About what kinds of things we may learn about mythology by reading about rituals recorded by bureaucratic scribes

Citation

Published Version

Permanent link
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42182175

Terms of Use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA

Share Your Story
The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story.

Accessibility
Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone
Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins
Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

About

Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

While articles archived in DASH represent the original Classical Inquiries posts, CI is intended to be an evolving project, providing a platform for public dialogue between authors and readers. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries for the latest version of this article, which may include corrections, updates, or comments and author responses.

Additionally, many of the studies published in CI will be incorporated into future CHS publications. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing for a complete and continually expanding list of open access publications by CHS.

Classical Inquiries is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Every effort is made to use images that are in the public domain or shared under Creative Commons licenses. Copyright on some images may be owned by the Center for Hellenic Studies. Please refer to captions for information about copyright of individual images.

Citing Articles from Classical Inquiries

To cite an article from Classical Inquiries, use the author’s name, the date, the title of the article, and the following persistent identifier:
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

For example:

About what kinds of things we may learn about mythology by reading about rituals recorded by bureaucratic scribes

§0. This essay centers on a scribe working in the Mycenaean palace at Pylos who wrote a Greek-language text about protocols involving rituals. The scribe’s text, written on a tablet of clay in a form of writing known as Linear B, was accidentally preserved because this tablet, along with hundreds of other such tablets, was baked solid by a great fire that destroyed the palace at Pylos around 1200 BCE. Mycenologists know the approximate date of the scribe’s writing for a simple reason: they know the dating of the fire. The text of this particular tablet, which is classified by Mycenologists as Tn 316, is about rituals honoring divinities whom the scribe actually mentions by name, and these divinities include Zeus, Hērā, Poseidon, Hermes—names familiar to anyone today who studies Classical Greek mythology as it evolved in the course of the first millennium BCE. But what about these same gods as we see them named in the rituals recorded by our scribe, who is writing in the second millennium BCE? In the brief essay I present here, I argue that such rituals have something to tell us about the myths that went with the rituals. The scribe himself may have been an ordinary person—just as the ancient Egyptian scribe whom we see in my first illustration for this essay seems ordinary enough. Still, what the scribe writes might seem extraordinary even for such an ordinary bureaucratic mortal—if he is put in charge of writing up various protocols for various prescribed ways of caring for divinities and for things that are sacred to those divinities. Even a worldly bureaucrat, if he is to care about protocols for taking care of gods, could then be thinking otherworldly thoughts that are worthy of those gods. Beyond the Greek-speaking world, a model for such otherworldly thinking is the ancient Egyptian divinity Thoth, god of all scribes. We get a glimpse of this divinity, pictured with the head of an ibis, in my second illustration. There he is, otherworldly scribe, in the act of writing on his own otherworldly tablet.
The ancient Egyptian divinity Thoth, god of all scribes, depicted with the head of an ibis. (Image via Flickr. (The following notes are by Nagy 2019.11.23, revised 2019.11.27.) The image here is a close-up photograph of a model of Thoth, part of a set of modern three-dimensional models based on ancient two-dimensional pictures painted inside the text of a papyrus scroll excavated in 1891 and dating from the 21st Dynasty. The god Thoth is pictured in “Scene III” of the papyrus, the text of which depicts a series of otherworldly scenes derived from the Book of the Dead. The version of that Book as rewritten in the text of this papyrus has been customized to fit the circumstance, which I can summarize this way: a dead woman has been mumified and then entombed in her coffin together with the papyrus. The woman’s mummy and her coffin and the customized papyrus and the modern three-dimensional models that are based on the ancient two-dimensional pictures in the papyrus are all housed together in the Field Museum, Chicago: https://flic.kr/p/21Qs3Ba. Pictured in “Scene III” of the papyrus is the god Thoth in the act of taking notes while observing a ritual action, and it is this picturing that we see replicated in the modern three-dimensional model that I show in the close-up photograph above. The ritual action here is a weighing of the heart of the dead woman, described in the papyrus as a Chantress of the god Amun. The actual heart of this woman had been left inside her mumified body, enlombed together with the papyrus. The figures who are pictured in “Scene III” of the papyrus—and who are replicated by way of the modern three-dimensional models exhibited in the Field Museum—are engaged in the act of actually weighing the woman’s heart. The weighing is supervised by the jackal-headed god Anubis and recorded by the ibis-headed god Thoth. Pictured on one side of a huge otherworldly scale is the heart of the Chantress, and, on the other side, the Feather of Truth. If the heart successfully balances against the Feather, then the Chantress has passed the test and may now be presented to Osiris and Isis; if she does not pass the test, however, her heart will be devoured by the monstrous Ammit, also pictured in the papyrus. The god Thoth, with tablet and stylus in hand, stands by, observing the results of the weighing—and taking notes.

