HERAKLES AND THE PANHELLENIC IDEA IN ANCIENT GREEK CULTURE

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Abstract: The ancient Greek city states never constituted a politically coherent unit. Nevertheless, the idea of a Greek nationalism *avant la lettre*, based on a shared linguistic, cultural and religious heritage, had been a widespread notion since the Persian Wars (early 5th century BC) at the latest. This panhellenic idea was prevalent, for example, in the political speeches by Isocrates and Demosthenes as well as in supra-regional institutions such as the oracle at Delphi and sport festivals like the Olympic games. In addition, the panhellenic idea manifested itself in mythology. In this context, the figure of Herakles was of eminent importance. As early as the *Iliad*, Herakles served as a positive example of a hero unifying the Greeks and elevating the Trojan War to a panhellenic enterprise, and later, the idea of Herakles as a political figure became widespread. Herakles was regarded as the ideal, prototypical ruler from whom kings and royal families claimed their ancestry, and he also served as a model founder of Greek colonies and panhellenic institutions such as the Olympic games. This article discusses how Herakles and the panhellenic idea were intertwined in ancient Greek culture, and it argues that Herakles' unique in-between status as a demigod and a god proper made him particularly apt to serve as a mythical paradigm of the panhellenic idea.

Keywords: Herakles, Ancient Greece, panhellenism, god, demigod

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1. Introduction: The Panhellenic Idea in Ancient Greece

As is well known, the ancient Greek city states, the *póleis* (πόλεις), never constituted a politically coherent unit, but they were all independent (and it was as late as 1830 that Greece as a modern nation arose after the War of Independence). Nevertheless, the idea of a Greek nationalism *avant la lettre*, based on a shared linguistic, cultural and religious heritage, had been acknowledged since the archaic period.[2] In Homer's *Iliad* (c. 8th century BC) – an epic that offers a mythical account of the Trojan War and constitutes the founding document of written Greek literature – a collective military enterprise involving all Greeks against a common, non-Greek enemy lies at the centre of the action; and indeed, the term *Panhéllēnes* (Πανέλληνες) is used once to denote the united Greek forces (*Iliad* 2.530).[3]

Although the word "panhellenism" as such "is a modern coinage" and "no ancient ever used" it "for the […] phenomena usually held to be embodied in Panhellenism" (Mitchell, 2007, p. xv), there is ample evidence that the idea behind it became – and remained – widespread from the early fifth century onwards. It was stimulated, first and foremost, by the Persian Wars (499–449 BC), when several Greek city states fought united against the Persian invasion forces, when "consciousness of community […] formed the basis for common political action, prompted by a common danger" (Brunt, 1953, p. 135).[4] To name just two examples, in Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians* (472 BC), the collective Greek victory against the Persians was celebrated in dramatized form;[5] and according to Herodotus' *Histories* (430 BC), the Athenians emphasized their kinship with their archenemies the Spartans when confirming their resistance to Xerxes, stating that Athenians and Spartans "were from the same Greek blood and the same language, having the temples of the gods and the sac-

2 On the history of the ancient Greek city states, see Hansen (2006), and Hansen & Nielsen (2004) for an inventory; on the formation of modern Greece as a nation, Gallant (2015). The most recent discussion of Greek panhellenism in the archaic and classical periods is that by Mitchell (2007).

3 It must be noted, though, that the term is anachronistic because *Héllēnes* (Ἕλληνες) is otherwise not used in the *Iliad* to collectively denote all Greeks; see Brügger, Stoevesandt & Visser (2010, p. 169) and Mitchell (2007, pp. 67–68, n. 32). However, *Panachaioí* (Παναχαιοί) is used repeatedly in Homer to refer to the collectivity of all Greeks (*Achaioí* [Ἀχαιοί] being the default Homeric term for the Greeks).

4 There is, however, scholarly disagreement about the extent to which the Persian Wars caused the development of the panhellenic idea; see by Mitchell (2007, pp. xv–xii). In fact, only a minority of the Greek *póleis* contributed to the Persians Wars by providing armed forces; see Herodotus, *Histories* 9.28.2–30.1; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 5.23.1–2; Mitchell (2007, pp. 77–78).

