

Running From Olympia to the Isles of the Blessed Sacrifice, Athleticism and Cosmology in a Panhellenic Hero Cult

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Abstract: This study explores the ritual features of the Pelops cult at Olympia from roughly the sixth century BCE to the second CE. It attempts to arrive at a sense of the meaningfulness of the sacrificial operations the cult contained, as revealed in the writings of Pindar and Pausanias. Of concern is how the ritual sacrifice, the blood offering, discloses a sense of mortal, embodied existence as it was experienced by the Greeks. Additionally, it seeks to explore the relationship between athletes and heroes within this context. The historical sources already noted are informed by means of comparative description with relevant material drawn from the poetry of Homer and Hesiod.

Introduction

This study seeks to explore the meaningfulness of sacrifice in the ancient Greek hero cult context. While the sources reveal that heroes were worshipped and were offered sacrifice in a variety of ways, most of which were locally determined by the traditions specific to the worshippers, the heroes nonetheless occupied a discrete religious modality that was general to ancient Greece in its entirety; heroes and their cults had a both Panhellenic range of devotion and a coherently uniform religious modality within that range. Expressed as generally as possible, the hero was believed to have been a mortal who, after death, was granted cult honours, but, more typically, was regarded as the child of a divine parent.¹ Heroes in epic poetry were also believed to have been the last mortals of mythic time, the demigods of the Heroic Age, who existed in a time immediately preceding the contemporary age, when gods mingled freely with mortals.

¹ Eckroth (2007) 100-101.

Also, the heroes, despite their deaths, were regarded to have a strong connection with the living and, owing to this, were granted honours in the form of sacrificial cults in order both to placate their potentially destructive wrath and to curry their creative beneficence.

My interest here is to explore a specific cult, that of Pelops at Olympia, as a paradigmatic instance of hero worship given that it pertained to the entire Greek-speaking world. In attempting to arrive at the meaningfulness of the cult's sacrificial operations, I have engaged an inter-textual analysis that seeks to inform the details provided in the historical sources by means of the mythic utterances of the epic poets, Homer especially. In so doing, I wish to demonstrate that the sacrifice seeks to achieve a specific ritual objective, namely it serves as an allegorical form of alimentionation that placates the hero's anger and grief at being isolated among the dead and, most especially, serves to energize him to move joyfully to his immortal destination, the Isles of the Blessed, where he experiences the full benefits of undying fame. What is more, this ritual trajectory, from death and suffering to glory and immortality is also inscribed in the performance of athletic competition, itself a ritual activity that seeks to connect the accomplishments of the victorious athletes with those of the former mortals, the heroes of the mythic age.

The Pelops Cult in the Literary Sources

Writing in the 2nd century CE, Pausanias supplies invaluable detail to the sacrificial aspects of the Pelops cult first mentioned by the epinician poet Pindar over six centuries earlier.² In addition to the physical description of its precinct, the Pelopion, Pausanias adds clarity to the specific cult sacrifice, the

² While such a lengthy span in time may appear to invalidate bringing both together to reconstruct the Pelops cult in the ancient and classical periods, the precedent for doing so has been established by Walter Burkert (1983) 93-103. Archaeological investigation has effectively confirmed the continuity of the physical elaboration of cultic space in the Olympia sanctuary, from the 6th cent BCE-2 CE, leaving only the matter of victim selection as a legitimate point of contention.

haimakouria, or blood-offering, first mentioned by Pindar.³ Pausanias states that it was Heracles who first “sacrificed into the pit to Pelops” (Paus. 5.13.2). Continuing into contemporary time from the cult’s mythic foundation in the Heroic Age, the local magistrates maintained the yearly sacrifice to Pelops by sacrificing a black ram to the hero. The verb that Pausanias uses in his description is not appropriate to the “blood-offerings” Pindar speaks of, but to the sacrifice that precedes festal dining, *thuein*. However, in this particular instance, it is clear that the victim’s flesh is consumed by only one ritual participant, a temple slave identified as the Woodman. This curious figure was ascribed the ritual task of consuming the flesh from the ram’s shoulder and neck area exclusively, but anyone else who partook of the victim could not enter the presence of Zeus (Paus. 5.13.3).

Regrettably, Pausanias was not an eye-witness to the blood rites at the Games, and therefore it is arguable that the yearly sacrifice he describes differs from the *haimakouriai* mentioned by Pindar. While this imprecision is vexatious, a reasoned speculation as to the nature of the rites of Pelops at Olympia can still be managed from the relative wealth of detail.⁴ Most important in this regard is Pausanias’ description of the

³ Pindar *Olympian* 1. 90. The blood offering is a sacrifice that is directed to cult entities, such as heroes and the chthonic expression of certain gods, who were believed to reside below the ground. Typical of this was the use of a black coloured victim, sunken altar, night time setting, followed by the immolation of the victim, rather than a feast. Blood offerings were matters of purification and, in the hero cult context, appear closely related to the hero’s own murderous activity. The pouring of blood counteracts the lingering pollution caused by recollecting the hero’s hubris and therefore represents a preliminary ritual act required for creating the sacred conditions under which the feast, or banquet occurs (Burkert 1985: 80-82; 205). While this is most certainly the case, I wish to draw attention to its alimentary aspect insofar as it can be seen to revitalize the hero languishing in the grave, energizing him to partake of the feast in the sacred realm the poets refer to as the Isles of the Blessed.

⁴ The authoritative account of the Pelops cult under discussion is in, Burkert (1983) 93-103. I shall engage Burkert’s description in detail further below.

