



About a defeat of the Centaurs, and how to imagine such an event in Olympia

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Classical Inquiries

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About a defeat of the Centaurs, and how to imagine such an event in Olympia

April 19, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2019.04.19 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. This posting, written 2019.04.19, picks up from where I left off in Classical Inquiries [2019.03.22](#), [rewritten 2019.04.17](#). In the last paragraph of that posting, I focused on a myth that told about a defeat of the Centaurs, beastly hominoids who were half horse, half man. Such a mythological event is pictured in the sculptures of the west pediment of the temple of Zeus in Olympia, created around the middle of the fifth century BCE. And I have a basic question to ask about the picturing of this event: in our own reading, as it were, of the pedimental sculptures, who exactly were the mythological characters who defeated the Centaurs? In other words, how are we to imagine this primal event?



West pediment of the temple of Zeus in Olympia. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

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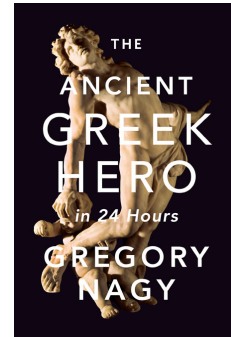
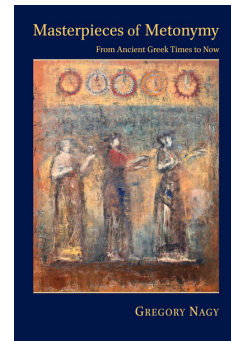


A Lapith and a Centaur. Parthenon, South Metope 31. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.



Battle between the Centaurs and Lapiths, detail (c. 1500–1515). Piero di Cosimo (1462–1522). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. In my earlier posting, I had highlighted some of the inconsistencies that impede the expert efforts of today's archaeologists and classicists to reconstruct the content of the myth that we see being pictured in the sculptures of the west pediment. I contrasted such inconsistencies with a relatively more consistent interpretation provided by the ancient traveler Pausanias. Unlike today's experts, who are forced to work with mere fragments of an original ensemble, Pausanias had the good fortune of viewing the pedimental sculptures in their totality when he visited the temple of Zeus in Olympia around the middle of the second century CE. In the present posting, I argue briefly that this ancient traveler, by way of his own reading of the pedimental sculptures, is a most valuable source for understanding the myth about the Centaurs as



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pictured in these sculptures. And my argument holds even if Pausanias might have been wrong about the identity of the central figure that adorns the west pediment.

§2. Essential for such an argument, as I noted in my previous posting, is the work of Hilda Westervelt (2009) on the pedimental sculptures of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. She demonstrates that these sculptures visualize the myth about a defeat of the Centaurs in a way that conforms with the local traditions of Elis, which was the community that initiated the building of the temple together with all its adornments. She also demonstrates that the version of the myth that was native to Elis is different in significant ways from the version that was native to Thessaly. The Thessalian version, as I showed in my previous posting, corresponds closely to the story that we see coming to life in the existing Homeric references to Centaurs. In the version that was native to Thessaly, the primary heroic figure who defeats Centaurs is the hero Peirithoös, king of the Lapithai, whose wedding is disrupted by the Centaur Eurytion and his beastly companions. By contrast, in the version that was native to Elis, as also in other versions that Westervelt traces in the course of her meticulous study, the primary heroic figure who defeats Centaurs is Herakles. According to the myth native to Elis, as noted by Westervelt (2009:141), there was a king of Elis by the name of Dexamenos who hosted a feast attended by a Centaur named Eurytion, but the feast got disrupted because Eurytion got drunk and tried to rape the daughter of the king; then Herakles, who happened to be attending the feast, put an end to the disruption by killing Eurytion. This myth was retold in an unattested song composed by Bacchylides ("Fragment" 44), and the content of that song, as summarized here, was paraphrased in Homeric scholia relevant to *Odyssey* 21.295–303.

