



Looking through rose-colored glasses while sailing on a sacred journey

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Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins

Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

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Looking through rose-colored glasses while sailing on a sacred journey

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After Theseus dives into the depths of the sea, the sea-goddess Amphitrite welcomes him, enveloping the hero in a purple robe (line 112) and crowning his head of hair with a garland made of roses (line 116: ῥόδοις)—a garland that she herself as a bride of Poseidon the sea-god had received as a wedding present from Aphrodite (lines 113–116). When Theseus finally comes up for air, emerging from the depths of the sea, he is wearing the purple robe and the garland of roses, ready to confront Minos. From here on, it will be Theseus and not Minos who will have dominion over the Aegean Sea, and this dominion is expressed by the symbolism of the purple robe and the garland of roses. I will now argue further that this kind of symbolism can be traced back genealogically to rituals that existed already in the era of the Minoan Empire. One such ritual, as we will see, is depicted in the “flotilla scene” of the Theran fresco that I had mentioned [in the previous posting, 2015.08.26](#).

Introduction

§0.1. In the [posting for 2015.08.26](#), §§49–50, I started to argue that the golden garland given to the hero Theseus by the sea-goddess Amphitrite in a myth narrated by Pausanias 1.17.3 was a symbol for the ritual of a stylized wedding that links this hero as future king of Athens with the Aegean Sea. In the text of Pausanias, the golden garland is correlated with a golden ring that Minos, ruler of the Minoan Empire, had thrown into the sea. Theseus dives after the ring and recovers it from the depths of the Aegean. When he comes back up for air, he is in possession of the ring—and also of a golden garland that Amphitrite as goddess of the Aegean Sea had given to him in the course of his dive into the deep. In another version of this myth, as narrated in Song 17 of Bacchylides, we read further details that are in some ways the same and in some ways different: after Theseus dives into the depths of the sea, the sea-goddess Amphitrite welcomes him, enveloping the hero in a purple robe (line 112) and crowning his head of hair with a garland made of roses (line 116: ῥόδοις)—a garland that she herself as a bride of Poseidon the sea-god had received as a wedding present from Aphrodite (lines 113–116). When Theseus finally comes back up for air, emerging from the depths of the sea, he is wearing the purple robe and the garland of roses, ready to confront Minos. From here on, it will be Theseus and not Minos who will have dominion over the Aegean Sea, and this dominion is expressed by the combined symbolism of (1) the golden ring and (2) the purple robe and (3) the garland of roses. Focusing on the garland of roses, I will now argue that this kind of symbolism can be traced back genealogically to rituals that existed already in the era of the Minoan Empire. One such ritual, as we will see, is depicted in the “flotilla scene” of the Theran fresco that I had mentioned in the previous posting.

§0.2. When I speak of a genealogy of rituals, I am making a distinction between genealogical and typological approaches. I already used both terms “genealogy” and “typology” in [the previous posting, 2015.08.26](#) §36, but I have waited till now to offer a working definition of these terms. Basically, a genealogical comparison involves a study of parallels between structures that can be traced back to a proto-structure. By contrast, a typological comparison involves a study of parallels between structures that are not necessarily related to each other. Typological comparison can be applied to parallelisms between structures as structures pure and simple, without any presuppositions about a common origin. [1]

§0.3. In what follows, then, I will apply a genealogical approach in comparing details we see in the myth concerning the garland that adorns the head of Theseus with details we are about to see in a ritual concerning a sacred voyage of a ship adorned with garlands. And I will also apply a genealogical approach in comparing details we see in this ritual with details we are about to see in a ritual depicted in the “flotilla scene” of the Theran fresco that I had mentioned in the previous posting 015.08.26 §36. In that context, at §36, I also applied a typological approach when I briefly compared the “flotilla scene” with the yearly ritual of a floating procession that symbolized the prosperity, power, and prestige—the three “P”s—of the Venetian Empire in dominating the Adriatic Sea. Comparably, as I argued, the “flotilla scene” of the Theran fresco represents a ritual of a floating procession. And, in this case, such a ritual symbolizes the prosperity, power, and prestige of the Minoan Empire in dominating the Aegean Sea.

