



Olympus as mountain and Olympia as venue for the Olympics: a question about the naming of these places

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Olympus as mountain and Olympia as venue for the Olympics: a question about the naming of these places

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2019.07.06 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. The question is, can we connect the name for Mount Olympus with the name for Olympia, the place where the festival of the Olympics was traditionally celebrated every four years? Aiming for a unified answer to this question, which seems simple only on the surface, I will collect here seven facts that may lead to a satisfactory formulation showing a genuine connectedness between the names Olympus and Olympia. Part I will present my collection of the seven facts, and then Part II will connect these facts with my overall question about the naming of Olympus and Olympia. The connecting of these seven facts, which are mostly well-known, can be seen as a game of connect-the-dots.



Olympus. [Image](#) via Flickr under a [CC BY-NC 2.0 license](#).

Part I: seven facts

§1. I start with the best-known fact that is relevant to my question. The fact is, Homeric poetry pictures Mount Olympus as the abode of the gods. The god Zeus lives there, as we read in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

§2. But where is 'there'? Where is Olympus, actually? This question brings me to a second well-known fact, which also concerns Mount Olympus. The fact is, this mountain is located in the modern state of Greece, in a region that is known today as Macedonia. On a clear day, if you look across the Thermaic Gulf from the Macedonian city of Thessaloniki as your point of outlook, you can actually see Mount Olympus looming from afar over the western horizon. The site of the mountain was known as Macedonia already in the overlapping first centuries BCE/CE, as we read in the reportage of the geographer Strabo (10.3.17 C471). Likewise earlier, in the middle of the second century BCE, the location of Olympus was understood to be Macedonia, as we see from the testimony of Aristarchus of Samothrace (as reported for example in the scholia for *Iliad* 8.19), who was in that era the director of the Library of Alexandria and who has over time earned the reputation of being the most accomplished ancient editor of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

§3. The topic of Aristarchus brings me to a third fact that is relevant to my overall question about Olympus, and this fact has to do with Aristarchus himself. For him, Mount Olympus in Macedonia was not only the abode of the Olympian gods: as it has been clearly shown by Francesca Schironi (2018:323–329), Aristarchus was convinced that his poet Homer thought of Olympus exclusively as the only possible abode of these gods. To put it negatively, Aristarchus thought that the existing references in the Homeric textual tradition to ouranos or 'sky' as the real abode of the gods must be post-Homeric. As Aristarchus would have said it, references to the sky as the heavenly home of the gods must have come from poets who are *neōteroi*, that is, 'newer' than Homer

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I§4. As Schironi has also shown (again, 2018:323–329), Aristarchus has in this case stretched too far the textual evidence of Homeric poetry, since we can find occasional passages in both the Iliad and the Odyssey where the abode of the Olympian gods is pictured as the sky, not as a mountain. But the fact remains that Aristarchus did indeed think that such a picturing is post-Homeric. And that fact, which has been the third of relevant facts I have dealt with so far, can now be linked with a fourth fact that I will now introduce here. The fact is, a formulaic analysis of all existing references to the abode of the gods in the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey shows that the picturing of this abode as a mountain is relatively older than the picturing of a heavenly home that hovers on high in the pure sky above (Sale 1984). So, even if Aristarchus had overextended his interpretation by arguing that the sky as a divine abode is a post-Homeric construct, he was at least partly correct in preferring the mountain over the sky as the older way of visualizing poetically the place where gods live. I should add that, in the post-Homeric era of classical Greek poetry, as we see for example at verse 1655 of the Oedipus at Colonus by Sophocles (comments on this passage by Nagy 2013 Hour 18§42), the abode of the gods is visualized more generally as the pure sky, not more specifically as a mountain.

