



Synthesis
ISSN: 0328-1205
ISSN: 1851-779X
synthesis@fahce.unlp.edu.ar
Universidad Nacional de La Plata
Argentina

Hearing epic, living heroes: cult-connected moments in Homeric poetry

 **Martin, Richard P.**

Hearing epic, living heroes: cult-connected moments in Homeric poetry

Synthesis, vol. 29, núm. 1, 2022

Universidad Nacional de La Plata

Disponible en: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=84670344002>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24215/1851779Xe114>



Esta obra está bajo una Licencia Creative Commons Atribución-NoComercial-CompartirIgual 4.0 Internacional.

Hearing epic, living heroes: cult-connected moments in Homeric poetry

Oyendo una épica de héroes vivientes: momentos conectados al culto en la poesía homérica

Richard P. Martin

Stanford University, Estados Unidos de América

rpmartin@stanford.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8917-2567>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24215/1851779Xe114>

Recepción: 31 Enero 2022

Aprobación: 28 Febrero 2022

Publicación: 01 Abril 2022



Acceso abierto diamante

Abstract

Two case studies of myths and rituals related to Zeus and kingship are here employed to suggest new ways of reading some key passages in the *Iliad*. The first centers on the ritual veneration of Agamemnon's scepter in Chaeronea, while the second examines features of the myth of the Lapith king Kaineus as they relate to hero-cult. The article articulates a method of interpreting that which one might call "religion" in Homer by relating the historical fictions of epic to realities of interaction with the supernatural in actual ancient Greek communities (in this instance, in Boeotia and Thessaly). It attempts to explore such linkages and their poetic implications for the larger Homeric compositions (for example, the endings of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) while avoiding the positivism and historicizing that have been endemic to scholarship on problems of this type.

Keywords: Agamemnon, Kaineus, Kingship, Scepter, Ritual, *Iliad*.

Resumen

En el presente artículo se utilizan dos estudios de caso de mitos y rituales relacionados con Zeus y su reinado para sugerir nuevas formas de interpretar algunos pasajes clave de la *Ilíada*. El primer caso se centra en la veneración ritual del cetro de Agamenón en Queronea, mientras que el segundo caso examina las características del mito del rey lapita Ceneo en relación con el culto al héroe. Se expone un método de interpretación de lo que podría considerarse "religión" en Homero, vinculando las ficciones históricas de la épica con hechos de interacción con lo sobrenatural en comunidades griegas antiguas reales (en este caso, en Beocia y Tesalia). Se exploran tales vínculos y sus implicaciones poéticas para las composiciones homéricas más extensas (por ejemplo, los finales de la *Ilíada* y la *Odisea*), de modo de evitar el positivismo y la historización, que han sido endémicos de la erudición sobre problemas de este tipo.

Palabras clave: Agamenón, Ceneo, Reinado, Cetro, Ritual, *Ilíada*.

The study of that which one might call “religion” in Homer can range from personalities to practices, from gods and heroes portrayed in the historical fictions enacted by the epics, to rituals and habits such as sacrifices, prayers, processions, hymns and dedicated offerings. Since antiquity, readers have tried to relate what the poems describe—whether actions of Zeus or protocols at a funeral—to the realities of interaction with the supernatural in historical Greek communities. To explore the possibility of such linkages, while avoiding the positivism and historicizing that have marred much modern scholarship, presents a challenge to the interpreter.¹

One pathway to understanding epic religion can be to consider its ties to entertainment. The poetry’s relation to the supernatural, however, should in no way be taken as softening or clothing pre-existing dogma to make it palatable or contemporary. Giving gods and heroes a personal voice is not like staging “Jesus Christ Superstar,” the 1970s rock-opera that re-imagined the Gospels. It is unlikely that there existed any archaic Greek theological discourse apart from embodiment in song and ritual. Rather than attractively packaging more austere ideas, the Homeric poems themselves provide something akin to an engrossing religious experience. The *Star Wars* franchise offers a rough analogy. Although George Lucas, genius inventor of the original film, once remarked that he envisioned it “taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily accessible construct,” he also confessed to using the movie to encourage spirituality within young people—“more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system” (Lucas, 1999, p.92). Neither he nor anyone else can deny that this spiritual subtext is anything less than entertainment, albeit based on serious themes.

Of course, the difference between the *Iliad* and *Star Wars* is that Darth Vader and the rest never existed outside Lucas’ imagination. Zeus, on the other hand, long existed before Homer. The god was worshipped on Crete and in mainland Greece from the 13th century BC, at the latest. A Linear B tablet from Pylos (PY Tn 316.9) records dedications “to Zeus” [*Di-we(i)*] of a gold vessel and a man (and on the same line, to Hera, a gold vessel and woman). Further back, Zeus appears to be the only member of the Greek pantheon boasting a clear Indo-European heritage, with cognate divinities in Latin (*Ju-piter*) and Sanskrit (*dyáus*) (Mallory and Adams, 2006, pp.409-11). So those who created Greek epics inherited the god in some form. But how much was that inheritance the Zeus we know? That “Homer” was in some regards more like George Lucas than we might expect was suggested by Herodotus (2.53):

Where each of the gods arose from, or whether all had always existed, and what they were like in form, they [the Greeks] did not know until yesterday or the day before, one might say. For I reckon that Hesiod and Homer existed not more than four hundred years before me, and it is they who made poetically for the Greeks the origin of the gods (*theogonie*), gave the gods their titles (*eponumiai*), distinguished the honors due them (*timai*) and their skills (*tekhnai*), and indicated their forms.²

While it seems odd that two hexameter poets would have introduced such primary constituents of Greek religion, Herodotus is *not* asserting that they created the gods. Rather, poetry shaped our imagination of the gods. Yet if no single imaginative discourse dominated before these Panhellenic poets, what materials did they work with? The sort of thing found in the 13th century in Pylos, Knossos or Thebes, or any one of 800 different Greek communities that were already venerating a set of divine beings and heroes: local traditions, grounded in particular landscapes and idiosyncratic rituals. Stories surely accompanied the traditions, all of which Homeric and Hesiodic poetry were in a position to stylize and re-imagine in powerful ways.

