2004

Singing Heroes: The Poetics of Hero Cult in the Heroikos

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In this essay, I explore the poetic, emotional, and ritual dimensions of hero cult as presented in Philostratus's *Heroikos.* After a short digression on hero cult in the Greek period, I focus on the emphasis placed on the emotional bond between worshiper and hero, as well as the important role played by hymns and laments in the narrative. I propose to investigate these twin themes in depth by focusing on examples provided by Philostratus himself, and particularly the cult of Melikertēs. Because Philostratus associates hymns and laments with initiation or mystery cults, I also consider the link between hero and mystery cult in the *Heroikos,* as well as in earlier Greek texts. The link between these two forms of ritual, I argue, is already present in the classical sources, yet while the connection between mystery and hero cult is not unique to the Roman period, the function of initiation in Philostratus's narrative is different; it

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2 I would like to thank Ellen Aitken and Jennifer Maclean for inviting me to the conference "Philostratus's *Heroikos,* Religion, and Cultural Identity." I also gave a version of this paper at "A Symposium on Hero Cults in the Greek East During the Empire" at the University of Chicago. My warmest thanks to Sulo Asirvatham, Judy Barringer, Claude Calame, Betsy Gebhard, Albert Henrichs, and Gregory Nagy for their help and advice.
expands in order to accommodate skepticism and include conversion. Whereas the reality of heroes is implicitly accepted as fact in archaic and classical sources, in the Heroikos their existence needs to be established through a series of proofs; the reader, along with the Phoenician merchant of the dialogue, undergoes an initiation of sorts. The central role of initiation into the mystery of the hero in the narrative reflects historical changes in the perception of cult heroes in the imperial period. Just as we see a gradual movement from unquestioning belief in heroes to skepticism, and from hearing about heroes to reading about them, we also see a shift from mourning to communion with the hero come back to life.

Before examining hero cult in the Heroikos, I would like to backtrack and turn for a moment to Greek hero cult in general. By “hero cult,” I mean the combination of myths and rituals associated with the worship of heroes. Starting in the archaic period, some human beings are assigned the status of hero after their death and become objects of worship and recipients of animal sacrifice. Because of the local nature of most hero cults, allusions to ritual practice (as Gregory Nagy and Albert Henrichs have argued) tend to be implicit rather than explicit in archaic and classical literature. Although allusions to hero cult per se are scarce in Greek poetry, allusions to heroes themselves, their deeds, lives, and deaths, are plentiful. Myths and rituals in honor of heroes not only fulfill important religious functions, but the narrative of the hero’s death and heroization must also have been a source of aesthetic pleasure that finds its way both in literary and visual representations.

Traditionally, the connection between worshiper and hero is established through ritual, and the relationship between hero and worshiper is conceived in terms of reciprocity through cult and not in terms of a close personal bond: the hero is conceptualized as a “deceased person,” in Burkert’s formulation, “who exerts from his grave a power for good or evil and who demands appropriate


honour.” There are, however, two important exceptions to this general rule. Two texts in extant Greek literature depict a hero simultaneously as the recipient of cult and as alive: the *Heroikos*, and some six hundred years earlier, Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*. Sophocles’ play depicts Oedipus as if he were already a cult hero *before* his death, while Philostratus depicts heroes *after* their deaths as very much alive to their worshipers. I will come back to other affinities between these two texts, but for now what I wish to emphasize is their extraordinary status. Oedipus notwithstanding, hero cult in the archaic and classical period is a highly ritualized form of worshiping the dead.

Hero cult continues to thrive in the Greek world beyond the classical era, and by the Hellenistic period, this answer to death becomes so popular that private citizens routinely heroize dead members of their own families. By the time of Philostratus’s *Heroikos*, we also see a renewal of interest in the earlier Greek heroes in the Roman East. Dennis Hughes recently suggested that among the attractions of the traditional heroes was the link they can provide with the past, both mythical and historical. He argues, “Hero cult—with its political and historical as well as religious dimensions—played a particularly important role in the ‘Greek Renaissance’, the revival of civic and national pride and identity in Greece under Roman rule.” He also notes that, at a time when the distance between worshipers and gods increases, worshipers grow closer to their heroes and worship them not only as a way of identifying themselves with the Greek past, but also because they hope to join the old heroes in the life to come.

When we turn to the *Heroikos*, we find that the promise of hero cult lies not only in the hope of joining ancient heroes in the afterlife, but very much in the possibility of enjoying their company in the here and now. The *Heroikos* records the conversation between a vinegrower and a traveling Phoenician merchant that takes place at Elaious on the north shore of the Hellespont. At the beginning of the dialogue, the merchant makes clear that he does not believe in

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5 Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 203.
6 For the controversy about dating the *Heroikos*, see Maclean and Aitken, *Philostratus: Heroikos*, xlii-xlv.
heroes, and the vinegrower proceeds to persuade him of their existence.

Some scholars have dismissed the third-century C.E. work as a sophistic exercise with no religious import. Others take the Heroikos at its word and argue that the concern with hero cult is indeed serious and central to the dialogue. Without denying the obvious literary aspects of Philostratus’s text, I agree with the latter group of scholars that the discourse about heroes must be understood within the framework of a society in which hero cult was a common practice, and a society in which Philostratus’s readers would have had no problems recognizing the ritual vocabulary associated with hero cults.