I§5. All this is not to say that Zeus, as the primary divine resident of Mount Olympus, was not a sky god. He was always a sky god, but his celestial essence was linked more with physical picturings of high points that reach up from earth to sky and less with abstract picturings of the highest imaginable point in the sky. And here we have the fifth of the relevant facts that I have collected so far concerning Mount Olympus. The fact is, Zeus is a sky god precisely by way of his connectivity with a mountain named Olympus. I have already pointed out this fact in a separate study centering on the physicality of Zeus as a sky god (Nagy 2016.05.12), and I will quote here just one example, taken from Homeric poetry, as cited in that study (§2). In this Homeric example, the routing of the enemy in battle is being compared to a violent rainstorm sent by Zeus from his abode high above on Mount Olympus (Iliad 16.364–366):

1364 Ὡς δ' ὄτρ' ἀπ' Οὐλύμπου νέφος ἔρχεται οὐρανὸν εἴσω | 1365 αἰθέρος ἐκ δῖης, ὅτε τε Ζεὺς
λαίλαπα τείνη, | 1366 ὥς τῶν ἐκ νηῶν γένετο ἰαχὴ τε φόβος τε.

1364 Just as when, down from Mount Olympus, a cloud [nephos] comes upon the sky [ouranos], | 1365 following an earlier moment of bright [diē] air [aithēr], and when Zeus stretches [over the sky] a violent rainstorm [lailaps], | 1366 so also was there a clamorous routing of them [= the Trojans], driven away from the ships [of the Achaeans].

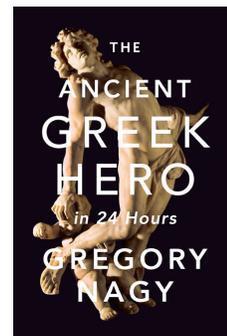
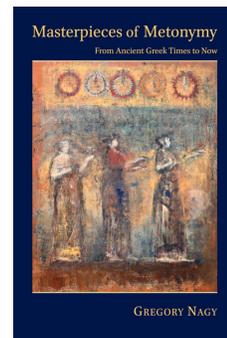
I§6. In the light of such specific mental associations of Mount Olympus with Zeus in his generic role as a sky god, our thinking may now be in danger of getting clouded over—as we go on to consider a troubling new question. What happens every time it rains? When rain happens anywhere in our world, surely we do not expect Zeus himself, as a single sky god, to generate that rain from his abode on high on Mount Olympus, which in our minds has been firmly anchored in a region known as Macedonia. The question can be clarified, however, by way of considering at this point yet another relevant fact that I have collected—the sixth one. And this sixth fact is not nearly as well-known as the previous five facts we have already considered. Here it is. The fact is, the very idea of Mount Olympus had taken shape in a different kind of world—a world sometimes described by archaeologists today as the Mycenaean Empire—and the political macrocosm of such a world consisted of a far-reaching network of kingdoms, each one of which could potentially have a Mount Olympus of its very own. What I have just described here as a sixth relevant fact—that there were many mountains named Olympus in the world of the Mycenaean Empire—can be found in a book by Martin P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology*. Published in 1932, this book was based on the author's Sather Classical Lectures, delivered in 1930/1 at the University of California, Berkeley.

I§7. Here I will add a seventh relevant fact, which is directly connected to the sixth. In her introduction to a paperback edition of Nilsson's *The Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology*, published forty years after the original appearance of the book, my sorely missed friend and colleague Emily Vermeule (1972:xiii) highlighted something special about the Sather Lectures of Nilsson: "A few years ago, it was said [by Sterling Dow 1965:22] that, if one lecture of the more than four hundred Sather Lectures delivered [up to that point in 1965] had to be chosen as the most valuable, it might be Nilsson's last [of four], entitled 'Olympus'." As Vermeule (again, 1972:xiii) acutely observes about that lecture, which became Chapter 4 in Nilsson's *Mycenaean Origins* (1932:221–251), it "explores the nature of the kingdom of the gods as Homer sang of it," and the model for such a "kingdom of the gods," as Vermeule goes on to say in the course of summarizing the thesis of Nilsson, can be viewed as "the real kingdoms of the Mycenaean age." This formulation, stemming from Nilsson and reinforced by Vermeule, encapsulates what I now present as the seventh of the seven facts I have collected concerning the name of Mount Olympus. The fact is, for each different kingdom that had its own version of Olympus in the far-reaching world of the Mycenaean Empire, there would be a matching kingdom of divinities presiding over such a mountain.

