Classical Inquiries

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For example:

§0. For my brief essay here, TC XIX in Classical Inquiries, I return to an analysis, started at §4 of TC V, 2019.08.22, centering on a myth that tells how the hero Hēraklēs succeeded in clearing the stables of Augeias, king of Elis. These stables had been clogged with vast accumulations of manure produced by the king’s countless cattle. But now the hero single-handedly diverts two local rivers that wash away the manure he shovels out from the stables, and this strenuous work gets to be counted as a Labor of Hēraklēs. The myth lives on as a celebrated curiosity in the classical era and beyond—even during the Renaissance, as we see for example in the illustration that accompanies my introduction here. For me, however, this myth is less of a curiosity and more of a revelation, since it shows clearly a post-Mycenaean as well as a Mycenaean view of Hēraklēs in the act of performing one of his Labors.

§1. To put into context a post-Mycenaean aspect of this myth about the clearing of the stables of Augeias by Hēraklēs, I return to another analysis, started at §§0–1 of TC XVIII, 2019.11.27, centering on a post-Mycenaean dating for one particular version of various myths about the founding of the Olympics by the same hero, Hēraklēs. This version, as we saw, can be dated only as far back as the first millennium BCE—and not much earlier than the fifth century. It was the official version of the myth as promoted by the state of Elis around that time. According to this version, the founding of the Olympics at Olympia, controlled by the state of Elis, was funded by way of the vast wealth that Hēraklēs had plundered when he led an army against Augeias, king of Elis, and defeated his forces, killing the king himself and then installing Phyleus, son of Augeias, as the new king. Augeias was thus punished for having refused to compensate Hēraklēs for work that the hero had performed for the king, namely, the clearing of the stables of Augeias. This work was counted as the Twelfth and last Labor of Hēraklēs according to the version of the relevant myth as promoted by the state of Elis and, according to the version of the relevant myth as promoted by the state of Elis and, we know this because the hero’s act of shoveling the manure from the stables of Augeias is actually pictured in the relief sculptures of the twelfth of twelve metopes gracing the Temple of Zeus at Olympia in Elis, built by the state of Elis in the middle of the fifth century BCE.

§2. I am not claiming, however, that the myth about the founding of the Olympics by Hēraklēs at Olympia in Elis is exclusively post-Mycenaean. There are aspects of the same myth, even in the version promoted by the state of Elis in the sixth century BCE and thereafter, that still date back to a Mycenaean phase of transmission, going all the way back to the second millennium BCE. The point that I am making here has in fact already been made in my analysis at §§2–5 of TC XVIII, 2019.11.27, where I drew attention to a myth about an earlier Hēraklēs, originating from Mount Ida in Minoan-Mycenaean Crete and predating a later Hēraklēs originating from Mycenaean Tiryns: in terms of this myth, attested in the reportage of Pausanias (5.7.6–5.8.4), both the earlier and the later Hēraklēs had a role in the evolution of the athletic events that...
took place at the Olympics at Olympia in Elis, but it was the Minoan-Mycenaean Hēraklēs who counted as the very first competitor and winner, in the footrace known as the stadion, as distinct from the Mycenaean Hēraklēs, who competed and won in the athletic events of wrestling and the pankration.

§3. Nor am I claiming that the myth about the clearing of the stables of Augeias by Hēraklēs is exclusively post-Mycenaean. In terms of my argument, such a description applies only to some aspects of that myth. One such aspect, as I already noted at §1 here, is the detail about the wealth that is plundered by Hēraklēs after he kills Augeias: since that wealth, according to the myth, is used for funding the foundation of the Olympics at Olympia in Elis, this detail is relevant to the fact that the clearing of the stables of Augeias counts as the Twelfth and last Labor of Hēraklēs according to the version of the relevant myth as promoted by the state of Elis, and we know this, as I also noted, because the hero’s act of shoveling the manure from the stables of Augeias is actually pictured in the twelfth and last metope of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia in Elis, built by the state of Elis in the middle of the fifth century BCE.