5 On Aeschylus' *The Persians*, see e.g. Harrison (2000); on panhellenism in Attic tragedy, Rosenbloom (2011). On the construction of "the barbarian" in Athenian tragedy as a counterpoint to the panhellenic idea under Athenian domination, see Hall (1989).

rifices in common, and their customs being of the same kind" (*Histories* 8.144.2).[6]

Aside from the collective experience effectuated by the Persian Wars, the panhellenic idea was also prevalent in political rhetoric. One may think of Isocrates' *Panegyricus* (380 BC), a speech that calls for a panhellenic union under the guidance of Athens against the still imminent Persian threat; and of Demosthenes' *Philippics* (351–341 BC), a series of speeches in which the orator warns his citizens against the expansion of the Macedonians, suggesting that all Greek *póleis* be reunited under Athenian command.[7] Finally, mention must also be made of supra-regional institutions such as the panhellenic sanctuaries, a good dozen of which are known – the most famous being the oracle of Delphi, which offered advice to Greeks from all city states alike – and of the panhellenic games that took place at those locations, and at which Greeks from all *póleis* (including the colonies) participated.[8]

The panhellenic idea also manifested itself in mythology. In this context, the figure of Herakles was of eminent importance. In what follows, it is demonstrated how Herakles and the panhellenic idea were intertwined in ancient Greek culture, and it is argued that Herakles' unique in-between status as a demigod and a god proper made him particularly apt to serve as a mythical paradigm of the panhellenic idea.

2. Herakles in the Homeric Epics: A National Hero, Deified

Herakles does not participate in the main narrative of either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* because he belongs to an earlier generation of heroes; he is part of the "epic plupast", that is, "the embedded past of the heroes [that] figures as a mirror to the heroic past presented in epic poetry" (Grethlein, 2012, p. 15). Nonetheless, Herakles is an important character in the Homeric epics: in the *Iliad*, a total of thirteen references to the hero can be found, scattered through the entire epic. As I have argued elsewhere,[9] the Homeric narrator thus keeps the audience's memory of Herakles alive and, in particular, equates Herakles, the eminent hero from the old days, with Achilles, the main hero of the *Iliad.* By being constantly reminded of Her-

6 Greek text (ed. Wilson, 2015): τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, ἐὸν ὅμαιμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον, καὶ θεῶν ἱδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι ἤθεά τε ὁμότροπα. – All translations are mine.

7 On the construction of Athenian and panhellenic identity in Isocrates' speeches, see e.g. Baynes (1955) and Too (1995); on Demosthenes, Dunkel (1938). The rhetoric of panhellenism was also used to promote the supremacy of one *pólis* over the others; see Perlman (1976). On the Athenian redefinition of panhellenism due to the shift from a Persian to a Macedonian threat, see Low (2018).

8 On the panhellenic sanctuaries, see e.g. Marinatos & Hägg (1993) and Scott (2010). On the panhellenic sport festivals, see Christesen & Kyle (2014).

9 Bär (2018, pp. 33–44) and Bär (2019, pp. 110–114).

akles in the context of the greatest panhellenic enterprise ever, the audience is thus encouraged to read Herakles as a national hero *avant la lettre.*

In a famous passage in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, Achilles, being aware of his own impending death, puts himself on a parallel with Herakles when he consoles his mother Thetis by stating that even Herakles had to die (*Iliad* 18.117–121):

> For, not even the powerful Herakles escaped the doom [of death],
> although he was dearest to king Zeus, the son of Kronos;
> but destiny and the painful wrath of Hera overcame him.
> Such I too, if a similar destiny is meant for me, (120)
> will be lying there once I have died. […][10]

Whereas the Iliadic Herakles is still mortal (as is any demigod – i.e. the offspring of a mortal and an immortal parent – by default), the idea of Herakles being deified at the end of his life can be found in the *Odyssey*, in the context of Odysseus' descent to the Underworld. There, Odysseus describes his encounter with the shadow of Herakles (*Odyssey* 11.601–604):

