The Sign of the Hero: A Prologue to the Heroikos of Philostratus

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The traditional practice of worshipping heroes, commonly known as “hero cult,” is a basic historical fact of ancient Greek civilization, and the evidence for it goes back all the way to the “Geometric” period of the first millennium BCE.[1] Paradoxically, references to this practice are not obvious—at first sight—in the prime media of archaic and classical Greek literature that deal most directly with heroes. Current research on the traditions underlying the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey as well as the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides has demonstrated the pervasive influence of hero cults in shaping the media of epic and [15|16] drama, but the fact remains that most references to the actual cults of heroes are only implicit in these forms of archaic and classical Greek literature.[2] It is the historians of the
classical period who give us the earliest explicit references to hero cults, and the most prominent example is the narrative of Herodotus about the cult of Proteus at Elaious (Histories 7.33, 9.116–120).[3] And yet, even in the medium of classical Greek historiography, the actual meaning of such a hero cult remains something of a mystery. That mystery, as we shall see, is intentional. In fact, mysticism is a fundamental aspect of ancient Greek hero cults, and the mystery of cult heroes like Proteus can be considered a tradition in its own right.[4]

In the narrative of Herodotus, the dead hero Proteus ‘gives a sign’, sēmaineι, to the living (9.120.2). What this sign ‘means’ (the same Greek word sēmaineι can mean simply ‘he / she / it means’—whence the English borrowing semantics) is made explicit by the narrative. Through a ‘power’ (dunamis) given to Proteus by the gods, the hero can uphold justice by punishing the unjust—just as surely as he can give a mystical sign, as (16/17) narrated immediately beforehand: an Athenian is roasting tarikhos ‘preserved fish’, and the dead fish suddenly come back to life (9.120.1). So also Proteus is now being called a tarikhos: even though he is dead, and thus a tarikhos, he still has the power to intervene in the world of the living (9.120.2). By implication, Proteus has mystically come back to life, just like the preserved fish.

Here is the context of the Herodotus’ narrative. Athenian forces have just captured the Chersonesus from the Persians, reclaiming for the native Greek population this region of the Hellespont—and taking as prisoner its Persian administrator. He is condemned to death for having violated the hero cult of Proteus at Elaious in the Chersonesus. As the Persian man is about to be executed, a teras ‘portent’ intervenes. The preserved fish that are being roasted by one of the Athenian captors for an everyday meal are suddenly resurrected, to the amazement of all. The non-Greek captive is now quoted as saying to the Athenian man:

"Ξείνε ἀθηναῖε, μηδὲν φοβέο τὸ τέρας τούτο—οὐ γὰρ σοὶ πέφηνε, ἀλλ’ ἐμοὶ σημαίνει ὃ ἐν Ἑλαιοῦντι Πρωτεσίλεως ὁ τι καὶ τάριχος καὶ τάριχος ἐων δύναμιν πρὸς θεῶν ἔχει τὸν ἀδίκειον τίνος ἔχει."  

Athenian stranger, do not be frightened of this portent [teras]. For it was manifested not for you. Rather, Proteus—is making a sign [ sēmaineι ] to me that, even though he is dead—and a tarikhos—he has the power [dunamis] from the gods to exact retribution from the one who commits wrongdoing.

Herodotus 9.120.2

Elsewhere, Herodotus uses the same word tarikhos to mean ‘mummy’, in explicit reference to mystic rituals of mummification in Egypt (2.85–2.89). In considering the most expensive and sacred form of these rituals, Herodotus says ostentatiously that he does not wish to reveal the name connected to this form (2.86.2). His opaque language here corresponds to other contexts where he expresses a reluctance to reveal the secrets of mysteries (as at 2.61, 2.86, 2.132, 2.170, 2.171).[5] In this context, it appears that (17/18) the mystery centers on the figure of Osiris, whose resurrection from the dead depends on the secret rites of mummification.[6]

The mystification surrounding the Egyptian prototype of resurrection, Osiris, is extended to the Greek hero Proteus by the narrative of Herodotus. The mystery inherent in the hero’s own cult is signaled by the double meaning of the word tarikhos—either the everyday Greek sense of ‘preserved fish’ or the hieratic Egyptian sense of ‘mummy’:

What the two meanings seem to have in common is the idea of ‘preservation’. In an everyday sense, rotting is negated by ‘preservation’ through the drying or salting of fish; in a hieratic sense, rotting and death itself are negated by ‘preservation’ through mummification, which is from the standpoint of Egyptian religion the ritual phase of the mystical process of immortalization.[7]

Ironically, when the dead Proteus ‘gives a sign’, sēmaineι, to the living, the Greek hero’s ‘meaning’ seems at first sight to depend on whether the word tarikhos is to be understood in the everyday Greek sense of ‘preserved fish’ or in the hieratic non-Greek sense of ‘mummy’ (Herodotus 9.120.2). But there is a third sense, both hieratic and Greek, and it depends on the meaning of the word sēmaineι:

In the image of a dead fish that mystically comes back to life, we see a convergence of the everyday and the hieratic senses of ‘preservation’. This image [in the story of Herodotus], where Proteus sēmaineι ‘indicates’ (9.120.2) the power that he has from the gods to exact retribution from the wrongdoer, amounts to a sēma or sign of the revenant, the spirit that returns from the dead. The hero Proteus himself is represented as giving the sēma, the ‘sign’ of his power as a revenant [from the heroic past].[8] [18/19]
The mystical sense of sēma ‘sign, signal; tomb [of a hero]’ is a tradition in its own right, well attested already in Homeric poetry[9] and this traditional sense extends from the noun sēma to the verb sēmainein ‘give a sign, signal; indicate’ as used by Herodotus to indicate the meaning conveyed by his own medium, the Histories (especially 1.5.3).[10] Within the overall narrative framework of the ‘inquiry’ or historia of Herodotus, the historian says what he ‘means’ at the very beginning of his Histories when he speaks authoritatively about divine retribution, using the word sēmainein to signal his meaning (1.5.3), and this ‘meaning’ is finally authorized at the very end of his Histories when the hero Protesilaos expresses his own meaning, signaled again by the word sēmainein (9.120.2).[11] Now it is the resurrected hero, not just the historian, who speaks authoritatively about divine retribution, and the semantics of sēmainein connect the heroic world of Protesilaos, the first warrior to die in the Trojan War (lliad II 695–710), with the historical world of Herodotus and beyond. (19|20)

But the hero’s meaning is opaque. The non-Greek speaker can claim that the meaning of Protesilaos is intended for him, not for the Athenian, let alone the native Greeks of the Chersonesus who worship Protesilaos as their local hero. Who, then, is the intended receiver, the destinataire, of the meaning of Protesilaos? The historian does not say, and in this regard his meaning, too, is opaque:

When Herodotus ‘indicates’, sēmainei, he is indirectly narrating the actions of the gods by directly narrating the actions of men. And the most powerful ‘indication’ is the sēma of the hero, whose message is also his medium, the tomb. The double meaning of sēma as both ‘tomb’ and ‘indication, sign’ is itself a monument to the ideology inherent in the ancient Greek institution of hero cults—an ideology that appropriated the very concept of meaning to the tomb of the hero.[12]

The opaqueness of cult heroes like Protesilaos is a tradition in its own right, grounded in the mysteries (mustēria) of local initiation rituals. [13] In general, opaque signification is a vital aspect of the traditional essence of hero cults. […] {20|21}

When Herodotus narrates the teras ‘portent’ about the tarikhos ‘preserved fish’ that come back to life while they are being roasted for an everyday meal, the narrative is identified as a local tradition originating with the native Greeks of the Chersonesus, the site of Protesilaos’ hero cult: kai teōi … legetai hupo Khersonēsiteōn … tarikhous optōnti teras genesthai toionde ‘and it is said by the people of the Chersonesus that the following portent [teras] happened to a person who was roasting tarikhos’ (Herodotus 9.120.1). Similarly in Philostratus, the narrative about the same portent is described as an ancestral tradition linked to the same site, specifically, the sacred space of Protesilaos at Elaious: to de ge hieron en hōi, kata tous pateras ‘the sacred space in which, in the time of the ancestors …’ (Heroikos 9.5). In Philostratus, however, there is no direct application of the word tarikhos to Protesilaos himself: to … hieron … eph’ hōi και to tarikhos anabionai phasi ‘the sacred space … in which they say that even the tarikhos came back to life [anabionai]’ (Heroikos 9.5). I take it that tarikhos here applies to the preserved fish directly: even ό [kai] they came back to life from the dead. The word tarikhos applies to Protesilaos only indirectly: the idea that he too came back to life from the dead is merely implicit. In the narrative of Herodotus, by contrast, the initial mention of the roasting of tarikhos (9.120.1) is followed up at a later moment with a direct application of the word to Protesilaos himself, when the Persian herald is quoted as interpreting the portent:

ο δὲ Ἀρταύκης, ὃς ἐδέ τὸ τέρας, καλέσας τὸν ὁππάντα τούς ταρίχους ἔφη: “Ξείνη Ἀθηναῖε, μηδὲν φοβέο τὸ τέρας τούτο—οὐ γάρ σοι πέφησιν, ἀλλ’ ἔμι σημαινεῖ ὃ ἐν Ἐλαιοῦντι Πρωτεσίλεως δίκαιος ἕως τάρίχους ἐν δύναμιν πρὸς θέων ἔχει τὸν ἀδίκεντα τύνεσθαι.”

But when Artauktes saw the portent [teras], he called out to the one who was roasting the preserved fish [tarikhos], saying: “Athenian stranger, do not be frightened of this portent [teras]. For it was manifested not for you. Rather, Protesilaos—the one who abides in Elaious—is making a [21|22] sign [sēmainei] to me that, even though he is dead—and a tarikhos—he has the power [dunamis] from the gods to exact retribution from the one who commits wrongdoing.”