Pelopion, the hero's tomb,⁵ in which the following features are identified:

- Located at the fording point of the confluence of two rivers draining into the sea;
- Sectioned off by a wall and entered through a west-facing gate;
- Contained a grove of deciduous trees;
- Concealed a pit over which sacrifices in the form of blood-offerings were performed.

These identify the Pelopion as a hero-shrine of the funerary sort that conforms with Pindar's identification of it as the hero's tomb and the location of the blood offerings (*Ol.* 1. 90-93). Pausanias, in stating that Heracles first sacrificed over the pit, implies that the blood of the victim, the black ram, was drained into it as an offering to the hero. While the participation of the Woodman may mark an innovation of the rite introduced after Pindar's time, or it may relate only to the sacrifices held on non-Olympiad years, the type-defining prohibition against consuming the victim's flesh is evident in the details provided by Pausanias, including mention of the fact that it extended also to the seer. This ritual element, along with the grave site context, solidifies the funerary and propitiatory nature of the cult. In both Pindar (*Ol.* 2. 3-4) and Pausanias, Heracles was assigned the role of cult founder, and he set the precedent of pouring the blood into the grave pit in honour of his ancestor Pelops.

The Pelops Cult and the Olympia Festival

In his recreation of the rite, Walter Burkert conjectures⁶ that the blood-offering to Pelops was held under the full moon on the

⁵ The hero's bones were kept apart in a bronze chest close to the Artemis Kordax temple where victory dances were held (Paus. 6. 22. 1). The storied shoulder blade of the hero, gone by Pausanias' time, is recollected in detail (Paus. 5. 13. 4-6).

⁶ Burkert (1983) 96-97. Burkert comes to the conclusion that the blood offering to Pelops occurred on the night prior to the Zeus largely by means of a structural analysis of the site and the scholiast

night preceding the great sacrifice to Zeus. This would mean that the Games were well under way prior to the resident hero's ritual acknowledgment, at least this was so in the early fifth century, following the ostentatious refurbishment of the site in the mid-sixth. By Pindar's time, a five-day schedule was fixed and anchored by this moon; with the opening procession, boys' competition and equestrian events occurring under the waxing gibbous phase, and the Zeus sacrifice, the men's stadium events along with the victors' ceremonial banquet under the waning phase.⁷ While the precise scheduling of the Pelops cult within the broader programme of the Games cannot be confirmed by the sources, it most certainly was held on a night prior to the foot race and the Zeus sacrifice, an important fact that leaves either the night of the first day or that of the third day, the night of the full moon, as the two most likely possibilities. While the sources do not permit complete assurance on the matter, Burkert's scheduling of the blood offering on the full moon night prior to the Zeus sacrifice is entirely reasonable.

I shall return to the temporal dimension of the cult following my discussion of its spatial context, its location within the sanctuary itself. What I am seeking to draw attention to here

reference stating that Pelops was honoured before Zeus and the Sun.

⁷ The lunar chronology is alluded to by Pindar in *Ol.* 3. 20-23, and the five-days' schedule is given in *Ol.* 5. 6. By the early fifth century, the schedule was as follows:

- Day 1 saw the procession departing from Elis and arriving at the sanctuary at midday with the entry of athletes and officials into the precinct for the swearing of the oath, the determination of the program and the evening religious observances.
- Day 2 featured the stadium competitions for the boys.
- Day 3 began with the equestrian events and concluded with the pentathlon. The night was given over to the propitiation of Pelops.
- Day 4 was the climactic day beginning with the grand procession to the altar of Zeus, the sacrifices and then the men's stadium events beginning with the foot races and concluding with the fighting competitions.
- The fifth day was given to feasting the winners.

See Valavanis (2004) 148-151. Mallwitz "Cult and Competition Locations at Olympia" in Raschle (1988) 79.

is the way in which the specific topographical features of the Olympia precinct setting are taken up by Homer in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in order to situate the poems within a cosmological context. By recreating the setting of Olympia in his depiction of the Trojan plain, the Homeric poet appears to be drawing an association between the athletic competitions of the Games and the mythic battle undertaken by the mythic Achaean heroes to win Helen back from the Trojans. While this cannot be fully developed in this study, my hope is that a focussed treatment of the Pelops cult in relation to the Homeric narratives can be sufficiently persuasive as to encourage a broader, more sustained analysis of the Greek hero cult, Homeric epic and ritual athleticism such as the competitions at Olympia.

The Topography of the Olympia Sanctuary and the Homeric Depiction of the Trojan Plain

Olympia is situated on the bank of the Alpheus, a river with its sources in the mountains to the east, from where it skirts the slopes of Mount Lykaion before flowing into the plain of Elis. Joining its streams in confluence with the Cladius, a smaller river flowing out of the flatlands to the north, it drains into the Ionian sea a short distance from the sanctuary itself. These features are quite distinctive, especially the confluence of the Alpheus and Cladius which is located close to the fording point at the Olympia sanctuary's entrance. As Pindar states, the tomb of Pelops is at the fording point of the river Alpheus (*Ol.* 1.90-95). It needs also be noted that the Alpheus has many tributaries draining out of the mountains, of which Pausanias identifies seven as most important (5.7.1). This topographical information matches precisely the relevant features Homer⁸ attributes to the Trojan plain (see appendix).

