DOI: 10.14232/suc.2025.6.21-40

Emma de Koning
University of Erfurt / University of Graz

The Language of Birth
The Symbolic Use of Childbirth Imagery on Hellenistic Cyprus

This paper demonstrates that the images of childbirth – in different mediums – that survive from socio-religious contexts on Hellenistic Cyprus are not just valuable in the biomedical reconstruction of childbirth, but that they were used as powerful and dynamic symbols and can thus be used to access a web of ideas about the ways childbirth was approached and understood on Ancient Cyprus. To do so, it presents two case studies: the limestone figurines of Agios Photios, which connect childbirth to a diversity of concerns surrounding family, the survival of the community, and the protection of the mother and child; and the couvade ritual at Ariadne's Tomb in Amathous, which illustrates the potential for childbirth to act as a vehicle for transformation. Together, these case studies show that childbirth existed at a point of intersection of many ideas about family, community, death, rebirth, divinity, and more.

Keywords: Cyprus, childbirth, pregnancy, figurines, Agios Photios, Ariadne, couvade

> "Childbirth is an intimate and complex transaction whose topic is physiological and whose language is cultural."
>
> -- Brigitte Jordan, Birth in Four Cultures (1978), p. 3

As the anthropologist Brigitte Jordan succinctly summarises in the opening sentence to her landmark monograph *Birth in Four Cultures*, giving

birth is about much more than the biological act of parturition. It is the topic of an elaborate, culturally-determined language. Archaeologists have attempted to grasp this language from its – often scarce – material remains, including representations. Elisabeth Beausang called for a general re-evaluation of the study of birth in prehistory[1], and scholars of Cypriot archaeology like Diane Bolger and Elizabeth Goring have studied figurines connected to pregnancy and birth.[2] Unfortunately, these studies have so far restricted themselves to the prehistoric period – later examples of birth imagery on Cyprus have almost exclusively been studied from a biomedical perspective.[3] This does not do justice to the potential of these remarkable images, which have no less emotional and symbolic power than their prehistoric counterparts. This paper presents two examples of representations of childbirth from socio-religious contexts on Hellenistic Cyprus – one group of figurines and one performance – in order to demonstrate that they sit at a nexus of complex and intersecting ideas about family and community, death and rebirth, and the role of the divine in human life, a position that enabled their use as compelling and dynamic symbols.

Representing Childbirth at Agios Photios

The first case study comes from the sanctuary of Agios Photios near Golgoi. Edmund Duthoit recovered many statues and statue fragments from the site in 1862, but did not recognise the remains of the temple.[4] These were not uncovered until the large scale excavation directed by Luigi Palma di Cesnola in 1870, which revealed the foundations of a temple measuring c. 9 by 18 metres, likely constructed of plastered mud-

[1] Beausang (2000).
[2] Bolger (2003), (1996), (1992) for example; Goring (1991).
[3] For example Vandervondelen (2002), (1997).
[4] Counts (2012: 46–48); Masson (1971: 307–308); Cesnola (1877: 151).

brick walls covered by a wooden roof.[5] Within the temple, he discovered hundreds of limestone statues, ranging in size from a little over half a metre to almost three metres tall and depicting male and female votaries, musicians, warriors, and more; as well as a large collection of anatomical votives, reliefs, oil lamps, and other offerings.[6] The finds suggest a date for the temple between the Cypro-Archaic and Cypro-Hellenistic periods (circa 7th–1st centuries BC).[7]

One of the most remarkable finds was a votive deposit near the north entrance of the temple:

> Near the north entrance, between the first and second rows of large square blocks or pedestals, was another kind of votive offering consisting of little stone groups of women holding and sometimes suckling babes, and of cows and other animals similarly occupied with their young. Another group, badly defaced, consisted of four persons, one holding a newly born babe, while the mother, extended upon a sort of chair, her face still convulsed by pain, has her head supported by an attendant. Another group, in no better preservation, exhibited a like scene in the vaccine race. In the close proximity of these offerings was found the base or lower part of a cone in blue granite, which Mr. Georges Ceccaldi recognises as a fragment of the symbol of Venus.[8]

This figurine group, now exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York[9], represents a remarkably explicit and touching depiction of the moment of birth, in which the parturient slumps on a birthing

[5] Hermary–Mertens (2015: 15); Counts (2012: 49–50); Cesnola (1877: 138–140).
[6] Counts (2012: 49–50); Cesnola (1877: 141–159).
[7] Counts (2012: 50).
[8] Cesnola (1877: 158–159).
[9] MMA 74.51.2698. See also Myres (1914: no. 1226) and Cesnola (1885: pl. LXVI).

chair, supported by attendants, in a way that clearly demonstrates the strain and exhaustion of the event (fig. 1). Three similar limestone scenes are included in the collections of the Louvre (fig. 2), a fourth in those of the Musée Rolin in Autun, and a fifth in the British Museum.[10] Although they were all acquired at Golgoi in 1866 and can thus be presumed to come from the sanctuary site, their exact provenance is unknown.

