.* 210 δῖναν γ' Εὐρώτα. For more on this, see Litinas 2017: 11.

⁴²⁵ e.g. *AP* 10.21.8 (Philodemus, 1st c. BCE): λιμένας. Sider comments: "Just as κόλπος has a double meaning... so too here... note the extended meaning of λιμήν for the female's genitals, as in Empedokles 31 B 98.3 DK, Κύπριδος ὁρμισθεῖσα τελείοις ἐν λιμένεσσιν and Sophocles, *OT* 1208." David Sider, *The Epigrams of Philodemus: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1997: 94.

⁴²⁶ *AP* 5.55.8 (Dioscorides): Δωρὶς... ἐξεχύθη. This 3rd century BCE example of a woman "pouring" in a sexual context seems to be the earliest attestation of poetic depictions of vaginal secretions with liquid vocabulary.

⁴²⁷ Calypso is also ἐυπλόκαμος at *Od.* 1.86, 5.30, 7.246, 255, and 12.449.

Latin literature,⁴²⁸ and is most plainly embodied in certain nymphs' transformation stories.⁴²⁹

Hair, in turn, has been shown to epitomize women's bodies and sexuality,⁴³⁰ and of particular emphasis is the scent of a woman's hair.⁴³¹ The explicit reference to Calypso's beautiful locks and the passage's emphasis on foliage suggest a deeper affinity between the two, thus representing a particularly erotic part of Calypso's body through landscape.

As a nymph,⁴³² Calypso's identification with the environment is only natural. Beyond mere nature deities, nymphs' bodies were considered to comprise the natural world itself. This "ecologizing" of the female body, while made explicit in later sources,⁴³³ is usually subtextual in earlier accounts, though there is one notable early exception in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*:

HH 5.264–72

τῆισι δ' ἄμ' ἡ' ἐλάται ἡὲ δρύες ὑψικάρῃνοι
 γεινομένησιν ἔφρυσαν ἐπὶ χθονὶ βοιωτανείρῃ·
 καλαὶ τηλεθάουσαι ἐν οὐρεσιν ὑψηλοῖσιν
 ἐστᾶσ' ἡλίβατοι, τεμένη δέ ἐ κικλήσκουσιν
 ἀθανάτων· τὰς δ' οὐ τι βροτοὶ κείρουσι σιδήρῳ.

"As [nymphs] are born, fir trees or tall
 oaks come forth on the earth that feeds
 mankind: fine and healthy they stand
 towering in the high mountains, and
 people call them precincts of the gods,
 and mortals do not cut them with the axe.

⁴²⁸ Κόμαι was frequently used to describe foliage, e.g. *Od.* 23.195, Cratin. 296, et al. See LSJ "κόμη," definition II. While it is tempting within the present schema to interpret this hair as pubic hair, there is no evidence for this use in the LSJ or in proximity searches with ἡβη in the *TLG*. The preferred word for pubic hair in ancient Greek from all time periods seems to have been θρίξ, with a qualifying use of ἡβη for males and αἰδοῖον for females. Nonetheless, it has been shown by several scholars that hair on a woman's head was an erogenous aspect of a woman's appearance; see Molly Myerowitz Levine, "The Gendered Grammar of Ancient Mediterranean Hair," in *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, eds. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger, De Gruyter, 1995; Oliver Pilz, "Water, Moisture, Kourtophobic Deities, and Ritual Hair-Cutting among the Greeks," *Les Études classiques* 87 (2019), 112.

⁴²⁹ For example, the story of Daphne and Apollo; on an interpretation of Ovid's account of the myth (*Met.* 1.452–567) through a focus on Daphne's hair, see Levine, "Gendered," 82–85.

⁴³⁰ See Calame, *Poetics*, 27, note 29

⁴³¹ On this, see, for example, Jane Burkowski, "Puellae Gently Glow: Scent, sweat, and the real in Latin love elegy and Ovid's didactic works," in *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity*, edited by Mark Bradley, Victoria Leonard, and Laurence Totelin, Routledge, 2021: "Certainly, hair (and especially women's hair) was an important locus of messages about women's sexuality and held a lot of erotic cultural 'baggage' for the Romans, but it did so less by direct association than by a process of metonymy;" and Elizabeth Bartman, "Hair and the artifice of Roman female adornment," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1 (2001), 5: "In the Roman world... hair's erotic potential made it a lightning rod for anxieties about female sexuality and public behavior."

⁴³² Although Calypso is everywhere considered a nymph, there is little agreement in antiquity as to her typology. Hesiod names her as a daughter of Oceanus, and thus an Oceanid (*Th.* 359); Apollodorus provides variations where she is a Nereid (*Lib.* 1.2.7) or a daughter of Atlas (*Lib.* Epit. 7.24), as she is in Homer (*Od.* 1.52; 7.245).

⁴³³ In the Hellenistic period, Callimachus's depiction of some springs playfully switches between the personified and the inanimate, *Aetia*, fr. 66. On this, see Jennifer Larson, *The Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore*, Oxford University Press, 2001: 52–53.

ἀλλ' ὅτε κεν δὴ μοῖρα παρεστήκη θανάτοιο,
ἀζάνεται μὲν πρῶτον ἐπὶ χθονὶ δένδρεα καλά,
 φλοιὸς δ' ἀμφοιπεριφθινύθει, πίπτουσι δ' ἅπ' ὄζοι,
τῶν δέ θ' ὁμοῦ ψυχὴ λείπει φάος ἡελίοιο.

But when their fated death is at hand, first
 the fair trees wither where they stand,
 their bark decays about them, their
 branches fall off, and simultaneously the
nymphs' souls depart from the sunlight.

Here, Aphrodite explains that the lifespan of tree nymphs is coeval with the lifespan of the trees themselves and that, critically, the death of the tree is also death of the nymph.⁴³⁴ This equation of the body of the nymph to the materiality of the tree is therefore important in the characterization of various female characters but is crucial in the interpretation of Calypso's landscape for the identification of the cave as the womb.

We now come to the primary theme of this chapter: sexual encounters, especially atypical and threatening ones. Just before the passage from the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* mentioned above, the nymphs of the mountain are said to have sex with Sileni and Hermes in caves:

HH 5.258–272

αἱ τὸδε ναιετάουσιν ὄρος μέγα τε ζάθεόν τε·
 αἱ ῥ' οὔτε θνητοῖς οὔτ' ἀθανάτοισιν
 ἔπονται...
 τῇσι δὲ Σειληνοὶ τε καὶ εὖσκοπος
 Ἀργειφόντης
μίσγοντ' ἐν φιλότῃ μυχῶι σπείων ἐροέντων.

...mountain-couching nymphs who dwell on
 this great and holy mountain... Sileni and the
 keen-sighted Argus-slayer unite in love with
 them in the recesses of lovely caves.

M. L. West's Loeb translation here, "lovely caves", uses the standard translation of ἐρόεις, which is often used to describe "lovely" nymphs. However, being derived from ἔρος, it can also refer explicitly to sexual attraction, and indeed elsewhere it is primarily used in erotic contexts.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁴ The use in line 264 of ἅμ(α), followed shortly by δρύες, works in the etymology of *hamadryads*, the type of nymphs who are "with the trees".

⁴³⁵ This adjective can have more "chaste" (usually visual) aesthetic connotations: it modifies the singing mouths of the Muses at the end of *hH Selene*, 20. Hesiod uses the adjective three times, only in the *Theogony*, always to describe one of the nymphs within a long list or catalogue: 245, 251, 357. Ibycus uses it to describe the "beauty" (μορφὰν) of Troilus, fr. 1a, 45. In more erotic contexts: it describes the flowers in the meadow where Persephone is kidnapped by Hades, *hH Dem.* 425; Anacreon, fr. 373, uses it of the lyre with which a man seduces a woman. Moschus, *Lament for Bion*, 66, of girls' kisses (φιλήματα); Oppian, *Halieutica*, modifying "pleasure" τερπωλὴν τ' ἐρόεσσαν; Collothus, *Rape of Helen*, 305, of Helen's eyes as she yearns for Paris; and Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 10.279, of the beauty of a youth that attracts a Satyr; 346, τερπωλὴν ἐρόεσσαν, a "double joy" felt by Dionysus during a sexual encounter; *et alia* in *Dion*.

Moreover, the majority of its uses coincide with descriptions of or in association with Aphrodite.⁴³⁶ Since this is the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* and the goddess explicitly refers to Hermes and the Sileni having sex (μίσγοντ' ἐν φιλότῃτι) with the nymphs, “lovely” seems too chaste a translation. “Sensual”, “amorous” or even its relative “erotic” might more accurately encapsulate the adjective. We therefore see from at least the late archaic or early classical period⁴³⁷ the designation of certain cavernous spaces in which amorous encounters take place as themselves “sensual caves.”

Returning to the Odyssean passage, the fact of Odysseus and Calypso’s sexual relations inside the cave is mentioned multiple times.

Od. 5.151–158⁴³⁸

τὸν δ' ἄρ' ἐπ' ἀκτῆς εὗρε καθήμενον· οὐδέ ποτ'
ὄσσε
δακρυόφιν τέρσοντο, κατεΐβετο δὲ γλυκὺς αἰὼν
νόστον ὀδυρομένῳ, ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι ἦνδανε νύμφη.
ἀλλ' ἢ τοι νύκτας μὲν ἰαύεσκεν καὶ ἀνάγκη
ἐν σπέσσι γλαφυροῖσι παρ' οὐκ ἐθέλων ἐθελούσῃ·
ἤματα δ' αἶμα πέτρῃσι καὶ ἡιόνεσσι καθίζων
δάκρυσι καὶ στοναχῇσι καὶ ἄλγεσι θυμὸν ἐρέχθων
πόντον ἐπ' ἀτρύγετον δερκέσκετο δάκρυα λείβων.

Him she found sitting on the shore, and his eyes were never dry of tears, and his sweet life was ebbing away, as he grieved for his return, for the nymph no longer pleased him. By night indeed he would sleep by her side perforce in the hollow caves, unwilling beside the willing nymph, but by day he would sit on the rocks and the sands, racking his heart with tears and groans and griefs, and he would look out over the [barren]⁴³⁹ sea, shedding tears.

⁴³⁶ e.g. Alcaeus fr. 296b, of trees in some (fragmentary) context of Aphrodite. A Homeric scholiast uses it to gloss the meaning of ἱμερόεντα at *Od.* 18.194, of the dances of the Graces which Aphrodite watches. Dorotheus uses it to modify Aphrodite’s epithet Κυθήρη, David Pingree, *Dorothei Sidonii carmen astrologicum*, Teubner, 1976: 399. Musaeus, *Hero and Lysander*, 145, of the “laws” (θεσμὰ) of Aphrodite.

⁴³⁷ The dating of the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, like that of most Homeric Hymns, has caused debate. Those in favor of an earlier, archaic dating include Patricia G. Preziosi, “The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite: An Oral Analysis,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 71 (1967): 171–204, and Hugh Parry, “The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite: Erotic ‘Ananke,’” *Phoenix* 40, no. 3 (1986), note 12. Proponents of a low chronology in the 4th century BCE or even later include Grace Freed and Raymond Bentman, “The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite,” *The Classical Journal* 50, no. 4 (1955): 153–159; Pascale Brillet-Dubois, “An Erotic Aristeia: The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite and its Relation to the Iliadic Tradition,” in *The Homeric Hymns: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Andrew Faulkner, Oxford University Press, 2011: 107. Most proponents of this later dating point to the hymn’s conscious reworking of entire Homeric lines which suggests a robust written Homeric text at the time of the hymn’s composition.

⁴³⁸ cf. 5.225–227, their final sexual encounter seems to bring mutual pleasure.

⁴³⁹ I have emended West’s translation here from “unending” to “barren,” which is the more literal definition of ἀ-τρύγετον, “not harvestable,” from τρυγάω.

This passage establishes Odysseus' grief; instead of luxuriating in the *locus amoenus* of the rest of Calypso's island, he sits on a beach looking outward to the barren sea (πόντον ἐπ' ἀτρύγετον). The barrenness of the sea and his ascetic insistence on spending his days on what appears to be the polar opposite of Calypso's lush and comfortable gardens calls greater attention to the discrepancy between Odysseus' desires and his current existence. Even though the island is paradisaical, Odysseus cannot enjoy its verdant luxury or the sensual pleasures of a life with Calypso. This fact therefore underscores the power imbalance between Odysseus and Calypso. Even though he is the male partner in this relationship, he is powerless to physically leave the island and ultimately powerless to resist the sexual advances of the amorous goddess. The sexual agency within this couple is therefore strongly skewed toward Calypso, who also holds the greater divine power.

The placement of their sexual encounters inside the cave underscores this power imbalance. It is important to note that other, more normative, sexual encounters in Homer and other archaic Greek poetry take place in a meadow.⁴⁴⁰ The meadow is a perfectly fine spot for Hades' kidnap (if not the actual rape) of Persephone.⁴⁴¹ Zeus seduces Hera and persuades her to have sex on Mt. Ida and while they are in the act, a meadow sprouts up beneath them.⁴⁴² These relationships differ from that of Calypso and Odysseus in that they conform to the status quo regarding gendered power relations. Zeus seduces Hera, therefore acting as the initiator of sexual relations; Hades seizes Persephone and steals her away to the Underworld. Both of these methods exhibit male initiative for and agency in sexual intercourse. Calypso has at her disposal a nice meadow with beautiful flowers and fragrant herbs (5.72–73). If Odysseus and Calypso

⁴⁴⁰ On the meadow as the site of sexual encounters, especially mythical rapes, see Susan Deacy, "From 'Flowery Tales' To 'Heroic Rapes': Virginal Subjectivity In The Mythological Meadow," *Arethusa* 46, no. 3 (2013): 395–413; Calame, *Poetics*, "Eroticized Meadows," 154–157.

⁴⁴¹ *hH Dem.* 2.7: λειμῶν' ἄμ μαλακόν.

⁴⁴² *Il.* 14.346–351. Zeus snatches Europa from a meadow: *schol. Iliad* 12.307; Aeschylus, fr. 99.1.

were on equal divine footing, therefore rendering the male Odysseus as the more powerful partner, the meadow might have been the normative locale for their erotic activities. But their inequality, emphasized repeatedly both in Book 5 and elsewhere in the poem, renders this more normative sexual space inappropriate. The cave, however, functions as the heterotopic “safe space” in which this atypically-powered relationship may be staged without threatening the dominant gender-power dynamics found in more normative sexual spaces: houses/bedrooms or meadows and other pastoral locales.⁴⁴³

The key reason that this heterotopic cave is a “safe space” for this mythic (and therefore, hypothetical) examination of alternative gender-power dynamics is that it is doomed to fail. In order to maintain the status quo, and therefore uphold the gender dynamics within the world order, Calypso and Odysseus must not end up together. In the poem, this is justified by Odysseus’ fate: Hermes tells Calypso, “It is not his fate to perish here far away from his loved ones” (οὐ γάρ οἱ τῇδ’ αἴσα φίλων ἀπονόσφιν ὀλέσθαι, 5.113). Within Greek culture, however, the relationships between goddesses and mortal men threaten the understood gender-power dynamics, and must be swiftly rebuked. Calypso complains to Hermes about this very fact—

Od. 5.118–129

“σχέτλιοί ἐστε, θεοί, ζηλήμονες ἔξοχον ἄλλων,
οἳ τε θεαῖς ἀγάσθε παρ’ ἀνδράσιν εὐνάζεσθαι
ἀμφοδίην, ἣν τίς τε φίλον ποιήσεται ἀκοίτην.
ὥς μὲν ὅτ’ Ὀρίων’ ἔλετο ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως,
τόφρα οἱ ἠγάσθε θεοὶ ῥεῖα ζῶντες,
ἥος ἐν Ὀρτυγίῃ χρυσόθρονος Ἄρτεμις ἀγνή
οἷς ἀγανοῖς βελέεσσιν ἐποικομένη κατέπεφνε.
ὥς δ’ ὁπότε Ἰασίῳ ἐυπλόκαμος Δημήτηρ,
ὃ θυμῷ εἷζασα, μίγη φιλότητι καὶ εὐνῇ

“Cruel are you, you gods, and quick to envy
above all others, seeing that you begrudge
goddesses that they should mate with men
openly, if any takes a mortal as her own
bedfellow. Thus, when rosy-fingered Dawn
took to herself Orion, you gods that live at ease
begrudged her, till in Ortygia chaste Artemis of
the golden throne assailed him with her gentle
shafts and slew him. Thus too, when
fair-tressed Demeter, yielding to her passion,
lay in love with Iasion in the thrice-plowed

⁴⁴³ Sexual encounters in the pastoral works of Theocritus and Vergil, as well as the pastoral romances popular in the early centuries CE (e.g. *Daphnis and Chloe*), never feature sexual encounters inside of caves. For the most part, the relationships portrayed in these works do not involve atypical power dynamics of goddess-mortal man relationships or even those between socially more powerful mortal women and men. In *Daphnis and Chloe*, a Cave of the Nymphs is an important location for the titular characters’ story, but no one in the novel has sex inside the cave.

νειῶ ἐνι τριπόλῳ· οὐδὲ δὴν ἦεν ἄπυστος
 Ζεὺς, ὅς μιν κατέπεφνε βαλὼν ἀργῆτι κεραυνῶ.
 ὥς δ' αὖ νῦν μοι ἄγασθε, θεοί, βροτὸν ἄνδρα
 παρεῖναι.

fallow land, Zeus was not long without
 knowledge of it, but smote him with his bright
 thunderbolt and slew him. And in this way
 again do you now begrudge me, you gods, that
 a mortal man should be my companion.

She points out the double-standard between gods' commonplace liaisons with mortal women (which conforms to normative gender-power dynamics) and goddess' unnatural coupling with mortal men.⁴⁴⁴

The two mortal men Calypso names here are both killed because of their relationships with goddesses, even though they were not the agent of such couplings. Odysseus will not suffer a similar death at the hands of a god, but his prolonged interaction with Calypso has been interpreted by some scholars as a kind of death in the sense of his stagnation.⁴⁴⁵ By staying on Ogygia, Odysseus would in essence cease to exist in a manner much worse than death: he would not earn his *kleos*.⁴⁴⁶ Other scholars see death in the Ogygia episode as a symbolic and geographic undercurrent. Building upon the more mortuary interpretations of the island's description, these interpretations show how the physical movement of Hermes and Odysseus resembles movements of Hermes and dead souls elsewhere in Homer. As Crane observes, after the council of the gods at the beginning of the book, "Hermes takes his *rhabdos*, which does not

⁴⁴⁴ The poet sneaks in one additional example of the goddess/male mortal relationship dynamic in the first line of Book 5: Ἡὼς δ' ἐκ λεγέων παρ' ἀγαυοῦ Τιθωνοῖο / ὄρνυθ': "Now Dawn arose from her couch from beside lordly Tithonus." The same formula is used to open *Iliad* 11. While theirs is not one of the relationships cited by Calypso, it is often featured in such catalogues, e.g. *hH Aphr.* 5.218; Hesiod, *Th.* 984; Lucian, *Parliament of the Gods*, 8, among a list featuring also Anchises, Endymion, Iasion, and others. See Corinne Ondine Pache, "Odysseus νυμφόληπτος," in *A Moment's Ornament: The Poetics of Nympholepsy in Ancient Greece*, Oxford University Press, 2011: 101.

⁴⁴⁵ Jessica Navarro Diana, "Calypso as a Figure of Death in the *Odyssey*: The Duality of the Calypso Episode," in *Approaches to Greek and Latin Language, Literature and History: κατὰ σχολήν*, eds. Sandra Rodríguez Piedrabuena, Gréta Kádas, Sara Macías Otero, and Kevin Zilverberg, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019; Filippomaria Pontani, "Speaking and concealing – Calypso in the eyes of some (ancient) interpreters," *Symbolae Osloenses: Norwegian Journal of Greek and Latin Studies* 87 (2013), 42ff; Rick M. Newton, "The Rebirth of Odysseus," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 25, no. 1 (1984): 11.

⁴⁴⁶ On a similar note, for Calypso and Circe as threats of oblivion, see Michaël Martin, "Les dangers suaves de l'identité oubliée: Circé, Calypso et les épouses célestes des chamans sibériens," *GAIA. Revue interdisciplinaire sur la Grèce ancienne* 10 (2006): 133–146.

help him on his journey and which he does not use on Ogygia, because the *rhabdos* marks him here, as it does in *Odyssey* 24, as the psychopomp, the mediator between this world and the next.”⁴⁴⁷ Within Nanno Marinatos’ sketch of Odysseus’ “cosmic journey”, Ogygia, understood to be in the far west where the sun sets, marks the geographic beginning of the realm of the dead.⁴⁴⁸ The episode with Calypso—whose name, Marinatos argues, means “darkness”⁴⁴⁹—is therefore interpreted as the “western cosmic juncture,” which marks the end of Odysseus’ cosmic journey.

Calypso’s obvious counterpart is Circe,⁴⁵⁰ offspring of the sun, residing on her own island in the east. The comparison of these two has been a source of discussion and debate since the *Odyssey* itself: Odysseus tells the Phaeacians about Calypso keeping him in her cave, and that Circe did the same (ὥς δ’ αὐτῶς, 9.31). As is well-known, the poet uses common motifs and formulae between the two episodes. Later ancient sources mention them in conjunction as well.⁴⁵¹ 19th century German scholars struggled to make sense of the two: some believe that Circe is the older or more original goddess in the tale and that Calypso was “duplicated” from that model.⁴⁵² Wilamowitz-Moellendorff—shucking the constraints of Occam’s Razor—argued that Circe was the older figure that inspired the creation of Calypso, but that Calypso was in turn the model for Circe as presented in *Odyssey* 10.⁴⁵³ Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s interpretation has been the dominant understanding for over a century. Crane engaged with this view from a comparative perspective with ancient Middle Eastern parallels in his *Calypso: Backgrounds and*

⁴⁴⁷ Crane, *Calypso*, 16.

⁴⁴⁸ Nanno Marinatos, “The Cosmic Journey of Odysseus,” *Numen* 48, no. 4 (2001): 381–416.

⁴⁴⁹ Most commentators interpret her name more literally as “the concealer”, e.g. de Jong, *Commentary*, 129.

⁴⁵⁰ de Jong refers to Calypso as a “doublet” of Circe and notes their points of commonality: *Commentary*, 130.

⁴⁵¹ The following are instances where Calypso and Circe are mentioned together without any other characters (except Odysseus): e.g. Cicero, *de Officiis*, 1.113; Plotinus, *Ennead* 1. 6.19–20. Dictys goes so far as to call them sisters, fr. 1a.49f: ἡ Καλυψὼ ἡ ἀδελφὴ τῆς Κίρκης.

⁴⁵² Adolf Kirchhoff, *Die Homerische Odyssee*, Verlag von W. Hertz, 1879: 275–340; Benedictus Niese, *Die Entwicklung der homerischen Poesie*, Weidmann, 1882: 184–185..

⁴⁵³ Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Homerische Untersuchungen*, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1884: 122–123. Crane mistakenly cites this as *Philologische Untersuchungen*.

Conventions of the Odyssey (which spends much more time discussing Circe than Calypso).

More recently, Emily West has also examined Circe and Calypso from a comparative perspective with ancient Indian epic, and argues for an Indo-European scaffolding for the archetype.⁴⁵⁴

Whatever the precise genetic connection between the Circe and Calypso episodes, there is a broad agreement that they have similar motifs, characteristics, and narrative roles. Part of the question may be, then, what makes them different? And how is Odysseus' relationship with each of them different?

One primary difference is their divine statuses: Calypso is a nymph, while Circe is a goddess. The distinctions between levels or types of divine power are always messy. In her monograph *Greek Nymphs*, Jennifer Larson draws a distinction for her research purposes which falls along the lines of localized versus broad appeal and worship.⁴⁵⁵ While nymphs were understood to have superhumanly long lives, they were still considered to be mortal.⁴⁵⁶ This cannot be the case for Calypso, however, whose repeated offers of immortality to Odysseus belie any assumption of her own mortality. On the other hand, although Circe is supposed to be immortal, she becomes terrified of being stabbed by Odysseus and (according to Odysseus) beseeches him. The act of Circe's supplication to Odysseus completely reverses the power dynamics that Circe intends. It is also notable that Odysseus' elevated position over Circe (literally and figuratively) is only due to the early intervention of Hermes, whose anaphylactic *moly* renders Circe's power impotent. In fact, the poet (speaking through Odysseus) mentions that mortals are not able to find or harvest *moly*, but that the gods "can do anything".⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁴ Emily West, "Circe, Calypso, Hidimba: The *Odyssey* and Graeco-Aryan Proto-Epic," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 42, no. 1/2 (2014): 144–174.

⁴⁵⁵ Larson, *Greek Nymphs*, 7–8 and throughout.

⁴⁵⁶ See the above discussion on the death of nymphs in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. Also, Larson, *Greek Nymphs*, 31.

⁴⁵⁷ *Od.* 10.305–306: μῶλυ δέ μιν καλέουσι θεοί· χαλεπὸν δέ τ' ὀρύσσειν / ἀνδράσι γε θνητοῖσι, θεοὶ δέ τε πάντα δύνανται.

It is only after this role reversal (and an oath not to harm him) that Circe and Odysseus establish a sexual relationship.⁴⁵⁸ The only context in which their sexual relationship exists in, then, is one where the gender dynamics conform to expected norms. The two of them are still unequal in terms of their respective divine statuses, but the intervention by Hermes renders a big part of Circe's power irrelevant. She is therefore not able to exert control over Odysseus.

Additionally, her acute fear of his near-ambush also casts slight doubt on the immortality we assume that she must have, though it is not possible to argue strongly for her mortality given only this fear. Circe and Odysseus' much more symmetrical power dynamic here is also seen in the fact that Odysseus is able to negotiate his safety before going to bed with her, therefore exhibiting a fair amount of consent for the interaction. Conversely, in Book 5, he has no real agency within his sexual relationship with Calypso, and is made to have sex, "by necessity, he unwilling with her willing."⁴⁵⁹

Calypso, then, is the only one of these two goddesses who is actually able to exert control or coercion over Odysseus, despite being seemingly of a lesser divine status than her counterpart. Because Odysseus and Circe's sexual relationship exists within the required gender dynamics, their union takes place in Circe's house—crucially, in her bed.⁴⁶⁰ There is no such mention of a bed in Calypso's cave nor of any sort of physical comfort in their lovemaking.⁴⁶¹ Odysseus and Calypso's sexual relationship with its unnaturally skewed gender-power dynamics is staged within a place not only atypical for a romantic encounter, but wholly opposite to both the bed in Circe's palace and the marriage bed of Penelope.

⁴⁵⁸ *Od.* 10.347.

⁴⁵⁹ *Od.* 5.154–5: ἀνάγκη / ... παρ' οὐκ ἐθέλων ἐθελούση.

⁴⁶⁰ There is much emphasis on the bed: *Od.* 10.334, εὐνή; 335, εὐνή; 340, εὐνή; 342, εὐνή; 347, εὐνή.

⁴⁶¹ The only mentions of a bed in *Odyssey* 5 are in the context of Demeter and Iasion's relationship (126) and Odysseus' bed of leaves that he crafts for himself on the beach of Scheria (482).

The parallels between Circe and Calypso's roles in the story led to the occasional mythical variant where Circe lived not in a palace, but in a cave. Pausanias describes at length the illustrations carved on a cedar chest dedicated in the Temple of Hera at Olympia, including both mythological and historical scenes.⁴⁶² Several of the scenes are captioned with lines attributed to Eumelus of Corinth, an 8th century epic poet.⁴⁶³

Paus. 5.19.7

Ἡ δὲ ἀνωτάτῳ χώρᾳ—πέντε γὰρ ἀριθμόν εἰσι—παρέχεται μὲν ἐπίγραμμα οὐδέν, λείπεται δὲ εἰκάζειν ἐς τὰ ἐπειργασμένα. εἰσὶν οὖν ἐν σπηλαίῳ γυνὴ καθεύδουσα σὺν ἀνδρὶ ἐπὶ κλίνῃ, καὶ σφᾶς Ὀδυσσέα εἶναι καὶ Κίρκην ἐδοξάζομεν ἀριθμῷ τε τῶν θεραπαινῶν, αἷ εἰσι πρὸ τοῦ σπηλαίου, καὶ τοῖς ποιουμένοις ὑπ' αὐτῶν· τέσσαρες τε γὰρ εἰσιν αἱ γυναῖκες καὶ ἐργάζονται τὰ ἔργα, ἃ ἐν τοῖς ἔπεσιν Ὅμηρος εἶρηκε.

The highest space—the spaces are five in number—shows no inscription, so that we can only conjecture what the reliefs mean. Well, there is a grotto and in it a woman sleeping with a man upon a couch. I was of opinion that they were Odysseus and Circe, basing my view upon the number of the handmaidens in front of the grotto and upon what they are doing. For the women are four, and they are engaged on the tasks which Homer mentions in his poetry.

The number of barely-mentioned handmaids in Calypso's cave is not specified in our extant version of the Odyssey, but Circe's palace does indeed have four.⁴⁶⁴ While I do note above that there is no mention of a bed or couch in Calypso's cave, it is perhaps reasonable for a later artist to assume that such furniture was there, so its inclusion here may not be significant. It is possible that Pausanias has confused or conflated the figures and episodes of Circe and Calypso.

However, other claims about the caves of Circe, along with Pausanias' note that the source material might be an epic poet other than Homer, may suggest a variant myth in which Circe (either instead of or in addition to Calypso) inhabits a cave. The emperor Julian attributes a

⁴⁶² Paus. 5.17.1–19.10.

⁴⁶³ This is Pausanias' conjecture. 5.19.10: "As to the maker of the chest, I found it impossible to form any conjecture. But the inscriptions upon it, though possibly composed by some other poet, are, as I was on the whole inclined to hold, the work of Eumelus of Corinth."

⁴⁶⁴ *Od.* 10.348–349: ἀμφίπολοι δ' ἄρα τέως μὲν ἐνὶ μεγάροισι πένοντο / τέσσαρες, αἷ οἱ δῶμα κάτα δρήσταιραι ἔασιν· "But her handmaids meanwhile were busied in the halls, four maidens who are her serving women in the house."

mention of the “wooded island of Calypso and the caves of Circe” to his tutor, Mardonius, who was specially trained in the works of Hesiod and Homer.⁴⁶⁵ Around the same time, Libanius refers to the “caves of Circe” as well.⁴⁶⁶

These three literary examples are listed here in chronological order, meaning that Pausanias’ 2nd century account is our earliest written attestation of this variant, which could be due simply to chronological distance from the heyday of the poem’s performance. However, there is an early fifth century BCE Attic red-figure *lekythos* depicting two man-pigs inside a cave.⁴⁶⁷ They have the heads of boars but otherwise have human bodies. They are both nude, and one of them walks on hands and knees toward the other. The cave in the *lekythos* painting is rendered clearly with a rupestral arch; the stone remains red like the figures while the depths of the cave are painted black. The man-pig imagery is known from other classical vase paintings and a late archaic terracotta altar from Sicily.⁴⁶⁸ The unique motif is immediately diagnostic of the Circe episode of the *Odyssey*. What is remarkable is this vase’s early date relative to our written sources, appearing about 700 years before Pausanias’ mention of Circe’s cave.

It is difficult to say for certain whether a tradition of Circe’s cave existed in any lasting way. There may always have been a variant tradition that never gained popularity but lingered in the oral tradition. It is also possible that this variant arose comparatively late due to confusion or mistake, and that version was perpetuated enough to be on the minds of Pausanias, Mardonius the tutor, and Libanius, though the early 5th century vase painting would make it difficult to date the variation later than the sixth century BCE. It is even possible that several individuals made

⁴⁶⁵ Julian, *Misopogon, or, Beard-Hater*, 352A: καὶ ἡ δένδρῆσσα τῆς Καλυψοῦς νῆσος καὶ τὰ τῆς Κίρκης σπήλαια. On his tutor, 352B.

⁴⁶⁶ *Declamation* 28, subd. 1, section 16, line 4: τὰ Κίρκης ἄντρα μυθεύουσιν.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ulisse: Il mito e la memoria*, Progetti Museali Editore. Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 1996: “In una grotta si vedono due uomini con testa di cinghiale,” 135. The vase is in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, inv. 9685.

⁴⁶⁸ On this and other depictions of the man-pigs from the Circe episode, see Bernard Andreae et al., *Odysseus: Mythos und Erinnerung*, Verlag Philipp Von Zabern, 1999: 256–259.

the mistake of conflating or confusing the two goddesses who already have a lot in common. Whatever the relationship is between these attestations and the Homeric text and the motif painted on the *lekythos*, the placement of the Circe episode in a grotto attests to the appropriateness of a cave setting for an episode known in antiquity to epitomize the dangers of female sexual control.

Having established the narrative role of Calypso's (and Circe's) sexualities within the *Odyssey*, it is also necessary to stress the nurturing role that Calypso plays and its connection to her sexuality. While the actual sexual encounters with Calypso no longer please Odysseus and take place in what may be assumed to be an uncomfortable setting, other aspects of Calypso's hospitality are much more favorable. In fact, until he starts building his raft, Odysseus seemingly has no chores or responsibilities to fill his day, and is living the guarded but comparatively unburdened life of a child. Not only has Calypso rescued him from shipwreck, she repeatedly performs acts of "mothering" for Odysseus,⁴⁶⁹ tasks that would in most other contexts be performed by a servant.⁴⁷⁰ In her conversation with Hermes, she enumerates some of these tasks:

Od. 5.130–131; 135–136

τὸν μὲν ἐγὼν ἐσάωσα περὶ τρόπιος βεβαῶτα
οἶον, ...
τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ φίλεόν τε καὶ ἔτρεφον, ἥδ' ἐφασκον
θήσειν ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀγήραον ἥματα πάντα.

[Odysseus] I saved when he was bestriding the keel and all alone, ... Him I welcomed kindly [or, loved] and gave him food, and said that I would make him immortal and ageless all his days.

And once Odysseus has built his raft, Calypso prepares him for this final journey:

Od. 5.263–268⁴⁷¹

τῷ δ' ἄρα πέμπτῳ πέμπ' ἀπὸ νήσου διὰ Καλυψώ,

And on the fifth [day] the beautiful Calypso sent him on his way from the island after she had bathed him and dressed

⁴⁶⁹ On Calypso as a maternal figure, see Ann Bergren, "Similes and Symbol in *Odyssey* V," in *Weaving Truth: Essays on Language and the Female in Greek Thought*, Harvard University Press, 2008: 58–64.

⁴⁷⁰ And it is not that Calypso does not have servants; she has at least a couple almost imperceptible handmaids (δμῳαί) who serve Calypso nectar and ambrosia, *Od.* 5.199.

⁴⁷¹ Many of these services are mentioned earlier, when Calypso first tells Odysseus to make a raft, 5.165–167.

εἵματά τ' ἀμφιέσσασα θυώδεα καὶ λούσσασα.
 ἐν δέ οἱ ἄσκον ἔθηκε θεὰ μέλανος οἴνοιο
 τὸν ἕτερον, ἕτερον δ' ὕδατος μέγαν, ἐν δὲ καὶ ἦα
 κωρύκῳ· ἐν δέ οἱ ὄψα τίθει μενοεικέα πολλὰ·
 οὔρον δὲ προέηκεν ἀπήμονά τε λιαρὸν τε.

him in fragrant clothing. On the raft the goddess put a skin of dark wine, and another, a large one, of water, and provisions, too, in a bag. In it she put many good things to satisfy his heart, and sent him, too, a fair wind, gentle and warm.

Calypso thus repeatedly provides him with food and drink,⁴⁷² one of the essential mothering acts discussed in the previous chapter. In addition, she also bathes him. Note here that the poet uses the active feminine participle λούσσασα, making it clear that Odysseus did not bathe himself, but was bathed by Calypso. She dresses him and packs his food for later, then sends him off with a warm, gentle wind. Every component of this description is a task of mothering.⁴⁷³ Her offer of immortality likewise paints her as a potential giver of life, linking her to Odysseus through implicit notions of birthing. Far from the character of seductive mastermind that subsequent Greek literature will often paint her as, in *Odyssey* 5 Calypso is largely portrayed as a benevolent, if clingy, lover. Of all the deities and creatures Odysseus encounters in his journey, Calypso is “one of the most humane, warm and compassionate.”⁴⁷⁴

Calypso's nurturing aspects are attested elsewhere. Hesiod has a catalogue of kourotrophic nymphs that includes Calypso:

Hesiod, *Theogony*, 346–348, 359

τίκτε δὲ θυγατέρων ἱερὸν γένος, αἷ κατὰ γαῖαν
 ἄνδρας κουρίζουσι σὺν Ἀπόλλωνι ἄνακτι
 καὶ ποταμοῖς, ταύτην δὲ Διὸς πάρα μοῖραν ἔχουσι,

And she gave birth to a holy race of daughters who, together with lord Apollo and the rivers, raise boys so that they become men on the earth, for this is the lot they have from Zeus:

⁴⁷² Recall the grape vines surrounding the entrance to her cave. This wine is probably an Ogygia specialty.

⁴⁷³ While not attributed only to mothers, bathing is nevertheless a task of nurturing women taking care of men, almost exclusively Odysseus. In addition to Calypso, the Phaeacian handmaids bathe Odysseus (8.454–455) and Circe bathes both him (10.360–364) and his comrades (10.449–451). In the *Iliad*, an injured Machaon is bathed by Hecamede, the daughter of Nestor (14.5–7). In all cases, the man being bathed is in a weakened state: Odysseus is shipwrecked alone on Ogygia, is shipwrecked alone again on Scheria, and has witnessed his men be turned into swine by Circe; Machaon has been injured in battle. The vulnerable position of these men, in need of aid, is therefore similar to the helplessness and dependence of children.

⁴⁷⁴ Navarro Diana, “Calypso,” 41.

...

καὶ ἡμερόεσσα Καλυψὼ...

[35 names of nymphs],
and lovely Calypso...

While Calypso's actual maternity is not mentioned in Homer, in Hesiod and most later traditions she bears Odysseus a son or two. In the *Theogony*'s catalogue of goddesses who bed mortal men, Calypso is the very last goddess listed, and also the final goddess named in the whole *Theogony*:

Hesiod, *Theogony*, 1017–1018⁴⁷⁵

Ναυσίθοον δ' Ὀδυσῆϊ Καλυψὼ δῖα θεάων	Calypso, divine among goddesses, bore
γείνατο Ναυσινόον τε μίγξις ἔρατῃ φιλότῃ.	Nausithous to Odysseus, and Nausinous,
	mingling in lovely desire.

Therefore, in addition to her greater divine status and her sexual agency over Odysseus, she also exhibits a maternal control, a type of nurturing that both sustains and stifles him. This connection perpetuates the Greek conflation of female sexuality with maternity and bolsters Calypso's superior status. Her nurturing services to Odysseus, which could in another context be framed as submission and subservience, is linked to the potential for life-giving, and instead is depicted as a dependence of the less powerful party on the more powerful.

The abundance surrounding Calypso's cave, both floral and faunal, combined with her nymph identity, all attest to the correlation between her grotto and fertility. Furthermore, Calypso's almost maternal actions toward Odysseus—sheltering, feeding, and clothing him, and then finally releasing him into a sort of rebirth⁴⁷⁶—also feed into the idea of her cavern as a sort of womb.⁴⁷⁷ But there is a darker edge to this maternalism, as is demonstrated by Odysseus' inability to leave the island for seven years. What once was a place of safety and refuge after

⁴⁷⁵ Ancient writers did not agree on the name of her son(s), however: cf. Apollodorus, *Library*, Epitome, 7.24: Ἐκεῖ δὲ ἀποδέχεται Καλυψὼ θυγάτηρ Ἀτλαντος, καὶ συνευνασθεῖσα γεννᾷ παῖδα Λατῖνον, "There Calypso, daughter of Atlas, received [Odysseus], and bedding with him bore a son Latinus."

⁴⁷⁶ The reading of *Odyssey* 5 as a symbolic rebirth has been discussed many times, notably Erling B. Holtmark, "Spiritual Rebirth of the Hero: *Odyssey* 5," *Classical Journal* 61, no. 5 (1966): 206-210; Charles Paul Segal, "The Phaeacians and the Symbolism of Odysseus' Return," *Arion* 1, no. 4 (1962): 17-64; and Newton, "Rebirth," *passim*.

⁴⁷⁷ Bergren reads Calypso's cave as a "womb-like pleasure dome," "Similes," 63.

shipwreck has become not just another swift obstacle on his voyage, but a cage. Odysseus is housed, nurtured, but also trapped in a feminized space. The cave, therefore, is not a neutral setting; it is a feminized enclosure that symbolically "holds" him, delaying (or, if Calypso had it her way, preventing) his *nostos*.

So, within this relationship Calypso is clearly the dominant partner, and she exercises this power by keeping Odysseus on Ogygia and by forcing him to be her lover. She is thus his superior both in her actions and her identity as a goddess. In the Greek mind, there was obvious and inherent danger in such dynamics. The reason for this double-standard, for the anxiety and rarity of such relationships is the confusion of the gender-power dynamics involved. While in gods' relationships with mortal women, the god holds the more powerful position in both his gender and his divine status, in goddess' relationships with mortals, the divinity of the goddess complicates this identification and leads to unsanctioned, subversive, and even dangerous power complexes.

Calypso and Odysseus' sexual encounters in the cave on Ogygia becomes the prototype for a prevalent dynamic regarding female sexuality. The power structure of the female as the active partner—in some ways, as an 'aggressor'—coupled with the complexity of human-divine relations offers much to be discussed. These sexual power dynamics are mediated within texts, and the poetic rendering of these relationships frequently involves cave settings. The poet's placement of this relationship in a grotto therefore characterizes the space as a heterotopia in which the negotiations of power between male and female and between divine and mortal can be brought to the fore. The heterotopic nature of the space does not resolve these tensions; that is not the purpose of the heterotopia. The anxieties and contradictions are allowed to exist in this space and the audience is allowed to consider them in a manner that is "safe" for disruption and

subversion in much the same way that later on, the tragic stage was a safe space for working through issues of public and religious life.

Selene & Endymion

While the Odysseus and Calypso relationship has a concrete narrative on which to stand, complete with a cave *ekphrasis*, we do not have such sources for similar relationships. The relationship of Selene⁴⁷⁸ and Endymion is one such myth for which no longer narrative depiction survives. Nevertheless, their myth survives through brief references in a variety of texts over several centuries. Because there is no authoritative source like the *Odyssey* is for the Odysseus/Calypso pairing, we must piece together the details of the myth from these passing references. However, the relationship between Selene and Endymion and the cave becomes an important allusion in the relationships discussed later in this chapter, and therefore warrants comment.

Endymion is a beautiful mortal man with whom the moon becomes infatuated. The details beyond this initial premise vary. In some versions, Selene asks for Endymion to be made immortal, but forgets to request that he stay young; he thus grows old indefinitely but never dies, and the beauty she fell in love with withers away. In a similar vein, sometimes she requests that he be made immortal and he remains young but he spends his life in an eternal sleep (usually in a cave). In at least one version she is considered a virginal goddess who wishes to fulfill her longing by gazing at the forever-asleep Endymion, but does not actually copulate with him.⁴⁷⁹ In others, it is stated or implied that she and Endymion do indeed have sex before she asks for him

⁴⁷⁸ Depending on the text, the Moon is variously referred to as Selene (Σελήνη) or Mene (Μήνη); in Latin, Luna or Selene.

⁴⁷⁹ Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica*, 10.125–132.

to be made immortal, and in some they even have children together. Sources are therefore quite divided on several details.

The myth of Endymion and Selene often features a cave. However, many references to them do not. The vast majority of mentions of Endymion and Selene are simply part of miniature catalogues of goddess-mortal relationships or are brief, passing allusions which rely on the barest mention to conjure the story in the audience's minds. Therefore, while many references to them do not mention the cave setting, there is also no indication that the cave was not the standard setting for Endymion's slumber or his relationship with Selene. There are no versions which place their relationship in locales other than a cave, only the majority which do not mention the cave. In the vast majority of their depictions, the couple are reduced either to a trope of the forbidden lust between mortal man and divine goddess or to a proverbial reference to prolonged sleep.⁴⁸⁰

One piece of evidence for the importance of the cave in Selene/Mene and Endymion's relationship can be found in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. In Book 4, Medea seeks to join Jason and the Argonauts in the quest for the Golden Fleece. After she flees her father's palace one night and runs to meet the Argonauts, the Moon spots Medea and compares her frenzied hurrying toward Jason to her own visits to Endymion:

Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, 4.57–64

“οὐκ ἄρ’ ἐγὼ μούνη μετὰ Λάτμιον ἄντρον
ἀλύσκω,
οὐδ’ οἷα καλῶ περιδαίομαι Ἐνδυμίωνι.
ἦ θαμὰ δὴ καὶ σεῖο, κύον, δολίησιν ἀοιδαῖς
μνησαμένη φιλότητος, ἵνα σκοτὶη ἐνὶ νυκτὶ

“So I am not the only one, after all, to flee to the
Latmian cave, nor alone in burning for
handsome Endymion. How often indeed did
your crafty incantations, shameless one, remind
me of my love, so that in the dark of night you

⁴⁸⁰ On the proverbification of Endymion see, for example, J. E. King's editor's note on Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* I.XXXVIII.92: “Endymion was a shepherd, and from his story came the proverb, *Endymionis somnum dormire*, to express a long sleep. Cicero is again perhaps thinking of the *Phaedo*, where Socrates says, “If there were no alternation between sleeping and waking, the story of the sleeping Endymion would in the end have no meaning,” J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press: 111.

φαρμάσσης εὐκηλος, ἃ τοι φίλα ἔργα τέτυκται.
 νῦν δὲ καὶ αὐτὴ δῆθεν ὁμοίης ἔμμορες ἄτης,
 δῶκε δ' ἀνιηρόν τοι Ἰήσωνα πῆμα γενέσθαι
 δαίμων ἀλγινόεις...

could calmly work the spells that are dear to you. But now it appears that you too have been allotted a similar obsession, for a cruel god has given you Jason as a grievous affliction.”

This speech equates two powerful female figures who have fallen in love with mortal men.

Medea herself will be discussed in greater depth below, so for now I will focus on Mene’s self-presentation in this speech and how it conforms to and diverges from other representations of her and Endymion’s relationship elsewhere in ancient literature. The initial phrasing of her speech (57–58) makes it sound like Medea herself is also in love with Endymion, though we know from a few lines later (and from narrative context) that this is not the case and that Mene knows that it is not the case. It would be possible for her to comment that she is not alone in her passion for a man, or that she is not alone in her frenzied wandering as a result of this passion, and to then draw a comparison either through an overt simile or through parallel clauses. Instead, she grammatically blurs the distinctions between herself and Medea and between Endymion and Jason, bringing the two couples into an even closer likeness than a simile would. Jason is not even mentioned within Mene’s close comparison until seven lines into her speech, by which point she has already explicitly linked herself with Medea and commented on Medea’s distinctive power, raising her above the status of an ordinary mortal.

Within her acknowledgement of Medea’s circumstances, Mene seems to find solace in the fact that in Medea and Jason, she has found a parallel to her own love story. By commenting this way on Medea, Mene therefore offers a glimpse into her understanding of her own relationship, framing both as ἄτη. This noun has a host of associations, all of them derogatory. It can refer to delusion, often divinely-inspired delusion that leads to rash decisions.⁴⁸¹ It also has a

⁴⁸¹ LSJ, ἄτη, I.

connotation that the object of obsession leads down a destructive path, prefiguring doom for one or both parties involved.⁴⁸² In legal settings, it denotes the monetary damages paid by the offending individual,⁴⁸³ therefore a negative consequence of one's poor behavior. Within Mene's evaluation of her own relationship with Endymion and consequently, her prediction about Medea's relationship with Jason, she recognizes or predicts an impending doom as the result of such a union. Mene's retrospection on her relationship differs starkly from our Homeric glimpse at Calypso, who is within the throes of the breakup when we (like Odysseus) leave her.

Mene also seems to attribute her passion for Endymion to the intervention of Eros,⁴⁸⁴ both here (63–64) and elsewhere: in Lucian's *Dialogue of the Gods*, Aphrodite and Selene chat about their respective relationships with mortal men. Aphrodite asks Selene what is going on between her and Endymion, to which she responds, "Ask your own son, Aphrodite; it's his fault."⁴⁸⁵ So, while Selene, as a goddess, is certainly the more powerful in her relationship to Endymion, she is powerless against the penetrative control of Eros. Calypso, on the other hand, is never said to have been subject to such emotional intervention by mother or son. Her desire and affection for Odysseus is not portrayed as something passive that has happened to her, an ἄτη that has been inflicted upon her.

There are a few other important distinctions between Selene and Calypso, especially concerning their individual agency and sexual power. In Homer, Calypso is referred to variously as "goddess" and "nymph," though she does seem to be more powerful than most nymphs. Calypso herself is the daughter of one or two Titans, depending on the tradition, and is thus

⁴⁸² LSJ, ἄτη, II, 2.

⁴⁸³ LSJ, ἄτη, III.

⁴⁸⁴ Hunter reads this differently, applying the actions of the "cruel god" only to Medea's plight, and not to the Moon's; he would therefore take the δαίμων in 64 to refer to Hera's manipulation, rather than the physical involvement of Eros: Richard Hunter, ed. *Apollonius of Rhodes. Argonautica Book IV*, Cambridge University Press, 2015: 94.

⁴⁸⁵ Ἐρώτα, ᾧ Ἀφροδίτη, τὸν σὸν υἱόν, ὅς μοι τούτων αἴτιος: Lucian, *Dial. of the Gods*, 19.1.

immortal.⁴⁸⁶ She also claims to have the power to impart immortality on Odysseus as well, which greatly exceeds the powers attributed to other nymphs and elsewhere is a power attributed only to certain Olympian gods. Selene, on the other hand, is a “full” goddess, also the daughter of one or more Titans,⁴⁸⁷ and is never referred to with the status of “nymph” or in catalogues of nymphs. Despite Selene’s greater divine status, and theoretically greater divine agency when compared with Calypso, neither of the relationships is narratively allowed to survive.

Regarding the detail of the cave in Selene and Endymion’s relationship, in many ways it is used similarly to the cave and isle of Calypso, as a method of sequestering and entrapping the male beloved of the goddess. As in the relationship between Odysseus and Calypso, the cave functions as the setting for an ongoing sexual relationship that exists outside normative marriage paradigms and between couples with inverted power dynamics. Since this type of relationship—and, indeed, explicitly Endymion and Selene’s relationship—is described as “most shameful”,⁴⁸⁸ the normativity expected in the outcome of the myth does not allow this relationship to function without issue. In such taboo dynamics, the couple must always end up separated. Calypso is forced to concede Odysseus to his mortality and Selene is deprived of a normal relationship through Endymion’s divine narcolepsy, itself a near- or pseudo-death.

There are also a handful of other attestations for the importance of the cave in Selene and Endymion’s myth. This once included both a lost poem of Sappho and part of Nicander’s

⁴⁸⁶ On Calypso’s parentage and divine status, see above, note 432.

⁴⁸⁷ There are multiple claims to her parentage. The most common is Hyperion and Theia (Hesiod, *Th.* 371–374; Apollodorus, 1.2.2;) and therefore the sister of Helios and Eos. Others name her parent(s) as Hyperion and Euryphaessa (*hH* Helios, 31.4–6); Hyperion and Aethra (Hyginus, *Fab.* Preface, entry 15); Hyperion and Basileia (Diod. Sic. 3.57.3–4); Pallas (*hH* *Hermes*, 4.99–100); or the daughter of Helios (Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 175–176; Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 44.191).

⁴⁸⁸ Lucian, *Parliament of the Gods*, 8: Ἀφ’ οὗ δὲ ἄπαξ σύ, ὦ Ζεῦ, ἀνέῳξας τοῖς τοιούτοις τὰς θύρας καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς θνητὰς ἐτράπου, ἅπαντες μεμίμηνταί σε, καὶ οὐχ οἱ ἄρρενες μόνον, ἀλλ’ , ὅπερ αἰσχιστον, καὶ αἱ θήλειαι θεοί. Ἰ τίς γὰρ οὐκ οἶδεν τὸν Ἀγχίσην καὶ τὸν Τιθωνὸν καὶ τὸν Ἐνδυμίωνα καὶ τὸν Ἰασίωνα καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους; “From the moment that you, Zeus, once opened our doors to such as they and turned your attention to mortal women, everyone else has copied you, and not the male sex alone but—what is most unseemly—even the goddesses. Who does not know about Anchises, Tithonus, Endymion, Iasion, and the rest of them?”

Europeia, according to a scholion on the above passage from the *Argonautica*.⁴⁸⁹ Some scholars even argue that Sappho's depiction of Selene and Endymion was the poet's own innovation, and it is true that this specific relationship does not appear in the extant literature predating Sappho.⁴⁹⁰ ní Mheallaigh therefore identifies two main innovations on Sappho's part: "first, by switching the gender roles so that the *goddess* becomes the agent of sexual desire, and Endymion the passive object of her desiring gaze; and second, by selecting the *Moon-goddess* Selene to be the protagonist in her love-story," thereby "recasting" the stories of other "desiring-goddesses, such as Eos... and Aphrodite."⁴⁹¹ Stehle includes this lost work in a group Sappho's poems that has the following basic plot: "a goddess desiring a young, beautiful, mortal man whom she hides away in an enclosed place far from civilization. The young man is or becomes incapacitated sexually and never leaves his condition of dependence and confinement to return to human society."⁴⁹² Overall, I find it unlikely that Sappho innovated this version of the story. Subsequent ancient authors do not mention this as a Sapphic invention, and this model was prevalent in both earlier Greek myth and in traditions from the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor.⁴⁹³ More likely, in my opinion, is that Sappho was drawn to a dynamic that already existed in the Selene/Endymion story and used it as inspiration for her poetry. The inclusion of this episode in

⁴⁸⁹ Λάτμος ὄρος Καρίας, ἔνθα ἔστιν ἄντρον, ἐν ᾧ διέτριβεν Ἐνδυμίων... λέγεται δὲ κατέρχεσθαι εἰς τοῦτο τὸ ἄντρον τὴν Σελήνην πρὸς Ἐνδυμίωνα. περὶ δὲ τοῦ τῆς Σελήνης ἔρωτος ἱστοροῦσι Σαπφῶ καὶ Νικάνδρος ἐν β' Εὐρώπείας. "Latmos is a mountain in Caria; there is the cave in which Endymion spent his time... And it is said that Selene went down to Endymion into this cave. Sappho and Nicander (in *Europeia* book 2) tell the story about the love of Selene." *Schol. in Ap. Rhod.* 4. 57.

⁴⁹⁰ Karen ní Mheallaigh, "The Moon in Ritual, Myth and Magic," *The Moon in the Greek and Roman Imagination Myth, Literature, Science and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 24. Stehle suggests two primary explanations: Sappho's adaptation of a local story from Anatolia, or her own personal innovation; Stehle does not argue specifically for either: Eva Stehle, "Sappho's Gaze: Fantasies of a Goddess and Young Man," in *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*, ed. Ellen Greene, University of California Press, 2023 [1996]: 194.

⁴⁹¹ ní Mheallaigh, "Moon," 24.

⁴⁹² Stehle, "Sappho's," 195–196.

⁴⁹³ For connections with Phoenician/Cypriot traditions of Aphrodite and Adonis, see John J. Winkler, "The Laughter of the Oppressed: Demeter and the Gardens of Adonis," in *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*, Routledge, 1990, 189–190.

her *oeuvre* thus supports the identification of this myth with the goddess/mortal romance dynamics discussed here.

Later on, geographic works in the Roman Empire refer to certain caves as having belonged to Endymion, though these texts do not provide detailed accounts of the myth.⁴⁹⁴ The so-called “Louvre Inscription”, an inscribed fragment composed by an anonymous lyric poet, seems to refer to the Moon putting Endymion in his everlasting sleep in his caves.⁴⁹⁵ And in his *Posthomerica*, Quintus of Smyrna provides a brief account of Selene and Endymion which involves a cave,⁴⁹⁶ though he possibly identifies Selene as a virgin, a departure from other traditions.⁴⁹⁷

Selene and Endymion are not visually depicted until the Roman period.⁴⁹⁸ They appear in numerous frescoes from the houses of Pompeii, though these typically set the scene on top of rocks and on mountains, rather inside a cave. The non-cavernous setting accords with Pompeians’ affinity for depicting *loci amoeni* and lush gardens on the walls of their homes.⁴⁹⁹ Endymion is frequently seen inside a cave on sarcophagi in the Imperial period, however.⁵⁰⁰ The earliest known sarcophagus of Endymion dates to before 150 CE, and does include a cave,

⁴⁹⁴ Strabo 14.1.8 places the tomb of Endymion in a cave in Latmus (ἐν τινι σπηλαίῳ); Pausanias refers to multiple places believed to be the tomb of Endymion, including one on Mount Latmus, though he does not specifically refer to a cave: 5.1.5 and 6.20.9.

⁴⁹⁵ fr. 1037, “Louvre Inscription” *Greek Lyric, Anonymous Fragments*, Loeb Classical Library.

⁴⁹⁶ Hunter proposes that Quintus of Smyrna looks at AR 4.1131, the nuptial cave of Medea and Jason, for this motif. That scene will be discussed below. Hunter, *Apollonius*, 236.

⁴⁹⁷ I say “possibly” because that is indeed one translation of the word used. Quintus of Smyrna does not describe Selene as a παρθενος, but rather as ἀκήρατος, “unblemished, pure, undefiled.” This adjective is indeed used of young women to mean something like “chaste” or “virginal” (e.g. E. *Tr.* 675, Andromache refers to herself as such when Hector takes her hand in marriage, coupled with παρθένοιον in the next line). Elsewhere, it is used to describe wholeness or purity (e.g. “pure gold”, Archil. *Supp.* 4, et al.), the state of being unspoiled (e.g. *Il.* 15.498, of a home and land that have not been ravaged), new or not yet altered (e.g. uncut hair, unmown fields, e.g. E. *Ion* 1266). Of people it can also mean to be untouched by misfortune, free of pain, etc. (e.g. A.R. 1.974, E. *Hipp.* 1113).

⁴⁹⁸ Selene without Endymion is depicted, usually portrayed with a chariot and horses. She is depicted thus in the east pediment of the Parthenon, see ní Mheallaigh, “Moon,” 13.

⁴⁹⁹ See Verity Platt, “Viewing, Desiring, Believing: confronting the divine in a Pompeian house,” *Art History* 25, no. 1 (2002): 87–112; Tanya Kane, “Garden Paintings Of Pompeii: Context And Meaning,” Master’s Thesis, McMaster University, 1998.

⁵⁰⁰ Hellmut Sichtermann, “Endymion,” in *Die Mythologischen Sarkophage*. Gebr. Mann, 1992: 103–163, tables 26–114.

though some examples depict him sitting on rocks under a tree instead.⁵⁰¹ The Endymion motif flourished in the second half of the 2nd century CE and diminished in prominence in the first half of the 3rd century.⁵⁰² The cave appears in Endymion scenes throughout that whole period, co-occurring with the cave-less depictions.

As mentioned above, the model of Selene and Endymion is invoked regularly in catalogues of goddess-mortal relationships. The brevity of most allusions to the couple in Greek literature removed the necessity for details, and therefore most omit the cave setting. Nevertheless, the myth and its context must have been well-known since these brief mentions were expected to conjure the narrative contexts of these figures in the mind of the reader.

Jason & Medea

The cave also plays a role in the tale of Jason and Medea in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* (4.1128–1169). Before assessing that specific scene, it is first necessary to examine its narrative context. I will therefore present a few key aspects of Medea and Jason earlier in Book 4.

Medea realizes that her father has learned of her treachery in helping Jason (14–15) and contemplates her options for escaping his wrath (20–23). Apollonius focuses not only on Medea's emotional state—her fear and indecision—but also the physical effects it has on her: Her heart “flutters” (περόεις, 23, with the πτ- root connoting falling, flying, or wings), her eyes fill with fire (ὄσσε / πλῆτο πυρός, 16–17), and her ears roar (περιβρομέεσκον ἀκουαί, 17). These symptoms to me recall the physicality expressed in Sappho 31.⁵⁰³ the speaker's heart “flutters”

⁵⁰¹ Sichtermann, “Endymion,” 103–105.

⁵⁰² Sichtermann, “Endymion,” 103.

⁵⁰³ Scholars have previously noted echoes of Sappho 31 elsewhere in the *Argonautica*: in the scene of Jason and Medea's initial meeting in Book 3: e.g. Anja Bettenworth, “Ovid, Apollonius und Sappho: die Liebessymptomatik der Medea in Ov. Met. 7, 74–88,” *Philologus: Zeitschrift für Antike Literatur und Ihre Rezeption* 147, no. 1 (2003): 101–113.

with the same πτ- root (ἐπτόαισεν, 31.6), she experiences fiery sensations and visual disturbances (χρῶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν, / ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', 10–11), and her ears hum or roar (ἐπιρρόμ/βεισι δ' ἄκουαι, 11–12). In Sappho's poem, the emotions seem to be jealousy, love, or lust,⁵⁰⁴ rather than the fear that Medea exhibits (φόβον, 4.11; ἐφόβησεν, 13; τάρβει, 16). In a further similarity with Sappho's fragment, which seems to end with the sentiment that the woman seems “a little short of dying,” Apollonius calls attention to Medea's own proximity to death: καί νύ κεν αὐτοῦ τῆμος ὑπὲρ μόρον ὦλετο κούρη, “and now right there on that spot, the girl would have died before her time,”⁵⁰⁵ but Hera “urges” or “drives” (ῥορσεν, 4.23) Medea to flee with the Argonauts instead.

Next comes Medea's flight from the house of Aietes to Jason, which I argue can be interpreted as a makeshift and inverted *nymphagōgia*, the bridal procession attested in the wedding traditions of most Greek *poleis*.⁵⁰⁶ Several of the details of this and associated wedding rites have narratively-suited analogues in Medea's escape, as I will show. Throughout the Greek world, the bride would commonly cut off a lock of her hair and dedicate it to a virginal goddess as a sign of the end of her childhood and leaving her natal household.⁵⁰⁷ Here, Medea does the

⁵⁰⁴ The specific emotion described in Sappho 31 has been a matter of debate. Page interprets the emotion described as “the passion of love” and notes that Homeric epic instead conveys “fear, anger, sorrow, [or] pain,” Denys Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 1955: 29. Agreeing with him is Furley, who argues for the interpretation of Sappho's love or lust causing these symptoms and attempts to contextualize Sappho's response through Catullus' rendition in his Poem 51: “Rivalry between the ‘man’ and Sappho as suitors of the same girl involves asymmetry. Their suits, one feels, must somehow be different in the girl's eyes. Hence Catullus' poem invites interpretation along the lines of jealous love, whereas... jealousy need play no part in Sappho's. In her poem Sappho is... dramatizing the effect of a loved girl's beauty on herself,” William D. Furley, “Fearless, Bloodless... like the Gods: Sappho 31 and the Rhetoric of ‘Godlike’,” *Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2000): 7–15. cf. Most, who is more uncertain about this interpretation and offers several possible alternatives: “Just what is Sappho responding to? Is she expressing sexual passion for the woman, or sexual jealousy at the man's relation to the woman, or admiration for the woman's beauty, or admiration at the man's fortitude in enduring the woman's beauty, or some mixture of these, or something else?” Glenn Most, “Reflecting Sappho,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 40 (1995), 28 and note 65, with bibliography. on herself.”

⁵⁰⁵ Translation here is my own.

⁵⁰⁶ Katia Margariti, “The Greek Wedding Outside Athens and Sparta: the Evidence from Ancient Texts,” *Les Etudes Classiques* 85 (2017): 319–335.

⁵⁰⁷ Margariti, “Greek Wedding,” 330–331.

same and leaves to her mother the “memento of her maidenhood” (μνημῆα.../... παρθενίης, 4.27–29). Before she departs, Medea lovingly caresses and kisses the structure of her house and bedchamber (26–27). Although to my knowledge there is no ancient attestation for this type of loving farewell to the physical house, Medea’s actions here are perhaps acting in lieu of saying goodbye to her family.

While Medea does not wear a veil, as was common in bridal processions,⁵⁰⁸ she does conceal her face from the guards using her *peplos* (44–45), a garment which has been noted to have had draping and veiling uses.⁵⁰⁹ Maria Pavlou has thus read this scene as an impromptu veiling in which Medea leaves behind her *kaluptrē*, “symbolic of her separation from her prior status as an adolescent and her transition to adulthood.”⁵¹⁰ Typically, the veiled bride would be led by her family and friends to her husband’s house. With Medea, however, she improvises a veil to hide her identity, slips away in secret from her family, and arrives at the boat where her husband-to-be awaits.

