Classical Inquiries

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For example:
2019.07.12 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. As I indicated in the previous posting, in Classical Inquiries 2019.07.06, the aim of the brief follow-up essay that I offer here in the present posting, 2019.07.12, is to connect a myth about the apotheosis of Hēraklēs on Mount Olympus with a myth that credits this same hero with the original founding of the Olympics.

Part I: The apotheosis

§1. At II-G5 of the previous posting, Classical Inquiries 2019.07.06, I referred to the myth about the apotheosis of the hero Hēraklēs on Mount Olympus, citing my book The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 hours (hereafter abbreviated H24H), Nagy 2013 Hour 1§§46–47, where I offer a paraphrase and a brief commentary. For my paraphrase, I used the sequential narrative provided by Diodorus of Sicily, who flourished in the first century BCE. From the sequencing of this narrative, we can see clearly that the apotheosis—the Greek word for which means ‘being transformed [from human] to god’—is preceded by a most painful death, where the hero is burned alive over the flames of his own funeral pyre. Thus the transformation of Hēraklēs into a theos or ‘god’ is a process of immortalization, and, by using this word, I mean simply that the mortal as mortal is required to die first—and die most painfully—before he can become immortal like a god. Artists in the era of the Renaissance and beyond, which was a time when the ancient Greek myth of the hero’s immortalization was becoming a familiar theme, were evidently aware of a mythological need to visualize such a requirement of death-before-apotheosis, as we see in the illustrations that I have chosen to lead off my essay.
I§2. What follows is an epitomized retelling of the myth. In the logic, as it were, of this myth, there is clearly a need to tell about the death of Hēraklēs first of all, and only then about his subsequent apotheosis. The retelling comes from my paraphrase in H24H I§46, where I follow closely the narration of Diodorus (4.38.1–4.39.3):

Hēraklēs experiences the most painful death imaginable, climaxéd by burning to death. This form of death is an ultimate test of the nervous system, by ancient Greek heroic standards. Here is how it happens. Hēraklēs is fatally poisoned when his skin makes contact with the semen of a dying Centaur. The estranged wife of Hēraklēs, Deianeira, had preserved this poisonous substance in a vial, and she smears it on an undergarment called a khiton that she sends to Hēraklēs in a vain attempt to regain his affections; the hero had asked for a cloak and a khiton to be sent to him so that he could perform a sacrifice to Zeus after capturing Iole, a younger woman whom he now intends to marry(4.38.1–2). Hēraklēs gets dressed for the sacrifice and puts on the khiton. The consequences are fatal. Once the skin of Hēraklēs makes contact with
the poison smeared on the undergarment, he starts burning up on the inside as the poison rapidly pervades his body from the outside. The pain is excruciating, and Héraklēs knows he is doomed. He arranges with the people of Trachis to have them build for him a funeral pyre on the peak of Mount Oeta, and then he climbs up on top of the funeral pyre (4.38.3–4). He yearns to be put out of his misery, ready to die and be consumed by the fires of the funeral pyre; he calls on his friend Philoktetes to light his pyre (4.38.4–5). At that precise moment of agonizing death, a flaming thunderbolt from his father Zeus strikes him. He goes up in flames, in a spectacular explosion of fire (4.38.4–5). In the aftermath, those who attended the primal scene find no physical trace of Héraklēs, not even bones (4.38.5). They go home to Trachis, but Menoitos, the father of Patroklos, will later establish a hero cult for Héraklēs at Opous, and the Thebans have a similar hero cult for him (4.38.1). Others, however, especially the Athenians, worship Héraklēs not as a hero but as a god (4.39.1). The rationale for this alternative custom is given by the continuation of the myth as retold by Diodorus: at the moment of his death, Héraklēs regains consciousness and finds himself on the top of Mount Olympus, in the company of the gods (4.39.2–3). He has awakened to find himself immortalized. He is then adopted by the theoi, ‘gods’, on Mount Olympus as one of their own. Here, then, is his moment of apotheosis. And now the goddess Hērā, who had persecuted Héraklēs throughout his lifetime, changes identities: she proceeds to transform herself from stepmother, as it were, to mother. The procedure is specified by Diodorus, and I translate literally (4.39.2): ‘Hērā got into her bed and drew Héraklēs close to her body; then she ejected him through her clothes to the ground, re-enacting [= making mimēsis of] genuine birth’ (tēn de tekhnōsin genesthai phasi toiautēn: tēn Hērān anabasan epi klinēn kai ton Hérakea proslabomenon pros to sóma dia tēn endumatōn apheinai pros tēn gēn, mimounenēn tēn alēthēnēn genesin).