Figure 1 Limestone childbirth group from Agios Photios.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, 74.51.2698. Cesnola Collection, purchased by subscription, 1874–76.

[10] Louvre: AM3028, AM3068, AM3368. Musée Rolin, Autun: V.11. British Museum: 1866,0101.334. The relief AM 2929 (Louvre), also recovered at Golgoi is described by the Louvre as a childbirth scene, but it is so different from the other images that I would dispute this description and suggest instead that it depicts a healing scene, with a patient reclined on the bed, as are known also from Greek sanctuaries of Asklepios and Amphiaraos. Three similar limestone birthing scenes were found in Idalion (British Museum: 1869,0608.54, 1855,1101.26) and the Vouni palace (Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm: V406). In the Cypro-Archaic period, childbirth scenes were also executed in terracotta and dedicated, for example, in the sanctuary of Empros Temenon near Lapithos and elsewhere (Vandenabeele [1988: 31–32]; Karageorghis [1988: 78–79]).

Figure 2 Limestone childbirth scenes from Golgoi, probably from Agios Photios.
(a) AM3368. 2009 Musée du Louvre / Département des Antiquités orientales. https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010122313
(b) AM3068. 2009 Musée du Louvre / Département des Antiquités orientales. https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010122311
(c) AM3028. 2009 Musée du Louvre / Département des Antiquités orientales. https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010122312

These figurine groups are remarkable not only for their emotional power, but also for their subject matter: explicit images of the moment of birth are very rare across the Mediterranean.[11] These figurines are gener-

[11] Wise (2007: 157).

ally interpreted as votives dedicated by women requesting or expressing gratitude for divine aid during the hazardous experience of childbirth.[12] Although this interpretation seems to be correct, to leave it there is a pity. A closer examination of these figurines and their place within the sanctuary context demonstrates that these striking objects can still reveal much about the place childbirth occupied in the lives and society of the ancient Cypriots, where its significance clearly extended considerably beyond the immediate protection of a particular mother and her child.

Cesnola describes the figurine group from the Metropolitan Museum as found not in isolation, but in a deposit together with figurine groups of kourotrophoi, cows suckling their calves, and a group of a cow giving birth.[13] This demonstrates two important points. The first is that childbirth was apparently regarded as only one event in an extended relationship of caretaking, the next stage of which is represented by the seated women holding or even nursing infants.[14] This combination effectively illustrates the junction of biological and social at which childbirth sits. Of even more interest, however, are the images of cows referred to by Cesnola. Limestone reliefs of cows suckling calves are preserved within the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Louvre (fig. 3)[15] but the intriguing 'like scene in the vaccine race' is unfortunately not mentioned again, and I have been unable to track down anything like it in the museum collections. Animal birth scenes are even rarer than depic-

[12] For example: Hermary–Mertens (2012: no. 279); Budin (2011: 227–228); Vandervondelen (2002: 151); (1997: 281).

[13] Cesnola (1877: 158–159).

[14] Although no depictions of pregnant women could be identified among the material from Agios Photios, this earlier stage is referred to by a figurine of the Egyptian birth demon Bes (Metropolitan Museum 74.51.2613). Images of pregnant women are attested elsewhere on Hellenistic Cyprus, including for example the terracotta Deae Gravidae of Kition (Maillard [2021: 76–78]; Yon–Caubet [1989: 31]) and Amathous (Hermary [1996: 20]).

[15] Metropolitan Museum of Art: 74.51.2663 and 74.51.2595, see also Myres (1914: nos. 1146, 1147) and Cesnola (1885: pl. XCVIII). Louvre: AM3407-3413; AM 2779.

tions of childbirth in humans, and the closest parallels might be the tomb reliefs of Old Kingdom Egypt, where a wide range of animals, including cows, goats, hippopotami, and even a civet cat are shown giving birth in natural surroundings, emphasising the fertility of the natural world.[16]

These bovine scenes effectively demonstrate that the concern with childbirth and fertility extended beyond the human to the animal world

