



Questions While Viewing Greek Myths and Rituals Through the Lens of Pausanias, I: Did Athena, Goddess of Athens, Belong Only to the Athenians?

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Questions while viewing Greek myths and rituals through the lens of Pausanias, I: Did Athena, goddess of Athens, belong only to the Athenians?

April 17, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2020.04.17 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In conversations about the ancient world, my sorely-missed friend Emily Vermeule was fond of asking this rhetorical question: in Mycenaean times, was Athena a goddess who was worshipped only in Athens? And there can be variations on such a theme. For example, I have a related question, formulated from a diachronic point of view. That is to say, I have a question that is formulated from the standpoint of an outside observer who is trying to view, over time, whatever evidence remains. And there are many obstacles that block such a diachronic view in this case, since the stretch of time to be studied is vast, extending from the second millennium before our era all the way into the first millennium and even later. That said, here is my question, as already worded in the subtitle of this post: *did Athena, goddess of Athens, belong only to the Athenians?* And there is a related question: *was Athens the only place that was ever named after Athena?* Further, here is yet another related question, with specific reference to the “classical” Athena as visualized in the illustration that introduces my comments: *did this goddess always look like that?*



Statue of Athena in the reproduction of the Parthenon in Centennial Park, Nashville, Tennessee. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. Addressing these questions is not all that easy, but a re-reading of Pausanias, a traveler who lived in the second century CE, makes things somewhat easier for me. In my commentary-in-progress on information recorded by this author about the myths and rituals he observed in the course of traveling

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across a vast stretch of space inhabited by a vast variety of Greek-speaking people in his time, I have come across some new ways of finding possible answers.

§2. To start, I return to the question posed by Emily Vermeule: *in Mycenaean times, was Athena a goddess who was worshipped only in Athens?* Turning to Pausanias for a possible answer, I think we can find, by way of information that we learn from this traveler, some traces of a Mycenaean phase for the worship of Athena—not only in Athens but also throughout those regions of the Greek-speaking world that had once been dominated by a social order known to archaeologists as the Mycenaean Empire.

§3. In over twenty connected essays I produced for *Classical Inquiries* about Hēraklēs (they are all listed in the Bibliography at <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/bibliography-for-comments-on-comparative-mythology/>, starting with Nagy 2019.07.12 and then proceeding all the way to 2019.12.20, then restarting with Nagy 2020.02.14 and then proceeding all the way to 2020.04.03), where I was concerned mostly with Mycenaean phases in the evolution of myths about this hero, it was clear to me all along that the most important goddess connected with Hēraklēs in these myths was Hērā. But it was also clear—and made clear enough, I hope, in those same essays—that the second most important goddess connected with this hero during that same Mycenaean phase was Athena.

§4. In my commentary-in-progress on Pausanias, linked to APRIP = *A Pausanias reader in progress*, online at <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6768>, I have already come across some traces of such a Mycenaean phase in my analysis of myths and rituals, as reported by our traveler, involving the connectedness of Athena with Hēraklēs. But now my interest extends beyond this connectedness. For my commentary on Pausanias, one of my many objectives is to broaden the scope of inquiry for ongoing analysis of myths and rituals in general. So, in the case of Athena, to start with this goddess as my first example, my long-term objective will be to study all possible traces of a Mycenaean phase in the evolution of myths and rituals involving Athena in general, combined in some contexts—hardly in all—with her protégé Hēraklēs.



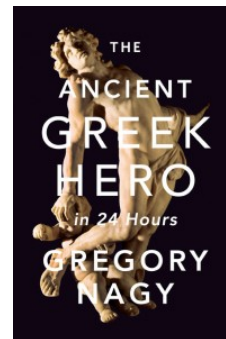
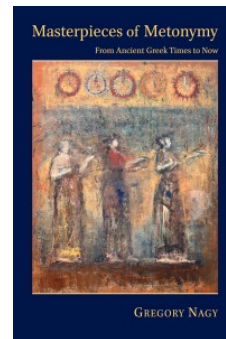
Minerva and Hercules opening the Doors of Victory (1651). Oil on panel. Christiaan van Couwenbergh (1604–1667). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§5. As a preview of comments, to be serialized in postings to come, about possible traces of a Mycenaean Athena to be found in passing references made by Pausanias, I offer here a small sampling of such references. As we will see, the Mycenaean version of Athena that slowly emerges is a far cry from the “classical” Athenian version of the goddess as visualized in the illustration that introduces my preview.

