



About Greek Goddesses as Mothers or Would-Be Mothers

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About Greek goddesses as mothers or would-be mothers

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2020.04.10 | By [Gregory Nagy](#)

§0. My essay here concentrates on myths about two Greek goddesses and on their roles as mothers or would-be mothers:

(A) The first goddess is Hērā in her role as mother or would-be mother of a serpentine Titan by the name of Typhon, alternatively called Typhoeus, who is destined to become a most dangerous threat to the sovereignty of Zeus.

(B) The second goddess is Athena in her role as would-be mother of a serpentine human by the name of Erikhthonios, alternatively called Erekhtheus, who is destined to become the ancestor of all Greeks native to the city of Athens.

The ancient image that I choose as the lead-off illustration shows another goddess, Gaia/Ge or Mother Earth herself, who is seen emerging from underground and presenting her very own baby boy to the goddess Athena, who receives the child. Athena will raise the baby in her role as mother of a son she “never” had. Looking on, in the same image, is a figure whose upper half is human while his lower half is serpentine. He is known as Kekrops to the people of Athens. In this version of the many surviving visual representations of such a scene, the baby boy is not marked by any overtly serpentine features. In other versions, however, as we will see, the baby too, like Kekrops, is pictured as half-human, half-serpent.



Melian clay relief, about 460 BCE. Gaia offers Erikhthonios to Athena. On the right, Kekrops. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. For the title of this essay, I was at first tempted to begin with “Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XX,” to be followed, as a subtitle, by the wording that I finally chose for the actual title, “About Greek goddesses as mothers or would-be mothers.” But why did I make such a choice, switching subtitle for title while dropping what could have become the beginning of a longer title? I did so because the essay I

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present here is in one way quite different from the nineteen essays of mine in *Classical Inquiries* that bear titles beginning with “Thinking comparatively,” numbered I through XIX, as listed in the cumulative Bibliography signaled below. Although I will continue to be “thinking comparatively” about Greek mythology in what I have to say here, the primary subject for analysis is now significantly different. By contrast with those nineteen essays, where the primary subject in each case was Hēraklēs (his name was actually featured in the subtitles of all nineteen), the primary subject here is not the Greek hero but rather his would-be mother, that is, the Greek goddess Hērā.

§2. But that is not all. There is another significant difference to be noted. My essay here stands in contrast not only with the nineteen previous essays about Hēraklēs but also with seven further essays of mine—those bearing titles beginning with “Comments on comparative mythology,” numbered 1 through 7, again as listed in the cumulative Bibliography signaled below. In those seven essays, as in the previous nineteen, the main point of interest was the Indo-European linguistic heritage of myths about the hero Hēraklēs, though by now there was more emphasis on the complementary Indo-European aspects of myths about the goddess Hērā in her role as would-be mother of this hero. But my essay here, by contrast, will focus on what seem to be non-Indo-European aspects of myths about Hērā—and, more specifically, on her role as either mother or would-be mother of Typhon/Typhoeus, parallel to the role of the goddess Athena as would-be mother of Erikhthonios/Erektheus.

§3. I start with the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, verses 300–355. We read here how Hērā was angry at her brother and husband Zeus for fathering—without her female participation—the goddess Athena. Hērā in her anger now went ahead and found a way to conceive and to give birth to the serpentine monster Typhon/Typhoeus—without any need for male participation in the form of insemination. The ‘anger’ of the goddess here is relevant: the word is *kholos*, *χολωσαμένη* and *χολωσαμένη* at verses 307 and 309. To be contrasted with this myth about Hērā, as Joan V. O’Brien points out (1993:101n41), is an alternative myth in the Hesiodic *Theogony*, where Hērā is only the would-be mother of Typhon/Typhoeus. We read at verses 821–822 how Mother Earth, the immortal Gaia/Ge, was inseminated by the immortal Tartaros, and she thus conceived and gave birth to Typhon/Typhoeus. As noted in the commentary of Martin West (1966:252), the names Typhon at verse 306 and Typhoeus at verse 821 refer to the same monstrous son, who is then described at verse 825 with the words *ophis* and *drakōn*, both of which mean ‘serpent’. Hereafter, I will refer to this serpentine monster simply as Typhon.

