

CHAPTER SIX

Heroes and Hero-Cults*Gunnel Ekroth***What Is a Hero?**

Name a hero and Achilles, Agamemnon, and Heracles immediately spring to mind. These characters are the household names, so to speak, among the heroes, and we are well informed about both their spectacular lives and their deaths from epic and myth, and of the sanctuaries and shrines where they received cult. But what about Egretes, the Children of Caphyae, and the “Heroes in the Field”? They were also heroes and, though less well known to us, certainly no less important to the people who worshiped them. And what do we make of the figure or figures who for more than a hundred years received offerings of pottery, figurines, and metal objects from the rural inhabitants of Berbati in the Argolid, when they feasted next to the monumental Mycenaean tomb in the midst of their valley? This may also be a hero-cult, though we can neither name its recipient nor define his (or her) character.

Heroes (*hērōes*, fem. *hērōinai*, *hērōissai*) are a category of divine beings of Greek mythology and religion which are difficult to define, since they varied over both time and place. To quote a now classic statement by Nicholas Coldstream: “Greek hero-worship has always been a rather untidy subject, where any general statement is apt to provoke suspicion” (Coldstream 1976:8). A characteristic of heroes and hero-cults is their heterogeneity, both in relation to the nature of the heroes themselves and the appearance of their cult-places, and, to a lesser extent, the cult practices. Their importance in the Greek religious system is, on the other hand, indisputable, not the least from the fact that they were worshiped all over the Greek territory from the late eighth century BC to the end of antiquity.

For the ancient Greeks there was no clear-cut definition of a hero; still, heroes were distinguished from gods and from the ordinary dead. How *we* perceive a hero and his cult is dependent on which kind of evidence we consider. A hero can be defined as a person who had lived and died, either in myth or in real life, this being the main distinction between a god and a hero. He was thus dead and may have had a tomb,

which sometimes was the focus of a cult, though not all heroes received religious attention. The difference between a hero and an ordinary dead person lies in the relationship with the living, the ordinary dead having some kind of connection with those tending the grave and presenting offerings, while the heroes were worshiped on a more official level. Finally, the hero was generally a local phenomenon and most heroes were connected with one specific location.

The use and meaning of the term hērōs

The written sources provide us with accounts of myths and cults of heroes, but the designation *hērōs* is not always a distinct marker of the status of the figure described in this manner or of the extent to which he received any form of cult.

The etymology of the term is unclear. A connection with Hera has been suggested, the *hērōs* being seen as the young divine consort of the goddess in her aspect as a goddess of marriage or of the seasons (Hall 2004; Pötscher 1961; cf. Adams 1987). A Linear B tablet from Pylos (PY Tn 316) mentions a *Tiriserōe* which may refer to a divinity, but it is difficult to know whether the Mycenaean *hērōs* constituted an equivalent to the hero of later periods (Gérard-Rousseau 1968:222–4).

Homer uses *hērōes* for the human protagonists of his epics, not only the warriors but also the bard Demodocus and even the people of Ithaca at large, but not for a recipient of cult in the same sense as in the archaic and classical periods. In Hesiod's *Work and Days* (157–68), the Heroes constitute one of the four races, which came before the present Iron Race of men. After Gold, Silver and Bronze, the Heroes were created, “a god-like race of hero-men who are called demi-gods”; they fought at Thebes and Troy and perished there, apart from a lucky few who continued their lives on the islands of the blessed.

From the archaic period, *hērōs* is used not only for a figure of extrahuman status, a protagonist of myth and epic, but also for a divine figure receiving cult. The terminology is not unambiguous, however, and an individual who fulfilled the criteria for being a hero could sometimes be called a god (*theos*), as was the case with the athlete Theogenes, worshiped on Thasos (Pausanias 6.11.2–9), or the healing divinity Hērōs Iatros from Athens, designated as *theos* in a third-century inscription (*IG ii²* 839). *Hērōs* seems in this case to have functioned more as a name or a title. The disparity between terminology and content is evident also for the heroines. Though the concept of a female equivalent of *hērōs* exists in Homer, the earliest use of a term for a heroine (*hērōis*) is found in Pindar (*Pythian* 11.7; Lyons 1997: 7–11).

But the fluid use of *hērōs* can reflect the character of the figure in question as well, Heracles being the prime case (Lévêque and Verbanck-Piérard 1992). Born a mortal, he burnt himself to death on Mount Oite and finally ascended to the gods on Olympus. He was worshiped all over Greek territory but there was no tradition of him having a tomb. Heracles was primarily perceived as a god, though of mortal descent, a status pinpointed when Pindar describes him as a *hērōs theos* (*Nemean* 3.22). Also the Dioscuri and Asclepius transgressed the category of heroes with the panhellenic spread of their cults and their mythical background presenting them as partly immortal.

In the hellenistic period, some tombstones for the ordinary dead begin to carry the word “hero” or “heroine.” These are frequently decorated with heroic motifs, such

as banqueting scenes and riders, and, where the age of the departed is known, they were often children or adolescents, whose untimely death may have led to them being heroized (Graf 1985:128–35). Instead of taking *hērōs* to have meant simply “dead man” and as a sign of the devaluation of hero-cults after the classical period, it seems that these individuals were in some way considered as special and distinct from the ordinary dead.

