



Picturing Archilochus as a Cult Hero

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Classical Inquiries

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Picturing Archilochus as a cult hero

June 6, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy](#)[Comments off](#) [Edit This](#)2018.06.06 | [By Gregory Nagy](#)

This posting in *Classical Inquiries* for 2018.06.06 picks up from where I left off in a posting for [2016.03.03](#), the title of which was "Picturing Homer as a cult hero." I now turn to a close parallel, which is a picturing of Archilochus as a cult hero in the island state of Paros.

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)

Silver coin from Paros, dated to the first century BCE. Plate 31 and Catalogue VI 31 in Clay 2004, with commentary at pp. 61–62. There is also an image of the coin in Zanker 1995 Figure 86a. Pictured is Archilochus of Paros, seated on a diphros, holding a lyre in his left hand and a papyrus scroll in his right. The inscription to the right of the poet reads ΠΑΡΙΩΝ 'of the people of Paros'; on the left, it reads ΠΕΙΣΙΒ, referring to the archon of the state at the time of minting, Peisiboulos. The other side of the coin pictures the god Dionysus, wearing a garland of ivy. Drawing by Zoie Lafis.

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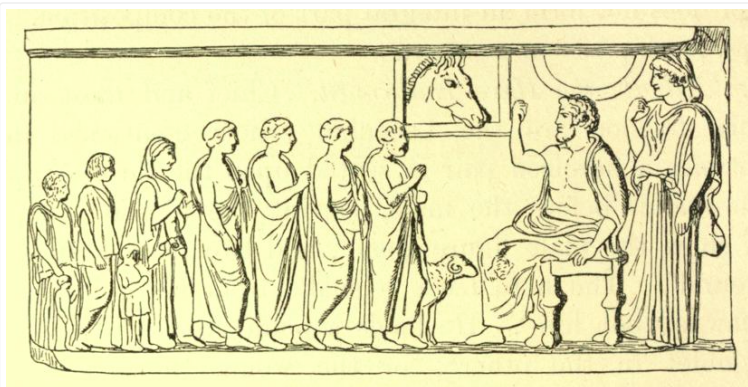
Another silver coin from Paros, this one dated to about 200 BCE. Pictured again is Archilochus of Paros, seated on a diphros, holding a lyre in his left hand and a plectrum in his right. The inscription to the right of the poet reads ΠΑΡΙΩΝ 'of the people of Paros'; on the left, it reads ΑΝΑΞΙΚ. Here too the other side of the coin pictures the god Dionysus, wearing a garland of ivy. [Image](#) via Münzkabinett Online Catalogue, under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#) license.

In my posting about Homer as cult hero, I concentrated on a scene that is pictured in the so-called Archelaos Relief, dating from the third century BCE. That scene pictures a climactic moment of hero cult, where a seated Homer is being worshipped as a cult hero. I show here a close-up of that scene.



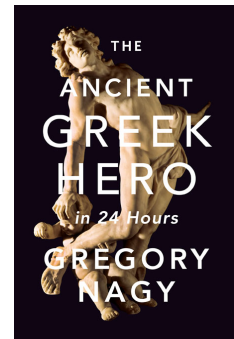
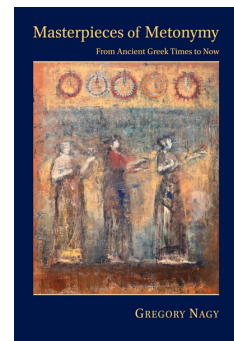
Detail of a relief attributed to Archelaos of Priene, ca. 225–205 BCE. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

I showed also a parallel scene featuring an anonymous hero.



Line drawing of hero relief from Patras, Roscher i. col. 2571, fig. 8. Appeared as fig. 2 in Rouse 1902.

In my current posting about Archilochus, I concentrate on a comparable scene that is pictured in a so-called "Totenmahl Relief," dating from the sixth century BCE. This scene pictures another climactic moment of hero cult, where a reclining Archilochus is being worshipped as a cult hero.



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A so-called "Totenmahl Relief," with a reclining Archilochus being worshipped as a cult hero. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

(On variations in the pose of cult heroes as either enthroned or reclining, I find it useful to consult Rouse 1902, especially pp. 20 and 34 on heroes enthroned and p. 22 on heroes reclining.)

