



Questions While Viewing Greek Myths and Rituals Through the Lens of Pausanias, II: In Mycenaean Times, Was Athena a Goddess Who Was Worshipped Only in Athens?

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Questions while viewing Greek myths and rituals through the lens of Pausanias, II: In Mycenaean times, was Athena a goddess who was worshipped only in Athens?

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2020.04.24 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In classical Athenian visual art, we find representations of the goddess Athena in the act of conveying the hero Hēraklēs to Olympus in her chariot, as we see in the illustration that I have chosen as the cover for this essay. At first sight, it seems as if such an Athenian visualization of the hero's apotheosis derives from an exclusively Athenian myth: after all, Athena is the goddess of the city of Athens—she is, as it were, Our Lady of Athens—and her very identity defines the identity of her city. In this essay, however, I argue that such a myth involving both the goddess Athena and the hero Hēraklēs is not uniquely Athenian—and that the goddess herself, in her role as charioteer of the hero and in other such roles, is not uniquely Athenian either. In other words, *Athena was multiple, not unique to Athens*. And one of the easiest ways to get a good sense of this multiplicity is to read through all of Pausanias, who conscientiously keeps track of the many different Athenas that are still being worshipped even in his time. Traveling around so many different locales of the Greek-speaking world in the second century CE, Pausanias finds different versions of myths and rituals linked with a goddess who is generally but not exclusively known by the name of Athena. And for me the only viable explanation for such multiplicity, as it survives into the first millennium CE, is to posit a pre-existing multiplicity of Athenas in Mycenaean times, that is, already in the second millennium BCE. Thus I have a negative answer to the question I pose in the subtitle of this essay: *In Mycenaean times, was Athena a goddess who was worshipped only in Athens?*



Attic red-figure pelike depicting Herakles conveyed to Olympus by Athena, ca. 410 BCE, attributed to the Kadmos Painter, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich. [Image via Wikimedia Commons](#).

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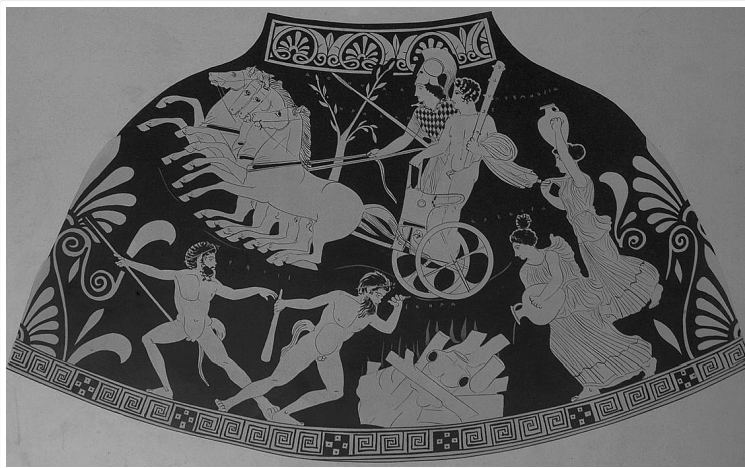
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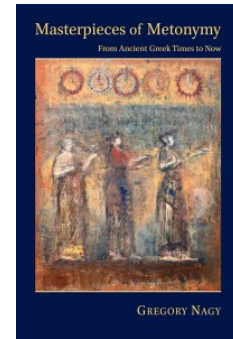


"Colorized" close-up of the drawing above.

§1. Here in *Classical Inquiries* 2020.04.24, I continue where I left off in the posting for [2020.04.17](#), rewritten 2020.04.23, where I asked a more basic question: *did Athena, goddess of Athens, belong only to the Athenians?* And there was a related second question: *was Athens the only place that was ever named after Athena?* Further, there was even a third question: *did this goddess always look the way she looks in classical Athenian visualizations?* All three of these questions had been left unanswered in the previous posting, though it was becoming obvious, already there, that my answer to all three questions would ultimately be negative. I held off because I still needed to answer an initial question, less basic and more specific than the other three questions. That initial question, to repeat the wording from my initial paragraph here, was this: *in Mycenaean times, was Athena a goddess who was worshipped only in Athens?* Here too, as I already said in the initial paragraph, I have a negative answer. And a prime example of my reasons for giving a negative answer here as well is a detail I find in the reportage of Pausanias about the myths and rituals of territories controlled by ancient Sparta. This detail comes from one of many visual representations that adorned a celebrated work of art known as the Throne of Apollo at Amyklai, attributed to an artist named Bathykles of Magnesia and conventionally dated to around the middle of the sixth century BCE. Among these representations, described by Pausanias at 3.18.9–3.19.1, was the picturing of the apotheosis of Hēraklēs, who is described here as being 'taken into the sky' by Athena in particular and by other gods in general. That is what Pausanias saw, as he describes it at 3.19.5.

§2. I think that this detail from Greek mythology, as seen and described by Pausanias at 3.19.5, can be traced back to the Mycenaean era. What drives my thinking here is the fact that the ancient site of Amyklai, where the Throne was located, is linked with older ways of mythological thinking that Pausanias at 3.19.6 describes as non-Dorian in origin. The traveler is setting up a contrast here with newer ways of thinking that he links with the Dorian world view represented by Sparta. The Dorians, Pausanias says, had put an end to the political power of Amyklai already in the heroic age, reducing what had once been an ancient city to its eventual status as a *kōmē* or 'village'. In the post that follows this one, I will offer fuller commentary on relevant observations of Pausanias here at 3.19.6.

§3. In that same post, I will have more to say in general about the territory controlled by Sparta, where the myths and rituals involving Athena are clearly independent of corresponding myths and rituals involving Athena in Athens. And here is where things will get more complicated. As I will argue, Athena in the region of Sparta was distinct from Athena in the region of Athens—ever since Mycenaean times. In territory eventually controlled by Sparta—and elsewhere as well—there was more than one way of worshipping the



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goddess Athena already in Mycenaean times. Moreover, as I will also argue, more generally, there was more than one city by the name of Athens—again, already in Mycenaean times. These arguments will be relevant to further interpretations of what we saw in the previous posting, where we considered a reference to the goddess Athena in the Linear B tablet V 52, found in the room of the Chariot Tablets at Knossos and probably to be dated to around 1400. As we will see, this Athena may or may not have originated from the city of Athens as we know it.

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