The rise of the hero concept

The earliest traces of hero-cults depend on which kind of sources are considered and it is not obvious that the written and archaeological evidence for heroes and hero-cults coincided from the beginning. Tendencies of hero-worship may be distinguished in Homer (Hadzisteliou-Price 1973), such as the tomb of Ilios being a respected landmark (*Iliad* 10.414, 11.166, 371, 24.350) and bulls and rams being sacrificed by the Athenian youths to Erechtheus (*Iliad* 2.550–1). The basic features of the Hesiodic heroes, that they are mortal but still semi-divine, is in accordance with the concept of heroes as we know it from later periods and it is possible that these heroes (as well as the races which preceded them) were thought to correspond to the heroes of the kind later receiving cult (Antonaccio 1994:405–9; Nagy 1979:151–73; West 1978:370–3).

Even though our earliest written sources do not use *hērōs* in the same sense as in later periods, or refer to hero-cults directly, the archaeological evidence indicates that hero-cults existed in some form in the late Early Iron Age. From the eighth century, there is a small and scattered group of hero shrines, all connected with epic or mythic heroes, identified by inscribed dedications (in most cases postdating the installation of the cult): Helen and Menelaus at Sparta, Odysseus in the Polis cave on Ithaca, and Agamemnon at Mycenae (Catling and Cavanagh 1976; Malkin 1998:94–199; Cook 1953). A *hērōon* dedicated to the heroes who participated in the expedition against Thebes was established in Argos in the early sixth century (Pariente 1992).

Traces of Iron Age activity are found at Mycenaean tholos and chamber tombs over most of the Greek mainland in the eighth century, though some instances date back to the tenth century BC (Antonaccio 1995; Boehringer 2001; Coldstream 1976). Some deposits, rich in content and spanning several centuries, were probably hero-cults (as at Menidi in Attica and Berbati in the Argolid), while offerings of a more simple nature suggest “tomb cult” directed towards the recently dead or to ancestors. A recent finding at a tholos tomb in Thessaly of an inscribed tile (seventh or sixth century BC) dedicated to Aetatus, the mythical founder of the region, shows that the heroes worshiped at the Bronze Age tombs may have been identified with mythic and epic figures as well (Intzesiloglou 2002).

Veneration of the recently dead also developed into hero-cults. Some individuals were buried in a manner clearly exceeding the regular norm, such as the couple interred in the tenth-century monumental house at Lefkandi, though at this site there is no sign of a subsequent cult. In Eretria, a group of people – men and women – were given rich cremation burials near the West Gate in the late eighth to the early seventh century (Bérard 1970). A triangular precinct was constructed around 680 BC and a building functioning as a shrine or a dining room was later erected next to it, the cult-place being in use until the late classical period, most likely as a hero-cult.

Another early category of hero to consider is the oikist, the leader of the party setting out to found a new colony outside the Greek homeland (Malkin 1987). The oikist was chosen by the oracle at Delphi and after his death buried in the agora of the new colony and there received a cult. Considering the early institution of some of these cults, as early as the mid-eighth century BC, it is possible that they influenced or even gave rise to hero-cults in the motherland.

Why did hero-cults arise in the eighth century? The spread of the Homeric epics (and Hesiod's writings) may have stimulated the identification of the Mycenaean tombs as those of the Homeric heroes, though a number of later-attested heroes do not figure in Homer. The occurrence of hero-cults is contemporary with the rise of the city-state, and hero-cults can be seen as a response to political and social changes. It has been suggested that they were mechanisms for aristocrats and prominent families to assert themselves or attempts by individual landholders and smaller communities to claim rights to land and territory. On the whole, the origins of hero-cults must be viewed as highly diverse. Certain hero-cults may be derived from an interest in ancient graves or the tending of the graves of important contemporary individuals, while the heroes of myth and epic inspired others. To attempt to single out *the* factor that gave rise to hero-cults seems to be a futile endeavor. A more fruitful approach is to focus on the development of the category of heroes, a heading under which a whole range of figures with diverse origins came to be included, as well as on the political, social, and religious changes which contributed to this process (Parker 1996: 39).

Though the earliest traces of heroes and hero-cults date back to the Early Iron Age, heroes and hero-cults in the full sense of the terms did not become a prominent feature of Greek religion until the archaic period. Furthermore, different hero-cults came into being (and also disappeared) continuously all through the archaic, classical, and hellenistic periods, and the Bronze Age tombs even became the focus of religious attention a second time, in the late classical and hellenistic periods (Alcock 1991).

How To Become a Hero: Myth vs. Cult

Attempts have been made to make sense of the plethora of Greek heroes by dividing them into categories or by focusing on one particular category (Farnell 1921; Pfister 1909–12). Such groupings seem to have been of little importance in antiquity and most regions housed a variety of heroes cutting across these groups (Brellich 1958).

Many heroes (and heroines) are found in myth, epic, and other narratives (including iconography), but there are also a large number solely known from cultic contexts and for whom we have no biographical details. Similarly, there is an intricate relationship between stories told about heroes and heroines and actual hero-cults. Myth may reflect cult practices but also be about the same rituals or about cult-places, or aim to place them in a heroic context. Though the bulk of all heroes who have come down to us in any kind of media have no attested cults, this is in many cases probably just due to lack of evidence. Every hero seems to have been a potential candidate for worship in some form.

The heroes of myth and epic were a mixed bunch, who performed extraordinary deeds and were claimed as founders of cities and sanctuaries, inventors and ancestors

of families. Most of these heroes are male warriors or kings, giving rise to our modern use of “hero” and “heroic.” But myth and epic also contain a number of female figures. These heroines often occur in a familial context, as the less influential part of a heroic couple, or as virgins who give their lives to save their city, family, or husband (Larson 1995; Lyons 1997). A perhaps more surprising group of heroes is those who are children or even babies, as in the case of the infant Opheltes/Archemorus, who was killed (or even partly eaten) by a snake when he was put down on the grass near a spring at Nemea (Pache 2004:95–134).

