

# BRAURON

## *The Sacred Sanctuary of Artemis*

Brian Clark



*'Once one has seen her, one can never forget the glory and the serenity of the admirable face of the goddess on the Brauron reliefs who so wonderfully suits her landscape.'*<sup>1</sup>

The sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron is situated near a small bay in eastern Attica, about 38 kilometres from Athens. In ancient times the sanctuary was on the coast. However, today the acropolis is about ½ kilometre from the Bay of Vraona. The Brauron sanctuary lies in the Erasinos valley close to the mouth of the river, behind Mounts Pentelicus and Hymettus.

Artemis was a goddess of the margins and the outdoors, associated with hunting and wildlife. One of her functions was presiding over the young and vulnerable, both animal and human, especially during transitional stages in the life cycle. As a goddess of childbirth she watched over pregnant women during the perilous, peri-natal transition. Concerned with fertility she also protected the young in the transition into puberty. Reflecting this transitional aspect, her sanctuaries were often located in marginal regions or at junctions where boundaries were unclear. Common features of the location of Artemis' sanctuaries were in areas of transition either on the edge of cultivation or in transitional zones

---

<sup>1</sup> Lily Kahil, "Mythological Repertoire of Brauron", from Warren G. Moon (ed.), *Ancient Greek Art and Iconography*, University of Wisconsin Press (Madison, WI: 1983), page 243. I visited the sanctuary of Brauron in May 1999 and was overwhelmed by the 'glory and serenity' of the setting.

near the juncture of land and water. The setting for Brauron is marshy, coastal and rural, on the edge of cultivation.

The cult ritual of ‘dancing the she-bear’ (*arkteia*) performed by young girls at the sanctuary honoured the transitional period between *parthenoi* and *nymphē*, the liminal phase from girlhood to marriageable woman. As women were marginalised in the social sphere of classical Greece it was appropriate that Artemis, goddess of the margins, was the deity presiding over these rituals of transition. The Greeks used the word *nymphē* to suggest marriageable girls as well as new brides. A wife became a *gyne* only after the birth of her first child. Therefore the language identified liminal stages for women who were marriageable but unmarried or married and without child. Interestingly the bear, which was the totem of the ritual, passes directly from maiden to mother. At Brauron the goddess combined her traditional role as a goddess of fertility and protectress of animals with her Athenian aspect as a patroness of civic and social life. While Artemis served the *polis* as a goddess of women’s transitional rituals she is essentially a goddess of nature and the wild, being more at home in Attica than Athens. Politically the sanctuary’s rituals also reaffirmed the primary role of women as mothers in classical Greece.

Athena, towards the end of Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris* (produced ca. 413-498 BCE), commands Orestes to take the sacred wooden image of Taurian Artemis and build a shrine to Artemis.<sup>2</sup> The location was Halai Araphinides, seven kilometres north of Brauron. His sister Iphigenia is instructed by Athena to go to Brauron and serve the shrine of Artemis there:

*You, Iphigenia, shall hold her [Artemis] sacred keys, and serve  
Her shrine at the Brauron steps. There, when you die,  
They shall adorn your grave with gowns of softest weave  
Left in their store by women who die in childbed.*<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, lines 1456-59:

“There is a holy place  
Called by my people Halae, near the very edge  
Of Attic soil, neighbour to the Carystian Rock;  
There you shall build a shrine, and set the image therein”

The sanctuary of Artemis Tauropolos was discovered at Halae on Attica’s East Coast, as Euripides described. This may suggest both Halae and Brauron referred to by Euripides were well known sanctuaries in his day.

<sup>3</sup> John Papadimitriou, “The Sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron”, *Scientific American* (1963), pp. 113 suggests that at Brauron the identification of Iphigenia with Artemis is a remnant of the prehistoric cult which worshipped the great mother goddess. It has been suggested that Iphigenia represented the darker face of childbirth and that the clothes of the women who died in childbirth were dedicated to her, whereas Artemis represented the successful delivery and it was these mothers who dedicated their clothes to Artemis.

By the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, Iphigenia had become woven into the fabric of the Brauron rituals. A shrine was dedicated to her and the earliest finds at the tomb of Iphigenia date from the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The sanctuary of Brauron was excavated by the Greek director of antiquities, John Papadimitriou between 1948 and 1963. Human presence in the sanctuary had existed from Neolithic times up until the end of the Mycenaean period (3500 -1300 BCE). Excavated chamber tombs suggest the most prosperous period was between 2000 and 1600 BCE. Continuous cult activity seems to have occurred on the site since the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century until mid-third century BCE. Finds on the site have included various votives and reliefs, including objects from the private lives of women (a bronze mirror, rings, gems etc.), terracotta statues, statuettes of young girls and boys, plaques, plates, women's working tools, clothing and wooden objects, the earliest votives dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Pottery shards recovered have scenes of various women's activity as well as mythological scenes of birth (the birth of Athena), divine or heroic children (Achilles being presented to Chiron) and legends of love and lust (Aphrodite/Adonis). Of particular interest are the *krateriskoi*, a particular vase depicting ritual scenes from the *arkteia* use as votives.