In Athens, and possibly in other locales whose rituals are less thoroughly documented, the *nymphagōgia* took place at night, “under the auspicious light of the full moon⁵¹¹ to which the ancients assigned special fertility powers.”⁵¹² Medea’s procession also happens at night, with

⁵⁰⁸ As Ferrari has shown, the bride was likely veiled for a considerable part of the wedding rituals, including the feast and the procession, Gloria Ferrari, “What Kind of Rite of Passage Was the Ancient Greek Wedding?” in *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. David B. Dodd and Christopher A. Faraone, Routledge, 2003: 32.

⁵⁰⁹ Spyridon Marinatos, *Kleidun. Haar- und Barttracht. Archaeologica Homerica*, cited in Hans van Wees, “Clothes, Class and Gender in Homer,” in *Body Language in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. D. L. Cairns, Classical Press of Wales, 2005; Mireille M. Lee, “Constru(ct)ing Gender in the Feminine Greek *Peplos*,” in *The Clothed Body in the Ancient World*, ed. Liza Cleland, Mary Harlow, and Lloyd Llwellyn-Jones, Oxbow Books, 2005.

⁵¹⁰ Maria Pavlou, “Reading Medea through Her Veil in the ‘Argonautica’ of Apollonius Rhodius,” *Greece & Rome* 56, no. 2 (2009): 193.

⁵¹¹ Both the full and new Moon were favorable for weddings: “the full Moon, probably because of the implications of fertility, while the new Moon was significant for marking the transition from an old cycle to the new,” ní Mheallaigh, “Moon,” 14; she in turn cites Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher, *Nachträge zu meiner Schrift über Selene und verwandtes*, Teubner, 1890: ii ff. and Margarete Bieber, “Eros and Dionysos on Kerch Vases,” *Hesperia Supplements* 8 (1949): 31–38; 440–441.

⁵¹² Margariti, “Greek Wedding,” 322.

Mēnē explicitly watching over and even commenting on her flight.⁵¹³ Medea is not led by torches, as was typical of these nocturnal bridal processions, but by the Moon, which was frequently associated with lamps in both literature and figural decoration on lamps in the archaeological record.⁵¹⁴ Through Apollonius' conscious combination of these details, Medea therefore experiences a distorted *nymphagōgia*, where all of the requisite components are included but based in the logistical constraints of the narrative.

Having left her father's house, shed herself of virginal identifiers, and emerged in the liminal space of the city's hinterland,⁵¹⁵ Medea is now spotted by the Moon:

Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, 4.54–65

τὴν δὲ νέον⁵¹⁶ Τιτηνὶς ἀνερχομένη περάτηθεν
φοιταλέην ἐσιδοῦσα θεὰ ἐπεγήρατο Μῆνη
ἀρπαλέως, καὶ τοῖα μετὰ φρεσὶν ἦσιν ἔειπεν·
“οὐκ ἄρ' ἐγὼ μούνη μετὰ Λάτμιον ἄντρον
ἀλύσκω,
οὐδ' οἴη καλῶ περιδαίομαι Ἐνδυμίωνι.
ἦ θαμὰ δὴ καὶ σεῖο, κύον, δολίησιν ἀοιδαῖς
μνησαμένη φιλότιτος, ἵνα σκοτὶ ἔνι νυκτὶ
φαρμάσσης εὐκήλος, ἃ τοι φίλα ἔργα τέτυκται.
νῦν δὲ καὶ αὐτὴ δῆθεν ὁμοίης ἔμμορες ἄτης,
δῶκε δ' ἀνιηρόν τοι Ἰήσονα πῆμα γενέσθαι
δαίμων ἀλγινόεις. ἀλλ' ἔρχεο, τέτλαθι δ' ἔμπης,
καὶ πινυτὴ περ ἐοῦσα, πολύστονον ἄλγος ἀείρειν”

And when the Titanian goddess, the Moon,
newly rising above the horizon, saw her
wandering in distress, she exulted gleefully over
her and spoke these thoughts to herself:
“So I am not the only one, after all, to flee to the
Latmian cave, nor alone in burning for
handsome Endymion. How often indeed did
your crafty incantations, shameless one, remind
me of my love, so that in the dark of night you
could calmly work the spells that are dear to
you. But now it appears that you too have been
allotted a similar obsession, for a cruel god has
given you Jason as a grievous affliction. Go on,
and in spite of your cleverness bring yourself to
endure pain full of tears.”

⁵¹³ The moon was sometimes equated with the bride in marriage songs, e.g. Sappho fr. 96.6–9; see Andromache Karanika, “The Poetics of Childhood: Wedding, Song, and Performance,” in *Wedding, Gender, and Performance in Ancient Greece*, Oxford University Press, 2024: 79, 81; ní Mheallaigh, “Moon,” 22–23.

⁵¹⁴ ní Mheallaigh, “Moon,” 34, who cites the proximity of Lampland to the Moon in Lucian's *True Stories* (1.29), along with scholarship on celestial lamp imagery: Ruth Bielfeldt, “The Lure and Lore of Light: Roman Lamps in the Harvard Art Museums,” in *Ancient Bronzes through a Modern Lens: Introductory Essays on the Study of Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Bronzes*, ed. Susanne Ebbinghaus, Yale University Press, 2014: 227–230; and the role of lamps in erotic epigram: Maria Kanellou, “Lamp and Erotic Epigram: How An Object Sheds Light On The Lover's Emotions,” in *Eros in Ancient Greece*, ed. Ed Sanders, Chiara Thumiger, Chris Carey, and Nick J. Lowe, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁵¹⁵ Reading at line 50 *νειόνδε*. As Hunter notes, the transmitted *νηόνδε* “toward the temple” does not make sense: she does not go to a temple; he instead proposes *νειόνδε*, “toward the ploughing-field,” which had been geographically established in Book 2 (1266–1269). Hunter also notes an alternative *νηύνδε*, “toward the ship,” which works contextually and accords with a scholion but does not fit metrically: Hunter, *Apollonius*, 91.

⁵¹⁶ The adjective *νέος*, when modifying the moon, typically refers to a “new moon,” as in our English vernacular. This adverbial use plays on this idea associated with the new moon, but because the moon is “out” in the sky here, it cannot possibly actually be a new moon.

The Moon's aside about Medea has a mocking tone (55), reveling in a critical moment of her vulnerability. Medea has left the safe institution of her father's palace, a place where she is guarded by her *kyrios* (though she flees due to her fear of him), and now scrambles through the liminal hinterland in pursuit of Jason.⁵¹⁷ In saying that Medea's incantations often reminded her of her own love for Endymion (59–60), Mene implies that she was a witness to these spells, and that her presence facilitated (crucially, with a result clause: ἵνα... / φαρμάσεως, 60–61) these magical tasks. This likely refers to the Moon's association with Hecate and the motif of witches "drawing down the moon" to harness control over the natural world.⁵¹⁸ While not made explicit, there is a suggestion here that Medea has power greater even than the Moon, a goddess, at least within magical contexts.⁵¹⁹ Since both Jason and Medea are mortals, Mene's divine acknowledgement of Medea's power is crucial to understanding the power dynamics between the couple.

Once Medea reaches the Argonauts, she tells Jason that she will help them secure the Golden Fleece and that she wants him to make good on his promise to marry her and take her back to Greece. In this way, even though she is without a male *kyrios*, Medea has made a dowry of the Golden Fleece.⁵²⁰

The dynamic outlined above by the Moon as she identifies with Jason and Medea's relationship is made manifest later in Book 4. After the heroes have secured the Golden Fleece

⁵¹⁷ She recognizes and states her own vulnerability at this moment at 4.91, χήτει κηδεμόνων ὄνοτιν καὶ ἀεικέα, "blameworthy and dishonored with my lack of guardians."

⁵¹⁸ cf. A.R. 3.531–533; Theoc. *Id.* 2.10; Ar. *Clouds* 749–50; Plato *Gorgias* 513a 5–6; in Latin: Prop. 1.1.19–24; Lucan, BC 6.499–506; Apuleius, *Met.* 1.3. The best examination is Radcliffe G. Edmonds, *Drawing down the moon: magic in the ancient Greco-Roman world*, Princeton University Press, 2019, esp. 19–34.

⁵¹⁹ On magician's exercise of power over the Moon goddess in both poetry and in the *Greek Magical Papyri*, see ní Mheallaigh, "Moon," *passim*, but especially 36–37.

⁵²⁰ On the Golden Fleece as Medea's dowry, see Hunter, *Apollonius*, 95; Andrew R. Dyck, "On the Way from Colchis to Corinth: Medea in Book 4 of the 'Argonautica,'" *Hermes* 117, no. 4 (1989): 458–459.

(123–182) and Jason has murdered Medea’s brother Apsyrtus (452–481), they spend several hundred lines fleeing the Colchian forces with a grand tour of Europe and Asia’s waterways, during which they encounter several Odyssean obstacles: Circe (4.661–752), the sirens (891–921), the Wandering Rocks (924–963). Once they reach the end point of Odysseus’ time lost at sea, the kingdom of Alcinous (981), Medea begs Queen Arete not to hand her over to the Colchians out of fear of the horrible punishments that would await her at the hands of her father (1011–1028). Arete pleads with her husband Alcinous and he agrees that if Medea and Jason are married, he will not allow the Colchians to take her (1073–1109). Arete transmits this message to the Argonauts (1110–1127), thus hatching their marriage plans.

Arete’s missive arrives via messenger in the night, and the Argonauts immediately spring into action:

Apollonius Rhodius 4.1128–1130

αὐτίκα δὲ κρητῆρα κερασάμενοι μακάρεσσιν,
ἦ θέμις, εὐαγέως τ’ ἐπιβώμια μῆλ’ ἐρύσαντες,
αὐτονοχί κούρη θαλαμήμιον ἔντυον εὐνὴν
ἄντρῳ ἐν ἡγαθέῳ⁵²¹...

Immediately [the Argonauts] mixed a crater of wine for the blessed gods, as is proper, and after reverently leading sheep to the altar, on that very night they spread a bridal bed for the girl in the sacred cave...

Apollonius then provides the aetiological importance of this cave (4.1131–1140), which was sacred to Makris, a nurse of Dionysus and daughter of Arietaeus, himself the son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene.⁵²² In Hera’s rage at Dionysus’ existence, she drove Makris from her home in Euboea and she established herself in this cave in the land of the Phaeacians.⁵²³ Association with the nymphs is natural for caves and for marriage rites, so the mythic connection within the Argonautic myth is fitting.

⁵²¹ An alternative found in a late 1st century BCE papyrus is ἄντρῳ ἐν ζαθέῳ.

⁵²² As discussed in Chapter 1, there was a nymph cave cult in Cyrene concerned with issues of maternity. See pages 101–113.

⁵²³ Homeric “Scheria,” but in Apollonius, Corcyra (4.982ff)

Apollonius Rhodius 4.1141–1160

ἔνθα τότε ἑστόρεσαν λέκτρον μέγα· τοῖο δ' ὑπερθεν
 χρύσειον αἶγλῃεν κῶας βάλλον, ὅφρα πέλοιτο
 τιμῆεις τε γάμος καὶ ἀοίδιμος. ἄνθεα δέ σφιν
 νύμφαι ἀμεργόμεναι λευκοῖς ἐνὶ ποικίλα κόλποις
 ἐσφόρεον· πάσας δὲ πυρὸς ὥς ἄμφεπεν αἶγλη,
τοῖον ἀπὸ χρυσέων θυσάνων ἀμαρύσσετο φέγγος.
δαῖε δ' ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς γλυκερὸν πόθον· ἴσχε δ'
 ἐκάστην
 αἰδῶς ἰεμένην περ ὅμως ἐπὶ χεῖρα βαλέσθαι.
 αἰ μὲν τ' Αἰγαίου ποταμοῦ καλέοντο θύγατρες,
 αἰ δ' ὄρεος κορυφᾶς Μελιτηίου ἀμφενέμοντο,
 αἰ δ' ἔσαν ἐκ πεδίων ἀλσηίδες· ὥρσε γὰρ αὐτὴ
 Ἥρη Ζηνὸς ἄκοιτις, Ἰήσωνα κυδαίνουσα.
 κεῖνο καὶ εἰσέτι νῦν ἱερὸν κληίζεται ἄντρον
 Μηδείης, ὅθι τοὺς γε σὺν ἀλλήλοισιν ἔμειξαν
τεινόμεναι ἑανοὺς εὐώδεας· οἱ δ' ἐνὶ χερσὶν
 δούρατα νωμήσαντες ἀρήια, μὴ πρὶν ἐς ἀλκὴν
 δυσμενέων αἰδήλος ἐπιβρίσειεν ὄμιλος,
 κράατα δ' εὐφύλλοις ἐστεμμένοι ἀκρεμόνεσσιν,
 ἐμμελῶς Ὀρφεὺς ὑπαὶ λίγα φορμίζοντος
νυμφιδίαις ὑμέναιον ἐπὶ προμολῇσιν ᾄειδον...

Here, then, they spread the great bed and over it threw the gleaming golden fleece, so that the wedding might be honored and worthy of song. And for them the nymphs gathered many-colored flowers, which they brought in their white bosoms. Around them all flickered a radiance as of fire—such was the gleam that sparkled from the golden tufts of wool. The fleece kindled in their eyes a sweet longing, but reverence restrained each one, in spite of her desire, from putting her hand on it. Some were called daughters of the Aegaeus river, others haunted the peaks of mount Melite, and still others were woodland nymphs from the plains. For Hera herself, Zeus' wife, urged them to come in Jason's honor. To this day that holy cave is called Medea's cave, where the nymphs spread the fragrant linens and joined the couple together. Meanwhile the crew, wielding their battle spears in their hands lest a band of enemies fall upon them with an unforeseen attack before they were ready, wreathed their heads with sprigs of leaves and then, to the bright accompaniment of Orpheus' lyre, tunefully sang the wedding song at the entrance of the bridal chamber...

As Margariti observes, the key features of a wedding shared by most Greek peoples were 1) feasting, 2) wedding songs, 3) dowry and gifts, and 4) sacrifices to deities (usually goddesses of virginity, sexuality, or marriage).⁵²⁴ Also common in the festivities were the cutting of the bride's hair, nuptial baths, and a nocturnal, torch-lit procession to the husband's house. Before this scene, then, we already have many of the makings of a Greek wedding: I have already shown how features of Medea's flight can be read as an inverted *nymphagōgia*, and the Golden Fleece as the dowry. Her tearing out a lock of her hair to leave to her mother (4.27–29) is also within

⁵²⁴ Margariti, "Greek Wedding," 330–334.

this tradition, though typically the lock is dedicated to a virginal goddess or heroine.⁵²⁵ While in Athens, the wedding ceremony was meant to span three days,⁵²⁶ Medea's spans several months at least, with a large hiatus between the procession and the actual celebration and consummation.⁵²⁷ Here, thanks to Arete and the Argonauts, we finally have the completion of the wedding rituals: libations, sacrifices of sheep (which suggests later feasting), and wedding songs are all present while the couple consummate the marriage inside the cave of Makris.⁵²⁸ Although the wedding is fairly unconventional in several ways, including being consummated in a cave, care is taken to ensure propriety (ἡ θέμις, 1129). Nevertheless, the distorted nature of the wedding, first hinted at with the odd *nymphagōgia*, is top of mind for both protagonists. Apollonius puts the reader in the minds of both of them, each wishing that the wedding had happened back at Jason's home in Greece.⁵²⁹

Of the couples discussed so far in this chapter, Jason and Medea are the first truly married couple. The relationships between Odysseus and Calypso and Selene and Endymion are unable to be marriages, due to a variety of factors. Odysseus is already married, for one, and Endymion is eternally asleep, for another. Nevertheless, these goddesses keep their mortal lovers inside these caves, and for both, the cave is both the setting for their sexual activity and the means of entrapping their lover. Jason and Medea and the couple that comes next, Dido and Aeneas, have some resonances with those goddesses' relationships, but diverge in a few key ways, namely, in

⁵²⁵ Margariti, "Greek Wedding," 330–331.

⁵²⁶ Margariti, "Greek Wedding," 320.

⁵²⁷ It could potentially be argued that the long journey around every major waterway in and around the Mediterranean was one very long nymphagōgia, particularly since Medea's brother was a "participant."

⁵²⁸ Hunter also suggests that the gleaming of the golden fleece, emphasized throughout the passage, is meant to stand in for "the torches which were normally at wedding celebrations," emphasized by its likening to fire (πυρὸς ὧς, 1145) and its "kindling" desire in the nymphs (δαΐε, 1147); Hunter, *Apollonius*, 237–238.

⁵²⁹ 4.1161–4: οὐ μὲν ἐν Ἀλκινόοιο γάμον μενέαινε τελέσσαι / ἥρωϊ Αἰσονίδῃ, μεγάροις δ' ἐνὶ πατρὸς ἐοῖο / νοστήσας ἐς Ἰωλκὸν ὑπότροπος, ὧς δὲ καὶ αὐτῇ / Μήδεια φρονέεσκε· τότε αὖ χρεὼ ἦγε μιγῆναι, "Yet it was not in Alcinous' domain that Jason, Aeson's heroic son, had wanted to celebrate his wedding, but in his father's halls after returning to Iolcus; and Medea herself also had the same intention, but necessity led them to make love at that time."

that both parties are mortal. Nevertheless, despite the mortality of the female parties henceforth, the power dynamics interrogated in the above contexts remain: in all instances, the female partner has greater agency than the male. This agency, since it is no longer based in divinity, instead takes other forms.

Any modern reader of the *Argonautica* will likely agree that as soon as Medea arrives in the narrative in Book 3, she is the most powerful character in the story. Though not technically a goddess, she has magical abilities that distinguish her from other mortal women and which are emphasized much more frequently in Apollonius' tale than in other depictions of Medea, such as that of Euripides. Apollonius, says Fantuzzi, "appears to structure his plot so that all the steps of the capture of the Golden Fleece are under the signs of Medea's magic."⁵³⁰ It is through her ability that the Argonauts are able to take the Golden Fleece:

Apollonius Rhodius 4.145–151; 162–163
τοῖο δ' ἐλισσομένοιο κατόμματος εἶσατο κούρη,
ῥ' ὕπνον ἁοσσητῆρα, θεῶν ὕπατον, καλέουσα
ἠδείη ἐνοπῇ θέλξαι τέρας· αὖτε δ' ἄνασσαν
νυκτιπόλον, χθονίην, εὐαντέα δοῦναι ἐφορμήν.
εἶπετο δ' Αἰσονίδης πεφοβημένος· αὐτὰρ ὃ γ' ἤδη
οἴμῃ θελγόμενος δολιχὴν ἀνελύετ' ἄκανθαν
γυγενέος σπείρης, μήκυνε δὲ μυρία κύκλα,...

But as [the snake] was coiling, the girl rushed to look it in the eye, and in a sweet voice called to her aid Sleep, highest of the gods, to enchant the monster, and invoked the queen of the underworld, the night-wanderer, to grant a favorable venture. Jason followed in fear, but the snake, already enchanted by her song, was relaxing the long spine of its earthborn coils and stretching out its myriad spirals...

ἔνθα δ' ὁ μὲν χρύσειον ἀπὸ δρυὸς αἶνυτο κῶας,
κούρης κεκλομένης...

Then, at the girl's command, [Jason] took the golden fleece from the oak tree...

Jason is extremely fearful and passive in this climactic encounter with the snake, while Medea takes command of the situation by looking the snake in the eye,⁵³¹ enchanting it, and giving

⁵³⁰ Marco Fantuzzi, "Which Magic? Which Eros? Apollonius' *Argonautica* and the Different Narrative Roles of Medea as a Sorceress in Love," in *Brill's Companion to Apollonius Rhodius*, ed. Theodore D. Papanghelis and Antonios Rengakos, Brill, 2003: 296.

⁵³¹ On the aggression inherent in the ancient Greek "active, emissionist model" of vision, see Nancy Rabinowitz, "Women as Subject and Object of the Gaze in Tragedy," *Helios* 40, nos. 1–2 (2013): 195–222. On vision in

Jason instructions. As Hollmann has recently shown, Apollonius assigns to Medea nearly all of the magical power in the poem, whereas other versions of the myth attribute magical aptitude to a variety of characters, including Jason.⁵³² By excluding Jason from magical agency and expounding at every step Medea's supernatural potency, Apollonius thus characterizes the "hero" Jason as a nearly helpless figure whom Medea must protect and aid throughout the poem.

Even aside from her metaphysical powers, in Colchis Medea a princess and wields considerable power as the object of Jason's supplication when they meet in secret at the temple of Hecate in Book 3—

Apollonius Rhodius 3.985–9

πρὸς σ' αὐτῆς Ἑκάτης μειλίσσομαι ἡδὲ τοκῆων
καὶ Διός, ὃς ξείνοισι ἰκέτησί τε χεῖρ' ὑπερίσχει·
ἀμφοτέρων δ' ἰκέτης ξεινός τέ τοι ἐνθάδ' ἰκάνω,
χρειοῖ ἀναγκαίῃ γουνούμενος· οὐ γὰρ ἄνευθεν
ὑμείων στονόεντος ὑπέρτερος ἔσσομ' ἀέθλου.

"I implore you by Hecate herself, by your
parents, and by Zeus, who holds his
protective hand over guests and
suppliants—for I have come to you here as
both suppliant and guest, at your knees
because of compelling need—for without
your aid I will not prevail in the dire contest.

Jason is both a visitor in her land and at the mercy of her magical aid, demonstrating an uneven power dynamic. Hunter goes so far as to call this Jason's "complete dependence" on Medea, in which she "protects Jason as a mother cares for her child."⁵³³ Thus, while Medea is not a goddess, she is undoubtedly the more powerful individual within her relationship with Jason. This female-weighted power imbalance therefore aligns with the trope of sexual relationships between goddesses and mortal men.

While the Odysseus/Calypso and Selene/Endymion relationships are depicted as iterative encounters, Jason and Medea's cavernous copulation is a one-time event meant to legitimize a

Argonautica 4, see Helen Lovatt, "Apollonius Rhodius *Argonautica* 4 and the Epic Gaze: There and Back Again," in *Gaze, Vision, and Visuality in Ancient Greek Literature*, De Gruyter, 2018.

⁵³² Alexander Hollmann, "Magic in Apollonius' *Argonautica*," in *A Companion to Apollonius of Rhodes*, ed. Ruth Scodel, University of Michigan Press, 2025.

⁵³³ R. L. Hunter, "Medea's Flight: The Fourth Book of the *Argonautica*," *Classical Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1987), 132.

wedding of primarily social and political convenience. While both parties are willing participants in the marriage, each of them wishes their wedding had been under different circumstances and in a different place: the cave is not the locale in which they wish to consummate their relationship.

The placement of Jason and Medea's first sexual encounter inside a cave therefore functions similarly to those above, characterizing the relationship as non-normative and "doomed" to fail in some way.⁵³⁴ This impending failure is also hinted at through the prophecy that Medea will marry Achilles in the Elysian Fields, (4.811–815), which Hunter calls "a strategically placed warning that Medea and Jason will not 'live happily ever after'."⁵³⁵ Although this specific plot does not come to fruition in Apollonius, it nevertheless acts as another microfracture in the relationship. While for Odysseus and Endymion the doom came in the form of accepting one's fated mortality and prolonged sleep, respectively, the stakes for two mortals is seemingly heightened and will lead to a more tragic outcome: Jason will leave Medea, Medea will kill their children, and everything ends horribly. None of these couples can "live happily ever after" (to use Hunter's phrasing) within an outright subversion of established power and gender dynamics, and therefore each couple must be separated at the end of their story. And within these relationships, there is no other explicit reason that these couples do not "work out". Although Zeus has countless affairs with mortal women and Hera has strong contempt for Zeus, there is no version where Zeus and Hera "break up" in the way that Jason will leave Medea. Despite their marital issues, Zeus and Hera's relationship does not pose a threat to the gender and power status quo: both male and female are immortal, they have sex in a meadow (a perfectly respectable locale), neither of them leaves the other. Thus, gender and power are re-affirmed. But

⁵³⁴ This outcome was also depicted in lost works by Ibycus and Simonides, according to a scholion on this passage.

⁵³⁵ Hunter, "Medea's Flight," 133.

the subversive nature of the goddess-mortal relationships—and, by extension, relationships between powerful mortal women and less powerful men—threatens patriarchal supremacy and therefore must be put down.

Aeneas & Dido

The next example of sexual activity taking place inside a cave that I will discuss in this chapter is the supposed “marriage” of Dido and Aeneas in a cave in the *Aeneid*. Until now, I have primarily engaged with sources written in Greek, but Vergil’s obvious engagement with and adaptation of Greek literature demonstrates the pervasiveness of many of these themes throughout the ancient world and, in particular, within the epic genre. Furthermore, Vergil’s reception of the relationships and myths already discussed in this chapter even more clearly demonstrates the unstable nature of these relationships and the narrative role that the cave plays in their characterizations. As in my analysis of the *Argonautica* passage above, I will first examine earlier parts of the poem to establish the gender and power dynamics between the couple, and then read the scene of the cave in relation to those dynamics.

Like Jason and Medea, both Aeneas and Dido are mortal, so the power imbalance between the two is likewise less explicit than in the goddess-mortal relationships. There is a tendency to frame Dido as a woman remarkably equal to the titular hero, but I will briefly show that her power actually exceeds that of Aeneas. Vergil suggests this through Dido’s political status, her guest-host relationship with Aeneas, and through intertexts with Odysseus and Calypso in the *Odyssey* and with Jason and Medea in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁶ For a comparison of the Dido/Aeneas episode with the Odysseus/Nausicaa episode in the *Odyssey* and the Jason/Medea marriage scene in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, see Wendell Clausen, “Two Similes and a Wedding,” in *Virgil’s Aeneid and the Tradition of Hellenistic Poetry*, University of California Press, 1987.

Like Odysseus, Aeneas is shipwrecked in the realm of a powerful female figure and is therefore at her mercy for his safety (and in Aeneas' case, also that of his crew). Calypso herself notes to Hermes her role in saving Odysseus, as discussed above.⁵³⁷ Odysseus faces no existential threat while on the mythical Ogygia, devoid of humans, whereas Aeneas finds himself in a foreign land brimming with humanity.⁵³⁸ As Aeneas arrives (1.305–309), Jupiter dispatches Mercury to inspire the Carthaginians to “lay aside their savage thoughts,”⁵³⁹ “so that the land and towers of new-built Carthage may open to greet the Teucrians, and Dido... might not bar them from her lands.”⁵⁴⁰ Aeneas ventures inland and meets his mother Venus, disguised as a Tyrian maiden (1.315). He inquires about their whereabouts, and she replies:

Verg. *Aen.* 1.338–341

*Punica regna vides, Tyrios et Agenoris urbem;
sed fines Libyci, genus intractabile bello.
imperium Dido Tyria regit urbe profecta,
germanum fugiens.*

“It is the Punic realm you see, a Tyrian people, and the city of Agenor; but the bordering country is Libyan, a race unconquerable in war. Dido wields the [[power]]⁵⁴¹—Dido, who, fleeing from her brother, came from the city of Tyre.”

This initial introduction establishes several power dynamics in less than four verses. The first is between the Trojans and the locals: Venus calls the Libyan people Dido rules unmanageable or “unconquerable in war” (*intractabile bello*, 1.339), which must hit close to home for Aeneas and his crew, whose homeland was sacked by the Greeks. Venus does not name the city of Carthage itself, but refers to it instead by naming its founder and ruler, Dido. As the Vergilian commentator Servius tells us, the name *Dido* was an epithet bestowed on the founder-queen Elissa, equivalent to the Latin *virago*, which refers to a “masculine” (*vir-*) woman, often a

⁵³⁷ See pages 137–138.

⁵³⁸ The multitude of citizens diligently working are compared to bees: Verg. *Aen.* 1.430–436.

⁵³⁹ *ponuntque ferocia Poeni / corda*, Verg. *Aen.* 1.302–303.

⁵⁴⁰ *ut terrae utque novae pateant Karthaginis arces / hospitio Teucris, ne... Dido / finibus arceret*. Verg. *Aen.* 1.298–300.

⁵⁴¹ Here, I have amended H. Rushton Fairclough's Loeb translation from “Dido wields the scepter” to more literally translate *imperium*.

warrior.⁵⁴² It is unknowable whether this meaning was more broadly known among Vergil's Roman readers, but it does demonstrate that the legend of the Carthaginian queen had always characterized her as a woman wielding typically-masculine agency.

The detail of Dido fleeing her brother aligns her subtly with Medea, who spent most of Book 4 of the *Argonautica* fleeing her own brother Apsyrtus. However, the backstory of Dido's flight from Tyre, including her stealing its treasures, rousing her brother's enemies, and executing their escape (1.346–364) all paint her as more powerful (especially over men) than even Medea. Venus marvels at the fact that all of this was done with “the leader of the enterprise a woman,” *dux femina facti*.⁵⁴³ Now Dido orchestrates the foundation and construction of her city through her wits⁵⁴⁴ and command.⁵⁴⁵

By contrast, Aeneas describes himself to his disguised mother as “unknown and destitute,” *ignotus, egens*.⁵⁴⁶ While Dido was born a princess and rules now as a queen, Aeneas is the leader only of his diminished crew. In fact, his own men, strewn to another part of the coastline during the storm, enters Dido's counsel assuming that he has died, while he watches on shielded in his mother's cloud of invisibility⁵⁴⁷ until he assures his safety.⁵⁴⁸ Aeneas and his crew therefore arrive in Carthage at the mercy of Dido, and are under her protection. The shipwrecked Odysseus was bathed, clothed, and fed by Calypso, and Aeneas and his crew are likewise tended to: they are given guards and wealth⁵⁴⁹ and are waited on by no fewer than two hundred and fifty

⁵⁴² Serv. schol. *Aen.* 1.120.

⁵⁴³ Verg. *Aen.* 1.364. cf. *Aen.* 4.124 (=4.165), discussed below.

⁵⁴⁴ Demonstrated initially through her trick with the oxhide: the local Berber king tells her she can have as much land as an oxhide encompasses, so she cuts the hide into a long strip and uses it to outline a large area for herself: *Aen.* 1.368.

⁵⁴⁵ As Dido sits in her throne in the temple of Juno, she establishes laws and directly oversees the construction labors: *iura dabat legesque viris, operumque laborem / partibus aequabat iustis aut sorte trahebat*, “Laws and ordinances she gave to her people; their tasks she adjusted in equal shares or assigned by lot”: *Aen.* 1.507–508.

⁵⁴⁶ Verg. *Aen.* 1.384.

⁵⁴⁷ cf. Hera shrouding Jason and the Argonauts with a cloud of mist when they enter Colchis, A.R. 3.210–212.

⁵⁴⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 1.509–560.

⁵⁴⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 1.571.

servants at their welcome banquet.⁵⁵⁰ Throughout every stage of their first encounter, then, Dido wields greater political, social, and economic agency than Aeneas, giving their forthcoming romantic relationship a power dynamic inverse to expected norms.

Like Odysseus in *Odyssey* 7–12, over the course of Books 2 and 3 Aeneas tells the Carthaginians how he ended up there, starting with the fall of Troy and leading up to the storm that landed them there in Book 1. Book 4 opens with the emotional state of Dido, recalling, perhaps, *Argonautica* 4, which opens with the emotional state of Medea. While Medea is filled with fear, however, Dido is filled with love for Aeneas (4.9–29), though it is a distressing and painful type of love.⁵⁵¹ The city of Carthage reflects its queen’s distress: the initial industriousness of the denizens⁵⁵² gives way to idleness.⁵⁵³ Amid this shift from prosperity to stagnation, Juno and Venus agree to ally the Carthaginians and Trojans by pushing the two leaders to marry.⁵⁵⁴ Juno outlines her plan for the two to get together during a hunting expedition:

Verg. *Aen.* 4.120–7

*“his ego nigrantem commixta grandine nimum,
dum trepidant alae saltusque indagine cingunt,
desuper infundam et tonitru caelum omne ciebo.
diffugient comites et nocte tegentur opaca;*

“I will pour down from above a black rain mingled with hail, and wake the whole [[heaven]]⁵⁵⁵ with thunder. The company shall scatter and be veiled in gloom of night; to the same cave shall come Dido

⁵⁵⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 1.703 and 705.

⁵⁵¹ *est mollis flamma medullas / interea et tacitum vivit sub pectore vulnus. / uritur infelix Dido totaque vagatur / urbe furens*, “All the while the flame devours her tender heartstrings, and deep in her breast lives the silent wound. Unhappy Dido burns, and through the city wanders in frenzy”: *Aen.* 4.66–69.

⁵⁵² Verg. *Aen.* 1.430–436.

⁵⁵³ *non coeptae adsurgunt turres, non arma iuventus / exercet portusve aut propugnacula bello / tuta parant; pendent opera interrupta minaeque / murorum ingentes aequataque machina caelo*. “No longer rise the towers begun, no longer do the youth exercise in arms, or toil at havens or bulwarks for safety in war; the works are broken off and idle—great menacing walls and cranes that touch the sky.” *Aen.* 4.86–89.

⁵⁵⁴ They “agree” ostensibly, at least. Juno has the ulterior motive of wanting to keep Aeneas from Italy to avoid the fated destruction of Carthage by the future Romans. It should also be noted that in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, Juno and Venus’ Greek counterparts were likewise responsible for the wedding of Jason and Medea; on this, see Nelis, *Vergil’s*, 151–152.

⁵⁵⁵ Here, I have amended Fairclough’s “welkin” to “heaven” for easier comprehension.

*speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem
deveniunt. adero et, tua si mihi certa voluntas,
conubio iungam stabili propriamque dicabo;
hic hymenaeus erit.*”

and the Trojan chief.⁵⁵⁶ I will be there and,
if I can be sure of your good will, will link
them in sure wedlock, sealing her for his
own; this shall be their bridal!”

Juno here says that she will draw the couple to a cave, and soon after her plan is fulfilled, evidenced by the repetition of the entire line: *speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem / deveniunt* (4.165 = 4.124). The full sentence changes from its original form only in the tense of the verb enjambed in the following line.⁵⁵⁷ Vergil’s use of epic repetition has been well-studied.⁵⁵⁸ In the *Aeneid*, there is no other instance where an entire line is repeated within the same book.⁵⁵⁹ While general readers may not notice the repetition even of entire lines when they are separated by several hundred verses, these two instances are separated by only 40 lines. The recurrence of 4.124/165 in such close proximity adds an extra epicizing or archaizing effect, recalling the higher incidence of full-line repetition in the oral epic tradition as recorded in Homeric poetry.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁶ The word order and implications of 4.125 (=4.165) have been discussed several times, with scholars pointing out the ambiguity of which party is designated *dux*. See Clausen, *Virgil’s*, 23–24: “[Dido] seems to take the lead... ‘Dido dux,’ the willing woman, the not-unwilling man. For a moment, the reader construes ‘dux’ with ‘Dido’; the effect is untranslatable... Aeneas is not elsewhere styled ‘dux Troianus.’” Also Caldwell, “*Dux* has a double resonance for Dido, since it also suggests her status as leader (cf. *dux femina facti*, 1.364–65). Indeed, its placement in the line demands scrutiny, since the reader first is encouraged to take *dux* with Dido, then with both Dido and Aeneas, and finally, after the postpositive *et* is recognized, with Aeneas. There is little reason to doubt that this lack of clarity is intentional, underlining that both Dido and Aeneas are leaders of their people,” Lauren Caldwell, “Dido’s *Deductio*: *Aeneid* 4.127–65,” *Classical Philology* 103 (2008): 430; and Lee M. Fratantuono and R. Alden Smith, *Virgil, Aeneid 4: Text, Translation, Commentary*, Brill, 2022: “*Dux* comes at the middle of the verse, immediately after *Dido* (with whom it is most naturally taken), and before the delayed conjunction that is followed by the reference to Aeneas as *Troianus*. The noun may be read with both Dido and Aeneas—both of whom, of course, are leaders of their respective people. The more “innocent” way to read the verse would be to take *dux* of Aeneas alone—Aeneas the *Troianus dux*—but word order, alliteration, the fact that the host Dido and not Aeneas would be the likelier to know where a cave may be found, and most of all the reminiscence of Dido as *dux femina facti* (Juno here recalling Venus’ earlier comment on the queen) all serve to highlight who is the real *dux* for this moment in time,” 272.

⁵⁵⁷ From the future *deveniunt* (125) to the present *deveniunt* (166).

⁵⁵⁸ See, for example, Walter Moskalaw, “Verbal Repetition in Vergil’s ‘Aeneid.’” PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1975.

⁵⁵⁹ There is a phrase spread across two lines that is repeated in full within Book 7: 98b–99a and 271b–272a; and there is a *nearly*-identical line repeated in Book 11: 591 ~ 848. For this repetition data, I am indebted to Moskalaw, “Appendix: List of Repetitions,” 257–296.

⁵⁶⁰ Moskalaw, “Verbal Repetition,” 147: “repetition in itself gives the lines the appearance of archaic formulae”; Clausen likewise notes that Vergil repeats the line “in Homeric fashion,” *Virgil’s*, 24.

As Duckworth observes, “Juno’s words anticipate the issue with almost the fidelity of an Homeric repetition.”⁵⁶¹

This repeated line begins the full description of the events that transpire in the cave:

Verg. *Aen.* 4.165–172

*speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem
deveniunt. prima et Tellus et pronuba Iuno
dant signum; fulsere ignes et conscius Aether
conubiis, summoque ulularunt vertice Nymphae.
ille dies primus leti primusque malorum
causa fuit. neque enim specie famave movetur
nec iam furtivum Dido meditatur amorem;
coniugium vocat; hoc praetexit nomine culpam.*

To the same cave come Dido and the Trojan chief. Primal Earth and nuptial Juno give the sign; fires flashed in Heaven, the witness to their bridal, and on the mountaintop screamed the Nymphs. That day the first of death, the first of calamity was cause. For no more is Dido swayed by fair show or fair fame, no more does she dream of a secret love: she calls it marriage and with that name veils her sin.

As has been thoroughly discussed by many scholars, Vergil uses divine and natural elements here to convey and pervert key aspects of a typical Roman wedding:⁵⁶² a signal is given for the procession (*pronuba Iuno / dant signum*),⁵⁶³ there are lightning ‘torches’ (*fulsere ignes*), and howled ‘wedding songs’ (*ulularunt... Nymphae*). While Jason and Medea’s wedding had intentional adaptations of marriage customs to fit their circumstances, the tenuousness of the connections here further underscore the instability of the union. It is almost as if we are in Dido’s head: she is grasping at straws, looking for any sign that what is happening is a ‘real’ marriage. Within her self-deception,⁵⁶⁴ she can delude herself into interpreting the sights and sounds of a thunderstorm as proverbial ‘wedding bells.’ The sense of unease evoked by these ominous approximations of wedding traditions is confirmed by the poet, who marks this day—really, this

⁵⁶¹ George Eckel Duckworth, *Foreshadowing and Suspense in the Epics of Homer, Apollonius, and Vergil*, Princeton University Press, 1933: 42.

⁵⁶² e.g. Damien Nelis, *Vergil’s Aeneid and the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius*, Francis Cairns, 2001: 148–152. Nelis refers to the *coniugium* of Aeneas and Dido as a “terrible parody of a true wedding... a hideous inversion of the happy, ritually correct union of Jason and Medea,” 149; Francis Cairns, *Virgil’s Augustan Epic*, Cambridge University Press, 1989: 47–49.

⁵⁶³ On this signal, see Annamaria Cotrozzi, ed. *Virgilio, Eneide, libro IV*, Pisa University Press, 2023: 125.

⁵⁶⁴ Cotrozzi, *Virgilio*, 127: *[Didone] ricorre all'autoinganno chiamandola coniugium*, “[Dido] resorts to self-deception by calling it *coniugium*.”

very moment in the cave—as the crucial point that seals her tragic fate (*ille dies primus leti primusque malorum / causa fuit*, 4.169–170). At this point, even a reader who does not know the story of Dido could infer the ending.⁵⁶⁵

In reality, it is difficult to say what an ancient reader would have known of this plot point going into the poem, since it is unclear what sources, if any, Vergil drew this particular version of events from. The romance of Dido and Aeneas does not appear in our earlier extant sources, and it is probable that, in his desire to tell a political origin story for Rome’s relationship with the Carthaginians (among others), Vergil combined the story of Aeneas with legends about the foundation of Carthage.⁵⁶⁶ The original story was still in circulation, it seems, even a few centuries after the *Aeneid*’s revision of events: the Vergilian commentator Servius, writing in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, knew the pre-Vergilian tale:

Servius, schol.*Aen.* 1.120

Dido: *vero nomine Elissa ante dicta est, sed post interitum a Poenis Dido appellata, id est virago Punica lingua, quod cum a suis sociis cogeretur cuicumque de Afris regibus nubere et prioris mariti caritate teneretur, forti se animo et interfecerit et in pyram iecerit, quam se ad expiandos prioris mariti manes extruxisse fingebat.*

She was first called by her real name Elissa, then after her death she was named Dido by the Phoenicians, that is, *virago*, in the Punic language, because when she was urged by her allies to wed one of the African kings and she held on to her love for her first husband, she with a strong soul killed herself and threw herself on the pyre which she had feigned to have built to placate the spirit of her first husband.⁵⁶⁷

In his thorough examination of Vergil’s reception and adaptation of this story, David Quint observes that “there is no narrative need for Dido to fall in love with Aeneas”: because Mercury has ‘softened up’ the Carthaginians, Aeneas is in no real danger, so Venus’ request for Cupid’s

⁵⁶⁵ On this an earlier foreshadowing of Dido’s tragic demise, see Duckworth, *Foreshadowing*, 42, 64, 59, and 79.

⁵⁶⁶ On Vergil’s “fabrication” of the romance and his weaving together of fact and fiction, see David Quint’s brilliant chapter, “The Doubleness of Dido,” in *Virgil’s Double Cross: Design and Meaning in the Aeneid*, Princeton University Press, 2018: 67–81, esp. 67–75. Quint notes the possibility that Naevius invented the relationship, but admits that it is impossible to know with the fragments that survive: 67.

⁵⁶⁷ Translation by Quint, “Doubleness,” 68.

intervention is “an add-on.”⁵⁶⁸ In his analysis, however, Quint focuses on Vergil’s deviations from and glimpses into this original story. He does not discuss in depth the narrative models—and in particular the Greek intertexts—with which Vergil engages in his reconfiguration of events. The two Homeric models for Dido that Quint briefly cites are Penelope, for her stalwart marital devotion, and Nausicaa, for her rescuing of Odysseus on the shores of Scheria.⁵⁶⁹ Other scholars, of course, have read Dido in relation to Medea (in both Apollonius and Euripides). But there is a missing link between Quint’s dissection of Vergil’s adaptation of the founding of Carthage and the epic models. I therefore argue that within his revision, Vergil draws specifically on the paradigms and motifs discussed earlier in this chapter in order to comment on gender and power dynamics that situate Aeneas’ quest in a broader mythic tradition.

In his etiology for the Carthage-Rome rivalry, Vergil thus stages an anachronistic meeting between Aeneas and Dido. This etiology answers the “why”. The “how” is more my concern here: how Vergil draws upon earlier epic traditions and how his choices contribute to the narrative and his underlying “argument”. Once he decides to have these two meet, it sets off a Rube Goldberg-esque set of consequences that have been established by Vergil’s epic predecessors. When a voyaging hero ends up shipwrecked (and therefore vulnerable), he tends to be greeted by a powerful woman. Such a meeting of unequal powers involves acts of mothering through the provisions of baths, clothing, and food, but it also invariably involves sexual encounters.⁵⁷⁰ Relationships where gender-power dynamics are truly inverted⁵⁷¹ are threatening

⁵⁶⁸ Quint, “Doubleness,” 67.

⁵⁶⁹ Quint, “Doubleness,” 69.

⁵⁷⁰ Up to this last point, it is possible to include Nausicaa in this list, though there were indeed offers of marriage extended to Odysseus.

⁵⁷¹ In the case of Odysseus and Nausicaa, there is not a power inversion at the scale of mortal/immortal that we see with Calypso and Circe, or of someone who is magically inclined. And, while Nausicaa is royalty, she is not a queen like Dido is, and although he is at first unrecognized in Scheria, Odysseus is king of Ithaca and his reputation precedes him.

and therefore unfit to be consummated within the traditional marriage chamber and are instead staged in a heterotopic space. The feminized cave, with its structural affinity to both a womb and to a domestic structure, is perfectly suited to act as the narrative foil to the marriage chamber. And in the case of Aeneas and Dido in particular, the cave is especially apt to depict the gulf between Aeneas and Dido's respective understandings of their encounter. Within Dido's equating natural elements with wedding traditions, the cave as a bridal chamber is all the more fitting. Later in the book, Mercury will convince Aeneas to fulfill his destiny in Italy. Aeneas will stealthily abandon Dido, who in her grief and shame throws herself onto a pyre.

In many ways, the events of Book 4 of the *Aeneid* are inevitable; this is simply what happens when a hero is subject to a powerful female figure. There is no scenario in which the couples who copulate in caves "live happily ever after" because to do so would be to allow for the possibility of femaleness and matriarchy to "work". Thus, Vergil's staging of Dido and Aeneas in the cave does something that none of the other texts examined in this chapter does: it literalizes and solidifies the association in an almost too on-the-nose manner.

The Cave of Pan in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

My final literary source provides the "exception that proves the rule" for the paradigms I examined above. The subversive nature of the sexual relationships examined above and their frequent placement inside caves is not restricted to the epic genre or to mythological accounts. Aristophanes uses a similar trope in *Lysistrata* (411 BCE), a play which dramatizes the anxieties about women being in power. During the Peloponnesian War, an Athenian woman named Lysistrata leads a movement to bring an end to the war by banding women together to withhold sex from their husbands. They also occupy the Athenian Acropolis, where the war funds were kept, thereby making further military investment impossible. This dual approach leads to peace

talks between the Athenian and Spartan contingents. During the occupation men try to retrieve their wives, while some women attempt escapes to meet lovers. A man named Cinesias sneaks behind “enemy” lines to meet his wife Myrrine for an evening romp at the Cave of Pan on the North Slope of the Acropolis.

The generic and thematic contexts of this play differ starkly from the mythographic, epic, and hymnic material examined thus far. This diversity, I contend, reflects the pervasiveness of the trope I am examining. Aristophanes’ placement of a sexual encounter in a cave at once evokes and recontextualizes these other models. Staged in 411 BCE, this play was certainly crafted in a society familiar with the Calypso/Odysseus story. Sappho’s poetry, including her lost work on Selene and Endymion, was also popular in Athens at the time.⁵⁷² Finally, Euripides’ *Ion* was recent in public memory, having been staged probably between 418–412 BCE.⁵⁷³ The Cave of Apollo on the Acropolis that was featured prominently in *Ion* is directly adjacent to the Cave of Pan in *Lysistrata*. The proximity of time and space between *Ion* and *Lysistrata* is compelling; Euripides’ in-depth examination of the mythic dimension of the Cave of Apollo on the North Slope of the Acropolis in a tragedy may have inspired Aristophanes’ focus on the adjacent Cave of Pan in a comedy. Combining these geographic references with the fact that these plays were performed in the Theater of Dionysus on the South Slope of the Acropolis, so close to the narrative references, the ties become even more apparent. This physical and symbolic convergence of theatrical space, mythic precedent, and civic anxiety is vividly realized in a scene between husband and wife at the Cave of Pan.

⁵⁷² Dimitrios Yatromanolakis, “The Anthropology of Ancient Reception: The Late Archaic and Classical Periods,” in *Sappho in the Making: the Early Reception*, Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁵⁷³ On the struggles of dating *Ion*, see John C. Gibert, “Introduction,” *Euripides Ion*, ed. John C. Gibert, Cambridge University Press, 2019: 2–4. Gibert cites Cropp and Fink’s research on metrical resolution rates and their applicability for dating Euripides’ plays. See Martin Cropp and Gordon Fick, “Resolutions and Chronology in Euripides: the Fragmentary Tragedies,” *Bulletin Supplement* (University of London. Institute of Classical Studies) 43 (1985): iii–92.

Cinesias, driven by lust, infiltrates the occupied Acropolis to beg his wife for sex. His wife Myrrhine masterfully and comedically delays the reunion and maintains the strike—

Aristoph. *Lys.* 910–21; 947–953

MYPPINH: ποῦ γὰρ ἂν τις καί, τάλαν,
δράσειε τοῦθ’;

Myrrhine: But my dear, just where could a person do it?

KINHΣΙΑΣ: ὅπου; τὸ τοῦ Πανὸς καλόν.

Cinesias: Where? Pan’s Grotto will do fine.

MYPPINH: καὶ πῶς ἔθ’ ἀγνὴ δῆτ’ ἀνέλθοιμ’ εἰς
πόλιν;

Myrrhine: But how could I go back up to the Acropolis no longer pure?

KINHΣΙΑΣ: κάλλιστα δῆπου, λουσαμένη τῇ
Κλεψύδρᾳ.

Cinesias: Very easily done: just wash off in the Clepsydra.

MYPPINH: ἔπειτ’ ὁμόσασα δῆτ’ ἐπιорκήσω,
τάλαν;

Myrrhine: You’re telling me, dear, that I should break the oath I swore?

KINHΣΙΑΣ: εἰς ἐμὲ τράποιτο· μηδὲν ὅρκου
φροντίσης.

Cinesias: Let that be on my head; don’t you worry about any oath.

MYPPINH: φέρε νυν ἐνέγκω κλινίδιον νῶν.

Myrrhine: All right then, let me fetch us a bed.

KINHΣΙΑΣ: μηδαμῶς· / ἄρκεῖ χαμαὶ νῶν.

Cinesias: Nothing doing; the ground will serve for us.

MYPPINH: μὰ τὸν Ἀπόλλω, μὴ σ’ ἐγὼ / καίπερ
τοιοῦτον ὄντα κατακλινῶ χαμαί.

Myrrhine: Apollo no! I wouldn’t dream of letting you lie on the ground, no matter what kind of man you are.

*Myrrhine goes to acquire a bed.*⁵⁷⁴

KINHΣΙΑΣ: ἦ τοι γυνὴ φιλεῖ με, δῆλη ’στὶν
καλῶς.

Cinesias: You know, she really loves me, that’s quite obvious!

MYPPINH: ἰδοῦ, κατάκεισ’ ἀνύσας τι, κἀγὼ
’κδύομαι. / καίτοι, τὸ δεῖνα, ψίαθός ἐστ’
ἐξοιστέα.

Myrrhine: (*returning with a cot*) There we are! Lie right down while I undress. But wait, um, yes, a mattress! Must go get one.

... [Myrrhine makes excuses to acquire a mattress, a pillow, a blanket, and vial of

⁵⁷⁴ Obviously, these stage directions are not original and were added by the Loeb edition editor, Jeffrey Henderson.

ΚΙΝΗΣΙΑΣ : ἀλλ' ἕτερον ἔχω. / ἀλλ' ὄζυρά,
κατάκεισο καὶ μή μοι φέρε / μηδέν.

ΜΥΡΡΙΝΗ: ποιήσω ταῦτα νῆ τὴν Ἄρτεμιν. /
ὑπολύομαι γοῦν. ἀλλ' ὅπως, ὦ φίλτατε, /
σπονδὰς ποιῆσθαι ψηφιεῖ.

ΚΙΝΗΣΙΑΣ: βουλευσομαι. / ἀπολώλεκέν με
κάπιτέτριφεν ἡ γυνὴ / τὰ τ' ἄλλα πάντα
κάποδεῖρας' οἴχεται.

perfume]

Cinesias: I've got one ["alabastron"]⁵⁷⁵ of my own! Now lie down, you witch, and don't bring me anything more.

Myrrhine: That's what I'll do, so help me Artemis;⁵⁷⁶ I'm just getting my shoes off. But remember, darling, you're going to vote for peace.

Cinesias: I'll give it serious consideration. (*finding Myrrhine gone*) The woman's destroyed me, annihilated me! Not only that: she's pumped me up and dropped me flat!

In contrast to the couples mentioned above, the cave-copulating couple in *Lysistrata* in many ways seems to conform to expectations and paradigms of traditional marriage. The female partner is not divine or royal, so the power dynamic between the two favors the male partner, as it should. They are publicly recognized as being married and already have a child together (907ff.). Jason and Medea and Aeneas and Dido, by contrast, are both placed in the cave as the site of their marriage chamber, their first foray into sexual marital life. Additionally, Cinesias' infiltration of the Acropolis resistance compound, a feminized space, has undertones of penetration that are much more pronounced than any of the texts I have examined so far.⁵⁷⁷ Cinesias' name even has sexually-dominant undertones with its root in "movement," and therefore the "active" or penetrating partner.⁵⁷⁸ Therefore, this representation of a normative marriage and Cinesias' masculine commandeering of space seems initially to deviate from the

⁵⁷⁵ This is a double-entendre referring to the rather phallic shape of most Greek *alabastra*.

⁵⁷⁶ Artemis, a symbol of female chastity,

⁵⁷⁷ This is probably in part due to the comic genre, though Henderson observes, "the line that separates metaphorical obscenity in this class of comparisons from the many noble and exalted metaphors found in serious poetry is very often delicate and sometimes merely a matter of context," Jeffrey Henderson, *Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*, Oxford University Press, 1975: 46.

⁵⁷⁸ On the sexual implications of κινέω in Attic comedy, see Henderson, *Maculate*, 35, 64, 77, 151–153, 186, 209, 214, and 218.

non-normative sexual relationships already examined in this chapter; that is, it seems to conform to expected societal norms.

However, two contextual details about the situation reveal the subversive nature of the encounter. First, the very conceit of the play itself is a comic subversion of societal norms. As one of Aristophanes' three "women-on-top"⁵⁷⁹ plays (the other two being *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Assembly Women*), *Lysistrata* pulls its comedy from the perceived absurdity of its premise. As De Marre notes, "the very notion of female mass action and overt female power was as fanciful and farcical as a cloudcuckooland in the sky."⁵⁸⁰ Thus, within the context of the plot, Cinesias' initiating of sexual activity inverts the paradigm established within the reality of the play. Myrrhine and Cinesias nearly engage in normative sexual behavior between spouses, though in a somewhat absurd place: a cave on the slopes of the Acropolis. The cave here again signals that something is amiss. Therefore, what appears at first glance to be a "normative" sexual encounter turns out to be in essence a subversion of societal norms.

Additionally, while in theory Cinesias is the "dominant" partner—he is the male, the one who infiltrated the feminine Acropolis—in actuality, Myrrhine is in control. She exerts her power over the situation by making a decision about sex, though she decides *not* to have sex. While in the above relationships the women or goddesses seek out and enable sexual encounters, Myrrhine uses her control of the situation to stall her reunion with Cinesias so as to maintain her commitment to the anti-war effort. She tells her husband, "But remember, darling, you're going to vote for peace" (950–951) before slipping away. While Cinesias is the one to initiate sex in

⁵⁷⁹ The term "women-on-top", describing scenarios (usually comic stage performances) in which one or more female characters wield greater power (whether political, militaristic, social, or monetary) than their male counterparts, was coined by Zemon Davis in her analysis of early modern French comedic performances. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford University Press, 1975: chapter 5, "Women on Top," 124–151.

⁵⁸⁰ Martine De Marre, "Aristophanes on Bawds in the Boardroom: Comedy as a Guideline to Gender Relations in Antiquity," *Social Identities* 7, no. 1 (2001): 37–65.

Lysistrata, and even seems to convince his wife to sleep with him, the fact that she is able to thwart his advances demonstrates her greater power over sexuality.

The placement of this encounter inside the Cave of Pan on the Acropolis has implications both for the gender-power dynamics expressed in the play and for its military-political commentary. Pan was a sexually aggressive god, much more associated with unstable erotic encounters than with marital relationships.⁵⁸¹ While elsewhere, it seems that having sex in a shrine or sacred cave was a polluting action, there seems in *Lysistrata* to be no such concern for the Cave of Pan. The only concern that Myrrhine shows is her own personal impurity (912), which Cinesias suggests can be washed away easily at the nearby Clepsydra (913). The Cave of Pan therefore befits the scenario's sexual circumstances. Additionally, Herodotus tells us that Pan was introduced to Attica after the Battle of Marathon, in which he aided the allied Greeks against the invading Persians.⁵⁸² In thanks for his help, the Athenians established cave shrines for him, including one in the prime real estate on the North Slope of the Acropolis. The Cave of Pan therefore had a direct link to Athenian military victory and, in particular, the thwarting of an invasion. Within this play, directly concerned with the Peloponnesian War, the Cave of Pan is therefore an appropriate site in which to stage a struggle between the sexes and between war and peace.

Homosexuality

One additional point that reinforces my argument about the role of caves in tales of sexual politics is actually the absence of certain kinds of sexual activity in caves. Nowhere in extant mythic accounts is there copulation between same-sex couples in caves. Of course,

⁵⁸¹ On Pan's aggressive sexuality, see Philippe Borgeaud, "From Landscape to Sexuality and Music," in *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece*, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

⁵⁸² Herodotus, 6.105.

depictions of female-female relationships in general are scarce. However, even within the pastoral tradition, which does refer to relationships between males, these sexual encounters do not take place inside cavernous spaces. Caves are mentioned in pastoral, and are often referred to, obviously, as the haunts of Pan, Hermes, the nymphs, etc. They might be sites of encounter with gods, sources of shelter or freshwater, or landmarks in other ways, but the use of grottos for sexual activity is exclusive to heterosexual relationships. The exclusion of that paradigm from the evidence reinforces the identification of the female essence of the cave in particular.

Section Conclusion

So, what does the cave “do” in these cases? Why are grottos the typical setting for these relationships? I contend that the heterotopic nature of the cave allows these poets to suggest the non-normative nature of the relationships consummated within. As heterotopias, grottos both exist in the world and apart from it, refracting the “real” world and presenting opportunities for critical examination of cultural or societal expectations. Heterotopias can exaggerate certain dynamics in ways that invite readers to reconsider norms. The issues of power dynamics between male and female and between mortals and immortals are pervasive in ancient Greek literature, and one way to signal to an audience that the relationship being examined is engaging with these issues is by situating them within a heterotopic frame.

The cave, as a heterotopia, therefore offers a place in which to play with a hypothetical, inverted gender-power dynamic. It acts, therefore, as an outlet for confrontation while “offer[ing] no resolution or consolation,... no promise or space of liberation.”⁵⁸³ These women’s equal or even greater agency in these relationships is not framed as empowering for female characters, but rather as a dangerous notion that must be thwarted. The societal “safety” of the cave

⁵⁸³ Johnson, “Unravelling,” 87.

heterotopia therefore allows interrogation of patriarchal structures and investigation into alternatives to those structures within a frame where the dominant masculine perspective will always prevail.

Lived Religion in “Nympholeptic” Cave Cults

Sexuality is always intimately involved in ritual. There is no social order without a sexual order; but, even so, sexuality always retains the quality of something extraordinary and strange.

— Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 58.⁵⁸⁴

The final section of this chapter will examine the phenomenon of nympholepsy, literally “being seized by the nymphs.” Our modern understanding of nympholepsy is tenuous at best, and much of the confusion stems from uncritical application of the term to a wide variety of situations in literature and the archaeological record from all eras of antiquity. One primary assumption about nympholepsy perpetuated by scholars is that there is inherently a subversive sexuality in which the female nymphs wield erotic control over male mortals, a dynamic which is prominent in the literary examples explored earlier in this chapter. And within this paradigm, scholars further assume that nympholepsy was a dangerous phenomenon that spelled transfiguration, madness, or death for the seized mortal. However, in the archaeological record, both of these features are difficult to discern in cult practice. In the final portion of this chapter, then, I will examine the phenomenon of nympholepsy more critically to determine the extent to which the literary paradigms should be read into the three so-called “nympholeptic” cave cults from antiquity: the Vari Cave in Attica, the Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus, and the Kafizin Nymphaeum on Cyprus.

Defining “Nympholepsy”

In the ancient Greek world, a νυμφόληπτος was literally “one who was seized by the nymphs”. Modern scholars refer to the phenomenon of being seized by the nymphs as

⁵⁸⁴ Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: the Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual*, tr. Peter Bing, University of California Press, 1983 [1972].

nympholepsy, though this word has been, in my view, too liberally applied. As a result, the word itself is used as a blanket term that has several possible connotations, some of which are mutually exclusive. In her 2011 monograph on nympholepsy, Corinne Pache uses a definition for nympholepsy that is both too specific and too broad. As Jennifer Larson has critiqued, Pache uses the term as a “catchall” and applies it to “virtually any relationship between female deity and mortal male”.⁵⁸⁵ Pache sees inherent sexual under- or overtones to the term and yet applies it to situations that have no such implications—even, for example, the relationship between Athena and Odysseus.⁵⁸⁶ Thus, for Pache, nympholepsy is specifically tied to sexuality, especially male sexual submission to female divinities, but she also applies it to a host of situations “which sweep disparities together, goddesses and nymphs, real-life nympholepts and the creations of poets, early and late.”⁵⁸⁷ Although two of the three cave cults Pache discusses were active during the classical period, she for the most part glosses over the literary evidence for the term νυμφόληπτος in the classical period, even though that is the only period when it is attested in literature organically.⁵⁸⁸ While Pache’s consideration of both literary and archaeological evidence is admirable in theory, her conflation of literary constructions with lived experience shows disregard for the functional differences between myth and cult.⁵⁸⁹ Thus, before delving into the

⁵⁸⁵ Jennifer Larson, “Review of *A Moment’s Ornament: The Poetics of Nympholepsy in Ancient Greece*, by Corinne Ondine Pache,” *Classical Philology* 106, no. 4 (2011): 365.

⁵⁸⁶ See the chapter “Odysseus *Nympholeptos*,” 93–122.

⁵⁸⁷ W. Robert Connor, “Review of *A Moment’s Ornament: The Poetics of Nympholepsy in Ancient Greece*, by Corinne Ondine Pache,” *Mnemosyne* 65, no. 4/5 (2012): 884.

⁵⁸⁸ i.e. in emic discourse, rather than in later, etic discussions about the meaning of that discourse, as is the case in Roman period references to nympholepts, as will be discussed below.

⁵⁸⁹ Pache does distinguish between these phenomena on a surface level by examining the archaeological evidence in one chapter, separate from her chapters on nympholepsy in the *Theogony*, the *Odyssey*, and Hellenistic poetry. However, she interprets each data set with an underlying presumption of the sexual nature of nympholepsy, which I argue below is anachronistic. She thus applies her definition of nympholepsy to sources from all time periods, media, and genres. This leads to what Larson refers to as Pache’s “problematic” expansion of this terminology, projecting the implications of later motifs onto early evidence, and leading to—according to Larson—an “unacknowledged dissonance” between archaeological and literary evidence: Larson, “Review,” 366, 368.

archaeological evidence for “nympholeptic” cave cults, I will first dissect terminology, both ancient and modern.

Let us start from zero and build up the meaning of the term chronologically. νυμφόληπτος is not attested in poetry despite its compatibility with lyric (if not epic) meters. It first appears in our extant sources in the classical period in the mouth of Plato’s Socrates. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates and his eponymous interlocutor discuss male *erotēs/eromenos* relationships while in an idyllic setting to which Socrates repeatedly calls attention. He tells Phaedrus:

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 238d

τῷ ὄντι γὰρ θεῖος ἔοικεν ὁ τόπος εἶναι, ὥστε
ἐὰν ἄρα πολλάκις νυμφόληπτος προϊόντος
τοῦ λόγου γένωμαι, μὴ θαυμάσης· τὰ νῦν γὰρ
οὐκέτι πόρρω διθυράμβων φθέγγομαι.

*For the place seems truly inspired by a god,
so don't be surprised if I perhaps become
possessed by the nymphs as the speech
progresses. You see at the moment I'm almost
on the point of breaking out into dithyrambs.*

Here, Socrates’ use of the term is unambiguously tied to artistic or poetic expression and is framed as the result of their surroundings. The setting—a grove sacred to the nymphs—is a crucial detail, and “Plato himself spares no pains to depict the scene, not in broad colours but with a vase-painter's delicate precision of line.”⁵⁹⁰ Socrates comments that he does not often go outside the urban center because, he believes, nature has nothing to teach him.⁵⁹¹ Nevertheless, he delights in the aesthetic and sensory pleasures of the spot,⁵⁹² using much of the same

⁵⁹⁰ R. E. Wycherley, “The Scene of Plato’s ‘Phaidros,’” *Phoenix* 17, no. 2 (1963): 88. On sacred groves in ancient Greece more generally, see R. Barnett, “Sacred Groves: Sacrifice and the Order of Nature in Ancient Greek Landscapes,” *Landscape Journal* 26 (2007): 252–269.

