



Helen of Sparta and her very own Eidolon

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Helen of Sparta and her very own Eidolon

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How do we square the idea of Helen as goddess of Sparta with the idea of Helen of Troy as we see her come to life in the Homeric Iliad? I hope to address this problem here by taking a second look at the idea of Helen's 'image-double', the word for which in Greek was eidōlon.

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Recovery of Helen by Menelaus. Attic black-figure amphora, ca. 550 BCE. Staatliche Antikensammlungen. Photo: [Public domain] via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Introduction

§0. In [Classical Inquiries 2016.02.18](#), I analyzed a scene in the Homeric Odyssey where Telemachus finds himself transported into a kind of "Mycenaean heaven" while visiting the palace in Sparta where Menelaos lives together with Helen as his wife. And I argued that the picturing of Helen as a 'daughter of Zeus' in this context is a most fitting description of a goddess who was already worshipped at Sparta in an era as early as the second half of the second millennium BCE—an era that marks the rise and the eventual fall of an early Greek civilization that archaeologists recognize as the Mycenaean Empire. But there is a problem with this picture: how do we square the idea of Helen as goddess of Sparta with the idea of Helen of Troy as we see her come to life in the Homeric Iliad? I hope to address this problem here by taking a second look at the idea of Helen's 'image-double', the word for which in Greek was eidōlon.

Helen as goddess

§1. Helen of Troy, as we know her in the Homeric Iliad, appears to be a woman, not a goddess. But the remarkable fact is—I spotlight its relevance from the start—that the Homeric Odyssey describes Helen at 4.227 by way of the epithet *Dios thugatēr*, which means 'daughter of Zeus'. And I spotlight here another relevant fact that is even more remarkable: the Homeric Iliad describes Helen as *Dios ekegauia* 'daughter of Zeus' at 3.199, 418, and the same epithet occurs also at Odyssey 4.184, 219; 23.218. But the most remarkable relevant fact of them all is that *Dios thugatēr* 'daughter of Zeus', as we see this epithet deployed elsewhere not only in the Iliad but also in the Odyssey, can be used only with reference to goddesses: Aphrodite, Artemis, Athena, Persephone, Ate, and the Muses. These and other facts to be brought up later lead me to argue that, although Helen appears to be a woman and not a goddess in the Iliad, she is still a goddess. And I argue further that, despite appearances as poetically created in the Iliad, Helen is recognized even there as a goddess. In terms of my argument, then, Helen is recognized as a goddess not only in Sparta but also in the Troy or 'Iliion' of the Iliad, the name of which epic means of course 'the song of Iliion'. And she is a goddess in 'the song of Iliion' precisely because she is Helen of Sparta.

§2. Someone may object that, even if it is a fact that you have Zeus as your father, this fact alone is not enough to make you a goddess or a god. Your mother must also be a goddess. In other words, you have to have two divine immortals as your biological parents in order to be worshipped as an immortal divinity in your own right. After all, as I myself have argued in [The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours \(2013\)](#), the dominant gene in the genetic code of ancient Greek mythmaking is mortality while the recessive gene is immortality, not the other way around. In other words, if the family tree that produced you includes even one solitary mortal ancestor, that will be enough to make you mortal as well—no matter how many

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immortal ancestors grace your genealogy (H24H 055). So, what about Helen's mother in Sparta? If she were a goddess, then the status of Helen as a goddess in her own right would be a given.

§3. In one version of the surviving myths about Helen, the mother of Helen is in fact a goddess, named Nemesis (Cypria fragment 7 ed. Allen, by way of Athenaeus 8.334b–d). In terms of this version, then, there is no question about the divinity of Helen. But things are more complicated. There are also other versions, native even to Sparta, where the mother of Helen is not Nemesis but Leda, as we read in the wording of a Spartan song dramatized by Aristophanes in the *Lysistrata* (line 1314). And this Leda, as we are about to see, is a mortal woman who is impregnated by Zeus. So, I am faced with a problem here. In terms of my own argumentation concerning mortality as the dominant gene, as it were, I should expect the mortality of Leda as mother to undo the divinity of Helen as daughter of Zeus. In other words, even the paternity of immortal Zeus would not be enough to cancel the mortality of a mortal mother.