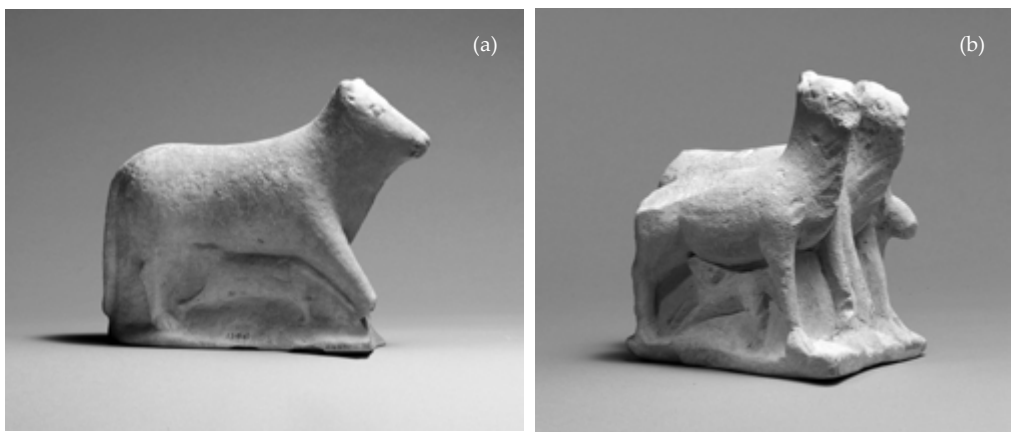

Figure 3 Limestone scenes of animals with their young from Agios Photios.
(a) Cow nursing a calf. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 74.51.2663. The Cesnola Collection, purchased by subscription 1874–76.
(b) Cows or sheep with their young, one of them nursing. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 74.51.2595. The Cesnola Collection, purchased by subscription 1874–76.

– which is to be expected for a society thoroughly dependent on agriculture. Such agricultural concerns were likely also the reason for the dedication of the model of a sheepfold at Agios Photios.[17] It is worth noting, however, that – unlike the Egyptians – the dedicants of this temple limited themselves to domesticated animals.[18] They were not interested in a wild, untamed fertility of the natural world, but in reproduction

[16] Ezz (2014: 33–35).
[17] Metropolitan Museum: 74.51.2677.
[18] Various depictions of lions were recovered from the sanctuary, but none of these appear to have a connection to fertility or birth, and possibly should be associated with the prominence of Herakles in the sanctuary.

within the structured system of agriculture. We thus return to this intersection of the natural and the social that the images of the kourotrophoi already touched upon. Together, they suggest that these figurines did not just represent the wished-for or achieved safe birth of an individual child, but were tied up in the larger hopes for the vitality and survival of a community, guaranteed by the reproduction of the relationships between people and animals depicted in these images of birth, nurturing, and caretaking.

A different perspective on this intersection between the natural and the cultural or social emerges when we zoom out and place the figurines within the context of the sanctuary's votive assemblage as a whole. In addition to the statues and statuettes, Cesnola's excavations at the temple also revealed numerous limestone anatomical votives, especially eyes, ears, and breasts.[19] They indicate that the deities of Agios Photios were skilled in curing a variety of ailments, and the breasts in particular – as well as a single example of male genitals – suggest that this included ailments related to fertility, birth, and lactation.[20] Michaelides describes the birth scenes as an unusual subtype of the anatomical votive[21], giving a different twist to their interpretation: whereas the connection with the cow figurines suggested that birth was a part of the natural order of things, this association with anatomical votives instead presents it as a dangerous condition requiring medical or divine intervention to ensure a happy outcome. This juxtaposition also demonstrates that childbirth is a place where the personal and the communal come together: on the one hand, placed alongside the kourotrophoi and cow figurines, the childbirth scenes express a concern with the continuation of the community, but when seen next to the anatomical votives, which are generally ded-

[19] Hermary–Mertens (2015; nos. 393–408); Cesnola (1877: 157–158). See also Michaelides (2014: 31–32). Particularly intriguing is the unusual composite ex-voto MNB 324 (Louvre).
[20] Hermary–Mertens (2015: 17).
[21] Michaelides (2014: 30).

icated by individual persons for the cure of particular ailments, they appear to be associated with the protection of a single individual (or perhaps a mother-child pair). All these objects – childbirth scenes, kourotrophoi, cow figurines, and anatomical votives – have the same basic function of votive dedications. But they all come with entirely unique sets of associations, and juxtaposing them in different ways creates a rich variety of narratives – reinforcing the great (symbolic) significance of birth within Hellenistic Cypriot communities.

