



A Mycenaean background for Herakles as a model for athletes

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Classical Inquiries

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[Home](#) » [By Gregory Nagy](#) » A Mycenaean background for Hēraklēs as a model for athletes

A Mycenaean background for Hēraklēs as a model for athletes

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2019.07.19 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. As I argued in the previous posting, [Classical Inquiries 2019.07.12](#), the name of Olympia as a setting for the myth about the founding of the Olympics by Hēraklēs is linked with the name of Mount Olympus as the setting for the myth about the immortalization of this hero after death. In the present posting here, 2019.07.19, I take the argument further: the various different versions of the myth about the founding of the Olympics by this same hero reveal a Mycenaean background for the figuring of Hēraklēs himself as a model for athletes competing at the Olympics in particular and at any other athletic festival in general. I say “a Mycenaean background” and not “Mycenaean origins” for reasons I will explain in what follows. These reasons, as we will see, have to do with methodologies I generally use in my various efforts to reconstruct the past. As for the actual argument I am about to offer, the image I show at the very start of this posting is directly relevant. What we see here is the picturing, by a Renaissance artist, of a celebrated ancient myth that told about a primordial athletic event: it was a wrestling match between Hēraklēs and a homicidal ogre named Antaios, who was figured as an enemy of the civilized world.

§1. A most lively introduction to this myth about a primal wrestling match between Hēraklēs and Antaios is available in the “universal history” composed by Diodorus of Sicily, who lived in the first century BCE. As we read in Diodorus (4.17.4; further details at 4.27.3), Hēraklēs in his role as promoter of the civilized world travels to Libya, where visitors to this land are being systematically killed off by Antaios, an ogre who forces any incoming visitor to compete with him in a wrestling match that he always wins—and the result is always death for the unfortunate visitor. In the wording of Diodorus here, such a visitor is a *xenos*, that is, a potential ‘guest-friend’ who is entitled to guest-friendship in terms of the customary laws of Greek-speaking people. But the supremacy of Antaios as a world-class wrestler is ended by Hēraklēs: the hero challenges Antaios to a wrestling match that he of course wins. By winning, Hēraklēs actually kills the ogre, thus making Libya safe for civilization—or, to put it in terms of the “universal history” composed by Diodorus, Hēraklēs makes Libya safe for inhabitation by Greek-speaking people. In the era of Diodorus, after all, Libya was the region of Africa controlled by the Greek city of Cyrene, which was world-renowned for its wealth and its cultural prestige. And the narrative of Diodorus here (again, 4.17.4) describes in cultural terms the flourishing of Libya after the defeat of Antaios by Hēraklēs as a universal culture hero. Such a pattern of story-telling is then immediately repeated by Diodorus (4.18.1; further details at 4.27.3) as he now proceeds to narrate the very next adventure of Hēraklēs: the hero now travels from Libya to neighboring Egypt, where he kills the ogre-king Bousiris, another serial killer of incoming “visitors.” Thus Hēraklēs has this time also made Egypt safe for inhabitation by Greek-speaking people. In the era of Diodorus, of course, Hellenized Egypt surpassed even Hellenized Libya in wealth and cultural prestige

§2. For those who are interested in the details of the myth about the defeat of Antaios by Hēraklēs, I recommend the narrative of “Apollodorus” (2.115): here we learn that Antaios was the son of Gaia, Mother Earth, and that his successes as a world-class wrestler were due to his groundedness, as it were, on Earth: that is why Hēraklēs during his primal wrestling match with Antaios could only kill the ogre if he lifted him in the air and thus got him off the ground. It is this fatal moment, when Antaios loses his grounding, that we see captured in the picture that I show to illustrate the myth.

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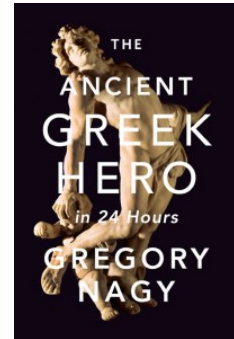
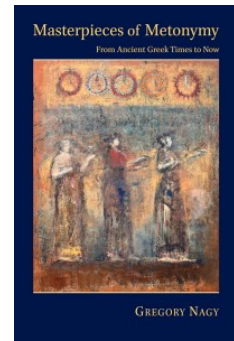


A wrestling match between Hēraklēs and Antaios (ca. 1500–1550). School of Marcantonio Raimondi (1480–1534). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§3. Even the name Antaios is relevant to the myth about the wrestling match of Antaios with Hēraklēs: the second part of this compound noun Ant-aios is evidently derived from the noun aia, which means ‘earth’, while the first part, the prefix anti-, can be understood in the sense of ‘competing with, substituting for, matching with’. Antaios, son of Mother Earth, is a most worthy match for her powers.