⁵⁹¹ *Phdr.* 230d.

⁵⁹² *Phdr.* 230b–c, The two men were seated under a plane tree in the grove of the Ilissos, outside the city walls (ἐξω τείχους, 227a), a place with a cooling stream (ῥᾶστον οὖν ἡμῖν κατὰ τὸ ὑδάτιον βρέχουσι | τοὺς πόδας ἰέναι, καὶ οὐκ ἀηδές, “So it will be easiest for us to go along the stream getting our feet wet, and not unpleasant either,”) *Phdr.* 229a; also 230b; ample shade (ΦΑΙ. Ὁρᾷς οὖν ἐκείνην τὴν ὑψηλοτάτην πλάτανον; ... Ἐκεῖ σκιά τ’ ἐστὶν καὶ πνεῦμα μέτριον, καὶ πόα καθίζεσθαι ἢ ἂν βουλόμεθα κατακλιθῆναι. “So do you see that very tall plane tree?... There’s shade there and a bit of a light breeze, and grass to sit on, or, if we want, lie down on.”) *Phdr.* 229a–b; also 230b; a pleasant aroma, and the hum of cicadas, *Phdr.* 230c. Several scholars have therefore read the setting of this dialogue as a *locus amoenus*, e.g. Helene P. Foley, “‘The Mother of the Argument’: Eros and the Body in Sappho and Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” in *Parchments of Gender: Deciphering the Bodies of Antiquity*, ed. Maria Wyke, Oxford University Press, 1998; Christopher Rowe, “Philosophy, Love, and Madness,” in *The Person and the human mind: issues in ancient and modern philosophy*, ed. Christopher Gill, Clarendon Press, 1990: 141. Others read it more specifically as an “eroticized meadow”: Elizabeth Pender, “Poetic Allusion in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*,” *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* 10 (2007): 21–57. Pender claims that the classification of the *Phaedrus*’ setting is “more

vocabulary and compliments that the poets and narrative authors use in their ekphrastic depictions of natural spaces.⁵⁹³ The sensory pleasures of sight, sound, smell, and touch paint this scene, like others we have examined thus far, as an eroticized *locus amoenus*. This aspect is also illustrated in Phaedrus' reference to Boreas' capture of Oreithyia nearby, an instance in which nature (in the form of the North Wind) seizes and makes a mortal disappear.⁵⁹⁴

However, within the erotic context of the dialogue, both the Boreas/Oreithyia and the pederastic dynamics are “sanctioned” within paradigms of masculine sexual agency. Proper *erotēs/eromenos* couplings and heterosexual pairings in which the male partner is the one “seizing,” and therefore the dominant partner, are both perfectly permissible. The grove in which Socrates and Phaedrus have this conversation therefore has (or is given) sexual overtones that conform to, rather than subvert, expected gender-power dynamics. Plato's dialogue does not take place within the realm of myth, but is instead intended to reflect lived experience. As visitors to this nymph shrine—even without the intention of engaging in religious activities—Socrates and Phaedrus are nevertheless embedded within a cult environment. This passage can therefore be interpreted as evidence for “lived religion.” And in this context, the relationships that are discussed adhere to societal expectations of gender-power dynamics.

The location—outside the city walls⁵⁹⁵ and eroticized both in its sensory depiction and local lore—is therefore the catalyst for Socrates' eloquence: “For the place seems truly inspired by a god, so don't be surprised if I perhaps become a *nympholept* as the speech progresses.”

Their extra-urban position therefore renders Socrates, in theory, vulnerable to “possession” by

precisely” (than a *locus amoenus*) an “eroticized meadow”: Pender, “Poetic Allusion,” 37. Here, Pender praises the section on “Eroticized Meadows” in Calame, *Poetics of Eros*, 155–157. I struggle to understand the necessity for the distinction and in particular disagree with its application to the setting of the *Phaedrus*, since the *locus amoenus* has sexual connotations and often includes a meadow among its trees and streams of cool water, both of which are mentioned by Plato.

⁵⁹³ For a breakdown, see Pender, “Poetic Allusion in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*.”

⁵⁹⁴ *Phdr.* 229b.

⁵⁹⁵ ἔξω τείχους, 227a

the nymphs, which would result in heightened eloquence and poetic skill. He does not, however, imply ramifications that would indicate his sexual submission to the nymphs themselves.

Socrates' use of the word in this context does not, therefore, imply any sexual connotation that would subvert expected norms of gender-power dynamics.

The term νυμφόληπτος is, on the contrary, an expected and apparently neutral term for divine "possession". Aristotle uses it when discussing happiness, musing about whether happiness arises by nature, nurture, or by divine inspiration such as in νυμφόληπτοι and θεόληπτοι.⁵⁹⁶ Thus, elsewhere in literature, we see all kinds of variations on the -ληπτος form: θεόληπτος, φοιβόληπτος, μητρόληπτος, πυθόληπτος, πανόληπτος, ἐρωτόληπτος, μουσόληπτος.⁵⁹⁷ With the exception of ἐρωτόληπτος, "one seized by Eros/desire" (and perhaps πανόληπτος, "one seized by Pan"), none of these other types of possession have inherently sexual connotations.⁵⁹⁸ Excising from our definition of νυμφόληπτος the (subversive) sexual connotations assumed by Pache, we see that in the classical period such "possession" chiefly resulted in divine inspiration, typically in the form of poetic ability.

Later, there seems to be a slight shift from poetic to prophetic inspiration, though the two are, of course, closely linked. Plutarch uses the term to describe divinatory practices at the cave oracle of the Sphragitic nymphs on Mt. Cithaeron, which the Pythia told Aristides to visit.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁶ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1214a: ἢ τούτων μὲν κατ' οὐδένα τῶν τρόπων, δυοῖν δὲ θάτερον, ἢτοι καθάπερ οἱ νυμφόληπτοι καὶ θεόληπτοι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ἐπιπνοία δαιμονίου τινὸς ὥσπερ ἐνθουσιάζοντες, "Or does happiness come in none of these ways, but either by a sort of elevation of mind inspired by some divine power, as in the case of persons possessed by a nymph or a god?"

⁵⁹⁷ On these various types of divine "possession," see Borgeaud, *Cult of Pan*, 104; Nikolaus Himmelmann-Wildschütz, *Theoleptos*, Marburg-Lahn, 1957. Some of the terms cited by Borgeaud only appear in the Byzantine period, however. For those used in antiquity, see Pollux, *Onomasticon*, 1.19, on the art of prophecy (ἡ τέχνη μαντική): θεόληπτος, φοιβόληπτος, νυμφόληπτος, μουσόληπτος, ἐκ Πανὸς ἢ ἄλλου τινὸς θεοῦ κάτοχος ἢ κατεχόμενος, "one seized by the god, one seized by fear, one seized by the nymph(s), one seized by the muse(s), one held or taken by Pan or some other god."

⁵⁹⁸ Furthermore, neither ἐρωτόληπτος nor πανόληπτος were used before the late antique or early Byzantine periods: the first appearance of ἐρωτόληπτος is Procopius, *Anecdota* 1.18, 6th century CE; the first and apparently only use of πανόληπτος was Hermias' 5th century CE commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus*.

⁵⁹⁹ Plutarch, *Life of Aristides*, 11.4: καὶ τὸ τῶν Σφραγιτίδων νυμφῶν ἄντρον ἐν μιᾷ κορυφῇ τοῦ Κιθαιρώνους ἐστίν, εἰς δυσμὰς ἡλίου θερινὰς τετραμμένον, ἐν ᾧ καὶ μαντεῖον ἦν πρότερον, ὥς φασι, καὶ πολλοὶ κατεῖχοντο τῶν

Here, we see perhaps the first explicitly cultic application of the term: the νυμφόληπτοι at the Sphragitic sanctuary acted as liaisons between humans and the divine. A few generations later, Philostratus uses it when discussing oracular practitioners, particularly the more reliable ones who prophecy not from intoxication but from “sober” methods.⁶⁰⁰ Again, there is no implication of a sexual dynamic to the proceedings, and they are seen as providing useful services to the public.

These νυμφόληπτοι are not framed here with negative connotations at all. Negative connotations were applied, however, at least in the etic perspective offered by Varro, who says, “persons of disturbed mind, whom in Greece they call νυμφόληπτοι, ‘seized by the Nymphs,’ our fellow-countrymen from this called *lymphati*.”⁶⁰¹ This contrasts with Philostratus’ use, where he emphasizes the staid and sober qualities of legitimate seers. Emperor Julian uses the term to describe theatrical performances rejected by the Celts, framing certain actors as crazed, bizarre outcasts, νυμφόληπτοι.⁶⁰² Frenzy and madness became the dominant meaning, therefore, in the Roman period.

On the other hand, in expanding the search to include phrases that mean “being seized by the nymphs” rather than specifically the noun νυμφόληπτος, there are additional dimensions. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, such a sentiment is occasionally used as a euphemism for

ἐπιχωρίων, οὓς νυμφολήπτους προσηγόρευον, “and the cave of the Sphragitic nymphs was on one of the peaks of Cithaeron, facing the summer sunsets, and in it there was also an oracle in former days, as they say, and many of the natives were possessed of the oracular power, and these were called *nympholepti*, or ‘nymph-possessed.’”

⁶⁰⁰ Philostratus of Athens, *Apollonius of Tyana*, 2.37, especially 2.37.3.

⁶⁰¹ While the Greek term has explicit reference to “possession” or “seizure,” Latin *lymphati* only has a passive implication; a colloquial translation might be “to be nymph-ed”, though both obviously have connotations of subjection.

⁶⁰² Julian, *Misopogon* 360B: τοὺς ὀρχηστὰς δὲ ἐπιτραπέντας ἐπιδείκνυσθαι ἐν τῷ θεάτρῳ τὴν τέχνην εἶσαν οἰόμενοι τοῖς νυμφολήπτοις αὐτοὺς εἰοικέναι, “but when the dancers began to display their art in the theatre, the Celts left them alone because they thought that they were like men stricken with nympholepsy.”

death, and therefore appears on some epitaphs,⁶⁰³ usually for young people.⁶⁰⁴ These do not involve the word νυμφόληπτος (or the Latin *lymphati*), but rather some combination of a passive verb of “being seized” and the nymphs as an agent. Such associations with death and disappearance primarily stem from Hellenistic poetry. The example *par excellence* is Hylas, a beautiful youth who is seized by the Nymphs while fetching water from a spring.⁶⁰⁵ In Theocritus’ telling, Hylas tries in vain to escape the Nymphs but upon his disappearance is “counted among the blessed ones,” οὕτω μὲν κάλλιστος Ὑλάς μακάρων ἀριθμεῖται.⁶⁰⁶ We therefore see an example of female sexual aggression leading to the death of a young person but characterized, it seems, by a ‘happy ending’ among the blessed. This dynamic thereafter becomes the model for many epitaphs of young (unmarried) people, burgeoning with unrealized sexual potential but imagined as being favored or desired by divine beings and therefore counted among the blessed. In this way, Hellenistic poetry provided specific, concise phrasing for describing such experiences in the manner depicted in sepulchral epigrams both real and fictitious. But the association between seizure by the nymphs and one’s death or disappearance was not an established motif for classical period nympholepts. Additionally, at absolutely no point in the documented use of the word νυμφόληπτος was there an inherently sexual connotation, and yet Pache and Connor see this word as such and to apply it specifically in contexts where they emphasize sexually subversive dynamics.

⁶⁰³ e.g. *IG* XII,4 3:1507.A, 2nd/3rd c. CE, a funerary epigram for Chrysogonos, a “servant of the Nymphs” (Νυφῶν λάτρις), which does not connote the kidnapping aspect but does convey subjection to the Nymphs.

⁶⁰⁴ *IG* XIV 2040, 2nd c. CE, an epitaph for a 5-year-old girl: παῖδα γὰρ ἐσθλὴν ἤρπασαν ὥς τερπνὴν Ναίδες; *IG* XIV 2067, for a 2-year-old: νύμφαι κρηναῖαί με συνήρπασαν ἐκ βιότοιο; *AP* 7.170, for a 3-year-old boy; cf. in Latin, *CIL* 6.29195, 2nd c. CE, *Hic situs est M(arcus) / Ulp(ius) Firmus A(uli) l(ibertus) / anima bona su/peris reddita / raptus a Nymphis / vix(it) ann(os) VIII m(enses) VI*. On the use of this motif in epitaphs for children, see Doralice Fabiano, “Raptus a Nymphis. Emozioni e gender nelle epigrafi funerarie di bambini,” in *La Presenza dei Bambini nelle Religioni del Mediterraneo Antico*, ed. C. Terranova, Aracne, 2014.

⁶⁰⁵ Theocritus, *Idylls* 13.45–48; see also Apollonius Rhodius, 1.1324–1325.

⁶⁰⁶ Theocritus, *Idylls* 13.72.

As I will show, the actual cave cults of the men referred to in modern scholarship as “nympholepts” do not present evidence of their sexual submission to these female deities. Instead, these cave cults tend to do the opposite, reinforcing rather than subverting masculine supremacy. This accords with the difference in the social function of myth *vis-a-vis* religious practice, wherein the taboos depicted in mythic contexts are allowed to be critically examined and then safely rejected, while cult practices were intended to have “real life” effects, and thus needed to uphold the status quo. In myth, the taboos of Greek society—chiefly incest, murder (especially of kin), violent and sexual profanation of sacred spaces—were posited, critiqued, and ultimately punished. Thus, as Walter Burkert observes, “myths frequently tell of shocking exceptions”⁶⁰⁷ to sanctioned behaviors, exceptions which result in the disenfranchisement, disfigurement, or death of the transgressors. In this way, myth “explains and justifies social orders and establishments” and “clarifies the order of life.”⁶⁰⁸ As the complementary opposite to myth, ritual “creates and affirms social interaction”⁶⁰⁹ and “dramatizes the existing order.”⁶¹⁰ Ritual therefore does not freely explore, but channels into acceptable forms impulses of transgression and penetration, both sexual and violent.⁶¹¹ Therefore, while inverse gender-power dynamics are able to be explored within myth, in ritual the masculine status quo must be

⁶⁰⁷ Burkert, *Homo*, 60, n. 11.

⁶⁰⁸ Burkert, *Homo*, 33.

⁶⁰⁹ Burkert, *Homo*, 23.

⁶¹⁰ Burkert, *Homo*, 25. See also Durkheim on how social structures are reified through ritual action: *entretenir et raffermir, à intervalles réguliers, les sentiments collectifs et les idées collectives qui font son unité et sa personnalité*, “the need at regular intervals to maintain and strengthen the collective feelings and ideas that provide its coherence and its distinct individuality,” Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, tr. Karen E. Fields, Simon & Schuster, 1995 [1912]: 429. cf. the “concomitant ‘rectification’ of the inverted opposition” essential to ritual in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, tr. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, Basic Books, 1963: 235. The distinction between the differing social roles of myth and ritual is similarly explored, though not explicitly stated, by Jean Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, Routledge, 1983 [1965].

⁶¹¹ “The actions of banging and stabbing, thrusting and piercing thus all become ambivalent in deed just as they do in language. There is no need to enumerate the ubiquitous military metaphors for the sexual organs and activity... Whether it be a stick or a club, a spear or a sword, a gun or a cannon, as a symbol of masculinity the weapon has been equivalent to and almost interchangeable with the sexual organs from Stone Age drawings’ to modern advertising,” Burkert, *Homo*, 59.

reaffirmed. This is the case, I argue, in the three cave shrines that are typically described as “nympholeptic”: the Vari Cave, the Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus, and the Kafizin Cave on Cyprus.

These three cults have been discussed in conjunction before, most prominently by Connor and Pache.⁶¹² In my re-examination, I argue that while these cults do occasionally convey aspects of sexual dynamics between male and female figures, they do not depict the subversion of dynamics seen in the relationships presented in myth.

The Vari Cave, Attica

One of the most unique cave shrines known to us from the ancient world is on the slopes of Mt. Hymettos in Attica. What seems from afar like nothing more than a cleft in the rock is actually the mouth of the Vari Cave, also referred to as the Cave of Archedemos or the Cave of the Nympholept. The site’s primary excavator, Charles Weller, described his experience of entering the shrine around the turn of the 20th century:⁶¹³

Clinging partly to the branches of the fig tree, partly to the rock, one descends over the dozen or so of broken steps, rudely cut in the ridge at the western end of the opening [Fig. 2.1]. From here, as the eyes become accustomed to the dim light, it is possible to see down into either of the two rooms of the cave, which are separated by a massive rock partition.

⁶¹² W. R. Connor, “Seized by the Nymphs: Nympholepsy and Symbolic Expression in Classical Greece,” *Classical Antiquity* 7, no. 2 (1988): 155–189; Pache, *Ornament*, 37–70. Additionally, Larson *Greek Nymphs*; Pierre Bonnechere, “Prairies et jardins grecs. De la Grèce de Platon à l’Angleterre d’Alexander Pope,” in *Képoi*, eds. Edouard Delruelle and Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge, University of Liege Press, 2001; Doralice Fabiano, “La Nympholepsie entre Possession et Paysage,” *Recherches & Rencontres* 31, Special Issue “Perception et construction du divin dans l’Antiquité” (2013): 165–195; Esther Eidinow, “I-Thou-Nymph: a relational approach to ancient Greek religious devotion,” *Religion* 53 (2023): 24–42.

⁶¹³ Weller, “The Cave at Vari. Description,” 265. The cave was excavated by Weller and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens in 1901. On the excavation and finds, see the series of articles in the *American Journal of Archaeology*: Charles Heald Weller, “Description, Account of Excavation, and History;” Maurice Edwards Dunham, “The Inscriptions;” Ida Carleton Thallon, “The Marble Reliefs;” Lida Shaw King, “Vases, Terra-cotta Statuettes, Bronzes, and Miscellaneous Objects;” Agnes Baldwin, “The Coins;” and Samuel Eliot Bassett, “The Terra-cotta Lamps,” *AJA* 7, no. 3 (1903): 263–349.

Standing at the landing at the bottom of the staircase, one proceeds to the right along a mostly flat path before the space opens up and slopes downward into another chamber, which is the darkest accessible part of the cave [Fig. 2.2]. And it is exceedingly dark, especially considering the brightness of the landing area at the bottom of the stairs; the transition to all-encompassing obscurity is jarring. This dark room gently slopes further downward and it is difficult to move through it without artificial light. At the end of this area are a few more hewn steps that lead into the main shrine [Fig. 2.3], which includes a large relief portrait [Figs. 2.4, 2.5] and altars for Apollo Hersos⁶¹⁴ carved into the cave wall on the left [Fig. 2.6], another altar further up on the right for Pan [Fig. 2.7, 8]. Beside it, the natural rock of the cave has been fashioned into a statue of an enthroned deity [Fig. 2.9]. And coursing through the middle of the space, a narrow but dramatic staircase creeps up the natural incline [Fig. 2.10], with tiered terraces that house more small altars [Fig. 2.11]. Daylight streams in from the top of the staircase [Fig. 2.12], the end and beginning of the cave's internal circuit.

Chronology

The earliest materials from the cave are a few archaic potsherds,⁶¹⁵ possibly heirloom items dedicated generations after their initial production and use.⁶¹⁶ More frequent cult practice likely began in the 5th century; the site's connection to Pan would not have predated the Battle of Marathon in 490.⁶¹⁷ Archedemos' renovation works took place around this time, sometime around the second quarter of the 5th century. This renovation included the staircases, carved

⁶¹⁴ There is debate regarding the word ΕΡΣΟ inscribed on the altar after ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΟΣ, IG I³ 981. It could be interpreted as a cult epithet of Apollo, thus Apollo Ersos or (more likely) Hersos, thus "Apollo of the dew" (unattested elsewhere). It could be a separate deity, presumably personified Dew, or a local cult hero Hersos, possibly modeled after Herse, one of the daughters of Cecrops. On these debates, see Günther Schörner and Hans Rupprecht Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte von Vari*, Philipp von Zabern, 2004: 47–49.

⁶¹⁵ The oldest item recovered from the cave, however, is a 7th–6th century inscription reading Ἐπιχαρίδο (IG I³ 1247), which Schörner and Goette have determined was not originally in the cave, but was taken there later on.

⁶¹⁶ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 107.

⁶¹⁷ Schörner and Goette note that none of the finds that relate to Pan or the Nymphs dates before around 460–430 BCE, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 115.

altar, his self-portrait, a couple of inscriptions, and possibly a dance floor.⁶¹⁸ By the end of the 5th century, possibly after his death, Archedemos' services were further commemorated in the famed "nympholept inscription".

Worship continued in the 4th century. Around 340, cave-framed votive reliefs began to appear,⁶¹⁹ and would remain popular over the next 50 years; seven were recovered from the Vari Cave. At this time, Archedemos' shrine had become one of the most popular sites of nymph worship in rural Attica.⁶²⁰ The 4th century votives included terracotta figurines.⁶²¹ The dedication of figurines, at the very least, continued through the 3rd century. It seems that organized cult practice halted in the 2nd century, which corresponds with a drop off in cult cave use elsewhere in the Greek world, including the famed Corycian Cave near Delphi.⁶²² After a few hundred years with no evidence of use, the Vari Cave was visited occasionally in late antiquity, based on a few cross graffiti and the abundance of lamps from the late 3rd-6th centuries CE.⁶²³

The "Archedemos" Inscriptions

The Vari Cave is certainly one of the most well-studied cave sanctuaries of the ancient Greek world, particularly due to scholars' perpetual interest in the main cult character, Archedemos of Thera. Compared to most cult caves or other rural sanctuaries, the Vari cave has an abundance of surviving epigraphic material. Including both the inscriptions carved into the living rock and the "moveable" stone texts, this cave has yielded 18 individual inscriptions,

⁶¹⁸ Weller, "Cave at Vari," 281.

⁶¹⁹ Edwards, "Greek Votive Reliefs," 262.

⁶²⁰ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 108.

⁶²¹ 71 figurines were recovered from the Vari Cave, a small number compared to some cave sites. These were primarily either standard female or Pan figurines, though there were also few animals and some Hellenistic "grotesque" figures. King, "Cave at Vari. Vases, Terra-Cotta Statuettes," 333–334.

⁶²² Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 108.

⁶²³ Bassett, "Terra-Cotta Lamps," *American Journal of Archaeology* 7, no. 3 (1903): 338–349. Weller speculates that the damage and haphazard deposition of the marble votive plaques occurred during late antique iconoclasm and that the cave was intentionally filled with a "large quantity of earth" at or following this time: Weller, "Cave at Vari," 284–5.

recording the names of approximately 21 individual worshipers.⁶²⁴ Of these 18 inscriptions, 6 bear the name Archedemos, who is credited with the improvement of several features of the cave to increase accessibility for visitors, provide information on the ritual procedures, and delight the gods.

Two inscriptions refer specifically to the labor that Archedemos put into this shrine. The first was inscribed in limestone on two sides (texts A and B) and would likely have been set up outside the cave as signage.⁶²⁵ The B text is both difficult to make out and difficult to comprehend. I provide the two most commonly transmitted transcriptions and translations.

IG I³ 977 (ca. 450–425 BCE)

A.

Ἀρχέδαμος ἡο Θερ/αῖος κᾶπον Νύ/μφαις
ἐφύτευσεν.

A.

Archedamos the Theran⁶²⁸ grew the garden for
the nymphs.

B.

Ἀρχέδεμος ἡο Θερ/αῖος καὶ χολὸν {χορὸν?}
ὀδ/χεστὲ[ς] {ὀρχεστὲς?} Νύμφαι<ς>
ἐχ/σοικοδόμησεν.⁶²⁶

B.

Archedemos the Theran built a dance floor for
the nymphs.⁶²⁹

or

Ἀρχέδεμος ἡο Θερ/αῖος καὶ χολὸν/δ/χεστὲ τει

or

Archedemos the Theran, the receptacle of

⁶²⁴ Dunham, “Inscriptions,” 289–300. Dunham logs *IG I³ 976* as three separate inscriptions, bringing his count up to 20 inscriptions. Archedemos himself is named in five; several inscriptions record multiple names, some only have the names of deities, one inscription includes a word that has been identified as either name or a job descriptor, *Haipolos* (“goatherd”).

⁶²⁵ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 52.

⁶²⁶ Transcription published in *IG I³*.

⁶²⁸ As Andrea Purvis has noted, one significant aspect of the Archedemos inscriptions is the emphasis placed on his homeland of Thera: Andrea Purvis, “Archedamus of Thera,” *Singular Dedications: Founders and Innovators of Private Cults in Classical Greece*, Routledge, 2003: 31. Given the nymphs’ hyper-localized nature, the fact that an immigrant to Attica would embrace the local deities of his new land to the extent that Archedemos did is notable. Rock-cut shrines were common in Thera for both the nymphs and Olympian gods, probably providing the inspiration for his improvements to the natural grotto: 54–55. Ancient immigrants’ conspicuous involvement in local cults is attested elsewhere from the Greek world; Some of Purvis’ examples include Adamas the Odrysian on Paros, 33; Artemidorus of Perge on Thera, 54–55; and Philius of Cyprus at Priene, 56. Such presentations acted as a way of integrating themselves into their adopted homelands.

⁶²⁹ A reading proposed and then later rejected by Gaertringen is that χο<ρ>ὸν ὀ<ρ>/χεστὲ[ς] means “lame dancer,” thus commenting on Archedemos’ poor dance skills: F. Hiller von Gaertringen, “*IG I 424*,” *Hermes* 39, no. 3 (1904): 472–473. This reading was accepted by no one.

Νύνφαι<ς> ἐχ/σοικ[οδό]μεσεν.⁶²⁷

biles, built [the shrine?] for the Nymphs.⁶³⁰

This block is one of a few texts from the cave that most scholars believe could have been written by Archedemos himself. It is one of the older inscriptions discovered from the site based on its archaic lettering, particularly on the A side. The A side also has the peculiarity of recording a Doric form of Archedemos' name, *Archedamos*, as well as the Doric κᾱπον for κῆπον.⁶³¹ Given the Doric dialect spoken on Thera, scholars have therefore determined that Archedemos himself composed at least Side A. He therefore commemorates here his own labor and enumerates some of the improvements he made to the site. The existence of the garden, on the more securely-interpreted Side A, is uncontroversial. Gardens and groves—natural, cultivated, or a mixture of both—were common features of nymph shrines and are often accompanied by nymph caves. Connor's interpretation of Side B is generally not well-received today, but it is the interpretation that requires less "correction" of apparent spelling mistakes. More plausible and now generally accepted by scholars—especially considering the large, artificially-flattened area in the cave's main chamber—is that Archedemos is credited with the construction of a dance floor, with either a spelling error of λ for ρ or liquid interchange of /l/ and /r/.⁶³²

⁶²⁷ Transcription by Dunham, "Inscriptions," 297–298. This is the transcription used also by Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 51–52.

⁶³⁰ This reading is proposed by Connor, understanding it to refer to the bile associated with mania: "Seized," 171–172. Schörner and Goette reject his interpretation on linguistic and stylistic grounds, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 53.

⁶³¹ The B side of the block uses the Ionic form, Archedemos, and is written in less archaic letterforms. However, as Schörner and Goette have shown, it is unlikely that the two inscriptions differ much chronologically since the scribe used the more 'modern' four-bar sigma on both sides, rather than using the more archaic three-bar sigma on the "archaizing" side A; the three-bar sigma is present in, for example, the inscription reading "Archedemos Archedemos," *IG I³ 979*, discussed below. This appearance of the four-bar sigma even on the more archaizing side suggests their synchronicity around 450–425 BCE, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 54. Their interpretation responds to the understanding of Connor, who took the difference in dialect to indicate that a "considerable period of time" elapsed between the inscriptions, "Seized," 167, n. 42. The reasoning for the difference in dialect and alphabet between the two sides, particularly if they are roughly contemporary, remain obscure, and Schörner and Goette do not offer a hypothesis on this matter.

⁶³² On the rare phenomenon of liquid interchange in ancient Greek, see Carl Darling Buck, *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin*, University of Chicago Press, 1933: §§ 40.9, 114. Some examples of this interchange within ancient Greek include the alternation of Ἀγλαυρος and Ἀγραυλος, though this seems to have been restricted to words with more than one liquid. Liquid interchange became common in late Roman and Byzantine Greek, for example ἀδερφός for ἀδελφός; on this see *The Cambridge Grammar of Medieval and Early Modern Greek, Volume*

Another inscription is found just inside the cave upon descending, well-lit by the light from the cave mouth. It is carved into the living rock and announces more generally the labors of Archedemos:

IG I³ 980 (ca. 425-400 BCE)

Ἀρχέδημος ὁ Θ/ηραῖος ὁ νυμφ/όληπτος /
φραδ/αῖσι Νυμφῶν τ'ἄντρον ἐξηργ/άξατο.

Archedemos the Theran, the nympholept,
fashioned the cave at the advice of the
nymphs.

We therefore are told about this one man's immense amount of labor on behalf of the nymphs. He fashioned rupestral staircases to descend into and ascend out of the cave, planted a garden (*kaPOS*) for the nymphs, and worked parts of the living rock into cult equipment: a basin for receiving libations or collecting spring water,⁶³³ carved and labeled altars for various gods, and a dance floor. Furthermore, scholars have shown that this inscription displays an attempt at metrical composition, perhaps connected to the belief that nympholepsy inspired poetic production, as Socrates seems to have experienced in the *Phaedrus*.⁶³⁴ Schörner and Goette have shown that the five "Archedemos" inscriptions were not all carved simultaneously, but were probably written within one or two generations of each other.⁶³⁵ This demonstrates the

I: General Introduction and Phonology, eds. David Holton, Geoffrey Horrocks, Marjolijne Janssen, Tina Lendari, Io Manolessou, and Notis Toufexis, Cambridge University Press, 2019: section 3.8.6, "Liquid Interchange," 214–216; and Io Manolessou and Notis Toufexis, "Phonetic Change in Medieval Greek: Focus on Liquid Interchange," in *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Greek Linguistics, Ioannina, August 2007*, eds. Mary Baltazani, Giorgios K. Giannakis, Anastasios Tsangalidis, and Giorgios J. Xydopoulos, 2009. Since Attic inscriptions at this time and specifically at this site do not use omega for long /o/, it is possible to read χο<ρ>ov as either χῶρον or χορὸν; either interpretation leads to the conclusion of the construction of a dance floor or a place for dancing, since χορός itself can refer to a dance floor: *LSJ*, s.v. χορός, III.

⁶³³ The basin was furnished with a drain and was plastered, Weller, "Cave at Vari," 282.

⁶³⁴ Dunham calls the second half of the inscription, at least "unmistakably metrical," though the grasp of meter is less certain in the first half. Rather than the elegiac couplets commonly used in inscribed poetry, this poet used a lyric meter (possibly choriambic), which is rare; "Cave at Vari. Inscriptions," 299–300. Schörner and Goette report that while the second half of the inscription is indeed metrical, written in iambic trimeter, the first half cannot be metrical, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 43.

⁶³⁵ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 59. This was the general interpretation also of Dunham in his original publication of the site's inscriptions, Dunham, "Cave at Vari. Inscriptions," 300. A minority opinion is that all of the "Archedemos Inscriptions" were inscribed by Archedemos himself; this is the assumption made by Purvis, who attributes the array of dialects and alphabets to Archedemos being "impressed by his own creativity," "Archedamus," 38, 44.

persistence of Archedemos' own 'cult of personality' that continued to thrive alongside the cave's actual cult, even after he was no longer involved.

The most striking feature of the cave to the visitor is an over-life-sized portrait of Archedemos carved into the living rock [Fig. 2.4]. Rendered stiffly in profile, Archedemos' lower body moves toward the viewer's left, while his head faces to the right. In his hands he holds up a hammer and chisel, necessary equipment for the stone work he put into the cave. Beside his head on the right is an inscription, almost akin to a speech bubble, from which he seems to be speaking his name, "Archedemos! Archedemos!" (his name is inscribed twice, *IG I³* 979, ca. 475–440 BCE) [Fig. 2.5].⁶³⁶ Archaeologists have criticized this portrait as being of poor quality and lacking in artistic merit.⁶³⁷ It is not my objective here to evaluate the aesthetic value of this artist's work, nor is aesthetic value the point of this portrait. Despite the fact that there were obviously talented and experienced stone carvers in Attica and perhaps even in the immediate vicinity—a handful of marble reliefs from the cave attest to this—the devotee who created this larger-than-life relief of Archedemos (whether it was Archedemos himself or a later follower) certainly seems to have placed greater value in intent and "sweat equity" than in aesthetic quality. It could be argued that *because* this relief is at once ambitious in size and "amateurly" wrought, Archedemos felt or endeavored to convey a deeper connection between himself and the divinities of the cave since he chose to use his own skills rather than hire someone more experienced.

⁶³⁶ There has been debate regarding the dating and authorship of this relief, namely whether it is a self-portrait carved by Archedemos himself or a tribute created by someone later. Schörner and Goette argue convincingly that this is indeed a self-portrait. Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 22.

⁶³⁷ Weller, "Cave at Vari. Description," notes, "the workmanship is so crude and ineffective as to be ludicrous," 272 and remarks that "this may be the product of ignorant and unskilled hands of a much later date," 283.

The Cult Statue and Omphalos

The other main figural stone work in the cave is a “cult statue” hewn out of a speleothem, depicting an enthroned deity [Fig. 2.9]. It is roughly wrought, featuring very little detailing to the figure’s garments or other features. The proportions of the body are anatomically inaccurate and asymmetrical.⁶³⁸ At some point, the statue’s head was roughly detached and was not recovered by excavators.⁶³⁹ All that remains of the head are two locks of hair that fall onto the figure’s extant shoulders. The identity and even the gender of the figure have been debated over the past few hundred years,⁶⁴⁰ but recent research suggests that Apollo might be a solid identification.⁶⁴¹ Behind the enthroned figure, a large protuberance—now damaged beyond clear identification—was depicted in drawings as an *omphalos*.⁶⁴² The concurrence of Apollo and an *omphalos* would obviously be appropriate and could relate the cave cult to prophecy, which late classical and post-classical texts describe as a primary manifestation of nympholepsy.⁶⁴³

⁶³⁸ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 27.

⁶³⁹ Schörner and Goette note that the head was not an insert like we see elsewhere in the ancient world, but was part of the rock, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 26.

⁶⁴⁰ Various identifications include Isis: Richard Chandler, *Travels in Asia Minor and Greece*, Clarendon Press, 1825: 170; Rhea: Ernst Curtius and Johann A. Kaupert, *Karten von Attika*, vol. III, Dietrich Reimer, 1889: 16; Dionysus: Chandler, *Travels*, 170; Ge: Arthur Bernard Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1940: 261f; a nymph: Connor, “Seized,” 185ff. Schörner and Goette believe that the figure is meant to depict Cybele, and is therefore much later than Weller and others had assumed; they argue that because the statue is clearly an amateurish work, art-historical dating might not apply, and therefore this cruder form might be younger than it looks, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 27.

⁶⁴¹ See Alexandra Mari, D. Andritsanos Vassilios, Theodoros Chatzitheodorou, and G. Chatzitheodorou, “The Cave of The Nympholept at Vari – Fast Creation of a 3D Simulation Model of an Important Cult Cave in Attica, Greece,” In *CAA-GR 2018: Spreading Excellence in Computer Applications for Archaeology and Cultural Heritage*, eds. Phaedon Kyriakidis, Athos Agapiou, and Vasiliki Lysandrou, Cyprus University of Technology, 2019: 69; Paul Kalligas, “Honey from Hymettus: Platonic Philosophy in the Cave of Pan,” *Classics Ireland* 27 (2020): 165–196.

⁶⁴² Chandler and Ross, however, interpreted it as an erect phallus, *Travels*, 170; Ludwig Ross, *Tagebuch* (Diary), 1832, 78, cited by Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 36–37.

⁶⁴³ The use of caves for divination is well-attested in the ancient Greek world and has been thoroughly examined by Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Votive Reliefs

In addition to the inscriptions and furnishings carved from the living rock, other finds demonstrate the importance of the cave setting to the cult. Carved (usually marble) votive reliefs are ubiquitous in classical and Hellenistic sanctuaries, particularly in Attica. The subset of these that depict scenes inside cave-frames are obviously of particular interest to the present study.⁶⁴⁴ In his detailed examination of votive reliefs for Pan and the Nymphs, Charles Edwards identifies the Vari Cave as an early crucible for the motif's development.⁶⁴⁵ The site has yielded fragments of seven cave-framed votive reliefs of varying size, style, and quality, dating within a range of only about 50 years: approximately 340–290 BCE.⁶⁴⁶ All seven reliefs from the cave are incomplete; at the very least, the heads or faces of most humanoid figures have been damaged, either defaced or broken off entirely. No trace of the broken off heads were found in the cave, suggesting that they were taken by whoever broke them.⁶⁴⁷

While the reliefs from Vari fit into a broader tradition of cave-framed votive reliefs, there are some features that make this set distinct. The frames of the Vari group are sometimes oddly shaped.⁶⁴⁸ While typical cave reliefs show either a rounded or somewhat rectangular shape, at

⁶⁴⁴ Charles Malcolm Edwards, "Greek Votive Reliefs to Pan and the Nymphs," PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1985. Edwards' detailed examination of votive reliefs for the Nymphs and Pan has shown that the cave border likely grew out of two visual traditions: votive reliefs for Asclepius depicting him in a stoa and reliefs and paintings depicting the infancy of Dionysus, as in the famous "Neoptolemos Relief" found in the Athenian Agora. Edwards, "Greek Votive Reliefs," 59, 62–63. Curiously, when these motifs were adapted to reliefs for the Nymphs and Pan, these figures are never accompanied by Dionysus, but by Hermes or, less often, Apollo. Approximately 50 of Edwards' 113 reliefs for the Nymphs and Pan have an identifiable cave frame; the rest either have no border or have straight or architectural frames.

⁶⁴⁵ Edwards, "Greek Votive Reliefs," 262.

⁶⁴⁶ These cave votives were in vogue from the end of the 4th century into the Hellenistic period, though in the 310s and following the quality of the reliefs devolved and by 300 they more frequently occur outside of Attica. Edwards attributes this change to the anti-luxury decree of Demetrios of Phaleron in 317 BCE, which curbed excess in funerary monuments; the diminished demand of skilled stone artists led to their exodus from Attica to other parts of the Greek world, disseminating these votive types elsewhere while Attic worshipers relied on less skilled craftsmen: Edwards, "Greek Votive Reliefs," 58.

⁶⁴⁷ General consensus is that this defacement occurred in late antique iconoclastic movements, as there is ample evidence for early Christian use of the cave in the form of hundreds of lamps. See Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 4.

⁶⁴⁸ Thallon, "Marble," 302.

least one example from Vari uses a nearly triangular frame with rocks undulating symmetrically upward to an apex where Pan sits playing the syrinx.⁶⁴⁹ All of the reliefs that survive from the Vari Cave feature a group of three nymphs; all but one depicts a male figure interpreted as Hermes.⁶⁵⁰ Excluding the ultra-fragmentary 2013 (of which only a reclining Hermes survives) and 2011 (whose cave frame is entirely missing), all include a syrinx-piping Pan⁶⁵¹ and all but one incorporate a head of Acheloos into the cave frame.⁶⁵² Although there was a large altar to Apollo in the Vari Cave, none of the figures in the reliefs can be identified as him, and indeed, it is extremely rare for him to appear in any cave-frame votive reliefs.⁶⁵³

Typically the nymphs in the Vari reliefs are processing or dancing, often led by Hermes and musically accompanied by Pan. In two, Hermes shows off something he is holding while the nymphs observe, one of them seated on a rocky projection.⁶⁵⁴ The most unusual composition of the relief set features no Hermes at all.⁶⁵⁵ Pan—oddly, without his syrinx—reclines above the cave on the left, a youthful hunter and his dogs pursue deer above the cave on the right, and Acheloos faces the cave in profile from the lower left border. Inside the cave, two nymphs are seated on rocky projections flanking a central standing nymph who has one hand on her hip and one propping herself against the roof of the cave. In this one example, then, only female figures

⁶⁴⁹ Athens, National Museum inv. 2009; Schörner and Goette, R 3: p. 64–67, pl. 39.3; Edwards, no. 40, p. 572–577, pl. 18.

⁶⁵⁰ Athens, NM inv. 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, but not 2012. On Hermes in Nymph and Pan votive reliefs, see Edwards, "Greek Votive Reliefs," 65–66.

⁶⁵¹ With Pan: 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012; too fragmentary to determine: 2010, 2013.

⁶⁵² With Acheloos: NM inv. 2007, 2008, 2009, 2012; without Acheloos: inv. 2011; too fragmentary to determine: 2010, 2013. On the standard inclusion of Acheloos in the Nymph and Pan votive reliefs, see Edwards, "Greek Votive Reliefs," 66–68.

⁶⁵³ He appears in the early "Neoptolemos Relief": Edwards, "Greek Votive Reliefs," 422. He may be the seated figure in a relief of uncertain origin now in the museum in Treviso, Italy: Edwards no. 68, p. 636. Thus, out of the 50-odd cave-framed reliefs Edwards catalogues, only two include Apollo.

⁶⁵⁴ NM inv. 2010 (320s BCE), Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*: R 4, p. 67–69, pl. 40; Edwards no. 33, p. 547–552, pl. 16; and 2011 (330s BCE), Schörner and Goette, R 5, p. 69–71, pl. 41; Edwards no. 15, p. 439–446, pl. 8.

⁶⁵⁵ NM inv. 2012 (310s BCE), Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*: R 6, p. 71–74, pl. 42.

are present inside the cave and all three male figures are relegated to the exterior mountain border.

Worshippers: Identities and Relationships

Apart from the Archedemos inscriptions, the votive reliefs comprise much of the inscribed material from the cave. Compared to one of the other caves that will be examined in this chapter (the Kafizin Cave), we know little about the relationships, identities, and concerns of these worshippers and how they participated in the cult. The lists of dedicators, particularly those on the votive reliefs, can offer a few insights.⁶⁵⁶ Archedemos was foreign-born, probably a metic. From what is legible in the other votive inscriptions, all of the named dedicators were men, and many of them have names that were typically given to enslaved people, possibly suggesting their subaltern status.⁶⁵⁷ A few reliefs appear to have names in common with patronyms on others, and Schörner and Goette have proposed a “lineage” of some of these reliefs, recording the names of generations of fathers and sons.⁶⁵⁸ Thus, it seems that worship at the cave was typically practiced by groups, perhaps kinship groups or private associations. Private associations offered opportunities for collective identity and social engagement, particularly for individuals with marginalized identities such as the enslaved, formerly enslaved, or metics.⁶⁵⁹ These associations could be organized around different identities, such as a trade or profession. Gabrielsen and

⁶⁵⁶ NM inv. 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2012. 2011 records just “for the nymphs,” and 2013 is only a small portion of the pictorial field.

⁶⁵⁷ This was first observed by Dunham, “Inscriptions,” 291. Examples of names from the cave that were usually given to enslaved people include Sosias, Lydos, and Phryx, *IG II*³,4 1437.

⁶⁵⁸ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 73–74.

⁶⁵⁹ “[Associations] could also create the opportunity for the establishment of somewhat formalised social interaction between sections of the population for which full integration was not an option (for instance, foreigners in the Greek *poleis*). Furthermore, they could provide scope of action for those who could otherwise not have been able to contribute to their communities in the same way (for instance, women and slaves),” Vincent Gabrielsen and Mario C. D. Paganini, “Associations’ Regulations from the Ancient Greek World and Beyond: An Introduction,” in *Private Associations in the Ancient Greek World: Regulations and the Creation of Group Identity*, eds. Vincent Gabrielsen and Mario C. D. Paganini, Cambridge University Press, 2023: 20.

Paganini have shown that, even for groups that were not founded on religious grounds, religion was an undeniably pervasive concern.⁶⁶⁰

Women are not recorded as dedicators on any of the reliefs, but it is safe to assume that most of the following were dedicated by girls or women: *pyxides*, *krateriskoi*,⁶⁶¹ several of the *loutrophoroi*, miniature pottery,⁶⁶² and articulated dolls. These items comprise a large proportion of the overall material from the cave. Of the handful of inscribed drinking vessels from the cave, three cups preserve the names of female dedicators, suggesting that banqueting was open to mixed company.⁶⁶³ While the more “flashy” aspects of the Vari Cave (the marble reliefs, the texts inscribed on the cave walls) prominently feature male worshipers, the consistent presence of female votive practices attests to the broad appeal of rural nymph cults in the classical and Hellenistic periods and to the coexistence of several types of ritual participation and dedicatory concerns within one cult location.

Evidence of Cult Practice

Several aspects of the cave’s inscriptions, architectural modifications, and ceramic remains provide evidence of cult practice. The most obvious is banqueting: meat was certainly cooked and consumed in the main shrine of the cave. Several fragmented plates were found,⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁶⁰ Gabrielsen and Paganini, “Associations’,” 12.

⁶⁶¹ *Krateriskoi*, miniature *kraters*, are a specific miniature shape characteristic of young girls’ worship of Artemis, particularly at Brauron. The *krateriskos* fragments from the Vari Cave were not identified at the time of their publication because Brauron was not excavated until the 1940s and 1950s, so their specificity to Artemis and girls’ rites was not recognized. On the *krateriskoi* from Brauron and elsewhere, see Lilly Kahil, “Quelques vases du sanctuaire d’Artemis à Brauron,” *Antike Kunst* I (1963): 5–29; “Le ‘Craterisque’ D’artemis et le Brauronion de L’acropole,” *Hesperia* 50, no. 3 (1981): 253–263.

⁶⁶² The Vari Cave yielded examples of several miniature vessels, including primarily *loutrophoroi* (nos. 395–426), *aryballoi*, *lekythoi*, *cylixes*, two *oenochoi*, one *lekane*, one *amphora*, one *olpe*, and a cylindrical vase (nos. 346–367), King, “Vases,” 322. King also mentions a large group of “small *aryballoi* and *lecythi*” (nos. 28–142), though she does not explain her measurement criteria for distinguishing “small” versus “miniature” forms, 321. Miniature pottery has been associated with female dedicators and female divinities: Signe Barfoed, “Cult in Context - the Ritual Significance of Miniature Pottery in Ancient Greek Sanctuaries from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Period,” PhD Diss., University of Kent, 2016.

⁶⁶³ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 96–97. The feminine names are Timo, –xene, and Mika, *IG* I² 794, 796, and 797, respectively.

⁶⁶⁴ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 94.

and in addition to burn marks on many of the cave walls, there were ash deposits and animal bones.⁶⁶⁵ Near the staircase landing before one reaches the darkest part of the cave, there is a notice carved into the cave wall that directed visitors on proper etiquette for entering the shrine with meat:

IG II² 789

τᾶντερ' ἔχ/σο κλύζετε / καὶ τὸν ὄν/θον
νίζετε

Rinse the entrails outside and wash out the dung!

Wine consumption was also popular: vessels for mixing, pouring, and drinking were found in abundance.⁶⁶⁶ One notable aspect of cult practice at Vari is the participation of both men and women in the banqueting festivities, as evidenced by at least one drinking cup inscribed with a woman's name.⁶⁶⁷ As Schörner and Goette point out, this information accords with the family-wide celebration depicted at a similar cave in Menander's *Dyskolos*.⁶⁶⁸

Beyond burnt offerings, libations were probably offered to the gods: "concavities" are seen on the altars of Apollo and Pan.⁶⁶⁹ There is a basin just past the entry landing that could have collected spring water, and the circular depression in the bottom might have acted as a funnel to divert sediment or other contaminants from the water. In the main shrine room, a portion of the floor was flattened into a platform, likely used for ritual dance.⁶⁷⁰ Weller believed this platform to be the oldest artificial construction in the cave due to its low level and the sterility of the soil underneath it.⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁵ Weller, "Description," 278.

⁶⁶⁶ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 91–92, 94, 100.

⁶⁶⁷ King, "Vases," 327: Μίκα καλὴ ἀνέθηκεν, inscribed vase no. 8; Schörner and Goette, Graffito 8, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 97. Other fragments with dedicatory graffiti do not preserve the gendered endings of the name.

⁶⁶⁸ Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 113. The *Dyskolos* was staged at the Lenaian festival in 316 BCE, therefore overlapping in time with the cult use of the Vari Cave.

⁶⁶⁹ Weller, "Description," 270.

⁶⁷⁰ Weller, "Description," 281; Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 53.

⁶⁷¹ Weller, "Description," 280.

It is probable that the spring inside the cave had ritual significance in addition to its practical uses. Its water may have been used for libations in addition to wine or honey. Both brides' and grooms' pre-wedding baths used water from the spring associated with their hometown, and this water may have been collected in the *loutrophoroi* we see in the ceramic deposition from the cave.⁶⁷² Conversely, the miniature vessels, especially miniature *loutrophoroi*, might commemorate the act of collecting the sacred water. Unlike many nymph caves, there does not seem to have been a cult focus on maternity or childbirth here, though the possibility cannot be completely ruled out. There is no reason to assume that the water from the Vari Cave was used for specific medicinal purposes, though with the presence of Apollo, this would not be out of place. More likely than healing would be the use of the spring for divinatory practices, strengthened by the presence of Apollo, the probable *omphalos*, and possibly even the title of νυμφόληπτος.⁶⁷³ Some scholars, however, deny any oracular activity in the cave.⁶⁷⁴

Interpretation of Sexual Power

In his 1988 article, Connor discusses the Vari Cave at length, given that it is the only site we know of where a worshiper called himself a nympholept. Similar to Pache's later analysis, within Connor's conception of nympholepsy there must always have been an inverted sexual component to the relationship between the powerless nympholept and the powerful nymphs. In projecting this presumption onto the evidence from Vari, he puzzles on the "less romantic setting" of the cave. He grasps at straws in reading Archedemos' receiving "advice" from the nymphs (φραδαῖσι) as him being subjected to the nymphs' sexual energy.⁶⁷⁵ However, none of

⁶⁷² Oakley and Sinos, *Wedding*, 15.

⁶⁷³ Ustinova, *Caves*, 61–62; Connor, "Seized," 188; Larson, *Nymphs*, 16; Pache, *Ornament*, 51.

⁶⁷⁴ Most notably, Schörner and Goette, *Die Pan-Grotte*, 115, 118, although they do agree with the identification of the broken carved stone behind the enthroned statue as an *omphalos*, 28.

⁶⁷⁵ Connor, "Seized," 178. He also interprets the verb ἐξουκοδόμειν in IG I3 977 B as having nuptial connotations, which I believe is equally as far-fetched, 180.

the other uses of this word in dedicatory inscriptions have any sexual connotation,⁶⁷⁶ nor does it have one in poetry.⁶⁷⁷ Connor himself ponders: “Indeed we may wonder whether such an isolated place, so far from the sociability, matchmaking, and love affairs of the city, could have a strong association with love.” He then dismisses his own concerns by simply assuming that there must be some unknown sexual aspect present in this ‘unfit’ locale, and concludes instead that “paradoxes are never lacking near this cave.”⁶⁷⁸

While Connor does acknowledge the fact that there is no tangible evidence for Archedemos’ sexual submission to the nymphs, Pache’s examination of Archedemos uncritically projects a sexual dimension onto the relationship.⁶⁷⁹ Her entire view of nympholepsy is based upon the “goddess in love” motif from mythology that she examines in her first chapter,⁶⁸⁰ thus clouding her examination of Archedemos’ cult cave in her second. She does not consider the differences in social function between mythology and ritual, which makes her direct equivalences between myth and religion problematic.

What sexuality we do find at the cave is wholly normative—that is, it conforms to dominant societal models in which the male is the more powerful partner. In the marble reliefs, male gods are the dominating actors, with Hermes as Nymphagetes, the often-ithyphallic Pan looming over the scene, and Acheloos’ disembodied head infiltrating the sacred cave in an “all-seeing” manner. And fundamentally, the wedding was the public manifestation of a new

⁶⁷⁶ φραδή in inscriptions: e.g. IG I³ 773: Τίμαρχος μ’ ἀνέθεκε Διὸς κρατερόφρῳνι παιδί / μαντεῖον φρασμοσύναι μέτρ(ο)ς ἐπευχσαμένεες, “Timarchos dedicated me to the stouthearted daughter of Zeus, / his mother having vowed according to the instruction given by the seers,” transcription and translation by Sara Kaczko, *Archaic and Classical Attic Dedicatory Epigrams: An Epigraphic, Literary, and Linguistic Commentary*, De Gruyter, 2016: no. 63, p. 241–250, on φραδή, esp. 247–249; IG I³ 750: [...] γ τὸν ἑρμεν θεῷ <φ>ραδ[αῖσι] | [ἡδρυσ]ατο, “(...)n set up this herm following the instructions given by the god,” Kaczko, no. 66, p. 258–262.

⁶⁷⁷ φραδή in poetry, e.g. Pindar, *Olympian* 12.9: τῶν δὲ μελλόντων τετύφλωνται φραδαί, “their plans for future events lie hidden from view;” Aeschylus, *Libation-Bearers* 941: θεόθεν εὔ φραδαῖσιν ὥρμημένος, “having been well sped on his way by the words of god;” Theocritus, *Idylls* 25.52: ἄθανάτων, ὃ ξεῖνε, φραδῆ τινὸς ἐνθάδ’ ἰκάνεις, “‘Stranger, some god must have prompted your coming.’”

⁶⁷⁸ Connor, “Seized,” 170.

⁶⁷⁹ Pache, *Ornament*, 48.

⁶⁸⁰ Pache, *Ornament*, Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, 37–38.

couple that would form the basis of an *oikos* unit in the community. So, ritually, the very existence of pre-nuptial rites served to reaffirm the expected gender/power dynamics that uphold patriarchal structures.

I therefore argue that in the Vari Cave, there is no true connotation of the overpowering nature of female sexuality that is typically ascribed to nympholeptic cults. As examined above, the few roughly contemporary literary references to nympholepts focus on inspiration, mantic or poetic, but do not connote female sexual aggression. The literary depiction of violent nymphs abducting an overtly sexualized youth and bringing about his demise does not appear in literature in the classical period and is not apparent in the cult at the Vari Cave. While Archedemos is, of course, a self-proclaimed nympholept, most scholars' modern understanding of the term anachronistically ascribes to Archedemos a sexual subjection to the nymphs.

The Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus, Thessaly

The Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus is also referred to as Pantalkes' Cave, after the patron named in the site's two inscriptions. His patronage has been interpreted by modern scholars as a nympholept, though he never calls himself νυμφόληπτος. The Thessalian shrine was excavated over six days by the Italian Archaeological School at Athens in 1922 by D. Levi and G. Bagnani.⁶⁸¹ Apart from short annual reports, Levi and Bagnani never fully published the excavation, and the artifacts recovered from the site were stored at the Volos Museum, though they have since been reported as missing.⁶⁸² Autopsy of the material is therefore impossible. Robert Wagman's invaluable publication of the site a decade ago drew upon the excavators'

⁶⁸¹ July 17–22, 1922.

⁶⁸² Robert S. Wagman, *The Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus: Studies on a Thessalian Country Shrine*, Brill, 2015: 36.

photographs, notebooks and brief reports, as well as his own visits to the site, to finally present the material.

Chronology and Geography

Like most cult caves from the ancient Greek world, material evidence for worship begins sparsely in the archaic period, peaks in the classical, and dwindles throughout the Hellenistic, with little, if any, evidence for cult use in the Roman period. The modifications made to the natural topography of the site in the early 5th century, which will be discussed below, was followed by the cult's *floruit* in the classical period.⁶⁸³ The sanctuary's geographic and geologic context has been treated extensively by Wagman.⁶⁸⁴ The cave lies near the top of Karapla hill outside the ancient (and modern) settlement of Pharsalus (Pharsala). The region was once well-known for its abundant springs, though they are mostly dried up now.⁶⁸⁵ Today, only a small copse of trees near the cave suggest the underground water source that once flowed abundantly from the hill's springs and from the cave itself. The trail from the base of the hill is an ascent of around 80 meters with the latter portion being particularly steep.⁶⁸⁶

Site Description

There are two main levels to the site (for the site plan, see **Fig. 2.13**). The lower portion is a flat terrace which probably served in antiquity as the location for the sanctuary's garden or grove which is alluded to in inscriptions. Wagman also believes that the area served as the primary setting for ritual banqueting.⁶⁸⁷ Inscribed into the cliff face at eye-level here is Inscription II,⁶⁸⁸ now barely visible due to weathering. A staircase, which is much less

⁶⁸³ Wagman, *Cave*, 55. The 5th century BCE was also the century in which Archedemos renovated the Vari Cave.

⁶⁸⁴ Wasman, *Cave*, 4–11.

⁶⁸⁵ Wagman, *Cave*, 6.

⁶⁸⁶ Wagman, *Cave*, 18.

⁶⁸⁷ Wagman, *Cave*, 33.

⁶⁸⁸ Inscriptions I and II are discussed below.

pronounced now due to erosion, ascends to the upper sanctuary. Partway up this staircase is Inscription I, the older and shorter text of the two. At the top of the staircase is a trapezoidal landing from which a visitor can reach an “apsidal chapel” to the left, a small ledge or bench to the right, or enter the cave straight ahead.

The cave opens to the north and is long and narrow [**Fig. 2.14**]. Immediately inside the floor begins to slope steeply upward, making it difficult to go very far inside. Although the cave is dry in modern times, in antiquity its spring took up the majority of the cave interior, as is evident from the natural channel formed in the cave floor from millennia of erosion [**Fig. 2.15**]. This increased moisture and the incline would have hindered an ancient person’s ability to go deep into the grotto. In conjunction with its cramped quarters, the interior yielded no votive material. It is therefore clear that the cave itself was not conducive to cult activity and instead, the main settings for such activities and dedications were the shrines that flank the landing.⁶⁸⁹

Wagman highlights a notable phenomenological peculiarity of this cave site when compared with other sacred caves from the ancient Greek world. While many such caves necessitate a descent of some type, either a descent into the cave or a descending slope once inside, this grotto on the Karapla hill must be reached by multiple types of ascent, first up the hill to the terrace, then up a hand-hewn staircase, and then the upward slope of the cave floor. The interior is shallow and therefore well-lit. Wagman thus observes that the layout of the site is “more suggestive of an attic than a cellar.”⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁹ Wagman, *Cave*, 31–32.

⁶⁹⁰ Wagman, *Cave*, 2. Because of these natural orientations, Wagman shows that Ustinova’s model of caves causing altered states of consciousness through sensory deprivation is not applicable to this site (p. 33), though he does not altogether rule out a link with prophetic activity.

Inscriptions

The literature on this cave refers to the two inscriptions as Inscriptions I and II, but I will be discussing them in the order in which they would have been read by a visitor: II and then I. Wagman reads these two texts as “independent, if intertextually linked, documents”.⁶⁹¹ A visitor to the cave in the Hellenistic period would have arrived at the lower part of the sanctuary after a difficult final ascent and encountered Inscription II near the staircase. Positioned at eye-level, it functions chiefly as a “visitor’s guide” for the sanctuary. Wagman’s edition and translation of the text is as follows:⁶⁹²

θεός
τύχ[α].
χαίρετε τοῖ προσιόντες, ἅπας θηλύς τε καὶ ἄρσην,
ἄνδρες τε ἡδε γυναῖκες ὁμῶς μαῖδες τε κόραι τε,
χώρον δ’ εἰς ἱερὸν Νύμφαις καὶ Πανὶ καὶ Ἑρμῇ,
Ἀπόλλ<ω>νι ἄνακτι, <καὶ> Ἡρακλεῖ καὶ ἐταίραις,
Χίρωνος τ’ ἄντρον καὶ Ἀσκληπιοῦ ἡδ’ Ὑγιείας·
τούτων ἐστὶ τ[ὸ δ]ῶ[μα] ἅπαν ἱαρωτά τ’ ἐν αὐτῷ,
ἔμφυτα καὶ πίνακες καὶ ἀγάλματα δῶρά τε πολλ[ά]·
ἄνδρα δ’ ἐποίησα<ν>τ[α] ἀγαθὸν Παντάλκεα
Νύμφαι
τῶνδ’ ἐπιβαινέμεναι χώρων καὶ ἐπίσκοπον εἶναι,
ὅσπερ ταῦτ’ ἐφύτευσε καὶ ἐξεπονήσατο χερσίν,
ἀντίδοσαν δ’ αὐτῷ βίον ἄφθονον ἡματα πάντα·
Ἡρακλῆς μὲν ἔδωκ’ ἰσχὺν ἀρετὴν τε κράτος τε,
ὥπερ τούσδε λίθους τύπτων ἐπόησ’ ἀναβαίνειν,
Ἀπόλλων δὲ δίδωσι καὶ υἱὸς τοῦδε καὶ Ἑρμῆς
αἰὼν’ εἰς τὸν ἅπαντα ὑγίειαν καὶ βίον ἐσθλόν,
Πάν δὲ γέλωτα καὶ εὐφροσύνην ὕβριν τε δικαίαν,
Χίρων δ’ αὐτῷ δῶκε σοφὸν τ ἔμεν[αι] καὶ ἀοιδόν,
ἀλλὰ τύχαις ἀγαθαῖς ἀναβαίνεται[ε], θύετε πάν<τ>ες
εὔχεσθε, εὐφραίνεσθε· κακῶν ἐπίλησις ἀπάν<των>

god / good fortune / greetings, you who are coming this way, every female and male, men and women as well as boys and girls, to (this) place sacred to the Nymphs, Pan, and Hermes, to Lord Apollo, Heracles, and the fellow deities, (this) cave of Chiron, Asclepius, and Hygieia: theirs are the entire construction and the sacred things inside, the plantings, the tablets, statues, and the many gifts. the Nymphs made the noble-hearted Pantalces / tread upon these places and be their overseer:⁶⁹³ he is the one who planted this place and toiled over it with his hands; and they rewarded him in return with bountiful living through all of his days. Heracles gave him strength of will, heart, and body, with which he pounded these rocks and turned them into a way up; Apollo, his son, and Hermes gave him health and prosperity for his entire life; Pan laughter, merriment and just excess; Chiron gave him knowledge and musical skill. But go on up, with good fortune: let everyone be free to sacrifice, pray, and make merry. For here it is possible to

⁶⁹¹ Wagman, *Cave*, 60.

⁶⁹² Wagman, *Cave*, 68. His commentary is also very enlightening, 70–84.

⁶⁹³ In 2017, Wagman published a correction to his own translation here. In his 2015 monograph, he translated ἄνδρα δ’ ἐποίησα<ν>τ[α] ἀγαθὸν Παντάλκεα Νύμφαι / τῶνδ’ ἐπιβαινέμεναι χώρων καὶ ἐπίσκοπον εἶναι, as “the Nymphs who tread these places endowed Pantalces with a noble heart /and made him their overseer,” thus interpreting ἐπιβαινέμεναι as a participle modifying the Nymphs. In 2017, Wagman noted that a middle participle would be unprecedented here, and now reads the word as an epic infinitive, cf. Apollonius Rhodius 1.523. Robert Wagman, “‘SEG’ I, 248 = ‘IThess’ I, 73: A Retraction,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 202 (2017): 155–157.

ἐνθάδ' ἔνεστ', ἀγαθῶν δὲ [δόσις] πολέμοιο τε νίκη. forget all bad things, receive good things, and
overcome conflict.

Several scholars have published enlightening commentaries on this poem.⁶⁹⁴ It consists of four sections: the greeting (1–4), naming of the gods (5–9), the *aition* of Pantalkes (10–19, describing first his services, then his rewards), and the invitation to worship (20–22). The greeting uses an inclusive formula for the intended clientele of the shrine: “every female and male, men and women as well as boys and girls,” (3–4). On the one hand, the specification from the beginning that this is a site that is open and welcoming to all regardless of gender is notable.⁶⁹⁵

Following this, the poet begins to list the deities to whom the site is consecrated, and the list is comprehensive. The first four are expected in cavernous settings: the Nymphs, Pan, Hermes, and Apollo. Heracles is sometimes worshiped in caves,⁶⁹⁶ but is here as a founding hero figure and as the grantor of Pantalkes’ strength for the outfitting of the site. The identity of the “female companions” (ἑταίραις, 6) is obscure but must refer to deities, given their inclusion in this list.⁶⁹⁷ The final trio are all concerned with health and medicine, perhaps suggesting a specific concern that this cave site might have helped with.