§4. But Leda is no ordinary mortal mother, since her impregnation by Zeus produces not only Helen but also two sons who are twins, commonly known in English by their Latin names Castor and Pollux—Kastōr and Poludeukēs in the original Greek—who are also known as the Dioskouroi, meaning 'sons of Zeus' in Greek. As I will now argue, the mythological identity of Helen as a goddess at Sparta can best be understood by contemplating the mythological identity of these two brothers of hers, the Dioskouroi.

Dioskouroi and dioscurism

§5. In myth, the Dioskouroi are gods, but they can be gods only because they are twins. As twins, they share one-half immortality, one-half mortality. Here I introduce the term dioscurism in referring to such immortal-mortal complementarity.

§6. In the myth of the Dioskouroi, the two twins are born mortal and immortal. To be more precise, Castor is born mortal and Pollux is born immortal. On one and the same night, a mortal woman named Leda is impregnated both by a mortal man named Tyndareos and by the immortal god Zeus himself, who assumes the appearance of Tyndareos while impregnating Leda. A compressed version of this myth can be found in the Library of "Apollodorus" 3.10.7. The upshot, then, is that Castor takes after the mortal Tyndareos while Pollux takes after the immortal Zeus. Or, to put it in terms of the genetic code that we see at work in ancient Greek mythmaking, Castor is mortal while Pollux is at least recessively immortal.

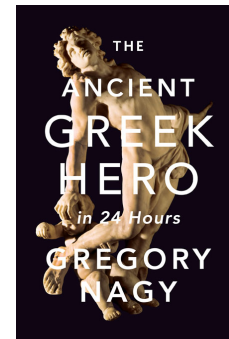
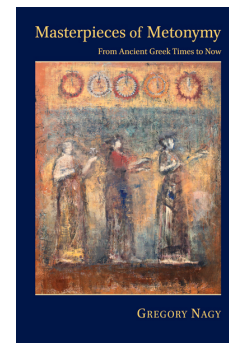
§7. Here is the mythological reasoning behind what I have just described as the recessive immortality of Pollux. If Pollux had been born as one single person whose father was Zeus and whose mother was Leda, then that single person would still have had one-half mortality combined with one-half immortality, since the mother was mortal, and thus the combination would ordinarily have resulted in dominant mortality. As a singleton, then, Pollux would be dominantly mortal. But, since Castor and Pollux are born as twins, the absolute mortality of Castor is symmetrically counterbalanced by an absolute immortality. This counterbalancing is due to a most significant detail about the fathering of Pollux by Zeus: according to the myth, the immortal god Zeus takes on the appearance of the mortal Tyndareos when he impregnates Leda and fathers Pollux. So, the immortal Zeus appears to be and appears as the mortal Tyndareos even when he fathers Pollux. As we will see, appearances count for everything here.

§8. The counterbalancing of absolute immortality with absolute mortality is then formalized in a mystical deal that Pollux makes with Zeus after Castor is tragically killed in a fight between the Dioskouroi and a rival pair of twins originating from Messenia, named Idas and Lynkeus, who are natural enemies of Castor and Pollux as originating from Sparta. Once Castor is killed, as we learn for example from the retelling of the myth in Pindar's Nemean 10, Pollux the loving twin of Castor misses his brother so much that he arranges with the help of Zeus to give up one-half of his own immortality and to share it with Castor, who will in turn share one-half of his mortality with Pollux. As a result of this symmetrical sharing, both twins are now half-immortal, half-mortal. And it is this new half-mortality of Pollux that makes his original immortality recessive. To say it another way: the ultimate recessiveness that we see in the immortality of Pollux is matched by the original appearance of immortal Zeus as the mortal Tyndareos at the moment when he impregnates Leda and thus fathers Pollux.

§9. Once Pollux is reunited or let us say recombined with Castor, however, the two twins together can now become dominantly immortal, since the innate recessiveness of immortality is now canceled by the mystical deal that Pollux has made with Zeus. The divine father can now accept both twins as his own sons, and the combined immortality and mortality that the twins share with each other can hereafter become the dominant force of their existence. That is how the Dioskouroi, viewed together, are both gods.

§10. As twin gods, the Dioskouroi can be pictured anthropomorphically as revealing their joint presence at the same time and in the same place. Or they can reveal their joint absence in any given time and place. Or they can even occlude jointly their divinity, in which case the name Tundaridai or 'sons of Tyndareos' is more appropriate than Dioskouroi or 'sons of Zeus'. Examples of such variations are evident from a brief survey of relevant wording in the Homeric tradition.