§4. Although Hērā does not conceive or give birth to the serpentine Typhon in the Hesiodic *Theogony*, she nevertheless breast-feeds his progeny, who are themselves all serpentine: as we read at verses 313–315, the goddess nurses the serpentine Hydra of Lerna—the verb for ‘nurse’ here is *trephein* at verse 314 (θρέπει). At verses 306 and 304 respectively, we find that the father of the Hydra is the serpentine Typhon, and that the mother is a likewise serpentine Ekhidna, whose name corresponds to the common noun *ekhidna*, meaning ‘viper’ in Greek.

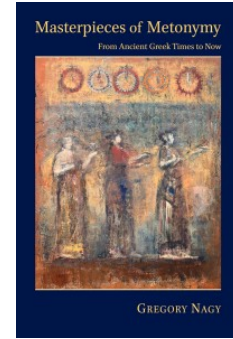
§5. In view of such serpentine features marking the monster Typhon, I must circle back to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, verses 300–355, where we find yet another such feature of this monster. But first I need to review a glaring detail that I have already noted about the overall story told in those verses of the *Homeric Hymn*. Here is that detail: by contrast with the Hesiodic *Theogony*, which says that Mother Earth, not Hērā, gave birth parthenogenetically to Typhon, the *Hymn* says at verses 305–307 that this monster was born parthenogenetically from Hērā, not from Mother Earth. But the story goes further, and here is where we can see yet another serpentine feature of Typhon. We now learn that Hērā, after having given birth to Typhon, handed him over to the ‘She-Dragon’ of Delphi, to be ‘nursed’ by this serpentine would-be mother—and the verb for ‘nurse’ here is once again *trephein*, at verse 305 (ἔτρεφεν). My translation ‘She-Dragon’ approximates the original Greek name *Drakaina* at verse 300 of the *Hymn*.

§6. I find it relevant here to compare the chicken-and-egg reasoning in the myth about the nursing of the Hydra by Hērā at verse 315 of the Hesiodic *Theogony*: as we see there, the goddess nursed the serpent because she was angry at Hēraklēs—and the word for her anger there is *kotos*, *κοτέουσα* at verse 315. Also relevant are my interpretations at §§9–11 of the seventh essay in the series “Comments on comparative mythology” (Nagy 2020.04.03), where I connected this myth about the breast-feeding of the serpentine Hydra by Hērā with two other myths. The first of these, as we saw, told how Hēraklēs, when he split open the body of the Hydra after killing it, made poisoned arrows by dipping the metallic tips into the gall that flowed from the gall bladder of the monster. And the second of these myths, as we also saw, told how Hēraklēs shot an arrow into the right breast of Hērā, causing a pain described as incurable. In terms of my interpretation, the venom of the Hydra infected the mother’s milk of Hērā when Hēraklēs shot his arrow into her breast. But the poison of the venom has been recycled here in a vicious circle, since this poison must have come from the anger of Hērā when she breast-fed the Hydra, and now the poison cycles back to the breast of Hērā when she is shot by an arrow that carries the same infection. The cause of the poison is also the effect of the poison, which is the anger of the goddess.

§7. It is also relevant, I think, that the Lion of Nemea, like the Hydra of Lerna, is likewise pictured as a nursling of Hērā in the Hesiodic *Theogony*: at verse 328 we read how the goddess nursed this monster—and the verb for ‘nurse’ here is once again *trephein* (θρέψασα). Like the Hydra, the Lion too has been nurtured by Hērā to become a most dangerous threat to Hēraklēs, but the hero kills the monster, as we read at verse 332, just as he kills that other most dangerous menace, the Hydra.

§8. And now I come to a comparison of the goddess Hērā, in her role as a would-be mother who nurtures her would-be children by literally breast-feeding them, with the goddess Athena in her own role as a would-be mother who nurtures her own would-be child, an earthling. I offer here an epitome of comments I have

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made on two passages of Pausanias, 1.2.5 and 1.14.6, as originally published in *Classical Inquiries* ([Nagy 2017.12.28](#)):

§8a. There is a myth, mentioned by Pausanias at 1.2.5 and at 1.14.6, that tells how the hero Erikhthonios of Athens was born not of *anthrōpoi* ‘humans’ but from Mother Earth or Gē/Gaia, and that his father was the divine smith Hephaistos. Pausanias keeps Erikhthonios distinct from Erekhtheus, who is described at 1.5.3 as the grandson of Erikhthonios. In Homeric poetry, however, Erikhthonios is not distinct from Erekhtheus, and it is the second of the two names that refers to the hero who was born of Mother Earth. There is a reference to the hero cult of this Erekhtheus at verse 547 of *Iliad 2*, where he is described as a prototypical human: the goddess Earth gave birth to him and the goddess Athena ‘nursed’ him—the verb here for ‘nursed’ is once again *trephein*, at verse 548 (θρέψε).