⁸ The references to the rivers in Homer are as follows: The gathering at the west bank of the Scamander (having the divine name Xanthus) by the army following prayers, sacrifices to Zeus and a processional passing under the aegis (*Iliad* 2.442-468); the fording point of the Scamander 14.433; 21.1; 24.692); the meeting in confluence of the Scamander and the Simoeis (5.773-774; 6.4); the main tributaries watering the Trojan plain (12. 19-22)

Homeric Troy is located in a great plain with the Hellespont to its west and the vast Ida mountain range at its east. It is described by Homer as a land of abundance, producing exceptional horses which, in turn, have generated vast wealth for the plain's inhabitants. The Ida mountain range to the east of the Trojan plain has an ancient Zeus altar atop its highest peak, the Gargarum (*Iliad* 8.47-8). These tall mountains cup the beneficent winds, the North and West, and gather their clouds to dispense the life-giving rains upon their slopes. Draining down from the mountains, the rains collect into a very distinctive network of rivers, of which the Scamander (*Iliad* 2.467) is the main waterway. Before releasing its fresh water into the barren sea at the extreme westerly point of the plain, the Scamander joins in confluence with his "brother," the gentle-flowing Simoeis, and, in so doing, creating a river belt around the vast plain (*Iliad* 4.773-4). Sharing a common source in the eastern mountain range, where "cloud-gathering" Zeus has his precinct, the fresh waters cascade down the mountain slopes, collect into a network of rivers on the level ground of the plain and mingle together in the west before emptying into the salty sea. In addition to these two rivers, Homer names six other "divine" tributaries, forming a network of eight Trojan rivers.

Not only does this topography evoke an ideal pastoral setting (high mountains to the east, open sea to the west and a lush, level plain striated by a network of rivers) it also imprints an *imago mundi*, or a model of the cosmos as the Greeks had conceived it. Earth, in the ancient Greek conception of it, was belted by a world-encircling river, Oceanus, from which all rivers originate (*Theogony* 337-345). The abode of the gods, or course, was conceived of as having its placement atop Mount Olympus where the pantheon convened and worked to enact the will of Zeus. In stark contrast to the snowy peaks of Olympus, was the dim Tartarus, the underworld region, with its depth as far below the surface of the earth as the peak of Olympus stood above. In this way, the cosmos was conceived of as three layered, having the heavens at the peak of Olympus as the stratum of the immortals where they exist in perpetual beauty and vitality and the chasm of Tartarus as the lower region of darkness, death and banishment where the former cosmic rulers, the Titans, are kept in a state of banishment (*Theogony* 722-731).

In relation to the setting of the *Iliad*, the cosmic model expresses itself in the two main points of reference; the tomb of the eponymous founder of Troy, Ilus, which is located at the extreme west of the plain, where the Scamander and Simoeis join and where the fording point stands, and secondly, the Gargarum, the highest peak of the Ida mountains to the east, reflecting Mount Olympus, and the location of the ancient altar and where Zeus first fathered the Trojan people (*Iliad* 20. 215-218). In order to draw out the cosmic dimensions of these opposite points in the epic setting, two scenes may be recalled. Firstly, the Gargarum stands as the cosmic homologue to Olympus when Zeus is described as overseeing the events on the plain from its vantage point. Enacting his world-ordering justice from atop the Gargarum, “cloud-gathering” Zeus raises his golden scales in order to signal the outcome of the battle taking place in the plain below (*Iliad* 8. 47-50; 68-72). Additionally, the Gargarum is where the royal couple, Zeus and Hera, join in sexual union concealed in the clouds above the peaks (*Iliad* 14. 346-349). The high peaks in the east capture and gather the clouds, causing them to dispense their life giving rains which in turn collect together on the steep slopes to form the rivers that create the optimal conditions for a pastoral culture.

At the opposite extremity of the plain lies the tomb of the founder at the bank of the river. Along this bank, the fighting is always the fiercest and it is where youths die in vast numbers; it is where their souls depart down to the House of Hades (7.327-330). The confirming scene in which the tomb evokes the entry to the underworld comes at the final night of the poem, when Priam undertakes his night-time journey to Achilles’ hut in order to retrieve the body of Hector.⁹ Instructed by his wife Hecabe to pray to Zeus of Ida and to pour him libation, Priam sets out in a mule cart with the festal equipment selected for the ransom of his son’s corpse (*Iliad* 24. 228-237). Having received the favourable omen, Priam sets out through the gates with his herald, the aged Idas, on their westward journey across the fording point and into the enemy camp. At this point in the poem, the plain has been blighted by fire and the river clogged with the corpses of Trojan youths following Achilles’ return to the battle, evoking the gloom of the underworld. When

⁹ See Mackie (1999)

they reach the tomb of Ilus, they are met by the god Hermes, guider of souls into the House of Hades, who, disguised as the youthful attendant of Achilles, replaces Idas and takes up the reins of the mule cart in order to cross over the river and enter safely into the camp (*Iliad* 345-351).

The Trojan plain, belted by rivers sharing a common origin in the eastern mountains atop of which is located the Zeus altar, join in confluence at the extreme west where lies the resting place of the dead founder-ancestor.¹⁰ Thus, the rivers encircle the plain that has at its high point in the east (Zeus altar) the point where the life-giving waters fall from the heavens and reunite again in confluence at a fording point (ancestor's tomb) before washing out into the sea in order to re-form into clouds, get moved eastward by the winds and begin the cycle anew. This, to repeat describes an *imago mundi* that expresses itself at Olympia exactly as it does in Homeric Troy, despite the geographically distinct place setting. It must also be recalled that the Trojan War marked the cosmic struggle that put an end to the mythic Fourth Age, the age in which the demigods populated the earth (*Works and Days* 156-165) while Olympia recalled the cosmic struggle that put an end to the First Age, the Golden Age, and ushered in the reign of Zeus.