§6. In what follows, the format of my sampling is an informal inventory, presented as a mere list, which focuses on “pre-classical” views of Athena as mentioned by Pausanias in Scrolls 1–2:

- 1.5.3 Athena Aithuia in Megara
- 1.13.2 *hieron* ‘temple’ of Athena between Pherai and Larissa in Thessaly
- 1.15.3 Athena and Hēraklēs combined

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- 1.18.2 commentary already in place: <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/a-sampling-of-comments-on-pausanias-1-18-1-9/>
- 1.22.6 myth: how Diomedes took from Troy the statue of Athena
- 1.24.3 Athena Erganē; Athena shares her *nāos* ‘temple’ with a Daimōn
- 1.26.6 ‘Both the city [*polis*] and the whole of the land [*gē*] are alike sacred [*hierā*] to Athena; for even those who in their demes [*dēmoi*] have traditions of worshipping [*sebein*] other gods nevertheless hold Athena in honor [*tīmē*]. But the thing that was customarily-thought [*nomizesthai*] to be the most holy [*hagion*] thing by all in common [*en koinōi*] already for many years before the demes [*dēmoi*] came-together [*sun-elthein*] is the statue [*agalma*] of Athena that is on what is now called the Acropolis, but was in early days [called] the Polis. A tale [*phēmē*] concerning it says that it fell from the sky [*ouranos*]; but I will not follow up and say whether it was this way or some other way. A golden lamp [*lukhnos*] for the goddess [*theos* (feminine)] was made [*poiein*] by Kallimakhos.’
- 1.27.1 ‘In the temple [*nāos*] of Athena Polias [‘of the Polis’] is set up a wooden Hermes, said to have been a dedication [*anathēmā*] by Kekrops, but not clearly visible because of boughs of myrtle [*mursinē*].’
- 1.27.2 ‘About the olive tree [*elaiā*] they have nothing to say except that it was evidence [*marturion*] adduced by the goddess [*theos* (feminine)] for the contest [*agōn*] [with Poseidon] for the land. [...] Adjoining the temple [*nāos*] of Athena is the temple [*nāos*] of Pandrosos, the only one of the sisters who was not-guilty [*an-aitios*] with regard to what-had-been-entrusted [*parakatathēkē*].’
- 1.27.3 commentary already in place: <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/a-sampling-of-comments-on-pausanias-1-24-8-1-27-3/>
- 1.27.10 ‘Anyway, they say that this bull was conveyed [*komizesthai*] from Crete to the Peloponnesus, and became one of what are called the Twelve Labors [*āthloi*] of Hēraklēs. When he was set loose on the Plain of the Argives he fled [*pheugein*] through the isthmus of Corinth and then fled [*pheugein*] further into the land of Attica as far as the Attic deme [*dēmos*] of Marathon, killing everyone he encountered, including Androgeōs, son of Minos. Minos then sailed against Athens with his navy, not believing that the Athenians were guiltless [*an-aitioi*] in the death of Androgeōs, and oppressed them so badly that it was finally agreed that they [= the Athenians] would bring seven girls [*parthenoi*] and seven boys [*paides*] to the Minotaur who was said to dwell [*oikein*] in the Labyrinth [*laburinthos*] at Knossos. But, later on, Theseus is said to have driven the bull of Marathon to the Acropolis, where he sacrificed [*thuein*] it to the goddess [*theos* (feminine), = Athena]. And the dedicatory-offering [*ana-thēma*] [that signals this deed] is from the deme [*dēmos*] of Marathon.’
