Picturing Homer as a cult hero

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

Picturing Homer as a cult hero

March 3, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

This posting for 2016.03.03 in Classical Inquiries centers on the head of a bronze statue, dated somewhere between 227 and 221 BCE. The bronze head, on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC until 2016.03.20, is on loan from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and a photograph of this head has been featured as the cover illustrations for two other postings in Classical Inquiries, 2016.02.22 and 2016.02.29. As Claudia Filos and Keith Stone report in the second of these two consecutive postings, there was a panel discussion concerning this bronze head at a public event held at the National Gallery of Art, 2016.02.25. In the context of that discussion, Gloria Ferrari Pinney argued that the Houston head is a representation of Homer. Taking my lead from that argument, I argue here in this posting for 2016.03.03 that Homer is in this case imagined not only as the greatest of all poets but also as a cult hero. [full article here]

Introduction

§0.1. This posting for 2016.03.03 in Classical Inquiries centers on the head of a bronze statue, dated somewhere between 227 and 221 BCE. The bronze head, on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC until 2016.03.20, is on loan from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and a photograph of this head has been featured as the cover illustrations for two other postings in Classical Inquiries, 2016.02.22 and 2016.02.29. As Claudia Filos and Keith Stone report in the second of these two consecutive postings, there was a panel discussion concerning this bronze head at a public event held at the National Gallery of Art, 2016.02.25. In the context of that discussion, Gloria Ferrari Pinney argued that the Houston head is a representation of Homer. Taking my lead from that argument, I argue here in this posting for 2016.03.03 that Homer is in this case imagined not only as the greatest of all poets but also as a cult hero.

§0.2. An essential aspect of Gloria Pinney’s argument is the fact that the Houston bronze head resembles closely the head of the god Zeus himself as represented in statues and coins. In terms of this argument, Homer is figured as the greatest poet of the ancient Greeks just as Zeus is figured as their greatest god.

§0.3. There is further evidence, as Gloria Pinney shows, for the artistic construct of such a resemblance between Homer and Zeus. A most telling example is a marble monument known as the Archelaos Relief, conventionally dated to the second century BCE. The lower zone of the relief sculpture shows an enthroned Homer receiving sacrificial offerings while the upper zone shows Zeus himself, holding a scepter. Similarly, Homer holds a scepter, which is in his left hand. Also, he holds a scroll in his right hand. There is no mistake about the identification of Homer here, since the Archelaos Relief features adjacent lettering that reads ΟΜΗΡΟΣ (Homēros). We see comparable representations of an enthroned Homer as pictured on two coins, one from the city-state of Smyrna, reputed to be the place where he was born, and another from the island-state of Ios, where he was supposedly conceived—and where he died.

Picturing Homer as blind or as sighted

§1. As Gloria Pinney argues, the artistic construct of such a resemblance between Homer and Zeus comes with a requirement: Homer must be pictured as sighted, not blind. If Homer is to be compared to Zeus, he cannot be deformed by blindness, since the greatest of all gods must surely be exempt from such deformity.

§2. But there are well-known examples of an alternative artistic construct that features Homer as blind, and this construct is amply attested in the visual arts. Further, such an artistic construct of a blind Homer matches what we read in the stories produced by the verbal arts of mythmaking about Homer’s life. In those stories as I analyzed them in my posting for 2016.02.25 and, earlier, for 2016.02.18, Homer in various different ways becomes a blind man in the course of his life. So, the question arises: what is the difference between a blind Homer and a sighted Homer?

§3. If we follow the logic of the artistic construct that we see at work in the Archelaos Relief, the enthroned Homer as pictured in that relief must surely be situated in a state of existence that follows his death. In other words, Homer now exists in an afterlife. That is why the Archelaos Relief has been thought to represent what is called the “apotheosis” of Homer: it is as if the greatest of poets had now become a theos or ‘god’, just as Zeus is a god.[1] And, in this transcendent state, Homer regains his vision. Here is a close-up of this transcendent Homer as represented in the Archelaos relief:
Picturing Homer as a cult hero

§4. I argue, however, that Homer in such a state of afterlife is not so much a god as he is a cult hero who looks like a god. Here I find it most useful to consult a book by W. H. D. Rouse on the iconography of votive offerings.[2] He collects images of cult heroes in the afterlife who are pictured as enthroned or reclining or engaged in other such poses.[3] In each case, as Rouse shows, the pose is matched by gods who are similarly engaged: in one particular case, Rouse describes the picturing of a reclining hero "with face approaching that of Zeus or Hades."[4]

§5. Just as the enthroned Homer in the Archelaos relief receives sacrificial offerings from his worshippers, so also the enthroned cult heroes in the collection put together by Rouse are seen in the act of receiving offerings from their worshippers. Here is an example:

Bibliography


Notes

[1] For a brief history of this terminology, which also inspired the painting "L’Apotéose d’Homère" by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1827), see Clay 2004:1.
Homer in Houston

Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies and the National Gallery of Art Collaborate to Shine Light on Ancient Greek Bronzes, Part 2

Tags: cult hero, Gloria Ferrari Pinney, Greek bronzes, Homer, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, National Gallery of Art, thrones

One Response to Picturing Homer as a cult hero

Clifford Groen  March 8, 2016 at 3:25 pm (Edit)

After reading Hour 15 ("What the Hero 'Means'”) of Prof. Nagy’s book "The Ancient Greek Hero In 24 Hours", I can know more about the cult heroes. This posting is excellent. Homer exists in an afterlife. He regains his vision. He looks like a god. I am not blind to this myth. The line drawing of a hero from Patras is very interesting. I have a Greek friend who was born there.