

**THE CULTS OF
LESBOS, A
DISSERTATION**

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The Cults of Lesbos, a Dissertation by Emily Ledyard Shields

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EMILY LEDYARD SHIELDS

**THE CULTS OF
LESBOS, A
DISSERTATION**

The Johns Hopkins University

THE CULTS OF LESBOS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE BOARD OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS
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EMILY LEDYARD SHIELDS

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INTRODUCTION

S. L. Plehn, in his *Lesbiacorum Liber*, Berlin, 1826, pp. 115-120, wrote a short section entitled *Res Sacrae*. Although Plehn made a very careful collection of the literary evidence, he had very little epigraphical or numismatic material at his disposal. But in recent years the number of Lesbian inscriptions has been many times increased by the *Inscriptiones Graecae Insularum Lesbi Nesi Tenedi*, William Paton, Berlin, 1899; by *Unedierte Inschriften von Mytilene*, Petros N. Papageorgiu, Leipzig, 1900; by *Ἀνέκδοτοι Ἐπιγραφαὶ Λέσβου*, Ἐμμανουὴλ Δαυίδ, Mytilene, 1913; and by other publications appearing from time to time in the daily newspapers of Greek cities.¹ The coins of the island are unusually beautiful and varied in type. Of those published in *Doctrina Numorum Veterum*, Joseph Eckhel, Leipzig, 1792-1828, and in *Description de Médailles antiques grecques et romaines*, Mionnet, Paris, 1806-1808, Plehn made good use. But since that time there have appeared the *Catalogue of Coins in the British Museum—Troas, Aeolis and Lesbos*, Warwick Wroth, London, 1894; *Historia Numorum*, Barclay V. Head, Oxford, 1911; *Catalogue of Greek Coins in the Hunterian Collection*, University of Glasgow, George Macdonald, 1901; and many publications in the journals of numismatics.² Not only have these collections of material been made, but during the last fifty years or so important books about Lesbos, of an archaeological, historical and topographical nature have been written. Among these should be named, *Travels and Discoveries in the Levant*, C. T. Newton, London, 1865; *Reise auf der Insel Lesbos*, A. Conze, Hanover, 1865; *Die Antiken Baureste der Insel Lesbos*, Robert Koldewey, Berlin, 1890, which treat of the antiquities. For history, most valuable are *Rom und Mytilene*, Conrad Cichorius, Leipzig, 1888; and *Beiträge zur Geschichte von Lesbos im vierten Jahrhundert v. Chr.*, Hans Pistorius, Bonn, 1913. The books dealing with topography, description and modern life are most numerous of all, but are only indirectly related to the subject of the ancient cults.³ For a clearer understanding of the legends and worship of the gods

¹ For a complete list of these publications of inscriptions see *Ἀρχ. Ἐφ.* 1913, pp. 220-1.

² Reference will be made to these later as the material is required.

³ For a list of these books of travel see R. Koldewey, *Die Antiken Baureste der Insel Lesbos*, pp. 1-2.

of Lesbos much work has been done in various articles of Pauly-Wissowa's Real-Encyclopädie and in Roscher's Ausführliches Lexikon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie, and in Lewis R. Farnell's *Cults of the Greek States*, Oxford, 1896-1909. But as no account of the Lesbian cults as a whole has been published since Plehn's work ninety years ago, it has seemed worth while to make a special study of them. And yet, even now only a beginning has been made in the collection of material; and excavations will one day reveal how insignificant is our present supply of information. Especially do we lack evidence for the sixth and fifth centuries, since the literary passages relate principally to the myths, while the earliest inscription on stone dates from the beginning of the fourth century, and the coins with divinities as types are from the middle of the fifth century or later. The date of excavation, however, cannot at present be foretold. And so it does not seem advisable to wait during an uncertain length of time for the gathering of a complete store of information. Enough is already gained to show that the Lesbian cults were many of them peculiarly interesting.

As the situation and prosperity of the island, the original home of the inhabitants, their relations with other peoples, and their character, mental and moral, all exerted a great influence doubtless on the religion, these topics will be treated briefly, in order to make clearer the religious history.