The sacred sea-voyage of Theseus

§1. Returning to the role of the hero Theseus in the myth about his receiving a garland from the sea-goddess of the Aegean, I will now make a genealogical comparison of this role with the role of the same

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Editor

Keith Stone
kstone@chs.harvard.edu

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hero in an Athenian ritual noted by Plato with reference to the death of Socrates in 399 BCE. Each and every year, as we see from the description of this ritual in Plato's *Phaedo* (58a and 58c), the priest of the god Apollo attaches garlands to the stern of the Athenian Ship of State, which is understood to be a replication of the hero's original ship, and this act of garlanding officially launches the ship on an annual *theōria* or 'sacred voyage' by sea, crossing over from Athens to Delos, which is the sacred island of Apollo in the Aegean, and then back from Delos to Athens. This *theōria*, as we read in Plato's *Phaedo*, stays the execution of Socrates. For the Athenian State to execute this man while the sacred sea-voyage is in progress would be to pollute the ritual—and to pollute the State. But that is another story, and there is no time here to delve into the deep symbolism of the annual Athenian *theōria* or 'sacred voyage' as it applies to Socrates. In the book *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, I have analyzed that kind of symbolism, which helps explain the philosophical meaning of the *theōria* as 'theory' or 'contemplation' in Plato's works.[2] But here I will stick to the basic meaning of the *theōria* as 'sacred voyage'.

§2. As we learn from the text of [Plato's *Phaedo* \(58a-c\)](#), the two coordinated yearly Athenian rituals of (1) garlanding the stern of the Athenian Ship of State and (2) then sending the ship on a sacred voyage, or *theōria*, are both linked to an Athenian myth about Theseus: once upon a time, the text of Plato says, this hero saved Athens—and himself—from domination imposed by the sea-empire of Minos. So we see here that the salvation of Athens from the dominion of Minos, in myth, is correlated, in ritual, with the garlanding of the Athenian Ship of State as it commences its *theōria* or 'sacred voyage' to Delos.[3]

§3. In the Athenian myth, as we see it retold briefly by [Plutarch in his *Life of Theseus* \(15.1-2\)](#), the dominion of Minoan thalassocracy over Athens took the form of a seasonally recurring human sacrifice of fourteen young Athenians, seven boys and seven girls, offered to the monster son of Minos, called the Minotaur, who was half man and half bull and who dwelled in the Cretan city Knossos inside a maze known as the *labirinthos* or 'Labyrinth' (15.2). Joining a prototypical ensemble of seven boys and seven girls who are destined for human sacrifice, Theseus sails with them to Knossos in Crete. Once he arrives at Knossos, the Athenian hero penetrates the Labyrinth, where he finds the Minotaur and kills him. Then, Theseus escapes from the Labyrinth and thus 'saves' both himself and the other young Athenians. This act of 'saving' the Athenians is expressed by the verb *sōzein* in the passage I already cited from Plato's *Phaedo* (58a-b), where we learn also that Theseus commemorated his salvation and the salvation of the other young Athenians by sailing together with them every year to Delos, sacred island of Apollo, on a prototypical *theōria* or 'sacred journey'; and this yearly ritual, as we are informed in Plato's text, was still being observed in the time of Socrates.[4] Even in that post-mythical time, [adds Plutarch in his *Life of Theseus* \(23.1\)](#), the *triākontoros* or thirty-oar ship that sailed every year on this ritualized journey to Delos and back was believed to be the same ship on which Theseus had sailed to Delos together with the rest of the young Athenians who had been saved from being sacrificed to the Minotaur. Plutarch in the *Life of Theseus* (again, 23.1) says that the ancient traditions about this ship could be traced forward in time from the mythical era of Theseus all the way to the historical era of Demetrius of Phaleron, a philosopher who dominated Athens both politically and culturally in the late fourth century BCE.

