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In Greek mythology, Leto (/ˈliːtoʊ/; Greek: **Λητώ** Lētō; Λατώ, Lātō in Dorian Greek, etymology and that **Ancient Greek** deities in religion and mythology.

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Feb 23, 2008 - 1 **Ancient Greek**. 1.1 Alternative spellings; 1.2 Etymology; 1.3 Pronunciation; 1.4 Proper noun. 1.4.1 Inflection; 1.4.2 Related terms; 1.4.3 ...

Leto

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

In Greek mythology, **Leto** (/ˈliːtoʊ/; Greek: Λητώ *Lēṓ́*; Λατώ, *Lātṓ* in Dorian Greek, etymology and that meaning disputed) is a daughter of the Titans Coeus and Phoebe and the sister of Asteria.^[1] The island of Kos is claimed as her birthplace.^[2] In the Olympian scheme, Zeus is the father of her twins,^[3] Apollo and Artemis, the **Letoïdes**, which Leto conceived after her hidden beauty accidentally caught the eyes of Zeus. Classical Greek myths record little about Leto other than her pregnancy and her search for a place where she could give birth to Apollo and Artemis, since Hera in her jealousy had caused all lands to shun her. Finally, she finds an island that isn't attached to the ocean floor so it isn't considered land and she can give birth.^[4] This is her one active mythic role: once Apollo and Artemis are grown, Leto withdraws, to remain a dim^[5] and benevolent matronly figure upon Olympus, her part already played. In Roman mythology, Leto's equivalent is **Latona**, a Latinization of her name, influenced by Etruscan *Letun*.^[6]

In Crete, at the city of Dreros, Spyridon Marinatos uncovered an eighth-century post-Minoan hearth house temple in which there were found three unique figures of Apollo, Artemis and Leto made of brass sheeting hammered over a shaped core (*sphyrelata*).^[7] Walter Burkert notes^[8] that in Phaistos she appears in connection with an initiation cult.

Leto was identified from the fourth century onwards with the principal local mother goddess of Anatolian Lycia, as the region became Hellenized.^[9] In Greek inscriptions, the Letoïdes are referred to as the "national gods" of the country.^[10] Her sanctuary, the Letoon near Xanthos predated Hellenic influence in the region, however,^[11] and united the Lycian confederacy of city-states. The Hellenes of Kos also claimed Leto as their own. Another sanctuary, more recently identified, was at Oenoanda in the north of Lycia.^[12] There was, of course, a further Letoon at Delos.

Leto's primal nature may be deduced from the natures of her father and mother, who may have been Titans of the sun and moon. Her Titan father is called "Coeus," and though Herbert Jennings Rose considers his name and nature uncertain,^[13] he is in one Roman source given the name **Polus**,^[14] which may relate him to the sphere of heaven from pole to pole. The name of Leto's mother, "Phoebe" (Φοίβη — literally "pure, bright"), is identical to the epithet of her son Apollo, Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων, throughout Homer.

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Etymology

Several explanations have been put forward to explain the origin of the goddess and the meaning of her name. Older sources speculated that the name is related to the Greek λήθη *lēthē* (oblivion) and λωτός *lotus* (the fruit that brings oblivion to those who eat it). It would thus mean "the hidden one".^[15]

In 20th-century sources *Leto* is traditionally derived from Lycian *lada*, "wife", as her earliest cult was centered in Lycia. Lycian *lada* may also be the origin of the Greek name Λήδα *Leda*. Other scholars (Paul Kretschmer, Erich Bethe, Pierre Chantraine and R. S. P. Beekes) have suggested a Pre-Greek origin.^[16]

Leto



The Rape of Leto by Tityos c. 515 BC. From Vulci.

Leto is third from left.

Abode	Island of Delos
Consort	Zeus
Parents	Coeus and Phoebe
Siblings	Asteria
Children	Apollo, and Artemis
Roman equivalent	Latona

Birth of Artemis and Apollo

When Hera, the most conservative of goddesses — for she had the most to lose in changes to the order of nature —^[17] discovered that Leto was pregnant and that Zeus was the father, she realized that the offspring would cement the new order. She was powerless to stop the flow of events. "Latona for her intrigue with Zeus was hunted by Hera over the whole earth, till she came to Delos and brought forth first Artemis, by the help of whose midwifery she afterwards gave birth to Apollo."^[18] Hera banned Leto from giving birth on "terra firma", the mainland, any island at sea, or any place under the sun.^[19] Antoninus Liberalis is not alone in hinting that Leto came down from the land of the Hyperboreans in the guise of a she-wolf, or that she sought out the "wolf-country" of Lycia, formerly called Tremilis, which she renamed to honour wolves that had befriended her^[20] for her denning. Another late source, Aelian, also links Leto with wolves and Hyperboreans:

Wolves are not easily delivered of their young, only after twelve days and twelve nights, for the people of Delos maintain that this was the length of time that it took Leto to travel from the Hyperboreoi to Delos."^[21]

Most accounts agree that she found the barren floating island of Delos, still bearing its archaic name of Asterios, which was neither mainland nor a real island, and gave birth there, promising the island wealth from the worshippers who would flock to the obscure birthplace of the splendid god who was to come. The island was surrounded by swans. As a gesture of gratitude, Delos was secured with four pillars and later became sacred to Apollo.