Lesbos, called by Strabo *νήσος ἡ Λέσβος λόγου ἀξία πλείστων*, lies south of Troas, at the mouth of the Gulf of Adramyttium. Only a narrow channel separates it from Asia Minor on the north and east, so narrow that Methymna was only sixty stades distant from the shore of the continent at Assus.⁴ Also the island commands an important position near the mouth of the Hellespont; and with its fleets, which were from early times important, it could control much of the traffic by sea from the region of the Pontus.⁵ Even in Homer we learn that it afforded a port for those making the voyage from the Troad to Greece.⁶ And to the great corn producing region of the Euxine Lesbos, as well as Athens, could look for a great part of its grain supply.⁷ Yet the island itself was very fertile, and especially

⁴ Strabo, XIII, 616.

⁵ Cf. Hdt. VI, 5. Histiaeus with eight ships from Lesbos took all the ships that sailed out of the Pontus, except such as were willing to submit to him.

⁶ Od. III, 169 f.

⁷ Thuc. III, 2; I. G. XII, ii, 3. Cf. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, p. 576; Pistorius, *Beiträge zur Geschichte von Lesbos*, pp. 44 f.; *English Historical Review*, 1914, pp. 125 f.

in the western part produced much wheat.⁸ The grape and the olive abounded.⁹ Diodorus says,¹⁰ "The islands, exposed to the winds and supplying healthful air to the inhabitants and producing fruits, rejoiced in plenty and soon made those who lived there blessed. For this reason they were also called the Islands of the Blessed (*Διὸ καὶ Μακάρων ὀνομάσθησαν νῆσοι*), the abundance of good things giving rise to the appellation."

Besides Macaria, of which mention has just been made, many other names and epithets were given to Lesbos in antiquity, indicative of its nature and importance. Such are *Λέσβον εὐκτιμένην*, II. IX, 129;¹¹ *Μάκαρος ἔδος*, II. XXIV, 544; *Λέσβος τ' ἠγαθὴ*, Hymn to Apollo, III, 37; *Λέσβος ἑραυνά*, Moschus, III, 90; *Λέσβω ἐν εἰδένδρῳ*, C. I. G. II, 3019; *ολιηρῆς Λέσβοιο*, Anth. Pal. VII, 501; *Λέσβον ἐς εἴουον*, Athen. (Hermesianax) XIII, 598c; *Λέσβον ἑριστάφυλον*, Athen. (Archestratus) III, 92d; *Μάκαρος πόλιν*, Strabo, VIII, 356; *σχεδὸν δέ τι καὶ μητρόπολις . . . τῶν Αἰολικῶν πόλεων*, Strabo XIII, 616;¹² *Λέσβου τ' εὐρυχόρου*, Dionys. Orbis Descr. 537; *πασέων δ' ἐστὶν ἀειδοτάτη*, Stobaeus (Phanocles) Flor. 64, 14; *ἰερῆ Λέσβω*, *ἴδιδεμ*; *ἐν Λέσβω κλεινῆς Ἑρέσου περικύματος μαστῶ*, Athen. III, 111 f.; *περιβρίτω Ἰσση*, Lycophron, Cass. 219;¹³ *inclita* . . . Lesbos, Petron. Sat. 133, 3.

There is evidence to show that the island in early times had other names. Pliny¹⁴ says that it was called Himerte et Lasia, Pelasgia, Aegira, Aethiope,¹⁵ Macaria. According to Callimachus it was called Mytonis from Myton, son of Poseidon.¹⁶ Others give the names Issa, Antissa.¹⁷ These evidently originated from characteristics of Lesbos or from names of places from which the Lesbians came. Plehn¹⁸ believed that Lesbos was called Aethiope because of Myrina,

⁸ Athen. (Archestratus) III, 111 f.

⁹ Cf. Conze, *Reise auf der Insel Lesbos*; Newton, *Travels and Discoveries*.