Some heroes and heroines may originally have been gods or goddesses who did not fit in and were eventually subordinated among the heroes or merged with a heroic figure. At Sparta, Alexandra-Cassandra, worshiped in a shrine together with Zeus-Agamemnon, and Helen, sharing her cult with Menelaus, were both originally local goddesses who later became identified with well-known epic characters. Similarly Erechtheus’ and Hippolytus’ close relationships with goddesses suggest that they also had been gods once.

The heroes known only from cultic contexts, as recipients of either sacrifices or dedications, demonstrate a great diversity. The Attic evidence is particularly rich, and many of the heroes mentioned in sacred laws or regulations dealing with state, deme, or private cultic matters are clearly local cultic figures who must have been incomprehensible outside their regional context. Some cultic heroes had a specialized function, evident from their name, such as, for example, the Hērōs Klaikophoros, presumably “The Holder of the Temple Keys,” attested in Epidaurus, Troezen, and Messene in the hellenistic period (*IG* iv 768 and 1300; v 1, 1447; *SEG* 15.210). Others demonstrate a strong topographical link, such as the “Heroes in the Field” or the “Hero at Antisara” (*LS* 2 C, 6–10; *LSS* 14, 84). There are even anonymous heroes and heroines evidenced both in the Athenian sacrificial calendars and from dedications from all over Greece. These figures must have been known by the people worshiping them, though perhaps never named.

A number of Greek heroes and heroines were historical or quasi-historical figures: founders of cities, soldiers killed in battle, former enemies, athletes, poets, writers, and other famous and exceptional individuals. For the figures of myth and epic, the reason for them being considered as suitable recipients of cult is self-evident. Historical figures being elevated to heroes is a different matter, since they had to distinguish themselves from the ordinary dead of the same period.

Having been extreme in some sense, in life or death, was the primary reason for heroic status. Poets, such as Homer and Archilochus, and the tragedians, and athletes, such as Theogenes from Thasos, as well as Hippocrates, the father of medicine, all reached hero status owing to their extraordinary achievements and contributions when alive. The first inventor of an action or an item, *prōtos heuretēs*, was often heroized, though many of these heroes were not actual historical figures.

Interestingly, a great number of extreme characters that became heroes had been far from benevolent when alive. This is an important distinction between heroes and Christian saints, who were given their status as a result of their good deeds and with whom the Greek heroes are often compared. A good example of extreme behavior leading to hero status is the case of the athlete Cleomedes from Astypalaea, who killed his opponent in pankration at Olympia and was disqualified (Pausanias 6.9.8–9). Consumed with rage, he tore down the roof of a school building in his home

town, killing sixty innocent children. He barely escaped being lynched and took refuge in a stone chest in a sanctuary and then miraculously disappeared. The Pythia declared him a hero, since he was no longer mortal. Another figure, Tereus, raped his sister-in-law and cut out her tongue to prevent her from telling. After being served his own son Itys for dinner as a punishment, he eventually committed suicide and was buried in Megara, where he received annual sacrifices (Pausanias 1.41.9, 10.4.6).

An extreme death, to be killed in a violent manner and at a young age, was a strong contributory cause for heroization. Many mythic and epic heroes and heroines perished violently at a young age. Among historical figures becoming heroes, a prime example of the time and manner of death being crucial is the case of the war dead, the soldiers fallen in battle. This development is linked to the rise of the hoplite armies of the archaic period, referred to in the poetry of Tyrtaeus at Sparta but also in a sixth-century epigram from a burial at Ambracia (*SEG* 41.540). In the classical period, the importance of these men, especially at Athens, is evidenced by the *epitaphioi logoi*, the official praise of the fallen, and by their burial place, the Dēmosion Sēma, but a *polyandrion* of the war dead has also been investigated at Thespieae (Schilardi 1977). The soldiers killed at Marathon and buried on the battlefield were venerated as heroes more than 350 years after their deaths (*IG* ii² 1006, 26 and 69).

Heroes were perceived as being able to help, perhaps even to a greater extent than a god, considering that heroes were thought to have once walked the earth and led some kind of “human” existence, as well as to be more intimately connected with specific locations. In times of threat or crisis, heroes were approached as helpers or acted as such of their own accord, and there are numerous reports of heroes appearing, especially to participate in battle. At the battle of Marathon in 490 BC, Theseus, Heracles, and Marathon (the eponymous hero of the region) were reported to have fought for the Greeks, but so too was Echetaeus, a figure dressed as a peasant and killing Persians with a plough (Pausanias 1.32.4; Jameson 1951). Such sightings often led to the institution of a cult.

The importance of heroes as helpers, particularly in war, is also evident from the stories stipulating that certain hero-cults or hero-tombs must remain secret and hidden from the enemy. A fragment of Euripides’ *Erechtheus* (fragment 370, lines 77–89 *TrGF*), provides a good case. Here, Athena instructs the widow Praxithea (and all of the Athenians for that matter) that the couple’s daughters, who gave their lives to save the city, are to receive sacrifices from the Athenians prior to battle, while their *abaton* must be guarded from the attempts by the enemy to sacrifice there to assure military success.