This paper focuses on two traditions that may have infiltrated the *Iliad*, and in turn have been transformed by it. A final *Star Wars* analogy might help us approach the details. Luke Skywalker’s hideout in *The Last Jedi* (2017) is where the fictional Jedi Order built one of its first temples. But it is also a real island, Skellig Michael, eight miles southwest of Co. Kerry, Ireland. The film’s crew sought a place with a mystical aura. As it happens, Skellig Michael sheltered a 7th-century hermitage for Irish monks. On a shelf 600 feet above sea-level are remnants of six beehive huts, two oratories, and a number of tombstones. A tourist destination thanks to film, the site is now probably “read” by visitors through these Jedi

associations. But others—perhaps even some of the same visitors—might also ponder its actual monastic past and even draw analogies between the Jedi Warrior and the leader of heavenly armies, Saint Michael the Archangel, to whom the site was dedicated. In short, one could triangulate and reconstruct the reader-responses of an audience that experiences the physical remains of a local cult site; knows an epic production that uses the site; and knows also the back-story (“myth” in Greek terms) of the site. I should like to reconstruct an analogous experience for some audiences of the *Iliad*.

The first tradition comes from Chaeronea in Boeotia. We have the following curious report from Pausanias (9.40.11-12):

Of the gods, the people of Chaeroneia honor most the scepter which Homer says Hephaestus made for Zeus, Hermes received from Zeus and gave to Pelops, Pelops left to Atreus, Atreus to Thyestes, and Agamemnon had from Thyestes. This scepter, then, they worship (*sebousi*), calling it Spear (*doru*). That there is something peculiarly divine about this scepter is most clearly shown by the fame it brings to the Chaeroneans. They say that it was discovered on the border of their own country and of Panopeus in Phocis, that with it the Phocians discovered gold, and that they were glad themselves to get the scepter instead of the gold. I am of opinion that it was brought to Phocis by Agamemnon's daughter Electra. It has no public temple made for it, but its priest keeps the scepter for one year in a house. Sacrifices are offered to it every day, and by its side stands a table full of meats and cakes of all sorts. Poets have sung, and the tradition of men has followed them, that Hephaestus made many works of art, but none is authentic except only the scepter of Agamemnon. (Trans. Jones 1935)

As we try to put this information regarding cult practice into relation with the *Iliad*, we need to be of two minds. That is, we first need to imagine the people of Chaeronea having heard something like the Homeric *Iliad*—although not necessarily the poem we have. Perhaps after the spread of texts they did in fact read something like our vulgate text. What do they conceptualize when they hear of this mysterious scepter, kept in the priest's house, the lucky recipient of tasty foods? Presumably, they recall the key *Iliad* scenes involving a scepter. Foremost is the passage to which Pausanias alludes. As Book Two opens, and Agamemnon (tricked by Zeus and Dream) prepares to rouse the troops for battle, he grasps “his ancestral scepter, unwithering always” as the poet describes it (*πατρῷον ἄφθιτον αἰεὶ*). As the Greek warriors swarm onto the field like bees from a hollow rock, and the heralds make them settle down, Agamemnon stands before the masses holding this scepter.³

It is at this point that we get the scepter's biography—like many material objects in Homer, it has its own backstory. Crafted for Zeus by Hephaestus, it passes to Pelops, then to his son Atreus, then Atreus' brother Thyestes upon Atreus' demise. Finally, upon Thyestes' death, it goes to his nephew Agamemnon. Already at this point an audience of the *Iliad* might be getting negative vibrations. The story of the house of Atreus is hardly a pretty tale. This narrative of the scepter's wanderings might summon memories of other unfortunate family exchanges relating to sovereignty over Mycenae. Thyestes first held the kingship, since he possessed a golden lamb—but according to some sources, he got it because his adulterous lover—the wife of Atreus—took it from her husband. Zeus sets things right (in a way) by having Atreus yield the kingship to his brother until such time as the sun should set in the East—which Zeus conveniently and immediately makes it do. For good measure, we read, Atreus threw in the Thyestean feast, carving and serving to his brother that man's own boiled children. Thyestes then gets his own back, some years later, by conceiving an avenging son (some said, through incest). Grown to manhood, Aegisthus kills his uncle Atreus. So goes the longer version of how the scepter passed to Thyestes (Apollodorus *Epitome* E.2.10-15).

How much of this detail was actually known to the *Iliad*'s audiences is debatable. The Hellenistic scholar Aristarchus seems to have believed that the Homeric poet did *not* know the worst. Geoffrey Kirk, however, points out “the probability is rather that it was available” (to Homer) “but that he preferred on occasion...to use a less elaborate version.”⁴ Kirk's view is supported by our knowledge that the story of the lamb featured in the lost epic poem *Alcmeonis*, dating to at least the 6th century BC.⁵ A scholiast on the *Iliad* passage notes that the epithet there given to Thyestes—*poluarni* “having many rams”—could be a hint about the grim earlier episode. Additionally, there is the detail that Atreus “left” the scepter to Thyestes after death, rather than gifting it to him in life.

Taking seriously this ominous framework, we might interpret with a keener sense of paradox the rather absurd scene that follows Agamemnon's authoritative commanding of the assembled troops. He has invented his own addition to Zeus' command to join battle. He will first make a test of the troops –a sort of reverse psychological jiu-jitsu by which, instead of urging the Greeks to fight, he says they should all give up: Zeus has broken his promise and deceived them, so they should go home. His own ruse, built upon an unsuspected ruse by Zeus, backfires. Waves of men instantly head for their ships, as Agamemnon's fellow officers try to beat back the tide. Literally –the always-reliable henchman Odysseus, grabbing his commander's scepter, wields it like a policeman's night-stick. When he meets a non-elite “man of the *dêmos*” he drives him back with the scepter, in authoritarian tones (*Il.* II.203-6):

Surely not all of us Achaians can be as kings here (*basileusomen*).

