A placeholder for the hero Amphiaraos

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

Amphiaraos, a hero who is most prominently featured in ancient Greek epic narratives about the so-called Seven Against Thebes, has a special place in the writings of Pausanias, as we can readily see from a search for this hero’s name in a retranslation of Pausanias that has been made available online for free in a retranslation of Pausanias Reader in Progress. Here I focus on a passage where Pausanias first mentions the existence of hero cults established in honor of Amphiaraos. In the context of this passage, we see also the traveler’s first mention of a myth about this hero.

According to the myth, Amphiaraos was fleeing from Thebes after the expedition of the Seven had failed, driving his chariot across a plain, when, suddenly, the earth opened up and swallowed him together with the chariot drawn by his speeding horses. This mystical moment of the hero’s engulfment by Mother Earth has captivated artists both ancient and modern, and I show an example here. As Pausanias observes, however, there were different traditions about locating the actual place where Amphiaraos was engulfed. This observation about ongoing disagreement over the place where the primal scene of the hero’s engulfment actually happened is what I mark here as a placeholder for further commentary on further passages where Pausanias refers to the hero cult of Amphiaraos.

Here is my retranslation of the relevant passage in Pausanias:

{1.34.1} The land of Oropos, between Attica and the land of Tanagra, which originally belonged to Boeotia, in our time belongs to the Athenians, who always fought for it but never won secure possession until Philip gave it to them after taking Thebes. Their city [polis] is on the coast and affords nothing remarkable for any scientific-write-up.
envelopment by the earth is a sign, I argue, of a keen awareness about the subsequent resurrection of the hero as narrated in the songs of Pindar, against Thebes is made explicit, though it is only implicit in the references to the engulfment of this same hero from death as a cult hero. In worshippers of the hero come to consult him, though Pausanias observes that there was some. {15§34} The death of Amphiaraos is a most telling example. In the version of the relevant myth as retold by Pausanias at 1.34.2, Amphiaraos is riding back home on his war chariot after the defeat of the Seven against Thebes, when suddenly the earth opens up underneath and swallows him—speeding chariot and horses and all; and, at the spot where this engulfment happened, there is a hieron, ‘sacred space’, where worshippers of the hero come to consult him, though Pausanias observes that there was some disagreement about matching the place of the ritual consultations with the actual place of the engulfment. In any case, the engulfment of Amphiaraos by the earth is a sign of his death and of his subsequent return from death as a cult hero. In Odyssey 15, lines 247 and 253, the death of Amphiaraos after the expedition against Thebes is made explicit, though it is only implicit in the references to the engulfment of this same hero as narrated in the songs of Pindar, at Olympian 6.14, Nemean 9.24–27, 10.8–9. The poetic reticence we see in Pindar’s songs about mentioning the actual death of Amphiaraos at the moment of his engulfment by the earth is a sign, I argue, of a keen awareness about the subsequent resurrection of the hero. Further comments at BA 154, 204 = 985, 10941n3.

Bibliography

See the dynamic Bibliography for APRIP.

Inventory of terms and names

See the dynamic Inventory of terms and names for APRIP.

Tags: Amphiaraos, Commentary, engulfment, Pausanias, Protesilaos, Thebes, Trophonios

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