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## Key Themes in Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology

“Creator, Schemer, Nurturer, Deceiver: The Case of Gaia as Cultural Continuum in Greek Myth  
and Iconography”

MA Dissertation

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Creator, Schemer, Nurturer, Deceiver:  
The Case of Gaia as Cultural Continuum in Greek Myth and Iconography

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## Abstract

Creator, Schemer, Nurturer, Deceiver:

The Case of Gaia as Cultural Continuum in Greek Myth and Iconography

This thesis is an analysis and assessment of the myth and iconography of the Greek goddess Gaia (Γαῖα, Γῆ, Gê) Mother/Earth with primary focus on the Archaic and Classical period. In Greek literature as the central protagonist in the myth of origins and goddess of fertile prosperity, over time, Gaia's role in the Greek world becomes marginalized. In the cultic sphere, the veneration of the goddess also diminishes, yet the myth and iconography of Gaia continues on to live such a lengthy time period.

Gaia's myth and iconography and its association within the historical framework of the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c BCE Athens as a primordial divinity and the foundation of ancestral power is symbolic as Athens evolves into a great city state. After the 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE even though her importance is minimized and her cultic role in Athens diminishes, I argue she continues to be characterized in myth and iconography as the dualistic embodiment of nature vs. nurture, of rule and order/chaos and disorder, and as a foundation for which the other gods and goddesses appear in the continuum of fertile prosperity in the urban setting.

To compare, I examine the importance of inclusion of Gaia in iconography within the historical context and framework of the development of the new city state of Athens in the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c BCE with the evidence of its literary works in conjunction with the epigraphical, iconographical and archaeological evidence of Gaia's myth, cult and iconography within this time frame. I also apply anthropological theory as an approach on how to view Gaia's myth and iconography within its historical context. I also give attention to Gaia's depth and breadth of influence and changing role in antiquity.

What is the significance of fertility within the framework of a developing Athens city state? Why do we not have abundant evidence for Gaia's cult yet her influence in myth and iconography appear for such a lengthy amount of time? These are some of the questions and objectives I explore in this thesis.

I conclude that Gaia, as the personification of Earth, is a case of cultural continuum. Due to the natural landscape in which she is associated with that continues to endure, more so than man made monuments, Gaia is a foundation for memory preservation of the old ways in both iconography and myth. I argue that the role of Gaia in Greek cult and her place in the cultic sphere alongside the dichotomy of her cultural continuum in myth and iconography was a result of urbanization and social reforms, both to preserve memory and introduce more urban icons and images of fertility, power, and victory.

Cover images:

Left: Gaia and the Gigantomachia. Athenian Red-Figure, Krater fragment, 410-400 B.C., Naples,

Museo Archeologico Nazionale: #81521/BAPD #217517/LIMC #10553.

Right: Gaia delivers Erichthonius to Athena. Athenian Red-Figure, Krater, 420-400 B.C.,

Richmond (VA), Museum of Fine Arts: #81.70./BAPD #10158/ LIMC #16812.

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## **Introduction**

This thesis is an analysis and assessment of the myth and iconography of the Greek goddess Gaia (Γαῖα, Γῆ, Gê) Mother/Earth with primary focus on the Archaic and Classical period. In Greek literature as the central protagonist in the myth of origins and in iconography a goddess personified as Earth, over time, Gaia's cult role in the Greek world becomes marginalized. In the cultic sphere, mostly attributed to Delphi and Athens, the veneration of the goddess diminishes but, for some reason, the myth and iconography of Gaia continues on to live such a lengthy time period. In application of Derek Bickerton's linguistic analysis to cultural theory, cultural anthropologist Lee Drummond argued that 'cultures are neither structures nor plural amalgams, but a continuum or set of intersystems... evident in polyethnic societies'.<sup>1</sup> Drummond furthers this argument stating that 'members of society with differences in ethnic identity operate with understanding of cultural continuum, thus, internal variation and change in the continuum are tied to symbolic processes of ethnicity'.<sup>2</sup>

On this premise, I start with discussion on the nature of the Mother/Earth goddess concept in myth and how its variation may have evolved as a consequence of a more socially and hierarchal structured urban form of civilization. The theme of fertility is also interchangeable between physical land association and urban association. Various myths frequently associate a 'Mother Goddess' or 'Earth Goddess' figure with the cycle of fertility, prosperity, and symbolic rites associated with birth and death. With these myths, she is often characterized as nurturer and personification of nature. In literary texts, she takes many forms and names and appears in myth for a long time. Some examples of the Mother Goddess/Earth Goddess figure include the Mesopotamian Inanna, the Egyptian Ishtar, the Lydian Cybele, the Cretan Rhea, the Etruscan Cel, the Roman Terra/Tella and the goddess known to Greeks as Gaia. I continue to build the case that Gaia's role as the mother of Erichthonius and the Titans in Greek myth and iconography was, particularly to the Athenians, a mediator between the earthly civic foundations and the divine for an equally balanced, prosperous, fertile and co-existent mortal and divine relationship in the urban setting. Ironically, in myth, when Gaia reproduces asexually, the divine beings are shaped to her design and she is accounted as the creator and nurturer. These bodies

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<sup>1</sup> Drummond 1980, 352-353.

<sup>2</sup> Drummond 1980, 353.

form the physical world which is direct extensions of her. This is the premise of harmony in symbiotic relationships within the laws of nature according to Hippocratic theory. In iconography, she is depicted as a ruler, mother, and mediator to both the divine and mortal, pictured half above and half below as seen in her depictions with the birth of Erichthonius. However, when Gaia reproduces sexually creating mortals, they sometimes undermine her and she cannot control their behavior, whereas, she is depicted as the schemer and deceiver. This can be viewed as a non-symbiotic mode of behavior and unnatural according to the laws of nature, thus, confirming the duality of her character. The mortal's need to conquer nature goes against the laws of harmony, as indicated by her iconography in the Gigantomachia. This is the ultimate challenge of the goddess and reflective of the time period within the historical framework of the fertilization of a polyethnic formation of the new city state of Athens 6<sup>th</sup> century to 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

In my first chapter I review previous scholarship on the Mother/Earth goddess figure. Using anthropological theory as a guide to myth and its function, I analyze Gaia's presence and role in mythology and how her characteristics are depicted in the literature citing primary sources spanning from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE up to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE with special focus on the 6<sup>th</sup> century to 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. To the Greeks she earned the epithet 'Mother of All' and, depending on the era of scholarship, she is often romanticized as a 'Mother-Earth' figure. Hesiod focuses on the goddess personified while other works such as the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides discuss her relationship with Heaven as 'an allegory to natural processes'.<sup>3</sup> Then, I evaluate Gaia as a dual character embodying important themes such as gender conflict, fertility, prosperity, and memory preservation. These themes existed before and after her appearance in Greek literature. As Drummond suggests, when learning another language we generate expressions according to transformational rules of a linguistic continuum.<sup>4</sup> This theory holds true in the transformation of myth from oral tradition to written texts and, with the migration of people through trade, may explain why the same creation myth occurs in both the Mediterranean and in Mesopotamia. I

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<sup>3</sup> *BNP* s.v. "Gaia" 639.

<sup>4</sup> Drummond 1980, 370; He further explains that "A cultural continuum, like a linguistic continuum, may be identified by inserting arbitrary boundaries within a transformational series". For more detail on structural linguistics, see Lévi-Strauss, C., C., Jacobson, C., & Schoepf, B. G. (1963). *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, Chapter 2, pgs. 31-54. For structural functionalism, see Durkheim, É., Simpson, G. (1960) *The Division of Labor in Society*, The Free Press; Durkheim, É., Sattler, S. (1962) *Socialism*, New York: Collier Books.



discuss the creation myth's occurrence in ancient Greece as a cultural continuum, the importance of the quest for truths in the underground, and the role of Gaia in the formation of the city state of Athens as it is evolving from an agricultural society to an urban, polyethnic, and hierarchal society.

My second chapter explores the evidence for Gaia's cult activity with emphasis on Athens. The main focus is religion and cult in the Greek world and her fit in it. In review of the scholarship dedicated to the study of her cult I find the interpretation of evidence is often divided on the importance of her role in cultic activity. Based on the epigraphical, archaeological, and literary evidence, I propose she is the symbolic foundation on which the ancient Greeks were able to preserve memory yet cultivate their own interpretation of the environment around them through their own making of divine gods and goddesses with human like attributes. In a sense, nature is rearranged by the hands of man. Gaia, unlike later personified figures of divinity, rarely took shape of something other than the natural environment she personified, the Earth and all it entails. Discussing the presence of Gaia in myth and iconography are accounts shaped by culture; they are transmissions and interpretations of human thought and design of that time period. Yet, when Gaia is placed within the cosmological realm, her shape is without boundaries. I expand on Landi's argument that this is one good reason why megastructures dedicated to the goddess have not been found.

The third chapter is dedicated to Gaia's iconography and, in particular focus, its presence in the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c BCE Athens. In support of her continuum, Gaia is depicted in iconography over a lengthy amount of time but mostly in Attic vase paintings where we have most of her iconography. Even in modern day, Gaia and themes associated with her have been the choice subject material for numerous films and documentaries, as a model for climate and environment systems analyses, and as the basis of doctrine in new age pagan religion. I give special attention to the fact that the majority of Gaia's iconography on vase paintings is placed in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> c BCE, the time period Athens is nearing its peak power. Considering the contexts in which she is portrayed, focusing on Gaia as the embodiment of duality seems an appropriate choice for pottery during this time period, yet very little has been uncovered. Through examination of the primary sources and through critical assessment of earlier and current scholarship, I argue for Gaia as a case of cultural continuum and also as the figure of the negotiation between the old and

new symbols of fertility. I also evaluate the theory that Attica and Earth are one and the same and that Athens may be depicting these same characteristics in its iconography in its quest for identity, power, and wealth with the backdrop of its attempt at preservation of memory.

The structure of this thesis is to approach the role of Gaia from the perspectives of myth, cult, and iconography. The challenge in this structure was to find the weaving thread that would tie these aspects together for the best formative picture of her role in antiquity and for the argument of Gaia as a case of cultural continuum. This is where anthropological theory helps play a crucial role in the discussion of the central themes of gender conflict, fertility, and the preservation of memory with focus on, but not limited to, the historical context of 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens.

One of the major difficulties in this research was the lack of access to information due to the closure of libraries. I have relied heavily on on-line material for the formation of this project, mostly pdf copies of books, journal articles, reports, my own personal home library, on-line archives and databases for the ancient texts and their translations, as well as for the iconography. At times this was quite vexing but perhaps reflective of a most unconventional year. Nonetheless, I made my best attempt with the material I could find. Secondly, archaeological and classical scholarship solely dedicated to the study of Gaia is limited and some of the material available on-line were in languages I have not mastered or do not have a fundamental reading ability of. I overcame this obstacle with the use of on-line translating tools in combination with my reading knowledge, as well as translations by other authors, to make good attempt at interpreting the material.

Finally, interpretation and assessment of materials change over time according to current views and research methods. To overcome this challenge, I use an interdisciplinary approach on the study of Gaia and evaluate her importance within the historical context in myth and iconography in chronological order. Through this method, my objective is to address and discuss Gaia's depth and breadth of influence of her mythical role over time.

## Chapter 1- Gaia and Her Mythology

### **1.1 Mother Goddess/Mother Earth in myth: a scholarship review**

Various myths frequently associate a ‘Mother Goddess’ or ‘Earth Goddess’ figure with the cycle of fertility, prosperity, and symbolic rites associated with birth and death. With these myths, she is often characterized as nurturer and personification of nature. In literary texts, she takes many forms and names and appears in myth for a long time. Some examples of the Mother Goddess/Earth Goddess figure include the Mesopotamian Inanna, the Egyptian Ishtar, the Lydian Cybele, the Cretan Rhea, the Etruscan Cel, the Roman Terra/Tella and the goddess known to Greeks as Gaia.<sup>5</sup>

Early works on the Mother Earth/Mother Goddess figure in the history of religion have been treated in publications such as A. Deiterich, in his *magnum opus Mutter Erde*, who argued that a “Mother Earth” figure existed, though not as part of a divine hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> His work proposed the theory that the rites of birth and death in religion worked as functions of a fundamental universal principle that was innate among humans. Later, E.O. James in his comparative studies of religions of the East Mediterranean examines how their cultural elements evolved and how societies adjusted to external forces which was a great contribution in the questioning of traditional theories on the formations of religion. A statement on Mother Goddess symbolism and its repeated occurrences he writes “Whether or not the Mother Goddess was the earliest manifestation of the concept of deity, her symbolism unquestionably has been the most persistent feature in the archaeological record of the ancient world”.<sup>7</sup> In the spirit of the 1960’s after a decade of conformity in traditional gender roles, in 1967, Bachofen’s matriarchal studies proposed that a link between early human society and the Mother Goddess female deity existed in many early religions.<sup>8</sup> His focus was primarily on the progress of growth and development of a society in parallel with the progress of religious practice. His rather unprecedented theories for his time period rested on the premise that matriarchy introduced the implementation of

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<sup>5</sup> There are certainly many sources attributed to a mother goddess figure and her myth. For further reading on these and other goddesses see Dietrich 1925; James 1959; Bachofen 1967; Burkert 1987; Penglase 1994; Parker 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Deiterich 1925 (1905), 82-84.

