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Shaping the Goddess' Image: The Role of Epithets in the Homeric Hymn *to Gaia*

Abstract: The article considers the poetical function of epithets in the short Homeric hymn “*to Gaia* (XXX)”. The primary objective was to determine whether epithets could convey a deity’s image within the span of a brief narrative, since, as is often the case, Homeric hymns, owing to their brevity, do not contain a protracted mythological story. Furthermore, the article examined images of the goddess Gaia in the Greek literary tradition after Homer and Hesiod.

Key words: Homeric epithets, Homeric hymn, goddess Gaia, mythological image.

It is not particularly easy to answer the question when images of the Greek gods first began assuming shape and form. We may suppose that this process commenced in prehistoric, pre-archaic times – i.e. during the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations – even before the appearance of any myths or stories. Russian scholar Irina Kovaliova has presented a logical scheme for the development of mythological structures¹: from the mythological name of a deity to his/her mythological image (at first, only imaginary) and, finally, from the image to the mythological narrative as presented in early archaic epics and also evident from iconographic artifacts. During the time of Homer and Hesiod, images of the gods already existed, there being “Homeric gods” or “Hesiodic gods”, all anthro-

¹ И. Ковальова: “Миф: повествование, образ и имя”, *Литературное обозрение* 1995, Vol. 3, pp. 92–94.

provide the etiology for the foundation of the deity's cult in Greece⁶. Therefore epithets play a very important role in the hymnal narrative. A thorough analysis of the context of epithets in the Homeric hymn to *Demeter* reveals images of two principal goddesses that can be identified in the ensuing literary tradition: Demeter as a mother mourning the loss of her daughter and Demeter as the founder of Eleusinian Mysteries⁷. In the author's opinion, such key images of the Greek gods, with their main features clearly portrayed, can be observed in any longer Homeric hymn and have an evident mythological narrative⁸. These images can be unique, as in the case of Demeter, or partly imitative of Greek epics, such as the hymn presented below.

But what about short hymns where, oftentimes, there is no mythological story? Are the epithets embedded in the narrative chaotically or rather logically? Another interesting question is whether the poetical epithets shape any new mythological image of the god or whether the hymn's author is presenting an existing belief. The following analysis of the short Homeric hymn to *Gaia* (XXX) aims to answer these questions and to reveal the essence of epithets in the literary tradition after Homer and Hesiod, i.e. to trace the evolution of meaning of concrete epithets diachronically and synchronically in the analyzed context.

The main problem concerning this goddess, according to Stella Georgoudi, relates to the complexity of the Earth figure in Greek religion. A clear distinction should be drawn between: (a) the goddess Earth, with her individuality and her own history since the time of Hesiod's *Theogony*; (b) the Earth, understood as a substance, as a cosmic entity, therefore an element of nature; (c) and finally, the Earth as a city's territory – where Gaia is seen as a mother – i.e. Earth, a native patria⁹ – and is revered by its citizens. Let us examine which of the images the poet chooses for his hymn.

The hymn to *Gaia* belongs to the shorter Homeric hymns; it contains only 19 verses, though it is not the shortest one in the collection¹⁰. This hymn can be

⁶ For example, the Homeric hymn to Apollo (III) or to Demeter (II). See more on the topic of longer Homeric hymns A. Faulkner: *The Homeric Hymns. Interpretative Essays*. Oxford 2011; *Hymnes De La Grèce Antique: Approches Littéraires Et Historiques – Actes Du Colloque International De Lyon, 19–21 Juin 2008*. Ed. par R. Bouchon, P. Brilllet-Dubois, N. Le Meur-Weissman. Lyon 2013.

⁷ M. Tymoshenko: "Rola epitetów Demeter w kształtowaniu się sylwetki bogini na podstawie hymnu homeryckiego *In Cererem*". *Littera antiqua* 2011, Vol. 3, p. 4–9.

⁸ An interesting survey on the functions of the poetical epithets in longer Homeric hymn one can find in E.S. Green: "Revising Legitimacy: The Use of Epithets in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*". *Classical Quarterly* 2005, Vol. 55.2, pp. 343–349.

⁹ See more on this topic S. Georgoudi: "Gaia/Ge. Entre mythe, culte et idéologie". In: *Myth and Symbol I: Symbolic phenomena in ancient Greek culture*. Ed. S. des Bouvrie. Bergen 2002, pp. 114–134.