Herodotus 9.120.2

Throughout the Heroikos of Philostratus, there is a sharp contrast being made between the special understanding of the initiated—in this case, he happens to be a local Greek ampelourgos ‘vineyard-worker’ in the hero’s sacred space—and the everyday understanding of the uninitiated—in this case, he happens to be a non-local non-Greek, from Phoenicia. This special understanding is conveyed by words that have a special meaning for the initiated but an everyday meaning for the uninitiated. The process of initiation allows the new initiate—hereafter I will refer to him as the ‘initiand’—to transcend the everyday meaning of words like tarikhos and to achieve a special
The details of such an initiatory process are vividly illustrated by Pausanias (middle of the second century CE), who describes the experience of ‘consulting’ the cult hero Trophonios in Lebadeia (9.39.5–14); at the end of his description, Pausanias admits that he himself had personally experienced this initiation by having once ‘consulted’ the hero (khρēsammenos: 9.39.14). The actual ‘consultation’ involves a series of ordeals signaled by concepts that seem obviously everyday at first sight but turn out to convey special meanings that are sacred, linked with the mysteries of hero cult.

In what follows, I offer my own translation of this crucial passage from Pausanias, attempting to approximate the ritual language as closely as possible, including the numerous repetitions and periphrases, and I highlight with underlines those words that seem to convey a special sacred meaning for the initiated while all along maintaining an everyday meaning for the uninitiated:

[9.39.5] When a man decides to descend to the place of Trophonios, first of all he undergoes a régime for an set number of days in a building [oikēma], and the building [oikēma] is sacred to the Good Daimōn and to Good Tukhē [Fortune]. In undergoing the régime there, he goes through various procedures of purification, avoiding hot baths; the water for bathing is the river Hercyna. He has unlimited access to meat from the sacrifices, for he who descends sacrifices to [22|23] Trophonios himself and to the children of Trophonios; also to Apollo and to Kronos, to Zeus with the epithet King [Basileus], to Hera Charioteer [Hēnikhōs = the one who holds the reins of the chariot], and to Demeter whom they name with the epithet Europa and say was the wetnurse of Trophonios. [9.39.6] At each of the sacrifices a seer [mantis] is present, who inspects the entrails of the sacrificial victim, and after an inspection prophesies to him who descends, saying whether Trophonios will be kind [eumenēs] and welcoming when he receives [verb dekhomai] him. The entrails of the other victims do not make clear all that much the thinking [gnōmē] of Trophonios. But the night when each person descends, on that night they sacrifice a ram over a pit [bothros], invoking Agamedes. [14] Even if the previous sacrifices have appeared propitious, no account is taken of them unless the entrails of this ram mean the same thing. If all the sacrifices are in agreement with each other, then each person descends, having good hopes [euelpis]. And each person descends in this way: [9.39.7] First of all, in the night, they take him to the river Hercyna. Having taken him, they anoint him with olive oil and wash him. Those who do this are two boys of the citizens, about thirteen years old, who are named Hermae. [15] These are the ones who are washing the one who descends and who attend to whatever is needed in their function as attendant boys. Afterwards he is led by the priests, not immediately to the oracle, but to fountains of water. These fountains are very near each other. [9.39.8] Here it is necessary for him to drink water, called the water of Forgetting [Lēthē], so that there may be for him a forgetting [lēthē] of all thoughts that he was thinking up to this point. Right after this, it is necessary for him to drink another water, the water of Memory [Mnēmosunē]. From this he remembers [mnēmoneuel] the things seen by the one who descended. Having viewed the statue [agalma] which they say was made by Daedalus—it is not revealed by the [23|24] priests except to those who are about to go to Trophonios)—having seen this statue [agalma] and having worshipped it and having prayed, he proceeds to the oracle, wearing a linen chiton and girding the chiton with ribbons and wearing the boots of the native locale [16] [9.39.9] The oracle is beyond the grove, on the mountain. There is a foundation, of white stone, in a circle. The perimeter of the foundation is in the proportion of a very small threshing floor. Its height is just short of two cubits. On the foundation stand rods. They are of bronze, like the bars holding them together. And through them has been made a double door. Inside the perimeter is a chasm [khasma] in the earth, not naturally formed, but artificially constructed as a work of masonry, according to the most exact specifications. [9.39.10] The form [skhēma] of this built structure [oikodomēma] is like that of a bread - oven [kribanos]. Its breadth across the middle one might estimate to be about four cubits. And the depth of the built structure [oikodomēma] could be estimated to extend to not more than eight cubits. There has been made by them no constructed descent [katabasis] to the bottom level. But when a man comes to Trophonios, they bring him a ladder—a narrow and light one. For the one who has descended there is a hole between the bottom level and the built structure [oikodomēma]. Its breadth appeared to be two spans, and its height one span. [9.39.11] So, then, the one who descends is lying down in the direction of the bottom level, holding barley-cakes [maza] kneaded with honey, and he pushes forward with his feet, forward into the hole; he himself pushes forward, eager for his knees to get into the hole. Then, after the knees, the rest of his body is suddenly drawn in, rushing forward, just as the biggest and most rapid river will catch a man in its torrents and carry him under. After this, for those who are now in the inner sanctum [aduton], there is no single or same way [tropos] for them to learn the things of the future. One person will see them, another person will hear them. To return and go back for those who descended is through the same mouth, with feet first, pushing forward. [24|25] [9.39.12] They say that no one of those who descended has ever been killed, except for one of the bodyguards of Demetrius. They say that this person did not perform any of the customary rituals in the sacred space, and that he descended not in order to consult [khρēsammenos] the god [17] but
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So also in the hero cult of Protesilaos at Elaious in the Chersonesus, the mystery of the hero is for the initiate to know and for [25|26] the initiand to find out. In reading the Heroikos of Philostratus, even the reader can assume the role of the initiand.

