ATHLETES, HEROES, AND THE QUEST
FOR IMMORTALITY IN ANCIENT GREECE

A Dissertation in
History
by
David J. Lunt

© 2010 David J. Lunt

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2010
The dissertation of David J. Lunt was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Mark Munn  
Professor of Ancient Greek History and Greek Archaeology  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Paul B. Harvey  
Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies, History, Religious Studies, and Jewish Studies

Stephen Wheeler  
Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies

Mark Dyreson  
Associate Professor of Kinesiology

Carol Reardon  
Director of Graduate Studies in History  
Professor of Military History

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

Victory in an athletic contest in ancient Greece, especially in a prestigious panhellenic festival, brought great status and acclaim to the athlete. Moreover, extraordinary victories by exceptional athletes brought superhuman status, a condition comparable to that of the mythic heroes. Ancient Greek myth emphasized the athletic nature of many heroic figures, imparting to them excellence in contests as well as achievements in battle or other endeavors. This athletic component of a hero’s identity allowed for ready comparisons between the accomplishments of the ancient heroes and the achievements of historical athletes. Consequently, a few extremely successful athletes during Greece’s Archaic and Classical periods received posthumous heroic cults. The accoutrements of victory, such as the victory crown, the epinician ode, and the victory statue likened the victor to the immortal heroes. In addition, the spatial organization of the panhellenic sanctuaries, as well as other athletic fields, closely connected the world of the living athletes with the accomplishments of the deceased heroes. Finally, the importance of founding and sponsoring athletic competitions, especially significant for the tyrants of the Archaic period, provided a means for powerful and wealthy rulers to associate themselves with the victory of athletic contests with no risk of defeat.

The athletic heroes are generally limited to a period in the late Archaic and early Classical periods, when large portions of ancient Greece were struggling with social and political upheaval. As glorified individuals, athletic victors embodied the ideals of the aristocratic elite but also could impart their kudos and kleos to communities as civic
heroes. The power of victory and its ability to justify and legitimize political power was not lost on the aristocratic and non-aristocratic forces in ancient Greece, and each side vied to capitalize on the immense power of prestigious kleos. Despite these social and political rivalries, powerful and successful athletes sought their own heroic honors through their individual quests for kleos and immortality.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................ viii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ........................................................................................................... ix
PREFACE ........................................................................................................................................ x
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................... xi

Chapter 1 Athletes, Heroes, and Immortality ................................................................................. 1
  1.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 1
  1.2 The Research Questions ................................................................................................. 3
  1.3 Organization .................................................................................................................... 9

Chapter 2 The Athletic Hero: the paradigms for seeking immortality ........................................ 14
  2.1. Ancient Greek Heroes and Hero Cults ......................................................................... 14
    2.1.1 Ancient Conceptions of the Hero ......................................................................... 16
    2.1.2 Modern Treatments of the Greek Hero ............................................................... 18
  2.2 Heroes, Victory, and Athletics ....................................................................................... 23
  2.3 Athletic Competition and the Homeric Heroes ............................................................... 25
  2.4 Theseus .......................................................................................................................... 28
  2.5 The Dioscuri ................................................................................................................... 32
  2.6 Heracles the athlete ....................................................................................................... 35
    2.6.1 The "athletic" labors of Heracles ....................................................................... 39
  2.7 Completion of Labors to Win Immortality ................................................................... 41
    2.7.1 Cupid and Psyche: a model for females .............................................................. 47
    2.7.2 Going too far: the myth of Bellerophon .............................................................. 49
  2.8 Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 53

Chapter 3 The Heroic Athletes ..................................................................................................... 55
  3.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 55
  3.2 Modern Discussion of the Hero-athletes ....................................................................... 56
  3.3 Victory, Kudos, and the Heroic Paradigm ................................................................... 64
  3.4 The Heroic Athletes ....................................................................................................... 66
    3.4.1 Milo of Croton and the athlete in battle ............................................................... 68
    3.4.2 Dioxippus of Athens ............................................................................................. 70
    3.4.3 Polydamas of Scotussa ......................................................................................... 72
    3.4.4 Euthymos of Western Locri ................................................................................. 73
    3.4.5 Theagenes of Thasos ........................................................................................... 76
    3.4.6 Cleomedes of Astypalaea ..................................................................................... 80
  3.5 Conclusions ...................................................................................................................... 82
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 5-1: Eric Brulotte’s reconstruction of the stadia at Olympia.......................... 137
Figure 5-2: Isthmia: The South Side of the Sanctuary of Poseidon.......................... 147
Figure 5-3: Nemea: Reconstruction of the Archaic Festival Center .......................... 155
Figure 5-4: Delphi: The area north of the Temple of Apollo ................................. 162
Figure 7-1: Decadrachm of Gelo I (ca. 480 BCE)................................................... 207
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AJA</td>
<td>The American Journal of Archaeology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCH</td>
<td>Bulletin de Correspondence Hellénique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IG</td>
<td><em>Inscriptiones Graecae</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IvO</td>
<td><em>Inschriften von Olympia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JHS</td>
<td>The Journal of Hellenic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA</td>
<td>Revue archéologique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEG</td>
<td><em>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAPA</td>
<td>Transactions of the American Philological Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

Modern society is eager to commemorate and immortalize our extraordinary athletes. We keep meticulous records, erect statues, retire numbers, re-name thoroughfares, and “enshrine” our champions in their sports’ Halls of Fame. These actions memorialize athletic achievements for future generations to admire. Posterity, it is hoped, will continue to recognize the great athletes of the past. The young of every generation have a strong tendency to idolize “heroes” throw, kick, shoot, or catch a ball in organized competition, and society is quick to criticize athletes who fail to set the right behavioral or moral examples for their young admirers. Similarly, the “heroes” of ancient Greek myth provided paradigms for ancient athletes, and these athletes demonstrated a strong desire to ensure that their accomplishments and reputations lived on forever. However, despite the similarities with some of today’s language and terminology, the drive for immortal honors in ancient Greece differed greatly from modern notions of achievement. The ancient Greek understandings of the power of victory and the nature of the immortality it could bring carried deep religious and cultic meanings that are foreign to the conceptions of modern sport.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like acknowledge the generous support and funding I received from many sources. I am especially grateful to my adviser, Professor Mark Munn, who has offered many words of encouragement, clarity, and counsel during my years under his direction. He has always been ready with sage advice in matters both professional and personal. My other committee members, Professor Daniel Berman, Professor Mark Dyreson, Professor Paul Harvey, and Professor Stephen Wheeler, provided valuable guidance as well. Professors Gary Cross, Matthew Restall, and Carol Reardon offered ready assistance as Graduate Directors. I thank The Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Penn State University for a Dissertation Fellowship, and the Penn State College of the Liberal Arts, The Department of History, and Religious Studies Program for awarding a Hill graduate Fellowship Award for Dissertation Support. Their generous support brought this project to completion. Finally, I thank my amazing wife Jana and our beautiful daughter Zola for their unwavering confidence in me. To these people and institutions I express my deepest gratitude.
Chapter 1

Athletes, Heroes, and Immortality

1.1 Introduction

Victory in an athletic contest in ancient Greece, especially in a prestigious panhellenic festival, brought great status and acclaim to the athlete. Moreover, extraordinary victories by exceptional athletes brought superhuman status, a condition comparable to that of the mythic heroes. A visit to Nemea in the summer of 2006 with the American School of Classical Studies at Athens first alerted me to the connections between athletes and heroes in ancient Greece. Since I had just visited Isthmia and was about to continue towards Olympia, the spatial layouts of three of the four panhellenic sites were fresh in my mind (we visited Delphi a few weeks later). Surveying the sanctuary of Nemean Zeus, I was struck by the importance of the Opheltes / Archemoros myth, as well as the various archaeological issues in fixing the location of the child’s hero-shrine. Intrigued, I began to investigate the importance of hero cults to the panhellenic games and emerged with a series of questions that encompassed issues of life, death, athletic competition, and immortality. This project, like most, is an assessment of the state of those questions rather than their definitive answers. Nevertheless, despite the shortcomings of the evidence, there remains much to be examined concerning the relationships between athletics, heroes, and notions of immortality in ancient Greece.
The relationship between athletes and heroes has not gone unnoticed or unremarked. Although there is a sizeable amount of scholarship on both athletics and heroes in ancient Greece, these discussions have, with a few notable and important exceptions, remained largely exclusive of one another. Where the topics have overlapped, most treatments have been superficial in nature, content mainly to summarize the careers of the heroic athletes.\textsuperscript{1} Other scholars, such as Joseph Fontenrose or François Bohringer, have treated at length the phenomenon of athletes who became heroes, but seem largely to have missed the paradigm of mythic heroes who were accomplished athletes.\textsuperscript{2} In addition, these discussions have largely overlooked the evidence for historical athletes who actively sought to ensure their own heroization. More recently, Bruno Currie has investigated the arguments for the heroization of living athletes, and his contributions represent what might be a turning-point in the discussion of this issue.\textsuperscript{3} Leslie Kurke has examined the power of \textit{kudos} from athletic victory and its attendant symbols, and her conclusions deserve elaboration and further development, as well as


broader application to athletes seeking immortality.\textsuperscript{4} While scholars of ancient athletics such as Stephen Miller and Donald Kyle have commented upon the proximity of hero tombs to stadium and hippodrome racetracks at panhellenic sanctuaries, the meanings behind these connections remain largely unexplored.\textsuperscript{5} The spatial arrangements of the sacred panhellenic sites and their athletic grounds indicate that the honors reserved for heroes also applied to athletic victors. The direct juxtaposition of the competition grounds with the tombs of the heroes physically connected the living athletes with the immortal heroes.

1.2 The Research Questions

This project addresses several gaps in the contemporary understanding of the relationship between athletics, heroes, and immortality. What was the nature of the honors claimed by and awarded to victors in prominent athletic contests, and how did these honors relate to the honors paid to the immortal Greek heroes? How did the paradigms of the ancient Greek heroes affect these athletes and their honors, and to what extent could powerful and extraordinary athletes lay claim to heroic status in the historical period? Drawing from literary, archaeological, epigraphic, and art-historical evidence, this investigation brings to bear a broad panoply of sources, and focuses on understanding the connections between heroes and athletics through the lens of the quest


for immortality. This project expands our understanding of the myth and rituals that underscored ancient Greek athletic competitions. In addition, it provides insights into the motivations of competitive athletes and the power that victory, and its attendant *kleos*, brought to a successful athlete. Finally, it discusses the contextual religious, cultural, social, and political forces that influenced the awarding and withholding of heroic honors for prominent individuals in Archaic and Classical Greece.

The connections between heroes and athletics are complex. A key component of a hero’s reputation stemmed from his manifold associations with victory. Powerful victories against military, monstrous, and athletic opponents were a mainstay of heroic myth. The presence of a hero, or his implied presence at his shrine and tomb, disseminated the power of victory to those in the vicinity. Ancient Greeks often interpreted the presence or epiphany of a hero in battle as a harbinger of victory. In addition to supernatural appearances, a hero’s presence was sometimes totemic. For instance, Pausanias informs his readers that, in order to end the Trojan War, the Greeks were compelled to bring the bow of Heracles and a bone of Pelops to Troy. Other examples of the transfer of hero bones are Oedipus and Orpheus. During the historical period, the Spartans claimed to have spirited the remains of Orestes out of Arcadia, the

---

6 Rohde, 137.

7 Pausanias 5.13.4-6. The Greeks successfully brought the bow of Heracles (dramatized in Sophocles’ play *Philoctetes*) and the shoulder-blade of Pelops to Troy, but the bone of Pelops was lost at sea on its way back to the Peloponnese. Eventually, the Delphic Oracle intervened and helped a fisherman from Eretria return it to the Eleans, although the bone had disappeared by the time of Pausanias’ visit presumably, so he wrote, because of the corrosion of the ocean’s salt water.

8 Paus. 1.28.7 claims that Orpheus’ bones were brought posthumously to Athens from Thebes, citing Homer, *Iliad* 23.679. See Paus. 9.30.4-5 for Orpheus.
Athenian Cimon brought the bones of Theseus from Skyros back to Athens, and the Eleans repatriated Hippodameia, wife of Pelops, from Midea. The remains of heroic figures served as important talismans for the ancient Greeks and the presence of a hero – living or dead – represented a token of victory. Unsurprisingly, the heroic association with victory manifested itself on the athletic field as well.

Ancient Greek myth emphasized the athletic nature of many heroic figures, imparting to them excellence in contests as well as achievements in battle or other endeavors. Many mythic episodes from the heroic age featured prominent heroes competing in athletic contests on a variety of occasions. Heracles stood as undoubtedly the most prominent athlete among the mythic heroes, especially famed for his prowess in wrestling. But there was another component to Heracles’ athletic identity – his labors, often referred to as athla (ἆθλα). The successful completion of these labors brought Heracles immortality among the gods of Mount Olympus. On a lesser scale, many of the great heroes of myth received cultic honors at their shrines and tombs. Although they had died, their reputations and achievements had secured for them some type of immortality. The observance of rites in their honor kept their kleos alive, with the understanding that the departed heroes could influence events on earth. Thus, the rituals that honored these heroes both commemorated the reputations of the heroes and also asked for their beneficial influence over mortal situations.

---

The ancient Greeks who recounted these myths cast their heroes in familiar, albeit exaggerated contexts. The program of events from the funeral games of Patroclus or the contests of the Phaeacians probably had more to do with athletics in Homer’s Archaic age than those from an obscure Mycenaean past. Nevertheless, these mythic heroes acted as important figures in both founding and competing in athletic competitions, and their various lineages, accomplishments, and exploits merited the institution of cults and shrines in their memory. This athletic component of a hero’s identity allowed for ready comparisons between the accomplishments of the ancient heroes and the achievements of historical athletes. Consequently, a few extremely successful athletes, mainly during Greece’s Archaic period, received posthumous heroic cults.

The stories of these heroic athletes, many of them recounted in the writings of Pausanias, represent the culmination of human athletic achievement and the embodiment of the heroic ideal. Their prestigious victories imparted to them such a degree of power, kleos, and notoriety that the ancient Greeks instituted posthumous heroic honors. Although the majority of these athletes lived and competed in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, the most complete sources date from the Roman era. While archaeological evidence indicates an expanded program of heroic honors for some of these athletes during the first and second centuries CE (such is the case with Theagenes of Thasos), there exists sufficient evidence to argue that these athletes sought heroic honors in their own lifetimes by emulating the feats and accomplishments of the mythic heroes, and that the heroic honors for them were introduced shortly after their deaths. By

---

pegging the establishment of heroic cults so closely to the athletes’ lifetimes, the logical implication is that the athletes were fully aware of the possibility for heroic honors and actively strove to gain them. While the achievement of heroic cult depended largely upon the willingness of others to observe rites after an athlete’s death, it nevertheless fell to the individual athletes to do all they could to stake their claims to those honors while they were yet alive. The most poignant ways of staking this claim were through the power of victory and the successful completion of heroic deeds.

Victory was an important component of these athletic would-be heroes. More than any other feature, their victories in athletic competition justified the heroic honors that they received. Victory in prestigious panhellenic competitions, as Leslie Kurke has pointed out, brought powerful *kudos* to the athlete.\(^\text{11}\) This power elevated the victor’s status above that of ordinary mortals, a status akin to that of the heroes. The tokens of victory such as the victory crown, statues, and victory odes reinforced this super-human status and underscored the similarities between the triumphant athlete and the mythic heroes as entities that occupied a position between gods and humans. These tokens commemorated the separation of the victorious athlete from his competitors and ordinary mortals. Athletes who accumulated extraordinary numbers of victories could lay claim to superhuman, heroic status.

A scholiast-authored hypothesis to Pindar’s *Isthmian Odes* noted that “all ancient games are for someone who has died.”\(^\text{12}\) While this seems an oversimplification, there

\(^{11}\text{Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 131-63.}\)
existed strong correlations between funerary honors, hero tombs, and panhellenic competitions in ancient Greece. The juxtaposition of human mortality with heroic immortality is evident in athletic contexts, and the spatial arrangements of the panhellenic sanctuaries where athletic contests were held underscored the relationships between heroes, athletes, and immortality. Each of the four sites of the panhellenic “Crown Games” prominently featured a hero’s tomb and shrine close to the competition grounds that connected the athletic space with the sacred space of the sanctuary. This physical relationship between athletes, heroes, and the sacred space of deity meant that those who competed did so in the shadow of a departed hero, a hero whose kleos lived on and who received cultic honors. These heroic sites physically connected the realm of the athletes (the stadia at Olympia, Isthmia, and Nemea; the theater at Delphi) with the sanctuaries of the gods. While equality with the gods was beyond the reach of a mortal, human athlete, the liminal status of the heroes was not. Victory provided the vehicle for athletes to transgress the normal limits of mortality and assume heroic qualities after death. The presence of hero tombs in the athletic grounds symbolized and commemorated victory’s power over the normal finality of death.

In addition to these relationships between athletes and heroes in ancient Greece, the founding and sponsoring of athletic contests provided an important means for a human to associate himself with the actions of the heroes. The Greeks credited their mythic heroes with founding three of the great panhellenic “Crown Games,” Athens’

---

Panathenaia, and with regularly instituting athletic contests, such as the funeral games for Patroclus as told in *Iliad* 23. Patrons of and presiders over athletic contests enjoyed the prestige of close association with the competitions and the *kleos* of victory without actually risking defeat. Their status as overseers allowed them to stand in for the gods in arbitrating disputes and awarding victories. The prestige and resources necessary for festival patronage were closely connected to notions of sovereign authority in ancient Greece. As most of the ancient hero-founders were rulers, so did tyrants during the Archaic period use their patronage of athletic festivals to bolster their own claims to authority and rule, and to bolster their own reputations.

### 1.3 Organization

These relationships between heroes, athletes, mortality, immortality, humanity, and divinity are the themes of this project. In order to lay out the evidence for these claims, I have broken the text into several sections. The first deals with the athletic nature of the ancient Greek heroes, emphasizing athletics as part of heroic identity in competition but also playing on the broader etymological implications of the Greek word for “prizes” and “labors.” The second component is a treatment of the heroic athlete, these persons from the historical period who received or, in some cases, should have received heroic honors after death. Heroic cult is chiefly the responsibility of family, friends, or communities who live after the heroic figure has died. While the institution of posthumous cults is an important consideration, this section also examines the various ways these athletes deliberately emulated their heroic paradigms in efforts to achieve
heroic status. Through their victories, these athletes achieved a superhuman status that elevated them above ordinary mortals. The accoutrements of victory had close ties with notions of heroic status and the next chapter investigates the heroic overtones that accompanied the tokens of victory. The various honors by which the ancient Greeks recognized their accomplished athletes emphasized the superhuman status of the athletic victor. Next, the project’s longest chapter investigates the spatial organization of the panhellenic athletic sites. The locations of the festivals and athletic competitions possessed clear and deliberate connections with mythic heroes. All four of the Crown Games sites, Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, Isthmia, featured the tomb of a hero in close proximity to both the sacred precinct and the site of the athletic contests. This arrangement is no accident, but instead emphasized the relationships between athletic victory and immortal glory. By competing in the shadow of the tombs of the heroes – tombs that received regular cultic honors – mortal athletes could aspire to similar status and similar posthumous honors through their victories. Thus the physical layouts of the panhellenic sanctuaries reinforced this understanding of athletics as a conduit to superhuman status.

The subsequent chapter treats another component of heroic imitation in an athletic context, the role of a founder or patron of athletic contests. Traditionally reserved for those with sufficient means to organize and support such contests, the mythic accounts of festival foundations became important models for the tyrants of the Archaic period, who sought to capitalize on their ability to found and preside over prestigious athletic competitions to reinforce their legitimacy and claims to power. Consequently, Adrastus
of Sicyon, Pheidon of Argos, and Peisistratus of Athens, to name three, seem to have been responsible for augmenting and expanding the panhellenic competitions of the cities they ruled. This role as founder offered a chance for a tyrant to associate himself with victory without risking defeat. Furthermore, the festival’s patron claimed association with the gods in arbitrating and overseeing the contests.

After the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE the role of founders, patrons, and presiders grew more important as a means of staking claims to legitimate power. During the turbulent years of the fourth century BCE and the subsequent Hellenistic age, the importance of founding games and festivals increased as various rulers and kings asserted their status and positions. The introduction of the Lysandreia on Samos shortly after the Peloponnesian War shifted the traditional paradigm of athletics as a vehicle to immortality. Lysander was not an athlete, but an important leader who led the Spartan forces to victory in the Peloponnesian War.13 The island festival offered the still-living Lysander honors typically reserved for Olympian gods, a status that far surpassed the powers of the heroes. Indeed, as the Hellenistic Age unfolded it became more common for games to be founded in honor of great rulers and kings, and there are no further recorded instances of mortal athletes achieving immortal heroic honors through athletic victories. Thus, the quest for immortality through athletic competition ended for the heroic athletes, while the avenue to god-like divinity was reserved for the powerful monarchs of Hellenistic times such as Ptolemy II of Egypt or Eumenes II of Pergamum. Athletic festivals in their honor commemorated, but did not

---

bestow, god-like honors on these rulers. The rise of the powerful monarchs after the Peloponnesian War seems to have ended the institution of heroic cults for magnificent athletes. Although archaeological evidence suggests that some of these cults, notably that of Theagenes of Thasos, were augmented and expanded during the Roman Empire, these represent commemorations of traditional heroes rather than altogether new cults.

Finally, the concluding remarks offer some observations concerning the social and political contexts of the heroic athletes. Specifically, this section demonstrates how the heroic athletes figured into the tensions between aristocracy, democracy, and tyranny that marked Greece’s Archaic and Classical periods. Associations with victory were important for tyrants and would-be tyrants but, paradoxically, athletics also fostered democratic involvement by relying upon the community to bestow kleos upon a victor. These dynamics suggest that the athletes from the late Archaic and early Classical period who achieved heroic status did so as civic heroes, allowing the community to participate in the kleos of athletic victory and as a safeguard against tyrannical aspirations.

Such is the scope of this project, from the heroic paradigms laid out in the myths of the ancient Greeks to the institution of cults for successful and victorious athletes during Greece’s Archaic and Classical periods. The Hellenistic period marked a departure from the established relationships between victory, athletes, and heroes. Although the quest for immortal status and honors remained a powerful component of athletic competition, it was reserved for the founders, patrons, and rulers of these contests rather than those who gained kleos through competition and victory. Although these founders and patrons looked to the examples of the mythic heroes in patterning their
actions, the eventual development of Hellenistic ruler cults superseded the traditional nature of the hero and claimed a more prominent status akin to the Olympian gods. A discussion of the nature of ancient Greek heroes and hero-cults, as well as the definitions and assumptions employed in this work will lay the groundwork for a closer examination of the connections between athletics, heroes, and immortality in ancient Greece.
Chapter 2

The Athletic Hero: the paradigms for seeking immortality

2.1. Ancient Greek Heroes and Hero Cults

It is difficult to define the ancient Greek hero. While a generalized description can comfortably place the hero somewhere between the mortal human and a god, specifying the boundaries is problematic. According to Walter Burkert, the category of heroes was “a peculiarity of Greek mythology” and renders comparisons with other cultures or religious systems problematic.1 There were nevertheless certain markers that qualify a figure for heroic status. The first of these was divine birth. Although conflicting genealogies of heroic figures can exist, most heroes have at least one immortal parent. Another important component of heroic identity is victory in all sorts of contests and the accomplishment of great and remarkable feats. Importantly, mythographers often referred to these heroic accomplishments as “labors” or athla (ἄθλα), connecting the heroic deeds with athletic achievement. Finally, the institution of honorific cult, most often at the hero’s tomb, indicated that the figure had passed from the mortal realm to the immortal; he had become a hero. Although Heracles seems to represent an exceptional case as the only hero to ascend Mount Olympus and dwell with the gods, his case is important. The example of Heracles aside, the barrier between the heroes and the Olympian gods seems to have been fairly solidly fixed. The more

---

compelling question becomes the demarcation between ordinary humans and the extraordinary heroes.²

The great heroes of Greek myth were human beings who possessed extraordinary and supernatural traits and characteristics.³ As human beings, albeit men of extraordinary strength and ability, the heroes of the ancient Greeks remained accessible as examples and models of ideal behavior and achievement. Jean-Pierre Vernant noted that heroes conferred “a new dimension on the usual norms of collective life” by means of “the exacting rigor of his life story and the uncompromising demands of his aretē.”⁴ With their remarkable life stories and their arete, heroes outstripped all others in competitive contexts and cemented their status as the best of humans, deserving of cult and ritual after death. The heroes connected the realms of history and myth, enjoying life in the same way as humans but accomplishing feats beyond the realm of human experience.⁵ Aside from these generalities, arriving at a clear, comprehensive definition of the ancient Greek hero remains problematic. While there are assuredly differences between mortals, heroes, and gods, the ancient Greeks seem to have considered the limits vague, elastic, and somewhat variable.

² While heroes seem to have been fairly systematically excluded from reaching Olympian status (e.g. Bellerophon) with the exception of Heracles, there nevertheless remains the case of Dionysus, who shared a parentage similar to Heracles and ended up on Olympus.


2.1.1 Ancient Conceptions of the Hero

There are several ancient descriptions of the characteristics of the heroes. Around 700 BCE, at the dawn of ancient Greece’s Archaic Age, the poet Hesiod, in recounting the various ages of existence, described an age of “demi-gods” (ἡμίθεοι) where a “divine race of heroic men” had fought great wars and earned a blessed afterlife.6 Plutarch, in his *Life of Theseus*, speculated that Theseus’ era produced a race of beings that far surpassed normal human athletic abilities such as bodily strength and swiftness of foot.7 In the fourth century BCE, the Athenian orator Isocrates distinguished between “immortality” (ἀθανασία) and “power equal to the gods” (ἡ δύναμις ἰσόθεος).8 In this encomium, Isocrates claimed that it was Helen’s “δύναμις ἰσόθεος” that allowed her to raise her brothers, Castor and Pollux, to immortality. With rhetorical flourish, Isocrates attributed to Helen the power of the gods, power that superseded that of the lesser heroes. It was this great power that could raise mortals to immortal status and transform humans into heroes. This important distinction, the notion that a hero is something that one becomes, was further explained in the writings of the Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero.

In his *Laws*, Cicero identified two types of divinities – those who have always lived in the heavens and those whose merits placed them there. Among those of this

---

8 Isocrates 10 (*Encomium to Helen*). 61.
latter category, Cicero places such heroes as Hercules, Aesculapius, Castor, and Pollux.\footnote{Cicero, \textit{Laws} 2.8.19: Divos et eos, qui caelestes semper habit, colunto et ollos, quos endo caelo merita locaverint.}

This seems to uphold the distinction between the gods and the heroes. Cicero’s discussion of the heroes, however, is more nuanced. These beings whose merits have earned them a place in the heavens, Cicero notes in another work, are often worshipped equally with those who have always been divine. Indeed, he writes, sometimes the latecomers are worshipped even more than the original deities.\footnote{Cicero, \textit{De Natura Deorum} 3.45: At hi quidem coluntur aeque atque illi, apud quosdam etiam multo magis.} In addition to the heroes of myth who eventually ascended to the heavens, Cicero acknowledges how many communities commemorated outstanding men by according them the status of the immortal gods.\footnote{Cicero, \textit{De Natura Deorum} 3.45-50.} Although Cicero includes this category of community hero in the “latecomers” category, he recognizes here the ongoing institution of heroic honors for actual, historical persons. As with the other explanations, Cicero’s main criterion stressed that one \textit{becomes} a hero. The heroes of myth were greater than humans and inferior to the gods, yet some historical humans had managed to transgress this boundary and achieve heroic status through the merits of their earthly achievements. These heroes were human, susceptible to death, and the recipients of cultic honors reserved for divine immortals. Despite these categories, a clear understanding of the various types of heroes and heroic cult in ancient Greek myth, cults, and traditions remains elusive. These limitations, however, have not prevented modern scholarship from engaging with the issue.
2.1.2 Modern Treatments of the Greek Hero

Scholars have encountered considerable difficulty in classifying and defining the types of deities that received hero cult, especially in comparison to the full-fledged gods of the Greek pantheon. One of the earliest attempts to pin down the nature of the ancient Greek heroes was offered by Erwin Rohde in the late nineteenth century. Rohde’s discussion focused, in part, on the formulation over time of ancient Greek concepts of the soul, afterlife, and immortality. The hero, contended Rohde, was an elaboration or reintroduction of ancestor worship, since so much of the hero’s cult relied upon the gravesite or tomb. These heroes were not “spirits of the dead, and not a species of inferior deities or ‘demigods,’” nor were they daimones, but rather men who “ha[d] become Heroes, and that only after their death.”12 Despite this neat arrangement, Rohde was hard-pressed to explain other categories of divine beings who were clearly not gods yet had never tasted mortal death (e.g. Amphiaraos). Instead, Rohde deflected the issue by calling these beings “quasi-Heroes; prototypes of the real Heroes they can never have been.”13 It is unfair to press Rohde’s work too closely on this point, since this discussion of heroes tangential to the text’s main thrust. Nevertheless, Rohde’s work, while important, bears now the limitations of its age. Additional sources and scholarship have clarified the issues surrounding the various embodiments of the ancient Greek heroes, but these embodiments continue to defy easy classification.

---

12 Rohde, 117-118. Rohde’s emphasis.
13 Rohde, 121.
In 1921, Lewis Farnell’s *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* identified no less than seven basic types or categories of ancient Greek heroes and heroines. His categorical definitions, however, seem as paradoxically ambiguous as the heroes themselves. For instance, Farnell separated “heroes who are also gods,” “epic heroes of entirely human legend,” and “historic and real personages” as different types of heroes.\(^\text{14}\)

While these categories retain some usefulness for understanding the various versions of heroization in ancient Greece, they nevertheless underscore rather than categorize the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of ancient Greek heroes as beings who occupied an intermediate status between mortal humans and immortal gods.

Besides these categorizations, scholars have attempted to distinguish between heroes and gods by analyzing the terminology of cult and sacrifice. In 1944, Arthur Darby Nock used sacrificial rituals to differentiate between ancient Greek hero and god.\(^\text{15}\) This distinction, mentioned in Rohde but developed considerably by Nock, distinguished between the sacrifices offered the departed heroes as “destruction sacrifices” (ἐναγίσματα) and the more traditional participatory sacrifices (θυσίαι) performed for the gods.\(^\text{16}\) The rites for the heroes were oriented to the ground, where the dead resided, and those for the gods were directed to the sky. Most recently, this distinction has been undermined by Gunnell Ekroth, who contended that there were in fact at least three kinds of sacrificial rituals performed for heroes, including θυσίαι where the participants partook


Ekroth noted that Pausanias utilized both terms to describe the honors paid to heroic figures, and decried modern distinctions where Pausanias saw none. In addition, although Farnell contended that the altars used for hero worship and those for the gods had different shapes, sizes, and names, he conceded the difficulty in assigning heroes to specific status since Heracles received both types of sacrifice and cult in the Greek world. It is therefore apparent that the most recent scholarship has done more to blur the categories between heroes, humans, and gods than to offer any fixed definitions.

Perhaps the most nuanced contribution to modern understanding of ancient Greek heroes is Gregory Nagy’s The Best of the Achaeans. Nagy tackles the apparent paradox of living heroes who have died by explaining that while the dead hero is “far removed from the realities of the here-and-now,” he nevertheless still enjoys “such real things as convivial feasts” in “pleasant company.” An important part of Nagy’s discussion turns upon the use of ἄφθιτος, or “unfailing.” A fragment of Simonides lamented that the lifespans of the heroes were not ἄφθιτος, but Homer’s Achilles, employing the same vocabulary, asserts that his kleos could be ἄφθιτος, depending on his actions at Troy. In this vein, Nagy has struck a crucial point. While death might be final, the vitality of a

---


19 Herodotus 2.44. Farnell, 95-99.

hero’s kleos was unfailing and immortal. The hero was removed from the world of the living, but still enjoyed attention and honors performed there on his behalf.

Bruno Currie addressed Rohde’s (and others’) contention that a hero is a person who has died by broadening the definition of the term “hero” (ἥρως). Rather than categorizing the heroes as a class of deceased super-humans, Currie defined the hero from the top of the spectrum as “a supernatural being subordinate to a θεός [god].” Currie noted that there were times that a hero in ancient Greece need not necessarily have died, since there are attestations of the word being used to refer to living persons in the first century BCE. Indeed, two-and-a-half centuries earlier Aristotle alluded to persons who manifested “heroic excellence.” Thus, Currie concluded, there “are good grounds then . . . to concede the possibility that the living might receive hero cult.” This contention would support the argument for heroic athletes actively seeking to ensure their heroization during their own lifetimes.

Recently, Jennifer Larson distanced herself from rigid categorization and embraced a broader definition of heroes by classifying them into two chapters, one entitled “Anomalous Immortals: hero-gods and heroine-goddesses” and the other devoted to “The Powerful Dead,” referring to mortals who had achieved a measure of heroization after death. These less stringent categories indicate the confusing mélange of god, hero,

---


23 Currie, *Pindar and the Cult of Heroes*, 163.

mortal, and immortal that the class of ancient Greek heroes represented. In addition to the pitfalls of debating whether most heroes were venerated mortals or “faded gods,”\textsuperscript{25} the wide array of figures who possessed some component of immortal status make definitive limits and rigid boundaries impossible. The hero of ancient Greece was a figure who both fixed and transgressed boundaries – boundaries between the living and the dead, between the mortal and the immortal, between the human and the god. This is perhaps best illustrated by Nagy’s contention that the hero’s striving for honors establishes a “ritual antagonism between god and hero.”\textsuperscript{26} This agonistic competition for community honors underscores the boundaries between the heroes and the gods, yet belies the assumption that this boundary was solidly fixed, allowing the heroes to push for their own honors. Similarly, extraordinarily successful mortals, including the heroic athletes, pushed the limits of mortality in their own quests for community honors. Their competition with the heroes for cultic honors mirrored the competitive contexts of the Homeric heroes and gods. In all these instances, however, the ancient Greeks understood that those who possessed this intermediate, heroic status retained interest in and exerted influence on earth after death, and therefore merited ritual and propitiation from mortals.

The stories of the heroes extended the limits of human experience, providing a vehicle for the best humans to achieve some measure of divinity, falling short, of course, of equality with the gods of Mount Olympus. Since their nature entailed setting, transgressing, and extending boundaries, it is natural that these heroes should defy easy


\textsuperscript{26} Nagy, 142-150 \textit{passim}. Quotation from 142.
classification into strictly defined categories. The attempts by Rohde, Farnell, Nock, Larson, and others to corral the essential features of ancient Greek heroism notwithstanding, the most effective means of conceiving the Greek hero is by leaving the boundaries between mortal and immortal, human and divine somewhat permeable. There is ample room on the spectrum between human and god to accommodate the various manifestations of the Greek hero, and this project embraces a wide understanding of the heroic figure, relying perhaps most upon Currie’s top-down definition of the hero as “a supernatural being subordinate to a god” or, perhaps, the philosophical designation of the hero as “between” (μεταξύ) gods and men.27 This satisfyingly wide definition avoids the historical pitfalls of relying upon ritual terminology, requirements of death, or overly specific sub-categories to understand the nature of heroic figures. Instead, it focuses on the hero as an extraordinary figure who transcended the normal boundaries between mortality and immortality, humanity and divinity. These figures, commemorated in myth and memorial, provided the paradigms for humans seeking immortality through athletics. It is to the stories of these mythic figures that we turn next.

2.2 Heroes, Victory, and Athletics

Heroes claimed a close connection with victory. Competition, whether in battle, athletics, or other challenges, offered the ancient Greek hero the opportunity to amass *kleos* and to demonstrate supremacy. Victory in these endeavors was an essential

component of the heroic identity and the greatest heroes, such as Achilles, Heracles, Theseus, and Pelops won the greatest victories. Since they provided such a ready avenue for victories, athletics played an important part in heroic identity and heroes often demonstrated athletic excellence and prowess. By means of these accomplishments, heroes achieved a measure of immortality after their deaths. Since athletics provided such an obvious context for victory, the mythic accounts of the athletic hero provided a paradigm for historical Greeks who sought to imitate the actions, victories, and eventual immortality of the heroes. The extraordinary athletic abilities of the ancient Greek heroes were an important component of their heroic identity and comprised an important part of the larger heroic theme of struggle and victory.

Consequently, the myths of the ancient Greeks highlighted the athletic identity of their heroes. Victorious in all their endeavors, heroes exemplified athletic excellence. The Roman mythographer Hyginus compiled a list of the first fifteen recorded games from the mythic tradition. Although a lacuna in the text obscures the first four, the remaining eleven include contests founded by Heracles, Perseus, Achilles, and Theseus, as well as the beginnings of three of the four great pan-Hellenic festivals. Although a late source from the first or second century CE, Hyginus’ list underscores the roles of the heroes in founding and competing in athletic contests in the Greek mythic tradition.28 An examination of some of ancient Greece’s most prominent heroes reveals the importance of athletics in establishing and defining these characters’ heroic identities. From the earliest Greek literature, the poetry of Homer, a conception of the athletic hero becomes

28 Hyginus, Fabula 273.
apparent. The description of the funeral games for Patroclus found in *Iliad* 23 illustrates the importance of athletic prowess to heroic identity, and Homer’s inclusion of athletic contests became a mainstay of epic poetry. William Willis noted that, in all the classical epics that came after Homer, the narrative action was interrupted at some point to accommodate athletic contests. Even within the context of Patroclus’ funeral games, Homer alludes to two previous heroic athletic competitions, the funeral games for Oedipus and for Amarynceus.