It is remarkable that Leto brought forth Artemis, the elder twin, without travail, as Callimachus wrote,^[22] as if she were merely revealing another manifestation of herself. By contrast, Leto labored for nine nights and nine days for Apollo, according to the Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo, in the presence of all the first among the deathless goddesses as witnesses: Dione, Rhea, Ichnaea, Themis and the "loud-moaning" sea-goddess Amphitrite. Only Hera kept apart, perhaps to kidnap Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth, to prevent Leto from going into labor. Instead Artemis, having been born first, assisted with the birth of Apollo. Another version, in the Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo and in an Orphic hymn, states that Artemis was born before Apollo, on the island of Ortygia, and that she helped Leto cross the sea to Delos the next day to give birth there to Apollo.

Witnesses at the birth of Apollo

According to the Homeric hymn, the goddesses who assembled to be witnesses at the birth of Apollo were responding to a public occasion in the rites of a dynasty, where the authenticity of the child must be established beyond doubt from the first moment. The dynastic rite of the witnessed birth must have been familiar to the hymn's hearers.^[23] The dynasty that is so concerned about being authenticated in this myth is the new dynasty of Zeus and the Olympian Pantheon, and the goddesses at Delos who bear witness to the rightness of the birth are the great goddesses of the old order. Demeter is not present; her mother Rhea attends. Aphrodite is not present either. The goddess Dione (in her name simply the "Goddess") is sometimes taken by later mythographers as a mere feminine form of Zeus (see entry Dodona): if this were so, she would not have assembled here.

Chthonic assailants

Leto was threatened and assailed in her wanderings by chthonic monsters of the ancient earth and old ways, and these became the enemies of Apollo and Artemis. One was the giant Tityos, a phallic being who grew so vast that he split his mother's womb and had to be carried to term by Gaia herself. He attempted to rape Leto near Delphi under the orders of Hera, but was laid low by the arrows of Apollo and/or Artemis, as Pindar recalled in a Pythian ode.

Another ancient earth creature that had to be overcome was the dragon Pytho, or Python, which lived in a cleft of the mother-rock beneath Delphi and beside the Castalian Spring. Apollo slew it but had to do penance and be cleansed afterwards, since though Python was a child of Gaia, it was necessary that the ancient Delphic Oracle passed to the protection of the new god.

The Lycian Letoon

Leto was intensely worshipped in Lycia, Asia Minor.^[24] In Delos and Athens she was worshipped primarily as an adjunct to her children. Herodotus reported^[25] a temple to her in Egypt supposedly attached to a floating island^[26] called "Khemmis" in Buto, which also included a temple to an Egyptian god Greeks identified by *interpretatio graeca* as Apollo. There, Herodotus was given to understand, the goddess whom Greeks recognised as Leto was worshipped in the form of Wadjet, the cobra-headed goddess of Lower Egypt.

Leto in Crete

Leto was also worshipped in Crete, whether one of "certain Cretan goddesses, or Greek goddesses in their Cretan form, influenced by the Minoan goddess".^[27] Veneration of a local Leto is attested at Phaistos^[28] (where it is purported that she gave birth to Apollo and Artemis at the islands known today as the Paximadia (also known as Letoai in ancient Crete) and at Lato, which bore her name.^[29] As *Leto Phytia* she was a mother-deity.

Leto of the golden spindle

Pindar calls the goddess *Leto Chryselakatos*,^[30] an epithet that was attached to her daughter Artemis as early as Homer.^[31] "The conception of a goddess enthroned like a queen and equipped with a spindle seems to have originated in Asiatic worship of the Great Mother", O. Brendel notes, but a lucky

survival of an inscribed inventory of her temple on Delos, where she was the central figures of the Delian trinity, records her cult image as sitting on a wooden throne, clothed in a linen *chiton* and a linen *himation*.^[32]

The Lycian peasants

Leto's introduction into Lycia was met with resistance; there, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,^[33] when Leto was wandering the earth after giving birth to Apollo and Artemis, she attempted to drink water from a pond in Lycia.^[34] The peasants there refused to allow her to do so by stirring the mud at the bottom of the pond. Leto turned them into frogs for their inhospitality, forever doomed to swim in the murky waters of ponds and rivers.

This scene is represented in the central fountain, the *Bassin de Latone*, in the garden terrace of Versailles.