§0.1. The general question that I ask here, about what kinds of things we may learn about mythology by reading texts of rituals recorded by bureaucratic scribes, stems from an event that I already described in my post for Classical Inquiries 2019.11.15. The event, which took place 2019.11.08 and which was organized by Rachele Pierini, led to many questions that are in need of further dialogue—questions that the participants in the event were calling “placeholders.”

§0.2. In order to turn my general question into something more specific, in the form of such a “placeholder,” I must first offer some background. The general question was inspired by an incisive analysis of the Pyllos tablet Tn 316 by our friend Thomas G. Palaima in the course of the ongoing dialogues at the event of 2019.11.08 (for essential background on Tn 316, I strongly recommend Palaima 1999, especially note 3 in that article). I highlight here only one of the many things I learned from Tom’s analysis, which is, that the scribe of this tablet Tn 316 must have been faced with major organizational challenges in his attempt to record the rituals that were to take place in Pyllos and in the environs of Pyllos. And I say I “rituals that were to take place,” not “rituals that took place,” because I think that the scribe’s wording is prescriptive, not descriptive. That said, I now ask my specific question in the form of a “placeholder,” which is the second following the first placeholder I offered in Classical Inquiries 2019.11.15:

Placeholder 2: In the prescriptive wording of Pyllos Tablet Tn 316, what is the subject of the verbs i-je-to and a-ke?

§1. In previous work on Pyllos tablet Tn 316 (Nagy 2017:543), I offered a translation of both sides, recto and verso. Here I show both the recto and the verso. (I should note that my terms r=recto and v=verso in my analysis of the two sides of this tablet Tn 316 may ultimately have to be reversed. Tom Palaima, at the event of 2019.11.08, made powerful arguments for such a reversal.)

| In the month of | Płówistos. | Płows | and makes-sacrifice [i-je-to-qe] at pa-ki-ja-ne; and carries [ph[ore]a] gifts [d[óra] and takes-along [ag]el | for the carrying [phorēnai] (of the gifts): to the Potnia, GOLD CUP 1 [type *215] WOMAN 1; to ma-na-sa, GOLD BOWL [type *213] 1 WOMAN 1; to Posid[æa], GOLD BOWL [type *213] 1 WOMAN 1; to the Tris-hærós, GOLD CUP [type *216] 1; to the Dospotás, GOLD CUP [type *215] 1. |
Pylos: 
\[\textit{v1+2+3}\] Pylos: \(\textit{v1}\) and makes-sacrifice \([\textit{i-je-to-qe}]\) at the precinct-of-Poseidon \(\text{[=} \textit{po-si-da-i-jo}]\); and the city \([\textit{wastu}]\) takes-along \([\textit{agei}]\) the (gifts); \(\textit{v2}\) and carries \([\textit{pherei}]\) gifts \([\textit{dōra}]\) and takes-along \([\textit{agei}]\) for the carrying \([\textit{pherei}]\) (of the gifts); \(\textit{v3}\) and GOLD CUP \([\textit{type *215}]\) 1 WOMAN 2 \(\textit{qo-wi-ja} \text{[=} \textit{ko-ma-we-te-ja}]\). \(\textit{v4+5+6+7}\) Pylos: \(\textit{v4}\) and makes-sacrifice \([\textit{i-je-to-qe}]\) at the precinct-of-\(\textit{pe-re*82} \text{[=} \textit{pe-re*82}]\) and of \(\textit{i-me-de-ja}\), and at the precinct-of-Diwya \(\text{[=} \textit{di-u-jo}]\); \(\textit{v5}\) and carries \([\textit{pherei}]\) gifts \([\textit{dōra}]\) and takes-along \([\textit{agei}]\) for the carrying \([\textit{pherei}]\) (of the gifts): to \(\textit{pe-re*82} \text{[=} \textit{pu-ro}]\) GOLD BOWL \([\textit{type *213}]\) 1 WOMAN 1; \(\textit{v6}\) to \(\textit{i-me-de-ja}, \text{GOLD BOWL} \text{[=} \textit{type *213}]\) 1; to Diwya, GOLD BOWL \([\textit{type *213}]\) 1 WOMAN 1; \(\textit{v7}\) to Hermes \(\text{[=} \textit{a-re-ja}, \text{GOLD CUP} \text{[=} \textit{type *216}]\) 1 MAN 1. \(\textit{v8+9+10+11}\) Pylos: \(\textit{v8}\) and makes-sacrifice \([\textit{i-je-to-qe}]\) at the precinct of Zeus \(\text{[=} \textit{di-u-jo}]\); and carries \([\textit{pherei}]\) gifts \([\textit{dōra}]\) and takes-along \([\textit{agei}]\) for the carrying \([\textit{pherei}]\) (of the gifts): \(\textit{v9}\) to Zeus, GOLD BOWL \([\textit{type *213}]\) 1 MAN 1; to Hera, GOLD BOWL \([\textit{type *213}]\) 1 WOMAN 1; \(\textit{v10}\) to Drimios the son of Zeus, GOLD BOWL \([\textit{type *213}]\) 1.}