### 2.3 Athletic Competition and the Homeric Heroes

Homer’s vivid account in *Iliad* 23 relates the competition and outcome of each event, including a chariot race, boxing, wrestling, a footrace, a throwing contest, spear-thrusting, and archery. While some of these events, namely spear-thrusting and archery, were not part of the general program of ancient Greek athletics, they nevertheless represent “athletic” contests in the sense of being contests for a prize, and they provided a forum for Homer’s heroes to compete for *kleos* and honor. Unsurprisingly, with the exception of Achilles who acted as sponsor, the most accomplished of the *Iliad*’s heroes played the largest role in Book 23’s athletic

---


31 Hom., *Il.* 23.272-897 *passim*. At 621, Achilles promises a contest of javelin throwing, but the contest never really takes place (see 884-897). Lines 798-883 recount competitions in spear-thrusting, throwing a lump of iron (surely related to discus throwing), and archery. The grieving Achilles, perhaps the greatest of the ancient Greek heroes, declines to participate in the contests, providing a heroic paradigm of games foundation and sponsorship that will be treated in a later section.
competitions. Diomedes won the chariot race. Ajax and Odysseus wrestled to a draw. Meriones dazzled the onlookers with his archery skill. Odysseus claimed victory in the footrace and Agamemnon received a prize for throwing the javelin without even competing. Homer took pains to assure his listeners that the less well-known characters who figure prominently in the contests, such as the boxers Euryalus and Epeius, nevertheless possessed other requisite heroic traits such as size, strength, and noble lineage. Epeius is “brave and large” and his vaunt claimed that his boxing skill would compensate for any of his shortcomings in battle.32 In addition, Homer characterized Epeius’ opponent, Euryalus, as “god-like” and the victor in the earlier funeral games for Oedipus.33 Certainly, his victory in this boxing bout brought “divine” and “great-souled” Epeius acclaim and status among the Homeric characters.34

In addition to the athletic feats recounted in the *Iliad*, Homer used an athletic contest to establish the identity and preeminence of Odysseus during his long journey back to Ithaca. In Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, the Phaeacian king Alcinous entertains the wandering hero. After a hearty feast, the Phaeacians engaged in athletic contests so that Odysseus might be impressed and tell his friends at home of the Phaeacian prowess in boxing, wrestling, jumping, and running.35 After Odysseus declines to participate, the Phaeacian prince Laodamas goads Odysseus into competing by scornfully comparing him


35 Hom., *Od.* 8.100-103.
to a common merchant, dismissively stating, “You don’t seem like an athlete.” Duly provoked, Odysseus seized a discus that was much heavier than any the Phaeacians had used, and flung it much farther than any of the other marks. Odysseus’ overwhelming throw immediately established his presence as an accomplished athlete. After the throw, Odysseus announced to the Phaeacians his abilities in other events as well, such as boxing, wrestling, or running, and offered to prove himself to any challenger. Odysseus continued, revealing his abilities with the bow and the spear, alluding to his exploits at Troy. Through this monologue, as Odysseus is literally constructing his identity to the hosting Phaeacians, he emphasizes his abilities in athletic events, and offers to prove them by competitive means. Ability and the means to prove that ability through competition were therefore integral components of Odysseus’ heroic identity. King Alcinous quickly recognized Odysseus’ abilities as heroic, acknowledging and complimenting Odysseus for his arete and looking forward to a day when Odysseus would tell this story to “another hero.” Homer’s paradigm for a hero is clear. The greatest of the heroes are also the greatest athletes. This episode underscores the inherent athletic nature of Homer’s heroes and demonstrates the use of athletic competition to construct and assert heroic identity.

---

36 Hom., Od. 8.164: οὐδ᾽ ἄθλητηρι ἔοικας.
37 Hom., Od. 8.185-195.
39 Hom., Od. 8.215-229. Odysseus mentions Troy and thereby alludes to his identity at line 220.
40 Hom., Od. 8.235-245. Alcinous refers to Odysseus as a hero at 241-242: ὅφρα καὶ ἄλλῳ ἔαπες ἠρώων.
2.4 Theseus

In addition to the heroes of Homeric epic, the stories of the mythic hero Theseus emphasized the importance of athletic ability to heroic identity. Although accounts of Theseus’ parentage vary (different traditions represent him as the son of Poseidon or of Aegeus), the stories define Theseus as a hero of high renown. Bacchylides lauded Theseus’ strength and courage as he journeyed from the Peloponnese to Attica and briefly listed some of his heroic achievements.\(^41\) Notably, Theseus relied upon athletic prowess to overcome his enemies during his journey. At Eleusis, he defeated and killed Cercyon in a wrestling match and took his kingdom. According to Pausanias, Theseus used skill and technique (σοφία) to defeat his opponent and, afterwards, Theseus taught his wrestling techniques to the Athenians, since wrestlers until that time had depended solely on brute strength.\(^42\) Pherecydes, a mythographer who wrote during the mid-fifth century BCE, claimed that Theseus learned to wrestle from his tutor Phorbon, and in turn taught the sport to the Athenians.\(^43\) In addition, one rationalized version of Theseus’ fight with the Minotaur claimed that Theseus had defeated Minos’ Cretan champion, a man named Taurus, in a wrestling match.\(^44\) These examples suggest that, like the other heroes, an important part of Theseus’ heroic identity stemmed from his athletic prowess, especially his skill and technique in wrestling. Accordingly, mortal athletes looked to


\(^{43}\) Scholiast to Pind. *Nem.* 5.89b = Pherecydes, fr. 152 (Fowler). A different scholion to the same line reports that Theseus invented pancration, not wrestling. (5.89a).

\(^{44}\) Plut., *Thes.* 19.
Theseus as their model and original teacher. As they learned and practiced wrestling
techniques, ancient Athenians could claim a direct connection to Theseus’ original
teachings. Thus, the tradition that Theseus taught wrestling skill to the people of Athens
connected athletes with a hero and provided a ready vehicle for human imitation of the
heroic ideal.

Philostratus, who wrote during the 3rd century CE seems to have accepted a
seamless transition from heroic predecessors to human champions in athletic
competition. He identified a general decline in athletic ability when comparing the
athletes of his day with the renowned athletes of Archaic and Classical Greece, and his
text offers advice on training and technique in order to produce athletes of a caliber
similar to those of the ancient Greeks. Consequently, in identifying appropriate
examples and models for the athletes of his time, Philostratus indiscriminately lumped
historical athletes with mythical heroes, separating them only chronologically. He stated,

Ancient gymnastic training produced Milo and Hipposthenes, Polydamas,
Promachus, and Glaucus the son of Demulos, as well as the athletes before
them, such as Peleus, Theseus, and even Heracles. Although the
gymnastics of the time of our fathers formed lesser athletes, they were still
remarkable and worthy of remembrance. As they are now, gymnastics
have so changed athletes that many people are annoyed with those who
pursue gymnastic training.

---

45 Philostratus’ essay On Gymnastics was discovered in 1844 near Constantinople, but not made widely
available until 1898. Precise identification of the text’s author is problematic, since the other works
traditionally ascribed to “Philostratus” were written by three, perhaps four, members of the same family
over at least two generations. On Gymnastics was most likely written by the second Philostratus, “the
Athenian” who also wrote the Life of Apollonius of Tyana, the Lives of the Sophists, and On Heroes. This
Philostratus died ca. 250 CE. For a brief but insightful treatment of De Gymnastica’s main themes, see
Alain Billault, L’Univers de Philostrate (Brussels: Latomus Revue d’Études Latines, 2000), 67-72.

46 Philostratus, De Gymanstica 2.
Here, Philostratus identifies human athletes with mythic heroes, categorizing them as athletes of similar abilities or, at least, similar training. Despite his contention that the athletes of his own day had declined considerably in comparison with the great victors and heroes of Archaic and Classical Greece, Philostratus’ text implies that it is possible for human athletes to seek the same level of athletic achievement as those athletes, both mythic and historical, of long ago. Poor training regimens and techniques, not an inferior human status, deserved the blame for the shortcomings in the athletes of Philostratus’ day. Both the mythic heroes and human competitors engaged in athletics on a similar scale – a scale that Philostratus sought to reintroduce.

Throughout the rest of De Gymnastica, Philostratus blends the mythic with the historical, paying attention to etiologies of the various competitive events. In describing the origins of the pentathlon, Philostratus wrote that Jason invented the event during the Argonauts’ stay on Lemnos in order to please Peleus, the father of Achilles. An accomplished athlete, Peleus nevertheless was unable to win victory in running, jumping, discus, or javelin, but always took second. His victory in wrestling, however, secured the pentathlon victory. For the other events, Philostratus offers questionable, yet wholly human explanations of their origins, such as the long-distance run developing from heralds who hurried to deliver messages, or the hoplite race and pancration stemming

---

47 Philostratus, De Gymnastica 1.

48 Philostratus, De Gymnastica 3.
from the Persian Wars. Although Philostratus’ chronology and etiologies are clearly inaccurate, they nevertheless underscore the close connection between human and heroic athletic competition. The tremendous feats of the mythic heroes included athletic prowess, and mortals who lived later could aspire to similar successes through the same medium. Thus, athletics provided a means by which ancient Greeks could imitate the heroes of myth. Those athletes who were most successful consequently laid claim to heroic status in their own right.

The stories of Theseus present an additional layer to this practice among ancient Greek athletes of imitating the heroes. According to Plutarch, Theseus, himself a hero, sought to imitate an even greater hero from an earlier generation, Heracles. Theseus dreamed of possessing *arete* such as that of Heracles, and Heracles’ example spurred Theseus to accomplish similar deeds himself. Accordingly, when Theseus killed Periphetes in Epidaurus, Theseus took the dead man’s massive club as a testament of his victory. Plutarch explained that just as the skin of the Nemean lion was useful to Heracles both in combat (its skin was supposedly impermeable) and as a memorial of the massive beast he had killed, so did Theseus make use of Periphetes’ massive club. In both cases the token of victory served as a useful tool and a monument to the hero’s fame. The size of the lion’s skin or of Periphetes’ club only reinforced the reputations of the men who had won them. Plutarch emphasized this imitation throughout his *Life of*

---

49 Philostratus, *De Gymnastica* 4, 8, 11.


51 Plut., *Thes.* 8.
Theseus, noting that Theseus’ punishments of the various brigands and bandits that threatened the route from the Peloponnese followed Heracles’ example of turning the violent traps intended for him back upon his enemies.⁵² Indeed, so great were Theseus’ conquests and achievements in his many contests that he is supposed to have inspired the phrase, “this one is another Heracles.”⁵³ Finally, the stories about Theseus claimed that he imitated Heracles in founding athletic contests, another heroic endeavor that will be treated in chapter 6. As Heracles was one of the legendary founders of the Olympic Games, so did some traditions attribute the Isthmian Games to Theseus.⁵⁴ In the end, Theseus’ accomplishments and achievements solidified his heroic status. Theseus represented a double paradigm for ancient Greeks. Both his accomplishments and his imitation of Heracles’ feats provided an example of overwhelming success for those seeking heroic status. Eager to assume the same honors and distinctions as the heroes of myth, ancient Greek athletes looked to their heroes, including Theseus, for their models.

2.5 The Dioscuri

The divine twins, the Dioscuri, also represented this heroic paradigm of athletic achievement. Homer’s Helen identified her brother Castor as the “tamer of horses” and her brother Polydeuces as “good at boxing.” Apollodorus wrote that Castor’s forte was

⁵² Plut., Thes. 11.

⁵³ Plut., Thes. 29.

⁵⁴ Plut., Thes. 25.
the art of war, and Polydeuces’ boxing.\textsuperscript{55} Pindar claimed that the brothers had innate natural ability.\textsuperscript{56} While Castor’s experience with horses could easily translate to equestrian athletics, Polydeuces’ accomplishments as a boxer merited special attention from ancient Greek writers. In the Hellenistic era, both Apollonius of Rhodes and Theocritus described the violent and gripping boxing match that took place between Polydeuces and Amycus as the Argonauts journeyed to Colchis.\textsuperscript{57} As with Odysseus and Theseus, Polydeuces, the stranger, proved himself superior to the local challenger by means of an athletic contest. The bout ended with Polydeuces killing or disabling Amycus with a crushing blow to the head, after which the Argonauts continued on their journey.

The myths of Polydeuces reinforced the paradigm of the athletic hero who achieves immortality. Known mainly for his prowess in boxing, this hero, along with his twin brother, eventually achieved immortal status. Like Theseus, the twins’ parentage was ambiguous. According to Homer, the two were the sons of Leda and Tyndareus.\textsuperscript{58} Yet in the Homeric Hymn to the Dioscuri, they were paradoxically “The Tyndaridai, whom Olympian Zeus begot.”\textsuperscript{59} Theocritus referred to Polydeuces as the “son of Zeus.”\textsuperscript{60} As with Theseus, the disagreement concerning mortal and immortal parentage


\textsuperscript{56} Pind. \textit{Nem.} 10.50-55.

\textsuperscript{57} Apollonius of Rhodes, \textit{Argonautica }2.1-97. Theocritus, \textit{Idyll} 22.44-134.

\textsuperscript{58} Hom., \textit{Od.} 11.298-300.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Homer Hymn to the Dioscuri} 17.
only underscores the ambiguous status between humans and gods that these heroes possessed. After Castor was killed in a battle with Idas and Lynceus, Polydeuces was injured and carried into the heavens. Polydeuces, however, secured permission from Zeus to share his immortality with his twin brother, alternating days among the gods and mortals. Homer’s *Odyssey* claims that, although the earth holds them, they continue to live, enjoying the honor of Zeus as they alternate between life and death, equal to the gods. Although modern scholar Timothy Gantz speculated that these lines might be a later interpolation intended to reconcile conflicting versions of the myth and support Zeus’ paternity, it is simpler and more accurate to conclude that the *Odyssey* recognized the ambiguous nature of heroic immortality, especially since the twins’ alternating status appears in Pindar as well. This extraordinary arrangement, where the two brothers eternally alternated between mortal and immortal status, reveals the ambiguity of the divine status of the ancient Greek hero. While the hero dies and is buried, he nevertheless enjoys some degree of immortality. In Polydeuces’ case, it was his divine parentage that secured his immortality and allowed him to share with his mortal brother. The divine Polydeuces did not earn immortality through his athletic feats, but the myths concerning the divine twins utilized their athletic accomplishments to construct and

---

60 Theoc., *Id.* 22.115.


reinforce their heroic identity. In this way, the myths of the Dioscuri and their eventual immortality supported the paradigm of an athletic component in a heroic identity.

The athletic prowess of the Homeric heroes, Theseus, and Polydeuces played an important role in constructing and asserting the heroic identity of these figures. Victory and accomplishment in athletics, as well as in battle or other types of contests, made up an integral part of heroic character. The heroic paradigm that relied so heavily on victory, and specifically on athletic triumph, was most thoroughly and comprehensively manifested through the stories of Heracles. Consequently, the exploits, achievements, and victories of Heracles provided the ideal model for securing immortality.

2.6 Heracles the athlete

Of all the ancient heroes, the Greeks considered Heracles perhaps the most important, the most famous. At Olympia, the site of ancient Greece’s most prestigious athletic competitions, Greeks recognized and worshiped Heracles simultaneously as a founder of the games, a victorious athlete, and a model for human athletes. The metopes of the fifth century BCE temple of Zeus at Olympia featured twelve of Heracles’ labors, and it is likely that these metopes played a key role in the conceptualization of Heracles as an athlete in the ancient Greek world. Wendy Raschke has noted the similarities between the poses and depictions of Heracles in these relief sculptures and other images of victors and victory from the ancient Greek world. Furthermore, her brief conclusion that the immortality earned by Heracles would be “an appropriate lesson” for competing athletes who hoped to complete their own athletic “labors” at Olympia further supports
the notion that athletes actively sought to imitate the exploits and rewards of their heroes. Heracles was strongly associated with the boundaries between the mortal and immortal spheres, and the transgression of these boundaries. The successful completion of Heracles’ struggles brought him immortality among the gods and established a model for those who sought immortal status.

Heracles is a complex figure in ancient Greek myth. Multiple versions of his exploits abounded in the ancient Greek world. Homer, Hesiod and the Homeric Hymn to Heracles knew him to have been born at Thebes, the result of a union between the mortal Alcmene and immortal Zeus. The fifth-century BCE writer Herodotus, however, acknowledged two different figures named Heracles: an ancient Phoenician / Egyptian god and the well-known Greek man who was born to mortal parents Alcmene and Amphitryon. Identifying a temple in Phoenicia that predated Amphitryon, Herodotus concluded that the worship of Heracles the god must have predated the birth of Heracles the Greek hero. Pausanias recorded a similar distinction between the Greek and non-Greek Heracles. The inclusion of the Idaean Dactyl Heracles confuses the picture even


66 Hdt. 2.43-44.

more. Pausanias dutifully reported the legend that it was the Cretan Idaean Heracles (not a hero from Thebes) that helped found the festival at Olympia, as did Diodorus Siculus.  

It seems that even the ancient Greeks had trouble distinguishing between the various versions of the Heracles myths. The formidable confusion most likely stems from ancient attempts to rationalize or situate Heracles’ life and deeds into a finite, historical timeframe. Rather than attempt to differentiate that which the Greeks could not, it is more useful to focus on the personage Heracles as an ambiguous heroic figure with both human and divine traits. As a mighty hero who achieved immortal status through his great deeds, Heracles was a figure who emphasized athletic achievement for the ancient Greeks.

The exploits of Heracles were filled with athletic activities that would have been very familiar to an ancient Greek. According to Apollodorus, Heracles enjoyed an upbringing suitable for Greek aristocratic mortals. He learned to drive a chariot, wrestle, use weapons, and to play the lyre – all components of ancient athletic competitions. Most often considered a wrestler, several mythic episodes recounted Heracles’ prowess in this sport. According to Apollodorus, Heracles killed Polygonus and Telegonus, both grandsons of Poseidon, in a wrestling match. When the Sicilian hero Eryx challenged

---

68 Paus. 5.7.6-9. Diod. Sic. 5.64.6.

69 Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality*, 95-145, esp. 99-102 attempted to trace Heracles’ progression from mortal to immortal but, while his ideas are insightful, the conception of Heracles’ evolving linearly and diachronically from man to god in Greek consciousness is too simplistic for a personage with such far-flung cult and traditions.


71 Apollod., *Bibl.* 2.5.9.
Heracles to a wrestling bout for one of Geryon’s cattle that had escaped and joined his herd, Heracles killed him on his third throw.\textsuperscript{72} When Heracles came across Antaeus, a son of Poseidon who killed strangers by wrestling them to death, the great hero killed him in a wrestling match by preventing Antaeus from touching the ground, from which he drew his strength.\textsuperscript{73} Heracles even wrestled in the underworld, breaking the ribs of Menoetes, who tended Hades’ cattle and objected to Heracles’ slaughter of one to provide blood for the shades of the dead.\textsuperscript{74} In all these instances, mainly reported by Apollodorus, Heracles engaged in athletic contests with opponents he happened to meet during his journeys. Those who challenged Heracles to wrestle received the worst of it, in most cases death. This characterization of Heracles as a journeying wrestler held great cultural significance for the ancient Greeks. He demonstrated his prowess and excellence through athletic competition, chiefly wrestling, and ancient Greek athletes sought to do the same. In addition to these competitive athletic endeavors, Heracles and his adventures represented a broader conception of athleticism that was common for the ancient Greek hero, a concept based on struggle, adversity, triumph, and prizes.

\textsuperscript{72} Apollod. \textit{Bibl.} 2.5.10. Paus. 3.16.4-5. Diod. Sic. 4.23.2.

\textsuperscript{73} Apollod. \textit{Bibl.} 2.5.11. Pind., \textit{Isth.} 4.52-55.

\textsuperscript{74} Apollod. \textit{Bibl.} 2.5.12.
2.6.1 The “athletic” labors of Heracles

Ancient literary sources often used athletic terminology to describe Heracles’ exploits. Isocrates, the fourth century Athenian rhetorician, described Heracles’ life as full of “contests” (ἀγώνες). The best known of Heracles’ adventures, the so-called “twelve labors” are most commonly associated with his service to Eurystheus in penance for the blood guilt the hero accrued from the murder of his children. Many ancient writers called Heracles’ labors athla (ἄθλα), a word that denoted competitive struggle but literally referred to prizes or contests for prizes. The athla of Heracles characterize him as a figurative “athlete” who struggled for his “prizes.” These labors were literally athletic contests. Heracles’ labors were indicative of the ancient Greek understanding of competition: they did not “play” their games; they struggled them. Like athletic competitions, Heracles’ athla are best understood as “struggles” or competitions for a prize.

What, then, were the athla that Heracles won in these contests? The ancient sources hint at several. The successful completion of two of Heracles’ labors brought him material benefits. The skin of the Nemean lion, for instance, protected Heracles in

75 E.g. Hom. Il. 8.362; Od. 11.622; Hes., Theog. 951; Pind. Isthm. 6.48. Acusilaus, fr. 29 (Fowler); Diod. Sic. 4.11.3 uses ἄθλα exclusively to refer to the works done for Eurystheus. Apollod., Bibl. 2.4.12; Paus. 8.18.3. Pind. Nem. 1.70 is an exception, referring to Heracles’ labors as καμάτων μεγάλων.

76 Isocr., Helen 17: Heracles’ glory came ἐκ τῶν πολέμων καὶ τῶν ἀγώνων.


78 Golden, Sport and Society in Ancient Greece, 146-157 presents an opposing view that contrasts Heracles’ ἄθλα with notions of wage labor, concluding that Heracles’ labors indicate the futility of working for money prizes and the value of striving for metaphysical rewards (like immortality). This, however, fails to account for the rich rewards Heracles received upon the completion of his tasks (Diod. Sic. 4.14.3).
his other labors because it was impenetrable.\footnote{Diod. Sic. 4.11.3-4. Cf. Pind., Isthm. 6.47-48.} When Heracles killed the Hydra at Lerna, he dipped his arrows into the beast’s venom, rendering them potently poisonous.\footnote{Diod. Sic. 4.11.6.} In addition to these tangible benefits, many of the labors required Heracles to bring back physical objects to Eurystheus. Whether it was the Eurymanthian boar, Geryon’s cattle, the apples of the Hesperides, or Hades’ dog Cerberus, the successful completion of a task required an object. While not prizes that Heracles was able to enjoy, these objects Nevertheless represent, as do prizes, physical tokens of achievement. It is telling that the one labor that required no physical token of accomplishment, the cleaning of Augeas’ stables, was perhaps not accepted as one of the authentic labors in antiquity.\footnote{Gantz, 392.} The labor that required Heracles to kill the Stymphalian Birds also, at first glance, lacks a physical token of success, but Pausanias, quoting the Archaic epic poet Peisander, relates that Heracles did not shoot the birds but drove them off with the noise of a bronze rattle, while Apollonius of Rhodes claimed that Heracles received this rattle from Athena.\footnote{Paus. 8.22.4. Cf. Ap. Rhod., Argon. 2.1052. Apollod., Bibl. 2.5.6. The mythographers Hellanicus (fr. 104a Fowler) and Pherecydes (fr. 72 Fowler) offered a slightly different version, where Heracles used the rattle to scare the birds into flight, whereupon he killed them with his bow.} The rattle suggests a material token of accomplishment. At any rate, the metope on the temple of Zeus at Olympia devoted to this labor depicted Heracles bringing a dead bird to a female figure, presumably Athena. Although not as obvious as the other labors, this

Heracles surely epitomizes aristocratic ideals, as Golden claims, the distinction between monetary and non-monetary rewards is not so clear-cut. While immortality was surely more valuable than monetary prizes, Heracles seems to have enjoyed both.
portrayal nevertheless satisfies the athletic image of a prize or token of achievement. But these hints of material athla were not the ultimate prize for which Heracles strove.

2.7 Completion of Labors to Win Immortality

In the 24th Idyll of Theocritus, the infant Heracles strangles two serpents that crept into the bronze shield where he slept. As explanation to the child’s astonished mother, the great seer Teiresias provides this prophecy,

“Such a man will your son be that he will ascend into star-bearing heaven, a broad-chested hero, and all beasts and men will be weaker than him. It is fated for him to live with Zeus, once his twelve labors are completed, although a Trachinian pyre will hold his mortal body.”

These lines establish the paradigm for the ultimate reward a hero could expect. After demonstrating prowess, excellence, and supremacy over all mortal creatures, after completing arduous tasks and labors, Zeus will welcome the hero to the sky to live with him and the other immortal gods. This is not an escape from death: the great hero must still die and his body burn on a pyre. Instead it represents an escape from the finality of death and an exalted afterlife for the glorious and triumphant hero. This is the ultimate prize for any mortal, and a hero had to complete the labors or tasks to win it.

Hesiod explicitly connected Heracles’ immortality with the completion of his labors, noting that his marriage and accession to Olympus came once “he had completed

his wretched labors (ἀέθλους).”

Pindar made a similar assertion, although with different language, describing the hero’s “reward” (ποινὰν) for the completion of his “great toils” (καμάτων μεγάλων). In the Arognautica, Apollonius of Rhodes also linked the successful completion of Heracles’ tasks to his immortality. As the Argonauts deliberated leaving the absent Heracles behind on their journey to Colchis, Glaucus, the eloquent messenger from the sea-god Nereus, appeared and explained it was the will of Zeus that Heracles return to Argos to complete his “labors” (ἀέθλους) and that he “will dwell with the immortals, if he manages to complete the few that yet remain.” Both Apollodorus and Diodorus Siculus described Heracles’ immortality as the reward of the gods in exchange for his labors (ἄθλους) for Eurystheus. In addition, Diodorus went on to list the many gifts that the gods showered upon the deified hero. Athena gave him a robe, Hephaestus a club and armor. Poseidon honored him with horses, Hermes with a sword, and Apollo with a bow and arrows. Demeter instituted religious mysteries in his honor. Diodorus’ list underscores this double meaning of the “labors” of Heracles as athletic in nature. Victory, success, and achievement brought various prizes to the adventuresome hero. Referring to more than just a “labor,” contest, or task, the athla offered prizes to the successful hero. The most valuable of these prizes was immortality. Thus, the completion of “labors,” was an important component of heroic status.

84 Hes. Theog. 951: τελέσας στονόεντας ἀέθλους.

85 Pind. Nem. 1.70.


87 Diod. Sic. 4.8.1; 4.10.7. Apollod., Bibl. 2.4.12.

88 Diod. Sic. 4.14.3.
accomplished labors brought the ultimate prize of immortality. Consequently, mortal athletes in ancient Greece sought to complete their own *athla*, or “labors,” in order to lay claim to heroic honors.

The notion of completing “labors” as a component of heroization was an important part of other myths too. A fragment of Callimachus’ *Hecale* refers to the “labors” of Theseus as ἀέθλους, although the text is too fragmentary to understand a more specific context. The sculpted metopes of the treasury of the Athenians at Delphi, constructed ca. 500 BCE, featured the labors of Heracles and Theseus, as did the metopes of the temple of Hephaestus in the Athenian agora, which was built in the middle of the fifth century BCE. From the beginning, Theseus undertook contests, tasks, and labors in his various adventures. As a youth, he pitted his strength against the boulder that concealed the sword and sandals cached there by his father Aegeus. Successful in this initial contest of strength, Theseus assumed his identity as a heroic figure and set out for Athens, encountering and defeating several opponents along the way as he “cleansed the Isthmus.” The stories that recounted Theseus meeting and defeating Periphetes the club-man, Sinis the pine-bender, and Sciron, who threw passers-by from a cliff into the sea, defined Theseus as a hero. His other notable adventures, which included hunting the Crommyon Sow, capturing the Marathonian bull, defeating Cercyon in wrestling, and killing the Minotaur, augmented this heroic status through the *kleos* of victory. As with

---


91 Apollod., *Bibl.* 2.6.3.
Heracles, ancient writers cataloged Theseus’ victories as a series of accomplishments that guaranteed his status and fame as a champion and a hero.

Bacchylides described Theseus’ victories during his journey through the Isthmus as the “extraordinary deeds of a mighty man.”92 The poem continues with the chorus opining that a god must be goading Theseus to enforce justice, since it is not easy to consistently engage in such adventures without meeting misfortune. The chorus concludes that Theseus’ luck is soon to run out, since “everything ends over the long course of time.”93 On one level, this gnomic truism is a believable response by Athenians who do not know Theseus and are unaware of his heroic capabilities. For ordinary people, luck and circumstances will turn unfavorable at some point. Theseus, however, is not an ordinary mortal but a hero, able to overstep regular boundaries and expectations. This passage reinforces social norms and limits while simultaneously allowing the heroes to extend and overcome these limits. Thus, the chorus’ caution subtly reminds the listener of the universal inevitability of death but ironically hints at Theseus’ ability to transcend death’s usual finality. While it is true that any string of great victories must eventually end, whether by defeat or death, those heroes who garnered the most looked forward to a continued influence on earth after death. Consequently, athletes who amassed numerous victories anticipated a similar ability to extend their influence beyond death. Like Theseus, their victories set them apart from ordinary people.

92 Bacchylides 18 (Dithyramb 4). 18-19.
93 Bacchyl. 18 (Dithyramb 4). 45.
The myths of Theseus’ successful adventures and his victories over his opponents secured his status as a divine hero. In addition to allusions to the Theseus myths in many Athenian religious rituals, the Athenians worshiped the hero with a shrine at Colonus and a city festival. At the Pyanepsia, Athenians commemorated the vow that Theseus and his companions had made to Apollo on their journey home from Crete by mixing their provisions in a common pot, boiling the contents, and sharing it among all. At the Oschophoria, Athenian “dinner-carriers” reenacted the visits of Athenian mothers to their children who were preparing to leave for Crete and Minos’ labyrinth. On the 6th of Munichion, a procession of Athenian girls commemorated the departure for Crete. The stories of Theseus, especially the expedition to Crete, were interwoven into the fabric of many Athenian religious festivals perhaps, as H.W. Parke asserted, to rationalize the forgotten origins of a traditional ritual with a mythic explanation. While Parke is justifiably skeptical of the historicity of the Theseus legend, the Athenian associations of these rituals with the Theseus myths indicates an important component of Athenian identity and heroic commemoration during the Archaic and Classical periods. The conceptions of Theseus as a champion of democracy, as a founder of cities and festivals,

94 Paus. 1.30.4.


97 Plut., Thes. 18. Parke, 137.

98 Parke, 79, 137.
and as a “national hero” hinged in large part on his heroic status, a status cemented by his
divine lineage and his multiple victories in athletics and other types of contests.99

In addition to these commemorations of the Cretan episode of the Theseus myth, the ancient Athenians venerated his tomb and established a festival to the hero. In 475 BCE, the Athenian admiral Cimon returned from Skyros with the bones of Theseus, where they were interred near the agora.100 The Thesia, an Athenian festival held yearly on the 8th of Pyanepsion, included procession, sacrifice, and games.101 While the stories of Theseus recount a bitter departure from Athens and an ignoble death, the hero and his legend comprised an important part of Athenian civic identity after the Persian Wars in the fifth century BCE. Plutarch relates that Theseus led the Athenian charge at Marathon and that this epiphany persuaded the Athenians to establish heroic honors for the hero.102 Thus, the heroic traditions associated with Theseus at Athens exemplify the paradigm by which victorious athletes sought heroization in Archaic and Classical Greece. Skilled in athletic contests, Theseus employed both strength and skill in wrestling competition. Associated with divine parentage and favor, Theseus’ many victories in his endeavors qualified and identified him as a hero. Finally, his appearance in the battle of Marathon, a watershed victory in Athenian history, strongly underscores the connection between victors and heroes. It was a cyclical effect, as heroes unfailingly won victories and extraordinary victories created heroes. This relationship provided a means for athletic

100 Plut., Thes. 8.
101 Parke, 81-82.
102 Plut. Thes. 35: χρόνοις δ’ ὑστερον Ἀθηναίους ἄλλα τε παρέστησεν ός ἠρωα τιμᾶν Θησέα.
victors to lay claim to heroic status. The quest for immortality was intrinsically tied to
the quest for victory, and labors, tasks, and contests provided the forum for would-be
heroes to stake their claims to heroic honors.

2.7.1 Cupid and Psyche: a model for females

The story of Cupid and Psyche, although a comparatively late source from the
second century CE, lays out a similar paradigm of a mortal achieving immortality after
completing a series of tasks. In this case, however, the female Psyche has to accomplish
several “labors” in order to prove herself worthy of her divine lover Cupid.103 Originally
written in Latin but set in Greece, Apuleius’ version of this myth emphasized the basic
components of the heroic paradigm, but with a focus on attributes and skills found in the
ideal female. When humans begin referring to the beautiful girl named Psyche as “a new
Venus,” honoring her as they would honor the goddess, the jealous Venus sends her son
Cupid to ensure that Psyche marries a lowly and base man. Cupid, however, is smitten
with the beautiful girl and keeps her for himself in a hidden valley while her family
mourns her death. When Psyche disobeys Cupid’s commands to avoid setting eyes on
him, the young god abandons her. The angry Venus punishes the girl by contriving
seemingly impossible tasks for her. Venus orders the girl to sort an immense pile of
seeds in a very short amount of time, to gather wool from wild and ferocious sheep, to
fetch water from a tributary of the river Styx, and to visit the underworld. With a

103 The story is found in Apuleius, Metamorphoses 4.28 – 6.24.
considerable amount of help, Psyche successfully completes the tasks, wins back Cupid’s love, and Zeus brokers an amicable settlement for all. While Psyche’s tasks are not very athletic in nature, they nevertheless underscore certain key elements of the heroic paradigm.

Psyche’s tasks are geared towards the feminine ideal in ancient Greece. Instead of hunting, warfare, or sport, Psyche engages in domestic trials, although Apuleius wrote that Psyche was “exercised” (exercita) considerably by her trials.¹⁰⁴ When the exaggerated circumstances are stripped away, her tasks essentially compel her to sort and separate seeds, gather wool, and fetch water, all duties normally confined to the female sphere in ancient Greece. Even in the task most obviously associated with normal male-oriented heroic myths, the charge to visit the underworld, there is an essential female component. Venus commands the girl to bring back from Proserpina, the goddess of the underworld, a mystical secret of divine beauty. As with other myths about the heroes, the adventures represent highly exaggerated yet familiar activities. Psyche exhibits heroic traits in the feminine sphere just as male heroes demonstrate their abilities in male-dominated activities such as combat and athletics. Furthermore, like the mythic heroes, Psyche relies heavily on divine and supernatural intervention in order to complete her tasks. An army of ants helps her sort the seeds. A talking reed reveals the secret of gathering wool from the wild sheep, and a magnificent eagle fetches the water on the maiden’s behalf. A talking tower informs Psyche of the complicated preparations necessary for a successful voyage to the underworld and back. Although the girl lacks

¹⁰⁴ Apuleius 6.12: “Psyche, tantis aerumnis exercita”.
restraint when she disobeys Cupid’s command or disobeys Proserpina’s admonition and opens the box containing the beauty secret, time and again the gods and deities of the story take pity on Psyche and forgive these lapses of judgment. As early as Hesiod’s version of the story of Pandora, uncontrollable curiosity maintains a place in Greek conceptions of the female. Like the accounts of male heroes completing their “labors,” there exist in this myth many of the themes whereby extraordinary mortals may attain immortal status. Psyche, a mortal woman with extraordinary beauty and reputation \textit{(fama)}, is likened to a goddess, inhabits a dwelling somewhere between the realms of the living and the dead, and eventually achieves immortality by successfully completing her “labors.” The story of Psyche therefore conveys and reinforces the basic elements of the heroization process, albeit from the perspective of an idealized and immortalized female.

2.7.2 Going too far: the myth of Bellerophon

The myth of Bellerophon neatly encapsulates many elements of the heroic paradigm and the quest for immortality. It focuses on the completion of heroic tasks, claims to superhuman honor and status, and the importance of boundaries between the realm of humans and the realm of the gods. Homer tells the earliest account, when the Trojan fighter Glaucus, the grandson of Bellerophon, reveals his lineage in a vaunt to Diomedes.\textsuperscript{105} According to the story, Bellerophon left the Argolid after being unjustly

\textsuperscript{105} Hom., \textit{Il.} 6.144-211.
accused of improper advances to the queen of Ephyre. Sent to Lycia in Asia Minor, Bellerophon brought to king Iobates a sealed missive instructing the king to arrange Bellerophon’s death. Accordingly, Iobates sent Bellerophon to kill the monstrous Chimera. In heroic form, Bellerophon killed the fire-breathing lion-goat-snake beast with the favor of the gods. Unsuccessful in his bid to end Bellerophon’s life, Iobates sent Bellerophon to fight the Solymi, a group of mighty warriors. Finally, Bellerophon is pitted against the Amazons and again he emerges triumphant. Unable to kill Bellerophon by proxy, Iobates prepared an ambush for the hero as he returned from fighting the Amazons. After Bellerophon again eluded death, Iobates realized that Bellerophon was “the brave son of a god” and offered his daughter and half of his kingdom to the hero. Despite Bellerophon’s achievements, however, the myths recount that his hubris eventually turned the favor of the gods against him.

Like the others, this story emphasizes the connection between superhuman tasks and heroic identity. Homer’s account relates that Bellerophon’s ability to overcome all sorts of obstacles and supernatural opponents must have derived from divine parentage. In other words, Bellerophon’s successes indicate that he must be a hero, sprung from a divine parent and enjoying the blessings of the gods. Indeed, Homer is careful to inform the listener that Bellerophon killed the Chimera, which was from a “divine, non-human

---

106 Homer does not provide the name Iobates, referring only to the “king of wide Lycia” (line 173). Hyginus named the king as Iobates (Fabula 57).

107 Hom. II. 6.183.

race,” with the favorable portents of the gods.\textsuperscript{109} His heroic nature, drawn in part from his divine lineage, allows Bellerophon to overcome a divine creature. Bellerophon’s favored status with the gods, his great achievements and glory, and his divine parentage certainly impart him with a heroic status worthy of posthumous cult in ancient Greek myth and religion. However, Bellerophon’s story also provided ancient Greek audiences with an important reminder to know and respect the boundaries between the realm of humans and the realm of gods.

Homer’s account only hints at Bellerophon’s hubris and punishment at the hands of the gods, when Glaucus cryptically states that Bellerophon came “to be hated by all the gods.”\textsuperscript{110} Pindar’s \textit{Isthmian} 7 provides more information, informing the listener that “winged Pegasus threw off his master Bellerophon who wanted to come to the dwellings of the sky and the gathering of Zeus.”\textsuperscript{111} A scholion to this passage indicates that the “meaning” of this story teaches that Pegasus was justified in throwing off his master because Bellerophon “longed for the impossible.”\textsuperscript{112} While Bellerophon fits the model for posthumous hero-worship, he did not merit ascension to Mount Olympus. His hubristic attempt to forcefully enter the realm of the gods brought grave punishment. In addition to reinforcing human understanding of the boundaries between the human and godly realms, Bellerophon’s attempt to join the gods also underscores the ambiguous relationship between heroes, humans, and the gods. Furthermore, his story illustrates a


\textsuperscript{110} Hom. \textit{Il}. 6.200.

\textsuperscript{111} Pind., \textit{Isthm.} 7.44-47.

\textsuperscript{112} Scholion to Pind., \textit{Isthm.} 7. 63b.
propensity for great humans and heroes to continually push the boundaries and limits that restrain them. While Bellerophon was certainly ill-advised to attempt to break into the ranks of the gods, his actions imply an understanding of how his superhuman status made him capable of traversing the boundaries that confine ordinary humans. The lesson situates the position of heroes between mortals and gods. While Bellerophon was certainly no ordinary mortal, he nevertheless was not a god. Heroes occupied the wide spectrum of status between the world of mortal humans and the immortal gods, but there were limits to their ability to straddle both realms. Heroes were expected to die. Any components of immortality or heroic recognition came after a hero’s death. Pindar explains as much in the lines preceding his brief mention of Bellerophon and Pegasus in *Isthmian* 7, “for we all die equally, but our fates are not the same.” Pindar here acknowledges the possibility of some type of heroic immortality, but those who would attain it must inevitably die and exert their influence posthumously. Thus, the myths of Bellerophon represented an important model as well as a warning to those who sought heroic immortality. While Bellerophon’s divine lineage and illustrious achievements qualified him for heroic status, his hubristic grab for god-like status was severely punished. In possessing an ambiguous status between humans and gods, heroes defined the boundaries between the two.

\[\text{Pind., } Isthm. \ 7.42-43: \ θνῄσκομεν \ γάρ \ όμως \ ἁπαντες: \ δαίμων \ δ’ \ άισος.\]
2.8 Conclusion

As the heroes of ancient Greek myth secured victory in athletics and other challenges and labors, they acquired immortality after death. With immortality came the ability to transcend the regular limits of the human and mortal world. Consequently, the stories of these mythic heroes were responsible for both establishing and transgressing mortal boundaries, and thereby provided precedent, guidance, and models to mortal humans with respect to social and religious propriety. These heroes possessed an ambiguous status between life and death, mortality and immortality, humans and gods. The stories that recounted their exploits, adventures, and deeds focused upon the heroes’ relationships with these boundaries that governed the lives of ordinary mortals. As the best of mortals and the least of the divinities, heroes straddled both realms, paradoxically both reinforcing the distinction between ordinary mortals and the powerful Olympian gods yet transgressing those boundaries by overcoming the finality of death, and occasionally, such as with the story of Bellerophon, attempting to push the boundaries beyond their due. Consistent with their status between ordinary humans and immortal gods, most of the heroes from Greek myth claimed at least one parent as a god or divinity. Furthermore, in some versions, such as with Heracles, Theseus, or Polydeuces, the myths assigned a double parentage that included, for instance, two fathers, one divine and one human.