But not all heroes by any means were kindly disposed, and a cult could be instituted or sacrifices performed not only to procure their help but also to appease their anger. There is a strand of danger and threat discernible in certain hero-accounts already in the fifth century and a fragment of Aristophanes describes the heroes as guardians of both evil and well-being (Aristophanes, *Heroes* fr. 322 K-A). Some heroes are said to be directly harmful and dangerous, such as the hero Orestes, and they could even be viewed as senders of diseases (Hippocrates, *Sacred Disease* [vol. 6, 362 Littré]). The dangerous aspect of certain heroes and its consequent effects on the living can be explained with reference to the fact that they belong to the categories of the *ahōroi* and the *biaiothanatoi*, those that had died too early and in a violent way. These groups included persons who had been murdered, executed, died of plague, or committed suicide, but also young people, such as children and virgins. They were

angered and vengeful and needed to be propitiated, but this condition was also the source of their power, making them stronger than the ordinary dead.

The institution of a hero-cult was often a means for solving some kind of crisis, usually related to someone having been wronged or even violently killed. The Children of Caphyae, mentioned above, pretended to hang a statue of Artemis and were stoned to death by the city's enraged population (Pausanias 8.23.7). The local women then began having miscarriages until the Pythia ordered the children to be buried and to be given sacrifices, since they had died unjustly. This story contains elements which can be found in the creation of a number of hero-cults, especially those of athletes and enemies: first, violent death and deprivation of burial resulting in negative effects for society, and secondly, the seeking of help from an oracle, especially Delphi, which remedies the situation by ordering the institution of a cult (Bohringer 1979; Fontenrose 1968; Visser 1982). The wronged hero, once the bitter enemy or a hostile ghost, eventually becomes a defender and protector.

Ritual: Consumption or Destruction

Our view of the sacrificial rituals of hero-cults has in the last decade undergone substantial changes. The traditional notion of hero-sacrifices consisting of holocausts on low hearth-altars, libations of blood in pits, and the offering of prepared meals, but never including ritual dining, needs to be fundamentally revised. This view of hero-cult ritual has been based on an uncritical use of literary sources of different date and character, and on the assumption that information derived from Roman or even Byzantine writers is valid also for conditions during earlier periods. If a broader range of evidence is considered (literary and epigraphical sources, iconography and archaeology) and a focus is maintained primarily upon contemporary sources, the sacrificial rituals of hero-cults in the archaic to hellenistic periods turn out to be very similar to those of the gods (Ekroth 1999, 2002; Nock 1944; Verbanck-Piérard 2000).

The main ritual in hero-cult was an animal sacrifice at which the worshipers ate the meat. The terminology used for these sacrifices was *thyein* and *thysia*, standard terms in the cult of the gods. There is literary, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence for the handling and division of the meat and dining facilities in the sanctuaries of heroes, and direct references to eating. For example, a mid-fifth-century Athenian decree of the cult association of the Hero Echelos and his Heroines states how the meat of the victims sacrificed, a piglet and two fully grown animals, probably sheep, was to be distributed (*LSS* 20; Ferguson 1944:73–9). Present members of the association were to receive a full portion, while the their sons, wives, and daughters seem to have been given at least half a portion of meat each.

Also, the terminology relating to and the appearance of the altars or sacrificial installations used in hero-cults show few differences from those used in the cult of the gods. The altar is called *bōmos*, while the term *eschara*, commonly taken to mean a particular hero-altar, was applied to the upper part of the *bōmos* where the fire was kept, often manufactured in a different material (Ekroth 2001). In hero-cults, *eschara* could also refer to a simple ash altar located directly on the ground, a feature known from the Archegeion on Delos, but the sacrifices were of the alimentary kind (Bruneau 1970:424–6; Ekroth 1998:120–1).

Apart from regular animal sacrifices, the heroes also received *theoxenia*, offerings of food of the kind eaten by humans. This ritual could simply consist of a table with offerings, *trapeza*, and would then be a less expensive, vegetarian alternative to animal sacrifice, especially in private contexts. In official cult, this ritual often functioned as a means of substantiating a *thysia*, either by giving the same recipient both an animal victim and a table or, in the case of a hero and a heroine, giving the former the animal, while the less important heroine received the table (*SEG* 33.147). A large number of reliefs (so-called *Totenmahl* reliefs) show a hero reclining at a table with offerings, while worshipers approach, sometimes bringing an animal as well. Heracles and the Dioscuri were commonly depicted as banqueters, a scheme certainly reflecting the particular importance of *theoxenia* in their cults (Thönges-Stringaris 1965; Verbanck-Piérard 1992). The aim of the *theoxenia* seems to have been to bring the recipient closer to the worshipers, and the ritual could also include the preparation of a couch and an invitation to the hero to come and participate as an honored guest. That a closer bond was desired at private sacrifices is understandable, but the presence of a Hērōxeinia festival on Thasos (*LSS* 68) shows that state cults of heroes focused on such rituals as well.

On the whole, the rituals traditionally considered as typical for heroes, and as distinguishing them from the gods in general, must be considered as marginal features in hero-cults. Blood was of relatively minor importance, and at standard animal sacrifices to heroes the blood was kept and eaten, just as the meat was. At a small number of sacrifices the ritual was modified, with the blood being completely discarded, an action designated by a particular terminology denoting the technical aspects of this procedure. The sacrifices to Pelops at Olympia, as outlined by Pindar (*Olympian* 1.90–3; Slater 1989), consisted of a *thysia* sacrifice embellished with a laden table and couch, but the ritual was initiated by a pouring out of blood, *haimakouria*, presumably over the hero's tomb or into a pit, *bothros*. The blood seems here to have functioned as a means of contacting and inviting the hero and ensuring his presence at the sacrifice.

