

APHRODITE CYTHEREA

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The word “Cytherea,” as a name for Aphrodite, appears in the earliest Greek poetry—Homer, Hesiod, Theognis—and after rarer occurrences in the classical period comes into favour again in Hellenistic Greek, until at last, in Nonnus, it is used thirty-four times.¹ Latin poets adopted it, and so did the literatures that came after. At its last gasp, in eighteenth-century English, it became a euphemism for a high-class prostitute.

The common understanding of the term—and certainly the explanation that is found in the vocabularies of school-texts—is that “Cytherea” is an adjectival form from the island of Cythera, which lies between Crete and the Peloponnese. It is clear that ancient scholars did not easily accept this view, and even went to some pains to combat it. Both Hesychius and the *Suda* begin their comments with a contradiction of this common error, and all the authorities strive for a different explanation. The first known explicator is Lucius Annaeus Cornutus, writing about 50 A.D. He says:

Cytherea is so called from the pregnancies (κυήσεις) that result from copulation; or because of the concealment (κεύθεσθαι) for the most part of sexual desires. It is from this that the island of Cythera is holy to Aphrodite.²

In other words, the island gets its name from the epithet, and not the other way around: and the word Κυθήρεια is to be explained by resemblances to other words beginning with *kappa-epsilon*. Cornutus, of course, is a Stoic allegorist, and goes on to explain Aphrodite’s other epithets in a similar way. She is called Κύπρις because of her connexion with κρύψις “concealment:” and Παφία because of her tendency ἀπαφίσκειν “to deceive.” Clearly Cornutus’ insights are to be treated with some reserve. All the same, though exaggerated, they are typical of many other explanations

¹The references are conveniently collected by Höfer in W.H. Roscher (ed.), *Ausführliches Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* 2.1 (Leipzig 1890–1894) s.v. “Kythereia.”

²Cornutus *ND* 45.15 (Teubner, ed. C. Lang, 1881).

of the name. The most comprehensive collection is found in the *Etymologicum Magnum*:

1. from the fact that love lies hid (κεύθειν)
2. because Aphrodite has love lying hid within her (κευθόμενον)
3. she keeps the Erotes hidden within her (κεύθουσα)
4. because she fires and inflames people with passion profusely (χύδην)
5. because of her hiding and concealment of that which is shameful—copulation being a secret affair (again, κεύθειν)
6. from the city of Cythera (though some say that Cythera took the name from her, because she was born and hidden there) (γεννηθεῖσα ἐκεῖ ἐκρύπτετο)
7. from her outpouring of love (χέειν)
8. because Aphrodite's birth was "mysterious," i.e., something that should be hidden and not mentioned
9. because she is the concealer of desire (κρυψίποθον).³

We are used to the random methods of post-classical and Byzantine etymologists: but we have to ask why it seemed so urgent to deny the explanation given at the beginning of Greek literature by no less an authority than Hesiod. In the *Theogony* (192 ff.) it is clearly stated that Aphrodite is known as Cytherea because, when she was born from the floating foam of Uranus' testicles, she touched at Cythera before going on to Cyprus, where she went ashore. The words used are ἐπλητο "came near," and προσέκυρσε "became adjacent to" or, as used by Theognis (1361), "grounded upon." The *aition* is, literally, tangential: it seems slight and awkward. Various editors have condemned the passage in whole or part, and it is noticeable that the later mythographers either ignore the story completely or treat it very briefly.

The main difficulty with the traditional derivation is undoubtedly the difference in quantity of the second syllable. Κυθήρεια has an *epsilon*, so that it can serve as a convenient ending to a dactylic hexameter, and in Homeric epic this is its only position (*Od.* 8.288, 18.193): the island of Κύθηρα always has an *eta*, and its regular adjectival form is Κυθήριος, which is found from Homer on. If Κυθήρεια is to be accepted as a derivation from Κύθηρα, then it must be considered as a case of metrical shortening—a phenomenon very much rarer than metrical lengthening.⁴ When we analyse the Homeric examples of metrical shortening, we find that the great majority are associated with proper names of the shape

³vulg. κρυψίποσθον. The emendation is probably correct.

⁴P. Chantraine, *Grammaire homérique* I (Paris 1948) para. 46, where earlier references are given.