Finally, we might briefly consider the deity or deities to which these childbirth scenes were dedicated. Although Cesnola identified Ayios Photios as a temple dedicated to Aphrodite, the large quantity of male votaries and a handful of syllabic inscriptions suggest rather that the primary deity of the sanctuary was a male god with elements of Apollo, Zeus, and Herakles.[22] The dedication of birth votives to a male god need not have been odd: Apollo in particular was known to get involved in pregnancy troubles in his guise as a healing deity.[23] That said, it does appear that a female goddess moved into the temple some time after it was established, so that the site became dedicated to a god-goddess pair.[24] One inscription – now lost – mentions Demeter[25], whose associations with agriculture and natural fertility on the one hand, and with motherhood on the other would have made her a very suitable recipient for such offerings.[26] However, her worship is generally very minor on Cyprus, as the Cypriot Great Goddess – later identified with Aphrodite – takes on many of the roles of other

[22] Hermary–Mertens (2015, 17–18); Ulbrich (2008: 298–301); Masson (1983: 280).
[23] Forsén (1996: 151).
[24] Counts (2012: 50); Vandervondelen (2002: 152); (1997: 281–282). Masson (1983: 280), however, seriously questions the presence of a female goddess at Agios Photios based on epigraphic evidence.
[25] Hermary–Mertens (2015: 17).
[26] According to Forsén (1996: 142–143), Demeter and Kore were worshipped as birth goddesses in various locations across Greece.

goddesses on that island.[27] Vandervondelen simply identifies the female goddess of Agios Photios as the Great Goddess of Cyprus, who was assimilated with different traits of Demeter, Aphrodite, and Isis-Hathor, and this ambiguous identification may overall be the most appropriate one.

Cesnola remarks that a certain intentional order appears to be visible in the arrangement of the votives across the sanctuary, as though they are clustered in separate foci for the different deities.[28] His description further specifies that the childbirth votives were found near a baetyl, which he associated with Aphrodite.[29] If the Cypriot Great Goddess – who in later times came to be identified with Aphrodite – was indeed the recipient of these childbirth votives, this serves not only as a reminder of the unique character of the Cypriot deities – which was maintained even when they came to be called by Greek names[30] – but also of the fundamental importance of childbirth to the Cypriots, that it was overseen by their most prominent goddess.

Although these figurines are clearly votive dedications, they are also much more than that: I hope the above has shown that a more in-depth consideration of the figurines themselves and their places within the sanctuary assemblage reveals some of the diversity of ways one can think about and deal with the reality of childbirth in such a ritual context. It shows that childbirth was something that existed at intersections, between natural and social, between matter-of-course and extraordinary, between personal and communal. It is precisely because childbirth sits at the centre of this web of associations that its image can appear in so many ways and in so many contexts.

---

[27] Vandervondelen (2002: 152); Bennett (1980: 291–292; 381–382).
[28] Vandervondelen (2002: 150); Cesnola (1877: 159).
[29] Cesnola (1877: 159).The most famous symbol of Aphrodite on Cyprus was of course the baetyl in her temple in Paphia, see Bennett (1980: 317).
[30] Sophocleous (1984: 132).

Re-Enacting Childbirth at the Tomb of Ariadne

This play on juxtapositions and transformations comes to the fore even more strongly in the second example, which takes us far from any straightforward votive imitation of real-life births. It concerns an intriguing ritual occurring annually at a place known as the tomb of Ariadne near Amathous, for which our only source is a passage in Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*, based on the writings of the little-known Hellenistic historian Paeon the Amathousian:

> A very peculiar account of these matters is published by Paeon the Amathusian. He says that Theseus, driven out of his course by a storm to Cyprus, and having with him Ariadne, who was big with child and in sore sickness and distress from the tossing of the sea, set her on shore alone, but that he himself, while trying to succour the ship, was borne out to sea again. The women of the island, accordingly, took Ariadne into their care, and tried to comfort her in the discouragement caused by her loneliness, brought her forged letters purporting to have been written to her by Theseus, ministered to her aid during the pangs of travail, and gave her burial when she died before her child was born. Paeon says further that Theseus came back, and was greatly afflicted, and left a sum of money with the people of the island, enjoining them to sacrifice to Ariadne, and caused two little statuettes to be set up in her honour, one of silver, and one of bronze. He says also that at the sacrifice in her honour on the second day of the month Gorpiaeus, one of their young men lies down and imitates the cries and gestures of women in travail; and that they call the grove in which they show her tomb, the grove of Ariadne Aphrodite.[31]

[31] Plut. *Thes*. 20.3sq. Trans. Bernadette Perrin.