Lordship for many is no good thing. Let there be one ruler,

one king (*basileus*), to whom the son of devious-devising Kronos

gives the scepter and right of judgment, to watch over his people (*bouleuëisi*).⁶

An interesting sound-play in the Greek makes these lines even more ironic: we cannot all be *basileus*; there is one *basileus*, and his job is to give counsel (not, *pace* Lattimore, to “watch over his people”). Yet shortly before this little speech, we have seen precisely what the *boulê* of one famous *basileus* has produced: the near-disaster of abandoning Troy, honor, and the dead who supposedly made the fight worthwhile. The prominent heirloom scepter of Agamemnon implies a high standard from which the king conspicuously falls short. Of course, Zeus himself—a trickster like his devious father Kronos—is no saint. Agamemnon, therefore, simply follows in the god's footsteps. Kings are from Zeus, as Hesiod states (*Theogony* 96), but the poet also knows of kingship's flaws (*Works and Days* 37-40, 202). This does not dislodge my broader point: the multigenerational scepter of Zeus and Agamemnon functions as a foil in the *Iliad*, evoking the evil of all-ambitious sovereignty. It encapsulates the poem's meditation on the perils of power.

This idea underlies the more famous scepter scene in the *Iliad*, when Achilles smashes it to the ground with an oath and a description (*Il.* I.234-39):

...this scepter which never again will bear leaf nor

branch, now that it has left behind the cut stump in the mountains,

nor shall it ever blossom again, since the bronze blade stripped

bark and leafage, and now at last the sons of the Achaians

carry it in their hands in state when they administer

the justice of Zeus.

Although this is probably not the same scepter as the Zeus-derived symbol carried by Agamemnon (instead, it authorizes assembly speech), the bleak image and reference to Zeus' justice underline even more graphically the suspect nature of kingly power.⁷

To return to Chaeronea: what might natives there, knowing the *Iliad*, think about venerating Agamemnon's scepter—or as they called it, the “spear” (*doru*)? Earlier criticism offers ethnographic excurses, rather than a view from the poetic angle. The pioneer of Greek anthropology, Sir James George Frazer, in his Pausanias commentary adduces multiple comparanda—the Scythians revering an iron sword; the Gonds of India worshipping an iron spear-head, or venerating Bhima in the form of his mythical club; Samoan war-clubs “battered and blood stained,” observed by Mr J.B. Stair to be “treasured up and revered as articles of the highest value.” There's the Samoan god Tufi, worshipped as a 10-foot-long

coconut-tree spear; a New Hebridian medicine man's sacred ancestral staff; and smooth black sticks representing the Mexican god Yacatecutli, who received offerings of blood drawn from the ears, tongues, legs, or arms of their merchant owners.⁸ The exotic was consumed ravenously by Frazer's Victorian stay-at-homes. Yet, apart from a frisson in contemplating the primitive possibilities of Boeotian life, we get little illumination from the ethnographers. The information is too monophonic; one wants to hear what Samoan *poems* say about Tufi. That way we might approach the Greek problematic, in which a sacred object (the scepter) is imaginatively embedded in a poetic fiction, as well as venerated in local rites. Informants aware of both could help us grasp how the epic influences their attitudes toward the cult object, and vice versa. In the absence of such persons, we must speculate.

Read carefully, circumstantial details in the Pausanias passage present a structure of binaries. For example, the scepter was found, along with gold objects, on the border between two territories, Panopeus in Phocis and the neighboring Chaeronea –two sorts of finds, two competing communities. In true folkloric fashion, the people choosing the seemingly less valuable object—literally “wood” not gold—end up with the better bargain (the opposite of the Promethean division). How the scepter's precious heritage was revealed is not told. A series of other puzzling doublets, some latent, lurks here. Electra, says Pausanias, must have been the one to have brought the scepter to Phocis. She did marry a Phocian, but what about her brother Orestes? Why the break in patrimonial tradition? The scepter has a private shrine –why not public? Among many works of Hephaestus, why is it designated the only “authentic” one? And it is “peculiarly divine” (*theioteron*) –in contrast, we assume, to some other scepters– proof of which is the distinction it brings (*to epiphanes*), a kind of epic glory like *kleos*. Yet, as it is privately held every year, its epiphanic power remains paradoxical.

Last, we have the double name. Pausanias uses the Iliadic word *skêptron* for what the Chaeroneans call *doru*. Not only are there two names, but the second has two meanings—“spear” but also “wood.” Both occur already in the *Iliad*, although of the 211 attestations, only five times does the word signify “wood” as a material: three times within a simile about ship-making (III.61, XV.410, XVII.744), once of rotting ship's timbers (II.135); and once of Achilles' well-built fir-wood hut (XXIV.450). Chaeronean local usage may not at all derive from epic diction. If they mean to call Agamemnon's scepter “the wood thing” (a euphemistic taboo?), the Iliadic parallels are ill-fitting, since they refer to *big* wooden beams. But if the Chaeroneans by saying *doru* wish to evoke a living tree-trunk, the relevant Homeric analogue is in the comparison made by Odysseus when, naked but for a tree-branch, he flatters Nausicaa for her resemblance to a pliant young palm once glimpsed on Delos. “I marvelled long at heart, for never yet did such a tree (*doru*) spring up from the earth,” says the hero (*Od.*6.166-67, trans. Murray 1919). If it is this latter connotation that the Chaeroneians intend—the scepter imagined as vital, growing “wood”—it makes for a nice opposition to the lifeless, shorn scepter angrily hurled by Achilles.