> After this one [= Sisyphus] I saw the powerful Herakles,
> [that is,] his shadow: he himself is enjoying himself among the immortal gods
> at festivities and has Hebe with the fair ankles [as his wife],
> a daughter of the great Zeus and of the golden-shoed Hera.[11]

Here, we can find the idea that the former ideal warrior and hero – a model for the greatest Iliadic fighters – has become a god proper, and that his shadow (*eídōlon*, εἴδωλον) in the Underworld is just a faint echo of his previous mortal status.[12] And indeed, the *post-mortem*-deification of Herakles as a reward for all his deeds and turmoil would go on to prove one of the most successful, and most persistent, notions in Greek mythology.[13]

10 Greek text (ed. van Thiel, 1996): οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδὲ βίη Ἡρακλῆος φύγε κῆρα, / ὅς περ φίλτατος ἔσκε Διὶ Κρονίωνι ἄνακτι· / ἀλλά ἑ μοῖρα δάμασσε καὶ ἀργαλέος χόλος Ἥρης. / (120) ὣς καὶ ἐγών, εἰ δή μοι ὁμοίη μοῖρα τέτυκται, / κείσομ' ἐπεί κε θάνω. […]

11 Greek text (ed. van Thiel, 1991): τὸν δὲ μέτ' εἰσενόησα βίην Ἡρακληείην, / εἴδωλον· αὐτὸς δὲ μετ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι / τέρπεται ἐν θαλίῃς καὶ ἔχει καλλίσφυρον Ἥβην, / παῖδα Διὸς μεγάλοιο καὶ Ἥρης χρυσοπεδίλου.

12 As the idea of Herakles being simultaneously dead and deified may appear self-contradictory, lines 602–604 have long been suspected to be a later interpolation (see Bär, 2018, pp. 47–48, n. 9 for references). However, in iconography a deified Herakles can be found as early as the seventh century BC (*LIMC* V.1 s.v. "Herakles", n. 3331). On Herakles in the *Odyssey*, see Galinsky (1972, pp. 10–14); Andersen (2012); Bär (2018, pp. 45–25); Bär (2019, pp. 114–116).

13 For Herakles' apotheosis as a reward for his accomplishments (not explicitly stated in the *Odyssey*), see Pindar, *Isthmian Ode* 4.55–60 (c. 474/3 BC). On ancient concep-

Taken together, the Homeric epics show Herakles as a figure of identification and a positive example of a hero unifying the Greeks and elevating the Trojan War to a panhellenic enterprise, while at the same time they already embrace the idea of the hero's apotheosis.

3. Herakles the Prototypical Ruler

The Homeric notion of Herakles as a model hero for a collective Greek war enterprise, along with the idea of his *post-mortem*-deification, formed the ideal basis for a later development that became widespread from the classical era onwards, namely, the notion of Herakles as the ideal, prototypical ruler. As Emma Stafford puts it, "Herakles was appropriated throughout antiquity for political ends, especially as a means of legitimating people's claims to territory or political power" (Stafford, 2012, p. 137). *Inter alia*, several Spartan families as well as Alexander the Great and his successors, the diadochi, claimed to be of Heraklean descent.[14]

Perhaps the most famous example of this type of Herakles comes with Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), who was virtually obsessed with the hero. Not only did he use his mythical role model as a namesake for his illegitimate son (327–309 BC, known as Herakles of Macedon), but he also had himself inscribed onto coins that displayed Herakles on the obverse and Zeus on the verso, along with a legend reading "of Alexander" (*Alexándrou*, Ἀλεξάνδρου), which made Alexander's genealogical link to Herakles (and also, ultimately, to Zeus) obvious:[15]

Figure 1. Tetradrachm from Greece, 336–323 BC. Obverse: Herakles covered with his lion's scalp. Verso: Zeus with his eagle. Legend: Ἀλεξάνδρου (*Alexándrou*, "of Alexander"). – Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of W. F. Dunham. Ref. n. 1920.707. Licenced under Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0).

tions of Herakles' deification, see e.g. Woodford (1971, p. 212) and Stafford (2012, pp. 172–174). Further on Herakles' apotheosis, see e.g. Shapiro (1983); Holt (1992); Winiarczyk (2000); Stafford (2010, pp. 239–243); Doronzio (2013).

