



Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XVII, with placeholders that stem from a conversation with Tom Palaima, starting with this question: was He#rakte#s a Dorian?

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Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XVII, with placeholders that stem from a conversation with Tom Palaima, starting with this question: was Hēraklēs a Dorian?

November 15, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2019.11.15 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. On a most memorable day, 2019.11.08, a special event took place at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC. The event, organized by Rachele Pierini, a current Fellow at the Center, was a far-ranging informal conversation about any and all things Mycenaean. The participants, besides the organizer, included a genial guest who was visiting the Center, Thomas G. Palaima; also participating were Roger Woodard, Leonard Mueller, Eric Cline, myself, and, "beaming in" from Iraklion in Crete, Georgia Flouda. Another participant, invited as a valued expert in comparanda stemming from the post-Mycenaean era, was Diane Harris Cline. For our conversation on that day, the keynote speaker—or, to say it much better, our highlighted conversationalist—was our dear friend Tom Palaima, whom I described as "the current doyen of Mycenologists" in an essay I posted on that same day in *Classical Inquiries*, [TC XVI](#). That essay of mine, meant as a supplementary contribution to our conversation, centered on myths about a "Dorian Invasion" led by kingly 'sons' of Hēraklēs the kingmaker. Pivotal for the argumentation in my essay was an article by Tom (Palaima 2002) where he examines what I call "substandard" dialectal features that are sporadically attested in the Linear B texts of the Mycenaean palaces—by contrast with the standard dialect reflected in those texts. As we will see in this present essay of mine, posted one week later in *Classical Inquiries*, Tom's article is relevant to the question I ask in my title for the day: was Hēraklēs a Dorian? The illustration that is featured here as an introduction to my essay, where we see a visual pairing of the hero with a Doric column, will also be relevant to my question, which had been one of many questions that came up during the conversation of 2019.11.08 with Tom Palaima. All of us attending kept mental notes, referring to these notes as "placeholders," written records of which can be linked together by way of annotations in a planned series of postings for *Classical Inquiries*. The present posting is merely the first such placeholder in the series, starting with the question: was Hēraklēs a Dorian?

Placeholder 1: Was Hēraklēs a Dorian?

§1. As Tom Palaima points out in his article (again, 2002), the dialectal features that are "substandard"—or perhaps it would be better to say "non-standard"—in the Linear B texts dating from the end of the second millennium BCE match the dialectal features of the Doric dialects that pervade the Peloponnese in the first millennium BCE. So, I argued in my essay of 2019.11.08, [TC XVI](#), that there is no need to posit a "Dorian Invasion" of the Peloponnese as a way to explain the demise of the Mycenaean Empire toward the end of the second millennium—if in fact the Dorians were already "there" in the Peloponnese, as a substrate population. After all, as I noted in [TC XVI](#), there is no archaeological evidence for such an invasion, and, accordingly, I argued that myths about Dorian invaders originated by *hindsight* as an aetiological explanation for the pre-existence of Dorian populations in the Peloponnese. But the question remains: in terms of such myths, was Hēraklēs himself a Dorian? And my answer is twofold: (1) yes, he was a Dorian from the standpoint of Athenian mythmaking, and (2) no, he was not a Dorian but rather a Mycenaean—or, to say it better, an Achaean—from the standpoint of kings who once upon a time claimed descent from Hēraklēs as a way to legitimate their rule over Argos, Sparta, and Messene.

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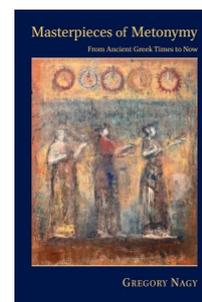
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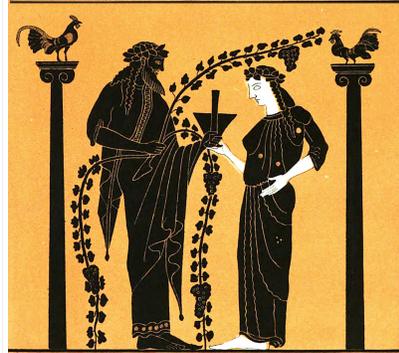
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From an amphora, British Museum number 1843,1103.96, dated toward the end of the sixth century BCE. Side "a" shows Hēraklēs on our left, standing next to a Doric column, and Athena on our right, standing next to an Ionic column. Side "b" shows Dionysus and Ariadne. Click on the image to view it at full size. Drawings: Eduard Gerhard, *Auserlesene griechische Vasenbilder, hauptsächlich etruskischen Fundorts* (Berlin 1858), plate 246. For photos of this amphora, see [the British Museum website](http://www.britishmuseum.org).