Hans Dieter Betz argues that the movement from skepticism to belief is one of the major themes of the Heroikos, and indeed the whole dialogue revolves around the Phoenician’s change of attitude toward the worship of heroes. There is a progression in the types of evidence the vinegrower uses to convince his interlocutor of the existence of heroes: he starts with his encounter with the hero Protesilaos, which represents a turning point in his own life, then goes on to the scientific proof afforded by the existence of large bones and to what he learned about other heroes directly from Protesilaos. After a section devoted to the correction of Homer’s account of epic heroes, the vinegrower goes on to describe the proper performance of heroic rituals.

The vinegrower never has any doubts about the reality of heroes, and his life changes for the better when he decides to follow the hero Protesilaos’s advice and moves to the country. He considers the hero to be both an adviser and a companion. The friendship the vinegrower enjoys with the risen Protesilaos, however, is not unique, and he gives other examples of heroes who have come back to life.

Even when one encounters heroes, it is not always easy to recognize them. When ghosts (eidos) first appear, the vinegrower explains to the Phoenician, the identity of each is not immediately

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10 Betz, “Hero Worship and Christian Beliefs.”
obvious. Heroes may appear in many different guises—they can change their appearance, their age, or their armor—and it can be a tricky task to recognize a hero from one time to the next (Her. 21.1–8).

To illustrate the difficulty in identifying heroes, the vinegrower tells the story of a Trojan farmer who particularly favors the hero Palamedes. The farmer is described as having deep sympathy for Palamedes’ suffering and his horrific death at the hands of his comrades. The farmer often goes to the shore where Palamedes was stoned to death; he brings offerings to the hero’s grave and sings dirges for him. After the farmer displays his admiration for Palamedes in these and other ways, the hero decides to visit and reward his admirer, whom he describes as his ἐραστής (“lover”). Palamedes appears to the farmer as he tends his vine:

Do you recognize me, farmer?" He answered, “How would I recognize you whom I have never seen?” “Then do you love him [ἀγαπᾷς] whom you do not recognize?” said the other. The farmer realized that it was Palamedes, and he reported that the hero’s image was tall, beautiful, and brave, although he was not thirty years old. The farmer embraced him and said with a smile, “I love you [φιλῶ σε], Palamedes, because you seem to me to be the most sensible of all and the most fair champion in deeds of skill.” (Her. 21.5–6)

As soon as Palamedes mentions love (ἀγαπᾷς), the farmer recognizes the hero. In this passage, there is an intimate emotional bond between worshiper and hero, and loving the hero comes to the same thing as physically seeing him.

Just before this epiphany, one of the ways in which the farmer shows his devotion to Palamedes is by experiencing the sufferings (πάθως) of the hero as well as singing laments (ἐθρήνει) for him. Mourning, paradoxically, revives the hero for the worshiper. Love and lament are keys to the hero’s coming back to life.

Later in the dialogue, another passage demonstrates a similar
conflation of loving and seeing, or loving and recognizing. The vinegrower tells the Phoenician what Protesilaos told him about Achilles’ physical appearance. He starts with Achilles’ hair, “lovelier than gold,” and then goes on to his nose, brow, and eyes:


“When he is rushing on,” [he adds,] “[his eyes] spring out along with his purpose, and he seems more lovely than ever to those who love [τοῖς ἐρῶσιν] him.” (Her. 48.2)

In the case of the farmer and Palamedes, loving precedes, and perhaps causes, the hero’s epiphany. In the second instance, loving and seeing are synchronous. Clearly, then, seeing, loving, and knowing the hero are all intertwined.

The same language of love and desire is used in the dialogue both of longing for the hero and also of longing for knowledge about the hero. Desire to learn is often described in terms of πόθος and ἐρως. The Phoenician, in particular, emphasizes his thirst for knowledge:


You know at any rate what I long to learn [πόθῳ μαθεῖν], and especially about this association you have with Protesilaos. (Her. 7.1)

And again a little later:


You tell the story to one who longs for it [πόθῳντι], vinegrower. And I believe I will seldom hear it. (Her. 23.2)

Similarly, the hero Palamedes himself is described as a lover of wisdom (σοφίας ἐρως, Her. 23.24).11

Nagy argues that epic heroes are eroticized already in Homer’s Iliad where yearning for the hero is conventionally described in the language of desire (πόθος). This happens when the warriors of Phthia “long” for their leader, Protesilaos, in Book 2 (Il. 2. 703, 709) and again in Book 23, when the Achaeans “long” for Patroklos (Il.

11 Other example of ἐρως for knowledge or wisdom: Her. 23.1; 23.36.
The same verb, ποθεῖν, is used in both instances. Yet, the discourse of love is nowhere as strikingly explicit as it is, almost a thousand years later, in the Heroikos, with the hero Palamedes’ description of his follower as an ἔραστὴς (“lover”), and his tacit self-definition as his worshiper’s ἐρωμένος (“beloved”). It is not only the intimate emotional bond between hero and worshiper that is surprising, but the physical reality of the hero’s presence and the individual nature of his relationship with worshipers.

While the emotional intensity of the bond between hero and worshiper in the Heroikos is unique, Philostratus also focuses on more conventional forms of worship. We saw how the Phoenician is both skeptical about heroes, yet eager to learn more about them at the beginning of his conversation with the vinegrower. Later in the dialogue, once it becomes clear that the Phoenician is no longer hostile to the idea of the reality of heroes in general, the vinegrower starts to discuss ritual in more details.