At the beginning of the Heroikos, the reader learns that Protesilaos experienced not one but two resurrections in the heroic past. The first time, the hero came back to life at Phthia in Thessaly after his death at Troy, all because of his love for his bride Laodameia (anabiōiē, Heroikos 2.9). Then he died a second time—and again it was because he loved his bride—only to come back to life a second time thereafter (anabiōnai, 2.10). Just exactly how he came back for the second time, however, is not revealed even to the initiate, who says to the initiand that Protesilaos chooses not to tell that particular ‘sacred secret’, that particular aporrhēton (2.11).[18] That was then, in the heroic past. Now, however, in the everyday present, the living hero continues to come back again and again, as a sacred epiphany or apparition, much like other heroes of the heroic past who likewise ‘appear in epiphanies’ or ‘show up’, phainontai (2.11). So speaks the initiate, and the initiand admits that he has a hard time believing all this: ‘I do not believe’, he says (apistō, 3.1). In other words, the initiand is not yet an initiate. Still, he wants to be a ‘believer’ (pisteuōn, 2.12). The initiate responds by proceeding to tell the initiand all about the epiphanies of Protesilaos, describing the cult hero’s interventions into the world of the everyday. Where is Protesilaos most likely to be sighted? The initiate reveals an array of places where the hero may ‘show up’, as it were: sometimes he is in the [26|27] Chersonesus, sometimes in Phthia, sometimes in Troy—a most notable of locations for frequent sightings of heroes who died in the Trojan War—and sometimes he is back in Hades (11.7). It is in Hades that he continues to have sex with his beloved bride Laodameia (11.8).

As the narrative of the hero’s epiphanies proceeds, a gentle breeze carries the sweet aroma of flowers in bloom, and the initiand is feeling refreshed (3.2–5). He remarks that the plantlife literally ‘breaths out’, anapneî, a sweetness of its own (3.3). It is the right season, the exact time, the perfect moment: it is the hōra (3.2, 3.5). One can begin to sense the hero’s sacred presence. Through a sort of hieratic metonymy, the breath of the hero himself animates the atmosphere, and Protesilaos is now revealing, apophainōn, the scent of the blossoms at their sweetest (11.3).[19] The hero’s presence smells sweeter than myrtles in autumn (10.2).[20] The perfect moment or hōra, in all its [27|28] natural beauty, becomes the ultimate epiphany of the cult hero.[21]

The secrets of the cult hero Protesilaos are clearly visible to the initiate: since these are things that are theia ‘divine’ and megalā ‘larger than life’, they will not escape the notice of those who are ‘cultivated’, kharentes (3.2). For the uninitiated, however, these same secrets are veiled in language that expresses what seems quite ordinary and everyday on the surface. About the cult hero Protesilaos, the initiate starts by saying to the uninitiated: ‘He lives [zēi] here, and we work the land [geōrgoumen] together’ (2.8). What image in life could be more straightforward, more everyday, than life itself? When the initiand follows up by asking whether Protesilaos ‘lives’ in the sense that he is ‘resurrected’ (anabebiōkōs), the initiate replies: ‘He himself does not speak about his own experiences pathos plural!’ (2.9). This absolutizing declaration is then followed by a series of qualifications: contradicting what he has just said, the initiate now goes on to say that the hero Protesilaos does indeed speak about his own death at Troy, about his first resurrection, (28|29) and about his second death—though he does not speak about his second resurrection (2.9–11).

A vital question remains: how can a cult hero like Protesilaos actually communicate with those who are initiated into his mysteries? According to the traditional mentality of hero cults, the answer is simple: whenever they come back to life, cult heroes are endowed with a superhuman consciousness. This consciousness of the hero, activated by hero cult, performs the basic function of ensuring the seasonality of nature, and it manifests itself in such specific functions as the healing of humans or animals or plants: in Heroikos 4.10, for example, Protesilaos is described as the iatros ‘healer’ of sheep, beehives, trees.[22]

For this superhuman consciousness to be activated, the cult hero must be consulted, as we saw in Pausanias’ description of his own
consulting of Trophonios at the oracle of that hero. Similarly in the case of Philostratus’ Heroikos, we see that a cult hero like Protesilaos has to be actively consulted by his worshippers: from the very beginning, in fact, the intent of the chief character, the worker in the vineyard of Protesilaos, is to make this cult hero his own personal ‘advisor’, xumboulos (Ionic for sumboulos; 4.7).[23] Whenever the ritual of consultation would fail, the worshipper says that he could know for sure, since the cult hero would be silent, esiōpa (4.8).[24] By contrast, the success of the consultation is manifested whenever the cult hero speaks.