While competing versions of a hero’s parentage might be a result of later revisions intended to emphasize divine connections, they nevertheless demonstrate and reinforce the double nature of heroes and their ability to transcend normal boundaries
between the human and divine realms. In addition to the boundaries between life and death, immortality and mortality, the stories of the ancient Greek heroes described their roles in establishing actual physical boundaries and demarcations. According to the myths, heroes often founded cities, established festivals, and laid out boundaries and borders. Thus, when Theseus, as he journeyed to Attica from the Peloponnese, set up a pillar on the Isthmus of Corinth with two inscriptions indicating the boundary between the Peloponnese and “Ionia,” he was demonstrating typical heroic behavior.\textsuperscript{114} Similarly, historical persons who led colonizing expeditions often received posthumous heroic honors.\textsuperscript{115} Mortal athletes in ancient Greece who sought to transcend the boundary of death looked to the examples of the mythic heroes. The heroic paradigm, based on victory in all contexts, including battle, athletics, and challenges or “labors,” set forth the blueprint by which human champions might claim heroic status. Like the stories of the mythic heroes, these humans sought to push, extend, and transgress the boundaries between life and death, mortality and immortality. Significantly, several athletes of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE sought to imitate the exploits of the heroes in their own lifetimes, and some succeeded in receiving heroic honors after death.

\textsuperscript{114} Plut., \textit{Thes.} 25.

Chapter 3

The Heroic Athletes

3.1 Introduction

In his Life of Aristides, Plutarch wrote that three characteristics distinguished divinity – power or might (δυνάμις), arete, and immortality (ἀφθαρσία).¹ In ancient Greece, those who sought divinity, especially successful athletes, strove to display might and arete in the hope of attaining that final component – immortality. Competition provided ancient Greek athletes with a means for displaying both their might and their arete and victory in such competitions allowed these athletes to claim status as heroes in their own lifetimes in their own quests for glory and immortality. The lives, adventures, and achievements of the mythic heroes provided models whereby successful and powerful athletes in ancient Greece could aspire to achieve a like measure of immortality after death. The best known of these historical athletes, described in book six of Pausanias’ Description of Greece, are Theagenes, Polydamas, Cleomedes, and Euthymos.² In addition, there are several athletes whose stories have not survived as fully, such as Euthycles.

¹ Plutarch, Life of Aristides 6.

² There are slight variations throughout the sources in the spelling of Theagenes and Polydamas. For the sake of consistency, I will use a single spelling for these athletes’ names.
There is a considerable amount of debate concerning the nature of these ancient Greek athlete-heroes. One of the problems is that Pausanias and Plutarch, two of the principal ancient sources for these fifth century BCE athletes, wrote much later, in the second century of the Common Era. While these writers’ chronological distance does not automatically disqualify them as reliable sources, it is a task for the modern scholar to determine how soon after the athlete’s death the ancient Greeks instituted heroic honors. In addition, mythic tropes and folkloric themes pepper the stories associated with these athletes, making it difficult to assess which components of these stories are historical and which are mythic. Finally, some scholars have conjectured that the athletic nature of these figures was not the primary reason for their heroization. Despite these debates and difficulties, the stories of these mortal athletes-turned-heroes provide valuable information for understanding the importance of athletic achievement in ancient Greece and indicate that prominent athletes actively sought heroic honors in their own lifetimes.

3.2 Modern Discussion of the Hero-athletes

General histories of ancient Greek athletics have commented upon these athletes who became heroes in ancient Greece with various degrees of detail and analysis. In 1910, E. Norman Gardiner listed some athletes who achieved heroic honors, but characterized Euthymos of Locri Epizephyrii as impious for receiving worship in his own lifetime. Gardiner also described the heroization of athletes as “extravagances” that must have developed as athletics degenerated over time, opining that the practice “must have been repugnant to the religious feeling and sound sense” of Archaic age Greece. Indeed,
Gardiner credits Xenophanes, a late 6th century BCE philosopher, with recognizing “the danger of the growing worship of athletics.”3 However, instead of identifying more concretely what, exactly, this danger entailed, Gardiner considered this an indication of a widespread hubristic excess that caused a general decline in athletic ideals, ushered in professionalism, and robbed sport of its “old Homeric joy.”4 In his 1930 publication, Athletics in the Ancient World, Gardiner mentioned the heroization of athletes only in passing, and obliquely alluded to the names of heroized athletes, such as Euthymos and Theagenes, that became “household words” after their deaths.5

Three decades later, H.A. Harris compiled an anecdotal list of remarkable athletes, some of whom achieved heroic status after death. Harris’ matter-of-fact recital of the various feats and victories of Milo, Theagenes, and Euthymos avoided tackling the issue of athletic heroization and its broader meanings, preferring instead to discredit anything supernatural and assigning some of the far-fetched athletic anecdotes to “the fairyland of the Odyssey.”6 In this vein, Harris characterized the healing abilities of the statue of Theagenes as “a form of faith healing, probably as well founded as much of modern psychiatry and doing little more harm.”7 In comparing Theagenes and Euthymos, Harris explained that the statue of Euthymos also possessed healing

---


4 Gardiner, Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals, 79. See Young, The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics for a thorough deconstruction of Gardiner’s claims regarding ancient professionalism in athletics.


6 Harris, 119.

7 H.A. Harris, Greek Athletes and Athletics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 118-119.
capabilities, but commented only that this was “a curious coincidence.”⁸ Although Harris seems to have recognized that the Greeks might have considered these supernatural events to have been historically factual, he neglected to investigate the contexts and implications of superhuman athletes, writing only that these anecdotes, although incredible to the modern student, only serve “as a healthy reminder that, while in many respects the Greek experience of life was very similar to our own, there are some points in which it was utterly different.” In instances such as these, he continued, “we are moving in a very strange world.”⁹

More recently, historians of ancient Greek athletics have dealt with the issue of athletic heroization more seriously, although only in superficial detail as part of larger surveys. Stephen Miller’s Ancient Greek Athletics dedicated a six-page chapter to “Athletes and Heroes,” but offered little new information. Indeed, Miller balances his account of these notable champions with references to less-than-heroic competitors, juxtaposing the “image of athlete as hero” with “the image of athlete as oaf.”¹⁰ Nigel Crowther skillfully combined accounts of highly acclaimed athletes, citing the example of Theagenes in addition to a Roman gladiator and a Byzantine charioteer.¹¹ Despite a chapter heading that implies a heroic status, Crowther followed Gardiner closely in his

---

⁸ Harris, 119. Although the sources for Euthymos do not mention healing in conjunction with his statue, they do acknowledge supernatural powers. Pliny, Natural History 7.152 indicates that the statues of Euthymos at Western Locri and at Olympia were struck by lightning on the same day.

⁹ Harris, 120.


treatment of Theagenes, commenting upon his apparent professionalism and hubristic behavior. As in these other treatments, Donald Kyle’s *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* related the stories of Theagenes and Polydamas and their supernatural associations, although Kyle avoided the editorial rationalization of supernatural events that is found in his predecessors.  

Finally, Michael Poliakoff’s *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* chronicled the stories of important athletes, including Milo, Theagenes, Euthymos, and Cleomedes, concluding his chapter with some brief but insightful comments on athletic traits that facilitated heroization, such as strength, size, and “unbridled assertion of self.”

Although these many surveys and descriptions of ancient sport recognized the close connection between victorious athletes and heroes, none of them devoted much attention to the criteria, appeal, and achievement of heroic status in ancient Greece. While elements of these stories certainly strain modern credulity, they nevertheless provide a considerable amount of material for understanding this component of ancient Greek athletics and religion. Joseph Fontenrose’s lengthy article represented an important step in examining the broader implications of athletic heroization in ancient Greece.

In a 1968 article, Joseph Fontenrose compiled a series of athlete-hero stories from ancient Greece and boiled them down to their essential elements, focusing especially on the mythic similarities among them. By examining the common themes and elements in

---


these accounts, Fontenrose formulated a type or model for the ancient Greek athletic
hero.14 Fontenrose identified fourteen themes in the various versions of common athlete-
hero stories and, with considerable effort, linked them to one another and to the general
Greek mythic tradition. While Fontenrose’s compilation represented an important step in
collecting and analyzing these stories of historical athletes-turned-heroes, his numerous
connections to mythic tropes betrayed an assumption that the legends of folklore
posthumously “attached” themselves to the historical athletes.15 This assumption,
however, did not allow for the possibility that the historical athletes had consciously
attempted to imitate the actions and adventures of the mythic heroes in order to claim a
similar immortal status. If this were the case, the athletes themselves would be, to some
extent, responsible for the parallels between their lives and those of the heroes. In
addition, as Leslie Kurke noted, Fontenrose proposed no explanation for why these
athletes assumed or received heroic honors.16

In a 1979 publication, François Bohringer revisited the issue of the ancient Greek
hero-athlete and sought to explain why certain victorious athletes achieved heroic cult
and others did not. Bohringer appropriately noted that many of these mortals-turned-
heroes were important military and political figures in their communities independent of
their athletic successes, and that ancient Greek communities honored these important
citizens as heroes in order to obscure periods of political or social weakness and

---


15 Fontenrose, 87-88.

division. Nevertheless, Bohringer’s explanation for why some athletes received heroic honors and others (apparently) did not is too simplistic. He contended that those who received no heroic cult lived in cities that experienced no duress during the athlete’s lifetime. Although he hinted that some athletes may have expressly identified themselves with heroic figures in their leading cities, and that cultic honors seem to have been instituted quite early for some athletes, Bohringer focused on the role of the cities in exalting individual athletes in order to smooth over collective weaknesses and crises. While Bohringer’s conclusions may have explained why some athletes received posthumous heroic honors and others did not, they did not address whether the athletes actively sought to participate in this process, nor did he account for the athlete who imitated the heroes, but never received posthumous honors.

David Larmour’s 1999 book, *Stage and Stadium*, although firmly in Fontenrose’s camp concerning heroic and folkloric themes attaching themselves to athletes after death, nevertheless suggested some intriguing parallels between these stories of heroic athletes and Athenian tragedy. According to Larmour, many of these stories contained essential elements of a tragic narrative, including a hero’s eventual fall from grace. Larmour explained the suicide of Dioxippus, a victorious athlete from the fourth century BCE who

---

17 Bohringer, 5-18.

18 Bohringer, 14, for instance, noted that Milo of Croton inaugurated a time of great prestige and prosperity for his city, and subsequently received no cultic honors.

19 Bohringer 11, 15 suggested that Theagenes of Thasos intervened directly in a reformation of the city’s rites to Heracles in order to claim descent from the great hero. Euthymos and Theagenes seem to have received cultic honors as early as the fourth century BCE.

20 Bohringer’s treatment of Milo of Croton glosses over the similarities between the life and adventures of the great wrestler and Heracles, since Milo received no posthumous cult.
was framed for theft, as a close parallel to the plot of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. Similarly, Larmour identified a “hint of hubris” and an unexpected twist in the death of the great wrestler Milo. According to the story, Milo tried to separate with his bare hands a tree that had partially split. When his hands became trapped, wolves devoured the helpless athlete.21

While Larmour’s identification of heroic elements in human athletes is certainly appropriate, he overlooked the importance of athletic achievement in heroic identity. As the previous chapter indicated, athletic prowess comprised an important part of being a hero, and this model had been established as early as Homer. Instead of recognizing the athletes’ imitation of heroic models, Larmour, like Fontenrose, explained the heroization of great athletes as a uniquely posthumous phenomenon, writing that it “is understandable that the traditional hero-tale should have attached itself to some famous athletes and made them into legendary heroes.”22 However, Larmour followed this statement with a comparison between an athlete departing for Olympia and Jason seeking the Golden Fleece, emphasizing the generic parallels of training, competition, victory, and triumphant return.

While the heroic motifs of quest, competition, victory, and celebration are certainly discernable in the careers of successful athletes, especially in their pursuit of “labors” and challenges, Larmour’s example in fact undermined his contention that the hero motifs only attached themselves to athletes after their careers and lives had ended.

22 Larmour, 60.
Instead, his example suggested the active, conscious imitation of a heroic paradigm. Naturally, the narrative accounts of heroes and athletes are strikingly similar: victorious athletes sought to imitate the mythic heroes. Despite his insightful approach, Larmour’s analysis, chained to Fontenrose’s assessment of posthumous heroization, is unsatisfactory.

More recently, Bruno Currie has argued that many of these athletes sought heroization in their own lifetimes, and that their athletic successes alone qualified them for heroization. Currie’s 2002 article on Euthymos of Locri represents an important shift in the treatment of these hero-athletes. Currie identified several Olympic victors in combat sports who sought to imitate Heracles, and he rightly and forcefully argues that these athletes who were imitating the heroes were “proactive in the process of their own heroization.” To build upon Currie’s suggestions, not only did successful athletes in some cases actively strive for heroization during their own lifetimes, they consciously strove to emulate the labors, feats, and contests of their mythic heroes in a quest for immortality. Just as athletic prowess was an important component of heroic identity in ancient Greece, so too was heroic action an important prerequisite for an athlete who sought immortality. There thus emerges a type of rough blueprint whereby a successful athlete might seek immortal status and heroic commemoration. This formula, established by the stories of the mythic heroes and neatly encapsulated by Plutarch’s observation concerning divinity and its seekers, requires victory in contests – athletic and otherwise –


and the public commemoration of these victories. These victories must demonstrate exceptional arete and prowess (δυνάμις) in order for the athlete to lay any claim to the immortality afforded by heroic honors.

3.3 Victory, Kudos, and the Heroic Paradigm

Leslie Kurke has argued that victory, especially prominent victory in a major festival or contest, brought kudos to the victor. This word, often translated as “praise” or “renown,” carried additional meaning for the ancient Greeks. As traditionally understood, the possessor of kudos enjoyed “special power bestowed by a god that makes a hero invincible.” A victorious athlete claimed kudos from his victory and possessed a substantial amount of this special heroic power. Understandably, athletic champions transferred the power of their heroic kudos from the athletic field to other endeavors, such as colonization and war. Accordingly, the appropriation of kudos by athletic champions

---

25 Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 132. However, cf. Poulheria Kyriakou, “Epidoxon Kydos: Crown Victory and Its Rewards,” Classica et Mediaevalia 58 (2007): 119-158. Kyriakou challenged this narrow definition of kudos, citing usage in Homer, Pindar, and Bacchylides. Despite Kyriakou’s dismissal of any type of athletic talismanic power or magic, her assertion that victory in the Crown Games was lucrative only because of its “political potential” as a “display of skill and affluence in a truly Panhellenic venue” dismisses the deeply ritualistic nature of victory in the sacred games (pg. 149).

26 Spartan kings, for instance, were accompanied in battle by victors in the crown games. (Plut. Lycurgus 22; Quaestiones Convivales 2.5.2). Plutarch cites Duris of Samos in relating a story that Alcibiades returned in triumph to Athens accompanied by a Pythian champion flute player. Plutarch, however, notes that the extravagant details in Duris are absent from the accounts of Theopompus, Ephorus, and Theopompus, and seems inclined to disbelieve the story (Plut. Alcibiades 32). Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 133-137 suggested that colonist leaders (oikists), such as Miltiades, the son of Cypselus who led colonists to the Chersonese were chosen because of their victories in the crown games. After his death, the people of the Chersonese instituted games in Miltiades’ honor, including chariot-racing and gymnastic competitions (Hdt. 6.36-38). This Miltiades was the uncle and namesake of the general who led the Athenians to victory at Marathon in 490 BCE. However, cf. Kyriakou, “Epidoxon Kydos,” 144-145 who downplayed the connection.
equated their achievements with the accomplishments of the heroes, and the Greeks regarded these kudos-charged athletes with both reverence and suspicion. Kudos from victory elevated human athletes to a liminal status between mortals and gods, a status similar to that of the immortal heroes. In some cases, these super-humans, loaded with the kudos of their athletic victories, claimed the powers of the mythic heroes and sought to imitate their deeds.

The previous chapter laid out the basic elements of the heroic paradigm for athletic accomplishment. Athletic prowess and achievement played an important role in constructing heroic identity in ancient Greek myth and established a framework for mortal athletes to imitate. The achievements of the heroes of Homer, Theseus, Castor and Polydeuces, and, especially, Heracles laid out the qualifications for heroization. The most attractive heroic model for a powerful athlete was Heracles. Triumphant in all sorts of contests, athletic and otherwise, in Greek mythology this demi-god achieved immortality and was welcomed to Olympus by the gods upon his death. Heracles’ example provided the ideal and ultimate example for a mortal athlete seeking immortality, whether through athletic contests or in various contests, challenges, adventures, or “labors.” As a result, victorious mortal athletes who sought immortality assumed other components of heroic honors, such as the successful completion of labors or a claim to divine parentage.
3.4 The Heroic Athletes

There seems to have been a considerable number of mortals who achieved some type of heroic status in ancient Greece. Although mortal imitation of heroic figures was not limited to athletic figures, victory in athletic contests provided access to heroic status. With respect to the majority of athletic champions who received some type of heroic status after death, few details have survived. Most attestations are passing or fragmentary references. Moreover, many of the sources for these athletes are much later in date, making precise dating of the beginnings of hero cult problematic. Nevertheless, there exists sufficient literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence to place some of these cults in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, suggesting that the attainment of heroic immortality through athletic victories was indeed a viable goal for prominent ancient Greek athletes of the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BCE.27

In the fifth century BCE, Herodotus related that the people of Egesta on the island of Sicily honored a colonist named Philippus as a hero. This colonist was an Olympic champion, but Herodotus explained that Philippus was heroized because he was extraordinarily good looking.28 According to an ancient commentator on the Hellenistic poet Callimachus, the statue of an Olympic victor named Euthycles was worshiped at Locri “equally to the statue of Zeus.”29 Eusebius of Caesarea, a much later source, added

---


28 Hdt. 5.47.

29 Diegesis (ii.5) to Callimachus, *Aeitia* 3.84-85 (Pfeiffer).
that the people of Locri wrongfully imprisoned the pentathlete and disgraced his statues after he died. This unjust behavior sparked a crippling famine, and the people of Locri instituted a cult for Euthycles in order to save their city.\textsuperscript{30} Even the second century CE Pausanias was confused by the conflicting dates for the runner Oibotas of Dyme. Supposedly, Oibotas won at the Olympic games during the eighth century BCE, yet some sources claimed that he fought against the Persians at the Battle of Plataea in 479 BCE. At any rate, the people of Dyme later remembered the athlete with sacrifices and garlands.\textsuperscript{31} The ancient Spartans worshipped Hipposthenes, a six-time Olympic wrestling champion from the late-seventh and early sixth centuries in conjunction with the god Poseidon.\textsuperscript{32} In addition to these examples, modern scholars have suggested other prominent and successful athletes who probably merited heroic commemoration due to their athletic victories, but have no association with heroic cult in the surviving sources.\textsuperscript{33} These poorly attested examples do little more than demonstrate that the ancient Greeks heroized their athletes on occasion, but more substantive accounts are necessary to identify and analyze any impulses by athletes to imitate heroic actions. Fortunately, a few such accounts have survived. The earliest of these athletic imitators of the mythic heroes was Milo of Croton.

\textsuperscript{30} Eusebius, \textit{Praeparatio Evangelica} 5.34.

\textsuperscript{31} Paus. 6.3.8; 7.17.6. Concerning this story, Pausanias mused, “I am bound to tell the stories that are told by the Greeks, but I am not bound to believe them all.”

\textsuperscript{32} Paus. 3.13.9; 3.15.7. Stephen Hodkinson, “An Agonistic Culture? Athletic Competition in Archaic and Classical Spartan Society” in \textit{Sparta: New Perspectives}, eds. Stephen Hodkinson and Anton Powell (London: Duckworth, 1999), 165-167 argues for a 5\textsuperscript{th} century BCE institution of cult for Hipposthenes, and follows Bohringer in suggesting a connection between the heroization and natural disaster and civil unrest at Sparta.

\textsuperscript{33} See Currie, \textit{Pindar and the Cult of Heroes} 120-123 for these athletes and their circumstances.
3.4.1 Milo of Croton and the athlete in battle

In the late sixth century BCE Milo, one of the greatest athletes of ancient Greece, won six Olympic crowns in wrestling, a remarkable feat. Convinced of his own heroic power, Milo led the soldiers of Croton, a city in Italy, in a battle against the neighboring community of Sybaris while crowned with his six Olympic wreaths, wearing a lion skin, and carrying a club. The olive wreaths, the lion skins, and the club all featured prominently in the myths concerning Heracles. Representing himself as Heracles, Milo led his countrymen to victory. The ancient historian Diodorus reported that the people marveled that Milo was personally the “cause” [αἴτιον] of Croton’s victory.34

Milo’s actions indicate the strong associations between athletes, heroes and victory in ancient Greece. In the fourth century, Xenophon wrote that the great heroes of myth made the Greeks “invincible” against their barbarian foes.35 As harbingers of victory, epiphanies of the heroes were sometimes claimed on a battlefield of particular significance. Theseus is supposed to have appeared at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE and, shortly before the Battle of Salamis in 479, the Greeks sent a ship to Aegina to fetch the statues of Aeacus and his sons, the most notable of which were Peleus and Telamon.36 Castor and Polydeuces appeared as stars on either side of Lysander’s ship

34 Diod. Sic. 12.9.5-6; Paus. 6.14.5-9; Strabo 6.1.12. Cf. Nikostratus’ Heraklean equipment in battle: Diod. Sic. 16.44.3.

35 Xenophon, Cynegeticus 1.17: ἀνίκητον.

36 Plut. Theseus 35. Hdt. 8.64, 83-84.
during the Battle of Aegospotami in 405. The great Messenian hero Aristomenes reportedly led the Thebans against Sparta at the Battle of Leuctra in 371. The presence of these heroes, and their talismanic power, assured Greek victories. Thus, the presence of Milo, and his heroic, talismanic power as displayed by his Olympic crowns and Herakleian dress, brought his heroic force to bear on the battle.

A hero in battle was an unstoppable force, a portent of victory. A crowned athletic victor possessed a measure of this heroic force or kudos. Not surprisingly, victors in the crown games served in the personal bodyguard for the Spartan king during battle. Leslie Kurke listed several examples of a crowned victor bringing his talismanic kudos to the battlefield. Phanas of Messenia fought in the Second Messenian War and Eualkides commanded the Eretrians in the Ionian revolt (499-493). During the Persian Wars, Phayllos of Croton, a three-time champion at the Pythian Games, came to the aid of the Athenians and fought at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. Although he won no victory at Olympia, Phayllus won the pentathlon twice and the stade race once at Delphi, where he dedicated a statue. At Athens, he was represented as an accomplished and archetypal athlete since his foot speed is mentioned in two of Aristophanes’ comedies.

---

37 Plut. Lysander 12.
38 Paus. 4.32.4-6.
39 Plut. Lycurgus 22; Quaestiones convivales 2.5.2.
40 Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 133-137.
42 Pausanias 10.9.2.
43 Aristophanes, Acharnians 215 and Wasps 1206.
This accomplished athlete contributed the *kudos* of his victories to the Athenian cause in battle. Nearly one hundred and fifty years later, after his decisive victory at the Granicus River, Alexander of Macedon sent offerings to the city of Croton in honor of their city’s prestigious athlete Phayllus and his valor at the battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. Thus Milo, a remarkable and victorious athlete, sought to imitate the military might of the heroes, especially the mythic Heracles. His athletic successes had endowed him with what he considered to be supernatural power, and he used this power to win military victory for his city and heroic status for himself.

### 3.4.2 Dioxippus of Athens

Nearly two hundred years after Milo, during the fourth century BCE campaigns of Alexander of Macedon, an Athenian athlete named Dioxippus defeated a fully armed Macedonian soldier in single combat. The Macedonian, named Coragos, must have had a little too much to drink at the raucous banquet where he challenged Dioxippus, a renowned athlete and a boxing champion in one of the Crown Games. On the day of the duel, Coragus arrived decked out in fine armor and weapons. Dioxippus, on the other hand, came naked, his body oiled, wearing a garland and carrying only a club. Appearing as a victorious athlete and armed as Heracles, Dioxippus easily defeated the well-armed Macedonian. The Olympic champion relied on his athleticism, avoiding Coragus’ javelin

---

44 Plut. *Alex.* 34. See also Hdt. 8.47.

45 Diod. Sic. 17.100-101. Quintus Curtius Rufus 9.7.16-26. Diodorus compared the combat to a contest between Ares (Coragus) and Heracles (Dioxippus).
throw, shattering his lance with a blow from the club, and wrestling him to the ground as the Macedonian reached for his sword. In accordance with the myths surrounding Heracles and his manifold duels and contests, Dioctippos treated this encounter as a contest in which he, the Heraklean athlete, vanquished the better armed (and perhaps not entirely Greek) enemy. Clearly, Milo and Dioctippos considered themselves imitators of and successors to the mythic Heracles.

Both Milo and Dioctippos imitated Heracles in battle and in sport. Both wore crowns that proclaimed their athletic victories and Dioctippos competed in the nude as an athlete. Applying Plutarch’s three-fold formula for divinity, both demonstrated might and arete through their athletic and military successes, in direct imitation of Heracles. The sources, however, are silent as to whether Milo ever received any measure of cultic worship after his death. Modern scholars certainly consider him a candidate for such honors. Dioctippos, however, received no such honors: he later committed suicide after being framed for theft. The story of Polydamas, however, provides an example of a successful athlete who imitated Heracles and who received religious cult after his death.

---

46Hesiod’s Shield, however, described Heracles arming as a hoplite soldier to fight Kyknos. Nevertheless, Heracles in art was overwhelmingly portrayed without conventional military weaponry. He fought with brute strength and his club. See also Pind. Ol. 10.15-16; Apollod., Library. 2.5.7, 11; Hyg. Fab. 31; Paus. 3.18.10; Eur. Hercules Furens 389-393 for the duel between Heracles and Kyknos.

47Fontenrose, 88-89; See Currie’s discussion, Pindar and the Cult of Heroes, 155-157.

48Diod. Sic. 17.100-101. Curtius 9.7.25. Curtius’ account of Dioctippos certainly presents the wronged athlete as a tragic, heroic figure who perhaps imitates the mythic Ajax in preferring suicide over disgrace. However, there is no indication of subsequent heroization.
3.4.3 Polydamas of Scotussa

Polydamas, a pancratiast from Scotussa in Thessaly, won a crown at the Olympic games in 408 BCE. His exploits, surely exaggerated, reportedly included pulling the hoof from a struggling bull and stopping a moving chariot by grabbing on and digging his heels into the ground. Furthermore, in some sort of contest, he simultaneously fought and defeated three members of the elite bodyguard of the Persian King in the court of Darius II. This one-against-three battle certainly is comparable to Heracles’ combat with the triple-bodied Geryon. Both the Persians and the monstrous Geryon represented powerful non-Greek forces, and the triplicate enemy suggests a convenient parallel.49

Besides this thematic similarity, Polydamas openly imitated the great Heracles in other endeavors. As Pausanias reported, out of an expressed desire to emulate the mythic hero, Polydamas went to Mount Olympus and killed a large lion with his bare hands. A surviving portion of Polydamas’ fourth century BCE statue base at Olympia shows the great athlete fighting a lion, linking this story more closely to the athlete’s lifetime.50 These heroic actions brought Polydamas some type of heroic status among the Greeks since, after his death, his statue was said to heal the sick.51 Polydamas’ athletic and heroic might and arete afforded his memory a degree of supernatural or superhuman power. Like his model Heracles, Polydamas achieved a measure of immortality and continued to exert influence on earth after his death, at least to those who appealed to his

49 Diod. Sic. 9.14.2. Paus. 6.5.1, 4-9 for Polydamas’ exploits.

50 Anna Maranti, Olympia & Olympic Games (Athens: Toubis, 1999), 102-103.

51 Lucian, Parliament of the Gods 12 for the healing power of the statue.
statue’s healing powers. These examples demonstrate the strong impetus of ancient Greek athletes to imitate Heracles. As these athletes challenged the boundaries between the mortal and immortal realms, they became more associated with the heroic tradition. In addition to the imitations of Milo and Dioxippus, and the supernatural powers attributed to the statue of Polydamas, three athletes from the early fifth century BCE, Euthymos, Theagenes and Cleomedes, made the transition, in Greek minds, from athlete to hero.52

3.4.4 Euthymos of Western Locri

Euthymos of Western Locri, in Italy, was an Olympic boxing champion in 484, 476, and 472 BCE. His adventures associated him with supernatural events, indicative of his super-mortal status. According to tradition, Euthymos fought a demon called “the Hero” at Temesa, Italy. The “Hero” was supposed to be the ghost of Polites, one of Odysseus’ comrades who had been stoned to death after raping a local girl. The dead sailor continued to torment the people of Temesa, requiring a virgin sacrifice each year. By chance, Euthymos happened along as the townspeople were shutting that year’s unfortunate girl into the ghost’s precinct. The great athlete entered the temple, fought the spirit, and drove it under the sea.53 As in the story of Heracles and Hesione at Troy,

52 For general discussion, see Fontenrose, 73-104; Bohringer, 5-18; Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 149-152; Currie, Pindar and the Cult of Heroes, 120-124.

53 Paus. 6.6.4-10; Callimachus, Aetia fr. 98-99 (Pfeiffer); Plin., H.N. 7.152; Aelian, Various Histories 8.18.
Euthymos the neo-hero defeated the enemy and rescued the girl.\textsuperscript{54} Accordingly, Euthymos accumulated other vestiges of ancient Greek heroism as exemplified by Heracles, namely a supernatural genealogy and an escape from the finality of death. Euthymos did not die as ordinary mortals do. Instead, he disappeared into the river Caecinus, which was supposedly his father.\textsuperscript{55} As in the other examples, this athlete, through his Heraclean escapades, acquired heroic status. There is some indication, however, that he secured this status in his own lifetime.

The fifth century BCE inscription on the pedestal of Euthymos’ victory statue at Olympia informs the reader that Euthymos himself set up the statue “for mortals to behold.”\textsuperscript{56} Some difficulties exist for understanding the dedication, since the stone shows evidence that the inscription was modified in antiquity. In the Greek text, the portion that reads “for mortals to behold” (τήνδε βροτοῖς ἔσορᾶν) does not align with the line above, the meter of the verse inscription changes abruptly, and the characters are recessed on the stone, making it quite clear that the original text was chiseled out and replaced with this phrase. In addition, two more lines were added below this inscription, identifying Euthymos (in the third person) as the dedicator and Pythagoras of Samos as the sculptor.

\textsuperscript{54} For Heracles, the sea monster, Hesione, and her father Laomedon, see Hom. \textit{Il.} 5.628-51; Diod. Sic. 4.42; Apollod. \textit{Bibl.} 2.5.9; Hyginus, \textit{Fab.} 89; Pind. \textit{Nem.} 1.94-95; Euripides, \textit{Hercules Furens} 400-402. Bruno Currie, “Euthymos of Locri: A Case Study in Heroization in the Classical Period,” \textit{JHS} 122 (2002): 35-37 sees Euthymos as imitating Heracles’ fight with Achelöos, a river deity.

\textsuperscript{55} Paus. 6.6.10; Aelian, \textit{Varia Historia} 8.18.

Judging from letter forms, the two parts of the inscription, including the revision to the first, are quite close in date, and both Joachim Ebert and Luigi Moretti dated the inscription to ca. 470 BCE, shortly after Euthymos’ Olympic victories. Moreover, Moretti is inclined to believe that Euthymos himself ordered the epigraphic correction and the addition after circumstances at Locri, perhaps such as the death of his father or financial difficulties in the city, forced Euthymos to pay for the statue himself. Whatever the story behind the alteration and addition to the dedicatory text, the fifth century BCE date of the inscription situates it in or close to Euthymos’ lifetime.

In addition to Euthymos’ dedicatory inscription, there was a tradition that Euthymos received heroic honors during his lifetime. Pliny the Elder, citing the Hellenistic poet Callimachus, claimed that after lightning struck the statues of Euthymos at Olympia and at Western Locri on the same day, the oracle of Delphi gave instructions for the still-living Euthymos to be deified. At Western Locri, archaeologists have discovered five herms dedicated to the great athlete. The image on the herms depicts a bull with the head of a man, and the inscriptions indicate that this represented Euthymos. Epigraphists have dated these inscriptions to the late fourth century BCE. Bruno Currie concluded that the image of a man-headed bull on the herms represented “an actual free-standing statue, perhaps in bronze, which stood somewhere in the region and declared itself ‘sacred to Euthymos.’”

---


59 Ibid.
was a standard representation of Achelous, a powerful river deity who fought against Heracles in myth.\textsuperscript{60} This artistic representation underscored the divinity of the powerful athlete by depicting him as a river god, in this case likening him to Caecinus, his divine “father.” Thus the people of Western Locri heroized Euthymos, a remarkable athlete, for his heroic achievements. These heroic honors, sparked by lightning strikes, dated to Euthymos’ own lifetime, according to Pliny, and lasted at least into the next century. Like Euthymos, an athlete named Theagenes managed to secure heroic honors and archaeological evidence indicates that his cult persisted for hundreds of years after his death.

3.4.5 Theagenes of Thasos

Theagenes of Thasos, a contemporary of Euthymos who competed against him, was another heavy-event athlete who achieved heroic status.\textsuperscript{61} An accomplished boxer and pancratiast, Theagenes won both events at the same Olympic Games in the early fifth century BCE, in addition to nine Nemean and ten Isthmian championships. Like Polydamas and Euthymos, the stories of Theagenes’ life have accumulated a good deal of mythic exaggeration. For instance, the epigram that adorned his statue reportedly claimed that Theagenes once ate an entire ox, and as a boy he is supposed to have carried a large bronze statue he admired home from the city’s marketplace. Like the other

\textsuperscript{60} Gantz, 28-29, 432-433.

\textsuperscript{61} Athenaeus 10.412 d-f; Dio Chrysostom 31.95-97; Lucian, \textit{Parliament of the Gods} 12; Paus. 6.6.5-6, 6.11.2-9; Plutarch, \textit{Moralia} 811d-e. Eusebius, \textit{Praeparatio Evangelica} 5.34.
athletic would-be heroes, Theagenes is reported to have consciously sought association with his mythic predecessors. Out of “ambitious envy of Achilles,” reputedly the swiftest of the Greek heroes, he abandoned combat sports for running and won a long-distance race in the hometown of Achilles.\textsuperscript{62} Other sources asserted that the Thasians associated their athletic champion with Heracles, claiming that Theagenes was really the son of the immortal hero instead of the mortal man who raised him, although his victory inscriptions listed Timoxenos as his father. After Theagenes’ death, one of his enemies went to the athlete’s statue on Thasos every night and flogged it out of hatred for the dead man. When, one night, the statue fell on the enemy and killed him, the man’s sons prosecuted the statue for murder and the people of Thasos threw it into the sea. Later, in order to dispel a crippling famine, the people of Thasos fished up the statue, re-dedicated it, and offered sacrifices to it as a divinity.\textsuperscript{63} Jean Pouilloux, one of the excavators of Theagenes’ shrine on Thasos, suggested that the statue’s “trial” took place in the fifth century BCE, between 440 and 420, within a generation or so of Theagenes’ athletic victories in the early-to-mid fifth century.\textsuperscript{64} In addition, Pausanias claimed to know of statues of Theagenes in many other locations that possessed the ability to cure diseases.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{62} Paus. 6.11.5.


\textsuperscript{64} Athenaeus 10.412 d-f; Dio Chrysostom 31.95-97; Lucian, Parliament of the Gods 12; Paus. 6.6.5-6, 6.11.2-9; Plutarch, Moralia 811d-e. Jean Pouilloux, Récherches sur l’Histoire et les Cultes de Thasos, vol. 1 (Paris: École Française d’Athènes, 1954), 102-103 dated Theagenes and his cult according to Thasos’ relationship with Persia, Athens, and Athenian law during the fifth century BCE, as demonstrated through the details of the statue’s “trial.” Bohringer, “Cultes d’Athlètes en Grèce Classique,” 15 found this date plausible.
Clearly, Theagenes’ impressive exploits as an athlete and a heroic imitator brought his memory divine recognition and heroic status after his death. Because of this event, Dio Chrysostom describes Theagenes and men like him as possessing divine power and foresight. Like Euthymos, part of Theagenes’ heroization came from his revised ancestry and his direct imitation of the heroes, in this case both Heracles and Achilles.

In 1939, French archaeologists unearthed a small stone treasury or deposit-box for offerings to Theagenes in the foundations of the hero’s shrine in the ancient agora. Seventy-three centimeters in height, the cylinder displayed two inscriptions, dated by its stratigraphic location and epigraphic features to the end of the first century BCE. The earlier of these inscriptions regulated monetary offerings to the heroic athlete. It required those coming to sacrifice to Theagenes to provide a one-obol offering through the opening in the top of the stone treasury. The second inscription, somewhat fragmentary, much briefer and inscribed later, probably during the first century CE, promised good fortune to the giver and the giver’s family. In addition, in his hero shrine at Thasos, archaeologists have uncovered inscriptions that list the athlete’s many panhellenic victories, and copies have also been found at Delphi and Olympia. The opening lines of the version from Delphi, the most complete of the three, highlights the separation between the mighty Theagenes and ordinary mortals:

You, son of Timoxenos . . .

---

65 Paus. 6.11.9 for the other statues of Theagenes.

66 Dio Chrysostom 31.95.

For never at Olympia has the same man been crowned for victory in boxing and in pancration. But you, of your three victories in the Pythian Games, won one unopposed,
A feat which no other mortal man has accomplished. In nine Isthmian Games, you won ten times. For twice the herald proclaimed your victories to the ring of mortal onlookers in boxing and pancration on the very same day. Nine times, Theogenes, you won at the Nemean Games. And you won thirteen hundred victories in the lesser contests. Nobody, I declare, defeated you in boxing for twenty-two years.

Theagenes, son of Timoxenos, from Thasos, won these events:

[Thereafter follows a list of Theagenes’ Olympic, Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean victories, as well as a victory in the dolichos race at Argos.] 68

Like the inscription of Euthymos, this monumental commemoration both proclaims the achievements of the great Theagenes while also distinguishing him from other mortals. The fifth surviving line reminds the reader (listener) that Theagenes accomplished victories that “no other mortal” had ever managed. Furthermore, the herald proclaims Theagenes’ victories to a crowd “of mortals,” the word (ἐπιχθονίων) literally means “those on earth” and again draws a sharp distinction between the awe-struck onlookers and the mighty victorious athlete. The heroization of Theagenes, made possible through his manifold victories, elevated him above the status of “those on earth.”