Such parturition mimes are not unknown from anthropological literature as a possible element of couvade, a diverse set of ritual behaviours that may be undertaken by men around the time of a child's birth. Anthropologists have accorded these rituals a variety of meanings, ranging from the protection of the parturient and child against malevolent spirits to the creation of a familial bond between father and child.[32]

The ritual described by Plutarch, however, differs from these couvade rites in a crucial manner: it is not connected to a simultaneous, 'biological' childbirth. When the youth lays down at the tomb, he is commemorating an event that happened in the deep past, rather than attempting to protect a parturient and/or a baby in the here and now. As a result, any anthropological readings connected with protection or paternity make little sense.[33] Scholars have offered different readings of the ritual. Kyriakos Hadjioannou, for example, suggests that it serves as a reminder of the importance of the male presence – and specifically of his enacting a couvade – during birth: because Theseus neglected to do so, Ariadne and the child died.[34] David Leitao offers a similar interpretation, arguing that both the unusual variation of the more common story and the ritual based on it may be a response to anxieties about the absence of the father during birth. First, he suggests that the change to the story that Ariadne became pregnant by Theseus – when her sons Staphylus and Oinopion are usually attributed to Dionysos – was inspired by a 5th-century manipulation of the myth in Athens, which allowed the sons, who grew up to be mythical colonisers, to be used as tools of Athenian imperial propaganda.[35] The details of childbirth thus become a powerful symbolic weapon even in the arena of politics. With regards to the

[32] Powis (2021: 411; 415–416); Varvounis (2014: 15–18); Rivière (1974: 425–426).
[33] See also Pirenne-Delforge (1994: 350).
[34] Hadjioannou (1978: 107).
[35] Plutarch does actually mention Theseus as the father to Staphylus and Oenopion. (Plut. Thes. 20.2). See also Webster (1966: 25–26).

ritual, Leitao suggests that it served as a kind of atonement for Theseus' absence and a reminder of the importance of the father's support during birth.[36] In his analysis, Leitao forcibly demonstrates that the symbolic significance of childbirth stretched beyond the parturient-child dyad to include the father, and even the community as a whole.

Returning to the theme of juxtapositions and intersections, however, is Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge's observation that childbirth served as a powerful symbol of transformation, which allowed passage from one state of being to another.[37] In both the version of the myth told by Plutarch and in the ritual occurring at the tomb, the event of childbirth serves as the connection between a trio of oppositions: life and death; mortal and divine; and male and female.

The connection between life and death in childbirth is perhaps more startling to us than it would have been to a Hellenistic Cypriot familiar with the probably high rates of infant and maternal mortality. Childbirth is a liminal moment, during which both mother and child balance on a knife's edge and may fall either way: to the joy of new life or, as the unfortunate Ariadne, to death. This intertwining of birth and death can be found in many places across the ancient world. Simone Zimmermann Kuoni, for example, in her analysis of ancient midwifery practices, notes that midwives across time and place have also served as psychopomps or caretakers of the deceased, not only facilitating the passage of souls through the life cycle, but actively creating this cycle.[38] Archaeologically, the same idea may be recognised in the custom of burying infants in jars, which can be conceptualised as a return to the womb.[39] This connection between birth and death was also widely ex-

[36] Leitao (2007: 269–270).
[37] Pirenne-Delforge (1994: 350).
[38] Zimmermann Kuoni (2019: 85–87).
[39] Jar burials of infants were identified in Enkomi, Salamis, and Kition for the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. Their number is, however, limited, and Fourrier et al.

pressed in literature where birth was employed as a metaphor for crisis – most famously of course in Euripides' *Medea*, but also in other texts ranging from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* to even the Bible.[40] Giving birth meant facing the possibility of death, stepping temporarily *over* the dividing line between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and hoping that one could make it back across – together with the baby.

For Ariadne, this transition from life to death is paralleled by another, almost opposite movement: that from human to divine, as she is immortalised and venerated as Ariadne-Aphrodite. It is fundamentally her death in childbirth that enables this transition, which is emphasised not only by the fact that her worship is focused on a structure known as Ariadne's tomb, but also by the transitory role of childbirth in general. For example, Claude Calame argues that it was the moment of birth – rather than the occasion of the first intercourse – that transformed a parthenos into a full-grown woman.[41] Parallels for this human-divine transformation effected through childbirth can be found elsewhere in literature: Diodorus Siculus explains how, when Herakles was taken up to Olympus, Hera also had to put on a parturition mime in order to facilitate the hero's rebirth as a god.[42] There is, of course, a glaring difference: in this story, it is the child who is quite literally 'reborn', whereas

(2021, 296–300) describe the practice as normal but not common. The liminal status of the perinatal deceased is further emphasised by their burial within the city limits rather than in the extramural necropoleis. In Archaic Salamis, infants were buried in jars in the dromoi of the tombs of *Celarka* – again in a liminal space, see Karageorghis (1970).