14 On the political Herakles, see e.g. Palagia (1986); Huttner (1997); Stafford (2012, pp. 137–156). In this context, the return of the sons of Herakles was also of eminent importance; see Prinz (1979, pp. 206–313) and Zingg (2016, pp. 25–40, 56–60 and *passim*).

15 On Herakles of Macedon, see Tarn (1921) and Brunt (1975); on the coin, Stafford (2012, pp. 144–145, with further references at pp. 254–255, n. 10). According to a contested theory, Herakles with the lion's scalp represents Alexander and hence Alexander should be equated with Herakles; see Dahmen (2007, pp. 39–41).

The genealogical references to Herakles continue after Alexander's death. In his Seventeenth *Idyll* (270s BC), the Hellenistic poet Theocritus glorifies Ptolemy II (309/8–246 BC), king of Egypt. His father Ptolemy I (367–282 BC) had been a companion of Alexander and the first ruler of Egypt after Alexander's death. Both traced their ancestral lineage back to Herakles, and both are credited with immortality by Theocritus (*Idyll* 17.13–27):

> From his forefathers, what sort [of a man] was he to accomplish a great deed,
> the son of Lagos, Ptolemy, whenever in his heart he put down
> a plan that no other man could have come up with. (15)
> Him the father rendered [to be held] in equal honour even with the blessed ones,
> the immortals, and for him a golden throne is wrought in the house of Zeus;
> and next to him sits Alexander, endowed with affection,
> a burden for the Persians, a god, with his shining diadem.
> And opposite [him], the seat of Herakles, the killer of the Centaurs, (20)
> is placed, crafted from hard steel.
> There he is partying together with the other heavenly [gods],
> being exceedingly happy about the sons of his sons,
> since the son of Kronos has taken away old age from their limbs,
> and since his descendants are [now] called immortals. (25)
> For, to both of them the strong son of Herakles was an ancestor,
> and they both eventually count themselves [among the descendants of] Herakles.[16]

Both Alexander and his successors saw themselves as *Héllēnes* (Ἕλληνες) in the emphatic sense of the word. At that time, being Greek was no longer regarded as a matter of origin and/or appearance, but of culture and

16 Greek text (ed. Gow, 1952): ἐκ πατέρων οἷος μὲν ἔην τελέσαι μέγα ἔργον / Λαγείδας Πτολεμαῖος, ὅτε φρεσὶν ἐγκατάθοιτο / (15) βουλάν, ἂν οὐκ ἄλλος ἀνὴρ οἷός τε νοῆσαι. / τῆνον καὶ μακάρεσσι πατὴρ ὁμότιμον ἔθηκεν / ἀθανάτοις, καί οἱ χρύσεος δόμος ἐν Διὸς οἴκῳ / δέδμηται: παρὰ δ' αὐτὸν Ἀλέξανδρος φίλα εἰδὼς / ἐδριάει, Πέρσαισι βαρὺς θεὸς αἰολομίτρας. / (20) ἀντία δ' Ἡρακλῆος ἕδρα κενταυροφόνοιο / ἵδρυται στερεοῖο τετυγμένα ἐξ ἀδάμαντος· / ἔνθα σύν ἄλλοισιν θαλίας ἔχει Οὐρανίδῃσι, / χαίρων υἱωνῶν περιώσιον υἱωνοῖσιν, / ὅττί σφεων Κρονίδης μελέων ἐξείλετο γῆρας, / (25) ἀθάνατοι δὲ καλεῦνται ἐοὶ νέποδες γεγαῶτες. / ἄμφω γὰρ πρόγονός σφιν ὁ καρτερὸς Ἡρακλείδας, / ἀμφότεροι δ' ἀριθμεῦνται ἐς ἕσχατον Ἡρακλῆα. – "The father" in line 16 refers to Zeus. "The strong son of Herakles" in line 26 refers to Karanos, the legendary founder of the Macedonian royal family and tenth in descent from Herakles (see Gow, 1952, vol. 2, p. 331). On *Idyll* 17, see also e.g. Stephens (2003, pp. 147–170) and Papadimitropoulos (2006, pp. 56–58).

education (a thought already expressed by Isocrates in his *Panegyricus*, 380 BC), and although the institution of the classical *pólis* did not cease to exist with and after Alexander, the idea of a panhellenic rather than local Greek identity had become prevalent.[17] Thus, by tracing back their origins to Herakles and by publicly celebrating their ancestry, Alexander and the other Hellenistic kings resorted to the panhellenic potential of Herakles, because any Greek – or anyone who wished to be hellenized – would be able to identify accordingly with the hero.