¹⁰ The hymn to *Ares* (VIII) comprises 17 verses, to *Aphrodite* (X) – 6 verses; the shortest one in the entire collection is the hymn to *Demeter* (XIII), it contains only 3 verses.

pomorphic and each deity with his/her own or common characteristic features and genealogy. As J.B. Hainsworth has pointed out, "the gods appear to be a fairly fixed feature of epic stories..."². On the basis of poetical epithets, which ancient Greek poets used generously and which are cast in Homeric formulas³, one can obtain an impression about what the Greek gods must have looked like and what characteristics they may have possessed. Their appearance was easily visualized by the authors: e.g. Homer's Athena is "grey- or bright-eyed", "whose shield is thunder", Persephone is "august", "dreaded" or "a daughter of Zeus"; Poseidon is "an earth-shaker", "a dark-haired god" and "a powerful lord", "who encircles the Earth"; Thetis is "lovely-haired" or "silver-footed" etc.

Since Milman Parry's identification of the Homeric formulae, most studies of epithets in ancient Greek poetry have focused on the metrical noun-epithet combinations that build the epic formulaic system⁴. There is, however, another point of view regarding this topic: Paolo Vivante concentrated on semantic features of Homeric repetitions, but more in a poetical than in a lexical sense⁵. He was rather more interested in the mode of their representation in poetry than in demonstrating their narrative function. For Vivante, epithets are not an instrument used in building the epic narrative; they can signify a thing: designate a color or quality, evoke a feeling, bring about a sharper focus etc.

Whereas, from the oral theory standpoint, poetical epithets can be regarded as an instrument for the poet in his creation of an epic narrative, some scholars have focused on their meaning and have studied epithets as poetical instruments. Epithets can have different functions in epics: from ornamental to metric and from poetic to aesthetic. But, as our analysis concerns the genre of Greek poetry known as the Homeric hymns, one cannot forget about the real purpose of their use here: the various epithets are aimed not primarily at presenting a story of the gods' lives or deeds but more at pleasing the addressee and, with a particular deity's help, obtaining personal benefit: the more praise and glorification heaped upon the deity, and the more carefully chosen the words, the greater the likelihood of the request being granted.

In longer Homeric hymns, there is always a mythological story connected with a deity from which we can find out about specific features; such hymns can also

² J.B. Hainsworth: "Good and Bad Formulae". *Homer: Tradition and Invention*. Ed. by Bernard C. Fenik. Leiden 1978, p. 43.

³ I.e. the Homeric formula, a terminus discovered by Milman Parry, creator of the theory of oral epic composition.

⁴ M. Parry: "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making. I: Homer and Homeric Style". *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 1930, Vol. 41, pp. 73-143. Other studies on Homeric formulas in epics and in the Homeric hymns: J.B. Hainsworth: *The Flexibility of the Homeric Formula*. Oxford 1968; J.H. Gaisser: "Noun-epithet Combinations in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter". *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 1974, Vol. 104, p. 113-137. On the history of studying formulae see M.E. Edwards: "Homer and Oral Tradition: the Formula, Part II". *Oral Tradition* 1988, Vol. 3/1-2, pp. 11-60.

⁵ P. Vivante: *The Epithets in Homer: A Study in Poetic Values*. Yale University Press 1982.

related to those in which Aoidos sang of gifts (δῶρα) and works (ἔργα) of Greek gods, the hymn recipients, in detail. The author and the date of hymn remain obscure, Richard Janko has stated that: “Unfortunately *Hymn 30* holds no clues as to its origin”¹¹, though his language-historical analysis situates it between 645 and 630 BC¹².

Εἰς Γῆν μητέρα πάντων¹³

Γαῖαν παμμήτειραν ἀείσομαι ἠϋθέμεθλον
πρεσβίστην, ἣ φέρβει ἐπὶ χθονὶ πάνθ' ὀπόσ' ἐστίν·
 ἤμὲν ὅσα χθόνα διὰν ἐπέρχεται ἡδ' ὅσα πόντον
 ἡδ' ὅσα πωτῶνται, τάδε φέρβεται ἐκ σέθεν ὄλβου.
 ἐκ σέο δ' εὐπαιδές τε καὶ εὐκαρποὶ τελέθουσι
πότνια, σεῦ δ' ἔχεται δοῦναι βίον ἡδ' ἀφελέσθαι
 θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποισιν ὁ δ' ὄλβιος ὄν κε σὺ θυμῷ
 πρόφρων τιμήσηςτῷ τ' ἄφθονα πάντα πάρεστι.
 βρίθει μὲν σφιν ἄρουρα φερέσβιος, ἡδὲ κατ' ἄγρους
 κτήνεσιν εὐθηνεῖ, οἶκος δ' ἐμπίπλαται ἐσθλῶν·
 αὐτοὶ δ' εὐνομήσι πόλιν κάτα καλλιγύναϊκα
 κοιρανέουσ', ὄλβος δὲ πολὺς καὶ πλοῦτος ὀπηδεῖ·
 παῖδες δ' εὐφροσύνη νεοθηλεῖ κυδιόωσι,
 παρθενικαὶ τε χοροῖς φερεσανθέσιν εὐφρονη θυμῷ
 παίζουσαι σκαίρουσι κατ' ἄνθεα μαλθακὰ ποίης,
 οὓς κε σὺ τιμήσης σεμνή θεὰ ἄφθονε δαίμων.
 Χαῖρε θεῶν μήτηρ, ἄλοχ' Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος,
 πρόφρων δ' ἀντ' ὤδῃς βίοτον θυμήρε' ὄπαζε·
 αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ καὶ σεῖο καὶ ἄλλης μνήσομ' αἰοιδῆς.