Part II: connecting the dots

Here in Part II, I add seven sections, numbered from II-A to II-G, which match the seven sections of Part I, numbered from I§1 to I§7. But the matchings of Part II with Part I will proceed in reverse order: in the sequence going forward from II-A to II-G, I will now be working my way backward, from I§7 all the way back to I§1.

II-A. So, I start by elaborating on the seventh fact I presented in Part I, as summarized in I§7. Yes, I take it as a proven fact that "the kingdom of the gods" on Mount Olympus as described in Homeric narrative must have been modeled on "the real kingdoms of the Mycenaean age," dating back to the second



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millennium BCE. The proof is amply documented by Martin Nilsson in Chapter 4 of his book (1932) and effectively backed up by Emily Vermeule in her introduction (1972:xiii). But now I go on to highlight Vermeule's use of the plural in referring to "the real kingdoms of the Mycenaean age" (again 1972:xiii). This use is in line with the emphasis placed by Nilsson on the nature of the Mycenaean Empire as a loose confederation of kingdoms that was dominated though not fully controlled by one supreme kingdom, at Mycenae. And I would emphasize that such modeling can be viewed as a two-way street, since the kingship of Zeus at Mount Olympus can be seen, in terms of Homeric mythmaking, as an ideological model for the kingship of Agamemnon at Mycenae.

II-B. Given that the Mycenaean Empire consisted of many kingdoms, it follows that each one of these kingdoms could have its own local version of Mount Olympus, dominated by a local version of Zeus the sky god. And the fact is—as I already anticipated in I§6—that the world of the Mycenaean had many mountains named Olympus. In Nilsson's Chapter 4 on Olympus, he lists some of the examples that have survived into the classical period and beyond (1932:235–236):

II-B1. The mountain called Lykaion in Arcadia was also called Olympus (Pausanias 8.38.2).

II-B2. The city of Pisa, once the capital of a state called Pisatis, was situated between two mountains called Olympus and Ossa (Strabo 8.3.31 C356).

II-B3. In various regions throughout Asia Minor and beyond, there were mountains called Olympus: among these regions, Nilsson lists Lydia, Mysia, Bithynia, Galatia, Lycia, Cyprus.

II-B4. In the Greek-speaking world extending into the present, there are mountains called Olympus to be found on the islands of Euboea and Skyros, also on the Attic mainland, near Laurion. Nilsson, in listing these locations (1932:236), does not happen to mention yet another Olympus, located on the island of Lesbos/Lesvos. This Olympus happens to be my personal favorite, and I have visited it two times already in my lifetime, thanks to the encouragement of my friend and colleague Nikolaos Panou, who is helping me investigate further the antiquity of the name that attaches to this mountain (relevant is a work by Matzouranis 1949). On the basis of the investigation so far, it seems that the name of this mountain in Lesbos goes as far back as the second millennium BCE—so, it would date back to the Mycenaean era.



Olympus in Lesbos. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

II-C. As I noted in my comments at I§5, Mount Olympus can be visualized generically as the mountain of the local sky god. Such a mentality is still preserved today, though of course without any direct links to Zeus, in the island of Aegina. Nowadays, the old mountain of Zeus is called simply 'the Mountain' by the local population of the island. In what follows, I epitomize what I wrote about this mountain in §§10–11 of [Nagy 2016.05.12](#).

II-C1. The divine action of Zeus the sky god as a maker of rain is 'good' not only in a personalized way, as when he harms the unrighteous and thus helps the righteous [I showed a Homeric example at I§5 above]. The rain made by Zeus can be good also in a less personalized and more naturalistic way, since the rain that Zeus makes will sustain the livelihood of mortals by giving them water, as we see in the case of a localized myth about Zeus as worshipped in the Greek island-state of Aegina. According to Aeginetan mythology, there was once a massive drought that brought to a stop all plantlife in the known Greek-speaking world. Relief from the drought was made possible by the hero Aiakos, native son of the island of Aegina. The parents of Aiakos were Zeus himself and a nymph named Aegina (Αἴγινα), who was the Mother Earth of the island. Aiakos prayed to his divine father, whose abode was situated on the highest mountain of the island, named after Zeus Panhellēnios, to make rain again for humanity. Zeus then made rain, and Aiakos commemorated the success of his prayer by setting up a sacred space on top of this mountain where Zeus had his abode. (The most revealing sources of the myth can be found in Pausanias 2.30.4 in the context of 2.29.6–8; another source is Isocrates 9.14–15.)