Such consulting of oracular cult heroes concerns not only the fundamentals of nature as defined metonymically by these heroes. It concerns also the fundamental nature of the heroes (29|30) themselves. Their heroic essence has two aspects, one of which is defined by epic narrative traditions, while the other is defined by hero cult. In the Heroikos of Philostratus, these two aspects of the hero are treated holistically as integral parts of a single concept. Thus the process of consulting oracular heroes leads to the initiate’s knowledge about their epic aspects, not only their ritual aspects as oracles. As the initiate declares, cult heroes have their own knowledge of epic narrative because they are endowed with mantikē sophia ‘the skill of a seer [mantis]’, and there is an ‘oracular’ principle, khrēsmōdes, operating within them (7.3–4). That is why a hero like Protesilaos ‘sees all the way through’, dihorāi, the poems of Homer (7.5), knowing things that go beyond his own experiences when he, Protesilaos, had lived in the past of heroes (7.5–6); the hero even knows things about which Homer himself did not sing (7.5).

In sum, the Heroikos of Philostratus provides a model of poetic inspiration that centers on the superhuman consciousness of the oracular hero, which has a totalizing control of epic narrative. As we shall now see, this model is not an innovation but an archaism, stemming from oral poetic traditions that predate even the Homeric traditions of the Iliad and Odyssey.

Confronted with the idea that an oracular cult hero possesses total mastery of epic narrative, our first impression is that this idea cannot be reconciled with what we find in Homeric poetry. According to the poetics of the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey, it is of course the Muses who ‘inspire’ epic narrative. At first glance, then, these goddesses of memory seem to be the sole source for the superhuman consciousness that informs the content of Homeric poetry and gives it the authority to tell about the gods and heroes of heroic times. This authority, however, is actually shared with the heroes who are quoted by Homeric performance, as a closer look at the Iliad and Odyssey reveals clearly.

In his book about the “quotations” of heroes in Homeric poetry, Richard Martin has demonstrated that the “voice” of the poet becomes traditionally identified with the “voices” of the heroes quoted by the poetic performance:

My central conclusion is that the Iliad takes shape as a poetic composition in precisely the same “speaking culture” (30|31) that we see foregrounded in the stylized words of the poem’s heroic speakers, especially those speeches designated as muthos, a word I redefine as “authoritative speech act.” The poet and the hero are both “performers” in a traditional medium. The genre of muthos composing requires that its practitioners improve on previous performances and surpass them, by artfully manipulating traditional material in new combinations. In other words, within the speeches of the poem, we see that it is traditional to be spontaneous: no hero ever merely repeats; each recomposes the traditional text he performs, be it a boast, threat, command, or story, in order to project his individual personality in the most convincing manner. I suggest that the “voice” of the poet is the product of the same traditional performance technique.[25]

Recent ethnographic work on oral poetic performance traditions has provided typological parallels in support of Martin’s demonstration. In the Sîrat Banî Hilâl epic singing tradition of the poets of al-Bakâtûsh in contemporary Egypt, for example, Dwight Reynolds has sought—and found—an analogy for Martin’s model of the interchangeable “voice” of poet and hero in epic performance:

[T]he social reality of the al-Bakâtûsh poets involves a distinctly negative position for the epic singer within the greater social hierarchy; in marked contrast to the poet’s marginalized status in village society, however, are the moments of centrality, power, and “voice” he achieves in epic performance. This disjunctive persona has produced not only a fascinating process of deep self-identification with the epic tradition on the part of the poets, but has clearly, over generations, shaped and indeed constituted many aspects of the content of the epic itself—an epic tradition, as I have termed it, of heroic poets and poetic heroes.[26]

All this is not to say that the Heroikos of Philostratus has preserved for us a direct continuation of living oral epic traditions where heroes are being “quoted” through the supernatural consciousness of the heroes themselves. I have little doubt that the oral traditions of composition-in-performance, as still reflected in the hexameter poetry of the Iliad and Odyssey and of the “Epic Cycle” in general, had been
dead for well over half a millennium by the time Philostratus composed his *Heroikos*. Still, it is essential to stress that the traditions of hero cults were evidently still alive in the era of Philostratus. Moreover, the archaic mentality of seeking communion with the consciousness of cult heroes was likewise still alive. Even though the Homeric poems and the “Epic Cycle” were now literary rather than oral traditions, they still preserved, as traditions per se, a vital link with the rituals of hero cult. The *Heroikos* bridges the chasm between the mythical world of epic heroes and the ritual world of cult heroes. In this [32][33] masterpiece of the Second Sophistic, a continuum is still felt to exist between these two diverging worlds. The spirit of this age is captured by this formulation of the would-be initiate Phoenician in the *Heroikos* (6.3): ‘I dreamed I was reading aloud (anaginóskein) the epic verses (epos plural) of Homer’.