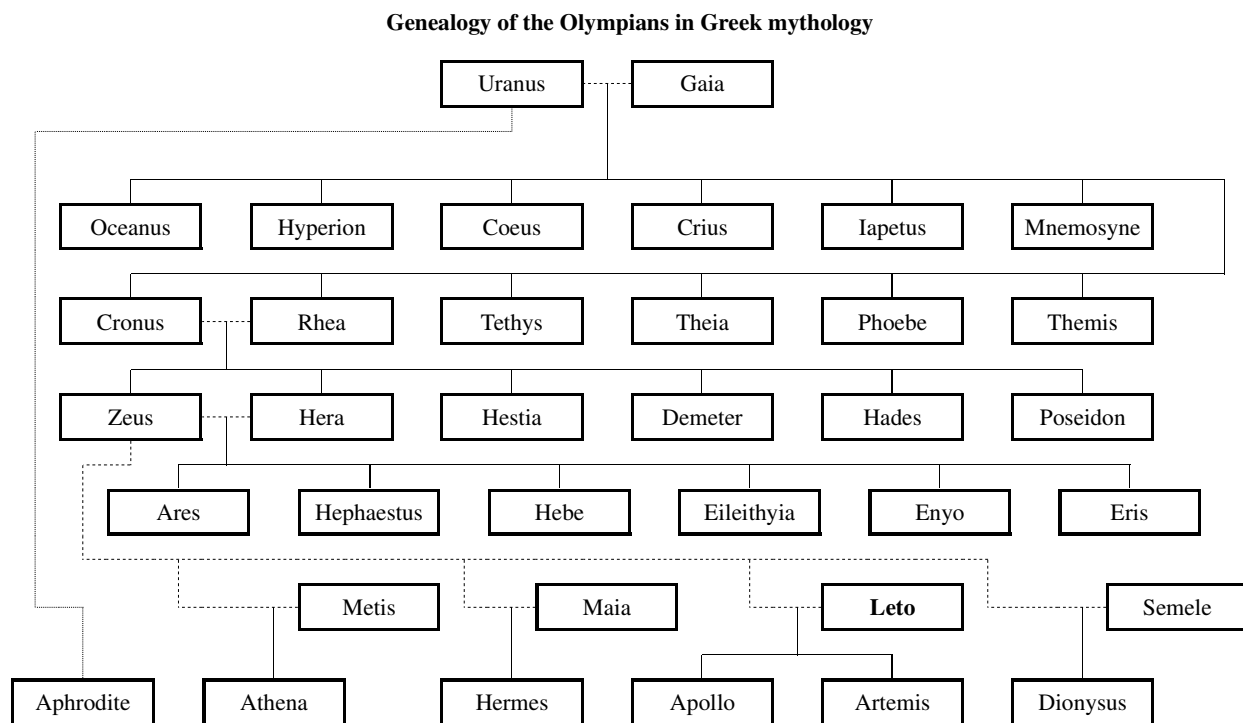
Latona and the Lycian Peasants, ca. 1605, by Jan Brueghel the Elder.

Niobe

Niobe, a queen of Thebes and wife of Amphion, boasted of her superiority to Leto because she had fourteen children (Niobids), seven sons and seven daughters, while Leto had only two. For her hubris, Apollo killed her sons as they practiced athletics, and Artemis her daughters. Apollo and Artemis used poisoned arrows to kill them, though according to some versions a number of the Niobids were spared (Chloris, usually). Amphion, at the sight of his dead sons, either killed himself or was killed by Zeus after swearing revenge. A devastated Niobe fled to Mount Sipylus in Asia Minor and either turned to stone as she wept or killed herself. Her tears formed the river Achelous. Zeus had turned all the people of Thebes to stone so no one buried the Niobids until the ninth day after their death, when the gods themselves entombed them.

The Niobe narrative appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book VI), where Latona (Leto) has demanded the women of Thebes to go to her temple and burn incense. Niobe, queen of Thebes, enters in the midst of the worship and insults the goddess, claiming that having beauty, better parentage and more children than Latona, she is more fit to be worshipped than the goddess. To punish this insolence, Latona begs Apollo and Artemis to avenge her against Niobe and to uphold her honor. Obedient to their mother, the twins slay Niobe's seven sons and seven daughters, leaving her childless, and her husband Amphion kills himself. Niobe is unable to move from grief and seemingly turns to marble, though she continues to weep, and her body is transported to a high mountain peak in her native land.