II-C2. The sacred space of Aiakos on top of the mountain named after Zeus Panhellēnios was connected, in Aeginetan myth and ritual, with a fresh-water spring or fountain house built in the city of Aegina. This spring was supplied by the waters of a spring that flowed down from the mountain of Zeus

Panhellēnios through an underground aqueduct that extended all the way to the city center. In this instance, the aqueduct was a product of the combined forces of “nature” and “culture.” That is, the natural pathways created over time by the course of the waters flowing down from the mountainous interior were enhanced by way of excavating artificial underground conduits to produce a continuum for the flow. (Nagy 2011:74. On the archaeological background, see Privitera 1988:65–67; also Fearn 2007:102–105.)

II-C3. As Theophrastus, who lived in the fourth century BCE has noted (F 6.24), if you see a *nephelē* ‘cloud’ hanging over the mountain of Zeus Panhellēnios on the island of Aegina, it is a sure sign of impending rain. If you visit Aegina today, you will see this most prominent mountain looming in the center of the southern part of the island, and the local population has given it a commandingly generic name: it is simply *tò Oros*, ‘the Mountain’. This generic naming of the mountain is a survival, I argue, of localized ancient versions of what became the Panhellenic Olympus of Homeric poetry. What Theophrastus said in the ancient world about the mountain of Zeus in Aegina holds true to this day: even now, the appearance of clouds gathering above Mount Oros on this island is seen, once again, as ever before, as a sure sign of impending rain.

II-D. As I noted in my comments at I§4, an earlier visualization of the gods’ abode as a mountain named Olympus was giving way, even in the evolving medium of Homeric poetry, to a later visualization of Mount Olympus as synonymous or at least near-synonymous with the sky itself. I see here a gradual erosion of an earlier Mycenaean model, since the synonymity or even near-synonymity of Olympus with the sky would eventually lead, in newer times, to the political and cultural emergence of one and only one Olympus, as distinct from the many instantiations of mountains that had the same prestigious name of Olympus in the older and more diverse world of the Mycenaean Empire. After the collapse of this empire near the end of the second millennium BCE, what evolves in the centuries that follow is the eventual idea of a single Olympus, matching the singular absoluteness of the sky. That single Olympus ultimately became the Mount Olympus of Macedonia, emerging as the winner-take-all. Meanwhile, the many other mountains that had inherited the same proud old name were being relegated to an inferior status, becoming mere local curiosities that could ultimately be of interest only to antiquarians of the future.

II-E. At this point I return to the thinking of Aristarchus, who was for the ancients the world’s leading expert in the study of Homeric poetry. As I noted in my comments at I§3, this expert thought that Mount Olympus in Macedonia was for Homer the only possible abode of Zeus and his fellow Olympian divinities. I see an irony here. On the one hand, Aristarchus is arguing for a mountain as the definitive abode for these gods: so, he is following a Mycenaean model—without knowing it. On the other hand, Aristarchus is simultaneously following a post-Mycenaean model by thinking of Mount Olympus in Macedonia as the specific location for this abode. It is relevant to repeat here what I already noted in my comments at I§4: the emergence of Mount Olympus in Macedonia as the classical landmark for visualizing the abode of Zeus and his divine family can be correlated with the emergence of an increasingly sky-centered post-Mycenaean view of this abode in the evolving medium of Homeric poetry.