As in the *Heroikos* of Philostratus, we can see in other literatures as well the stylized efforts of literati to maintain a continuum between myths and rituals associated with heroes. A notable example comes from an anecdote, dated to the ninth century CE.,[29] concerning the rediscovery of a supposedly lost book, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* ("The Cattle Raid of Cooley"), which is a collection of "epic" narratives about Ireland’s greatest heroes.[30] This anecdote is in effect a "charter myth,"[31] explaining the raison d’être of the *Táin*. In terms of the myth, this book of narratives, the *Táin*, is equivalent to an integral epic performance. The myth narrates how this book was once lost and how the assembled poets of Ireland ‘could not recall it in its entirety,’ since they knew only ‘fragments’.[32] In a quest to find the lost integral book, the poet Muirgen happens to travel past the tomb of Fergus mac Roich, one of the chief heroes featured in the narrative of the *Táin*. It is nighttime. Muirgen sits down at the gravestone of the tomb, and he sings an incantation to this gravestone ‘as though it were Fergus [33][34] himself.’[34] Responding to the incantation, Fergus himself appears in all his heroic glory, and he ‘recited him [= to Muirgen] the whole *Táin*, how everything had happened, from start to finish.[35] As in the *Heroikos* of Philostratus, we see that the superhuman consciousness of the hero can take over or even possess the narration of epic.

In sum, the *Heroikos* of Philostratus makes it clear that heroes cannot be defined exclusively in terms of their epic dimensions, though this aspect becomes vitally important in the history of ideas about heroism, especially in view of the ultimate cultural prestige of Philostratus, we see that the superhuman consciousness of the hero can take over or even possess the narration of epic.

In terms of the *Heroikos* surrounding the prime medium that conveys these ideas, Homeric poetry. For Philostratus, the prestige of Homer and the Homeric hero is a bridge the chasm between the mythical world of epic heroes and the ritual world of cult heroes. In this [32][33] masterpiece of the Second Sophistic, a continuum is still felt to exist between these two diverging worlds. The spirit of this age is captured by this formulation of the would-be initiate Phoenician in the *Heroikos* (6.3): ‘I dreamed I was reading aloud (anaginóskein) the epic verses (epos plural) of Homer’.

**Bibliography**


Footnotes

[ back ] 1. On the history and archaeology of hero cults, see Snodgrass 1987:159–165. Two pathfinding general works on hero cults are Brellich 1958 and Pfister 1909 / 1912. Specialized works include Kearns 1989, Kron 1976, and Pache 2004. Snodgrass 1987:172 speaks of "the transformation in the whole attitude to the heroic past that came about with the westward spread of Ionian epic." Prior to this spread, he argues (ibid.), "it seems that on the Greek mainland (and at least some offshore islands) the idea of the 'hero' was linked to ancestor worship, and was not tied to one specific past era; afterwards, these attitudes had to be merged with the notion of an eternally receding 'Heroic Age,' set already in the distant past, and a prime heritage of the whole Greek world." For another line of argumentation, see Antonaccio 1995.

[ back ] 2. For epic, see Nagy 1979:9–11; also Nagy 1999:vii (in the new introduction of the 2nd ed.). For drama, see Henrichs 1993. In Homeric usage, a key word for implicitly referring to the cult of a hero is sēma, meaning, 'sign, signal' and 'tomb [of a hero]': see Nagy 1979:340-343; see also Henrichs 1003:171–172.


[ back ] 4. This point about the inherent mysticism of hero cults is relevant to the two articles cited in the previous note. Both these articles concern references to hero cults in Herodotus, but they differ in emphasis and in lines of interpretation. Whereas the article of Boedeker (1988) studies Herodotus' use of a traditional story about the cult hero Protesilaos as it relates to the narrative ending of the Histories, my article (1987) concentrate on Herodotus' use of the traditional language inherent in this story (as signaled by such words as sēmainein, oikos, and so on); this language, I argue, conveys not only the mystical agenda of hero cult but also the "subtext" of the entire narration of
sweeter worshipper of the hero when he says about Protesilaos (9.7): 'I spend time with him [autōi gar xuneimi], and wind, on which see Nagy 1999.

For another instance of a narrative featuring a tarikhos 'preserved fish' that comes back to life, see the Alexander Romance (ca. third century CE) 2.39.12: here the dead fish is washed in the Water of Life in the Land of the Blessed (Makares), and it epsukhōthē 'recovered its psyche'; on the relevance of this theme to the official Ptolemaic propaganda about the mummy of Alexander the Great, see Nagy 1990a:271–272.

