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HONEY BEES AND HONEY: MYTHOLOGY, PROPHECY, AND HEALING

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Beekeeping occurred on Crete by the 1500s BCE. Coins of Militaea from this time depict Zeus on one side and bees on the reverse with an inscription reading "MELI" (honey). For the ancient Greeks, Crete was seen as the origin place of bees, since it was here that Rhea is said to have given birth to Zeus. On Crete, the future king of the gods was raised on honey and milk, thanks to Melissa, the daughter of the king of Crete, Melisseus. In myth, Melisseus was the first to sacrifice to the gods and Melissa becomes the first priestess to the Magna Mater (and in some versions of the story is turned into a bee herself). Priestesses and attendants to various deities continued to be called melissae after their mythological namesake. Associations with Zeus, Apollo, and Dionysus allowed a prophetic aspect to be attributed to bees, which extended to the sacred landscapes of Mount Dicte, the oracle sanctuary at Delphi, the home of the Thriae prophetic nymphs at Mount Parnassos, and cemeteries.

The ancients believed that if one were to consume honey, they would interact with the divine, and adopt the characteristics attributed to bees. Poets and prophetic figures were often said to have been fed by bees during infancy. By ingesting honey, a person could be pure, chaste, holy, prophetic, or come into contact with the divine. Nectar was not only food for the gods, but also food of bees.

Because of bee's proximity to the divine, honey also had a high sacrificial value and was used in funeral rites as offerings to the dead. Some believe that the bee embodies the soul of the dead and swarms of buzzing bees were the dead flying around on earth. Bees were chthonian creatures, connected to ideas of preservation and resurrection.

Keywords

honey bees, honey, mythology, Crete, prophecy, sacred landscapes

Note/comment