Ἄτρεΰς, Πηλεΰς, Τυδεΰς. Some of the patronymic forms of such names were not acceptable in hexameter verse without modification, and the resulting abbreviation spreads through the whole system. Putting this group on one side, the examples of metrical shortening are reduced to a very small number, of which many are disputable. Only one word can be directly compared with our problem—*ξηρόν* for *ξηρόν* in *Odyssey* 5.402. Even this may be regarded as a semantic distinction, *ξηρόν* “dry land,” connected with *σχερόν*, as opposed to the general adjective *ξηρόν* “dry.”⁵

In fact, it seems that there is no parallel to the metrical shortening of **Κυθήρεια* to *Κυθήρεια*. Nor is there the justification that the word is a name essential to the text. It happens seven times in Homeric epic and hymns: in five of these places it would have been possible to use Ἀφροδίτη.⁶

Another oddity in the use of *Κυθήρεια* is shown in the Homeric Hymns (10.1) and Theognis (1386), where it appears in the phrase *Κυπρογενῆ Κυθήρεια* “the Cyprus-born Cytherea.” If this really were a combination of two geographical adjectives, it would be distinctly strange. Later poets took the cue, and produced such patterns as “the Assyrian Cytherea,” “the Paphian Cytherea,” and “the Cnidian Cytherea” (Nonnus *Dion.* 3.11, *Anth. Pal.* 5.209, *Anth. Plan.* 160, 170).

I have been assiduously throwing doubts on the connexion of Cytherea with Cythera. Against all this must be set the statements of Herodotus (1.105) and Pausanias (1.14.7, 3.23.1) about the temple of Aphrodite in the island. In itself there is nothing particularly significant about this: shrines of Aphrodite were scattered over the whole of the Greek world. But Herodotus does say that the temple of Aphrodite on Cythera was very old, that it was founded by the Phoenicians, and that the goddess was in her “Heavenly” aspect—Aphrodite Urania. In Pausanias there are two references. The first simply repeats Herodotus’ information about the Phoenicians and the aspect of the goddess, but the second is more informative. The most ancient shrine of Aphrodite, he says, is in the town of Cythera, ten stades up from the old harbour, and has a wooden statue of Aphrodite in armour. These—Herodotus and Pausanias—are the only authors who mention Aphrodite’s temple at Cythera. Nowhere in Classical Greek literature, as far as I know, is there any suggestion of the famous and popular cult we might expect; and this is all the more striking when we

⁵The differentiation is accepted by Chantraine, *Dict. Etym.* 3 (Paris 1974), s.v. *ξηρόν*.

⁶*Od.* 8.288: *Hymns* 5.6, 175, 287; 6.18. Not possible at *Od.* 18.193, *Hymns* 10.1. The formulas connected with “Cytherea” and “Aphrodite” have been discussed recently by D. D. Boedeker, *Aphrodite’s entry into the Greek epic* (Leyden 1974) 19 f.

contrast it with the cults associated with other places that are used as epithets of Homeric gods—Argive Hera, Zeus of Dodona, and so on.

Archaeological evidence is similarly slight.⁷ Fragments of a Doric temple have been identified built into a Byzantine church, but even the site of the ancient shrine is not certainly known, and among all the archaeological finds only two objects can be seen as evidence of religious activity—an archaic sherd with the word *hiaros* scratched on it, and a fragment of a late Roman inscription. The name of a particular goddess does not appear. This is very small evidence for a cult that would justify a title “Cytherean Aphrodite.” Perhaps Cornutus was right when he suggested that the island of Cythera took its name from Cytherea, and not the other way round.

Modern views on the origin of *Κυθήρεια* fall into two categories. On the Semitic side (and we have to acknowledge the strong Asiatic connexions of Aphrodite) there have been attempts to link the name of Cythera to the Hephaestus-like Canaanite deity *Koṯar*. This has been opposed on grounds of Semitic phonology. It may be observed that the Semitic goddesses connected with *Koṯar*, called the *Kôsharôt*, are a group of (usually) seven divine midwives, and are identified by Philo Byblius with the Artemides or Titanides.⁸ The standard Greek etymological dictionaries accept the derivation from *Κύθηρα*, but the ancient suggestions of *κευθ*- and *κυ*- have found supporters within this century.⁹

After all this, I suggest that there is a simple and convincing derivation of *Κυθήρεια*—a derivation that is ignored by ancient authors. It is dangerous to say that any possible derivation was ignored by ancient scholars, but there seems to be no evidence that the Greeks were ever conscious of one strange phenomenon in the early history of their language—the eccentric treatment of the Indo-European labiovelars. I do not think that any Greek would have realised, for instance, that *πόλος*, *τέλος*, and *κύκλος* could possibly have come from the same root.

The root *gh*edh-/gh*odh-* is well attested in four branches of Indo-European:

Greek: *πόθος* (**φοθ*-) “desire;” *θέσσασθαι* (**θεθ*-) “pray”

⁷J. N. Coldstream & G. L. Huxley (edd.), *Kythera* (London 1972; see 35–36, 267). It must be conceded that the excavators have not as yet had complete freedom of search.

⁸See the interesting and complex article by J. P. Brown, “Kothar, Kinyras, and Kythereia,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 10 (1965) 197–219, esp. 215–18, and compare with W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the gods of Canaan* (New York 1968) 136, 143. The phonological question (of the pronunciation of Semitic sibilants) is touched upon by G. Garbini, “Phonetic shifts in sibilants in N. W. Semitic,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 1 (1971) 32–38, and (in an article I have not read) by H. Y. Priebsch, “S und Ṭ in Ugarit und das Amoritische,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 7 (1975) 389–94.