§2. In what follows, I repeat (and selectively rewrite) parts of what I have argued in previous work on Pylos tablet Tn 316 (Nagy 2017:544–547 = ¶¶112–122); in other parts, not repeated here, I have much more to say about my interpretation of \(\textit{po-re-na} \text{as an infinitive, phorēnai.}

¶112. My translation treats the verbs \(\text{pherei} \text{‘carries’ and agēi ‘takes along’ here as having no personal subject, in line with the impersonal prescriptiveness of the ritual instructions. Similarly, an impersonal translation can be applied to the introductory verb \(\textit{i-je-to}, \text{which I translate as \textit{hietoi} ‘makes sacrifice’, following the analysis of this form by José Luis García-Ramón, who argues for a formal connection between such a verb \textit{hietoi} (\textit{i-je-to}) and the adjective hieros ‘sacred’ (García-Ramón 1996).}

¶113. Having just said that the verbs \(\text{pherei} (\text{pe-re}) \text{‘carries’ and agēi (\text{a-ke})} \text{‘takes along’ and hietoi (\text{i-je-to}) ‘makes sacrifice’ are all deprived of a personal subject, I will now go on to argue that they all nevertheless share what I call an impersonal subject. An example of such an impersonal subject in popular culture today is any public sign that says \textit{EXIT}, derived from a prescriptive use of the Latin verb \textit{exit}, which means \textit{he/she goes out}.

¶114. The verb \(\textit{i-je-to} \text{at lines r2 and v1 and v4 and v8 is correlated with the place-name \textit{pu-ro} that we read at lines r2+3 and v4+5+6+7 and v8+9+10+11. This is the name for the city of Pylos, \textit{pu-ro}, which would be \textit{Pulos in the nominative case. As García-Ramón observes, a nominative \textit{Pulos} at lines r2+3 and v1+2+3 and v4+5+6+7 and v8+9+10+11 could in theory function as the subject of the verb \textit{i-je-to} at lines r2 and v1 and v4 and v8 (García-Ramón 1996:267–268). And here is where I apply the idea of an impersonal subject.}

¶115. In support of this idea, I note that the formatting of the word \(\textit{pu-ro} \text{as a headline, as it were, at lines r2+3 and v1+2+3 and v4+5+6+7 and v8+9+10+11, written in larger characters than the rest of the text, could indicate that \textit{pu-ro} functions as the subject not only for \textit{i-je-to} but also for \textit{do-ra-ke pe-re po-re-na-ke a-ke} at lines r2+3 and v2 and v5 and v8. As we will see in a moment, an essential piece of evidence in favor of this syntactical interpretation is the expression \textit{a-ke-ke wa-tu} at line v1.}