Having titled the hymn “Εἰς Γῆν μητέρα πάντων” (“To Earth, Mother of All”), it seems the author, from the very outset, has adopted the Hesiodic vision of the goddess in his poem¹⁴. From the title, the recipient can expect a story about the genesis of the gods and mythological creatures, borrowed from Hesiod’s *Theogony* (117, 126, 135, 176, 184, 232 ff), in which Gaia took a direct part, being also in opposition to Zeus for casting her sons, the Titans, into the Tartaros (*Th.* 462, 617, 687, 881 ff). This position also could announce the start (*prooimion*) of the hymn with its tradition of introducing epithets, where, after the god’s name, framed in a formula and the invocation verb, Γαῖαν παμμήτειραν ἀείσομαι ἠϋθέμεθλον /

¹¹ R. Janko: *Homer, Hesiod and the Hymns*. Cambridge 1982, p. 275, n. 12.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 200.

¹³ The original and a translation of hymn fragments from: *Anonymous. The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, London 1914.

¹⁴ The same formula, γῆ πάντων μήτηρ, and makes use of Hesiod in *Opera et dies* 563, though his Gaia is not a goddess, but a natural embodiment of the Earth, i.e. soil.

πρεσβίστην, (1–2) a relative clause usually follows: ἡ φέρβει ἐπὶ χθονὶ πάνθ' ὅπως ἔστιν [...] (2). Apart from the epithets, a relative sentence becomes a supplement to the hymn's introduction, explaining more precisely the meaning of the hymn's opening epithet παμμήτειρα.

The first epithet παμμήτειρα, 'mother of all', for the most part announcing the further content of the hymn, supplies another Hesiodic vision of the goddess¹⁵. Now Gaia appears as a nourishing power, 'which feeds everything in the world' (2), and as the Aoidos explains later, "all that go upon the goodly land, and all that are in the paths of the seas, and all that fly" (3–4). Then, for the first time in the literary tradition, there appears such an extensive commentary concerning Gaia. It explains more clearly why she is considered the mother of all and what benefits she brings to the people.

The next epithet in the hymn's invocation, ἡϋθέμεθλος – "well-founded" (1), refers us to the *Theogony*, where Hesiod speaks of Gaia as a: πάντων ἔδος ἀσφαλὲς αἰεὶ ἀθανάτων – "the ever-sure foundation of all immortals" (117–118). But the goddess' function as the mother of the Olympians is not mentioned here, and she should be considered as the foundation of all beings in a broad sense. Allen, Halliday and Sikes¹⁶, commentators on the Homeric hymns, note that this epithet occurs only here and is therefore *hapax legomenon*. It is interesting that it consists of a prefix εϋ- and Homeric τὰ θέμεθλα noun – "foundations" (*Il.* 14.493 etc.). As one can see, the author of the hymn also knows and uses the works of Homer when describing the goddess and devising epithets for her.

The third epithet in the introduction, πρεσβίστη – "the eldest of all beings" (2), closes the laudation of the goddess' attributes. Using it, Aoidos emphasizes Gaia's place, her high status as being the oldest, self-sufficient power and giving life to everything.

Due to its brevity, the aforementioned hymn does not contain the central aretalogical part, in which the exploits of the deity are usually eulogized¹⁷. By contrast, Gaia's benefits are enumerated, and her δύναμις is depicted in a most naturalistic form, like in Homer and in Aeschylus. The Homeric hymn describes the various functions of Gaia: as a giver of fruit and bearer of beautiful children (5–6); she is also responsible for bringing and taking lives – her chthonic function is quite evident here (6–7).

In verses 9–15 Aoidos artistically portrays fruitful fields and meadows with grazing cattle, joyful dancing youth, life full of abundance and prosperity, and the reason for all this is Gaia, the source of fertility, grace and happiness (16). It

¹⁵ Cf. γῆ πάντων μήτηρ – Hes. *Op.* 563; παμμήτορ τε γῆ – Aeschyl. *Pr.* 90.