In concluding this observation, the geographical location of Olympia on the western coast of the Peloponnese shares the same cosmic template as Homeric Troy in the following way: Just as Gargarum lies in the eastern distance within the Ida¹¹

¹⁰ In the foundation myth of Troy, cloud-gathering Zeus first begat Dardanus, ancestor of the Trojan people, in the eastern mountains of Ida (*Iliad* 20.215-8), while Dardanus' great-grandson Ilus founded the polis (*Iliad* 20.216-7)

¹¹ Mount Ida is significant in the lore of Olympia as this is where the Daktyls trained Zeus to defeat his father Cronus after the earth had raised him there. (Paus. 5.7.6-10). Hesiod identifies this mountain, containing the cave in which Zeus was reared from a godling to become the ruler of the cosmos, as Mount Aegaeum in Crete (*Theogony* 484). Pindar, in his praise of Zeus the Saviour, identifies three iconic features of Olympia; the Hill of Cronus, the Alpheus and, finally, the "holy cave of Ida" (*Ol.* 5.40-41) The use of the word Ida serves as a semantic connector linking the epic setting of the *Iliad* with the district in which Olympia was located. This encryption is disclosed early on in the *Iliad* by Achilles when

mountain range of Troy, so too does Mount Lycaeum, site of an ancient Zeus shrine, stand thirty five kilometers to the south east of Olympia. At its western point, where the sanctuary is located, the meeting of confluence of two rivers occurs, just as it does in the Homeric Trojan plain. Rather than the Scamander and Simoeis, however, the rivers Alpheus and Cladius intermingle before they drain in confluence into the Ionian Sea. What is more, Pausanias identifies the same number of rivers watering the plain of Elis as Homer names in relation to Troy.¹² Just as the respective Zeus altars lie on the far off peaks on the eastern horizon, so too in both Homeric Troy and in Olympia do the ancestral founders' respective tombs lie in the western lowland, at the point of confluence between two rivers where a fording point is located. Homeric Troy, site of the cosmic battle that brings the end of the Heroic Age, the mythic time of the

he reminds his mother of the time she rescued Zeus from the divine revolt. Reflecting Zeus' defeat of the Titans, the hero recalls to Thetis the time when she brought up Briarius to Olympos and freed the father of the gods from his fetters. Briarius was one of the three Hundred Handers whose suppression within Gaia caused the first cosmic succession and whose hiding place underneath the earth was revealed to Zeus so that he could defeat Cronus and thereby achieve the third, final cosmic succession. Achilles states that the divine name of this monster is Aigaion, so named because he was better in strength than his father (*Il.* 1. 403-404) In so doing, the poet touches off a series allusions to Olympia, the site of the cosmic struggle that put an end to the Golden Age, within the context of the Trojan Plain, site of the battle at the twilight of the Heroic Age. While this point requires more development than I can provide it here, my main interest is to indicate the topographical correspondence between the Pelopion and the location of Ilos' tomb at the bank of the Scamander (*Il.* 24.349-350)

¹² The correspondence of rivers is as follows:

Troy (<i>Iliad</i> 12.20-22)		Olympia (<i>Paus.</i> 5.7.1)
Scamander	-	Alpheus
Simoeis	-	Cladius
Rhesus	-	Helisson
Heptaporus	-	Brentheates
Caresus	-	Gortynius
Rhodius	-	Buphagus
Granicus	-	Ladon
Aesepus	-	Erymanthus

demigods, is modelled on the same cosmic paradigm as the Olympia sanctuary, the site of the cosmic struggle that inaugurated the reign of Zeus and put an end to the Golden Age. Homer, in depicting the contests between bronze-clad Achaeans and horse-taming Trojans over the winning of Helen, embeds into the epic setting the ritual topography, the cosmological model in which earthly existence is played out, of Greece's most sacred Zeus shrine, the sanctuary of Olympia.

ii. Temporal Correspondences Between the Ritual Athletics of Olympia and the *Iliad*

The events related in the *Iliad* occur in the tenth year of the campaign. At the beginning of the epic, on the morning of the first day of fighting, Odysseus recollects to the Achaeans their gathering at Aulis ten years previously. He states that nine years have passed since their departure and, now in the tenth year, they shall win Troy (*Iliad* 2. 303-332). With the fighting set to begin, king Agamemnon holds prayer and sacrifice to Zeus at the Achaean encampment and forms the army into its battle divisions. As a means of emphasizing the sacredness of this event, the poet states that the goddess Athena stands over the warriors shaking the aegis of Zeus above their heads in order to implant courage into their hearts as they move in procession towards the plain (*Iliad* 2.421-468). After crossing the river at the fording point in silence, Agamemnon is joined by the Trojan king Priam and the two offer sacrificial oaths of faith prior to the commencement of the contests¹³ (*Iliad* 3. 96-110).

Once again, these preliminary events accord with the staging of the Games. Rather than gathering at Aulis before sailing to Troy, as the Achaean heroes do, the Greek athletes, their trainers and the umpires gathered in Elis on the tenth month following nine months of training in their respective homelands. Following their arrival, they underwent further training in the facilities under the plane trees of Elis (Pausanias 6.23.1). During this preparatory period, the umpires, the Hellanodikai,

¹³ In the scene that introduces Helen into the narrative, she is weaving a tapestry of the Trojan War. The battles between the armies fought for her sake are described as athletic contests (*Iliad* 3. 125-128)

whose task it was to match up the athletes in the contest heats (Pausanias 6.24.1), occupied a room built over the grave of Achilles, the magnanimous arbiter in the Funeral Games of *Iliad* 23.

