Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XIII, with a focus on the role of He#rakle#s as kingmaker

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For example:

Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XIII, with a focus on the role of Hēraklēs as kingmaker

October 18, 2019  By Gregory Nagy

§0. In my essay for 2019.10.11, “Hēraklēs at his station in Mycenaean Tiryns,” I focused on references in Greek myth to the stationing of Hēraklēs at the Cyclopean stronghold of Tiryns in the context of the Labors that this hero performs for the king Eurystheus, who rules from his own Cyclopean stronghold of Mycenae, nerve center of the Mycenaean Empire. I argued that that spatial role of Tiryns as the point of access to Mycenae—a role made evident by archaeological evidence—can be matched with the mythological role of Hēraklēs as the Strong Man who upholds the kingship of Eurystheus in two alternating ways: one way is for him to serve as the leader of all the king's men in times of war, and the other way is for him to act as their model whenever he engages in ordeals of fighting singlehandedly against monstrous foes of humanity. In making this argument, I will spell out a disagreement I have with the views of Martin P. Nilsson about the relationship of Hēraklēs with Eurystheus, over-king of the Mycenaean Empire. In terms of my argument, as we will see, the relationship of Hēraklēs with Eurystheus in Greek myths can best be understood by comparing it to the relationship of the Germanic hero Starkaðr/Starcatherus with kings of Sweden or Denmark in Scandinavian myths.

§1. My point of departure is a formulation we find in the seminal book of Martin P. Nilsson, The Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology, originally published in 1931 and then reissued in 1972 with an incisive introduction by Emily Vermeule. In analyzing myths about deeds performed by the hero Hēraklēs in the service of Eurystheus, king of Mycenae, Nilsson (p. 209) refers to our hero as "the prince of Tiryns," describing him further as the "vassal" of Eurystheus. Here is the full wording of Nilsson's formulation (again, p. 209): "Archaeology corroborates the fact, the memory of which was kept by Homer, that the king of Mycenae was the suzerain. The prince of Tiryns was his vassal." I agree with Nilsson's description here of Eurystheus, king of Mycenae, as the "suzerain" of the Mycenaean Empire, as I noted already in a previous essay posted in Classical Inquiries, 2019.08.30, "TC VI," where the subtitle reads "A Mycenaean phase in the reception of myths about Hēraklēs." But I disagree with Nilsson's description of Hēraklēs as the "prince" of Tiryns, whose role is that of a "vassal" to Eurystheus as the king of Mycenae. From the standpoint of comparative Indo-European mythology, Hēraklēs is no "prince"—and certainly no "king," either. Like his Germanic analogue, the hero Starkaðr/Starcatherus in Scandinavian myths, Hēraklēs is always a kingmaker and never a king.

§2. The point I just made here has already been made in another previous essay, posted in Classical Inquiries, 2019.09.13, "TC VIII," where the subtitle reads "Some rough patches along the way toward a prototyping of Hēraklēs." At §7 there, I observed that a most fitting way to describe in comparative terms such figures as the Germanic hero Starkaðr/Starcatherus and the Greek hero Hēraklēs would be to invoke the Latin word dux 'leader' as opposed to another Latin word, réx 'king' (more on such wordings in Nagy 1979/1999 3§8 p. 48n3).
§3. By contrast, a "vassal"—to invoke the term used by Nilsson (again, 1931/1972:209)—is a king, even if he is lower-ranking than a high king or "over-king" such as Eurytheus. In another work by Nilsson, Homer and Mycenae (1933), his analysis of the interactions in Homeric poetry between heroes like Agamemnon as king of Mycenae and heroes like Odysseus as king of Ithaca really do point to a relationship between king and "vassal" respectively, where a figure like Agamemnon is "high king" while a figure like Odysseus can be viewed—at least, retrospectively—as a "vassal" (pp. 240–241).

§4. Returning to the deeds of Hēraklēs, stationed at Tiryns, which the hero performs as "dux" in the service of Eurytheus, who is the "rēx" residing at Mycenae, I see here a mythological construction that is parallel to the deeds of the Germanic "dux" named Starkaðr/Starcatherus, performed in the service of a "rēx" like the king of Sweden.

§5. I suggest that a parallel to such a mythological relationship between "dux" and "rēx" is a contextual relationship that we see attested in the bureaucratic language of Greek-speakers in the Mycenaean era, as reflected in the textual evidence of the Linear B tablets excavated at Pylos. In these texts, there are references to an official named the ra-wa-ke-ta, which spells lāwāg, who is a counterpart to a higher-ranking wa-na-ka, which spells lāwós. Nikoloudis (2006:1–3, with bibliography) points out that the contextual links between these Linear B words are comparable to the functional relationship between dux 'leader' and rēx 'king' as described by the Roman author Tacitus (first/second century CE) in his analysis of the social structuring of the ancient Germans. Using these Latin words rēx and dux, Tacitus in Germania 7 says that the rēx in German society is the king in whose service the dux leads the king's army of fighting men.

§6. Nikoloudis (2006:1–3, with bibliography) points out that the contextual links between the lāwāg and the wanax in the Linear B texts are comparable to the functional relationship between dux 'leader' and rēx 'king' as described by the Roman author Tacitus (first/second century CE) in his analysis of the social structuring of the ancient Germans. Using these Latin words rēx and dux, Tacitus in Germania 7 says that the rēx in German society is the king in whose service the dux leads the king's army of fighting men.

