

The Arkteia in Ancient Athens:  
Bear Necessities

by R.J. Fowler

In a well-known passage in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, produced in 411 BC, the chorus-leader explains why she is particularly well qualified to offer useful advice to the city:

As soon as I was seven, I served as an Arrhephoros.  
Then I was a Miller. At ten I was a Bear in the  
Brauronia, shedding my saffron cloak for Artemis; and I  
was once a Kanephoros—such a pretty sight I was with  
my necklace of figs.

This is a list of sacred offices, any one of which would be an honour to hold. The chorus-leader has held them all. Thus she has established a *bona fides* as a citizen fully devoted to the city and its gods. It is this record of service that gives her the right to speak on public affairs.

The offices named are full of interest. One in particular, the Bear in the Brauronia, has been the object of much study in recent years, especially after the sanctuary in question was excavated. Brauron is a village on the east coast of Attica (see map) where there was an ancient shrine of Artemis. The festival held there in Artemis' honour was called the Brauronia, and included among other activities a rite for young girls known as the "Arkteia," or "Rite of the Bear." Girls who participated were called "bears" (*arktoi*), and it seems from the passage in Aristophanes that ten was considered the ideal age at which to take part in the ceremony. However, as it occurred only once every four years, not everyone could take part in their tenth year; another source suggests that this was the upper limit for the age of participants, so that some of the girls might be as young as six.

A myth was told in connection with the festival which helps us understand its purpose. A wild bear in the region of Brauron was tamed and kept in the sanctuary. One day a young girl teased the bear, which attacked her and scratched out one of her eyes. The girl's brothers killed the bear, but this enraged Artemis. A plague resulted, and the suffering people eventually consulted an oracle. They were told that the goddess would be appeased if young girls "played the bear." So a festival was instituted in which girls dressed up as bears and danced in Artemis' honour. The plague ended, and ever after it has been the custom for girls to participate in this ceremony before they are married.

Why would people think that dressing up as a bear would appease Artemis? Why did little girls have to do this, and no one else? One must put the questions thus, since it is obvious that the story is made up to explain an already existing ritual, not the other way around. Artemis is the goddess of the hunt, and a particularly dangerous deity if offended. Hunting itself is a perilous business in primitive societies, and is normally associated with feelings of fear and guilt—fear for obvious reasons, and guilt for taking

life, necessary though it may be. Acting the part of an animal in advance of the hunt may help to assuage these feelings. It demonstrates and encourages communion with the world of the animals and of the goddess. It shows the goddess that you are her devotee. It is especially appropriate for girls to perform this ritual on behalf of others, because, like Artemis herself, they symbolize youth, purity, and innocence. The goddess of the wild is the goddess who nurtures the young, not only of animals but also of humans—the *kourotrophos*, as the Greeks called her. Artemis especially liked children, particularly girls (boys turned to Apollo). She was a goddess of childbirth, and in the same sanctuary at Brauron have been found the dedications made by the families of women who died in childbirth. Although Artemis could not save the women in question, another time she might, and her power must in all cases be acknowledged.

Hunting rituals are probably the earliest context of the Arkteia. However, the ritual as it is known from classical times seems to have taken on other functions as well. The myth spoke of girls performing the ritual before marriage; one source even says it was compulsory for all girls to be a bear before they were married. Many scholars have seen in the Arkteia a form of initiation ritual, in which young girls were taught some basic lessons about their future roles as citizen wives and mothers. All societies seek to inculcate important values in their young people by means of education. Key stages in growth are often marked by special ceremonies, which can be called "rites of passage" or sometimes "initiation rituals." Initiations normally have some imperative associated with them: they involve things the initiates *must* learn, or present tests the initiate *must* pass before moving on to the next stage. In the case of the Arkteia, we have a ritual that young girls *must* perform before they can be married. The ritual as a whole displays the classic hallmarks of initiations, such as the requirement to spend time away from home in seclusion and the use of special costumes. Presumably, important lessons were taught about future duties.

In this respect some of the other details of the cult are significant. Vases found in the sanctuary depict athletic events; perhaps girls had to demonstrate physical fitness. Healthy mothers make for healthy children; so the girls were being taught at an early age what was expected of them in this regard. "Shedding the saffron robe," to which the chorus-leader in Aristophanes refers, is another interesting detail. Saffron robes in other Greek texts are said to be sexy. Aristophanes says the girls not only wore these seductive garments but eventually took them off, and the vase paintings bear him out. Although these pre-pubescent girls are not sexually mature, it looks as if some form of sex education was part of the ritual. Indeed, the vase-paintings depict many young girls taking part in the rites who are plainly pubescent, leading some scholars to doubt the claim of the

ancient written source that ten was an upper age limit for participants.

Rituals often have many different purposes all at once. At one level, the Arkteia has a straightforward goal: the goddess of the young is angry, and unless the children do her dance she will strike them dead. People dance to keep the goddess happy. Ancient religion is characterized above all by the sense of hostile, uncontrollable powers threatening us on all sides, who must be constantly appeased or else the consequences will be disastrous (plagues, famines, earthquakes, etc.). You can never be sure that your efforts at appeasement will succeed—the plague may still come—but you do know that if you don't try at all, catastrophe will surely follow. If nothing else, the performance of such rituals eases the fear in the worshipper's mind, and in that sense they work—they won't stop plagues, but they do help people get through them. On another level, rituals like the Arkteia don't have specific goals, but rather express ideas and values that are important to the society, and in turn reinforce and perpetuate those values, thus shaping the society and giving people a sense of meaning and direction. This, too, has practical psychological benefits; people feel as if they belong to something, and they feel they know "what it's all about."

All rituals use symbolic behaviour to express the underlying system of values, and animals, especially in early societies, are among the commonest and most powerful symbols. The bear is wild and tender, sociable yet alone, mysterious and uncomplicated all at once; so too is the young unmarried girl in Greek thought: marriage is consistently described as a kind of taming; before marriage girls are not fully integrated into society, yet their nature pushes them in that direction; there is no more obvious symbol of uncomplicated innocence, yet as miniatures of women their natures are (at least to men) inscrutable. Thus they "play the bear" to honour their goddess, well before the age at which marriage might carry them off (as it did Greek girls as young as fourteen); other myths told how Artemis banished in anger, sometimes with horrible punishments (for instance, being turned into a bear!), girls who had left her group of maidens for a man. It could be disastrous to reach marriage without giving proper due to the virgin goddess while yet young enough oneself. Who knows how the *kourotrophos* might choose to wreak revenge? The dedications at Brauron offer grim testimony to one distressingly common possibility, death in childbirth—an event, indeed, that was only too common until very recent times. Thus Artemis is not someone to trifle with, and the reasons for "playing the bear" become quite cogent upon closer examination.