Ritual Setting and the Relationship Between Heroes and Athletes

In bringing into focus the space-time correspondences between the Panhellenic *Iliad* and the Panhellenic celebration of the Olympic Games, I wish to draw attention to the ritual dimension of athleticism at Olympia by identifying a modelling process between athletic competitors and heroes of the mythic past. Both Burkert and Nagy have identified in the performance of athletic competition a ritual trajectory that proceeds from a preliminary condition evocative of death, the consequence of hubris, to one of immortality, or, rather, the form of immortality conferred by fame and glory. In this light, the athletes in training nine months before journeying to Elis adhered to dietary restrictions and other forms of abstinence that served to homologize this preliminary stage with that of “death.”¹⁴ This preliminary stage was of ten months’ duration, the first nine of which were spent in the athlete’s homeland under the supervision of their trainers while one month immediately prior to the festival was spent gathered as a collective body in Elis. As I have sought to demonstrate, this chronology reflects that of the campaign against Troy in the *Iliad*; the Achaeans, the mythic hero-ancestors of the Greeks and descendants of Pelops (Paus. 5.25.10), set sail from Aulis to gather in the camp at the Hellespont before crossing the fording point of the Scamander and entering into the Trojan Plain, taking Troy on the tenth year (*Iliad* 2.301-32).¹⁵ The name given to the army, the Achaeans,

¹⁴ Burkert (1983) 101-102; Nagy (1990) 118-119.

¹⁵ The name Scamander suggests athletic competition, as the *skamma* “the furrows” were the marker lines in long jump contests and were also wrestling pits. As such, the name can be seen to translate to mean “the Marker of Men”. See Mackie (1999) 497-489, in which the rivers of Troy substitute for the infernal waters following the blighting of the plain by Hephaestus in *Iliad* 21. Mackie very aptly identifies the night time journey undertaken by

roughly translates to “the aggrieved”¹⁶ and denotes the Greek-speaking collective gathered together to engage in “contests” for Helen’s sake (*Iliad* 3.126-8). The epic poem, when viewed in this light, does not memorialize a great accomplishment in the prehistoric past so much as it allegorizes the experience of athletic competition at Olympia by projecting its contextual features, its time and space, back into the mythic age of the demigods and the great battle that brought about the end of the Heroic Age. The *Iliad* does not recount the fall of Troy and the return of Helen, rather it relates the extreme sufferings endured for Helen’s sake as a means of establishing an effective link with the mythic past and, in so doing, generates a ritual association between the athlete and the hero.¹⁷

The ritual process of athleticism that seeks through the accomplishment of glorious deeds and the attainment of victory to move the contestant from a state of preliminary exclusion and a figurative death to the goal of victory and immortality through everlasting fame is, finally, embedded in both the blood offering identified in the Pelops cult. What I have attempted to demonstrate here is that both the setting of the *Iliad* and the ritual environment are modelled precisely upon each other, as a reflection of the *imago mundi* as the Greeks conceived it. As such both stand as sacred enactments of the same ritual experience, the movement from the conditions of death and the underworld (hubris), to immortal life lived free of care (dike). I now wish to turn my attention to the specific details of the blood offering as they are related by Homer, not in the *Iliad*, but in the *Odyssey*¹⁸ in order to demonstrate this same ritual process of generating life from death.

Priam under the guidance of Hermes to the huts of Achilles as an underworld descent.

¹⁶ Nagy (1990) 83-93.

¹⁷ Curry (2005). This association is the basis of Pindar’s victory odes.

¹⁸ Whereas the *Iliad* relates the tragic events in the life of Achilles who was fated to die before Troy fell, the *Odyssey* presents the return journey of Odysseus, the hero who successfully captured Troy.

The Blood Offering as Ritual Alimentation

The blood offering given to honour Pelops at Olympia appears to be reflected in the sacrificial procedures Odysseus follows in consulting the spirit of the seer Tiresias in *Odyssey*, Book 11. Firstly, attention must be drawn to the setting of the sacrifice as it retains the same elements as both Ilus' (ancestor of the Trojans) and Pelops' (ancestor of the Achaeans) tombs by the confluence of two rivers (*Odyssey* 10.508-515). Odysseus is instructed to sail to the ends of the earth, past the sun and across the Oceanus where a grove of poplar and willow stands. This is the cosmic grove of Persephone, the goddess who lives half of the year with her consort Hades in the underworld and the other half with her mother, the Olympian Demeter, the goddess who gnawed at Pelops' shoulder in her grief over her daughter. The grove of Persephone too stands at the confluence of two rivers, the Periphlegethon and Cocytus which mingle their waters before emptying into the Acheron. Leading the black ram designated for the rite into the grove, Odysseus digs a pit at the designated spot and sacrifices the ram to the spirit of the seer in a manner that is identical to the blood offering to Pelops at Olympia, with the exception that no one consumes any part of the victim.¹⁹

Sated and with his prophetic acumen enlivened, the seer describes to Odysseus the travails he must undergo in order to atone for his hubristic dishonour of Poseidon before he can settle into a long life of ease and prosperity. Finally, the seer adds the significant detail that his fellows, the people around him, will be blessed by his presence (*Od.* 11.134-137). This scene identifies a pattern of movement that contains the following features:

- It begins in the Grove of Persephone, the funerary locale where the blood offering is performed;

¹⁹ That the sacrifice was in effect a ritualized feeding procedure can be garnered from the identification of the other substances that were drained into the pit before the sacrifice occurred. During his prayers, Odysseus offers libation of a mixture of milk and honey followed by wine, water and white barley, a nourishing porridge that has a spermatic appearance and a appeasing effect for the dead who are radically separated from the world of life and growth.