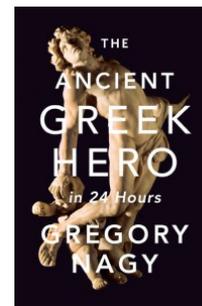
§1.1. For a singular example of the Athenian version of the myth, that is, where Hēraklēs is imagined as a Dorian, I point to the upper picture in the set of two drawings, shown above, which replicate pictures painted on two sides of an Athenian vase dated toward the end of the sixth century BCE. Here we see the hero Hēraklēs and the goddess Athena standing next to Doric and Ionic columns respectively. The Ionic style of one column befits Athena's role as representative of the dominantly Ionian culture of the Athenians, while the Doric style of the other column marks Hēraklēs as a Dorian. The appropriation, by Ionian Athens, of such a Dorian Hēraklēs is aetiological in an Athenian myth, attested in the *Library* of "Apollodorus" (2.8.1–3 pp. 277–289 ed. Frazer 1921), telling how the Hērakleidae, fleeing their persecutor Eurystheus, over-king of Mycenae, found refuge in territory belonging to Athens before they embarked on their expedition into the Peloponnesus as leaders of a Dorian Invasion. In terms of the politics involved in the Athenian mythmaking here, it seems as if the Peloponnesian kings who claimed descent from such Hērakleidae were just as Dorian as the Dorian invaders they were leading. The best-known attestation of such an Athenian version of the myth is the drama of Euripides that is named after the Hērakleidae; the title is often spelled in its Latinized form, *Heracleidae*.

§1.2. Conversely, the myths about a *kathodos* or 'return' to the Peloponnesus by the Hērakleidae or 'sons of Hēraklēs' (as in the *Library* of "Apollodorus" 2.8.2 p. 283 ed. Frazer 1921) could become a model for the Dorians themselves: they could be described in a way that seems as if they, too, under the leadership of the 'returning' Hērakleidae, were likewise 'returning' to the Peloponnesus. A particularly revealing source for such descriptions is the reportage of Pausanias about a Dorian Invasion (the passages highlighted in boldface make explicit the idea of a Dorian 'return': 2.12.3, 2.26.1, 2.30.10, **2.37.3**, 2.38.1, **3.1.6**, 3.2.6, 3.12.9, 3.19.6, 3.20.6, 3.22.6, **4.3.3**, **4.3.6**, 4.30.1, 4.31.11, 5.1.1, 5.1.2, **5.3.5–7**, **5.4.1–4**, 7.1.5, 7.1.7, 7.1.9, **7.3.9**, 7.20.8, **8.5.1**, **8.5.6**, **10.38.1**).

§1.3. In sum, whether they are returning to the Peloponnesus or entering this territory as newcomers, the Dorians in these myths are perceived as invaders from the outside, and this perception can extend to their leaders, the Hērakleidae—or even to the ancestor of such leaders, Hēraklēs himself.

§2. To be contrasted is the standpoint of the Hērakleidae who founded the dynasties of kings ruling over Argos, Sparta, and Messene. Their claim to kingship was based on the idea that they were descended from Hēraklēs as a Mycenaean, not as a Dorian. A striking example is the moment in the narrative of Herodotus (5.72) when Kleomenes, king of Sparta, approaches the temple of Athena on the acropolis of Athens and is challenged by the priestess of the goddess, who tells this man who claims to be a descendant of Hēraklēs that no Dorians are allowed to enter the sacred space of Athena. To which the king of Sparta responds: ὦ γύναι, ἀλλ' οὐ Δωριεύς εἰμι ἀλλ' Ἀχαιοίς. I translate: 'But madam, I'm not a Dorian; I'm an Achaean.' By saying *Achaiós* 'Achaean' here, this king is saying 'Mycenaean'. And, as I argued in [Nagy_2015.07.22](http://www.gregorynagy.com/2015/07/22/), the ancient people whom we now call 'Mycenaeans' were calling themselves 'Achaean' already in the second millennium BCE.

§3. In my essay here, I have supported the argumentation of Tom Palaima (2002) where he says that the Dorians were already very much present in the Peloponnesus before the collapse of the Mycenaean Empire. I should add that I also support, for the most part, the relevant arguments made earlier by John Chadwick (1976). Still, I resist some of Chadwick's formulations, as when he expresses his reluctance to use the evidence of myth. As Chadwick says (p. 116), "I do not believe that one can reconstruct history from myth." Well and good. But, right after saying this, he then goes on to say (again, p. 116): "for those who



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like to see the myths fully exploited, let me offer a crumb of comfort.” And here is the “crumb” (yet again, p. 116): “The Dorian hero par excellence is Herakles.” I ask myself: why does Chadwick say this? Evidently, it is because he then goes on to argue (pp. 116–117) that a Dorian identity for Hēraklēs is what disqualified him as king. In terms of Chadwick’s argument, such a disqualification supposedly shows that this hero belonged to a class of people who were considered to be inferior to the royalty of the Mycenaean Empire—and such inferior folk would have been the Dorians. But the myths about Hēraklēs never say that his failure ever to become a king had anything to do with a Dorian identity. So, the problem here, I think, is that the relevant myths have not been accurately reconstructed. As I have argued in my essays in *Classical Inquiries* on Hēraklēs, the very idea that this hero is never a king—but always a kingmaker—can be reconstructed all the way back to the mythological traditions of the Mycenaean Empire. And this is not to “reconstruct history from myth.” Rather, it is a matter of reconstructing myth itself—and thereby reconstructing the history of thinking mythologically. Such reconstruction, I insist, has much to tell us about the history and the prehistory of the people who found these myths good to think with.

Bibliography

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