Most heroes for whom such libations of blood are attested have a particular connection with war, and the ritual may have served both to underline this association and as a reminder of the bloodshed of battle and the battle-line *sphagia* sacrifices, at which the victim's throat was slit and the blood flowed freely. On Thasos, the war dead, called Agathoi, "the good men," were honored with a public funeral, sacrifices, and an official listing of their names (*LSS* 64, 7–22). The inscription gives the term *entemnein* for the ritual action, which in context is best understood to refer to the animal being killed and bled, the blood perhaps being poured on the tomb of the Agathoi, while the meat was eaten at a banquet in which the relatives of the fallen occupied a prominent position. A similar procedure can be reconstructed from Thucydides' account of the rituals for the Spartan general Brasidas, who fell while defending Amphipolis against the Athenians (Thucydides 5.11). He was buried in the city, proclaimed its new founder, and venerated as a hero with games and sacrifices, which included libations of blood and public consumption of the meat.

Destruction sacrifices, at which no dining took place, were rare in hero-cults. Some of these rituals are covered by the terminology used in the cult of the dead (*enagizein*), and the use of this terminology seems to imply not only the burning of the offerings, but also an emphasis of the dead and therefore impure character of these

particular heroes. Heracles received *thysia* sacrifices, at which the meat was eaten, and *enagizein* sacrifices, a combination meant to bring out his dual character as both an immortal god and a mortal hero (Herodotus 2.44; Verbanck-Piérard 1989). In all, however, the complete or partial destruction of the animal victim was no more common in hero-cults than in the cults of the gods, most instances, in fact, being found in the cult of Zeus (Ekroth 2002:217–28; *LS* 151 A, 32–4; *SEG* 33.147.13–15). Many destruction sacrifices, no matter who the recipient, were performed in a crisis context, in which this extraordinary ritual was aimed at solving the problems.

A particular heroic trait was to destroy a ninth part of the victim (or rather of its meat). The sacred law from Selinous mentions a sacrifice to the impure Tritopatores “as to the heroes” and prescribes that a ninth of the meat was to be burnt (Jameson, Jordan, and Kotansky 1993: A9–12; Scullion 2000). A sacrificial calendar from Mykonos from around 200 BC also stipulates such a sacrifice (*enatenein*) to Semele (*LS* 96, 23–4), and the ritual was also known, but perhaps not executed, on Thasos in the cult of Heracles (*LSS* 63; *IG* xii suppl. 353; Bergquist 2005).

That the heroes were important recipients of worship is obvious from the actual number of sacrifices they received and the amount of money spent on these occasions. It comes as no surprise that alimentary sacrifice was the main ritual of hero-cults, considering the fact that heroes fulfilled the same role as gods within the Greek religious system. The four best-preserved sacrificial calendars from classical Attica illustrate this point clearly (Ekroth 2002:150–69). Of the 170 or so sacrifices listed in these texts, 40 percent were performed to heroes, while the amounts of money spent on the victims for these sacrifices was around 38 percent of the budget. If the meat from all the animals sacrificed to heroes had been considered unfit for consumption, more than a third of animals slaughtered would not have been eaten. Such a waste of meat seems highly implausible, considering the vital role sacrifices and distribution of meat fulfilled in ancient Greek society, both as a means of strengthening the social ties between citizens and as an indicator of who belonged and who did not, and considering also the fact that virtually all meat eaten seems to have come from animals killed in a ritual context.

Cult-Places

The cult-place of a hero could be called by a variety of terms (Kearns 1992:65–7; Larson 1995:9–13). Some emphasize the fact that the hero was dead: *sēma*, *mnēma*, *thēkē*, and *taphos* are all terms used for regular burials as well as heroic tombs. *Hērōon* refers to a cult-place with a tomb, but the term seems to denote something more elaborate than just a simple burial. The lack of a burial could be noted, as when Pausanias states that the sacrifices to Myrtilus at Olympia took place at an empty mound, *kenon ērion* (6.10.17). Terms used for the sanctuaries of the gods are found as well, such as *temenos* and *hieron* (a holy place or precinct), *naos* (temple), or *alsos* (sacred grove).

The diversity in terminology corresponds to the variations in appearance of archaeologically attested cult-places of heroes (Abramson 1978; Pariente 1992). The identification of a cult-place of a hero or heroine is no simple matter, and without

any written evidence it is often difficult to distinguish a cult-place for a hero from that of a minor god or, in later periods, from a substantial burial monument for an ordinary dead person. Most archaeologically attested hero-cults have either been identified by epigraphical evidence found at the site or by being connected with a hero-cult mentioned in literary sources (Pausanias' account of Greece refers to more than a hundred heroes having some kind of physical monument). On archaeological grounds alone, the means for recognizing a hero-shrine are more ambiguous. A location on or at graves makes the identification plausible, if it can be demonstrated that the burials were in fact known when the cult was established. But a number of hero-shrines show no association with burials at all and it is also clear from the written evidence that the tomb of the hero was no prerequisite for the installation of the cult.

To single out certain kinds of votives as particularly "heroic" is difficult (Hägg 1987). Some types of figurines, such as horses and riders, or pottery shapes, such as kraters, drinking cups or large bowls for the bath of the hero, or objects, such as miniature shields, have been claimed to be typical for hero-cults. A closer comparison with local votive practices often shows that the same objects were dedicated to the gods or used as funerary gifts as well. One category of votive offering which can be said to be particularly linked to hero-cults, though their appearance often exhibits local traits, are stone reliefs or terracotta plaques showing a horseman, a seated male figure or a male-female couple, or a reclining and banqueting figure, often accompanied by a snake (Salapata 1993, 1997; van Straten 1995:92-100).