- It points to a testing period of travails and hardship resulting from crimes against the gods (Helios, Poseidon);
- It concludes finally with the assertion of a life of ease and prosperity

This sequence of events suggests the ritual trajectory of athletic competition at Olympia. Reflecting the prospects of Odysseus after completion of his travails and his sacrificial propitiation, the victors too, following the contests and the sacrifice to Zeus, were granted eternal fame and the means of life at state expense for the duration of their lives.²⁰ Again, like Odysseus, the people around the victor at Olympia, his fellow citizens, regarded themselves as having been blessed by his “god-like” presence.²¹

Not only does the sequence of events suggest athletic competition at Olympia, the Grove of Persephone is described with features held in common with the Pelopion and the tomb of Ilus, and thus also evokes the ritual environment in which mortal accomplishments move those who achieve victory from death and exclusion to immortality and celebrity. Summarizing then, the blood offering to Tiresias identifies the following relevant features that connect it with the ritual setting of the Pelopion at Olympia:

- The sacrifice takes place in a land of eternal darkness (11. 15-16) that suggests the night, the western land beyond the sunset and therefore the gravesite locale of the dead;
- The locale is within a grove of poplars and willows (10. 509-510);
- It is located at the meeting of two rivers (10. 515);
- The ritual procedure requires a black ram as sacrificial victim (11.46);

²⁰ Pindar Ol. 1. 97-99. For the material benefits attending Olympic victory, see Barringer (2005) 237-238

²¹ The heroization of athletes is discussed at length by Currie (2005) 120-157. That the victorious athlete was regarded as a blessing to his countrymen is suggested by having a victor accompany the Spartan king in battle, see Barringer (2005) 228

- A pit into which the blood is drained serves as the conduit to the dead who await the offering (10. 517);
- The rite is the preliminary ritual operation in a broader worship of a god involving subsequent travails and sacrifices for the ritual performers;
- The sacrifice resolves itself with a prognostication of a long life of ease and prosperity following successful completion of travails.

The Blood Offering and Achilles' Race to the Isles of the Blessed

Later in *Odyssey* 11, Odysseus encounters the spirit of Achilles in a scene that is arguably the climactic encounter of the underworld journey, given that it is the meeting between the two epic protagonists. This particular scene too reveals a similar pattern of movement as the ritual process of athletic competition, moving as it does from a state of initial despair to one of joyfulness following nourishment from the sacrificial blood. This is evident in the following way: The spirit of Achilles, formerly the best of the Achaeans, approaches the blood in an initial state of disconsolate grief (*Odyssey* 11. 472). Achilles is depicted as languishing in the underworld and bitterly demands that Odysseus account for his presence among the dead. Responding to him, Odysseus takes an “obsequious” tone and identifies Achilles’ elevated status, first by recalling how he was honoured as a god in life and then observing how he enjoys a similar status in the world below. Despite this reverential acknowledgement, Achilles remains bitterly hostile, but thinks to inquire as to the well-being of his father and son. When Odysseus describes to him the exploits of his still-living son and confirms to him the fact that he fathered a noble man who has performed glorious deeds, the spirit of Achilles is transformed and relieved of the gravity of despair that afflicted him at the outset of the encounter. Odysseus concludes his telling of the encounter by stating how the spirit of Achilles, after hearing him speak, ran with bounding strides and with a joyful attitude across the plain of asphodel.

The Homeric depiction of the underworld is typically treated as a gloomy container in which the dead flit about as

quasi-substantial psyches.²² But such a morose and static view leaves out the fact that Achilles is transformed by the encounter with Odysseus. The spirit of Achilles is strikingly presented as transitioning from an initial state of bitter grief to a one of joy as he runs away across the plain from the Grove of Persephone towards an unidentified destination. The Grove of the goddess Persephone, who divides her year above and below the earth in equal measure, marks the point above the House of Hades, the underworld locale where the dead languish. But this is not the only afterlife destination identified by Homer who, earlier in the *Odyssey*, mentions also the Elysian Plain. This is in reference to the conclusion of Menelaus' life and identifies the hero's final destination situated beyond Oceanus where life is easiest for mortal men. The general inference is that Menelaus, like the heroes honoured in cult, is to be granted immortality and to live free of care beyond the earth-encircling river Oceanus, where he will be in the presence of the noble magistrate Rhadamanthys (*Odyssey* 4.561-5).²³ Tiresias' prophesy that Odysseus is to expect a life free of care followed by an easy death and, finally, to be regarded as a blessing to his people, alludes to a similar prospect as Menelaus is to experience. By analogy,²⁴ Odysseus,

²² Bremmer (1983) 84-85, Burkert (1985) 294. The Homeric presentation of the afterlife is typically placed in stark contrast to that of the Mysteries. The difficulty is that Homer is of course supplying a narrative in which the underworld acts as a setting and not, of course, putting forward a broader conception of the underworld. My treatment permits the narrative context the underworld supplies in the *Odyssey* to be seen as conforming to broader Greek conceptions, such as those put forward by Pindar, *Olympian* 2.53-83.