The Doric temple to Artemis has been dated to the latter 6<sup>th</sup> /early 5<sup>th</sup> century. John Papadimitriou who excavated the site dates the temple to 'a short time before 500 BC'. The structure consisted of a shallow porch, a cella of three aisles and an *adyton*, which may have been used during the cult festival. The *adyton* as a rear room of a temple is particular to temples of Artemis. By hiding in the *adyton* the young initiates were ritually transformed, similar to the cave-like lair in which bears hibernate. It was also during this period that Brauron came under the direct control of Athens. It has been suggested that the tyrant Pisistratus introduced his region's cult of Artemis Brauronia into Athens in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Artemis Brauronia also had a sanctuary on the Acropolis, which housed the records and inventory of the cult at Brauron. She was the only deity whose cult was founded in rural Attica yet also retained a sanctuary on the Athenian Acropolis. From this sanctuary on the Acropolis the Brauronia, Artemis' official festive procession, began.

A smaller hero shrine east of the main temple, also originating in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, was dedicated to Iphigenia and included her tomb. It was in this place, the cave regarded as the shrine of Iphigenia where numerous precious objects were discovered. Earlier cult activity probably centred on a natural cave located here in connection with the first priestess of the cult, Iphigenia. The altar was possibly located on a small rocky plateau, south of the temple. Later this became the site of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine church of St. George. The other major monument, the stoa (dated 420 BCE), housed the

treasure records. Behind the north colonnade of the stoa is a portico where offerings (votives of statues, reliefs etc.) were placed. In the open air corridor in front of the portico the clothes worn in childbirth and dedicated to Artemis were hung on view. There is also a series of ten rooms, to the north and west of the stoa whose function is unclear. However one common theory is that the young girls participating in cult activity used these rooms as dormitories.

The cult ritual performed annually at the sanctuary was called the Brauronia. Every fifth year (the main festival was every four years or in the fifth year, known as the penteteric festival) the Brauronia rites included the *arkteia*, a ritual performed by young girls to mark the transitional period between the pre-menstrual phase of girlhood and womanhood. This ritual honoured the important pivotal point in a girl's life when she was initiated into the preparation for her role as mother. The rite of 'acting the she-bear' was founded on an Attic legend that Artemis insisted that rites be performed to appease her fury over the killing of a bear in her sacred precinct. During the penteteric festival at Brauron these rites were performed by young girls between the ages of 5 and 10, who imitated the she-bear, an animal sacred to Artemis and a symbolic totem of the festival.<sup>4</sup> Reconstructing the ritual has been inspired mainly from depictions on the *krateriskoi* plus Aristophanes' quote (*Lysistrata*, 643-5).

Images of the rituals on the *krateriskoi* include sacred races run by the little girls, some being naked. On some fragments the bear as well as the palm tree, a tree associated with Artemis' birth and the Attic

---

<sup>4</sup> See Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *Studies in Girls Transitions*, Kardamitsa (Athens: 1988). In this study of the two sanctuaries of Artemis at Brauron and Mounichia, the author concludes that the 'bears' were between 5 and 10: 'the "graduating" bears were symbolically thought of as being ten years old.' How many girls participated in the ritual is also unknown. Suggestions are a small number of girls represented their own age group or girls represented each of the tribes of Attica. Possibly many of the 'bears' were from aristocratic families. Symbolically it was as though all young girls would be part of this initiation rite.

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, translated by Alan H. Sommerstein, Penguin Books (London: 1973). Lines 643-5 specifically refer to the Brauron rites of passage:

"Then I went to Brauron town  
And put on my yellow gown  
To walk in the procession as the Bear"

Scholarship has suggested that Aristophanes refers to this ritual occurring for young girls when they were 10.

The life cycle of a bear, their rituals and common traits with man were studied in ancient times by Aristotle, Theophrastus and Pliny. However, archaeological evidence for the image of a bear as mother goes back to the Neolithic period. This Neolithic image portrays the 'notable tenderness of the mother beast for her cub as an image for human mothering' - Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, Penguin Arkana (London: 1991), p. 71. The authors also suggest that the bear is 'probably the oldest sacred animal of all'. These images are linked to the Brauron initiations into womanhood and motherhood as well as the suggestion that Artemis is a derivative of an ancient bear goddess. On page 28 the authors add 'the oldest animal hunted for food in the northern hemisphere, and also the oldest animal whose remains have been given a ritual significance, is the bear.

cult of Artemis Brauron, are depicted. The myth of Artemis' birth often suggests she was born under a palm tree. Men and women are also shown wearing bear masks, perhaps as priests and priestesses involved in the mystery initiation rite. The saffron gown (*krokoton*) worn for the *arkteia* may have represented both the bear (the skin) and also the 'garment appropriate for marriageable women and wives'<sup>5</sup>. Part of the ceremony may have included an exchange of clothing symbolising the transition from young girl to woman. This juxtaposition between nakedness (untamed, innocence, the *parthenoi*) and clothed (tamed, *nymphē*) is a theme which is coherent with the representations of the *krateriskoi*. Clothing was also dedicated to Artemis after the first menarche as well as after birth, again identifying that a previous stage of their life has ended.



*Fragments of the krateriskoi are displayed in the museum at Brauron*

The mystery rites of Brauron are intertwined with a rite of passage for the *parthenoi* as she prepares for a new stage of life into marriage and motherhood. In this rite the young girl was both an initiate into and a representative of the fundamental role women played in classical Athenian society. Here in the goddess' sanctuary under Artemis' protection they prepared for their transition into a fertile marriage.

---

<sup>5</sup> Paula Perlman, "Acting the She-Bear for Artemis", p.121.