§11. I start the survey with an example where the divine twins are jointly present as the sons of Leda and Zeus, in Homeric Hymn 17: in this hymn, which is addressed to the Dioskouroi, the divine twins Kastōr and Poludeukēs (line 1) are said to have been both fathered by Zeus himself (line 2), who impregnated Leda (line 3), but they are at the same time given the epithet Tundaridai 'sons of Tyndareos' (lines 2 and 5). Similarly in Homeric Hymn 33, which is likewise a hymn to the Dioskouroi, the twins Kastōr and Poludeukēs (line 3) are actually addressed as Dios kouroi 'sons of Zeus' (line 1) and then as Tundaridai 'sons of Tyndareos' (lines 2 and 18); here too it is made explicit that both twins have Leda and Zeus as their biological parents (lines 2–6).



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§12. I continue the brief survey with an example where the divine twins are jointly absent as the sons of Leda and Tyndareos, in Rhapsody 11 of the Homeric *Odyssey*: here the twins Kastōr and Poludeukēs (line 300) are said to be joint sons of Leda as mother and of Tyndareos only as father (lines 298–300), with no mention of Zeus; and, in this context, both twins are said to be abiding underground (line 301), thus staying out of sight, though the wording then goes on to say that both twins are jointly alive in the daylight (line 302–303) just as they are jointly dead (lines 303–304) when they are both abiding underground (line 302).

§13. Similarly in Rhapsody 3 of the Homeric *Iliad*, the twins Kastōr and Poludeukēs (line 237) are said to be abiding underground in Sparta (lines 243–244). This mention of the Dioskouroi happens only after Helen of Sparta herself makes mention of these twins (lines 236–242), saying that she shares with them the same mother (line 238) and how she worries that these brothers of hers are nowhere to be seen as she looks down from the walls of Troy and observes all the warriors who have come to fight on the Achaeans' side in the Trojan War (line 236). It is only after Helen observes that her twin brothers are nowhere to be seen among the Achaeans massing around the walls of Troy that the master narrator of the *Iliad* finally explains why the Dioskouroi are out of sight here: it is because, as we already noted, both twins are at that very moment abiding underground together in Sparta (again, lines 243–244). At a later point, I will come back to this detail about the absence of the Dioskouroi from the Trojan War and from the *Iliad* in general.

§14. So much, then, for traditional anthropomorphic visualizations of the Dioskouroi. By contrast, the cosmological visualizations of these twins show them coexisting in alternating times and places, as when they represent the Morning Star and the Evening Star (I offer documentation in [Nagy 1990b:256-259](#)). Such alternation would have to be initiated by Pollux, all lit up. Then, for Castor to light up in turn, Pollux must shut down. But then this twin will in turn light up again when the time comes for the other twin to shut down again. And so on it goes, forever. In another project, I have argued that the Greek name of Pollux, Poludeukēs, signals the recurrent action of this twin in initiating an eternally ongoing alternation with the other twin ([Nagy 1996:51](#)):

The name Poludeúkēs (*Iliad* 3.237, *Odyssey* 11.300) is straightforwardly related to the adjective poludeukēs [which means 'continuous' or 'leading many times' or even 'leading in many different ways'], in that the recessive accent of the name is typical of the naming function [details in Nagy 1996:51n36]. In the mythological functions of the divine figure Poludeúkēs, the idea of continuity seems as evident as that of variety, since the Divine Twins are models of consistency, perseverance, reliability (as in Homeric Hymn 33) [details in Nagy 1996:51n37]. In an astrological sense, we could say that Poludeúkēs, in the role of Morning Star, is 'repeating many times', the symbol of many happy returns. And the repetition can be visualized as a cyclical one—a pattern of eternal return. There is a striking semantic and morphological parallel in poluderkēs ['seeing many times' (or 'in many different ways')], epithet of the dawn-goddess Eos in Hesiod (*Theogony* 451).

§15. So long as the Dioskouroi or Divine Twins alternate with one other—that is, so long as they remain twins—they can oscillate between light and dark, between consciousness and unconsciousness, between life and death. This characteristic of the Dioskouroi is what I describe as dioscurism.