I would like to focus on a passage that describes the cult of Achilles and compares it with the cults of Melikertēs and the children of Medea. This passage comes close to the end of the dialogue, as the vinegrower and his interlocutor start to discuss the cult of Achilles. The vinegrower tells the Phoenician about the strange mixture of rites performed by the Thessalians in honor of Achilles:

καὶ μὴν καὶ ὕμνων ἐκ Θησαλίας ὁ Ἀχιλλεὺς ἔτυχεν, οἳς ἀνὰ πᾶν ἔτος ἐπὶ τὸ σῆμα φαίτωτες ἦδον ἐν νυκτί, τελετῆς τῇ ἐγκαταμεγίνετε τοῖς ἑναγίσμασιν, ὡς Λήμνοι τε νομίζουσιν καὶ Πελοποννησίων οἱ ἀπὸ Σισύφου.

From Thessaly, of course, Achilles also received hymns, which they sang at night when they visited his tomb every year, mixing something of an initiatory rite with their heroic offerings, just as both the Lemnians and the Peloponnesians descended from Sisyphus practice. (Her. 52.3)

While the Greek word τελετή can be an unmarked term for ritual in general, it also has a more specific meaning of “initiation” and in some cases “initiation into mysteries.” As Arthur Darby Nock has shown, the terminology of initiation and mystery acquired a generic quality as mysteries became increasingly popular in the Hellenistic period and later. Yet, because the narrative here
emphasizes that the ritual in honor of Achilles is a *mixture* of different rituals, and since τελετή is contrasted with ἐναγίαμα, a technical term for the type of bloody animal sacrifices preferred by the dead and heroes, I take τελετή in this passage in its specialized sense as initiatory rites.

When he learns of the rites in honor of Achilles, the Phoenician confesses that this is a subject of great interest to him. The vinegrower cautions him that a digression into these practices might be time-consuming, but encouraged by the Phoenician’s enthusiasm (“the soul’s cargo,” as he puts it, “is sweeter to me and more profitable”; *Her.* 53.3), he agrees that digressions make for worthwhile conversation, and he elaborates the comparison by specifying that he was comparing the ritual for Achilles with two Peloponnesian rites in particular:

> τά μὲν γὰρ Κορινθίων ἐπὶ Μελικέρτη (τούτους γὰρ δὴ τοὺς ἀπὸ Σιάφου εἴποι, καὶ ὅπωσα οἱ αὐτοὶ δρῶσιν ἐπὶ τοῖς τῆς Μηδείας παισὶ, ὡς ὑπὲρ τῆς Γλαύκης ἀπέκτειναν, θρήνῳ εἰκαστα τελεστικὸ τε καὶ ἐνθέω τοὺς μὲν γὰρ μελίσσονταί, τὸν δὲ ὑμνοῦσιν.

The rites of the Corinthians for Melikertēs (for these people are those whom I called the descendants of Sisyphus) and what the same people do for Medea’s children, whom they killed for the sake of Glaucē, resemble a *lament* that is both initiatory and inspired, for they *propitiate* the children and *sing hymns* to Melikertēs. (*Her.* 53.4)

The rituals mentioned in this passage are comparable because they all consist of a *mixture*. Let us look carefully at the terminology used by the vinegrower: he specifies that the rites for Melikertēs and those for the children of Medea are similar in that they resemble a lament (θρήνος), which is of an initiatory nature (τελεστικός), as well as divinely inspired (ἐνθέος). He does mention that “they,” the Corinthians, killed the children of Medea, but he does not refer to the circumstances of the death of Melikertēs. While worshipers propitiate (μελίσσοντα) the children of Medea, they perform hymns for Melikertēs. Μελίσσειν is a verb typically used to describe offerings to the dead or to heroes.14 Both these

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cults, then, like the one in honor of Achilles, consist of a blend of initiation rituals and heroic offerings.

In all three cases—Achilles, Melikertês, children of Medea—Philostratus also describes the rites in terms of singing. The performance of mourning songs in the context of hero worship is nothing unusual, but the emphasis in these two passages is on the link between singing and initiation: the performance of hymns and laments is, in fact, what defines these rites as τελεταί, as rituals of an initiatory nature.ⁱ⁵

Why are laments so important in the cults of Melikertês, the children of Medea, and Achilles? We have seen, in the case of Palamedes, how a lament can be a prelude to the hero's epiphany, and singing a θρήνος is clearly an effective means of communication with the hero as we see in these three cases. Yet what are we to make of Philostratus's insistence on describing these cults as similar to initiation rituals? Moreover, is this link between hero cults and initiation typical of the Roman period?

While the connection between initiation and hero cult is made explicit in the Heroikos, can the same be said about earlier Greek sources? Angelo Brelich already suggested in his 1958 book on hero cult that there is a type of hero who is closely connected to mysteries.⁶ Not surprisingly, he refers to Philostratus' s description of the cults of Melikertês and the children of Medea. Yet he also points out that Euripides already had his Medea describe the ritual in honor of her children in terms of initiatory rite:

οὐ δὴτ’, ἐπεὶ σφας τῇδ’ ἐγὼ θάψα χερί,
φέροντ’ ἐσ’ Ἑρας τέμενος Ἀκραίας θεοῦ,
ὡς μὴ τις αὐτοῦς πολεμίων καθημέρη
tύμβους ἀνασπῶν’ γῆ δὲ τήδε Σιοῦσου


Indeed no, I shall bury them with my own hand,
Taking them to the sanctuary of Hera the goddess of Akraia,
So that none of my enemies may outrage them,
Tearing up their graves. And on this land of Sisyphus
I shall enjoin a solemn festival and initiation rituals
For the rest of time as a compensation for this impious murder. (Euripides Medea 1377–1383)