§3. In other versions of the myth, the kingship of Dexamenos is not localized in Elis, and we find further variations in details. In a version paraphrased by Diodorus of Sicily 4.33.1, for example, the name of the daughter of Dexamenos is Hippolyte, and her bridegroom is a hero named Azan. According to another version, recorded in "Apollodorus" Library 2.5.5, the would-be bridegroom is the Centaur Eurytion himself. There are further versions to be found in the *Fabulae* of Hyginus. In *Fabula* 31, both Herakles and the Centaur Eurytion seek to marry the daughter of Dexamenos, and her name here is Deianeira; in *Fabula* 33 as well, Deianeira is the name of the daughter of the king Dexamenos; Herakles violates her but promises the father that he will marry her; then the daughter almost gets married off to Eurytion the Centaur at a wedding feast, but this feast fails, ending in disruption; Herakles intervenes, killing Eurytion and subsequently marrying Deianeira. There are still further versions attested in the visual arts, especially in vase paintings that date back to the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, and we find a most informative survey in the work of Westervelt (2009:143–150).

§4. At this point, I will go no further with specifics. Instead, I will make a general statement on the basis of what we have seen so far. I now go on record to say that I follow Hilda Westervelt in thinking that Herakles, as featured in the myths that I have outlined all too briefly here, is actually represented in the sculptural ensemble of the west pediment. In a future posting, I will have more to say about this line of thought, but for now, I content myself with my general statement. And I take the liberty here of going beyond the ancient world as I present a glimpse of a scene where the hero Theseus, that ubiquitous substitute for the hero Herakles, is shown in the act of smiting a Centaur in his own right:



Theseus defeats the Centaur (c. 1805–1819). Antonio Canova (1757–1822). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§5. As I now return to the sixth and the fifth centuries BCE, which was an era when a wide variety of myths about Centaurs still existed, I stress again what has been stressed most forcefully in the work of Westervelt: such a variety would have been mostly unknown to Pausanias, who lived some 600 years after the sculpting of the west pediment of the temple in Olympia around the middle of the fifth century. But Pausanias did know—and know well—the Thessalian version of the myth, as I showed in the previous posting. It is this version that dominates the surviving Homeric narrative about a primal fight between the Centaurs and the Lapithai, whose king was the hero Peirithoös. Also, Pausanias did know his Homer. That much is clear, as I also showed in my previous posting. So, Pausanias really did know what he was talking about, even if he did not know that the version of the myth about a primal fight with Centaurs, as pictured in Olympia, was different from the version of the myth that he already knew.

§6. More generally—and this is most important for my argumentation—Pausanias did know from sheer experience that myths are systems of communication, not randomized references to a distant past. So, when he was standing there at ground zero under the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, what did he see as he looked up at those sculptures looming over him on high? What he saw, and he knew it, was a myth that told a story, and the story he knew had a cast of characters that seemed to match the myth that was being retold in the pedimental sculptures up above. If Pausanias made any mistakes in mapping his knowledge of a myth on top of the myth that he saw being pictured in the sculptures of the west pediment, at least such mistakes were caused by misreadings of something that is systematic—something that Pausanias himself understood to be systematic.

§7. I wish I could consistently say the same thing about the interpretations being performed nowadays by experts who write about the sculptures of the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. All too often I sense that there is something missing in their readings of the story that is being retold in these sculptures. That missing something is simply the fact that this story about a primordial defeat of Centaurs is a myth. And myths are systemic. All too often, I fear, we moderns or postmoderns lose sight of appreciating the systemic power of myths. Without such an appreciation, I think that any attempt to understand scientifically the meaning of these pedimental sculptures becomes an exercise in pseudo-empiricism.

§8. With these thoughts in mind, I circle back to the driving question in my previous posting about the sculptures of the west pediment: who is the central figure in the sculptural ensemble? If Pausanias is wrong, and this figure is not Peirithoös, king of the Lapithai, then who is he? Consensus has it that the central figure represents Apollo, as we see from an admirable write-up by Ashmole and Yalouris (1967:17–18). But there are uncertainties even with this write-up. For example, there are different views about the gesture made by “Apollo” with his right hand (Westervelt 2009:137). In a future posting, I plan to say more about such uncertainties—and to pursue the possibility of finding new certainties.

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