

Blurred boundaries: Hades and Zeus Chthonios

In this paper I will explore the intersection between Hades and Zeus in myth and cult through a discussion of the epithet *chthonios* and its cognates.

Hades and Zeus, although they are brothers, are antithetical figures. Among the gods, Hades is an anomaly. Although powerful, he receives almost no cult and is a largely passive figure, ruling the dead but not adding to their number, remaining in the underworld (with the notable exception of the abduction of Persephone), separated from the other gods. His brother Zeus, on the other hand, looks like his antithesis in every way. Where Hades is isolated, Zeus is all-pervasive; his spheres of influence such as sovereignty, justice, *xenia*, and so forth, touch every aspect of human life; his cults are many and varied, and his myths are legion.

Yet the distinction between them is not as sharp as one might expect. Zeus has *epikleseis* – cult names – which embody underworld aspects; Hades, primarily but not solely under the name Plouton, has a strong connection with agricultural fertility. In this paper, I will focus on one area in which the foremost Olympian meets the god of the underworld, through a discussion of Zeus Chthonios and his relation to Hades in both myth and cult.

The word *chthonios*, which covers a spectrum of meanings related to the earth, the dead, and the underworld, has been the subject of considerable discussion (a recent summary: Parker 2011, 80-84). Zeus carries the epithet *chthonios* and its cognates (e.g. *katachthonios*) both in mythical narratives and in cult-related contexts. The identification of Hades as the underworld Zeus, or some variant thereon, has a long pedigree; already in the *Iliad*, Hades is referred to as Zeus Katachthonios (*Il.* 9.457). Passages referring to Zeus with the epithet *chthonios* form a small but particularly interesting subset of such references. Passages which refer to Hades as Zeus often illustrate an ambiguous shared trait between the two; thus Aeschylus uses the trope in discussing the Erinyes, dark administrators of Zeus' punitive

justice, in passages which evoke a striking impiety against both Zeus and Hades (Aes. Ag. 1385-7, *Choe.* 382-409; Winnington-Ingram 1983, 164 etc.). Zeus Chthonios in cult is also usually seen as an underworld deity (Johnston 2012, 214) or at best as ambivalent (West 1966, comm. ad Hes. *Erga* 465). A close reading of the few available sources, however, indicates that the cult of Zeus Chthonios is primarily agricultural, with no obvious affiliation to the underworld. Zeus Chthonios in cult thus seems a different kind of being from the Zeus Chthonios in literary, mythical narratives. My conclusion will emphasize that the different aspects of the word *chthonios* are at work in both cult and myth: literary sources use the complexity of the word *chthonios* to add complexity to the interweaving of Zeus and Hades, and the cult is an agrarian one with a subtle aroma of underworld about it.

Bibliography

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