



Questions While Viewing Greek Myths and Rituals Through the Lens of Pausanias, III: Is 'Athena' the Name of a Person or of a Place?

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Questions while viewing Greek myths and rituals through the lens of Pausanias, III: Is 'Athena' the name of a person or of a place?

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2020.05.01 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In asking myself whether the Greek proper noun *Athênē* is the name of a person, that is, the goddess known to us as Athena, or the name of a place, that is, the city known to us as Athens, I venture into a way of thinking about the goddess and her city that has never occurred to me before. In all my research till now, I had assumed that the city of Athens—or, at least, the citadel or acropolis of Athens—was named after the goddess Athena. What has changed my mind is my overall reading of Pausanias, a traveler whose detailed reportage about the many different ways of worshipping gods and heroes in the many different places he visited during his travels in the Greek-speaking world of the second century CE has led me to a different way of thinking. On the basis of relevant evidence attested by Pausanias I no longer think that Athens was named after Athena. Rather, I think that Athena was named after Athens—or, to say it more accurately, the names of goddesses known as Athena were based on the names of the places where these goddesses were worshipped. Such a rethinking of Athena can lead to a fuller understanding of ancient ideas centering on divinities as personifications of places sacred to them, and one way to get a close look at these personifications is to view them through the lens of Pausanias, who carefully focuses, one at a time, on each one of the many different Athenas he encounters in each one of the many different places he visits.



The Acropolis of Athens, guarded by a colossal bronze statue of the city's goddess, Athena (the statue is no longer extant), as reconstructed in a woodcut (1898) after a wall painting by Carl Graeb in what was then the Greek room of the Neues Museum, Berlin. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. I trace my rethinking all the way back to a problem I faced in analyzing a unique attestation of the proper noun *Athênē* as a place-name in Homeric poetry, at *Odyssey* 7.78, where this singular form seems to be referring to the citadel of Athens as we know it, not to the goddess herself. Elsewhere in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—and for that matter everywhere else in all Greek texts attested in the first millennium BCE and thereafter—the singular *Athênē* refers to the goddess Athena while the plural *Athênai* refers to the city of Athens or, more narrowly, to the citadel or acropolis of the city. In previous work, especially in Nagy 2004:157–75, I explained the meaning of the plural in terms of a semantic device known as *ellipsis*, where *Athênai* as a plural refers not to 'many cases of a singular *Athênē*' but rather, elliptically, to '*Athênē* and whatever is connected with *Athênē*'—or, in a narrower interpretation, '*Athênē* and whatever places are controlled by *Athênē*'. This explanation, where *Athênai* is the elliptic plural of *Athênē*, solves many problems in interpreting the plural formations of place-names. But one problem remains: if we interpret the place-name *Athênai* as an elliptic plural meaning '*Athênē* and whatever places are controlled by *Athênē*', how are

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we to understand the singular form *Athēnē*? Is *Athēnē* to be interpreted as the goddess Athena or as the acropolis of Athens?

§2. In an earlier essay, [Nagy 2015.09.10](#), at §§6–9, I came close to solving the problem. As I point out at §6 there, the suffix *-ēnē* that we see in the name of the goddess *Athēnē*, who presides over the acropolis of Athens as we know it, is visible also in the name of the nymph *Mukēnē*, who presides over the acropolis of Mycenae, that is, *Mukēnai* (more in Nagy 2004:163). So we see here a formal parallelism with the singular *Athēnē* referring to the goddess Athena and the plural *Athēnai* referring to the city of Athens. And, as I go on to point out at §7 of the same essay, the same suffix *-ēnē* as in *Athēnē* and *Mukēnē* is visible also in the place-name *Messēnē*, which means something like ‘Midland’ (more in Nagy 2004:163n1). To be compared is the place-name *me-za-na* written on a Linear B tablet from Pylos, Cn 3.1. Here is what I have already observed on the basis of this comparison: “I suspect that the suffix *-ēnē* is endowed with an elliptic function” (Nagy 2004:163n17).