For general notes on the practice of jar burials at different times and places, and the association with the womb, see Power–Tristant (2016: 1478–1479); McGeorge (2013, especially 11–12); Bacvarov (2004, 152–153) – though his association with the Mother Goddess is not necessary.

[40] For example: *Gilgamesh* XI, III: 117sqq; *Lamentation* 218–229; Jeremiah 50:43. See Bergmann (2008; 56–58 and *passim*). Consider also, of course *Iliad* 11, 269–272.

[41] Calame (1996: 204–205).

[42] Diod. Sic. 4.39.2.

Ariadne (like Calame's parthenoi) is transformed not by being born but by giving birth. As on the limestone figurines, it is the new mother who takes centre stage – seemingly a particular Cypriot habit.

The final opposition, between male and female, is probably the most startling to the modern observer. Why is it a boy who re-enacts Ariadne's troubles during the festival? Does he, as suggested by Leitao, take up the mantle of Theseus to atone for the latter's absence in Ariadne's hour of need,[43] or did he actually become Ariadne, utilising the potential of childbirth as a transformative event to (temporarily) cross the boundary between male and female? The latter seems more appropriate to the antiquity that both Pirenne-Delforge and Vandervondelen attribute to the ritual,[44] and again recognises the deeply-rooted indigenous character of the Great Goddess of Cyprus. The only other surviving fragment by Paeon the Amathousian is an explanation of the term Aphroditos quoted in Hesychios: "Paeon who wrote these things near Amathous says that on Cyprus the goddess was given the appearance of a man"[45]. A bearded Aphrodite is also mentioned by Macrobius,[46] and some rare figurines have been taken to be representations of this male/female deity – although their identification is much disputed.[47] Even if these sources of course post-date the ritual by many centuries, they suggest that the transgressing of gender boundaries was a part of the cult of Amathousian Aphrodite, one that can possibly be traced back to her origins in the Cypriot Great Goddess.[48] Childbirth – or specifically its

[43] Leitao (2007: 270).
[44] Vandervondelen (2002: 149); Pirenne-Delforge (1994: 350).
[45] Hsch., s.v. Ἀφρόδιτος. Own translation. See also Bennett (1980: 321–322).
[46] Macrob. *Sat.* III.8.1–3. See also the other references included in Sophocleous (1985: 79–80).
[47] Sophocleous (1985: 87). *Contra:* Karageorghis–Mertens–Rose (2000: no. 219).
[48] Bennett (1980: 322). It might also be worth noting here, that according to Pirenne-Delforge (1994: 351), Adonis also played a prominent role in the cult of Aphrodite at Amathous.

reenactment – and its exclusive biological association with women was one of the tools through which this transformation was effected.

The ritual described by Paeon provides us with a highly intriguing use of the childbirth image, in the medium of performance, for which no other example exists on ancient Cyprus. Although we cannot tease out its full significance from this single, brief reference, it does very clearly demonstrate two fundamental points about childbirth and its socio-religious significance. The first is that childbirth, despite its biological prerequisites, is not exclusively a woman's domain – the importance of the father's presence was emphatically driven home by this dramatic annual performance of Theseus' failure. The second is that childbirth could function as a moment of fundamental transition, transformation, and boundary-crossing, not just for the child, but also for the parturient.

Conclusion: The Language of Childbirth on Hellenistic Cyprus

This paper has tried to identify some of the elements of the culturally-determined, socio-religious 'language' of birth on Hellenistic Cyprus, by demonstrating that images of childbirth possessed a great symbolic and emotive power. These images were not simply imitations of one of life's major events, but they were also – in a somewhat clichéd phrase – 'good to think with'. Their significance extended beyond the single event of childbirth, to include the extended relationship of caretaking between mother and child, the reproduction of the community as a whole, and even the continuation of an agricultural relationship with animals. This flexibility made it possible for the childbirth figurines at Agios Photios to be used in the expression of a diversity of concerns, involving the natural and the social, the personal and the communal. This drawing together of opposing topics is also evident in the couvade ritual at Ariadne's tomb in Amathous, where the reenactment of child-

birth acted as the mediator enabling transitions between life and death, mortal and divine, male and female.