- 1.28.5 ‘... and there is an altar [*bōmos*] to Athena Areia’
- 1.30.2 Athena and Hēraklēs combined
- 1.30.4 ‘There is also pointed out a place [*khōros*] called the *Kolōnos Hippios* [‘Tumulus of Horses’], the first point in Attica, they say, that Oedipus reached—these things that are said do differ from what is in the poetry [*poiēsis*] of Homer, but they say these things in any case—and an altar [*bōmos*] of Poseidon *Hippios* [‘(controller of) horses’], and of Athena *Hippiā* [‘(controller of) horses’], and a hero-shrine [*hērōion*] of Peirithoōs and Theseus, Oedipus and Adrastos. The grove [*alsos*] and shrine [*nāos*] of Poseidon were burned down by Antigonos when he invaded Attica.’
- Of special interest here is the epithet of Athena as *Hippiā*, and of Poseidon as *Hippios*. In both cases, I translate this epithet as ‘controller-of-horses’, with reference primarily to the skill of charioteering. At a later point, at 8.47, where Pausanias is describing the traditions of the city of Tegea in Arcadia, he notes that a prized statue of Athena was given the epithet *Hippiā* by the people of this region because their goddess is said to have gone to war as a charioteer in the myth traditionally known as the Battle of the Gods and Giants.
- 1.31.6 ‘There is a deme [*dēmos*] called Akharnai, where they honor [*tīmān*], among the gods [*theoi*], Apollo Agieus [‘he of the causeways’], and Hēraklēs, and there is an altar [*bōmos*] of Athena Hygieia. And they call upon the name of Athena *Hippiā* [‘controller-of-horses’] and Dionysus *Melpomenos* [‘singing-and-dancing’ (in a chorus)] and, with reference to the same god, *Kissos* [‘ivy’], saying that the plant ivy [*kissos*] first appeared [*phanēnai*] there.’
- 1.41.6 Athena Aithuia in Megara
- 1.42.4 also in Megara: ‘The Megarians have a council chamber which once, they say, was the tomb [*taphos*] of Timalkos, who just now I said was not killed by Theseus. On the top of the citadel [*akropolis*] is built a temple [*nāos*] of Athena, with a statue [*agalma*] gilded except the hands and feet; these and the face are of ivory. There is another temple [*hieron*] built here, of Athena Nike, and yet a third of Athena Aiantis. About the last, the Megarian guides [*exhēgētai*] have omitted any mention, but I will write what I take to be the facts. Telamon the son of Aiakos married Periboia the daughter of Alkathoos; so my opinion is that Ajax, who succeeded to the throne of Alkathoos, made the statue [*agalma*] of Athena.’
- 2.3.1 in Corinth: ‘In the middle of the marketplace is a bronze Athena, on the pedestal of which are made-in-relief-figures [*agalmata*] of the Muses.’
- 2.4.1 still in Corinth: ‘This is the account that I had read, and not far from the tomb [*mnēma*] [of the children of Medea] is the temple [*hieron*] of Athena Khalinitis [‘the one holding the bridle’]. For Athena,