Although Theagenes won his victories in the early fifth century BCE, ca. 490-470, the cultic veneration of the accomplished athlete seems to date to about a hundred years later in the early fourth century BCE. The inscriptions from Delphi and Thasos, as well as the statue base in the city’s agora have all been assigned to this time, but the murderous statue presumably dated to Theagenes’ own lifetime. The institution of an elaborate cult in the city’s center for the great athlete within a century of his death, most likely a space of only two or three generations, demonstrates the significance of Theagenes’ victories. His memory remained powerful enough to merit an expanded cult in the Hellenistic and Roman periods that lasted for hundreds of years. His great victories, including his imitation of the hero Achilles, brought him heroic honors on Thasos and in many other places among both Greeks and barbarians. These athletes, following the heroic paradigm of athletic excellence, demonstrated through victory, achieved heroic honors in their own right. The puzzling case of Cleomedes, however, represents a departure from this model in some respects.

3.4.6 Cleomedes of Astypalaea

One of the most perplexing examples of the athlete-hero was the boxer Cleomedes of Astypalaea, most notorious for his manically violent behavior. An

---


70 Paus. 6.11.9.
Olympic boxer, Cleomedes defeated his opponent in 492 BCE, Iccus of Epidaurus, by beating him to death. The Olympic judges, however, disqualified Cleomedes for breaking the rules (ἄδικα εἰργάσθαι), presumably for his excessive brutality. Stripped of his victory, he returned to Astypalaea where he pulled a supporting pillar from a school, causing the roof to collapse and kill sixty boys. Fleeing the angry townspeople, Cleomedes hid inside a chest in the sanctuary of Athena. When pursuers broke the chest open, Cleomedes had disappeared. An inquiry to the Delphic oracle elicited a response that the people of Astypalaea should worship Cleomedes as “the last of the heroes.”

While his disqualification at Olympia was considered the cause of his madness, Cleomedes nevertheless did not quite fit precisely into the model of athletic champions seeking heroic status. His actions, killing a group of young schoolboys, hardly compare with the feats of Polydamas or Euthymos, despite the folkloric elements of the collapsing roof.

The stories of Heracles, however, do provide a parallel example. The myths relate that the goddess Hera caused a fit of insanity to come upon Heracles, causing him to kill his own children. In addition, the myths claim that Heracles murdered his lyre teacher, Linos, for hitting him during a music lesson, and he treacherously killed Iphitus,

---

71 Paus. 6.9.6


73 Fontenrose, 88 pointed out that the collapsing roof was a common element in folklore concerning powerful men. A similar fate claimed Polydamas, according to Paus. 6.5.1. The death of the Biblical Samson, told in Judges 16, is one of the best known of these stories.

74 Apollod., Bibl. 2.4.12.
who was searching for his lost mares. Clearly, some of the myths concerning Heracles contained irrational, manic, murderous violence. Perhaps the people of Astypalaea connected Cleomedes’ manic violence the insanity of Heracles. The brutal power of a boxer who killed his opponent with his bare hands, then demolished an entire building certainly evokes associations with the dangerous and deadly heroes of myth. A connection to the immortal Heracles would help explain an otherwise confusing sequence of events that led to the heroization of Cleomedes by the people of Astypalaea.

Leslie Kurke has proposed that the people of Astypalaea heroized Cleomedes because he did not receive his deserved attention or acknowledgment for the kudos he acquired at Olympia. With the suspension of the normal ritual of reintegrating a kudos-charged individual into the community, Cleomedes’ wrathful power punished the city’s residents. The institution of a heroic cult allowed the city to tame and participate in the athlete’s power. While Kurke’s argument is persuasive, a comparison of Cleomedes to Heracles adds to this explanation for the heroization of Cleomedes by providing a paradigm for understanding the potential violence of a dangerous hero.

3.5 Conclusions

These anecdotal examples indicate the dynamics of heroizing successful human athletes from the late sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BCE. While the sources suggest

---

75 Apollod., Bibl. 2.4.9, Paus. 9.29.3, Diod. Sic. 3.67.2 for Linos; Homer, Od. 21.22-30, Apollod., Bibl. 2.6.1-2 for Iphitus.

76 Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 151-152.
that these athletes on occasion imitated the exploits and achievements of the mythic heroes, the willingness of the community, often encouraged by a pronouncement from the Delphic oracle, played a key role in the awarding of heroic honors. Nevertheless, in addition to the community’s role, the active striving for heroic honors during an athlete’s lifetime, a phenomenon which Bruno Currie called the “subjective aspect of hero cult,” allowed a historical athlete who successfully completed contests, duels, and challenges to claim the ultimate prize of heroic immortality.\textsuperscript{77} The athlete’s efforts, however, provided only part of the formula for heroization. For the ancient Greeks, heroic immortality consisted of two components, glory and fame (kleos) and cultic honors (timê).\textsuperscript{78} The most important feature was to be remembered in some way after death, either by reputation or through religious ritual.

The posthumous heroic honors afforded to victorious athletes implied more than simple commemoration, however. Ancient Greek religion required sacrifice and ritual to appease and supplicate supernatural forces for some measure of earthly benefit.\textsuperscript{79} The living honored the heroes because they continued to exert influence on earth. The ancient Greeks remembered and commemorated the deceased heroes with the understanding that they would employ their supernatural powers on the suppliants’ behalf. With this understanding, the Thasians retrieved the statue of Theagenes to end a famine, the statue of Polydamas healed the sick, and the Achaians sacrificed to Oibotas to dispel his curse.

\textsuperscript{77} Currie, \textit{Pindar and the Cult of Heroes}, 7-9, 127.

\textsuperscript{78} Currie, \textit{Pindar and the Cult of Heroes}, 72.

\textsuperscript{79} Walter Burkert, \textit{Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 54.
that had prevented them from winning Olympic victories. Although a mortal athlete could personally do little to guarantee the observation of rites after his death, a victorious athlete could, in accordance with heroic models, seek to amass fame and receive honors in his own lifetime.

Prominent athletes in ancient Greece found the potential prize of immortality through heroic cult an appealing quest. While athletic prowess, both in sporting and more thematic “struggles” or contests comprised an important part of heroic identity, those humans who achieved great victory in sporting contexts sought to extend their fame and glory by connecting themselves to the mythic heroes. Like Heracles, who successfully overcame all obstacles and completed his labors or *athla*, victorious athletes sought their own heroic adventures in their quests for immortal status and heroic honors after death. Charged with *kudos* and hungry for *kleos*, these powerful champions claimed a heroic, superhuman status that enabled them to lead their cities to victory in battle or to continue to exert influence over earthly affairs after their deaths.

The connections between the mythic heroes and historical athletes from the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BCE provide a considerable amount of information for evaluating the role of the heroes in both ancient Greek athletics and religion. While the process of heroization surely varied over time and place in the ancient Greek world, the sources suggest that, in some cases, great athletes sought to imitate the heroes of myth, intending to secure for themselves the same degree of glory and recognition. While many of the literary sources date from the Roman period, epigraphic and archaeological evidence, such as the statue base of Polydamas and the cults to Euthymos and Theagenes
fixes heroic imitation and the institution of heroic honors much closer to the athletes’ lifetimes. This evidence suggests that the possibility of heroization informed the actions of these historical athletes, and the relationships between victory in athletics and heroic standing were well articulated in the late Archaic and Classical periods of Greek history.

The means by which ancient Greeks honored their athletic victors underscored the superhuman status of these champions and connected this status with the *kleos* and immortality of the mythic heroes. The prizes, statues, odes, and other honors that the Greeks awarded to their successful athletes highlighted the special power that victory bestowed on heroes and mortals alike. These symbols of victory served as important reminders of the superior status of victorious athletes and connected them to heroic ideals.
Chapter 4

The Tokens of Athletic Victory

4.1 Introduction

Victory, whether in athletics, heroic challenges, or warfare provided the avenue to immortality in ancient Greece. This immortality came in broad terms and encompassed several components. One manifestation of immortality was a grand posthumous reputation, ensuring that one’s fame lived on. The immortality of a victor’s reputation was linked to the notion that his influence lived on and the establishment of cult and ritual acknowledged this continued influence. Consequently, the commemoration of victory represented an important part of an athlete’s claim to immortal status.

The commemoration of a victory or achievement contributed to the reputation of a hero or athlete and contributed to the fame and cult that the heroes commanded. The tokens of athletic victory in ancient Greece played an important role in acknowledging and publicizing a victor’s mighty feats of prowess, and allowing him to stake his claim to heroic status and immortality. The epinician odes of Pindar and Bacchylides demonstrate a clear understanding of the victorious athlete’s designs on heroic status, and often connected athletic victory with the heroes of myth. Statues of victorious athletes also provided a means for perpetual reputation by physically juxtaposing an image of the athlete with the spatial locations set aside for the immortals. Finally, the crowns and
fillets awarded to and worn by athletic victors connected mortal athletes to the heroes and gods. All of these tokens of victory commemorated and publicized the glory won through victory.

### 4.2 The Importance of Kleos

Bruno Currie succinctly identified the two components of heroic immortality as renown (κλέος) and cult (τιμή). Kleos, the fame, glory, reputation, and honors that attended victory represented the currency of victory. The heroes of ancient Greek myth sought kleos through victory, whether in battle, athletics, or the successful completion of challenging “labors.” If someone managed to amass enough kleos, he could expect to receive honorific cult and ritual after death as suppliants sought to appease or entreat the departed hero. Although a mortal athlete could personally do little to insure the observation of cultic rites after his death, a victorious athlete sought to amass kleos and receive the honors of a hero in his own lifetime. In many ways, kleos was the more prominent component of heroic immortality: although the hero or athlete had died, his reputation, fame, and glory lived on. Heroes, according to Jean-Pierre Vernant, strove to “escape aging and death” despite its inevitability. They accomplished this by means of “the glory that will suffuse his memory for all time to come.”

Those with the most kleos, besides enjoying immortal reputations throughout the generations, could anticipate

---

1 Currie, *Pindar and the Cult of Heroes*, 72.

some type of heroic immortality that transcended death and allowed for continued influence on the living. *Kleos* was the key to immortality, whether in reputation, cult, or some type of advantaged afterlife. In addition to the pursuit of victory and fame that would insure a comfortable and prominent life, the quest for *kleos* provided an avenue to immortality.

The quest for *kleos* was an important component of the heroic paradigm and, through their victories, both heroes and would-be heroes laid claim to the fame and glory that could bring immortality. But *kleos* required more than a triumphant victory won by the hero or athlete. It required commemoration and, accordingly, an agent to publicize the famous deeds and a listening audience to adore and approve of the heroic feats. Jesper Svenbro contended that “kléos belongs entirely to the world of sounds,” noting that the word denotes the technical term for the praise and honor that poets bestowed upon deserving individuals.³ *Kleos* can only be possessed if someone proclaims it, and someone else hears it. In all likelihood, the word *kleos* is etymologically related to κλύειν, an ancient Greek word that meant “to hear.”⁴ The heroes of Homer understood the need to publicize their *kleos* in the company of their competitors. As Glaucus boasted to Diomedes in the sixth book of the *Iliad*, his father sent him to fight at Troy “to always be the best and to be preeminent over others.”⁵ Glaucus both publicly vaunted his reputation, and demonstrated war’s opportunity for proving excellence, superiority, and

---


⁵ Hom. *Il.* 6.208: αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἐμμενα ἄλλων,
supremacy among men. In direct competition with his peers (both allies and enemies), his desire was identical to that of the other Homeric heroes – “to always be the best.”

Commemoration before a wide audience was an important part of amassing kleos. Leslie Kurke has noted that, while the kleos of Homer’s Odysseus often carried a formulaic adjective εὐρύ, meaning “wide” or “broad,” it often carried an additional meaning of “report” or “account.” Kleos, then, consisted of “wide fame” or “broad report” of tremendous deeds, commemorated and publicized aloud. Since their kleos was so heavily dependent on the dissemination of their great deeds, victorious athletes or their families often commissioned epinician poetry to commemorate their victories and publicize their kleos.

4.3 Commemoration in Verse

The commemoration of athletic victors in verse represented an important component of an athlete’s kleos, and a significant feature of his heroization. The poets, most notably Pindar, Semonides, and Bacchylides, who commemorated and publicized the triumphs of athletic victors, played a key role in equating mortal athletes with immortal heroes. Their public performances proclaimed the kleos of the victors and elevated the athletes’ status in the minds of the audience. Pindar, the best known of the epinician poets, suggested many connections between mortal athletic victors and mythic heroes, often juxtaposing the feats of a victorious mortal with the achievements of a

---

mythic hero. For example, Pindar’s Olympian 1, composed to commemorate the Sicilian tyrant Hiero’s victory in a chariot race at Olympia in 476 BCE, described a chariot race from mythic time. According to the well-known story, which also served as one of the origin myths of the Olympic games, with the help of the gods the hero Pelops won a dramatic victory over the ruthless Lord of Pisa and came away with his life, a bride, and a kingdom. In this poem, Pindar related the chariot racing victory of Hiero to the victory of Pelops, juxtaposing the mortal realm with the immortal. While there certainly exist other considerations for Hiero’s association with the realm of immortality, such as his status as a “godlike kingly victor” and his priesthood of Demeter, Hiero’s athletic victory at Olympia only bolstered his claims to super-human status. In addition, Pindar equates mortal athletic triumph with heroic predecessors in several other instances.

Pindar wrote Nemean 5 and Isthmians 5 and 6 for a pair of brothers from Aegina during the early fifth century BCE. Pytheas, the laudandus of Nemean 5, was a pancration champion. Isthmians 5 and 6 chronicle the victories of Phylakidas, also a pancratist. They were the sons of Lampon, and related to other athletic champions. In these poems, Pindar’s praise naturally turns to the heroes of Aegina, to two brothers in

---

7 See Leslie Kurke, The Traffic in Praise, 163-194 for commentary on how Pindar’s odes contributed to a victor’s symbolic and financial benefactions to his polis; Kurke’s conclusion (pp. 257-262) detailed how the epinician poem “negotiate[d] with the community” to defuse the dangerous status the victor’s kudos has brought and facilitate his return to the community. Thus, Pindar’s poetry was intrinsically aware of the superhuman status of athletic champions.

8 Mark Munn, The Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia (Berkeley: 2006), 27. See also pp. 20-55 for an overview of the multiple and intricate connections between sovereignty, victory, and divinity in ancient Greek religion and society. See Munn, 92, n. 129 and Pindar, Olympian 6.92-96 for Hiero and the cult of Demeter and Persephone.
fact, Peleus and Telamon, the fathers of Achilles and Aias respectively. *Nemean* 5, written to celebrate the victory of Pytheas, refers to several stories about Peleus, including his rejection of Hippolyta’s advances, her false accusations against him, and Zeus’ saving intervention. Finally, it alludes to his eventual marriage to Thetis.\(^9\) To make the association between Pytheas and Peleus even more obvious, Pindar informs the victor (and his listeners), “Pytheas, you are from the same stock as him.”\(^10\) Like the heroes from myth, Pytheas’ victory has brought him an exalted status above ordinary mortals. Fittingly, Pytheas, as a new version of Peleus, enjoys his victory as a “sweet reward for his labors.”\(^11\) In this same vein, Pindar equated Pytheas’ brother Phylakides with Peleus’ brother Telamon in *Isthmian* 5 and *Isthmian* 6.

Pindar’s *Isthmian* 6 relates some of the adventures of Telamon, explaining how he accompanied Heracles for the first sack of Troy, and calls this undertaking a “labor for heroes.”\(^12\) The poet then relates how Heracles prophesied a brave son for Telamon, Aias, who would be powerful in the toils of war.\(^13\) The poem’s intergenerational connections are appropriate, since Euthymenes, the uncle of Pytheas and Phylakidas, was also an athletic victor, as was his father Themistios.\(^14\) Indeed, Pindar further blurs the generational lines by invoking Lampon, the father of both champions, on the poem’s

---


\(^12\) Pind. *Isthm.* 6.28: ἠρωσι μόχθοιν.


third line. Thus, the poem’s retelling of the mythic exploits of Telamon and Aias emphasizes familial connections, alluding to Phylakidas as both Telamon (the brother of Pytheas-Peleus) and Aias (the mighty son). These generational doublings enrich the poem’s meaning and emphasize the generational continuity of the athletic family by comparing it to Aegina’s mythic multi-generational heroic family. Isthmian 5 also highlights the achievements of this notable family of athletes, casting them as descendants and heirs to the heroic line of Aiakos, the mythic ruler of Aegina and the father of Telamon and Peleus. In the poem, Pindar first invokes the heroes of Thebes, Perseus at Argos, and Castor and Polydeuces at Sparta, before bringing up the heroes of Aegina and their glorious accomplishments. For Aiakos’ family was well represented at the two wars against Troy, and the poem mentions many of the great deeds of Achilles, son of Peleus, such as killing Memnon and Hector. Pindar’s message is clear. Just as the heroes of Aegina enjoyed great victories and acclaim, so has the family of Lampon – celebrated in these three odes – earned kleos and renown through athletic achievements, and their athletic prowess could translate into martial prowess.

Pindar’s Isthmian 5 also underscores how kleos – whether the kleos of a mythic hero or the kleos of an athletic champion – can contribute to immortality (lines 25-29):

Among the heroes, able warriors won renown. They are celebrated both with lyres and polyphonic flute strains for endless time. They are worshipped for Zeus’ sake and provide subjects for skilled artists.

---

15 Pind. Isthm. 6.3.

16 Pind. Isthm. 5.35-43.
This passage neatly sets the heroic paradigm for achieving immortality. Based on their accomplishments, the *kleos* of these heroes continues for “endless time” in the music and words of poetic commemoration. Accordingly, they are worshipped, but still in deference to Zeus. Although a greater achievement than most mortals could ever hope to attain, the immortal status of a hero was still subservient to that of Zeus. It is not difficult to recognize the self-referentiality of Pindar in this passage: he himself is in the act of celebrating with music and verses the glorious achievements of mortal athletes. As the heroes earned worship because of their widespread fame, so athletes could lay claim to similar honors.

The epinician odes of Pindar provide additional examples of the blurring between the victorious athletes and heroes. *Olympian* 6, for instance, composed in honor of Hagesias of Syracuse, compares the victor to the hero Amphiaraus. Pindar was well aware of the ambiguous status of the mortal athletic champion. The opening of *Isthmian* 5 refers to the tendency for human athletic victors to seek immortality. He cautions them to know their limits, emphatically commanding the athlete and listener, “Do not strive to become Zeus” and, a couple of lines later, “Mortal goals are fitting for mortals.” The immortality of the heroes – resounding *kleos* and worship in subservience to Zeus – provided a sufficient reward for the greatest mortals. Pindar’s admonition indicates that both athletes and heroes, as they sought immortality, pushed the boundaries between mortal and immortal, human and divine. Pindar’s poetry seems to indicate a willingness

---


18 Pind. *Isthm.* 5.14, 16.
for heroes and athletes to push these boundaries between humans, heroes, and gods.
Several times the poet reminds his patrons and listeners that a victor’s status among the
heroes, while greater than any mortal, was still less than the status of the gods. Athletic
champions indeed could lay claim to immortal honors, but Pindar warns them to seek
heroic honors, not the honors of the gods. Thus, Pindar says of Hippokleas that “he will
never set foot in brazen heaven,” indicating the inevitability of death and the futility of
assuming equality with the gods. This is the same limit Pindar established for heroes.
In *Isthmian* 7, the poet refers to the story of Bellerophon, the hero who killed the chimera
and unsuccessfully sought to ride Pegasus into the dwellings of the gods. Pindar warns
that man “is too short to reach the throne of the gods.” Having established the folly of
attempting to equal the station of the gods, Pindar stresses the ability for great mortals –
heroic and athletic – to achieve a measure of immortality after death. While clearly
unequal to the gods, these athlete-heroes surpassed all mortals and occupied a liminal
station between gods and men. Consider the opening five lines of *Nemean* 6:

There is one race of men, one race of gods. We both breathe from one
mother, but all deciding power divides us, since the one is nothing and the
bronze throne of heaven remains forever fixed. But, notwithstanding, with
a great mind or a great stature, we approach the immortals.

In these verses, Pindar allows that, despite the vast differences between gods and men, there is some chance for the greatest mortals to approach immortality. A great

---


stature or a great mind provides some access for a mortal to “approach the immortals.”
But it is more prudent to imitate and assume the honors of immortal heroes rather than
hubristically attempt to equal the gods. Pindar’s poetry lays out a strong boundary
between the heroes and gods – boundaries that heroes such as Bellerophon or Heracles
undertook to push to their limits. But the boundary between humans and heroes is much
more fluid, requiring only a sufficient quantity of *kleos* and posthumous recognition. The
status of Zeus and the other Olympians is far out of reach, Pindar admonishes, but the
status of heroes, the immortality of *kleos*, is the victor’s due.

Pytheas, the *laudandus* of Pindar’s *Nemean* 5, is also the object of praise in an
epinician ode by Bacchylides. This poem commemorates Pytheas’ pancration victory in
the Nemean Games. Like Pindar, Bacchylides connected Pytheas’ athletic victory with
the feats of the mythic heroes. A portion of the poem’s fragmentary text seems to retell
the story of Heracles and his fight with the Nemean lion, evoking images of close,
weaponless combat since the lion’s hide was impervious to metal blades. Bacchylides
praised the way Heracles employed “all sorts of skill” with his “neck-breaking hand” as
he fought the great beast.22 To make the connection even clearer, Bacchylides identifies
this labor of Heracles as an etiology for the pancration of the Nemean Games, singing
that, after Heracles, Greeks will sweat and toil for the crowns of the pancration at this
site.23 And, the listener understands, one Greek in particular, Pytheas, will win a crown
in the pancration at Nemea.

22 Bacchyl., *Ode* 13.13-16.
Like Pindar, Bacchylides also capitalized on the brothers’ connection to Aegina, drawing close parallels with the mythic house of Aiakos. Bacchylides praises the accomplishments at Troy of the great heroes Achilles and Aias, kinsmen with close ties to Aegina. Although neither Achilles nor Aias returned from Troy, both accomplished such great feats that their reputations lived on. Bacchylides explains,

Shining Excellence is not hidden by the dark shadows of night, but abounding glory spreads tirelessly, on and on, over the earth and the wide-wandering sea. 24

In this ode, Bacchylides compares Pytheas to these heroes and proclaims a similar immortal nature for the *kleos* of his victorious deeds:

With the crowning, the flowers of glory-bringing victory sustain a prominent golden fame, for a few mortals, throughout their lifetimes, and when the blue cloud of death has covered them, there remains the undying *kleos* of their well done deeds along with a steadfast destiny. And you, son of Lampon, secured these honors at Nemea. 25

This golden fame, secured by Pytheas through his athletic victories, assures him perpetual *kleos* and a “steadfast destiny” after death. This “steadfast destiny,” open to only a few mortals, is the heroic immortality enjoyed by the heroes. Thus Bacchylides anticipates both components of heroic immortality for these athletic victors. Their *kleos* will continue and they will receive some type of recognition or cult, assuring them of continued influence on earth after death. It is clear that both Pindar and Bacchylides understood the connections between heroic achievement and athletic victory, and both

---

24 Bacchyl., *Ode* 13.138-144.
emphasized the *kleos* and honors that the most successful could expect. By connecting the victories of the athletes with the exploits of the heroes, these poets reinforced athletic claims to heroic status and immortality.

About two hundred years after Pindar and Bacchylides, during the Hellenistic age, the poet Callimachus revived the epinician genre. The *Victory of Sosibos*, written sometime in the mid-third century BCE, commemorated several victories by the Egyptian Sosibos.\(^{26}\) The fragmentary text refers to a chariot victory at Isthmia and Nemea, wrestling at Athens, and a footrace in Egypt and emphasizes the connections between the games and heroes. Callimachus’ poem alludes to Melicertes and Opheltes, the two children whose funerals inspired the Isthmian and Nemean Games respectively and mentions the victory song of Archilochus, all connecting the athlete with the heroes.

In addition to the epinician poets, Hellanicus of Lesbos, a historian and mythographer from the fifth century BCE, provides another example of celebrating athletic victors through verse. He recorded a list of victors in Sparta’s Karneian festival in both poetry and prose.\(^{27}\) Although no fragments of Hellanicus’ *Karneonikai* have survived, ancient testimonies clearly stated that Hellanicus used verse to record the victors’ names. In many respects, the use of poetic meter represented the language of the gods. The Greeks delivered divine communications, such as pronouncements from the Delphic oracle, in dactylic hexameter. According to Plato, the Muses spoke to poets in

---

\(^{26}\) Callimachus, fr. 384 (Pfeiffer).

verse, and the poets acted merely as vehicles for conveying the divine words.28 Thus, when Hellanicus recited his metrical list of Karneian victors, he would have clearly evoked images in his audience of divine communications and the heroic age. The effect must have been akin to the second book of the Iliad, where Homer’s catalog of ships names and describes the epic poem’s Greek heroes and their homelands. In compiling a list of historical athletic victors and arranging them into verse, Hellanicus explicitly connected these men and their achievements with the immortal Homeric heroes.

Besides the association of mortals and immortals through juxtaposition in the victory odes, a fragment of Pindar from an unknown poem made the connection more explicit. The fragment survives in one of Plato’s dialogues, in an episode in which Socrates asserts the immortal nature of the soul and uses Pindar’s poetry to reinforce his point. Socrates informs Meno that the greatest men, “noble kings,” men of “swift strength,” or “great wisdom” are restored to life and are thereafter called “holy heroes.”29

These “men of swift strength” are most assuredly athletes, since this phrase employs an abbreviated form of the formulaic expression for accomplished athletes – those who are fleet of foot or strong with their hands. In Pythian 10, Pindar employs this basic formula, referring to happy athletes “who are powerful with hand or fleet foot and seize the greatest prizes with courage and strength.”30 In addition, Homer described athletic

28 Plato, Ion 534a-536d.


prowess as belonging to those who demonstrated “speed of foot and strength of hands.”

Pindar called these great athletes “holy heroes,” demonstrating the connection between mortal athletes and mythic heroes and underscoring the understanding that victorious athletes could claim heroic status.

Yet another commemoration in verse, the victory song of Archilochus, equated victorious athletes with the immortal heroes. Victorious Olympic champions enjoyed identification with Heracles by means of this victory song, or *kallinikos*. Those accompanying or welcoming an Olympic victor sang this hymn to Heracles in honor of the victorious athlete. Originally composed by the seventh century BCE lyric poet Archilochus, only a small fragment has survived in the opening lines of Pindar’s *Olympian* 9 and the explanatory note of an ancient commentator. The hymn’s repeated refrain proclaimed,

Hail glorious victor! Greetings lord Heracles
You and Iolaos, the two spearmen.
Hail glorious victor! Greetings lord Heracles.

This hymn to Heracles, performed in honor of the victorious athlete, connected the mortal victor to the immortal hero. Although ostensibly addressed to Heracles, the context of the hymn’s performance allowed the victorious athlete to appropriate this praise for himself. By implicitly calling the athlete Heracles, the singer connected the athlete’s accomplishment with those of the hero. Like Heracles, the mortal athlete could

---

lay claim to super-mortal status. Like Heracles, these mortal athletes sought the same prize of immortality.

These forms of praise poetry acted as a type of “verbal monument” by which a mortal athlete displayed and acquired *kleos* and claimed associations with the immortal heroes. Indeed, Pindar identifies a rivalry between his craft and that of the sculptors, asserting the supremacy of his skill. In *Nemean* 4, he refers to his ode as “a monument whiter than Parian stone [marble].”34 In *Nemean* 5, he contrasts the two forms of commemoration, disparagingly criticizing the static, unmoving nature of statues on pedestals in favor of the rapidly spreading song he has composed for Pytheas.35 Pindar makes a good point: if the goal of *kleos* is to spread as widely and broadly as possible, a voiced song is much more fluidly portable than marble or bronze. Yet, there exists permanence in statue that poetry is unable to imitate. And so, Pindar’s scorn aside, athletic champions erected statues to commemorate their victories, dedicating them to the gods and often placing them in the precincts of the gods. Like the commemoration of victory through verse, statues served as important symbols in the athlete’s claim to heroic status.

### 4.4 The Victory Statue

According to the Roman Pliny, portrait statues were normally reserved for humans who had accomplished something remarkable. As he wrote,


35 Pind. *Nem.* 5.1-5.
It was not customary for likenesses of men to be portrayed [in sculpture] except where there was an illustrious reason for everlasting commemoration, a foremost case being victory in the sacred games, and especially those at Olympia, where it was the custom for all who had won to dedicate statues. The statues of athletes who won three times were modeled in imitation of the athletes’ bodies. These statues were called “iconic.”

Art historians have engaged in a considerable amount of debate concerning the details of Pliny’s statement. Was Pliny’s three-time champion prerequisite for iconic dedications a longstanding rule, or was it an apocryphal explanation for the change in artistic conventions over time? As portraiture generally became more realistic and naturalistic during the fourth century BCE, it is entirely possible that Olympic victor monuments became accordingly more realistic in nature. In addition to this explanation, Walter Hyde proposed other alternatives, such as a conventional difference between equestrian and gymnastic dedications.

Aside from this modern discussion concerning the specifics of iconic and aniconic dedications, it remains unclear if these dedicatory statues of athletic champions were life-sized or larger. George Mylonas has indicated the problems with constructing a definite rule for sizing statues, including the nature of the evidence that so often consists of later Roman copies of Greek originals. There is often no definitive way to determine the size of the original dedicatory offering, and it is often difficult to determine if the statue

---

36 Pliny, *Natural History* 34.16.

portrays an athlete of a god. Leslie Kurke, relying on inscribed epigrams that adorned and explained the statues, stressed “the exact likeness of the statue to the victor,” and concluded from this that the statues were “life-size but no larger.” Walter Hyde’s efforts to adduce statue height from the size of footprints on pedestal bases and surviving fragments indicate a degree of variability in size and proportion, including a few athlete sculptures that were possibly larger than life size (e.g. a statue of the boxer Diagoras that measured six feet 4.5 inches).

While it is impossible to determine how accurately these statues represented the exact height of the victorious athletes, it is possible that athletes and artists pushed the limits of mortal representation, wishing to extend their physical presence beyond the norms of human size and enter into the heights normally reserved for heroes. In describing the statue of the great athlete Polydamas, Pausanias recorded that he was the “biggest of all humans except those called heroes.” In the next line Pausanias repeats himself, emphasizing that “this Polydamas, son of Nikias, is the biggest of humans.” The periegete here seems to be judging the size of the athletic champion (who lived over 500 years earlier) under the assumption that the size of the statue must accurately reflect the athlete’s height. While the exploits of Polydamas leave little doubt that he must have been a big, strong, and powerful man, Pausanias’ wonder at the athlete’s immensity


40 Hyde, Olympic Victor Monuments and Greek Athletic Art, 45-46.

41 Paus. 6.5.1.
indicates that the statue’s size might have been exaggerated in order to attribute heroic status to the Olympic champion.

Although this confusion concerning mortal and heroic statue size presents some difficulties in identifying particular pieces of sculpture as god, hero, or athlete, this ambiguity is highly consistent with the status of an athletic victor. Hyde spends a considerable portion of his monograph examining the “assimilation of Olympic victor statues to types of Gods and Heroes.” Hyde explained that the sculptors of athletic victor monuments demonstrated a “tendency toward assimilating victor statues to well-known types of gods or heroes, especially to those of Hermes, Apollo, and Heracles, who presided over contests of gymnasia and palaestra.” As Hyde asserted, the sculpting of athletes in poses and types consistent with gods and heroes reinforced the extraordinary honors paid to victorious athletes. Visually, victorious athletes assumed the features of divinity, often those closely related to athletic practices like Heracles and Hermes. This provided a powerful vehicle for a victorious athlete to claim status as a hero. The conventional nudity of athletes in competition and the sculptures of these athletes further exhibited the superhuman power of these victors. As Larissa Bonfante has claimed, the naked male body in late Archaic and Classical Greece represented “great magic power” and symbolized power, might, strength, and courage despite dangerous exposure. Accordingly, heroes and gods often appeared nude in ancient Greek art because, as

---


Bonfante explains, “they relied on themselves” instead of on weapons or armor for protection.44

To add further weight to an athlete’s association with divinity, ancient Greeks set up and dedicated their victory statues in sacred precincts, thereby juxtaposing them in close proximity to the gods and heroes of the sanctuary. In a similar practice, female victors at the Heraea games at Olympia won the right to hang a portrait in the temple of Hera.45 Thus, at Olympia for instance, scores of athletic monuments in the Altis physically connected a representation (whether “iconic” or not) of the victorious athlete with Zeus, Hera, and Pelops. This physical proximity enhanced the status of the victor and commanded a heightened degree of reverence. Dio Chrysostom implied as much, when he chastened the people of Rhodes for meddling with statues of notable persons that were placed in a holy sanctuary. He remarked that even “those that stand very close to the gods” had not avoided desecration.46 To Dio Chrysostom, the proximity of these statues to the statues of the gods brought an extra degree of reverence and sacrosanctity. This connection reinforced the status of athletic victors as the best of mortals who sought to push the boundaries between the mortal and immortal realms.

These dedicatory statues simultaneously honored the victorious athletes and the deities of the sanctuaries. Pindar seems to allude to this dichotomy in Isthmian 5, when he recognizes the role of the artist in honoring victorious athletes and that these athletes

44 Bonfante, 556-557.

45 Paus. 5.16.3. Hyde, Olympic Victor Monuments and Greek Athletic Art, 29.

46 Dio Chrysostom 31.87: καὶ σφόδρα ἐγγὺς παρεστῶτες τοῖς θεοῖς.
are worshipped “for Zeus’ sake.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Pausanias recognizes that the statues of athletic victors were more than votive or thank-offerings to the gods. He distinguishes between two kinds of offerings in the Altis at Olympia, claiming to provide “an account of the statues and dedications,” since there are many dedications to the gods while the statues of winners were given as some type of a prize.”⁴⁸ This statement would seem to imply that the athletic statues were not dedicated to the gods, but surviving inscriptions indicate that these statues were often dedicated to the sanctuary’s god, such as Zeus, Apollo, or Poseidon, in addition to extolling the athlete’s achievements. The simultaneous declaration of *kleos* – superiority over mortal competitors – and piety to the gods reinforces the ambiguous nature of athletic heroism. These offerings served a dual purpose, to praise an athlete’s victory while acknowledging the supremacy of gods who grant victory. Indeed, Pheidias’ statue of Zeus inside the temple at Olympia held Nike in his hand, indicating that victory was a gift from the gods.⁴⁹ Athletic victory, commemorated in a victory statue, brought the victor a status between men and the gods, a status akin to that of the divine heroes.

In addition to sculpted dedications, the epinician inscriptions that adorned a victor’s statue provided a means of continual *kleos* long after the victor had departed. Many of these inscriptions were composed in order to reenact and retell the key elements of the victor’s experience, such as name, patronymic, homeland, and event. An interested

---

⁴⁷ Pind. *Isth.* 5.28-29.

⁴⁸ Paus. 5.21.1.

⁴⁹ Paus. 5.11.1.
tourist who read the inscription aloud would, in effect, imitate the herald who had originally announced the victory. Written words required a reader’s voice before they became meaningful. This is consistent with the requirement of *kleos* for voice and audience. Indeed, reading such an inscription aloud completed and perpetuated the victor’s *kleos*. As Jesper Svenbro noted, the reading of written text was, in fact, “a meeting” between the reader and the words. These words, in the case of the athletic statue, recorded an athlete’s victory and staked his claim to *kleos*. Through the voice of a reader, many of these athletic victory inscriptions “speak” in first-person narrative, as if the dedication were perpetually proclaiming the victor’s achievement.

A typical example, an inscribed statue base from Nemea from the sixth century BCE, while dedicated to Zeus, nevertheless proclaimed the four victories of its donor:

Aristis dedicated me to Lord Cronian Zeus, having won pancration four times at Nemea. He is the son of Pheidon of Cleonae.

Here, the inscription, through the voice of the reader, announces Aristis’ victories and assures his *kleos*. The stone’s inscription, speaking through the reader, ensured that Aristis’ *kleos* would (and does) continue.

Victorious athletes dedicated statues both at the sanctuaries where they won their contests and in their home towns. A fifth century inscription from the Athenian acropolis proclaims the *kleos* won by a pancratiast named Kallias at several pan-Hellenic events:

---

50 Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 142.

51 Svenbro, 4-5.

52 Svenbro, 44-45.

Kallias, son of Didymos, dedicated [this].
He won
At Olympia
The Pythian Games: twice
The Isthmian Games: five times
The Nemean Games: four times
The Great Panathenaic Games 54

This straightforward inscription commemorates Kallias’ significant athletic achievements. Although it does not mention a deity in conjunction with the dedication, its position on the Athenian Acropolis indicates some type of association with divine power. By placing his dedication, possibly a statue of himself, in such close proximity to the temples of the gods at Athens, Kallias conspicuously associated his achievements with divinity.

In addition to these implicit connections between victorious athletes and the realm of the immortals, the inscriptions that accompanied a victory statue could more explicitly assert the victor’s claim to super-mortal or heroic status. It is worth briefly revisiting the inscription that accompanied the statue of Euthymos of Locri at Olympia:

Euthymos of Locri, son of Astycles, having won three times at Olympia, set up this image for mortals to look at. Euthymos of Locri Ephizephyri dedicated it. Pythagoras of Samos made it. 55

Euthymos’ inscription reminds the reader, hearer, and viewer that they are mortals, but he, by means of his three Olympic victories, can lay claim to a superior status. The statue stands for mortals to gaze upon, implying that they were looking at an

54 Moretti, IAG§ 15. See also JG I 1 826. Paus. 5.9.3; 6.6.1.
immortal. Clearly, an athlete who erected a victory statue with an inscription created a vehicle for nearly perpetual *kleos*. As long as the inscription survived, those who passed by read the inscription aloud and contributed, yet again, to the *kleos* of the victor.

The statues of a triumphant athlete provide important connections between the victor and immortality. Statues of bronze or marble allowed an athlete’s image to exist long after the athlete had died and the inscriptions provided for continued *kleos* as long as passers-by stopped to look. Leslie Kurke has described the victory monument as a “victor’s talismanic double” that “inserts itself into the gap between [the victor’s] presence and absence.”56 In her article on “The Economy of Kudos,” Kurke’s discussion of the power of *kudos* that an athletic victor won recognized the important role of the victory monument in promulgating this power. Intended to commemorate and reenact the moment of the athlete’s victory, the monument allowed the athlete to remain vicariously present as long as the statue survived. As the victors assumed heroic honors after death, the statues of these athletes symbolically continued to exert power and to receive cult on the departed hero-athlete’s behalf. The statues of Oibotas, Euthycles, Theagenes, and Polydamas emphasize this role of the victor’s statue as a power-bearing proxy for the heroic athlete.