§3. I explain further at §7 in the essay I already cited (Nagy 2015.09.10): a form that is *elliptic* refers not only to X but also to everything that belongs to X, such as X2, X3, X4 etc. An elliptic form of X implies X2, X3, X4 etc. without naming X2, X3, X4 etc. explicitly. In terms of this definition of ellipsis, the name *Athēnē* refers not only to the goddess ‘Athena’ but also to everything that belongs to the goddess. The primary example of that ‘everything’ in this case is the acropolis of Athens.

§4. And we see another level of ellipsis in the plural form *Athēnai*: this elliptic plural refers not only to the acropolis of Athens but also to everything that belongs to the acropolis of Athens, which is the city of Athens, and, by extension, to everything that belongs to the city, which is ultimately the region of Attica.

§5. But then I have a further point to make at §9 in the same essay I already cited (Nagy 2015.09.10), where I argue for an even deeper level of ellipsis, and I quote: “the suffix *-ēnē* of *Athēnē* indicates that the goddess Athena is also a personification of the place of Athena, which is the acropolis of Athens and, by extension, the city of Athens, and by further extension, everything that belongs to the city of Athens.”

§6. This formulation, as I just quoted it, already contains the essence of my further thinking: I am now ready to say that the form *Athēnē* itself, like the form *Messēnē* or ‘Midland’, must have been primarily a place-name and only secondarily the personal name of the goddess of the place. And the function of the form as a personal name can be explained, to return to my earlier formulation, as a personification of the place that was Athens.

§7. And here is where the testimony of Pausanias proves to be essential. The best starting-point for my examination of this testimony is to go back to the myths and rituals of the deme of Colonus as I considered them in a previous posting, [Nagy 2020.04.17, rewritten 2020.04.23](#). There at §7 I highlighted a fact noted about Colonus by Pausanias 1.30.4: he says that the epithet of the goddess, as worshipped at Colonus, was *Hippiā*, to be interpreted as ‘charioteer’—an epithet that conveyed, as I went on to argue in that posting, a Mycenaean heritage for the worship of the goddess in this locale. But now I note a parallel trace of such a Mycenaean heritage: as I highlighted in Hour 18 of my book *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (Nagy 2013), the most ancient local cult hero who was worshipped in this deme of Colonus is a figure named *Kolōnos*, who is described at line 59 of the *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles as *hippotēs*, that is, ‘charioteer’ (comments at H24H 18§4).

§8. There is evidence, then, showing that a figure who is worshipped in a given locale may be a personification of that locale, so that the personal name of this figure is primarily a place-name. In the case of *Kolōnos*, the primary function of the name as a place-name is evident from the meaning of this proper noun as a common noun. The fact is, *kolōnos* means ‘tumulus’. As I show in my book about the ancient Greek hero (H24H, Hours 14 and 18), the common noun *kolōnos*, meaning ‘tumulus’, refers primarily to landmarks for the worship of cult heroes. So the personified *Kolōnos* or Colonus, who is worshipped by the people of the deme of Colonus, had been named after a place that was called just that, *Kolōnos* or Colonus.

§9. Correspondingly, then, I am ready to say that Athena the goddess was named after a place called ‘Athena’, which was an acropolis—a fitting landmark for the worship of the goddess.

§10. I find it relevant that Stephanus of Byzantium (33.17–34.18 ed. Meineke 1849), an expert on place-names (and writing in the sixth century CE), reports on authoritative statements made by his predecessors Ōros of Miletus (second century CE) and Philon of Byblos (first/second century CE) about the existence of other ancient cities named Athens. Such testimony can be correlated, as I will show in later postings, with the existence of other goddesses named Athena.

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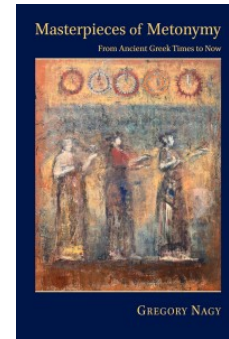
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