§4. But there are other aspects of this myth about the clearing of the stables of Augeias that do seem to date back to the Mycenaean era in the second millennium BCE. In search of such aspects, I return to the two most comprehensive and systematic ancient sources retelling the myths about the Labors of Hēraklēs: Diodorus of Sicily, dating from the first century BCE, and "Apollodorus," author of the Library, dating from the second century CE. And I should start by saying that in both these sources the clearing of the stables of Augeias is hardly the Twelfth and thus, climactically, the last and most important of the hero’s Twelve Labors, as in the case of the version of the myth promoted by the state of Elis. Instead, this Labor is the sixth of twelve in the case of Diodorus (4.13.3) and the fifth of twelve in the case of "Apollodorus" (2.5.5; especially pp. 195 and 197 ed. Frazer 1921 I). Moreover, in the case of the same passage from "Apollodorus" that I just cited (pp. 195 and 197 ed. Frazer), it is said that this Labor of Hēraklēs could even be discounted as a Labor. That is, this Labor was invalidated by Eurytheus, king of Mycenae, who had given the original order for the hero to clear the stables of Augeias, king of Elis. Thus this Labor, according to the myth as retold in "Apollodorus" (again, pp. 195 and 197 ed. Frazer), simply did not count. And it was discounted on the grounds that Hēraklēs had demanded that the king Augeias should pay him wages for his Labor, without telling this king that the original order for the hero to clear the stables of Augeias came not from that king but from the over-king Eurytheus. The Labor performed by Hēraklēs as work for pay on behalf of Augeias, king of Elis, was instead supposed to be performed as work for no pay on behalf of Eurytheus, king of Mycenae. At §§5–7 of TC V, I analyzed the mythological implications of such an invalidation of this Labor of Hēraklēs, and I now recapitulate the relevant parts of that analysis in what follows at §§5–7 here, concentrating on distinctions between Mycenaean and post-Mycenaean views.

§5. The invalidation by Eurytheus of Labor 5 in the narrative of "Apollodorus" (again, 2.5.5; pp. 195 and 197 ed. Frazer 1921 I) is explained this way: the Labor that the hero is performing here is in the service of the king Eurytheus, not the king Augeias. If the hero Hēraklēs had been exclusively in the service of the king Augeias when he was shoveling out the manure from the stables of that king, he could have demanded compensation. But he must perform this Labor gratis, not for payment, because he is really in the service of the king Eurytheus. It was Eurytheus, not Augeias, who gave the orders.

§6. The Labors of Hēraklēs are ordered by the king Eurytheus, yes, but the orders of this king are authorized by Zeus. These orders, these commands, can be quite arbitrary, but the authorization is purposeful. When Hēraklēs is commanded to shovel the immeasurable accumulation of manure produced by countless cattle—and that is what we see him actually doing in Metope 12 while his divine patroness Athena is sternly looking on—his choice to go ahead and shovel can count as a Labor only if he accepts the authorization of Zeus. If he accepts—and I say it again—he must perform the Labor gratis, not for payment.

§7. In the myth as retold by "Apollodorus" (2.5.5; again, pp. 195 and 197 ed. Frazer 1921 I), Augeias the king of Elis refuses to compensate Hēraklēs for the Labor of clearing his royal stables only after he finds out that it was Eurytheus the king of Mycenae who had given the original order for this Labor. And it is only after Eurytheus finds out that Hēraklēs had demanded that Augeias the king of Elis should compensate him for his Labor that this over-king of the Mycenaean Empire refuses to count this Labor as a Labor.

§8. But how could Eurytheus, king of Mycenae, find out that Hēraklēs had demanded compensation from Augeias, king of Elis, for the Labor of clearing that king's stables? To me it is evident that the informant must have been a character named Kopreús, son of Pelops. This Kopreús is described in the Iliad 15.639–640 as a messenger of Eurytheus, and, in his capacity as a royal delegate, he is put in charge of informing Hēraklēs about all the various Labors that the king of Mycenae orders the hero to perform. His name, Kopreús, turns out to be a "talking name" in the context of the Labor that requires Hēraklēs to clear the kópros or 'manure' from the stables of Augeias—the word kópros is actually used by Diodorus (4.13.3) with reference to this Labor. In the context of this myth, then, Kopreús is literally 'the man connected with the manure'. Further, in the corresponding narrative of "Apollodorus" (2.5.1 p. 187 ed. Frazer 1921 I), we learn that this man Kopreús, son of the hero Pelops of Elis, became the official kērux 'herald' of king Eurytheus in Mycenae after having been exiled from his native Elis, and that it was in this capacity, as a herald, that Kopreús delivered to Hēraklēs the various orders for the hero to perform his various Áthloi 'Labors'. Since Kopreús is an adoptive Mycenaean, there is a logic to the fact that his son Periphetes, who gets killed in the Iliad (15.638–643), is actually described there as one of the Mukēnai of 'Mycenaeans' (lines 638 and 643).