It may also hint at the larger religious context for the Chaeronean veneration of Agamemnon's scepter, which must be hero-cult. Starting in the eighth century BC, certain figures from the past were venerated in a manner resembling the cult of ancestors, but involving participation by larger communities. The names (made explicit by later dedications at the sites) are familiar from epic: Helen and Menelaus at Sparta, Odysseus on Ithaca, and at the Bronze Age site of Mycenae, the local king Agamemnon. Agamemnon was also worshipped in the area of Sparta. A deposit of 10,000 dedicatory items dating from as early as the 7th c. BC, uncovered near the church of Agía Paraskeví at Amyclae, includes a number of terracotta plaques and also vases apparently depicting Agamemnon together with a heroine named Alexandra (later interpreted as his Trojan war-captive Cassandra). Both legendary figures were supposedly buried at the site.⁹

Shocking as it seems to modern readers that the king who sacrificed his own daughter, provoked a deadly quarrel with his best fighter, and died at the hands of his enraged wife might have been venerated, the logic of ancient hero-cult elevates mortals thought to wield immense power even after death, with ability to heal or hurt. Morality does not enter the equation. A prime example is the incestuous parricide Oedipus, whose bones brought protection to those who possessed them. The Athenians asserted that his body lay in their deme Colonus, having been wrested from Theban control; others placed it at the borders

of his former homeland (Edmunds 1981). Compare with this crucial liminality the detail about Agamemnon's scepter being found at the border. The scepter can be metonymic for the man himself, so that this heroic talisman was conceived as a source of territorial protection, better than a wall. If the scepter was really thought by the Chaeroneans to be living "wood," like the emerging shoot of a tree, then it also neatly offers another metonymy, for the ideology of hero-cult makes the dead and denuded corpse into an ever-living source of strength and assistance, as if the discarded Iliadic scepter "blooms" again.¹⁰

Thus far we have sketched a scenario in which inhabitants of Chaeronea, hearing the *Iliad*, would have cultivated a dual awareness. On the one hand, from the mythopoeic world of epic they knew Agamemnon to be a tyrannical, petty, and ineffective leader. On the other hand, a precious material relic of his sovereignty connected their very *polis*, via the *heros*, with Zeus himself. Numinous power—not ethical niceties—would most likely have been in the minds of local audiences. At another cult-site, in Sparta, Zeus was worshipped with the cult-title "Agamemnon," apparently in the sense "good at devising."¹¹ Having something from this avatar of Zeus in their possession could have affected the way an ancient Chaeronean processed the *Iliad*. Unfortunately, we do not have information on the scepter/spear from a man who was both a learned priest and native of this particular city-state –Plutarch. For now, it is worth noting a detail that this later author does provide concerning a special spear located elsewhere in Boeotia: that magistrates in Thebes regularly took over a spear (δόρυ) as sign of their office.¹² It would no doubt have highlighted the symbolic power of Agamemnon's scepter/spear all the more if the Chaeroneans, as well, were possessed of a similar imaginary that led them to understand *doru* both as *living* "wood" and as *killing* wood, in the form of a crafted weapon.

Let us pivot briefly to the obverse, to ask not how one Boeotian *polis* interpreted the *Iliad*, but how the poem might have embedded and extrapolated something akin to the *polis* belief. If we focus on scepter as "spear" (the more common Iliadic meaning for *doru*), then the double-naming of Agamemnon's powerfully symbolic accessory at Chaeronea suggests a darker elision of objects. What should be an honorific signifier, a venerable piece of wood first designed for Zeus, merges in local parlance with the tool of war. The materialized message is: kingly right equals might. In the *Iliad*, the sovereignty of Agamemnon, in fact, flows from his control of the most ships and men. If we "read" this elision into the *Iliad* we are led to focus on a commander who demands submission to a kingly right that he can only uphold by brute might. Illustrating that syndrome, his precious Zeus-given scepter is employed, as we noted above, to beat dissenting warriors over the head and back (Il. II.265-69).¹³

I turn now more briefly to a second myth, probably but not conclusively once attached to a cult. This story is worth drawing into our orbit of symbols since it is alluded to indirectly in the *Iliad*. An audience for the poem that knew of the elision "scepter" with "spear" –as at Chaeronea– might well associate that ideational merger with another odd story about weaponry and sovereignty. Kaineus, king of the Thessalian tribe called Lapiths, was originally a woman, "Kaenis" or "Kainê," with whom Poseidon had intercourse. When the sea-god promised to grant her wish, Kaenis asked to become impenetrable and was turned into a man who could never be slain by a spear.¹⁴ Fast-forward to the death of Kaineus. In battling the Lapiths, the Centaurs, unable to wound Kaineus, drove him directly into the ground by battering him with the trunks of trees. Armand D'Angour, writing of this episode, notes the "spear-like persona" of Kaineus, and comments: "He represents in effect a dangerous weapon that can only be disposed of, like nuclear waste, by being thoroughly submerged beneath the earth. The fact that Kaineus' threatening presence is ultimately neutralized by his being bludgeoned into the ground makes him more akin to an iron weapon than a human being."¹⁵

Unpacking this hauntingly violent tale some scholars have detected signs of initiation ritual, which regularly featured transvestism. Unlike the cross-dressing of Achilles among the women of Scyros or Heracles at the court of Omphale, however, the change in Kaineus is permanent, resembling that of Leukippos, a young woman, changed into a man at the request of her mother, whose story explained the pre-nuptial ritual of the *Ekdua* ("Disrobing") at Phaistos.¹⁶ It is hard to trace a more specific relationship between the enduring invulnerability granted by Poseidon and the brutal ending of Kaineus, apart from

the obvious logistical dilemma posed by an unwoundable warrior. Jan Bremmer (2019, p. 24) proposed that the initiatory associations of sex-change signified entry into an ecstatic warrior cult, a phenomenon not much otherwise in evidence in Greek myth or history. Whatever linkage might once have existed is overshadowed by the prominent visual deployment of the death of Kaineus. The battle of Centaurs and Lapiths was depicted on the western pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, on the Parthenon, and on the Temple of Hephaestus in Athens, as well as on Athenian sympotic vases. The figure of Kaineus flanked by attacking Centaurs shows up on a 7th-century bronze relief from Olympia and on the François vase (circa 570 BC).¹⁷ Within the same era as the latter object, the pseudo-Hesiodic *Aspis* (lines 178-190) includes, in its elaborate ekphrasis of Heracles' shield, the Lapiths battling around their king.