¶116. The ritual procedure of taking gifts to divinities is well known from the evidence of fifth-century Greek: an ideal example is \textit{γέγονε… ἴππα ἔκ τοῦ ἔτους ‘to take \([\textit{agei}]\) gifts \([\textit{dōra}]\) to the sacred precincts [\textit{hiera}]’ in Herodotus 1.53.1. In the text of the Pylos tablet, however, we see that the ritual of \textit{agein} or \textit{‘taking’ the offerings to a sacred precinct is subdivided into \textit{‘carrying’} objects, as expressed by way of \textit{pherein}, and \textit{‘taking’} persons, as expressed by \textit{agein}. We see a comparable subdivision in Ἰλ. 23.512–513, where the prize that is given as a gift consists of a tripod for the recipient ‘to carry away’, \textit{pherein} (513), plus a slave woman for the recipient ‘to take away’, \textit{agein} (512).

¶117. I note here in passing a difference in perspective between the Homeric passage and the text of the Pylos tablet. In the Homeric passage, we see the gifts being \textit{carried away} and \textit{taken away} by the human recipient. In the text of the Pylos tablet, by contrast, the gifts are being \textit{carried to} and \textit{taken to} the divine recipients.

¶118. The fact that the recipients of the gifts are divinities in the text of the Pylos tablet helps us understand the status of the persons who are being taken to these divinities. In this text, the gift of a votive object or objects is optionally supplemented by the gift of a votive person or persons. And this person or these persons must be votive gifts just as the corresponding objects are votive gifts. So, in terms of my interpretation, these persons are slaves who can be given away as consecrated property, just as the objects are being given away as consecrated property. In the case of the persons who are being given as consecrated gifts, the consecration itself is indicated by the fact that the gender of the persons who are given consistently matches the gender of the divine recipients.

¶119. The verbs \textit{pherei} ‘carries’ and \textit{agei} ‘takes’ in my translation have as their direct object the noun \textit{dōra} ‘gifts’, and this direct object refers, first, to the consecrated golden vessels and, second, to the consecrated slaves—who are second-level gifts that are optionally added to the first-level gifts, which are the golden vessels. Accordingly, we could say that the semantic combination of a double verb meaning \textit{‘carries & takes-along’} with a noun meaning ‘gifts’ as a direct object is a \textit{merism} that can substitute for the semantic combination of a single verb meaning ‘takes along’ with the same direct object meaning ‘gifts’. (My understanding of the term I use here, \textit{merism}, matches that of Willi 1994–1995:181.)
¶120. That said, I am ready to consider the expression α-κε-κε ωατό-τυ at line v1 of Pylos tablet Tn 316, which I have translated 'and the city [wastu] takes-along [agei] (the gifts)'. This way of referring to the idea of bearing gifts would be the least specific way of expressing such an idea. It would be the unmarked way of saying it. In this prescriptive formula, I argue, wastu 'city' functions as a common noun in apposition to the proper noun Πολος 'Pylos'. In terms of my argument, wastu 'the city' is an impersonal subject of agei 'takes along (the gifts)', just as Pylos is the subject of hietoi 'makes sacrifice'. In this case, the sacrifice as indicated by hietoi (i-je-to) 'makes sacrifice' is taking place in the sacred precinct of Poseidon, written as pa-si-da-ra at line v1, and, as we know from other contexts recorded in other tablets, this precinct is located in the city center or wastu of Pylos, not in its periphery (Mathioudaki 2003–2004:122). That is why, in this case, the impersonal subject of the verb hietoi 'makes sacrifice' is exceptionally acting in the name of the city of Pylos when it participates in the rituals held in the sacred precinct of Poseidon in Pylos, at line v1. And that is why the expression α-κε-κε ωατό-τυ 'and the city [wastu] takes-along [agei] (the gifts) ' at line v1 occurs only in this case, where the sacred precinct is actually located inside the wastu 'city' of Pylos. In the other cases, by contrast, the city of Pylos is participating in rituals held outside of the city. That is what happens when the city hietoi (i-je-to) 'makes sacrifice' at a sacred precinct such as pa-ki-ra-ne at line r2, which as we know from other tablets (especially In 829) is located in the 'Higher Province' administered by Pylos. In such a case, the city still 'makes sacrifice', hietoi, but it makes this sacrifice not in its own name but in the name of the precinct that is sacred to the divinity who presides over that precinct. That is what we see also in the case of the sacred precinct of Zeus, di-u-jo, at line v8. And a similar formulation applies to the sacred precincts named pe-re-~82-jo and di-u-ja-jo at line v4.

