



# On the festival of the goddess Hērā at the Hēraion overlooking the Plain of Argos

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# Classical Inquiries

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## On the festival of the goddess Hērā at the Hēraion overlooking the Plain of Argos

March 20, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, H24H](#)

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§1. In H24H 13§§11–22 (see also 11§17), I quote and analyze the narrative in Herodotus 1.31.1–5 [Greek | English] about two young men named Kleobis and Biton who pulled the wagon that carried their mother, priestess of the goddess Hērā, in a sacred procession that started at the city of Argos and reached its climax at the heights [...]



Looking over the Hēraion south-southwest toward Argos

§1. In H24H 13§§11–22 (see also 11§17), I quote and analyze the narrative in Herodotus 1.31.1–5 [Greek | English] about two young men named Kleobis and Biton who pulled the wagon that carried their mother, priestess of the goddess Hērā, in a sacred procession that started at the city of Argos and reached its climax at the heights of the sanctuary of the goddess, known as the Hēraion. In terms of my analysis in H24H, this narrative is a “charter myth” centering on the importance of the goddess Hērā in defining the identity of the city of Argos and of its Argive population.

§2. Two days ago, on 18 March 2015, the group currently participating in the 2015 Harvard Spring Break travel study program with me visited the site of the Hēraion. On the previous day, 17 March, the same group had a conversation about this site with the noted archaeologist Dr. Heleni Palaiologou, who observed that the Hēraion had once been controlled by the “palace” of Mycenae in the era of the Mycenaean Empire of the late second millennium BCE and that the city of Argos took control of the sanctuary only after this city defeated the (by now) much smaller and much less powerful city of Mycenae in 468 BCE, many centuries after the heyday of the Mycenaean Empire.

§3. I argue that the Herodotean narrative about the priestess of Hērā and her two boys shows that the myth of Hērā, together with the rituals connected with the myth as localized at the Hēraion, preserves in many ways the world view of the Mycenaean era even after the eventual appropriation of this sanctuary by Argos.

§4. Then, yesterday, on 19 March, 2015, our group visited the Museum at Delphi, where the first thing we saw was the sculpted ensemble of Kleobis and Biton. The boys had been found in the Delphi excavations of the late nineteenth century, and so the world could now know for sure that Herodotus was right in reporting that the people of Argos had arranged for statues of Kleobis and Biton to be placed in the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi.

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§5. In the 2015 book *Masterpieces of Metonymy*, to be published both [online](#) and [in print](#), I argue in §142:

At the festival of Hērā at Argos, there was a seasonally recurring hecatomb, that is, a sacrifice of one hundred cattle, and the act of sacrifice is expressed by way of the verb *thuein* 'sacrifice' (in the book, I give the textual references). The ritual of this mass sacrifice was a culminating event of the festival, and the corresponding ritual that led up to this event was a grand procession that was held in honor of the goddess. The word for this ritual lead-up is *pompē* 'procession'. I find it most significant that this procession is the actual setting for a celebrated story told by Herodotus (1.31.1–5) about a priestess of Hērā and her two boys, Kleobis and Biton. The mother and the two sons are, all three of them, major characters in what turns out to be an aetiological myth about the ritual practice of sacrificially slaughtering one hundred cattle in the precinct of the goddess Hērā at the climax of the festival celebrated in her honor at Argos. Also involved as major "characters" in the story are two sacrificial oxen. The two boys, who are described as *āthlophoroi* 'prize-winning athletes', willingly took the place of the two sacrificial oxen, chosen to pull the wagon carrying the priestess across the plain of Argos—over a distance of 45 stadium-lengths—along a sacred way leading up to the precinct of Hērā (1.31.2). The oxen had been late in arriving at the starting-point of the procession (again, 1.31.2), and this lateness, in terms of the story, is the aetiological explanation for their replacement by the two athletes. If these two oxen had not been late, they would have been slaughtered along with the other ninety-eight oxen that had been chosen for the mass sacrifice of one hundred cattle at the finishing-point of the procession, inside the precinct of Hērā. At the feast that followed the sacrifice inside the precinct, the two boys died a mystical death after having pulled the wagon of the priestess all the way to this finishing-point of the procession (1.31.5). Thus, by way of this death that they shared with each other, the boys became sacrificial substitutes for the two premier victims of the animal sacrifice. [At this point in the book *Masterpieces of Metonymy*, I refer to documentation on the ritual practice of choosing two premier animal victims out of a mass of animals destined for slaughter at a sacrifice.]

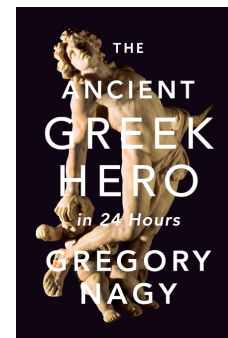
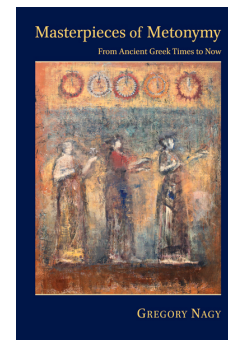
Here is a question that may arise: if the two oxen had really been destined for sacrifice, how would the priestess expect to get back to Argos from the Hēraion? My response is that such a question is based on a false assumption, since any procession that proceeded from the point of origin to the point of climax would not retrace its steps on the way back to the point of origin. Rather, the participants in the procession would disperse after the climactic sacrifice, and the participants would find their way back home on their own. Here is an example of what I mean, taken from the erotic novel *A Tale of Ephesus* attributed to one Xenophon of Ephesus (the translation is mine):

1.3.1 When the procession [*pompē*] finally reached its culmination [*telos*] and the whole crowd entered the sacred [*hieron*] space in order to make sacrifice [*thuein*] and when the arrangement [*kosmos*] of the procession [*pompē*] was finally dissolved and all the men and women entered the same space, as well as all the epebes and girls, then it was that . . .

In this case, where the procession involves the worship of the goddess Artemis in Ephesus, not of Hērā in Argos, it is made clear that the procession comes to an end after the sacrifice. So also in the case of the comparable event described by Herodotus, as I argue, the procession comes to an end after the sacrifice of one hundred cattle. In the case of the prototype of this procession, however, only 98 of the cattle would have been sacrificed because the two boys had been substituted for the oxen who were late to arrive for the beginning of the procession.

§6. For me, then, the narrative of Herodotus about Kleobis and Biton brings together the importance of the goddess Hērā for the population of Argos and, earlier, for the entire Mycenaean Empire, which had once asserted its wealth, power, and prestige at the great feast of Hērā culminating in the sanctuary of the goddess at the Hēraion. In a later conversation, I hope to compare this feast at the sanctuary of Hērā near Argos with the feast at the sanctuary of Hērā, Zeus, and Dionysus at a place called Messon on the island of Lesbos. At that feast, I will argue, the master singer could be figured as Sappho herself.

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