Even more relevant to our argument is another story told about Kaineus, and presented by some sources as the generating circumstance for his ultimate demise. It was said that he set up his spear in the marketplace and compelled all who passed to swear by it. This impiety caused Zeus to rouse the Centaurs to attack him.¹⁸ Four major themes in the vignette reverberate with the beginning of our *Iliad*. The authority of a king; his fixation on absolute power; the penal power of Zeus; and swearing oaths. One could say that the *Iliad* unties this bundle of mythic motifs and re-arranges them: Achilles swears an oath by a scepter, precisely because Agamemnon transgresses the bounds of proper kingship; and Zeus punishes Agamemnon (and troops), to honor Achilles. As mentioned earlier, it is the false dream from Zeus that prompts Agamemnon's martial display, toting his famous Zeus-descended scepter.

But we need not run to the handbooks to discover the parallels. The *Iliad* itself displays them. Immediately after Achilles has dashed the scepter to the ground, the aged warrior Nestor steps in to calm the situation. Commanding attention, he recalls (Il. I.260-68):

... I have dealt with better men than
you are, and never once did they disregard me. Never
yet have I seen nor shall see again such men as these were,
men like Peirithoös, and Dryas, shepherd of the people,
Kaineus and Exadios, godlike Polyphemos,
or Theseus, Aigeus' son, in the likeness of the immortals.
These were the strongest generation of earth-born mortals,
the strongest, and they fought against the strongest, the beast men
living within the mountains, and terribly they destroyed them.

(Trans. Lattimore 1951)

Nestor's preternaturally long memory zeroes in on the battle of Centaurs and Lapiths in which Kaineus—whom he names—was driven into the earth. Nestor is too diplomatic to mention that unfortunate ending. Instead, he spins the battle as a success, as well as proof that heroes of old took him seriously. Is it accidental, however, that precisely at this point in the *Iliad*, a mythic story of disaster, featuring an arrogant overweening king, one almost identical with his weapon, is told to fighting men collected in the *agora*? What does Achilles—who was, after all, raised by a Centaur—think while hearing this tale? Like him—an internal audience—we might hear a coded message in Nestor's narrative.

Now, to provide a closer parallel with the Agamemnon-scepter cult in Chaeronea, and its hypothetical interaction with the *Iliad*, we would need to find cults of Kaineus. In one regard, the tale already provides a stylized or retrojected vision of a cult. The self-instituted ritual that is portrayed as the Lapith king's demand for worship of his spear, in a spot central to his community, sounds like the *aition* for the cult of

an oikist, a *polis*-founder usually buried in the central *agora*.¹⁹ The locale of Gyrtion, just west of Mt. Ossa, with which Kaineus was associated, has not (to my knowledge) yet yielded cult remains, but this does not mean worship never took place there.²⁰ The dimension of hero-cult highlighted in the Chaeronea ritual is suggestively evoked by some details surrounding the Kaineus story. Agamemnon, dead *heros*, is a living presence; Kaineus, the spear/man driven into the ground like a living tree, by other trees, is not definitively dead. He was mentioned in the treatise *On Kingship*, attributed to Theophrastus, if we trust an Oxyrhynchus papyrus from the early 3rd century AD that preserves a grammarian's literary-critical remarks (perhaps of Hellenistic or Imperial vintage). The writer explicates Theophrastus' phrase "Kaineus ruled by the spear" (τῶι δόρατι ἄρχειντὸν Καίνεα) by citing a fuller version from Acusilaus of Argos (early 5th c. BC), in which Poseidon turned Kainê into an invulnerable man due to a taboo against the young woman bearing children.²¹ Acusilaus likely gave the further details that as king of the Lapiths, Kaineus had set up his weapon (in the papyrus called "javelin" ἀκόν[τιον]), commanding that it be accounted a god (θεὸν ἐκέλευεν ἀριθμεῖν). But Zeus' revenge as depicted here, with Centaurs pounding Kaineus upright into the ground, contains an odd inversion: *first*, Kaineus is buried under a tombstone, *then* he dies (αὐτὸν κατακόπτουσιν ὄρθιον κατὰ γῆς καὶ ἄνωθεν πέτρην ἐπιτιθεῖσιν σῆμα, καὶ ἀποθνήσκει).²² Robert Fowler (2013, p.161) observes that the *sema* here suggests hero-cult at a tomb. We might add, to similar effect, that both Apollonius and Pindar give the impression Kaineus descended into the ground while alive. The relevant passage in the *Argonautica* (1.57-64) makes this explicit:

And from wealthy Gyrtion came Caeneus' son, Coronus—a brave man, but no braver than his father. For bards sing of how Caeneus, although still living, perished at the hands of the Centaurs, (ζῶν περ ἔτι κλείουσιν ἀοιδὸι Κενταύροισιν ὀλέσθαι) when, all alone and separated from the other heroes, he routed them. They rallied against him, but were not strong enough to push him back nor to kill him, so instead, unbroken and unbending, he sank (ἐδύσσετο) beneath the earth, hammered by the downward force of mighty pine trees. (Trans. Race 2009)²³

Pindar, in a *threnos* from which mere scraps remain, makes Kaineus seem an active agent of his own burial, his "upright foot" splitting the earth like a digging tool (fg.128f SM: σχίσας ὀρθῶ ποδὶ γᾶν).²⁴ Even the "fresh green pine-trees" (χλωραῖς ἐλάτῃσι) by which he is beaten into the earth evoke the sense of renewed life: Kaineus (whose name perhaps puns on *kainos* "new" as Delcourt notes: 1953, p.136) is evergreen through his chthonic influence as object of hero-cult, at the same time as he resembles a cult object—just like the scepter of Zeus/Pelops/Agamemnon.