²³ Hesiod *Works and Days* 168-169, Pindar *Olympian* 2. 68-83. Nagy (1999) 167-173.

²⁴ See Cook (1995) 66. Who demonstrates the parallelism operating between the account of Menelaus' return (*Od.* 4. 351-480) and Odysseus' own *nostos*. In both instances the following features punctuate the homeward journey:

- A difficult return because the hero dishonoured the gods;
- A period of suffering and isolation in a remote place;
- Intervention by a goddess;

despite the difficulties of his current lot, can expect to feast on the Elysian Plain and enjoy the perfect justice achieved by the presence of Rhadamanthys after Poseidon's wrath has been propitiated and after he has lived out his long life of ease and prosperity.

The Homeric mention of the Elysian Plains as Menelaus' final destination, along with the future prospects Odysseus is to enjoy, identifies in my view the ritual objective of the hero cult. By means of the blood offering, the languishing hero, transits from the putrid House of Hades, where the vast legions of the anonymous dead accumulate and, "revitalized" through the ritual operations of cult, "runs" across the field of asphodel so that he can settle into the immortal feast with his similarly immortalized peers. This trajectory of movement from death and exclusion (hubris) to glorious acknowledgement and immortal life (dike), to repeat, also underpins the selective process of ritual athleticism as it was carried out at Olympia.

The Location of the Pelopion in Relation to the Other Ritual Areas of the Olympia Sanctuary

I have attempted to demonstrate that Homeric poetry has embedded the hero shrine at Olympia into both epic poems as a means of establishing a correspondence between ritual athleticism and hero myth. The contests undertaken by the bronze-clad Achaeans and the horse-taming Trojans for the sake of Helen evoke the travails of athletic performance undertaken by the Greek men and boys under the midsummer heat at Olympia. The selective process of competition, ritualized as an acknowledgement of Zeus' cosmic supremacy and as an attestation of his abiding rule, seeks to identify the best among the Greeks and to provide these with honour, glory and a life lived like the former mortals, the Golden People, but in the contemporary, non-mythic age. Whereas Olympia marks the site where Zeus ascended to rule over the cosmos and put an end to the Golden Age, the time when mortals lived like the gods on earth, the Homeric Trojan plain, encoded with the same iconic,

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- A prophetic consultation in which additional travails are identified, sacrificial instructions are given and a successful outcome is forecasted, along with a life of ease and prosperity.

topographical features as the Olympia shrine, marks the site of the epochal battle that brought an end to the Heroic Age, and to mythic time as well. The Olympia sanctuary and Homer's Troy both describe a topography that stands as an *imago mundi* and, as such, provide the context for mortal existence as ordained through the will of Zeus; to suffer through strife and travails but to endure and prevail through excellence and persistence.

I have also identified the pertinent features that establish a ritual correspondence between the Homeric Grove of Persephone with the Pelopion, the hero's grave and location of the blood offerings at Olympia. In seeing Homeric epic as a mythic evocation of athletic competition at Olympia, the just-discussed scene in which Achilles is described as running across the plain of asphodel suggests the Olympia stadium foot race. Unlike Odysseus and Menelaus who receive prophetic indications of a joyous afterlife in Elysium, Achilles dies at Troy before the polis is conquered and is fated to die without a glorious return. In the broader mythic cycle of Troy, it is related that the young hero is conveyed to the Isles of Blessed by his mother as his body awaits the funeral fire. This too is told to us by Pindar in *Olympian 2*; he recalls how Thetis carried her boy off to the Isles of the Blessed to join his father, and to experience after death the righteous will of the perfect judge Rhadamanthys.

The Greek Achilles cult was multilocal and highly complex, but poorly attested in the sources.²⁵ Although the cult was primarily focussed in the geographical area of Troy, it also formed part of the broader devotional complex associated with the Games, especially at Elis. At sunset, on the eve of the processional march to Olympia, the Elian women beat themselves in lamentation as a form of honour to Achilles (Pausanias 6.23.3). Also at Elis, a grave marker to the tragic hero of the *Iliad* was located in the umpires' room where these matched up the competitors in the foot race before sunrise and at noontime for the pentathlon (Pausanias 6.24.1). These cult features suggest that Achilles was honoured, in the first instance, as a heroic exemplar to the losers; to competitive defeat, the loss of youth, and the wrenching cleavage of the maternal bond. The grave over which the umpires determined the heats in the stadium events reflects the *Iliad* narrative as well, where Achilles

²⁵ See Hedreen (1991).

presides over the Funeral Games as the magnanimous and just arbiter of the contests, as the exemplary hero of the Games' referees.

The Pelopion was exclusive to the hero Pelops and the blood offerings were specifically given to him in order to purify the sanctuary of his own miasmatic crime against Myrtilus and to ritually transition the hero from the house of Hades to the Isles of the Blessed in preparation for the worship of Zeus. In *Olympian* 1, Pindar clearly models his account of Pelops' coming of age myth, his chariot race with Oenomaus, on the Homeric portrayal of Achilles.²⁶ In both accounts, the hero prays to a god at the seashore and, upon declaring the necessity of death and the folly of remaining aloof from the contest, is finally rewarded by the god with gifts of golden equipment.

