

HEROIC CULTS AT SPARTA BETWEEN MYTHOLOGICAL PAST AND SUPRANATIONAL RELATIONS

HEROES: DEFINITION

[SLIDE] Greek heroes were a special category of supernatural beings within the Greek religion. Differently from gods, heroes were mostly historical or epic beings, with a mythic or historical life, who obtained a super-human status and sometimes even immortality, and were therefore worshipped; their cult was different also from that of 'ordinary dead' because the hero was honoured on a more official level, belonging to a public sphere.

[SLIDE] The phenomenon spreads around the 8th century BC and could be related to the gradual birth, occurred after the end of the Dark Ages, of the first Greek *poleis*, that needed founders, mythological ancestors and a recent history; the spread of Homeric works and the transmission of epic poetry in written form; and finally the continuous veneration of Bronze Age ancestors and tombs between the 11th and 8th centuries BC, sometimes substituted and reused for new cults by the locals. Nevertheless, for the ancient Greek culture there was a not clear-cut definition of the heroes, since they varied over both time and place, thus they can be considered as a local phenomenon. Furthermore, heroes were often identified with specific cities or ethnic groups, because throughout the extensive use of hero-cults, it was possible to convey messages about political relationships. The spread of heroic cults was also accompanied by the development of ritual practices and the belief in the power of heroic relics, whose possession was believed to grant prosperity and protection to the *poleis* from external attacks. However, the ownership of hero bones often resulted in a constant competition among the cities and in attempts to discover the secret places where the sacred relics were preserved; therefore, the exact location of some heroic tombs was usually kept secret.

HEROIC SITES AT SPARTA: OVERVIEW

[SLIDE] Hero-cults in Sparta had a long institution from the late 8th- early 7th century BC until Roman period. These supernatural entities were both worshipped in monumental sanctuaries in Sparta's *chora*, or in lesser monumentalised shrines located within the borders of the *polis*.

Among the main heroic cult places at Sparta there were the *Menelaion*, located in the ancient region of Therapne, the sanctuary of Agamemnon and Alexandra and the *Amyklaion*, both at Amykles, and the tombs of Orestes and Teisamenos in the Spartan agora. They all acquired a special importance to the Spartan community, for both their religious and social significance, because they were representative of the whole Spartan population.

In addition to heroes, at Sparta cults in honour of historical personalities who obtained a sort of posthumous heroisation were also performed, such as the mythical lawgiver Lycurgos, the Spartan kings, especially Leonidas, and the war-dead, in particular the deceased at Thermopylai.

EVIDENCES

[SLIDE] Nevertheless, the shortage of archaeological remains prevents a throughout reconstruction of the Laconian heroic sites, not only from the architectural point of view, but also in the survey of the ritual aspects related to the cult of the heroes.

Therefore, a consistent part in analysing the dynamics of the phenomenon of the cults of the heroes relies on the analysis of literary *testimonia*, epigraphical and iconographical sources, besides the exam of other material data.

In this regard, additional information on Spartans' religious beliefs was provided by the historians of the classical period, starting from Herodotus and Thucydides and other following authors, such as Xenophon, Plutarch and especially Pausanias. Furthermore, Spartan authors of the 7th and 6th century helped in the recognition of the particular significance of some of heroic cults. Among them, there are especially the poets Tyrtaeus, Stesichoros and Simonides.

SPARTA'S ORIGINS BETWEEN MYTH AND HISTORY

[SLIDE] Sparta's origins are embedded in myth. From an archaeological point of view, evidences attested that the Spartan acropolis was difficultly inhabited before the 10th century BC, when the community was born through the synoecism of four villages that continued to retain their separated identities, to which Amykles was annexed later in the 8th century BC.

According to ancient legends, the Spartans were descendants of the Dorians, a community who invaded Greece and acquired dominion over the previous local inhabitants. Several of these Dorians were descendants of Herakles, and supposedly invaded the Peloponnese from north, conquered at least a part of Lakadaimon, deposed its previous rulers and founded the city of Sparta at the northern edge of the Eurotas plain, on the western bank of the river. This conquest was supposed to have taken place around the 12th century.

The earliest reference to the Herakleidai comes from 7th century BC poetry of Tyrtaeus and other references to the story are attested in Pindar, Herodotus and Thucydides. Herodotus in particular stresses the physical connection to the myth of Herakles and traces the lineage of the Spartan kings continuous back to him.

Nevertheless, the Herakleid/Dorian myth could be interpreted as a story that aims to explain various population's movements in the Peloponnese and should legitimize not only the kingship, but also the acquisition of the lands and especially the Spartan domination in Messenia.