Genealogy of the Olympians in Greek mythology



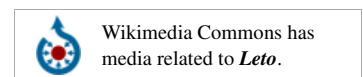
Notes

- ¹ ^ Hesiod, *Theogony* 403.
- ² ^ Herodotus 2.98; Diodorus Siculus 2.47.2.
- ³ ^ Pindar consistently refers to Apollo and Artemis as twins; other sources instead give separate birthplaces for the siblings.
- ⁴ ^ Karl Kerényi notes, *The Gods of the Greeks* 1951:130, "His twin sister is usually already on the scene."
- ⁵ ^ Hesiod, *Theogony* 406; "dark-veiled Leto" (Orphic Hymn 35, To Leto

6. ^ Letun noted is passing in Larissa Bonfante and Judith Swaddling, *Etruscan Myths* (series: The Legendary Past) (British Museum/University of Texas Press) 2006, p. 72.
7. ^ Marinatos' publications on Dreros are listed by Burkert 1985, sect. I.4 note 16 (p.365); John Boardman, *Annual of the British School at Athens* **62** (1967) p. 61; Theodora Hadzisteliou Price, "Double and Multiple Representations in Greek Art and Religious Thought" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* **91** (1971:pp. 48–69), plate III.5a-b.
8. ^ Burkert, *Greek Religion* 1985.
9. ^ The process is discussed by T. R. Bryce, "The Arrival of the Goddess Leto in Lycia", *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte*, **321** (1983:1–13).
10. ^ Bryce 1983:1 and note 2.
11. ^ Bryce 1983, summarizing the archaeology of the Letoon.
12. ^ Alan Hall, "A Sanctuary of Leto at Oenoanda" *Anatolian Studies* **27** (1977) pp 193–197.
13. ^ Herbert Jennings Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (1991:21).
14. ^ In the surviving summary of the preface to Gaius Julius Hyginus, Koios is translated literally, as *Polus*: "From Polus and Phoebe: Latone, Asterie."
15. ^ W. Smith, ed. *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* 1873, at Theoi.com (<http://www.theoi.com/Titan/TitanisLeto.html>)
16. ^ R. S. P. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, Brill, 2009, pp. 855 and 858–9.
17. ^ See Hera.
18. ^ Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliothēke* 1.4.1; Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses*, 35, giving as his sources Menecrates of Xanthos (4th century BCE) and Nicander of Colophon; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* vi.317-81 provides another late literary source.
19. ^ Hyginus, *Fabulae* 140).
20. ^ Antoninus Liberalis' etiological myth reflects Greek misunderstanding of a Greek origin for the place-name *Lycia*; modern scholars now suggest a source in the "Lukka lands" of Hittite inscriptions (Bryce 1983:5).
21. ^ Aelian, *On the Nature of Animals* 4. 4 (A.F. Scholfield, tr.).
22. ^ Artemis speaks: "my mother suffered no pain either when she gave me birth or when she carried me in her womb, but without travail put me from her body." (Callimachus, *Hymn 3, to Artemis*).
23. ^ Greek women, at least among Athenians, gave birth in the midst of a crowd of the women of the household.
24. ^ Appian tells of Mithridates' intention to cut down the sacred grove at the Letoon to serve in his siege of Patara on the Lycian coast; a nightmare warned him to desist. (Appian, *Mithridates*, 27).
25. ^ Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.155-56
26. ^ "The claim that it floated is rightly dismissed by Herodotus — it probably reflects nothing more than contamination by Greek traditions on the floating island of Ortygia/Delos associated with Leto," remarks Alan B. Lloyd, "The temple of Leto (Wadjet) at Buto", in Anton Powell, ed. *The Greek World* (Routledge) 1995:190.
27. ^ D.H.F. Gray, reviewing L.R. Palmer, *Mycenaean and Minoans: Aegean Prehistory in the Light of the Linear B Tablets* in *The Classical Review*, **13**, 1963:87–91.
28. ^ "the citizens of Phaistos on Crete performed sacrifices to Leto the Grafter because she had grafted male organs onto a maiden (Antoninus Liberalis 17)" notes William F. Hansen, *Handbook of Classical Mythology*, 2004: "Sex-changers", 285.
29. ^ Noted by R.F. Willetts, "Cretan Eileithyia", *The Classical Quarterly*, 1958..
30. ^ Pindar, *Sixth Nemean Ode*, 36
31. ^ O. Brendel, *Römische Mitt.* **51** (1936), p 60ff.
32. ^ O. Brendel, noting Pierre Roussel, *Délös, colonie athénienne* (Paris: Boccard) 1916, p 221, in "The Corbridge Lanx" *The Journal of Roman Studies* **31** (1941), pp. 100–127) p 113ff; the article is a discussion of the seated female figure he identifies as Leto on the Roman silver tray (*lanx*) at Alnwick Castle.
33. ^ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vi.317-81; Antoninus Liberalis also relates a version of this myth.
34. ^ The spring Melite, according to Kerényi 1951:131.

External links

- Theoi.com (<http://www.theoi.com/Titan/TitanisLeto.html>), Leto
- Pictures of the sanctuary for Leto at Letoum (<http://www.pbase.com/dosseman/gallery/letoon>)



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