Oibotas of Dyme, one of the earliest known athletes, won the stade race in the sixth Olympics (traditionally 756 BCE). Pausanias recorded that his statue was not erected at Olympia until the 80th Olympiad Games (460 BCE). Since the Achaeans did little to honor the victorious runner, Oibotas cursed the Achaeans so that they would not

---

win at Olympia. When the Delphic oracle explained to the Achaeans the reason for their
dearth of victories, they erected a statue to Oibotas at Olympia. The curse abated and
thereafter victorious Achaeans crowned him as part of their own victory celebrations.
Pausanias declares that the Achaeans continued to sacrifice to the runner during his own
time, the second century CE – nearly 1,000 years after Oibotas’ victory.57 Although
Pausanias understandably doubted the details of this story, this episode underscores the
importance of the recognition of victory, including the victory statue. In addition,
Oibotas’ statue acted as a “talismanic double” that represented the dead athlete and
facilitated his presence at Olympia and publicized his kleos. The Achaeans recognized
the importance of appeasing this departed athletic hero with sacrifice and with
recognizing his role in their athletic victories.

Like the monument for Oibotas, the statue of Euthycles of Locri acted as a proxy
for the athlete and received honors on his behalf. A couple of fragments from the Aetia
of Callimachus, written in the mid-third century BCE, best preserves the story of
Euthycles of Locri. Although most of the context is fragmentary, Callimachus relates
how Euthycles was an Olympic pentathlon champion but later, as an ambassador to
another city, came under charges of accepting bribes when he returned to Locri with a
pair of mules. When the angry citizens of Locri mutilated Euthycles’ victory statue, a
famine ensued. The oracle of Apollo informed the Locrians that their dishonor to

Euthycles had caused this harm to come to them. Accordingly, the Locrians built an altar and worshipped the statue of Euthycles “equal to that of Zeus.”

The statues of Theagenes and Polydamas, two prominent ancient Greek athletes whose careers were discussed at length in the preceding chapter, assumed supernatural powers after the athletes’ deaths. The Delphic oracle commanded the people of Thasos to retrieve the statue of Theagenes from the sea in order to abate a famine. This statue, to which the Thasians offered sacrifices, was supposed to have the ability to heal the sick. Similarly, the statue at Olympia of the great athlete Polydamas possessed healing properties. These statues, in addition to acting as long-term memorials and vehicles for kleos, demonstrated the immortality for these two athletes. It seems that Theagenes, through a connection with his statue, sent a plague to Thasos and both his and Polydamas’ statue possessed supernatural healing abilities. In addition to the strong connections between victory statues and the divine, these two stories indicate the

---


59 Susan C. Jones, “Statues That Kill and the Gods Who Love Them,” in ΣΤΕΦΑΝΟΣ: Studies in Honor of Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, Kim J. Hartswick and Mary C. Sturgeon, eds. (Philadelphia: The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1998), 140-141 considers the parallels between the stories of dishonor to the statues of Theagenes and Euthycles to have too much of a “folkloric resonance” to be considered historical. Regardless of the factual historicity of these events, the powers attributed to these statues in multiple ancient sources indicates a recognition of supernatural powers by the authors of these texts and, presumably, their audiences.

60 Athenaeus 10.412 d-f; Dio Chrysostom 31.95-97; Lucian, Parliament of the Gods 12; Paus. 6.6.5-6, 6.11.2-9; Plutarch, Moralia 811d-e.

important roles that the actual statues could play in securing immortality for athletic champions.

4.5 The Victory Crown

In addition to laudatory verse and victory statues, ancient athletes earned and displayed their kleos through the symbolism of the victory crown. The only official prize of the most prestigious “crown” games of ancient Greece, the crown closely associated its wearer with heroes and gods, separating the winning mortal from other humans. According to the early fifth century BCE Athenian tragedian Aeschylus, the crown symbolized Prometheus’ bonds, a commemoration of the suffering he experienced for the benefit of humankind.62 The Roman mythographer Hyginus commented further, claiming that Prometheus established the crown as a commemoration for his victory, and that “men established the custom of wearing crowns on occasions of supreme rejoicing and victories, and this can be seen in athletics and banquets.”63 Although it is unclear whether Aeschylus invented this etiology, or if he was merely dramatizing established mythological lore, it is clear that the Prometheus explanation for the crown was closely tied to victory and divinity. In the myth, Prometheus won his freedom but wore a crown as a symbolic bond, both to commemorate his victory but also to demonstrate his acknowledgment of Zeus’ authority. The ritual “binding” of athletic victors with crowns and fillets is well attested in literature and art. Leslie Kurke has argued that the crowns

62 TrGF 202 (Radt) = Athenaeus, Deipnosophistae 15.674d. TrGF 235 (Radt) = Athen. 15.674d.
63 Hyg., Poet. Astr. 2.15.4
were emblems of a victorious athlete’s talismanic, *kudos*-charged power. Ideally, adoring crowds welcomed home triumphant athletes who were charged with talismanic power from their victories. By dedicating their victory crowns in the city, athletic victors shared this power with their cities. Disruptions in this process – such as the Achaeans’ failure to honor Oibotas – could bring disastrous consequences.\(^\text{64}\)

David Sansone and Mark Golden have commented on the sacrificial and ritualistic connotations that accompanied the binding of the bodies and heads of victorious athletes with woolen fillets and crowns. These ritual bindings indicate that athletic victors, just like sacrificial victims, possessed a special status with respect to the powerful Olympian gods. Victorious among humans but consecrated to a god, the bound victor held both a triumphant and submissive position.\(^\text{65}\) The myths of Heracles further underscore the close connections between the victory crown, athletics, mortality and divinity.

According to the mythographer Apollodorus, it was Heracles who originated the use of the olive crown, the symbol of victory in prestigious Olympic Games. Having journeyed to rescue the chained Prometheus from the torments of the liver-gnawing eagle, Heracles “released Prometheus, having chosen for himself the bond of olive, and he presented to Zeus Cheiron, an immortal, to die instead of him [Prometheus].” As part of the arrangement to release Prometheus, Heracles bound himself ritually, perhaps as compensation for unbinding Prometheus, with an olive wreath. Ancient Greek myth

\(^{64}\) Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 137-142. Kurke’s argument is persuasive. Surprisingly, though, she fails to strongly connect the honors that attended victory, crowns, and kudos with heroic identity and ritual.

closely associated Heracles with the olive crown and Olympia, claiming that he re-founded the Games and introduced this prize for victory. Victorious athletes received olive crowns made from the trees that grew in the Altis, near the temples of Zeus and Hera and the tomb of Pelops. In imitation of Heracles, who introduced the olive crown and wore one himself, athletic heroes clearly claimed some connection to the great immortal hero. A token of “supreme rejoicing and victories,” even the great statue of Zeus at Olympia – one of the wonders of the ancient world – wore an olive crown as a symbol of power and triumph. Thus, the athletic victors at Olympia who wore crowns of olive leaves enjoyed a clear connection with divine power. Those who won at Isthmia, Delphi, and Nemea earned crowns of pine, laurel, and celery respectively.

While Aeschylus’ etiology of crowns representing both victory and submission is ill-suited to the crown worn by the Olympian statue of Zeus, a clear trend of victory, celebration, and connection with divinity emerges in these traditions. The statue of Zeus, crowned with olive and holding Victory in his hand, reminded Olympic victors of their favor in Zeus’ eyes. Honored with fillets and ribbons, these victors, like sacrificial animals, represented the best mortals had to offer and denoted a special relationship with the divine. Consequently, athletic victors wore their crowns to emphasize this connection, such as when Milo wore his crowns into battle or when the garlanded

---

66 Pindar, Olympian 3.20-25; 6.113-120; 10.24-59; Diod. Sic. 4.14.1, 5.64.6; Paus 5.7.9, 5.8.3; Herodorus fr. 34a (Fowler).

67 Pindar, Olympian 3.11-25. Paus. 5.11.1, 6.

68 Paus. 8.48.3. Gardiner, 36-37. According to Plutarch, Moralia 675d – 677b the games at Isthmia for a time awarded crowns of celery, perhaps (as Plutarch opines) out of Theseus’ view to imitate Heracles and the Nemean prize (Plut. Thes. 25).
Dioxippos faced Koragos. Verse, statues, and crowns all provided commemorations of a victorious athlete’s special status. Besides these, an athletic victor stood to win more lucrative prizes.

4.6 Prizes at Athens: Panathenaic Amphoras

Twice he pleased them at the Athenian ceremonies; with voices they plumed and exalted him. In earth burned with fire, the fruit of the olive tree came to the brave people of Hera, enclosed in vases rich and varied.

– Pindar, Nemean 10. 33-36.

Although many athletic festivals in ancient Greece offered sundry and valuable prizes, the Panatheniac Amphoras of Athens’ Greater Panathenaea represented a unique prize that connected athletic victors with the immortal realm. These elaborate vases, filled with valuable olive oil from the sacred groves of Athena, possessed an intrinsic value beyond the mere monetary worth of the oil. As physical tokens of victory, these vases, representatives of the glory of Athens and Athena, brought their owners the prestige and kleos associated with athletic success. Around 560 BCE, the people of Athens greatly increased the activities of the yearly festival to Athena. Although there had been rituals dedicated to Athena throughout the Archaic period, it was during this time that the Panathenaic festival took on the characteristics which it maintained
throughout the Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman periods.69 The Athenians held festivities each year, but every fourth year brought the Greater Panathenaea with a grand procession, lavish sacrifices, and competitions.70 Although many scholars believe that Peisistratus introduced the athletic and musical competitions to compete with or in response to the inception of three other great pan-Hellenic festivals (at Nemea, Isthmia, and Delphi) at around this time, the competitions at Athens boasted a unique and lucrative feature: the Panathenaic games rewarded their winners with large amphoras filled with olive oil from Attica’s public olive groves.71 These vessels, known as Panathenaic Amphoras, were distinctly produced and decorated to identify them as valuable prizes from this prestigious festival.

According to Aristotle’s Constitution of the Athenians, every four years the people of Athens selected ten Commissioners of the Games by lot. This group arranged the various components of the Panathenaic festival, including the commissioning of the prize amphoras and ensuring that they were filled with oil from the state-owned olive groves.72 Despite slight stylistic variations in shape over time, the prize vases maintained easily recognizable characteristics.73 On one side, the vases depicted an athletic event from the festival. On the other, each showed Athena in warrior pose, holding a shield

71 Davison, 26.
73 Panathenaic amphoras continued to be produced as black-figure ware, despite the widespread adoption of red-figure techniques fairly soon after their introduction in the mid-to-late sixth century BCE.
and spear. Except for a single fourth-century example, Athena is portrayed with feet wide, as if striding forward. Donald Kyle has noted the multiple aspects of Athena’s nature that are combined in these symbols. The olive oil inside the vases evoked her contest with Poseidon to determine which deity would be the patron of the city. Fittingly, the image of Athena – the goddess of crafts – appears on the ceramic vessel. Her depiction as a warrior suggests her role as protectress of the city.74 Later, it became customary for two Doric columns to flank the image of the goddess, and atop of each stood a rooster or cock.75 A declaratory inscription usually ran alongside one of the column – τῶν Ἀθηνηθευν ἄθλων, “one of the prizes from Athens.” During the fourth century BCE, Athenians began noting the name of the year’s Eponymous Archon, allowing for more precise dating.76

Athenian potters produced hundreds of Panathenaic Amphoras for each festival, since winners won huge quantities of oil. According to an inscription from the first half of the fourth century BCE, the victor in the men’s stade race won 100 amphoras of oil. The winners of pentathlon, wrestling, and boxing each won 60 amphoras of oil, A pancration victory brought 80 amphoras, and there were lesser prizes for second place finishes and boys’ events. In addition to the athletic events, 295 Panathenaic amphoras


75 The cock was a symbol of tenacity and fighting spirit. J.D. Beazley, The Development of Attic Black-Figure (Berkeley:1951), 91 reminds the reader of a fragment from the poet Ion of Chios: οὐδ’ ὅ γε σῶμα τυχεῖς διήμετρ’ τε κόρας ἐπιλύται ἄλκας, ἄλλ’ ἀλιγοδρανίῳν φθογγάζεται. “Smitten in body and both eyes, it forgets not its strength, but growing weak, it crows.” PMG, fr. 7 (Page).

76 Although the archon’s name did not necessarily correspond to the year of the vase’s production or the year of the Games, but rather recorded the year that the oil was collected from the public groves. Arist., Ath. Pol. 60.2-4. Beazley, 97. M. Tiverios, "Shield Devices and Column-Mounted Statues on Panathenaic Amphoras," in Worshipping Athena: Panathenaia and Parthenon, J. Neils ed. (Madison 1996), 165-167.
were awarded to the victors in the equestrian events, including an astounding 140 amphoras to the winner of the Two-Horse Chariot Race.\textsuperscript{77} These lucrative prize vases each contained around 39 liters of valuable, tax-exempt olive oil.\textsuperscript{78} These distinct prizes drew significant praise, publicity, and attention to the victors, effectively commemorating their accomplishments and providing a portable token that linked the athlete’s glory to the glory of Athens and Athena.

The production of smaller, commemorative “pseudo-Panathenaics” indicates the strong desire for commemoration and the urge to establish a link, albeit an artificial one, with a \textit{kleos}-charged victor from the Panathenaic Games.\textsuperscript{79} These smaller “souvenir” amphoras demonstrate a remarkable development in the nature of athletic achievement, and the popular appeal of athletes and prizes. Although similar to the official prizes basic shape and the depiction of a sporting event on one side with armed Athena on the other, the size and iconography of these pseudo-Panathenaics distinguishes them from the official prize vessels. These souvenirs are much smaller than the normal Panatheniacs, usually less than 50 cm in height.\textsuperscript{80} They bear no inscriptions. The columns are Ionic rather than Doric, and oftentimes the cocks are replaced by disks, owls, or other symbol.

These vessels signal an important aspect concerning the symbolism of the Panathenaic amphoras: the prizes had come to be identified with the vessels, not just the valuable oil they contained. The official amphoras had acquired an intrinsic value as

\textsuperscript{77} IG II\textsuperscript{2} 2311.


\textsuperscript{79} Kyle, “Gifts and Glory,” 122.

\textsuperscript{80} Hamilton, 138.
prizes and symbols of victory and achievement, tokens of victory that connected their owners with moments of heightened *kleos*. Although Aristotle’s description of Panathenaic prizes states that the winners of athletic and equestrian events won *olive oil*, he does not list the amphoras as prizes.\(^8\) Nevertheless, this olive oil, produced by the state-run olive groves of Athena, held special significance and connections with the divine. In addition to the production of souvenir versions, the dedication of vases underscores their ritual and talismanic importance as tokens of athletic victory and commemorations of *kleos*.

The dedication of Panathenaic amphoras throughout the eastern Mediterranean indicates their popularity and importance as valuable and powerful objects of *kleos*. Panathenaic Amphorae have been found at the important religious sites of Eleusis and Delphi, as well as at temples in Corinth, Sparta, the Greek isles, Asia Minor, Sicily, Italy, and Egypt. Panatheniac amphoras also served as funeral or grave goods, having been unearthed throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea area.\(^8\) It is not altogether clear if these prize amphoras were dedicated by the victors, their descendants, or by enthusiastic admirers who purchased the vessels for their own purposes. For instance, Panathenaic fragments with an inscribed champion’s name were found in the remains of a building at Rhodes, possibly as a dedication made by the victorious owner.\(^8\) A fifth century BCE grave in Italy yielded at least three different Panathenaic vases that depicted chariot


\(^8\) Frel, 6-7.

racing, pentathlon, and boxing. Despite Richard Hamilton’s conclusion that these must have belonged to a collector (since it is unlikely one person could have won all three of these events), it is doubtful that the picture on the vase necessarily corresponded to the victor’s athletic event. However, a grave in Attica revealed ten vases from the fourth century BCE, of which the archon dates spanned over twenty years. This seems too long for a single athlete to have won all of the vases, except perhaps in equestrian events, but might indicate a family of athletes. Regardless of whether these graves yielded the treasured amphoras of private collectors, or family prizes and heirlooms, it is clear that the Panathenaic vases possessed an intrinsic value as instruments of status and victory. Although the valuable oil was a handsome reward, the vessels which carried it commemorated the *kleos* of the victory. This *kleos* was, in some way, portable and transferable, since ancient Greeks sought to own vessels they had not won, or purchased imitation amphoras that evoked images of athletic victory. These practices demonstrate the strong impulse to acquire *kleos* through athletic victory, and the divine connections with Athena suggest that the prizes bestowed a certain degree of divinely connected honor. Although more subtle than a victory ode, statue or crown, a prize Panathenaic amphora represented a token of victory and a repository of *kleos*.

84 Hamilton, 142.

85 Hamilton, 142.
4.7 Tripods

Tripods are among the oldest prizes in athletic competitions. Achilles offers tripods at the funeral games for Patroclus to the victors in the chariot race and wrestling. Hesiod claimed to have won one in a poetry competition at Chalcis that he dedicated to the Muses. At Delphi, the Pythia of Apollo sat on top of a tripod to utter her prophecies, and the Siphnian treasury featured a relief carving of Heracles struggling with Apollo for this prize. Tripods conveyed powerful messages of victory. After the Persian Wars, the Greeks dedicated a golden tripod at Delphi. At Athens, choreic monuments decorated the “Street of Tripods” and prominently featured the Lysicrates monument of 334 BCE.

Archaeologists have recovered votive tripods at Olympia dating from from the Iron Age and early Archaic period, but it is unclear whether these acted as prizes for athletic competitions since tripods carried religious significance outside of an athletic setting. Indeed, Elmer Suhr contended that the tripod developed as a prize precisely

---

86 Hom. Il. 23.264, 700-703.
87 Hesiod, Works and Days 654-659.
89 Paus. 10.13.9. Hdt. 9.81.
because of its religious significance. A story in Herodotus’ account underscores the sacred nature of this prize. When Agasicles of Halicarnassas won a tripod at the games for Tropian Apollo, he took the prize home instead of dedicating it in the temple to the god. As punishment for this offense, the other cities that frequented the sanctuary prohibited Halicarnassas from future use of the temple. As with the other prizes for victory, the tripod carried strong connotations of divinity.

4.8 The Victory Palm

The palm frond, or victory palm, often depicted in art in the hands of victorious athletes, also contained implicit connections with the heroes. According to Pausanias, all games awarded a palm frond to their victors. This award evoked images of the sacred palm at Delos, mentioned as early as Homer. However, F.B. Tarbell noted that Pindar and Bacchylides make no mention of victory palms, and that “this symbol is conspicuously absent from the literature and the art of Greece down to about the end of the fifth century BC.” The palm nevertheless became an important symbol of victory and connected the victor with the heroic tradition. As Pausanias reports, Theseus started the practice when he founded the Delian Games on his voyage home from Crete.

93 Hdt. 1.44.
96 Paus. 8.48.3.
Plutarch dedicated an entire section of his *Moralia* to the victory palm, setting forth various etiologies for the use of the palm as a symbol of victory, such as its shape, its longevity, and the inedible nature of the fruit from its Greek species. The most complete rationale, however, echoes Pausanias as it hearkens to Theseus, Delos, and Apollo.\(^97\) While perhaps not as rich in symbolism as poetry, statues, crowns, and prize vases, the victory palm nevertheless maintains a connection between athletes, victory, heroes, and gods.

### 4.9 Other Tokens of Athletic Victory

Athletic victors enjoyed lucrative financial rewards, civic honors, and community prestige, but these benefits did not connect the athlete to the heroic and immortal realms as did the other honors. A late tradition claimed that athletic victors, arriving triumphantly, did not enter the gates of their cities as ordinary mortals but instead the citizens tore down a section of wall for the athlete to pass through.\(^98\) David Young has discussed the improbability of tearing down city walls, and blames 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century historians with erroneously claiming this to be a routine occurrence.\(^99\) Leslie Kurke, however, seems to accept it unreservedly, especially since her argument focuses so strongly on the powerful force of the *kudos*-charged victor.\(^100\) Although the rationale

---

\(^{97}\) Plut. *Quaest. Conv.* 8.4.1-5.


for tearing down the walls for a victorious athlete’s return to the city strongly supports Kurke’s argument, there is no evidence for this occurring outside of Nero’s return to Rome in the first century CE. Although it might seem appropriate to honor dangerously powerful athletic champions in this way, there seems to be insufficient evidence to claim this as a routine occurrence in Classical Greece.

4.10 Conclusion

Those who received the tokens of victory in the most prominent games took great pains that their triumphs receive commemoration and that their *kleos* endure after their departure from the site and from among the living. The verse of Pindar, Bacchylides, Callimachus, and Hellanicus drew close connections between the immortal heroes of myth and the athletic champions of their own times. The victory statue, often erected in close proximity to the site of athletic triumph and a divine sanctuary, allowed the victor to perpetually enjoy his moment of achievement, and the accompanying inscriptions proclaimed the *kleos* through the voices of passers-by. The mythic backdrop behind the victory crown emphasized a dual nature of both elite preeminence and humble subservience. The best of mortals, yet obeisant to the gods, the athletic champion wore his crown as a token of his liminal status between gods and men – precisely the same status enjoyed by the heroes of Greek myth. Finally, the valuable Panathenaic prizes awarded at Athens embodied the glory of victory in a portable medium, allowing their

---

100 Kurke, “The Economy of Kudos,” 133-134, 141.
owners to enjoy glorious reputations as they staked a connection to the divine associations with the sacred oil and games of Athena.

In addition to the tokens of victory, the organization of the panhellenic sites themselves linked the victorious athlete with the immortal hero, and reinforced the conception of the victor as an immortal being. Not only were the prizes and honors that the ancient Greeks awarded to their victors loaded with heroic associations, but the configuration of the athletic facilities, the sacred precincts, and hero tombs at the sites of these important panhellenic events physically connected the world of the athlete with immortal honors. The organization of the sanctuaries at Olympia, Isthmia, Nemea, and Delphi allowed successful, powerful, and victorious athletes to compare themselves to the immortal heroes and associate themselves with heroic honors.
Chapter 5

Games for the Living and Games for the Dead: Tombs, Hero Cult, and the Competitive Sites

5.1 Introduction

Funeral games and the spatial arrangements of many athletic sites both reinforced the boundaries between the living and dead while reminding athletes of the possibilities of posthumous honors and influence that victory brought. Monuments to the deceased were featured prominently at the sites of many pan-hellenic athletic contests, emphasizing athletics’ relationship to both life and death. The presence of a hero’s tomb in close proximity to the site of an athletic competition reinforced the connections between athletes, heroes, mortality, and immortality in ancient Greece. Consistent with a model that is evident in Homer, an athletic competition that took place next to the marker or tomb of a hero allowed the contests to both commemorate the deceased and bestow glory on the living. Since heroes were figures who transcended the normal boundaries between life and death, the location of a hero tomb adjacent to an athletic facility reinforced this idea that athletics could offer an avenue for a mortal to gain heroic honors. The four panhellenic festivals each featured a hero-tomb that was closely situated to both the sanctuary of the god and the site of the athletic competitions. This spatial arrangement reinforced the liminal nature of the heroes, since they straddled the worlds
of gods and men. Although their origins are earlier, the prominence of these hero-tombs at the sites of the four Crown Games can be traced to the Archaic Period of Greek history, a time when the majority of athletes who received heroization lived and competed.

The celebration of athletic contests in a funerary context offered a stark contrast between the living and the dead. The deceased had no further chance to gain kleos. Instead, his reputation must endure on the feats he accomplished during his lifetime. For the living, however, the contests provided a ready means for acquiring kleos and contributing to their own still-growing reputations. While not precisely a transference of glory from the dead to those still living, the context of funeral games both commemorated the ending of one mortal’s quest for glory and provided a vehicle for the living to add to their own. In addition, funeral games reinforced the boundaries and distinctions between the living and the dead. Those who competed in these types of athletic contests must have recognized the contrast between their living competitions and the inaction of the dead, especially since the events were often held in close proximity to the tomb. The spectacle of competitors struggling to outrun, out-jump, and otherwise physically outperform the others provided a sharp contrast to the quiet and permanent stillness of death. Although the monuments and inscriptions emphasized the persistence and power of enduring kleos, the physical tombs, situated close to the athletic grounds perhaps reminded the competitors and spectators of their inevitable fate and urged the athletes on to greater efforts in their striving for mortal honors.
Despite this great division between the living and the dead, the power of victory in athletic contests provided a means by which this gulf could be bridged by victorious athletes who had gained sufficient *kleos*. Athletic victory could bring a measure of immortality to its winner. While death was unavoidable, those athletes who earned the greatest victories and amassed the most *kleos* could look forward to continued influence on earth after death. It is no surprise, then, that prominent athletic competitions traced their roots to the funeral games that honored the glorious dead from the age of heroes.

### 5.2 The Homeric Model

In *Iliad* 23, just as the Achaeans have finished interring the cremated remains of the slain Patroclus, Achilles announces the prizes for the funeral games. As the sponsor of the contest, Achilles declines to compete but brags that he would surely have taken away the finest prizes in the chariot race, “if [they] were competing in honor of any other Achaean.”\(^1\) The games, this final funerary rite for Patroclus, demonstrate the close connection between honors for the dead and athletic competition in ancient Greece. These games served a double purpose by honoring the dead and providing a means for those still living to claim or acquire *kleos* through victory. Achilles offered lavish prizes for the winners of the various events, with the understanding that the glory heaped on the victorious competitors would honor the memory of Patroclus. By holding the games in close proximity to the site of the barrow that held his friend’s cremated remains, Achilles

---

\(^1\) Hom., *Il.* 23.274.
spatially juxtaposed the contests of the living with the memory of the dead. In addition to the close proximity of the tomb to Achilles’ announcement of the games and prizes, the turning post of the improvised hippodrome suggests a connection between the race and a grave marker.

As Nestor imparted advice to his son Antilochus, he identified the turning post as a point for special attention during the chariot race:

I will describe the very clear marker to you and you will not miss it. There stands a dry wooden marker, about a man’s height above the ground, either oak or pine, that has not been rotted by the weather. Two white stones have been leaned against either side, at a narrow part of the road, forming a smooth hippodrome all around. It is either the marker of a mortal who died long ago, or it was made as a turning post in a time of earlier men, but now godlike, fleet-footed Achilles has designated it as the turning point.2

Nestor’s identification of the wooden marker as either a turning post or tomb marker from a time long past marks an important overlap between funerary monuments and athletic competitions. The proximity of Patroclus’ tomb to the funeral games in his honor and Nestor’s description to his son of the racecourse’s turning post correspond to a strong tradition in ancient Greece that connected the tombs of heroes with athletic sites, especially the stadia and dromoi where the races were held.3 The archaeology of the sites of the Crown Games, Olympia, Isthmia, Nemea, and Delphi, as well as surviving funerary monuments from the historical period, reinforce this connection between tomb and athletics.

2 Hom., Il. 23.236-33.

5.3 The Panhellenic Festival Sites: Olympia, Isthmia, Nemea, Delphi

5.3.1 Olympia

Modern readers are indebted to the detailed, if occasionally roundabout, description of Olympia written by the periegete Pausanias in the second century CE. Pausanias dedicated two of his ten books to Olympia and the surrounding area. His description of the buildings, monuments, statues, and other components of the sacred site are especially valuable since many of these features have been lost through time. Besides the literary record, German archaeologists began excavating the panhellenic site of Olympia in the late 19th century. The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin jump-started efforts to renew the excavations and from 1937 to 1966 a considerable portion of the sanctuary, including the stadium, was excavated completely.4 By the 1950s, the excavators were able to reconstruct various phases of the stadium’s construction.5 As with the Homeric model, the physical landscape of the competitive area – the stadium – was closely connected to the tomb of a hero.

The myth of Pelops enjoys a prominent place in the traditional origins of the Olympic Games.6 The son of Tantalus, the figure of Pelops held important connotations

---


with sovereign authority and immortality. According to myth, young Pelops was killed by his father and his body prepared and served to the gods as a feast. When the gods discovered this crime, they resurrected the boy with minimal damage: the goddess Demeter had inadvertantly partaken of the flesh and Pelops had to make do with an ivory shoulder. As one beloved of the gods (Pindar Olympian 1. 71-81 also relates that Pelops was the favorite of Poseidon) and as one who had overcome death, Pelops was an attractive figure for athletes who sought immortal honors. These divine favors corresponded with his athletic victory in a chariot race near Olympia.

According to the story, the local ruler named Oenomus promised his daughter, Hippodameia, to anyone who could beat him in a chariot race, but the penalty for losing was swift execution. Twelve or so suitors, depending on the retelling, tried and failed. Oenomus fixed their severed heads above the door to his home. Although the details vary from version to version, all agree that Pelops challenged and defeated Oenomus. Oenomus perished in the course of the contest and Pelops claimed the girl and the kingdom. The race of Pelops and Oenomus served as one of the etiological foundation stories for the Olympic Games, and Olympia and pieces of the Pelops story were scattered throughout Olympia and its environs. For instance, the treasury of the Sicyonians featured Pelops’ gold-handled dagger, and the Eleians had once possessed the hero’s ivory shoulder-blade that had played a role in the Trojan War. This shoulder

---

8 Pindar, Olympian l. 1.25-27. Gantz, 532.
9 See Hygihum, Fabula 84, Paus. 6.21.9-11 for the names of the unsuccessful and unlucky suitors.
blade, however, had disappeared by Pausanias’ time.\textsuperscript{10} Constructed during the fifth century BCE, the eastern pediment of Zeus’ temple at Olympia featured the story’s main characters as they readied their horses.\textsuperscript{11} Pausanias relates that Pelops held the Olympic Games on an unprecedented and memorable scale, and that Heracles later revived the Games and instituted the practice of sacrificing to Pelops.\textsuperscript{12} Heracles, in this account, designated the site of the five-sided Pelopeion for remembering Pelops with cult and sacrifice.\textsuperscript{13}

Nestled between the temples of Hera and Zeus, the Pelopeion enjoyed a prominent position in the Olympian Altis. Although Pausanias makes passing mention of a bronze chest near the sanctuary of Artemis Kordax that housed the bones of Pelops, the Pelopeion is the site most often associated with the tomb of the dead hero.\textsuperscript{14} Here, Pausanias reports, the Eleans honored Pelops with more than the customary rituals for departed heroes and each year officials offered the hero a black ram.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to his significance as an etiological hero for the Games, Pelops and the Pelopeion occupied an important location in close proximity to the actual site of the athletic contests. In

\textsuperscript{10} Paus 6.19.6 for Pelops’ dagger. Paus. 5.13.4-6 for the shoulder blade. Pausanias records other Pelops relics outside of Olympia, such as the chariot of Pelops at Keleai (2.14.4), his divinely crafted scepter (9.40.11), and his mountain throne at Sipylos (5.13.7). Nigel Spivey, \textit{The Ancient Olympics: A History} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 215-217.

\textsuperscript{11} Paus. 5.8.2 for Pelops as founder of the Olympic Games. Paus. 5.10.6-7 for the eastern pediment of the temple of Zeus.

\textsuperscript{12} Paus. 5.8.2 for Pelops holding Olympic Games. Paus. 5.8.3-4, 5.13.2, Pind., \textit{Ol}. 10.24-59 for Heracles.

\textsuperscript{13} Paus. 5.13.1-2.

\textsuperscript{14} Paus. 6.22.1.

\textsuperscript{15} Paus. 5.13.1-3.
Olympian 10, Pindar recounts how the laws of Zeus compel him to sing about the contests (ἀγῶνα) which Heracles established “near the ancient tomb-marker (σάματι) of Pelops.” As with the Homeric precedents, the site of the competitions was prominently juxtaposed with the tomb of a dead hero. In Olympian 1, Pindar provides another account of this close relationship between the tomb and the competitions,

Now, [Pelops] is present at the splendid blood offerings, lying near the ford of the Alpheus with his oft-visited tomb beside the busy altar. The fame of Pelops flashes far and wide in the contests of the Olympic festivals, where there are contests in swiftness of foot and the bold pinnacles of strength.

Here, Pindar connects the fame of the living with the fame of the dead through athletic victory. Pelops’ kleos “flashes from afar” through the contests held in the Olympic festival. While the Olympic Games were dedicated to Zeus, the close proximity of Pelops’ tomb to the competitors emphasizes both the achievements of the dead hero, as well as the achievements of the victorious athletes. Tellingly, Pindar describes the contests at Olympia as dromoi or “races,” here used metonymically to describe all the contests. While archaeological excavations of the traditional site of Pelops’ tomb, the Pelopeion, have perhaps produced more questions than answers, it is nevertheless clear that Olympia’s oldest stadium (or dromos) was laid out next to the Pelopeion.

Beginning in 1928, a German team of archaeologists led by Wilhelm Dörpfeld systematically excavated the site of the Pelopeion. In analyzing the site, Dörpfeld concluded that the Pelopeion had undergone three phases. While the latter two dated from the historical period and adhered to the well-known pentagonal shape, Dörpfeld

16 Pindar, Olympian 10.24: ἀρχαίῳ σάματι πὰρ Πέλοπος.

17 Pind. Ol. 1.90-96.
dated the earliest version of the Pelopeion, a portion of a curved wall, to a 13th century BCE Mycenaean tumulus. In addition, Dörpfeld identified the remains of an earlier, Middle-Helladic apsidal house that overlapped with the later Pelopeion. These discoveries seemed to connect the site with a Mycenaean presence. However, in 1972, Alfred Mallwitz disputed these findings. While acknowledging the presence of human beings at the site in the Bronze Age, he considered the curved wall of the supposed Pelopeion I as “ein Spiel der Natur” and too old to connect to the apsidal Middle Helladic houses.’ From 1986 to 1996, Helmut Kyrieleis directed additional excavations that focused on determining the origins of religious cult at Olympia, focusing especially on the Pelopeion and its surrounding area. During this round of excavations, nearly forty trenches confirmed that beneath the Classical-period Pelopeion there was indeed a large tumulus-shaped structure from the Bronze Age. This tumulus, measuring 27 meters in diameter, was constructed during the Early Helladic II period, somewhere around 2600 / 2500 BCE, and therefore a thousand years too early to be a Mycenaean construction. Nevertheless, Kyrieleis concluded that the remains of this tumulus, especially its light-

---


colored limestone pavers, must have been visible at Olympia in the early Iron Age.\textsuperscript{21} However, despite the visibility of this monument in the Late Helladic and Iron Ages, there is no indication of continuous cult or ritual at this site from the Helladic to the Archaic Age. It seems that only later did Pelops arrive at Olympia.

The excavations of the Pelopeion indicate a clear break between the Early and Mid-Helladic buildings and the erection of the Classical-period Pelopeion. Dörpfeld’s excavations uncovered a wide layer of ash, soil, and charcoal, evenly distributed and separating the Classical-period building from the Early Helladic remains.\textsuperscript{22} Kyrieleis concluded that this ash layer indicates a general reorganization of the sanctuary around 600 BCE, and indicated that the cult of Pelops may have been introduced at this time.\textsuperscript{23} No archaeological evidence for a cult of Pelops before this has yet been uncovered. The Early Helladic tumulus, still visible in the Early Iron Age, might have warranted the attention of those who visited Olympia as a remnant of the heroic age, but there is no evidence of cult for Pelops before the layer of ash was laid down.

Elsewhere at Olympia, archaeology has confirmed continuous use of the site from the Early Helladic through the Iron Age, although there is nothing to connect the Pelopeion to the Mycenaean period directly. Nevertheless, although it seems clear that the story of Pelops was imposed on the visible remains of an Early Helladic tumulus at a later date, the ancient Greeks of the late Archaic Period accepted the Pelopeion as the

\textsuperscript{21} Kyrieleis, “The German Excavations at Olympia,” 53.

\textsuperscript{22} Dörpfeld, 120.

\textsuperscript{23} Kyrieleis, \textit{Anfänge Und Frühzeit Des Heiligtums Von Olympia}, 55.
tomb of Pelops. Whether or not the body of Pelops was actually under the ground of the sanctuary (no remains were found in the Early Helladic tumulus) is less important than the knowledge that the ancient Greeks, at least from the time of Pindar in the late sixth or early fifth century BCE and perhaps as early as the site reorganization of ca. 600 BCE, accepted the tomb as authentic. This evidence suggests that the Greeks appropriated the visible remains of this ancient tumulus for Pelops at a time when the sanctuary and contests were expanding in importance. ²⁴ Understanding the significance of linking a hero’s tomb with the athletic sites, the organizers of Olympia cultivated the connections by juxtaposing the stadium with this structure that came to be known as the Pelopeion. In accordance with this model, archaeological excavations have revealed that Olympia’s original stadium, like the Homeric precedent, placed a hero’s tomb next to the running course.

The present site of Olympia’s stadium is situated just to the east of the Altis, artfully separated from the sanctuary by the remains of the Echo colonnade and the arched stadium entrance. ²⁵ This version of the stadium, dubbed by archaeologists “Classical Stadium III” has been dated to around 340 BCE. ²⁶ Excavations have shown that the earlier two stadia, as well as a possible “Ur-Stadium,” were situated just about 90 meters to the west, placing the western edge firmly within the Altis. ²⁷ Ludwig Drees

²⁴ Mallwitz, “Cult and Competition Locations at Olympia,” 102-103. Mallwitz linked the expansion of the Olympic festival to Pheidon of Argos, a tyrant who briefly seized control of the games.

²⁵ Dörpfeld, Alt-Olympia (vol. 2), plate 2.

²⁶ Mallwitz, “Cult and Competition Locations at Olympia,” 94.

claimed that Stadium I (which he calls the “archaic stadium”) extended so far into the sanctuary that it “must have formed an integral part of the sacred grove.” Mallwitz, however, insisted on scaling back the stadium’s incursion into the Altis, noting that elevations would not allow the track to run so close to the proposed site of the altar of Zeus. Accordingly, he situated the site of Stadium I much further to the east than Drees had. In 1994, however, Eric Brulotte noted that Mallwitz’s reliance upon the difference in the relative elevations of the assumed level of Stadium I and the Metroon, an identifiable site presumably close to the (as yet undetermined) site of the altar of Zeus in the Altis, had failed to recognize that the Metroon had been constructed at least 150 years after the stadium had been moved away from the Altis, thus rendering Mallwitz’s comparison of relative elevations moot. Like Drees, Brulotte favored a site for Stadium I that was well within the confines of the Altis and scant meters from the buildings. Unlike Drees, however, Brulotte’s proposal more convincingly oriented the stadium along lines parallel to the later Stadiums II and III. Relying upon excavated wells and a portion of a retaining wall that has been dated to Stadium I, Brulotte’s stadium still ventured far into the confines of the sanctuary, with its ending point only a couple of meters away from the future site of the massive fifth century temple to Zeus, and only about 50 meters from the southeast edge of the Pelpeion (Figure 5-1).

---


29 Mallwitz, “Cult and Competition Locations at Olympia,” 94-95.

turning-post for this stadium, argued Brulotte, was left in place after the reorganization of the sanctuary and later, perhaps during the Hellenistic period, remembered as the pillar from the house of Oinomaos mentioned in Pausanias 5.20.7. If Brulotte’s conclusions are accurate, Pausanias’ description of the pillar of Oinomaos confirms the location of a sizeable portion of Stadium I within the Altis near the Pelopeion.

Figure 5-1  Eric Brulotte’s reconstruction of the *stadia* at Olympia.