¶121. In the last example I just cited, the divine recipients of gifts offered by the city of Pylos are three in number. We see here not only the female divinities pe-re-~82 and di-u-ja at lines v5 and v6, corresponding to the sacred precincts that are named after them, pe-re-~82-jo and di-u-ja-jo at line v4, but also the female divinity i-pe-me-de-ja at line v6, who does not have a sacred precinct of her own but shares the precinct belonging to pe-re-~82. Accordingly, the name of i-pe-me-de-ja is written at line v4 simply in the genitive, and that is why, I think, there is no separate votive slave assigned to her as a gift.

¶122. I have three final observations to make about the expression α-κε-κε ωατό-τυ at line v1 of Pylos tablet Tn 316, which I have translated 'and the city [wastu] takes-along [agei] (the gifts) :

¶122.1. In terms of my reconstruction, the use of the noun wastu (ωατό-τυ) 'city' as the impersonal subject of the verb agei 'takes along' here at line v1 is parallel to the juridical use of δάμος (δα-μο) 'district' as the impersonal subject of the verb φασί says' at line 5 of the Pylos tablet Ep 704. On Mycenaean δάμος as "an administrative entity that can have a juridical personality," see Palaima 2004:231.

¶122.2. In the expression that I interpret as agei-k'ε wastu (α-κε-κε ωατό-τυ) at line v1, which I translate 'and the city [wastu] takes-along [agei] (the gifts)', the verb agei 'takes along' has as its implied direct object the noun δώρα (δο-ρα) 'gifts', which is then made explicit in the wording that immediately follows at line v2, δώρα-k'ε pherei phorēnai-k'ε agei (do-ra-ke pe-re po-re-na-qe a-ke), which I have translated as 'and he carries [pherei] gifts [δώρα] and takes-along [agei] for the carrying [phorēnai] (of the gifts) ...'. We see in this wording a bipartition of the kinds of gifts that are offered to a divine recipient. But now I also argue that the preceding expression agei-k'ε wastu (α-κε-κε ωατό-τυ) at line v1 shows an absence of such bipartition, just as we saw no bipartition in the expression ἄγεν ... σῶπο ξύ τό ἵπα το τάκε [agei] gifts [δώρα] to the sacred precincts [hiera] in Herodotus 1.53.1.

¶122.3. Such alternation between the absence and the presence of semantic bipartition in the use of Mycenaean Greek agei and pherein is comparable to the alternation we see in the use of Latin circum-agō and circum-ferō in Cato's De agri cultura 141.1–2.

§3. With reference to ¶122.1, where I argue that nouns for social units can be used as impersonal subjects of verbs, I now note what I think is a comparison from the standpoint of Indo-European linguistics. The comparison comes from medieval Irish, as I learned from conversations with Joseph Nagy and Heather Newton. As the other Nagy points out to me, the noun tuath, which stands for a petty kingdom, can be used as the subject of a verb in the formula tuang do dia toinges mo thuath, ordinarily translated as 'I swear by the god my people swear by'. (For attestations, I refer to the entry tongaid in the Dictionary of the Royal Irish Academy. On the archaism of this Irish expression, I recommend an article by Watkins 1990.) But the translation 'people' for Irish tuath, as also for Greek δήμος, reflects a secondary meaning. Primarily, such words once referred to homelands ruled by kings, and each homeland had its own distinct customary laws—including its own ways of making judicial speech acts. Only secondarily, in juridical contexts, could such homelands be personified as people, and, even in such contexts the personification would have been originally restricted to contexts where the homeland itself had a juridical role, as in the case of formal oaths and asseverations.
Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XVIII, a post-Mycenaean view of Hēraklēs as founder of the Olympics

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

Bibliography

See the dynamic Bibliography for Comments on Comparative Mythology.

Tags: agein, Herodotus, pherein, Pylos, Pylos tablet Tn 316, Tn 316

Comments are closed.