While the catalogue of deities lists both Olympians and non-Olympian gods among the semi-immortal nymphs, it is clear that the nymphs are the primary receivers of the cult. In addition to being named first in the list, they are also given first position in the *aition* of

⁶⁹⁴ In addition to Wagman’s commentary: Jean-Claude Decourt, *Inscriptions de Thessalie I: Les cites de la vallee de l’Enipeus*, French School of Athens, 1995: I.73. Other discussions of the epigram include William Buckler and Georgina Buckler, “The Bearing of Inscriptions on Classical Literature,” *The Classical Journal* 40, no. 3 (1944): 148–167; Bonnechere, “Prairies,” 36.

⁶⁹⁵ Emma Aston, “‘Welcome Visitors’: Religious Inclusivity in a Pharsalian Cave-Cult,” in *Αρχαιολογικό Έργο Θεσσαλίας και Στερεάς Ελλάδας* 4 (2016): 223–227. This is possibly just a stylistic choice, as the epigram repeatedly utilizes structures and lists of three.

⁶⁹⁶ Pausanias, 7.25.10; 10.32.4–5.

⁶⁹⁷ Wagman notes that at the nymphaeum of Nea Heracleitsa in Thrace the term ἑταῖροι referred to members of a religious group who met in a cave for ritual banqueting, p. 75. This is very unlikely to be the case here, since this is a list of deities and because the feminine gender would indicate an all-female group. While that is not unheard of, necessarily, it does seem unlikely.

Pantalkes' cult patronage (10–13), further singled out because the next god is not mentioned until four lines later (14), at which point one or two gods are mentioned per hexameter (14–19).⁶⁹⁸ One key choice of words is the description of Pantalkes as the ἐπίσκοπος (11), the “overseer”. While he is not called νυμφόληπτος as Archedemos is, Pantalkes is nevertheless given—by the Nymphs themselves!—a title that distinguishes him as especially close to the deities of the shrine.

The poetic prowess typically ascribed to nympholepts in classical literature is therefore manifest in a very literal and monumentalized fashion. Wagman and several scholars before him have pointed out the poetic choices made by the composer, from its chiasmic structures⁶⁹⁹ to its “elevated” vocabulary.⁷⁰⁰ However, it is almost certain that the composer of the verse and inscriber of the cliff could not have been Pantalkes himself: Inscription II dates approximately a century later than Inscription I, probably the 4th century BCE.⁷⁰¹ This epigram, then, must be credited to some later acolyte who chose to commemorate a prominent patron of the cult.

Partway up the hewn staircase, the visitor encounters Inscription I:

Πανταλκες / ἀνέθεκε / θεαῖς τόδε ἔργ[ον] /	Pantalkes / dedicated / this work to the
τὰν δὲ δαφ<v>αν / ΑΕΔΑΠΙΑΞ / ΦΑΝΠ	goddesses. / the laurel / ? / ?

Here is the older reference to Pantalkes (early 5th century⁷⁰²), written in a dedicatory formula familiar from at least the early Classical period. Here, the primacy of the Nymphs for this cult is

⁶⁹⁸ As Wagman notes, the only divinities not mentioned a second time in the latter half of this epigram are the ἐταῖραι from line 6.

⁶⁹⁹ e.g. “every female and male, men and women,” with a gendered chiasmus.

⁷⁰⁰ e.g. ἄντρον, 7, rather than σπήλαιον;

⁷⁰¹ First observed by Himmelman-Wildschütz, Θεόληπτος, 17. Accepted by Wagman, 85; Decourt, *Inscriptions*, I.72; and Hendrik S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, Brill, 2011: 120. Pache and Larson both treat Inscription II as though it was an autobiographical epigram written, along with Inscription I, by Pantalkes himself: Pache, *Ornament*, 52; Larson, *Nymphs*, 18. Wagman notes that Inscription II could date to “anywhere in the fourth century—perhaps even in the first quarter of the third—but it is very difficult to be specific,” *Cave*, 66.

⁷⁰² Wagman, *Cave*, 57.

emphasized, as “the goddesses” are the only deities mentioned in this earlier text. It is clear that the Nymphs were important to this shrine, but it is unclear when their divine retinue enumerated in Inscription II became associated with the site. The “work” which Pantalkes dedicated has been unanimously identified as the stone cutting that made the site more fitting for worship and more accessible to visitors. Of particular importance, as noted in Inscription II, is the staircase. Themes of ascent are prominent at this site, and the conscious placement of Inscription I on the cliff wall along the staircase underscores just how essential that modification was to the cult.

The reading of “laurel” (δαφ<v>αν, 4) is generally agreed upon and is typically interpreted along with the ἔμφυτα as referring to a sacred garden or grove at the site, possibly in the lower sanctuary (Inscr. II, line 9). What follows this probable reference to a sacred plant, however, is debated. The adversive δὲ suggests that we should expect the name of another dedicator: *Pantalkes dedicated the work, but the laurel [was dedicated by X]*.⁷⁰³ Several scholars have endeavored to make the second half of the inscription understandable by assuming idiosyncratic abbreviations, proposing new and unattested personal names, ‘correcting’ the inscriber’s ‘mistakes’, making up new words, or interpreting the letters as *voces magicae*.⁷⁰⁴ Wagman proposes that the enigmatic ending may have been intended as musical notation for the song that would have been sung at the cave.⁷⁰⁵ Song and dance were undeniably common practices at cult caves generally, and at caves of the nymphs in particular, but there are too many issues with the text to say anything with certainty.

⁷⁰³ Peek suggested that, rather than another dedicator, the name of a nymph would fit: ἄερ’ Ἀθαν<ι>ππα, Werner Peek, “Metrische Inschriften,” *Mnemosynon Theodor Wiegand*, ed. Johann Friedrich Crome, F. Bruckmann Verlag, 1938: 22. Wagman believes this proposal to be “the most appealing” but also problematic in that it assumes that “this inscriber was so incompetent as to insert errors even when he was correcting himself,” *Cave*, 62.

⁷⁰⁴ See Wagman’s comprehensive list of failed attempts at comprehension, *Cave*, 62.

⁷⁰⁵ Wagman, *Cave*, 64–65. Musical notation was inscribed at other Greek sanctuaries, such as the Epidaurian Asclepeium and the treasury of the Athenians at Delphi.

In his reading of the two inscriptions in conjunction, Wagman proposes that the modern scholars' difficulty in understanding Inscription I was shared also by ancient visitors to the site, and that this confusion inspired Inscription II about a century later. Inscription II was therefore composed as an exegetical expansion upon that original enigmatic text, providing the visitor with a "newer, more explicit memorial" to get a sense of the cave's history, traditions, and modes of worship.⁷⁰⁶

Votives

The mode of worship most visible to us today was the dedication of votive gifts. The vast majority of the finds from the site come from the areas of the landings at the top and bottom of the staircase. The votive assemblage overall conforms to what the anonymous poet tells us in his welcome epigram: plantings, tablets, statues, and many gifts. As Wagman has noted, there is a discrepancy, however, between the actual volume of votive objects and what one would expect from this shrine, especially considering the inscription boasts of an apparent multitude (Inscr. II, line 9). It is certainly possible that many of the moveable objects were looted, particularly since they seem to have primarily been dedicated in front of the cave at the so-called "forecourt." Even more probable is the assumption that the majority of these gifts were made from perishable materials, especially wood. We have literary attestations of wooden sculptures or statuettes dedicated in caves, and we have a few wooden tablets surviving from antiquity, both from the anaerobic environments at the bottom of the spring at Brauron and from deep within the Pitsa Cave.

Most of the finds from the Pharsalus shrine are low-relief terracotta tablet fragments and terracotta figurines or protomes, though we do not find these in a large volume compared with

⁷⁰⁶ Wagman, *Cave*, 63, 93.

other cave cults. In all time periods,⁷⁰⁷ female figurines and protomes were more common than male;⁷⁰⁸ in the archaic period (the period with the most figurines dedicated), only female figurines are attested.⁷⁰⁹ Compared to most caves sacred to the nymphs, this one has a strikingly small amount of pottery: only three unadorned miniature *lekythoi* were found. None of the “female shapes” of ceramics that we typically see at nymph shrines were present, nor any vessels associated with drinking or dining. No stone sculpture was recovered, either. Overall, the anemic nature of this extant votive assemblage “has long kept scholars from appreciating the Karapla objects” and cave shrine.⁷¹⁰ All of this apparent deficiency contrasts with the assertion of Inscription II and should not be taken as evidence that the cult was unpopular. Wagman notes that in addition to the votives of perishable materials that do not survive, there are several natural and anthropogenic reasons for this paucity. Because the cave itself was not used for the deposition of votives, they were chiefly dedicated in the downward sloping, exposed areas of the sanctuary, which made them more vulnerable to a variety of disturbances, such as heavy rain, seismic activity, and animal and human interference.

Evidence of Cult Practice

The interactions between these votive objects, their ancient dedicators, and the shrine itself lead us to consider the nature of cult practice at the site overall. Wagman notes that the area of the upper sanctuary is comparable to that of certain dining facilities and it would have been possible to maneuver a small animal up the stairway for a sacrifice. However, the original excavators of the site did not note the presence or absence of archaeofaunal remains or ash

⁷⁰⁷ One possible exception is the singular figurine that may date to either the Hellenistic or Roman periods, which is male; Wagman, *Cave*, 56.

⁷⁰⁸ 36 total female figures, cf. 12 total male figures.

⁷⁰⁹ 18 examples, comprising half of the total number of female figures from the cave, Wagman, *Cave*, 56, Chart 3, “Distribution of votives by period and gender of figures represented (synopsis)”.

⁷¹⁰ Wagman, *Cave*, 56.

layers, so it is difficult to determine with certainty whether the preparation and consumption of meat was a feature of the cult.⁷¹¹ Wagman proposes that the lower sanctuary would have been more apt for banqueting, but I would argue that the complete lack of cooking, serving, or table wares from the miniscule amount of ceramic finds from the site suggests that food consumption was likely not a prominent feature of the cult at all. Only three vessels were recovered from the site, all of them miniature *lekythoi*, chiefly used for storing and pouring oils, especially perfumes.⁷¹² I therefore find it unlikely that burnt offerings or ritual banquets took place at the site, at least at any large scale. Other types of food were likely offered: fruits and other crops, perhaps honey or baked goods. Plants chosen for their aesthetic properties are also probable: fragrant flowers and wreaths, either cultivated or wild.⁷¹³

That most ubiquitous of offerings, the libation, likely was performed here, however. Those three *lekythoi* may have held the liquids (especially oils, but also possibly honey) offered to the deities of the cave, and several areas of the shrine could have received these libations, including the altars, ledge, the spring, or the cave itself. The *lekythoi* themselves may have been part of the dedication, but their scarcity and unadorned, utilitarian appearance may indicate that their practical uses for storing and pouring precious fluids were more important than the vessels themselves.

While the Vari Cave displays some possibility of prophetic activity, there is very little at the Karapla Cave that could be interpreted as such. As mentioned above, Wagman notes that the shrine is not well-suited to several of the aspects of oracular caves investigated by Ustinova.⁷¹⁴ Rather than sensory deprivation allowing for altered states of consciousness, as is Ustinova's

⁷¹¹ Wagman, *Cave*, 33.

⁷¹² Wagman, *Cave*, 51.

⁷¹³ Wagman, *Cave*, 26.

⁷¹⁴ Wagman, *Cave*, 33; cf. Ustinova, *Caves*, 33–34, 64.

primary explanation for prophetic activity in caves, in the Karapla Cave in particular there is instead an overabundance of sensory input even today. This would have been even more pronounced in antiquity when the spring was coursing through the cave and the fragrance of the associated garden was wafting through the air. The deity in Inscription II who is most strongly connected with prophecy is obviously Apollo, who is not said in the epigram to have provided any mantic power, but rather health.⁷¹⁵ Although Chiron's multi-hyphenate fields of proficiency include divination, he is here credited with the rather ambiguous gift of making Pantalkes "wise" and musically gifted.⁷¹⁶

Slightly more likely is the presence of healing activities at the cave. The "smoking gun" of medicinal cults, anatomical votives, is not present at the site. The existence of an abundant spring is a hallmark of healing centers, but also of oracular centers and nymph shrines, so its presence here is not indicative of healing *per se*. The theme of health and wellbeing are instead alluded to in Inscription II. Most of the deities mentioned are associated with medicine or healing: Apollo, Chiron, Asclepius, Hygieia, and the Nymphs themselves. The reading of line 16 is curious due to the mention of "his son," possibly referring to Apollo's son, Asclepius. Hermes is credited alongside Apollo for granting Pantalkes good health.

Inscription II also, of course, provides us with a very general picture of the acts performed at the site, but it is not properly a *lex sacra* and therefore does not dictate religious mandates to the viewer. The activities it lists are very general and could apply to many sanctuaries: ἀλλὰ τύχαις ἀγαθαῖς ἀναβαίνετε, θύετε πάντες / εὔχεσθε, εὐφραίνεσθε, "but go on up, with good fortune: let everyone be free to sacrifice, pray, and make merry". Wagman points out that the order of events listed here corresponds to the order in which a visitor will encounter

⁷¹⁵ ὑγίειαν καὶ βίον ἐσθλόν, line 17.

⁷¹⁶ σοφὸν τ' ἔμεν[αι] καὶ ἀοιδόν, line 19.

the various parts of the shrine: first, they will ascend the staircase (ἀλλὰ... ἀναβαίνετε, “but go on up!”). Once at the upper sanctuary, they will sacrifice, pray, and then celebrate.⁷¹⁷

The demographics of the worshipers at the Karapla Cave were likely diverse, including both locals and travelers, city-dwellers in Pharsalus and those residing in the hinterland.⁷¹⁸ Inscription II tells us that both genders and all ages were welcome, suggesting perhaps a family affair of the type seen in Menander’s *Dyskolos*. That play does, however, emphasize the preparation and consumption of food at its Nymph cave,⁷¹⁹ for which there is little evidence at the Karapla sanctuary.

Conclusions

It is now time to evaluate how this cave cult compares with concepts of nympholepsy and with issues of female sexuality. In his monograph on the site, Wagman refers to Pantalkes as a nympholept, primarily due to his uncommon “devotion” to the nymphs.⁷²⁰ However, even Connor admits that there is little in the evidence from the Karapla Cave that points to what he and others would identify as nympholepsy, such as language of domination.⁷²¹ There is no evidence of any concern with sexuality, nor even with what we would expect for marriage rites.⁷²²

⁷¹⁷ Wagman, *Cave*, 83–84. Wagman on page 83 (but not in his full translation on page 68) translates εὐφραίνεσθε rather liberally as “feasting.”

⁷¹⁸ Wagman, *Cave*, 16, 83.

⁷¹⁹ e.g. 393–402; 419–424; 438–441; 447–459; etc.

⁷²⁰ Wagman, *Cave*, 78–79.

⁷²¹ Connor, “Seized,” 163.

⁷²² In ancient Thessaly, weddings typically began with sacrifice and libations, then the groom dressed his horse for battle and led it to his bride and handed her the reins: Aelian, *Nature of Animals* 12.34; Margariti, “Greek Wedding,” 326; Maria Mili, *Religion and Society in Ancient Thessaly*, Oxford University Press, 2015: 82–84. Horses were extremely important to ancient Thessalian culture, and were frequently featured in cult. We might expect horse figurines at this site if marriage rituals took place at this cave. Horse figurines were especially abundant in Thessalian cult, and “only in Thessaly do they occur in such large numbers”; they were associated with fertility, a “metaphor for married life and reproduction,” Mili, 121. That we do not find horse figurines here does not rule out the possibility of marriage rites, but within the sanctuary’s Thessalian context, their absence is noteworthy. In contrast to the wedding rites of other, more well-attested locales, there is no attestation for the importance of nuptial baths in Thessaly, which may explain the lack of *loutrophoroi* typically associated with wedding rites in Attica.

On the other hand, the cult does align in some ways with understandings of nympholepts as attested in classical literature: the relationship between Pantalkes and the nymphs is a positive one and Pantalkes seems to have wielded some poetic prowess. However, this skill is credited in Inscription II not to the nymphs, but to Chiron. Overall, it is possible but rather unlikely that Pantalkes might have considered himself a nympholept in the classical sense.

There is almost nothing about this cult, however, that adheres to the conceptions of Connor, Pache, and Larson: there is no language of domination, no evidence of sexuality, especially of Pantalkes' sexual submission to the nymphs. The outcome of Pantalkes' interaction with the nymphs is not negative. There is not even a link to prophecy. The only criterion of these scholars' nympholeptic identification that applies to the Cave of the Nymphs at Pharsalus is the prominence of an individual who improved a rural cave shrine for the nymphs.

The Kafizin "Nymphaeum," Cyprus

The final cave examined in this chapter is the so-called "Nymphaeum" of Kafizin on Cyprus. This site is peculiar, both within the context of Greek nymph or nympholepsy cults and within its Cypriot cultural and religious context. The primary cult practitioner was a man named Onesagoras, and his apparent devotion to this nymph cult in a cave has thus been interpreted within the nympholeptic tradition.⁷²³ The cave was excavated sporadically in the second quarter of the 20th century,⁷²⁴ but unfortunately, no excavation reports were published and the notes of the primary excavator were lost after his death in 1971. The finds from the site were published

⁷²³ e.g. Connor, "Seized," 163–164; Pache, *Ornament*, 55–69; Larson, *Nymphs*, 16; Ustinova, *Caves*, 63–64; Theodora Suk Fong Jim, "Seized by the Nymph? Onesagoras the 'dekatephoros' in the Nymphaeum at Kafizin in Cyprus," *Kernos* 25 (2012): 9–26.

⁷²⁴ The cave was excavated by the Museum of Cyprus over two days in 1939 and yielded 134 fragments. There were a few subsequent excavations, in 1949, 1950, and 1955 by Mitford and Porphyrios Diktaios. Earlier, however, there had been looting of the area at least since 1918. These illegal excavators sold off several pots and fragments to collectors and museums, but by 1951, 310 pots had been identified as originating from this cave and were discussed briefly by Mitford, "Kafizin and the Cypriot Syllabary," *Classical Quarterly* 44, no. 3/4 (1950): 97–106. On this history, see Lejeune, "Le sanctuaire," 247–250.

posthumously by Mitford in 1980 as the *Nymphaeum of Kafizin*, with Olivier Masson in 1981 providing a more detailed overview of the site and a critique of Mitford's study.⁷²⁵ Mitford's is the sole publication on this site by an excavator, but it has several problems. It does not include information about the specific findspots of individual pieces, therefore making it impossible to reconstruct the spatial relationships between them. There is no useful description of the cave's size or structure.⁷²⁶ As of 1974, the site of Kafizin is in "No Man's Land", the United Nations Buffer Zone dividing the ethnically Turkish and Greek portions of the island. It has also been anecdotally reported that the cave itself collapsed some time in the late 1970s.⁷²⁷ We are therefore left to reconstruct the cult site based almost solely on a few photographs and the published finds. But from what scholars have been able to determine, virtually every aspect of this cult is odd.

Chronology

The cave did not yield any material before the establishment of this cult in the Hellenistic period, which in itself is unusual. Far from spanning decades or centuries, the cult at Kafizin was active for only 7 or 8 years either at the end of the 3rd century (224–218) or the beginning of the

⁷²⁵ T. B. Mitford, *Nymphaeum of Kafizin: The Inscribed Pottery*, Kadmos, 1980. Olivier Masson, "À propos des inscriptions chypriotes de Kafizin," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 105, no. 2 (1981): 623–649. Masson aided in the posthumous publication of Mitford's work but did not agree with several of his editorial decisions or remarks; his 1981 article includes *corrigenda* of Mitford's edition.

⁷²⁶ Mitford does not even mention, for example, the votive niches carved into the cave walls. Some of these issues are addressed in Masson, "À propos."

⁷²⁷ Masson, "À propos," 625, note 7.

2nd (183–177).⁷²⁸ Regardless of which absolute date is correct, it is clear that this possibly-nympholeptic cave cult existed at least a few hundred years after those at Vari and Pharsalus, both of which were founded in the first half of the 5th century BCE. Furthermore, the remarkably brief window during which this cult was active—especially considering that this is the *only* time when the cave was used for worship—is wholly unattested at other nymph caves, which tend to yield multiple centuries’ worth of votive material. Even after the cult’s abrupt end, the cave was only occasionally used in the following centuries for itinerant shelter.

Cypriot Context

The idiosyncrasy of this cave cult in some ways is not surprising, since Cyprus experienced a wide variety of influences in antiquity. At various times, it was settled or ruled by Ugaritians and Phoenicians, Neo-Assyrians, Egyptians, and Achaemenid Persians. Additionally, there were four waves of Greek settlement and influence. Following probable Minoan influence,⁷²⁹ Mycenaean Greeks settled there in the Late Bronze Age and then in the Greek Dark Age following the LBA Collapse. Cypriots rebelled as part of the Ionian Revolt in 499, and then

⁷²⁸ The precise dating of this cult’s 7–8 year span has recently been problematized. 73 of the 310 inscriptions from the site include regnal years, but—crucially—not the kings’ names. The firmly attested years are 23, 24, 25, 2, and 4, indicating that the cult straddled two rulers. Mitford also reconstructs in one fragment a date in the 26th regnal year: *Kaf.* nos. 227, 167–169. If the reading of 26 is correct, it would suggest that this king died in his 26th regnal year, pointing to Ptolemy III Euergetes, followed by the first four years of Ptolemy II Philopater’s rule, thus 224–218 BCE. Mitford’s dating has been largely accepted, presumably because most subsequent scholars have not questioned his editorial reconstruction: e.g. Masson, “À propos,” 626–627; Jim, “Seized?,” 10, note 9. However, as Lejeune has pointed out, Mitford’s otherwise “remarkably coherent” argument for this dating is grounded in the identification of the number 26, based on his own reconstruction for the numeral 20 and a dubious digamma that was located directly on a fragment fault line: Sidonie Lejeune, “Le sanctuaire de Kafizin, nouvelles perspectives,” *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 138, no. 1 (2014): 258–261. Mitford himself explains his reading of the digamma as “an erratic *zeta* [turned] into a tolerable *digamma*,” *Nymphaeum*, 168. Lejeune further points out that the inscription’s alphabet would likely have used *stigma* for the numeral 6 (as elsewhere in Hellenistic Cyprus), rather than the *digamma*, 260. Therefore, with 25 as the latest firm regnal year and with a reconsideration of local dating systems and paleography, Lejeune suggests instead that the cult straddled the reigns of Ptolemy V Epiphanes and Ptolemy VI Philometor, reestablishing the dating within a 7-year span in the early 2nd century: 183–177 BCE: Lejeune, “Le sanctuaire,” 266–270.

⁷²⁹ The Cypriot syllabary is derived from Linear A. Thus, both the Cypriot and Mycenaean Linear B syllabaries apply Linear A to Greek dialects. On the relationships between Linear A, Linear B, and Cypriot, see Jean-Pierre Olivier, “The Development of Cypriot Syllabaries, from Enkomi to Kafizin,” in *Syllabic Writing on Cyprus and Its Context*, ed. Philippa M. Steele, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

after a few centuries under Persian rule Alexander conquered the island in 333, bringing it firmly within the Hellenistic world. All these layers of conquest interacted with indigenous Cypriot communities, which nevertheless retained some semblance of distinct identity into the island's "long and multistaged 'hellenization'" over the course of the Classical and Hellenistic periods.⁷³⁰ Cypriot religious practices were distinct from mainland⁷³¹ cults and varied between communities. It is therefore not surprising that the nymph cult here differs from those of other sites in the ancient Greek world.

Despite the importance of the island to Greek religion,⁷³² one of the most pervasive aspects of Greek religion was not embraced in Cyprus: the nymphs. There is no evidence for nymph cults on Cyprus apart from this one cave site.⁷³³ Thus, the identification of this cave as sacred to the nymphs is in itself unusual. None of the other caves on this hill show any signs of use.⁷³⁴ Considering both the Greeks' pervasive use of caves elsewhere, particularly for pastoral and religious purposes, as well as the robust tradition of ancient Semitic peoples' use of caves for husbandry, burial, and cult,⁷³⁵ it is odd that neither this cave, nor any of those around it, were used for any of these purposes before the establishment of this cult or, indeed, after its demise.⁷³⁶

⁷³⁰ Giorgos Papantoniou, "Cypriot Autonomous Polities at the Crossroads of Empire: The Imprint of a Transformed Islandscape in the Classical and Hellenistic Periods," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 370 (2013): 170.

⁷³¹ By "mainland" here, I mean the respective "fatherlands" of the different communities who colonized the island at various points.

⁷³² Chiefly, it was known as the birthplace of Aphrodite.

⁷³³ The scant attestations for nymphs on Cyprus are from Chytroi, Troulloi, and Tamassus: Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 261; Jim, "Seized?," 14 and n. 23. At Chytroi, a statue base was inscribed with the word Naias. See also Anaïs Michel, "Arsinoe Philadelphus in Cyprus," in *Kyprios Character. History, Archaeology & Numismatics of Ancient Cyprus*, French School at Athens, 2021: 7; Giorgos Papantoniou, *Religion and Social Transformations in Cyprus: From the Cypriot Basileis to the Hellenistic Strategos*, Brill, 2012: 145. The evidence for nymphs on the island outside the Kafizin cave is always in isolation; there are no caches of votives or other indications that would suggest cult worship of one or more nymphs outside Onesagoras' cult.

⁷³⁴ While Lejeune notes that the cave is accessible after a very difficult ascent, difficulty of ascent was not a detriment to Greeks' access to other mountain caves, Sidonie Lejeune, "La vaisselle cultuelle du sanctuaire de Kafizin," *Cahiers du Centre d'Études Chypriotes* 44 (2014): 366.

⁷³⁵ See Helen Dixon, "Worship and burial in bedrock: Phoenician sacred caves (and other rock chambers) in first millennium BCE Lebanon," *Berytus* 61–62 (2021–2022): 135–157.

⁷³⁶ Papantoniou has observed that the use of caves as cult sites is a rare phenomenon in Cyprus generally: Papantoniou, *Transformations*, 80.

Geography

The “pointed hill” in which the nymph lived⁷³⁷ commands the surrounding flat landscape [Fig. 2.16] in between Nicosia (ancient Ledra, 7km NW) and Dhali (ancient Idalion, 13km N).⁷³⁸ Despite being closer to Ledra, the inscriptions from the cave suggest that the hill was under Idalionian control.⁷³⁹ The nearest settlement to the hill seems to have been the estate-turned-village “of Androklos” mentioned in the texts, though its location has not been identified.⁷⁴⁰ The grotto itself is natural, opening onto a natural terrace [Fig. 2.17]. The finds were primarily found in the cave and just before it, but some reportedly came from the terrace and cistern area.⁷⁴¹ Inside, the cave seems to have been rather small,⁷⁴² and was outfitted with a hewn ledge (for sitting or for holding offerings?⁷⁴³) and votive niches [Fig. 2.18].⁷⁴⁴ The existence of votive niches is perhaps the most ‘normal’ aspect of this cave cult.

⁷³⁷ She is referred to as “the nymph in the pointed hill” in the majority of the inscriptions: Νύμφη ἡ ἐπὶ τῷ στρόφιγγι or ἐν τῷ στρόφιγγι.

⁷³⁸ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 262.

⁷³⁹ While Ledra is mentioned in the inscriptions only once (no. 236), Idalion is mentioned 15 times. Idalion was originally a semitic city, but “by the reign of the first Euergetes... was already much Hellenized.” Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 253.

⁷⁴⁰ ὁ Ἀνδρόκλου οἶκος, discussed sparsely by Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 21, 32, 35, 36, 41, 54, 82, 85, 96, 160, 170, 222, 228, 253, 266.

⁷⁴¹ Lejeune “le sanctuaire,” 250

⁷⁴² I have been unable to find measurements of this cave in any of the publications and have therefore attempted to offer some estimates using interpretive photogrammetry. One photograph of the site (Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, xviii, pl. II a) shows the top of the hill with the terrace and cave mouth in frontal view. A man (perhaps Mitford?) stands on the summit, and the average height of an adult male is 1.7 meters, which I used to approximate the following measurements. He stands perhaps 5 meters above the top of the cave mouth, which itself seems to be approximately 2–2.5 meters high and 5–6 meters wide. Another photograph (xvii, pl. I b) shows part of the cave interior, though the absence of a clear scale reference in the image makes interpretation more difficult. The roof of the cave does not appear to be significantly higher than the top of the cave mouth, perhaps 2.5 meters above the cave floor. The chamber’s depth is harder to estimate, but the back wall of the cave is visible in the natural daylight without the foregrounded exterior of the cave being overexposed, demonstrating a limited differential in light levels between the cave exterior and the back wall of the chamber. This suggests a rather shallow depth, approximately 3–4 meters from the threshold to the back wall. On the cave floor is a small circular patch of darkened soil, likely moisture accumulation from the aperture in the cave roof mentioned by Mitford, though the specific location of this aperture was not described.

⁷⁴³ The L-shaped ledge appears in the photos to be very low, estimated 0.3–0.4 meters above the cave floor, suggesting that it functioned as a low ledge rather than seating, though Mitford interpreted it as a bench for banqueting.

⁷⁴⁴ Lejeune, “La vaisselle cultuelle,” 366.

Compared to nymph worship elsewhere in the Greek world, the cult at the Kafizin cave is odd. Even in antiquity, the cave at Kafizin seems not to have had a natural spring.⁷⁴⁵ The vast majority of nymph caves had an associated spring or at least some trickling water inside, and indeed the presence of water has been proposed as the primary requirement for the establishment of a nymph cult.⁷⁴⁶ The connection of the nymphs to water was so inherent that public fountains from the Hellenistic and Roman periods were called *nymphaea*, even though they were constructed, rather than natural sources.⁷⁴⁷ The area of the hill and its nearest settlement was “notably devoid of running water,”⁷⁴⁸ which necessitated the construction of a plastered cistern that reached a depth of about three meters.⁷⁴⁹ The cistern’s collection of rain water is therefore a practical (possibly cult-necessitated) adaptation to the landscape.

Votives

The finds from the cave sanctuary are also strange. All of the recovered votive objects are ceramic, some 310 of them with dedicatory inscriptions.⁷⁵⁰ There are no terracotta figurines, which were a primary votive type in Cyprus from all periods.⁷⁵¹ Limestone sculpture was also a characteristically Cypriot votive type in the Late Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman periods, but there is no evidence of any sculpture from this cave in limestone or marble.⁷⁵² Therefore, while

⁷⁴⁵ Mitford observes that the area in which this cave was situated “must indeed have depended upon wells and cisterns”, *Nymphaeum*, 258. This may help to explain the lack of occupation of this and the other caves on the mountain.

⁷⁴⁶ Larson, *Greek Nymphs*, 5.

⁷⁴⁷ On this shift, see Dylan K. Rogers, “Shifting Tides: Public Water-Displays in Roman Greece,” in *Great Waterworks in Roman Greece: Aqueducts and Monumental Fountain Structures, Function in Context*, eds. Georgia A. Aristodemou and Theodosios P. Tassios, Archeopress, 2018.

⁷⁴⁸ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 258. The nearby settlement is named in the inscriptions as *Androklou Oikos*, which Mitford speculates was a farm that grew into a small village, p. 254.

⁷⁴⁹ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 4.

⁷⁵⁰ One notable exception to this is a fragment of what Mitford calls a “gold diadem”, p. 262, though this object seems not to have been published and is not further discussed by Mitford or subsequent scholars.

⁷⁵¹ See, for example, the Cyprus chapters in Giorgos Papantoniou, Demetrios Michaelides, and Maria Dikomitou-Eliadou, eds. *Hellenistic and Roman Terracottas*, Brill, 2019, which contains 9 chapters on Cyprus, compared to 10 chapters for all of Greece and Asia Minor.

⁷⁵² In the Archaic and Classical periods, terracotta figurines and limestone sculptures were equally common in Cypriot sanctuaries. Furthermore, in general terracotta figurines were more common in western Cyprus and limestone sculptures in eastern Cyprus, possibly due to a lack of suitable stone quarries on the western part of the

the votive traditions of ancient Cyprus tend to be distinct from both Greek and Phoenician votive practices generally, the assemblage from this cave is unique even within the Cypriot context. As Mitford has shown, this cult seems to have been primarily frequented by a guild of potters; many of the pots record the name of the potter in the dedication to the nymph. Without these dedications, there is nothing in the votive assemblage that would indicate a cult of the nymphs.

The shapes of the vessels are also curious. In many nymph caves, there is a preponderance of “female shapes” which are associated with women’s toilet accessories and bridal rituals. Several sites also feature a high volume of miniature vessels of these and other shapes. The conscious or unconscious restriction of votives to specific shapes demonstrates a level of intention that is inherently tied to nymphic identities (by which I mean both the nature-goddess and brides). The cave at Kafizin, by contrast, has yielded a massive variety of forms, most of them utilitarian types specifically for food preparation and serving, as well as cult utensils like candelabra and incense burners. The vast array of shapes accords with the occupational identities of many of the dedicators, who would have been producing these objects in their workshops, rather than purchasing pots for dedication. But if it were not for the inscriptions on these pots, there would be no reason to assume that the cave housed a cult of the nymphs.

Inscriptions

These inscribed forms comprise almost all the material from the cave.⁷⁵³ The texts were either carved onto prefired pieces or etched through the slip or glaze after firing. They record two Greek dialects, alphabetic Koine and syllabic Cypriot (attested in 66 texts), with some pots

island; see Gabriele Koiner and Nicole Reitingner, “Hellenistic Terracottas and Limestone Sculptures in Cypriot Sanctuaries: On the Search for Types and Votive Habits,” in *Hellenistic and Roman Terracottas*, 44–47.

⁷⁵³ Mitford’s *Nymphaeum of Kafizin* is chiefly a publication of the inscribed pottery, though since inscribed pottery was the vast majority of recovered objects, it also serves at the site’s main publication more generally.

including digraphic inscriptions in both scripts/dialects (33 texts). Mitford notes that the survival of this Cypriot dialect⁷⁵⁴ relatively free from “contamination” is remarkable. On the digraphic pots, he observes that the Cypriot inscriptions are “shorter” and “less informative” than the Koine, and argues that this, along with their numerical inferiority (only 66 of the 310 pots) and the fact that they usually are the second-placed text, demonstrate that the Cypriot dialect and script suffered from a “lack of prestige” compared to Koine.⁷⁵⁵

On this point, I must disagree. Particularly in the case of the digraphic pots, if syllabic Cypriot were indeed inferior or “unfashionable,” what would be the point of including it in addition to the more ‘prestigious’ alphabetic Koine? Mitford says that the use of Cypriot on more utilitarian pots adds to this argument, but there are indeed decorated wares⁷⁵⁶ and “more complicated and decorative pieces”⁷⁵⁷ which bear Cypriot inscriptions. I believe that in this, Mitford’s assumption that the cave functioned in antiquity as a “showroom” (and thus, that it must have catered to “customers”, discussed more below) has influenced his evaluation of the respective roles and statuses of these two dialects. The use of Cypriot in addition to alphabetic Koine demonstrates that these two dialects were used in cooperation with each other, rather than competition. It would have been easy to omit the less prestigious language, particularly in the latter 3rd/early 2nd century, when the Cypriot syllabary had largely fallen out of use. In fact, the only attestation of the Cypriot syllabary *later* than the Kafizin collection is in “heritage” uses on seals from Paphos (probably recording personal names).⁷⁵⁸ That Onesagoras and his associates

⁷⁵⁴ The Cypriot syllabary was first used to write Greek around and after the LBA Collapse, from around 1050 BCE onward, with a proliferation in the late archaic and Greek classical periods, ca. 600–310 BCE, on the chronology, see Markus Egetmeyer, *Le dialecte grec ancien de Chypre*, vol. 1: *Grammaire*, De Gruyter, 2010: 8–13.

⁷⁵⁵ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 264. Also Masson, “À propos,” 635.

⁷⁵⁶ *Kaf.* nos. 23 and 29.

⁷⁵⁷ *Kaf.* nos. 288, 292, and 303.

⁷⁵⁸ The 66 syllabic texts from Kafizin is currently the latest attestation of the Cypriot syllabary in broad use. “Les dernières attestations [after Kafizin] sur des scellés de Paphos constituent seulement un ‘héritage’, le syllabaire n’étant plus vivant,” Egetmeyer, *Le dialecte*, 9, 38–39. On the seals, from the late 2nd to 1st centuries BCE, 783–784.

embraced the local syllabary—and, crucially, an “uncontaminated” local dialect—at such a late date, combined with the heritage uses of the dialect slightly later, suggest that its inclusion on these pots was a conscious display of identity. Considering nymphs were hyper-localized deities (and this specific nymph, even more so, since she is the nymph “in the pointed hill,” ἐπὶ τοῦ στόφιγγος or ἐν τῷ στόφιγγι), the use of a native dialect and script on several votive inscriptions suggests a degree of local pride and identification with the landscape in which the nymph’s cave was embedded.

Worshippers: Identities and Relationships

From the vast array of ceramic shapes, Mitford has concluded that the cave functioned as a sort of “showroom” for the pottery guild’s wares, a “shop window” where prospective patrons could inspect and evaluate their work.⁷⁵⁹ I believe Mitford’s interpretation is highly unlikely for several reasons⁷⁶⁰ and that the vast amount of inscribed pottery from the cave should be

⁷⁵⁹ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 241.

⁷⁶⁰ The majority of his argument for this contention is that some of the pieces recovered from the cave are too nice, and that “such brilliance is not in keeping with the Nymph’s rustic *grotto*” (p. 241, his emphasis). Mitford seems not to have engaged with the assemblages from other cult caves of the nymphs, in which we frequently find luxury items, including fine pottery, precious gemstones, and even gold jewelry. His evaluation of a “nymph’s *grotto*” as a place inferior to other cult sites is therefore unfounded. In reality, the inscribed pottery show that the dedicators were mostly potters themselves. Elsewhere, we know and are told about dedications of “first fruits” or other products of economic labor; here, the economic labor is not agricultural, but ceramic. The variety of vessel shapes need not indicate that the space was a showroom, but instead demonstrates the dedicants’ commitment to the nymph by dedicating objects made by their own hands and made specifically *for* the nymph—evident in the fact that many of the pots were inscribed in wet or leather-hard clay, before firing—showing an investment not only of money, but of time and effort. There are other reasons why Mitford’s identification of the cave as a “shop window” is unlikely. It would be a very poor business strategy to place your “showroom” so far outside a settlement. “Location, location, location” may be a modern motto, but its sentiment is foundational to any industry reliant on physical commodities. Judging from the paucity of finds anywhere else on the mountain and even inside this cave at any point outside the cult’s *floruit*, it is apparent that the site and its surroundings did not receive much foot traffic in antiquity. Additionally, the cave itself is poorly suited to storing wares that one would hope to sell: there was an aperture in the cave’s roof that was tenuously covered, probably by a thatch of branches. This is evidenced by post-holes directly under the opening (p. 4). These physical circumstances are therefore not conducive to displaying ceramics for intended sale. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the workshop itself was situated in or nearby the cave, which would be inconvenient for the proprietors of the establishment. While it is possible, perhaps, that the rural location was meant to serve multiple communities, this nevertheless still seems inefficient for all involved. It would not have been so difficult to create, fire, and sell ceramics inside even small communities, and pottery production is attested even at the household level in both ancient and modern times; on this, see Francesca Tomei, “Ancient Greek Pottery Workshops in their Rural Landscape Setting: Exploring the Intersection between Production, Environment, Society and Agrarian Economy,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Liverpool, 2022: 44. Rural ceramics workshops did

understood not as inventory, but as the votive link between the creators of the dedications and the nymph whose identity is declared on all of the pots. The coexistence of craft and sacred space is not uncommon, both in the broader Greek world and on Cyprus.⁷⁶¹

One of the most debated matters regarding this cave cult is the identities of and relationships between these worshipers. Several inscriptions refer to κοινωνία, which has many possible nuances within the general idea of a group of people with common interests. Papantoniou thus interprets this group of men as partners in an economic venture, translating κοινωνία as a “company”. We do indeed have mention of at least three different crafts or trades within the Kafizin corpus: pottery, flax and linseed production, and (sacred?) barbering.⁷⁶² This last one seems only to be applied to Onesagoras himself, while the first two occupations are applied to several individuals and groups. Untangling the relationship between the κοινωνία of Zenon,⁷⁶³ the κοινωνία of Androclus,⁷⁶⁴ the οἶκος (and sometimes οἶκος κοινὸς) of Androclus,⁷⁶⁵ the οἶκος of Leucus,⁷⁶⁶ the κῶμη of Androclus,⁷⁶⁷ and other establishments seems nigh

exist, but they were typically situated next to the natural clay deposits and water sources that the craft required. Tomei, “Pottery Workshops,” 120–123. Tomei shows through Least Cost Path analysis that pottery workshops were situated as close to their clay and water sources as possible and, when possible, on a relatively flat route. The hill at Kafizin is, as we have seen, devoid of such resources. The cistern’s storage capacity would have been vastly insufficient for the needs of pottery manufacture, and as the only apparent source for collecting and storing large amounts of water, it is much more likely that the cistern would be kept clay-free for libations and, perhaps, for consumption. I therefore think that Mitford’s insistence that the evidence “supports decisively the contention that the *Nymphaeum* served in effect as the company’s shop-window” (Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 241) is wholly unfounded and logistically implausible.

⁷⁶¹ V. V. Stissi, “Pottery to the people. The production, distribution and consumption of decorated pottery in the Greek world in the Archaic period (650-480 BC),” Doctoral Dissertation, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2002: 42–43; more common in sanctuaries are metallurgical workshops: Papantoniou, *Transformations*, 213; Michail Yu. Treister, *The Role of Metals in Ancient Greek History*, Brill, 1996, 76–77; Sandra Blakely, “Metallurgy between Myth and Production: Cognized and Operational Craft in the Northeastern Aegean,” in *Archaeology and Economy in the Ancient World. Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Classical Archaeology* 53, eds. Martin Bentz and Michael Heinzelmänn, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 2018: 79.

⁷⁶² Onesagoras’ barbering possibly had a religious dimension, as temple barbers were common fixtures of Phoenician cult establishments; a 4th century Phoenician inscription from Citium (SE Cyprus) mentions one such sacred barber: *CISem* I. 86 (a). This is the interpretation of Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 261–262; Masson, “À propos,” 634–635; Jim, however, believes Onesagoras’ barbering was more likely secular, “Seized?,” 19.

⁷⁶³ The κοινωνία of Zenon: *Kaf.* nos. 119, 265.

⁷⁶⁴ The κοινωνία of Androclus: *Kaf.* nos. 217, 218, 219, 223, 276.

⁷⁶⁵ The οἶκος [κοινὸς] of Androclus: *Kaf.* nos. 115, 121, 123, 213, 227, 228, 236, 255, 263, 266, 267, 283.

⁷⁶⁶ The οἶκος of Leucus: *Kaf.* nos. 45, 46, 51.

⁷⁶⁷ The κῶμη of Androclus: *Kaf.* nos. 113, 116, 251, 293, 296, 291

impossible without more context. The general consensus nowadays is that there was a guild, or possibly multiples guilds,⁷⁶⁸ of laborers in the vicinity of this cave site whose professional association involved ritual efforts.⁷⁶⁹ Such melding of professional and religious relationships was commonplace, blurring the artificially discrete categories often assigned by modern scholars. Indeed, typically an “association’s aims and interests were various and stretched beyond the confines of what its name or assigned ‘type’ might suggest.”⁷⁷⁰ Thus, religion was incredibly important for “nearly all associations.”⁷⁷¹

Of the men in the association of Kafizin, Onesagoras was by far the most frequent dedicant and is the figure whom scholars have deemed a *νομόκληπτος*. Of the 310 inscribed pots recovered from the cave, 269 bear his name.⁷⁷² Unlike Archedemos at Vari, Onesagoras does not describe himself as a *νομόκληπτος* in any of our extant inscriptions, though we do know some of the other roles or titles he affixed to his name. He was a (possibly sacred) barber, as well as a *δεκατηφόρος*⁷⁷³ and is once described as *μανζιαρχήσαντος*. Mitford interprets the latter as a linguistic variant (or ‘typo’) of the term *μαντίαρχος*, which is attested on Cyprus in conjunction with the prophetic cults of Apollo and Aphrodite.⁷⁷⁴ Connor used this as evidence for the practice

⁷⁶⁸ It is unclear whether the group of potters and the “company” involved in flax and linseed production overlapped at all. Names attested for potters: Menecrates (x5 or 6), Philoitios (x5 or 6), Zomenes (x4), Pnytilos (x2), Olympios (x2), Eumachs (x2), Aristagoras, Epaphroditus, Sol[on], and a handful of others whose names are wholly or mostly lost. Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 277, s.v. *κεραμεύς*; *κηραμεύς*. Members or employees of the “company” of Androclus or Zenon are not named individually.

⁷⁶⁹ Whether the religious aspect of the group was intended at its incorporation or arose in response to some factor after the group already existed is unknown.

⁷⁷⁰ Gabrielsen and Paganini, “Associations,” 8.

⁷⁷¹ Gabrielsen and Paganini, “Associations,” 12. See also Papantoniou, *Transformations*, 146.

⁷⁷² The next most frequent dedicant is Demetrios, who is attested 14 times. Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 14. It is important to note that Onesagoras is not the scribe of all these inscriptions; multiple distinct hands have been identified along with numerous variants in letterforms shapes, p. 264.

⁷⁷³ The meaning of this title is another point of debate among scholars. Outside the Kafizin collection, it is only attached to divinities, where it means “receiving the tithe.” Mitford understands it as an economic term, one collecting tithes from company members and then delivering them the nymph: *Nymphaeum*, 256. He therefore translates *δεκατηφόρος* and refers to Onesagoras as the “managing director” of Zenon’s company. Agreeing with him is Masson, “À propos,” 630. On the other hand, Jim has understood it as a religious term in line with *κανηφόρος*, *σκαφηφόρος*, etc. “Seized?”, 21–23.

⁷⁷⁴ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 194; cf. Jim, “Seized?”, 20–21, note 63, who thinks this interpretation of a linguistic variant in a single attestation of a fragmentary location is “highly uncertain.”

of prophecy at the cave, which would link it to other nympholept cults.⁷⁷⁵ As Jim points out, however, this proposed linguistic variant is unattested elsewhere on Cyprus and the inscribed word itself is missing most of the internal letters.⁷⁷⁶ I would also add that even if this reading is correct, the aorist aspect of this participle suggests that at the time Onesagoras was writing, he was no longer serving as *μαντιάρχος*, and this therefore cannot be taken as evidence for prophecy within this cave cult's practice. Nowhere else in our extant corpus from the cave is there any indication of divination or even of divine inspiration in the form of poetry, as none of the inscriptions are metrical or use "elevated" vocabulary. Nevertheless, from the evidence it is safe to infer that Onesagoras acted as a representative of this group in its relation to the nymph. Whether his post required special cult functions is unclear. Onesagoras seems at the very least to have been involved in the creation of most of the inscriptions, though because he is not a potter, it is possible that he was more involved in the texts inscribed after the pieces were fired.

There is no evidence of female worshipers at the Kafizin cave. Apart from the female divinity (or divinities), all of the named individuals on the pots are men. Even the caves with more male-centered organized cults—as the Vari Cave might have been—typically yield some finds that point to female presence at the site, even if there are no dedications with women's names. Thus, at Vari we see "female shapes" in the ceramic assemblage which point to concerns with female maturation, bridal rites, or reproduction. This is even more the case at other cult caves of the nymphs, such as those examined in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Another pervasive feature of nymph cults and other sanctuaries to female deities is miniature ceramic forms, which are likewise absent from the Kafizin assemblage.⁷⁷⁷ Because pottery is this cult cave's only

⁷⁷⁵ Connor, "Seized," 164.

⁷⁷⁶ Jim, "Seized?," 20, n. 63.

⁷⁷⁷ Susan Guettel Cole, *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space: The Ancient Greek Experience*, University of California Press, 2004: 100.

extant votive type, statuettes and figurines are also not attested here, objects that are dedicated at cult caves commonly, though not exclusively, by women. Women's cults also usually show dedications of jewelry; there is one item from the cave that has been identified as a gold diadem, but this is the only such piece. All of this contrasts with every other nymph cave that I am aware of, all of which show at least some indication of female worshipers.

The question of the absence of women can be extended more broadly to ask who, aside from Onesagoras and his associates, could worship at the cave? Papantoniou takes the exclusivity of the votive pots, along with the occasional epithet of the nymph "harkening to one who backs his prayers with vows," to conclude that this cult valued secrecy.⁷⁷⁸

Cult Activities

Some scholars have suggested that there was iterative banqueting at the cave,⁷⁷⁹ based on the "bench" and one attestation to some event put on by Onesagoras and the company of Androklos/Zenon (*Kaf.* 227, lines 2–3).⁷⁸⁰ However, the reference to this event in *Kaf.* 227 is entirely reconstructed by Mitford. What survives on the pot is the following:⁷⁸¹

Kaf. 227.2–3

[-?]-]αγοντ[-?]-] + c vac. εντοιc+[-?]-]οικoco[-?]-]
[-?]-]υειc+++λoc[-?]-]voc vac. χρεμαcι[-?]-] + onτοc[..] + cαγο[-?]-]

We are missing an unknown number of letters, then we have a masculine active participle in an oblique case, possibly from ἄγω. ἐν τῷ σ<τ>ροφιγγι is all over the Kafizin pots, so that reconstruction here is likely. We clearly have an οἶκος. On the next line, we are missing several

⁷⁷⁸ Papantoniou, *Transformations*, 142; *Kaf.* nos. 102, 229, 249, 307, 230, and 301.

⁷⁷⁹ e.g. Lejeune, "La vaisselle," 370–371.

⁷⁸⁰ The "deplorable" condition of inscription 227 has led to Mitford's perhaps overly-ambitious reconstruction. Masson says that Mitford's text in 227, as elsewhere, is "trop largement," a consistent critique of his, "À propos," 641.

⁷⁸¹ This is my own transcription of what is visible on the pot from the illustrations published by Mitford. + indicates a letter that is partially visible but illegible.

letters of some word or words ending in upsilon; a second declension masculine genitive singular is likely. εἰς could be either a preposition or a prefix. We have illegible traces of three letters, then a possible nominal ending in -λος. After another lacunae of unknown length, we have the full word χρέμασι, followed by another masculine active participle, this one firmly a genitive singular. We then probably have the internal part of Onesagoras' name, though there are other instances where this letter combination would fit. Mitford reconstructs:

Kaf. 227.2–3 (Mitford)

[έορτήν] ἄγοντ[ος τῆς Νύμφης τ]ῆς *vac.* ἐν τῷ σ<τ>ροφιγγί ὁ οἶκος ὁ κοινὸς]
[Ἀνδρόκλο]υ εἰς τὸ τέλος τ[οῦ ἀγῶ]νος *vac.* χρέμασι [συμπά]ροντος [Ὀν]ησαγό[ρου]

Mitford uses these reconstructions to assert that there was indeed a festival put on by the village or company of Androclos, with Onesagoras acting as the party planner and supplying money for the prize to the winner of the games. All of these details, however, are Mitford's speculation. He restores the entire word for 'festival', έορτήν, which does not appear elsewhere in the corpus, as well as the base of the word for "contest," ἀγῶνος.⁷⁸² I believe this construction and the very notion that there were "games" at a "festival" to be unlikely. Without the "festival" and the "games" we are left with the "prize," but even Mitford's reading of τὸ τέλος is highly suspect. Even if this is the correct reading, the sense of τέλος as a "prize" for games is only attested in Pindar, and there, the word ἀγῶν is never used to describe the games whose winners he praises.⁷⁸³ Elsewhere in literature, the concurrence of the two words is exclusively used by historians for military contexts and refers to the "outcome" or "result" of a battle, rather than a "prize."⁷⁸⁴ Epigraphically, the concurrence of τέλος and ἀγῶν appears only here, where it is

⁷⁸² Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 169.

⁷⁸³ *Ol.* 10.67; *Isth.* 1.27; *Pyth.* 9.118.

⁷⁸⁴ e.g. Polybius, 3.109.4; Diodorus Siculus, 15.78.3 and 24.1.7, where he uses τέλος adverbially, "finally," to introduce the outcome of a battle; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 3.6.3, 6.64.1; Plutarch, *Lives. Publicola* 9.4; *Timoleon* 30.9, et al.

speculated by Mitford. Mitford has therefore likely invented the mention of a festival as well as the existence of games. Without this, there is nothing that might suggest any sort of celebration. What *Kaf.* 227 does appear to mention is some sort of votive gift that was set up by the worshiper(s). Again, I will provide what survives on the pot and then Mitford's edition.

Kaf. 227.5–7

[-?]-εν+ρεσταιικο[-?]- *vac.* γ[-?]-επινδουσαδι
 ολυμπ[-c. 2/3-]αιπροσευγο[-?]- *vac.* κ[-?]-ιντελετιδιφροιο+[-?]-
 καιενπυελριεν[-?]-αται+

Kaf. 227.5–7 (Mitford)

[εὐν]οίας [ἔνεκ]εν, χρεται ? ἰκό[να γραπτὴν ἐν ἡ] *vac.* γ[ράφεται ἡ Νύμφη] σπένδουσα Δι[ι
 Ὀλυμπί[οι] καὶ προσευχο[μένα - - -] *vac.* Κ - - - ΟΝΤΕΑ ἐπὶ δίφροι οὐ[σα]
 καὶ ἐν πυέλοι ἐνχ[έουσα? - - κωμ]ασταὶ ?

Several letters that Mitford transcribes are not fully visible on the pot, at least not by the time that the pot's fragments were illustrated.⁷⁸⁵ The most telling aspect of these lines is the use of feminine participles, preserved well in line 5 and possibly at the end of line 6. Considering there is no other female character mentioned in the cave cult aside from perhaps “Good Fortune,” Mitford's reconstruction of the nymph as the subject of these participles is likely. Similarly convincing is his understanding of ἰκό[as the base of εἰκόνα, “image,” in line 5. The notion that the image was painted, γραπτὴν, γράφεται, is speculation based on a single gamma and the fact that there was no statuary recovered from the site.⁷⁸⁶ Mitford's interpretation of επινδουσα as σπένδουσα is likely correct since there is confusion of ε, ει, η, and ι throughout the corpus. σπένδουσα probably describes the subject of the εἰκόν: the image shows the nymph pouring a libation for Olympian Zeus. Libations were “one of the most ubiquitous ceremonial acts in Greek

⁷⁸⁵ *Kaf.* 227 is composed of 33 fragments, which were illustrated individually in 1939, 1951, and 1952; see Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 167–168.

⁷⁸⁶ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 169.

religion”, so it is likely that this activity took place at the cave, and this was one of the few sacrificial activities where an altar was not needed: libations could be poured onto the ground or into a body of water if an altar was not available.⁷⁸⁷

Overall, I find it unlikely that there was banqueting or communal wine consumption at this cave. *Kaf.* 228 bears a mostly complete Koine inscription which designates the pot itself as οἰνοφόρον τὸδε ἰς τὰς κοινὰς συνόδους,⁷⁸⁸ “this wine-carrier for the common meeting”. But while there are several examples of jugs, decanters and pitchers, there are very few drinking cups,⁷⁸⁹ and most of the small bowls either could not have held liquid⁷⁹⁰ or had rounded bottoms that would not have been conducive to placing on a surface when holding liquid.⁷⁹¹ Drinking therefore seems not to have been a common activity.

Additionally, and perhaps counterintuitively, the inclusion of so many cooking vessels is odd,⁷⁹² as we do not typically see this many in caves where there was feasting. A platter, *Kaf.* 285, declares that Onesagoras dedicated σπλ(α)νχνοεντεριφόρον / τόδη, “this entrails-and-intestines-carrier.”⁷⁹³ A cursory reading of the word without the archaeological context might lead one to conclude that there was feasting in this cave. However, the excavators reported no ash layers in or around the cave, nor any animal bones, and there is no discernable

⁷⁸⁷ Milette Gaifman, *The Art of Libation in Classical Athens*, Yale University Press, 2018: 1.

⁷⁸⁸ *Kaf.* no. 228.3–4. There seems to be a mistake by the inscriber: ἰς τὰς κοινὰς συνόδους should either be ἰς τὰς κοινὰς συνόδους “to the [place] of the common meeting” or ἰς τὰς κοινὰς συνόδους, “to the common meetings”.

⁷⁸⁹ There are six Megarian bowls (nos. 29–34), four *kantharoi* (nos. 40–43), one *skyphos* (no. 35), and one uninscribed *rhyton* (unnumbered, Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 219), totalling 13 drinking vessels in the collection of more than 310 pots, roughly 4% of the total assemblage. By contrast, there are 51 shallow bowls (nos. 62–112). There are more named potters in the inscriptions than there are drinking vessels from the cave.

⁷⁹⁰ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 19, 60.

⁷⁹¹ e.g. *Kaf.* nos. 22–28, 79, 80; in addition, casserole dishes were meant to be used with a stand, so they had rounded bottoms and as such were stored upside-down: *Kaf.* no. 235.

⁷⁹² Mortars (nos. 113–115), frying pans (116–118), pans (119–132), porridge bowls (133–134), fish plates (135–136), cooking pots (229–234), meat trays (285–287, one casserole dish (235), and dozens of shallow bowls that Mitford says would not have been used for liquids (nos. 56–112); cf. drinking cups: four *kantharoi* (40–43), two uninscribed *rhyta* (p. 219), one *skyphos* (35), one uninscribed *mastos* (p. 25)

⁷⁹³ The mention of entrails in a sacred cave recalls the stipulation carved on the walls of the Vari Cave: IG II2 789, τᾶντερ ἔχ/σο κλύετε / καὶ τὸν ὄν/θον νίζετε, “Rinse the entrails outside and wash out the dung!”

altar stone, so it is unlikely that any actual cooking or eating took place there. Finally, as stated above, the area inside the cave is rather limited, especially considering the vast amount of space that would have been taken up in antiquity by more than 310 (intact!) vessels.⁷⁹⁴ Dining could have taken place on the terrace outside the cave, but again, no evidence of fire or animal bones was found.

As stated above, no altar was found at the site. This is not all that unusual; while the two other “nymphleptic” caves both have preserved altars (because they were carved into the rock), many cave cults seem either to not have had an altar, used one or more speleothems as focalizing points in lieu of an altar, or are missing their altars. We know from marble votive plaques that sacred caves sometimes had altars constructed from stone blocks, and these many have been destroyed or dismantled in the intervening millennia. What does survive from the cave are four incense-burners which likely had a cult function similar to portable altars (*Kaf.* 302–307).⁷⁹⁵ The interior of *Kaf.* 303 has areas darkened by smoke.⁷⁹⁶ It is therefore possible that there were small-scale burnt offerings for the nymph at the cave probably not involving the cooking of meat. Additionally, we know from other archaeological and literary evidence that perishable items were often sacrificed to the nymphs, including flowers, fruits or crops, cakes, or honey. Considering the group’s involvement in the flax and linseed industry, it is possible that those plants were offered in exchange for the nymph’s protection.

⁷⁹⁴ The vessels numbered in Mitford’s 1980 publication are only those that were inscribed. Additionally, there were many uninscribed pieces, “thousands in number,” 259. The reconstructed uninscribed pots included by Mitford are *Kaf.* nos. 501–527, *Nymphaeum*, 246–248.

⁷⁹⁵ Portable altars were most commonly used in domestic spaces; one is mentioned at Aristophanes, *Peace*, 942; see Alexandra Sofroniew, *Household Gods: Private Devotion in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Getty Publications, 2016: 24. On portable altars in the archaeological record, see Lea Kimberly Cline, “Altars and Empire: Studies in Roman Altars and Divine Kingship (c.300 B.C.- A.D. 96),” Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2013: 21–23, where she discussed Greek miniature votive altars as precursors to Roman *arulae* and their similarity to incense burners; and Joseph W. Shaw, “Ritual and Development in the Greek Sanctuary,” in *Kommos: an excavation on the south coast of Crete, Volume IV, Part I: Text*, Princeton University Press, 2000: 674, 695.

⁷⁹⁶ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 238.

Without a spring, an altar, or votive-specific vessels, we are left to wonder what religious activities happened here, if any. In her more recent examination of the evidence from the cave, Lejeune has proposed that ritual barbering took place at the Kafizin cave.⁷⁹⁷ The title that Onesagoras most consistently applies to himself—often in conjunction with his patronymic—is “barber,” κουρεύς. Onesagoras’ barbering is cited in *Kaf.* 227 as the source of the money or wealth of the group or cult,⁷⁹⁸ and *Kaf.* 117 seems to note that Onesagoras was “appointed barber.”⁷⁹⁹ While Mitford interpreted this as “temple-barber in the Phoenician sense,” he does not explore the possibility of sacred barbering happening as a cult activity at the cave.⁸⁰⁰ According to inscriptions from Kition and Carthage, Phoenician and Punic sanctuaries employed barbers, though the specific role(s) of these practitioners are debated.⁸⁰¹ Literary texts mention the practice of ritual beard or hair cutting in Semitic cults and funerary portraits of priests from Palmyra depict them as clean-shaven and bald.⁸⁰²

Only a handful of the pots from the cave have illustrations, and these illustrations are mainly human heads: some with facial hair [e.g. **Fig. 2.19**], others clean-shaven [e.g. **Fig. 2.20**].⁸⁰³ Lejeune’s astute consideration of the texts’ references to barbering in conjunction with the illustrated heads has shown that Onesagoras likely served as the *de facto* “temple barber” for the group and that the pots depicting heads in various states of beardedness are meant to

⁷⁹⁷ Sidonie Lejeune, “Kafizin, portraits d’un nymphaion,” *Cahiers du Centre d’Etudes Chypriotes* 39 (2009): 309–324.

⁷⁹⁸ *Kaf.* 227, 4: τῆς κουρικῆς τέχνης[ς].

⁷⁹⁹ *Kaf.* no. 117, in syllabic Cypriot: *e-pi-ta-se ko-ro-u-se* ~ ἐπι(σ)τὰς κωρούς, “having been appointed barber,” Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 88.

⁸⁰⁰ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 13.

⁸⁰¹ See Jean-Baptiste Yon, “Coiffeurs et barbiers dans les sanctuaires du Proche-Orient,” *Tempora: Annales d’histoire et d’archéologie* 18 (2009): 81–94. Some possibilities for their roles are: barbering cult personnel who reside at the sanctuary; barbering worshipers for the purpose of dedicating locks of hair to the god; and adorning a cult statue with wigs, but these possibilities are not mutually exclusive, either: Yon, “Coiffeurs,” 85.

⁸⁰² e.g. Lucian, *De Dea Syria* 55, 60. Yon, “Coiffeurs,” 90.

⁸⁰³ 25 heads are preserved on 15 pots, with each pot having between 1 and 5 heads. Only 5 heads are clean-shaven; 5 have beards only; the remaining 15 or so have both beards and mustaches. Lejeune, “Kafizin, portraits,” 311.

commemorate instances of his sacred barbering.⁸⁰⁴ The offering of hair, including facial hair, to various deities existed in both the Greek and Phoenician religion.⁸⁰⁵ It is therefore probable that acts of ritual barbering took place at the cave, where the hair was offered to the nymph and a vessel was dedicated to mark the occasion.⁸⁰⁶

Nympholepsy at Kafizin?

Onesagoras does not fully fit within the classical conception of the nympholept. While it is true that he seems to have had a positive relationship with the Nymph, as Pantalkes and Archedemos had with their own, there is no connection to poetic proficiency at Kafizin. None of the inscriptions are metrical, they do not tend to use overtly poetic terms like the other two caves' texts do. The development of nympholepts into prophetic figures, seen first in the late classical period and becoming more popular in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, is very unlikely. The only "evidence" for prophecy at Kafizin is one dubious reconstruction (*Kaf.* 258).

Even less fitting is the definition of nympholepsy perpetuated by Connor, Pache, Larson, and others, which focuses explicitly on domination, always with a dimension of female sexual aggression toward the man. As Mitford observes, Onesagoras' interactions with the Nymph in the Pointed Hill "were not amorous but commercial."⁸⁰⁷ I therefore take the minority opinion,

⁸⁰⁴ Lejeune, "Kafizin. portraits," 317, 321.

⁸⁰⁵ Lejeune, "Kafizin. portraits," 316. Dedications of hair were common at coming-of-age ceremonies for young men and at pre-wedding rites for young women. Hair dedications could also be made in requests or thanks for divine aid, as well as in mourning rituals; e.g. Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers*, 4–6: τύμβου δ' ἐπ' ὄχθῳ τῷδε κηρύσσω πατρί / κλυεῖν, ἀκοῦσαι [/ × – ~] πλόκαμον Ἰνάχῳ θρεπτήριον / τὸν δεύτερον δὲ τόνδε πενθητήριον, "I make proclamation to my father to hearken and hear me [and to aid me. I have already offered] a lock of hair to Inachus in recompense for my nurture, and [I now offer here] this second lock as a mourning-tribute [to you]."

