

Artemis' Bear: Brauron, Callisto and Childbirth

My paper will examine the role of Artemis' sacred animal, the bear, in connection with her aspect as goddess of childbirth. There has been much scholarly attention given to the *Brauronia*, a festival at Brauron, in which youths perform a rite in honor of Artemis to usher in puberty and prepare for marriage: 'playing the bear'. Scholarship has traditionally interpreted the ritual as taming girls' wildness before their transition to being good wives (Faraone 2003), or as appeasing the virginal goddess as girls prepare to lose their virginity (Burkert 1983; Papamichali et al. 2022). Building off of the work of scholars such as Paula Perlman (1989), I hypothesize that the bear, sacred to Artemis, serves as a symbol for easier childbirth based on ancient scientific ideas about bears and reproduction. I will analyze this Brauronian ritual alongside the myth of Callisto, and epigraphical and zoological evidence.

The well-known myth of Artemis and Callisto is frequently connected to the rite. The story has some mythical variation in antiquity, but most accounts feature Callisto as a companion to Artemis, who swears to remain as chaste as the goddess. When Zeus (impersonating Artemis in some versions) impregnates Callisto, Artemis transforms her into a bear and casts her out of her inner circle. It is notable that the majority of these myths feature Callisto giving birth to her son Arcas *after* her metamorphosis. What is more interesting is a claim made by Helen in Euripides' eponymous tragedy that Callisto's transformation 'changed her burden of sorrow' into a positive (Eur. *Hel.* 375-380). How could this metamorphic punishment be a blessing?

I argue that the answer lies in part with ancient biological ideas about the animal. Bears' skin, in part due to their practice of hibernation, were believed to be able to expand and contract

and bear cubs were easily born as unarticulated lumps of flesh, σαρκοτοκεῖται (Cf. Arist. *GA* 774b, *HA* 6.30; Pliny *NH* 8.54; Sex. Emp. *Hyp.* 1.43). I suggest that examining the bear as an animal for women to imitate during puberty rights is sensible in light of ancient zoological theory. Maurizio Bettini (2013) has deployed a similar methodology with woman and weasels, making the argument for an association between weasels' childbearing habits and symbolic association, and the mythology surrounding the birth of Heracles, during which a midwife was changed into a weasel by Hera.

Furthermore, we know that young girls at Brauron were expected to serve in the cult of Artemis as a 'bear' (read: 'priestess') before reaching the age of marriage. Similarly, Athenians decreed (or legislated) that no maiden was to cohabit with her husband before she had served as a bear for the goddess. The epigraphical evidence fits in nicely, too. A purity law from Cyrene instructs pregnant women to visit Artemis' temple and sacrifice 'to the Bear', Artemis' priestess, before they give birth (CGRN 99, Carbon, Peels, and Pirenne-Delforge 2017). Greek women, both young and/or pregnant, paying homage to Artemis, may have invoked the bear in these rituals in hopes of gaining an easier birth for themselves; in the same way that bears easily birthed 'lumps of flesh' and had skin that could stretch to accommodate a change in size, perhaps so too could a woman's womb in childbirth.

All of this evidence helps enlighten us as to why Artemis' transformation of Callisto into a bear could be rendered as a blessing, and why so many Greek women 'played' the bear or sought out Artemis' 'Bear'-priestess in her sanctuary. Between the attributes of bears, the mythology surrounding Callisto, and ritual evidence, we stand to learn more about the connection between Artemis and her sacred animal, and how the goddess expressed her childbirth aspect to control Greek puberty and pregnant bodies.

Works Cited

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