4. Herakles as a Founder of Colonies and Supra-Regional Institutions

Stephanus of Byzantium, the author of a geographical dictionary (6th century AD), mentions twenty-three cities called Herakleia in different areas of the then-known world, in places such as Thrace, Karia, Skythia, the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, etc.[18] As the geographical dissemination clearly indicates, these must all have been Greek colonies. That so many Greek settlers originating from various *póleis* would choose Herakles as the namesake of their new homes can, first, be explained by the fact that Herakles as the prototypical traveller arguably offered "an ideal role-model for the Greeks who took to their ships to found colonies overseas" (Stafford, 2012, p. 156).[19] Secondly, one need also think of Herakles' widely acknowledged function as a benefactor and protector from evils, as his common epiclesis *alexíkakos* (ἀλεξίκακος, "repellent of evils") demonstrates.[20] Thirdly, here too the panhellenic potential of Herakles comes to the fore: as it appears, Herakles was a character with whom Greeks from any provenance could identify and whose name could function as a marker of Greek identity better than that of any other mythological figure.

Furthermore, Herakles also served a similar purpose as the mythical founder of the most important panhellenic institution: the Olympic games.[21] The archaic Greek poet Pindar gave Herakles corresponding credits in his Tenth *Olympian Ode* (476 BC), and on the metopes of the temple of Zeus in Olympia (erected between 470 and 457 BC), Herakles'

17 On the Hellenistic *pólis*, see Börm & Luraghi (2018).

18 For details, see Billerbeck & Zubler (2011, p. 221). See also Hansen & Nielsen (2004, *passim*) and Stafford (2012, pp. 156–160, with further references at pp. 255–256, nn. 25–28).

19 On mythical wanderers as models for Greek colonists, see Erskine (2001, pp. 131–156).

20 On *Hēraklês alexíkakos* (Ἡρακλῆς ἀλεξίκακος), see Woodford (1976) and Kajava (1997, pp. 59–60).

21 See e.g. Spivey (2004, pp. 225–230); Young (2004, pp. 12–13); Stafford (2012, pp. 160–163).

Twelve Labours were programmatically depicted.[22] The fact that Herakles' deeds were visible to all visitors at the Olympic games, from all Greek *póleis* including the colonies, is perhaps the clearest piece of evidence regarding Herakles' panhellenic function: as early as the 470s BC, Herakles and his deeds must have been generally understood and accepted as canonical and as creating a sense of a common Hellenic identity.

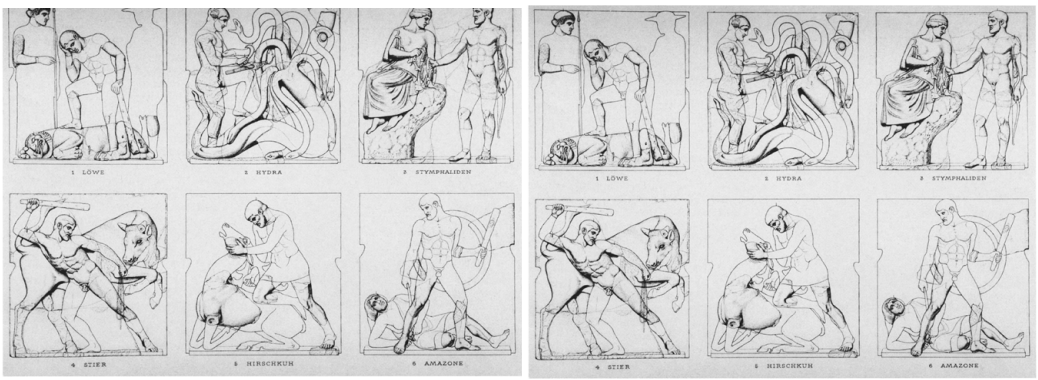

Figure 2. Metopes of the temple of Zeus in Olympia, 470–457 BC. The Twelve Labours of Herakles. Reconstruction drawings by M. Kühnert. From Cohen (1994, p. 709).