A stranded Twin: the case of Herakles

§16. Dioscurism can be canceled. As [Douglas Frame \(2009\)](#) has shown in his definitive book on the mythology of dioscurism, reflected not only in Greek but also in other Indo-European languages, the mythological scenario of divinization breaks down if the Dioscuric twins become deparization from one another. In Greek myths, as Frame also shows, a primary example is Herakles. This hero becomes, in terms of Frame's explanation, a stranded Twin.

§17. As we read in a brief retelling preserved in the Library of "Apollodorus" 2.4.8, Herakles has a twin named Iphikles. The two twins have the same mortal mother, Alkmene, but their fathers are different. The first twin of the dyad, Herakles, is fathered by the immortal god Zeus himself, who impregnates Alkmene by assuming the appearance of her husband, Amphitryon the mortal. Only the second twin, Iphikles, is fathered by that mortal. This way, one twin can be immortal while the other twin must be mortal.

§18. In the myth of Herakles, his immortality happens only after he experiences death. We get to see him die a most spectacular death, before he ever becomes immortalized. A classic account is given by Diodorus of Sicily 4.38.4–5; the actual immortalization is narrated in 4.39.2–3, where we see that Herakles ultimately arrives in Olympus after he is struck by the thunderbolt of Zeus and thereby brought back to life (H24H 1§46). But why do things have to go so far before Herakles actually becomes immortal? It is because Herakles goes through life without really interacting with his mortal twin. The adventures of Herakles, retold in ancient Greek song culture so many times and in so many ways, never really need his twin Iphikles as a partner. And so the mortal Iphikles, whenever it happens that he ultimately dies, is of no consequence to the potentially immortal Herakles (Frame 2009:239, 305).

§19. I just said that Herakles is "potentially" immortal, since the immortality of Herakles is still recessive: after all, his mother is a mortal. And, I must add, even the ultimate immortalization of Herakles is due to an exception, which is, the exceptional intervention of Zeus. Just as Zeus initiated an exception and canceled the recessiveness in the immortality of the twin Pollux, thus making him dominantly immortal, so also the god initiates an exception and makes Herakles dominantly immortal. But, in this case, Herakles does not share his immortality with his twin, unlike the case of Pollux.

§19A. We see it clearly in Rhapsody 11 of the Homeric *Odyssey*, where Odysseus says that he saw in Hades an eidōlon or 'image-double' of Herakles (line 602), while Herakles 'himself' (autos at line 602) abides in

the company of the Olympian gods in Olympus (lines 602–603). I had already commented on this doubling in an earlier project ([Nagy 1979/1999 9§26n](#) and [10§48](#)). But here I add this further comment: the eidōlon or 'image-double' of the immortal twin is by now all that is left of the mortal twin. By now, the mortal twin does not even have to have a name like Iphikles, since he is simply a mortal stand-in for the now immortal Herakles. All that is needed now is a mortal Herakles who stands in as an image-double for the immortal Herakles.

Another stranded Twin: the case of Helen

§20. The immortal Helen, worshipped as a goddess at Sparta and looking like an Olympian goddess when she and her husband Menelaos are visited by Telemachus in *Odyssey* 4, needs a mortal stand-in who can serve as her image-double at Troy. Unlike the mortal stand-in of Herakles, however, who as an eidōlon or 'image-double' is seen merely as a shadowy phantom in Hades, the eidōlon of Helen in Troy lights up the scenery there and bedazzles all, appearing to be so real as to get mistaken for the genuine Helen who abides in Sparta. As I will now argue, we see here another case of a stranded Twin.

§21. The idea that Helen at Troy is a mere eidōlon or 'image-double' of Helen at Sparta is brought to life in an ancient Greek lyric form of song known as *palinōidiā* or 'recantation'. [The song I have in mind](#), attributed to Stesichorus, can be found in the collection *Poetae Melici Graeci* (ed. Page), number 193. At lines 5 and 14 of this song, the word eidōlon refers to Helen at Troy, who is dismissed as an illuminated phantom of the real Helen who is goddess at Sparta.