The sources describing the cult in honor of the children of Medea are few and not always in agreement. Parmeniskos, an Alexandrian grammarian of the second and first centuries B.C.E., reports that the cult in honor of the children was instituted by the Corinthians after some sort of a plague (λωμός) struck the city. The Corinthians consulted the oracle, which told them to establish a cult in honor of the children in order to expiate their guilt and appease the wrath of Hera. And from that time on, seven boys and seven girls were chosen every year from the Corinthian aristocracy to serve in the temple of Hera for one year.17 Pausanias, who is the other main source for the ritual, is silent about this yearly rite of segregation in his second-century C.E. guidebook to Greece. According to him, his contemporaries have abandoned the rituals (θυσίαι) in honor of the children of Medea. He mentions that Corinthian children used to cut their hair and wear dark clothes in honor of the dead heroes, but that the custom ended with the sack of Corinth by the Romans in 146 B.C.E. (Description of Greece 2.3.7). Aelian, on the other hand, writing after Pausanias, disagrees and claims that the Corinthians still perform sacrifices for the children in his own time, but he speaks in terms of heroic sacrifices (ἐναγιώσαι, Varia historia 5.21). Although Pausanias's and Aelian's versions are difficult to reconcile, and regardless of whether the rituals were still performed in the Roman period, we should nonetheless note that Euripides, the scholia to the Medea, and Pausanias all describe the ritual in terms of initiation.

When we turn to Melikertês, we find that the Isthmian myth is well documented in earlier sources, and although they disagree on details, the same basic elements are found in most versions of the story: baby Melikertês dies when his mother Ino tries to escape the murderous fury of her husband, Athamas, by jumping into the sea

17 Scholia to Euripides Medea 264 = FGrH 417 F 3.
from the White Rock, holding her son in her arms. The Nereids welcome her, and she is deified as Leukothea, while the body of her son, Melikertès, is brought ashore at the Isthmus by a dolphin. There Sisyphus finds the body, gives him a funeral, and establishes the Isthmian Games in honor of the boy, renamed Palaimôn. Pindar is the earliest source to mention the ritual established by Sisyphus in honor of the dead child:

Aiolídan de Sísypfon klówto
ψ παιδι ηλεφαντον ὄρσαι
γέρας φθιμένω Μελικέρτα.

They ordered Sisyphus, the son of Aiolos, to establish an honor that can be seen from afar for the dead child Melikertès. (Pindar Isthmian frg. 6.5 Maehler)

Pindar’s “honor that can be seen from afar” clearly refers to the cult in honor of Melikertès. The Greek word γέρας can be understood both literally and metaphorically, as both a physical monument and the institution of a festival in honor of the dead hero. The myth of Melikertès appears not only in lyric poetry, but also in tragedy as well as in Hellenistic poetry. Yet, as Helmut Koester argues in a

18 For τηλέφαντος γέρας as a panhellenic festival in honor of Melikertès, see Elizabeth R. Gebhard and Matthew W. Dickie, “Melikertes-Palaimon, Hero of the Isthmian Games,” in Hägg, Ancient Greek Hero Cult, 161. I argue elsewhere (Baby and Child Heroes in Ancient Greece [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004]) that the adjective τηλέφαντος refers both to time and space; the word has the connotation both of “appearing” and “speaking.” In the case of Pindar’s Isthmian fragment, the τηλέφαντος γέρας belongs to the rhetoric of cult: I suggest that it refers both to a concrete visible heroic shrine built in honor of Melikertès, as well as to the poetic narrative of the hero’s death.

19 We know that Aeschylus and Sophocles each composed an Athamas (actually, Sophocles is the author of two plays of the same name); there is also a Phrixos by Sophocles, as well as two Phrixos plays by Euripides; see Timothy Gantz, Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 179. Euripides’ lost Ino can be reconstructed via Hyginus’s Fabula 4. Euripides (Medea 1282–1291) mentions the story of Ino and Melikertès and describes Palaimôn, the son of Leukothea, as the guardian of ships (Iphigenia in Tauris 270–271). The scholia to Pindar’s Isthmian Odes also gives many details about the myth and ritual in honor of Melikertès (Anders Björn Drachmann, Scholia vetera in Pindari Carmina [3 vols.; Teubner; Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1966–67], 3:192–95). In Hellenistic poetry, Melikertès becomes an angry baby requiring human sacrifice: see Callimachus Causes 4; Diegests frg. 91 Pfeiffer, where Lesbians sacrifice babies on the altar of Melikertès at Tenedos; Lycophron Alexandra 229 mentions Melikertès as a baby slayer (βρεφοκτόνος) and the scholia add that the son of Ino is especially honored in Tenedos, where he receives sacri-
1990 article, the cult in honor of Melikertès begins to be described as a mystery cult in our literary sources only in the Roman period.\textsuperscript{20}

Pausanias describes the temple of Melikertès-Palaimôn, which he places "to the left" within the sanctuary of Apollo at Isthmia. The ὀῖνων, an underground chamber, is where Palaimôn is supposed to be hidden—and anyone, either Corinthian or foreign, who falsely swears an oath there has no way to escape his oath (Pausanias Description of Greece 2.2.1). It is unclear from Pausanias's description whether the ὀῖνων was part of the temple or a different structure altogether.