Only Ovid adds a further detail about Kaineus that carries a symbolic undertone reminiscent of metempsychosis (another variety of *post mortem* life). In its broader mythopoeic setting, this detail can provide further connections with the Chaeronean cult-object. As Nestor tells the tale (*Met.*12.525-535), Kaineus left the earth entirely:

His end is doubtful. Some said that his body was thrust down by the weight of woods (*silvarum mole*) to the Tartarean pit; but the son of Ampycus denied this. For from the middle of the pile he saw a bird with golden wings fly up into the limpid air. I saw it too, then for the first time and the last. As Mopsus watched him circling round his camp in easy flight and heard the loud clangour of his wings, he followed him both with soul and eyes and cried: 'All hail, Caeneus, thou glory of the Lapithaeon race, once most mighty, now sole bird of thy kind!' (*maxime vir quondam, sed nunc avis unica*).

(Trans. Miller, 1916)

Perhaps an audience of Romans recalled the fate of their legendary sovereign Romulus, whose mysterious (apparent) death—whirled away in a thunderstorm—led to inaugurating cult honors (Livy 1.16). But a closer parallel for what befalls Kaineus in the Ovidian version appears in the mythographer Antoninus Liberalis (#6) concerning Periphas, an autochthonous ruler of Attica before the time of the primordial Cecrops (and known to Ovid, who names at *Met.* 7.400). Unlike Kaineus, or Salmoneus (another mortal with pretensions to challenging Zeus's kingship), Periphas piously sacrificed to Apollo, judged justly, and was so morally upright that people transferred to him honors properly due to Zeus, from

sanctuaries and temples to cult titles (Savior, Overseer, Gracious One). Zeus was only deterred by Apollo from incinerating Periphas amidst his whole household; he instead turned him into an eagle (and his wife into a vulture), made him king of all birds, and appointed him to guard his sacred scepter (φυλάσσειν τὸ ἱερὸν σκήπτρον).

A.B. Cook long ago (Cook 1904) tried to account for this story-pattern in Frazerian terms, reading the avian transformation of such would-be “Zeus” figures as a mythic explanation for how sovereign power passed with the royal spirit from one (slain) king to his successor. In contrast to the historicizing style of so much 20th-century work on myth and religion—something this essay has tried to counteract— I suggest that we dwell just as much on the internal poetics of the epic poem, keeping its fictional account and any actual ritual in open-ended dialogue. In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon is himself a “failed” Zeus—or at least a failed proponent of the kingship of Zeus, to which he continually adverts as the bulwark or his own shaky authority. In epic, Agamemnon never achieves transformation, in large part because Homeric poetry’s relentless tight focus on the tragic mortality of its heroes, the good as well as the not-quite-good-enough. But ritual beyond epic can regard the prime kingly accoutrement of this Achaean expedition leader, with its aura of Zeus’ reign, as an object of veneration.

It was left to Aeschylus to expand most brilliantly on this symbolic logic. If an Athenian audience knew that Zeus’ eagle was Periphas, the unwitting rival to Zeus transformed into the emblem of his rule, and furthermore that his wife, begging to be his companion after his metamorphosis was changed by Zeus into an omen-producing lammergeier (σύννομον τῷ Περιφάντι ἐποίησε φήγη), the magnificent *parodos* of the *Agamemnon* (e.g. line 114) gains even greater depths of meaning concerning royal powers.²⁵ Sophocles, perhaps forty years after the *Oresteia*, condensed into one image the essence of the other side of Agamemnon’s existence, as I have sketched it above, namely his continuing exercise of power even *after* death. Clytemnestra hastened to send grave-gifts to Agamemnon’s tomb after a disturbing dream (*Electra* 417-23). In reporting their mother’s nocturnal vision, Chrysothemis informs Electra:

They say that she was once more in company with your father and mine, who had come to the world of light; and then he took the staff which he used to carry, and which Aegisthus carries now, and planted it beside the hearth (ἐφέστιον πῆξαι... σκήπτρον) and from it grew up a fruitful bough, which overshadowed all the land of the Mycenaeans.

(Trans. Lloyd-Jones, 1994).²⁶

To turn back from this powerful tragic imagery to the understated associations one detects in epic, let us conclude with two smaller points concerning Kaineus and continuity. First, the *Odyssey*. The image of a still-living hero connected to a symbolic wooden tool has captured the attention of a number of Homerists, who find a homology between the *sema* of Elpenor (the young sailor who fell from Circe’s roof) and the shrine of Poseidon that Odysseus, as directed by Teiresias, will erect at the farthest inland point of his post-return wanderings. Compare Elpenor’s wish to be commemorated with a mound and oar (*Od.*11.75-78):

and heap up a mound (σῆμα) for me on the shore of the gray sea,
in memory of an unlucky man, that men yet to be may know of me.
Do this for me, and fix upon the mound my oar (πῆξαι τ’ ἐπὶ τύμβῳ
ἐρετμόν), with which I rowed in life in the company of my comrades.

with the place where Odysseus will propitiate Poseidon (*Od.*11.129-135):

Then fix in the earth your shapely oar (πῆξας ἐνῆρες ἐρετμόν)
and make handsome offerings to the lord Poseidon

—a ram, and a bull, and a boar that mates with sows—
 and depart for your home and offer sacred hecatombs
 to the immortal gods who hold broad heaven,
 to each one in due order. And death shall come to you yourself
 away from the sea, the gentlest imaginable ...