<sup>7</sup> James 1959, 11. For more in-depth reading on the antecedents of the goddess cult, see James (1959) Chapter 1. For works against the argument of Mother Goddess as a concept of deity, see Georgoudi (2002) 113-114, Olaf Petersson 1967.

<sup>8</sup> Bachofen 1967, 98-99.

monogamy as a result of the male rebellion against female promiscuity to insure lineage confirmation. Most of his work concerned cultural evolution and the development of religion which, in turn, inspired further investigations in social philosophy about the role of gender in family organization.

Burkert (1985; 1987) and Penglase (1994) note similarities between several Greek myths and those of Mesopotamia. Penglase focuses on how Hesiod's *Theogony* was influenced by Near Eastern succession myths. His study concerns the historical possibility of Mesopotamian influence on Greek myth through trade and cultural connections, as well as to demonstrate the existence of parallels between the literary materials of both cultures.<sup>9</sup> Burkert discusses the coexistent tradition of magic and mysteries and its interrelations in craftsmanship, especially noting the parallel in Egyptian texts with those of Eleusis and its association with Demeter. His work places emphasis on the status of *logoi* and that written texts were not the very basis of religion. He cites Plato's *Meno* that in context of religious cults, *logoi* was learned from "men and women who are wise about things divine...from priests and priestesses who care about being able to give an account of what they are doing".<sup>10</sup>

In a 2002 study by Rey Koslowski concerning the political consequences of human migration, he uses the case model of ancient Greece as a polyethnic society and discusses the way migration, association and connections with its city-states, as well as its trade neighbors, shaped its dynamics.<sup>11</sup> This evidence is reinforced in Greece's architecture, literature, and visual culture. In 2002, Stella Georgoudi published her work on the myth, cult and ideology of Gaia describing her as a universal Mother Earth that would proceed by emanation with various derivatives including Athena, Hera, Aphrodite and especially Demeter and Kore; 'the offspring that would grow of this original bosom.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Penglase 1994, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Burkert 1987, 71-72.

<sup>11</sup> Koslowski 2002, 379.

<sup>12</sup> Georgoudi 2002, 113: *Car ce serait de cette Terre-Mere universelle que 'procederaient,' par une sorte d'emanation, les diverses Athena, Hera, Aphrodite, mais surtout Demeter et Kore, comme autant de 'rejetons' qui 'pousseraient' de ce 'giron' originel ala maniere des plantes.*

Parker's *On Greek Religion* in 2011 focuses on how the divine world was perceived by the Greeks and how myth and art made the gods and goddesses accessible by observation, not revelation. The search for revelation by religious experience, cult ritual, or by the book, was not a concept to the Greeks. The absence of the concept of a creator god suggests that the function of myth and written texts was one of validation and not revelation. Poems which described gods and goddess and their doings were just as proficient in treating sacred matters, such as those by Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Homeric Hymns. The art of telling myth by choral performances or by recitation competition was often a part of many festive rituals. Therefore, it appears the relationship and interaction between myth and ritual was reliant, especially to the observer, on an idea or concept that was able to take physical form. A good example of this concept is expressed by the works of Homer and Hesiod, where Gaia takes the physical form of the Earth.

Cole's work in 2004 shows how ancient Greek communities defined themselves through organization of gender and landscape and how female ritual and its connection to the contribution of the community aided in shaping the political ancient Greek polis. The division of space and gender created productive and sacred space, with emphasis on purity and pollution, and she demonstrates its effects on political organization using epigraphical evidence of ritual practice. Furthermore, she explores how ritual was performed in context of landscape and how these performances were relevant according to the philosophical ideals about the female body concerning reproduction and family health in conjunction with male anxieties on lineage confirmation, and how this separation created a gender premised ritual system. According to Cole, the *Theogony* emphasizes "the principles of communal decision making and the establishment of a Greek moral order".<sup>13</sup> As a product of the early formation of the polis, it is congruent with the need to explain and control the natural world.

Landi's work on the forms and structures of the worship of Gaia in the Greek world supports a veneration of the goddess and that her role as creator of immortals and men was later emphasized as 'the primeval goddess preceding the formation of the civil context'.<sup>14</sup> Her examination of testimony from the extensive epigraphic documentation and literary sources provides a tangible

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<sup>13</sup> Cole 2004, 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> Landi 2012, 164.

reconstruction of forms and the values of veneration in association with worship of the goddess, including within the context of religion and Athenian society and her place in it.

Concerning the myth of goddess Gaia, she is featured in numerous literary texts with the fullest account of her creation myth in Hesiod's *Theogony* as a primordial divinity and a protagonist in the cosmic birth. Early myths of the Mother/Earth goddess figure across cultures associate her with the agricultural cycle and symbolic rites associated with birth and death sometimes within a tripartite structure or formula. In the later works of Aeschylus (5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.) and Aristophanes (5<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.) competition between the cults of poets often took place and the philosophy, either through comedy or tragedy, to gain the upper hand and prevail is perhaps indicative of Athens taking form. Gaia and Erichthonius acts as visual agents in the coming of age theme. With this background and considering the extent of Greek influence on cultures it came into contact with, and vice versa, it is reasonable to suggest variations of myth are realistic adaptations of the same conception, which is, the earth is ever present no matter what the territory is named. The Mother/Earth goddess and the physical land form are the common link from which the goddess varies based on cultural interpretation and adaptation. This means that a continuum of the 'Mother Earth idea' had similar foundations but with different variations.

## 1.2 Myth and its function

Myth is a valuable tool that reflects a culture's religious and social ideologies but should be carefully understood within its own societal context.<sup>15</sup> Many scholars have attempted to term 'what are myths' and 'how to use them'. The importance of the idea to understand myth in its own context is reinforced by Bouvrie that 'tales identified as myth can present a wide range of themes and can be owned by different social groups, but should not be taken at face value.'<sup>16</sup> Some problems in myth function are the transmission of traditional tales to new environments.<sup>17</sup> Looking at myth through an anthropological lens as a 'symbolic phenomenon', "the distinction between rites and myths (and icons) is not an essential one, but sometimes useful for practical

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<sup>15</sup> For more in depth reading and some cultural examples of myth and its function, see Csapo (2005) Chapter 1, pgs. 1-11.

<sup>16</sup> Synnøve des Bouvrie 2002, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Synnøve des Bouvrie 2002, 21.

purposes, helpful only as seen from the observer's perspective.<sup>18</sup> In terms of their origin and function they are inseparable: traditional tales, ritual behavior, traditional images and physical arrangements.”<sup>19</sup> Geertz’s work in cultural symbolism is a similar and empathic approach. The mechanism he uses in understanding society is through the use of a culture’s public symbols. According to his method, to situate the audience within the system facilitates a better understanding of meaning.<sup>20</sup>

When applied to ritual behavior and symbolism in celebration, myth’s role in functional symbolism is best described by Victor Turner: “In the cyclic rituals of preindustrial and agriculturally based cultures, the past, mythically and quasihistorical, is “carried” by certain key or dominant sacred symbols. The unchangeable character of the cosmic and cultural orders and the notion of life as a repetition of structures are expressed by sacra (“holy things”), objects and activities believed to be charged with supernatural power, which are presented for worshipful attention in religious celebrations.”<sup>21</sup>

The function of 'myth' in anthropological terms may justify authority or explain natural phenomena, however, myth is ‘never a complete replica or reflection of a people's culture and it may contain exaggerated and inverted features of real life ... And not all myths represent a harmonious unity of social life; some, on the contrary, can be ... expressing and not solving social-psychological conflicts of a particular social structure or of certain distributions of power within society.’<sup>22</sup>

Ancient Greeks worshipped a whole range of gods and goddesses as well as heroes.<sup>23</sup> The best explanation in understanding the difference between the gods in literature and those of cult or practiced religion is best explained by Herodotus: “*I suppose Hesiod and Homer flourished not more than four hundred years earlier than I; and these are the ones who taught the Greeks the*

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<sup>18</sup> Synnøve des Bouvrie 2002, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Synnøve des Bouvrie 2002, 26.

<sup>20</sup> McGee and Warmes 2004, 553.

<sup>21</sup> Turner 1982, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Synnøve des Bouvrie 2002, 25; She cites Saliba, J. 1976 ‘*Homo religiosus*,’ in *Mircea Eliade. An anthropological evaluation*, Numen Suppl. Second Series 5 (Leiden).

<sup>23</sup> Mikalson 2005, 32.

*descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms..”<sup>24</sup>*

Mikalson points out that Hesiod and Homer were a culmination of oral poetic tradition and that this tradition was jointly a product of imagination and the ascription of deities, Near Eastern and Greek, that were worshiped at the time defined by function and location.<sup>25</sup> This picture of the divine world was an expression with historical roots. Parker explains the role of myth implies conception of the gods, not as sheer belief about them, but accentuating the role myth played in religious life and ritual acts of pleasing or criticizing the divine as a way to both mediate and interact with their environment in their search for evident truths.<sup>26</sup>

Observations and interpretations of symbolism are not without variability. One person using the same approach may very well have different insights than another. The best way to understand and interpret material is to keep in mind the time period and historical context in which it is placed.

## **1.2 Literary accounts of Gaia and their historical context**

The known literary accounts of Gaia extend from the 8<sup>th</sup> c BCE up to the 10<sup>th</sup> c AD, from Homer’s *Iliad* to *The Suda*. Some scholars consider Gaia an ancient pre-Hellenic goddess; according to Beekes, Gaia is a pre-Greek word.<sup>27</sup> In Indo-European her name may mean ‘she who gives birth’.<sup>28</sup> In the Mycenaean Thebes tablets the word *maka*, interpreted as the name Ma Ga ‘Mother Earth,’ may relate to Gaia.<sup>29</sup> Further on the matter, Dieterich states ‘the  $\mu\tilde{\alpha}/\Gamma\tilde{\alpha}/\pi\tilde{\alpha}$  words are “Lallformen” or “babble-forms” from a primitive language and mean mother and

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<sup>24</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 2.53. (trans. A.D. Godley).

<sup>25</sup> Mikalson 2005, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Parker 2011, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Beekes 2010, 270.

<sup>28</sup> *BNP* 619; See also M. Meier- Brügger, Zu griech,  $\gamma\tilde{\eta}$  und  $\gamma\tilde{\alpha}\tilde{\alpha}$ , in: Münchner Stud. Zur Sprachwissenschaft 53, 1992, 113-116.

<sup>29</sup> Beekes 2010, 270; Roux (1976) 23 interprets the inscription name as a Mycenaean version of Gaia. Landi 2012, 128. Landi also cites C. Cappelletti 2004, *Cult of Gaia in Greece*, Ad Limina II.



father, which are indicative of a primitive religion'.<sup>30</sup> There is also the possibility of Ma Ga as a variation of the word Ma Ka in association with makarismos.<sup>31</sup>

In myth, Gaia's characteristics are mostly associated with caverns and chasms, fertility and childbearing as the genesis of mortals and gods, as a witness to oaths, and the first antagonist of the heavenly gods. Starting with the 8<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. the earliest reference of the goddess Gaia is in Homer's *Iliad*. Gaia is not named per se, but referred to as earth, the giver of grain:<sup>32</sup>

*“And they that held Athens, the well-built citadel, the land of great-hearted Erechtheus, whom of old Athene, daughter of Zeus, fostered, when the earth [Gaia], the giver of grain, had borne him; and she made him to dwell in Athens, in her own rich sanctuary.”*

Gaia is frequently mentioned where primordial beings are invoked. In the *Iliad* she receives the sacrifice of black sheep by persons taking oaths.<sup>33</sup>

Over time, different accounts of Gaia's creation story and myth appear. The first and fullest account of her creation myth appears in the early archaic work Hesiod's *Theogony*.<sup>34</sup> In summary, Gaia's origin according to Hesiod describes her as the parentless goddess emerging from the void of Chaos.<sup>35</sup> Tartarus follows Gaia in succession and then Eros. Gaia's femininity is emphasized with her ability to asexually produce Ouranos. Then, with encouragement from Eros, she 'marries' Ouranos and gives birth to the Mountains and the Sea. The Sky, the Mountains, and the Sea all form essential physical elements of the Earth as a tripartite structure.