§4. But why do I think that the myth about Hēraklēs as a world-class wrestler, reported in the “universal history” of Diodorus, can be used as evidence to support my argument that there is a Mycenaean background for Hēraklēs as a model for athletes? Here I turn to another myth, likewise reported by Diodorus, that I highlighted in the previous posting of *Classical Inquiries*, [2019.07.12](#) (at II§1). Diodorus (4.14.1–2) says that one of the greatest of all the achievements of Hēraklēs was his founding of the Olympics, that is, of the Olympic festival at Olympia. Further, as Diodorus also says here (4.14.2), Hēraklēs not only founded this major festival: he also competed and won in every athletic event on the prototypical occasion of the first Olympics. Just as in the later narrative of Diodorus (4.17.4) about the prototypical athletic victory of Hēraklēs in his wrestling match with Antaios, this previous narrative of his (again, 4.14.1–2) glorifies Hēraklēs as a culture hero who builds the very foundations of Greek civilization.

§5. In the era of Diodorus, the myths about Hēraklēs as a model for athletes would of course be interpreted as a sign of his Panhellenic status as a universal culture hero. But even back in the era of the Mycenaean empire, well over a thousand years earlier, back in a distant time when the universalizing cultural



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phenomenon that we can describe retrospectively as Panhellenism had not yet taken shape, I argue that there had already existed comparable myths, though in this case the status of Hēraklēs as a hero was not yet universalized by the various populations of the Greek-speaking world back then.

§6. The idea of a non-universalized Hēraklēs in the Mycenaean era is comparable, I think, to the idea of a non-universalized Mount Olympus in the same distant era. As I noted in my posting for [Classical Inquiries 2019.07.06](#), the existence of such a fragmented idea of Olympus in the Mycenaean era, when many different mountains in many different places were known by that name as the abode of the gods, was argued by Martin P. Nilsson in Chapter 4 (pages 221–251) of *The Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology* (1932). And now I note that Nilsson likewise argued, in Chapter 3 of the same book (pages 187–220), that there also existed a comparably fragmented idea of a proto-Hēraklēs in the Mycenaean era. As Nilsson shows, there were many different versions of such a hero throughout the Greek-speaking world—and such a hero was not even always known by the same name.

§7. The title of my posting in *Classical Inquiries 2019.07.06*, “Olympus as mountain and Olympia as venue for the Olympics: a question about the naming of these places,” gives an indication of where my argumentation is now leading me. In that posting, I already argued that there existed a Mycenaean background for the naming of Olympia, parallel to the Mycenaean background, as posited by Nilsson, for the naming of Olympus. But now I argue, by extension, that there also existed a Mycenaean background for linking the actual site of Olympia with myths about Hēraklēs as a founder of athletic competitions at this site. The methodology I used for making such an argument has been comparative, in that I analyzed the myths and rituals involving the names of Olympus and Olympia by way of critically comparing historical contexts where the hero known as Hēraklēs is linked with both places so named, that is with both Olympus and Olympia.

§8. Such a methodology would have been too broad for Nilsson, whose own method was more restrictive. For him, the evidence of archaeology was decisive: if there is no evidence for Mycenaean remains at a given site, then the myths that are linked with such a site cannot have Mycenaean “origins.” So, my linking of Olympia with Hēraklēs would have been for Nilsson untenable if there were no Mycenaean archaeological remains of any significance to be found at Olympia. And that was in fact exactly the state of affairs at the time when *Mycenaean Origins* was published: as Nilsson says (1932:90), Olympia yielded practically no evidence at the time of his writing. So, Nilsson effectively gave up on Olympia (1932:236; also 90–92). But by the time of Emily Vermeule’s introduction to Nilsson’s book, 40 years later, a wealth of new archaeological evidence for Mycenaean remains at Olympia had already come to light: as she notes, by now “Olympia has been drawn firmly within the Mycenaean realm” (Vermeule 1972:xii).

§9. Accordingly, I argue that the various versions of myths concerning a “proto-Hēraklēs” in the Mycenaean era can be linked with the site of Olympia as a place where such a hero became a model for athletic competition. One particularly interesting version of such myths is reported by Pausanias (5.7.9): according to this version, the hero named Hēraklēs who founded the Olympics came from Mount Ida in Crete. In this case, Mount Ida seems to be a local variant corresponding to other variants where the mountain linked with Hēraklēs is Mount Olympus.



A wrestling match between Hēraklēs and Akhelōs (ca. 1560–1570). Annibale Fontana (Italian, 1540–1587). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

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The apotheosis of Hēraklēs on Olympus and the mythological origins of the Olympics »



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