Near where the temple of Palaimôn should have been according to Pausanias, excavators found the foundations of an earlier stadium, as well as the concrete foundation of a Roman building. An earlier cult place for Melikertès was probably located somewhere in this area, but all remains were obliterated during the destruction of Corinth by Mummius (146 B.C.E.). The earliest remains, however, that can be directly linked with Melikertès are from two sacrificial pits from the first century C.E. filled with animal bones, pottery, and lamps of a unique shape unknown anywhere else in Greece. The Palaimônion was rebuilt in the Roman period, and the temple as it stood in the second century C.E. has been reconstructed from representations on coins from the Isthmus and Corinth.\textsuperscript{21}

What about the cult, then, and the lament that is both “initia-


\textsuperscript{21} For lamps, see Oscar Broneer, Isthmia III: Terracotta Lamps (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1977) and Koester, “Melikertes at
tory and inspired”? Philostratus is, in fact, not our only source for
this aspect of the ritual. Plutarch also mentions the cult in his life
of Theseus:

> ο γάρ ἐπὶ Μελικέρτη θείς αὐτόθι νυκτὸς ἐδράτω, τελετής ἐχων
> μᾶλλον ἡ θέας καὶ πανηγυρισμοῦ τάξιν.

For the contest established in honor of Melikertès was
taking place there at night, organized like an initiatory
ritual [τελετή] rather than like a spectacle or public festi-
vval. (Plutarch Theseus 25.5)

In this passage, Plutarch is distinguishing between the panhel-
lenic athletic games, which he claims were founded by Theseus, and
the ἄγων in honor of Melikertès, which he describes as already in
place by the time Theseus came to the Isthmus. Plutarch uses the
traditional ritual syntax ἐπὶ plus the dative to indicate that the ἄγων
is offered to Melikertès as a compensation for his death. This ἄγων,
however, is not a simple public athletic festival, but rather it is
organized like an initiatory ritual (τελετή), which takes place at
night.

Another important source for the cult of Melikertès-Palaimôn
is Philostratus's Imagines. I want to focus more particularly on a few
sentences referring to the ritual:

> ὃς θάνων ἐν Ἰσθμῷ δῆμος—εἶν δ’ ἄν ὁ ἐκ τῆς Κορινθίων—καὶ
> βασιλεὺς οὔτος τοῦ δήμου—Σίσυφον αὐτὸν ἡγομεθα—τέμενος
> δὲ τούτῳ Ποσειδώνος ἱέμα τι προσήχουνθαλάττῃ—αἱ γάρ τῶν
> πιθόων κόμαι τοῦτο ἁδοὺσι—τοιάδε, ὦ παῖ, σημαίνει ἡ Ἰνω τῆς
> γῆς ἑκπεσοῦσα τὸ μὲν ἐαυτῆς Λευκοθέα τε καὶ τοῦ τῶν Νηρίδων
> κόκλου, τὸ δὲ τῶν παιδῶν ἡ γῆ Παλαίμων τῷ βρέφει χρήσται.
> καταίρει δὲ ἡδὴ ἐς αὐτὴν ἐπὶ δελφίνος εὐρύου, καὶ ὁ δελφίς τὰ
> νῦν ὑποστρωμένος φέρει καθεύδουτα διοισθάνων ἀφοφητὶ τῆς
> γαλήνης, ὃς μὴ ἐκτέσσει πότε προσῆλθε δέ αὐτῷ ρήγνυται
> τι κατὰ τὸν Ἰσθμὸν ἄδυτον διασχύσας τῆς γῆς ἐκ Ποσειδώνος,
> ὃν μοι δοκεῖ καὶ Σίσυφος τοῦτῳ προειπεῖ τὸν τῶν παιδῶν εἰπόλων
> καὶ ὁτι θύειν αὐτῷ δεῖ. θύει δὲ ταύρων τοιοῦτα μέλαια
> ἀποσπάσας οἴμαι αὐτὸν ἐκ τῆς Ποσειδώνος ἀγέλης. ὃ μὲν
> οὖν τῆς θυσίας λόγος καὶ ἡ τῶν θυσάντων ἔσθης καὶ τὰ
> ἑναγίσματα, ὥ παῖ, καὶ τὸ σφάττειν ἐς τὰ τοῦ Παλαίμωνος

Isthmia,” 359–60; for the temple, see Oscar Broneer, Isthmia I: Temple of Poseidon (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1977). For a recent
discussion, see Elizabeth Gebhard, “The Beginnings of Panhellenic Games at the
Isthmus,” in Akten des Internationalen Symposions Olympia 1875–2000 (ed.
Helmut Kyrieleis; Mainz am Rhein: Zabern, 2002), 221–37.
This people sacrificing at the Isthmus, that would be the people of Corinth, and the king of the people here is, I think, Sisyphus himself; this is the sacred precinct of Poseidon, which resounds gently with the sea, for the leaves of the pine trees sing in this way, and this, my boy, is what it means: Ino, after she threw herself into the sea, became Leukothea and one of the circle of the Nereids; as for her son, the earth will benefit from the baby Palaimon. Already he puts into port on the well-disposed dolphin, and the dolphin carrying the sleeping child spreads his back, slipping through the calm sea noiselessly, so that the child may not be waken from his sleep. And with him approaching, an ādvtn breaks forth out of the earth split apart by Poseidon, who, it seems to me, is announcing the child’s sailing-in to Sisyphus here, and also that he should sacrifice to the child. And Sisyphus sacrifices this black bull here, having dragged him away from the herd of Poseidon. The lógos of the sacrifice and the attire worn by those sacrificing as well as the offerings, my boy, and the slaying must be kept for the secret rites of Palaimón. For the lógos is holy and altogether secret, since Sisyphus the wise himself deified it. That Sisyphus is wise is indeed shown by the thoughtfulness of his appearance. As for the face of Poseidon, if he were about to break the Gyrean rocks or the Thessalian mountains, he would certainly have been depicted as terrible and such as someone striking a blow, but since he is receiving him as a guest so that he might keep him in his land, he smiles