II-F. We now need to consider the ownership, as it were, of Homeric poetry as an evolving medium that eventuates into the sixth century BCE. Or, to say it even more narrowly, we need to consider the shareholders who were involved in the ownership of Homeric poetry in the sixth century. There are complications to be noted here, from the very start. And the biggest of these complications is the historical fact, which I noted in I§2, that the Mount Olympus of Homeric poetry as analyzed by Aristarchus is located in Macedonia. But now we must confront another historical fact: the Macedonians, whom Aristarchus recognized as the owners of Mount Olympus in Macedonia, were not the original owners. Before the Macedonians, in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, the owners of this Mount Olympus were the dynasts of Thessaly. And these Thessalian dynasts were also shareholders, as we will see, in the ownership of Homeric poetry.

II-F1. In order to reconstruct the role of the Thessalians in the ownership of Mount Olympus in Macedonia, we need to go back to sources that predate Strabo in the first century BCE/CE and Aristarchus in the second century BCE. Both of these authorities, as we saw at I§2, were already thinking of Macedonia as the site of Mount Olympus. But if we consult other sources, we can reconstruct an earlier state of affairs.

II-F2. As we read in the History of Herodotus (7.128), who lived in the fifth century and who was reporting on historical events that date back to the sixth as well as the fifth century BCE, Mount Olympus was in that era considered to be a landmark that belonged to the dynasts of Thessaly, not to the Macedonians. And these same Thessalians, as we learn from still other sources, were at the same time also shareholders in the ownership of Homeric poetry. The major shareholders in this case, however, were not these dynasts of Thessaly but rather the Peisistratidai, dynasts of the city of Athens during most of the second half of the sixth century BCE.

II-F3. In another project (Nagy 2009|2010 II§§47–48), I have noted the ongoing alliance, as highlighted by Herodotus (5.63.3), between the dynasts of Thessaly and the Peisistratidai of Athens, and I have argued that the politics of this alliance can be connected with the poetics of references made in Homeric poetry to the Thessalian identity of Achilles (Nagy II§49). But now, for the first time, I argue further that the politics of this same alliance can also be connected with the poetics of privileging Mount Olympus, which was a landmark for territory controlled by the dynasts of Thessaly, as the definitive abode of Zeus. Such poetics, after all, also privileged the territory of Thessaly itself as the homeland of Achilles, the premier hero of Homeric poetry.

II-G. Here I come back full-circle to the first of the seven facts I collected in Part I, as formulated in I§1. As I noted there, the fact is that Homeric poetry pictures Mount Olympus as the abode of the gods, and that the god Zeus lives there, as we read in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But now, by continuing to connect the dots, as it were, I can add a further formulation by tracing the evolution of Homeric poetry forward in time,

toward the second half of the sixth century BCE. At that time, an alliance between the dynasts of Thessaly and the Peisistratidai, who were then the dynasts of Athens, led to two levels of “ownership,” as it were: while the dynasts of Athens “owned” Homeric poetry, the dynasts of Thessaly could at the same time “own” the mountain that was celebrated as the abode of the gods in that poetry.

II-G1. A visible sign of such “co-ownership” in Homeric poetry is the narrative in *Odyssey* 11.305–320 about two young Giants named Otos and Ephialtes (308) who try to overthrow the gods by piling on top of the mountain named Olympus another mountain, named Ossa, and, on top of that mountain, another mountain named Pelion (315–316). By piling these three mountains on top of each other, they reckoned, they could reach the ouranos ‘sky’ (316)—and thus capture it for themselves. Curiously, this act of aggression against the gods abiding in the sky is described at an earlier point in this same text as an attack against the gods who abide on Mount Olympus (310). We see at work here an interaction between a later post-Mycenaean model that pictures the divine abode as the sky and an earlier Mycenaean model that pictures this same abode as a mountain. The Giants fail, of course, and the futility of their attempt to reach the abode of the gods in the sky is even actualized in this story by the very idea that it takes three of the highest mountains, piled one on top of the other, to reach the sky.