FOREIGN POLITICS AND MYTHS APPROPRIATION

[SLIDE] In this regard, after the mythical foundation of the Doric Sparta during the 10th century BC, a first attempt of expansion occurred during the 8th century, when the first Messenian war started, concluded later in the 5th century BC with the complete conquest of Laconia region. Therefore, from the 8th century on, Sparta started a foreign politics of subjugation, which included the colonization of new territories over sea, f.i. Taras in southern Italy, and a new expansion outside Laconia, northwards in Argolid and Arcadia, aiming to conquer the whole Peloponnese. In particular, the *polis* of Tegea in Argolid was interested by the expansionistic goal of Sparta, and its conquest occurred not only through military supremacy, but was also supported by the religious order of the oracle of Delphi, on whose behalf Orestes' bones were therefore stolen by the Spartans at the middle of the 6th century, in order to obtain Tegea, but not yet the whole Argolid. Orestes' relics were then buried in Spartan agora, as the bones of Theseus in the Athenian agora, a location generally dedicated to the founder of the *polis*. In this respect, a peculiar feature of the establishment of Sparta is the lack of an official founder, because Orestes, differently from Theseus, was not the founder of Sparta. In addition, Strabo argues that the first founders were Eurysthenes and Procles, but they never gained the title of *archegetes*. Moreover, the 'national' Spartan hero remained Lycurgus.

However, Orestes, son of Agamemnon, was not the first Atreid to be included in Spartan genealogy, because a sort of research of an Achaean past started at least a century before, with the creation of the Spartan cult of Agamemnon, whose brother, Menelaus, had already a Spartan tradition since the late 8th century BC.

The reason could be researched in the ancient ethnic tradition of Laconia: the Achaeans were the first inhabitants of the Peloponnese before the arrival of the Dorians; thus, the Dorians probably tried to recover the continuity with the past in order to legitimize the right of the Spartan kings to proclaim themselves as descendants of the Achaeans too. This could have led to the possibility of the adjunction of new Achaean/Homeric heroes among the 'proper' Spartan heroes: Agamemnon, Orestes, Teisamenos and Menelaus.

THE ACHAEAN TRADITION: THE MENELAION

[SLIDE] Menelaus is attested as king of Sparta by Homer, therefore among the earliest heroic cult places at Sparta there is the *Menelaion*.

The sanctuary is located in the ancient Therapne, on a narrow plateau ca. 6 km south of Sparta and its institution comes back to the 7th century BC, although a Mycenaean settlement that was regarded as the Palace of Menelaus was already present. Menelaus, and his wife Helen, of Spartan origin too, were worshipped in one of the most important sites of ancient Sparta's surroundings. Although the name refers to the male character of the couple, here Helen was the most venerated, as attested by Herodotus and Pausanias, who indicate specific rituals and probably a festival in her honour, the Spartan *Heleneia*. [SLIDE] From the votive deposit recovered at the site, it is possible to observe the great quantity of offerings to the couple, and to Helen in particular.

[SLIDE] In addition, large quantity of lead figurines, similar to those found at the sanctuary of Orthia, includes for instance warriors and horses, which stress the military peculiarity of Sparta.

THE CULT OF AGAMEMNON

[SLIDE] Another important complex especially in Archaic period was the sanctuary of Agamemnon, mythic king of Mycenae, and Alexandra, which was the local name of Cassandra, the daughter of king Priam of Troy. The location is at Amykles, ca. 5 km south of Sparta, instituted during the 7th century BC.

It is noteworthy that throughout the 'appropriation' of an Achaean hero such as Agamemnon, who was traditionally buried at Mycenae, the Spartans tried, on one side, to relate their recent history to a pre-Dorian past, since Achaeans were the inhabitants of Peloponnese before Dorian invasion; on the other side, this could be viewed as the attempt to the construction of a communal identity in order to strengthen the Spartan hegemony over the Peloponnese and also outside Laconia.

Nonetheless, Cassandra was here celebrated as the main owner of the sanctuary, probably also for the violent death she suffered, murdered with Agamemnon by his wife Klytaimnestra and her lover Aigisthos. Indeed, Greeks had special fear of those who suffered a violent and unavenged death, and worshipped these special deceased with unique ceremonies.

[SLIDE] The importance acquired by Cassandra is formally stated by a Hellenistic decree and a marble throne mentioning the "temple of Alexandra", besides a large quantity of votives to the heroic couple.