¹⁶ T.W. Allen, W.R. Halliday, E.E. Sikes: *The Homeric Hymns*. Amsterdam 1980, p. 430.

¹⁷ Richard Janko divided all the hymns into those comprising a central mythological part and those in which the poet describes the attributes of the deity. After the Introduction, he calls them *Attributive hymns*; see R. Janko: "The Structure of the Homeric Hymns: A Study in Genre". *Hermes* 1981, Vol. 109, pp. 11–12.

is striking that in the description of this idyll¹⁸ the author actually does not use laudatory epithets for the goddess. In portraying the anthropomorphic image of the deity, which differs from her naturalistic characterization as Earth (i.e. omnipotence), epithets play a very important role. For example, the conventional Homeric epithet πότνια – “mistress” (6) clearly glorifies her as a goddess, and, at the end of the idyllic picture, the author explains that all good things come from Gaia, because she appears as σεμνή θεά – “august, holy goddess” (16). When the gods are called *semnoi*, this, in Greek poetry, often means that they are not only “holy” but “worthy of honor, special veneration and belong to heaven, to the Olympians”¹⁹. The addressee’s favor towards the people is revealed in the author’s words to her as ἄφθονε δαίμον (Voc.) – “bountiful daemon” (16) i.e. a daemon who generously sends so many goods. One can find here the formula ἄρουρα φερέσβιος – “fruitful land” (9), synonymous to the Hesiodic γαῖα φερέσβιος (*Th.* 693), representing Gaia in epics in the role of bearing soil and the deity who gives life to all creatures.

In the final part of the hymn (*eksodion*), Aoidos comes to the *Theogonical* image of Gaia. Only in the greeting (this hymn part starts with a salutation χαῖρε) his Gaia appears as the ‘mother of the gods’ – θεῶν μήτηρ²⁰, and the wife of a starry Uranus – ἄλοχ’ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος (17). Even Homer tells us about this cosmic couple²¹. Thus, the author closes his hymn with the goddess’ mythological image. Finishing his story, the singer addresses his request to Gaia to give him ‘a delightful life’ – βίστον θυμήρε (18). One finds the same formula in the Homeric hymn *to Helios* (XXI): πρόφρων δὲ... βίον θυμήρε ὄπαζε – “give me a delightful life, you gracious (god)” (17)²². These requests have rather general character; the author ends the hymn with words that are standard for this genre²³: he promises the goddess to remember her and the other song.

Notwithstanding the small number of epithets in the Homeric hymn *to Gaia*, it is indeed possible to discern the deity’s main features. She appears less as a Hesiodic divine being, a mother of the gods, and more as a personified naturalistic

¹⁸ There are other artistically portrayed sceneries in the Present tense or Past tense in hymns, now with the gods in the main role: Artemis, going in a chariot up and down the hills (Hy IX and XXVII), merrily wandering Pan with a crowd of nymphs (Hy XIX) as well as Dionysus (Hy XXVI).

¹⁹ For example, the hymn to Demeter (Hy II, 1), Demeter and Persephone (Hy II, 486), Hecate (Pi. *Py.* 3.79), Apollo (A. *Th.* 800).

²⁰ Though, in Greek mythology, Rhea was regarded as the mother of gods – sister of Gaia and Uranus, who gave birth to the majority of the Olympians (the XIV Homeric hymn, dedicated to the *Mother of Gods*, could be addressed to Rhea).

²¹ Cf. *Il.* 15. 36–38 etc.; *Od.* 5. 184–186.

²² The scholars state that the Homeric hymns XXX, XXI and XXXII are works of the one author due to many similarities between them, both in language and in structure – see T.W. Allen, W.R. Halliday, E.E. Sikes: *The Homeric Hymns...*, p. 430.

²³ The last two verses of the hymn *to Gaia* completely coincide with the final part of the hymn to Demeter, 494–495; for other similarities between the two hymns see N. Richardson: *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Oxford 1974, p. 69.

element, *Protogenos*, for she is the eldest and the main foundation of the whole world. The goddess' epithets clearly show the complexity of her figure in Greek literature and religion, as underscored by Stella Georgoudi, although it seems that the nourishing mother's function is more important for the poet. He emphasizes that real human happiness largely depends on Gaia, and "happy is the man whom she delights to honor (7-8)". This earth-man connection is very noticeable in the poem. The poet also skillfully transforms the lack of a mythological story into a naturalistic idyll in the middle part of the hymn, which bears witness to its high literary value. Another important conclusion should be mentioned here: the analysis of poetical epithets shows the direct correlation of the author's use of the goddess' functional attributes during his narration with the final request to the goddess, i.e. "to give him a life" as she is "the Mother of all" in the title and invocation of the hymn.