§22. This lyric version of the Helen myth, as I argued at some length in the book [Pindar's Homer](#) (Nagy 1990 14§§13–17) contrasts itself with the epic version that we see in the Homeric *Iliad*, where Helen comes to life as a seemingly mortal woman who has been taken from Sparta to Troy by her lover Paris/Alexander and later recovered by her former husband Menelaos after the capture of Troy by the Achaeans. In terms of the argument in my book, the word eidōlon in such contexts signals the existence of an alternative version of a given myth. In the case of the Helen myth, as I argue in the book, the epic version that we see in the *Iliad* contradicts the lyric version that we see in the recantation of Stesichorus, and that is why the lyric version corrects the epic version by unsinging, as it were, the epic appearance of Helen as a mortal woman at Troy and by resinging her lyric reality as an immortal goddess at Sparta.

§23. Even within epic, we can see situations where one version of a myth contrasts itself with an alternative version by use of the word eidōlon 'image-double' in referring to the alternative version. In *Rhapsody* 5 of the *Iliad*, for example, when Apollo carries the wounded Aeneas away from the battlefield and thus saves the hero from being killed and despoiled of his armor by the Achaeans (lines 445–448), the god substitutes for Aeneas an eidōlon of Aeneas (449, 451), so that the Achaeans are now fighting to possess the phantom armor of a phantom hero (lines 451–453). In this case, of course, the substitution of an image-double for Aeneas is temporary, whereas the substitution in the case of Helen is sustained throughout the *Iliad*, but we can see nevertheless a striking parallelism here: in both cases, the Achaeans are fighting to possess a figment of their imagination, not a reality. And the figment represents an alternative tradition.

§24. I can see also a situation where the epic version of the Helen myth contrasts itself with the lyric version that we know from the song of recantation by Stesichorus. I have in mind here a Homeric passage that I have already highlighted from *Rhapsody* 3 of the *Iliad*, where Helen herself makes mention of the *Dioskouroi* (lines 236–242), saying that she shares with them the same mother (line 238)—but not saying that she shares with one of the twins the same father. And, as we already noted, Helen goes on to say how she worries that these brothers of hers are nowhere to be seen as she looks down from the walls of Troy and observes all the warriors who have come to fight in the Trojan War in order to repossess her (line 236). Finally, as we have also already noted, it is only after Helen observes that her twin brothers are nowhere to be seen among the Achaeans massing around the walls of Troy that the master narrator of the *Iliad* finally explains why the *Dioskouroi* are out of sight here: it is because both twins are at that very moment abiding underground together in Sparta (lines 243–244).

§25. So, just as the Divine Twins of Helen are out of sight in the *Iliad*, so also is the divine Helen out of sight. As we have just noted, Helen does not even mention Zeus as the father she shares with the *Dioskouroi*, even though epithets of the *Iliad* itself acknowledge her as the daughter of Zeus. This way, the mortal stand-in for Helen at Troy occludes the immortal Helen at Sparta. In the case of Helen, then, she is a stranded twin both as the mortal woman at Troy and as the immortal goddess at Sparta. If her brothers at Sparta both have their lights shut off there, then the light of Helen's divinity at Troy must also be shut off.

Beyond Helen and her image-double

§26. I have much more to say about the idea of Helen as a stranded twin, but I must save most of it for another project. I content myself here to bringing this essay to a close with a preview of further observations centering on the idea of the eidōlon as an image-double:

§26A. As we learn in *Rhapsody* 24 of the *Odyssey*, Agamemnon refers to his wife Clytemnestra as the daughter of the mortal Tyndareos. On the basis of this and other such details, I propose to argue that Clytemnestra is to Helen as Iphikles is to Herakles.

§26B. Similarly, I propose to argue that Helen and Clytemnestra are to Menelaos and Agamemnon as Helen and her eidōlon together are to Pollux and Castor together.

§26C. In general, I hope to correlate my arguments with the intuitive findings of [Douglas Frame \(2009\)](#) concerning the Indo-European background of myths about dioscurism. I will concentrate on what Frame has to say about the correspondences between Greek and Indic traditions and how they can be related to Baltic traditions about a Daughter of the Sun who is both sister and wife to dyadic twins visualized as Morning Star and Evening Star.

§26D. I also hope to correlate my arguments with the exhaustive comparative survey of Lowell Edmunds in his book *Stealing Helen* (2016). I should add that the bibliography in this book leaves almost no stone unturned when it comes to myths centering on the abduction of a quintessentially beautiful woman.

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