¹⁰ Diod. Sic. V, 82. Interesting in this connection is Hesychius, s. v. *ἡλέσιων μακάρων νῆσος* . . . *ἔπου οὐ διαλλονται ἀπὸ τῶν σωμάτων αἱ ψυχαί. καὶ οἱ μὲν φασὶν περὶ Αἴγυπτον εἶναι, οἱ δὲ περὶ Λέσβον*.

¹¹ See also Od. IV, 342 and XVII, 133.

¹² Cf. Strabo, XIII, 622 and Eustath. Dion. Per. 536, *εὐρύχορος* . . . *μητρόπολις δὲ τῶν Αἰολικῶν*.

¹³ Cf. Cicero's description, *De Leg. Agr.* II, 16, 40, *agri iucundi et fertiles*.

¹⁴ Pliny, N. H. V, 139.

¹⁵ Cf. Epithet *εἰμερνά* in I. G. XII, ii, 313. Hesych. s. v. *Αἰθιοπῶν ὁ Λέσβιος*.

¹⁶ Steph. Byz. s. v. *Μυτιλήθη*.

¹⁷ Strabo, I, 60; Eustath. Dion. Per. 536.

¹⁸ See Plehn, *Lesbiaca*, pp. 3-4 for the origin of the names.

queen of the Amazons,¹⁹ who is said to have conquered it. For the Amazons, according to Zenothemis, lived in Aethiopia.²⁰ It is much more probable that the name was Aethiopia and that it was given because of *Αἰθίοπιον*, a region near the Euripus,²¹ from which we know that some of the early colonists came. A detailed account of these settlements and of the history of Lesbos may not be attempted here. Only enough will be said to show the influence of other countries on Lesbos, and her influence, in turn, on the peoples with whom she came in contact.

The stories of the settlement of Lesbos indicate a close relationship to the mainland of Greece. Diodorus Siculus²² gives the longest and most connected account. He says that Xanthus, son of Triopas, with Pelasgians from the Peloponnesus²³ took possession of Lesbos, which had been previously without inhabitants. Some generations later Lesbos was stripped of its population by the flood of Deucalion. Then came Macar or Macareus. This period seems to have been one of the most important for settlement, as the sons and daughters of this Macar were reputed to be the eponymous heroes and heroines of the principal cities and mountains of Lesbos.²⁴ Concerning the parentage of Macar, Diodorus gives different accounts. In book V, 81, he tells that Macar was son of Crinacus, descendant of Zeus; while in book V, 56, he calls him one of the seven sons of Helius, thus indicating a Rhodian origin.²⁵ Gruppe²⁶ accepts the descent from Zeus through Crinacus, and finds a connection with the Boeotian region. This seems more likely than the supposition that the settlers of the period came from Rhodes.²⁷ The Lapith Lesbus, said to be a son-in-law of Macar, is certainly a Thessalian-Minyan element.²⁸

¹⁹ Diod. Sic. III, 55.

²⁰ Schol. Apol. Rhod. II, 965.

²¹ Cf. Steph. Byz. s. v. *Αἰθίοπιον*. Such mistakes in spelling are easily made. Cf. Anth. Pal. VI, 269, where the codex reads *Αἰθιοπίε* for *Αἰθιοπίε*.

²² Diod. Sic. V, 81; Steph. Byz. s. v. *Μυτιλήνη*. Cf. Plehn, *op. cit.* p. 24, and Busolt, *Gr. Gesch.* I, pp. 273 f.

²³ There is considerable evidence for Pelasgians in Lesbos, and as Plehn (*op. cit.* pp. 29-30) thinks, they probably came from Thessaly.

²⁴ Steph. Byz. s. v. *Μυτιλήνη*.

²⁵ See Plehn, *op. cit.* p. 25, for still other accounts of the parentage of Macar.

²⁶ Gruppe, *Gr. Mythol.* p. 297, n. I; Busolt, *l. c.*

²⁷ There was certainly some connection, however, with Rhodes at this period. Diod. Sic. V, 81, says Macar sent his sons into Chios, Samos, Cos and Rhodes with colonies. Bérard, *Les Phéniciens et l'Odyssee*, II, 79; Curtius, *Gr. Gesch.* I, 49, connects Macar with Melkar.

²⁸ Thraemer, *Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encycl.* II, 1660.