The symbolism of birth imagery was thus not limited to actual childbirth events, and its significance was transferable. This flexibility was enabled by the place birth had at the nexus of different strands of thought about a wide range of topics ranging from family, community, survival, relationships with the divine, the social and the animal world around us, the opposition between male and female, and much more. It is of course no surprise that the ancient Cypriot were concerned with these topics, but the possibility of accessing that web of thought through the image of birth has so far not been recognised – and demonstrates effectively that Brigitte Jordan was absolutely correct when she wrote that the language of childbirth is cultural.

Research on this paper was undertaken within the framework of the International Graduate School 'Resonant Self-World Relations in Ancient and Modern Socio-Religious Practices' at the University of Erfurt and the University of Graz, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (GRK 2283) and Der Wissenschaftsfonds (W 1265).

Primary sources

Perrin 1914 — B. Perrin (ed.): *Plutarch's Lives with an English Translation. Vol. I Theseus and Romulus, Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Publicola*. Cambridge MA 1914.

Secondary sources

Bacvarov 2004 — K. Bacvarov: *The Birth-Giving Pot. Neolithic jar burials in southeast Europe.* In: V. Nikolov – K. Bacvarov – P. Kalchev (eds.): Prehistoric Thrace: Proceedings of the International Symposium in Stara Zagora, 30.09 – 01.10.2003. Stara Zagora 2004, 151–160.

Beausang 2000 — E. Beausang: *Childbirth in Prehistory: An Introduction.* European Journal of Archaeology 3.1 (2000) 69–87.

Bennett 1980 — C. G. Bennett: *The Cults of the Ancient Greek Cypriotes*. PhD diss. University of Pennsylvania 1980.

Bergmann 2008 C. Bergmann: *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18.* Berlin 2008.

Bolger 2003 D. Bolger: *Gender in Ancient Cyprus: Narratives of Social Change on A Mediterranean Island*. Walnut Creek 2003.

Bolger 1996 D. Bolger: *Figurines, Fertility, and the Emergence of Complex Society in Prehistoric Cyprus*. Current Anthropology 37 (1996) 365–373

Bolger 1992 D. Bolger: *The Archaeology of Fertility and Birth: A Ritual Deposit from Chalcolithic Cyprus.* Journal of Anthropological Research 48.2 (1992) 145–164.

Budin 2011 S. L. Budin: *Images of Woman and Child from the Bronze Age: Reconsidering Fertility, Maternity, and Gender in the Ancient World*. Cambridge 2011.

Calame 1996 C. Calame: *Thésée et l'imaginair athénien: Légende et cult en Grèce antique.* Lausanne 1996.

Cesnola 1877 L. P. di Cesnola: *Cyprus: its Ancient Cities, Tombs, and Temples. A Narrative of Researches and Explorations during Ten Year's Residence as American Consul in that Island*. London 1877.

Counts 2012 D. B. Counts: *A History of Archaeological Activity in the Athienou Region*. In: M. K. Toumazou – P. N. Kardoulias – D. B. Counts (eds.): Crossroads and Boundaries: The Archaeology of Past and Present in the Malloura Valley. Boston 2012, 45–54.

Ezz 2014 M. Ezz: *A Study of Animal Motherhood Scenes in the Private Tombs in Ancient Egypt*. Journal of the Association of Arab Universities for Tourism and Hospitality 11.1 (2014) 33–45.

Forsén 1996 B. Forsén: *Griechische Gliederweihungen: eine Untersuchung zu ihrer Typologie und ihrer religions- und sozialgeschichtlichen Bedeutung.* Papers and Monographs of the Finnish Institute at Athens 4. Helsinki 1996.

Fourrier et al. 2021 S. Fourrier – A. Georgiadou – B. Chamel – N. Denninger – A. Gardeisen – K. Papayanni – T. Theodoropulou: *The death of infants in Early Iron Age Cyprus. A jar burial from Kition-Bamboula*. Opuscula 14 (2021) 281–304.

Goring 1991 E. Goring: *The Anthropomorphic Figurines*. In: E. Peltenburg – A. V. G. Betts – D. Bolger – P. Croft – C. Elliott – E. Goring – M. A. Murray – J. S. Ridout-Sharpe – G. Thomas (eds.): A Ceremonial Area at Kissonerga (Lemba Archaeological Project II.2). Göteborg 1991, 39–60.

Hadjioannou 1978 K. Hadjioannou: *On Some Disputes Matters of the Ancient Religion of Cyprus.* RDAC (1978) 103–110

Hermary–Mertens 2015

A. Hermary – J. R. Mertens: *The Cesnola Collection of Cypriot Art. Stone Sculpture.* New Haven 2015.

Karageorghis 1998 V. Karageorghis: *The Coroplastic Art of Ancient Cyprus. V. The Cypro-Archaic Period. Small Female Figurines. (A) Handmade/wheel-made figurines*. Nicosia 1998.