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<sup>30</sup> Dieterich 1925 (1905), 38: *Es sind Worte der primitiven Sprache, "Lallformen" für "Mutter" und "Vater", wie man mit Recht erklärt hat: es sind auch Lallformen primitiver Religion.*

<sup>31</sup> Cole 2004, 148. Cole cites *Hymn Hom. Ap.* 14 for the connection of a *makarismos* with mother. Early literary evidence for *makarismos* collected by Dirichlet, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, II. 2.546 (trans. A.T. Murray).

<sup>33</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, iii. 3.104 (trans. A.T. Murray).

<sup>34</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116 (trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White).

<sup>35</sup> In Greek, the noun chaos [χάος] is the infinite space in which celestial bodies move or a large, empty space. It is etymologically related to the word «space». Το άπειρο διάστημα μέσα στο οποίο κινούνται τα ουράνια σώματα. Είναι ένα πολύ μεγάλος κενός χώρος. Το όνομα "Χάος" σχετίζεται ετυμολογικά με την λέξη "χώρος".

[https://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/modern\\_greek/tools/lexica/triantafyllides/search.html?lq=%CF%87%CE%AC%CE%BF%CF%82&dq=](https://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/modern_greek/tools/lexica/triantafyllides/search.html?lq=%CF%87%CE%AC%CE%BF%CF%82&dq=). It is also translated as the abyss, gaping void, or yawn.

<https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-1513?rskey=N70mSN&result=1> and <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/chaos>.

Her association with caverns and chasms, often symbolic of her womb, is noted when she hides the Hekatoncheires.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Gaia can be viewed as the first rebel against the heavenly male gods. She schemed against Ouranos who had imprisoned several of her giant-sons within her womb. In another occasion, she also hid the infant Zeus in her cavern. After the war with the Titans, the Olympic gods pressed far-seeing Olympian Zeus to reign and to rule over them, by Earth's prompting,<sup>37</sup> and she later sided with Zeus in his rebellion against Kronos. Eventually, she came into conflict with Zeus for binding her Titan sons in Tartarus and bore the Gigantes and Typhoeus to overthrow him, but they failed.

And it is from Kronos and Rhea that the first Olympians emerge with the birth of Zeus and the cycle repeats: the only child not eaten by his father Kronos, Zeus ends up killing his father and assuming all power as ruler after the famous battle of the Titans. Alternatively, this succession myth also has parallels in Egypt and Sumeria.<sup>38</sup>

Gaia's succession myth and its notable parallels with Mesopotamian literature are pointed out by Walter Burkert and Charles Penglase. Concerning the origin of the gods in myth, both authors emphasized the parallel of the Greek Okeanos (Gaia's Titan Son) and Tethys (the wife of Okeanos) with Babylonian characters Apsu and Tiamat.<sup>39</sup> In the study of Sumerian literature by Broekema and James, Inanna is central protagonist in the succession myth and equally, in Egyptian mythology, the separation of Heaven and Earth. In Egyptian cosmology Nut (the Sky) is thrust and held apart from her brother Geb (the Earth) by their father Shu, who corresponds to the Greek Atlas<sup>40</sup> and in this separation comes the birth of Isis and Osiris (the first King and Queen of civilization).<sup>41</sup> Set, their son, kills Osiris and declares himself King until Isis gives birth to Horus and contests his claim, which parallels Zeus slaying Kronos to take power as ruler.

In Mesopotamia, James suggested with the establishment of husbandry and domestication that the Mother/Earth goddess was assigned a spouse and, when the birth cult coincided with the

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<sup>36</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 139-172 (trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White).

<sup>37</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 881 (trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White).

<sup>38</sup> James 1959, 47-68; Broekema 2014, 47-74.

<sup>39</sup> Burkert, 1987, 10-40; Penglase 1994, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 173-206 (trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White). See footnote 1.

<sup>41</sup> James 1959, 47-68; Broekema 2014, see Chapter 2.

seasonal cycle and vegetation ritual, the Earth goddess was then conceived as the generative power in nature.<sup>42</sup> In Cole's study of agricultural metaphors and the plague of infertility, women can be viewed as the passive field where males compete for the female prize.<sup>43</sup> This can be traced to nature, where all female wombs are more valuable than the male counterpart according to Aristotle's view on the seed.<sup>44</sup> According to Cole, to cope with this fear of invalidation, social structures such as marriage laws and inheritance rights come into being.<sup>45</sup>

As human society domesticated animals and built urban cities there is a gradual shift between the implementation of social laws and the effects these laws had on the status of women. In his comparison of the city of straight and crooked judgements Hesiod metaphors that reproductive success is evident in a city's judicial maturity.<sup>46</sup> Signs of a successful city are successful agriculture, successful animal husbandry, and successful childbirth.<sup>47</sup> Using the example of women in Attic funerary monuments after 500 B.C. in terms of the drive to perpetuate the oikos, validate the status of parents, and not disrupt lineage<sup>48</sup> one can interpret the kore statue of Phrasikleia of Merenda (550-540 B.C.) as model of these ideals who died before fulfilling her social responsibility to get married and bear children.<sup>49</sup>

As for Gaia's role in oath taking, Hesiod writes judicial success is a responsibility of the males and the reproductive responsibility of the females, therefore the oath is a way to avert the threat of failure in male productivity. Burkert argues 'the practice of vows [and oaths] can be seen as a major human strategy for coping with the future'.<sup>50</sup> The theme of reproductive anxiety and wives' sexual loyalty and female fertility is a common in Greek literature<sup>51</sup> and reproductive prosperity one of the top questions asked by males to the oracles.<sup>52</sup> In myth, this may explain

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<sup>42</sup> James 1959, 47-8.

<sup>43</sup> Cole 2004, 153.

<sup>44</sup> Boylan 1984, 83-112.

<sup>45</sup> Cole 2004, 149-154.

<sup>46</sup> Cole 2004, 154; Cole cites Hesiod *Op.* 243, lines for 'just city' 225-226, 'crooked city' 250.

<sup>47</sup> Cole 2004, 154; Hesiod, *Op.* 225-36.

<sup>48</sup> Cole 2004, 152. Also see Cole, pg. 152, footnote 48.

<sup>49</sup> Kaltsas 2007, 190;205.

<sup>50</sup> Burkert, 1987, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Cole 2004, 148.

<sup>52</sup> Cole 2004, 149.

why a female divinity figure such as Gaia [Hesiod also names her Eurysternos<sup>53</sup> ‘broad-chested’] was chosen for this task. Gender conflict is a prevailing theme all throughout Hesiod’s account of the birth of the cosmos. Within this context, asexual reproduction is a threatening but unique role for Gaia, yet Hesiod portrays her as heroine like, an idea that precedes the phenomenon of heroization that takes place later in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.

After Hesiod’s work, Gaia again appears in form of a divine being in *The Homeric Hymns* of the 7<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. Though the specific date of the hymn is uncertain, she is referenced as the primordial essence of the earth and referred to as ‘Mother of the gods’ and ‘Mother of All’:<sup>54</sup>

*“I will sing of well-founded Earth, mother of all, eldest of all beings. She feeds all creatures that are in the world, all that go upon the goodly land, and all that are in the paths of the seas, and all that fly: all these are fed of her store. Through you, O queen, men are blessed in their children and blessed in their harvests, and to you it belongs to give means of life to mortal men and to take it away. Happy is the man whom you delight to honor! He has all things abundantly: his fruitful land is laden with corn, his pastures are covered with cattle, and his house is filled with good things. Such men rule orderly in their cities of fair women: great riches and wealth follow them: their sons exult with ever-fresh delight, and their daughters in flower-laden bands play and skip merrily over the soft flowers of the field. Thus is it with those whom you honor O holy goddess, bountiful spirit. Hail, Mother of the gods, wife of starry Heaven.”*

At the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> c BCE, the Derveni Papyrus cites predecessor creation myths with a greater emphasis on the role of Nyx.<sup>55</sup> In his interpretation of the papyrus doctrine, Janko argues that it was the work of the sophist Diagoras in response to the religious enlightenment of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C., whereas Burkert simply ascribes it to one of the intellectuals.<sup>56</sup> The Derveni Papyrus states that ancient earth goddesses were equivalent: “Gē and Meter and Rhea and Hera are the same thing”.<sup>57</sup> The Derveni Papyrus is thoroughly examined by Gábor Betegh in the context of the late pre-Socratic philosophy and the religious developments at that time. The cult of the hero theme is prevalent in 5<sup>th</sup> century literature. In his translation of Column 8, we see this similar

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<sup>53</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 117 (trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White).

<sup>54</sup> *Homeric Hymns 30* (trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White).

<sup>55</sup> *BNP*, 639.

<sup>56</sup> Janko 2001, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Janko 2001, 29; Derveni Papyrus col. XXII line 166.

theme that appeared in previous succession myths: ‘*Zeus when he took the strength from his father and the glorious daimon*’ which Betegh interprets “since this is so he (sc. Orpheus) does not maintain that Zeus hears [from his father] but that he takes the strength [from him]. If it is taken the other way, [it would seem] that he [took it] contrary to the divine decrees...for seems to this...might be believed necessary...and knowing...”<sup>58</sup>

Gaia is also present in numerous tragedies of Aeschylus’ (5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.) and in the comedies of Aristophanes (5<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.). Whether or not she is the subject of competition between the cults of poets, the philosophy, either through comedy or tragedy, to gain the upper hand and prevail is perhaps indicative of the formation of Athens. Also during this period, polytheism was challenged by monotheism and pantheism<sup>59</sup> and to win in victorious battle (the many dedications of Nike are a good example) both physically and intellectually is also a consistent theme throughout the 5th c. B.C. Aeschylus gives clues to these themes with the mention of Khthon [Gaia] who was one form but with many names in *Prometheus Bound*:<sup>60</sup>

The Titan Prometheus tells his tale of the Trojan War...quote- “*I, although advising them for the best, was unable to persuade the Titans (Titanes), children of Heaven and Earth [Ouranos (Heaven) and Khthon (Earth) [Gaia]; but they, disdainingly counsels of craft, in the pride of their strength thought to gain the mastery without a struggle and by force. Often my mother Themis, or Earth [Gaia] (though one form, she had many names), had foretold to me the way in which the future was fated to come to pass. That it was not by brute strength nor through violence, but by guile that those who should gain the upper hand were destined to prevail. And though I argued all this to them, they did not pay any attention to my words.*”

In addition, Prometheus calls to her "O universal mother Earth (*panmêtôr gê*) [Gaia]."<sup>61</sup>

“*O you bright sky of heaven, you swift-winged breezes, you river-waters, and infinite laughter of the waves of ocean, O universal mother Earth, and you, all-seeing orb of the sun, to you I call! See what I, a god, endure from the gods.*”

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<sup>58</sup> Betegh 2004, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Janko 2001, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 207-218 (trans. Herbert Weir Smyth).

<sup>61</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 88-94 (trans. Herbert Weir Smyth).