§7. As Nikoloudis also points out, however, there is a problem here with the meaning of the Mycenaean word *lāwos, which is actually attested as the Homeric word lādos (Ioāc). The problem is, can we really say that the Mycenaean *lāwos was an 'army'? After studying thoroughly the contexts of the word ra-wa-ke-ta (= lāwāg) in Linear B texts, Nikoloudis reaches an alternative explanation: the function of this official as 'leader of the *ra-wo (= *lāwos'), she proposes, was not purely military. In terms of her proposal, then, the Mycenaean *lāwos was not really an 'army'. She proposes, instead, a different definition (Nikoloudis 2006:187):

> It is proposed that the Mycenaean *ra-wo [= *lāwos] constituted a subordinate/minority group made up of all 'others' or 'outsiders' from the point of view of the ruling and land[...]granting palatial élite and da-mo [= dāmos] groups. These 'outsiders' included both local and nonlocal groups and individuals who were granted access to land in return for their service to the state. Through such avenues as military and naval service, agricultural and other labour, the ra-wa-ke-ta [= lāwāg] is thought to have mediated the integration of 'outsiders' into Mycenaean society. Ethnographic parallels attest to the practical benefits of such an office.
§8. In terms of this working definition by Nikoloudis, the *ra-wo (= *lāwós) as a social grouping that is led by the ra-wa-ke-ta (= lāwāgētās) includes people in general, not just warriors. And these people may be outsiders, non-locals, even immigrants. They may be underprivileged, in some cases even slaves. Thus the *ra-wo (= *lāwós) is a social grouping that represents the "weak" part of society, "in need of protection" (Nikoloudis 2006:207). In her use of the wording that I have just quoted here, Nikoloudis is drawing support from the work of Johannes Haubold (2000) and others in their interpretation of the Homeric word lāós, which is the attested form of the unattested Mycenaean word *ra-wo (= *lāwós). This is how she puts it (again, Nikoloudis 2006:207):

The Homeric lāós is now better understood as referring to any (weak) group of followers in need of protection. Yet the equation *ra-wo [*lāwos] = 'army' has persisted in Mycenaean scholarship, largely unchallenged, owing to [A] the term's apparent etymological connection with Hittite laḫḫa- 'military expedition, campaign' and [B] the convenience of interpreting the related high status ra-wa-ke-ta [lāwāgētās], second in rank only to the wanaks [...], as the military commander, appropriately involved in the defence of the polity.

§9. I too follow Haubold (2000) in interpreting the Homeric word lāós as potentially referring to a marginalized population who can in some contexts be included while in other contexts they are excluded from participation in a given society. But I think that this interpretation still leaves room for understanding both Homeric lāós and Mycenaean *ra-wo (*lāwós) as 'army'—in an ideologized sense.

§10. In terms of my understanding, the Mycenaean *ra-wo (= *lāwós) as a social grouping that is led by the ra-wa-ke-ta (= lāwāgētās) includes not only people in general, who may or may not be underprivileged or "weak," but also those people who are privileged or "strong," as represented by an army of fighting men. That is the ideology that I see built into the meaning of the Mycenaean word *ra-wo (= *lāwós).

§11. And I see a comparable ideology built into the meaning of the Hittite word laḫḫa- 'military expedition, campaign', which is cognate with the Mycenaean word *ra-wo (= *lāwós) and the Homeric word lāós (λαός). Here I agree with the interpretation of Jaan Puhvel (2001:5), who defines Hittite laḫḫa- etymologically as 'warpath, warfare', in that this word "occupies a semantic interspace between KARAŠ 'army' and KASKAL 'road, trek', especially far-flung expeditionary campaigning rather than generalized hostilities." As Nikoloudis adds (2006:210n11), this interpretation by Puhvel "highlights the sense of movement conveyed by the word laḫḫa-.

§12. As for the ideologizing of Homeric lāós, I am guided by the analysis of David Elmer (2013:195–197), who builds on the explanatory model of Haubold (2000). If a population that has been excluded from participation in a given society now gets to be included in the military contexts of that same society, as in the case of, say, a raiding expedition, then such a context of occasional inclusion can become ideologized as general inclusion, so that the 'army', which is a subset of society, can become re-ideologized as society in its entirety. Retrospectively, as Elmer shows, the listeners of Homeric poetry in the post-heroic age can view the lāós of fighting men in the heroic age as an incomplete society of the past, which is destined to become the notionally completed new society of the present. Such a new society, now complete, becomes the idealized context for the idealized reception of Homeric poetry in the present—by contrast with the incomplete society of the heroic past.

§13. I see an analogous pattern of ideologizing in the form of the office held by the official known as the ra-wa-ke-ta (= lāwāgētās) in the Linear B texts of the Mycenaean era. His militaristic title was an ideologized way of representing the marginalized as well as the centralized aspects of society. Likewise in a mythological context, I argue, the hero Hēraklēs himself could have been represented, already in the Mycenaean era, as such a leader of the people.

§14. A parallel argument can be made in the case of the Germanic hero named Starkaðr/Starcatherus as we see him represented in the mythological traditions of medieval Scandinavia. In the essay that follows this one, I will argue that the role of "dux" in Scandinavian myths about this hero is parallel to the same role in Greek myths about the hero Hēraklēs. As a preview for this argument, I show here a woodcut picturing the Scandinavian hero in such a role.
Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XII, Hēraklēs at his station in Mycenaean Tiryns

Tags: Comments on Comparative Mythology, dux, Eurystheus, Herakles, lāwāgetās, Linear B, Martin P. Nilsson, Mycenae, Pylos, rex, Starcatherus, Starkaðr, wanax

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