



A placeholder for the White Goddess

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[Home](#) » [By Gregory Nagy, Pausanias commentary, Pausanias reader](#) » A placeholder for the White Goddess

A placeholder for the White Goddess

May 25, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, Pausanias commentary, Pausanias reader](#) Comments off [Edit This](#)

2018.05.25 | By Gregory Nagy

The Greek name for the mythological figure whom we recognize as the White Goddess was Leukotheā—a name that actually means ‘white goddess’. In the ancient myths that tell about this figure, however, she was not always a goddess: once upon a time, she was a mortal woman named Ino, wife of the hero Athamas and mother of the child-hero Melikertes. This Ino was considered to be a hero in her own right: she was in fact worshipped as a cult hero in the city of Megara, as we read in the text of the ancient traveler Pausanias, who lived in the second century CE. When our traveler visited Megara, he saw there a hērōion ‘hero-shrine’ that had been built in honor of Ino. But, Pausanias adds, this female hero was also known in Megara as the White Goddess. How can that be? In the present posting, I offer a possible explanation.

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)



Terra-cotta head of Leukotheā, from the Etruscan port of Pyrgi, 4th c. BCE. [Image](#) via Flickr, under a [CC BY 2.0](#) license.

In what follows, I start by offering a literal translation of relevant passages in Pausanias, 1.42.7 and 1.44.6–1.44.9. These translations are extracts from an ongoing overall retranslation of Pausanias that has been made available online for free in [A Pausanias Reader in Progress](#). Then I offer comments on details given by Pausanias about both the myths and the rituals centering on Ino as a female hero who became transformed into the White Goddess.

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Ino, by her name Leukotheā, the White Goddess. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons, with modifications.

Here is my retranslation of the relevant passages in Pausanias:

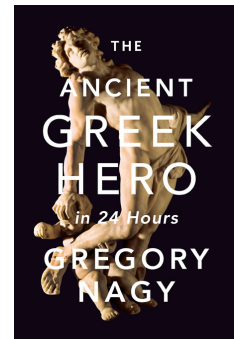
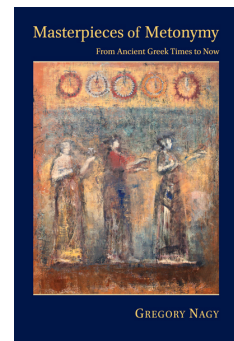
{1.42.7} On the road to the Prytaneion ['City Hall'] [of Megara] is the hero-shrine [hērōion] of Ino, around which is a fencing [thrinkos] of stones. Olive trees grow there. The people of Megara are the only Greeks [Hellēnes] who say that the corpse [nekros] of Ino had washed ashore on their coast; more, they say that Klēsō and Tauropolis, the daughters of Klēsōn son of Lelex, found and buried it; even more, they say that it was in their locale [= Megara] that Ino was for the first time named White Goddess [Leukotheā], and every year a sacrificial-feast [thusiā] is celebrated [agein] in her honor.

{1.42.7} subject heading(s): hērōion 'hero-shrine'; Ino; nekros 'corpse'; Klēsō; Klēsōn; Leukotheā 'White Goddess'; thusiā 'sacrifice, sacrificial feast'

{1.44.6} As one proceeds from Megara to Corinth, there are tombs [taphoi], including that of the aulos-player Telephanes of Samos. The tomb [taphos] is said to have been made [poiēin] by Kleopatra, daughter of Philip son of Amyntas. There is also the tomb [mnēma] of Kar, son of Phoroneus, which was originally a piled-up-mound [khōma] of earth, but afterwards, in accordance with what the god [theos] said-in-an-oracular-pronouncement [khrēsai], it was adorned [kosmeîn] with a kind of stone known as konkhītēs ['in-which-seashells [konkhoi]-are-embedded']. The people of Megara are the only Greeks [Hellēnes] to possess this kind of konkhītēs stone, and in the city also they have made [poiēin] many things out of it. It is very white, and softer than other stone; embedded in it through and through are seashells [konkhoi]. Such, then, is the stone itself. [As for rock formations that are also white...] There is a road called Skirōnis—that is what it is called even to this day—and it is named after Skirōn [= 'he of the White Rock']. This Skirōn, when he was the military leader of the people of Megara, was the first, they say, to make [poiēin] it [= Skirōnis] a road usable enough for men who outfit themselves for travel. But then 'King' [basileus] Hadrian broadened it, and made it more usable—so much so that even chariots [harmata] could pass each other going in opposite directions.

{1.44.6} subject heading(s): mnēma 'tomb'; Skirōnis'; Skirōn 'he of the White Rock'

{1.44.7} There are tales told with regard to those [white] rocks [petrai] that become ever more elevated as the road narrows. One of these [elevated white rock formations] is a rock



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called Molouris, and it is from here, they say, that Ino threw [rhiptein] herself into the sea while holding Melikertes, the younger of her children. Learkhos, the elder of them, had been killed by his father. It is said by some that Athamas did [drân] this in-a-state-of-madness [manênai]; but others say that he vented on Ino and her children his uncontrollable rage [thūmos] when he learned about the famine [līmos] that befell the people of Orkhomenos and about the death—as he supposed—of Phrixos. He [= Athamas] supposed that all the things happened not because of divine power [tò theion] but because of plotting by Ino, the stepmother.