I§3. And here is an epitome of my commentary at H24H 1§47 on this myth as narrated by Diodorus (4.38.1–4.39.3):

Birth by Hērā is the hero’s rebirth, a birth into immortality. Death by lightning is the key to this rebirth: the thunderbolt of Zeus, prominently featured in the poetry of cosmogony and anthropogony, simultaneously destroys and regenerates (Nagy 2006 §75): Elysium, one of many different names given to an imagined paradisiacal place of immortalization for heroes after death, is related to the word en-é-λισων, which designates a place struck by lightning—a place made sacred by contact with the thunderbolt of Zeus (Nagy 1990:140–142).

I§4. In terms, then, of my overall argumentation (In Hour 1 of H24H), the myth about the apotheosis of Héraklēs on Mount Olympus is parallel to other myths about the immortalization of other heroes in other imagined paradisiacal places of immortalization for heroes. In all these myths, the hero can be immortalized, but the fundamental painful fact remains: the hero is not by nature immortal.

I§5. My interpretation of the myth about the apotheosis of Héraklēs differs from the corresponding interpretation we find in Chapter 3 of The Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology by Martin P. Nilsson (1932:187–220), which is all about Héraklēs. Nilsson’s overall view of myths about Héraklēs discounts the rituals involving this same hero, as if the hero cults of Héraklēs were irrelevant to the myths that were told about him—and, more important for now, as if the myth about the apotheosis of Héraklēs exempted him from the status of cult hero. In the posting that follows this one, I will analyze in some depth the reasoning offered by Nilsson in support of his interpretation, and for now I will simply confine myself to observing that this deservedly admired expert in ancient Greek Religionsgeschichte was strongly opposed to the methodologies of what he called “comparative mythology”—a methodology that I will proceed to defend in my next posting, though with some adjustments added.

I§6. That said, I return to my ongoing argument in the posting here. To summarize what I have argued so far, I am saying that the myth about the apotheosis of Héraklēs at Olympus is in line with myths about cult heroes whose place of immortalization is directly connected with rituals of hero cults.

Part II: A myth that credits Héraklēs with the original founding of the Olympics at Olympia

II§1. In his overall sequential narrative of myths about the hero Héraklēs, Diodorus of Sicily (4.14.1–2) says that one of the greatest achievements of this hero was his founding of the Olympics, that is, of the Olympic festival at Olympia. Further, as Diodorus also says here, Héraklēs not only founded this major festival: he also competed in every athletic event on the prototypical occasion of the first Olympics.

II§2. As I argued in The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours, we see here an aetiological myth that is correlated with athletics as ritual (H24H 1§41). This myth about Héraklēs as the founder of the Olympics at Olympia, as I argued further, is a perfect illustration of a fundamental connection between the labors of heroes and the competitions of athletes at athletic events like the Olympics. The hero’s labor and the athlete’s competition are the “same thing,” from the standpoint of ancient Greek concepts of the hero (H24H Hour 8b). That is why the Greek word for the hero’s labor and for the athlete’s competition is the same: āthlo. Our English word athlete is a borrowing from the Greek word āthlētēs, which is derived from āthlo.
name, Olympia, localizes in terms of both myth and ritual. Olympus, the heavenly locale of immortalization for the hero, is mapped on to Olympia, the earthbound locale of mortal aspirations to immortalization.

II§4. In the light of such a formulation, I conjure the passing observations of Nilsson (1932:193, 199, 205) about a seasonally recurring festival that took place at Mount Oeta, where a spectacular bonfire was lit to re-enact the incineration of Hēraklēs by the thunderbolt of Zeus. In this context, I see Mount Oeta as a regional variant of the Panhellenic Mount Olympus, where the hero’s painful death can immediately be followed by immortalization.


Bibliography


Tags: apotheosis, athlete, athlos, Deianeira, Diodorus of Sicily, Elysium, Hera, Herakles, Hercules, Hour 1, immortalization, Iole, Martin P. Nilsson, Menoitios, Mount Oeta, Mount Olympus, Olympia, Olympics, Olympus, Zeus

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