§8b. In this context, Erekhtheus is pictured as a cult hero who is worshipped by the Athenians in a festive setting of seasonally recurring sacrifices. The link between Athena and this cult hero Erekhtheus is reflected also in another Homeric reference, at *Odyssey* 7.78–81. As I argue in HC 1§138, the figure of this cult hero underwent a mitosis. The one figure with one name becomes two figures with two names. In the evolution of Athenian myths and rituals, the name Erikhthonios displaced the name Erekhtheus in occupying the older role of the prototypical human conceived by the goddess Earth, while the name Erekhtheus was reassigned to the newer role of a dynastic grandson of Erikhthonios. In terms of this pattern of displacement and reassignment, as we see most clearly from the narrative of “Apollodorus” (*Library* 3.14.6 ed. Frazer), Erikhthonios now became the name of the prototypical human who was begotten by the god Hephaistos, born of the goddess Earth, and ‘nursed’ by the goddess Athena—once again, the verb that I translate as ‘nursed’ is *trephein* (3.14.6, ἔτρεφεν).

§8c. Pausanias at 1.14.6 says cryptically that he knows a myth about a relationship between Erikhthonios and Athena. One way to describe such a relationship, I suggest, is to say that Erikhthonios is the son that Athena “never” had. And here is how I would explain the scare quotes that envelop my wording “never” in referring to a myth about any relationship between Erikhthonios and Athena. As we see from several sources, including the text of “Apollodorus” as already cited, there was a myth that told how Hephaistos had tried to have sex with Athena, but his semen fell on the ground instead and thus impregnated Earth. The myth is analyzed most perceptively by Douglas Frame (2009:461–462), who shows that earlier versions of such a myth could have pictured Athena herself as a Mother Goddess in her own right, so that she could have been once upon a time not only the wet nurse but also the mother of Erekhtheus as the earthling hero of the Athenians. In terms of such an analysis, Erikhthonios eventually displaced Erekhtheus as the prototypical earthling hero, though the sacred space that housed the myths and rituals concerning Erikhthonios and the goddess Athena Polias continued to be defined by the name Erekhtheus, as we see from the context of the reference made by Pausanias at 1.26.5 to this space as the *Erekhtheion* or Erechtheum.

§9. I asserted, at the beginning of this essay, that this nursling of Athena can be seen as serpentine, just like the nurslings of Hērā. To back up this assertion, I offer here an epitome of some relevant comments I originally published in *Classical Inquiries* ([Nagy 2018.01.25](#)):

§9a. I focus here on an Athenian myth, as narrated by Pausanias at 1.18.2, about the baby Erikhthonios and the young daughters of Kekrops, king of Athens. These girls had been chosen by the goddess Athena to take good care of Erikhthonios—and not to open the box in which the baby was hidden. But two of the girls went ahead and opened the box—and they were instantly driven mad by what they saw. Then, in their madness, they killed themselves by leaping off the steepest part of the Acropolis.

§9b. In this narrative of Pausanias at 1.18.2, the holy mystery of what the girls really saw is left untold. In the narrative that we read in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 2.560–561, on the other hand, the secret is half-revealed: what you see from the poet’s wording, which pictures two distinct visions that are viewed simultaneously, are a baby and a snake. Some illustrators of this double vision, as we see in the close-up picture I show here, press for a full revelation: the baby is really half human, half snake.