Two important deposits, presumably located in the area of the alleged sanctuary, have brought to light thousands of votive offerings dedicated to the couple from the 7th century to the beginning of the 4th century BC. [SLIDE] These offerings could be dedicated to Cassandra alone or to Agamemnon and show the typical Laconian hero-relief, which is particularly spread around the 6th century. [SLIDE] Terracotta dedicatory offerings, the most typical category of votive offerings in Laconia, are found in abundance throughout the Greek world, with religious and social value. These reliefs or plaques

were produced locally, probably in or near Sparta. Earliest Laconian reliefs date back to the mid-6th century and early 5th century and represent one of the most common heroic iconographies, i.e. the seated couple. From the early 5th century, evolution of this iconographical typology led to the gradual disappearance of the female figure, leaving the scene to the alone seated male.

The male-seated figure is often holding a cup of wine, sometimes accompanied by a female figure seated by the male or standing before him. A snake, sometimes bearded, may be also present, together with tiny worshippers in the act of approaching the heroic couple.

ORESTES AND TEISAMENOS

[SLIDE] As previously mentioned, other members of Agamemnon's family were worshipped in Sparta, although no archaeological remains, nor votives are associated to the heroic cult places in the Spartan agora dedicated to Orestes and Teisamenos, whose evidence is characterised only by the accounts provided by Pausanias and Herodotus. Furthermore, the general prominence of the cult in honour of the Achaean heroes in Laconia is particularly represented by a *corpus* of tragedies written by the Spartan Stesichoros, Simonides, and later authors.

This large number of cult places consecrated, to Agamemnon (and Alexandra), Menelaus (and Helen), Orestes and Teisamenos, and the important value associated to these locations by the Spartan community, could suggest that the Spartans tried to establish a cultural and political continuity between Achaean and Doric tradition and the Spartan diarchy, formally justified by the presence of a shared kingship between the two brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus. Two interpretations could be provided in this respect: on one side, this geographical manipulation of traditions and myths could have improved the connection with the surroundings throughout their common ancestors, creating an Atreids' Lakonian tradition; on the other side, the possibility that the Spartans adapted a pre-existing local tradition and associated it with a new cult should not be ruled out. In any case, the Atreids heroes could have played an important function as symbols of local history and identity, counteracting the Spartan recent history in the territory, going back to an ancient pre-Doric heroic past. Therefore, this sort of propagandistic use of the Spartan community, mainly formalized in the Archaic period, was finally strengthened by the 'repatriation' of the bones of Orestes and his son Teisamenos from, respectively, Tegea and Helice in the period of the major Spartan expansion outside Laconia, although a religious tradition was also at the base of the recovery of their relics, aiming to justify the conquests.

CONCLUSION

[SLIDE] To sum up, the cult of Agamemnon could have been established to furnish a justification to political acts, in order to conciliate the Spartan recent history with a more ancient mythical past. The

cult of Orestes strengthened this tradition and, from a religious point of view, he revenged the death of his father Agamemnon, unfairly murdered. The bones of Teisamenos, besides creating relationships with the Achaeans or exhibiting their subjugation to the power of Sparta, were used to placate the anger of his father Orestes, accomplishing a second revenge for his murder. By founding a cult in honour of Teisamenos, his avenged father was also honoured.

However, the lack of information doesn't help in recognising a precise moment for these translations to Sparta: while Orestes' bones recovery could have occurred around the middle of the 6th century BC, after the Second Tegean War, as noticed by Herodotus, the 'repatriation' of the relics of Teisamenos could have followed that of his father, most likely due to another oracular order.

To conclude, it is therefore possible that, after bringing Orestes' bones to Sparta, the Spartans aimed to strengthen their hegemony over the northern and southern Peloponnese, by taking possession of both his son Teisamenos and his father Agamemnon, with a special relevance during the 6th century BC. Furthermore, an ethnic significance has been also proposed for this political action performed in a warfare regime: by establishing a cult in honour of Orestes, who would have ruled not only at Mycenae, inherited by his father Agamemnon, but also at Sparta, an inheritance of his uncle Menelaus, he would have been able to reunify in his person the northern and southern Peloponnese hegemony of Sparta.

At the middle of the 4th century BC this operation was therefore completed, leading to a twofold interpretation of the appropriation of the Achaean myth: on one side there was the will of creating a relationship with the pre-Dorians, on the other side there was the wish of a continuation and expansion of an existing policy, thus completed throughout the assimilation of Agamemnon's family with Sparta.

Therefore, on the whole, it is possible to assume that Spartan heroic cults follow the general pattern of development and the overall chronological growth of the phenomenon elsewhere documented in the Greek world, with a significant evolution in the Archaic and Hellenistic period. Nevertheless, these hero-cults assume in Sparta a specific social and political connotation that distinguish and set them apart from the rest of the other Greek *poleis*, creating a unique local tradition which is attested in Sparta only.