II-G2. Highest mountains where? In the Homeric text at *Odyssey* 11.305–320, it is no coincidence that the mountains that are named here—Olympus, Ossa, and Pelion—were all three of them seen as landmarks belonging to territory controlled by the dynasts of Thessaly in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. The whole region of Thessaly itself, bounded on its east side by the coastline of the Aegean Sea, was shielded from access along that coastline by these three mountains Olympus and Ossa and Pelion, one next to the other, from north to south. And here it is relevant for me to recall what is said by Herodotus (7.128), cited back at II-F2. As we saw there, Herodotus thinks of Thessaly as the actual location of Mount Olympus. But there is more to it. As Herodotus also says (again, 7.128), Mount Olympus is to be paired with Mount Ossa. The mountain ranges of Olympus and Ossa are split by a narrow pass, through which the river Peneios flows into the sea, from west to east. In describing the routes contemplated by Xerxes as leader of the massive forces that were about to invade mainland Greece, Herodotus (yet again, 7.128) describes this narrow pass as a gateway for entering the territory of Thessaly.

II-G3. The fact that Mount Olympus is thus paired with Mount Ossa, I argue, is relevant to another fact. It has to do with another pairing, which I highlighted earlier at II-B2 while summarizing Chapter 4 of Nilsson (1932). There we saw that the city of Pisa, once the capital of a state called Pisatis, was situated between two mountains called Olympus and Ossa (Strabo 8.3.31 C356). And now I can add another relevant fact: over time, the political existence of Pisa as a city and of the Pisatis as a state was obliterated by a deadly rival, the neighboring state of Elis, and this obliteration resulted in a takeover, by Elis, of a sacred site called Olympia, which had once been under the control of Pisa.

II-G4. And here I have finally reached a point where my exercise in connecting the dots has led from Olympus all the way to Olympia, site of the ancient Olympics.

II-G5. I postpone for a future posting my further comments on the loss of Olympia by Pisa—and on the eventual obliteration of this city along with the entire state of Pisatis. For now it is enough for me to emphasize that the sacred site known as Olympia used to be under the control of Pisa before it came under the control of Elis. Also, in sources stemming from the fifth century BCE, Olympia was still being linked with Pisa instead of Elis. In the diction of Pindar, for example, Zeus as lord of Olympia is linked not with Elis but with Pisa (Olympian 13.24–29), which is a place described as belonging to Zeus (Olympian 2.3, 6.5). Also, the wording of Pindar links the idea that Pisa belongs to Zeus with the idea that Hēraklēs, son of Zeus, was the founder of the festival of the Olympics (Olympian 2.3). In the posting that follows this one, I will highlight the relevance of Hēraklēs, as the mythological founder of the Olympics, to a myth about his immortalization, which takes place on Mount Olympus (Diodorus of Sicily 4.39.2–3; paraphrase and comments by Nagy 2013 Hour 1§§46–47).

II-G6. Before I conclude for now, I highlight here one more reference, also stemming from the fifth century BCE, to the connection of Pisa with Olympia, site of the Olympics. This reference shows that the city of Pisa, which as we have seen is linked with its own Mount Olympus, is also linked with the Olympian gods. As we read in Herodotus (2.7), this historian ostentatiously connects the Temple of Zeus in Olympia with the city of Pisa, not with the state of Elis, as he measures the distance extending from the Altar of the Twelve Gods in the center of Athens all the way to a landmark that he describes this way: ‘Pisa and the Temple of Zeus Olympios’ (ἐξ τε Πίσαν καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν νηὸν τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Ὀλυμπίου); that distance, by the reckoning of Herodotus, was 1,500 Olympic stadium-lengths minus 150.

II-G7. As I will argue in the future posting that I signaled at II-G5, this Altar of the Twelve Gods, which was actually founded by the Peisistratidai, dynasts of Athens, is linked with the corresponding idea of the Olympian gods, which was taking shape in Homeric poetry as we can see it evolving under the sponsorship of these same dynasts. The abode of these Olympian gods, as we saw already in I§1, was Mount Olympus, and the god Zeus lives there, as we read in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Also living there, on and off, are other gods, and the canonical number for all these gods, Zeus included, is twelve. And the Altar of the Twelve Gods, as founded by the dynasts of Athens in the sixth century BCE, connects all these Olympians, not just Zeus, to the Olympia of the Olympics.

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Sensations of agony and ecstasy while indexing a book about ancient Greek heroes »



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