ὦ δῖος αἰθὴρ καὶ ταχύπτεροι πνοαί,  
ποταμῶν τε πηγαί, ποντίων τε κυμάτων  
90ἀνήριθμον γέλασμα, παμμῆτόρ τε γῆ,  
καὶ τὸν πανόπτην κύκλον ἡλίου καλῶ.  
ἴδεσθέ μ' οἷα πρὸς θεῶν πάσχω θεός.  
δέρχθηθ' οἷαις αἰκείαισιν  
διακναιόμενος τὸν μυριετῆ

In previous mention of the Ma Ga relation, Aeschylus also notes the name Ma Ga as the mother of Zeus in *Suppliant Women*<sup>62</sup>:

οἰοῖ, πάτερ, βρέτεος ἄρος  
ἀτᾶ μ' :: ἄλαδ' ἄγει  
ἄραχνος ὡς βάδην.  
ὄναρ ὄναρ μέλαν,  
ὀτοτοτοτοῖ,  
μᾶ Γᾶ μᾶ Γᾶ, βοᾶν  
φοβερὸν ἀπότερεπε,  
ὦ πᾶ, Γᾶς παῖ, Ζεῦ.

“Alas, father; the help of the sacred images deludes me. Like a spider, he is carrying me seaward step by step—a nightmare, a black nightmare! Oh! Oh! Mother Earth, mother Earth, avert his fearful cries! O father Zeus, son of Earth!”

A critic of Bachofen, Olof Pettersson disagrees with Aeschylus’s portrayal of Gaia as a “Mother Earth” and mother of Zeus figure and argues her vague appearance in literature is not a condition to represent her in this emphasis.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Aeschylus *Suppliant Women*, 885-892 (trans. Herbert Weir Smyth).

<sup>63</sup> Pettersson 1967, 51.

Aristophanes in his work *The Birds* records Gaia's origin myth equal to the account of Hesiod's:<sup>64</sup>

*"At the beginning there was only Khaos (the Chasm) [Air], Nyx (Night), dark Erebos (Darkness), and deep Tartaros (the Pit). Ge (Earth) [Gaia], Aer (Air) [Aither] and Ouranos (Heaven) had no existence . . . That of the Immortals did not exist until Eros (Sexual Desire) had brought together all the ingredients of the world, and from their marriage Ouranos (Uranus, Heaven), Okeanos (Oceanus, Ocean), Ge (Gaea, Earth) and the imperishable race of blessed gods (Theoi) sprang into being."*

Additionally, Aristophanes uses the term *makarios* as a blessing for reproductive success in a dialogue between Dicaeopolis and Xanthias in the *Acharnians*.<sup>65</sup> The cosmic origins of Gaia are written by Hesiod but in Plato's *Timaeus*, the author formulates the ideal of becoming like god in hopes to achieve good health, emulating that which in the divine organism is unfailing<sup>66</sup> and perhaps a clue to how the Greeks desired to express the mortal image like the gods and, therefore, becoming gods themselves.

In reference to divine seed, [foundation] with the birth of the King of Athens from Gaia and Hephaestus, we have the dialogue here, a priest speaks to Solon:<sup>67</sup>

*"Upon hearing this, Solon said that he marvelled, and with the utmost eagerness requested the priest to recount for him in order and exactly all the facts about those citizens of old. The priest then said: "I begrudge you not the story, Solon; nay, I will tell it, both for your own sake and that of your city, and most of all for the sake of the Goddess who has adopted for her own both your land and this of ours, and has nurtured and trained them,—yours first by the space of a thousand years, when she had received the seed of you from Ge and Hephaestus, and after that ours. And the duration of our civilization as set down in our sacred writings is 8000 years. Of the*

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<sup>64</sup> Aristophanes, *Birds*, 694-700 (trans. Eugene O'Neill, Jr.).

<sup>65</sup> Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, 241-262. (English trans. Anonymous; Greek trans. Hall and Geldart) In connection with fertility, see footnote 2: [Phallus] The emblem of the fecundity of nature; it consisted of a representation, generally grotesquely exaggerated, of the male genital organs; the phallophori crowned with violets and ivy and their faces shaded with green foliage, sang improvised airs, call 'Phallics,' full of obscenity and suggestive 'double entendres.' See also Aristophanes. *Aristophanes Comoediae*, ed. F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart, vol. 2. F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart. Oxford. Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1907. 241-262.

<sup>66</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 90a-c (trans. W.R.M. Lamb).

<sup>67</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 23d-e (trans. W.R.M. Lamb).

*citizens, then, who lived 9000 years ago, I will declare to you briefly certain of their laws and the noblest of the deeds they performed.”*

For a greater look at the laws that define civilization [when colonizing another territory] in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C consider this dialogue that occurs on the way to the cave of Zeus in Plato’s *Laws*:<sup>68</sup>

An Athenian speaks to Clinias:

*“Let us persuade the young man by our discourse that all things are ordered systematically by Him who cares for the World—all with a view to the preservation and excellence of the Whole, whereof also each part, so far as it can, does and suffers what is proper to it. To each of these parts, down to the smallest fraction, rulers of their action and passion are appointed to bring about fulfillment even to the uttermost fraction; whereof thy portion also, O perverse man, is one, and tends therefore always in its striving towards the All, tiny though it be. But thou failest to perceive that all partial generation is for the sake of the Whole, in order that for the life of the World—all blissful existence may be secured,—it not being generated for thy sake, but thou for its sake.”*

Georgoudi addresses political values surrounding the Mother Earth figure within the civic context as such: “these male deities would be more apt, it is said, to meet the needs of archaic cities, within the framework of a civic religion with an aristocratic and more urban character”.<sup>69</sup> The same belief system in religious mythology that frequently reoccurs over time attests to the significance of humanity’s idea about the divine and mortal relationship and the place of man in the world of the divine.<sup>70</sup> In this context, the chthonic goddess could be considered symbolic of the growth cycle of the newly formed Democratic Athens born from the death of the tyranny rule that presided before it. Gaia promotes the ideal that Athenian Greek men were equally born of the soil of the earth and were, therefore, autochthonous. This belief perhaps distinctly justified the Greek right to democracy and unification as one body. The meanings of myths are often concealed in code and used as symbolic vehicles. In this historical context, as a chthonic

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<sup>68</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 10.903b-903d. (trans. R.G. Bury).

<sup>69</sup> Georgoudi 2002, 115: *Car ces divinites males seraient plus aptes, dit-on, a repondre aux besoins des cites archa"iques, dans le cadre d'une religion civique a caractere aristocratique et davantage citadin.*

<sup>70</sup> Penglase 1994, 10.



goddess, mother of duality, and the creator of both the mortal and immortal realm Gaia, therefore, could be considered personification of both Mother Earth and of Attica.

As time moves on, Gaia continues to appear throughout literary works such as *The Orphic Hymns* dedicated to Orpheus. The authorship is unclear and the timeframe is still in dispute with speculation of earlier origins, but the plausible range is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. B.C.-2<sup>nd</sup> c. A.D. In the hymns, Gaia is the Orphic or Mystic Earth, nurturer of life, called Hestia as an alternate name, and the all-taming savior of Phrygia.<sup>71</sup> Gaia plays an essential role in forming and maintaining conditions that allow humans and the divine to prosper co-dependently. Again, similar to Hesiod's earlier account, in the *Orphic Theogony* she is the center point of the physical world born from Nyx or Night with the emphasis is on Nyx.<sup>72</sup> She is paired with Ouranos and this union constitutes the first marriage and by this union she birthed the race of Titans. Also, by consorting with the underworld Tartarus, she created the monstrous serpent Typhon.

Gaia's tale continues in Roman poetry of the 1st c. B.C. to 1st c. A.D. as Terra/Tella, also meaning Earth. Roman poet Ovid writes:<sup>73</sup>

*“After chaos, as soon as the three elements were given to the world, and the whole creation resolved itself into new species, the earth subsided by its own weight, and drew the seas after it, but the sky was borne to the highest regions by its own lightness; the sun, too, not checked by gravity, and the stars, and you, ye horses of the moon, ye bounded high. But for a long time neither did Earth yield pride of place to Sky, nor did the other heavenly bodies to Phoebus; their honours were all equal.*

*‘post chaos ut primum data sunt tria corpora mundo,  
inque novas species omne recessit opus,  
pondere terra suo subsedit et aequora traxit,  
at caelum levitas in loca summa tulit;  
sol quoque cum stellis nulla gravitate retentus*

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<sup>71</sup> Athanassakis and Wolkow 2013, 69-70; *Orphic Hymn* 26 To Earth & 27 To the Mother of the Gods.

<sup>72</sup> *BNP*, 369.

<sup>73</sup> Ovid *Fasti* 5.11-24. (trans. Sir James George Frazer).

*et vos lunares exiluistis equi.  
sed neque Terra diu Caelo, nec cetera Phoebos  
sidera cedebant; par erat omnis honos,  
saepe aliquis solio, quod tu, Saturne, tenebas,  
ausus de media plebe sedere deus,  
nec latus Oceano quisquam deus advena iunxit,  
et Themis extremo saepe recepta loco est,  
donec Honor placidoque decens Reverentia voltu  
corpora legitimis inposuere toris.*

As a goddess of many names and epithets, Pausanias (2<sup>nd</sup> c. A.D.) refers to Gaia as Γῆς  
Κουροτρόφου (Nurse of Youth),<sup>74</sup> Γασεπτόν,<sup>75</sup> and Μεγάλη (great).<sup>76</sup> Even up to the 5<sup>th</sup> c. A.D.  
Gaia appears numerous times in Nonnos' *Dionysiaca* and in this occurrence similar to a biblical  
flood story:<sup>77</sup>

*“After the first Dionysos had been slaughtered [by the Titanes], Father Zeus . . . attacked  
the mother of the Titanes [Gaia] with avenging brand, and shut up the murderers of horned  
Dionysos within the gate of Tartaros [after a long war]: the trees blazed, the hair of suffering  
Gaia was scorched with heat. He kindled the East: the dawnlands of Baktria blazed under  
blazing bolts, the Assyrian waves set afire the neighboring Kaspion Sea and the Indian  
mountains, the Red Sea rolled billows of flame and warmed Arabian Nereus. The opposite West  
also fiery Zeus blasted with the thunderbolt in love for his child; and under the foot of Zephyros  
the western brine half-burn spat out a shining stream; the Northern ridges--even the surface of  
the frozen Northern Sea bubbled and burned: under the clime of snowy Aigokeros the Southern  
corner boiled with hotter sparks. Now Okeanos poured rivers of tears from his watery eyes, a  
libation of suppliant prayer. Then Zeus claimed his wrath at the sight of the scorched earth; he  
pitied her, and wished to wash with water the ashes of ruin and the fiery wounds of the land.*

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<sup>74</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.22.3 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>75</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.12.8 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>76</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.31.4 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>77</sup> Nonnos, *Dionysiaca* 6, 206-229 (trans. W.H.D. Rouse).

*Then Rainy Zeus covered the whole sky with clouds and flooded all the earth [in the flood of Deukalion]."*

Lastly, Gaia is described in the Byzantine Greek Lexicon, *The Suda* (10<sup>th</sup> c. A.D) which reads: "Ge (Earth): Since the earth is a seat of every city, as, supporting the cities, her image is that of a tower-bearer." Also, as Ges agalma: "Ges agalma (A statue of the earth): They model Hestia as a woman, like the earth, holding up a kettledrum, since the earth encloses the winds below herself."<sup>78</sup> It also affirms Erichthonius' decree that all sacrifices to Gaia *Kourotrophos* were to be given first before any other divinity.<sup>79</sup>

In summary, Gaia takes many forms and names and the known literary accounts of Gaia's presence appear in myth for a long time. In her myth continuum, Gaia is frequently mentioned where primordial beings are invoked and her characteristics are mainly associated with caverns and chasms, fertility and the genesis of mortals and gods, as a witness to oaths, and the first antagonist of the heavenly gods. Throughout the texts the attributes of Gaia, mostly as a mediator maintaining the harmony of all forms of life where the animal and the divine are connected as one of her names suggests: Gaia Eurysternos, the broad-chested and all-encompassing, describe her as a foundation and, as Suidas indicates, 'the seat of every city.' This implies the ancient Greeks were aware of this connection to harmony. Perhaps this is a clue on how they perceived their physical environment as I will explore in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 2: Gaia and Her Cult Worship**

### **2.1 Religion and ritual in ancient Greece**

Although the main arguments for cultural continuum in this thesis lie in Gaia's myth and iconography, a small section on evidence of her cult worship, particularly in Athens, will add for a better interpretation of her role in antiquity. The focus here is on religion and cult in the Greek world and her fit in it. In the texts she is portrayed as a foundation on which the ancient Greeks were able to validate their origins and preserve memory through transcription of oral to written tradition. In iconography, she is an interpretation of their environment and physical landscape as

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<sup>78</sup> Suidas, *The Suda*, s.v. Ge; Ges agalma.