⁸⁰⁶ e.g. *Kaf.* 274. Lejeune has also posited that these hair dedications may have been connected to mourning: Lejeune, "Kafizin. portraits," 322.

⁸⁰⁷ Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, 261.

along with Lejeune, that it is difficult to interpret Onesagoras as a nympholept in either the ancient or modern understandings of the term.⁸⁰⁸

Conclusions: Rethinking “Nympholepsy”

I will now compare these three cults with each other [Table 3] and with the definitions of nympholepsy to determine the extent to which they conform to or diverge from the models depicted in literary caves. The most obvious feature all three cults share is the use of a cave as the focal point of the shrine. In all three instances, these caves are in rural, mountainous settings, rather far from the nearest ancient settlements. All three are natural grottoes that have been modified by carving features into the living rock inside and around the cave. All three had roofs at some point in their history. Finally, the most important criterion by which these cults are designated “nympholeptic” is the predominance of an individual worshiper who is credited in writing with a great dedication of labor for the foundation, improvement, or maintenance of the sanctuary. Crucially, at all three sites, this individual is always portrayed as having a positive, cooperative relationship with the nymphs and other deities worshiped at the shrines.

There is nothing else in common between all three caves. The Vari and Pharsalus cults have some additional features in common with each other that do not appear at Kafizin. The first is their classical date; Pantalkes and Archedemos both improved pre-existing nymph cave cults in the early 5th century BCE. Their cults also dwindled around the same time in the latter Hellenistic period. Both clearly valued their grottoes’ natural springs, planted a tree or garden, and chose a whole host of deities to honor in these idyllic settings. Poetry and music must have been important aspects of worship or of the patrons’ identities: both caves have a metrical

⁸⁰⁸ “Il est difficile de faire d’Onésagoras un « nympholepte », un « possédé par les Nymphes », comme il est d’usage de le présenter,” Lejeune, “Kafizin, portraits,” 319.

inscription commemorating their renovators; piping Pans were common at Vari, which also probably had a designated dance floor, and Pantalkes is designated as a singer in his epigram.

The differences are particularly pronounced between the Kafizin Cave and the other two. As has been discussed extensively already, Onesagoras' cult is odd in practically every context: it is odd for Greek religion, for Phoenician religion, for the already-odd Cypriot religion, and for nymph cults. The cult occupied a dry cave, unparalleled for nymph worship, and dedicated only pottery (and probably perishable goods). Rather than worshiping a plurality, at Kafizin, only a singular Nymph is attested.

The patterns that we see in literature therefore seem not to have been prevalent in cult practice. In the myth we see relationships between powerful female figures and less-powerful males that are consummated in cavernous settings. In all instances, the power dynamics at play pose a threat to the status quo, in which the masculine should have greater agency and power than the feminine. As a result, all of these relationships in the literary evidence end badly, often leading to the death of one of the partners. Within the world of myth, then, the cave functions as a staging area for subversive patterns, offering an opportunity to propose, explore, and rebuke notions of gender and power that are antithetical to established patriarchal norms.

In cult, however, the idea of feminine agency—especially sexual agency—dominating men is not a productive model to replicate. Religious practice is not a safe staging area like the mythic cave. It is, instead, the place to affirm the norms and patterns that are seen as constructive to society, and thus, to reassert masculine models of domination. We therefore see expressions of male power: the ithyphallic Pan, herms, the looming Acheloos and the supervisory role of Hermes or Apollo as *νυμφαγέτης*. The presence of Pan and other male gods in the caves, which are so inherently linked with the nymphs, therefore has connotations of male penetration of the

feminized cave space. But this is the natural order of things, and is therefore perfectly permissible. So, while the cave setting in more strictly ritual contexts does not necessarily connote female sexual agency, it can still be read as a yonic space for the inverse, for bolstering masculine agency. The sexual dynamics proposed in the literary sources are not put into action, largely because to do so would endanger the gender-power status quo.

Chapter 3: Testing and Defending Virginitv in Greek Caverns

The final paradigm that I will discuss in this dissertation is the connection between caves and virginitv, the definitions and applications of which have been hotly debated.⁸⁰⁹ The politics of virginitv are pervasive in Greek literature; the “*cursus honorum*” of sexual statuses or identities (from *parthenos*, to *nymphē*, to *gynē* and *mētēr*) is a quality uniquely shared by both divine and mortal females.⁸¹⁰ As I will show, Greek literature often uses cave settings symbolically to guard, test, and complicate notions of female virginitv. Furthermore, in lived religion, caves were often used as settings for rites pertaining to girls’ puberty and virginitv.

In order to delve into these issues, I will first define ancient Greek medical and social understandings of “virginitv” to the best of modern scholarship’s abilities. Then, I will investigate the two main circumstances involving these issues in myth and literature: virginitv ordeals and a maiden’s defense of her own virginitv. I will use these to speak about what these cave scenarios can elucidate about conceptions or and values surrounding female virginitv, particularly in the 2nd century CE when this motif emerges. Finally, I will contextualize these narrativized caves within the lived experience of the cave-centered virginitv ordeal and virgin-centered cave rituals. I show that until the early Hellenistic period, Greek literature and religion did not display a uniquely strong connection between caves and virgins, and that this notion gained prominence in the Roman period, peaking in the 2nd century CE. Before then, the cave cults concerned with virginitv were more concerned with the qualities associated with virginal identities, rather than the fact of virginitv itself.

⁸⁰⁹ See, for example, Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginitv*, Harvard University Press, 1990; Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher, eds. *Virginitv Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, University of Toronto Press, 2007; Vichi Eugenia Ciocani, *Virginitv and Representation in the Greek Novel and Early Greek Poetry*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2013; and Giulia Sissa, “The hymen is a problem, still: virginitv, imperforation, and contraception, from Greece to Rome,” *Eugesta* 3 (2013): 67–123.

⁸¹⁰ Eleanor Irwin, “The Invention of Virginitv on Olympus,” in *Virginitv Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, ed. Judith Fletcher and Bonnie MacLachlan, University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Ancient Greek Virginity

Over the centuries there have been myriad attempts to determine the sexual status of a woman by determining whether or not her hymen was intact.⁸¹¹ Modern medicine has shown that the presence or absence of this membrane does not determine whether or not a female has had penetrative sex.⁸¹² In ancient Greek literature, virginity appears as a social, rather than strictly somatic, identity. The social construction of virginity—essential for ensuring the paternity of “legitimate” heirs, and thus fundamental for upholding patriarchy—led to the close protection and scrutiny of young women’s behavior. Notions of anatomical or empirically observable virginity were for the most part not existent in ancient Greek society.⁸¹³ Because ancient Greek medicine did not purport to identify a woman’s virginity through anatomical indicators, ancient people used other means to determine the sexual status of young women. These typically involved witness testimonies, oaths, and “ordeals” meant to determine, by the gods’ intervention, the girl’s sexual status.

External acknowledgement of sexual intercourse, particularly acknowledgement from a girl’s father or other male *kyrios*, bestows the change in status on the maiden, not the sexual act itself.⁸¹⁴ The role of the *kyrios* in maintaining a maiden’s virginal status is essentially the role of a real estate agent or car salesman: his guarantee in the purity of his product (his faith in the virginal status of his maiden charge) eases the transition of ownership from him to the groom. As Irigaray observes, “A virgin is the // future of [men’s] exchanges, transactions, transports. A kind of reserve for their explorations, consummations, exploitations. The advent of [men’s] desire,

⁸¹¹ For a collection of examples up to the modern day, see Michael Rosenberg, “Virginity and Violence in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Signs of Virginity: Testing Virgins and Making Men in Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, 2018: 22 and note 8.

⁸¹² See, for example, the World Health Organization’s “Eliminating virginity testing – An Interagency Statement,” 2018.

⁸¹³ Julia Kelto Lillis, *Virgin Territory: Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity*, University of California Press, 2022: 25.

⁸¹⁴ See Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 88–90.

Not of [women's]."⁸¹⁵ In this way, as Catullus says, a young girl's virginity is not just her own; it belongs as much to her as it does to each of her parents.⁸¹⁶ The dynamics of ownership, control, and exchange present in issues of virginity demonstrate that "in all cases virginity is closely allied with power."⁸¹⁷

Virginity Caves in Literature

In this section, I will first discuss Aelian's account of Atalanta in his *Historical Miscellany* and the cavernous virginity ordeal in Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*. Then, I will examine two early Christian figures whose virginity is explicitly connected with caves in 2nd-century Christian apocrypha. Throughout these passages, issues of sexual continence are configured or interrogated by means of cave settings. Within the paradigm of the cave-as-womb, these works illustrate 2nd-century concerns about the preservation of female virginity in two dimensions: as an instrument in upholding patriarchal standards of female sexual behavior and, in some instances, as a tool for female empowerment in response to masculine sexual aggression.

Atalanta

Atalanta is a mythic figure who is often referenced but seldom given a starring role.⁸¹⁸

Her biggest claims to fame are her participation in the Calydonian boar hunt and her footrace

⁸¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together," in *The Sex Which Is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter and Caroline Burke, Cornell University Press, 1985 [1977]: 211–212.

⁸¹⁶ *Virginitas non tota tua est, ex parte parentum est, / tertia pars patre est, pars est data tertia matri, / tertia sola tua est*, "Your virginity is not entirely yours, part belongs to your parents: a third to your father, a third to your mother, only one third is your own," Cat. 62.62–64. This poem is discussed in greater detail below.

⁸¹⁷ Bonnie MacLachlan, "Introduction," *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, edited by Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher, University of Toronto Press, 2007: 4.

⁸¹⁸ The longest narrative of Atalanta outside of Aelian is in Ovid, *Met.* 10.560–707. For prior scholarship on Atalanta's episode in Ovid, see Artemis Archontogeorgi, "Gaze, movement, and gender in Ovid's story of Atalanta and Hippomenes (*Met.* 10.560–707)," *Letras Clássicas* 2, no. 1 (2024): 195–224; M. A. Ciabaton, "Multiplicity (intertextual et al.) in *Metamorphosis* 10.560–707: Atalanta's duplicity unveiled," *Classical Philology* 115, no. 2 (2020): 186–208; Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, "Ovide et les mythographes: pratiques catalogique et narrative dans les «Métamorphoses»: l'«exemplum» d'Atalante et Hippomène," in *Y el mito se hizo posia*, edited by Maria Consuelo Alvarez and Rosa Maria Iglesias, Centro de Linguística Aplicada Atenea, 2012; Ioannis V. Ziogas, "Ovid as an Hesiodic poet: Atalanta in the «Catalogue of women» (fr. 72–6 M–W) and the «Métamorphoses» (10.560–707)," *Mnemosyne* 62, no. 2 (2011): 249–270.

with potential suitors. The latter episode, ending with the golden apple trick which forces her to marry, marks the end of her virginal identity, which by all accounts she fights hard to retain.⁸¹⁹

Before that episode, Atalanta lives an Artemisian lifestyle in the woods for much of her life. Caves feature in several accounts of the myth of Atalanta.⁸²⁰ The most extensive portrayal of her myth, especially of her pre-marital life, is from Aelian's *Historical Miscellany*, which tells Atalanta's story from her birth through her fighting off the centaurs.⁸²¹ As the story goes, Atalanta is born to a father who exposed her because he wished for sons.⁸²² He leaves her near a cave and spring on Mt. Parthenium ("Mt. Virginity"), where she is found and nursed by a bear.⁸²³

⁸¹⁹ The name of her husband differs. In Ovid, his name is Hippomenes. Elsewhere, he is Melanion. On iconographic representations of this episode in both ancient and modern art, see Maria Isabel Rodríguez López, "Atalanta e Hipomenes: recreación iconográfica de un mito," *Eikon / Imago* 7 (2018): 167–196.

⁸²⁰ Two examples that will not be discussed here are [pseudo-?] Palaephatus (3rd c. BCE), *De Incredibilibus*, 13 and Ovid *Met.* 10.686–707. In the former, the married Atalanta and Melanion enter a cave to have sex and come out as lions. Palaephatus rationalizes this as the lions living in the cave killing and then being mistaken for the metamorphosed couple; Ovid (identifying the husband as Hippomenes) presents it as a legitimate metamorphosis. The "doomed" nature of their relationship (being transfigured into lions) can be understood in the paradigm of cave sex discussed in Chapter 2. Since neither party in this relationship is divine, the normative gender/power dynamic remains. One could argue that since Melanion had to trick Atalanta with the golden apples in order to beat her in the footrace and win her hand in marriage, Atalanta is the more powerful of the two. For work on the under-studied Palaephatus and his rationalization of miracles and mythology, see Greta Hawes, "Palaephatus, *Peri Apiston*," in *Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, 2014; and "Story time at the library: Palaephatus and the emergence of highly literate mythology," in *Between orality and literacy: communication and adaptation in antiquity*, edited by Ruth Scodel, Brill, 2014; and David Bouvier, "Palaiphatos ou Le mythe du mythographe," *Polymnia* 1 (2015): 25–60.

⁸²¹ *Historical Miscellany*, 13.1. This work, while not exactly obscure, is also certainly not popular. As part of the Second Sophistic tradition of miscellanea, the work includes everything from interesting animal behaviors to odd ethnographic observations. While some writers of miscellanies introduced their compendia with methodological or bibliographical notes, Aelian did not. The neglect of works of miscellany is often due to evaluations of their "derivative" nature, being both unoriginal in content and unmeritorious in style. Aelian's work is now, "at best a quarry for scholars hoping to fill the many gaps in our information about the ancient world." Five chapters stand out in both length and style from the rest of the text; in these, Aelian "aimed in each case to produce a piece of prose which by the standards of his day would seem superior to the original," though "in his effort to achieve fine effects his taste sometimes let him down" (Wilson, 12). Atalanta's myth is one of the five extended chapters in the work, which is composed of an impressive 464 chapters spanning 14 books (though most chapters are only a few sentences long). Wilson has observed that three of these five extended chapters have stated or understood sources and believes it likely that the other two (including the story of Atalanta) similarly adapted stories from other sources, though Aelian does not cite them. See Nigel G. Wilson, "Introduction" to Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1991.

⁸²² Surely there is some irony here in Atalanta's adoption of masculine traits and activities.

⁸²³ The mothering (especially nursing) of exposed human or divine infants by animals is common. Aelian actually provides a short list of examples in *Historical Miscellany*, 12.42, including dog-, goat-, deer-, horse-, and bear-nurses. On this, see Giulia Pedrucci, "Breastfeeding Animals and Other Wild 'Nurses' in Greek and Roman Mythology," *Gerión* 34 (2016): 307–323.

Local hunters discover Atalanta and raise her in the nearby settlement until she reaches puberty.

She then leaves the settlement to maintain her virginity⁸²⁴ and returns to the mountain, living in a cave. Aelian gives her grotto a generous *ekphrasis*:⁸²⁵

Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, 13.1⁸²⁶

Τί γὰρ ἡμᾶς λυπεῖ καὶ ἄντρον Ἀταλάντης ἀκοῦσαι, ὥς τὸ τῆς Καλυψοῦς τὸ ἐν Ὀμήρῳ; καὶ ἦν ἐν κοίλῃ τῇ φάραγγι σπήλαιον μέγα καὶ βαθὺ πάνυ, κατὰ πρόσωπον δὲ βαθεῖ κρημνῷ ὠχύρωτο. κιττοὶ δὲ αὐτὸ περιεῖρπον, καὶ ἐνεπλέκοντο οἱ κιττοὶ μαλακῶς <τοῖς> δένδροις καὶ δι' αὐτῶν ἀνείρπον. κρόκοι τε ἦσαν περὶ τὸν τόπον ἐν μαλακῇ φυόμενοι καὶ βαθεῖα τῇ πόα. συνανέτελλε δὲ αὐτοῖς καὶ ὑάκινθος καὶ ἄλλη πολλὴ χροιά ἀνθέων οὐ μόνον εἰς ἑορτὴν ὄψεως συντελεῖν δυναμένων, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁσμαι ἐξ αὐτῶν τὸν ἀέρα τὸν κύκλῳ κατελάμβανον· καὶ παρῇν τῇ τε ἄλλῃ πανηγυρίζειν καὶ κατὰ τὴν εὐωδίαν ἐστιᾶσθαι. δάφναι τε ἦσαν πολλαί, φυτοῦ διὰ τέλους ἀκμάζοντος ἡδεῖται προσιδεῖν κόμαι, καὶ ἄμπελοι δὲ πάνυ σφόδρα εὐθενούντων βοτρυῶν πρὸ τοῦ ἄντρου τεθιγυῖαι τὸ φιλεργὸν τῆς Ἀταλάντης ἐπεδείκνυντο. ὕδατά τε διατελῇ καὶ εἰσρέοντα καὶ καθαρὰ ἰδεῖν καὶ ψυχρά, ὅσον γε ἀψαμένῳ τεκμήρασθαι καὶ καταγνῶναι πίνοντι, χύδην καὶ ἀφθόνως ἐπέρρει· τὰ δὲ αὐτὰ ταῦτα καὶ εἰς ἀρδεῖαν τοῖς δένδροις τοῖς προειρημένους ἦν ἐπιτήδεια, συνεχῶς ἐπιρρέοντα καὶ εἰς τὸ ἔμβιον αὐτοῖς συμμαχόμενα. ἦν οὖν τὸ χωρίον χαρίτων ἀνάμεστον, καὶ σεμνότατόν τε ἅμα καὶ σώφρονα παρθενεῶνα ἐδείκνυν.

What harm does it do us to hear of Atalanta's cave, like Calypso's in the *Odyssey*? At the bottom of the defile was a large and very deep cave, at the entrance protected by a sheer drop. Ivy encircled it, the ivy gently twined itself around trees and climbed up them. In the soft deep grass there crocuses grew, accompanied by hyacinths and flowers of many other colours, which can not only create a feast for the eye; in fact their perfume filled the air around. In general the atmosphere was of festival, and one could feast on the scent. There were many laurels, their evergreen⁸²⁷ leaves so agreeable to look at, and vines with very luxuriant clusters of grapes flourished in front of the cave as a proof of Atalanta's industry. A continuous stream of water ran by: pure in appearance and cold, judging by the touch and the effect of drinking it; it flowed in generous and lavish quantity. This very stream served to water the trees already mentioned, with an unfailing current contributing to their vigour. The spot was full of charm, and suggested the dwelling of a dignified and chaste maiden.

⁸²⁴ κατὰ μικρὸν δὲ αὐτῇ τὰ τοῦ σώματος μετὰ τῆς ἡλικίας ἀνέτρεχε· καὶ ἦρα παρθενίας καὶ τὰς τῶν ἀνδρῶν ὁμιλίας ἔφευγε, “and slowly her body grew with age. She was committed to virginity and avoided contact with men.”

⁸²⁵ This is the first of three *ekphrases* in Aelian's chapter on Atalanta. The second details her beauty and the love and fear she inspires in men; the third is a “set piece” describing in detail the threat of the centaurs.

⁸²⁶ Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* (*Varia Historia*), 13.1 contains the entire Atalanta episode; most editions are not further subdivided into sections, paragraphs, or sentences, so all references to his Atalanta episode are simply 13.1.

⁸²⁷ More literally, “with the plant having reached its peak maturity.”

Aelian halts the linear progression of Atalanta's life to dwell on the features of the cave. Every literary *ekphrasis* in Greek and Latin literature harkens back to Homer;⁸²⁸ in this case, Aelian explicitly mentions the passage he is in conversation with: the *ekphrasis* of Calypso's cave in *Odyssey* 5.⁸²⁹ The author's invitation to compare the two passages elicits comparison also between the two women; in both instances, these women are powerful inhabitants of caves who have a seductive appeal that is marred by a sense of danger. Atalanta's lethality and her power to inspire fear in men will be discussed in greater detail below. For now, I will respond to Aelian's invitation for comparison.

Aelian's passage, while touching upon all the senses required to describe a cave within the ekphrastic tradition, differs strongly from the Homeric passage. He is writing in Atticizing prose rather than the poetic linguistic melange of Homer. Aelian occasionally uses some unusual words (discussed more below), but not Homeric words. For the most part, his syntax and vocabulary are straightforward and uncomplicated. Aelian's descriptive *ekphrasis* is non-diegetic, arising not from the point of view of a specific character (e.g. Hermes in *Odyssey* 5) but from a self-aware external perspective engaging with his assumed readers.⁸³⁰ Additionally, while in Homer the *ekphrasis* serves the narrative purpose of establishing the surroundings that are important for the plot (the remoteness of the site, the presence of trees for Odysseus to cut down, and the fact that Calypso has a relatively comfortable, if solitary lifestyle in the cave), Aelian's is a purposefully artificial writing exercise that does not include detail that will become

⁸²⁸ On the Greek ekphrastic tradition from Homer to Moschus, see Niels Koopman, "Introduction: Ekphrasis, Narrative, and Description," in *Ancient Greek ekphrasis: between description and narration. Five linguistic and narratological case studies*, Brill, 2018: 1–40. While ekphrastic descriptions likely did not start with "Homer", Homeric poetry contains the earliest extant *ekphrases*.

⁸²⁹ This passage is examined in depth in the previous chapter. See pages 118–141.

⁸³⁰ Τί γὰρ ἡμᾶς λυπεῖ καὶ ἄντρον Ἀταλάντης ἀκοῦσαι, "What harm does it do us to hear of Atalanta's cave?" Note in particular the ἡμᾶς, "us", a 'breaking of the fourth wall' where Aelian speaks directly to his audience.

relevant in the later events of his narrative. It is therefore largely a self-indulgent cosmetic effort to display the author's erudition and education.⁸³¹

As far as the imagery in the passage, there is much to be discussed. Like almost every cave that is described at length in Greek literature, this one is big (μέγα) and very deep.⁸³² Aelian provides the curious detail that the cave is “protected by a sheer drop” (βαθεῖ κρημνῷ ὠχύρωτο).⁸³³ Like the cave of Calypso, there is abundant vegetation in the surrounding area. Aelian's mention of several types of flowers gives the scene a maidenly air, since flowers were frequently invoked as symbols of virginity, and in their ephemerality were linked with the presumably temporary nature of maidenhood.⁸³⁴ The meadow associated with Calypso's cave has only one type of flower: violets. Atalanta's and Calypso's groves do not have any plants in common except for one: the grapevine, but even for this their vocabularies differ.⁸³⁵ While Aelian lists several specific types of flowers and fragrant plants, he lumps together the trees into one word (δένδροις). This contrasts starkly with the Calypso passage, where five species of trees are named. The phallic structure of trees⁸³⁶ (and, perhaps, the anonymizing nonspecificity of Aelian's

⁸³¹ Aelian states this explicitly in this chapter, 13.1: Φέρε δὲ καὶ τὸ εἶδος αὐτῆς, εἴ τι μὴ λυπεῖ, διαγράψωμεν· λυπεῖ δὲ οὐδέν, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐκ τούτων προσγένοιτ' ἂν λόγων τε ἐμπειρία καὶ τέχνη, “Now let us describe her appearance, if that is not unwelcome—and it is not, since from it one might gain experience and skill in writing.”

⁸³² cf. *Od.* 5.57, μέγα; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 3.69.1, τῷ δὲ μεγέθει καὶ τῷ κάλλει θαυματοστόν.

⁸³³ I am honestly not quite sure what to make of this note, particularly since it seems to make the later outcome of Atalanta seeing and shooting the centaurs from her cave more difficult to fathom. Most likely, Aelian simply had a certain cave in mind and was describing it.

⁸³⁴ On this, see Eva Stehle Stigers, “Retreat from the male: Catullus 62 and Sappho's Erotic Flowers,” *Ramus* 6, no. 2 (1977): 97.

⁸³⁵ Aelian 13.1: καὶ ἄμπελοι δὲ πάνυ σφόδρα εὐθηνούντων βοτρυῶν πρὸ τοῦ ἄντρου, “and vines with very luxuriant clusters of grapes flourished in front of the cave.” cf. *Od.* 5.68–69: ἡ δ' αὐτοῦ τετάνυστο περὶ σπείους γλαφυροῖο / ἡμερὶς ἡβώσσα, τεθήλει δὲ σταφυλῆσι, “And right there about the hollow cave ran trailing a garden vine, in pride of its prime, richly laden with clusters.” These two sentences do not have any words in common, even the words for “cave” are different.

⁸³⁶ Trees and wooden pillars sacred to Dionysus have been interpreted as phalluses, Eric Csapo, “Riding the Phallus for Dionysus: Iconography, Ritual, and Gender-Role De/Construction,” *Phoenix* 51, no. ¾ (1997): 253–295. One prime example is a misshapen olive tree worshiped as a cult icon at Methymna under the title “Dionysus Phallen;” in Euripides' *Bacchae*, the scene where Pentheus climbs the fir-tree can be read as “more than a little suggestive;” Csapo 258–259; 282. In a much more on-the-nose example, Lucian uses the connection in *True Stories* 1.22 when he described the Moon People cutting out and then planting a testicle that then grows into a large phallic tree: ἐκ δὲ αὐτοῦ δένδρον ἀναφύεται μέγιστον, σάρκινον, οἶον φαλλός.

lexical choice⁸³⁷) suggests a reading in which the feminine cave is surrounded by the masculine trees in a sexually threatening manner.⁸³⁸ The abundant laurel⁸³⁹ that surrounds the area is described in apposition with hair (κόμαι),⁸⁴⁰ which has been shown to epitomize women's bodies and sexuality.⁸⁴¹ The sexual maturity of Atalanta's body is alluded to obliquely through the description of her environment. The plants around her are depicted as "full-grown" (διὰ τέλους) and "ripe" or "in their prime" (ἀκμάζοντος).

The most detailed aspect in this *ekphrasis* is the flowing water associated with the cave.⁸⁴² Its description is much longer than the eleven words allotted to Calypso's four springs.⁸⁴³

⁸³⁷ Since the names of tree species were grammatically feminine, despite often having second declension masculine-appearing suffixes, there is perhaps something suggesting masculinity, or at least non-femininity, by using the neuter δένδρον, though it is also possible that this disambiguation is not significant.

⁸³⁸ The tree-as-phallus has this sexually threatening character in Statius, *Silvae* 2.3, though the threatened female in that poem is associated with a pool of water rather than a cave. See Philip Hardie, "Statius' Ovidian Poetics and the Tree of Atedius Melior (*Silvae* 2.3)," in *Selected Papers on Ancient Literature and its Reception*, De Gruyter, 2023; and Christopher Chinn, "Statius and the Erotic Gaze," in *Visualizing the Poetry of Statius: An Intertextual Approach*, Brill, 2022.

⁸³⁹ The association of the laurel trees (δάφναι) with hair recalls the story of Daphne and Apollo; on an interpretation of Ovid's account of the myth (*Met.* 1.452–567) through a focus on Daphne's hair, see Molly Myerowitz Levine, "The Gendered Grammar of Ancient Mediterranean Hair," in *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, edited by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger, De Gruyter, 1995: 82–85.

⁸⁴⁰ Κόμαι was frequently used to describe foliage, e.g. *Od.* 23.195, Cratin. 296, et al. See LSJ "κόμη," definition II. While it is tempting within the present schema to interpret this hair as pubic hair, there is no evidence for this use in the LSJ or in proximity searches with ἡβη in the *TLG*. The preferred word for pubic hair in ancient Greek from all time periods seems to have been θριξ, with a qualifying use of ἡβη for males and αἰδοῖον for females. Nonetheless, it has been shown by several scholars that hair on a woman's head was an erogenous aspect of a woman's appearance; see Myerowitz Levine 1995; Elizabeth Bartman, "Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1 (2001): 1–25.

⁸⁴¹ On this, see, for example, Jane Burkowski, "Puellae Gently Glow: Scent, sweat, and the real in Latin love elegy and Ovid's didactic works," in *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity*, edited by Mark Bradley, Victoria Leonard, and Laurence Totelin, Routledge, 2021: "Certainly, hair (and especially women's hair) was an important locus of messages about women's sexuality and held a lot of erotic cultural 'baggage' for the Romans, but it did so less by direct association than by a process of metonymy;" and Bartman 2001, 5: "In the Roman world... hair's erotic potential made it a lightning rod for anxieties about female sexuality and public behavior... We also see a marked difference in the hairstyling deemed acceptable for preadolescent girls, such as long hair cascading loosely onto the back, compared to that for sexually mature women—equally long hair but controlled through wrapping, tying, and braiding."

⁸⁴² Curiously, Aelian does not use any of the lexical options for "spring", and does not define the type of flowing water he is describing. His focus is on the amount of water moving through the space. It is also not clear from his description where the water originates from: neither ὕδατά διατελῇ nor any of the following phrases explain the spatial layout. It could be argued that the stream emanates from the cave, due to Aelian's introduction of the passage as a description of the cave, rather than a grove with a cave within.

⁸⁴³ Excluding conjunctions, prepositions, articles, and particles, Aelian uses 23 nouns, verbs, adjectives, and participles to describe the spring, more than twice the number of total words in Homer's *ekphrasis*.

Particularly emphasized is the abundance of the liquid. The stream flows by plentifully and generously (χύδην⁸⁴⁴ καὶ ἀφθόνως ἐπέρρει). As explored in Chapter 1, female bodies were understood as cold⁸⁴⁵ and wet in antiquity, and this liquidity is especially associated with female sexuality.⁸⁴⁶ Nikos Litinas has shown that in several erotic epigrams from the *Greek Anthology*, vaginal lubrication is frequently alluded to with various bodies of water,⁸⁴⁷ including the sea,⁸⁴⁸ rivers,⁸⁴⁹ bays or harbors,⁸⁵⁰ or liquid being poured.⁸⁵¹ Within a reading of Atalanta's cave as her womb, then, the focus on watery abundance takes on connotations of sexual lubrication. Aelian notes also that these generous streams provide liveliness or vitality (ἔμβιον) to the trees in the area around the cave, which could indicate the virgin's inspiration of male arousal.

While Atalanta cannot control the arousing effect she has on men, she can control some aspects of her existence. She does this first by removing herself from civilization and therefore from regular male attention, by her mastery of typically masculine activities such as hunting, and in her imposition of ordered cultivation upon the natural landscape.⁸⁵² The image of grapes being carefully tended, combined with Atalanta's rebuke of sex and marriage, has parallels in Catullus'

⁸⁴⁴ Etymologically related to χέω "pour", suggesting fluids.

⁸⁴⁵ cf. Aelian's description of the water as ψυχρά. However, the coldness of a spring's water was usually a comment on its potability and refreshing effect.

⁸⁴⁶ See above, pages 38–40.

⁸⁴⁷ On these and other sea and ship metaphors in erotic Greek epigram, see Maria Kanellou, "Unboxing Sea and Nautical Metaphors," in *Greek Erotic Epigram: A Diachronic Approach*, Oxford University Press, 2025.

⁸⁴⁸ e.g. *AP* 11.220.1: ἀλμυρὸν ἐς πέλαγος, "salty sea". Nicarchus uses the same image, "grey sea," (πολὴν ἄλα) in *AP* 11.328 for the vagina of a woman who is "shared between three men," the other two men occupy other orifices. Nikos Litinas, "The Maculate Muse: A source of sexual arousal in fourth-century AD Alexandria (Palladas, *AP* 9.395)" *Eugesta, Journal on Gender Studies in Antiquity* 7 (2017); see pages 10–11. Additionally, in a particularly vulgar and unflattering epigram about a prostitute, her body is compared with a dilapidated ship, and "below, she is full of [*lit.* waterlogged with] bilge water," νέρθε δὲ πάνθ' ὑπέραντλα νεώς, Meleager, *AP* 5.204.7.

⁸⁴⁹ *AP* 5.60.5–6: τὸν δ' ὑπεροῖδαίνοντα ... / ... Εὐρώταν, "the swelling Eurotas." The Eurotas was well-known in antiquity for being particularly well-watered, see Euripides, *IT* 399 εὐυδρον; *Hecuba* 650 εὐροον; Theognis, *Eleg.* 1.1088 καλλιρῶι ποταμῶι; Euripides, *Tr.* 210 δῖναν γ' Εὐρώτα. For more on this, see Litinas 2017: 11.

⁸⁵⁰ e.g. Philodemus, *AP* 10.21.8, λιμένας. On this, Sider comments: "Just as κόλπος has a double meaning... so too here... note the extended meaning of λιμήν for the female's genitals, as in Empedokles 31 B 98.3 DK Κύπριδος ὁρμισθεῖσα τελείοις ἐν λιμένεσσιν and Soph. *OT* 1208." David Sider, *The Epigrams of Philodemus: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1997: 94.

⁸⁵¹ *AP* 5.55.8: Δωρίς... ἐξεχύθη.

⁸⁵² καὶ ἄμπελοι δὲ πάνυ σφόδρα εὐθενοῦντων βοτρυῶν πρὸ τοῦ ἄντρου τεθηλυταὶ τὸ φιλεργὸν τῆς Ἀταλάντης ἐπεδείκνυντο.

pseudo-wedding song (poem 62). Taking the form of a song-contest between a group of girls and a group of boys, the primary struggle is the girls' resistance to giving up their unmarried lives and transitioning to the role of wife.⁸⁵³ The girls liken marriage to rape and theft (20–23), to the sacking of cities (24), then equate the figure of the maiden with a flower in a walled-off garden, noting that this protection preserved its aesthetic allure, and its inaccessibility maintains viewers' attraction (39–47). “The garden, then, represents both the girls' own uncultivated wombs and also their retreat from society into a separate world of unacknowledged childhood dependence on 'nature.'”⁸⁵⁴ In turn, the boys refute this image, implicitly pointing out that the cultivated “garden” actually situates “nature” *within* the control of civilization; they instead use the image of an uncultivated vine that collapses under the weight of its own grapes, and thus lacks the support system offered by civilization and male intervention (49–58). Reading the Atalanta story against this Catullan referent, the fact of her resourcefulness and utter control over her situation is depicted visually in the abundant grape clusters, and Aelian calls attention to the importance of the image by making explicit the connection between the natural landscape and the Atalanta's body and character.

The final sentence of the cave section adapts a common claim in *ekphrasis* that a specific spot was “fit for a god.”⁸⁵⁵ Here, since Atalanta is not a goddess nor a nymph, but a mortal maiden, Aelian says that “the spot was full of charm, and suggested the dwelling of a dignified and chaste maiden.”⁸⁵⁶ The “charms” of the area (χαρίτων) also have sexual connotations,

⁸⁵³ See Stehle Stigers, “Retreat,” 84.

⁸⁵⁴ Stehle Stigers “Retreat,” 86–87.

⁸⁵⁵ e.g. θεοπρεπῆ and θεοπρεπῶς, used of the cave of Dionysus, Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 3.69.2 and 3; and of a cave near Hecatonpylus, 17.75.2. This term is derived from a phrasal idea, “to befit the gods,” θεῶν πρόπει, which appears in later archaic and classical literature. The single-word form dates back to Pindar (*Nemean Odes* 10.2) but seems not to have been in common usage until the 1st century CE. Diodorus is the first to use it multiple times in one work. It was swiftly adopted by early Christian writers, on which, see Felix Maurice Granderath, “The Influence of the Greek Principle of God-Fittingness on 2nd-Century Christianity,” PhD Dissertation, Durham University, 2024.

⁸⁵⁶ ἦν οὖν τὸ χωρίον χαρίτων ἀνάμεστον, καὶ σεμνότατόν τε ἄμα καὶ σώφρονα παρθενεῶνα ἐδείκνυεν.

however. As Henderson has shown in *The Maculate Muse*, χάρις can refer to beauty and erotic allure, sexual pleasure, and the reproductive organs of both sexes.⁸⁵⁷ Taken at face-value, this sentence equates the cave and its surroundings with maidenhood, designating it as her “virgins’ room” (παρθενεῶνα). If understood with the ulterior definition of χάρις, we can understand here the coupling of virginity with heightened eroticism, and both with the cave.

The heightened erotic appeal of sexually mature but chaste young women is associated with the wilderness, both in this passage and more broadly in Greek and Latin literature. Virgins are frequently depicted as horses to be broken, fields to be tilled, or flowers to be harvested by means of marriage.⁸⁵⁸ There is also, of course, the motif of the maiden in a rural meadow plucking flowers at the time of her kidnap and subsequent rape.⁸⁵⁹ In his *ekphrasis* of Atalanta’s body and beauty, Aelian further emphasizes this equation between the environment and Atalanta’s virginal but alluring body in a rhetorical question, “What flower could be so beautiful as the face of a young woman taught to be modest?”⁸⁶⁰ Indeed, the connection between a character and her described environment was a point of rhetorical discussion in antiquity, particularly within the Second Sophistic tradition in which Aelian wrote. Dio Chrysostom notes the rhetorical power of this correlation, using the apt example of Calypso’s cave:

Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses 2, On Kingship* 2.41.

σχεδὸν γὰρ οὖν ἔοικεν οὐδὲ τῶν ἄλλων οὐδὲν μάτην ὁ ποιητὴς οὕτως λέγειν ἀλλὰ	Indeed it is fairly clear that [Homer] never elsewhere speaks without a purpose, but repeatedly
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⁸⁵⁷ Henderson, *Maculate*, 160, entry 250 on χάρις.

⁸⁵⁸ e.g. Sophocles, *Antigone* 569, Creon refers to “other fields to be plowed”, ἀρώσιμοι γὰρ χἀτέρων εἰσὶν γύαι, as in “there are other fish in the sea” for his son to marry. The following refer to maidens or brides as young horses to be “broken” and tamed: e.g. Anacreon, fr. 417, Euripides, *Hippolytus* 545ff, Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 1307; Aelian *On Animals* 12.10 (quoting Epicrates); Lucilius, *Satires* 30.1041–1042, cf. in Latin, Horace, *Odes* 3.11.9–12; Catullus, 62.39–47 for an extended description of a maiden as a flower and her “plucking” as loss of virginity.

⁸⁵⁹ For an in-depth look at this motif, see Susan Deacy, “From ‘Flowery Tales’ to ‘Heroic Rapes’: Virginal Subjectivity in the Mythological Meadow.” *Arethusa* 46, no. 3 (2013): 395–413.

⁸⁶⁰ τί δὲ οὕτως ὥραϊον ἂν γένοιτο ἄνθος, ὥσπερ οὖν καλὸν ἦν τὸ πρόσωπον αἰδεῖσθαι πεπαιδευμένης παρθένου;

καὶ στολὴν καὶ οἴκησιν καὶ δίαίταν πρὸς
τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἥθος πολλάκις
ἀπεικάζει.

διὰ τοῦτο τὰ μὲν ἐν Φαίᾳσι βασιλεία
ἐκόσμησεν ἄλσεσιν τε καὶ ὀπώρας δι'
ἔτους καὶ κρήναις ἀνάοις, ἔτι δὲ μᾶλλον
τὸ τῆς Καλυψοῦς, ἅτε ὠραίας καὶ
φιλανθρώπου θεᾶς ἐν νήσῳ καθ' αὐτὴν
ἀπωκισμένης·

...

πάντα γὰρ ταῦτα ὑπερφυῶς ἐρωτικά καὶ
ἡδέα, κατὰ τὸν τρόπον οἶμαι τῆς θεᾶς.

depicts the dress, dwelling, and manner of life of
people so as to accord with their character.

This is why he beautified the palace of the
Phaeacians with groves, perennial fruits, and
ever-flowing springs; and again, with even greater
skill, the grotto of Calypso, since she was a
beautiful and kindly goddess living off by herself
on an island...

[Dio Chrysostom summarizes the contents of Od.
5.55–75]

Now all these touches are marvellously suggestive
of love and pleasure, and to my thinking reveal the
character of the goddess.

Thus, the *ekphrasis* of the cave not only serves Aelian's purpose of showing off his descriptive
skills, but also equates both the character and the physical body of the virginal Atalanta with the
natural landscape she inhabits. This, in turn, bolsters the imagery of sexual violence that will
come with Aelian's third *ekphrasis*, the centaurs' attempted rape of Atalanta.

The cave that Atalanta inhabits is fundamental to the climax of the story described in this
third *ekphrasis*. Two centaurs approach her grotto one night intending to sexually impose
themselves upon Atalanta. The threat of rape spurs her into action, using her unrivaled skill at the
bow to shoot down both centaurs from the mouth of her cave:

Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, 13.1

συνεκκαίοντες καὶ τὰ δένδρα ἐπὶ τὴν παῖδα
ἔσπευδον, κακοὶ μνηστῆρες, σὺν ὕβρει καὶ

[the centaurs] burned trees and made
towards the young woman,⁸⁶¹ evil suitors

⁸⁶¹ More literally, "toward the child." The use of *παῖς* here is interesting; Atalanta is referred to as *παῖς* only one
other time in this chapter, and it is when she was a literal child: μέγεθος μὲν γὰρ ἔτι παῖς οὕσα ὑπὲρ τὰς τελείας ἦν
γυναικας. "For while still a child her size was above that of full-grown women." Its use here may stress the
perversity of the centaurs' attempted rape, though in theory *παρθένος* would also suffice. Perhaps Aelian wished to
vary the vocabulary he used to refer to Atalanta, since he had just referred to her as *παρθένος* in the previous
sentence ("the first sight of fire would have terrified even the population of a city, let alone a solitary young
woman," μήτι γοῦν μίαν παρθένον).

οἷστρω τὰ ἔδνα τῶν γάμων προεκτελοῦντες.
 τὴν δὲ οὐκ ἔλαθεν ἡ ἐπιβουλὴ· ἰδοῦσα δὲ ἐκ
 τοῦ ἄντρου τὸ πῦρ καὶ γνωρίσασα οἷτινές ποτε
 ἄρα ἦσαν οἱ κωμασταί, μηδὲν διατραπεῖσα
μηδὲ ὑπὸ τῆς ὄψεως καταπτήξασα τὸ μὲν τόξον
 ἐκύκλωσεν, ἀφῆκε δὲ τὸ βέλος καὶ ἔτυχε τοῦ
 πρώτου μάλα εὐκαίρως. καὶ ὁ μὲν ἔκειτο, ἐπῆει
 δὲ ὁ δεῦτερος οὐκέτι κωμαστικῶς ἀλλ’ ἦδη
 πολεμικῶς, ἐκείνῳ μὲν ἐπαμῦναι θέλων ἑαυτοῦ
 δὲ ἐμπλῆσαι τὴν ὀργήν. ἀπήντησε δὲ ἄρα καὶ
 τοῦτ’ αὖ τιμωρὸς ὁ τῆς κόρης οἷστος ὁ ἕτερος.

who in a violent and over-excited state
 brought gifts for the wedding in advance.
 But she saw through their plan. From the
cave she caught sight of fire and realised
 who the revellers were; not flinching or
cowed by what she saw she bent her bow,
 shot her weapon, and hit the first of them
 directly. He lay there, and the other
 advanced, no longer in the mood of a
 reveller but with hostile intent, wishing to
 defend his companion and vent his anger.
 But he too was punished, by the young
 woman’s other arrow.

The centaurs appear in Atalanta’s field of vision by burning the trees around her cave (ἰδοῦσα... τὸ πῦρ). The participle used here for burning the trees is a rather odd choice: συνεκκαίοντες. This verb is only used by four authors in antiquity, and was apparently a favorite of Plutarch, who used it five times.⁸⁶² Plutarch uses it in two contexts: with the ignition of the air by certain materials and for the rousing of spirits and inciting (often martial) action, and this latter meaning is also used once by Polybius.⁸⁶³ Outside of Aelian, it is never used for literally igniting or burning a physical object. It is perhaps possible to read into his use here an equation of the burning up of Atalanta’s environment with spurring her into violent action. Symbolically, the burning of the trees acts as a display of destructive control over nature and as a signal for the centaurs’ intention of invasion and brutality against Atalanta’s body.

The loss of one’s virginity, even within the bounds of a “legitimate” marriage, is often characterized by young women in literature as violence. We have seen this already in Latin in the case of Catullus 62. Similarly, in an episode in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, the maiden Rhodopis

⁸⁶² The two authors with the next highest number of uses are Theophrastus, *On Fire*, fr. 27.3 and 37.9; and Galen with two uses, who uses it in the context of fevers, *On the Method of Medicine*, 9.2, section 605K; *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 11.605.

⁸⁶³ For rousing spirits and inciting action: Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 19.5.4; *Caesar*, 44.8.5; Polybius, *Histories*, 3.14.3.

depicts all sexual activity, not only rape, as a violent act.⁸⁶⁴ Aelian here does not euphemize the centaurs' intentions: they are “evil suitors,” *κακοὶ μνηστῆρες*, naming outright their sexual intentions, and they are acting with violence, *σὺν ὕβρει*. The twisted sexual-nuptial language introduced by *μνηστῆρες* is perpetuated with the characterization of their sexual imposition as *τὰ ἔδνα*, which typically refers gifts that the groom gives to his bride.⁸⁶⁵ The heinous recharacterization of rape here as a wedding gift from the “grooms” to the “bride” Atalanta—also suggesting the “giving” and “receiving” of penetrative sex—underscores the association of sexuality with violence and the connection between virgins and the “savagery” of the natural world or the rejection of civilization.⁸⁶⁶

Atalanta handles the threat with apparent ease, sinking an arrow into each centaur. She seemingly does not even emerge from her cave to shoot.⁸⁶⁷ Penetrating them with her arrows, in itself a phallic image,⁸⁶⁸ she fends off centaurs from entering her cave, and thus, from violating her ecologized body.

⁸⁶⁴ Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 8.12.2: ἀλλὰ καὶ ὥμοσεν... τὴν πρὸς ἄνδρας ὁμιλίαν φυγεῖν, καὶ τὴν ἐξ Ἀφροδίτης ὕβριν μὴ παθεῖν, “But [Rhodopis] swore to flee intercourse with men and to never suffer the violence of Aphrodite,” translation here is my own. Other examples of the “violence” of sexuality include: Eubulus, fr. 67, quoted by Athenaeus, 13.569a; on male homosexual intercourse, Plutarch, *Moralia, Dialogue on Love* 23; the chorus in Aeschylus, *Suppliants* 798–799 sings of the “killer, marriage”: πρὶν δαΐκτορος βία / καρδίας γάμου κυρῆσαι.

⁸⁶⁵ e.g. Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women* 45; Moschus, fr. 3.3; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 20. *On Retirement*, section 20; Arabius Scholasticus, *AP* 16.144.1 (on Atalanta and Hippomenes). The same term is sometimes used for wedding gifts in general, and Homer uses it to refer to the bride-price paid by the groom.

⁸⁶⁶ Achilles Tatius characterizes Tereus' rape and silencing of Philomela in a similar way: τὴν γλῶτταν τῆς Φιλομήλας φοβεῖται, καὶ ἔδνα τῶν γάμων αὐτῇ δίδωσι μηκέτι λαλεῖν, καὶ κείρει τῆς φωνῆς τὸ ἄνθος “then, fearing Philomela's tongue, his bridegroom's present to her was that she should be dumb, and he shore away the glory of her speech,” *Leucippe and Clitophon* 5.5.4. This scene contains an *ekphrasis* depicting the episode of Procne and Philomela, as well as dialogue narrating the tale to Leucippe, 5.3.4–5.5.9.

⁸⁶⁷ As I mentioned above in my examination of the cave *ekphrasis*, the precipitous drop immediately inside the cave makes the staging of this scene somewhat questionable.

⁸⁶⁸ See Eve Sweetser, “Metaphor, Mythology, and Everyday Language,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 24 (1995): 590–91; Cristóbal Pagán Cánovas, “The genesis of the arrows of love: Diachronic conceptual integration in Greek mythology,” *American Journal of Philology* 132, no. 4 (2011): 553–579. Sweetser argues for the phallic nature of penetrative arrows, particularly those of Eros; Cánovas disagrees, arguing that the arrows represent an emotional, rather than sexual, impact.

Interestingly, Aelian chooses to end his tale of Atalanta here (καὶ ὑπὲρ τῆς Ἰασίωνος Ἀταλάντης τοσαῦτα). Atalanta's origin story is not attested in our extant sources until the early imperial period. Aelian's Second Sophistic account is our earliest narrative of her childhood and upbringing before the exploits she is more famous for. In fact, this is, to my knowledge, the only account of Atalanta which does not mention any of the following: her footrace betrothal, the Calydonian boar hunt, or her son Parthenopaeus. Crucially, with Aelian cutting off her biography here, Atalanta *seems* to retain her virginity, even if the reader knows this to be inaccurate: there is no hint of her marriage (and loss of virginity), nor of her maternity. Instead, by omission, Atalanta's virginal status endures.

Aelian's telling is the longest examination of this portion of Atalanta's life; elsewhere, brief references are made as background information for these later escapades. In some ways, Aelian's omission makes sense: he tends to focus his chapters on lesser-known facts and anecdotes that are meant for the novel entertainment of his readers. Since the above episodes in the myth of Atalanta were both well-known and widely-referenced,⁸⁶⁹ Aelian seems to have picked up on her less commonly-told origin story. Considering the fact that Atalanta's chapter is the already second-longest chapter in *Historical Miscellany*,⁸⁷⁰ falling short of first by a small margin, it makes sense that Aelian would choose to forego the several subsequent stories about

⁸⁶⁹ A few of the Greek examples will suffice, though there are many more: on her nuptial footrace, Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women* 1 (26)–23 (48); Theocritus, *Idylls* 3.40–42; on the Calydonian boar hunt, Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 1105–1109; Philostratus, *Imagines* 15.2; Callimachus, *Hymn to Artemis* 215–224, Apollodorus, *Library* 1.8.2; on her maternity, Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1320–1322; Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 150; on all of these episodes, Apollodorus, *Library* 3.9.2. Note in particular how short these passages are.

⁸⁷⁰ The longest chapter in *Historical Miscellany* is the story of another (initially) virginal figure, Aspasia of Phocia, *HM* 12.1. Like that of Atalanta in the same initial position in the following book, the narrative of Aspasia is composed of three main sections, though they are episodic rather than ekphrastic. Aspasia's primary virtue is her modesty, demonstrated by her lack of ostentation and her temperate comportment. Steven Smith sums up the overall characterization of Aspasia and the almost moralizing message of the chapter: "It may be said that Aelian's Aspasia projects the male fantasy of a woman who finally learns and accepts her status as a sexual object. But Aspasia's subtly shifting morality also reveals a subjectivity that has the potential of destabilizing masculine ethics," Steven D. Smith, "After animals: the women of the *Varia Historia*," in *Man and Animal in Severan Rome: The Literary Imagination of Claudius Aelianus*, Cambridge University Press, 2014: 267.

her. Furthermore, Aelian has structured this chapter in three main sections, each of which contains an *ekphrasis*: the “descriptive” *ekphrases* of the cave and Atalanta’s beauty, and the “narrative” *ekphrasis* of the centaurs’ near-attack on Atalanta and her cave.⁸⁷¹

This account of the prehistory of Atalanta thus uses the cave as a proxy for female anatomy, first as the seat of Atalanta’s maidenly existence and then as the site from which she wards off would-be rapists. Her rejection of male attention drove her to remove herself physically from their gaze and retreat to her unexamined life on Mount “Virginity”. Thus, in the cave, the virginal huntress finds refuge from the imposition of male sexuality present in more “civilized” society. We therefore find here, again, an implication of masculinity with civilization and femininity—particularly virginal, “wild”, “untamed” femininity—with nature, though the actions of those involved reflect the opposite attributions.

Leucippe & Clitophon and the Evaluation of Virginity

Before delving into the next text, it is necessary to define some terms. In this chapter, I will use the term “ordeal” to refer to actions taken to confirm or deny one’s virginity or chastity on religious or metaphysical grounds that include an element of danger in the event of a negative result. There are several forms of such ordeals, as we will see, but cross-culturally, these may involve entering dangerous terrain, facing the threats of beasts, fire, or flooding, ingestion of potions, or the interpretation of divine portents. On the other hand, virginity “tests” in this chapter do not involve elements of danger, but rely on observation, particularly on the physical

⁸⁷¹ On the definitions of “descriptive” and “narrative” *ekphrases*, see Koopman’s “Introduction” in *Ancient Greek ekphrasis*, cited above in note 828.

examination of a woman's genitals.⁸⁷² I will use the term "evaluation" to refer broadly together to these distinct methodologies.

The ancient Mediterranean was obviously a large, diverse, and dynamic region in which information, technology, and other ideas (such as religion) changed, spread, and intermingled constantly. While we do not have literary attestation for virginity evaluations from most of these cultures and religions, we do see them in Jewish, Greek, and Roman traditions. Virginity was a primary concern in Hebrew traditions from at least the time of the compositions of the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, which have been dated back to at least the 6th century BCE.⁸⁷³ These early authors recorded several methods of evaluating female virginity, including ordeals, testing, and the "proof" of bloody sheets after initial nuptial coitus. As will be discussed in the lived religion portion of this chapter, virginity tests appear in the Italic/Roman world from at least the first century BCE. As Michael Rosenberg has shown, virginity ordeals are portrayed in *Leucippe and Clitophon* as something new, or at least not part of Greek culture in the second century CE.⁸⁷⁴ And indeed, that novel is the first extant reference we have to evaluations of virginity in Greek literature outside the Septuagint. From the current state of research, it is unclear to what degree these different cultures developed their methods individually or through exposure to these or other traditions. It is possible, given the chronology, that the evaluation of female virginity in the Jewish tradition introduced the notions of "empirical" evaluation for the

⁸⁷² I do not include among these virginity tests the notion that a woman's sexual history could be determined by, for example, the size of her neck, on which, see Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, eds. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, Princeton University Press, 1990, 328–329.

⁸⁷³ This dating is based on, among other factors, the discovery of a silver protective amulet bearing references to verses found in Numbers and Deuteronomy. The paleographic and archaeological context of the amulet was dated to the 6th century, thus providing a *terminus ante quem* for the dissemination of these Books. Gabriel Barkay, Marilyn J. Lundberg, Andrew G. Vaughn, and Bruce Zuckerman, "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 334 (2004): 41–71.

⁸⁷⁴ Rosenberg, "Virginity and Violence," 23, discussing *Leucippe and Clitophon* 2.28. Here, Leucippe says, "What more can I tell you? What more valid proof can I bring that I am speaking the truth? If there be any test [δοκιμασία] of virginity, apply it to me."

Greeks and Romans, though this seems unlikely to me due to the vast differences between their respective methodologies, which will be discussed in greater depth below. The absence of virginity evaluations in the Greek literary tradition before the 2nd century CE might indicate an increased concern for virginity inspired by the Jesus Movement and early Christianity, though it is also possible that these evaluations sprung from Roman hegemony, which seems to have more in common methodologically with these second century ordeals and, indeed, with the early Christian martyr ordeals imposed by the Roman state.

The first identifiable virginity ordeal in Greek literature is found in the 2nd century romance novel *Leucippe and Clitophon*.⁸⁷⁵ While the plot of the novel is much too long and complicated to describe in detail here, the gist of the story is that the titular young couple have been separated due to various circumstances and go through various adventures while trying to reunite. Virginity is a central focus of the novel. The trials and tribulations that Leucippe suffers over the course of the narrative include a handful of “deaths” or near-deaths and several threats to her virginity. Meanwhile, Clitophon has an affair with Melite, the wife of a man named Thersander. Once the pair are reunited, Clitophon attempts to obtain permission to marry Leucippe from her father and tells him about the adventures the two of them had experienced,

⁸⁷⁵ In addition to Leucippe’s virginity ordeal, the climax of the novel also features a chastity ordeal for Melite, the wife of Thersander (Ach. Tat., *Leuc. and Clit.* 10.12). Thersander accuses Clitophon of adultery, claiming that C. slept with Melite while Th. was out of town and presumed dead. In fact, however, they slept together after Thersander got back to town. To prove the guilt of Clitophon, Thersander subjects his wife to a test of her chastity. This ordeal, too, is given an etiology, this one the tale of Rhodopis and Euthynicus, who are both young people who have devoted themselves to Artemis and promised to remain virgins. Aphrodite is insulted and has Eros shoot them both with arrows. They meet, fall in love, and have sex inside a cave. When Artemis finds out, she turns Rhodopis into a spring inside the cave. Thenceforth, a woman accused of adultery will be tested by writing her claim of innocence on a tablet and standing in the spring. If the water rises and covers the tablet, she is guilty of adultery. I have decided to omit an in-depth discussion of this ordeal and its aition from this chapter. It does, however, show a strong connection between caves and sexual continence, both chastity/celebrity and as a punishment for the loss of virginity. The passage stresses in particular the violence inherent in sexuality, at least from a female perspective. The aition of Rhodopis, unlike that of Syrinx discussed above, does not have a parallel in Ovid or, it seems, elsewhere in extant literature, though it follows a common structure and conveys familiar concerns. For a good comparison of these two virginity and chastity ordeals, see: Theodore MacDonald, “Narrative, Genre, and Interpretation in Achilles Tatius,” Doctoral Dissertation, Washington University in St. Louis, 2023: especially 184; and R. M. Rattenbury, “Chastity and Chastity Ordeals in Ancient Greek Romances,” *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society* 1 (1925): 59–70.

both as a couple and as individuals.⁸⁷⁶ Clitophon's main thesis in this speech is twofold: that

Leucippe is still a virgin and that she admirably endured intense hardships in order to remain so:

Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 8.5.5–6; 8

ἐξῆλλον καὶ τὰ αὐτῆς ἔτι μᾶλλον ἢ τὰμά,
ἐρωτικῶς αὐτῇ χαριούμενος ἀκούοντος τοῦ
πατρός· ὥς πᾶσαν αἰκίαν ἤνεγκεν εἰς τὸ
σῶμα καὶ ὕβριν, πλὴν μιᾶς· ὑπὲρ δὲ ταύτης
τὰς ἄλλας πάσας ὑπέστη· “Καὶ ἔμεινε, πάτερ,
τοιαύτη μέχρι τῆς παρούσης ἡμέρας, οἷαν
αὐτὴν δέξεμεν, ἀπὸ Βυζαντίου. καὶ οὐκ
ἐμὸν τοῦτο ἐγκώμιον, ὅτι φυγὴν ἐλόμενος
οὐδὲν ἔδρασα ὑπὲρ ὧν ἔφυγον, ἀλλ’ αὐτῆς...
εἴ τις ἄρα ἐστὶν ἀνδρὸς παρθενία, ταύτην
κἀγὼ μέχρι τοῦ παρόντος πρὸς Λευκίππην
ἔχω· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἦρα ἐκ πολλοῦ τοῦ τῆς
Ἀρτέμιδος ἱεροῦ.

I made much more of her adventures than I had of
my own, wishing, as a lover should, to give
[Leucippe] the greatest possible credit while her
father was listening; how she suffered bodily all
manner of insult and violence, save one, and
because of this one alone withstood all the others:
“And in that respect, father,” I added, “she is still
the same, up to the present day, as when you sent
her away from Byzantium. Nor is it to be put down
at all to my credit that after accomplishing this
flight I abstained from the very object for which we
had fled: but to hers... If there be any such thing as
virginity among us men, then that I have preserved
with respect to Leucippe up to the present moment,
while, as for her, she has long been anxiously
hoping for this temple of Artemis.

Notable here is Clitophon's explicit crediting to Leucippe the maintenance of her own virginity.

In this tale, Leucippe is without a male protector or *kyrios* for the majority of her tale and still safeguards her chastity, and she does so through suffering and inflicting violence upon threatening men.

In the climax of the novel, both lovers are in Ephesus and have been reunited, only to face a final struggle that threatens not only their romance, but also their lives. Clitophon, on the one hand, is accused by Thersander of murder and adultery (though the latter charge's judgement and punishment would be inflicted upon Melite, not Clitophon). Thersander therefore calls for Clitophon's execution. He also accuses Leucippe of having profaned the temple of Artemis, since the temple is open only to men, virgins, and enslaved women. Because of the hardships Leucippe has endured up to this point, including being captured by pirates and being (falsely)

⁸⁷⁶ Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 8.5.1–9.

enslaved (her final enslaver being Thersander himself), Thersander believes it impossible for her to still be a virgin. Therefore, he argues, she must be a slave, and should rightfully be under his ownership.⁸⁷⁷

Sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesus

This entire sequence of accusations, ordeals, and judgements takes place at the Sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesus. In order to properly understand Achilles Tatius' portrayal of the virginity ordeal, it is first necessary to examine the physical space of the sanctuary and its cave, as well as the web of associations allotted to it. The sacred precinct is described in a few different passages.⁸⁷⁸

Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 7.13.2 and 3:

καί, ἣν γὰρ τῶν ἀγρῶν πλησίον τὸ τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος ιερόν... τὸ δὲ παλαιὸν ἄβατος ἦν γυναιξὶν ἐλευθέραις οὗτος ὁ νεῶς, ἀνδράσι δὲ ἐπετέτραπτο καὶ παρθένοις. εἰ δέ τις εἴσω παρῆλθε γυνή, θάνατος ἦν ἡ δίκη, πλὴν εἰ μὴ δούλη τις ἦν ἐγκαλοῦσα τῷ δεσπότῃ. ταύτῃ δὲ ἐξῆν ἱκετεύειν τὴν θεόν.

Now quite near to the country house was the temple of Artemis... the shrine was anciently forbidden to free matrons, but open to men and maidens: if any other woman entered it, death was the penalty of her intrusion, unless she were a slave with a legal complaint against her master: such a one was permitted to come as a suppliant to the goddess.

8.6.1:

Ὅρᾳς τουτὶ τὸ ἄλσος τὸ κατόπιν τοῦ νεῶ. ἐνθάδε ἐστὶ σπήλαιον ἀπόρρητον γυναιξί, καθαραῖς δὲ εἰσελθούσαις οὐκ ἀπόρρητον

You see this grove here behind the shrine. Within it is a grotto that may not be entered by any women except clean maids, and a little

⁸⁷⁷ These accusations are made at 8.1.

⁸⁷⁸ The setting of this portion of the novel at Ephesus seems to indicate that this sanctuary is indeed “the” temple of Artemis Ephesia. However, the grove associated with Artemis near Ephesus was not near her temple on the outskirts of Ephesia, but was further away near modern Kirazlı. C. Foss, G. Reger, Tom Elliott, Sean Gillies, Brady Kiesling, and R. Talbert, “Ortygia,” *Pleiades: A Gazetteer of Past Places*, 2018; Joel Michael Kent, Brady Kiesling, R. Scott Smith, Jeffrey Becker, Greta Hawes, and Adam Rabinowitz, “Temple of Artemis at Ephesus,” *Pleiades*, 2025. Furthermore, to my knowledge, there is not a cave in the vicinity of the grove, nor is one mentioned by the ancient geographers’ accounts of the grove. The mention of the asylum rules in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, however, suggest that this is indeed “the” temple of Artemis at Ephesus, since the asylum rules of the site were much-discussed in antiquity, e.g. Strabo, quoting Artemidorus of Ephesus, 14.1.24.

παρθένοις· ἀνάκειται δὲ σύριγξ ὀλίγον ἔνδον [[behind its doors]]⁸⁷⁹ there hangs up a
τῶν τοῦ σπηλαίου θυρῶν. pan-pipes.

The structure of the area is as follows: the sacred area/sanctuary (ἱερὸν) contains a temple (νεώς/ναός) of Artemis, access to which is restricted to men, virgins, and enslaved people seeking legal asylum from their enslavers. This detail of the Ephesus sanctuary as a place of refuge is attested elsewhere in ancient literature.⁸⁸⁰ There is, therefore, a precedent for legal or pseudo-legal judgements at the site, though to my knowledge there is no other evidence for virginity ordeals. The restrictions on entry are reflected in the shrine's personnel: the attendants of the temple are male,⁸⁸¹ possibly eunuchs.⁸⁸² There is also at least one male priest (τὸν ἱερέα) and an unknown number of virgin priestesses.⁸⁸³ Behind the temple is a grove (ἄλσος), which is accessible to anyone. Access to the cave (σπήλαιον) within the grove is restricted to "clean maidens" only, and therefore is the most restricted area of the entire sanctuary.

We have already seen caves restricted to priestesses of a goddess,⁸⁸⁴ as well as caves that are forbidden for anyone, man or god, to enter.⁸⁸⁵ We have also seen caves or certain chambers of

⁸⁷⁹ I have amended S. Gaselee's Loeb translation, 1969. Gaselee translates that the pan-pipes are contained "within the walls" of the cave, while the Greek says they are contained behind the cave's "doors" (ἔνδον τῶν τοῦ σπηλαίου θυρῶν). While Gaselee's translation makes more sense in standard English and retains the sense of the adverbial ἔνδον, the cave's architectural modification to include doors is explicit and relevant.