Just like the cult-places of the gods, hero-shrines could be located anywhere: isolated in the countryside, along roads, at city gates, or on the agora, the location often evoking the hero's role as a founder or protector of the community. A number of hero-cults had a relationship with a divine cult and most, if not all, major sanctuaries of gods housed both burials and cults of heroes. These heroes were often intimately connected with the mythical history of the sanctuary: the hero or heroine founded the sanctuary, instituted the cult, and was its first priest or priestess. The performance of games was also linked to the presence of a hero in a divine sanctuary. At Olympia, Pelops' defeat of Oenomaus was said to have been commemorated by the institution of the games or, according to another tradition, the games were founded by Heracles in honor of Pelops himself.

The tomb of a hero in a sanctuary gave rise to a myth explaining its presence. At Delphi there were different accounts of why Neoptolemus was slain at the altar of Apollo and buried within the sacred area: Pausanias (10.24.6) pointed out the *peribolos* with the hero's tomb near the temple of Apollo. The fact that no convincing match has been made so far with the excavated remains illustrates the difficulties in identifying a hero-shrine.

Written and archaeological evidence makes it clear that many installations connected with heroes consisted only of a tomb, a statue, or a stele, but by no means were all such monuments the focus for sacrifices. The accidental discovery of a prehistoric burial may have called for a one-off sacrifice and dedication of votives, presumably to appease the disturbed hero, but it did not give rise to a recurrent cult. There was also a tradition of some heroes not wanting any cult, as was the case with Eurystheus, who was going to protect Athens from his grave on the condition that the Athenians did not offer him sacrifices and libations (Euripides, *Heraclidae* 1026-36, 1040-3).

The heroes were local phenomena, and the layout of the cult-place was adapted to local conditions and traditions. These circumstances, as well as the heterogeneity of the hero population, account for the lack of panhellenic conformity in the appearance of the cult-places. The layout of cult-places ranged from the simplest and smallest, some only a piece of land marked by a boundary stone (*horos*), to large and elaborate sanctuaries. The sacred area could be an *abatōn*, somewhere it was not permitted to enter, and any votives were offered by dropping them over the walls, as at the so-called Leokorion in the Athenian agora (Thompson 1978) and a number of small precincts on Delos. Many hero-cults consisted of small enclosures, in which only an offering table or altar was placed, as in the case of the Stele shrine and the Crossroads *hērōon* at Corinth (Williams 1981: 410–12) or that of the Amyneion at Athens, which also had a well and perhaps a simple stoa (Travlos 1971:76–8).

Some were unique in appearance, as in the case of the Menelaion at Sparta, which consisted of a massive, rectangular platform, almost 15 × 20 m and at least 5 m high. It was accessed by a ramp, and on top there may have been an altar, statues, or a small temple. Finally, there were hero sanctuaries with a temple, like that of a god, and auxiliary buildings, such as the Amphiareion at Oropus, the sanctuary of Hippolytus at Troezen, and the Herakleion on Thasos. The sanctuary of Hērōs Ptoios in Boeotia had at least two altars, a small temple, probably housing the cult statue, and a stoa where the worshipers could dine and sleep, and in which votive objects were kept (Schachter 1981–94:3.11–21). The importance of this sanctuary is also evident from two rows of inscribed stone columns, from the late sixth to the mid-fifth century, supporting monumental tripods.

A fundamental trait of a hero was the fact that he was dead, but the relationship between the tomb of the hero and the location and appearance of the cult-place is complex. Some cult-places emphasized the burial aspect, as in the case of the archaic enclosure of the Pelopion at Olympia, which was centered on a prehistoric tumulus, identified as the tomb of the hero (Kyrieleis 2002), or in that of the precinct of Opheltēs at Nemea, in which a mound was artificially created in the sixth century (Miller 2002). Others show no traces of a tomb or burial, and some heroes had cults even though the mythic narrative makes it clear that there were no physical remains, since the hero had vanished at the moment of death. While the tomb of an ordinary dead person constituted a source of pollution, the burials of heroes were an exception to this rule and could be placed in spaces reserved for the living or for the gods, areas from which the dead were otherwise banned. However, religious personnel sometimes had to take certain precautions. Two third-century BC inscriptions from Cos stipulate that the priestesses of Demeter, in order to keep their purity, should not step upon or eat by a *hērōon* (LS 154 A, 21–2 and 37; 156 A, 8–10, heavily restored). Pausanias remarks that anyone who ate from the sacrifices to Pelops at Olympia could not enter the temple of Zeus (5.13.3). Presumably participation in the cult of this hero made the worshiper impure in the eyes of the god.

In several cases the bones of heroes are described as gigantic, in accordance with the notion of heroes being men larger than life. The finding of prehistoric bones may have lain behind some stories, and discoveries of this sort could also give rise to cults. The display of actual heroic bones seems, on the other hand, to have been less important for the cult than the fact that a city or sanctuary possessed them and that they were kept at a particular location. In contrast to the relics of Christian saints,

individual bones did not contain the power of the hero (unless the rest of the skeleton was missing, as in the case of Pelops' shoulder blade, kept at Olympia), and there is no tradition of the bones being used to perform miracles or healing, or of them being dangerous. Other possessions of heroes were also displayed in sanctuaries and revered, though rarely in the same cultic sense as the bones (Pfister 1909–12:331–9). Among such venerable objects were spears, shields, and other items of weaponry, but also chariots, ships, furniture, and clothing, and the egg of Leda was even reported to have been kept in the sanctuary of the Leucippides at Sparta.

