



Questions While Viewing Greek Myths and Rituals Through the Lens of Pausanias, IV: Is Athena, Viewed Theologically, a Person?

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Questions while viewing Greek myths and rituals through the lens of Pausanias, IV: Is Athena, viewed theologically, a person?

May 8, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2020.05.08 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In the previous posting, [Classical Inquiries 2020.05.01](#), I asked this question: is “Athena” the name of a person or of a place? And my answer was: “Athena” is the name of a place that we know as Athens. I backed up that answer by arguing against the assumption that the city of Athens was named after a goddess who was already named “Athena”. Rather, I argued for a different idea: that the goddess Athena was named after Athens—or, to be more precise, after the citadel or acropolis of Athens. But that is not the same thing as arguing that Athens came first, as it were, and that the goddess named Athena came second. I was making an argument about the name of Athena, not about her identity. And, as I argue more fully in this posting, it is only the naming of the goddess as Athena that came second, but the idea of the goddess came first: *she was already there, if we view her theologically*. The goddess seems secondary only if we make the mistake of equating her name with *who she is as a goddess*, as a divinity who is worshipped by her people. As a goddess, *Athena is her own person*, whatever her name may be. It is only when we view her name etymologically, that is, from the standpoint of linguistics, that *Athēnē* can be explained as the name of a place. Yes, the name is a place-name, as I showed in the previous posting. But she is not the name. As I just said, she is her own person. And, as a person, as a divine persona, she personifies whatever is mentally connected with her. In the painting I have chosen for the lead illustration, we view the solitary goddess looming over her acropolis. Her bronze statue, no longer extant, is seen here in the eternal role of this goddess as guardian of her city and her people. That is how she connects with her own space, and with everything that she personifies in that space.



“The Acropolis at Athens” (1846), by Leo von Klenze (German, 1784–1864). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

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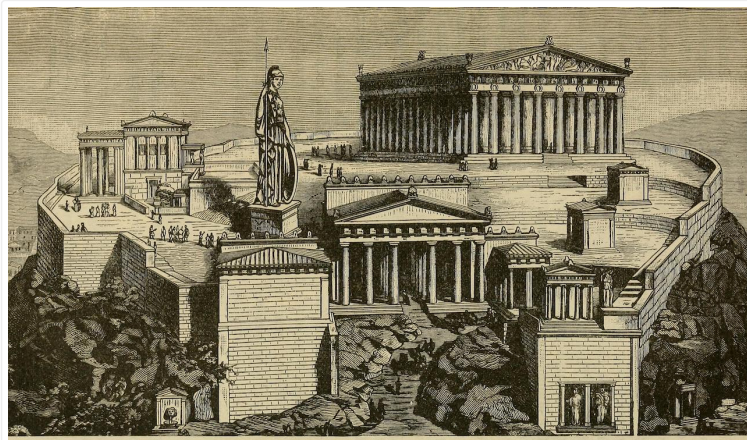
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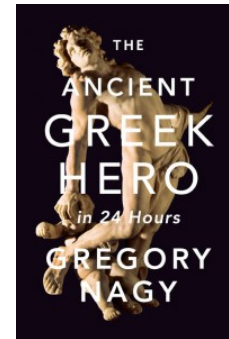
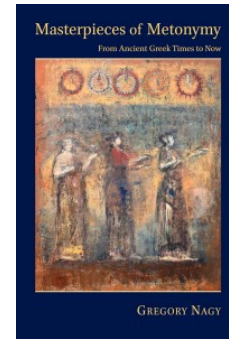
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RESTORATION OF THE ACROPOLIS OF ATHENS.

Restoration of the acropolis of Athens. From Philip Van Ness Myers, *A general history for colleges and high schools* (Boston: 1889), p. 181. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.



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Fig. 80. The Acropolis of Athens, restored.

The appearance of the Periclean building program as of the late 5th century BCE. From Wilhelm Lubke, *Outlines of the history of art* (trans. Clarence Cook; New York: 1881), vol. 1, fig. 11. [Image](#) via Flickr, shared under a [CC BY-NC 2.0](#) license.

§1. As I have been arguing, then, the citadel or acropolis of the ancient Greek city known as Athens was a place that became personified as the goddess known as Athena. What I also argue in the present posting, however, is something more: that the citadel of Athens was not the only place that ancient Greek worshippers could personify as the goddess.

§2. As we learn from evidence collected by Pausanias, he visited many other ancient Greek locales where a prominently elevated local landmark could be viewed as the personification of a goddess named Athena. Such a landmark could be (A) a citadel or (B) a mountaintop or even (C) a headland jutting out into the sea. Whatever the specific form of the landmark happened to be, it was further marked by a temple or a shrine or some other such form of sanctuary that was built on top, and such a building was sacred to a goddess named Athena. Inside the sacred space of the sanctuary-on-high would be a statue of the goddess, and the oldest form of such statues would be wooden, carved as a personification of Athena—even if any superficial resemblance to a humanoid goddess turned out to be minimal.

§3. Such personification of the goddess as a statue is enhanced in the language of Pausanias, who often speaks of any given statue of Athena as if that statue were the goddess herself, seen in person. In this way, Athena the person can become the syntactical substitute of Athena the statue. What I just formulated linguistically, however can be reformulated theologically: the statue of Athena, situated in her sanctuary-on-high, is really Athena herself, who confers her identity not only on her sacred abode but also on everything she sees from her lofty vantage point. That everything is her very own place, inhabited by natives of that place who worship her as the personification of their place.

§4. So, even in the era of Pausanias, who lived in the second century CE, there still existed many different local goddesses by the name of Athena, and they could still personify many different locales besides the city known as Athens. But here I must highlight a big change that has already happened by this time: by now, in the era of Pausanias, only the faintest traces of other cities still known by the name "Athens" have

survived. The name "Athens"—that is, the elliptic plural form *Athênai*—was by now reserved for one and only one city, the classical city of Athens in Attica. And this big change creates a big problem. In the post-classical era of Pausanias, the accepted morphology for the name of Athena was *Athênâ*, which is a contracted form of adjectival *Athēnaiâ* and which can be translated as meaning, etymologically, "Our Lady of Athens". When I translate "Athens" here, however, I mean merely the name of a place—and that place did not have to be the Athens that we know as the classical city of Athens in Attica. In the dialect family of the ancient Greek language known as Dorian, for example, I can reconstruct the pre-classical form of this place-name as *Athânā*, corresponding to *Athênē* in Homeric Greek, which as we saw in the previous posting refers at *Odyssey* 7.78 to a place called "Athena", not to the goddess who is elsewhere called by that name. And my reconstruction *Athânā* for a non-classical place-name that could also refer to the personified goddess of whatever place is being named that way will in fact fit all classical Greek dialects other than Ionic and Attic, which was the dialect of Athens and of the whole region of Attica, dominated by the city of Athens in the historical era. To go one step even further, I can say that a pre-classical place-name like *Athânā* would fit even the Greek dialects that were spoken in the era of the Mycenaean Empire in the second millennium BCE.

§5. In postings to come, I will analyze specific references made by Pausanias to the goddess whom he calls *Athênâ* as she is worshipped in a wide variety of locales other than Athens. In each case, we can see her statue—or we can say we see the goddess herself—as she abides in her sanctuary on high, looking out at the vista that is the locale bearing her name and manifesting herself in her role as the eternal guardian of the local people who live under her divine gaze.

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