etymology Eurystheus Georges Dumézil

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Helen Hera Herakles

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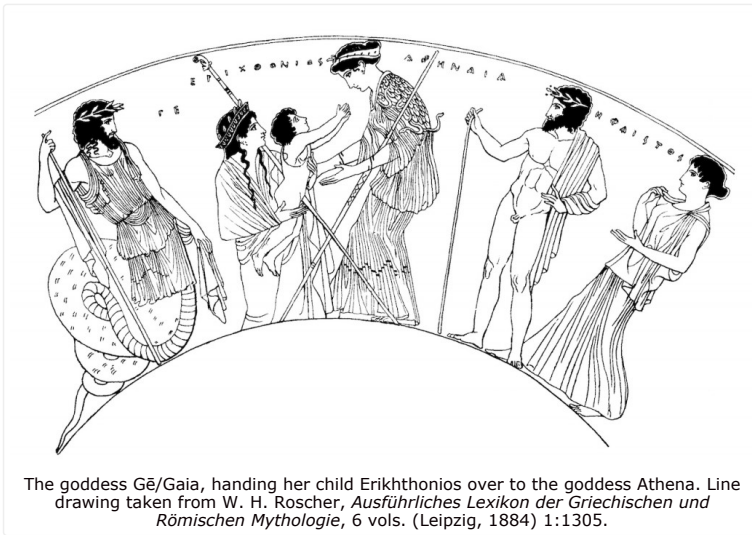
Erichthonius cistella laxata cernitur.

Erichthonios Released from His Basket (*Erichthonius cistella laxata cernitur*). Engraving by Antonio Tempesta; Plate 14 of a series of illustrations for *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, published by Wilhelm Janson (Amsterdam, ca. 1606). [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), Los Angeles County Fund (65.37.98).

§9c. The mystical vision experienced by the daughters of Kekrops, as narrated at 1.18.2 by Pausanias, is relevant to the identity of Kekrops himself, their father, whose form is human from the waist up and serpentine from the waist down. To say it in Greek: Kekrops is *diphuēs* 'double-natured' (scholia for Aristophanes *Wasps* 438): he is half human, half snake. This biformity of Kekrops is shown clearly in some ancient visual representations. In the illustration I showed for the cover of this essay, for example, we see Kekrops in attendance at the moment when Gaia/Gē the Earth Mother hands over to Athena the infant Erichthonios:



Melian clay relief, about 460 BCE. Gaia offers Erichthonios to Athena. On the right, Kekrops. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.



§9d. The half-human and half-snake identity of Kekrops here is a sign, I argue, of the shock experienced by the daughters of Kekrops in seeing an Earth-born baby that is likewise half-human and half-snake. The girls are looking at the true form of a true *autokhthōn*, an autochthon. The word means literally 'one whose self is linked to the Earth'. Here is a 'self' who is literally born of the Earth, of the *khthōn*. But what about the girls themselves? What about their own selves? What about their own humanity? Having a father like Kekrops, should the girls not expect to be biform themselves? Perhaps, then, the realization that the Earth-born baby is biform leads to the girls' self-realization, that they, too, must be biform. It is I think the suddenness of such a self-realization that drives them mad.

§10. In this myth about Erikhthonios as the nursling of Athena, the uncanny sight of a half-serpentine and half-human figure causes what may be described as a kind of "culture shock," analogous perhaps to the kind of emotional reaction evoked by the horrific sight of the monstrous Typhon, that half-serpentine and half-humanoid Dragon who menaces the sovereignty of Zeus himself. Representations of such a menace are amply attested in the ancient Greek visual arts, centering on a dramatic scene that shows Zeus saving the day as he aims his deadly thunderbolt at the menacing Typhon:



The scene recurs in modern Greek visual arts as well, and a splendid example is this picture on a postage stamp, replicating the primal event:



§11. A big question remains: are we to interpret the myths about such serpentine figures, mothered as they are by the goddesses Hērā, Athena, and Gaia/Gē, as Indo-European or non-Indo-European in derivation?

§12. At least one aspect of the answer is already clear to me: when we consider the two goddesses Hērā and Athena as mythological constructs, I find that the figure of Hērā can easily be reconstructed as Indo-European in derivation, whereas the figure of Athena in many ways resists such reconstruction. Even the etymology of the name *Hērā*, which is morphologically a variant of the noun *hōrā* meaning 'season', is transparently Indo-European, as I have argued in Hour 1 of *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (H24H 1§§26–28)—whereas the name of *Athēnē* appears to be non-Indo-European.

§13. Before proceeding, I should explain why I felt I needed first to emphasize in §12 the Indo-European aspects of the goddess Hērā. My reason is simple: all too often, these aspects are left unexplored. For example, if you look up the goddess in the index of an admirable book by Martin West that goes by the title *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (2007)—a title that I think is well deserved because of the author's conscientiousness in assembling a vast array of linguistic details (I cite two favorable reviews: Nagy 2008b, intended for linguists, and Nagy 2010, for classicists), you will find references to only two pages (West 1995:185, 192) where the goddess is even mentioned in a volume that extends over five hundred pages.