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they say, was the divinity who gave most help to Bellerophontes, and she handed over to him Pegasus [Pēgasos], having herself broken him in and bridled him. The statue [*agalma*] of hers is made-of-wood [*xoanon*], but face, hands and feet are of white marble.'

2.4.5 still in Corinth: 'Now the temple [*hieron*] of Athena Khalinitis is next to their theater, and nearby is a naked wooden-statue [*xoanon*] of Hēraklēs, said to be a work of Daidalos.'

2.5.6 in Sikyon: 'The Sikyonians, the neighbors of the Corinthians at this part of the border, say about their own land that Aigialeus was its first and autochthonous [*autokhthōn*] inhabitant, that the region of the Peloponnesus still called Aigialos was named after him because he reigned over it, and that he founded [*oikizein*] the city [*polis*] Aigialeia on the plain. Their citadel [*akropolis*], they say, was where is now their temple [*hieron*] of Athena.'

2.6.3 myth: king Epopeus of Sikyon builds a temple [*nāos*] for Athena

2.11.1 Ditto

2.11.7 in Titane: the people 'honor' [*tīmân*] a 'wooden-statue' [*xoanon*] of Coronis in the 'temple' [*nāos*] of Athena

2.12.1 'In Titane there is also a temple [*hieron*] of Athena, into which they bring-up-to-the-heights [*an-agein*] the [statue of] Coronis. In it [= the temple] is an old wooden-statue [*xoanon*] of Athena, and it was said that it, too, was struck by lightning. The temple [*hieron*] is built upon a hill, at the bottom of which is an Altar [*bōmos*] of the Winds [*anemoi*], and on it the priest [*hiereus*] sacrifices [*thuein*] to the winds [*anemoi*] one night in every year. He also performs [*drân*] other secret-rites [*aporrhēta*] at four pits [*bothroi*], taming the fierceness of the blasts, and he is said also to chant [*ep-āidein*] the chants [*ep-ōidai*] of Medea.'

2.15.1 in Argos: sanctuary of Athena

2.17.7 in Argive territory, at the Hēraion: how the priestess there, Khryseis, went to Tegea in Arcadia and supplicated there the goddess Athena Alea

2.21.3 in Argos: a sanctuary of Athena, founded by Hēgeleōs. 'This Hēgeleōs, according to the story, was the son of Tyrsēnos, and Tyrsēnos was the son of Hēraklēs. [...] In front of the temple [*nāos*] of Athena is, they say, the tomb [*taphos*] of Epimenides. It is explained [by the people of Argos] that the people-of-Sparta [Lakedaimonioi] made war on the people of Knossos and took Epimenides alive; they then put him to death for not prophesying [*manteuesthai*] to them things-in-due-order [*aisia*], and the people of Argos, taking his body, buried it here.'

2.22.2 still in Argos: facing the tomb of the hero Pelasgos are statues [*agalmata*] of Artemis, Zeus, and Athena.

2.23.5 still in Argos: the people of this city claim that the statue [*agalma*] of Athena was brought there from Troy..

2.24.2 still in Argos: at the citadel [*akropolis*] of Larisa is a 'temple' [*hieron*] of Athena Oxyderkēs ['sharp-sighted'], dedicated by Diomedes, 'because once when he was fighting at Troy the goddess [*theos* feminine] removed the mist [*akhlus*] from his eyes.'

2.24.3 still in Argos: 'On the heights of Larisa is a temple [*nāos*] of Zeus, who has the epithet Larisaios, which has no roof; the statue [*agalma*], made of wood, I found no longer standing upon its pedestal. There is also a temple [*nāos*] of Athena, which is worthy of viewing. Here are placed votive-offerings [*anathēmata*], including a wooden-statue [*xoanon*] of Zeus, which has two eyes in the natural place and a third on its forehead. This Zeus, they say, was the paternal-god [*patrōios*] of Priam, the son of Laomedon, and he [= Zeus] is set up in the uncovered part of his courtyard; when Troy [Ilion] was taken by the Greeks [Hellēnes] Priam sought refuge at the altar [*bōmos*] of this god. When the spoils of war were divided, Sthenelos, the son of Kapaneus, received it [= the statue], and for this reason it has been set up here.'

2.25.10 'On the straight road to Epidauros is a village [*kōmē*], Lēssa, in which is a temple [*nāos*] of Athena containing a wooden-statue [*xoanon*] that is not at all different from the one on the citadel [*akropolis*] that is Larisa. Looming over Lēssa is Mount Arakhnaion, which long ago, in the time of Inakhos, was named Sapys-elatōn. On it are altars [*bōmoi*] to Zeus and Hērā. When rain is needed they sacrifice [*thuein*] to them here.'

2.29.1 in Epidauros: 'For Athena on the citadel [*akropolis*], there is a wooden-statue [*xoanon*] worthy of viewing, and her epithet is Kissaia ['goddess of ivy'].'

2.30.6 in Troizen: 'Athena and Poseidon disputed about the land, and after disputing held it in-common [*en koinōi*], as Zeus commanded them to do. For this reason they worship [*sebein*] both Athena, whom they name both Polias and Sthenias, and also Poseidon, who has the epithet Baslleus ['King']. And their old coins have as device a trident and a face of Athena.'