Public and Private Perspectives

Just like the gods, heroes appealed to all levels of Greek society. Heroes and gods were of equal importance in the supernatural sphere and were invoked together in oaths and prayers to guard city and country (e.g., Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 184; Isocrates, *Plataicus* 60). The attraction of heroes and hero-cults in promoting identity both for a community and for a group of people derived from the fact that they were local and therefore more unique than the panhellenic gods.

The prominent role of heroes in state cult is evident in the epigraphical record of all Greek states. In Athens, heroes were a particularly important feature of official religion (Kearns 1989), a fact illustrated by the Cleisthenic reforms in the late sixth century, when the citizen body was divided into tribes, each named after a hero chosen by the Pythia at Delphi from a list of a hundred names (Herodotus 5.66; *Athenaion Politeia* 21.6; Kron 1976). The importance of a hero for the internal development of a city could be enhanced when needed, as was the case with Theseus, who rose to prominence in the classical period when credited with the synoecism of Attica. At the foundation of Messene in 370, as the capital of the new, free Messenia, the old heroes were called up again (Pausanias 4.27.6), an action underlining the idea of the heroes forming the core of the city. But the allocation of a hero to a particular site seems in many cases to have been rather arbitrary. An intimate and original connection with a particular hero was far from necessary. This multilocality of heroes and hero-cults, often with a clear political agenda, had the outspoken aim of strengthening one's own position versus that of neighboring communities: the possessor of the hero and, most frequently, the hero's bones would have the upper hand in a conflict.

When heroes were relocated their bones played an important role, and one reason for keeping a hero's grave secret was to prevent such movements. Bone transferral seems to have been particularly motivated by politics and was used as propaganda, as in the case of the bones of Orestes acquired by the Spartans (Herodotus 1.66–8; Boedeker 1993; McCauley 1999) or that of Theseus' bones, brought back from Scyrus to Athens in 476/5 by Cimon (Plutarch *Theseus* 36 and *Cimon* 8).

Mythic heroes could be moved from one location to another by the adoption or elaboration of different versions of a myth, and heroic mythology provided a means for constructing the past of the community. Agamemnon is placed by Homer at Mycenae and he had a hero-shrine at this site. Still, his cult was prominent at Sparta, where he had a sanctuary and was worshiped in the guise of Zeus-Agamemnon, together with his companion Alexandra-Cassandra. The Laconian link with the

Pelopid heroes became even more pronounced when the Spartans transferred the bones of Orestes, Agamemnon's son, from Arcadia in order to secure success in their conflict with Tegea. The Spartan promotion of Agamemnon and his family supported their claims as leaders of the Peloponnese, supplanting Argos.

Expelling a hero with whom the political establishment was dissatisfied was also attempted. After his war with Argos, Cleisthenes of Sicyon tried to banish the hero Adrastus, an Argive (Herodotus 5.67). When discouraged by the Pythia, he invited the hero Melanippus from Thebes (with Theban consent), since he was the bitter enemy of Adrastus. Finally, Cleisthenes stripped Adrastus of his sacrifices and festivals and transferred them to Melanippus.

On a local level – deme, village, or region – the prominence of heroes is even more apparent and their connection to the land is fundamental. The sacrificial calendars of Attica illustrate the spectrum of different kinds of such local heroes, many closely linked to the topography. In the deme of Thorikos, the most expensive victims, bovines, were given to the eponymous hero of the deme, Thorikos, and to Cephalus, who was intimately connected with this deme in myth (*SEG* 33.147). Other local heroes lacked proper names and were simply identified as “The hero of . . .”, such as the Hero at the Salt-Works or the Hero at Pyrgilion (*LSS* 19, 84–5). At the other end of the spectrum, we find a group of anonymous heroines, who only received *trapezai*, tables of offerings, at very low cost.

Hero-cult was also the prime focus for private cult associations, known primarily from the epigraphical record (Ferguson 1944). The members, *orgeōnes*, often owned the shrine and gathered there to sacrifice to their hero. The *orgeōnes* of Egretes, a hero known only from one inscription (*LS* 47), leased his *hieron* and other buildings to a private person for ten years, on the condition that the tenant would look after the precinct, including the trees growing there, and that the members would have access to the shrine for their annual celebration. This sacrifice ended with a meal in the sanctuary, which was equipped with a kitchen, a small stoa, couches, and tables.

The relationship between private individuals and heroes is harder to trace in detail; dedications in hero-shrines provide one way of spotting them. The small size of many cult-places for heroes also points to them being used primarily by small groups of people on a local or private level. The specialization of many heroes must have made them attractive on a personal basis, the most obvious case being the healing heroes (Verbanck-Piérard 2000). A small healing shrine, catering to local needs, has been found at Rhamnous, on the east coast of Attica: two simple rooms for incubation, an altar in an open courtyard where dedications were displayed, a sacred table, and a cistern. The hero was originally nameless, but identified with Amphiarus when the sanctuary was renovated on local initiative in the late third century (*IG* ii² 1322).

