



A placeholder for the hero Amphiaraos

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A placeholder for the hero Amphiaraos

May 4, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, Pausanias commentary, Pausanias reader](#) Comments off [Edit This](#)

2018.05.04 | By Gregory Nagy

Amphiaraos, a hero who is most prominently featured in ancient Greek epic narratives about the so-called Seven Against Thebes, has a special place in the writings of Pausanias, as we can readily see from a search for this hero's name in a retranslation of Pausanias that has been made available online for free in [Pausanias Reader in Progress](#). Here I focus on a passage where Pausanias first mentions the existence of hero cults established in honor of Amphiaraos. In the context of this passage, we see also the traveler's first mention of a myth about this hero.

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



Amphiaraos on his chariot, swallowed up in the earth; in the background, a group of wounded soldiers (ca. 1540/1550). Domenico del Barbieri (French, 1506–1570). [Image](#) © The Trustees of the British Museum, used under a [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#) license.

According to the myth, Amphiaraos was fleeing from Thebes after the expedition of the Seven had failed, driving his chariot across a plain, when, suddenly, the earth opened up and swallowed him together with the chariot drawn by his speeding horses. This mystical moment of the hero's engulfment by Mother Earth has captivated artists both ancient and modern, and I show an example here. As Pausanias observes, however, there were different traditions about locating the actual place where Amphiaraos was engulfed. This observation about ongoing disagreement over the place where the primal scene of the hero's engulfment actually happened is what I mark here as a placeholder for further commentary on further passages where Pausanias refers to the hero cult of Amphiaraos.

Here is my retranslation of the relevant passage in Pausanias:

{1.34.1} The land of Oropos, between Attica and the land of Tanagra, which originally belonged to Boeotia, in our time belongs to the Athenians, who always fought for it but never won secure possession until Philip gave it to them after taking Thebes. Their city [polis] is on the coast and affords nothing remarkable for any scientific-write-up

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[sungraphē]. About twelve stadium-lengths from the city [polis] is a sanctuary [hieron] of Amphiaraos.

{1.34.2} It is said that, when Amphiaraos was fleeing from Thebes, the earth opened up and received-from-down-below [hupo-dekhesthai] both him and his chariot. Except, it is also said that it did not happen here. There is a place called the Chariot [Harma], located on the road from Thebes to Khalkis. It was first among the people of Oropos that it became customary to think [nomizein] Amphiaraos to be a god [theos]. In later time, all Greeks [Hellēnes] have come around to thinking [hēgeísthai] the same way. I can enumerate [kata-legein] other humans [anthrōpoi] from back then who now have honors [timai] that belong to gods [theoi]; some even have cities dedicated to them, such as Elaious in Chersonnesus, dedicated to Protesilaos, and Lebadea of the Boeotians, dedicated to Trophonios. The people of Oropos have both a temple [nāos] and a white marble statue [agalma] of Amphiaraos.

Here I offer relevant commentary, epitomized from [H24H 15§§33–34](#):

{15§33} The three cult heroes, as mentioned here by Pausanias, all qualify as theoi, 'gods', in the context of the hero cults that had been established in their honor. Pausanias says about Amphiaraos that the worshippers of this cult hero at Oropos considered him to be a theos, 'god', and all Hellenes eventually accepted such a status for this cult hero; in the same context, Pausanias then goes on to say that the same status of theos, 'god', was eventually accepted by all Hellenes in the cases of the cult hero Trophōnios as worshipped at Lebadeia in Boeotia and the cult hero Protesilaos as worshipped in the Chersonesus. Such a formulation is typical of the era of Pausanias, the second century CE, by which time the distinctly localized aura of hero cults was receding and giving way to the far brighter Panhellenic publicity that was being generated by the most famous cult heroes of the time, such as the triad of Amphiaraos, Trophōnios, and Protesilaos. That said, I should emphasize that this triad of cult heroes was already famous in the era of Herodotus, who lived over 600 years earlier than Pausanias. In the case of Protesilaos, Herodotus gives him a most significant role as a cult hero who guards against injustice, as we see especially at 9.120.1–2; in the case of Amphiaraos and Trophōnios, Herodotus at 1.46.2 mentions both of them together in the context of narrating oracular consultations made by Croesus, king of the Lydians, at the sites where these two cult heroes were worshipped. Still, my point remains that the mysteries concerning the death and the resurrection of all three of these cult heroes were becoming ever less mysterious in the era of Pausanias. Correspondingly, the eventual status of such heroes as theoi, 'gods', became ever more obvious to all.

{15§34} The death of Amphiaraos is a most telling example. In the version of the relevant myth as retold by Pausanias at 1.34.2, Amphiaraos is riding back home on his war chariot after the defeat of the Seven against Thebes, when suddenly the earth opens up underneath and swallows him—speeding chariot and horses and all; and, at the spot where this engulfment happened, there is a hieron, 'sacred space', where worshippers of the hero come to consult him, though Pausanias observes that there was some disagreement about matching the place of the ritual consultations with the actual place of the engulfment. In any case, the engulfment of Amphiaraos by the earth is a sign of his death and of his subsequent return from death as a cult hero. In *Odyssey* 15, lines 247 and 253, the death of Amphiaraos after the expedition against Thebes is made explicit, though it is only implicit in the references to the engulfment of this same hero as narrated in the songs of Pindar, at *Olympian* 6.14, *Nemean* 9.24–27, 10.8–9. The poetic reticence we see in Pindar's songs about mentioning the actual death of Amphiaraos at the moment of his engulfment by the earth is a sign, I argue, of a keen awareness about the subsequent resurrection of the hero. Further comments at BA 154, 204 = [9§5,10§41n3](#).

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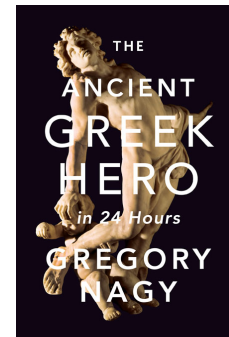
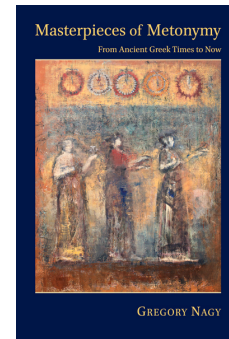
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