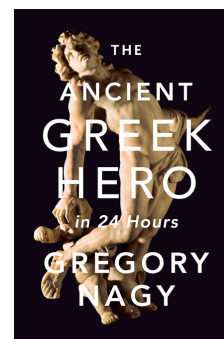
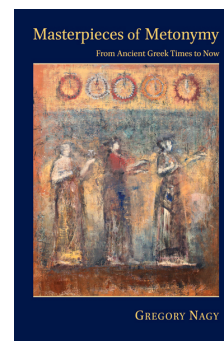
§4. In [Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* \(21.1-3\)](#), we can read further details about that prototypical sacred sea-voyage to and from Delos. Every year when Theseus and the other young Athenians arrived in Delos, they performed as a choral ensemble a ritual of re-enacting in song and dance the story of the hero's victory over the Minotaur inside the Labyrinth of Crete, and the Labyrinth itself was ritually re-enacted by way of the singing and dancing, which is traditionally called the *geranos* or 'crane'. This song and dance of the crane, as traditionally reperformed in post-mythical times at the festival of Apollo at Delos, literally re-enacts the Cretan Labyrinth, since the dance-steps danced by cranes in the course of these birds' courtship rituals during mating season seem to be re-tracing the patterns of a maze or Labyrinth, as Plutarch says explicitly in his *Life of Theseus* (21.2), following the report of the antiquarian Dicaearchus (F 85 ed. Wehrl). [5]

§5. Up to now, I have compared an action of garlanding in a myth, where Theseus is garlanded by the goddess of the sea, and an action of garlanding in a ritual, where a replica of the supposedly original ship of Theseus is being garlanded. In the first case of garlanding, the myth refers to a ritual of crowning Theseus with a garland, but the garlanding is not explicitly represented as a ritual of and by itself. In the second case, on the other hand, we do see the ritual of garlanding the Athenian Ship of State as a ritual, but we not see the myth that explains the reason for the ritual, which is, that Theseus once upon a time rescued Athens from the thalassocracy of Minos. It seems that there is no explicit reference made by the ritual itself to the myth about the rescue. Only Plato's text, in describing the ritual, refers explicitly to the myth. By contrast, the ritual of the crane dance does refer explicitly to the myth about the rescue, since that myth is re-enacted symbolically by singing and dancing the entrance and the exit of Theseus into and out of the Labyrinth.

Some thoughts about the terms myth and ritual

§6. I am highlighting here a distinction between what happens in myth and what happens in ritual because this kind of distinction is not always obvious when we study any interaction between myth and ritual. I can state in general that rituals very seldom refer explicitly to the myths that interact with them, and so the case of the ritual known as the crane dance is quite exceptional in its explicitness with reference to a corresponding myth centering on the salvation of Theseus from the Labyrinth. By contrast, myths often do refer to rituals with which they interact, as we see in the case of the myth about the garlanding of Theseus by the goddess of the sea.

§7. To elaborate on this statement, I step backward one step and offer here a working definition of myth and ritual as two interacting processes. This definition applies to my use of these terms myth and ritual not



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only in this posting of 2015.09.3 but also in the previous posting of 2015.08.26. Here, then, is the definition, which I had developed on the basis of analyzing a variety of myths and rituals in the book *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*:

- Ritual is doing things and saying things in a way that is considered *sacred*.
- Myth is saying things in a way that is also considered *sacred*.

To say it another way:

- Myth is an aspect of ritual, since the act of saying things in myth is understood to be one of many ways of doing things in ritual.
- But the act of doing things in ritual does not require the act of saying things in myth.

So, myth is an optional aspect of ritual. And myth operates within the larger framework of ritual.^[6] Further, as a framework for myth, a ritual can imply a myth even if that myth is not explicitly retold each and every time the ritual is reperformed.