⁸⁸⁰ cf. Artemidorus of Ephesus, quoted by Strabo: 14.1.24: νυνὶ δὲ τὰ μὲν φυλάττεται τῶν νομίμων, τὰ δ' ἦττον, ἄσυλον δὲ μένει τὸ ἱερὸν καὶ νῦν καὶ πρότερον, "but the temple remains a place of refuge, the same as in earlier times, although the limits of the refuge have often been changed." On asylum in *Leucippe and Clitophon* and at the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, see Dora Yuanxing Gao, "Virginity As Metaphor: Reconciling Tradition And Imperium In Achilles Tatius," Master's Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2020.

⁸⁸¹ τις τῶν τοῦ νεῶ προπόλων... θέων; the participle θέων designates the gender of the otherwise gender-flexible vocabulary. These attendants seem to specifically serve the temple, νεώς, rather than the sanctuary as a whole).

⁸⁸² Artemidorus of Ephesus, quoted by Strabo, says, ἱερέας δ' εὐνούχους εἶχον, οὓς ἐκάλουν Μεγαβύζους, καὶ ἀλλαχόθεν μετιόντες αἰεὶ τινὰς ἀξίους τῆς τοιαύτης προστασίας, καὶ ἦγον ἐν τιμῇ μεγάλη, "They had eunuchs as priests, whom they called Megabyzi. And they were always in quest of persons from other places who were worthy of this preferment, and they held them in great honour."

⁸⁸³ Artemidorus, in Strabo, 14.1.23: συνιεῖσθαι δὲ τούτοις ἐχρῆν παρθένοισι, "and it was obligatory for maidens to serve as colleagues with [the eunuchs] in their priestly office."

⁸⁸⁴ e.g. Paus. 8.36.3. ἔστι δὲ πρὸς τῇ κορυφῇ τοῦ ὄρους σπήλαιον τῆς Ῥέας, καὶ ἐς αὐτὸ ὅτι μὴ γυναιξὶ μόναις ἱεραῖς τῆς θεοῦ ἀνθρώπων γε οὐδενὶ ἐσελθεῖν ἔστι τῶν ἄλλων. "On the summit of the mountain is Rhea's Cave, into which no human beings may enter save only the women who are sacred to the goddess."

⁸⁸⁵ e.g. Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* 19.1–2: Ἐν Κρήτῃ λέγεται εἶναι ἱερὸν ἄντρον μελισσῶν, ἐν ᾧ μυθολογοῦσι τεκεῖν Ῥέαν τὸν Δία καὶ ἔστιν ὅσιον οὐδένα παρελθεῖν οὔτε θεὸν οὔτε θνητόν. "On Crete it is said that

caves that are referred to as *adyta*, “not to be entered.”⁸⁸⁶ Furthermore, certain caves in both the archaeological record and in literary sources have been described as restricting access in various ways, whether preventing anyone from looking into the cave, as is the case with the Nymphaeum at Cyrene, or through the addition of doors at the mouth of the cave. We therefore see in this novel the demarcation of a restricted sacred cave. Within the cave-as-womb allegory, this restriction therefore prevents the metaphorical defloration of the sanctified cave.

The virginity ordeal involving this cave is described to our protagonists by the priest:

Ach. Tat. *Leucippe and Clitophon* 8.6.12–14

ὅταν οὖν αἰτίαν ἔχη τις οὐκ εἶναι παρθένος, προπέμπει μὲν αὐτήν ὁ δῆμος μέχρι τῶν τοῦ σπηλαίου θυρῶν, δικάζει δὲ ἡ σύριγξ τὴν δίκην. ἡ μὲν γὰρ παῖς εἰσέρχεται κεκοσμημένη στολῇ τῇ νενομισμένῃ, ἄλλος δὲ ἐπικλείει τὰς τοῦ σπηλαίου θύρας. κὰν μὲν ἦ παρθένος, λιγυρόν τι μέλος ἀκούεται καὶ ἔνθεον, ἥτοι τοῦ τόπου πνεῦμα ἔχοντος μουσικὸν εἰς τὴν σύριγγα τεταμιεύμενον, ἡ τάχα καὶ ὁ Πᾶν αὐτὸς αὐλεῖ. μετὰ δὲ μικρὸν αὐτόματα μὲν αἱ θύραι ἀνεώχθησαν τοῦ σπηλαίου, ἐκφαίνεται δὲ ἡ παρθένος ἐστεφανωμένη τὴν κεφαλὴν πίτυος κόμαις. ἐὰν δὲ ἦ τὴν παρθεनीαν ἐψευσμένη, σιωπᾷ μὲν ἡ σύριγξ, οἰμωγὴ δὲ τις ἀντὶ μουσικῆς ἐκ τοῦ σπηλαίου πέμπεται, καὶ εὐθὺς ὁ δῆμος ἀπαλλάττεται καὶ ἀφίησιν ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ τὴν γυναῖκα. τρίτῃ δὲ ἡμέρᾳ παρθένος ἰέρεια τοῦ τόπου παρελθοῦσα τὴν μὲν σύριγγα εὕρισκει χαμαί, τὴν δὲ γυναῖκα οὐδαμοῦ.

If therefore any girl is accused of being of doubtful virginity, she is sent by public decree to the door of the grotto, and the panpipes decides the ordeal for her; she goes in, clad in the proper dress, and the doors are closed behind her. If she is in reality a virgin, a clear and divine note is heard, either because there is some breeze in the place which enters the pipes and makes a musical sound, or possibly because it is Pan himself that is piping: and after a short time the doors of the grotto open of their own accord, and out comes the virgin with a wreath of the foliage of the pine upon her head. But if she has lied about her virginity, the pan-pipes is silent, and a groan comes forth from the cave instead of a musical sound; the people go away and leave the woman inside. On the third day after, the virgin priestess of the spot comes and finds the pan-pipes lying on the ground, but there is no trace of the woman.

Several details from this scene warrant consideration. The maiden, “clad in proper dress,”⁸⁸⁷ is

allowed into the cave through the threshold, and the doors are closed behind her, confining and

there is a sacred cave of bees in which they say Rhea bore Zeus and it is so holy that no one enters it, neither god nor mortal.”

⁸⁸⁶ e.g. Salmacis Inscription, line 7–9: οἱ πρῶτοι κοίλην ὑπὸ δειράδα θέντο νεογνὸν / παῖδα Ῥέης κρύψιον Ζῆν ἀπιταλλόμενοι / Γαίης ἀμφ ἀδύτοισιν “It was they who first under a hollowed crest placed Zeus, newborn, the son of Rhea, so that he was hidden, and who fostered him in the innermost recesses of Earth.”

⁸⁸⁷ The clothing that the test subject is required to wear will be discussed below.

concealing her for the test. The emphasis on the opening and closing of doors, the accessibility or inaccessibility of the cave brings to mind ancient notions of female anatomy. Throughout several Hippocratic and post-Hippocratic medical texts, the uterus was believed to be open to or shut off from the vagina, depending on varying states of health or illness.⁸⁸⁸ Lillis has shown that in biblical and early Christian writings, gates and doors were used to illustrate the nature of virginity, in which the closure of these thresholds is analogous to the closed nature of the womb in virgins.⁸⁸⁹ The doors in this passage act as a barrier both for bystanders penetrating the inner workings of the cave, preventing them from entering or even gazing inside, which itself was a penetrative act in ancient conceptions of sight.⁸⁹⁰ The doors also, of course, entrap the ordeal subject in case she is determined not to be a virgin.

Earlier in the novel Achilles Tatius uses a similar image of opened and closed doors in describing the respective visions or dreams of the two protagonists.⁸⁹¹ After Leucippe rejects Clitophon's premarital sexual advances, she tells him about a vision she had in which Artemis asks her to maintain her virginity until she has married Clitophon. Clitophon then tells Leucippe about a dream in which he approaches a temple (νέος) of Aphrodite (and thus, sexuality) when

⁸⁸⁸ e.g. Celsus, *Medicine* 7.29; Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.14.43; Galen, *Natural Faculties* 3.3; *Use of Parts* 14.3; Aetius *Gynecology*, *passim*. The same basic belief is reported in early Christian texts, the Hebrew Bible, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian medical sources. For more on this subject, see Lillis, 29–31.

⁸⁸⁹ Lillis examines several interpretations of Song of Songs 4:12, where a bride is compared to an enclosed or “locked garden”; in particular, Ambrose of Milan's 4th century works on virginity discusses the “closed genital doorway” of Mary and the “closed genital” standard for other virgins. See Lillis, “Sealed Fountains: The Imagery of Fourth-Century Christian Virginity Discourse,” in *Virgin Territory*. This metaphor is also prevalent in Syriac Hymns of Mary, e.g. “In a womb of flesh a marriage chamber was set out / in whose midst the heavenly Bridegroom lay reclining, / while the virgin doors were carefully guarded. / When the glorious Groom desired to go forth / He left the virgin doors sleeping, unaware of His departure,” *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches*, translated by Sebastian P. Brock, 1994: *Hymn* 17, page 59.

⁸⁹⁰ On the penetrative nature of sight, see S. H. Lonsdale, “If Looks Could Kill: *Papainô* and the Interpenetration of Imagery and Narrative in Homer,” *CJ* 84.4 (1989): 325–333; Melissa Haynes, “Framing a View of the Unviewable: Architecture, Aphrodite, and Erotic Looking in the Lucianic *Erôtes*,” *Helios* 40, no. 1/2 (2013): 71–96; Goldhill, “Naïve”; Irigaray, “Sex,” 25–26; E. Ann Kaplan, “Is the Gaze Male?” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (309–27), New York University Press, 1983; Pagán Cánovas, “Genesis.”

⁸⁹¹ Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 4.1.1–7. For a good summary of these and other theories of vision, see the “Introduction” in *Vision and Viewing in Ancient Greece*, edited by Sue Blundell, Douglas Cairns, and Nancy Rabinowitz, *Helios* 40, no. 1/2 (2013).

the doors suddenly shut (κλεισθῆναι τὰς θύρας) before he can enter. The imagery here and its implications for the mindsets of the two characters at this juncture are not difficult to parse. This Book 4 motif of feminized enclosed spaces closed off from male penetration by doors therefore becomes relevant again during the virginity ordeal in Book 8. By this point, Achilles Tatius has transformed the sentiment of “your body is a temple” from subtext to text.⁸⁹²

The etiology of the pan-pipes, whose sound signals the confirmation of a maiden’s virginity from within the cave, is given an extended description, delving into musical theory and its differences from other types of pipe instruments. Then the reeds of the pipe are given an etiology:⁸⁹³

Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. and Clit.*, 8.6.7–11.
ἦν δὲ ἡ σύριγξ οὔτε αὐλὸς ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς οὔτε
κάλαμος, ἀλλὰ παρθένος εὐειδῆς οἶαν εἰς
 θεοὺς ἐγκρίνειν. ὁ Πάν οὖν ἐδίωκεν αὐτὴν
 δρόμον ἐρωτικόν, τὴν δὲ ὕλη τις δέχεται
 δασεῖα φεύγουσαν· ὁ δὲ Πάν κατὰ πόδας
 εἰσθορὼν ὥρεγε τὴν χεῖρα ὡς ἐπ’ αὐτήν. καὶ ὁ
μὲν ὦετο τεθηρακέναι καὶ ἔχεσθαι τῶν τριγῶν.
καλάμων δὲ κόμην εἶχεν ἡ χεὶρ. τὴν μὲν γὰρ
 εἰς γῆν καταδύναι λέγουσι, καλάμους δὲ τὴν
 γῆν ἀντ’ αὐτῆς τεκεῖν. τέμνει δὴ τοὺς
καλάμους ὑπ’ ὀργῆς ὁ Πάν, ὡς κλέπτοντας
 αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐρωμένην. ἐπεὶ δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα οὐκ
εἶχεν εὐρεῖν, εἰς τοὺς καλάμους δοκῶν
 λελύσθαι τὴν κόρην, ἔκλαιε τὴν τομήν,

Now originally the pan-pipes was neither pipe nor
reed, but a maiden so fair that one would judge her
 worthy of a place among the gods. Pan was chasing
 her, a chase inspired by love,⁸⁹⁴ and in her flight she
 entered a thick wood; he, close on her heels, was just
 stretching out his hand to catch her. He thought that
his chase had been successful, and that he was
grasping her hair: but his hand only clutched a bunch
of reeds; she, it is said, had sunk into the ground,
 which bore a clump of reeds in her place. Pan, in a
passion, cut away the reeds, thinking that they were
 hiding his beloved from him: but when, after a
 search lasting some time, he was unable to find her,
 he realised that she had been transformed into the
 reeds and regretted his action, thinking that he had

⁸⁹² I am not arguing here that this verse from Corinthians 6:19 (written in the 1st century CE) influenced Achilles Tatius, just making a parallel.

⁸⁹³ This story is also told by Lucian, *Dial.* 22.4, Ovid, *Met.* 1.689–712, Hyginus 274, Serv. schol. Virg. 2.31.

⁸⁹⁴ On the “erotic chase” or “erotic pursuit” motif: in meadow and flower-picking scenes, see Deacy, “From ‘Flowery Tales’”; in art, see Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “A Series of Erotic Pursuits: Images and Meanings,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 131–153; in semantics and cognitive linguistics (not Greek-specific or ancient-specific): Maria D. López Maestre, “‘Man the hunter’: a critical reading of hunt-based conceptual metaphors of love and sexual desire,” *Journal of Literary Semantics* 44, no. 2 (2015): 89–113. There are several such sources on erotic pursuit specifically in Ovid, e.g. (chronologically) Hugh Parry, “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Violence in a Pastoral Landscapes,” *TAPA* 95 (1964): 268–82; Leo C. Curran, “Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*,” *Arethusa* 11, no. 1/2 (1978): 213–41; Charles Segal, “Ovid’s Metamorphic Bodies: Art, Gender, and Violence in the ‘*Metamorphoses*,’” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 5, no. 3 (1998): 9–41; Amy Richlin, “Reading Ovid’s Rapes,” in *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*, University of Michigan Press, 2014.

νομίζων τετμηκέναι τὴν ἐρωμένην.
συμφορήσας οὖν τὰ τετμημένα τῶν καλάμων
ὡς μέλη τοῦ σώματος, καὶ συνθεὶς εἰς ἓν
σῶμα, εἶχε διὰ χειρῶν τὰς τομὰς τῶν καλάμων
καταφιλῶν, ὡς τῆς κόρης τραύματα· ἔστενε δὲ
ἐρωτικὸν ἐπιθεὶς τὸ στόμα, καὶ ἐνέπνει
ἄνωθεν εἰς τοὺς αὐλοὺς ἅμα φιλῶν. τὸ δὲ
πνεῦμα διὰ τῶν ἐν τοῖς καλάμοις στενωπῶν
καταρρέον αὐλήματα ἐποίει, καὶ ἡ σύριγξ εἶχε
φωνήν. ταύτην οὖν τὴν σύριγγά φασιν
ἀναθεῖναι μὲν ἐνθάδε τὸν Πᾶνα, περιορίσαι δὲ
εἰς σπήλαιον αὐτήν, θαμίζειν τε αὐτοῦ καὶ τῇ
σύριγγι συνήθως αὐλεῖν.

actually cut down the object of his love. So he collected the fragments of reed as though they had been the maiden's limbs and put them together as though to form a single body: and then, holding the pieces in his hands, kissed them, as though they had been her wounds. As he put his lips to them he groaned from love, and breathed down upon the reeds while he kissed them; and his breath, pouring down through the holes in them, gave musical notes, and the pan-pipes found its voice. So it is said that Pan there hung up⁸⁹⁵ the instrument, shutting it up in a cave, and that it was his custom to resort there often and play on the pipes.

The story told is a typical lust-filled chase in which Pan erotically pursues a maiden in the wilderness.⁸⁹⁶ As is typical of these metamorphoses, the maiden Syrinx's body (here, her hair, τῶν τριχῶν) is equated with and then is made into a part of the natural world (in this case, a vegetal comparison, again using κόμη: καλάμων δὲ κόμην, "the hair of reeds").⁸⁹⁷ Achilles Tatius' main innovation on the story is an extra layer of shock or horror here when Pan cuts away the reeds to try to reach Syrinx before realizing that she has been transformed. Once he understands that his violent pursuit has killed her, he pieces together her "body" to form the instrument. Only then does Syrinx have a "voice" (καὶ ἡ σύριγξ εἶχε φωνήν); she is voiceless without Pan's intervention.

While in Ovid, Pan gets the idea to make pipes when the wind blows through the reeds, Achilles Tatius' take here brings into sharper focus the macabre elements of the myth, the grisly

⁸⁹⁵ ἀνατίθηναι is also the verb used for a worshiper setting up a dedication at a shrine or someone setting up a funerary stele for the deceased. It has non-religious uses, also, of course, but considering the context, the religious connotations are evident.

⁸⁹⁶ cf. Ovid's brief treatment of the same story at *Met.* 1.689–712. It is unclear where exactly Achilles Tatius' etiology takes place. Traditionally, the myth of syrinx was situated in Arcadia; however, here Pan places the pan-pipes in a cave apparently near Ephesus.

⁸⁹⁷ Cf. Ov. *Met.* 1.705–706: *Panaque cum prensam sibi iam Syringa putaret, / corpore pro nymphe calamos tenuisse palustres*, "and how Pan, when now he thought he had caught Syrinx, instead of her held naught but marsh reeds in his arms."

fact that, since Pan could not possess Syrinx' virginal body for his sexual pleasure, he instead dismembers and then reassembles that body for his aesthetic pleasure.⁸⁹⁸ Rather than the natural intervention of wind as portrayed in Ovid, in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, it is the kisses and sighs that Pan imposes upon the mutilated body of Syrinx that inspire his invention. Upon his creation of the pan-pipes, he shuts the instrument up in the cave. Since the pan-pipes is the physical equivalent of Syrinx, the effect is that Pan essentially imprisons Syrinx in the cave so that she is "available" to him musically, if not sexually. She has been physically altered twice (once from metamorphosis and once from Pan's tinkering), but through this transformation she was able to maintain her virginity.

While not focused on the cave itself, this etiology is vital to understanding the dynamics of gender and power at play in the virginity ordeal that takes place. In the ordeal, the girl being examined is taken to the cave in which Pan stores the body of the maiden Syrinx and is shut up inside along with her. Syrinx herself thus plays a role in determining the sexual status of the maiden-in-question, though not through her own will or actions. The narrator of the ordeal's procedure offers two explanations for the sounding of the pan-pipes when the maiden is confirmed to be a virgin: either the wind blows through them or Pan himself plays them.⁸⁹⁹ As Theodore MacDonald has observed, "the fact that Pan serves as the primary adjudicator and his gavel is effectively the dismembered body of a would-be rape victim is rather discordant."⁹⁰⁰

In this ordeal, the alternative to confirming a maiden's virginity is death or some sort of nonexistence (τὴν δὲ γυναῖκα οὐδαμοῦ). The morose nature of this disappearance is suggested by

⁸⁹⁸ Rattenbury believes the differences between Achilles Tatius' and Ovid's accounts indicate that the authors used different sources for the common legend. Rattenbury "Chastity," 67.

⁸⁹⁹ λιγυρόν τι μέλος ἀκούεται καὶ ἔνθεον, ἥτοι τοῦ τόπου πνεῦμα ἔχοντος μουσικὸν εἰς τὴν σύριγγα τεταμιεύμενον, ἢ τάχα καὶ ὁ Πᾶν αὐτὸς αὐλεῖ, "a clear and divine note is heard, either because there is some breeze in the place which enters the pipes and makes a musical sound, or possibly because it is Pan himself that is piping." Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 8.6.12.

⁹⁰⁰ MacDonald, "Narrative," 182.

the silence of the pan-pipes, the groaning (οἰμωγή, literally a wail) from the cave,⁹⁰¹ and the discovery of the pan-pipes on the floor of the cave (possibly in lieu of the woman), rather than hung up on the wall. This disappearance parallels the nonexistence inflicted upon those pursued by Pan or other lascivious gods. In the Syrinx etiology, just when Pan thinks he has gotten ahold of the nymph and she is transformed into reed, he looks around for her but she is nowhere to be found (οὐκ εἶχεν εὐρεῖν). When Pan, through the silence of Syrinx's body (σιωπᾷ μὲν ἢ σύριγγι), announces the non-virginal status of a woman inside the cave, the result is again a disappearance. The maidens whom Pan (and other gods) encounter do not die, exactly, but they nevertheless cease to exist.

If the maiden truly is a virgin, the cave's doors unlock and open and she emerges with a wreath of pine on her head (ἐστεφανωμένη τὴν κεφαλὴν πίτυος κόμαις). This detail, combined with the etiology of Syrinx and the strong presence of Pan at the sanctuary, has parallels in Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, another 2nd century Greek romance novel. In Book 1, Chloe crowns herself with pine branches while in a *locus amoenus* with Daphnis; he thinks her beauty and pine crown make her look like one of the nymphs of the cave where she frequently makes offerings.⁹⁰² Also within this *locus amoenus*, "the winds made syrinx-music as they blew through the pines."⁹⁰³ Daphnis tries to teach Chloe to play the syrinx, stealing her "kisses" by putting his mouth to the instrument after her. He tells her the story of another girl who "sitting beneath a

⁹⁰¹ οἰμωγή and, in particular, its verbal form οἰμῶζω, is typically used for men's cries, rather than women's cries, which are typically noted with κωκυτός and its verbal form κωκύω. Furthermore οἰμῶζω typically indicated cries of physical or emotional pain. See Giuseppe Spatafora, "Esigenza fisiologica e funzione terapeutica del lamento nei poemi omerici: studio sul significato di κλαίω, γοάω, στένω, οἰμῶζω/κωκύω, δόδυρομαι," *L'Antiquité Classique* 66 (1997): 1–23, on the gender distinction in particular, pages 11–14. The choice of οἰμωγή here may denote a low pitch, though the masculine implications are implicit. I would argue that the intent here is to clarify that the tested woman is not the one screaming from inside the cave. It is possible perhaps to ascribe the groaning to Pan, though this is not clear. The impersonal construction here with the medio-passive πέμπεται deliberately obscures the source of the groan, which corresponds to the ambiguity of the blower of the pan-pipes in the opposite verdict. In turn, this uncertainty reflects the experience of a spectator of such an ordeal; since the test itself is concealed from everyone except the maiden-in-question, we therefore are put in the perspective of a spectator, rather than the maiden.

⁹⁰² Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, 1.23.3; 1.24.2.

⁹⁰³ καὶ τοὺς ἀνέμους συρίττειν ταῖς πίτυσιν ἐμπνέοντας, Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, 1.23.2.

pine and garlanded with pine twigs would sing of Pan and Pitys” (i.e. the nymph Pine). The same combination of a syrinx, pine wreaths, and Pan crops up a few times within the first half of the novel.⁹⁰⁴ Outside of this roughly contemporary romance novel, pine crowns are mentioned only as the reward for winners of the Isthmian games.⁹⁰⁵ Apart from the creation of crowns, pine products (nuts, cones, and pollen) were frequently described and prescribed as an aphrodisiac and stamina enhancer.⁹⁰⁶ Pinecones and pine branches were often dedicated to Demeter, and were burned as torches for both religious and secular use.⁹⁰⁷ It is clear, then, that Achilles Tatius’ somewhat rare choice of the pine wreath holds deeper connotations. The similarity of this rather idiosyncratic use of a pine wreath between Longus and Achilles Tatius is compelling, but it is difficult to determine the direction that the influence flows in, since the relative dating of both novels within the 2nd century CE is uncertain.⁹⁰⁸ That this image is associated with Pan and his threatening sexuality,⁹⁰⁹ compounded with the presence of his victim, Syrinx, is therefore illustrative of the vulnerability of these maidens. The cultural connotations of the pine both as a symbol of female fertility generally and, crucially, as a male aphrodisiac imbues the virginity ordeal with an overt sexuality, further developing the “heavily emphasized tensions between sexual innocence and the force of sexual desire.”⁹¹⁰

⁹⁰⁴ Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 2.26.2–3; 2.28.2–3; 2.31.2–3.

⁹⁰⁵ Plutarch, *Biogr. et Phil. Timoleon* 26.5; *Moralia, Table-Talk* 5, Question 3; Dio Chrysostomus, *Orations* 9.10, 11; Lucian, *Anacharsis* 10.

⁹⁰⁶ Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 2.423; Galen, *De Sem.*; also in the *Greek Magical Papyri (PGM)* VII 184–185; *SM* 83. Modern science has confirmed these effects due to the high amount of zinc in pine.

⁹⁰⁷ On ancient uses of pine, see Eleni Chronopoulou, “The Pine in the Magical Papyri,” in *Des dieux et des plantes. Monde végétal et religion en Grèce ancienne*, edited by Ariadni Gartzou-Tatti and Athanassia Zografou, Presses universitaires de Liège, 2023.

⁹⁰⁸ Based solely on the imagery of the pine wreath, I would argue that Longus’ novel predates Achilles Tatius’. Most recent scholarship dates Achilles Tatius’ novel to the last decades of the 2nd century CE. Longus’ novel has not been dated any more specifically than the 2nd century CE. See Sylva Fischerová, “The Ancient Love Novel: Formula and its Innovation,” in *Ancient Weeds: Contours of Popular and Trash Literature in Ancient and Medieval Times*, edited by Sylva Fischerová and Jiří Starý, Karolinum Press, 2024.

⁹⁰⁹ At least in Longus’ *Daphnis and Chloe*. Elsewhere, the pine is connected with Poseidon and Dionysus (particularly in his aspect as the god of wine).

⁹¹⁰ Charles Segal “The Trials at the End of Achilles Tatius’ *Clitophon and Leucippe*: Doublets and Complementaries,” *Studi italiani di filologia classica* 2, no. 3 (1984): 87.

Andromeda's Cave

It is also helpful to read Leucippe's virginity ordeal in comparison with another episode from *Leucippe and Clitophon*. There is another association of a virgin and a cave that serves as an intra-textual reference for the cave in the grove of Artemis. In Book 3, Clitophon sees a pair of paintings depicting the sufferings of Andromeda and Prometheus, and he speculates that the artist chose these figures because they are both chained to rocks.⁹¹¹ The painting of Andromeda depicts her as chained up in a cave as she is about to be devoured by Poseidon's sea monster.⁹¹²

Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 3.7.1–2; 4–5.

Ὀρώρουται μὲν οὖν εἰς τὸ μέτρον τῆς κόρης ἢ πέτρα: θέλει δὲ τὸ ὄρυγμα λέγειν ὅτι μή τις αὐτὸ πεποίηκε χεῖρ, ἀλλ' ἔστιν αὐτόχθον: ἐτράχυνε γὰρ τοῦ λίθου τὸν κόλπον ὁ γραφεύς, ὥς ἔτεκεν αὐτὸν ἡ γῆ. ἡ δὲ ἐνίδρυται τῇ σκέπῃ· καὶ ἔοικε τὸ θέαμα, εἰ μὲν εἰς τὸ κάλλος ἀπίδοις, ἀγάλματι καινῷ, εἰ δὲ εἰς τὰ δεσμὰ καὶ τὸ κῆτος, αὐτοσχεδίῳ τάφῳ. ... τὰς δὲ χεῖρας εἰς τὴν πέτραν ἐξεπέτασεν, ἄγχει δὲ ἄνω δεσμὸς ἐκατέραν συνάπτων τῇ πέτρᾳ: οἱ καρποὶ δὲ ὥσπερ ἀμπέλου βότρυες κρέμονται. καὶ αἱ μὲν ὠλέναι τῆς κόρης ἄκρατον ἔχουσαι τὸ λευκὸν εἰς τὸ πελιδνὸν μετέβαλον καὶ εἰκόσιν ἀποθνήσκειν οἱ δάκτυλοι. δέδεταί μὲν οὖν οὕτω τὸν θάνατον ἐκδεχομένη· ἔστηκε δὲ νυμφικῶς ἐστολισμένη, ὥσπερ Αἰδωνεὶ νύμφη κεκοσμημένη· ποδῆρης ὁ χιτῶν, λευκὸς ὁ χιτῶν: τὸ ὕφασμα λεπτόν, ἀραχνίων ἐοικὸς πλοκῇ,”

“In the picture of Andromeda, there was a hollow in the rock of about the size of the maiden, but it was of a sort that would indicate that it was not artificially made, but natural, for the painter had made its surface rough, just as nature had fashioned it. She rested within its embrace, and while, if one gazed upon her beauty, one would compare her to a newly carven statue, anybody seeing the chains and the approaching beast would think the rock a hastily contrived tomb. ... Her hands were stretched out against the wall of rock, a bond holding both of them fast to it above her head, so that her fingers hung like bunches of fruit from a vine; the arms of spotless white verging towards the livid, and the fingers white with the pallor of death. Thus was she bound, waiting for her fate, adorned for a bridal as one who was to be the bride of the King of Death. She wore a tunic reaching to her feet, and white, of the thinnest woof like a spider's web”

In this *ekphrasis* we again see a “somaticization” of the earth. Clitophon emphasizes the

“naturalness” of the cave: it is not hewn by human hands, but is αὐτόχθον and appears in the painting ὥς ἔτεκεν αὐτὸν ἡ γῆ, “as if Earth bore it.” αὐτόχθον is an interesting choice, as it is

⁹¹¹ Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 3.6–8. Achilles Tatius' Prometheus is not inside a cave.

⁹¹² Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 3.6–7. cf. the long treatment of Andromeda and Perseus in Ovid, *Met.* 4.670–764. Ovid places her on a rocky cliff, but not inside a cave. Euripides' fragmentary *Andromeda* opens with Andromeda and the nymph Echo in a cave, fr. 118.

rarely, if ever, not used of humanoid beings.⁹¹³ Likewise, *τίκτω*, used here to emphasize the naturalness of the cave, is not used of non-animate objects until early Christian times, when it is occasionally used for some action “birthing sin.”⁹¹⁴ Furthermore, the cave itself is described as a *κόλπος*, a versatile word that has among its definitions connotations of “bosom” and “vagina,” but most literally here refers to a cleft in the rock. The translator of the Loeb, Gaselee, seemingly omits the phrase *τοῦ λίθου τὸν κόλπον* and translates only the verb. While his phrasing does still serve the narrator’s apparent primary desire to emphasize the naturalness of the cave, the blending of anatomical and geographical terminology is vital to a true verbal depiction of the portrait. The cave therefore is the site for the imprisonment of a virgin and is fashioned as a proxy for her womb.

The inverse is also true. Not only is the cave “somaticized”; Andromeda’s body is “ecologized”. The helpless drooping of her hands is compared to pendulous fruits on the tree or vine.⁹¹⁵ Her arms, formerly pure white (*ἄκρατον... τὸ λευκὸν*), begin to turn blue-grey (*πελιδνὸν*), which, while frequently used to describe ill or deceased bodies, was also used of some types of stone.⁹¹⁶ In this paragraph, then, there is repeated blending of the landscape with the bodyscape, particularly with regard to the cave and its surrounding rock.

⁹¹³ *αὐτόχθων* is most often used of people, whether individuals or groups.

⁹¹⁴ e.g. James 1:15, *τίκτει ἁμαρτίαν*; Origen, fr. 470, line 8, *τεκεῖν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν*; Epiphanius, *Panarion* εἴτα ἡ ἐπιθυμία *τίκτει ἁμαρτίαν*; *et al.*

⁹¹⁵ οἱ καρποὶ δὲ ὥσπερ ἀμπέλου βότρυνες κρέμανται.

⁹¹⁶ e.g. *τὸ δὲ ἦν χυμαίρας τι πλάσμα πελιδνὸν τὴν χροῖαν*· καὶ γὰρ τὸ τεθνηκὸς ὁ λίθος ὑπεδύετο, “and the figure of the kid was livid [blue-grey] in colour, for the stone assumed the appearance of dead flesh”, Callistratus, *Descriptions of Statues* 2.30; *λίθος πελιδνὸς τῷ χρώματι*, “a stone livid [blue-grey] in color,” Pseudo-Plutarch, *De Fluviiis* 22.3.1. In addition to the hue of her fingers, Andromeda is repeatedly likened to a statue. She is “established” here (*ἐνίδρυται*), a verb typically used in scenes of founding a temple or setting up a cult statue. In fact, Andromeda herself is like a statue (*ἔοικε... ἀγάλματι*), cf. Ovid, *Met.* 4.675: *marmoreum ratus esset opus*. It is interesting that the narrator here compares Andromeda as portrayed in a work of art by comparing her to a hypothetical work of art in another medium. This suggests that the choice of comparison is based on more than just the fact that she is beautiful (as is mentioned several times) and that she is unable to move. She is contrived and shaped by an external force, then “established” in what amounts in this comparison to a votive niche.

These details help to depict the virgin's impending death. Clitophon describes the cave in which she is held as an "improvised tomb" (αὐτοσχεδίῳ τάφῳ). Even before she has been attacked by the sea-monster, her arms begin to grow pale and lifeless due, presumably, to the fact that the blood is leaving her elevated hands, as well as the fear that the narrator repeatedly credits with enhancing her beauty (δέος [twice], εὐμόρφῳ φόβῳ).⁹¹⁷ Thus she awaits her death (τὸν θάνατον ἐκδεχομένη), dressed like a bride (νυμφικῶς ἐστολισμένη), as if she were about to marry Hades (ὥσπερ Αἰδωνεῖ νύμφη κεκοσμημένη). The motif of a maiden's marriage or loss of virginity as a symbolic death is prevalent from at least the Hellenistic period. Several sepulchral epigrams from the *Greek Anthology* depict the death of unmarried girls as their marriage to Hades.⁹¹⁸ We therefore see a virgin inside a cave being threatened with death or, as we shall see, the loss of her virginity through rape.

This analogy is conveyed in Clitophon's description of the Andromeda painting. With the cave functioning as the female anatomy within the image, the maiden's "virginity" is threatened by the sea-monster, κῆτος. While this word is not specific and can refer to any large marine animal, especially whales or other typically fish-shaped beasts, the description of the monster's body in the painting makes it clear that the creature depicted has a snake-like lengthiness: its head is able to be above the surface of the water while the majority of its body is underneath.⁹¹⁹ It has an arched neck (τὰ τῶν ἀνθένων κυρτώματα) and a twisting tail (οἱ τῆς οὐρᾶς ἐλιγμοί). The shape of the monster is therefore rather phallic in the painting.⁹²⁰ Its object, Andromeda, is

⁹¹⁷ Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 3.7.3–4.

⁹¹⁸ See, for example, *AP* 7.182, 183, 185, 188, 492, and 547. For more on this motif, see H. J. Rose, "The Bride of Hades," *Classical Philology* 20 (1925): 238–242.

⁹¹⁹ Hilton notes the many variations on the appearance of this monster in literature and in wall paintings from Pompei: "some represent the monster with legs, some show a coiled tail, while others depict a fishy appendage," John L. Hilton, *A Commentary on Books 3 and 4 of Achilles Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon*, Brill, 2024: 105.

⁹²⁰ On the phallic symbolism of snakes in Greek myth and in other cultures, see D. Wilfred Abse, "Snakes and Us," in *Mental Zoo: Animals in the Human Mind and its Pathology*, ed. Salman Akhtar and Vamik D. Volkan, Routledge, 2005; Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, University of California Press, 1985: 352–353; Ramona Morris and Desmond Morris, *Men and Snakes*, McGraw-Hill, 1965: 36, 82, 207.

therefore under threat of death, yes, but also the forced loss of her virginity, as is hinted at with the bridal imagery.

In this respect and in several others, the description of Andromeda in *Leucippe and Clitophon* strongly resembles the punishment of Antigone. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, we see the protagonist's imprisonment and abandonment in a cave-like space⁹²¹ as punishment for her forbidden burial of Polynices, with the presumption that there, she will die of exposure. The cave therefore will become her "strange tomb" (τάφου ποταινίου, 849), again reflecting the oddness of using a cave as a resting place for the dead in Greek culture. This sentiment is echoed also in Achilles Tatius' description of Andromeda, whose cave is described as an "improvised" or "makeshift" tomb (αὐτοσχεδίῳ τάφῳ).

Like Andromeda in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Antigone characterizes this impending death as her marriage to Hades:

Sophocles, *Antigone*, 810–816

ἀλλὰ μ' ὁ παγ/κοίτας Ἄιδας ζῶσαν ἄγει / τὰν
Ἀχέροντος / ἀκτάν, οὐθ' ὕμεναίων /
ἔγκληρον, οὐτ' ἐπὶ νυμ/φείοις πῶ μέ τις ὕμνος
ὕμνησεν, ἀλλ' Ἀχέροντι νυμφεύσω.

Hades who lulls all to sleep is taking me, still
living, to the shore of Acheron, without the
bridal that was my due, nor has any song been
sung for me at my marriage, but I shall be the
bride of Acheron.

While Antigone focuses on the absence of wedding songs as a symbol of her lost marriage, Achilles Tatius focuses on the appearance and attire of Andromeda as the symbol of her imminent marriage-death. Thus, he describes her as being dressed as the bride of Hades (νυμφικῶς ἐστολισμένη, ὥσπερ Ἀἰδωνεῖ νύμφη κεκοσμημένη) wearing a floor-length white chiton (ποδήρης ὁ χιτὼν, λευκὸς ὁ χιτὼν).⁹²² This garment is therefore the proper attire for a bride. This same outfit, with additional embellishments, is worn by Leucippe in her virginity ordeal:

⁹²¹ πετρῳδεῖ... ἐν κατώρυγι, Sophocles, *Antigone* 774. Here an excavated, rather than natural cave.

⁹²² Notice here the parallel phrases of an adjective with ὁ χιτὼν repeated.

Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 8.13.1

ἐστόλιστο δὲ ἡ Λευκίππη ἱερᾷ στολῇ·
ποδήρης ὁ χιτῶν, ὀθόνης ὁ χιτῶν, ζώνη κατὰ
μέσον τὸν χιτῶνα, ταινία περὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν
φοινικοβαφής, ἀσάνδαλος ὁ ποῦς.

Leucippe had been clad in a sacred robe,
which was a long tunic of linen, with a girdle
about her waist, a scarlet fillet on her head,
and bare feet.⁹²³

Both Andromeda's outfit in Book 3 and Leucippe's in Book 8 consist of a "floor-length" chiton, using the same parallel phrase structure as in Book 3. However, since Leucippe is participating in a semi-religious ordeal, rather than being solely sentenced to death, she is further adorned with a girdle and red headband. Since there is no specific color provided to describe the garment that Leucippe wears, only the material (linen), it can be assumed that the tunic had the off-white shade of undyed linen.⁹²⁴ This could have stood out among the other people at the sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesus, since it is said that luxuriant, colorful clothing (βαπτῶν ἱματίων, lit. "dyed clothes") was preferred there.⁹²⁵ Leucippe's sacred clothing, then, both distinguishes her from the other worshippers at the site and suggests virginal/bridal connotations that connect her with Andromeda's near-death in a cave in Book 3.

⁹²³ The detail of her being barefoot is curious; ἀσάνδαλος appears once in a 5th century source (Pherecydes *Hist. fr.* 60) and once in a Hellenistic source; it does not become common until the Roman period. The adjective is typically used to describe goddesses, nymphs, or women who are wandering crazed through the wilderness. Bion uses the adjective for Aphrodite as she roams wildly following the death of Adonis: *Lament for Adonis*, 21. Nonnus is responsible for 12 of the 26 total uses of the adjective in our extant sources, though he mistakenly spells it ἀσάμβalos. He uses it exclusively attached to nymphs or bacchantes in the *Dionysiaca*. A scholiast on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* uses it to gloss the meaning of ἀπέδιλος, suggesting that it had supplanted that word in popular speech by that period. This is also evident in its use in early Christian writings in reference to the poor; they are "naked, penniless, shoeless, and helpless." Given the simplistic vocabulary and syntax of most early Christian texts, it is likely that ἀσάνδαλος was in common use by that time.

⁹²⁴ Similarly, at the sacred Cave of Pan at Marathon, it was forbidden to wear dyed clothing inside the grotto, as is recorded in the *lex sacra* from the site. *SEG* 36:267, ca. 60 BCE. Prohibitions and prescriptions for appropriate attire were demanded at several cult sites in antiquity, though they were site- and cult-specific; there was not a standard of dress appropriate at all sanctuaries. On this, see Aynur-Michèle-Sara Karatas, "Greek cults and their sacred laws on dress-codes: The laws of Greek sanctuaries for clothing, colour, and penalties against misbehaviour," *Revue des Études Anciennes* 122, no. 2 (2020): 445–488.

⁹²⁵ Democritus of Ephesus, *On the Temple in Ephesus*, Book 1, quoted by Athenaeus Book 12, Casaubon section 525, subsection c. Karatas 2020: 469–471 mentions this passage and discusses sanctuaries with prescriptions for colorful clothing.

Throughout Greek myth and literature, virgins were associated with the natural world and with states of wildness.⁹²⁶ Beyond the prototypical exemplum of Artemis, there are the several maidens who are metamorphosed into plants or animals in order to escape gods' sexual assault.⁹²⁷ The plants and animals that many of these maidens are changed into tend not to be domesticated species;⁹²⁸ the uncultivated aspect of their floral or faunal identity therefore reflects and reinforces the virginal quality of their humanoid body. The unrealized fertility of virginal but sexually mature young women is thus deeply connected to floral and faunal nature, but also, as I have shown in the cases of Atalanta and Leucippe, to certain geological features like caves. The cave, then, seems an ideal setting for the types of ordeals that appear in *Leucippe and Clitophon* and more broadly in imperial Greek literature. Aelian's Atalanta passage uses the same structural and connotative associations to depict a maiden's defense of her own virginity through violent means. The "uncivilized" and un-tampered-with nature of the cave, combined with its structural affinity with the uterus, makes it an image ripe for such associations in these second century narratives.

⁹²⁶ This wildness can be seen in comparisons of maidens to animals such as fillies/young horses referring to their "untamed" nature, e.g. Anacreon, fr. 417, Euripides, *Hippolytus* 545ff, Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 1307; Aelian, *On Animals* 12.10 (quoting Epicrates); in Latin: Lucil, *Satires* 30.1041–1042, Horace, *Odes* 3.11.9–12.

⁹²⁷ The two most famous are Syrinx and Daphne. Others include Asteria (Apollod. *Lib.* 1.4), Britomartis (Call. *H Artemis*, 189–200). A common variant is that maidens are transformed preemptively, for their safety, such as Iphigenia, who is saved from sacrifice when Artemis turns her into a deer (E. *Iph. Taur.* 26–29), along with a handful of Zeus' mistresses, whom he transforms so that Hera cannot find and punish them.

⁹²⁸ None of the so-called "Mediterranean Triad" (various grains, grapes, and olives) have associated nymphs or metamorphosed figures, nor do the other major crops: legumes, fruit trees, flax, vegetables. Daphne/the bay laurel was common throughout the Mediterranean and held symbolic and cultic value, but was not an agricultural (i.e. cultivated) product. In the *Metamorphoses*, plants that women or nymphs are changed into include: Daphne (1.452–553, cf. Parthenius *Amat. Narr.* 15.1–3; Nonnus *Dion.* 33.210, 42.387–390; Hyginus *Fab.* 203; et al), Syrinx (marsh reeds, 1.689–712), Leucothoe (Frankincense, 4.214–255), Clytie (heliotrope flower, 4.256–270), Baucis (oak or linden, 8.620–719), Lotus (lotus, 9.342–348), Myrrha (myrrh tree, 10.306–502). None of these were cultivated crops in the ancient world, though some were gathered and used for symbolic, cultic, or medicinal purposes.

Early Christian Caves

The traditions relayed in both the New Testament and non-canonical gospels demonstrate the incorporation of regional beliefs and attitudes from ancient Greek religion and culture into the fabric of the early Jesus movement.⁹²⁹ Furthermore, given the highly multicultural nature of the ancient Mediterranean in the second century, the picture of the cave motif in literature about virginity would be incomplete without consideration of contemporary early Christian literature, especially since they are written in the same language. In this section, I will outline the use of caves in the traditions of the Virgin Mary and Saint Thecla in apocryphal literature from the 2nd century CE. These tales demonstrate, I contend, the broader cultural associations between issues of virginity (and, in the case of Mary, maternity⁹³⁰) and caverns. In turn, I draw parallels between these tales and the virginity evaluations of “pagan” Greek texts from the second century CE which I have already discussed. These traditions were not discrete and did not exist segregated from each other; rather, they are both the result of cultural and religious values that influenced each other in the religiously diverse world of the Roman Empire.

Mary

The western church maintained one main cave in the story of Jesus Christ: his tomb.⁹³¹

Eastern orthodox traditions, however, accept the tradition that also places Jesus’ birth in a cave.

⁹²⁹ Mystery religions’ influence on Christianity has been widely acknowledged by scholars of ancient and modern religions for at least the past century. For the most recent examinations of this and of the history of such scholarship, see Annelies Lannoy and Danny Praet, eds., *The Christian Mystery: Early Christianity and the Ancient Mystery Cults in the Work of Franz Cumont and in the History of Scholarship*, Steiner, 2023.

⁹³⁰ I have chosen to discuss Mary here instead of the chapter on maternity for a few reasons. First, the function of the cave in the maternity aspect of Mary’s story differs slightly from the paradigms of maternity expressed through caves in earlier Greek literature. Additionally, Mary’s maternity does not become miraculous and, therefore, recognizably divine until her postpartum virginity has been confirmed.

⁹³¹ The gospels mention this cave-tomb as having been “cut” into the rock, which was consistent with Jewish customs of the late Second Temple Period. The caves used for Jesus’ burial, as well as those used for other burials of the time do not generally utilize natural caves. These human-hewn spaces could be as simple as a single chamber for an individual burial or could house the remains of dozens, if not hundreds, of people within a multi-chambered subterranean complex. See Yuval Baruch and Alexander Wiegmann, “New Discoveries Concerning Jewish Burial Caves from the Second Temple Period in Jerusalem,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 3, no. 2 (2013): 429–451.

Nativity scenes in the frescoes adorning orthodox churches are frequently set in caves, rather than the constructed stable or barn favored by the western church.⁹³² Christmas hymns in eastern traditions emphasize the cave setting of the birth in conjunction with Mary's virginity.⁹³³ The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built atop the cave believed to have been the site of his arrival.⁹³⁴ Thus, the placement of the nativity in a cave, regardless of historical accuracy, was pervasive and is likely due to cultural associations of caves with mothers and virgins, as well as the popularity of one written text in particular: the Protevangelium of James.

The Proto-Gospel or Protevangelium of James⁹³⁵ purports to be written by the half-brother of Jesus.⁹³⁶ It dates to the mid-second century CE and was composed in Greek,⁹³⁷ then widely translated during the Byzantine period.⁹³⁸ Within the large manuscript corpus, there are "wide-ranging textual differences, both great and small," which reflect the impact of the oral

⁹³² It seems that since caves were occasionally used as stables, the divergent understandings of both churches makes sense. However, Western Christian iconography typically depicts the stable as a constructed shelter adjacent to the "inn" from which Joseph and Mary were turned away. In the Protevangelium of James, Joseph and Mary do not make it to Bethlehem before Mary goes into labor, and Joseph must traverse a considerable area to find a midwife. The imagery of the cave of the nativity versus the stable of the nativity is under-explored in literary and art historical scholarship. Rowland briefly discussed the significance of a cave nativity scene in a 13th century painted panel from Siena, idiosyncratic in its use of this eastern motif while ostensibly in the western iconographic tradition, Benjamin Rowland Jr., "A Nativity Panel with a Note on the Iconography of the Cave," *Bulletin of the Fogg Art Museum* 8, no. 2 (1939): 59–65.

⁹³³ e.g. the Byzantine hymns of the Menaia, where seven of the ten hymns for December 25th refer to the birth cave. This is also frequent in the Syriac church. See Brock, *Bride*, Hymn 33, stanza 2; Hymn 37, stanza 3; Hymn 46, line 55.

⁹³⁴ Michele Bacci, Giovanna Bianchi, Stefano Campana, and Giuseppe Fichera, "Historical and archaeological analysis of the Church of the Nativity," *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 13 (2012): 5–26.

⁹³⁵ Not to be confused with the "Epistle" of James, which is considered canonical by all major Christian denominations. The Latin name is the Protevangelium Jacobi.

⁹³⁶ While the text has claims of authority—that it was written just after the events it describes, that it was written by the half-"brother" of Jesus—certain errors and ignorances belie that the author was likely not Jewish, let alone a son of Joseph, Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, Oxford University Press, 2011: 35.

⁹³⁷ Ehrman and Pleše, *Apocryphal*, 35

⁹³⁸ There are approximately 150 Greek manuscripts surviving and translations into Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, and Slavonic. It was also translated into Latin, but these manuscripts are very fragmentary and speaks to the broad disinterest of the western church in this and similar gospels. The primary force behind its neglect in the west was Jerome, who argued that Joseph, as well as Mary, was a virgin. Ehrman and Pleše, *Apocryphal*, 31.

tradition on written record, and even the earliest transmitted text seems to be based on unknown earlier sources.⁹³⁹

The language of the Protevangelium is very straightforward and uncomplicated Koine. This is largely within the tradition at the time of Judeo-Christian authoritative writings; the Greek of the Septuagint is likewise quite plain.⁹⁴⁰ Sentences are short and follow a predictable, repetitive structure. Subordinate clauses are rare, as is indirect discourse. The discourse particles that add complexity and structure to the sentences of most Greek literature are mostly absent, and the prose is overwhelmingly paratactic. The content of the Septuagint and early Christian writings, while clearly influenced by other literature, rarely uses overt literary reference, making the bar for full comprehension much lower than for the highly allusive texts of earlier and contemporary literary (pagan) works. The practical, democratizing result is that these texts were easy to read and understand even for those with modest literary education.

The Protevangelium mostly focuses on the background of Mary from her parents' fertility struggles up through the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Magi. Although the cave only appears in chapters 17–20, it is necessary to examine it within the broader context of the whole work. Below is a brief summary of chapters 1–20:

A wealthy man named Joachim is shunned for his childlessness. He leaves home and “gives himself to the desert” (ἔδωκεν ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον, 1.4) while his wife Anna mourns the loss of her husband and her own childlessness (2.3). She exchanges her mourning clothes for bridal clothes (τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῆς τὰ νυμφικά, 2.4), then retreats to a garden (τὸν παράδεισον) and

⁹³⁹ Ehrman and Plese, *Apocryphal*, 33.

⁹⁴⁰ The style of the Septuagint has been the object of much criticism since antiquity from quality-based judgements to assertions of a “Jewish” dialect or colloquialized style. For a detailed summary and analysis of these criticisms and debates, see William A. Ross, “Some Problems with Talking about ‘Septuagint Greek’,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 54 (2023): 451–493.

asks God for a child and performs a dirge for her barrenness, (ἐποίησε θρήνον, 3.1–3).⁹⁴¹ An angel informs Anna that she will have a child (4.1) and then appears to Joachim to tell him the same (5.1). In Anna’s seventh month of pregnancy,⁹⁴² she gives birth to Mary, cleanses herself of the lochial blood (ἀπεσμήξατο ἡ Ἄννα τῆς ἀφέδρου αὐτῆς), and breastfeeds the infant (ἔδωκε τὸν μασθὸν τῇ παιδί, 5.2).

Anna makes a “sanctuary in her bedroom” (ἀγίασμα ἐν τῷ κοιτῶνι αὐτῆς, 6.1) to sequester the prodigious infant⁹⁴³ and maintain her holiness. At age three, Mary is given over to the Temple (chapter 7). When she turns twelve,⁹⁴⁴ the priests at the Temple worry about her defiling the Temple through menstruation, and find a widower, Joseph, to marry her (chapter 8). Mary is visited by an angel and told the secrets (τῶν μυστηρίων) of her fated maternity (chapters 11–12). In her sixth month of pregnancy, Joseph returns from his construction work and becomes upset about the pregnancy, but Mary assures him she has remained chaste (13). In a dream, an angel corroborates Mary’s claim and tells Joseph that she was impregnated by the Holy Spirit (14). When the religious authorities find out, they also doubt the claims and order both Mary and Joseph to endure the chastity ordeal of the “water of refutation” (τὸ ὕδωρ τῆς ἐλέγξεως, 15–16). Each of them is made to drink the potion and then go out to the wilderness, from which they

⁹⁴¹ Harm Reinder Smid, “Protevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary,” PhD Dissertation, Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen, 1965. Smid, “Prot.,” 36, quotes Karl Kerenyi, *Die Griechisch-Orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962, 28: “The *threnos* offered fine opportunity for rhetorical development; the Greek novel echoes with *threnoi*.”

⁹⁴² τῷ δὲ ἑπτὰ μηνί, ἑβδόμῳ μηνί. In general, commentaries focus here on textual variants and do not comment on Anna’s delivery in the seventh month of her pregnancy, rather than nine months, or the ten months frequently counted for pregnancy in the Greco-Roman world. Numerologically, the number seven holds great significance for Judaism and Christianity. Adela Yarbro Collins, “Numerical Symbolism in Jewish and Early Christian Apocalyptic Literature,” in *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, Brill, 1996.

⁹⁴³ In addition to her early arrival in the seventh month of pregnancy, Mary starts walking at six months, taking seven steps (again, a holy number). In Greek myth, holy infants were occasionally described as having prodigious abilities; the most famous are Hermes and Heracles. On the precocity of several gods and heroes, see Louise Pratt, “Play, Pathos, and Precocity: The Three P’s of Greek Literary Childhood,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, ed. Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Parkin, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁹⁴⁴ Smid notes, “anthropological conditions in the various regions exercise their influence,” resulting in different ages in various manuscripts, “Prot.,” 66.

must find their way back. They both pass the test, their chastity is confirmed, and they are allowed to return home (16).

While journeying to Bethlehem for the census, Mary senses that she is about to give birth (17.3). Joseph asks her, “where should I take you to hide your shame? For this place is a wilderness,” “Ποῦ σε ἀπάξω καὶ σκεπάσω σου τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην, ὅτι ὁ τόπος ἔρημός ἐστιν;” (17.3). Joseph leaves Mary in a nearby cave (σπήλαιον)⁹⁴⁵ and goes in search of help (18.1).⁹⁴⁶ He runs into an unnamed midwife (19.1) and has her come to the cave, where she stares in awe of a cloud shrouding the entrance (νεφέλη⁹⁴⁷ ἐπισκιάζουσα ἐπὶ τὸ σπήλαιον), then a great light appears in the cave (ἐφάνη φῶς μέγα), a miracle (καινὸν θέαμα καὶ παράδοξον) demonstrating that the savior of Israel has been born (19.2). Inside the cave, Jesus shows prodigious qualities similar to his mother’s by “going” and “taking” Mary’s breast: (ἦλθεν καὶ ἔλαβε μασθὸν ἐκ τῆς μητρὸς).

The midwife leaves and urges another woman, Salome,⁹⁴⁸ to behold a wonder: “a virgin has given birth,” (παρθένος ἐγέννησεν) “contrary to her nature” (ὁ οὐ χωρεῖ φύσις αὐτῆς⁹⁴⁹).

⁹⁴⁵ Several scholars have made a connection between this cave and the cave tomb of Rachel, which was similarly located between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, see Smid “Prot.,” 123–124. Smid: “The author may feel himself bound to the tradition of the *speleion* as the place of the nativity,” 123, though “the idea of ‘de petra natus’ is foreign to the P.J.; the *speleion* as a place of birth is the point of resemblance. It is not very likely that the cave in P.J. is derived from the myth of the birth of Mithras.”

⁹⁴⁶ On his way, Joseph has a bizarre vision where the world stands still, which is narrated in the first person, Prot. Jam. 18.2–3. This rather long passage (seven sentences) is omitted from three of the 32 manuscripts, including the earliest manuscript, Bodmer 5, which dates to the fourth century. The vision reported here marks the switch in narrative person from the omniscient third person to the first person, narrated by Joseph himself. The first person portion lasts only into the first section of chapter 19, and then switches back to the third person at the end of chapter 19 section 1. Some manuscripts, however, put the entire passage, including Joseph’s vision, into the third person. Smid notes that while the motif of nature standing still is present in both the Old and New Testaments, none of those correspond to a birth. Accounts in the *Oracula Sibyllina* do show this correlation, however: 8.474, 475, 8 3.197i. Others connect the motif with theophany. Smid, “Prot.,” 128.

⁹⁴⁷ In some manuscripts, the cloud is “dark” (σκοτεινή); in others, the cloud is “bright” (φωτεινή) or made “of light” (φωτός); in most, it is not further modified. *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques*, edited by Emile de Strycker, Société des Bollandistes, 1961; on this variation, see 154–155, note 4.

⁹⁴⁸ The text is not clear about Salome’s identity or purpose; most assume she is a midwife. On this, see de Strycker 1961: 412.

⁹⁴⁹ Most manuscripts say “contrary to *her* nature,” but manuscript C and two Armenian manuscripts (Arm^a and ^b) have “contrary to human nature” (ἀνθρωπίνη). Five manuscripts include an additional clause after this: καὶ ἡ παρθένος μένει παρθένος.

Salome replies, “if I do not insert my hand and examine her condition,”⁹⁵⁰ I will not believe it” (ἐὰν μὴ βάλω τὴν χεῖρά μου εἰς αὐτήν, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω, 19.3). The first midwife tells Mary that there is “controversy” (ἀγὼν) regarding her.⁹⁵¹ Salome examines Mary’s genitals and thus “tests” (ἐξεπείρασα) the validity of the claim. Salome shouts a war-cry (ἀνηλάλαξεν, 20.1) and regrets her sin (ἀνομία or ἁμαρτία, depending on the manuscript) because she “tested the living God” (ἐξεπείρασα Θεὸν ζῶντα). In retaliation, her hand is burnt and falls off (καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ χεὶρ μου πυρὶ ἀποπίπτει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ). She desperately apologizes to the newborn God, asking him for forgiveness and the return of her “completeness” (ὀλοκληρίαν,⁹⁵² 20.3). After Salome is cured, the text (not in dialogue) says, ἰδοὺ φωνὴ λέγουσα, “behold, a voice saying...” The disembodied voice is odd, particularly after an angel visually appeared to Salome in the cave. The voice tells her not to tell anybody what she saw until Jesus comes to Jerusalem. (20.4).

The presence of the cave has caused puzzlement among some scholars.⁹⁵³ Due to the manger’s presence, it has largely been extrapolated that the birth took place in a stable or barn.⁹⁵⁴ The story as conveyed in the book of Luke does not describe the structure in which Mary gives birth; the manger in which she places the infant God is the only defining feature of the space.

⁹⁵⁰ Some manuscripts have Salome saying that she must “look at” (ἰδῶ, manuscripts A, C, E, Syr^a, Aeth, and Syr^b) or “examine” (ερευνῆσω, manuscripts B, F^a, I, L, and R) to verify Mary’s virginity. Three manuscripts have “finger” instead of “hand” (Z, D, F^b)

⁹⁵¹ This word would later be used for the trials that the martyrs would go through, many of which resemble the virginity ordeals in Greek and Roman sources. It is also the word that Thersander uses to describe his charge of adultery against Melite: Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, 8.8.12.

⁹⁵² A rare word. It appears only once in the New Testament, Acts 3:16, where Jesus has “given completeness” to a lame man.

⁹⁵³ e.g. Ernst Benz, “Die heilige Höhle in der alten Christenheit und in der östlich-orthodoxen Kirche,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 12 (1953): 365–432; Michael Gervers, “The Iconography of the Cave in Christian and Mithraic Tradition,” in *Mysteria Mithrae: Atti del Seminario Internazionale su 'La specificità storico-religiosa dei Misteri di Mithra, con particolare riferimento alle fonti' documentarie di Roma e Ostia*, edited by Ugo Bianchi, Brill, 1979.

⁹⁵⁴ e.g. Gervers, who believes that two understandings are irreconcilable, frames the cave-birth as “opposed to the Nativity in a manger as described by Luke”. However, the birth does not happen “in a manger,” as he says, since it is a trough and it is too small for Mary to have sat in. Instead, the infant is said to have been placed in a manger after his birth. So there is no real discrepancy: there can be a manger inside a cave, and there likely often were, since caves were frequently used as stables and shelters for herders of various kinds. Gervers, “Iconography,” 579.

Western scholars⁹⁵⁵ have found the discrepancy disturbing and have found ways to remedy their discomfort.⁹⁵⁶ It has been suggested, for example, that the cult of Mithras influenced the tradition, or the story of Dionysus, which such scholars generally attribute to that god's supposedly "Asiatic" origins.⁹⁵⁷ In reality, using caves as stables both temporarily (for extra-urban sites) or even permanently (urban sites) was common practice in Mediterranean antiquity, especially in the Levant,⁹⁵⁸ so the presence of a manger inside a cave should not be cause for confusion. Nonetheless, scholars have wondered where this birth cave motif came from.

I argue that not only is the cave a possible and fitting location for the birth practically, but that it situates the birth of Jesus within a cultural-religious tradition that cherishes divine births in caves. In the Jewish tradition, caves were not associated with birth, but with death.⁹⁵⁹ Elsewhere in this dissertation, I have shown that in the Greek tradition, caves were associated with birth

⁹⁵⁵ By "western" here, I mean inhabitants of countries that are or have historically been aligned with the "western" Christian catholic and protestant traditions.

⁹⁵⁶ For an examination of modern depictions of the nativity in a cave or a barn in Croatian Catholicism (thus, the western church, but surrounded by neighbors within the eastern orthodox tradition), see Aleksandra Prčić, "Christmas Nativity Scenes of the Diocese of Subotica in the Light of Traditional Piety of Catholic Believers," *Ethnological Research* 28 (2023): 222–240.

⁹⁵⁷ e.g. Paul Carus, "The Nativity. Similarities in Religious Art. With Illustrations from Ancient Classical Buddhist and Christian Art," *The Open Court* 12 (1899): 710–730; M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God*, translated by Therese Megaw and Vincent Megaw, Chatto & Windus, 1963; Alfred Schütze, *Mithras-Mysterien und Urchristentum*, Verlag Urachhaus, 1972; Manfred Clauss, "Mithras und Christus," *Historische Zeitschrift* 243, no. 1 (1986): 265–286. cf. Justin Martyr, *Dial. Tryphone*, 51, where he complains that Mithraic priests are comparing the cave birth of Jesus to the cave/rock birth of Mithras by adopting the "prophecy" of Jesus' birth in a cave from Isaiah 33:16.

⁹⁵⁸ See, for example, Ahuva Sivan Mizrahi, Yitzhak Paz, and Yuval Yekutieli, "The Judean Shephelah 'Underworld' during the EB III: Socio-Economic, Political, and Symbolic Aspects of the Use of Subterranean Spaces," in *Archaeological Excavations and Research Studies in Southern Israel*, ed. Amir Golani, Daniel Varga, Gunnar Lehmann, and Yana Tchekhanovets, 2021; Patricia Martín and Carlos Tornero, "Sheepfold caves under study: A review of zooarchaeological approaches to old and new-fashioned research questions," in "Shepherds and Animal Husbandry, Origins, and Development: New Theoretical and Methodological Approaches," ed. Mónica Alonso-Eguiluz, Rosa María Albert, and Josep María Vergès, Special Issue, *Quaternary International* 683/684 (2024): 51–60.

⁹⁵⁹ On the importance of both natural caves and rock-cut tombs in the mortuary practices of ancient Israel/Judea, see David Ilan and Yorke Rowan, "The Judean Desert as a Chalcolithic Necropolis," *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 28, no. 2 (2015): 171–194; Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices, and Rites in the Second Temple Period*, Brill, 2004, *passim*; Mariusz Rosik, "Israelite (Iron Age II) Burial Customs in the Jerusalem Area in the Light of Biblical and Archeological Evidence," *Scriptura Sacra* 5, no. 5 (2001): 113–128.

(particularly divine births), but not with death. Several commentators over the years have deemed the cave unfit for a birth, and for the nativity cave's resemblance and possible proximity to the burial caves that were common in ancient Judea.⁹⁶⁰ To be fair, God (Yahweh) had never been "born" before in the Jewish tradition,⁹⁶¹ so what would a suitable place have been? The Greeks, however, were familiar with the idea of their gods being born, and the site of this activity or of the baby god's subsequent infancy was frequently a cave.

The testing of a woman's virginity by examining her genitals first appears in Greek in second century Christian texts such as this; there are no mentions of genital examinations in non- or pre-Christian Greco-Roman literature.⁹⁶² Michael Rosenberg has shown that this anatomical basis and the quasi-violent nature of the "bloody sheets" feature only in cultures where the book of Deuteronomy would have been a part of religious canon.⁹⁶³ Another type of chastity or virginity ordeal is attested both in Numbers and in here in the Protevangelium of James, the so-called "ordeal of the bitter water" in which the accused woman (or, in the case of the Protevangelium, both Mary and Joseph) swears her virginity or chastity and ingests a concoction given to her by a priest.⁹⁶⁴ If she is guilty of having been "defiled", the drink makes her very ill; if she is innocent, the drink causes no ill effect.⁹⁶⁵ In the Protevangelium of James, a priest uses a modified version of the "ordeal of bitter water" to evaluate both Joseph and Mary (15.1–16.3).

