The Creativity of Disaster

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One of the many ways in which Jan Bremmer has contributed to our field is through his publications on myth, which have provided new models for thinking about the work that myth does and how it does it. In particular, I have been stimulated by his thoughts on Greek creation myths,¹ and it is in recognition of this that I offer some thoughts on a related topic.²

I begin by relating a story that comes to us from Pausanias (8.23.6–7), who heard it while traveling through Arcadia:

About a stade distant from the city of Caphyae is a place called Condylea, where there is a grove and a temple of Artemis that used to be called Condyleatis. They say that the name of the goddess was changed for the following reason. Some children, while playing about the sanctuary found a rope, tied it around the neck of the cult statue and said that Artemis was being strangled. The Caphyans, discovering what the children had done, stoned them to death. After they had done this, their women became ill and all babies were stillborn, until the Pythian priestess told them to bury the murdered children, and sacrifice to them every year as heroes, because they had wrongly been put to death. The Caphyans obeyed this oracle, and they began to call the goddess at Condyleae ‘The Strangled Goddess’, as the oracle told them to.

This is a strange tale, for several reasons—most obviously, it compels us to wonder what it means for a goddess to be strangled.³ But in one

² A preliminary version of the current essay was presented at the meeting ‘The End of Everything: Catastrophe and Community in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Worlds’ at Indiana University in October 2007; I thank Bert Harrill for his invitation and both Bert and other audience members for their suggestions.
³ This question was brilliantly addressed by H. King in ”Bound to Bleed: Artemis and Greek Women”, in Images of Women in Antiquity (eds. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 109–127. I discuss the story as part of a larger group of similar stories in Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 203–249.
way, at least, the tale is not so strange after all, for it exemplifies a three-part story pattern that is common in Greek myth: 1) disaster befalls a community (here, an epidemic of stillborn babies); 2) the community makes a ritual response (here, the Caphyans establish hero cult to the murdered children and rename their local goddess) and 3) the disaster abates.\footnote{Although the third part of the pattern is left unexpressed in Pausanias’ version of the story, it is so commonly included in these stories that we can scarcely doubt it is implied here; compare the very similar stories of maiden’s deaths that I assemble in Restless, 203–249.}

This pattern is so common, indeed, that it seems to have been considered too banal for comment; scholars seldom acknowledge it, preferring instead to apply other interpretative models to such myths. One of these is Alan Dundes’ ‘lack/lack liquidated’ pattern (which is in turn developed from Vladmir Propp’s ‘Quest’ pattern),\footnote{A. Dundes, The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1964); V. Propp, Morphology of the Folktale (translation L. Scott; Bloomington, IN: Research Center, Indiana University, 1958). See also W. Burkert, Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 1–18.} according to which a deficit or failure of some kind (here, the community’s inability to reproduce successfully) is resolved. Walter Burkert is well known for his application of this model to ancient Mediterranean myths, demonstrating its usefulness, for example, in revealing similarities amongst a group of Greek and Hittite tales about a ‘disappearing deity’ who must be coaxed back into action.\footnote{Burkert, Structure, 123–142 (chapter 6).} As in the tale of the Strangled Goddess, the deity’s withdrawal or anger typically manifests itself as a famine or an epidemic of some kind.

A second interpretative model, which was developed by Burkert himself, is what I will call the ‘sacrifice/restitution’ pattern: an individual or community surrenders something important and in return is promised that it will receive a greater good. Burkert used this pattern to clarify many different kinds of Greek myths, but particularly famous is his application of the pattern to a type of myth that he called the ‘maiden sacrifice’, in which a marriageable girl is sacrificed in order to guarantee some benefit for the community. In some such myths, the sacrifice is figured as exactly