§8. I also offer here a working definition for a related term, aetiology, by which I mean a special kind of myth that motivates or explains an institutional reality, especially a ritual.^[7] Even in the case of an aetiology, it can be an aspect of the ritual it explains, but the aetiology is not necessarily made explicit in each and every reperformance of the ritual. Finally, we need to allow for situations where characters in myth perform a ritual that prefigures the reperformance of that ritual in its own here-and-now.^[8] A case in point is the performance of the crane dance by Theseus together with his choral ensemble: this performance of the ritual is seen as a prototype for the yearly reperformances of this ritual, extending into the historical era.^[9]

Transition: a ritual moment as represented in a painting

§9. I am now ready to reconsider in some detail a ritual moment I initially mentioned at §24 of my posting 2015.08.26. This ritual moment, as I noted all too briefly in the context of that initial mention, is represented in an elaborate painting described as a “flotilla scene,” which is part of a miniature fresco discovered at Akrotiri on the island of Santorini, the ancient name for which island was Thera. The dating of this Theran fresco, as I noted already in my initial mention, can be placed at around 1600 BCE or even earlier, and the painting captures, as I argue, a ritual moment as celebrated in the context of an Aegean thalassocracy that evolved into the Minoan Empire. As I also noted in my initial mention, the ritual that is depicted in this Theran fresco painting is remarkably similar to the ritual called “the Wedding of the Sea” as celebrated annually in the context of an Adriatic thalassocracy that evolved into the Venetian Empire. In what follows, I build on my typological comparison of the similarities between the Aegean and the Adriatic rituals. And I use the term “typological” here in the same way as I used it in §36 of the posting from 2015.08.26.

§10. As I proceed to analyze the details we find in the Aegean “flotilla scene,” it will become evident that some of these details are not only typologically comparable with details we see in the Adriatic ritual known as the “Wedding of the Sea.” We will also find other details that are genealogically comparable with details of the Aegean ritual involving the ship that sails yearly on a sacred voyage or theōria from Athens to Delos and back. One detail stands out: as we will see, the garlanding of the theoric ship is genealogically parallel to the garlanding of the ships sailing in the “flotilla scene.”

The “flotilla scene”

§11. As we now proceed to take a closer look at the “flotilla scene,” I offer some further background on the wall painting that pictures the scene. The date for this painting and for all the other wall paintings found at the site of Akrotiri on the island of Thera can be correlated with a prehistoric time when a volcano that once occupied most of this island exploded, sometime around the middle of the second millennium BCE, leaving behind a gigantic caldera that now occupies the space where the mountain once stood. The paintings were preserved by the volcanic ash that buried the site of Akrotiri in the wake of this explosion. Till now, I have referred to the wall painting of the “flotilla scene” as a fresco, since it is part of a set of pictures painted on the plastered surface of the inner walls found at the site of Akrotiri, but from here on I will use a term more favored by archaeologists, Miniature Frieze. The term frieze is based on the fact that the paintings in this case form a band that lines all four inner walls of “Room 5” in a building known to archaeologists as the West House (there is currently no agreement about what exactly is meant by the term “house” in this instance).^[10] This Miniature Frieze, has been described as “one of the most important monuments in Aegean art.”^[11]

§12. In my book *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, I offer this further description:^[12]

The Miniature Frieze occupies the upper third of the inner walls of Room 5, where the doors and the windows would not interrupt the flow of the narrative that was painted on all four of the inner walls. The narrative of the Frieze moves clockwise, beginning and ending at the same point. The point of beginning, situated at the southernmost end of the west wall, shows part of a harbor city or “Town I,” while the point of ending, situated at the