Odysseus' planted oar is not on his tomb—or is it? Teiresias has prefaced his instructions with reference to the “sign” he will relate to the hero (*Od.*11.126: σῆμα δέ τοι ἐρέω μάλ' ἀριφραδέες), using the same word that Elpenor has applied to his *post mortem* commemorative mound. And the result of Odysseus' inland sacrifices to the sea god, says the seer, will be a painless death.²⁷ Whether or not it occurred immediately in lived time (and at least in the *Telegony*, Odysseus made it back to Ithaca once more), the demise takes place, in the narrative's referential scheme, a few lines later. Since it was Poseidon whose transformation of Kaenê into the invulnerable Kaineus conditioned that king's death (under a mound of wood), an intriguing possibility presents itself: that Odysseus' ritual construction is as much a signalling of sacral kingship as it is the monument of a sailor who made peace with his nemesis. In other words, Odysseus, reinstated on Ithaca, is the positive pole of a structural binary; Kaineus, entombed (alive) in his own land, is the negative.²⁸

The second evocation is even more discreet. At the games for Patroclus, Leonteus, co-leader of a Thessalian contingent (cf. *Il.*II.738-47) competes to throw a heavy lump of unworked iron, which serves both as sporting equipment and prize in the contest, but loses to his countryman Polypoetes (*Il.* XXIII.826-49). The scene must be visualized within a landscape of burial monuments—not only the just-completed *sema* covering Patroclus' bones (*Il.* XXIII.255-57), but also a much older monument that is (another doublet) both athletic marker (turning-post for the chariot race) and tomb-marker. Nestor stresses its importance to his son Antilochus (*Il.* XXIII.326-33):

Now I will tell you a most certain sign that will not escape you (σῆμα... ἀριφραδέες).

There stands, about a fathom's height above the ground, a dry stump,

of oak or pine (δρυὸς ἢ πεύκης) which rots not in the rain,

and two white stones on either side of it are firmly set against it

at the turning of the course, and on either side is smooth ground for driving.

Perhaps it is a monument σῆμα of some man long ago dead,

or perhaps was made the turning post of a race in days of men of old;

and now has swift-footed noble Achilles marked it as his turning post.

The scene is semiotically layered, with a verbal sign about a visual sign that might already have been construed by men of the past as turning-point for *their* races and is now so re-characterized.²⁹ But it is also rich in more personalized signification. Nestor, the one to highlight this uncannily unrotted tree-stump and voice the interpretive choice, was present at the entombing of Kaineus with another wood-piled grave-marker. Leonteus was probably not there, but no doubt knew of it: he is the grandson of Kaineus.

The foregoing attempt to read poetry and cult in tandem prompts a concluding methodological consideration concerning directions of influence. For years, hero cult had been taken to be a belated imitation of epic—a variety of fan-fiction combined with tourist attraction, as it were. Since the late 20th century, however, recognition of a more subtle relation has gained ground. Contrast, for example, these

two comments. On one hand, Lewis Farnell, in his Gifford Lectures on Hero Cults, concerning the cult of Agamemnon's scepter at Chaironeia:

We ...discern here a clear example of the cult-influence of Homer's poetry, which inspired the Chaeroneans to transfigure and somewhat to exalt their primitive and debasing little-fetish cult.³⁰

On the other the archaeologist Gina Salapata writing in 2011 of the Chaironeia cult and others:

Agamemnon's great fame as the mightiest king in epic poetry might have been the motive behind the association of his name with all the aforementioned cults in so many different areas of the Greek world on the other hand, since epic poetry and hero cult were parallel phenomena, poetry might have drawn upon a preexisting mythical figure (Salapata, 2011, p. 47).

Taking the latter approach, which balances poetry and cult as interactive and culturally grounded religious expressions, lets us see the *Iliad* in a new light, with darker shadows.

References

- Alföldi, A. (1959). *Hasta-Summa Imperii: The Spear as Embodiment of Sovereignty in Rome*. *American Journal of Archaeology*, 63(1), 1-27.
- Andolfi, I. (2019). *Acusilaus of Argos' Rhapsody in Prose*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Arrington, N. (2010). *Between Victory and Defeat: Framing the Fallen Warrior in Fifth-Century Athenian Art*. Diss. Berkeley. Recuperado de <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7b03d0rv>
- Aston, E. (2017). Centaurs and Lapiths in the landscape of Thessaly. In G. Hawes (Ed.), *Myths on the Map: the Storied landscapes of ancient Greece* (pp.83-105). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bremmer, J. (2019). *The World of Greek Religion and Mythology. Collected Essays II*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Cannatà Fera, M. (1990). *Pindarus. Threnorum fragmenta (Lyricorum Graecorum quae exstant 7)*. Rome: Ed. dell' Ateneo.
- Cook, A. B. (1904). The European sky-god. II. *Folklore*, 15(4), 369-426.
- Cyrino, M. (1998). Heroes in d(u)ress: transvestism and power in the myths of Herakles and Achilles. *Arethusa*, 31(2), 207-241.
- D'Angour, A. (2011). *The Greeks and the New: Novelty in Ancient Greek Imagination and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Decourt, J.-C. (1998). Caïnis-caïneus et l'occupation humaine de la plaine orientale de Thessalie. *Revue des Études Grecques*, 111, 1-41.
- Delcourt, M. (1953). La légende de Kaineus. *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 144(2), 129-150.
- Easterling, P. (1989). Agamemnon's *sképtron* in the *Iliad*. In M. M. Mackenzie and C. Roueché (Eds.), *Images of Authority: Papers Presented to Joyce Reynolds on the Occasion of her 70th Birthday* (pp.104-21). Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society.
- Edmunds, L. (1981). The cults and the legend of Oedipus. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 85, 221-238.
- Ekroth, G. (2007). Heroes and Hero-Cult. In D. Ogden (Ed.), *A Companion to Greek Religion* (pp.100-114). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Farnell, L. (1921). *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Fowler, R. (2013). *Early Greek Mythography*. Vol 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frazer, J. G. (1898). *Pausanias's Description of Greece*. Vol 5. London: Macmillan.
- Jones, W. (Ed.) (1935). *Pausanias. Description of Greece, Volume IV: Books 8.22-10*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kirk, G. (1985). *The Iliad: A Commentary: Volume 1, Books 1-4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lattimore, R. (Trans.) (1951). *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lloyd-Jones, H. (Ed.) (1994). *Sophocles. Ajax. Electra. Oedipus Tyrannus*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lucas, G. (1999). Of myth and men. Interview by Bill Moyers. *Time*, April 26, 1999, 153(16), 90-94.
- Malkin, I. (1987). *Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece*. Leiden: Brill.
- Mallory, J. P.– Adams, D. (2006). *The Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, R. (2015). Epic Religion. In E. Eidinow and J. Kindt (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Religion* (pp.151-164). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Miller, F. J. (Ed.) (1916). *Ovid. Metamorphoses, Volume II: Books 9-15*. Revised by G. P. Goold. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Murray, A. (Ed.) (1919). *Homer. Odyssey*. Revised by George E. Dimock. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nagy, G. (1983). *Sêma and nóêsis*: some illustrations. *Arethusa*, 16, 35-55.
- Nagy, G. (1987). The sign of Protesilaos. *Mêtis*, 2, 207-213.
- Nagy, G. (2013). *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pirenne-Delforge, V. (2017). Le rituel: communiquer avec les dieux. In G. Pironti and C. Bonnet (Eds.), *Lesdieux d'Homère: polythéisme et poésie en Grèce ancienne* (pp.135-150). Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège.
- Prellwitz, W. (1891). *Δρυζυμν. Beiträge zur Kunde der indogermanischen Sprachen*, 17, 171-172.
- Pollard, J. (1948). Birds in Aeschylus. *Greece & Rome*, 17(51), 116-127.
- Race, W. (Ed.) (2019). *Apollonius Rhodius. Argonautica*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Salapata, G. (2011). The heroic cult of Agamemnon. *Electra*, 1, 39-60.
- Salapata, G. (2014). *Heroic Offerings: The Terracotta Plaques from the Spartan Sanctuary of Agamemnon and Cassandra*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Stein, C. (2016). The life and death of Agamemnon's scepter: the imagery of Achilles (Iliad 1.234-239). *Classical World*, 109(4), 447-463.
- West, M. (Ed.) (2003). *Greek Epic Fragments: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Notes