---

31 Brulotte, 58-62 and fig. 6.

32 Brulotte, 53, 56-57.
Despite the various opinions of Mallwitz, Drees, and Brulotte about the exact location and orientation of the earliest stadium at Olympia, the three agree that the earliest running-track was physically connected to the Altis. Philostratus, a late but not unreliable source from the second or third century CE, claimed that the stade race originated with runners standing a stadium’s length from the altar of Zeus and the contestants ran towards the priest, with the winner receiving the honor of lighting the sacrificial offerings. Although no remains of this altar have been found, this account indicates that the one-stade race at Olympia began at the stadium’s eastern end, with the runners coming towards the Altis. Whatever the exact orientation of Stadium I, its angle required the runners to face the direction of the Pelopeion as they ran towards their goal. The tomb of the hero on the edge of the racetrack connected the hero’s presence with the competitions. Pausanias explained that the altar of Zeus was situated between the Pelopeion and the temple of Hera, but to the east of both of them.

Although this large monument would have figured prominently in the landscape of those in the Archaic stadium who were gazing towards the Altis, the unadorned large mound that marked the resting place of Pelops would have been ever present. The spatial arrangement of the buildings of the sanctuary and the site of the athletic contests reinforced the important nature of the hero tomb at Olympia. The proximity of the hero allowed ancient Greek athletes to juxtapose their feats with his, and reminded both the

---

33 Philostratus 1.5.1-1.6.1. Brulotte, 63.

34 Paus. 5.13.8.

35 Mallwitz considered the location of the altar to have resulted from a general reordering of the sanctuary that he proposed took place in the early seventh century BCE. Mallwitz, “Cult and Competition Locations at Olympia” 102-103
competitors and the spectators that great victories in athletic contests could extend an
athlete’s power beyond the end of life. Thus, a tomb near an athletic site, especially a site
as prestigious as Olympia, brought honor to the interred and inspiration to the
competitors. In addition to the tomb of Pelops, Pausanias informed his readers that the
tomb of his wife, Hippodameia, was also located in the Altis at Olympia and that it
enjoyed a similar, albeit more limited, relationship with athletics.

According to Pausanias, the Hippodameion was surrounded by a wall and situated
near the processional entry to the Altis. Here, presumably, the bones of Hippodameia
were interred after an oracle commanded them to be brought back from the Argolid.36
Although archaeology has yet to reveal any physical remains of Hippodameia’s tomb or
shrine at Olympia, Pausanias connected the mythic woman to the celebration of the
festival of Hera, the Heraia, which was celebrated every four years at Olympia. It was
Hippodameia who instituted the festival, including its races for girls, in thanks for
Pelops’ victory in the chariot race that assured their marriage. Consequently, those
celebrating the Heraia at Olympia honored the heroine with a dance.37 The lack of
surviving physical remains for the shrine or tomb makes it difficult to assign a date to the
cult of Hippodameia at Olympia, and Pausanias only offers that the heroine’s bones were
brought to Olympia “later.”38 Nevertheless, Barbara McCauley has suggested a date of
420 BCE for the transfer of Hippodameia’s bones to Olympia, citing the Elean-Argive

36 Paus. 6.20.7.

37 Paus. 5.16.4, 6.

38 Paus. 6.20.7: “ὕστερον.”
alliance that developed after the Peace of Nicias and the celebration of the Olympic Games that year. McCauley also points out that the conveyance of Hippodameia’s bones to Olympia need not have corresponded to the institution of her cult: it could have started at the same time as that of Pelops.

However, until more information about the cult of Hippodameia at Olympia surfaces, many questions, including the time of its institution, will remain. Nevertheless, the relationship between Hippodameia, her tomb, and the festival and races of the Heraia correspond to some degree to the myth and shrine of Pelops and the Olympic Games. Thomas Scanlon has argued that the obvious parallels between the festivals to Hera and Zeus at Olympia suggest either a common origin or considerable influence upon one by the other. Comparable female-only festivals at Orchomenos and at Sparta, as well as the limited athletic program of the Heraia imply that these contests served an initiatory function quite separate from the functions of the male-only contests. The role of the Heraia as an initiatory festival for soon-to-be-married girls hints at a very ancient origin, although the athletic component might have been introduced around the time of Olympia’s reorganization and the institution of a committee of sixteen women to oversee Hera’s festival around 580 BCE. While the footraces of the Heraia are probably more accurately classified as initiation rites for unmarried girls than as full-fledged agonistic

---


competitions, the juxtaposition of heroic tomb and athletic competition was deliberate, and underscores the important connections between heroic cult and festival games.

In addition to the tombs of Pelops and Hippodameia at Olympia, the sculptures that adorned the fifth century temple of Zeus reinforced the connections between athletics and heroes. The eastern pediment featured sculptures of Oinomaos, Pelops, Hippodameia, and their attendants as they prepared to race. Although the western end of the stadium had been removed to the east by the time of the construction of the temple of Zeus, the depiction of this sculpture group on the eastern pediment, the pediment that faced the stadium, still connected the story spatially to the athletic grounds. The figures in this group served as a visible reminder of both an aetiology of the Olympic Games as well as the athletic feat of the hero whose shrine lay a few meters to the north. The presence of Pelops and Hippodameia on the pediment sculptures of Zeus’ temple, as well as their tombs in the Altis, oriented towards the stadium connected the athletics of the living with the veneration and feats of the dead. Elite athletes, competing in close proximity to these memorials, were constantly reminded of these heroic accomplishments from mythic times, and perhaps sought to measure their own accomplishments against those of the heroes.

Besides the heroes of the Altis, there were other tombs near the athletic grounds at Olympia. Pausanias notes that Endymion, one of the heroic progenitors of the Elean people, was interred near the end of the stadium at Olympia. A grandson of Zeus,

---

42 Paus. 5.10.5-7.
43 Paus. 6.20.9.
Endymion had his sons compete in a race, and promised his kingdom to the winner. In addition to this tradition, Pausanias describes a mound in the hippodrome, the “Taraxippos,” or “terror of horses.” This location of this mound coincided with a spot on the racetrack where horses were prone to panic for no apparent reason, but it is unclear exactly what the Taraxippos was. Pausanias provides several possible explanations, and most of them assumed the mound to be some kind of tomb. Whether it was the grave of a local man named Olenios, a contemporary of Heracles named Dameon, the bitter Oinomaos, or an empty tomb meant to appease the spirit of the murdered Myrtilos, the mound marked a place where the world of the dead influenced the world of the living, and their competitions. Elizabeth McGowan has suggested that the belief that hippodrome accidents were caused by restless spirits of heroes buried nearby might have been widespread in ancient Greece. The juxtaposition of tomb and track at Olympia again underscores the close associations between the living and the dead, and the power of the departed heroes.

5.3.2 Isthmia

The hero-cult associated with the site and games of Isthmia, as at Nemea, commemorated the death of a child. While there are some variations, the most common

44 Paus. 5.1.3-4.

45 Paus. 6.20.15: τὸ τῶν ἵππων δείμα ὁ Ταράξιππος.

46 McGowan, 629-630.

47 McGowan, 630. McGowan cites Pausanias’ statement of disbelief that spirits caused chariot wrecks in the Pythian Games as evidence that the superstition was commonly held there and elsewhere.
version of the mythic tradition tells how Ino, the daughter of Cadmus, in a fit of madness jumped with her son Melikertes into the sea. Ino was transformed into the sea nymph Leukothea and the boy’s name was changed to Palaimon. After a dolphin gently carried the boy’s body to shore, Sisyphus, who ruled the land around Corinth, buried the body and instituted the Isthmian Games in his honor.48 Although the majority of literary references to the foundation of the Isthmian Games date from the Roman era, this can be attributed to the fragmentary nature of the evidence as well as a renewed focus on the cult of Palaimon after the re-founding of Corinth in 46 BCE. Although less complete than the Roman-period sources, earlier literary accounts indicate Palaimon’s presence at Isthmia long before the Roman period. A fragment of Pindar mentions the honors (γέρας) that Sisyphus paid to the dead boy, and a fragment of Callimachus alludes to the games for the “brother of Learkos,” i.e. Melikertes/Palaimon.49 These fleeting references are important for establishing the presence of the boy-hero at Isthmia before the Roman period, and for understanding his connection to the Isthmian Games.

While the sanctuary and games at Isthmia honored the god Poseidon, Palaimon figured prominently at the site. Inside the temple of Poseidon, Pausanias describes a statue group dedicated by Herodes Atticus. This group featured four gilded horses drawing a chariot holding Poseidon and Amphitre, and Palaimon standing atop a


49 Pindar, fr. 6.5 (Snell). Callimachus, fr. 384 (Pfeiffer).
dolphin. Pausanias also reports that the shrine to Palaimon was located just inside the wall of the sacred precinct. This shrine featured statues of Poseidon, Leukothea, and the boy himself. In addition, a hidden statue in the shrine’s adyton was supposed to commemorate the location of Palaimon’s body.

In the accounts of the Palaimon myth found in Apollodorus and Philostratus, the dolphin swims to shore with the boy’s body lying across its back. Philostratus’ account is quite clear in its explanation that the dolphin straightened its back so as not to disturb the boy’s sleep. Perhaps with this component of the myth in mind, Pausanias explicitly notes that the sculpture group featured Palaimon standing “upright” (ὁρθός) atop the dolphin, implying that he lives on, in the company of Poseidon. A scholiast-authored Hypothesis to Pindar’s Isthmian Odes drew a similar conclusion, explaining that Melikertes “was transformed into a daimon.” Although he is a child with little to recommend him for immortal honors other than the beneficence of Poseidon, the images and stories of Palaimon at the sanctuary stressed the notion of continuation after death, and the proximity of the athletic facilities, as at other Crown Game sites, juxtaposed these themes with the competitive arena.

Although a valuable source, Pausanias’ account of the sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia describes the sanctuary during his own day, that is the 2nd century CE. Archaeological excavations indicate that the sanctuary and, especially the shrine of

---

50 Paus. 2.1.7.
51 Paus. 2.2.1.
52 Pind., Isth. Hyp. Α: ὁ δὲ Μελικέρτης μεταβλήθη εἰς δαίμονα.
Palaimon, had undergone several substantial renovations by the time of Pausanias. Although there are some difficulties in identifying all of the components, the earlier stadium was situated much closer to the Temple of Poseidon and, presumably, the hero shrine of Palaimon. There is some evidence to suggest that the location of Palaimon’s shrine in the earlier layout of the sanctuary corresponds to the connections between athletic competitions, the sanctuary, life, and death that are evident at Olympia.

Ancient chronographers have traditionally fixed the institution of the Isthmian Games to the 49th Olympiad, or either 582 or 580 BCE.

Despite this tradition, Gebhard noted that the archaeological record suggests a slightly later date for the introduction of games on a large scale. Archaeological excavations began in earnest in 1952, and excavators have argued for an expansion of festival activities, including athletic competitions, as occurring around the mid-sixth century BCE. The archaic temple of Poseidon dates from ca. 650 BCE, and the stadium seems to have been constructed about a century later, in conjunction with this expansion of the athletic component of the festival. This construction, which Gebhard considers “the first major addition to the sanctuary,” closely connected the location of the stadium with the altar to Poseidon, with the stadium entrance lying only about 10 meters from the edges of both the temple and the altar (Figure 5-2). This arrangement emphasized the contests’ relationship to the god. Besides this juxtaposition of locations, a curved ramp

53 Gebhard, “The Beginnings of Panhellenic Games at the Isthmus,” 221.

54 Gebhard, “The Beginnings of Panhellenic Games at the Isthmus,” 228. The southern part of the altar, i.e. the section closest to the Archaic stadium, seems to have been the oldest section before being enlarged in the Roman period. See Gebhard and Frederick P. Hemans, "University of Chicago Excavations at Isthmia, 1989: I" in Hesperia 61, no. 1 (1992): 41.
actually linked the stadium’s running track with the long altar in front of the temple, providing the point of entry for the athletes. Thus, in order to enter the stadium and compete, athletes had to pass through the sanctuary, quite obviously connecting the rituals of the altar with the rituals of the stadium.\textsuperscript{55}

In addition, Gebhard pointed out that the site of the original stadium was hardly chosen out of convenience, since the natural terrain was quite irregular and required massive efforts to construct a level \textit{dromos} on the site.\textsuperscript{56} These features indicate that the location of the Archaic stadium was chosen deliberately to connect the efforts of the athletes with the offerings to Poseidon. Although Pausanias assures his readers that Palaimon was an important part of the sanctuary of Poseidon during the Roman Era, by Pausanias’ time, around 700 years after the construction of the original, the stadium had been moved about 200 meters to the southeast and its orientation changed to align with the more convenient topography of a stream bed.\textsuperscript{57} It is uncertain exactly when the stadium’s location was shifted, but Broneer speculates that such a costly undertaking must have corresponded with some important event at Corinth, such as the ambitious building program of Philip and Alexander in the mid-fourth century BCE.\textsuperscript{58} The proximity of the earliest stadium to the sacred temenos of Poseidon is easily enough

\textsuperscript{55} Oscar Broneer, \textit{Isthmia} II (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens), 46-48 and plan IV.

\textsuperscript{56} Gebhard “The Beginnings of Panhellenic Games at the Isthmus,” 228. Broneer, \textit{Isthmia} II, 47.

\textsuperscript{57} Broneer, \textit{Isthmia} II, 55-56 and plan 1.

\textsuperscript{58} Broneer, \textit{Isthmia} II, 66.
Figure 5-2  Isthmia: The South Side of the Sanctuary of Poseidon.

established, but identifying the presence of Melikertes/Palaimon near the stadium during
the Archaic period has proven more difficult.

The Roman-era shrine or temple of Palaimon which Pausanias visited lay atop the
remains of the older stadium and was fairly easily identified by the site’s excavators.
Despite the ancient nature of the Palaimon myth at Isthmia, as alluded to in Pindar and
Callimachus, all of the material remains of the shrine of Palaimon were identified as
dating from the Roman period. The excavation of various pits surrounding this temple or
shrine revealed a good deal of votive and ritual material, all dating from the Roman era
after the first century CE.\(^{59}\) Broneer suggested that the large number of lamps discovered
in these deposits supports ancient descriptions of the nocturnal mystery rites that were
observed in the worship of the boy-hero.\(^{60}\) These rites, and the material evidence for
them, seem to date from the Roman period. Indeed, the material evidence for the worship
of Palaimon at Isthmia is so firmly grounded in the Roman period that John Hawthorne
argued in 1958 for an Augustan date for the institution of this cult at Isthmia.\(^{61}\)
Nevertheless, despite Hawthorne’s objections, there is some evidence for a hero cult at
Isthmia during the Archaic period, a cult most probably associated with Palaimon.

Hawthorne overlooked the fragment of Pindar and the reference in Callimachus
which connect the story of the dead boy with the games at Isthmia, although they
admittedly do not explicitly mention cultic rituals. In addition, an inscribed *haltêr*


for ancient references to the mysteries of Palaimon.

(jumping-weight) discovered in the debris from the Archaic temple might refer to the boy-hero.

The inscription, dated by Broneer based on Archaic letter-types to around 575 BCE, states that it was dedicated by the winner of the pentathlon. The most persuasive restoration for the second line is to “Inoides,” the matronymic term for Palaimon, the son of Ino. As Broneer remarked, the “dedicator would not have offered this tool of his trade to the son of Ino, had he not then been revered by athletes as their protector and giver of victory.” Besides these tantalizing fragments of Palaimon in the Archaic Age sanctuary, David Rupp has suggested that three pre-Roman “foundation stones” found near the site of the Roman-period shrine to Palaimon could have supported an earlier altar and statue group. He further proposed that a fragment of an Archaic period kouros, discovered in a pit about 50 meters west of the Roman Palaimonion, could be a piece of Palaimon’s statue. Brunilde Ridgway, who first published this kouros fragment, allowed for the same possibility, noting that the “Isthmia youth” might have been erected in honor of Palaimon.

Despite these possibilities, the site or existence of an Archaic or Classical period Palaimonion remains indefinite. Nevertheless, Broneer speculated that an earlier cult

---


63 Broneer (1976), 52.


place and a minor monument were likely situated somewhere in the vicinity of the Archaic stadium and that this tradition survived the long period of inactivity at Isthmia following the destruction of Corinth in 146 BCE. Broneer assumed that the Roman–period shrine to Palaimon, despite its late date, “owed its location to the existence of an early cult place,” most likely near the site of the later buildings adjacent to the Archaic stadium.66

The discovery of cultic objects, in a series of pits to the east of the Archaic stadium and the later Palaimonion indicate the observance of cultic rites for a hero long before the construction of the Roman-period structure. The East Terrace’s Pit A, located about 9 meters from the edge of the altar of Poseidon and about five meters from the edge of the Archaic stadium, contained a considerable amount of debris associated with rituals and offerings. Excavators found ash, 88 burnt animal bones (of which nearly 98% were identified as sheep/goat), and over 200 sherds of pottery, some of which were clearly dedicatory.67 Gebhard, who re-excavated the site in 1989, concluded that the pit appears to have been connected with cult activity, that the pit was in use for approximately 50 years, and that the pit was filled in shortly after the destruction of the Archaic temple in 470 BCE.68 In addition, the location and construction of the pit imply that a good deal of care went into establishing and maintaining the site. When the 1.50m x 1.25m x .76m pit was constructed, the boulders on the south end were trimmed off. Evidence also exists

66 Broneer, Isthmia II 99-100. Quote from 100.
67 Broneer, Isthmia II 15. Gebhard and Hemans, 63-64.
68 Gebhard and Hemans, 64.
for a wooden post that marked the location after the pit was filled in. Gebhard also concluded that the nearby Pits C, D, and E had a “more limited use” as receptacles for the sacrificial remnants from the altar of Poseidon. Pit B also contained pottery sherds from the Archaic period and was roughly contemporaneous with Pit A, although only Pit A appears to have been commemorated with a wooden marker or post after it was filled in.

The contents of Pit A offer some of the most substantial evidence for a hero cult at Isthmia during the Archaic period. Although this pit yielded no specific evidence for worship of Palaimon, it is likely that a hero of some sort was worshiped and commemorated here. Gebhard indicated as much, and further reminded her readers that perishable offerings, such as garlands and libations, would have left no archaeological trace.\(^69\) The recovery of a piece of an Attic lekythos in this pit also implies that this site was associated with a grave, likely a heroic figure.\(^70\) While hardly conclusive, these discoveries provide at least some circumstantial evidence for an Archaic period Palaimon cult in the sanctuary, near, indeed practically within the early stadium at Isthmia.

Although the evidence is tenuous at best, Rupp’s suggested location for an Archaic and Classical Period Palaimon, on the same site as the later Roman construction, closely connects the tomb of the boy with the site of the competitions. In addition, Pit A’s prominent location, marked with a post and situated at the stadium entrance reminded athletes of the connections between hero cult and the field of competition. While far from conclusive, the archaeological record seems to support a connection between

\(^{69}\) Gebhard and Hemans, 64.

\(^{70}\) Gebhard and Hemans, 67.
athletic competitions, the sacred temenos, and the tomb of a hero, as found at other
Crown Games sites during the Archaic period.

5.3.3 Nemea

In the most common versions of the myths that treat the foundation of the
Nemean Games, the Seven heroes who marched against Thebes instituted the
competitions as funeral games for a child named Opheltes.71 On their way to Thebes, the
seven stopped in Nemea, where king Lycurgus reigned with his wife Eurydice.
According to an oracle, their infant son Opheltes was not to touch the ground until he was
able to walk. When the Seven queried Hypsipyle, the infant’s nurse, she set the baby
down to show the heroes a nearby spring. A serpent appeared and killed the boy, and the
heroes killed the serpent and held funeral games for the dead child, re-naming him
“Archemoros,” as an inauspicious omen of the expedition’s chances of success at
Thebes.72 The story is well attested in ancient sources, with references in Simonides,
Bacchylides, and one of the lost plays of Aeschylus. In addition, the surviving fragments
of Euripides’ play Hypsipyle retell the story as well.73 According to tradition, these

71 There is also a tradition that Heracles founded the Nemean Games in commemoration of killing the
Nemean lion. Callimachus, for instance, offers this aetiology: Supplementum Hellenisticum frs. 254-69,
esp. 265. See also Hypotheses A, D to Pindar’s Nemean Odes.

72 “Archemoros” means “beginning of doom.”

73 Simonides: PMG 533; Bacchylides 9.10-20; Timothy Gantz, Early Greek Myth (Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins Press, 1993), 510-512. A Scholiast Hypothesis (D) to Pindar’s Nemean Odes mentions the lost
play of Aeschylus. For a later version, see Apollodor., Bibl. 3.6.4. See also Stephen Miller, Nemea: A
Guide to the Site and Museum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 26-27 for a synthesized
summary of the myth and for a brief description of archaeological finds connected to the story.
funeral games became part of the panhellenic festival for Nemean Zeus in 573 BCE, the last of the four Crown Games sites to enter the circuit. Although the Nemean festival honored Zeus, Opheltes seems to have remained an important part of the sanctuary and its rituals.

Pausanias reports that the grave of Opheltes was encircled by a wall of stones at Nemea, and the scholiast Hypotheses to Pindar’s Nemean Odes reports that the judges wore black and the victors’ crowns were made of celery in remembrance of the dead baby – black for mourning, and celery because of the bed of celery that Hypsipyle had laid him on as she attended to the Seven who were marching against Thebes. Besides these literary accounts, archaeologists have unearthed at least two small votive statuettes of a young child within the sanctuary at Nemea, one of bronze and another of terra-cotta. These, presumably, commemorate Opheltes. Thus the myth of Opheltes, like the myths of Palaimon and Pelops at Isthmia and Olympia respectively, was present at the sanctuary and festival of Zeus at Nemea. The similarities with Olympia and Isthmia are striking. As at Isthmia, the foundation of the Nemean Games sprang from funeral games for a child. Although the child had no heroic accomplishments on par with those of Pelops, whose tomb figured at Olympia, the tombs of Palaimon and Opheltes enjoyed prominent positions near the sanctuaries and stadia of their sites. To some extent, the parallels between the layout of the child’s tomb at Nemea and the tomb of Pelops at Olympia seem

75 Paus. 2.15.3. Hypotheses C, D to Pindar, Nemean Odes.
to have been deliberately engineered. If this is the case, it further underscores the significance of locating a hero tomb near the site of the athletic competitions in the panhellenic contests of Greece’s Archaic period since the organizers at Nemea took pains to copy this component from Olympia.

Stephen Miller has argued that the layout of the site of the Nemean Games was deliberately modeled after Olympia, and the similarities between the Pelopeion and the shrine to Opheltes seem clear. In 1979, Miller discovered a lop-sided pentagonal enclosure about 100 meters southwest of the temple of Zeus at Nemea. This structure, which enclosed an area of about 850 square meters, seems to imitate the shape of the Pelopeion at Olympia (see Figure 5-3). Accordingly, Miller has identified it as the “Ophelteion.” Although the final results of the excavation of Opheltes’ heroön have yet to be published, some preliminary conclusions strongly argue for the presence of an Opheltes cult at this shrine as early as the sixth century BCE. While the pentagonal retaining walls for this structure have been dated to the late 4th or early 3rd centuries BCE, these walls were built over an earlier mound, as they were at the Pelopeion at Olympia. Pottery contained in the layers of this artificial mound at Nemea seems to have been dedicatory in nature, probably in conjunction with libations in a purification ritual, and dates to the first half of the sixth century BCE. These several layers were systematically laid atop an earlier mound, and preliminary soundings revealed Geometric...
and Mycenaean period pottery, although it is still unclear whether the mound should be dated to the Bronze Age, or was built in the Iron Age with earth containing Bronze Age pottery.\textsuperscript{79}

---

The commemoration and improvement of the burial mound attributed to one of the site’s early mythic figures is consistent with the practices at Isthmia and Olympia. In addition, the construction of a pentagonal retaining wall in the fourth or third century BCE corresponds to the construction of the Classical Period Pelopeion at Olympia in both shape and time frame. Also, as at Olympia and Isthmia, Nemea’s earliest stadium was adjacent to the hero tomb.

Directly to the east of this mound, excavators discovered a white clay layer and at least five starting blocks from the earliest stadium, some of which included lane “numbers” to indicate runners’ lanes. These characters appear to be consistent with letter forms of the late Archaic or early Classical date. Directly to the west of the Ophelteion, Miller identified 6th-5th century evidence for the hippodrome, including wheel grooves from chariots. Thus, it seems that the shrine to Opheltes, in addition to commemorating the hero for whom the games were founded, enjoyed an important vantage point between the two racecourses in the 6th century BCE. The elongated mound served as a barrier between the stadium and the hippodrome, all of which were oriented in the same north-south trajectory. As Miller conjectured, spectators seated atop the shrine could have enjoyed watching competitions in both locations. Eventually, as at Isthmia and Olympia, the site of the stadium was moved away from the sanctuary to a locale that could support a greater number of spectators.\(^{80}\)

Although Miller’s argument that specific architectural features at Nemea should be considered imitative of Olympia’s seems clear, the juxtaposition of hero tomb and

athletic contest should be understood in a wider context than Olympia’s alone. The organizers of the Nemean festival, the latest of the panhellenic Crown Games festivals, would have naturally looked to Olympia as a model for organizing a sanctuary and festival for Zeus, but the placement of the athletic grounds directly adjacent to a hero tomb was present in other locations as well. Besides, even if Nemea’s arrangement was solely derived from Olympia’s, the message of this juxtaposition of hero tomb and athletic stadium would have been powerful for the contestants of the Nemean Games. Competitions in the shadow of a hero’s grave carried a similar message of life, death, and athletic quests for *kleos* at Nemea, Olympia, Isthmia, and elsewhere.

### 5.3.4 Delphi

According to ancient tradition, the first panhellenic Pythian Games at Delphi took place in 586 BCE. These games, sacred to Apollo, have a different type of mythic foundation story than the other Crown Games. Leaving aside a single late reference to Zeus founding the Olympic Games, the Olympic, Isthmian, and Nemean festivals were founded by heroic figures to commemorate heroic figures. However, according to the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, the Olympian god Apollo instituted his sanctuary on Mt. Parnassos after killing “the Python,” a monstrous serpent that had raised Typhon for Hera. Later sources, such as Hyginus, added that Apollo instituted musical contests on

---

81 Paus. 5.7.10. This tradition contended that Zeus founded the Olympic Games to commemorate his victory over his father Kronos. Donald Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, 137.

the site as funeral games for the beast. There is some hint of a connection between Apollo and athletic competition at Delphi, such as the story of his struggle with Heracles over the Delphic tripod. Since tripods were common prizes in Archaic period athletics, this story seems to be cast in an athletic light, but hardly describes a bona fide competition. Yet, despite this lack of a heroic presence in the contests’ foundation story, the presence of a hero’s tomb figured prominently in the landscape of the sanctuary at Delphi. This hero was Neoptolemus.

The myths of Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, recorded an impressive list of heroic achievements. Brought to Troy as a youth after the death of his father, most accounts claim that it was he who killed Priam at an altar of Zeus in the courtyard, and killed young Astyanax by hurling him from a city tower. Eventually, Neoptolemus died violently at Delphi. Several convoluted versions disagree on the details. Some accounts claim that Neoptolemus was killed while plundering Apollo’s sanctuary because of the god’s role in Achilles’ death. Euripides’ play Andromache has the deranged Orestes kill Neoptolemus for having seized Hermione. Pausanias adds that Neoptolemus was killed on an altar as retribution for killing Priam on an altar. In still another version, Pindar relates on two occasions that the hero went to Delphi to offer spoils from Troy to Apollo, and was killed after a dispute over the sacrificial meat. Paean 6, although heavily

---

83 Hyginus, Fabula 140. Also Plutarch, Quaest. Graec. 12; De defectu oraculorum 15; Aelian, Var. Hist. 3.1; Paus. 2.7.7; 2.30.3; 10.6.5; Ovid, Metamorphoses 1.416-450.


85 Euripides, Andromache 49-55, 1086-1165. Joseph Fontenrose, The Cult and Myth of Pyrros at Delphi (Berkeley: University of California Press), 212-213 identified five different versions and some confections of these versions.
amended, seems to indicate that Apollo himself did the deed in his sanctuary.\textsuperscript{86} The slightly different account in \textit{Nemean} 7.41-42 states only that “a man struck him with a knife.” In \textit{Nemean} 7, Pindar alludes to his own prior criticisms of Neoptolemus. Modern scholars have usually understood this to be a reference to \textit{Paean} 6 and have explained Pindar’s rehabilitation of Neoptolemus’ reputation as an effort to please the Aeginetan patrons who commissioned \textit{Nemean} 7.\textsuperscript{87} Despite the confusing details of these contradictory accounts, they all agree that Neoptolemus was killed at Delphi and his tomb was located near the temple of Apollo.

Pausanias situates this tomb to the left as one exits the temple of Apollo at Delphi and mentions another stone nearby on which the hero was killed.\textsuperscript{88} Nearby, Pausanias describes in detail an elaborate painting by Polygnotus, which was intended to adorn Neoptolemus’ tomb. In this painting, Neoptolemus was the only Greek hero depicted as still killing Trojans, since it was originally intended to adorn his tomb.\textsuperscript{89} Pausanias’ description, however, elsewhere seems to indicate that the cultic honors for Neoptolemus at Delphi were not instituted until after 279/8 BCE. According to this version, supernatural forces, including the presence of Neoptolemus and other heroic phantoms, turned away invading Gallic forces and preserved the sanctuary. In gratitude for this act,

\textsuperscript{86} Pindar, \textit{Paean} 6. 120.

\textsuperscript{87} Fontenrose, \textit{The Cult and Myth of Pyrros at Delphi}, 192-195. Aegina was the homeland of Peleus, father of Achilles and grandfather of Neoptolemus.

\textsuperscript{88} Paus. 10.24.6.

\textsuperscript{89} Paus. 10.26.4.
the people of Delphi decided to institute heroic honors for Neoptolemus.\footnote{Paus. 1.4.4.} Despite some attempts to justify Pausanias’ claim for a Hellenistic date for the institution of a cult for Neoptolemus at Delphi,\footnote{E.g. Konrat Ziegler’s argument, s.v. “Neoptolemus,” RE 16.2454-2457. Fontenrose, The Cult and Myth of Pyrrhos at Delphi, 192-198 argues strongly against this point of view.} Pindar’s \textit{Nemean} 7 strongly supports an earlier date, informing the reader (or listener) that Neoptolemus acts as “overseer” of the processions for the heroes and their many sacrifices.\footnote{Pind. Nem. 7.44-47.} Following this account, it seems that, in Pindar’s day, that is the early fifth century BCE, the people of Delphi not only honored Achilles’ son with heroic cult, but in fact assigned him a status superior to the other heroes honored at Delphi. Pindar’s slightly differing versions represent the oldest surviving testimonia of a cult and tomb of Neoptolemus at Delphi. In addition, fragmentary references from the roughly contemporary mythographer Pherecydes also support an early date for placing Neoptolemus at Delphi, although no mention of cult has survived.\footnote{Apollodor., \textit{Epitome} 6.14. Strabo 9.3.9, p. 421. Paus. 4.17.4 and 10.7.1. Hyginus \textit{Fab.} 123, Pind., Nem. 7.34.42. Pherecydes fr. 64 (Fowler).} Despite the contradictions in Pausanias, the earlier writings of Pindar and Pherecydes argue more convincingly for a tomb and cult of Neoptolemus at Delphi in the late Archaic period.

Archaeological excavations in the early twentieth century identified a likely location for a shrine to Neoptolemus (Figure 5-4). From 1934 to 1935, French archaeologists excavated a rectangular building that measured approximately 12 by 8 meters. Although a significant portion of these excavations was wiped out by a great earthquake and landslide in 1935, enough of the findings were catalogued to suggest an
Archaic period date for portions of the shrine. A significant amount of the sanctuary’s walls seemed to the excavators to have been constructed at the same time as the neighboring Daochus monument in the third century BCE, but there is plenty of evidence that the site was in use long before this particular organization. Three portions of statues and a statue base discovered in the structure have been assigned dates in the late fifth or early fourth centuries BCE. In addition, excavators also discovered in the sanctuary a portion of wall that they dated to the Archaic period. Unfortunately the disaster of 1935 destroyed this wall, and it is unclear how it related to the later construction. Finally, preliminary soundings of the fourth century version of the construction revealed evidence of a Mycenaean occupation of the site, but Pouilloux contended that there was a long period of disuse between the Mycenaean era and the debris from the fourth century BCE. These Mycenaean remains included a wall and a large pithos that measured 1 m 30 in height. Inside this pithos archaeologists discovered ashes that contained the charred remains of another vessel. While it has been suggested that the burnt remains inside this Mycenaean period pithos might represent the Classical period continuation of a Mycenaean period cult, with the pithos’ contents eventually coming to represent the cremated remains of Neoptolemus, the evidence is too sparse to offer this as anything more than fanciful speculation.


95 Pouilloux, *Fouilles de Delphes 2*, 50.

96 Pouilloux, *Fouilles de Delphes 2*, 57.
As Jean Pouilloux noted, the discovery of this strange pithos produced “plus d’enigmes” than answers for understanding the origins, if any, of a cult of Neoptolemus at Delphi.97 The discovery of a large amount of burned animal bones, presumably the remnants of sacrifices, near the base of the Daochus monument might provide a clue to a Classical period cult if these remnants held any connections to the sanctuary of

97 Pouilloux, Fouilles de Delphes 2, 57.
Neoptolemus, but there remains the unsatisfying fact that excavations revealed no indication of sacrificial activity within the temenos itself.98

Thus, the case for assigning this structure to the cult of Neoptolemus remains circumstantial. This site corresponds precisely with the description offered by Pausanias, and the nature of the surrounding monuments suggests connections to the son of Achilles. The Daochus monument, situated directly north of this structure, was dedicated by a prominent family of Thessaly whose holdings were purported to include the ancestral lands of Achilles. The Attalid rulers of Pergamum, who also dedicated their offerings in this area, likewise claimed a connection with Neoptolemus: according to tradition Pergamus, the eponymous hero of Pergamum, was the son of Neoptolomos.99 Did the family of Daochus and the Attalids choose this area for their dedications based on the proximity to the shrine of Neoptolemus? It is certainly possible, but further archaeological investigations are necessary before the four-sided structure directly northeast of Apollo’s temple at Delphi can be considered unquestionably the site where the ancient Greeks provided offerings to Neoptolemus.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the location of a shrine and the conflicting versions of the myth of Neoptolemus at Delphi, the literary references in Pindar and Pherecydes support the existence of a cult in the late fifth or early fourth centuries BCE. Whether or not the location of Neoptolemus’ tomb during the later Archaic period (or earlier) corresponds to the site identified by modern archaeologists, Pindar relates that

---

98 Pouilloux, *Fouilles de Delphes* 2, 58.

Neoptolemus “remains next to the well-walled house of the god” at Delphi, implying that the hero’s tomb was indeed situated in close proximity to the temple of Apollo.\textsuperscript{100} This corresponds to the locations of the hero tombs at the other three panhellenic sites, although at Delphi, instead of the stadium, the theater was juxtaposed with the hero’s tomb and the sanctuary. Although the topography of Mt. Parnassos might have necessitated the construction of the stadium further up the mountain, the juxtaposition of the theater with the hero’s tomb and the sanctuary of Apollo is appropriate for Delphi. The Pythian Games were especially known for the musical contests which took place in the theater, directly adjacent to the Temple of Apollo and, presumably, near the tomb of Neoptolemus.

These four panhellenic sites all prominently featured tombs of a hero in conjunction with the locations of the athletic contests. Although the evidence for some of these connections is stronger than others, the literary and archaeological sources reinforce the presence of a heroic monument next to the competitions. Such a layout emphasized the hero’s role in the origins of the games and provided examples of the immortal honors available to extraordinary athletes. The spatial organization of these sanctuaries during the Archaic period physically suggested the link between human and hero through athletic competition. Although death marked the end of one’s quest for \emph{kleos}, these tombs also reinforced the notion of the perpetual \emph{kleos} of the glorious dead. This connection between grave and athletic sites is apparent outside of the panhellenic sanctuaries as well.

\textsuperscript{100} Pind., \textit{Nem.} 7.45-46: ἔμμεναι θεοῦ παρ’ εὐτειχέα δόμον.
5.4 Racetracks and Funerary Monuments from the Historical Period

5.4.1 Athens

At Athens, the statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton enjoyed a prominent position in the city’s agora in close proximity to a racetrack. These two tyrannicides assassinated Hipparchus, the son of Pisistratus, in 514 BCE.\(^\text{101}\) Harmodius was killed on the spot, and Aristogeiton was executed later. Four years later, the Athenians (with Spartan backing) expelled the tyrant Hippias, Hipparchus’ brother. As the Athenian democracy developed over the succeeding decades, Harmodius and Aristogeiton became symbols of democratic principles and hostility to tyranny. The Athenians heroized the two and erected bronze statues sculpted by Antenor that depicted the two men ready to strike at tyranny.\(^\text{102}\) These statues, however, were carried back to Persia after Xerxes captured Athens in 480 BCE.\(^\text{103}\) After 480, the Athenians commissioned another set of statues and placed them in the city’s agora, near the racetrack where the Panathenaic

\(^\text{101}\) Thucydides 6.54-59. Hdt. 5.57-61.

\(^\text{102}\) Aristophanes Lysistrata 630 is the earliest literary reference to the statues (the play was first performed in 411). Aristotle, Ath. Pol. 58.1 is the earliest attestation of the hero-cult to the tyrannicides. Pliny, Natural History 34.16-17 states that the statues were set up the same year the kings were expelled from Rome (509 BCE). If this is the case, the hero-cult developed very soon after the expulsion of Hippias. See Michael W. Taylor, The Tyrant Slayers: The Heroic Image in Fifth Century B.C., Athenian Art and Politics (New York: Arno Press, 1981), 18-50.

\(^\text{103}\) Alexander’s army discovered these statues after conquering Susa and eventually returned them to Athens. Arrian 3.16.7-8; 7.19.2. Paus. 1.8.5.
Games were held in 477/6 BCE.\textsuperscript{104} Numerous surviving copies of this second set of sculptures indicate the iconic importance of both the heroes and the sculptures that depicted them as symbols of Athenian civic ideals. Aileen Ajootian has investigated the location and significance of placing these symbols of Athenian democracy in this location. This position recalled the festival setting of the assassination, “neutralized” the Peisistratid associations with the festival, and linked the memory of the tyrant-killers with the heroes of the mythic past. In addition, artistic representations of the tyrant-slayers on pottery situated the statues next to a free-standing column, reminiscent of the Homeric turning post and tomb marker.\textsuperscript{105} In placing these important statues of Athenian heroes in close proximity to the racetrack and its turning post, Athenians honored their memory with an athletic, heroic setting, augmented the democratic ideals of the city, and likened them to the heroes of myth.\textsuperscript{106}

Besides the erection of heroic statues near the athletic grounds in the Athenian agora, the city’s cemetery, the Ceramicus, featured the starting points for Athenian torch races. In the second century CE, Harpocratinion wrote that the Athenians regularly held three torch races in conjunction with religious festivals, one for Athena in the Panathenaea, one for Hephaestus the god of the forge, and one for Prometheus.\textsuperscript{107} A

\textsuperscript{104} According to the Parian Marble: IG XII\textsuperscript{5} 444. Paus. 1.8.5.