22 Euripides uses same word when he describes Medea establishing a σεμνήν και τέλη ritual. For ἱερὸς λόγος in the context of mysteries, see Burkert, Ancient Mystery Cults, 69–70.
at the child coming into harbor, and orders the Isthmus to unfold its breast and become a home for Melikertès. The Isthmus, my boy, is painted in the form of a δαίμον sprawling himself on the land, and he has been appointed by nature to lie between the Aegean and the Adriatic as if he were yoking the two seas together. There is a young man on the right, Lechaios probably, and girls on the right, who are the two seas, beautiful and suitably calm, lying beside the land representing the Isthmus. (Philostratus Imagines 2.16)

Neither the "λόγος of the sacrifice," the attire worn by the people performing the sacrifice, the offerings, nor the way of killing the animal, are to be disclosed. "For the λόγος is holy [σεμιωτός] and altogether secret [ἀπόθετος]." Never mind that this prohibition is transgressed in this image, which shows precisely what must be kept secret.

The "λόγος of the sacrifice" (ὁ τῆς θυσίας λόγος) is in itself a mysterious phrase: is it referring to the language used during the sacrifice, the order in which it is performed, the beliefs of the participants, or the story behind it? I suggest it refers to the narrative dealing with the death and coming back to life of the hero Melikertès. We see a similar preoccupation in the Heroikos, with the vinegrower carefully distinguishing between which part of the λόγος of Protesilaos can be told and which parts must be kept secret.

Aelius Aristides also mentions the cult of Melikertès at the end of his hymn to Poseidon. He wonders whether the story of Melikertès and Ino should be described as a story (λόγος) or a myth (μῦθος), and is distressed at the idea that the goddess Leukothea might have undergone the sufferings ascribed to the mortal Ino (Sacred Discourses 46.32–34). Thus, for him, Leukothea must have been a goddess from the beginning, and since there can be no evil among the gods (Sacred Discourses 46.36), he rejects the violent details of the narrative: Leukothea actually never threw herself into the sea, and neither was the child Melikertès snatched away—according to Aristides, he was actually entrusted to Poseidon as a source of delight and a gift (ἀθυρμα καὶ δῶρον).

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23 On cult of Melikertès being secret (ἀπόρρητα), cf. Libanius Or. 14.65 Foerster.

24 There is an intriguing precedent for this story, of course, in the myth of Poseidon falling in love with another beautiful young boy, Pelops (see Pache, Baby and Child Heroes in Ancient Greece).
When it comes to the cult of Melikertès, Aristides describes it in much the same terms as Philostratus:

Παλαίμονα δὲ καὶ εἰπεῖν καλὸν καὶ τούνομα αὐτοῦ οὖνμάσαι καὶ ὁρκον ποιήσασθαι καὶ τῆς τελετῆς τῆς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ καὶ τοῦ ὀργιασμοῦ μετασχεῖν—τασσοῦτος τῆς ἵμερος πρόσεστι τῷ παιδί—καὶ ἰδεῖν γε καὶ ἐν γράμματι, . . . ὃποι δὲ καὶ ἐπ’ αὐτῶν τῶν νότων τῆς θαλάττης, ὃποι δὲ καὶ ἐν ταῖς χεραῖς τῆς μητρὸς τὸ θάλασσα τοῦ παιδὸς καὶ τὴν ὄραν καὶ τὸ φῶς. ταύτα γὰρ θεάματα θεαμάτων ἡδύστα καὶ ἰδεῖν γε καὶ ἀκούσαι.

It is good to talk about Palaimôn and say his name and swear his oath, as well as to take part in the initiation ritual [τελετῆ] and the celebration of secret rites [ὁργιασμὸς] in his honor, and also—so great is the desire [ἡμερος] attached to the boy—to see in the picture the bloom and freshness and flower of the boy when he is on the back of the sea, and when he is in his mother’s arms. For these are the sweetest of sights to see and to hear. (Aelius Aristides Sacred Discourses 46.40 Keil)

Aristides specifically describes the rites in honor of the hero as initiatory. Not only does he use the nouns τελετῆ and ὀργιασμὸς, which are associated with initiation rituals, but like Plutarch he also uses the traditional ritual syntax ἐπ’ αὐτῷ, which in combination with the noun τελετῆ means “to be initiated into the mysteries of the hero.” Although Aristides just dismissed the story of Ino and Melikertès throwing themselves into the sea, the picture he describes seems to show precisely this scene: the mother holding her child in the sea, and the child being carried forth by the sea. Two aspects of Aristides’ description are particularly intriguing: Aristides insists on both the importance of speaking about Palaimôn (both talking about him and saying his name), as well as the pleasure inherent in seeing the boy.

The mention of swearing an oath in the name of Palaimôn recalls Pausanias’s description of the ἄδυτον at Isthmia where worshipers actually swear oaths. Pausanias’s claim that Palaimôn is hidden (κεκρύφθαι) begs the question: does Melikertès ever appear to his worshipers? Pausanias describes another ἄδυτον in the context of a hero cult, that of the oracle of the hero Trophônios at Lebadeia, where in order to consult the oracle, the worshiper descends into an underground χῶσμα. Once they reach the inner sanctum (ἄδυτον), worshipers learn the future. According to Pausanias, there is no
single way of doing this, but some learn through seeing, others through hearing (Description of Greece 9.39.11).