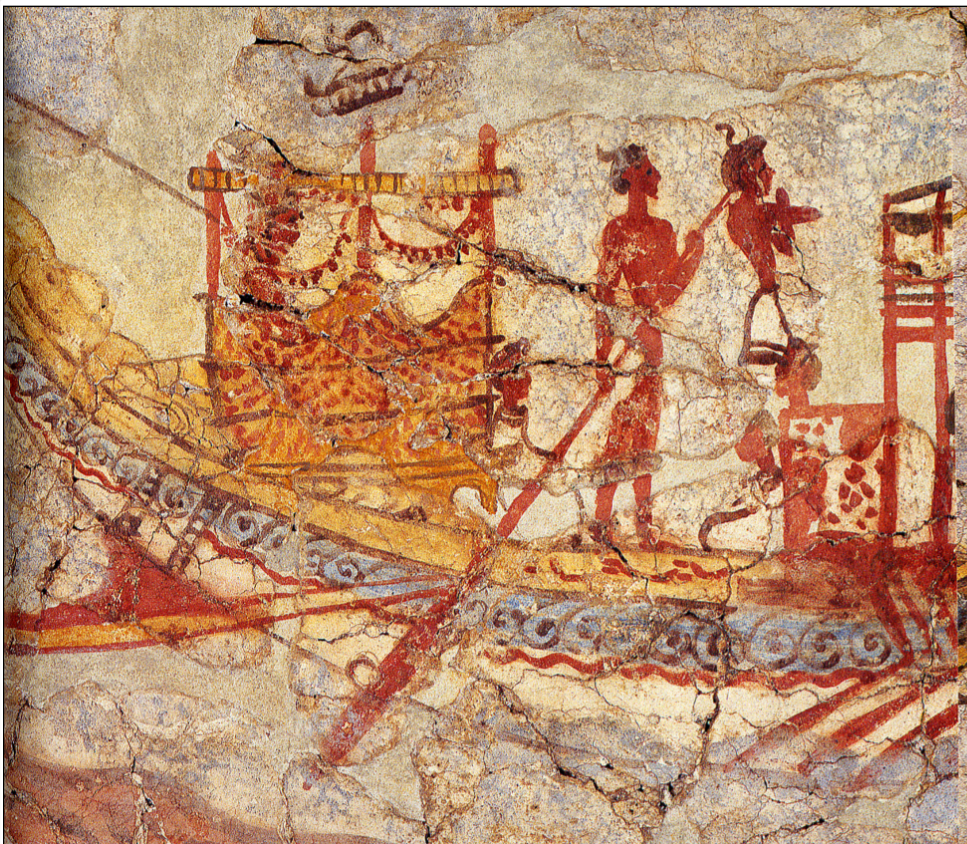
westernmost end of the south wall, shows the other part of the same harbor city, "Town I." So, the narrative comes full circle back to "Town I."^[13] The north wall shows, again, a coastal city, which is "Town II"; as for "Town III," which overlaps the north and the east walls, this site is yet another coastal city, and, in this case, it is situated at the mouth of a river; the same can be said for "Town IV," at the eastern side of the south wall, which is once again a coastal city situated at the mouth of a river; actually, "Town IV" may be another way of looking at one and the same city, "Town III."^[14] Then there is the south wall, showing a fleet of ships sailing from the harbor of "Town IV" toward the "home port," that is, toward the same place that had also served as a point of departure, which was "Town V."^[15] The fleet consists of seven large ships, only one of which is under sail;^[16] the other six ships are being rowed by multitudes of oarsmen; further back to our left, in front of "Town IV," there is also a small boat, equipped with no mast, which is rowed by only five oarsmen.^[17] All seven of the large ships are heading from left to right in the direction of the harbor of "Town V." Located at the stern of each one of these seven large ships is a structure that looks like a cabin, and there is a male figure seated inside each one of these "cabins."

In the previous posting, 2015.08.26, at §33, I already showed the part of the Miniature Frieze where we can see the fleet of ships that are sailing from left to right, back toward the "home port"—which was also the point of departure. For ease of reference, I show again here the relevant part of the Miniature Frieze. So, now we see here what I described in the paragraph I quoted just a moment ago. We see the flotilla of seven ships, only one of which is under sail while the rest are being rowed by "multitudes of oarsmen." And I repeat my remark that this flotilla is sailing in the mode of a floating procession.