§9. The mythological details about this Kopreús reveal both Mycenaean and post-Mycenaean aspects of the myth about the Labors of Hēraklēs. Only in the context of Elis, where the Labor of Hēraklēs requires the removal of manure from the stables of the king Augeias, is the relevant name Kopreús mythologically connected with the idea of manure. In other contexts, there seems to be no such mythological connection. And, as we read in the scholia for the Iliad 23.346–347, there is another character in Greek myth who has this very same name, Kopreús—he is king of Haliartos in Boeotia—and, again, we find in such a case no mythological connectivity with the idea of manure.

§10. Here the evidence of the Greek language as attested in the Linear B texts of the Mycenaean era proves to be decisive. The personal name Kopreús is actually attested in these texts: it is spelled ko-pe-re-u (Knossos Am 821; Pyllos Es 646 and Es 650). But this form cannot mean 'man connected with manure', since such a form in Linear B would be spelled *ko-pe-re-u, representing *kop*reús, not kopreús. The Greek 'manure' has to be reconstructed as *kop*ros not *kópros, as we know from comparative evidence: there is a cognate noun in Sanskrit with the same meaning 'manure', śákṛt, śaknáḥ, which must likewise be derived from a root shaped *śák-, not *kop-. So, as the noted Indo-Europeanist Charles de Lamberterie (2012:490–497) has argued most effectively, the Mycenaean name Kopreús has nothing to do with manure, and can best be etymologized as a derivative from the verb kóptein in the sense of 'cut' or 'strike'.

§11. But this is not to say that the name Kopreús in the first millennium BCE cannot be understood as meaning 'man connected with the manure', since the distinction between kópros and kopreús, still maintained in the second millennium BCE, that is, in the Mycenaean era, had by now been lost in the post-Mycenaean era of the first millennium: now there is only p as in Kopreús. In this post-Mycenaean era, a mythological character by the name of Kopreús could thus be readily linked with the myth about the kópros 'manure' that had to be cleared by Hēraklēs from the stables of Augeias. In terms of Greek morphology, Kopreús in the first millennium BCE would be understood as a derivative of kópros 'manure'. As we see from the linguistic analysis of de Lamberterie (2012:496), there are ample examples of such a derivational pattern (Toξές as derived from τόξον, 'bow', and σκόπους as derived from σκέπτομαι, 'I think').

§12. But the myth that tells how Hēraklēs shoveled away the kópros 'manure' from the stables of Augeias could have existed even without the existence of a messenger from Mycenae by the name of Kopreús. In other words, such a myth could have existed already in the Mycenaean era. After all, the fertilizing of soil with the manure of cattle is associated with rituals that are ancient enough to be dated back to the second millennium BCE. Evidence for such rituals can be found in wording that we read in sacred laws prohibiting the removal of kópros 'manure' from soil that is deemed to be sacred (as in Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum 28:100 line 2, [κε] τος οικετηριας γες κόπρον μη δινεσαι μηδεις 'not to take [against] any manure [kópros] out of the sacred [here: land]'). It is in the light of such contextual evidence that we can come to terms with the semantics involved in the ancient place-name Kópros (mentioned in the scholia for Aristophanes Knights 899). We see here the actual name of one of the demes (ἄθλου) of Attica (that is, of the overall region controlled by Athens). And, as in the case of official Athenian references to any demesman native to any deme of Attica, the designation of a demesman who is native to the deme of Kópros is actually Kópros, as we read for example in the wording of an Athenian decree quoted by Democthenes (18.73: Εὐθύλαοι Μυκηναῖοι Κόπροις ζέσαν).