Aristides uses a series of adjectives associated with youth to describe Palaimôn in his mother's arms: θάλος, ὑφα, ἄθος. All belong to the metaphorical world of flowers and spring, and all draw attention to Palaimôn's youth and beauty. What about the ιμερος evoked by Aristides? The word can express longing or yearning, but also love and desire. This is the word used by Philostratus, for example, when he describes how desire is awakened in Achilles and Helen after they hear descriptions of each other. Yet, in the case of Melikertês, Aristides is not talking about romance, but about a dead, heroized child. At first glance, it may seem that the ιμερος described by Aristides is caused by the vision of the boy's image, but on closer examination it becomes clear that this ιμερος is very closely related to what precedes as well; it is the participation in the rites (πελετή, οργασμός) and oath, as well as the description of the picture that follows, that awakens the ιμερος for the hero in the worshiper. Moreover, Aristides emphasizes at the end of the passage that these sights are the sweetest to see and to hear (καὶ ίδείν γε καὶ ἀκοῦσαι), making it very clear that both components are essential. In some way, then, ιμερος is closely linked with initiation into the mystery of the hero Melikertês. Something similar seems to be at work in the Heroikos, where we see worshipers falling in love with heroes. Indeed, in some cases, loving a hero seems to be a form of initiation.

How early, then, can we trace back a link between a hero cult and a mystery cult? I have mentioned Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus as an important exception in the way in which it conceptualizes a living being as a hero. Sophocles' last tragedy also provides an intriguing perspective on the link between initiation and hero cult. The play describes the death and heroization of Oedipus in the grove of the Eumenides at Kolônos. Although Oedipus is still alive, other characters are aware of his status as cult hero and of the powers he can exercise as such. As Claude Calame has shown, Sophocles superimposes a pattern of initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries onto the narrative of the death of Oedipus.25 While this

does not necessarily mean that the ritual in honor of Oedipus was in fact a mystery cult, the very fact that Sophocles can make such an analogy is intriguing.

If a link, however tenuous, between hero cult and mystery rites can already be attested for the fifth century B.C.E., then the initiatory nature of the cults of Melikertès, of the children of Medea, as well as of Achilles described in the Heroikos is perhaps not an exception or a late (Roman) development, but rather represents a particular strand of hero cult that was there all along. 26

What about the role of initiation and mysteries in the Heroikos in general? While the existence of heroes is a given in the classical period, in Philostratus’s narrative, initiation becomes a prerequisite to perception. I return to an episode at the very beginning of the dialogue:

καὶ οὖν, ξένε, τῶν ἀνδόνων ἡκουσάς, οἶον τῷ χιφίῳ ἐναττικῷ-ζουσίῳ, ἐπείδαν δείλη τε ἡκή καὶ ἡμέρα ἄρχεται.

"Stranger," says the vinegrower, "you have not yet heard the nightingales that sing here in the Attic manner both when evening comes and when day begins." (Her. 5.4)

Here again, let me turn to Sophocles: the allusion to nightingales recalls Antigone’s description of Kolônos at the beginning of the play, where nightingales are a defining feature:

χῶρος δ’ ὁδ’ ἱερός, ὃς σάφ’ εἰκάσαι, βρύων
dάφνης, ἀλάτας, ἀμπέλου πυκνὸτεροι δ’
eἰσόκ τ’ αὐτὸν εἰστομοῦσ’ ἀνδόνες.

But this place is sacred, one may clearly surmise, luxuriant
with laurel, olive and vine. A throng of feathered nightingales sing their blessed song within it. (Oedipus at Colonus 16–18 Blundell)

And later in the play, the chorus echoes Antigone’s words in their description of the sacred grove:


26 For heroic cults “di carattere misterico,” see Brelich, Gli eroi greci, 121.
In this country of fine horses, stranger,  
You have reached the mightiest shelter upon earth,  
White Kolônos.

The clear-toned nightingale,  
Frequenting it most,  
Pipes plaintively within green glades,  
Occupying the wine-dark ivy  
And the foliage of the god  
Where none may step, with untold berries, out of the sun  
Out of the wind of all storms. (Oedipus at Colonus 669–678 Blundell)

Two keywords in these two passages, Kolônos and nightingale, evoke concerns closely linked to mourning and hero cults. The noun kolônôs here refers to the sacred grove near Athens where the heroization of Oedipus takes place. Nagy argues that the word is consistently associated with hero cult and is often used as a marker of the hero’s grave. Indeed it appears in the Heroikos, where it is used to describe the mound that extends over the grave of the hero Protesilaos (Her. 9.1). The same term later on describes the grave of Achilles and Patroklos (Her. 51.12). Moreover, like the White Rock that marks the entrance to the underworld in archaic Greek poetry, it can also be perceived, metonymically, as the boundary as it were between life and death.

Just as important as the word kolônôs is the presence of nightingales singing in these two passages. The presence of nightingales at Kolônos is no coincidence. Nightingales are often connected with

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27 See Nagy, “The Sign of the Hero,” xxxiii n. 34.
mournings in the context of hero cults, and more particularly they
mourn the death of the poet par excellence, Orpheus:

ο δὲ Μυρσίλος ο τὰ Λεσβιακά συγγεγραφώς φησιν, τῆς Ἀντισσαίας ἐν ϑότῳ μυθολογεῖται καὶ δείκνυται δὲ ό τάφος ὑπὸ τῶν ἐγχώριων τῆς τοῦ Ὀρφέως κεφαλῆς, τὰς ἀμύνας εἶναι εὐφωνοτέρας τῶν ἄλλων.