In the hellenistic period, the concept of the hero and hero-cults were partly transformed and put to new uses by private individuals (Hughes 1999). Apart from tombstones carrying the word *hērōs*, a development touched on above, there was an increase in the appearance, size, and location of funerary monuments for private individuals (Kader 1995). New evidence for these practices has come to light at Messene, in the form of a grave conjectured to be the *hērōon* of the artist Damophon and his sons near the temple of Asclepius and a series of hellenistic burial monuments for families at the gymnasium (Themelis 2000). Some of these monuments may have been the focus for some kind of ritual, though it is not evident that the deceased were

called heroes. In this period, the term *hērōon* used in a funerary context referred to a substantial monument for the departed person, rather than to a cult-place for a hero, and the same term could be applied to very ordinary tombs as well.

The most striking development of hero-cults of the hellenistic period is the foundation by private citizens of hero-cults for their family members, a practice previously reserved for the state. These institutions, beginning in the third century BC and best documented through the epigraphical record, aimed to promote the prominence of the family by declaring a member or members of it as heroes and laying down the guidelines for the cult, covering hereditary priesthoods, animal sacrifices and dining, often on a large scale, games, and the management of the cult-place, which was in some instances substantial. The private cult-foundations can be seen as an upgrading of the cult of the dead, through the adoption of the ritual practices and terminology of traditional hero-cults, but they are not to be considered typical of funerary cult in general of the same period.

The testament of Epicteta of Thera, dated to around 200 BC, provides for the completion of a Mouseion and the establishment of an annual three-day festival with sacrifices to the Muses, the heroes Phoenix (her late husband) and Epicteta herself, and their two dead sons, also called heroes (Laum 1914: vol. 2, no. 43). The sacrificial rituals are described in detail. The meat from the victims was to be divided between the members of the cult association and religious officials. At the end of the second century, the city of Aegale on Amorgus agreed to administer a donation made by Critolaus to provide for the heroization of his dead son, Aleximachus, and the yearly public feast (Laum 1914: vol. 2, no. 50). This event included a procession, in which officials of the city participated, the sacrifice of an ox eaten at a public banquet at the gymnasium, and games at which a ram, boiled in a cauldron and set in front of Aleximachus' statue, served as a prize.

None of these documents can be linked to any archaeological remains. A large building constructed in around 100 BC at Calydon to honor a private individual named Leon can give us an idea of the appearance of such shrines. A peristyle court with rooms on three sides could have been used for games, while one room equipped with couches was meant for dining for privileged participants in the cult. The central room focused on the cults of Zeus, Heracles, Eros, and Aphrodite, as well as of Leon himself, interred in a vaulted burial chamber below and now worshiped as the "New Heracles."

Conclusion: Heroes between the Gods and the Dead

Greek religion can be imagined as being based on three major components: gods, heroes, and the dead, all linked to each other. There is a distinction between them as to their degree of mortality but also as to their power, the immortal gods being the highest and most universal while the departed are confined to their graves and possess little power. Oscillating between these two poles are the heroes, dead but still divine. The importance of the heroes lies in their dual nature, which renders them adaptable to different conditions and needs at all levels of Greek religion and society.

The conceptualization of heroes as distinct from the gods, particularly the gods of the sky, and instead as more akin to the dead and the gods of the underworld, has its

theoretical underpinning in the division of Greek religion into an Olympian and a chthonian sphere, with the two spheres being viewed as the opposites of each other. This model is, however, in many ways too restricted and does not capture the full potential of heroes and hero-cults (Ekroth 2002:310–25; Schlesier 1991–2; but see also Scullion 1994). Moreover, from the archaic period onwards, when hero-cults began to be a prominent feature of Greek religion, the heroes and the dead gradually became more separated, conceptually as well as in reality. The ordinary dead began to be perceived as dangerous and as having to be averted, and funerary legislation suppressed the traits of tomb cult that overlapped with those of hero-cult, such as animal sacrifice, while burials of the ordinary dead were kept distinctly apart from the areas of the living and of the gods (Johnston 1999a; Sourvinou-Inwood 1995a). Though they were dead, the heroes moved closer to the gods, but they always remained closest to the worshipers.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

A number of aspects of Greek heroes and their cults are covered in Hägg 1999. On the origins of hero-cults, the diversity of the evidence, and its complexities, see Antonaccio 1995 and Boehringer 2001, who basically include all relevant sites. The oikists and their roles as recipients of religious attention are discussed in Malkin 1987. The different kinds of heroes are laid out in Farnell 1921, though Farnell's classification also illustrates the difficulties of dividing heroes in to such groups. Some categories have been treated separately, such as athletes (Bohringer 1979 and Fontenrose 1968), enemies (Visser 1982) and heroines (Larson 1995 and Lyons 1997). The cults of Heracles and his religious status are treated, on the basis of written as well as archaeological evidence, by Bergquist (1973, 2005), Verbanck-Piérard (1989 and 1992), and Lévêque and Verbanck-Piérard (1992).

Owing to the rich epigraphical evidence, local heroes from Attica are especially well known: see Kearns 1989, as well as Kron 1976, for the eponymous heroes of the Cleisthenic tribes. The sacrificial rituals, including the ritual terminology, are discussed in Ekroth 2002, who also relates the cults of heroes to those of the gods and the ordinary dead. There is no really comprehensive overview of the archaic, classical and hellenistic cult-places of heroes, partly owing to the complexity of the evidence. A collection of many of the principal sites, though with little analysis, is given in Abramson 1978; see also Pariente 1992. The written evidence for relics and bones is to be found in Pfister 1909–12. Hughes 1999 discusses the main developments of hero-cults in the post-classical period; see also Wörrle and Zanker 1995.