<sup>79</sup> Suidas, *The Suda*, s.v. kourotro/fos gh.

a goddess with human like attributes. In this sense Gaia, unlike later iconic statues of divinity, rarely took shape of anything other than the natural environment she personified, the Earth, where she is mostly portrayed connected to it since we only see half of her body in most of her early iconography. Discussing the presence of Gaia in myth and iconography are those accounts made by culture; transmissions and interpretations of human thought and design. Yet, when placed within the cosmological realm, her shape is without boundaries much like that of nature.

In antiquity, the human capacity was not allowed to disrupt true order nor reconstruct the foundation of laws in nature without consequence. Rational and natural are by the same token. 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C pre-Socratic philosophy sought explanations of origins based on a rule-bound natural order which eventually came into conflict with religious actions of gods.<sup>80</sup> Hippocratic theory of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. is one example where natural events did not convey truths about the divine nor were the cause of disease, emphasizing a close symbiotic relationship between body and landscape.<sup>81</sup> As Parker states, “nature was a great mechanism for the transmission of communication from, and about the divine, but the mechanism was only recognized as operating occasionally.”<sup>82</sup> With the dual of philosophies of intelligent design we see from Plato on, versus the phenomenon of providential design in late 5<sup>th</sup> century literary texts.<sup>83</sup>

As we saw in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, out of void Gaia ‘happened’ into existence, though her role as creator of immortals and men was later emphasized as ‘the primeval goddess preceding the formation of the civil context’.<sup>84</sup> Parker argues ‘in the early mythological cosmologies, however, the world is not made, but simply happens, and though in passing allusions the gods may be said to have “made” this or that, there is no elaborated concept of a creator god.’<sup>85</sup> But, humans can play god in creating marble images and temples of divine worship creating the ‘divine’ with

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<sup>80</sup> Parker 2011, 4.

<sup>81</sup> Cole 2004, 161. For medical analysis of dreams she cites Oberhelman (1993) 127-33 in footnote 93: *The author discusses interpretation and analysis of dreams sent by the gods and therapeutic dreams resulting from the soul’s ability to understand conditions of the body. Natural phenomenon (celestial and terrestrial) exist in symbiosis with the body.*

<sup>82</sup> Parker 2011, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Parker 2011, 5.

<sup>84</sup> Landi 2012, 164.

<sup>85</sup> Parker 2011, 6; Parker also cites C. J. Classen, “The Creator in Greek Thought from Homer to Plato,” *CIMed* 23 (1962): 1–22, footnote 10.

human characteristics as a mirror of themselves. How to mirror Gaia, the personification of Earth?

Philosophy claimed knowledge about the divine and what a god should be<sup>86</sup> while ritual enacted by institutions controlled expectations through collective action and social convention. Parker argued though beliefs were held without revelation, only acts were subject to control. Though Coulanges' work has since been outdated, some observations on his study of law and religion in the Greek and Roman world remain debatable. He argued that 'among the Greeks and Romans...law was at first a part of religion. The ancient codes of the cities were a collection of rites, liturgical directions, and prayers, joined with legislative regulations. The laws concerning property and those concerning succession were scattered about in the midst of rules for sacrifices, for burial, and for the worship of the dead'.<sup>87</sup> The ancients claimed their laws were sent from the gods.<sup>88</sup> The calendar was nothing more than the order of the religious festivals regulated by the priests and governed solely by the laws of religion.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, according to this view, one of the most secure ways to sustain a common cause and promote specific situations regarded as important was through ritual and celebration.

The nearest term for religion, to the Greeks, was likely cult or threskeia, 'a situation in which people regard that thing as very important or special'.<sup>90</sup> Between literature and epigraphy from Magna Graecia to Asia Minor, testimonies and connections of a Mother goddess appear in worship, myth, festivals and rituals, religion and society and, in some ways, politically, in the cultures of antiquity.<sup>91</sup> According to Landi, a fair amount of literature and epigraphy testify the reality of a cultic universe, whose roots extend from Magna Graecia to Asia Minor.<sup>92</sup> James held the belief that Greek religion is Minoan-Mycenaean in origin.<sup>93</sup> Burkert states the Mother

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<sup>86</sup> Parker 2011, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Coulanges 1956, 186.

<sup>88</sup> Coulanges 1956, 189.

<sup>89</sup> Coulanges 1956, 160.

<sup>90</sup> Definition of cult in Collins Dictionary: *In sociology, cult is defined as a group having an exclusive ideology and ritual practices centered on sacred symbols, especially one characterized by lack of organizational structure.*

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/cult>. Even today, in the Greek public school system at least, kids from 3rd grade forward are taught thriskeftika. <http://iep.edu.gr/el/thriskeftika-programmata-spoudon>.

<sup>91</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>92</sup> Landi 2012, 127.

<sup>93</sup> James 1959, 128-160.

Goddess is established in Greek cult, from Asia Minor to southern Italy, by the archaic period.<sup>94</sup> But, as he further points out, the adoption of cult can be short-lived and a fashion of time.<sup>95</sup> The Mother or Earth Goddess idea cross-culturally shows the importance of how people interact with their physical landscape and to have a cult of any kind, dedicated to her by any form, meant she was regarded as something important in their world. This is the continuum of Gaia in the natural Earth form and a clue as to how the Greeks (and others with their own Mother/Earth goddess) viewed their physical landscape in light of her.

Ustinova states the dead knew more about earthly affairs than the living, thus, conceivable for Gaia naturally to carry out her oracles in grottos located inside the earth.<sup>96</sup> The reason for the ascent/descent factor is a subliminal journey for truth. Furthermore, she notes caves were often a significant site for burials and the connection of the Apollo's shining oracles with caves, a contrast of light and dark similar to the death and rebirth, calls for explanation.<sup>97</sup> As Penglase and Burkert pointed out, these same parallels occur in Mesopotamian myth.

This scenario is comparable to the cult of the hero. In myth, the symbolism of the cave and chthonic nature is also reviewed by Kefalidou in her study of Dionysian iconography in Attic vase paintings of the late 6<sup>th</sup> to early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. She suggests that in all cases Dionysos is shown as a prominent chthonic deity and that Dionysos, Herakles and the Dioskouroi had been connected with the Eleusinian Mysteries (each at a different time and possibly for a different reason) because they all went down to the Underworld, while still alive, and they successfully managed to come back.<sup>98</sup>

In Aeschylus' *Danaïds*, Ouranos desires Gaia and fertilizes her with rain. She conceives and gives birth to food for mortals on the promise of immortality, 'which was ritualistically and

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<sup>94</sup> Burkert 1987, 2. See footnote 22: Burkert also cites the work of Graillet 1912, Thomas 1984, and Vermaseren 1977.

<sup>95</sup> Burkert 1987, 15.

<sup>96</sup> Ustinova 2009, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Ustinova 2009, 4. Ustinova also notes "Night has nothing in common with Apollo". She cites Plut. *Mor.* 566C; cf. Farnell 1907: 4, 253.

<sup>98</sup> Kefalidou 2006, 26-27. In footnote 78 she adds: *We note that the motif of the cave is of particular importance in Dionysian iconography. Inside it meets light with darkness, the above ground with the underground element. The cave is therefore a border between the upper and lower worlds, a fact that is directly linked to the chthonic nature of Dionysus, the god who moves to the limits and transcends them.*

metaphorically connected to the rebirth of dead grain “being restored to the womb of Mother Earth.”<sup>99</sup> With the idea of how Greeks interacted with their environment in mind, if we were to examine Gaia’s characteristics within a rites of passage framework<sup>100</sup> as a tripartite structure, and analyze her association with birth, death, and rebirth, my interpretation is this: the caverns and chasms that she is associated with in literature, as the mother of mortals, and as a witness of oaths, implies that Gaia’s cult activity could have been associated with the three dynamic realms of the earthly, mystical and heavenly. The earthly chasms and caves are representational of the birth phase, the mystical and liminal phase represents the death of her offspring, and as a witness of oaths because she is connected with heaven (Ouranos, her ‘husband’) completes the rebirth portion. In summary, the search for truth underground, a finding of the truth in the middle, and a witness to the truth by the heavens. And like a good hero, Gaia as this scenario of a tripartite structure, births a ‘dual character’ for the Greeks, Erectheus who was the earth born hero and Erichthonius the mythical figure. In the context of the formation of the polis, this may be of particular symbolic significance.

## **2.2 History of scholarship**

Much of the ambiguity surrounding the cult of Gaia lies in the fact that, to date, there is a limited amount of archaeological evidence to positively establish her worship or the specifics surrounding her cult activity. This, by all means, does not suggest its non-existence. It is through myth and iconography that Gaia lives such a lengthy time period more so than by physical man-made structures and this is, perhaps in part, due to the characteristics of the goddess. As a goddess that embodies the land and personifies the Earth in myth and iconography, it would be suitable to suggest this is one good possibility why monumental megastructures dedicated to her have not been discovered. The land and the earth and all that it entails, as some of her epithets suggest such as Ge Panteleia and Ge Eurysternos, were already her natural sanctuary spaces as is attested in her myth. As Landi points out, this is a suitable reflection point when interpreting cult activity and its value in memory preservation.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Draper 2020, 59; Draper also cites Guthrie 1950, 292.

<sup>100</sup> Garwood 2011, 261-284.

<sup>101</sup> Landi 2012, 163.

Early scholarship concerning the cult of Gaia and the interaction between myth and cult was first researched by Jane Harrison in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her approach was to read myth as history.<sup>102</sup> In 1907, Farnell argued that 'art and literature were not mere records of religion' but aided in its growth.<sup>103</sup> By differentiating myth from cult history he emphasized the idea of religion in the Greek world and how its human personages were a more ideal form and ethical content.<sup>104</sup> There are some arguments by scholars that associate Gaia with the Anatolian Kybele such as those by Dieterich and Guthrie. Others scholars suggest the association as a blending of earth deities and cultures to overstate to perpetuate theory of 'primitive' trans-cultural earth worship.<sup>105</sup>

Rhea, the traditional mother of Zeus, was also identified as the "Asiatic mother-goddess Kybele", who in turn was occasionally identified as Gaia.<sup>106</sup> The association of Gaia with Kybele studied by Burkert claims the cult of Mother Goddess in Anatolia is traced back to prehistory in the Neolithic epoch, for the Greeks her Phrygian name Matar Kubileya, Kybeleia or Kybele in Greek, mostly Mother of the Mountain.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, he notes 'Mater Magna is the Phrygian Goddess for both Greeks and Romans but institution of mysteries cannot be traced to either Anatolia, Egypt, or Iran but seem to reflect the older model of Eleusis or Dionysus, or both.'<sup>108</sup> He also speculated Greek worship of Gaia had been used as the "prototype of all piety" and what cult she did have were ceremonial libations to her only.<sup>109</sup>

Sourvinou-Inwood highlights Athenian society and its approach to myth and festival in her 2011 work. In analysis of the ancestral aspect of knowledge of secret or mystery cult and its transmission she writes "This belief in ancestral secret knowledge passed down from generation to generation also applied to the other genē involved in the Eleusinian cult, though it was the Eumolpids who were clearly perceived to possess by far the greater part of such knowledge. Such a belief is a stronger version of the established Greek religious representation that cults

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<sup>102</sup> Draper 2020, 27.

<sup>103</sup> Farnell 1907, 10.

<sup>104</sup> Farnell 1907, 12.

<sup>105</sup> Draper 2020, 58. Cf 175.

<sup>106</sup> Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, 391-402 (trans. F. Storr).

<sup>107</sup> Burkert 1987, 6.

<sup>108</sup> Burkert 2, 1987: Footnote 9 Burkert cites Wilamowitz 1932, 368-387.