And Myrsilos, who wrote the Lesbiaka, says that in Anti­sssaia, in the place where the tomb for the head of Orpheus is reported to be and shown by the inhabitants, the nightingales are more melodious than others. (FGrH 477 F 2)

Here Myrsilos describes how the inhabitants of Lesbos describe the place where the grave for the head of Orpheus is in terms of the nightingales who sing there more melodiously than others. Similarly, according to Pausanias, the Thracians say that the nightingales that nest on Orpheus’s grave, which they claim is in Thrace, sing more loudly and in a sweeter manner than other nightingales (Description of Greece 9.30.6). The Greeks traditionally understood the song of the nightingale as a song of lament, and clearly this is how the vinegrower understands it when he tells the Phoenician that he has not yet heard the nightingales singing. But what interests me even more is the Phoenician’s answer, in which he makes a distinction between lamenting and singing:

δοκῶ μοι αἰκηκοεῖαι ξυντίθεσθαι τε μηδὲ θρηνεῖν αὐτὰς, ἀλλὰ ἄθευν μόνον.

“I think that I have heard them and I agree that they do not lament, but only sing.” (Her. 5.5)

Is this an indication of the Phoenician’s utter failure to understand what is really at stake? Remember what the vinegrower said: “You have not yet heard the nightingales that sing here in the Attic manner both when evening comes and when day begins.” By link-

ing the nightingales to Attica, the vinegrower makes clear both the literary and ritual connection to the classical past. The Phoenician merchant perhaps catches the literary allusion, but not the ritual one. He cannot hear the nightingales’ lament yet because he is not yet initiated into the mysteries of hero cult. By the end of the dialogue, however, the Phoenician has been persuaded and is ready to understand, and perhaps experience, the bond between worshiper and hero.

Laments and hymns clearly are at the center of hero worship in the *Heroikos*, but this is also something we see at work in other sources: telling the story of the hero, singing of him, and lamenting him are constantly described as the focus of the cult of Melikertês and of Achilles, for example. Lamenting the hero is a form of community for the worshipers, and perhaps the beginning of an initiation into the mysteries.

Before I turn to my conclusion, I would like to go back once more to initiation as it is described in the *Heroikos*. As many have noticed before, the Phoenician undergoes an initiation of sorts himself in the course of the narrative; at the beginning of the dialogue, he makes it clear he does not believe in heroes; by the end, he is so entranced by the vinegrower’s narrative that he asks to come back the next day to hear more about yet another subject. Through hearing the vinegrower’s stories, the Phoenician merchant begins to see a truth he had not suspected even existed before, and by the end of the dialogue he claims that his soul’s cargo is more valuable than that of his ship, and that he would rather delay his business than miss the opportunity to hear more from the vinegrower and Prote silaos himself.

The Phoenician merchant realizes that he cannot ask about certain subjects, such as Prote silaos coming back to life, but there is one topic he is particularly interested in: he wants to hear about the place where the rivers Kôkytos, Pyriphlegetôn, and Akherousias flow, or the place—as we know it from the *Odyssey*—which is just beyond the White Rock, beyond the world of the living, beyond everyday consciousness:

\[ \text{τούς δὲ Κοκυτοὺς τε καὶ Πυριφλεγέθοντας καὶ τὴν Ἀχερουσίαδα καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα τῶν ποταμῶν τε καὶ τῶν λιμνῶν ὄνοματα καὶ νῆ} \]


31 See Nagy, *Greek Mythology and Poetics*, 236.
Δία τοὺς Ἀιακοὺς καὶ τὰ τοῦτον δικαστήρια τὸ καὶ δικαστήρια αὐτὸς τὲ ἱσως ἄπαγγελεὶς καὶ ἔνθωμεὶ διηγεῖσθαι.

On the Kókytoi and the Pyrīphlegethontes and the Akherousiada, and such names of rivers and seas, and, by Zeus, the Aiakidai and their courts of justice and places of punishments, you yourself will perhaps report and he [Protesilaos] will agree to set forth the details. (*Her.* 58.3)

The vinegrower advises him to set sail or, if the winds should be bad, to come back the next day. The Phoenician merchant does not hesitate and reiterates that he wants to hear more:

πείθομαι σοι, ἀμπελουργέ, καὶ οὗτος ἔσται: πλέυσαιμ δὲ μήπως, Πόσειδών, πρὶν ἄτοιδε ἀκροάσσάθαι τοῦ λόγου.

*I believe in you*, vinedresser, and so shall it be. May I not sail, by Poseidon, before I listen to this *story* as well. (*Her.* 58.6)

Kókytos, Pyrīphlegethōn, and Akherousias: Wailing, Blazing Fire, and Woe, these are the topics the Phoenician wants to learn more about, and this, it seems to me, is the perfect way to conclude an initiation into the mysteries of the hero: in the *Heroikos*, the λόγος of death and mourning literally gets the last word of the dialogue.

In conclusion, the *Heroikos* uses the same ritual vocabulary and concept of the hero used by the poets of the classical period. The roles played by mourning, love, and πόθος reflect earlier Greek practices, yet the dialogue also fundamentally differs from the earlier tradition. The need for persuasion and the "scientific," or to echo Don Quixote, the "geometric," nature of the evidence represent new developments. The vinegrower's belief in heroes, just like Don Quixote's belief in giants, is being challenged by his interlocutor and the burden of proof is on the believer. The *Heroikos* depicts worshipers who still empathize with, mourn, and love the hero, but belief in the existence of heroes is no longer a given. While earlier hero cults already exhibit aspects that we associate with mystery cult, something new is at work in the *Heroikos*, where the mystery is closely connected with doubt and the need for persuasion and conversion. And, through conversion and initiation, the hero becomes alive to the worshiper.