2.31.6 in Pnokaia (a city in Ionia): an old temple [*nāos*] of Athena

2.32.5 still in Troizen: 'on the citadel [*akropolis*] is a temple [*nāos*] of Athena, who has the epithet Sthenias'; inside the temple is a wooden statue [*xoanon*] of the goddess.

2.33.1 still in the territory of Troizen: 'The people of Troizen possess islands, one of which is near the mainland, and it is possible to wade across the channel. This was formerly called Sphairia, but its name was changed to Hierā ['sacred'] for the following reason. In it is the tomb [*mnēma*] of Sphairos, who, they say, was charioteer [*hēniokhos*] to Pelops. Safeguarding [*komizein*] a dream [*oneiros*] from Athena, Aithra crossed over into the island with libations [*khoai*] for Sphairos. After she had crossed, Poseidon is said to have had intercourse with her here. So, for this reason, Aithra set up here a temple [*nāos*] of Athena with the epithet Apatouria, and changed the name of the island from Sphairia to Hierā ['sacred']. She also established-a-custom for the girls of Troizen: to dedicate their waistbands [*zōnai*], before marriage, to Athena Apatouria.'

2.34.8 still in the territory of Troizen: 'As one sails from Skyllaion in the direction of the city, one reaches another headland, called Boukephala ['ox-heads'], and, after the headland, there are islands, the first of which is Halioussa [from the word meaning 'salt']. This provides a harbor with good anchorage. After it comes Pityoussa [from the word meaning 'pine'], and the third they call Aristerai [from the word meaning 'left hand']. On sailing past these, one comes to another headland, Kōlyergia, jutting out from the mainland, and after it to an island, called Trikrana ['three heads'], and a mountain, projecting into the sea from the Peloponnesus, called Bouporthmos ['ox-ford']. On Bouporthmos has been built a temple [*hieron*] of Demeter and her daughter, as well as one of Athena, whose epithet is Promakh-ormā ['fighter-at-the-anchorage'].'

2.34.10 in Hermione: 'Here the people of Hermione had their former city [*polis*]. They still have temples [*hiera*] here: one of Poseidon at the east end of the spit, and a temple [*nāos*] of Athena; further inland, nearby, are the foundations of a race-course [*stadion*], at which they say the sons of Tyndareos competed [*agōnizesthai*]. There is also another temple [*hieron*] of Athena, of no great size, the roof of which has fallen in. There is a temple [*nāos*] to Hēlios ['sun'], another to the Graces [*Kharites*], and a third to Sarapis and Isis. There are also circuits of large unhewn stones, within which they perform [*drân*] sacred [*hiera*] mystical-rites [*aporrhēta*] to Demeter.'

2.36.8 in the territory of Lerna: 'There is a sacred [*hieron*] grove [*alsos*] extending from the mountain they call Pontīnos. Now Mount Pontīnos does not let the rainwater flow away, but absorbs it into itself. From it flows a river, also called Pontīnos. Upon the top of the mountain is a temple [*hieron*] of Athena Saītis, now merely in ruins.'

§7. In this list, I highlight a most revealing piece of information, reported by Pausanias, that points to a Mycenaean role of Athena. I focus here on what we have just read at 1.30.4, listed above. There we learned that the epithet *Hippiā* is applied to the goddess by the natives of Colonus, just as they apply the epithet *Hippios* to the god Poseidon. This epithet, which I translate in both cases as 'controller-of-horses', is I think referring primarily to the skill of charioteering. At a later point in his write-up, at 8.47, where Pausanias is describing the traditions of the city of Tegea in Arcadia, he notes that Athena was worshipped there as *Hippiā*, and that there was a specific reason for the application of this epithet in that locale: it was because the goddess, according to the local mythology, went to war as a charioteer in the local version of a widespread myth traditionally known as the Battle of the Gods and Giants. With these details in mind, I now turn to relevant evidence in Mycenaean Greek as written in the Linear B texts found at Knossos and at Pylos. In these texts, as we are about to see, the comparable forms *Athānā* and *hikk^weiā* are attested in contexts that correspond to the contexts of *Athēnē* and *Hippiā* as reported by Pausanias. In analyzing these texts and contexts, I mostly agree with the relevant argumentation presented in a paper jointly authored by Joann Gulizia, Kevin Pluta, and Thomas Palaima (2001). The authors, hereafter abbreviated GPP, concentrate on two texts: the tablet V 52 from Knossos, which they date around 1400 BCE, and the tablet An 1281 from Pylos, unambiguously dated around 1200 BCE.