Reflecting both the Grove of the goddess Persephone and the ancestral tomb of Ilus in the Homeric poems, the Pelopion identifies the location of cult honour to the dead hero. This honour, as discussed previous, expresses itself in the form of the blood offering to the hero who was, as the *Odyssey* reveals, conceived of as languishing in the world below, beneath the earth in the putrid House of Hades. The offering, along with the reverential praise, was thought of as a form of ritual nourishment that served to revitalize the hero, transform his disposition, and energize him to run across the plain to his final destination on the Isles of the Blessed, the happy locale at the ends of the earth where Cronus rules and the heroes recuperate in death the existence of the first mortals, the Golden People

Also within the Olympia precinct, stood a high hill to the north of the stadium called the Tower of Cronus. At the foot of this hill was a particularly auspicious area where the shrines to the goddesses, the treasuries and the banquet area reserved for the victors were located. Pindar equates this northern section of the sanctuary with the Isles of the Blessed (Ol. 2. 68-76), allegorizing it with the afterlife abode of the heroes, where Cronus rules and Rhadamanthys dispenses his perfect justice, dike. This area where the victors were exalted, then, identifies the place of the perfected mortal life--as exemplified first by the

²⁶ Griffith (1989) 171-4.

Golden People,²⁷ then by the heroes Odysseus and Menelaus and, finally in non-mythic time, by the feted victors at the Games--in which the travails have been gloriously completed, the gods honoured, and the life of ease achieved. Secondly, it symbolizes the joyful locale, the Isles of the Blessed, where Zeus relocated the heroes he had granted immortality after their deaths and sufferings in Hades. Finally, it was the area in which the victors were feted for their accomplishments. Considered as a sacred geography in which the cosmic layout is embedded in its ritual elements, the Hill of Cronus describes the area in which mortals gain immortality by means of the “undying glory” - the victory that the Games confers.

Achilles was fated to die before the fall of Troy but, like victorious Odysseus who propitiates him with the blood offering, was also granted by Zeus an immortal life on the Isles of the Blessed. The underworld encounter between the two great Homeric heroes, suggests that the immortality conferred upon the demigods was conceived of as dynamic and transitional. What is more, it was an immortality that was also regarded as contingent upon the enactment of the blood rite insofar as the hero, although dead, was conceived of as still requiring the vital substance otherwise unavailable to him in the underworld. Honoured through the cult acts and “enlivened” by the ritual offerings, the hero, in this case Achilles, is depicted as to running from the western location of the cosmos, the Grove of Persephone, to the northern “Hyperborean” shore of the Oceanus where the Isles of the Blessed lay. In this way, the cult entailments of hero worship reflect the same ritual trajectory as athletic competition; of moving from hubris to dike, from death to the immortality conferred by a glorious victory.

²⁷ In the mythic lore of Olympia, it is where the Golden Men first worshipped Cronus (Paus. 5.7. 6) and where Zeus won cosmic supremacy by defeating his father (Paus. 5. 7. 10).

Appendix- The Ancient Greek Cosmos as Imago Mundi

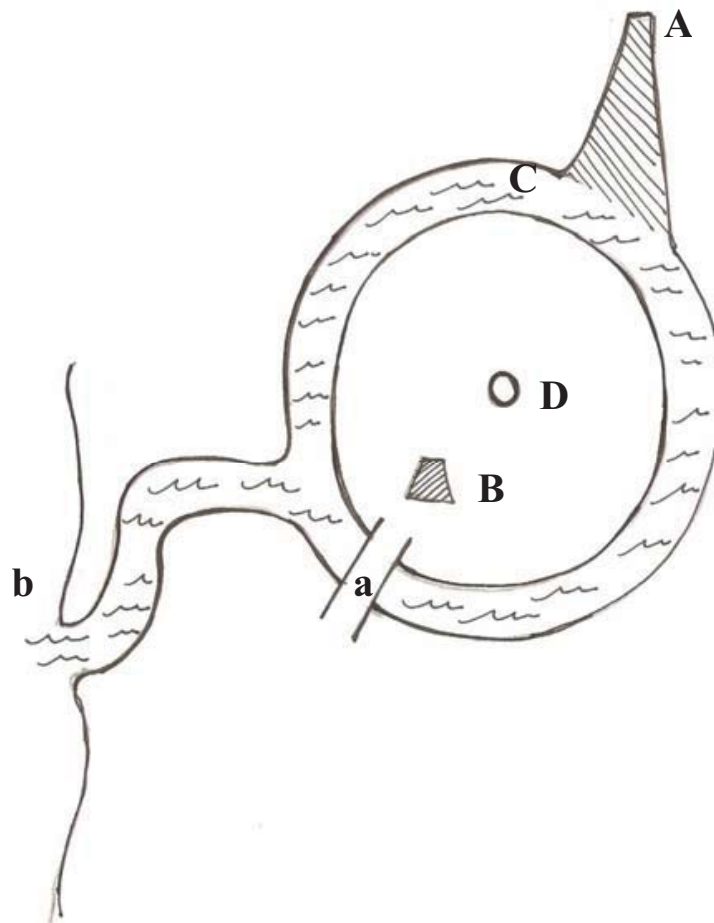
- A
 - 1. The Cosmos: Mount Olympus
 - 2. The Trojan Plain: Mount Gargarum
 - 3. Olympia: Mount Lycaeum

- B
 - 1. The Grove of Persephone
 - 2. The tomb of Ilus
 - 3. The Pelopion

- C
 - 1. Oceanus
 - 2. The Scamander-Simois
 - 3. The Alpheus-Cladius

- D
 - 1. Delphi
 - 2. Troy-Pergamus
 - 3. Zeus altar in Altis

- a. The Fording Point
- b. The Salt Sea



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