<sup>109</sup> Burkert 1985, 175.



were symbolically anchored and validated through their foundation in the heroic age, when men could have direct contact with, and sometimes were descended from, gods, and when the most prominent and important of them became the heroes of present-day cult, most strongly when the founders of the cult were...the children of gods".<sup>110</sup>

The large debate over the previous owner of the Delphi oracles is outside the scope of this paper and a work in itself, and thoroughly researched by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, Martin Nilsson, and recently by Eilish Draper in 2020. All contested that Gaia was never worshipped as the primary goddess of the oracle. In her Master's thesis, Draper expands on Sourvinou-Inwood's argument that Gaia's myth does not reflect her cult worship in Greece.<sup>111</sup> Through the examination of Gaia's myth in literature in comparison to the history of scholarship on the subject Draper makes a case for bricolage and of confirmation bias concerning the cult of Gaia using epigraphical evidence to study the interaction between mythological evidence and Gaia's presence in Greek cult. Furthermore, through the examination of the late inscriptions to Ge Meter outside of Attica she does not support that Gaia's cult had any connection to the Anatolian Kybele nor Gaia as a divine Mother Earth figure universally worshipped in Greece with origins in Anatolia.<sup>112</sup>

### **2.3 Evidence of cult activity**

Based on the literary evidence and inscriptions, cult worship of Gaia was mainly associated with Athens. Perhaps as a unifying and continuum agent, her cult worship appears widespread among the Greeks, and she is associated with many different regions according to authors Thucydides, Plutarch, and Pausanias such as at Athens,<sup>113</sup> Sparta,<sup>114</sup> Delphi,<sup>115</sup> Olympia,<sup>116</sup> Bura,<sup>117</sup> and Tegea.<sup>118</sup> A look at Gaia and her place in ancient Greek cult, the names she is given according to

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<sup>110</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 5.

<sup>111</sup> Draper 2020, 7. Draper also cites Sourvinou-Inwood (1987) 215.

<sup>112</sup> Draper 2020, 3-4.

<sup>113</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 2.15 (trans. J.M. Dent); Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.22 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>114</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.31; 3.11(trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>115</sup> Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis*, 17 (trans. Frank Cole Babbitt); Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 10.5.5 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>116</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 5.14.10 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>117</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 7.25 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>118</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 8.48 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

epigraphical testimonials are abundant, and sometimes this may distort the perception of Gaia's role in the cult world. Isis and Osiris from archaic age as Demeter and Dionysus have been examined by Burkert<sup>119</sup> and the perception of Gaia as Demeter noted by Suidas:

"Demeter: The earth, as if being Ge-meter (Earth-Mother). Since the earth is a foundation of every city, as holding up the cities she is represented wearing towers [sc. as a crown]."<sup>120</sup>

Landi notes that the cult of Gaia in Tegea at the sanctuary of Ilizia was linked to the land rooted in the common character of fertility which verifies the nature of both divinities Demeter and Kore.<sup>121</sup> In the calendar of cults of the Attic *Tetrapolis*, specifically at Marathona, sacrifices are prescribed for Gaia ἐν Γύαις<sup>122</sup>, meaning 'in the fields'. The epithet Gaia Εύρύστερνος (Eurysternos) in Hesiod's *Theogony* was also attributed to Gaia by the historian Mnasea of Patras in a lost collection of Delphic oracles.<sup>123</sup> From Hyllarima, an epigraph relating to a list of priests mentions Gaia Κανήβος (Kanivos).<sup>124</sup> The term Ἀνησιδώρα meaning producer of gifts, and an epithet in Anazarbos, Cilicia as Gaia Ἐδραία, seated to the earth, underline themes of fertility.<sup>125</sup>

In the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE a statue base and inscriptions from the 4<sup>th</sup> c BCE describe an ἱερόν of Gaia at Delphi.<sup>126</sup> The 5th century BCE inscription at the top reads "Α Γ": Gē and the 4<sup>th</sup> century inscription on the front side reads "ΓΑ".<sup>127</sup> In the same time period, Aeschylus also mentions Gaia's worship at Delphi in *Eumenides*<sup>128</sup> and is one of the earliest pieces of literary evidence for Gaia's worship at Delphi.

"In Athens, the presence of a cult paid to Gaia Θέμις is attested, in evident connection with the goddess of justice, considered daughter of Gaia herself. In particular, the epiclesi is cited by the

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<sup>119</sup> Burkert 1987, 6.

<sup>120</sup> Suidas, *The Suda*, s.v. Demeter.

<sup>121</sup> Landi 2012, 143-144.

<sup>122</sup> *IG II<sup>2</sup>* 1358, II; Landi 2012, 129.

<sup>123</sup> Landi 2012, 129. Landi cites in footnote 85: *FRAG. HIST. GRAEC.* III, p. 157, fr. 46. Tale epiclesi, che ritorna anche nel territorio di Egira, parrebbe inoltre suggerire un interessante rapporto culturale tra due regioni poste in parte l'una di fronte all'altra: Focide ed Acaia.

<sup>124</sup> Landi 2012, 129. Landi cites LSA 56.

<sup>125</sup> Landi 2012, 128-129.

<sup>126</sup> Landi 2012, 131.

<sup>127</sup> de La Coste-Messelière and Flacelière 1930, 283-284.

<sup>128</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 1 (trans. Herbert Weir Smyth).

inscription pertaining to one of the seats of the auditorium of the theater of Dionysus, which reserves a place for the priestess specifically assigned to the service of this divinity.”<sup>129</sup>

Again in Athens, several sources<sup>130</sup> confirm the existence of a temple consecrated to Gaia Ὀλυμπία. The mention of the *Kourotrophos* in a fragment of Solon attested by Coricius of Gaza also appears to refer to Gaia.<sup>131</sup> Evidence of Ge *Kourotrophos* consists of three fragmentary loutrophoroi found (interesting that these vases are normally for wedding or funerary purposes) from the Acropolis and possibly from the Sanctuary of Gaia near the entrance. According to the writer Suidas, Erichthonius orders the rule people must first sacrifice to her at the altar before sacrificing to another god.<sup>132</sup>

I expand on Landi’s argument why megastructures dedicated to the goddess have not been found. For comparison, when humans live in harmony with nature, versus when humans want to conquer nature. Building a monument can also be described as a way of conquering the Earth and its natural structures by molding and adjusting it into a shape of human vision. Thus, why do we distinguish between man-made and natural made in our products? This pertains to buildings and monuments, too. Perhaps, as Landi suggests, her worship was in outdoor spaces, sanctuaries, without roofs and in the natural landscape. With the theme of natural wooden material, in cults of Meter the secret rites of *teletai* and *mysteria* such as the *taurobolium*, a token of good luck, used wooden baskets closed by a lid and a wooden platform<sup>133</sup> coincide with Pausanias’ account of a wooden statue of Gaia at Aegae.<sup>134</sup> Landi argues the absence of roofing and open-aired construction, symbolic of the very freedom of the earth, is key as to why Gaia cult is somewhat obscure and, so far, why no monumental structure dedicated to her has been uncovered in the archaeological material.<sup>135</sup> How does this relate to preserving memory? It is the connection of humans with the natural landscape via caves, springs, outcropping rocks, etc. as places of worship. Why the need for other structures if the natural landscape is already her?

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<sup>129</sup> *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 5130; Landi 2012, 129.

<sup>130</sup> Landi 2012, 130. Landi also cites THUC. II, 15, 3-4; PLUT., *Thes.* 27, 4; PAUS. I, 18, 7.

<sup>131</sup> Landi 2012, 129. Landi also cites SOLON. Fragn. (CHOR. GAZ. Or. II 6). Cfr. *RE*, s.v. *Kourotrophos*, col. 2215.

<sup>132</sup> *Suidas* s.v. *kourotro/fos* gh.

<sup>133</sup> Burkert 1987, 6.

<sup>134</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 7.25.13 (trans. Jones, Litt and Ormerod).

<sup>135</sup> Landi 2012, 159-163.

My aim here is not to show that Gaia was ‘the’ Mother Goddess but as an adaptation and variation of an idea that existed previously before the formulation of the ancient Greek society. In the spirit of competition, as noted in literary and theatrical works, the Greeks may have wanted to demonstrate this idea to other societies with their better (or adapted) version. For example, in the polis formation of Athens in the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE is congruent with the rise of the temple and more dominant male figures like Zeus, Apollo, Herakles, and Dionysus, even Athena as a wonder of the world and as Foster Mother.<sup>136</sup> Based on the literary, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence, the interpretation of Gaia as the symbolic foundation on which the ancient Greeks were able to preserve memory by her widespread place among different regions yet cultivate their own interpretation of the environment around them through their own making of divine gods and goddesses with human like attributes appears plausible. In a sense, nature is rearranged by the hands of man. Nature is already monumental by design. Therefore, the lack of a manmade structure dedicated to her appears symbolic. In antiquity, the human capacity is not allowed to disrupt true order nor able to create their own foundation of laws, like nature, without consequence.

### **Chapter 3: Gaia and Her Iconography**

#### **3.1 Art as agents of social meaning**

In his study of religion, anthropologist Gill wrote 'We have shown that much of the significance of artifacts is inseparable from the context of the cultural and religious processes and associated beliefs and principles from which they rise ... Now we should see that commonly these objects come about as a result of human actions which are creative in the primary sense, that is, in the sense of bearing cosmic responsibilities, in the sense of making life possible.'<sup>137</sup>

How do artifacts and images function as things and what do they tell us? Gell theorized objects are made and used for a purpose, entangled within a social and historical recipe of combined human relation and interest.<sup>138</sup> Whitley argues it is not what objects mean, but what they do. They are animate, having a voice themselves or as an extension of human persons as an agent of

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<sup>136</sup> Farnell 1907.

<sup>137</sup> Gill 1982, 37.

<sup>138</sup> Whitley 2012, 582.

human voice and soul.<sup>139</sup> Parallels often occur between poetry and art<sup>140</sup> and this relationship between the two establishes how the maker and viewer narrated their cultural values and motives within their historical context. An important question by O'Donnell in his work on pictorial narrative, "does human action constitute broadly the basic object of narration for Greek and other ancient cultures?"<sup>141</sup> I suggest the ancient Greeks are using the character of Gaia as a continuum of a voice and of cultural ideas that precede their time, but also as an object of narration and as agent. Based on the literary texts, she is the foundation for just laws and those good 'things', whether people or ideas, that spring forth from fertile soil, and acts as an animate agent in the form of the divine.<sup>142</sup>

How was Athens blossoming as a polis and how is this depicted in ancient Greek art? Athens, for the most part of the Classical period 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, was receiving large revenues from allied and tributary city-states throughout the Aegean, making the city very rich.<sup>143</sup> Under the rule of Perikles, many of the buildings such as the Erectheion, the Parthenon, and the Propylaea on the Acropolis were being constructed, replacing buildings that had been lost or damaged by the Persians.<sup>144</sup> The revenues were used to help supply the numerous religious festivals held throughout the year and it was also a way for the city to show off its wealth by returning to the gods what they provided.<sup>145</sup> As Mikalson points out, "from the period of 490-415 BCE the gods were very generous to the Athenians...and in this period became militarily, politically, economically, and artistically dominant in the Greek world, and the scale and expanse of their religious program reflects this."<sup>146</sup> In 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, it was necessary to return a tithe to the gods that provided them great wealth and success and this was a huge reason for great expenditures on religious cults as a way to express and boast their love of beauty through the objects that they created and designed.<sup>147</sup> The monumental marble temples, artworks, and

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<sup>139</sup> Whitley 2012, 582.

<sup>140</sup> Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999, 10.

<sup>141</sup> Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999, 16.

<sup>142</sup> Whitley 2012, 589.

<sup>143</sup> Mikalson 2005, 179.

<sup>144</sup> Hill 1953, 150-78.

<sup>145</sup> Mikalson 2005, 179.

<sup>146</sup> Mikalson 2005, 179.

<sup>147</sup> Mikalson 2005, 179.

extraordinary lavish festivals act as status signifiers, showing Athens was more fortunate than other poorer cities of Greece.

In ancient Greece, the cultural ability to join together in fertility celebration was taught by collective action and social convention through festive rites about obligatory duties for the overall benefit of the polis.<sup>148</sup> In the symposium, vases are a testament to the continued fertility of the city and, as mobile works, a way to exploit the wealthy Athenian image for all to bear witness at home, abroad, as well as in the public and private sphere. Vases are also agents of social meaning for each gender by illustrating how festival ritual procession is performed. While serving as ‘things’ the vases create a response from its audience but also the vases give instruction. The ability to fund festivals is to show great strength, wealth, and power. In addition, to have the ability to provide the agricultural resources needed for the feeding and entertainment of the polis confirms a sense of security for the population and boosts morale. To the enemies, it further affirms the city’s population as protected by divine forces.