⁹⁶⁰ Smid, *Apocryphal*, 123–124.

⁹⁶¹ The pre-biblical gods of Semitic peoples in the Levant had genealogies, indicating that they were born and gave birth to other gods. However, in the Hebrew Bible, God does not receive a birth narrative and is depicted as eternal into both the past and the future.

⁹⁶² See Rosenberg, "Virginity and Violence," 21–24.

⁹⁶³ Rosenberg, "Virginity and Violence," 21–24.

⁹⁶⁴ Num. 5:11–31.

⁹⁶⁵ Several commentators and scholars have speculated that the "bitter water" mentioned in these ordeals is an abortifacient; this would thus indicate that the test is a macabre pregnancy test, and that the existence of an abortion thus indicates that the woman being tested had in fact been unfaithful to her husband. See, for example, Dennis Oldon, *Numbers: Interpretation: A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996: 36–37.

Thus, through this metaphysical or religious ordeal Mary is confirmed to be a virgin before giving birth to Jesus.

What is depicted in the Protevangelium as even more remarkable is the virginity test performed by Salome in the birth cave. This confirms that not only was Mary a virgin when impregnated, but that the act of giving birth did not cause the expected effect or damage to her reproductive organs. Within an understanding of virginity as the presence of the hymen, the assumption would have been that vaginally giving birth must have ruptured the membrane. Throughout Mary's birth story, however, it is clear that her pregnancy is not marred by the pains or fluids typically accompanying childbirth. The baby does not require initial bathing to remove lochial material. Although we do not get an actual report from Mary as to her experience with the moment of birth, the midwife's amazement at the cloud and light appearing suggest that it is this light force that miraculously transported Jesus outside Mary's womb, therefore leaving her hymen intact.

Salome then conducts the virginity test while Mary is inside the cave. Her and the other midwife's⁹⁶⁶ entry into the cave space to check on Mary and Jesus prefigures the choreography of Salome's examination, in which she must insert part of her hand into Mary's genitals (chapter 20.1). There is a layer of irony to the mechanics of the test: in order to ensure that penetration has not happened, Salome must penetrate Mary with her hand. The fact that this virginity test takes place inside the cave where she gave birth is important for the completion of the miracle and for the importance of the cave site. Thus, "the miracle of the account is not simply God's presence with Mary, nor is it the birth of an extraordinary child. Above all else, it is the preservation of God's holy virgin."⁹⁶⁷

⁹⁶⁶ Joseph is absent from the narrative from 19.2–20.4.

⁹⁶⁷ Mary F. Foskett, "Defying Nature," in *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity*, Indiana University Press, 2002, 159.

The information regarding the inspection of Mary's virginity and the birth of Jesus in a cave are attested in other second century sources: the cave birth is discussed in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 130) and the *Dialogue with Trypho* by Justin Martyr (ca. 155–160),⁹⁶⁸ while Clement of Alexandria discussed the virginity test of Mary around the turn of the century (ca. 203).⁹⁶⁹ With respect to Justin, Benz has shown that the debates raised and refuted by Justin Martyr indicate a popular and widespread tradition of Jesus' cave birth in Rome by the mid-2nd century.⁹⁷⁰ As scholars have observed, the "apologetic" tone of the work, like certain others of the infancy gospels, reflects popular disbelief in the divine and pure pedigree of Jesus and Mary. The Protevangelium of James, therefore, as well as other expegetical works that seek to add credence to the story of Jesus, must have been written at a time before the broader dissemination of Christian theology and belief throughout the Roman Empire. Scholars thus posit a composition date in the latter half of the 2nd century, long enough after these miraculous events that there could be detractors basing their disbelief in certain lines of argumentation which these Gospels thus aim to refute.⁹⁷¹ This opposition crested in the 2nd century; the Roman physician Celsus was one such polemicist.⁹⁷² To the evidence for the 2nd century date of the work, I would add the virginity ordeals in 2nd century Greco-Roman literature, reflecting concerns regarding virginity and sexual purity more broadly. Within this cultural framework, the testing of Mary's virginity inside a cave is merely another example of a broadspread trope connecting virginity with caves in a wide variety of 2nd century literature. Furthermore, the text's reliance on an

⁹⁶⁸ Justin Martyr refers to Jesus' birth in a cave in *Apology* 1.33 and *Dialogue* 78.5. However, Justin's account agrees with the story in Luke that Joseph could not find lodging for Mary in Bethlehem, whereas in the Protevangelium of James, they do not make it to Bethlehem before Mary's labor. For a comparison with Justin's accounts, see de Strycker, *La forme*, 412–417.

⁹⁶⁹ Clement of Alexandria mentions the virginity test of Mary at *Stromateis*, 7.16.

⁹⁷⁰ The *Dialogue with Trypho* has been dated to 155–160 CE. Benz, "Die heilige," 377.

⁹⁷¹ Ehrman and Plese, *Apocryphal*, 34–35.

⁹⁷² Ehrman and Plese, *Apocryphal*, 34. Celsus essentially argued that Mary had been impregnated not by the Holy Spirit, but by a Roman soldier, and that Mary and Joseph were poor, common laborers.

outwardly-observable component to female virginity can be dated during this earlier Christian period: by the 4th century, understandings of virginity will largely shift from a physical to a spiritual state, particularly in the Latin patristic tradition.⁹⁷³

Thecla

Roughly contemporary with the composition of the *Protevangelium of James*, as well as Aelian and Achilles Tatius' texts, is the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, dated to around 180 CE.⁹⁷⁴ Thecla is a maiden (παρθένος) in Iconium (modern Konya), engaged to a man named Thamyras (7).⁹⁷⁵ Hearing the apostle Paul preaching outside her window about the holiness of chastity (ἀγνεία), Thecla is enraptured (ἐάλωται, 10) by his teachings, and becomes a devotee⁹⁷⁶ thus putting off her impending wedding.⁹⁷⁷ After imploring Thecla in vain (9–10), Thamyras laments the loss of his would-be wife, Theocleia the loss of her child, and the maidens the loss of their mistress (10).⁹⁷⁸ Thecla leaves home to visit Paul in prison and refuses to testify against him

⁹⁷³ de Strycker 1961: 402–403; Jose A. de Aldama, “*Natus ex Maria Virgine*,” *Gregorianum* 42 (1961): 37–62.

⁹⁷⁴ Thecla is among the most studied women of early Christianity, and there is a long bibliography of scholarship. I provide here the most recent or influential: Linda Ann Honey, “Thekla: Text and Context with a First English Translation of the *Miracles*,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Calgary, 2011; Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study*, Harvard University Press, 2006; Korinna Zamfir, “The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*: ecclesiastical, social and political context,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 92.3 (2016): 355–380; The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, abbreviated *APTh*, also referred to as *Acts of Thecla*, abbreviated *ATh*, survives in many manuscripts from the 2nd to 5th centuries, some with slight variations. The events of *ATh* were expanded upon and novelized in the 5th century *Life and Miracles*, which consists of two books, the first a biography of Thecla and the second a compendium of miraculous anecdotes associated with the saint. Finally, the *Virtuous Deeds of the Holy Apostle and Protomartyr Thekla in the Myrtle Wood* (hereafter *Myrtle Wood*) is a 7th century text

⁹⁷⁵ “*Acta Pauli et Theclae*” 7, *Acta apostolorum apocrypha*, edited by Richard Adelbert Lipsius, H. Mendelssohn, 1959 [1891], page 240.

⁹⁷⁶ On ancient commentators' observations of eroticism of this episode in the *Lives and Miracles*, see Brian P. Sowers and Kimberly Passaro, “Christianity re-sexualised: intertextuality and the early Christian novel,” in *Exploring gender diversity in the ancient world*, edited by Allison Surtees and Jennifer Dyer, Edinburgh University Press, 2020: 188–189.

⁹⁷⁷ Thecla's neglect of household/wifely duties in favor of conversion to Christianity is a motif also seen in the Gospel of Luke (10:38–42), where Mary of Bethany becomes a disciple of Jesus and neglects to help her sister Martha with the domestic labor. On this motif in the New Testament, see Sowers and Passaro 2020: 187–188. Cf. the women of Thebes abandoning their housework to become followers of Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, 115–119.

⁹⁷⁸ Θάμυρις μὲν γυναῖχός ἀστοχῶν, Θεοχλεῖα δὲ τέκνου, αἱ δὲ παιδίσκαι κυρίας. The fashioning of Thecla as the “mistress” of this throng of maidens brings to mind the groups of virginal nymphs that accompany Persephone and Artemis.

(15–19). Her mother asks the governor to burn Thecla at the stake for her rejection of marriage and sexuality, so that her daughter’s execution would serve as a lesson to the other maidens of the town (20–21).⁹⁷⁹ However, a divine rainstorm puts out the fire (22); Thecla cuts her hair short⁹⁸⁰ then escapes to meet Paul in a cave tomb,⁹⁸¹ where she vows her virginity and loyalty to Paul and requests to be baptized, though he refuses (25). While traveling with Paul to Antioch, a certain Alexander attempts to rape her, but she fends him off and humiliates him (26). In retaliation, he orders that she be executed by wild beasts (27). But in the arena the lioness becomes docile and starts to lick her feet, disappointing the crowd (28). She is sentenced again the next day, and this time the lioness saves her from a male lion and a bear (33). Thecla dives into a pool in the arena and thus baptizes herself,⁹⁸² and a divine thunderbolt kills the attacking beasts (34). She is released by the governor out of his fear for her power (37–38). Thecla then dons the clothing of a man to travel to Myra to meet Paul (40).⁹⁸³

Some manuscripts of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* end there. In others, the story continues:⁹⁸⁴ she returns to the tomb near Iconium where she met Paul and his family, then, after

⁹⁷⁹ Theocleia says, Κατάκαιε τὴν ἄνομον, κατάκαιε τὴν ἄνυμφον ἐν μέσῳ θεάτρου, ἵνα τεῦσαι αἱ ὑπὸ τούτου διδαχθεῖσαι γυναῖκες φοβηθῶσιν., “Burn down the lawless one, burn down the unmarried one in the middle of the theater, so that the women in this place will be instructed and be afraid.” A longer speech from Theocleia is provided in the *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla* (1.12.15–24), including some of the same vocabulary as *ATH*, but expanding on the threat of Thecla’s actions on the “fatherland” and the shame of not having children.

⁹⁸⁰ Thecla’s assumption of masculine qualities may allude to a certain “Mary” in the Gnostic gospels (conflating Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene), whom Jesus transforms into a man so that she may keep the secrets of the gospel and serve as an itinerant preacher, Gospel of Thomas 114. See Sowers and Passaro 2020: 189–190.

⁹⁸¹ Many scholars interpret Pauls’ family tomb mentioned here as a cave. This is largely in keeping with the tradition of burial caves in the Levant and Asia Minor. See, for example, Honey 2011, 8; Stephen John Davis, *The cult of Saint Thecla: a tradition of women’s piety in late antiquity*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Clarendon Press, 2001: 6.

⁹⁸² Before jumping in, she says, “Νῦν καιρὸς λούσασθαι με.” καὶ ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν λέγουσα “τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὅστερ’ ἡμέρ’ α βαπτίζομαι.” “Now is the right time to cleanse myself.” And she threw herself in, saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ, on my last day, I baptize myself.”

⁹⁸³ ἀναζωσαμένη ῥάψαι τὸν χιτῶνα εἰς ἐπενδύτην σχήματι ἀνδριχῶ ἀπιῆλθεν: “girding herself to fashion the chiton into a cloak in a masculine style, she went away.” On female cross-dressing in early Christian hagiographies, see Stephen John Davis, “Crossed texts, crossed sex: intertextuality and gender in early Christian legends of holy women disguised as men,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2002): 1–36.

⁹⁸⁴ Manuscript G of *ATH* is the earliest extended account of this period of Thecla’s life.

“sealing up her whole body”,⁹⁸⁵ Thecla wanders around but is led by a bright cloud (νεφέλη φωτεινή) to a cave (σπηλαίον), where she lives an ascetic life (43). There, for seventy two years, she and her band of women followers work as healers while preaching the word of God.⁹⁸⁶ Thecla’s work is not welcomed by all, however, and the physicians associated with the local cult of Artemis are threatened by her presence and by her virginity, which they see as bringing her closer to the goddess and supplanting them.⁹⁸⁷ They rush to her cave and loom outside “like lions”⁹⁸⁸ and tell her they want to have sex with her and, ignoring her refusal, attempt this deed nonetheless.⁹⁸⁹ Thecla prays to God for aid, recalling the two earlier episodes where God has helped her to maintain her virginity. God says to her, “do not be afraid, for I am with you,” and a new chamber in the cave opens up. Thecla slips in and the stone closes behind her just before the men grab her, and all that is left is a scrap of her veil (μαφόριον).⁹⁹⁰ She therefore is praised as the first female martyr and apostle of God.⁹⁹¹

⁹⁸⁵ κατασφραγισαμένη ὅλον τὸ σῶμα αὐτῆς: “having sealed up her entire body,” manuscript *M*, following chapter 43, in Lipsius, *Acta apostolorum apocrypha*, page 269.

⁹⁸⁶ Manuscripts ABC and G, chapter 44, Lipsius, page 270–271.

⁹⁸⁷ καὶ εἴ τι ἂν αἰτήσῃ αὐτήν, ἀχούει αὐτῆς ὡς παρθένου οὔσης: *And if ever there was a reason, [Artemis] listened to her because she was a virgin*, manuscript G, chapter 44, Lipsius, page 271.

⁹⁸⁸ As scholars have noted, this is likely a parallel to the lions Thecla faced in the arena, *Ath* 33. The parallel is mentioned by Davis 2001: 44; Robin J. Greene, “(Un)Happily Ever After: Literary and Religious Tensions in the Endings of the Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla,” in *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*, edited by Marilia P. Futre Pinheiro, Judith Perkins, Richard Pervo, Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012: 29, n.28.

⁹⁸⁹ ἐβούλοντο χυβρίσαι αὐτήν. While βούλομαι in earlier Greek expresses will or preference, its contrast with (ἐ)θέλω in this passage (five occurrences within the previous six sentences) designated intent and action, rather than just will.

⁹⁹⁰ The μαφόριον was a type of veil originating from the Levant worn by noble women in the Byzantine period; it is mainly associated with the Virgin Mary, though it also appears in depictions of other holy women. Mary’s μαφόριον is typically adorned with three stars, each of which represents her virginity at a certain point of her life: before birth, during birth, and after birth. For more on this garment, see Virginia M. Kimball, “*Theotokos*, Ever-Virgin, Bearer of the Life-Giver: A Patristic, Iconographic Image of Virginity,” *Marian Studies* 58 (2007): 115–142.

⁹⁹¹ ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ πρωτομάρτυς καὶ ἀπόστολος καὶ παρθένος Θέκλα: *The first martyr and apostle and virgin of God*, chapter 44, Lipsius, page 272. There have been many disagreements since antiquity regarding the living or dead status of Thecla at the end of her legend, since the figure’s death at the hands of hostile forces is a requirement for martyrdom.

Traditional interpretations of the cave in Thecla's story focus on the cave as an indicator of intentional poverty and asceticism.⁹⁹² And it is true that for many later saints, caves become the ideal setting for religious hermitism.⁹⁹³ However, when viewed in conjunction with contemporary literature about virginity and caves and contrasted with hermitic practices, the connection between Thecla's cave and her virginity becomes the strongest reading.

Ascetic hermitism or hermitic asceticism is the practice of removing oneself from society and living with conscious denial of worldly pleasures in order to become closer to God. The first movement of ascetic hermitism in Christianity took the form of desert monasticism, which seems to originate in the tales of Saint Anthony the Great, who retreated to an uninhabited mountain region near the Red Sea at the end of the 3rd or beginning of the 4th century.⁹⁹⁴ The association of a Christian hermit living an ascetic lifestyle inside a cave was therefore not prevalent until around two hundred years after the *Acts of Thecla* was written. Thereafter, ascetics sought out caves and rocky crevices for their isolation and voluntary discomfort.

These two points— isolation and discomfort—were essential to these holy men. This reveals the discrepancy in motivations between Thecla and the later ascetic monks. As Belden Lane has observed, “The monk⁹⁹⁵ had to be totally separated from society... having no place in contemporary culture was crucial to his effectiveness.”⁹⁹⁶ Thecla's cave is not in a desolate wasteland and it is not, apparently, difficult to access. Instead, it is situated above the town of

⁹⁹² e.g. Greene 2012: 30; Davis 2001: 43.

⁹⁹³ Veronica della Dora, “Anti-landscapes: caves and apophysis in the Christian East,” *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 761–779.

⁹⁹⁴ della Dora “Anti-landscapes,” 773.

⁹⁹⁵ While most scholars, including Lane, default to masculine pronouns when talking about the “Desert Fathers”, many women also engaged in this practice and frequently lived in caves. See Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*, Paulist Press, 2001. The Desert Mothers who lived in caves include: Amma Sarah, Anastasia the Patrician, Athanasia of Antioch and Egypt, Euphrosyne of Alexandria, Blessed Maria the Harp Player, Blessed Woman Marina, Blessed Hermit Susan, and Syncletica of Palestine.

⁹⁹⁶ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, Oxford University Press, 1998: 163.

Iconium, within a reasonable distance from the town such that she receives frequent visitors. Some of the the local “well-born” women (τινες τῶν εὐγενίδων γυναιχῶν) come regularly⁹⁹⁷ to learn from Thecla and follow her way of life (ἀπετάζαντο τῷ βίῳ καὶ συνήσχουν αὐνῇ). She also performs miracles of healing and exorcism from her cave for the people of Iconium. These practices are therefore in direct opposition to the stated goal of the ascetic hermits. The hermits aim to be fully removed from society, while Thecla remains socially integrated despite her cave residence.

Apart from maintaining her virginity, Thecla is never said to have embraced any sort of ascetic or deprivational lifestyle. Like some later “Desert Mothers” and female martyrs, Thecla does engage in some light transvestism, though from the context of the story it is framed as a tactic to prevent unwanted male attention after she has been sexually assaulted. Otherwise, Thecla is described in female-gendered clothing and is said to have or wear jewelry, even after her conversion.⁹⁹⁸ Her offer to Paul to shave her head after first escaping from Iconium is perhaps the most “ascetic” move that she makes; among the stories of the Desert Mothers, cropping one’s hair was both a marker of embracing the ascetic lifestyle and a way to masquerade as a male monk.⁹⁹⁹ She is not said to have endured the alimentary hardships and resulting miracles usually depicted in such stories, such as a small supply of beans that never runs out.¹⁰⁰⁰ In all, there is nothing from the *Acts of Thecla* which suggests that her retreat to the cave above Iconium was an ascetic choice.

The male physicians’ attempt to enter Thecla’s cave to rape her has an obvious analogue in Aelian’s account of Atalanta. In both instances, there is a group of males who approach a cave

⁹⁹⁷ The text uses the imperfect, ἐμάνθανον, suggesting an iterative practice.

⁹⁹⁸ Honey “Thekla,” 59–64.

⁹⁹⁹ e.g. Swan, *Forgotten*, 42 (Amma Syncletica of Egypt), 91 (Mary the Anchorite), 94 (Matrona of Perge), 112 (Justina), and 125 (Susanna). Mary, Matrona, and Susanna used the short hair to present as men and enter monastic communities rather than convents.

¹⁰⁰⁰ This example is from the story of Blessed Maria the Harp Player, Swan, *Forgotten*, 88.

where a powerful virgin lives with explicit intent to sexually assault them.¹⁰⁰¹ The mechanisms by which the two virgins evade the threats differ. Atalanta herself shoots the centaurs down with her bow from the threshold of her cave, while Thecla escapes through a chamber that God opens up for her in the cave. Reading these responses within the cave-as-womb image, Thecla preserves her virginity by retreating further inside, while Atalanta reverses the penetrative violence by shooting arrows out. In both instances, the cave's bounded shelter and differentiation from the landscape aid in the maintenance of the women's sexual purity.

The characterization of Thecla's virginity differs from that of Mary. When she is chosen by God and married to Joseph, Mary is only twelve. Sources on Thecla, on the other hand, say that Thecla was eighteen when she became an acolyte of Paul. Mary's assertion of virginity is based on her innate holiness and her upbringing in the Temple, and therefore is bestowed upon her from outside sources. By contrast, Thecla chooses to maintain her virginity of her own volition, actively shunning its loss and her already-planned wedding.

Something they have in common, however, is the emphasis on their virginity as a source of their holiness and of their power. This is particularly explicit in the legend of Thecla: The male physicians complain that Thecla is usurping their business because she is favored by Artemis due to her virginity. Because this virginity is understood as the source of her holiness and healing power, the men thus intend to rob her of her abilities by stealing her virginity through rape. With Mary, her virginity and overall immaculate nature is both the reason for her selection as the mother of Jesus, and is also the enduring proof of her own power and that of God. Thus, while the characterizations of these maidens' virginal identities are individualized, in both instances, their virginity acts as proof of and as the source of their holiness and power.

¹⁰⁰¹ In the case of Thecla, it is often said that other maidens lived with her, but the episode of the physicians' infiltration does not mention anyone else in the cave with her.

In comparison with the pagan sources mentioned above, both Mary and Thecla are virginal in a manner different from depictions in most Greek and Latin literature. As we have seen, those texts tend to depict virgins as connected with wildness, with the expectation that marriage and the loss of virginity will tame them. Thus, Atalanta's adolescence is spent hunting with a bow and arrow, wearing animal skins, and shunning the company of all men.¹⁰⁰² Similarly, in Achilles Tatius, Rhodopis is framed as a devotee of Artemis not only in her virginity but also in the wildness of her ways. While Atalanta ultimately returns to her father's household and becomes "tamed" in her marriage, Rhodopis' extra-marital sexual encounter, purposefully set in a cave, leads to her swift punishment by transfiguration. These early Christian virgins are never associated with the "wildness" of these and other virginal figures from Greco-Roman literature. Nonetheless, Thecla is indeed connected with "Nature" by the interventions of God in her *agones*: a divine rainstorm quenches the fire meant to burn her, a lioness cuddles and then protects her (albeit from other, male beasts), and the living rock of her virginal cave opens up to swallow her to safety.

Literature Discussion

All the caves discussed in this section are situated outside settlements: Atalanta abandons civilization in favor of isolation in the wilderness and her cave; the sanctuary of Artemis in *Leucippe and Clitophon* is in a rural location;¹⁰⁰³ Mary gives birth to Jesus in a cave because they are well outside a settlement when she goes into labor; Thecla's cave is a stadion outside the city of Iconium.¹⁰⁰⁴ In every case, the distance from civilization is explicitly noted. This is not simply a matter of caves existing outside of settlements, as there were often caves inside cities, often

¹⁰⁰² With Atalanta wearing animal skins, cf. Thecla, whose escape through the cave's portal leaves behind a scrap of her *maphorion*, a woven garment.

¹⁰⁰³ ἦν γὰρ τῶν ἀγρῶν πλησίον τὸ τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος ἱερόν, "Now quite near to the country house was the temple of Artemis," Ach. Tat. *Leuc. and Clit.* 7.13.2.

¹⁰⁰⁴ ἔξω τῆς πόλεως ἀπὸ ἐνὸς σταδίου, *Ath.* 44, manuscript G.

ringing a *polis*' acropolis, if present. The placement of these caves outside a settlement are crucial for the plot of two of these (Atalanta and Mary). Temples of Artemis, such as that in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, were frequently situated in rural locations or borderlands, though her sanctuary in Iconium is connected to the town, and the famous temple of Artemis at Ephesus was as well.

In all four of these sources, the virgins' caves are associated with their power. Actually, the figure whose agency is least reflected in the cave is Mary, who had every element of her virginity and maternity thrust upon her by God and her mother. Virginity's association with caves may have some link with their "wild" or "uncivilized" connotation, as suggested also in the myth of Atalanta. The idea of the "virgin wilderness" or "virgin forest" is prevalent even today to describe land that is "unspoilt" by human involvement. The "wildness" of various characters in Greek mythology is illustrated by several tropes: eating uncooked food, wearing animal skins, and living in caves are some of the most prevalent.¹⁰⁰⁵ Crucially, however, this framing does not actually apply to the characterizations of these maidens. Atalanta's control over her landscape is emphasized. Leucippe has maintained her virginity by fighting off the savage advances of men and repeated near-death experiences. Mary's childhood, her time to be untamed, never existed, since she was always contained within the bounds of the "sanctuary" bedroom, the Temple, the cave. And Thecla exhibited control over her body even before she reached her cave by asserting her virginity and even baptizing herself. In all cases, these maidens are either sexually harassed or are framed as adulterers. And yet in each scenario, the cave acts as the locus of their

¹⁰⁰⁵ The prototypical example is Homer's attribution of "uncivilized" behaviors to the Cyclopes in *Odyssey* 9 (112–115), but other examples abound. Herodotus briefly mentions Ethiopian cave-dwellers (τρογλοδύται) who eat reptiles and speak like screeching bats (4.183); Diodorus Siculus talks about "the first men" (Τοὺς οὖν πρώτους τῶν ἀνθρώπων) who lived in caves, wore no clothing, and gathered, rather than cultivated, their food (1.8).

empowerment. From there, Atalanta and Thecla ward off sexual imposition and Leucippe and Mary prove their innocence.

The four primary texts I have discussed in this chapter were all written in the 2nd century CE. Before then, certain virginal figures were associated with caves, though in these instances, the connection with caves is perhaps due to the wild associations of virgins, rather than the state of virginity in itself. In those cases, virginity is often a feature of a broader category; The story of Demeter and Kore (or Despina) often features a cave, though this does not appear in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. In different versions of the story, caves are linked to maternity (as with Demeter the Black), sexuality (the passage to the Underworld and Persephone's transition from maiden to wife), and virginity (in conjunction with Persephone's childhood activities with Hecynia). However, there is an absence of *explicit* connections between virginity and caves in earlier Greek literature of the type we see in the 2nd century sources. Thus, we can see a chronological development in Greek conceptions of virginity and of caves as proxies for female anatomy. The allegory of the cave-as-womb in these texts relies heavily on the notions of boundaries, restriction of access, and the danger inherent in the violation of these concepts.

Lived Religion in Virginity Grottos: Girls, Snakes, and Caves

In the final portion of this chapter, I will examine evidence for women's lived religion in caves as it pertains to issues of virginity. Since virginity ordeals are the most explicit connection of caves and virginity, my discussion will begin there with the only solid identification of a virginity ordeal cave from antiquity, which is from Lanuvium beginning in approximately the third century BCE. I will then show how scholars have drawn connections between the rites at Lanuvium and cults at Athens and Epirus and provide a new examination of the evidence with a special focus on the role of caves in these rites.

Virginity Ordeals Involving Caves

The first matter to be discussed is the evidence for virginity ordeals involving caves like the dramatization in Book 8 of *Leucippe and Clitophon*. To the best of my knowledge and research, the sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesus does not have a known cave within or in its immediate vicinity.¹⁰⁰⁶ It is therefore probable that the episode in Achilles Tatius is purely fabricated, though drawing upon beliefs and practices regarding virginity that gained popularity in the second century.

First, a few disclaimers are in order. While the following section relies on “literary” sources, these authors focus on the actions and experiences of the girls performing the rites, rather than on episodes from mythology and narrative. This therefore provides information about lived religion. Additionally, the first ordeal being discussed is not from the Greek world, but from pre-Roman and Roman Italy, and can therefore not be specifically regarded as “Greek” religion. I fully recognize that Greek and Roman religion are separate, if intertwined, phenomena. My justifications for including it in this chapter are discussed below.

The earliest source for an explicit virginity ordeal is from the Latin poet Propertius in the 1st centuries BCE/CE.¹⁰⁰⁷ The ordeal is folded into a public rite involving a cave at Lanuvium.¹⁰⁰⁸

Propertius 4.8, 5–14

Lanuvium has enjoyed from of old the

¹⁰⁰⁶ There are several caves in the broader area, many of which are purported sites of import to early Christianity, such as the Cave of the Seven Sleepers. The episode with the Seven Sleepers dates to no earlier than the mid-3rd century CE.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Propertius 4.8, 5–14. Elsewhere in Propertius’ *Elegies*, particularly in Book 4, the poet uses depictions of ritual to contrast his interactions with his beloved Cynthia. On Propertius’ use of ritual, see for example, Jörg Rüpke, “Finding Religion in Reported Sensorial Experiences: A Case Study of Propertius 4.6,” in *Sensorium: the senses in Roman polytheism*, edited by Antón Alvar Nuño and Jaime Alvar Ezquerro, Brill, 2021; Vassiliki Panoussi, “Spinning Hercules: Gender, Religion, and Geography in Propertius 4.9,” in *Brides, mourners, Bacchae: women’s rituals in Roman literature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019; Robert Karacsony, *Properzens Vertumnus-Elegie (4,2) und das Dichtungsprogramm des vierten Buches: ein intertextu*, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2018.

¹⁰⁰⁸ On the archaeology of Lanuvium, see Pino Chiarucci, *Lanuvium*, Collana di studi sull’Italia antica, Paleari Editrice, 1983.

*Lanuvium annosi vetus est tutela draconis:
hic tibi tam rarae non perit hora morae.
qua sacer abripitur caeco descensus hiatu,
hac penetrat (virgo, tale iter omne cave!)
ieiuni serpentis honos, cum pabula poscit
annua et ex ima sibila torquet humo.
ille sibi admotas a virgine corripit escas:
virginis in palmis ipsa canistra tremunt.
talìa demissae pallent ad sacra puellae,
cum temere anguino creditur ore manus.
si fuerunt castae, redeunt in colla parentum,
clamantque agricolae ‘fertilis annus erit.’*

protection of an ancient serpent (an hour spent here on so infrequent a visit is well worth while). Where the sacred slope is reft by a dark chasm, at that point the offering to the hungry serpent makes its way—maiden, beware of all such paths—when he demands his annual tribute and hurls hisses from the depths of the earth. He seizes the morsel held out to him by the virgin: the very basket trembles in the virgin’s hands. Maidens sent down to such a rite turn pale when blindly entrusting their hand to the serpent’s lips. If they have been chaste, they return to embrace their parents, and the farmers cry: ‘It will be a fruitful year.’

While most commentators understand the cave as a proxy for a mouth,¹⁰⁰⁹ I argue that it also has a vaginal character, and that the passage can also be read with connotations of sexuality. Even beyond the fact that the rite involves a supposed virgin entering a cave, several details support this reading. Foremost is the importance of the snake, which is known to have had phallic associations.¹⁰¹⁰ The grammar of lines 8–9 is debated, specifically whether *virgo* is the nominative subject of *penetrat*,¹⁰¹¹ and therefore in apposition to *honos*, or whether *virgo* is a vocative address within a direct command with the imperative *cave*, “beware!”, and therefore *honos* is the sole subject of *penetrat*.¹⁰¹² In either reading, the semantic subject of *penetrat* must be the girl performing the rite, which makes the girl’s identification with *honos* “offering” rather foreboding.¹⁰¹³ The vocative warning to the virgin, combined with the connotation of her as a gift

¹⁰⁰⁹ e.g. Paolo Fedeli, *Properzio Elegie*, Volume II, Mondadori, 2022: 354.

¹⁰¹⁰ On the phallic character of snakes, see above, note 920. Additionally, Evy Johanne Håland, “Saints and Snakes: Death, Fertility, and Healing in Modern and Ancient Greece and Italy,” *Performance and Spirituality* 2, no. 1 (2011): 111–151. Håland notes that in the modern town of Cocullo, Italy, loaves of bread also hold sexual connotations, 120, note 14.

¹⁰¹¹ While it is tempting to read sexual innuendo into the verb *penetrat*, Adams asserts that *penetro* did not have such connotations in Classical Latin, J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, Duckworth, 1982: 151.

¹⁰¹² Most commentators understand *virgo* as the vocative, and editors have punctuated the sentence as such.

¹⁰¹³ Since the girl is meant to give the bread to the snake, if you take *virgo* as a vocative it is possible that *honos* refers to the bread and thus the subject of the verb; however, the use of *penetro* with an unmoving, inanimate subject in a literal sense of entering a place is unattested.

for the sexually threatening inhabitant of the cave recalls (or, chronologically speaking, prefigures) the ordeal in Achilles Tatius, wherein Clitophon tells Leucippe to be careful because Pan the virgin-lover poses a sexual and—in the case of a negative outcome of the test—existential threat. Propertius here describes the snake as *ieiunus*, “hungry.” This obviously fits into the performance of presenting the bread to the snake, but hunger also has sexual connotations in Latin literature.¹⁰¹⁴ A reading of the scene merely in its literal sense of hunger neglects the importance of sexuality, or lack thereof, in the rite itself. In other words, if there were no connotations of sexuality at all in the passage, why the emphasis on the requirement and confirmation of a girl’s sexual status?

Propertius’ allusion in *Elegies* 4.8 is, therefore, the earliest written source for a virginity ordeal, let alone one involving a cave. He wrote a century or more before Aelian, Achilles Tatius, and the early Christian sources discussed in this chapter. Aelian, whose *Atalanta* mini-novella within his *Historical Miscellany* was discussed above, also wrote a treatise, *On Animals*, in the 2nd century. In his discussion of the divinatory powers of the snake, he describes in detail the rites likely portrayed in Propertius’ poem:

Aelian, *On Animals*, 11.16

οὐκοῦν ἐν τῷ Λαουινίῳ ἄλλος τιμᾶται μέγα
καὶ δασύ, καὶ ἔχει πλησίον νεῶν Ἑρας
Ἀργολίδος. ἐν δὲ τῷ ἄλλῳ φωλεός ἐστι μέγας
καὶ βαθύς, καὶ ἔστι κοίτη δράκοντος.
παρθένοι τε ἱεραὶ νενομισμέναις ἡμέραις
παρίαςιν ἐς τὸ ἄλλος ἐν τοῖν χεροῖν φέρουσαι
μάζαν καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τελαμῶσι
κατελιγμένοι· ἄγει δὲ αὐτὰς εὐθύωρον ἐπὶ τὴν
κοίτην τοῦ δράκοντος πνεῦμα θεῖον, καὶ

Well, there is a sacred grove in Lavinium¹⁰¹⁵
of wide area and thickly planted, and near by
is a shrine to Hera of Argolis. And in the
grove there is a vast and deep cavern, and it is
the lair of a Serpent. And on certain fixed
days holy maidens enter the grove bearing a
barley-cake in their hands and with their eyes
bandaged. And divine inspiration leads them
straight to the Serpent’s resting-place, and
they move forward without stumbling and at a
gentle pace just as if they saw with their eyes

¹⁰¹⁴ On the twin appetites of hunger and sex in the ancient world, see Veronika E. Grimm, “On Food and the Body,” in *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, edited by David S. Potter, Blackwell, 2006.

¹⁰¹⁵ Aelian has erred in his Italian geography. The rites of the serpent in the cave were set in Lanuvium, not Lavinium.

ἀπταιστώσας προΐασι βάδην καὶ ἡσυχῇ, ὥσπερ οὖν ἀκαλύπτους ὀρῶσαι τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς. καὶ ἐὰν μὲν παρθένοι ᾧσι, προσίεται τὰς τροφὰς <ᾗτε> ἄγνὰς ὁ δράκων καὶ πρεπούσας ζῶω θεοφιλεῖ. εἰ δὲ μή, ἄπαστοι μένουσι, προειδότες αὐτοῦ τὴν φθορὰν καὶ μεμαντευμένου. μύρμηκες δὲ τὴν μάζαν τὴν τῆς διακορηθείσης ἐς μικρὰ καταθρύψαντες, ὡς ἂν εὐφορα αὐτοῖς εἴη, εἴτα ἐκφέρουσιν ἔξω τοῦ ἄλλους, καθαίροντες τὸν τόπον. γνωρίζεται τε ὑπὸ τῶν ἐπιχωρίων τὸ πραχθέν, καὶ αἱ παρελθοῦσαι ἐλέγχονται, καὶ ἡ γε τὴν παρθενίαν αἰσχύνουσα ταῖς ἐκ τοῦ νόμου κολάζεται τιμωρίαις.

unveiled. And if they are virgins, the Serpent accepts the food as sacred and as fit for a creature beloved of god. Otherwise the food remains untasted, because the Serpent already knows and has divined their impurity. And ants crumble the cake of the deflowered maid into small pieces so that they can be carried easily, and transport them without the grove, cleansing the spot. And the inhabitants get to know what has occurred and the maidens who came in are examined, and the one who has shamed her virginity is punished in accordance with the law.

Aelian's account is much more detailed than Propertius' poetic reference. In Propertius, the poet seems to imply that the rite is performed by an individual *virgo*, while Aelian described a group of παρθένοι participating one after the other.

The biggest discrepancy between the two accounts is the reported focus or purpose of the rite. In Propertius, the scenario emphasizes a public function with the promise of widespread agricultural fertility.¹⁰¹⁶ Aelian's account has no explicit mention of fertility or any other public-facing concerns for prosperity. The community members are *interested* in the outcome of the rites, as Aelian states toward the end of the section (γνωρίζεται τε ὑπὸ τῶν ἐπιχωρίων τὸ πραχθέν), but there are no farmers rejoicing the return of the girl. Instead, Aelian focuses on the negative test result, while Propertius conspicuously avoids that outcome.

That in Propertius the girl's return is the indicator of her virginity suggests that, on the contrary, a sign of her non-virginity is her disappearance. This mirrors the result of the negative outcome in the virginity ordeal in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, wherein the crowd must disperse and the woman is never seen again. Aelian's version, however, does not mention or even imply through omission such a death penalty. Rather, the women who emerge from the rite are

¹⁰¹⁶ e.g. *clamantque agricolae 'fertilis annus erit.'*

cross-examined (ἐλέγχονται, presumably against each other, since in Aelian they participate in this rite as a group). Those who are “guilty” are punished by law (note the legal language: ἐκ τοῦ νόμου... τιμωρία), rather than some sort of divine disappearance.

Propertius and Aelian’s accounts of the religious associations of young girls and snakes at Lanuvium and the antiquity of the rite are attested numismatically: coins minted in the mid-1st century BCE depict a girl feeding a large snake; on the obverse is a profile of the patron goddess of Lanuvium, Iuno Sospita, with her unique goatskin garment.¹⁰¹⁷ The snake iconography of Iuno Sospita is not present on materials from Lanuvium of the 5th or 4th centuries BCE, suggesting that the herpetological association was a later introduction to the native cult.¹⁰¹⁸

Unlike many cult caves attested in ancient literature, modern scholars have identified a likely candidate for this cave of the serpent at Lanuvium. In fact, there are two candidates. Within the *temenos* of the sanctuary of Iuno Sospita, at the northwest corner of the site is a chamber carved out of the stone which excavators dubbed the “cave of the serpent” (‘antro del serpente’). Excavations of the cave were conducted in 2009 and 2014.¹⁰¹⁹ The chamber is entirely hand-hewn and is framed by a monumental entrance. Inside, the rock has been shaped to form channels for the movement of water, but there was no sign of ritual activity inside the cave. Its position also does not conform to our ancient sources, which place it in a grove adjacent to the sanctuary, rather than within it. Most scholars now agree that this is likely not the cave mentioned by Propertius and Aelian, and was likely part of a hydraulic system.¹⁰²⁰

¹⁰¹⁷ Coins of the Roman Republic (CRR), RRC 412/1, 64 BCE; 472/3, 45 BCE. The same iconography is attested on tesserae of the Lanuvian youth organization from the mid-1st century CE. On these coins and tesserae, see Rianne Hermans, “Juno Sospita and the *draco*: Myth, Image, and Ritual in the landscape of the Alban Hills,” in *Valuing Landscape in Classical Antiquity: Natural Environment and Cultural Imagination*, edited by Jeremy McNerney and Ineke Sluiter, Brill, 2016: 213–214.

¹⁰¹⁸ Hermans, “Juno,” 214.

¹⁰¹⁹ Luca Attenni and Giuseppina Ghini, “La stipe votiva in località Pantanacci,” *Lazio e Sabina* 10 (2014): 153–161.

¹⁰²⁰ Hermans, “Juno,” 216.

However, in 2012, 1.5 kilometers away from the sanctuary of Iuno Sospita archaeologists interrupted illegal looting and conducted rescue excavations that revealed a natural cave enlarged by human intervention, the Antro di Pantanacci [Fig. 3.1]. This natural grotto was also outfitted with hewn channels and basins. Unlike the so-called *antro del serpente*, however, the Antro di Pantanacci yielded abundant votive material.

The items recovered from the cave date from the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE and mostly consist of ceramics (including miniature *skyphoi* and miniature cups¹⁰²¹), small bronzes, and figurines. Dining was a likely activity in the cave based on ash layers, animal bones, oyster shells, and seeds.¹⁰²² Anatomical votives make up a significant portion of the material from the cave [Fig. 3.2].¹⁰²³ Uteri were the most abundant shape, comprising 25% of all anatomical votives or 8% of the total number of items from the cave. Female-specific shapes (uteri, vulvae, breasts) comprise 34% of the anatomical votives, which is 11% of the total of items from the cave. Male shapes (including phalloi and male torsos) made up 22% of the anatomical votives.¹⁰²⁴ These numbers make it obvious that issues of fertility were prominent at this site.

Regarding the individual findspots of these votives, Hermans notes, “what is remarkable about these offerings is that they were preserved in the context in which they were placed: in and near the cavities in the walls, or bundled in groups on the floor of the cave, surrounded by stones to keep them from moving. Some of the ceramic objects seem to have been laid directly on the floor stones, where water flowed over them.”¹⁰²⁵

¹⁰²¹ Attenni and Ghini, “La stipe,” 156.

¹⁰²² Attenni and Ghini “La stipe,” 157.

¹⁰²³ Hermans, “Juno,” 220; Attenni and Ghini “La stipe,” 156. These calculations of the anatomical votives are based on the pie chart of votive types in Attenni and Ghini “La stipe,” 158.

¹⁰²⁴ The other 56% of anatomical votives are of non-gender-specific shapes.

¹⁰²⁵ Hermans, “Juno,” 220.

Also found near the entrance to the cave were three cylindrical peperino blocks with shallow incised decorations in the form of reptilian scales [Fig. 3.3].¹⁰²⁶ Excavators have thus identified what was likely a large monumental snake measuring around three meters in length. It is unclear whether the statue would have been inside the cave in antiquity, as would be expected from the anecdotal accounts of Propertius and Aelian.

We can therefore conclude that there was indeed a cultic association between virginal girls, snakes, and caves at Lanuvium that existed at least by the 1st century BCE.¹⁰²⁷ It is worth noting, however, that while the votive objects in the cave date to the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, our earliest attestation of the rite with the snake is not until the 1st century. There is, therefore, a gap of at least a century between the end of the votive materials and the earliest literary reference. Was the cult still active when Propertius recorded the ritual in his elegy? He does mention that the rite is old (*vetus*, 5), but uses present tense verbs throughout his description. It is possible that this is a vivid present usage, but within his elegiac plot, his beloved Cynthia was supposed to be at these rites while Propertius, feeling abandoned by her, hosted a party.¹⁰²⁸ This narrative suggests that at the time of his writing in the last decades of the 1st century BCE, the virginity ordeal or rite at Lanuvium was still practiced. I believe it is probable also that the rites were practiced nearly two hundred years later when Aelian recorded them. Given his higher degree of detail and even slight contradiction to the rites as transmitted poetically by Propertius, it is clear that Aelian did not use Propertius as a source, or at least not his only source. It is possible, even, that Aelian himself had been to Lanuvium, since he was from nearby Praeneste. He probably did not even need an earlier written source to base his account on, especially if the

¹⁰²⁶ Attenni and Ghini “La stipe,” 157–158; Hermans, “Juno,” 221.

¹⁰²⁷ I arrive at this approximation through the absence of snake imagery at Lanuvium before the 3rd century and the dating of the finds from the cave discussed here.

¹⁰²⁸ Prop. 4.8.15–16.

rites were still in practice in his day and had the public spectacle quality described by both authors.

So, how do we explain the gap between the end of the cave's (extant) votive dedications and the rites described by sources from the late 1st century and later, particularly when the presence of a monumental snake sculpture suggests accurate identification of said cave? With the apparently abrupt end of votive practice after or around the end of the 3rd century BCE, it is clear that there was some change in the nature of the cult. But the absence of extant votives is not necessarily indicative of a lack of cult activity. The rites described by Propertius and Aelian required offerings that would not have been preserved to the present day: bread or cakes (especially if they were eaten by the snake!) and perhaps wicker baskets.¹⁰²⁹ I believe that the most likely explanation is that the votive offerings recovered from the cave do not directly correspond to the rites or cult of the snake and virgins. It is likely not a coincidence that the 3rd century BCE is when the snake iconography emerges at the sanctuary of Iuno Sospita. The installment of the snake-virginity cult in the cave, possibly an imported notion, would therefore have supplanted the earlier cult that possibly concerned healing and fertility, based on the large proportion and types of anatomical votives.¹⁰³⁰ The palimpsestic re-use of sacred spaces between cults or even between entire religious orders is attested throughout human history, as discussed in this dissertation's introduction.

As mentioned above, the rites at Lanuvium are not, strictly speaking, "Greek" religion. However, I find it relevant to mention here for a few reasons. First, it is extremely likely that this ritual has some relationship with the *Arrhephoria*, which I will discuss in the next section. However, our admittedly sparse descriptions of the *Arrhephoria* do not include the aspect of the

¹⁰²⁹ The coins mentioned above in note 1017 depict the girls holding baskets, presumably holding the food offering for the snake. Wicker baskets are also crucial to the ritual inside the cave in the *Arrhephoria*.

¹⁰³⁰ On these, see above, page 290.

virginity test that is attested twice in literature and in very different manners. The earliest attestation for a virginity test in a cave is, as mentioned, Propertius 4.8. Virginity ordeals are occasionally mentioned before then by Greek authors, but they are among non-Greek peoples¹⁰³¹ and are never associated with caves. The excavated cave at Lanuvium is, then, our only known archaeological parallel for any sort of virginity ordeal.¹⁰³²

Secondly, the political and, increasingly, religious context of the Mediterranean basin by the 2nd century CE was largely Roman. Local variations still persisted in many places, but emperors deliberately installed Roman cults in their conquered provinces and thereby spread Roman religion further outside Italy. While the ordeals examined in this chapter were certainly not a major aspect of Roman cult, virgins and virginal priestesses were integral to Roman religion well into the Christian period.¹⁰³³ Combined with occasional evidence for virginity ordeals outside the Greek world, the rise of such tests in the literature of the 2nd century must be viewed in their Roman political and religious contexts as much as their Greek or local contexts. The archaeological evidence for this virginity test in a cave in Latium thus bolsters the apparent veracity of cave-based virginity tests recorded in later literature.

Finally, it has been posited by several scholars that the serpentine aspect of the cult of Iuno Sospita is derived from similar snake rites known from the Greek world.¹⁰³⁴ The fact that the snake did not join Iuno Sospita's iconographic repertoire until the 3rd century (some 200 years after the earliest cult activity at the site) lends some credence to it being an outside

¹⁰³¹ Young women of Libya were said to fight in order to determine which among them were still virgins, Herodotus 6.180. Sissa, "Hymen," 73.

¹⁰³² One possible exception might be the Cave/Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem. However, there is no evidence that ritual practice included virginity ordeals, and the association is only in the reported story associated with the cave.

¹⁰³³ The Vestal cult was discontinued at the end of the fourth century. See Stefano Conti, "Tra integrazione ed emarginazione: le ultime Vestali," *Studia Historica Historia Antiqua* 21 (2003): 209–222.

¹⁰³⁴ On these, see Daniel Ogden, *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

influence. Indeed, many scholars, including Brule, believe that this rite in Italy had a genetic connection with the *Arrhephoria* in Athens, given three main similarities: the participation of virgins, the visit to a cave, and the presence of a sacred snake.¹⁰³⁵ It is this rite that I will examine next.

The *Arrhephoria* at the Cave of Aglauros

The enigmatic *Arrhephoria* ritual has long puzzled scholars. The only aspects of the rite that everyone seems to agree on are the participation of elite-born virgins, their transportation of some sacred containers, and that it took place on the Athenian Acropolis. Nearly every other aspect of the ritual is a matter of debate and uncertainty, in particular the following main questions: 1) Where on the Acropolis did the ritual take place? 2) Based on the name, *Arrhephoria*, what was being “carried” (-*phor*-) by the girls?¹⁰³⁶ 3) What connection did the rite have with the myths and cults of Athena, Aglauros, Pandrosos, and Erichthonius? 4) What were the central purposes or concerns of the cult? And, for my purposes, 5) What relationship did the rites have with the caves on the slopes of the Acropolis?

Unlike some cults and sites examined in this dissertation, scholars have already frequently considered the literary and archaeological evidence together. Previous investigations have considered the literary and archaeological evidence in tandem, or the literary evidence of the *Arrhephoria* with that of the Lanuvium cult. I have not yet found a study integrating all of these sources; most scholarly interest in the *Arrhephoria* took place in the 1970s and 1980s, while excavation of the Lanuvium cult cave took place only in 2014. Additionally, like most of the cults I have examined, few scholars have interrogated specifically the role of the cave in the

¹⁰³⁵ Brule 1987: 95–98.

¹⁰³⁶ The debate about the meaning of *arrhe*- stretches back to the Hellenistic period. Schol. Ar. *Lys.* 642 (attr. Philochorus, 3rd c. BCE); *Etym. Mag.* 149.14, entry for *Arrephoroi*; Hesychios, entry for *Errhephoroi*; Suda, entry for *Arrhephoria*.

ritual. How does the subterranean aspect of the ritual reify aspects of the associated myths, and what connection is there, if any, between the cave in this rite and female puberty or virginity? First, I will provide and briefly discuss the few ancient passages that discuss the rite. I will then present the current state of the archaeological evidence for these rites on the Acropolis. Next, I will bring this evidence into conversation with comparative evidence for the rites at Lanuvium in both archaeological and literary dimensions, with special consideration for the role of the cave in both rites.

The scant ancient literary evidence for the *Arrhephoria* has tantalized scholars; there is enough description from later times to pique interest, but not enough to answer our most essential questions. Part of the obscurity of this rite's details is likely due to the fact that it was performed by two young girls, aged seven to eleven.¹⁰³⁷ Thus, the male authors of most of our extant literature had no firsthand experience of the ritual. Additionally, since only two girls per year were chosen, a very small percentage of the female population were involved. In fact, the obscurity was likely intentional: the ritual seems to have valued secrecy, since the girls carried their loads in closed baskets and were not permitted to look inside. Barbara Goff has argued that even if Pausanias, in his 2nd century CE anthropological investigations, had met with and questioned individuals who had taken part in the rite, there are the twin issues of chronological distance from the cult's archaic, classical, and Hellenistic forms attested elsewhere only obliquely and of 'uncooperative' witnesses "reluctant to divulge the secret to the prying ethnographer from Lydia." After all, "why inform the anthropologist if he can't work it out for himself?"¹⁰³⁸

¹⁰³⁷ Schol. Ar. *Lys.* 642.

¹⁰³⁸ Barbara Goff, *Citizen Bacchae: Women's Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece*, University of California Press, 2004, 101–2.

The identification of the important subterranean area mentioned by Pausanias was debated for several decades during and after the American School of Classical Studies at Athens' excavations of the Acropolis and its slopes.¹⁰³⁹ The caves and open-air sanctuaries on the North Slope of the Acropolis have several votive niches carved into the rock face and the areas yielded cult material both apparently *in situ* and fragments fallen from atop the Acropolis.¹⁰⁴⁰ Broneer conformed to earlier identification of one of these caves on the North Slope as the "Aglaurion" due to its proximity to a staircase and to the open-air sanctuary of Aphrodite and Eros.¹⁰⁴¹ A few years later, Broneer's excavation of the "Cave on the East Slope of the Acropolis" [Fig. 3.4] yielded scant archaeological material from the cave.¹⁰⁴² In fact, the only archaeological material was found in the two meters of dirt dump from earlier excavations on the Acropolis.¹⁰⁴³ Before modern excavations, then, the cave was "practically empty" [Fig. 3.5].¹⁰⁴⁴ In front of the cave, however, the bed of a stele was found cut into the rock [Fig. 3.6], and eight meters north is a "rock-cut stairway leading to a rectangular bedding in the rock, probably for an altar" [Fig. 3.7]. Based on the cutout for a stele and the stairway, Broneer concludes that the cave was used in antiquity.¹⁰⁴⁵ The area was largely forgotten after that for several decades. Then, as told by George Dontas, "on the 16th of April, 1980 there came to light at the bottom of the newly dug

¹⁰³⁹ e.g. Oscar Broneer, "Excavations on the North Slope of the Acropolis in Athens, 1931–1932," "1933–1934," "1937," and "1938," *Hesperia* 2, no. 3 (1933): 329–417; 4, no. 2 (1935): 109–188; 7, no. 2 (1938): 161–263; "Eros and Aphrodite on the North Slope of the Acropolis in Athens," *Hesperia* 1 (1932): 31–55; "Recent Discoveries on the North Slope of the Acropolis in Athens," *AJA* 42, no. 1 (1938): 161–164; "Discoveries on the North Slope of the Acropolis, 1938," *AJA* 42, no. 4 (1938): 445–450; and "Excavations on the Slopes of the Acropolis, 1939," *AJA* 44, no. 2 (1940): 252–256.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Marble votive plaques, numerous inscriptions, votive reliefs, and sculpture. On this, see Broneer, "Excavations... 1933–1934."

¹⁰⁴¹ Broneer, "Eros and Aphrodite," 51. He cites Panagiotis Kavvadias, "Τοπογραφικά Αθηνῶν κατὰ τὰς περὶ τὴν Ἀκρόπολιν ἀνασκαφάς," *Αρχ. Εφ.* (1897): 26–32.

¹⁰⁴² Oscar Broneer and M. Z. Pease, "The Cave on the East Slope of the Acropolis," *Hesperia* 5, no. 2 (1936): 247–272.

¹⁰⁴³ 36 small pottery fragments ranging from the Early Mycenaean period to the early 5th century BCE were recovered from an immense volume of soil, Broneer and Pease, "Cave," 254–272.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Broneer and Pease, "Cave," 250.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Broneer and Pease, "Cave," 253.

trench under the large cave on the east side of the Akropolis a find so remarkable that [excavators] were obliged to review the whole project.”¹⁰⁴⁶ The find in question was an inscribed stele and base *in situ* containing a 3rd century decree regarding the rites and priestess of Aglauros [Fig. 3.8].¹⁰⁴⁷ Dontas therefore concludes that the area of the cave should be understood as the “true” Aglaurion and the site of the *Arrhephoria*, and his conclusions have been generally accepted. I too agree with the Dontas’ identification of the area and the cave as the Aglaurion, but would like to examine his identification in conjunction with Broneer’s excavation of the cave, the literary attestations, and the comparative evidence.

I contend that the intended secrecy of the rite factored into its location and timing. If the myth being reified by the ceremony is indeed that of the Cecropides and Erichthonius, then the geographic situation on the Acropolis is the obvious and perhaps necessary choice. While in general the Athenian Acropolis and its slopes are not particularly suited to covert activity, the East Slope would have been the best option for those wanting secrecy. It is by far the most inaccessible area on the Acropolis due to its precipitous angle, and to this day, the cave is primarily accessed via a staircase descending from the Acropolis.¹⁰⁴⁸ Access to this cave, then, is as restricted as possible in an otherwise extremely public setting. During daylight hours, the large cave is prominent when looking at the Acropolis from below, even from quite far away. The ritual’s nocturnal setting, then, was possibly a response to the need for privacy during a ritual that took place in a very visible, if inaccessible, spot.

Other cult caves that I have discussed in this dissertation, as well as the other cult caves on the Acropolis, not only yielded caches of votive objects inside and/or in front of the cave, but

¹⁰⁴⁶ George S. Dontas, “The True Aglaurion,” *Hesperia* 52 (1983): 50.

¹⁰⁴⁷ On the inscription, see Dontas, “True,” 52–57.

¹⁰⁴⁸ On the inaccessibility of this cave, see Broneer, “Excavations... 1931–1932,” 416. While the publication title refers to the North Slope, in the final few pages Broneer notes that the East Slope had not yet been investigated, prefiguring his later excavations there, 415–417.

many show other aspects of cult use in the form of burn layers or carved niches for votives and cult statues. Broneer's excavation and the modern appearance of the cave display none of these objects or modifications. The cave's inaccessibility from the *peripatos* would have limited casual encounters with the sacred space that likely contributed to the popularity of the *peripatos* cave shrines of Pan, Apollo, and the open-air sanctuary of Aphrodite and Eros. Accordingly, there is no evidence for personal dedications at this cave.

The sterility of this cave is compelling when compared with the lack of votives in the Lanuvium cave after the introduction of the serpentine cult. I suggested above that based on literary evidence, the offerings to the sacred snake at Lanuvium would have been organic and therefore long since disintegrated. I believe the same can be said of this cave, even though the nature of the offerings in the Arrhephoria was unknown by our ancient sources. All we know is that these offerings were borne in some type of container, probably a wicker basket. The wicker would certainly not have survived. Scholars have speculated about the contents of the baskets deposited by the girls. Robertson provides a neat summary of these theories:¹⁰⁴⁹

Live snakes and figures of young things, perhaps including a human child (Harrison); or of figures of snakes and of male members and also pine boughs (Deubner...); or of ithyphallic cakes (Adrados); or of a live infant, after they first brought dew to impregnate the earth or tokens to lay with the baby or snakes to symbolize the act of procreation (Cook, Hooker, Burkert respectively).

¹⁰⁴⁹ Noel Robertson, "The Riddle of the Arrhephoria at Athens," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 87 (1983): 241. He is citing here: Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1903; Ludwig Deubner, *Attische Feste*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962; Arthur Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, Vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, 1940; Francisco Rodrigues Adrados, "Sobre las arreforias o erreforias," *Emerita* 19, no. 1 (1951): 117–133; G. Hooker, *Parthenos and Parthenon*, Clarendon Press, 1963; Walter Burkert, "Kekropidensage und Arrhephoria: Vom Initiationsritus zum Panathenaenfest," *Hermes* 94 (1966): 1–25; and *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, tr. Peter Bing, University of California Press, 1983.

Some of these suggestions are probably more likely than others.¹⁰⁵⁰ I think it unlikely that figurines in stone or terracotta would have been used, since these materials would have survived and over the hundreds of years of cult practice, but the cave was completely sterile once excavators sounded below the modern dirt dump. I believe the most likely answer is that the offerings were organic.

In the second century CE, Athenaeus records the detail of a certain type of bread that is made “for the *arrhephoroi*,” τὸν ἀνάστατον... ὃς τοῖς ἀρρηφόροις γίνεται.¹⁰⁵¹ This *anastatos*, from the adjectival form of ἀνίσταμαι, “to rouse” or “rise”, is presumably a very light (leavened) bread. From Athenaeus’ mention, it is not clear whether this bread was food or an offering. Further clarification is provided by a *scholion* on Lucian’s *Dialogue of the Courtesans*. In discussing the *Arrhephoria*, the scholar says: Ἀναφέρονται δὲ κἀνταῦθα ἄρρητα ἱερὰ ἐκ στέατος τοῦ σίτου κατεσκευασμένα, μιμήματα δρακόντων καὶ ἀνδρείων σχημάτων, “The things brought up are sacred *arrheta*, prepared from floury dough and shaped like snakes and male anatomy.” While there is certainly a chronological and possibly cultural gulf between this unknown commentator and the rites of these girls in Athens, what he presents is certainly possible based on the comparative evidence. In both literary attestations of the Lanuvium cult, the girls involved in the rite brought food—bread or cakes—to the snake that dwelled in the cave. Finally, a report of another similar rite is handed down by Aelian as well in which food (if not specifically “bread”) is offered to the snake:

¹⁰⁵⁰ In particular, given the intended secrecy of the basket’s contents, I find it highly unlikely that they would contain a live infant; not only would this be rather heavy for young girls to carry down a precipitous and irregular staircase, and not only would the infant therefore be in some danger, but there is no way to guarantee that a baby would not cry or make other noises which would reveal the basket’s contents. I believe bringing live snakes is unlikely for a similar reason.

¹⁰⁵¹ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 3.114a.

Aelian, *On Animals* 11.2

Θύουσι δὲ καὶ ἄλλως οἱ Ἑπειρῶται τῷ Ἀπόλλωνι καὶ αὐτοὶ καὶ πᾶν ὅσον τῶν ξένων ἐπίδημόν ἐστι, καὶ τούτῳ δὴ τὴν μεγίστην ἑορτὴν ἄγουσι μιᾶς ἡμέρας τοῦ ἔτους σεμνὴν τε καὶ μεγαλοπρεπῆ. ἔστι δὲ ἄνετον τῷ θεῷ ἄλσος, καὶ ἔχει κύκλῳ περίβολον, καὶ ἔνδον εἰσὶ δράκοντες, καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄθυρμα οὗτοί γε. ἡ τοίνυν ἱέρεια, γυνὴ¹⁰⁵² παρθένος, πάρεισι μόνῃ, καὶ τροφὴν τοῖς δράκουσι κομίζει. λέγονται δὲ ἄρα ὑπὸ τῶν Ἑπειρωτῶν ἔκγονοι τοῦ ἐν Δελφοῖς Πυθῶνος εἶναι. ἐὰν μὲν οὖν οὗτοι παρελθοῦσαν τὴν ἱέρειαν προσηνῶς θεάσωνται καὶ τὰς τροφὰς προθύμως λάβωσιν, εὐθενίαν τε ὑποδηλοῦν ὁμολογοῦνται καὶ ἔτος ἄνοσον· ἐὰν δὲ ἐκπλήξωσι μὲν αὐτήν, μὴ λάβωσι δὲ ὅσα ὀρέγεται μερίγματα, τάναντία τῶν προειρημένων οἱ μὲν μαντεύονται, οἱ δὲ ἐλπίζουσιν.

The people of Epirus and all strangers sojourning there, beside any other sacrifice to Apollo, on one day in the year hold their chief festival in his honour with solemnity and great pomp. There is a grove dedicated to the god, and round about it a precinct, and in the enclosure are Serpents, and these self-same Serpents are the pets of the god. Now the priestess, who is a virgin, enters unaccompanied, bringing food for the Serpents. And the people of Epirus maintain that the Serpents are sprung from the Python at Delphi. If, as the priestess approaches, they look graciously upon her and take the food with eagerness, it is agreed that they are indicating a year of prosperity and of freedom from sickness. If however they scare her and refuse the pleasant food she offers, then the Serpents are foretelling the reverse of the above, and that is what the people of Epirus expect.

There is much overlap between these rites in Epirus and those at Athens and Lanuvium. Once again, we see a virginal figure enter a dangerous space with a serpent and offer it food (here, τροφήν). However, while at Lanuvium in particular, the ritual is used either primarily or secondarily as a test of a maiden's virginity, this does not seem to have been the case at Epirus or Athens.

One important question that scholars have debated is the extent to which we can even use this comparative evidence as indication of cult praxis in the *Arrhephoria*. And if we use comparative evidence, does it suggest a cultural borrowing between the cults, in which one was imported from or inspired by another, or a cultural cognate, where these three sites preserved a rite that must have predated the split between the Hellenic and Italic language branches? On the one hand, the apparently somewhat late introduction of the serpentine aspect of Lanuvium's cult practice would suggest borrowing rather than an inherited tradition. But it is also possible that

¹⁰⁵² Lobeck: γυμνή.

this rite had always been a part of their religious repertoire, but only gained importance and iconographic prominence in the 3rd century BCE. Since the main iconographic source for this dating is numismatic, and coinage typically relies on images that are recognizably associated with their place of mint, it is certainly possible that the snake cult simply was not famous, useful, or fruitful enough before the 3rd century to warrant its inclusion on coinage.

The matter of the Epirus cult is much trickier, since Aelian did not include specifics about the location of the cult and the lack of a static landmark like a cave to guide potential searches. It is also very possible that there would be nothing to find at all from the place where this ritual took place, since we find a similar dearth of cultic material in the Aglauros cave and in the Lanuvium cave after the 3rd century. Aelian's account of the Epirus ceremony is nevertheless a crucial resource. That the same author, in the same work, recorded the practices at Lanuvium and at Epirus, which had points of similarity but were otherwise distinct, is a marvel. The biggest difference between these two accounts of Aelian's is the presence or absence of a cave as the ritual setting. But is there really no cave in the rite in the Epirus rite?