⁹H. Güntert, *Kalypso* (Halle a.S. 1919) 187 f.; O. Gruppe, *Gr. Myth.* 1358 f. A stem *κυ-θ* now seems to be established for *ἄκυθος*, *κυθνόν* (Frisk, *GEW* 3.139).

Celtic: M. Ir. *guidiu* “pray;” O. Ir. *goithimm* “*futuo*;” Welsh *gweddi* “prayer;” *gōd* (etc.) “adulterer”

Iranian: Av./O. Pers. *jadiyāmiy* “ask for, pray”

Balto-Slavonic: Lith. *gedauti* “long for, desire;” *gedėti* “mourn;” *gōdas* “desire, lust, greed;” Ch. Sl. *žędati*, Boh. *žádati*, Pol. *żądać*, Russ. *žaždat’* “desire, thirst, long for.”¹⁰

The central meaning is “strong desire” or “want,” and this may be specialised as “desire for something not readily accessible” in such forms as “thirst” or “mourn.” The meaning may be sublimated into the idea of “prayer,” or it may go the other way into “sexual desire.” The extreme is found in an Old Irish gloss in a St. Gall manuscript, where the verb *goithimm* is translated as *futuo*.¹¹

The Greek words illustrate most of the semantic range. In the O-grade, *πόθος* (with aspirate dissimilation) is the central word, often with connotations of “longing for something absent” (like *desiderium*) or “sexual desire.”¹² In the E-grade we have *θέσσασθαι* “to pray.” In the Zero-grade, I now suggest, we have the adjective **χυθερός* taking its place with other similarly formed adjectives from early Greek, such as *θαλερός*, *βλαβερός*, *ιερός*. The *upsilon* is to be regarded as a residual resonance (*Nachklang*) of the initial labiovelar, just as it is in *γυνή* (**gʷn-*, corresponding with Boeotian *βανά* and Vedic *gnā*).¹³ Regular dissimilation of the initial aspirate leads to **κυθερός* and to *Κυθέρεια*.

The form *Κυθέρεια* is now seen as an exact parallel for *ίερεία* “priestess.” Just as *ίερεία* means “the female agent/purveyor of divine force,” so *Κυθέρεια* means “the female agent/purveyor of ardent desire.”¹⁴

Semantically and morphologically, this is a satisfactory etymology that removes the difficulties felt about the traditional derivation. I suggest,

¹⁰Most of these examples are extracted from the copious entry in J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* 488. See also C. D. Buck, *A dictionary of selected synonyms in the principal Indo-European languages* (Chicago 1949) section 16.62.

¹¹M. E. Byrne (ed.), *Contributions to a dictionary of the Irish language*, fasc. G (1955) col. 132. For the alternation of *oi/ui*, compare *oillu/uilliu* “ample,” *cuis/cois* “leg,” etc. (R. Thorneysen, *A grammar of Old Irish* [Dublin 1946] para. 76).

¹²Even the disputed *πόσθη* “penis” might well be from the same source, with expressive gemination—**πόσθη*, cf. *πάππα*, *μάμμη*.

¹³Schwyzler, *Gr. Gr.* I.296; Frisk, *Chantraine*, s.v.

¹⁴Although *ίερεία* functions as a feminine of *ίερεύς*, we must not easily assume that the masculine necessarily precedes and the feminine follows. The word **charman* has yet to be recorded in English. *Seamster* (later to be superseded by *seamstress*) was an original feminine; the masculine *seamer* did not appear for a thousand years. I owe these references (*NED*s.vv.) to my wife. The appearance of *iereja* in Mycenaean (Chadwick & Baumbach in *Glotta* 41 [1963] 197) instead of the expected **ierewija* might be thought to support this point of view. For later bibliography on *iereja* see D. E. Gerber, *Euterpe* (Amsterdam 1970) 100.

therefore, that *Κυθήρεια* does not mean “Cytherean,” but is a cult-title, “Goddess of Desire.”^{15, 16}

¹⁵In an astrological poem from the Hermetic writings (in Stobaeus 1.5.14 Wachsmuth) Venus as a planet is called *Paphiê*; as celestial influence she is equated with “desire, lust, appetite” in the phrase *Κυθήρεια δ’ ὀρεξίς*. On the whole, I should regard this as coincidence. A very high proportion of the adjectives given to Cytherea throughout Greek writing have the same connotation; but it would be impossible to argue from this that some residue of an original meaning was still present in later times.

¹⁶I am very grateful to the anonymous referees of *TAPA* for painstaking and instructive criticism. A first version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association in Washington, D.C., in December 1975.