The material culture of ancient Greece shows the importance of fertility, ritual, religion and their strong connection to the agricultural cycle. Through collective action and social convention and with the use of visual material culture as agent, the ancient Greek’s expectation of fertilizing the land and its citizens for the overall benefit of the polis was accepted and understood. The iconography of Gaia, therefore, can be seen as propaganda, especially in the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. In a sense, this is a rational explanation and foundation for the idea of urban fertility and Gaia as agent of this idea.

### **3.2 Iconography**

In my search for terra cotta figurines of the goddess, I came across two prospective pieces. One statuette designated from Tanagra and hosted at the Musée Borély in Marseille is supposedly attributed to the goddess.<sup>149</sup> The other figurine also claims to be from Tanagra and is pictured in the Granger Historical Picture Archive, but with no further details other than ‘thought to

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<sup>148</sup> Some examples of collective action and social convention through festive rites were the Phallophoria, the Great Dionysia, and the Thesmophoria.

<sup>149</sup> An image of this figurine can be found in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gaea>). I attempted to contact the museum to learn more but they never responded to my inquiries.

represent Gaea'.<sup>150</sup> In both instances, the female statuettes are with both arms raised, hands on the head, and with full figure bodies.

In Lucien Lerat's report of Delphi in 1956, he uncovered a mass of 175 Mycenaean terra cotta statuettes in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. strata in the sanctuary of Athena Pronaia grouped together on a large flat stone south of the altars of the goddess.<sup>151</sup> There remains conflict among scholars whether or not the statuettes constitute worship of Gaia (based on the fact that they are female) and the evidence appears inconclusive.

In the continuum of Gaia in iconography and myth, she is known to the Etruscans as Cel, to the Greeks as Gaia, and to the Romans she was Tella/Terra. By the 5th c. B.C. Attic vase painters were commonly inspired by mythology. Myths and tales of gods, goddesses, and heroes were often transmitted from one generation to the next by oral tradition then transformed to text. Ancient images are not visualizations of the ancient texts but as individual interpretation of these oral traditions. Putting these myths to aesthetic form was a way to interpret and express the cosmos. Gaia is one such myth. The iconography of Gaia depicted on Greek red-figure vase paintings of the 6th-4th c. B.C. reveal how the people from this period attributed her as a central, motherly, and abundant being and icon of fertile prosperity not in an agricultural sense, but in the context of the formation of the city-state and its approach to fertility of the polis using both the male and female agent: Gaia and Erichthonius.

Most of this section is dedicated to vase paintings where most of Gaia's Greek iconography is credited to. How do these vases tell stories? Are these true narratives? Lissarrague suggests "it is more widely admitted that images do not reproduce mechanically the reality to which they refer...but are an elaboration of that reality, and that we can learn as much from that elaboration,

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<sup>150</sup> Granger Historical Picture Archive, item #0077273.

<https://www.granger.com/results.asp?image=0077273&itemw=4&itemf=0001&itemstep=1&itemx=1>.

<sup>151</sup> Lerat 1956, 708-710: Cette fouille avait eu pour principal résultat de mettre au jour une masse d'idoles mycéniennes en terre cuite, dont la plus grande partie se trouvaient groupées sur une large pierre plate au Sud des autels de la déesse. Draper 2020, 10. She also cites Demangel (1926), *Fouilles de Delphes II. Topographie et architecture. Le sanctuaire d'Athéna Pronaia*, Paris: Editions de Boccard. pp.14-28; French (1971) "The Development of Mycenaean Terracotta Figurines", *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 66:107 who support an earlier date of the figurines.

provided we are able to analyze it properly”<sup>152</sup> Combined with written texts, pottery offers a way to enter the psyche of the ancient Greek. We depend on pottery and all other art forms to understand how Greek society functioned in their economy, politics, religion and myth.<sup>153</sup> With this premise in mind, I start my discussion on Gaia’s vase iconography.



Ge Panteleia. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 92.AE.6, BAPD #28083 / LIMC #3827  
Athenian Red-Figure, Krater Calyx, 470-460 B.C. Attributed to the Syriskos Painter.

There exist only very few pottery pieces depicting scenes with Ge/Gaia. Most of the certain identifications of her are in reference either to the birth of Erichthonius or to a battle scene in the Gigantomachia, but one of the earliest examples and a rather unusual depiction of Gaia in Attic pottery is in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. where she is named Ge Panteleia, ‘the all-embracing earth’. She is seated on a throne between Okeanos and Dionysos and on the reverse side Themis (or Ge) is sitting between mythical kings Balos and Epaphos perhaps reminding the viewer of Egypt and Argos.<sup>154</sup> Interestingly, Simon suggests in her work that the chair Gaia sits upon is of the same type as those of the Twelve Gods on the East Frieze of the Parthenon.<sup>155</sup> The Syriskos Painter is recognized for painting scenes of the glorification of Athens after the victory of the Persians<sup>156</sup> as well as victorious moments in Athenian mythology. It is clear to suggest the scene is not about

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<sup>152</sup> Lissarrague 2012, 565.

<sup>153</sup> Smith and Plantzos 2012, 6-14.

<sup>154</sup> Kerényi 2015, 82.

<sup>155</sup> Simon 1969, 128.

<sup>156</sup> Kerényi 2015, 81-82.



wine (as in the numerous instances of Dionysos' depictions) and, according to Kerényi, perhaps to show Syriskos was emphasizing the importance of Dionysos and his cosmic dimensions beyond Athens.<sup>157</sup>

In Fallerii Necropoli di Celle, Tomb 16, an Attic rhyton of the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the shape of a dog's head depicts an image of Dionysos on the dog's neck.<sup>158</sup> In the same grave was another rhyton dated to the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century made by the Syriskos Painter.<sup>159</sup> This evidence, perhaps as ceremonial pieces, may reinforce Kerényi's interpretation of Dionysos' cosmic dimension outside of Athens. If the Syriskos Painter, according to Kerényi, emphasizes Dionysos outside of Attica this raises two questions: First, what is the purpose of his depiction of Gaia on the throne and not Dionysos? Secondly, why does this early iconography differ in content from Gaia's iconography on later vase paintings? There is one account in the latter half of the first century A.D. of a seated Gaia 'Εδραία, the recipient in a votive dedication attested by an epigraph found in Anazarbos, Cilicia, as an analogy of sedentary or being tied to the earth.<sup>160</sup> Is this also a reference to her cosmic dimension beyond Athens? Earliest existence of settlement at Falerii dates to 10<sup>th</sup> c BCE with tomb finds testifying to occupation in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>161</sup> Among the finds in the female burials of the wealthier class were bronze spindles and distaff. A north Syrian seal found in a woman's grave of the 8<sup>th</sup> c BCE accounts for the community's wealth and trade network with the Near East as well as the other female burials that emphasized weaving as a trade.<sup>162</sup>

If the Syriskos Painter highlighted a glorious moment in Athenian mythology, the narrative connection with Egypt is intriguing. In approaching the iconography of Gaia, we have to keep in mind the audience. In vase paintings Gaia is often depicted in mythical events. Finally, this

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<sup>157</sup> Kerényi 2015, 82

<sup>158</sup> From personal observation at the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Roma: July 10, 2021. The plaque reads as follows: Fallerii Necropoli di Celle, Tomba 16 (LXXXVII) A Camera VI-V Sec. A.C. #24. Rython attico a figure rosse configurator a testa di cane. Sul collo: scena di banchetto. Pittore di Brygos. Primo venticinquennio V sec. a.C.

<sup>159</sup> From the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Roma: July 10, 2021. The plaque reads as follows: Fallerii Necropoli di Celle, Tomba 16 (LXXXVII) A Camera VI-V Sec. A.C. #23. Rython attico a figure rosse configurator ad astragalo Pittore di Syriskos. Reca la firma del ceramista: SYRISKOS EPOIESEN e l'acclamazione TIMARCHOS KAL(OS). Secundo venticinquennio V sec. a.C.

<sup>160</sup> Landi 2012, 129;151. She cites *SEG* XII 513.

<sup>161</sup> From the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Roma: July 10, 2021, exhibit "La Comunità Preurbana".

<sup>162</sup> From the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Roma: July 10, 2021, exhibit "La Comunità Preurbana".

iconography is on a krater. The function of the vessel may enhance the narrative. According to Stansbury-O'Donnell's definition, a pictorial narrative has an agent and a consequence, whether something or someone.<sup>163</sup> In this case, the viewer is afforded a range of open-ended interpretations.

In Gaia and the birth of Erichthonius narrative her association with the Gigantomachia has uniformity in time and place. For example, most of her pieces depict similar versions of a similar scene. This leads to the question why artists chose these particular accounts of her as pictorial narrative when she is described in many other various ways throughout the literary texts?

In context of the formation of the polis of Athens, next I would like to explore the ways in which Gaia is chosen to be represented in the dual realms of birth and death in iconography. The timeframe in which most of Gaia's iconography appears in the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C., after the tyrannical rule of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and birth of Democracy in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C., the Greeks thought themselves long-settled and that the land was literally their mother.<sup>164</sup> This perhaps propagandistic ideal is represented in the pottery where Gaia is handing Erichthonius to Athena. Men of Athens were born of the earth and did not migrate from another country. Some scholars such as Smith argue that Attika and Earth are one and the same.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999, 18.

<sup>164</sup> Mikalson 2005, 58-59.

<sup>165</sup> Smith 2011, 116.



Birth of Erichthonius. British Museum, London, #E182/BAPD #206695/LIMC #16813.

Athenian Red-Figure, Hydria, 470-460 B.C. Found in Italy, Etruria, Vulci. Attributed to the Oinante Painter.

With this foundation of Gaia in the texts, myth is great inspiration for artists to use this type of content for their vase paintings for both import and export and as agent of the ideal of Hellenism.<sup>166</sup> The above example shows this same birthing scene with Erichthonius (or possibly Dionysos) in an export to Etruria dated approximately the second quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. A fundamental source of inspiration in myth and ritual, the coming of age theme was a pivotal concept in Greek culture since the status of adult male was required for citizenship and privilege in the developing Athens of 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.<sup>167</sup>

Vase paintings are great story tellers and may offer significant historical information. Combined with written texts, painted pottery offers a way to understand the ancient Greek world. Painted pottery and all other art forms help us to understand how Greek society functioned in their economy, politics, religion and myth.<sup>168</sup> The medium of using vases gives art mobility. What is the psychology of this? By being mobile it means the art can be controlled as who sees the art and who does not (unless used for funeral purposes and then buried). A public and private sphere is formed. I believe this is particularly significant in the symposium. The difference between sculpture and vase painting is best noted by Lissarrague who says the vase itself is

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<sup>166</sup> Bundrick 2019, 51-92.

<sup>167</sup> Larson 2007, 10.

<sup>168</sup> Smith and Plantzos 2012, 6-14.

mobile and circulating among the people whereas the sculpture or votive relief is placed within the ritual space as a permanent static fixture, thus more of a standardized version of an event and a more permanent offering to the god.<sup>169</sup>

With Athens blossoming as a polis and its transition from tyranny and oligarchy to a democratic state, perhaps means that some type of ritual or symbolism may have taken place to mark this transition. An initiation or birthing event is perfect propaganda material to claim the growth from a newborn state to a mature status equating that the city is fertile and developed enough to produce its own first King. In the event of this creation, it is important to briefly point out the difference in the account of Erectheus who was the earth born hero and Erichthonius the mythical figure who was born in the snake figure and later given human shape.<sup>170</sup> Kerényi points out the difference which Erichthonius signifies a chthonian name as a being from the underworld and a child worshipped in mysteries and Erectheus, the earth born, worshipped in the house of Athena.<sup>171</sup> Athenians named themselves after their heroic founder given the name Kekropidai the primaeval being, descendants of the land and not the beast but yet of a two-fold nature<sup>172</sup> and Erechtheidai was the name given to Athenians after their king and hero.<sup>173</sup>

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. this myth was still accounted for by the Greek poet Callimachus:<sup>174</sup>

*"Pallas laid him [Erikhthonios], the ancient seed of Hephaistos within the chest, until she set a rock in Akte (Attika) for the sons of Kekrops; a birth mysterious and secret, whose lineage I neither knew nor learnt, but they themselves [the daughters of Kekrops] declared, according to report among the primeval birds, that Gaia (earth) bare him to Hephaistos."*

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<sup>169</sup> Lissarrague 2012, 568-69.

