



On Herakles as a model for the athlete Milo of Croton

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On Herakles as a model for the athlete Milo of Croton

May 10, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2019.05.10 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. The death of my friend Marcel Detienne on March 21, 2019 has been a very sad loss. Included among the many who mourn this loss are those devoted colleagues of his who follow his lead in pursuing comparative studies that combine the disciplines of classics and anthropology. Marcel had been ailing for some time, and I, as one of those colleagues, produced an earlier essay, [Nagy 2018.10.11](#), in an attempt to cheer him on. Now that he is dead, I feel the need to cheer myself up, conversely, by recalling some examples of the intellectual legacy left behind by this prodigiously creative thinker. And there are so many examples to recall. I start somewhere, anywhere, by offering some thoughts inspired by an article published by a young Detienne, back in 1960, concerning Herakles as a model hero for the followers of Pythagoras. And I will concentrate on the athlete Milo of Croton, who, as Detienne shows, modeled himself on Herakles as a “Pythagorean hero.”



Herakles with club and Olympic garland and lionskin and bow. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. In the picture that I show immediately above, as also on the cover of this posting, we see an ancient representation of the hero Herakles. This image comes from “Side A” of an Attic red-figure calyx-krater, dated 460–450 BCE, which was found in Orvieto and is now housed in the Louvre. In what follows, I will analyze four visual markers we see in this picture of Herakles, and the first three of these markers are directly relevant to the argument made by Detienne (1960)—about Herakles as a “Pythagorean hero”:

1. Herakles holds a club in his right hand.
2. Herakles wears the skin of the Nemean Lion.
3. Herakles wears a garland made from the leaves of the olive tree (as I argue—so, not from the leaves of the laurel bush, as we read in the museum catalogue of the Louvre).
4. Herakles holds a bow in his left hand.

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§2. I have two more pictures to show, immediately below. They are both photographs, taken from two different angles, of a non-ancient representation of the athlete Milo of Croton. It is a marble sculptural ensemble, dating from 1754 and created by Étienne Maurice Falconet. This work of art, like the ancient vase painting that I already showed above, is likewise housed in the Louvre. I show here the two photographs of the sculpture showing Milo in a pose that conveys the final agonizing moments of a most painful death.



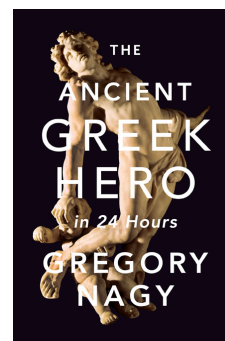
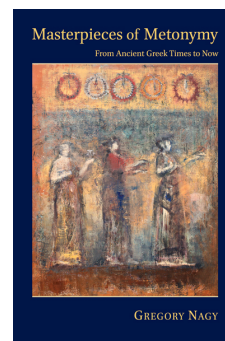
Milo of Croton and the lion. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.



Milo of Croton and the lion. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§3. So, what does the representation of Milo in this modern piece of sculpture have to do with the representation of Herakles in the ancient painting? Here is where the article of Detienne (1960) becomes pivotal. As he argues, and most persuasively so, Milo of Croton was a follower of Pythagoras, and, precisely because he was a follower, he modeled himself on the hero Herakles. The article of Detienne (1960) highlights, as the starting point for his argumentation, a remarkable narrative about such modeling in the context of an enormous battle that took place in 510 BCE between two leading cities in Magna Graecia, namely, Sybaris and Croton. The source for this narrative is a historian who flourished in the first century BCE, Diodorus of Sicily (12.9.5–12.10.1):

στρατευσάντων δ' ἐπ' αὐτοῖς τῶν Συβαριτῶν τριάκοντα μυριάσιμ ἀντετάχθησαν οἱ Κροτωνιάται δέκα μυριάσι, Μίλωνος τοῦ ἀθλητοῦ ἡγουμένου καὶ διὰ τὴν ὑπερβολὴν τῆς τοῦ σώματος ῥώμης πρώτου τρεψαμένου τοὺς καθ' {12.9.6} αὐτὸν τεταγμένους, ὁ γὰρ ἀνὴρ οὗτος, ἐξάκις Ὀλύμπια νενικηκῶς καὶ τὴν ἀλκίην ἀκόλουθον ἔχων τῆ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα φύσει, λέγεται πρὸς τὴν μάχην ἀπαντῆσαι κατεστεφανωμένους μὲν τοῖς Ὀλυμπικοῖς στεφάνοις,