\textsuperscript{106} Ajootian, 8-9.
scholiast to Aristophanes indicated that these three torch races took place in the Ceramicus, a neighborhood just outside the northwest gate of Athens, quite near to Colonus and Plato’s Academy.\textsuperscript{108} These three locales are quite close to one another, with the Ceramicus separating Colonus and the Academy from Athens at a distance of about one mile. The very close proximity of these three sites suggests a single starting point, which the ancient authors situated near the shrine of Prometheus, somewhere near Colonus, the Academy, and the Ceramicus.\textsuperscript{109} The route of the torch race took the Athenian runners along the Panathenaic Way towards the city, passing near the monuments of prominent Athenians buried in the Ceramicus. Pausanias noted several of these graves, including those of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, Cimon, Pericles, and those who died in Athens’ wars.\textsuperscript{110} Ian Morris has described how a few Athenian families in the early fifth century BCE deliberately set up ostentatious tombs in the Ceramicus to connect themselves “unambiguously with the past” by cremating and interring the deceased in Homeric style.\textsuperscript{111} As with the sites of the Crown Games, the topography of Athenian competitions in the Archaic and Classical periods connected the sites of athletic

\textsuperscript{107} Ludwig Deubner, \textit{Attische Feste}, second ed. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1966), 211. Hdt. 6.105 states that the Athenians instituted a torch race to honor Pan after he appeared to Pheidippides shortly before the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE.
\textsuperscript{108} Scholiast to Aristophanes, \textit{Frogs} 131.
\textsuperscript{109} Paus. 1.30.1-2 states that the races started at the altar of Promethues. Plutarch, \textit{Solon} 1 claims that the torch runners started from the altar of Eros in the Academy. It is possible, but not probable, that Eros and Prometheus shared an altar. More likely, one of the authors was confused or the race started somewhere near both altars.
competitions with the graves of heroic figures, although at Athens these figures were historical persons who had been raised to heroic status for their services to the state.

A late example emphasizes the importance of the connections between civic heroes and athletics. Herodes Atticus, who lived in Greece from ca. 100-177 CE, bestowed many benefactions on the people of Athens, including a renovation of the Panathenaic stadium. This impressive structure was completely decked out in dazzling white marble and Pausanias records that Herodes used up most of the Pentellic quarries in the construction.\textsuperscript{112} When Herodes died, Philostratus relates that the people of Attica seized his body and insisted it be interred next to the Panathenaic stadium at Athens instead of near Marathon where Herodes had requested.\textsuperscript{113} Although Joseph Rife has noted that the Athenians chose this location because “it was his greatest gift to them,” there was an additional, more compelling reason to bury Herodes next to the stadium. His generosity to the city earned him recognition as a civic hero. Archaeologists have identified a nearby structure as his tomb, although this is still debated.\textsuperscript{114} However, an altar inscription from the area supports Philostratus’ account that Herodes was buried somewhere near (or in) the stadium. Although the names were deliberately erased at some point in antiquity, the altar was dedicated to “the Marathonian hero,” most probably

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{114}] Rife, 111 considers the long foundation to be an altar that marked the burial site of Herodes, similar to altars in the sanctuaries at Isthmia and Nemea. Jennifer Tobin, “Some New Thoughts on Herodes Atticus’ Tomb, His Stadium of 143/4, and Philostratus VS 2.550” \textit{AJA} 97, no. 1 (1993): 85-89 contends that the structure is a shed for the ship used in the Panathenaic procession. Cf. Camp, 214.
\end{itemize}
Herodes Atticus.\textsuperscript{115} Although Herodes died several hundred years after the time of the heroic athletes, the altar inscription was chiseled with archaic spelling and letter forms, making it appear to date from the late Archaic or early Classical periods.\textsuperscript{116} By reviving the practice of interring a hero in a prominent athletic facility, as well as using old-fashioned script and spellings for the heroic dedication, the Athenians honored Herodes as a hero from more ancient times. Joseph Rife argues that this treatment of Herodes evoked images of heroic foundations of panhellenic contests and likens the positioning of Herodes’ tomb to that of Pelops at Olympia and Palaimon at Isthmia.\textsuperscript{117} The examples of Neoptolemus at Delphi and Opheltes at Nemea would be suitable comparisons as well. Although not a tomb, the commemoration of Harmodius and Aristogeiton in the early Classical agora at Athens juxtaposed heroic honors with athletic grounds. The imagery and associations of heroic honors and athletic facilities during the Roman period at Athens demonstrates the longstanding nature of these symbols and ideas. The archaizing language of Herodes’ altar, however, suggests an understanding that the cults of heroic founders dated to an earlier, more heroic period.

The memorials erected in close proximity to the athletic grounds ensured continued funerary-style honors for the deceased through athletic competitions. Victorious athletes augmented their own reputations by earning glory in the shadow of

\textsuperscript{115} IG II$^2$ 6791. Rife, 104-106. Tobin, 84-85 (includes photograph).

\textsuperscript{116} Rife, 115-117.

\textsuperscript{117} Rife, 116-117. Although Rife fails to recognize that a second-century CE Athenian would have probably been unaware of the proximity of the Archaic stadium to the (supposed) shrine of Palaimon, his point is well taken. The burial of Herodes Atticus in proximity to the Panathenaic stadium was modeled after the presence of hero-tombs at prestigious athletic sites.
the Athenian civic heroes. Alexander’s visit to the tomb of Achilles in Asia Minor seems to have evoked similar sentiments of *kleos* for both competitors and for the deceased. However, in this case, Alexander’s actions implied more than just the commemoration of the dead hero.

### 5.4.2 Alexander at the Tomb of Achilles

In his *Life of Alexander*, Plutarch described the various sacrifices, rites, and observances that Alexander and his comrades performed when they arrived near ancient Troy.

> When he had gone up to Ilium, he sacrificed to Athena and poured libations to the heroes. After richly anointing the column of Achilles, and racing naked with his companions as is the custom, he crowned [the column], noting how blessed Achilles was to have found a faithful friend while living and a great herald [*i.e.* Homer] after he had died.\(^{118}\)

In addition to worshiping the goddess Athena through sacrifice and the departed heroes through libations, Alexander and his companions honored the tomb and memory of the great hero Achilles by running a race. More than just an impromptu sprint, the actions of Alexander and his men indicate a wholly conceived ritual intended to honor Achilles as a victorious athlete. As one who claimed descent from mighty Achilles, Alexander’s offerings at the tomb were appropriate and customary.\(^{119}\)

---

\(^{118}\) Plutarch, *Alexander* 15. Arrian 1.11-12 does not mention the race but does indicate that Alexander placed a wreath on the tomb of Achilles.

tomb marker, Alexander and his companions ran a race naked and crowned the monument with a wreath. While modern scholarship on Alexander has not overlooked this episode, it usually interprets this series of rituals as typical funerary honors for the fallen Achilles. The use of oil and the adornment of grave-markers were indeed common funerary practices for the Greeks. The sequence of anointing, racing, and crowning, however, suggests an additional layer of meaning, where Alexander and his companions not only honored the dead hero through an athletic competition, but also invited him to participate.

Before the race, Plutarch wrote that Alexander anointed the grave-marker, a typical observance for grave-markers and altars in the ancient Greek world, but also an important part of athletic practice. Before exercise or athletic competition, Greek athletes anointed their bodies with oil, and afterwards scraped it off with a tool called a strigil. Although there is no obviously practical reason for athletes to anoint their bodies before engaging in competitive sport, the strong religious implications of anointing altars and grave monuments readily connect the exertions of the athlete with the honors for the gods and the deceased. In addition, there is perhaps a Bronze Age connection to oil and


122 Sansone rightly dismissed Lucian’s (satirical?) claim that athletes anointed their bodies with olive oil to make them more supple (Lucian, Anarchasis 24) and wrote, “It is likely that the Greeks had no idea why they anointed themselves with olive oil before they exercised.” (pg. 96) He proposed that the practice of
anointing. Cynthia Shelmerdine has noted the Homeric description of perfumed oils as “sweet-smelling” or “fragrant” derived from words closely tied to notions of immortality in ancient Greek belief: ambrosia (ἀμβρόσιος) and nectar (νεκτάρεος). If so, the anointing of gravestones might have been tied to preserving the memory of deceased and anointing oneself for athletics might have been an allusion to immortality.

After anointing the tomb marker and, presumably, themselves, Alexander and his companions ran their race and crowned Achilles’ stele with a wreath or garland. As with the anointing, this practice also resonated in both funerary and athletic contexts: ancient Greeks often garlanded tombs to honor and remember the deceased, and they awarded crowns for athletic victories in the most prestigious competitions. Plutarch’s silence about the winner of the race implies that the competitors in fact awarded the crown of victory to “fleet-footed” Achilles when they placed the garland on his monument. As with a living athlete, the monument to Achilles was oiled before the race and crowned afterwards.

Walter Burkert has noted that funerary monuments and painted lekythoi indicate a belief among the Greeks that the presence of the deceased could visit the gravesite on occasion. In addition, a grave stele “may to some extent be treated as representative of the deceased” since they are oiled, garlanded, and given food and drink. With this

anointing athletes was a remnant of earlier hunters who washed and oiled their bodies to conceal their scent from their prey (pp. 97-103).


124 Ποδάρκης: a common epithet for the hero. E.g. Hom. Il. 1.121.
understanding, Alexander’s actions should be considered more than simple commemoration. Running a race near the grave-marker of Achilles honored the memory of the departed hero and, by inviting Achilles to join the competition and awarding him the victory prize, Alexander acknowledged the power of the hero with whom he had identified since boyhood, from whom he claimed descent, and whose exploits he sought to surpass. As the preceding discussion indicates, Alexander’s observance of an athletic contest in close proximity to a funerary monument is not unique. Indeed, although Plutarch’s description is admittedly ambiguous, his description of the race as being “customary” might indicate that others honored Achilles in this way. Competing in the vicinity of a tomb commemorated the reputation and kleos of the hero and also allowed the competitors to bolster their own reputations through victory. Alexander’s observance at the tomb of Achilles indicates the strong connections between Homeric heroes, tombs, and athletics, all within a context of the living honoring the achievements of the departed while striving to earn their own kleos and kudos.

5.4.3 Archaic Burials at Athletic Sites

In addition to this instance where Alexander and his companions honored the memory of the deceased through athletic competition, during the Archaic period of Greek history, some athletic victors were interred near stadium and hippodrome racecourses.

---

125 Burkert, Greek Religion, 193-195.

126 Plutarch’s description, καὶ μετὰ τῶν ἐπιάρων συναναδραμὼν γυμνῶς ὠπέπρ ἔδοξε ἐπίτιν, could conceivably indicate that it was customary to race naked, that it was customary to run a race next to the tomb of Achilles, or both.
This followed the Homeric model and proclaimed the achievements of the deceased by assuring the continued juxtaposition of the memory of the dead with the athletic competitions of the living. According to Pausanias, the tomb of Pindar was inside the hippodrome at Thebes.\textsuperscript{127} Elizabeth McGowan has suggested that the use of freestanding columns in the Greek world during the Archaic age as tomb markers indicates a desire to associate the deceased with athletic contests and Homeric heroes.\textsuperscript{128} Drawing upon an assortment of Archaic-period funerary columns and their inscriptions, McGowan argued that burial in close proximity to a stadium or hippodrome called attention to the prestige and reputation of the deceased. Furthermore, by mimicking the Homeric convention of erecting a “stele on a tomb” (στήλη ἐπὶ τύμβῳ), Archaic age Greeks attempted to assure a permanent memory of the deceased’s \textit{kleos}.\textsuperscript{129} The proximity of the tomb and its marker to the site of athletic competition brought status and prestige to the dead. As funeral games held near a gravesite honored the departed, so did a gravesite placed near an athletic field.

This merger of athletic competition with funerary locations vividly underscores the connections between athletic prowess and enduring \textit{kleos}. The free-standing column, then, could act as a double symbol of athletics and grave memorial, evoking the imagery of the athletic turning-post as well as a marker to commemorate the deceased. Whether referring to athletic training or merely eulogizing the dead, the funeral column embodied

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Paus. 9.23.2.
\item \textsuperscript{128} McGowan, 615-32.
\item \textsuperscript{129} McGowan, 620.
\end{itemize}
an attempt to tap into the kleos-giving powers of athletic victory to ensure the reputation of the departed. In the Homeric model laid out by Nestor and still recognized in the time of Alexander, the funeral column evoked images of the heroes of Homer and provided an opportunity for the dead to announce their kleos and the living to acquire theirs. Like the Homeric characters who had competed in the shadow of the tomb of Patroclus and (perhaps) used a funeral marker as a turning post, Greeks of the Archaic period sought to capitalize on this relationship between athletic competition and funeral rites to secure and publicize their own reputations.

For instance, a free-standing column discovered at Troezen, dated to the late 6th century BCE carried this verse inscription:

(A) For Damotimus, (his) dear mother Amphidama erected this marker, because no children were born in his megaron.

(B) And the tripod which he won in running at Thebes . . . Unharmed, she set up over (her) son.130

Although the original context of this three-and-a-half meter tall column is unknown (it was discovered as part of a Hellenistic cistern), the column as a grave monument fits the Homeric model for combining a funeral site with athletics. By mentioning and, presumably, displaying the prize from an athletic victory in running at Thebes, Damotimus’ grave evoked images of the Homeric games for Patroclus or the column of Achilles. In addition to the form and content of the monument and its inscription, the epigram’s dactylic meter reinforced the connection between Damotimus and the Homeric world, as any passers-by who read the inscription aloud would have

130 IG IV, 801. Carmina Epigraphica Graeca (CEG) no. 138. See also McGowan 621-622.
quickly recognized the dactylic cadence and recognized the allusion to Homeric epic poetry. Finally, Amphidama’s use of the term “megaron” evokes both Homer and heroes. The megaron refers to a large hall or home, and denotes the spacious dwellings of a Homeric hero, especially since this word occurs only rarely in Greek literature outside of Homer. With the column, inscription, and tripod, the gravesite of this dead athlete evoked the Homeric model in proclaiming the kleos of the deceased, with the prize tripod as a testament of victory in life and the column as an allusion to the racecourse where that glory was won. Although it is unclear whether this particular column was originally erected near a dromos, other surviving examples demonstrate the close connection between grave columns, turning posts, and athletics.

An inscribed column capital which was discovered in 1937 about a mile from the Argive Heraion serves as such an example. The capital and epigram, dated to the last quarter of the sixth century BCE, served as a tomb marker for a man named Hyssemaatas:

(A) I Kosina have buried Hysemastics close to the hippodrome, a good man, [I set up] this memorial for many [to see], both present and future.

(B) He died in battle, losing his youthful prime, A prudent man, prize-winner, and wise among his comrades.132

According to the inscription, Kosina expressly chose to erect the monument in close proximity to the hippodrome. This juxtaposition of memorial with racetrack is

131 McGowan, 621.

consistent with the Homeric model, but also publicizes Hysemmatas’s achievements. Kosina describes the departed as “a good man” and refers to his prudence, wisdom, and athletic achievements. In describing Hysemmatas as an ἀθλοφόρος, or “one who carries off a prize,” the inscription alludes to the athletic victories and clearly connects the gravesite with the athletic competitions and achievements of athletes both living and dead. By erecting the monument near the hippodrome, Kosina ensured that it would be visible to the spectators who were present to watch the races, and thereby associate the reputation and kleos of the dead Hysemmattas with the kleos of those who competed in the races. In this case, as with that of Damotimus, one of the deceased’s notable achievements was an athletic victory. There exist clear connections between burial sites, heroic models as related through Homer. Athletic grounds and facilities both honored the dead and provided a venue for the living to capture their own kleos. These connections are evident in the layout of the sanctuaries and competition locations of the four sites that hosted Crown Games in ancient Greece.

5.5 Conclusion

The juxtaposition of an athletic contest with a heroic tomb or grave marker underscored the important connections between life, death, and athletics in ancient Greece. More specifically, the Archaic period practice of juxtaposing tombs with athletic grounds offered a means for remembering and commemorating the reputations of the deceased while providing opportunities for the living to gain their own kleos. This model, set out in Homer’s funeral games for Patroclus, provides an important and useful
lens for understanding the nature of funeral games and the relationship between honoring the dead and rewarding the living through athletic competitions. The Archaic period practice of erecting tomb markers near racecourses imitated the Homeric convention and associated the deceased with the mythic heroes. In addition, the spatial arrangement of sanctuary, hero tomb, and athletic grounds at the sites of the four Crown Games indicates an understanding of this relationship between the living and the dead, mortality and immortality. To some extent, the tombs (or the sites that the Greeks believed to be the tombs) of Pelops, Opheltes, Palaimon, and Neoptolemus offered a focal point for the athletes and spectators at the festivals. While the festivals honored a particular god, the presence of the hero’s grave both emphasized the boundaries between the mortals and the gods while also providing a glimpse of how those boundaries could be transgressed.

As transitional figures, the heroes straddled the worlds of the living and the worlds of the divine, having died yet retained some type of influence on earth and enjoying the honors of ritual and cult. The heroization of athletes in the Archaic period indicates the possibility, albeit remote, for a remarkable mortal athlete to earn some type of heroic status after death. Competitions for the living, juxtaposed with the tombs of the dead, invited comparisons between the great accomplishments of the present and (mythic) past. These comparisons, including conscious imitation of the heroes by mortals, illustrate the importance of the connections between athletic contests and the mythic heroes for understanding the motivations and aspirations of athletic competitors in the Crown Games.
Chapter 6

Founders and Patrons of Athletic Contests

6.1 Introduction

The origins of many panhellenic festivals and competitions also possessed heroic connections through claimed heroic founders and patrons. Besides competing in athletics, heroic figures from ancient Greek myths played important roles in establishing the contests that honored the gods and the departed. The overseer or founding figure claimed a special relationship to the games, and acted in the interest of the gods or mortals in whose honor the games were held. Historically, founding or presiding at athletic competitions and festivals provided a means for an individual to augment his individual *kleos* with no risk to reputation or status. By removing himself from the athletic field, the patron of the games elevated himself above the competitors and acted as the agent of the gods and the arbiter of the games. This tendency towards founding and presiding over competition seems to possess connections with the individualized power of kingship, and correspondingly became more pronounced in the years after the Peloponnesian War, as Asian and Macedonian models of kingship and authority came to play a stronger role in the fourth century BCE Greek world.
6.2 Achilles and the Funeral Games for Patroclus

When Achilles announces the funeral games for Patroclus in *Iliad 23* and lays out the prizes, he explains that he will not take part. While it makes sense that Achilles would not compete for prizes that he was providing, there are more compelling reasons for Achilles to act as the overseer of the competitions. As the patron of the games, he determines the competitive program, fixes the boundaries of the racecourse, provides the prizes, and offers arbitration. As victory in athletic contests provided a means for acquiring and displaying *kleos* and outstripping one’s competitors, Achilles’ role in presiding over the funeral games also distinguishes him from the competing heroes. Indeed, he informs his comrades before the chariot race that, were he to compete, he would surely win the prizes for the top finisher.\(^1\) Although he declines to compete, Achilles’ role as the organizer and patron of the games still affords him ample prestige, and it precludes any risk that Achilles would be unable to make good on his boast.

Achilles’ actions as the sponsor and administrator of the games are comparable to the actions of the Olympian gods. Throughout Homer’s account of the games, the gods are involved in helping or hindering the heroic competitors, and Achilles likewise plays a role in assigning victory and defeat. As Aias and Odysseus prepare for their wrestling match, the son of Telamon expresses to Odysseus the role of the gods in determining victory, stating that “either you will lift me, or I you, but Zeus will attend to everything in turn.”\(^2\) Despite Aias’ words, it is actually Achilles who intervenes in the match, calling it off before either competitor achieves a third and decisive throw. By awarding victory to

\(^{1}\) Hom. *II.* 23.274.

\(^{2}\) Hom, *II.* 23.724: ἢ μ’ ἀνάειρ’, ἢ ἐγὼ σέ· τὰ δ’ αὖ Διὶ πάντα μελήσει.
both wrestlers, Achilles interjects himself into the role of the divine Zeus, and his generosity augments his status as the patron and leader of the competitions. In a similar juxtaposition, Odysseus wins the footrace after Athena intervenes on his behalf and Antilochus, the race’s final finisher, praises the role of “the immortals” in helping the older Odysseus win. Achilles, pleased with Antilochus’ praise of the older generations, awards him an extra half-talent of gold. Achilles, then, as an arbiter and benefactor, sees fit to modify and augment the original prize, an act that emphasizes Achilles’ generosity and his involvement in the competitions.\(^3\) In addition to these episodes, Achilles awards unwon prizes to Nestor and Agamemnon in deference to their past accomplishments.\(^4\)

Ben Brown has argued that Achilles’ subversion of “the gestures and proper treatment of specific goods,” especially something designated as a legitimately earned prize, is a complement to Agamemnon’s actions at the beginning of the *Iliad*, the seizure of Briseis that sparked the epic’s dramatic conflicts. By contravening the established norms of gift-giving and prize-winning, Achilles’ actions at the end of the story provide closure to the earlier episode: his generosity and deference contrast with Agamemnon’s greed and impropriety.\(^5\) While Brown’s point seems well-placed, it nevertheless unnecessarily takes to task the work of Donald Kyle, who argued that “the ideology of early Greek prize giving” was based in gift giving, and that prizes are more appropriately

---

\(^3\) Hom., *Il.* 23.768-796.


understood as “gifts” rather than “wages.” Brown insists that prizes weren’t given, but taken by victors who claimed “proprietorial right” to the goods.\(^6\)

Both of these positions have merit, and both are grappling with the ambiguity of victory and competition, here personified in the figure of Achilles. While victory is seized, earned, or won, divine favor can also play a deciding role. The gods of the *Iliad* intervene to help their favorites win but, as Brown points out, the competitor can still claim to have earned the right to the prize. So, while Kyle correctly asserts that there is an element of “giving” that manifests itself in victory and its attendant prizes, Brown is also rightly claims that there is an element of earned right incompatible with unreciprocated awards. Indeed, to make his case Brown uses the case of Antilochus, who protested when Achilles modified the prizes and awarded more to the last-place Eummelos than he deserved.\(^8\) In this case, Achilles is able to both act as a gift-giver in circumventing or modifying the bestowal of the competition’s prizes, as well as one who is bound to award prizes those who claim legitimate right. Neatly encapsulated in this episode is the ambiguous nature of victory as it relates to mortals and the gods: the gods can grant victory while mortals simultaneously earn it. Victory is both a gift and reward. Achilles, as the provider of the prizes and overseer of the games occupies, to some extent, the role of the gods: he awards prizes and victories, as with Agamemnon and Nestor, but must also recognize the claims of the successful athlete, as he does with Antilochos. The sponsor and organizer of the games, then, occupied an important role that augmented his


\(^7\) Brown, 140-142. Quotation from 141.

\(^8\) Homer, *Iliad* 23.534-554. Brown, 140-144.
own status in relation to the competitors, a status removed from the need to compete but still derived from the competitive context.

6.3 Other Heroic Founders

The example of Achilles is not unique. Many of ancient Greece’s festivals claimed foundations by heroic figures, and historical persons attempted to capitalize on the prestige that came from organizing, augmenting, and presiding over important festivals and their athletic competitions. Prominent traditions credited Pelops with founding the Olympic festival to commemorate his chariot-race victory over Oenomaus. A couple of generations later, Heracles re-founded the Games and introduced the prize, having brought the wild olive tree and crown to Olympia from the Hyperboreans. The Seven heroes who marched against Thebes founded the Nemean Games when they held the funeral for the dead child Opheltes (Archemorus) and a competing version found in Callimachus credited Heracles with founding the Games after killing the Nemean lion. Theseus founded the Delian Games and introduced the victory palm as a prize on his way home from Crete after killing the Minotaur. At Athens, Theseus augmented the games to

---

9 Pind., Ol. 3.20-25; 6.67-70. Diod. Sic. 4.14.1; 5.64.6. Paus. 5.7.9; 5.8.3.

Athena and renamed it the Panathenaic festival in accordance with the *synoecism* of Attica.\(^ {11}\) In addition, some traditions connected Theseus with the Isthmian Games.

Plutarch relates that Theseus re-organized the Isthmian Games to honor Poseidon, just as Heracles had done for Zeus at Olympia.\(^ {12}\) In addition, it is tempting to connect the story of Theseus killing the brigand Sinis by tying him to pine trees to the pine crown awarded to Isthmian victors, although there exists no explicit evidence for this.\(^ {13}\) There are compelling reasons to consider the association of Theseus and the Isthmian Games an invention of fifth century Athenians who experienced considerable tension with Corinth. Elizabeth Gebhard has written that the Corinthians most likely attributed the foundation of this festival to their hero Sisyphos. The growth of Athenian power in the fifth century BCE and the escalation of tensions with Corinth coincided with the growth of Theseus as an important figure for Athenian identity.\(^ {14}\) It was during this century that Hellanicus wrote his history of Athens which, judging by the surviving fragments, seems to have featured Theseus considerably.\(^ {15}\) In addition, in 475 BCE Cimon retrieved the bones of Theseus from the island of Skyros and instituted a festival at Athens in the hero’s honor.\(^ {16}\) This apparent rivalry between the proponents of Sisyphos and Theseus as the

---

\(^ {11}\) Paus. 8.2.1.


\(^ {13}\) Pausanias 2.1.3-4 juxtaposes the stories of Sisyphos founding the games with Theseus’ act, but does not mention the crown from the Games.

\(^ {14}\) Gebhard, “The Early Stadium at Isthmia and the Founding of the Isthmian Games”, 73-79. Pausanias 2.1.3 relates that Sisyphos established the Isthmian Games to honor the dead Palaimon/Melikertes.

\(^ {15}\) Hellanicus, fr. 132, 143, 164-168 (Fowler).

organizer of the Isthmian Games underscores the importance of instituting and organizing the contests. Corinth and Athens both looked to capitalize on this prestige by associating their hero with the origins of the Games.

6.4 Tyrants and Founders during the Archaic Period

During Greece’s Archaic age, founding and presiding over prestigious panhellenic contests became a useful tool for tyrants and would-be tyrants to assert and consolidate power. While some of these important figures were athletic champions in their own right, the regular observance of contests institutionalized victory and its attendant glory, and allowed the festival’s patron and benefactor to enjoy the prestige of the games without risking defeat. Mark Munn has discussed the links between sovereignty, victory, and divinity, noting that victorious athletes, like kings, were “crowned, paraded, feasted and celebrated in monuments and songs.” While athletes could aspire to divine status through victory in competitions, the institution of athletic contests represented, at least in some cases, attempts “to recreate and participate in the effects of these archetypes of victory.” To the Greeks, the power of prestigious athletic victories readily equated to political power, such as tyranny, as Munn explains with the examples of Cylon and Alcibiades. Founding and presiding over games, however, represents a slightly different paradigm whereby kings and rulers sought to associate themselves with all the victories of the contests, and assumed the roles of the paradigmatic heroes who had done the same in myth. Furthermore, the patron of the games, as shown by the example of Homer’s

---

Achilles, in some ways represented the deity in judging and awarding victories to the
competitors. This association reinforced the connections between contests, victory, and
immortality, but with an important difference: those who competed won their victories.
Those who presided made the victories possible. Cleisthenes, a sixth century BCE tyrant
at Sicyon, not only imitated a heroic model but attempted to supplant the great Adrastus
as a patron and founder of athletic festivals. Adrastus ruled over Sicyon and Argos, and
participated in the expedition against Thebes. As one of the seven heroes, he played an
important role in founding the Nemean Games after the death of Opheltes, and is also
considered to have founded Pythian Games at Sicyon.\textsuperscript{18}

Herodotus is the most important source for the career of Cleisthenes, the tyrant of
Sicyon who lived during the early sixth century BCE. According to the account,
Cleisthenes was himself an Olympic Champion in the four-horse chariot race, and used
his position as tyrant of Sicyon to oust the memory of the hero Adrastus. Herodotus
reports that, out of enmity for the Argives, Cleisthenes took away the festivals and
sacrifices that were regularly observed for Adrastus, the hero whose shrine was situated
in the \textit{agora} of Sicyon. Thwarted by the Delphic Oracle in his plan to completely expel
Adrastus, Cleisthenes instead dishonored the hero by importing a cult for Melanippus,
who had been a fierce rival of Adrastus. In addition, Adrastus transferred to Melanippus
the festivals and sacrifices of Adrastus.\textsuperscript{19} Cleisthenes also figured prominently in the
First Sacred War, aiding in the destruction of the city of Crisa (sometimes called Kirrha)

different from the Pythian Games at Delphi.

\textsuperscript{19} Hdt. 5.67. 6.126 for Cleisthenes’ victory at Olympia.
and allying himself with the Delphic Amphictiones. Accordingly, he seems to have played a prominent role in the reorganization and expansion of the Pythian Games at Delphi at this time, although the extent of his participation is unclear. Pindar’s *Ninth Nemean*, written to honor a victor in the Pythian Games at Sicyon, links the games to Adrastus. The scholiast, however, corrects Pindar’s assertion by claiming that the Sicyonian Pythian Games were founded, in fact, by Cleisthenes, with his share of the spoils from the First Sacred War. It seems likely that both traditions carry some accuracy, since historical leaders often expanded or augmented existing athletic festivals. Cleisthenes, despite his obvious distaste for Adrastus, seems to have recast the athletic festivals of Sicyon in his own image, setting himself up as the founding figure. Although a good deal of the modern discussion concerning Cleisthenes has focused on ethnic tensions between Dorians and non-Dorians in the Peloponnese, the tyrant’s relationship to the games and festivals of the region represents an important component of his identity as a tyrant and his claims to legitimacy.

In the nineteenth century, J.B. Bury investigated the role of Archaic period tyrants in expanding athletic festivals to panhellenic status. Despite the objections raised by Malcolm McGregor in 1941 to Bury’s timeline and his theories of causation, there can be no doubt that the tyrants considered patronage and sponsorship of athletic festivals an important part of their identity as powerful rulers. Bury connects the augmentation of the great panhellenic festivals to specific tyrants: the Olympian to Pheidon of Argos, the

---


Pythian to Cleisthenes of Sicyon, the Isthmian to Periander of Corinth, and the Nemean to the fall of the Orthagorid tyranny.\textsuperscript{23} Despite the shortcomings of this simplification, Bury rightly acknowledges the role of tyrants in the panhellenic games. Pheidon, according to Herodotus and Pausanias, meddled in the Olympian Games, probably during the mid-seventh century BCE, and was perhaps responsible for augmenting the festival program.\textsuperscript{24} Peisistratus, as well, is sometimes connected to the augmentation of the Panathenaea in the mid-sixth century, but the extent of his personal influence is unclear.\textsuperscript{25}

To further underscore and complicate the connections, Henry Walker has investigated how tyrants used the heroic myths to support their own claims to power. As a “prototype of the successful monarch,” the accounts of the mythic heroes provided legitimate precedent for autocratic rule and extraordinary status. Tyrants could either model the myths to legitimize their claims, or modify their behavior to imitate the heroes.\textsuperscript{26} This is clear enough in Peisistratus’ relationship with the myths of Heracles through important iconographic scenes that show up in Athenian art from the period.\textsuperscript{27} These impulses are evident in the relationship between sixth century tyrants and the panhellenic festivals.

While the exact correlations and causes that connect the rise of the panhellenic festivals in sixth century Greece with the rule of tyrants in major poleis remain a subject

\textsuperscript{23} Bury, \textit{The Nemean Odes} 252-255


\textsuperscript{26} Walker, \textit{Theseus and Athens} 39-40.

\textsuperscript{27} John Boardman, “Heracles, Peisistratos and Sons,”\textit{RA} (1972): 57-72.
for debate, there nevertheless seems to be a clear connection between tyrants and heroes in organizing, supporting, and presiding over athletic competitions. The prestige of running a panhellenic contest augmented the reputation and authority of a tyrant. Modeled after the kingly status of the mythic heroes, these tyrants sought to legitimize their rule in part through their relationship to the games. While the observation of contests does not seem to have coincided with any claims of immortal or superhuman status, the kingly status of a tyrant is within striking distance of these ideals. Nevertheless, the founders of these contests do not seem to have garnered heroic honors for themselves through their patronage of the contests. During the Archaic and Classical periods, the “heroic athlete” earned his kleos through athletic victory, not through sponsorship of the contests. However, after the Peloponnesian War, this distinction changed and immortality was attributed to those who sponsored and presided at the games, often in direct assimilation to the gods in whose honors the festivals were normally held. This marked shift, unsurprising for the tumultuous Hellenistic Age, represents the closing of the ranks of “heroic athletes” and a new emphasis on the cults of divine rulers.

6.5 After the Peloponnesian War: The Rise of the “Godlike Man” and the End of the Athletic Heroes

Founding and presiding over athletic festivals acted as a useful tool in augmenting an individual’s prestige and position. Reinforced by the connections to the heroes of myth, tyrants and rulers capitalized on the games as symbols of kingship and authority. After the Peloponnesian War ended in 404 BCE, a marked shift occurred in the
relationship between founders, patrons, and the gods that the festivals were intended to honor. While not an entire departure from the norms and practices of earlier times, powerful patrons began to identify more with the festivals’ honorific deities. Instead of Heracles founding games to honor Zeus, Adrastus to honor Apollo, and Theseus to honor Poseidon, the festivals honored the patron. This trend towards the more explicit veneration of a living person, referred to as the “θεῖος ἀνήρ,” or “godlike man” by Bruno Currie, represents an interesting departure from the “intermediary” immortality of heroes and a claim to god-like status.28 This trend is especially evident in the cases of Lysander of Sparta, the Macedonian kings, and the Ptolemaic rulers of the fourth and third centuries.

6.5.1 Lysander of Sparta

Recognition and adoration of the “godlike man,” as Currie explained, is not confined to athletic champions, kings, or festival founders, but encompasses men whom the Greeks honored for a range of accomplishments. Since the term θεῖος ἀνήρ, attested in Aristotle, can encompass a variety of meanings, it seems most effective to define it as a category of “more-than-human-man” and within our working definition of “hero.”29 Yet the example of Lysander demonstrates the move towards a more god-like status than the paradigmatic heroes. Plutarch’s Life of Lysander relates that, after Sparta’s victory in the Peloponnesian War, Lysander was more powerful than any Greek had ever been, and that

28 Currie, Pindar and the Cult of Heroes, 172-189.

his pride outstripped his power.\textsuperscript{30} Plutarch goes on to quote Duris of Samos, a historian who seems to have written sometime between the mid-fourth and mid-third centuries BCE. Duris claims that Lysander “was the first to have altars erected and sacrifices performed for him as if he were a god.” In addition, he was the first to have a paean sung for him, an honor normally reserved for gods such as Apollo. As a culminating factor in Lysander’s transition to θεῖος ἄνὴρ, the people of Samos changed their festival to Hera to a festival to Lysander, the Lysandreia.\textsuperscript{31} Lysander apparently presided at the games as well, since Plutarch relates that Lysander awarded a victory in one of the festival’s poetry contests. Thus Lysander, through the actions of the people of Samos but with his own approval, elevated himself to a god-like status. Indeed, approval was necessary, as shown by Agesilaus’ refusal of divine cult from the people of Thasos. This Spartan king, a well-known contemporary of Lysander, was offered “temples” and “deifications” but he demurred.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{6.5.2 The Macedonian Kings: Alexander I and Archelaus}

In the context of the tumultuous world of fourth century BCE Greece, the kingdom of Macedon gained tremendous strength through the policies and leadership of Philip II. Involvement with panhellenic athletic competitions had been common enough among Philip’s Argead predecessors, but Philip both adopted the heroic model of

\textsuperscript{30} Plut.,\textit{ Life of Lysander} 18.2-3.

\textsuperscript{31} Plut.\textit{ Lys.} 18.3.

\textsuperscript{32} Plutarch,\textit{ Sayings of the Spartans} 25 210d. Currie, \textit{Pindar and the Cult of Heroes}, 160. Agesilaus also declined to preside over the Isthmian Games in 390 BCE, during the Corinthian War. Xenophon \textit{Hellenica} 4.4.17. Plut.\textit{ Agesilaus} 21.
patronage and sponsorship while using his relationship to the festival games to proclaim his status as θεῖος ἄνήρ.

The earliest example of a Macedonian king’s association with Greek athletics comes from Herodotus. He relates that Alexander I, king of Macedon from 495 to 452 BCE, was initially barred from competing at Olympia, but was allowed when he was able to prove Argive descent. The account cryptically explains that Alexander “ran out together with the first.” Modern scholarship has both supported and challenged the reliability of this story. Eugene Borza rejects it because he can find no Olympiad in which Alexander I would have been of an appropriate age to compete, and cannot reconcile the strange language of Alexander’s finish in a dead heat with his omission from Eusebius’ victor list. W. Lindsay Adams tends to accept it, since the Greeks seemed to. Neither gives much thought to Justin’s report (based on Pompeius Trogus) that Alexander I was a talented man who competed at Olympia in “a variety of events.”

In addition to Alexander I, Archelaus was another Macedonian monarch who used athletics to bolster his position as king. Archelaes was king of Macedon from 413 to 399 and a noted philhellene. He was a patron of Euripides and is credited with Hellenizing Macedonia. Archelaus founded games to Zeus and the Muses at Dion, modeled after

---

33 Hdt. 5.22: συνεξέπιπτε τῷ πρώτῳ.


36 Justin, Epitome 7.2.14.

37 Borza, In the Shadow of Olympus 172. Borza contends that Euripides’ lost play Archelaeus invented a Hellenic ancestry for the Argead house.
the games at Olympia. Whether or not these “Olympic” games (at the foot of Mount Olympus) were meant to rival the Olympic Games near Elis, or whether they indicate Macedonian ineligibility in Pan-Hellenic competition is unclear. Nevertheless, Archelaus’ sponsorship of these games demonstrates a clear understanding of the reputation to be gained through sponsorship and patronage of athletic festivals. Archelaus’ sponsorship, though, seems to have remained within customary expectations of a patron or festival organizer. Philip II, however, used his relationships with the panhellenic sites and festivals to emphasize his own status as a θεῖος ἄνηρ.

6.5.3 Philip II

Philip II was king of Macedon from 359 to 336, and he is largely credited with turning Macedon into an international power. Philip was keenly aware of the impact of sponsoring Games and athletics, and he made political use of the prestige that accompanied athletic activities. Following Archelaus’ precedent, Philip celebrated the Macedonian Olympic Games after capturing Olynthus in 348. In addition, Philip was an Olympic victor in chariot racing. Philip’s efforts to associate himself and his family with the prestige of panhellenic sanctuaries reinforced his political status as a king and conqueror.

38 Diod Sic. 17.16.3-4. Arr. 1.11.1 (erroneously) situates the Games at Aegae.

39 A late source (Solinus 9.16) states that Archelaus competed in the four-horse chariot race at Olympia and Delphi. Ernst Badian doubted the source’s credibility, as did Eugene Borza, who cited this as proof of Macedonian exclusion at Pan-Hellenic festivals. See Borza, 174-176 for discussion. For an alternate view, see Adams, 206-207.

