

The Rise of Eileithyia in Mainland Greece

In the 5th century BCE, the cult of Eileithyia shifted from the caves and harbors of Crete to the Peloponnese and beyond. While she was mentioned in Homer and in other myths, it is not until the end of the 5th century that her cult begins to appear on the Greek mainland (Homer 1924 16.187-92). The focus most scholars tend to place on this birth goddess is either in mentioning her as secondary to other gods – such as Artemis or Hera – or focusing on her cult in Crete (Budin 2016, 106). This cult, which dates to the beginning of the Bronze Age at sites like Inatos, is well researched (Betancourt 2022, 3); however, there is a gap in scholarship focusing on her independent worship outside of Crete. This work focuses on this gap, specifically the cult shift to the mainland and Cyclades, the evidence for its dating, and factors that may have caused it.

The primary dating method used is through accounts of shrines dedicated to Eileithyia. Most attestations of in mainland Greece come from Pausanias – 600 years after she arrived. All shrines he names are in southern Greece, and few if any of these sanctuaries have been excavated or even attested in other sources (Pausanias 1918-1933). However, there are other accounts from Herodotus and Isaios of shrines at Delos and Pyrgus, creating a *terminus ante quem* for her cult outside of Crete in the middle of the 5th century BCE (Herodotus v.2 1982, 4.35.1; Strabo 1932, 5.2.8; 1944, 10.4.8). Unfortunately, as only a few of these shrines have been dated, it is difficult to gauge when Eileithyia's independent cult was adopted in the mainland. Despite this uncertainty, there is some evidence for how this shift from Crete occurred. When the Phoenician political climate changed in the 6th century, it broke down their extensive trade network which included Crete (Erikson 2005, 627). With these imports lost, it seems the Cretans instead began to trade with those on the Peloponnese (Erikson 2005, 628). With this regular contact established

between regions in the late 6th century, the appearance of Eileithyia's cult on the Peloponnese at the end of the 5th century could then be the result of cultural exchange from newly forged trade relations.

Works Cited

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