§14. But the very identity of Hērā—including even her name and the relationship of this name with the name of the hero Hēraklēs—is all derivable from Indo-European traditions of mythmaking, as I have argued in Hour 1 of *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (H24H 1§§26–28, 39, 48–53).

§15. More needs to be said about names of mythological figures like *Hērā* and *Hērakléēs*, where the meanings of their given names are explainable by way of comparative Indo-European linguistics. In this particular case, the etymologies of both names can be traced back, as I have in fact argued (again, H24H 1§§26–28, 39, 48–53), to pre-historic phases of the Indo-European "family" of languages.

§16. In what follows, then, I will be tracking Indo-European aspects of the goddess Hērā, to be compared with non-Indo-European aspects of the goddess Athena. But I will avoid assuming, I must emphasize from the start, that any myth involving Hērā is therefore Indo-European in derivation—while any myth involving Athena is not.

§16a. If we consider the mythological relationship between Hērā and Typhon, for example, we can see a close parallelism with the mythological relationship between Athena and Erikhthonios/Erekhtheus, and this parallelism leads me to infer, at least in this case, that a non-Indo-European pattern of mythmaking has influenced an Indo-European pattern rather than the other way around.

§16b. By contrast, as we can see clearly in the myth about the Judgment of Paris, as analyzed by Georges Dumézil in his *Mythe et épopée* I (1968:580–586 = 1995:608–614), the mythological relationship between Hērā and Athena as representatives of the first and the second "functions" of sovereignty and warfare respectively is surely an Indo-European construct. And so, in this case, we see an Indo-European pattern influencing and even absorbing a figure like the goddess Athena, even if her overall identity seems to be derived from non-Indo-European traditions of mythmaking. In this case, then, the non-Indo-European background of Athena is re-aligned with the Indo-European background of Hērā.

§17. I must note here a qualification: although any given myth—whether or not it is derivable from Indo-European traditions of mythmaking—may contain names with meanings that are relevant to the content of the traditional language that tells the story of the myth, such meanings may not always be relevant to any given version of the story as told at any given time and place. In the myth about the Judgment of Paris, for example, I find in attested versions of the story no special relevance to etymological analysis of the names for the two goddesses Hera and Athena—one Indo-European and the other, non-Indo-European. What I just said here would have pleased Georges Dumézil, I am sure. He did not worry all that much about the etymologies of names in myths of Indo-European provenience. At one point, he is even on record as saying, wryly, that the myth of the Judgment of Paris, as we see it in play at *Iliad* 24.25–30, could be analyzed as an Indo-European myth even if the three goddesses in the story, 'Hera' and 'Athena' and 'Aphrodite', were to be renamed as *Margot* and *Fanchon* and *Catin* (Dumézil 1968:586 = 1995:614).

§18. Well and good. So, names are not always relevant to the stories in which they are embedded. But my argument, as developed so far, still holds, and I summarize it this way: Any etymologies of names embedded in the traditional narratives of mythmaking, Indo-European or otherwise, can be re-synchronized by the narratives themselves with the overall meaning of those narratives. I show examples of such re-synchronizations in my work on the etymological retro-fittings of two names in the formulaic system of the Homeric *Iliad*—the names of Apollo (Nagy 1994) and Achilles (Nagy 1994b). I have referred to my analysis of these two names already in an earlier posting (Nagy 2020.02.14).

§19. Having posited non-Indo-European elements in myths about Hērā and Typhon, as influenced by non-Indo-European elements in myths about Athena and Erikhthonios/Erekhtheus, I must still allow for at least some Indo-European elements as well, since the myth where Zeus as husband of Hērā smites with his thunderbolt the menacing Typhon can be derived at least in part from Indo-European myths about the defeating of dragons by thunder-gods. After all, as Calvert Watkins has argued (1995), the defeat of the Typhon by the thunderbolt of Zeus can be traced back to a myth shaped by bilingual contacts in the second millennium BCE between two separate Indo-European languages, Greek and Anatolian (in the case of "Anatolian," I have in mind especially the Hittite branch of the Indo-European languages in Anatolia).

§20. That said, I now conclude by recapping my own point of view. I continue to think that the mythological relationship of Hērā with Typhon, like the relationship of Athena with Erikhthonios/Erekhtheus, derives mostly from non-Indo-European myths that told about a great goddess who loved as her very own nursling an earthborn serpentine monstrosity.

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