5. Herakles Between Demigod and God Proper; Conclusion

Whereas there can be no doubt that Herakles clearly fulfilled an aetiological purpose in relation to the panhellenic idea, the question remains: why Herakles? Essentially, there are two answers to this question. One answer can be found in the fact that Herakles served a double function as a supra-regional, "national" Greek hero on the one hand, while on the other hand, he was often also considered to be a local hero in many Greek *póleis.* In the words of Alan Shapiro,

> the abundance, variety, and geographic diversity of myths were all matched by his ubiquitous local cults, from Spain to the Levant. […] [Herakles] is the only true pan-hellenic hero, worshipped with equal fervor in many parts of the Greek world, in cults as numerous and in their own way as important as most members of the Olympian pantheon. (Shapiro, 1983, p. 9)

In other words, Herakles offered a double identification for many Greeks because they could identify with him both on a regional/local level and on a supra-regional/quasi-national level. The second answer can be found in the in-between status of Herakles as a demigod and as a god proper.

22 On Herakles in Pindar, see Pike (1984) and Nieto Hernández (1993); on Herakles on the Zeus temple in Olympia, Cohen (1994).

As a demigod, Herakles was born human, but – as seen above – after the *Odyssey* he was considered to have been deified at the end of his life. As a result of this double function, the Greeks were able to admire Herakles as a hero, but also to venerate him as a god. The pantheon of the Twelve Olympians, in turn, tied up very strongly with the panhellenic idea, for, in addition to speaking the same language and to sharing the same cultural values, all Greeks worshipped the same deities.

Much has been said about Herakles' intermediate status, which Pindar in his Third *Nemean Ode* (475 BC) aptly put to the formula "demigod-god" (*hêrōs theós* [ἥρως θεός], line 22).[23] Important pieces of evidence come from cultic practice, because we know that "worshippers throughout the Greek world sacrificed to Herakles as both hero and god, and some cults accommodated both statuses" (Padilla, 1998, p. 20).[24] A particularly instructive case in point can be found on the isle of Thasos, where Herakles belonged to the local pantheon and had, *inter alia*, his own sanctuary, where he was, in other words, venerated as a god proper. His divine status is evidenced most conspicuously by the fact that the Thasians minted coins that displayed Herakles, including legends reading "of Herakles the Saviour, from the people of Thasos" (*Hērakléous Sōtêros Thasíōn*, Ἡρακλέους Σωτῆρος Θασίων).[25] The fact that Herakles was depicted on coins testifies unequivocally to his divine status because only gods, not demigods, were typically depicted on coins.

Figure 3. Verso of a tetradrachm from Thasos. Herakles with his club and the lion's scalp. Legend: Ἡρακλέους Σωτῆρος Θασίων (*Hērakléous Sōtêros Thasíōn*, "of Herakles the Saviour, from the people of Thasos"). – From Wikipedia. Photographer: M.-L. Nguyen. Licenced under Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 Generic (CC BY 2.5).

23 See e.g. Shapiro (1983); Padilla (1998, pp. 20–22); Stafford (2005); Stafford (2010, with p. 228, n. 1 for further references); Stafford (2012, pp. 171–197).

24 On the peculiarities of hero cults as opposed to cults for divinities, see Ekroth (2007).

25 See Prokopov (2002) and Stafford (2012, pp. 189–190). For Herakles/Hercules on Greek and Roman coins generally, see Vollkommer (1987, pp. 14–17).

To conclude, I would therefore like to argue that the unique standing of Herakles as a mortal who was granted immortality at the end of his life made him perfectly apt to serve as a mythical paradigm of the panhellenic idea in ancient Greece. Due to his double status as a regional and a supra-regional hero, Herakles offered a double identification for many Greeks, and as a result of his status in between a demigod and a god proper, he was not only admired for his deeds, but he also (in part) belonged to the supra-regional, panhellenic pantheon.

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