§7a. We start with the Linear B tablet V 52 from Knossos. The specific context of this text, according to GPP, can be traced back—with some certainty—to the Room of the Chariot Tablets or RCT, as it is known to archaeologists. This context, as we will see, is relevant to a detail mentioned by Pausanias at 1.30.4: according to our travelers, as I have already noted, the goddess Athena is worshipped as *Hippiā* or 'charioteer' at Tegea in Arcadia. But what about the goddess in the text of tablet V 52, situated in the context of the Room of the Chariot Tablets? She is mentioned prominently, in the first line of V 52, where we read a-ta-na-po-ti-ni-ja. The second element, -po-ti-ni-ja, spells *potniāi*, dative case of *potnia*, corresponding to classical Greek *potnia* (πότνια), meaning 'mistress, lady'. As for the first element, a-ta-na-, it can be interpreted as spelling either *Athānāi* or *Athānās*—so, either the dative or the genitive case of the name *Athānā*, corresponding to the classical Greek name *Athēnē*. A big question remains, though: is this Mycenaean name *Athānā* (1) the personal name of the goddess Athena or (2) a place-name, referring to the citadel of Athens, a primary residence of the goddess? In the paper of GPP, a persuasive argument is made for the second of these two alternative explanations. Crucial for their argumentation is a fact that I have highlighted in my own work: the fact is, as I showed at §§4–9 in Nagy 2015.09.10 with reference to *Odyssey* 7.78 and with bibliography referring to earlier phases of my relevant work, the singular form *Athēnē* can refer in Homeric Greek to the citadel of the goddess Athena in what later became, already well before the classical era, the city of Athens. Accordingly, if we follow the interpretation preferred by GPP, the wording of the first line in the tablet V 52 can be interpreted this way: 'to the Lady [*potnia*] of Athens', where a-ta-na- spells *Athānās*, in the genitive case, while po-ti-ni-ja spells *potniāi*, in the dative. Alternatively, if we were to read a-ta-na- as *Athānāi*, in the dative case, then we could interpret the wording this way: 'to the Lady Athena'. Either way, in any case, the referent would be the goddess Athena, in a Mycenaean phase of her evolution.

§7b. But more can be said about such a Mycenaean Athena as a charioteer, to be matched with the role of the "classical" Athena at Colonus as *Hippiā*. Here we turn to the Linear B tablet An 1281 from Pylos, dated

around 1200 BCE. We read in this text the noun *po-ti-ni-ja*, spelling *potniāi*, in the dative case, and meaning 'to the Lady [*potnia*]'. Although the name of the goddess who receives the offering is not indicated, the identity of the divine referent here is most likely to be the goddess Athena. As we see from the analysis of GPP (p. 456), the noun *po-ti-ni-ja* that we see in the text of this tablet is described by way of the epithet *i-qe-ja*, which can be interpreted as *hikk^weiā*, in the dative case—so, adjective *hikk^weiāi* describing and agreeing with the noun *potniāi*. As observed by GPP (again, p. 456), this Mycenaean Greek epithet *hikk^weiā* would be the equivalent of *hippeiā* in classical Greek. Thus the combination of *po-ti-ni-ja* and *i-qe-ja* in the text of this tablet can be interpreted to mean this: 'to the Lady [*potnia*], controller-of-horses' [*hikk^weiā*]*—or, to word it more specifically, 'to the Lady, Charioteer'.*

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