{1.44.7} subject heading(s): Molouris; Ino; Melikertes; Phrixos

{1.44.8} Then it was that she [= Ino] fled to the sea and precipitated [aphiēnai] herself and her son from the Rock [Petrā] that is Molouris. The son, they say, was brought to land on the Isthmus of Corinth by a dolphin, and honors [tīmai] were given to Melikertes, thereafter renamed Palaimon. One of these honors, in-compensation-for [epi + dative case] him, was the celebrating [agein] of the competition [agōn] called the Isthmia. The Rock [Petrā] that is Molouris has been considered to be sacred [hierā] to the White Goddess [Leukotheā] and Palaimon. But the other rocks, as one travels further, are customarily-thought [nomizein] to be polluted [en-ageis], in that Skīrōn [= 'he of the White Rock'], dwelling there [par-oikein], used to cast into the sea all the strangers [xenoi] he met. A turtle used to swim under the rocks [petrai] to seize those that fell in. Sea turtles are like land turtles except for their size and for the shape of their feet, which are like those of seals. Retribution [dikē] for these things overtook Skīrōn, for he was precipitated [aphiēnai] into the same sea by Theseus.

{1.44.8} subject heading(s): Molouris; Ino; Melikertes; Palaimon; epi [+ dative case] 'in compensation for'; Skīrōn [= 'he of the White Rock']; aphiēnai 'precipitate'

{1.44.9} [Digression...] On the top of a mountain [in Aegina] that is called The Mountain [Oros] is a shrine [nāos] of Zeus surnamed the Precipitator [Aphésios, derived from the verb aphiēnai 'precipitate']. It is said that, on the occasion of the drought [aukhmos] that once afflicted the Greeks [Hellēnes], Aiakos in obedience to an oracular-instruction [logion] made-sacrifice [thuein] in Aegina to Zeus Pan-Hellēnios, and that Zeus made-precipitation [aphiēnai], saving [komizen] them [from the drought] and thus getting the name Aphésios [derived from the verb aphiēnai 'release']. [Back from the digression, to Megara ...] There are also statues [agalmata] of Aphrodite, Apollo, and Pan.

{1.44.9} subject heading(s): Oros 'The Mountain' in Aegina; Aiakos; aphiēnai 'precipitate'; komizen 'save'; Zeus Aphésios 'Precipitator'

{1.44.10} Farther on is the tomb [mnēma] of Eurystheus. They say that he fled from Attica after the battle with the Herakleidai and was killed here by Iolaos. Further down from this road is a sanctuary [hieron] of Apollo Lātōios, and then, after that, there are the limits [horoi] between Megara and Corinth, where they say that Hyllos, son of Hēraklēs, fought-in-single-combat [monomakheîn] with Ekhemos of Arcadia.

{1.44.10} subject heading(s): mnēma 'tomb'

Next, I offer three comments on 1.42.7 and 1.44.6–1.44.9.

1. At 1.42.7, Pausanias reports that the people of Megara were the only Greeks who could claim to possess the nekros 'corpse' of the cult hero named Ino, and the reason, in terms of their local myth, was that Ino had leapt to her death from the heights of a landmark that was located in their territory, that is, from the top of a lofty formation of white rock named Molouris, 1.44.7. So, according to the myth as told by the people of Megara, it was in their seas where Ino drowned—and it was on their land where her dead body was washed ashore. In the myths of people who lived elsewhere, by contrast, as in the case of Messenia, the fatal plunge of Ino was followed by a different course of events: instead of being washed ashore as a corpse, she simply emerged from the sea—according to the Messenian version it happened offshore from their local mountain, named Mathia—and now she had become the 'White Goddess' herself, Leukotheā. That is what we read elsewhere in Pausanias, 4.34.4. But such a transformation is assumed also in the version that is local to Megara. As I argue in [H24H 18§43](#) about the overall mind-set of myths that aetiologize the rituals of local hero cults, it is taken for granted that heroes are immortalized after they die, so that the very existence of a hero cult in honor of Ino, as indicated by the highlighting of her hērōion 'hero-shrine' in Pausanias 1.42.7, is also an indication, of and by itself, that the hero cult of this female cult hero of Megara is connected to a myth about her immortalization after her death. It is precisely in the context of her hero cult, signaled here at 1.42.7, that Pausanias can speak practically in the same breath about Ino first as a corpse and then as a goddess—that is, as the Leukotheā 'White Goddess' of Megara.

2. Myths about Ino as a mortal hero who came back to life as a goddess are attested in poetry as well. In an ode of Pindar, for example, Olympian 2.29, the immortal afterlife of Ino is described as a biotos, 'life',

that is *aphthitos*, 'unwiling' (GMP 126, following BA 175, 203 = 10§1n4 and 10§41n2). Also in *Odyssey* 5.333–335, Ino is described as a mortal woman who was transformed into a goddess (BA 175 = 10§1n4; Nagy 1985:79–81 = §§76–79):

... καλλίσφυρος Ἴνώ,
Λευκοθέη, ἣ πρὶν μὲν ἔην βροτὸς αὐδήεσσα,
νῦν δ' ἄλδς ἐν πελάγεσσι θεῶν ἐξέμμορε τιμῆς.

...Ino, with the beautiful ankles,
who is the White Goddess [Leukotheā], formerly a mortal endowed with speech,
but who now has her share of divine honor [tīmē] in the depths of the sea.

Odyssey 5.333–335

3. The son of Ino, Melikertes, is a cult hero in his own right. I recommend the analysis by Pache 2004:135–183, 204–211.



Leukotheā, the White Goddess, preserving Odysseus (1805). John Flaxman (1755–1826). Purchased as part of the Oppé Collection with assistance from the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, 1996. [Image](#) via the Tate.

For more about the scene depicted here and its context, see my post "[A sampling of comments on *Odyssey* Rhapsody 5.](#)"

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