<sup>170</sup> Kerényi 1997, 209-246.

<sup>171</sup> Kerényi 1997, 214.

<sup>172</sup> Kerényi 1997, 209.

<sup>173</sup> Kerényi 1997, 214.

<sup>174</sup> Callimachus, *Hecate Fragment* 1.2 (from Papyri) (trans. Trypanis).



Gaia and the War of the Giants, Antikensammlung, Berlin, #F2531/BAPD #220533/LIMC #10641.  
Athenian Red-Figure, Kylix, ca. 410-400 B.C. Signed by Aristophanes.

Here, opposite of the birth scene, we have a death scene associated with Gaia. As the mother of the Giants, Gaia appears disheveled and rightly distraught at the slaying of her son Polybotes and appears pleading for the life of her son as he battles with Poseidon in the Gigantomachia. Her hand gesture perhaps a sign of despair and the eyes looking in an upward direction of plea. As in most of her iconography, she is depicted as half above and half below the ground as we see also in a later scene of the Gigantomachia on a kylix fragment dating 410-400 B.C.



Gaia and the Gigantomachia. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale #81521/BAPD #217517/LIMC #10553.  
Athenian Red-Figure, Krater fragment, 410-400 B.C., *Akin* to Pronomos Painter.

In a later 3<sup>rd</sup> c. A.D. text by Philostratus the Elder he writes of a similar gesture used by Gaia:<sup>175</sup>  
"[Description of an ancient Greek painting:] *In his passion for driving this son [Phaethon] of Helios (the Sun) ventured to mount his father's chariot, but because he did not keep a firm rein he came to grief and fell into the Eridanos . . . Look [at the painting]! . . . Despairing, Ge (the Earth) raises her hands in supplication, as the furious fire draws near her. Now the youth is thrown from the chariot and is falling headlong--for his hair is on fire and his breast smouldering with the heat; his fall will end in the river Eridanos.*"

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<sup>175</sup> Philostratus the Elder, *Imagines* 1.11 (trans. Fairbanks).



Birth of Erichthonius, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. #81.70/BAPD #10158/LIMC #16812.  
Athenian Red-Figure, Krater, 420-400 B.C. Attributed to the Kadmos Painter.

Conversely, in this highly decorated birthing scene by the Kadmos Painter, Gaia looks regal and content to hand over her son to the care of Athena and is encircled by onlookers. In his study of Greek religion, Coulanges suggests that ancient families were united by the sacred fire and this caused the family to form a single body.<sup>176</sup> Simon points out that part of an Athenian ritual, the Amfidromia (“running around festival”), was an act of purification for newborn and the household.<sup>177</sup> Even to this day, Modern Greek couples in the baptism ceremony of their child walk around in a circular movement around the basin together with the chosen godparents. This circular motion and purification ritual around the sacred hearth fire was a tradition to Hestia and in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. Hestia and Gaia were often regarded as of equal stature.<sup>178</sup> It seems fitting, then, that Athena would be chosen as the reciprocal ‘godmother’ or caretaker of Erichthonius since in myth Gaia bore the seed of Hephaistos who was spurned by Athena.

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<sup>176</sup> Coulanges 1956, 42.

<sup>177</sup> Simon 1969, 128.

<sup>178</sup> Simon 1969, 128.

Ancient Athens was a gender segregated and patriarchal culture. Land was passed on mostly to male heirs who were obligated to continue the family's rules and worship style.<sup>179</sup> In most circumstances, the daughter did not inherit land except for the *επίκληροι*.<sup>180</sup> Male privilege in ancient Athens meant to own and have control. For the male, to be a soldier for society and polis was a great expectation and honor.<sup>181</sup> Well known examples of this ideology can be seen in the Kerameikos cemetery where numerous kouroi (and korai) stood as *semata*<sup>182</sup> of superiority, youth, life, social acceptance, family agency, and the aristocratic ethos to the viewer.<sup>183</sup> Thus, Erichthonius, like other heroes of grain, may be portrayed as hero and tamer of the seed and tamer of the grain. Even today, in Modern Greek, it is not unusual for village people to call their children, in slang, 'spore or sporakia', the seed or seeds.

According to mythology, when Gaia consorted with Tartarus she gave birth to a serpent. Often in scenes of her iconography, upon observation, this serpent motif appears on the dress and the fact that Gaia is portrayed half in the ground where snakes are known to burrow may not be coincidence. Perez argues "the ancient Greeks perceived the existence of a special primordial force living within, emanating from, or symbolized by the snake; a force which is not more—and not less—than pure life, with all its paradoxes and complexities."<sup>184</sup> In a metaphorical sense, the snake may symbolize opposing ideas—the serpent as adversary to heroes or gods, or as a healing symbol, and as protector over a city such as the sacred snake of the Athenian Acropolis.<sup>185</sup> This is another explanation of the duality of Gaia when she is depicted half in and half out of either realm of the earth underground and above ground. It appears as if she is a liminal mediator of the two worlds. Much like the cave in which she is often associated with, she is the mediator between the world of mortal and world of the divine.

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<sup>179</sup> Coulanges 1956, 72-77; Cole 2004, 156. This obligation can also be viewed as a political responsibility and "as an oath that defined the family as security for the citizen's loyalty to the community."

<sup>180</sup> Gould 1980, 41-42.

<sup>181</sup> Banou and Bournias 2014, 247.

<sup>182</sup> Banou and Bournias 2014, 247.

<sup>183</sup> These were themes discussed concerning the kouroi and korai in Dimitris Plantzos' lecture on "Monumentality" on 10/26/2020 at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

<sup>184</sup> Perez 2021, 1.

<sup>185</sup> Perez 2021, 2.



### 3.3 The matter of duality

Archaeology and anthropology use analogies, important parallels and comparisons all the time. It seems appropriate to mention that the theme of duality is present within many facets and subjects of life such as alchemy, religion, mathematics, language, and music theory, to name a few, as is also the case in myth and iconography. The title or expression of Gaia as “Mother of All” title implies encompassing all traits, in general terms, both the positive and the negative. Gender conflict and difference are also underlying themes throughout Hesiod’s *Theogony*. Gaia’s role in the episodes of the succession myth reveals her duality in both her decisions and actions.

In the context of the shaping of Attica, we see a gradual shift from ruralism to urbanism and eventually from tyranny and elitism to a Democratic society with social class mobility. Divided tribes are coming together to form a solid city state with unification but this also means the movement from a solely agricultural economy to a trade base mixed economy.<sup>186</sup> We also have the formation of the philosophical schools, some conservative while others more liberal.<sup>187</sup>

In architecture we see a gradual shift from the small and personal to the form of monumental. In theater, there is development of both comedy and tragedy.

Throughout text and art Gaia is depicted in a certain way that suggests her centrality, fertility, and importance as divine but also the human side that celebrates the joys of birth yet experiences the lamentations of death. Often described as broad-breasted, this suggests her vast emergence and tie to all physical forms of good and evil, positive and negative. She is often depicted with her lower half of her body not visible, as if her body is one with the Earth and rising from the ground. This shows the idea that Gaia was embodiment of the physical world and that her body not only gave each of the god’s vitality, but also to the mortal human. To the Greeks, Gaia represented the seed and foundation for all life, and as foundation, was given the first honors at the altar.

Modern Day interpretations of Gaia are not irrelevant in this study. As the case of cultural continuum, 20<sup>th</sup> century humanity still interacts with their natural landscape and, therefore, once

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<sup>186</sup> Mikalson 2005, 58-59; Landi 2012, 146.

<sup>187</sup> Cole 2004, 165. She gives the example of Aristotle vs. Hippocratic explanations on which gender is superior, and the Knidian vs. Koan medical approach.

again the interpretation of environment is a continuing subject. In modern day cultural legacy, Gaia and Gaia themes continue to emerge from the depths of history. Similar to Plato's view of the cosmos, the Native American People express similar concepts of earth as a living entity. The 'Mother Earth' type figure is iconic of order (nature only knows rules) and with order comes structure. To note a modern day continuum of the Mother Goddess/Mother Earth theme, Native American tribal elder Frank Waters once said: "*To Indians the Earth is not inanimate. It is a living entity, the mother of all life, our Mother Earth. All Her children, everything in nature, is alive: the living stone, the great breathing mountains, trees and plants, as well as birds and animals and man. All are united in one harmonious whole. Whatever happens to one affects the others, and subtly changes the interlocking relationships of the parts of the whole.*"<sup>188</sup> As the world's ecological networks continue to undergo drastic changes, it is interesting that our theatrical and cinematic approach to search for and reveal truths about the Earth as a living system continues.<sup>189</sup>

## Conclusion

We have to keep in mind the cultural impact of literary texts, vase paintings, and other art mediums within their time period. It is important to remember that when studying visual material that the ancient viewer does not have the same view as us and we, as modern people, view these materials out of their context. To the ancient Greek, these were everyday sights and objects that were a part of their world and if we accept them as recordings of past rituals and vision of the artist, we may come to terms with them somehow on their own level.<sup>190</sup> We may not fully understand the ancient world and the most important parts of the ancient ritual do not survive but, through the study of material culture, we can interpret a portion of it. The significance of fertility within the framework of a developing Athens city state in the literary texts and material culture of ancient Greece show the importance of fertility, ritual, religion and their strong connection to the agricultural cycle and to the physical landscape. Through collective action and social convention and with the use of visual material culture as agent the

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<sup>188</sup> Peterson 1973, 63-99.

<sup>189</sup> There are several films and documentaries dedicated to the subject of Gaia, Mother Earth themes, and Earth as a living system. A few include: (2021) *Gaia* by Jaco Bouwer, (2018) *Annihilation* by Alex Garland, (2014) *As Above, So Below* by John Erick Dowdle, (2011) *Animate Earth: Science, Intuition & Gaia* by Sally Angel, Josh Good, and Clive Ardagh, (2009) *Dancing with Gaia* by Jo Carson, (2009) *Avatar* by James Cameron, (1999) *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior* by John McTiernan and Michael Crichton.

<sup>190</sup> Lissarrague 2012, 575.

ancient Greek's expectation of fertilizing the land and its citizens for the overall benefit of the polis was accepted and understood.

The 5<sup>th</sup> century was a time of development following the Persian Wars, and the Athenian propaganda of autochthony links Erichthonius rising from the soil of his polis like Gaia from the underground of the earth. She is the figure first given sacrifice to before entering a temple, as thanks to the founding mother and the root of all things, according to literary sources. Gaia is often depicted as a regal, nurturing, and central motherly figure, but she also takes part in several deceiving and vengeful actions; like all Greek gods and goddesses do because they are very 'human'. In myth, Gaia plays a prominent role in many of the conflicts between her offspring and herself and it is equally apparent that she displays the same duality in her decisions becoming rather humanlike. Her scheming actions in the literary texts simply contrast her seemingly positive creator status. Much like the cave in which she is often associated with, she is the mediator between the world of mortal and world of the divine. In particular to the Athenians, Gaia is the mother of Erichthonius and mediator between the earthly civic foundations and the divine for an equally balanced, prosperous, fertile and co-existent mortal and divine relationship in the urban setting. Though her iconography in vase painting is limited, these themes are evident in her iconography of the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century where she is mostly depicted half above and half below the Earth.

Due to the natural landscape in which she is associated with that continues to endure, Gaia is a foundation for memory preservation of the old ways in both iconography and myth. The role of Gaia in Greek cult and her place in the cultic sphere alongside the dichotomy of her cultural continuum in myth and iconography was a result of urbanization and social reforms, both to preserve memory and introduce more urban icons and images of fertility, power, and victory. After the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Gaia's iconography continues to flourish in the Roman world and Gaia as the personification of Earth continues to evolve.

As a foundation of ancestral power, the goddess Gaia is characterized in myth and iconography as creator, schemer, nurturer, and deceiver. As the personification of Earth, Gaia is a case of cultural continuum as the dualistic embodiment of nature vs. nurture, of rule and order/chaos and

disorder, and foundation for which the other gods and goddesses appear in the continuum of fertile prosperity in the urban setting. Gaia's embodiment of these dualistic themes seem an appropriate choice for depiction on pottery as the civilized race conquers the wilds of earth and perhaps it is also the beginnings of the movement away from the deification of the divine and gradual shift to the deification of mortals.

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