Karageorghis 1970 V. Karageorghis: *Excavations in the necropolis of Salamis 2*. Nicosia 1970.

Karageorghis–Mertens–Rose 2000

V. Karageorghis – J. R. Mertens – M. E. Rose: *Ancient Art from Cyprus: The Cesnola Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York 2000.

Leitao 2007 D. Leitao: *Male Improvisation in the 'Women's Cult' of Eileithyia on Paros*. In: M. Parca – A. Tazanetou (eds.): Finding Persephone: Women's Ritual in the Ancient Mediterranean. Indianapolis 2007, 252–276.

Masson 1983 O. Masson: *Les inscription Chypriotes syllabiques. Recueil critique et commenté.* Études Chypriotes 1. Paris 1983.

Masson 1971 O. Masson: *Kypriaka IX. Recherches sur les antiquités de Golgoi*. BCH 95.1 (1971) 302–334.

McGeorge 2013 P. J. P. McGeorge: *Intramural infant burials in the Aegean Bronze Age*. In: O. Henry (ed.): Le Mort dans la ville. Pratiques, contexts et impacts des unhumations intra-muros en Anatolie, du début de l'Age du Bronze à l'époque romaine. Instanbul 2013, 1–20.

Michaelides 2014 D. Michaelides: *The Anatomical Ex-Votos of Hellenistic and Roman Cyprus*. In: D. Michaelides (ed.): Medicine and Healing in the Ancient Mediterranean World. Oxford 2014, 123–145.

Myres 1914 J. L. Myres: *Handbook of the Cesnola Collection of Antiquities from Cyprus.* New York 1914.

Pirenne-Delforge 1994

V. Pirenne-Delforge: *L'Aphrodite grecque: Contribution à l'étude de ses cultes et de sa personnalité dans le pantheon archaïque et classique*. Kernos Suppléments 4. Liège 1994.

Power–Tristant 2016 R. K. Power – Y. Tristant: *From refuse to rebirth: repositioning the pot burial in the Egyptian archaeological record.* Antiquity 90.354 (2016) 1474–1488.

Powis 2021 R. Powis: *From couvade to "men's involvement": Sociocultural perspectives of expectant fatherhood*. In: S. Han – C. Tomori (eds.): The Routledge Handbook of Anthropology and Reproduction. London 2021, 410–421.

Rivière 1974 P. G. Rivière: *The Couvade: A Problem Reborn.* Man 9.3 (1974) 423–435.

Sophocleous 1985 S. Sophocleous: *Atlas des Représentations Chypro-Archaiques des Divinités*. Göteborg 1985.

Sophocleous 1984 S. Sophocleous: *De quelques aspects de l'ancienne religion de Chypre*. Κυπριακαί Σπουδαί 48 (1984), 129–142.

Ulbrich 2008 A. Ulbrich: *Kypris. Heiligtümer und Kulte weiblicher Gottheiten auf Zypern in der kyproarchaischen und kyproklassischen Epoche (Königszeit).* Münster 2008.

Vandenabeele 1988 F. Vandenabeele: *Kourotrophoi in Cypriote Terracotta Production from the Early Bronze Age to the Late Archaic Period*. RDAC (1988) 25–34.

Vandervondelen 2002 M. Vandervondelen: *Childbirth in Iron Age Cyprus: A Case Study*. In: D. Bolger – N. Serwint (eds.): Engendering Aphrodite: Woman and Society in Ancient Cyprus. Boston 2002, 143–156.

Vandervondelen 1997 M. Vandervondelen: *L'accouchement à Chypre dans l'antiquité*. In: R. de Smet – H. Melaers – C. Saerens (eds.): In Honorem Aloysi Gerlo. Leuven 1997, 271–288.

Varvounis 2014 M. G. Varvounis: *The* Couvade *in ancient Cyprus: A Folk ritual performance*. Butletti de la Reial Acadèmia de Bones Lletres de Barcelona 54 (2014) 11–28.

Webster 1966 T. B. L. Webster: *The Myth of Ariadne from Homer to Catullus*. G&R 13.1 (1966) 22–31.

Wise 2007 S. Wise: *Childbirth Votives and Rituals in Ancient Greece*. PhD diss. University of Cincinnati 2007.

Zimmermann-Kuoni 2019 S. Zimmermann-Kuoni: *Midwives of Eileithyia. Tracing a female healing tradition in prehistoric Crete.* PhD diss. Trinity College Dublin 2019.