Note the mysticism surrounding the funerals of heroes, as discussed in Nagy 1983b, rewritten as part of ch. 5 of Nagy 1990b (pp. 122–142, ‘The Death of Sarpedon and the Question of Homeric Uniqueness’). For a most valuable survey of ancient testimony concerning the tombs of cult heroes, see Brelich 1958:80-90. See also Rusten 1983.

On Protesilaos as a mystical cult hero, see Brelich 1958:198; for other heroes, see his pp. 118–123. The sense of mystery is neatly encoded in this observation of the worshipper, as portrayed by Philostratus: you cannot even see the cult hero Protesilaos while he is in the act of actually consuming the offerings left for him, since it all happens thaton ē katamusai 'quicker than blinking' (Heroikos 11.9).

With reference to this expression, involving katamuein ‘blink’, I draw special attention to the semantic relationship of the basic word muein ‘have the eyes / mouth closed’ to derivative words like mustērion ‘mystery’; see Nagy 1990a:32.

Agamedes was the brother of Trophonios. In the myth that corresponds to the ritual being described, Agamedes dies when the two brothers are buried alive, while Trophonios escapes with his life; later, Trophonios experiences the mystical process of engulfment by the earth: Pausanias 9.37.5–7.

Note that Pausanias considers the hero in the afterlife to be a theos ‘god’. There is a comparable reference to Protesilaos in Herodotus 9.120.3: here the quoted words of the non-Greek express the idea that he has finally recognized the power of the cult hero, and in this context he now refers to Protesilaos as a theos. All this is not to say that the hero is some kind of “faded god”; rather, in terms of the hero cult, the hero becomes a theos when he is immortalized after death.

It is relevant to note the suggestive use of the word pathos ‘experience’ in an earlier context: ‘He himself [Protesilaos] does not speak about his own experiences [pathē]’ (Heroikos 2.9). The speaker goes on to say that the aporrhēton ‘sacred secret’ belongs to the Moirai ‘Fates’ (2.11). In the formulaic language of epic diction, the name Prōtesilāos seems to be associated with the word proōtōs ‘first’, in the sense that this hero was the first Achaean to die at Troy (lliad II 702; prōtistos). But the name seems also to be associated with the root of peprōtai ‘it is fated’ (as in lliad XVIII 329), in that Protesilaos is linked with traditional epic narratives about the fate of the Achaeans and the Achaeanlāos or ‘people’ (Nagy 1979:70). A turning point in the plot of the lliad is the moment when the fire of Hektor reaches the ships of the Achaeans, and here the narrative focus centers on the ship of Protesilaos himself (lliad XV 704–705; 716–718; see also XVI 286). This same precise moment is figured as a turning point for the very destiny of all Hellenes as descendants of the epic Achaeans, in that the lliad equates the threat of destruction for the Achaeans’ ships with the threat of extinction for the Hellenes that are yet to be (Nagy 1979:335–337).

Such a traditional metonymy depends on a pre-existing traditional metaphor that pictures an interchangeability between breath and wind, on which see Nagy 1999.

In contexts of beautiful natural settings, the cult hero is conventionally eroticized, as here in Heroikos 10.2–4 and elsewhere; see especially 11.2, describing the urge of the worshipper to embrace and kiss the hero. A sense of personal intimacy is conveyed by the worshipper of the hero when he says about Protesilaos (9.7): ‘I spend time with him [autōi gar xuneimi], and no cult statue [agalmā] can be sweeter [hēdion] than he, that one [ekēinos].’ The worshipper’s experience of the hero as a real person, not as a cult statue [agalmā], is
here conveyed by the deictic pronoun ekeinos ‘that one’, which is conventionally used to refer to a hero who appears in an epiphany (see Nagy 1990a:200-201, with special reference to Mimnermus F 14.1 W and Sappho 31.1 LP). The deixis of ekeinos conveys the remoteness (‘that not this’) of the hero, even in the immediacy of his epiphany. The gap between the superhuman and the human is so great that it sets the superhuman apart from the human even in the process of attempting to bridge that gap in an epiphany. The human response is a sense of longing and yearning as experienced even during the immediacy of an epiphany. I refer again to Heroikos 11.2, describing the urge of the worshipper to embrace and kiss the cult hero. The convention of eroticizing this sense of longing and yearning is implicit, I further suggest, in the epic usage of potheîn ‘long for, yearn for’, as at Iliad II 703, 709. On one level of meaning, the warriors native to Phthia long for the epic hero Protesilaos as their leader. On a deeper level, however, the reference implies the emotional response of native worshippers who are ‘yearning’ for their local cult hero in all his immanent beauty; we may compare the application of potheîn to Patroklos at his funeral, Iliad XXIII 16. For other Homeric examples of similar two-level references to heroes of epic / cult, see Nagy 1990b:132–134 on the usage of the word dēmos (in the sense of ‘local district’) as an index of localized cult practices.