- 1 For excellent analysis of the problem: Pirenne-Delforge (2017).
- 2 All translations are mine unless otherwise attributed. On this passage, see Martin (2015).
- 3 Insightful analysis of this and related scenes in Easterling (1989).
- 4 Kirk (1985, p. 127). Easterling (1989, p.105) sees danger in reading any ironic allusion to more disreputable versions.
- 5 Fr. 6 (= Schol. Eur.Or.995) in West (2003).
- 6 All translations of the *Iliad* are from Lattimore (1951).
- 7 On the dense imagery here and links to other passages, see Stein (2016).
- 8 Frazer (1898, pp. 211-12), who notes in passing the story of Kaineus, on which see below.
- 9 For concise introduction to hero-cult with further references: Ekroth (2007); on the Agamemnon cults: Salapata (2014).
- 10 On the theme of resuscitation as tied to hero cult: Nagy (1987); on vegetal imagery as metonymic for the hero: Nagy (2013, pp. 299-360).
- 11 Schol. ad Lycophron 335; on etymology: Prellwitz (1891).
- 12 Plut. *De genio Soc.* 578c; cf. 597b, where it is noted that Theban magistrates normally initiated successors into rites at Dirce's tomb, the location of which was kept secret; see below for further tomb and spear cult connections.
- 13 On this scene: Easterling (1989, pp. 109-11).
- 14 Exhaustive list of sources: Decourt (1998).
- 15 D'Angour (2011, pp. 77-78). Delcourt (1953, p. 144) briefly juxtaposes the Chaeronea and Kaineus stories.
- 16 For Leukippos, see Antoninus Liberalis #17, which also alludes to several more temporary sex-changes (e.g. Teiresias). More generally on the motif: Cyrino (1998).
- 17 Arrington (2010, pp. 105-121; 280-85).
- 18 Schol. ad Ap.Rhod.1.57-64, Eust. ad *Il.*1.264. On oaths by a spear: Alföldi (1959).
- 19 Oikist cult: Malkin (1987: 204-66).
- 20 On Lapith locales: Aston (2017).
- 21 FGrHist 2 F 22 = P.Oxy. 1611fr.1col.II38. Most recent edition and commentary: Andolfi (2019).

- 22 The scholion to Apollonius Rhodius (above n.18) specifies a *doru*, but an exegetical scholion to *Il*.1.264 calls it *akontion* and in general fits the P.Oxy 1611 version.
- 23 The syntax of ζῶν περ ἔτι κλείουσιν is deliberately ambiguous; “still” can modify either adjective (“alive”) or verb (“celebrate”, as in Ap.Rhod.1.18: νῆα...ἔτι κλείουσιν ᾠοῖδοι). Paradoxically the hero lives in death and song.
- 24 P.Oxy.2447, supplemented by schol. Ap. Rhod. 1.57a. For commentary and references to debate going back to Rohde over whether Kaineus remained alive, see Cannata Fera (1990, pp. 157-63).
- 25 On poetic uses of these species: Pollard (1948).
- 26 On the passage in relation to Homeric themes: Easterling (1989, pp. 115-16).
- 27 On these passages: Nagy (1983, pp. 44-48).
- 28 Cf. the parallel between the suitors’ treatment of Odysseus and the Centaurs’ *hubris*, thematized at *Od*.21.295-304. Kaineus’ relation to Poseidon is read by Bremmer (2019, p. 23) as reflecting the god’s patronage of men’s associations, paternity of clan ancestors (Boetus, Aeolus) and cult title “Phutalmios” (“fosterer”).
- 29 Explicated by Nagy (1983, pp. 44-48).
- 30 Farnell (1921, p. 322); he ties the scepter-cult to worship of Zeus in Arcadia that connects the god to a meteor-stone; both “seem to belong to some primitive stratum of pre-anthropomorphic religion” (p.83).