Theran fresco at Akrotiri showing flotilla, [via Wikimedia Commons](#)

§13. I highlight once again in this picture one particular detail: at the stern of each one of the seven large ships is a structure that looks like a cabin, and there is a male figure seated inside each one of these cabins. Now I show once again the closeup that I had showed in the previous posting 2015.08.26 at §35. In this closeup we can see clearly both a cabin, which as I had previously observed looks like a Venetian *tièmo*, and a passenger sitting inside the cabin:



Detail from Theran fresco at Akrotiri, c. 1600 BCE, original image via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

A ritual moment for the Aegean sea-empire

§14. With this background in place, I am ready to consider in more detail the ritual moment that I think is represented in the "flotilla scene." As I described the scene already, the flotilla is returning to the "home

port,” and so the floating procession has come full circle. As I argued in *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, such a coming full circle for such a floating procession in the era of Plato would be called a *theōria*. And we have already seen from the account in Plato’s *Phaedo* that such a *theōria* was inaugurated by way of garlanding the stern of the Athenian Ship of State. My point of comparison, then, is the garlanding of the cabin at the stern of the ship that we see in the closeup I just showed from the “flotilla scene.”

§15. And now I show a related digital sketch that I have not yet shown:



Detail from a fresco painting in Room 4 of the West House

For an interpretation of this picture, I repeat, with adjustments to the present argument, what I say in my book *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*:[\[18\]](#)

The middle zone of wall paintings in Room 4, situated to the south of Room 5 in the same “West House,” shows a variety of close-up pictures featuring enlarged views of the same kinds of decorations that we see attached to the “cabins” at the sterns of the seven large ships in the “flotilla scene” as painted in Room 5. Of particular interest are two semi-circular garlands of flowers that decorate the cabin at the stern of the ship, as we just saw in the closeup of one of the ships in the “flotilla scene”: this detail matches most closely the two semi-circular garlands of flowers that decorate the wall of the adjacent Room 4. [\[19\]](#)

What we see painted on the wall of Room 4 shows the same garlanded frame of vision that we see painted in the “flotilla scene” decorating the south wall of Room 5. But there is a big difference. Whereas the man who is seated in the “cabin” positioned at the stern of the ship in the picture painted on the plaster wall of Room 5 can look through the garlanded frame of vision and see the sights to be seen as he sails ahead on his sea voyage, a viewer who looks at the plaster wall of Room 4 and sees a picture of the same garlanded frame of vision could merely imagine the sights to be seen in the course of such a sea voyage. Having noted this difference, however, I must return to what the two painted details have in common: whether the sights to be seen are really seen or only imagined, these sights could be interpreted as a *theōria* or the ‘seeing of a vision’, and here my translation reflects the oldest reconstructable meaning of this word. What is being represented in both paintings, I argue, is a prototype of a *theōria* in the sense of a ‘sacred journey’ that leads to the achievement of a mystical vision. And that view of that vision is framed by the two semi-circular garlands through which the viewer views what is seen. To borrow from a modern idiom, the vision is viewed through rose-colored glasses.

§16. When I speak about rose-colored glasses in the formulation as I just repeated it from the book *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* there is something missing. I come back here full circle to a detail in Song 17 of Bacchylides. There I now find that missing something. It is the garland of roses (line 116: *ρόδοις*) given to Theseus by the sea-goddess Amphitrite when that Athenian hero dove to the bottom of the sea. That same garland had inaugurated, as we saw, the wedding of Amphitrite the sea-goddess to Poseidon the sea-god. And of course Poseidon was the divine father of Theseus. But that is another story, and I have no space here to delve into it. What I need to keep in the forefront of my argumentation as it comes to a close here is the basic meaning of the ritual act of garlanding the stern of a ship. As I see it, such garlanding is a ritual moment of marrying the sea.

§17. Here I recall the wording of Plato’s *Phaedo* (58a and 58c) with reference to the ritual moment when the priest of Apollo attaches garlands to the stern of the Athenian Ship of State as the formal act of launching this ship on its sacred voyage or *theōria* to Delos and back. I now focus on the word used in the text of Plato here, *stephein*, which means ‘to garland, to make garlands for’ (again, 58a and 58c). But what does it really mean, to ‘garland’ a theoric ship? In ancient Greek, the noun that derives from this verb

stephein is stephanos, meaning 'garland'. Both the noun and the verb refer to blossoms or leaves that are strung together and then ritually attached to an object or to a person. In Modern Greek, the noun corresponding to ancient stephanos is stéphānē (stéphāni), likewise meaning 'garland'. There is also a neuter plural form of the noun in Modern Greek, stéphana, which can mean 'wedding garlands': I note with special interest the metonymy embedded in the phrase used to offer best wishes to newlywed couples: kalá stéphana, meaning literally '[may you have] good garlands!'. This expression can be translated 'may you have a quick and happy wedding'.^[20]