While at first glance, there is no evidence of a grotto in this passage, I believe that this rite may have originally stemmed from one using a cave in ways similar to the practices in Athens and Lanuvium. Aelian describes the staging of the ceremony as κύκλω περίβολον, a "round" or "circular" precinct.¹⁰⁵³ A *peribolos* was a sacred area demarcated from its surroundings by a low wall.¹⁰⁵⁴ Generally, they are rectangular. The specification here that the *peribolos* was circular is therefore rather striking.¹⁰⁵⁵ I think it is possible that this sacred circular

¹⁰⁵³ LSJ s.v. κύκλος, II. adverbial usage: κύκλω, "in a circle or ring".

¹⁰⁵⁴ *Periboloi* could be used for both sanctuary spaces and funerary spaces.

¹⁰⁵⁵ There are a couple notable exceptions to this. The Altar of Zeus Agoraios on Thasos was surrounded by a circular peribolos. There is also speculation that an archaic circular wall near the temple of Apollo at Didyma was a peribolos encircling the archaic altar. Circular structures were utilized in the construction of several structures at the Sanctuary of the Great Gods on Samothrace, the seat of the Samothracian mystery cult. On this site and the apparent importance of its circular forms, see Bonna D. Wescoat, "Coming and Going in the Sanctuary of the Great Gods,

area is an approximation of a cave. Roundness or circularity is a noted feature of several caves in Greek literature.¹⁰⁵⁶ Given the many other points of agreement or analogy between these three cults and the oddity of the circular precinct here, it is likely that the rite in Epirus stems from a version that took place in a cave. The reason for such an amendment is not readily apparent to me, since Epirus does indeed have caves. This is an instance where greater geographic specificity on Aelian's part would have been beneficial.

An additional detail from Aelian's account which may point to an earlier cave ritual is the Epirians' assertion that the snake that the virgin priestess interacts with is a descendent of the Python of Delphi. The broader celebration context for this snake ceremony is part of the cult of Apollo, so a reference to Python or Delphi is not out of place. But a key aspect of the myth of Python and Apollo is the cavernous lair of the serpent.¹⁰⁵⁷ It is therefore possible that the rare circular *peribolos* in this Epirian ceremony is meant to evoke the cave den of Python, the purported ancestor of these ritual snakes. While this is impossible to prove, it would account for peculiarity of the cult architecture reported by Aelian.

Scholarship has been particularly divided on the nature of the *Arrhephoria*'s relationship to individuals or to the broader community. The default interpretation was that it was "plainly initiatory."¹⁰⁵⁸ It is true that caves, as liminal spaces, have frequently hosted rites of passage or

Samothrace," in *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*, ed. Bonna D. Wescoat and Robert G. Ousterhout, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

¹⁰⁵⁶ e.g. Arist. *Marvelous Things Heard*, 82; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 2.41; Diod. Sic. 3.69.1; Str. 14.5; Plutarch, *Moralia, Divine Vengeance*, 27; Himerius, *Or.* 23, 50; Callistratus, *Descriptions of Statues* 1.

¹⁰⁵⁷ The den of Python is mentioned explicitly at, e.g. Apollodorus, 1.4; Clearchus, fr. 64, line 7; Athenaeus 15.62; *Orphic Hymns*, 79.5; in Latin: Lucan, *BC* 5.130–140; Ovid, *Met.* 1.438–440. It is also implied elsewhere where Apollo establishes the Pythian oracle in or over a chasm on Parnassus after he kills Python. The motif is also present in vase painting, the Delphic serpent emerges from its cave in a lost red-figure Apulian amphora from the early 4th century BCE. Hamilton and Tischbein 1791–5: iii, Fig. 4.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Emily Kearns, "The Nature of Heroines," in *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, ed. Sue Blundell and Margaret Williamson, Routledge, 1998, 100; also Christiane Sourvinou, "Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 641–647," *Classical Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1971): 339–342.

initiation throughout human history, though this evidence for the ancient Greek world is scant.¹⁰⁵⁹

Walter Burkert was the most vocal advocate for an individualized initiatory purpose to the *Arrhephoria*.¹⁰⁶⁰ As subsequent scholars have shown, I think quite convincingly, such an interpretation does not accord with our evidence. The selection of only two girls per year to perform these sacred duties belies the purpose of age-related initiation rites, which are “by definition required of all members of the community.”¹⁰⁶¹ Some have therefore qualified Burkert’s initiation argument by dubbing this an “initiation-by-proxy,” in which the two girls acted as representatives for their age group.¹⁰⁶² This “initiation-by-proxy” is not otherwise attested, possibly because the very idea negates the purpose of the rite of initiation, which is to integrate individuals within a group. And considering the rather large age range of the girls selected for service, the implication of such “initiation-by-proxy” would theoretically be “initiating” girls annually for five years, which essentially negates the purpose and significance of an initiatory rite of passage, which should function as a fulcrum point dividing one’s life into a time “before” integration and “after”. Furthermore, while Burkert’s initiatory argument relies on puberty rites, the selected age group of these girls is pre-pubescent; if rites of passage or transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood was the point of the rite, there is no reason for girls as young as seven to be included, since the average age of menarche in the ancient world was reported to be 13–14.¹⁰⁶³ Finally, the myth on which the *Arrhephoria* seems to

¹⁰⁵⁹ See Jean Clottes, “Ritual Cave Use in European Paleolithic Caves,” and Peter Tomkins, “Landscapes of Ritual, Identity, and Memory: Reconsidering Neolithic and Bronze Age Cave Use in Crete, Greece,” in *Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves*, ed. Holly Moynes, University of Colorado Press, 2013.

¹⁰⁶⁰ See above, note 1049.

¹⁰⁶¹ Robertson, “Riddle,” 280. On this point, see also Fritze Graf, “Initiation: A concept with a troubled history,” in *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives*, ed. David B. Dodd and Christopher A. Faraone, Routledge, 2003, 12–15, especially 14.

¹⁰⁶² This interpretation is championed by Angelo Brelich, *Paides e Parthenoi*, Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1969, 269–273.

¹⁰⁶³ Darrel W. Amundsen and Carol Jean Diers, “The Age of Menarche in Classical Greece and Rome,” *Human Biology* 41, no. 1 (1969): 125–132.

have been based, that of the daughters of Cecrops and Erichthonius,¹⁰⁶⁴ does not have overtly initiatory connotations, and indeed ends with the deaths of two out of the three maidens, rather than their successful integration into society.

From a comparative point of view, neither the rites at Epirus nor Lanuvium indicate initiatory practices. The closest one could come to claiming initiatory purposes is that the girls at Lanuvium apparently approach the cave of the snake in a group, though entering one by one. On the other hand, there is ample evidence at both Lanuvium and Epirus for public or communal purposes for the ceremony, both of them acting as a sort of “Groundhog Day” (to use a modern American analogy) where an animal predicts prosperity (the groundhog seeing his shadow and predicting early spring) or hardship (six more weeks of winter). The *Arrhephoria* took place at the end of spring or beginning of summer, corresponding with the rising of the Hyades, a star cluster associated with the Cecropides.¹⁰⁶⁵ It was therefore in the grain harvesting season. These initially disparate details therefore seem to converge on a public rite centered on “fertility” generally, possibly related to the mythology of the “earth-born” Erichthonius, Athena’s tutelage of him and the role of the Cecropides in his infancy story.

The primary indication of such a purpose is provided in a scholion on Lucian’s *Dialogue of the Courtesans* in which the commentator discusses together the *Arrhephoria*, *Thesmophoria*, and *Skirophoria*, telling us that all three follow “the same logic” or “the same purpose” (τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον) about the “generation of vegetables and the procreation of humans”, as we see in

¹⁰⁶⁴ This connection seems clear from the cultic connection with the “steepest part of the Acropolis” from which Aglauros and Herse reportedly hurled themselves, but is also confirmed epigraphically in inscriptions commemorating girls’ service to Athena and Pandrosos, the one Cecropian daughter who obeyed Athena’s orders not to look in the basket: *IG II*² 3461, 3465, 3466, 3470–73, 3482, 3488, 3496–97, 3515–16, 3528, 3554–56, 3566, 3634. Robertson, “Riddle,” 242.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Efrosyni Boutsikas and Robert Hannah, “‘Aitia’, Astronomy, and the Timing of the Arrhēphoria,” *Annual of the British School at Athens* 107 (2012): 233–245. Erika Simon also discusses the debate about the timing of the festival and its relation to agricultural cycles, particularly that of the olive: “Festivals of Athena, Aphrodite, and Hephaistos,” in *Festivals of Attica, an Archaeological Commentary*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993, 44–45.

the rites at Epirus and Lanuvium.¹⁰⁶⁶ The public concerns of the rites are also alluded to in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, a play which dramatizes and satirizes the role of women in public affairs. There, the *Arrhephoria* is referenced as one of the most communally important religious roles that a young girl could hold in ancient Athens. The women's chorus says that because of their participation in rites such as the *Brauronia* and the *Arrhephoria*, they are civically engaged enough to have an opinion on public matters of the *polis*.¹⁰⁶⁷ The ritual's connection with the myths and cults of the Cecropides shows that in Athens it was inextricable from the legendary history of the city, which in itself suggests the cult's possible public function. I therefore agree with Robertson and Simon that the *Arrhephoria* likely had concerns for community prosperity, rather than an initiatory function.¹⁰⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the maiden identities of the practitioners of these rites, along with the concern for human as well as vegetal fecundity, does indicate a focus on young girls and in particular on their future sexual potential. Virgins are obviously well-suited to service of Athena and are ritual proxies for the mythical Cecropides. It is possible that the ritual actions of the girls, particularly their commitment not to look into the basket as instructed, is meant to "correct" the error of Aglauros and Herse, and therefore strengthen Athena's patronage and the city's autochthonous connection to their land.

As to the cave's role in the rite, it is possible to see multiple threads of interpretation. There is, as emphasized in Propertius' account of the Lanuvium ritual, a connotation of the cave as a "mouth," especially as the large maw of a threatening serpent.¹⁰⁶⁹ The metaphor of the "mouth of the uterus" when discussing the vagina or cervix is frequently used by Hippocrates,¹⁰⁷⁰

¹⁰⁶⁶ τὰ δὲ αὐτὰ καὶ ἀρρητοφóρια καλεῖται καὶ ἄγεται τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον ἔχοντα περὶ τῆς τῶν καρπῶν γενέσεως καὶ τῆς τῶν ἀνθρώπων σπορᾶς, Schol. Luc. *Dial. Hetair*.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 638–647.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Simon, *Festivals*, 41–42; Robertson, "Riddle," 280.

¹⁰⁶⁹ cf. the *ekphrasis* of Andromeda in *Leucippe and Clitophon* above, pages 260–263.

¹⁰⁷⁰ e.g. *Diseases of Women*, 10.8 and *passim*.

Aristotle,¹⁰⁷¹ Soranus,¹⁰⁷² Galen,¹⁰⁷³ and others. The presence of a snake (a phallic symbol) inside the cave (a yonic symbol) also has sexual connotations, especially when discussed in conjunction with the virginity or non-virginity of certain maidens. The cave's association with birth is compelling here for the earth-born Erichthonius and for Athenian civic notions of autochthony, which also plays into the cult's possible focus on fertility in all its forms. In the rites at all three sites, entry into the cave or cave-like circle is permitted to maidens, but in Lanuvium this virginal penetration also takes on the role of a virginity ordeal, thus linking the virginity of the maidens and the fertility of the land with the girls' interactions with the snake and the cave.

Intertextual Analysis & Chapter Conclusion

While it was fitting that virginal figures be associated with caves, as discussed above, it was certainly not a requirement. The other two main virgins in the Olympic pantheon, Athena and Hestia, are not connected with caves. Hestia's restriction to domestic spaces makes her exclusion understandable. Athena's is slightly more nebulous, though it probably had to do with the civilizing function of the goddess and her connection with order and masculine rationality, which made the cave's associations of wildness and untamed femininity unsuitable for her. In literature, when mortals swear their virginity to a deity, it is always Artemis, not Athena (or Hestia). This discrepancy, combined with the rather late chronology of emphatic virginity-cave connections in literature, indicates that it is not the virginity *per se* that warrants cave worship or connections, but rather a category for which virginity could be a feature, such as liminality, pubescence (Athena is said to have been born fully grown), and wildness. The main

¹⁰⁷¹ e.g. *Generation of Animals*, Bekker page 727b line 23 *at al.*; *History of Animals*, 510b line 15 *et al.*; and *Fragments*, Treatise 39.

¹⁰⁷² e.g. *Gynecology*, 1.61.2, 2.1.2, 3.16.2, *et al.*

¹⁰⁷³ e.g. *On the Natural Faculties*, Kühn volume 2 page 150 line 17; *On the Use of Parts*, Kühn volume 4 page 225 line 10; *On the Cutting of Veins*, Volume 11 page 200 line 16; *et al.*

manifestation of concerns about virginity within both the literary and archaeological sources characterizes the cave as the seat of virginal, rather than maternal, power. The overwhelming fertility associated with virginity independent of motherhood is seen in the public implications of these cave cults.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have endeavored to open up a discussion about the associations between caves and gender and sexuality in the ancient Greek world. As structural analogues to the womb, the house, or the temple, these natural spaces were frequently exploited in both literature and religious experiences for the purposes of exploring issues related to femininity and female sexuality.

I have shown that there were three dominant themes within the relationship between caves and femininity, mapping somewhat neatly onto three ontological stages in female sexual progression: virginity, sexual activity, and maternity. Particularly in the cases of virginity and maternity, the cave can be read as a proxy for the womb: it is often portrayed in literature as the source of life, particularly for divinities, and as an ongoing site of maternal acts of nurturing, such as nursing/feeding and protection/concealment. Within the realm of virginity—which seems to emerge rather late, in the 2nd century CE—the cave has two primary roles. The first involves virgins using caves as places from which to defend their virginity from would-be invaders/rapists. Literary sources make explicit the connection between male characters’ near-invasions of cave spaces and the virgins’ often violent protection of their cave/womb. In the intermediate status of pre-maternal sexual activity, the cave acts primarily as narratives’ spatial frame for sexual encounters, exclusively those which defy norms of gender/power dynamics. This serves to portray female sexual agency/dominance as inherently threatening to the patriarchal system, and therefore a notion relegated to the heterotopic safe space of literary caves.

An important consideration threading all three thematic chapters is the universally male authorship behind these texts. Part of the inspiration for this dissertation in general is the

discrepancy between depiction and reality, specifically the assertions of (mostly elite) male authors and the lived intentions, actions, and experiences of women, whose perspectives were rarely authentically recorded.

In Greek literature, therefore, we see predominantly the masculine point of view, which was essentially equal to the point of view of society at large. Within this patriarchal system, women's sexuality in all stages was portrayed as inherently linked with their capacity for producing children. This is also—perhaps counterintuitively—true for notions of virginity, as many rites specifically concerning virginity correspond directly to fertility. This configures human virginity¹⁰⁷⁴ as a temporary status with the promise of future sexual activity and childbearing. So, while this dissertation distinguishes between these three statuses, it is important to note that they were understood in antiquity as inherently linked; barring some twist of fate, there would (in theory) be no sexuality without maternity, and the existence of virginity prefigures the existence of non-virginity, of sexual activity and, as a result, maternity.

In an effort to recover a more authentic understanding of women's ritual experiences, throughout this dissertation I employed methodologies from “lived ancient religion” in my examination of archaeological and ancient ethnographic materials. Before delving into this evidence, I had hypothesized that women-centric cave cults were primarily instances of the direct, individual concerns of the women themselves, outside the public, usually male-centric cults of the state. However, the evidence proved more complex, with varying relationships and dynamics between worshipers' concerns and actions.

One example of the difference between literature and lived religion can be seen in modern scholars' erroneous projection of literary dynamics of female sexual dominance onto “nympholeptic” cave cults. I have shown that instead, while the most famous cult practitioners of

¹⁰⁷⁴ This is obviously not the case for the divine (and therefore, eternal) virgins.

these female deities were men, the depiction of gender dynamics within the votive objects from these sites demonstrates a conformity with societal norms about gender/power dynamics. We therefore have a discrepancy between literary depiction (subversive gender/power dynamics) and ritual action (normative dynamics). The “nympholept” cults did not, however, comprise the entirety of ritual action undertaken at these sites, and the caves at Vari and Pharsalus show ample evidence for female worshipers before and concurrent with the “nympholept” cults.

Regarding the focus in “lived religion” on individual worshipers and its diminution of orthodoxy and ritual establishment, it also became clear that some of the cave rituals cannot be interpreted as having a solely individual focus or scope. In the chapter on virginity, we see that cave cults involving women and girls largely had two-pronged concerns of individual maidenhood, on the one hand, and public (vegetal) fertility on the other. While the practitionership was restricted (and violations of these rules could be punished), these were still fundamentally public-facing civic rites of fertility, and thus conformed to patriarchal systems.

Perhaps the most straightforward example of “lived ancient religion” in which women’s individual ritual intentions and actions were foregrounded is in the realm of maternity. In the cave cults of Eileithyia and birthing-centric nymphs, there is generally a conformity between literary depictions and the evidence for cult practice. The biggest discrepancy is the difference in subject: literary maternity caves typically involve the births of male gods, so in the archaeological record, these birth or infancy caves seem to have catered to mixed-gender groups or even skew more toward male worshipers. There is much less emphasis in literature on mortal women safely giving birth or performing positive acts of mothering in caves. On the one hand, this is not surprising, as most caves would be unsuitable for childbirth. On the other hand, we therefore occasionally see in literature a negative connection between mortal mothers and caves,

while in the archaeological record it is clear that caves were popular locales for the concentration of all concerns about maternity.

One line of inquiry that deserves attention in the future is the relationship of the paradigms outlined in this dissertation with the myths and cults of Cybele and Attis. Aside from her origins outside the Greek homeland, Cybele has not been included in this dissertation due to her blurring of thematic boundaries. While this dissertation proceeded through three distinct themes concerning female sexual identities, Cybele and Attis seem to have frequently represented all three simultaneously.

While the maternity chapter of my dissertation examines the non-syncretized association of Rhea and caverns, the depiction of Cybele/Mountain Mother after the sixth century BCE shows a much more complex picture and a more intricate relationship with the landscape. The introduction of Cybele, and then Attis, into Greek cult activities demonstrates not only the maternal dimension, but also the themes of sexuality and of sexual abstinence in caves. The myths of her eunuch priest Attis frequently feature caverns as the settings for the Cybele shrines he establishes. Elsewhere, a cave is the setting for his self-castration.

Archaeological investigation in the caves of modern Turkey is still rather nascent compared to projects in modern Greece. This research has mostly focused on inscriptions,¹⁰⁷⁵ many found on cave walls. There have been excavations of a handful of these sites, many of which show evidence of cult use during Greek antiquity.¹⁰⁷⁶ Because most publications of these sites are written in Turkish, these sources are rarely considered in conjunction with Europhone scholarship. One possible next step in the study of women and caves in the ancient Greek world

¹⁰⁷⁵ M. J. Vermaseren. *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque*, I. *Asia Minor*, Brill, 1987.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Jale Dedeoğlu, "The Sanctuary at Zindan Mağarası in the Light of the New Archaeological Evidence," *Gephyra* 2 (2005); Gül Işın, "Yumaklar Arpalık Tepe Küçük Buluntuları: Ön Rapor," *Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı* 23/2 (2006): 125–135.

could incorporate this body of evidence to investigate how these hybrid Greek-Anatolian cults compare with the more deeply Greek cults examined in this dissertation.

Classics' recent "turn" toward ecocriticism and environmental history has up till now focused on the organic features of the natural world. This dissertation offers one foray into consideration of inorganic nature's impact on ancient Greek people. As spaces both embedded within and yet distinct from their surrounding areas, caves functioned as heterotopic stages for examinations of social realities. Their heterotopic quality allowed them to complicate, blur, or even collapse boundaries, leading to encounters between mortal and immortal; between past, present, and future; and between nature and civilization. These aspects were invoked in myth and in lived religion, with the landscape cast as analogue to the female body within the ancient Greek conception of femininity's simultaneous bounty and danger.

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Tables

Table 2: Comparison of Maternity Caves

		Inatos	Paros	Pitsa	Cyrene
Shrine	Inside sanctuary?	No	Yes?	No	Yes
Features	Rock-cut feature(s)	No?	niches	No?	niches, benches, water conduits
	Water source	spring (inside)	spring (adjacent)	moisture deep in cave	spring (inside)
Dates	Start of Cult	Proto-Geometric	Geometric	Archaic (7th c.)	Classical (mid-5th c.)
	Most active?	Geometric/Archaic	Classical (4th c.)	Late Archaic, Classical	Classical
	End of cult	Early Roman	Hellenistic (2nd c.)	Hellenistic (2nd c.)	Hellenistic (3rd c.)
Gods		Eileithyia	Eileithyia	Nymphs	Nymphs
Texts		dedicatory (1, in Tsoutsouros)	dedicatory; record of upkeep	N/A	<i>lex sacra</i>
Votives	Figurines	A lot	Some	Many	A lot
	Stone sculpture	N/A	reliefs, statuettes, children's portraits	N/A	hung plaques, stelai, statues
	Main vessel types	miniatures, aryballoi,	<i>skyphoi</i> , miniature <i>skyphoi</i>	Miniature <i>skyphoi</i> , <i>pyxides</i> , unguent bottles	N/A
	Other	Egyptian finds; jewelry	Mask fragments	Painted wood tablets, jewelry, weaving implements	N/A
Motifs	Pregnant female	Yes	No	Yes	No
	Copulation	Yes	No	No	No
	Parturition	Yes	No	Maybe	No
	<i>Kourotrophos</i>	Yes	No	No	Yes
	Kids/babies	Very few	Many	Few in painted	2 nude boys

			panels	
Anatomical	No	breasts, pubic triangle	No	No
Males	only in copulation groups (2 ithyphallic)	4 crouching men, 2 crouching boys, 1 crouching Silens	very few, Silens	Yes, 58% of figurines are male. 3 nude.
Animals	bovines, horses, various quadrupeds	not significant (1 bull)	several species	gazelles
Vegetal		not significant	poppies, fruits, pinecones	silphium

Table 3: Comparison of the “Nympholept” Caves

		Vari, Attica	Pharsalus, Thessaly	Kafizin, Cyprus
Patron	Patron's name	Archedemos	Pantalkes	Onesagoras
	“Self portrait”?	Probably	No	Probably (graffito)
	Titles	<i>nympholeptos</i>	<i>episkopos</i>	<i>dekatophoros</i>
Shrine	Garden?	Yes	Yes	No evidence
Features	Rock-cut feature(s)	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Water source	Spring	Spring	None (rain cistern)
Dating	Archaic worship	Yes	Yes	No
	Date of Patron	Early 5th c. BCE	Early 5th c. BCE	Late 3rd/early 2nd c. BCE
	End of cult	2nd c. BCE	Late Hellenistic	Late 3rd/early 2nd c. BCE
Deities	Nymph(s)	Nymphs	Nymphs / goddesses	Nymph in the Pointed Hill
	Pan	Yes	Yes	No
	Others	Apollo, Charis, Hermes (on votive reliefs), “Hersos”?	Apollo, Hermes, Heracles, Asclepius, Hygieia, Chiron	Zeus (?), “Good Fortune”?
Texts	Rock-cut inscription(s)	Yes	Yes	No
	Metrical inscription(s)	Yes	Yes	No
Activities	Banqueting	Yes	Probably not	Probably not
	Prophecy	Possibly	Probably not	Probably not
	Music/dancing	Probably	Probably	No evidence
	Healing	Probably not	Possibly	Probably not
Votives	Figurines	Yes	Yes	No
	Stone sculpture	Yes	No	No

	Main vessel types	<i>loutrophoroi</i> , <i>lekythoi</i> , miniatures, drinking/wine	3 mini <i>lekythoi</i>	cooking vessels, shallow bowls, utensils
	Female dedicants	Yes	Yes	No
Demogr.	Group dedications	Yes	No evidence	Yes

Table 3: Comparison of Virginité Cave Rites

		Lanuvium (literature)	Lanuvium (archaeology)	<i>Arrhephoria</i> , Aglaurion, Athens (lit. attest. and arch.)	Epirus (Aelian)
Dating	Earliest attest.	1st c. (B)CE (Prop.)	5th c. BCE	Archaic	2nd c. CE
	Latest attest.	2nd c. CE (Ael.)	3rd c. BCE (no votives thereafter)	Roman	2nd c. CE
	Snake?	Yes (both)	Yes, from 3rd c. BCE (monumental sculpture)	Unknown	Yes, plural
Ritual	Bread/cake	Yes, barley cake (Ael.)	Unknown	Yes (possibly snake/phallus-shaped)	Not specific
Needs	Feeding the snake?	Yes (both)	Yes (iconography on coins)	Maybe	Yes
	Box/basket?	Yes (only Prop.)	Yes	Yes	No
Gods		Juno (Prop.) / Hera (Ael.)	Juno	Athena? Erechthonius? Cecropides?	Apollo
Virginité	Virgins only	Yes (both)	Unknown	Yes, 2 virgins per year (ages 7–11)	Yes, only 1
	Ordeal/test	Yes (both)	Unknown	No	No
Civic rite?		Yes (only Prop.): agricultural fertility	Unknown	Most likely (but some say initiatory purpose)	Yes: prosperity and health
Votives	Pottery shapes	N/A	miniature <i>skyphoi</i> , miniature cups; none after 4th c. BCE	No finds from cave	N/A
	Anatomical votives	N/A	34% female (uteri, vulvae, breasts); 22% male (phalloi, male torsos); none after 4th c. BCE	No finds from cave	N/A

Figures

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Figure 1.1

Entrance to the Cave of Eileithyia at Inatos (modern Tsoutsouros), Crete. After Flouda, “Goddess,” Fig. 1. Photo by P. Betancourt, 2017.



Figure 1.2

The mouth of the Inatos Cave closed off with iron bars. After After Flouda, “Goddess,” Fig. 2. Photo by P. Betancourt, 2017.



Figure 1.3

INA 117, kourotrrophic female figurine from the Inatos Cave. After Betancourt and Kanta, *Shrine*, Plate 31, 18.2. Photo by Y. Papadakis-Ploumidis.

Figure 1.4

INA 109, pregnant female figurine from the Inatos Cave. After Betancourt and Kanta, *Shrine*, Plate 28, 14.4. Photo by Y. Papadakis-Ploumidis.





Figure 1.5

INA 110, birthing configuration figurine from the Inatos Cave. After Betancourt and Kanta, *Shrine*, Plate 27, 14.1. Photos by Y. Papadakis-Ploumidis.



Figure 1.6

INA 102, embracing couple configuration with pregnant female. After Betancourt and Kanta, *Shrine*, Plate 37, 15.3. Photo by C. Papanikolopoulos.



Figure 1.7

INA 104, embracing couple configuration with ithyphallic male from the Inatos Cave. After Betancourt and Kanta, *Shrine*, Plate 38, 15.5. Photo by Y. Papadakis-Ploumidis.



Figure 1.8

Entrance to the Cave of Eileithyia on the Kounados Hill, Paros.

Photo from Arachne

iDAI.objects: entity 9001.



Figure 1.9

Exterior of the Cave of Eileithyia on the Kounados Hill, Paros.

Photo from Arachne

iDAI.objects: entity 190846.

Unknown photographer.

Dated 1900.



Figure 1.10

Selection of votive inscriptions from the Cave of Eileithyia on Paros. Paros A 305. Photo from Arachne iDAI.objects: entity 1166649.

Figure 1.11
Relief sculpture fragment showing the upper head and raised right arm of a female figure. Paros A 30. Roman period. Photo from Arachne iDAI.objects: entity 1149997.



Figure 1.12

Relief sculpture of breasts with dedicatory inscription. Marble. Paros A 307. Photo from Arachne iDAI.objects: entity 1166858.

Figure 1.13
Marble statuette of an enthroned female. Heavily worn, missing upper torso and head. Paros A 31. Photo from Arachne iDAI.objects: entity 1150006.



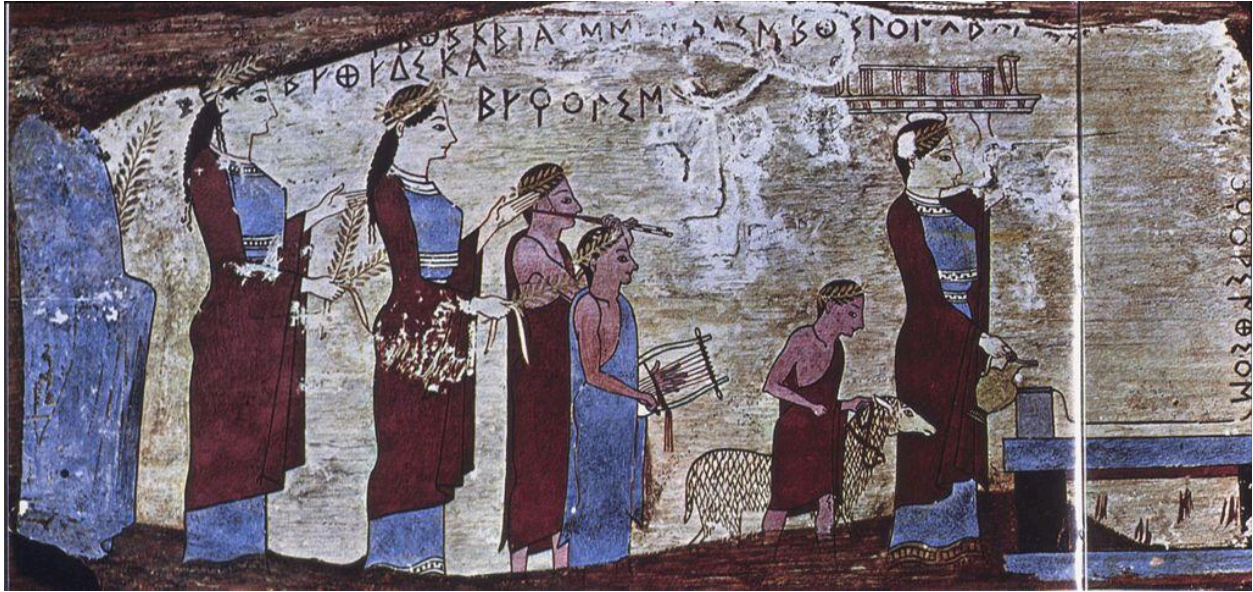


Figure 1.14

Pinax 1 from the Pitsa Cave, Corinthia.

Late 6th c. BCE. Wood. NAMA 16464. From Artstor.



Figure 1.15 (left)

Pinax 2 from the Pitsa Cave, Corinthia.

Late 6th c. BCE. Wood.

NAMA 16465.



Figure 1.16 (right)

Pinax 3 from the Pitsa Cave, Corinthia.

Late 6th c. BCE. Wood.

NAMA 16465.



Figure 1.17

Pinax from the Pitsa Cave, Corinthia.

Late 6th c. BCE. Wood.

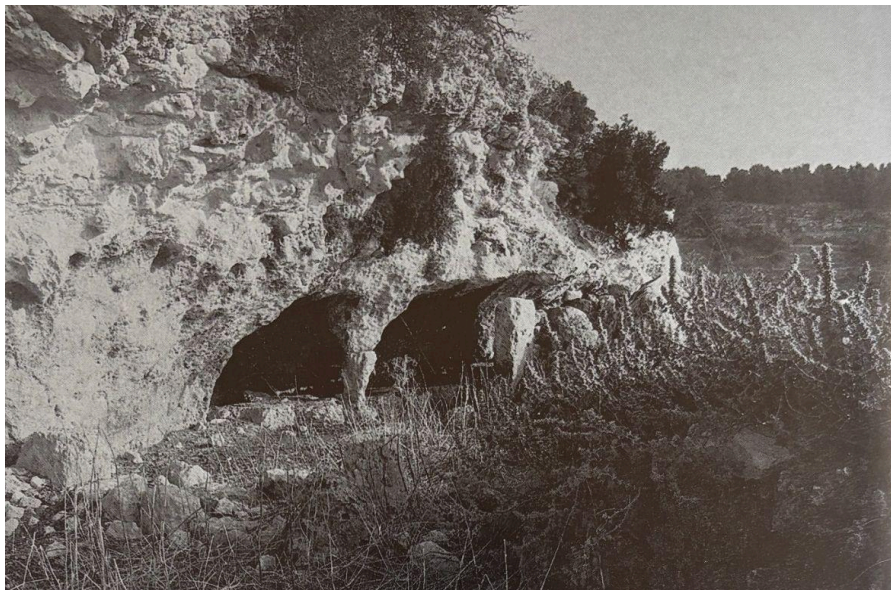
NAMA 16467. From Artstor.

Figure 1.18

Pregnant standing female figurine from the Pitsa Cave. Missing head and legs. After Wise, “Childbirth,” 137 Fig. 23. Photo by A. Orlandos.

**Figure 1.19**

Exterior of the Cyrene Nymphaeum.
After Micheli and Santucci,
Il Santuario, Tab. IV.1,
1991.

**Figure 1.20**

Monumental *lex sacra* from the Sanctuary of Apollo at Cyrene, which was re-used as a stair in the Byzantine baths. Image shows lines 84–109.

IGCyr. 16700. Cyrene Museum no. 51.

Photo by Dobias-Lalou, Mission Archéologique Française, 2010.

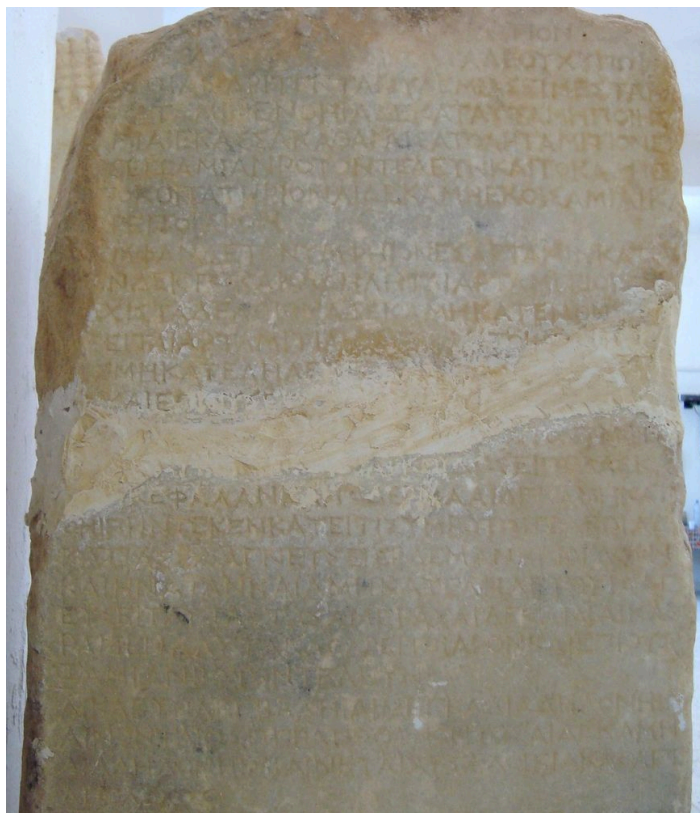




Figure 1.21

Votive niches in the wall south-east of the Nymphaeum.

After Micheli and Santucci, *Il Santuario*, Tab. IV 2, 1991.

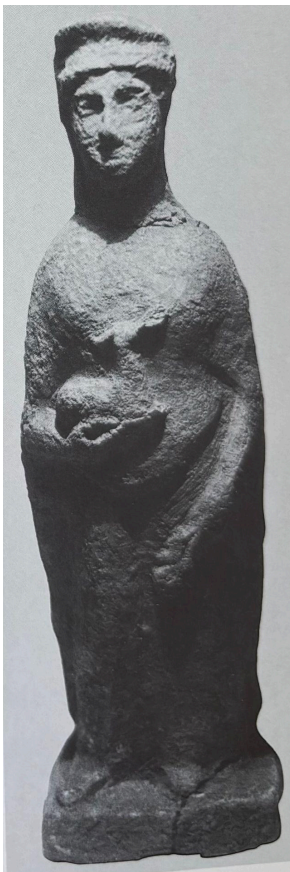


Figure 1.22 (left)

Standing female figurine carrying a baby gazelle in her right hand. Terracotta.

After Micheli and Santucci, *Il Santuario*, Tab. XIII 80.



Figure 1.23 (right)

Standing female figurine carrying a silphium plant in her right hand and a phiale (or similar) in her left. Terracotta.

After Micheli and Santucci, *Il Santuario*, Tab. X 6.



Figure 2.1

The descent into the Vari Cave via the precipitous hewn 'staircase'. Ropes have been installed to aid entry and increase safety.

Photo by the author, February 2026.

Figure 2.2
The threshold between the staircase landing and the "dark room," which slopes downward. Vari Cave.
Photo by the author, February 2026.



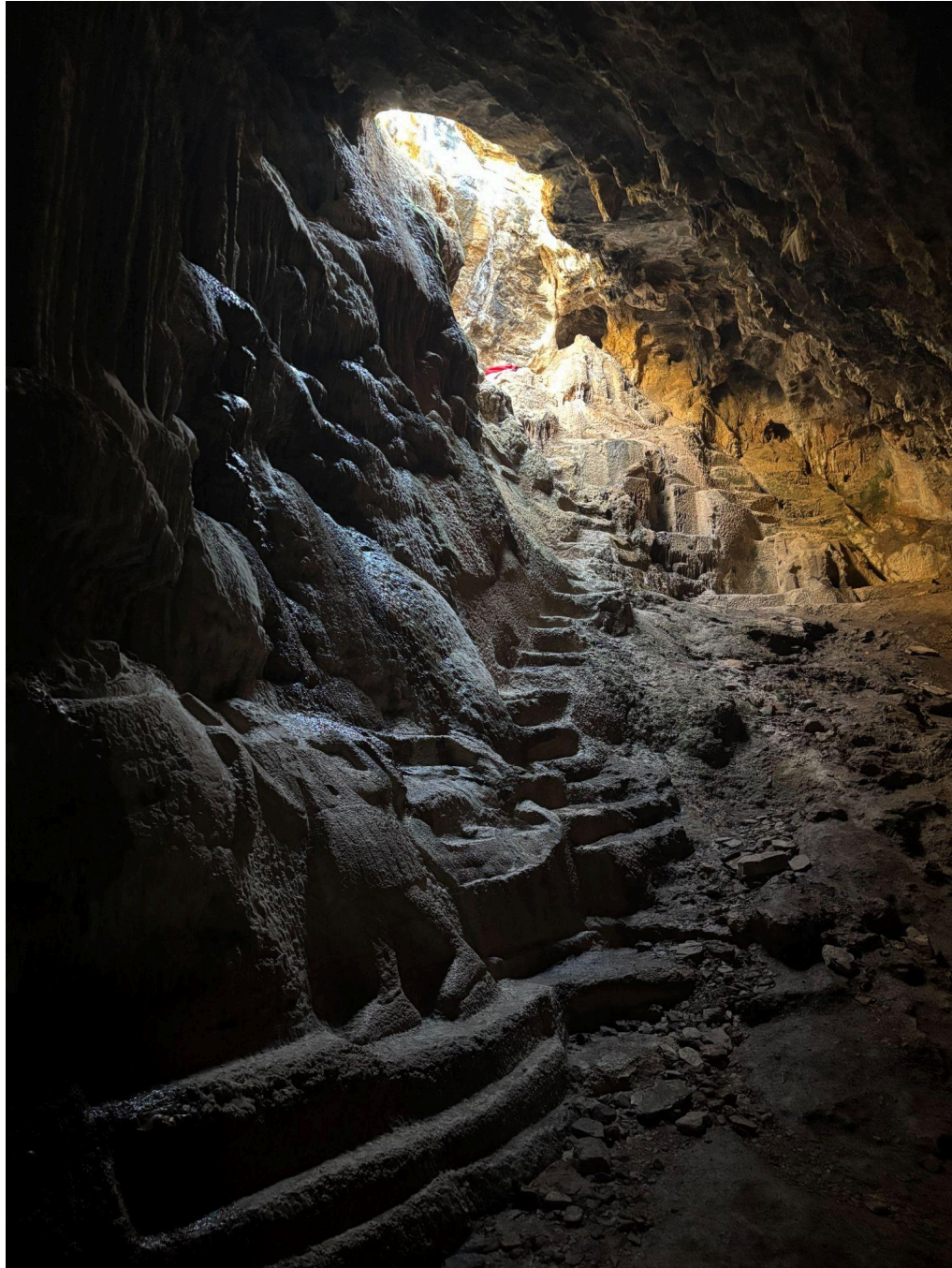


Figure 2.3

Main shrine of the Vari Cave. At the bottom left is the portrait of Archedemos. The staircase was hewn into the natural rock up to the entrance/exit of the cave. To the right and out of view to the right is the so-called “dance floor,” above which sits the unidentified enthroned cult statue hewn into the natural rock. Altars are peppered along the terraces, reachable via the ascending staircase.

Photo by the author, February 2026.

Figure 2.4

Larger-than-life (self?)-portrait of Archedemos. To the right of the figure's face is a very shallow inscription partially obscured from stalagmitic deposits, reading "Archedemos Archedemos," *IG I³ 979*, ca. 475–440 BCE.
Photo by the author, June 2023.

**Figure 2.5**

Detail of *IG I³ 979* to the right of the relief portrait.
Photo by the author, June 2023.

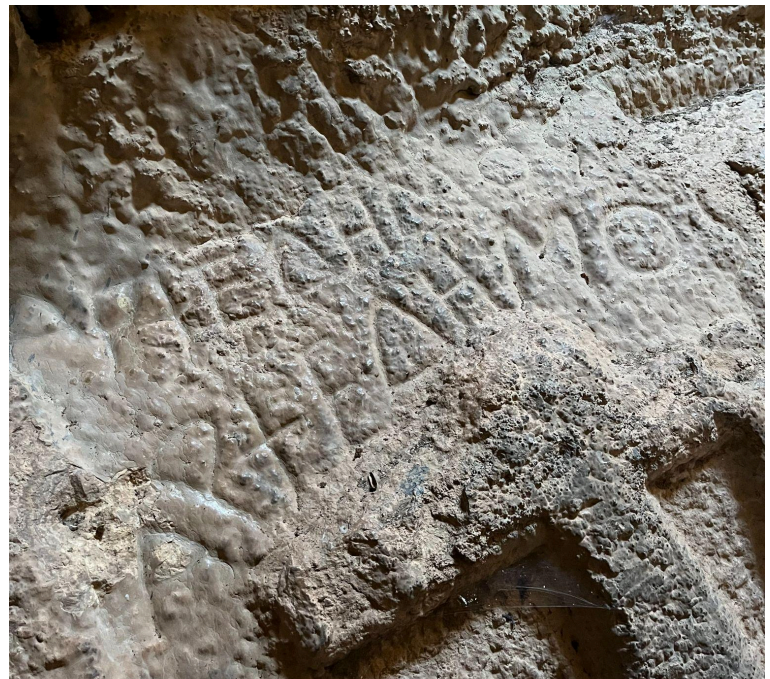




Figure 2.6

Altars of Apollo Hersos or Apollo and Hersos (*IG 1² 783*). Slots were carved in the upper tier probably to hold cult statues. Immediately to the right of the relief portrait of Archedemos.

Photo by the author, February 2026.

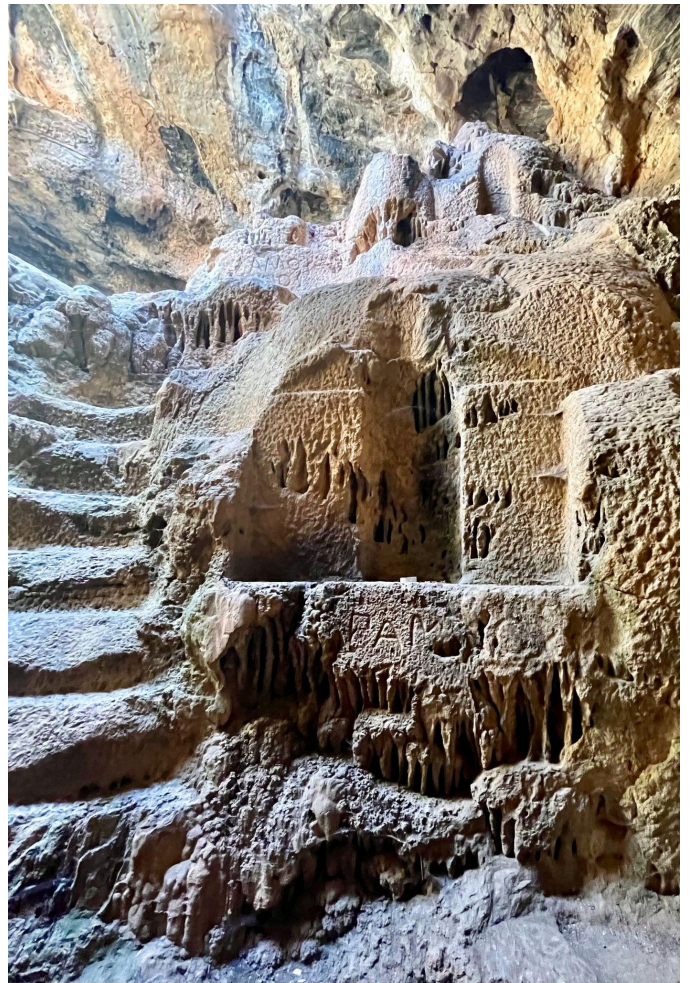


Figure 2.7

Altar of Pan carved into the natural rock. It was made to resemble a temple facade. Pan's name is inscribed on the bottom ledge, probably one of the oldest inscriptions in the cave (*IG 1² 781*).

Photo by the author, June 2023.

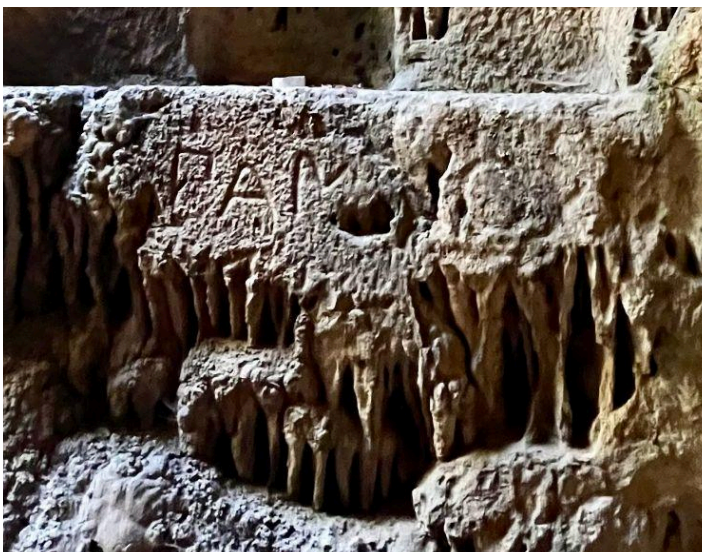


Figure 2.8

Detail of *IG 1² 781* below the temple-facade altar of Pan.

Photo by the author, June 2023.

Figure 2.9

Cult statue of an unidentifiable enthroned deity, carved into the natural rock of the cave. The head is missing and may have been of a different material. Slightly smaller than life-size.
Photo by the author, February 2026.



Figure 2.10

Hewn staircase ascending through the main shrine.

Photo by the author, June 2023.



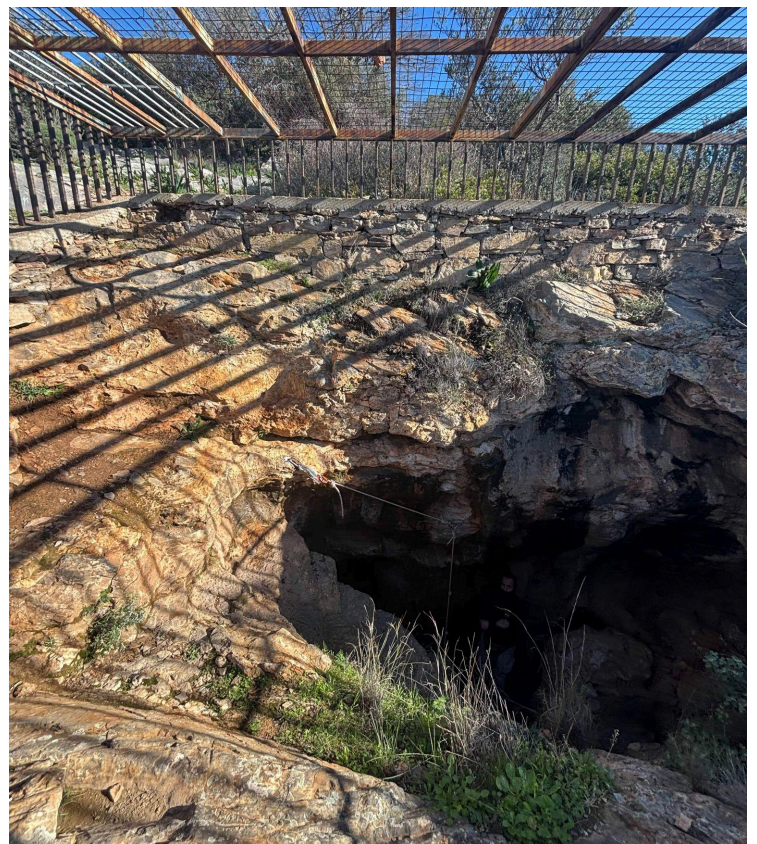
Figure 2.11

View down into the main shrine from the top of the hewn staircase.

Photo by the author, February 2026.

Figure 2.12
View of the modern exterior of the cave. For safety and conservation reasons, the ephorate has erected a metal cage around the cave mouth.

Photo by the author, February 2026



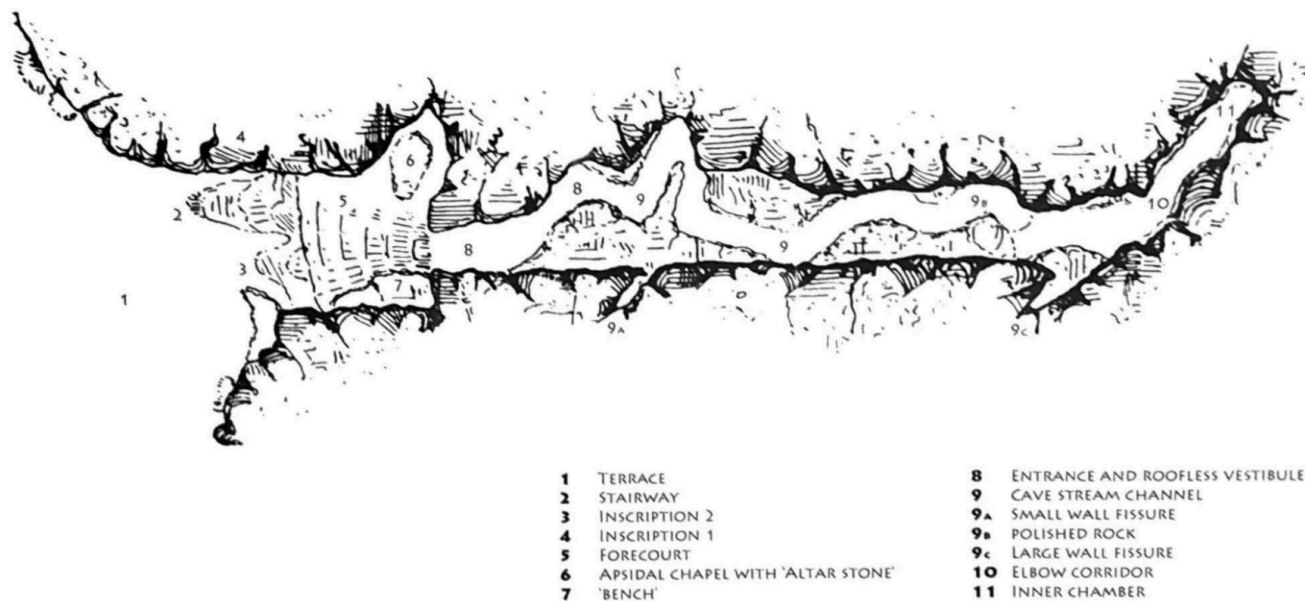


Figure 2.13

Plan of the Cave of the Nymphs, Karapla Hill, Pharsala. After Wagman, *Cave*, Plate VI.



Figure 2.14

Entrance to the cave, facing south.

After Wagman, *Cave*, Plate XIX, Fig. 32.



Figure 2.15

Cave interior, facing north toward the cave mouth. The winding channel in the cave floor marks the path of the spring that existed in antiquity.

After Wagman, *Cave*, Plate XX, Fig. 35.

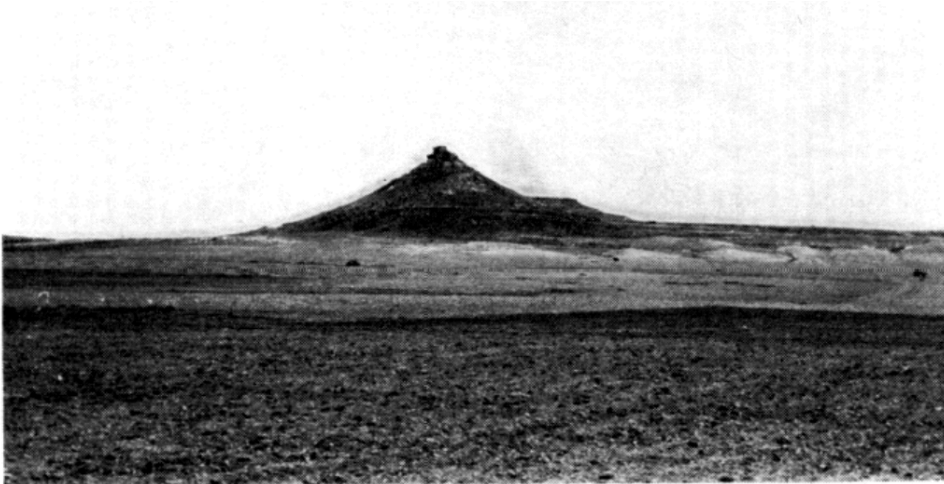


Figure 2.16

The “pointed hill” of Kafizin, Cyprus on the road between Nicosia and Larnaca.

Photo by Olivier Masson, 1957; after Masson, “À propos,” 1981, 624, fig. 1.



Figure 2.17

View of the cave on the hill of Kafizin with the natural terrace in front.

After Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, Plate II a.

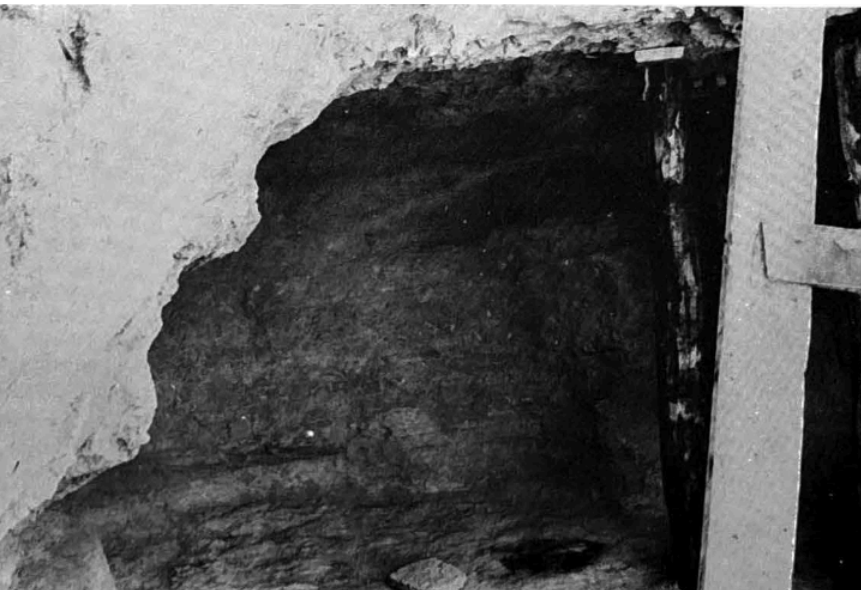


Figure 2.18

View of the cave interior from outside, with a modern ladder or support post in the foreground on the right. The L-shaped ledge is on the lefthand side of the cave interior.

After Mitford, *Nymphaeum*, Plate I b.

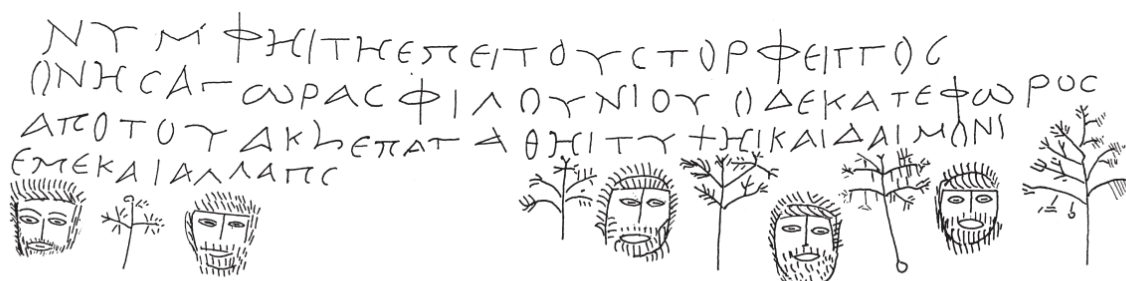


Figure 2.19

The so-called “Blanconnier Amphora” from the Kafizin Cave. The neck of the amphora features an alphabetic Koine inscription and five male heads, all bearded, separated by small trees or branches.

Illustration after Lejeune, “Kafizin. portraits,” Fig. 2, who cites Antoine Hermay, “Un nouveau vase inscrit de Kafizin,” *Cahiers du Centre d’Études Chypriotes* 36 (2006): 63–72, Fig. 4, drawing by Caroline Florimont.



Figure 2.20

Kafizin no. 274, a vase fragment with three bald, clean-shaven heads.

Photo after Lejeune, “Kafizin. portraits,” Fig. 4, who credits the Cyprus Museum for the image.

Figure 3.1

Exterior of the Antro di Pantanacci,
Lanuvio, Italy.
After Hermans, "Juno," 219, fig. 8.5A.

**Figure 3.2**

Select anatomical votives from
the Antro di Pantanacci,
including heads, arms, eyes,
bladders, masks, ears, male and
female genitals, esp. uteri.
After Ghini and Attenni, "La
Stipe," 393, fig. 12.

**Figure 3.3**

Cylindrical peperino
blocks with incised
scale decoration.
After Ghini and
Attenni, "La Stipe,"
397, fig. 18.



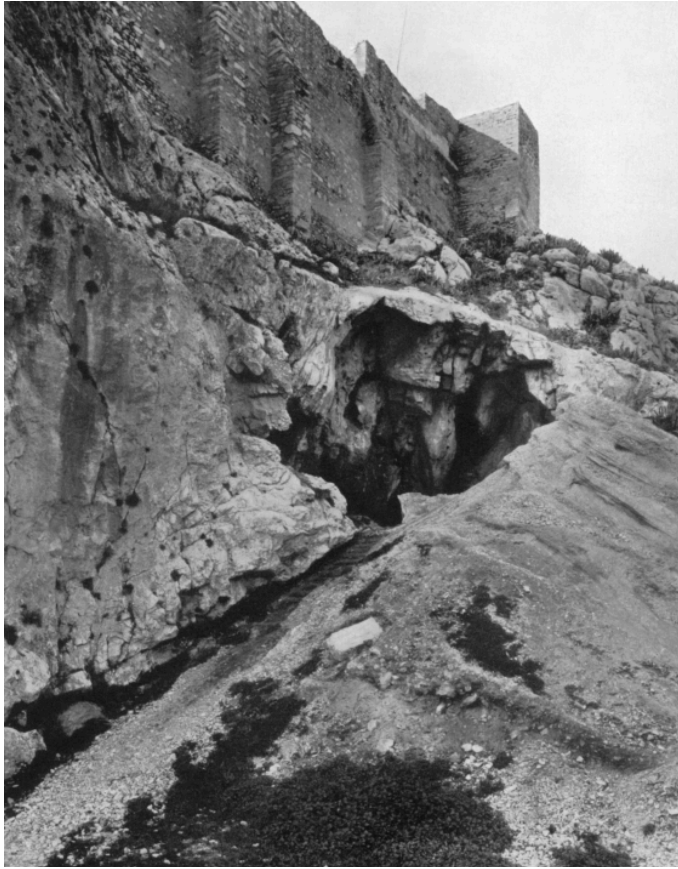


Figure 3.4

Exterior of the Cave of the East Slope of the Acropolis (i.e., the *Agaurion*). View from the southeast.

After Broneer, "The Cave on the East Slope," fig. 1.

Figure 3.5 (below, right)

Interior of the Cave of the East Slope of the Acropolis (i.e., the *Agaurion*)

After Broneer, "The Cave on the East Slope," fig. 2.

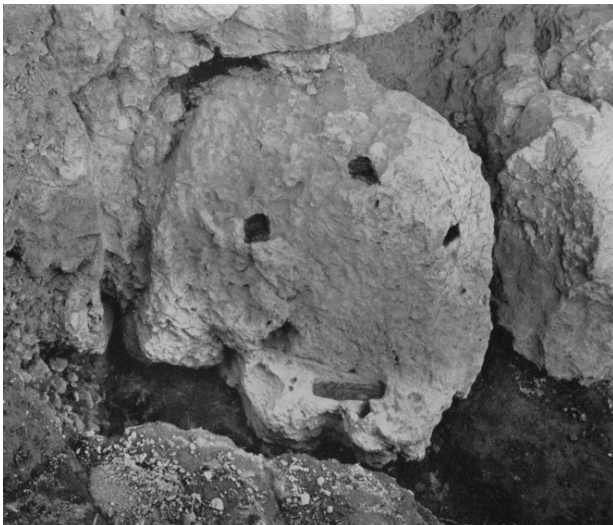
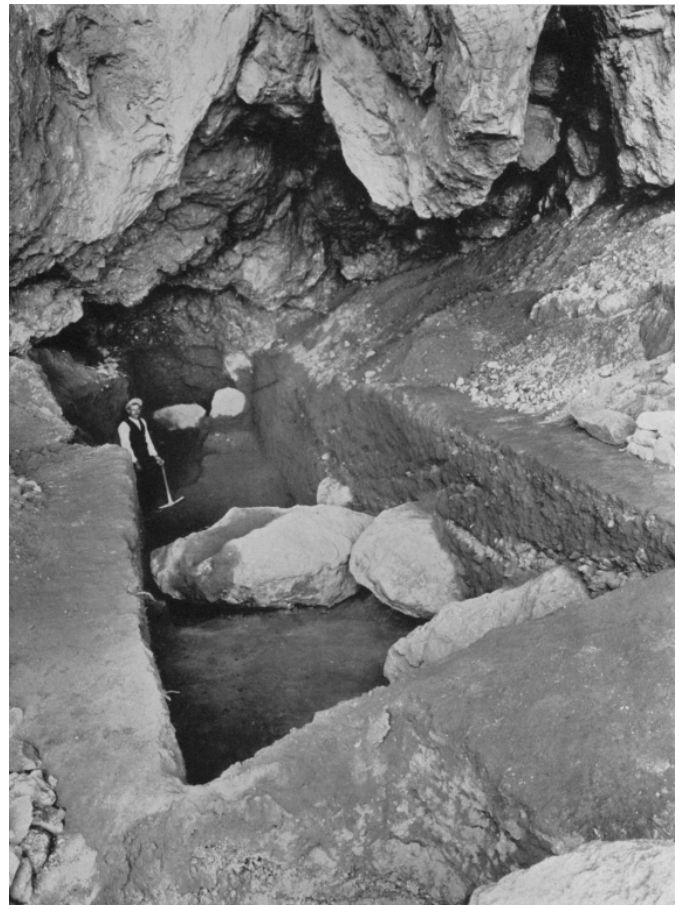


Figure 3.6 (above)

Stele bed directly outside the cave of Aglauros.

After Broneer, "The Cave on the East Slope," fig. 3.

Figure 3.7 (right)

Rock-cut staircase leading from the top of the Acropolis to the cave of Aglauros. After Broneer, "The Cave on the East Slope," 253, fig. 4.



Figure 3.8 (left)

Stele with 3rd century BCE decree regarding the rites and priestesses of Aglauros. Discovered in 1980. After Dontas, "The True Aglaurion," Plate 14.