[ back ] 21. On the religious mentality of equating ritual perfection with beauty itself, see in general the work of Pache 2004. The concept of hōra as the ‘right season’ conveys the context of ritual perfection and correctness; in that sense, hōra is conceived as the perfect moment of beauty, as in Philostratus Heroikos 3.2, 3.5. The Modern Greek adjective orōs, which corresponds to ancient Greek hōraios, derived from hōra, means ‘beautiful’. On the formal and semantic connections of hōra and Hēra and hērōs ‘hero’, see Nagy 1996:48n79: heroes become ‘seasonal’ after they die and achieve mystical immortalization, but they are ‘unseasonal’ during their own lifetime in the heroic age (thus for example Achilles while he is alive in his own epic narrative is described as pan-a-hōrais ‘the most unseasonal of them all’ in Iliad XXIV 540). The formal connections between hōra and hero cult are evident in Heroikos 18.2–3, a passage that describes in explicit terms the ritually correct times (hōrai) for slaughtering herd animals as sacrifices to cult heroes; in this particular context, diseases affecting herd animals are said to be caused by an angry Ajax, in his capacity as a cult hero. In this context, such a belief is linked to the myth about the ritually incorrect slaughter of herd animals by Ajax (as dramatized, for example, in Sophocles’ Ajax).

[ back ] 22. On the ‘iatric’ function of cult heroes, see in general Brellich 1958:113–118. Cult heroes, when they feel benign, will cure illnesses afflicting humans, animals, and plants—just as they will inflict these same illnesses when they feel malign (see the previous note). On the phnēkē or sacred ‘frisson’ induced by a cult-hero’s presence, see Heroikos 6.4, 8.11, 18.4, etc.

[ back ] 23. See also Heroikos 14.4: Protesilaos is an ‘advisor’ sumboulos ‘advisor’ to athletes who cultivate him (cf. 15.5: Protesilaos is said to give oracular advice, khrēsai, to an athlete who consults him on how to win). Already in Homeric poetry, we see implicit references to consultations of cult heroes: in Iliad X 415, for example, Hektor boulas bouleuei ‘plans his plans’ at the sēma ‘tomb’ of Ilos, a stylized cult hero of Ilion.

[ back ] 24. Signals of initiation, such as ritual silence and ritual whispering, can be formalized as mystical names of cult heroes, as in the case of Sigēlos [‘The Silent One’] and Psithuros [‘The Whisperer’] respectively; see Brellich 1958:157.


[ back ] 30. There are two main surviving recensions of the Táin, as attested in: (1) the Book of the Dun Cow (Lebor na hUidre, eleventh century CE) and (2) the Book of Leinster (twelfth century). For editions of these respective recensions, see (1) O’Raillihy 1976 and (2) O’Rallihy 1967. For a synthetic translation, see Kinsella 1969.


[ back ] 32. There is a translation provided by Kinsella 1969:1–2.

[ back ] 33. Kinsella 1969:1. The concept of a blog ‘fragment’ of a corpus that has disintegrated is a traditional theme found in the charter myths of many cultures; for a brief survey, see Nagy 1996:70-74.

[ back ] 34. Kinsella 1969:1. We may compare the use of the word kolōnos at Heroikos 9.1, which I propose to translate as ‘landmark’; in this context, it marks the mound, surrounded by elm-trees, that ‘extends over’ (epēkhei) the body of the cult hero Protesilaos at Elaious in the Chersonesus. (The expression kolōnos lithōn, as in Herodotus 4.92, suggests the ad hoc translation ‘mound of stones.’) At Heroikos 51.12, kolōnos designates the mound that the Achaeans built (the verb here, ageirein, suggests a piling of stones) over the bodies of Achilles and Patroklos, situated on a headland overlooking the Hellespont (thus facing the mound of Protesilaos on the other side of the strait); at 53.10-11, kolōnos refers, again, to the tomb of Achilles, and here the word is used synonymously with sēma (53.11). In Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus, the place-name Kolōnos refers to a sacred grove (690, 889) where Oedipus’ body is destined to receive an
Philostratus or Lucius Flavius Philostratus, called "the Athenian", was a Greek sophist of the Roman imperial period. His father was a minor sophist of the same name. He was born probably around 172, and is said by the Suda to have been living in the reign of emperor Philip the Arab (244–249). His death possibly occurred in Tyre c. 250 AD. Some ambiguity surrounds his name. The praenom Flavius is given in The Lives of the Sophists and Tzetzes. Eunapius and Synesius call him a Lemnian; Photius a Tyrian. The "mystical," personal aspects of hero cult are clearly evident, for example, in Philostratus's On Heroes, on which see Nagy, Gregory, "The Sign of the Hero: A Prologue to the Heroikos of Philostratus," in Flavius Philostratus, Heroikos (trans. Aitken, Ellen Bradshaw and Maclean, Jennifer K. Berenson; Writings from the Greco-Roman World 1; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001) xv–xxxv. This is not to mention the varieties of healer ideologies attached to cults of heroes, for which see Speyer, Wolfgang, "Heros," RAC 14 (1988) 861–77, esp. 870; and Farnell, Lewis R., Greek H...