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διεσκευασμένους δὲ εἰς Ἡρακλέους σκευὴν λεοντῆ καὶ ῥοπάλω· αἴτιον δὲ γενόμενον τῆς νίκης {12.10.1} θαυμασθῆναι παρὰ τοῖς πολίταις.

When the Sybarites, 300,000 of them, collided in battle with the Crotoniates, who were 100,000 in number, the leader of the men of Croton was Milo the athlete [āthlētēs], and, by way of the overflow in his bodily strength, he was the first to turn the tide of battle against the enemy ranks facing him. And that was because this man, who had won six victories in the Olympics, and who had an inner-force [alkē] that matched his physique, is said to have faced the battle while crowned with six garlands that he had won in the Olympics and while outfitted, in the mode of Herakles, with a lionskin and a club. Having become the one-who-was-responsible [aitios] for the victory, he was admired as a wonder by the citizens [of Croton].

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§4. This battle between the Sybarites and the Crotoniates effectively finished off the defeated city of Sybaris, which was now destroyed by the victorious city of Croton. And the man who had urged the Crotoniates to initiate the battle, as it is made explicit in an earlier part of the narrative of Diodorus (12.9.4), was Pythagoras, who was at the time a dominant political and cultural figure in the city of Croton. In a second article about Pythagoras, Detienne (1970) has shown that the teachings of Pythagoreans about dietary norms, traditionally linked with vegetarianism (Diogenes Laertius 8.20), seem to have been compatible with symmetrically opposite norms of dieting for warriors and athletes as represented by Milo: this follower of Pythagoras ostentatiously presented himself as a superhuman carnivore, and there are many different ancient stories about Milo's prodigious cravings for meat, especially for beef and veal (I cite here just one example of such reportage: Athenaeus 10.412e–f). Here too we can see an example of Milo's modeling himself on Herakles, who is celebrated as a founder of the practice of sacrificing cattle (Timaeus FGH 566 F 164 via Diodorus 5.4.2).

§5. In stories about Milo, his attempts to model himself on the hero Herakles can also be seen as the cause of his own undoing. Here I circle back to the sculptural ensemble that I highlighted in §2, where we see a visual retelling of an ancient story reported by Strabo (6.1.12 C263): it is said that Milo, all alone in the wilderness, came upon the stump of a mighty tree, and he felt so challenged by the fact that wedges had been driven into a crack in the stump that he inserted his hand in order to split the stump completely in two, but the wedges fell out and the crack snapped shut on his hand, trapping him: along came a lion that then attacked and devoured the mighty athlete. There is another variant of this story in Pausanias 6.14.8, but I like better the version that I just retold, where the attacking beast is pictured as a lion. I see here an ironic ending for a man who wore the lionskin of Herakles in the proudest moment of his life.

§6. Before I draw this brief essay to a close, I signal two details about Milo and Herakles.

§6A. The first detail is about Milo. When I read in the story of Diodorus about Milo's wearing six Olympic garlands to battle, I am reminded of a comparable detail in Plato's *Ion* 535d. In this passage from Plato, the rhapsode Ion is pictured as already wearing a golden garland while competing for first prize at the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens. I infer from the passage Diodorus that a competitor is allowed to wear a garland he won in a previous competition.

§6B. The second detail is about Herakles himself. In the ancient painting, shown in §1, where we see Herakles pictured with a club and a lionskin and an Olympic garland, he is holding a bow in his left hand. I think that the last of these four details is comparable to the bow held in the left hand of the central figure we see in the sculptural ensemble of the West Pediment in Olympia (details about this bow in Ashmole and Yalouris 1967:17). As I already hinted in an earlier post ([Nagy 2019.04.19](#)), I suspect that this central figure represents a youthful Herakles.

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