In saying that both scenes, picturing an enthroned Homer and a reclining Archilochus, indicate a climactic moment of hero cult, I am offering interpretations that differ slightly from corresponding interpretations offered by Diskin Clay in his book *Archilochos Heros* (Clay 2004; the argumentation continues in Clay 2008). In a future post, I will give further details. For the moment, however, I present here merely the essentials of my friendly disagreement with Diskin, a colleague most sorely missed (he died on June 9, 2014). The slight differences center on two formulations of his that I paraphrase as follows:

- (1) The scene picturing Homer in the Archelaos Relief can be viewed as an "apotheosis" of the poet (Clay p. 91).
- (2) The scene picturing Archilochus in the "Totenmahl Relief" can be viewed as a feast marking the death of the poet—a feast attended primarily by his "surviving wife" (Clay p. 41).

Starting with the first formulation, about "apotheosis," I offer a slight adjustment. I argue that the relevant Greek word *theos* 'god' can refer to any hero in special ritual contexts where he or she is viewed as a cult hero:

For example, in the wording of Herodotus (9.120.3) concerning the hero cult of Protesilaos and in the wording of Pausanias (9.39.12) concerning the hero cult of Trophonios, there are references to the cult hero as a *theos* 'god' in the context of imagining him in an afterlife. In my previous work I argued that such convergent wording is in fact typical of hero cults: the given cult hero is envisioned as a mortal in the preliminary phase of the ritual program of worship and then as a god in the central phase, at a climactic moment marking the hero's epiphany to his worshippers. [Nagy 2008:259, with bibliography]

In line with such an argument, the "apotheosis" of Homer is a function of his general status as a cult hero who died and was then immortalized in a mystical afterlife—not of his special status as a poet who earned immortality from the gods.

Turning now to Diskin Clay's second formulation, I offer a related adjustment. In this case, I argue that the scene of a "Totenmahl" for Archilochus is a picturing of honors paid to the poet not on the special occasion of his death but on general occasions of worshipping him as a cult hero. As I infer from a systematic study by Rhea Thönges-Stringaris (1965) of iconography centering on the theme of "Totenmahl," the central idea in the scenes picturing such a theme is that a cult hero is being shown in the act of partaking in his own Totenmahl or "feast for the dead," thus showing the way for his worshippers to worship him—and even to visualize him.

In the documentation produced by Thönges-Stringaris (1965, especially pp. 48–58), I find that the most interesting examples of "Totenmahl" scenes involve inscriptions that refer to the given cult hero who is pictured: the most common designation of such heroes is simply $\text{HP}\Omega\text{Σ}$ 'hero', without the specification of any name. Occasionally, there are euphemisms, such as $\text{HP}\Omega\text{Σ EYK}\Lambda\text{O}\Sigma$ 'hero who digests [offerings] easily' and $\text{IATP}\Omega\text{Σ}$ 'healer' (on the "iatric" functions of cult heroes, I offer a reference in H24H [15551n50](#)). And, in one case, the inscription referring to a female figure who accompanies the hero calls her simply ΘEΑ BΑΣIΛEIA 'goddess queen'. (All these examples are documented by Thönges-Stringaris at p. 51.)

In view of such details, I will argue in a future posting that the figure of Archilochus as pictured in the sixth-century "Totenmahl" relief is attended by a goddess, not by a "surviving wife."

In that future posting, I will emphasize that this "Totenmahl" relief celebrates Archilochus as a cult hero instead of mourning him as the dearly departed, so to speak. In contexts of mourning as arranged by families for their dead, the practice of picturing these "dearly departed" as cult heroes does not become fashionable until the fourth century BCE and beyond, as the survey of Thönges-Stringaris shows (p. 65). A related point of special interest is a set of "Totenmahl" reliefs that show a cult hero holding a rhyton (p. 50). As we know from an explicit remark in Athenaeus 11.461b, the rhyton was the cup of choice for offerings to cult heroes (p. 65).

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For an overall bibliography that accompanies *A Pausanias reader in progress*, see the dynamic [Bibliography for APRIP](#).

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