§18. In Greek Christian Orthodox weddings even today, a high point of the ritual is the exchange of garlands between bride and bridegroom. Here are some illustrations of such garlands:



This picture, given to me by my friend Costas Tzagarakis, shows an assortment of garlands on sale in a marketplace. The flowers that make up the garland in this case are sempreviva (in Venetian Italian, it means 'eternally alive'; the local Greeks think it is a local Greek word). The locale is Cythera. For more on this flower and on its symbolism, I refer here to [the words of Costas](#).

§19. And here are illustrations of wedding garlands as pictured on votive objects called tamata:



A votive offering or tama, showing stephana or 'wedding garlands'



Another votive offering or tama, showing stephana or 'wedding garlands'

§24. The mind set that corresponds to such a usage in Modern Greek throws light on the fact that the garlanding of objects or of persons is a way of delineating a ritual framework. The attaching of a garland marks the beginning of engagement in a ritual—and a ritual must always have a notionally perfect beginning. So, the attaching of a garland to the stern of the theoric ship is meant to be a perfect send-off for the sacred voyage ahead, which must also be notionally perfect and therefore unpolluted. For the Athenian State to execute Socrates while the sacred voyage is in progress, as I noted already, would be to pollute the ritual—and to pollute the State. I should add that the ritual practice of garlanding a ship before a sea voyage survives to this day in the Greek-speaking world, and such rituals of garlanding are linked with important festive occasions—including Easter. [21]

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Kosmin, P. 2013. "Rethinking the Hellenistic Gulf: The new Greek inscription from Bahrain." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 133:61–79. I list this article here because it contains a variety of valuable details that are relevant to the idea of "marrying the sea" as explored here.

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Nagy, G. 2005. "The Epic Hero." A Companion to Ancient Epic (ed. J. M. Foley) 71–89. Oxford.

Nagy, G. 2006. "[The Epic Hero](#)." Expanded version of Nagy 2005.

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Notes

[1] Nagy 2006 §4. Typological comparisons are especially useful in fields like linguistics: comparing parallel structures in languages—even if the given languages are unrelated to each other—is a proven way of enhancing one's overall understanding of the linguistic structures being compared.

[2] H24H 23§§13–14.

[3] H24H 23§§10–11.

[4] H24H 23§11.

[5] Calame 1990:239–242.

[6] This formulation derives from H24H 00§13, repeated at 3§18, 5§28, 8e§2.

[7] H24H 7a§15, repeated at 8§14, 8b§3, 20§36.

[8] See for example H24H 8§§53–62 on the mythical event of the chariot-race at the Funeral Games of Patroklos, which is a prefiguration of chariot-racing as a seasonally-recurring ritual event in the post-heroic age.

[9] See also H24H 8e§4 on *mimēsis* as a 're-enactment' of myth in ritual: what you re-enact is myth, and how you re-enact it is ritual.

[10] Dumas 1999:44–97.

[11] Dumas 1999:47. For a valuable analysis of the themes that are represented in the Miniature Frieze, I cite the article of Morris 1989. My reference to this article was accidentally omitted in the List of References in the printed version of H24H, but it appears in the online version.

[12] What I quote in the paragraph that follows comes from H24H (23§18).

[13] Dumas 1999:47–49.

[14] Dumas 1999:48.

[15] Dumas 1999:47–48.

[16] Morris 1989:517.

[17] Dumas 1999:47.

[18] H24H 23§§19–20.

[19] Dumas 1999:95.

[20] This paragraph repeats what I say in H24H 23§15.

[21] Repeated from H24H 23§16.

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