40 Diod. Sic. 16.55.1.

41 Plut. Alex. 3. In the regular Olympic Games near Elis.
After the conclusion of the Third Sacred War in 346/5, Philip was given the right to administer the Pythian Games, along with the Boeotians and Thessalians.\footnote{Diod. Sic. 16.60.2.} In this regard, Philip was clearly imitating the practice of Jason of Pherae, \textit{tagos} of Thessaly who had briefly united Thessaly in the late 370s. Jason had made preparations for and planned to supervise the Pythian Games of 370 before he was assassinated earlier in the year.\footnote{Xen. \textit{Hell.} 6.4.29-30.} Likewise, Philip possessed the right to administer the Pythian Games, thereby exercising his political influence at the Delphic Amphictyony in conjunction with his sponsorship of the Pythian Games. Although the administration at Delphi was an important political venture for Philip, his endeavors at Olympia were more extravagant and lavish, blatantly claiming status among the Olympian gods. Sometime after the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BCE, Philip commissioned the Philipeion at Olympia. Essentially a temple to Philip and his family, it was a powerful political statement, set in an athletic context.

Pausanias describes the Philipeion at Olympia as a round building made of brick, surrounded by columns. Within this structure, situated in the Altis, were placed statues of gold and ivory, sculpted by Leochares, depicting Philip and his family: his father Amyntas, his wife Olympias, his son Alexander, and his daughter-in-law Eurydice.\footnote{Paus. 5.17.4; 5.20.9-10.} Besides supporting Philip’s status as leader of the Greeks, the setting of this monument, within the Altis near the Pelopeion and the temples to various deities, clearly stood as a statement to connect Philip and his family to divinity. The previous chapter examined
the importance of the hero tombs and monuments in conjunction with the athletic competitions at prominent festivals and Philip’s monument should be considered in this context as a deliberate injection of the Macedonian family into the deities and heroes of Olympia. In addition, the sculpting of Philip and his family in gold and ivory imitated the style and material of prominent cult statues. The magnificent statue of Zeus at Olympia by Pheidias was also made of gold and ivory, as was the statue of Athena in the Parthenon at Athens.\textsuperscript{45} Besides the magnificence of the Philipeion, the Eleans saw fit to honor Philip and Alexander, as well as the later Macedonian generals Seleucus and Antigonus, with statues at Olympia.\textsuperscript{46}

It was not just at Olympia that Philip sought to associate himself with the gods in an athletic setting. At the elaborate and exquisite contests he sponsored to commemorate the marriage of his daughter Cleopatra to Alexander, the king of Epirus, Philip commissioned thirteen statues for the parade: the twelve Olympian gods and Philip, symbolically taking his place among the gods.\textsuperscript{47} Unfortunately for Philip, this was the occasion of his assassination. Philip’s participation, presiding, and construction program at Delphi and Olympia demonstrate an acute awareness of the power that came with these athletic contests. In imitation of heroic and historical predecessors, he assumed control over the administration of the Pythian festival and participated in the Olympian Games. However, the construction of a monument to himself and his family within the sacred Altis at Olympia is an important departure from precedent. As a \textit{θεῖος ἀνήρ}, Philip sought

\textsuperscript{45} Paus. 5.10.2; 5.11.1 for the statue of Zeus at Olympia. Paus. 1.24.4-5 for Athenian sculptures.

\textsuperscript{46} Paus. 6.11.1.

\textsuperscript{47} Diod. Sic. 16.92.5. Cf. 16.95.1.
to take his rightful place among the gods and heroes of Olympia. Philip, like Lysander, actively cultivated an association with the Olympian gods. Most successful in this endeavor, though, was Philip’s son Alexander III “the Great.”

6.5.4 Alexander III

Alexander ruled as king of Macedon from 336-323 BCE, and is best known for his military conquest of the Persian Empire and his forays into modern day India and Afghanistan. An important part of Alexander’s policy as a military and political leader was the founding and sponsoring of large athletic festivals throughout his campaigns. These festivals often included gymnastic, musical, and equestrian athletic competitions. Plutarch relates that Alexander founded “a great many contests,” including athletic, dramatic, quarter-staff fighting, and hunting.48 Arrian, the most important source for these sponsored festivals, lists fifteen instances in which Alexander celebrated Games during his nearly thirteen year reign.49 Athletics played a vital role in Alexander’s conception of his army and himself. Alexander was known to exercise on campaign, and the culture of competition that athletics brought pervaded his military environment.

48 Plut. Alex. 4.

49 They are: the ‘Olympian’ Games in Macedonia (Arr. 1.11.1; Diod Sic. 17.16.3-4); Victory Games at Soli (Arr. 2.5.8); Victory Games at Tyre (Arr. 2.24.6); Games to Apis at Memphis (Arr. 3.3.4); Games at Memphis, again (Arr. 3.5.2); Games at Tyre, again (Arr. 3.6.1; Plut. Alex. 29); Victory Games at Susa (Arr. 3.16.9); Games at Hyrcania (Arr. 3.25.1); Games at the foundation of Alexandria (Arr. 4.4.1); Games upon reaching the Indus River (Arr. 5.3.6); Games after the “peaceful victory” at Taxila (Arr. 5.8); Victory and Funeral Games at Hydaspes after the victory over Porus (Arr. 5.20.1); Thanksgiving competitions at Carmania (Arr. 6.28.6); Games at Ecbatana (Arr. 7.14.1; Plut. Alex. 72); Funeral Games for Hephaestion (Arr. 7.14.10).
Alexander’s games served religious and practical purposes, such as fostering unity and solidarity among his troops and reinforcing Hellenic identity in a foreign land. Games also served as a respite from the rigors of military life and battle, and they provided relaxation, recreation, and motivation for future campaigns. Diodorus Siculus specifically states that Alexander intended the festival to Zeus and the nine Muses in Dion to foster the men’s “enthusiasm for the contests [battles] which lay ahead.” In a similar vein, the later sets of contests at Memphis and Tyre in 331 motivated Alexander’s army for the push towards Darius, Babylon, and Persepolis.

Besides the benefits to his army, Alexander sponsored athletics because he understood the implicit connections between kings, divinity, and patronage of games. In sponsoring so many competitions, games, and festivals, Alexander consciously perpetuated the tradition of heroes and kings, which explains why he chose kings of Cyprus to sponsor the dramatic troupes at Tyre. By overseeing these sponsors, Alexander claimed status as a leader of kings. Although the games were celebrated to honor a specific deity, it was Alexander who provided the rewards. As in the model established by Achilles, it was Alexander who bestowed gifts, rewards, and honors on a victor and stood in for the god to whom the games were dedicated. Like Achilles,

---


52 Diod. Sic. 17.16.3-4.

53 Plut. *Alex.* 29.
Alexander declined to compete in the games himself, preferring, as was befitting a king, to bestow victory rather than struggle for it.\(^{54}\)

Alexander’s understanding of his role as a kingly sponsor and patron of athletic competition coincided with his conception of his own immortality. Alexander quite famously encouraged his own association with the gods, to the chagrin of some of his Macedonian comrades. There is a considerable amount of scholarship dedicated to Alexander’s claims to immortality. His visit to the oracle at Siwa in the Libyan desert sparked a claim to be the son of Ammon.\(^{55}\) Later, after Alexander conquered the Persian empire and expanded his influence eastward into Asia, Alexander’s associations with divinity continued to grow. Most of the modern scholarship has supported earlier claims that Alexander’s association with divinity stemmed from contact with the Persian east. Although it is unclear how much Alexander encouraged this identification among his Greek subjects, it is probable that many of the cities of Asia Minor recognized Alexander as a god during his lifetime. Indeed, most modern discussions focus on Alexander’s conception of himself as a god; few doubt that he was recognized as such.\(^{56}\)

As a θεῖος ἄνήρ, Alexander associated himself with victories without risking defeat. As the presiding figure of the games, Alexander imitated the role of Achilles, and his actions are consistent with an ambition for godlike, not just immortal status.

---

\(^{54}\) Plut. *Alex.* 4 relates an anecdote where Alexander, when urged to compete in the Olympic Games, declared that he would do so only if he had other kings to run against.

\(^{55}\) Diod. *Sic.* 17.49.2-51.4; Curtius 4.7.6-32; Justin 11.11.2-12; Plut. *Alex.* 26-27; Arrian 3.3-4; Strabo 17.1.43. See Green, *Alexander of Macedon,* 272-296 for discussion of Alexander and divinity, as well as some summary modern treatments.

6.5.5 Hellenistic Rulers

After Alexander, as the Hellenistic Age unfolded and as Rome expanded throughout the Mediterranean, the link between athletic sponsorship and immortality solidified, but the ability for successful athletes to lay claim to heroic honors seems to have faded. Sometime after 280, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who ruled Egypt, established the Ptolemaieia, a festival in honor of his deified parents Ptolemy I and Berenice. The Nesiotic League decreed these games “equal to the Olympics” and acknowledged that the sacrifices, the spectacles, and the contests should go along with the “equal-to-the-gods honors” (ἰσοθέοις τιμαῖς) they had previously awarded Ptolemy I. The deification of Ptolemy II’s father, commemorated and reinforced through this athletic festival, supported Ptolemy II’s claims to divinity as well as the son of Ptolemy I and the ruler of Egypt. While the institution of the athletic festival did not grant Ptolemy I his godlike status, the festival acted to support this status, consistent with the Hellenistic paradigm. While the relationship between athletics and immortality remained close, the model had clearly shifted.

The ancient Egyptian connections between rulers and divinity laid a strong foundation for Ptolemy II to adapt and appropriate in deifying his family and elevating his position among the gods. Other Hellenistic and, later, Roman rulers enjoyed close associations with athletics and god-like status: Demetrius Poliorcetes presided at the


58 A decree from Crete from ca. 246 proclaimed the birthdays of Ptolemy III and his wife to be sacrifice days, celebrated with a festival and a race. Syll.³ 463.
Argive games to Hera and installed himself in the Parthenon in Athens. In 290 BCE, loyal followers of Pyrrhus seized Delphi and banned all of Demetrius’ supporters from participating in the Pythian Games. In retaliation, Demetrius held a rival version of the games later that year in Athens. He justified this location for the games because Apollo was said by some to have been the originator of their people. Demetrius’ actions underscore the usefulness of sponsoring and presiding over athletic contests in staking claims to kingly and godlike status. The Attalids rulers of Pergamum, another Hellenistic kingdom, also sought honors through athletics. A decree from second century BCE Pergamum mentions the Eumeneia, a festival that honored Eumenes II. Eumenes ruled this small but prosperous kingdom from 197-158 BCE. This same ruler either instituted or enlarged an existing festival to Athena Nikephoros making it panhellenic in status. This tradition carried on into the Roman era, with Herod of Judaea, Augustus, and Nero – among others – founding and presiding at athletic contests.

The revival and augmentation of heroic athletes during the Roman period, such as the cult of Theagenes on Thasos, can, perhaps, be interpreted in light of this increased emphasis on apotheosis throughout the Hellenistic and Roman world, but these would seem to be the result of contemporary issues and pressures. Despite the apparent

59 Plutarch, *Demetrius* 23 (for the Parthenon) and 25 (Heraia).


63 Herod founded the Sebasteia in 10 BCE in honor of Augustus. In 27 BCE, Augustus founded the Actia to commemorate his victory at the Battle of Actium (Suetonius, *Augustus* 18) and Nero founded the short-lived Neronia in 60 CE (Suetonius, *Nero* 12).
regularity with which mortal rulers, such as Roman emperors, received godlike status, the canon of athletic heroes seems to have been closed off before the end of the Peloponnesian War. Later attempts to revive and augment the memories and cults of these athlete-heroes only reinforced the notion of overall athletic decline, where the humans of those later days could never hope to reach the level of athletic achievement of the 6th and 5th century BCE Greeks. This decline was on the mind of Philostratus, who wrote during the second or third centuries CE to urge better training to combat the decline in athletic achievement. Philostratus put into words what the augmented cults of athlete-heroes implied: these heroes, like those of myth, lived in an earlier time and accomplished incredible feats. Although the evidence suggests that these athletes considered the possibility of receiving heroic cult and actively pursued it, the continued observance of these rites through the Roman period demonstrates how successful they were. Although the paradigm for heroic imitation shifted considerably after the Peloponnesian War, the connections between athletics, victory, and immortality remained strong.

---

64 Philostratus, *De Gymnastica*, 1-2, 43-44.
Chapter 7

Conclusion: Tyranny, Aristocracy, Democracy, and the Power of Athletic Victory.

7.1 Introduction: Tyranny and the “godlike kingly victor”

The power of victory in prestigious athletic contests bestowed superhuman status on the successful athlete. This power elevated human athletes above their competitors and countrymen. During Greece’s Archaic period, when social and political forces were causing considerable tensions among aristocratic and non-aristocratic elements, the power of athletic victory to exalt individuals both reinforced and undermined the power structures of the time. Tyrants and would-be tyrants capitalized on the kleos and kudos that victory in panhellenic contests brought through founding, sponsoring, or competing themselves in the games. Athletic competition determines the best performer and victory bestows honor upon a single individual. Aristocratic athletes in the Archaic period used athletics to emphasize the superiority of their naturally born abilities and their subsequent right to political power. However, athletic competition paradoxically also undermined aristocratic ideals since, theoretically, any free-born male citizen was eligible to compete for the kleos of victory. With the specialization that accompanied the rise of professionalism in athletic competition, many aristocratic Greeks sought athletic victories by proxy and fortune through equestrian events. Nevertheless, despite the immense prestige of a victory in the four-horse chariot race, there is no record of equestrian victors securing posthumous heroic honors.
The preceding chapter examined briefly the relationship between Greece’s Archaic period tyrants and organized athletic competitions. Building upon the associations that tyranny and kingship held with divinity, the power of victory in athletic competition brought a similar type of divine status to an athletic champion. Mark Munn has examined the phenomenon of the “godlike kingly victors” in ancient Greece and the case for a relationship between kings, victors, and divinity is compelling.¹ Victory and kingship glorified and exalted the individual. Indeed, tyrants used their associations with victory to claim and justify their status as rulers.

7.1.1 Athletics, *Arete*, and the Right to Rule

In the 630s BCE, Cylon, the son-in-law of Theagenes, tyrant of Megara, attempted to seize control of Athens as a tyrant.² As an Olympic victor, Cylon sought to parlay his athletic glory into tyrannical power. As the relative of the tyrant of nearby Megara, Cylon enjoyed the prestige of aristocratic political connections. Although his attempt was unsuccessful, Thucydides explains that the timing of Cylon’s coup was influenced by his status as an Olympic victor. In compliance with an oracle from Delphi, Cylon chose the occasion of “the greatest festival of Zeus” for his attempt, since he enjoyed a special relationship with this festival on account of his victory at Olympia.³ As an Olympic victor who enjoyed special honors from the gods, Cylon’s attempt capitalized

---

³ Thuc. 1.126. Thucydides was uncertain whether “the greatest festival to Zeus” referred to the Olympic festival or to a more local festival in Attica.
on his associations with divinity. However, his *kleos* and his armed forces proved insufficient and his Athenian opponents thwarted his attempt at tyranny.

Despite the unsuccessful outcome of Cylon’s attempt to seize power at Athens, the episode underscores the importance of athletic competition for determining and glorifying an individual’s *arete*. Naturally born virtue, in the minds of Archaic period aristocracy, indicated and justified an individual’s right to political and social authority. According to Aristotle, *arete*, whether that of an individual or of a family, was one of the justifications for a tyrant to seize and maintain power. Athletic competition was a useful means for determining and evaluating an individual’s *arete*. For instance, Herodotus recorded the means by which Cleisthenes, the tyrant of Sicyon in the early sixth century, determined which man should receive the privilege of marrying his daughter. Cleisthenes announced at the Olympic Games that any man who wished to be considered needed to present himself at Cleisthenes’ home in sixty days’ time. Although parentage and country were important criteria, Cleisthenes had athletic facilities, namely a racetrack and wrestling ground, prepared to test the suitors. As Cleisthenes evaluated his potential sons-in-law, athletics provided him with a means to test their *arete* and to determine their worthiness to enter into a marriage alliance with the tyrant’s house. This episode illustrates the importance of athletic excellence for determining those with the most *arete* in a way similar to the tyrants’ justification for their own rule. Just as athletics singled out individual champions, so did tyrants exalt themselves as individual rulers.

---

4 Arist., *Pol.* 1310b.

5 Hdt. 6.126-130.
The importance of athletic victory for aristocratic and tyrannical prestige was not lost on the elites of the Archaic and Classical period. However, in competing in athletic contests there was always the danger of defeat. In addition, as the Crown Games increased in popularity and prestige during the Archaic period, the athletic contests became more competitive and exclusive. Aristocratic Greeks who sought the kleos of athletic victory came to focus their efforts on equestrian events, which allowed them to capitalize on their financial resources to compete at the highest levels. This is especially evident in the behavior of the tyrants of Sicily.

7.1.2 The Sicilian Tyrants

Little is known about the earliest Sicilian tyrants, such as Panaetius of Leontini or Phalaris of Acragas. A dedicatory inscription discovered at Olympia indicates that Pantares of Gela was an Olympic champion, although the event is uncertain. This victory indicates the prominence of Pantares’ family and, around 505 BCE, Pantares’ son Cleander seized control of Gela. After the death of Cleander and his brother, a prominent military officer named Gelo assumed the tyranny of Gela. Through a series of wars and local intervention, Gelo eventually controlled most of Sicily and founded the Deinomenid tyranny, with its power seated in Syracuse. The Deinomenid tyrants were quite

---


8 Hdt. 7.154-156. Aristotle, *Politics* 5.12 (1316a-b).
conscious of the importance of victory and actively sought to emphasize their connections with martial and athletic achievement.9

Gelo won an Olympic chariot-racing victory in 488. Pausanias commented on a chariot at Olympia that was dedicated by Gelo, and archaeologists have recovered fragments of an inscription that accompanied Gelo’s victory statue.10 After the death of Gelo, his brother Hiero ruled Syracuse as a tyrant from 478-466 BCE.11 Like his brother, Hiero was a keen equestrian competitor in the Crown Games, winning the prestigious four-horse chariot race at Delphi’s Pythian Games in 470 and at Olympia in 468 BCE.12 Hiero was quite conscious of the ability of athletic victory to bestow authority and legitimacy on his rule and he took pains to proclaim the kleos these victories had brought him. Although he did not live to see them delivered, Hiero ordered a large bronze statue group to dedicate to Zeus at Olympia in commemoration for his victories there.13 Hiero also commissioned Pindar to compose Olympian 1 and Pythians 1 and 2 in honor of his victories, and these odes of praise highlight connections between Hiero and the mythic heroes, such as Pelops’ victory over Oenomaus.14 In addition, Hiero also hired

---

9 See Sarah E. Harrell, "King or Private Citizen: Fifth-Century Sicilian Tyrants at Olympia and Delphi" in Mnemosyne 55, no. 4 (2002): 439-64 for an analysis of how the Deinomenid tyrants represented themselves politically to various audiences through various media, including epinician odes and statues.

10 Paus. 6.9.4. Moretti, Olympionikai 185. Dittenberger, Syll 1 143.

11 Gelo had turned the tyranny of Gela over to Hiero several years before. After Gelo’s death, Hiero assumed his brother’s position at Syracuse. Murray, Early Greece, 292-293.

12 Mann, 240-244.

13 Paus. 6.12.1 and 8.42.8-10. Hiero’s large dedicatory bronze equestrian statue group was sent to Olympia by Hiero’s son Deinomenes.

14 Pythian 1 praises Hiero for founding Aetna (60-61), a heroic activity. Olympian 1 compares the victory of Hiero at Olympia to that of Pelops.
Bacchylides to compose poetry to praise his equestrian victories.\textsuperscript{15} Besides these public proclamations, Hiero and other Sicilian tyrants emphasized the legitimacy that victory brought to their rule by commemorating their equestrian victories on Syracusan coinage. Coinage in Sicily developed around 480 BCE, and Gelo is credited with introducing the typical Syracusan issue. This featured a chariot with a hovering image of Victory holding a crown in her hands.\textsuperscript{16} (Figure 7-1) This image of a victorious chariot racer played an important role in staking the legitimacy of the Syracusan tyrants and later rulers maintained this convention well after Sicily became a Roman province in 242 BCE.

Figure 7-1: Decadrachm of Gelo I (ca. 480 BCE).


\textsuperscript{15} Bacchylides, \textit{Odes} 3 and 5 were composed to honor Hiero’s Olympic victory. \textit{Ode} 3 honored his victory in the Pythian Games.

\textsuperscript{16} G.F. Hill, \textit{Coins of Ancient Sicily} (Westminster, England: Archibald Constable & Co., 1903), 53-65. Hill suggests that the obverse image of a woman’s head was probably Victory wearing a laurel wreath.
The importance of victory for Sicilian rulers was longstanding. A hundred years after Hiero, representatives of Dionysius I bribed the father of a Milesian boy who had just won an Olympic crown in boxing to have the boy proclaimed a Syracusan citizen. The boy, named Antipater, refused the bribe and made explicit mention of his Milesian citizenship on his statue at Olympia. As in equestrian events, the tyrant’s financial power was employed in an attempt to secure athletic honors. Despite the boy’s reluctance, this episode demonstrates the importance that victory brought to a tyrant or would-be tyrant. Similarly, in the sixth century BCE, Cimon, a triple Olympic victor in Olympic chariot races, “gave” his second victory to the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus. In the early fourth century BCE, Aristonous, a six-time Pythian champion in kithar-singing, offered to transfer his next victory to Lysander. In each of these instances, a tyrant or a commander with tyrant-like tendencies (Lysander) could claim prestige and justification through a vicarious victory. As with presiding and sponsoring games, or entering equestrian events, this type of association with athletic victory allowed tyrants and aristocrats to tap the exalting power of victory by means of their other resources and with no risk of defeat.

17 Paus. 6.5.6.
18 Hdt. 6.103. See Kurke, *The Traffic in Praise*, 179-180 for analysis of this episode.
7.1.3 Alcibiades and Athens

A final example, that of Alcibiades, demonstrates the power that athletic victories, especially equestrian victories, had in supporting and legitimizing tyrant-like behavior. As Plutarch noted, no person, “neither private citizen nor king” ever entered seven teams of chariots at the Olympic Games as Alcibiades did in 416 BCE.20 With this unbelievable display of wealth, Alcibiades won an unprecedented victory, taking first, second, and fourth place (according to Thucydides) or third place (according to Euripides). Indeed, an epigram in Alcibiades’ honor composed by Euripides notes that “no other Greek” had ever achieved such a feat.21 With such fame as this, Alcibiades claimed the right to command the Sicilian expedition in 415. As reported by Thucydides, Alcibiades informed the citizens of Athens that the magnificence with which he represented his city at the Olympic Games had bestowed upon him an unmistakable impression of power, and this power had given him the right “more than any other” man to lead the Athenian forces.22 These equestrian victories, so Alcibiades claimed, had given him the right to command – a justification also claimed by the tyrants of the preceding century. Thucydides records that the people were hostile to Alcibiades and interpreted his lavish lifestyle as an aim to seize power as a tyrant.23 Surely this lavish

20 Plut., Alc. 11.

21 Euripides frag. 755 Page PMG = Plut. Alc. 11. Donald Kyle, ““The Only Woman in All Greece”: Kyniska, Agesilaus, Alcibiades and Olympia,” Journal of Sport History 30, no. 2 (2003): 183-203 analyzes Alcibiades’ victory and suggests that the Spartan princess Cynisca’s equestrian victories at Olympia in 396 and 392, and the epigram of her victory statue, were direct responses to Alcibiades’ excess. Kyle’s argument is supported by Plut., Agesilaus 20 that Agesilaus encouraged his sister Cynisca to enter the races in order to prove that wealth, not arete, brought equestrian victories.

22 Thuc. 6.16.

23 Thuc. 6.15.
lifestyle included the unprecedented expense of entering seven teams in the Olympic equestrian races. This scale of participation smacked of tyrannical aims to the Athenian people, and Alcibiades’ defense hardly denied this, since he claimed that the performance of his teams at Olympia actually justified his right to command. Both the Athenian people and the Athenian aristocrat recognized the power of Olympic victory in justifying political power.

7.2 Athletics as Force of Democratization

The response of the Athenian people to both Cylon and Alcibiades indicates that the power of athletic victory was not absolute, nor did it automatically bestow tyrannical power on its possessor. Despite athletic competition’s ability to single out one individual for great acclaim and glory, athletics also, perhaps paradoxically, offered an avenue for more democratic involvement. In theory, any freeborn Greek male could participate in athletic contests and acquire the glorious fruits of victory. In practice, however, the extent to which ancient Greek athletics were open to all remains a topic under intense discussion among modern scholars. The traditional modern narratives of ancient Greek athletics traced an arc of aristocratic origins, the increased participation in and eventual domination of the games by lower-class professionals, and then eventual decline of athletic ideals. However, beginning with David Young in 1984 and Donald Kyle in 1987, it became apparent that modern European conceptions of class, “amateurism,” and athletics had tainted previous treatments of ancient sport and social class.24

Young’s contention, however, that lower-class citizens had always participated in ancient athletic contests during the Archaic and Classical periods, the sources for investigating this question remain Atheno-centric and problematic.\(^{25}\) David Pritchard has offered an elaborate treatment of the problem, rightly identifying the pitfalls of equating athletic participation at a local gymnasium with victories in panhellenic contests.\(^{26}\) Pritchard concluded that, while poor Athenians certainly had access to the public gymnasia, they nevertheless could not afford the tutors and trainers that were necessary for athletic competition at the highest levels. Furthermore, families of moderate means, Pritchard argued, would probably have chosen to focus their resources on the discipline of letters rather than music or gymnastics.

Despite these difficulties, there is an argument to be made for athletics as a democratizing force in ancient Athens. Stephen Miller has suggested that the “foundations of democracy,” namely isonomia (equality under the law) developed out of athletics.\(^{27}\) All competitors, Miller noted, were measured equally “before absolute standards of distance and speed and strength” and this constituted a “basic isonomia.”\(^{28}\) Miller goes on to explain that the nudity required of competing athletes acted as a leveler, as it became difficult to determine which were rich and which were not. Furthermore, some of the fundamental sources for the modern understanding of aristocratic dominance

\(^{25}\) Young, *The Olympic Myth*, 163.


\(^{28}\) Miller, “Naked Democracy,” 279.
in Archaic period Greece stem from the laudatory poetry of Pindar, Simonides, and Bacchylides, poets who were hired and paid by those who could afford it. This necessarily skews modern notions of how social class figured into panhellenic competitions.

In addition to Miller’s contention that athletics helped to engender anti-aristocratic democratic ideals at Athens, Nigel Nicholson has identified another example of athletics detracting from the ideal of aristocratic individualized glory during the Archaic period. Like Pritchard, Nicholson observed that the highest levels of athletic competition required the services of highly skilled and proficient trainers. Furthermore, aristocratic competitors who wished to enter equestrian events relied upon jockeys and charioteers.29 This reliance upon paid, presumably lower-class professionals undermined the power and prestige of the individualized victory. The relative silence of the victory memorials with respect to these trainers, jockeys, and drivers suggests an aristocratic need for a way to proclaim their “problematic victories in ways that made them accord with aristocratic ideologies.”30 The glorification of the individual was exaggerated to overcome the uncomfortable fact that individuals were usually incapable of competing at the highest level without the help of lower-class support staffs. The democratizing force of athletic competition, however, extended beyond the ranks of athletic competitors. The approval and praise of the crowd and community, or kleos, was sought by athletes and


30 Nicholson, 3.
earned through victory. The glory and power of victory was a manifestation of the community’s response to an athlete’s performance.

### 7.3 Victorious Athletes as Civic Heroes

It is generally within this Archaic-period environment of social and political tension between tyrants, aristocrats, and communities that the heroic athletes figured. The social tensions between tyrants and would-be tyrants and the communities they controlled directly affected the phenomenon of the heroic athletes. Although some of these athletes seem to have come from aristocratic families, and their quests for heroic honors clearly distinguished them from their communities, the heroic athletes should be considered civic heroes rather than aristocratic champions. Despite the highly individualized glory that came to these powerful victors as they sought heroic honors, it nevertheless fell to the community to bestow them. An athlete’s *kleos* stemmed from the crowd’s response to victory. Communities appropriated the *kudos* and *kleos* of their athletic champions and collectivized it through heroic cult. The collectivization of *kleos* is apparent in the civic honors afforded to Athenian victors in the Crown Games.

Plutarch relates that Solon’s reforms of the early sixth century BCE included provisions for cash payments to victors in the Isthmian Games (100 drachmas) and the Olympic Games (500 drachmas).\(^{31}\) Although it is unclear if Solon was increasing, decreasing, or merely standardizing the reward rates, this policy recognized the

---

achievement of the individual as a benefaction to the city. Indeed, Athenian inscriptions in the fifth century honored athletic victors in the Crown Games in the same way as it did other civic heroes (such as the descendants of Harmodius and Aristogeiton), with *setis*, or daily meals at state expense in the Prytanaion. By taking steps to cast these athletic victors as civic heroes instead of aristocratic champions, Greek city-states attempted to diffuse the great individual power of a champion and to use it to reinforce civic identity rather than to elevate the champion to a tyrant-like status. This mentality justifies the prominent positioning of the statues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton in the Athenian *agora* next to the racetrack. Although not athletic heroes, the juxtaposition of these civic heroes of democracy next to the athletic course reinforced the notion of athletic victory bringing honor and glory to the city. This aversion to tyranny was a product of the late Archaic and early Classical periods in ancient Greece and allowed communities to negotiate the immense individual power of the athletic champion without risking his elevation to power of a tyrant.

As François Bohringer has noted, the best attested heroic athletes, Cleomedes, Theagenes, Euthymos, and (probably) Euthycles won their victories in the first part of the fifth century BCE, between about 490 and 470. This time also corresponded to the heyday of epinician poetry in the works of Pindar, Simonides, and Bacchylides. These

---


33 E.g. *IG* I3 131 awarded *setis* to the descendants of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, various priests, and “whoever has won at the Olympian or Pythian or Nemean” games.

34 Demosthenes 20.70 suggests that Athenians were reluctant to honor civic heroes as prominently as Harmodius and Aristogeiton, presumably because of their aversion to the tyrannical overtones of great individual glory.
poets, as patrons of aristocratic or tyrant athletic victors, lauded the arete of their champions and bolstered their aristocratic claims to power and prestige. Practically nothing is known of Astypalaea, the hometown of Cleomedes so it is difficult to determine what influence the tensions of the fifth century had on his heroization. More, however, is known about the poleis of Theagenes, Euthymos, and Euthycles.

Jean Pouilloux has suggested that Theagenes played an important role in restoring civic pride and identity after Thasos was captured by the Athenian Cimon in 463. Several generations of Theagenes’ family appear on the Thasian magistracy lists and Pouilloux speculates that Theagenes, having retired from athletic competition, devoted his middle and old-age to reviving Thasian fortunes under the Athenian empire, in part by augmenting and embellishing a shrine to Heracles. Pouilloux continues, proposing that after Theagenes died in the late fifth century, pro-Athenian elements on Thasos contrived to have his statue thrown into the sea, only to be retrieved after the collapse of Athenian power in the late fifth century. While this sequence of events is highly speculative, it does support the notion that Theagenes was a civic hero and, as such, received heroic cult from his countrymen. While this might explain the willingness of Theagenes’ community to bestow heroic honors, it nevertheless underestimates Theagenes’ drive to distinguish himself from all mortals and to claim honors as a heroic athlete.

Euthycles of Locri won an Olympic victory in pentathlon, probably in the early 5th century. His contemporary and countryman, Euthymos, won boxing crowns at

35 Bohringer, 10.
Olympia in 484, 476, and 472. Like Theagenes, these athletes lived in a city that suffered from external threats. Justin’s *Epitome* reports that, when the Locrians were under threat of the aggressive expansion of Anaxilas, the tyrant of nearby Rhegium, and his son Leophron, Hiero of Syracuse intervened and preserved the Locrian state. So desperate were the Locrians, they vowed to prostitute their unmarried women in honor of Aphrodite should they be preserved. 38 Although neither Euthymos nor Euthycles is ever mentioned in the sources that describe these events, Bohringer appropriately suggests that these developments must have had some influence on the athletes and perhaps on the institution of heroic honors for them. In the cases of Theagenes, Euthycles and Euthymos, Bohringer insisted that the heroic cults for these powerful athletes stemmed from a civic desire to obliterate “periods of weakness and division in their cities.” 39 This might account for why heroic honors were instituted for Theagenes, Euthymos, and Euthycles, within the context of this late fifth century struggle between the community and the individual for the honors of victory. The heroization of a deceased athlete is an appealing way for a community to tap into the athlete’s *kleos* with no danger of the athlete seizing power as a tyrant.

The power of victory was a lucrative vehicle for establishing and asserting the right to power, whether used by an individual or by a community. The marked tensions between individual and community that dominated the Archaic period of Greek history played out in the athletic field as well, with competition between individuals and communities for the *kleos* that accompanied athletic victory. While aristocratic families


39 Bohringer, 15 (my translation).
enjoyed financial advantages in the equestrian events, the heroic athletes possessed enormous physical stature and strength, more closely connecting them with the heroes of myth and lending greater credence to their identification as successors to the heroic tradition. As Plutarch’s formula for divinity suggests, those mortals who achieved immortality in ancient Greece possessed both excellence (arete) and power or might (dynamis).40 This physical component should not be undervalued. Recall that Pausanias described Polydamas as the biggest of all humans except those who are called heroes.41 With the exception of Oibotas of Dyme and Euthycles of Locri, all of the known heroic athletes were champions in the “heavy-events” of boxing, wrestling, and pancration. Ancient Greek athletic competitions had no weight classes or divisions other than distinguishing between men and boys (and occasionally “youths”). The athletes who dominated these events and their competitors were physically larger and stronger than their contemporaries, making comparisons to the heroes of myth more easily believable.42 In the late fifth century, Dorieus of Rhodes, a member of a prominent family of athletes that won many Olympic crowns, won three Olympic crowns at Olympia in pancration, as well as eight Isthmian seven Nemean championships, and a victory at Delphi when nobody dared to fight him.43 During the Peloponnesian War, Dorieus fought for the Spartans in several naval battles and was eventually captured by the Athenians. Pausanias relates that the angry Athenians were so awed by a man so big and famous that

40 Plut., Aristides 6.

41 Paus. 6.5.1.

42 When Cimon uncovered the remains of Theseus, Plutarch reports that they were of gigantic size. Plut., Theseus 36. (cf. Plut., Cimon 8.)

43 Paus. 6.7.4-6. Thuc. 3.8. See Thuc. 8.35 and Xen. Hell. 1.1-7 for Dorieus’ involvement in naval battles.
they let him go without doing him any harm.\textsuperscript{44} It was both Dorieus’ fame as an athlete and his immense physical size that secured his freedom. Such physical prowess was an important characteristic of the heroic athletes, prowess that escaped the vicarious athletic endeavors of the aristocratic chariot-owners. Although the story of Pelops does present a paradigm of a heroic charioteer, the heavy events produced the heroic athletes. While chariot victories brought immense amounts of prestige and *kleos* to the owners of the horses, there exists no record of any equestrian athlete receiving heroic honors.

7.3.1 The Importance of *Dynamis*

While victory served as an important part of establishing and maintaining aristocratic ideals of the glorified individual, heroic identity required power and might. Thus, while external factors certainly influenced the use and appropriation of athletic victory for both aristocratic and civic promotion, the pursuit of heroic honors remained an individualized quest. Only those who possessed adequate *dynamis* and earned sufficient victories were capable of assimilation with heroic ideals. While the honoring of heroic athletes seems to have stemmed from communal desires to defuse the tensions presented by a glorious individual endowed with divine power, the drive for heroic honors and the impulse to imitate the heroes of myth transcended these tensions and was focused on the individual who was capable of demonstrating sufficient force and power in his victories. Thus, Milo of Croton and Dioxippus of Athens, separated by over 150 years and considerable geographical distance, both imitated Heracles in their quests for heroic

\textsuperscript{44} Paus. 6.7.5.
status. While neither seems to have received heroic cult, both attempted to pattern their adventures and achievements after those of the heroes of myth. The power and might of Euthymos, Theagenes, and Cleomedes also qualified these heavy-event athletes for heroic honors and their communities awarded them, allowing their accomplishments to glorify the community as well as the individual.

7.4 Conclusion

The ability of victory to bestow a superhuman status represented an important component of ancient Greek religious cult and athletic practice. The heroes of myth provided important paradigms for athletes of the historic period, and powerful victorious athletes sought to replicate the heroes’ victories and accomplishments in their efforts to secure a similar heroic status. The accoutrements of victory, such as the victory crown, the epinician ode, and the victory statue likened the victor to the immortal heroes. In addition, the spatial organization of the panhellenic sanctuaries, as well as other athletic fields, closely connected the world of the living athletes with the accomplishments of the deceased heroes. By juxtaposing the feats of the living with the memory of the dead, athletic competitions both honored the memory of the departed while providing athletes with a means of adding to their own living reputations. Finally, the importance of founding and sponsoring athletic competitions, evident in Homer but especially important to the tyrants of the Archaic period, provided a means for powerful and wealthy rulers to associate themselves with the victory of athletic contests with no risk of defeat. After the Peloponnesian War, divine honors were still associated with athletic contests, but in the context of ruler-cult as Hellenistic monarchs presided over the competitions. The athletic
heroes are generally limited to a period in the early fifth century BCE when large portions of ancient Greece were struggling with social and political upheaval. Paradoxically, athletics acted both as the purview of aristocratic elites as well as an egalitarian environment for the democratic pursuit of victory and \textit{kleos}. As glorified individuals, athletic victors embodied the ideals of the aristocratic elite but also could impart their \textit{kudos} and \textit{kleos} to communities as civic heroes. The power of victory and its ability to justify and legitimize political power was not lost on the aristocratic and non-aristocratic forces in ancient Greece, and each side vied to capitalize on the immense power of a victorious athlete’s \textit{kudos} and \textit{kleos}. Despite these social and political rivalries, powerful and successful athletes sought their own heroic honors through their individual quests for \textit{kleos} and immortality.
Modern Bibliography


Beazley, J.D. The Development of Attic Black-Figure. Berkeley: University of California, 1951.


Fraser, P.M. "The Foundation-Date of the Alexandrian Ptolemaieia." The Harvard Theological Review 54, no. 3 (1961): 141-45.


Gebhard, Elizabeth. "The Beginnings of Panhellenic Games at the Isthmus." In Olympia 1875-


Martin, R. "Un Nouveau Règlement De Culte Thasien." *Bulletin de Correspondence Hellénique*


Munn, Mark. *The Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia*. Berkeley: University of


———. "Race or Chase at the Arkeia of Attica?" *Nikephoros* 3 (1990): 73-120.


Curriculum Vitae

David J. Lunt
The Pennsylvania State University
108 Weaver Building
University Park, PA 16802.
lunt@psu.edu

Education

2004-2010 PhD (History). Penn State University
2006 Summer Session Member. American School of Classical Studies at Athens.
1999 B.A. (History). University of Utah.
1999 Certificat d’Études Françaises. l’Institut de Touraine. Tours, France.

Research and Teaching Interests:

Ancient Greek History
Ancient Athletics
Greek and Roman Historiography and Mythography
Roman History
Sport History

Publications:


Awards

2009 The Hill Graduate Fellowship Award for Dissertation Support. Awarded by the Penn State College of the Liberal Arts, The Department of History, and Religious Studies Program.
2008 Institute for the Arts and Humanities Dissertation Fellowship, Penn State University.
2006 Ellen N. Lawler Summer Session Fellowship, American School of Classical Studies, Athens.
2000 Brigham Madsen Award for Outstanding Teaching Assistant. University of Utah.