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## **Human or Superhuman: the Concept of Hero in Ancient Greek Religion and/in Politics\***

The word *hero* appears in Greek language with a twofold meaning. On one hand it is used for denoting a divine being, who lived a mortal life, but after doing some great deed deserved to become god. On the other hand, the hero stands for great and brave warrior who is ready to give his life in order to gain immortal glory, and continue to live in the social sphere, in the memory of his descendants. Exactly this epic narrative survived and was exploited many times, as a very convenient and useful pattern in constructing the ideal of brave warrior, ready to die for his country when necessary. I am going to requestion the relation between two meanings of the word *hero*, in order to get deeper insight in the meaning of this twofold term in the social and cultural context in which it appears, as a religious concept or as a narrative in war propaganda.

*Key words:*

hero, polis, religion, aristocracy, democracy, epic poetry

### **Hero Cult**

When considering heroes in ancient Greece, it is necessary to point out the difference between hero as a divine creature and hero as a brave warrior. In the first case, the word hero used to denote a deceased person celebrated for some great deeds, who, after death, became honored and praised on the grave for his supernatural powers and influence on the living. The other type of the hero was a brave warrior whose fame was sung in epic poetry, by the bards (*ap̄oloi*). But let me begin

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with the type of hero that I mentioned first – the divine creature, whose cult was organized and formed in a sanctuary, at his tomb.

According to the archeological sources, traces of this cult appear in the post-Homeric time, since the tenth century, but they became particularly popular from the last quarter of the eighth century. It was then, that the practice of rediscovering old graves and attributing them to famous mythical heroes became widespread.<sup>1</sup> The specific type of a hero grave is known as a *hērōn* and it consists of a special kind of precinct, where sacrifices and votive gifts used to be deposited. Also, it usually used to have a special type of a tombstone and/or the altar. The boom of rediscovering hero graves and turning them into sanctuaries coincides with the appearing and development of the polis (city-state) in the 8<sup>th</sup> ct. Thus, it is possible to claim that the introduction of this cult was the result of change in the social life and new political organization. The argument in favor of this thesis should be also searched for in the character and function of heroes – namely, heroes were praised and divinized mortals meritorious mainly for the formation of the cities and for bringing social order. Thus, the constitution of such cults was aimed at justifying and empowering political associating on the grounds of family nucleus and tribes. This leads to the conclusion that the crucial aspect for understanding the hero cult is the relationship between religion and newly established social and political forms of organization. Thousands of heroes existed in Greek religion, and this enormous number is related to the local character of their worship i.e. to the fact that each city was actually a state for itself, so called *polis*.

Let me turn roughly to the case of Athens. One among many heroes was Athenian hero Theseus famous for many heroic exploits (struggling and winning horrible enemies: killing of Minotaur – half-bull, half-human who lived in a maze in Crete, and to whom Athenians had to send 7 young men and 7 girls as victims; fighting with Centaurs; Hades' origin, the abduction of Helen and many other deeds.). The Athenians believed that he was the first ruler who introduced democracy, who united all inhabitants of Athens, and who declared an Athens to be the capital.<sup>2</sup> But, he was not the only Athenian hero. A special category of Athenian heroes were those who were believed to be the founders of Athenian tribes. Namely, Athenian polis consisted of ten tribes (*filiai*), to which (from the time of Kleisthenes) its citizens were tied – neither by blood chains (as in former period) nor by geographical criterion, but according to democratic idea of equality – all the people from the city, inland and coast belonged to one of the tribes. All of these tribes had their heroes founders (*hērō- epwumoi*) – Erechtheus, Aigeus, Pandion, Leos, Akamas, Oineus, Kerkops etc., and their function was to strengthen the feeling of belonging to this tribe, through common mythical genealogy and through the cultic practice.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the case of the Grave of the Seven against Thebes. Paus. 1.39.2, Plut. *Thes.* 29 The grave of Amphion at Thebes. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Harvard University Press, 1985, 203 cf. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Thuc. II, 15. Cic., *Leg.*, II 5; Plut., *Thes.* 24.

Concerning its religious aspect, honors that heroes received were quite the same as those for the deceased. What is also important, and related to the dependence between politics and religion, is that the rise in the importance of certain individual graves from hero cults coincided with the decline in importance of the dead cult.<sup>3</sup> Of course, it was not about the complete disappearance of the dead cult, since both family and political cults of the dead functioned as a kind of basis for society. But, the formation of the hero cult was aimed at decreasing the importance of the cult of the dead, and overtaking the power over this cult. As many researches on funeral rituals and lamentation in ancient Greece pointed: the power over the dead meant the power over the living.<sup>4</sup> In terms of this, one should understand also the efforts of the polis, and the newly developed mechanisms of Athenian democratic ideology to control family funeral practice by overtaking the funerals of the fallen soldiers and performing them publicly.<sup>5</sup> However, this did not happen at once.

Namely, the newly established city-states needed fresh legislation for adaptation of ritual practice around the dead and creation of new state religion. About the same time (VI-V ct. BC), all across Greek world, similar laws were introduced aimed at limiting and controlling women's behavior at the funerals. The famous legislator of Athens, Solon introduced measurements aimed at reducing the number of women relatives allowed to participate funerals. The wake was moved from the graveyard to the house, while the procession at the grave had to be finished by the sunrise so as not to disturb public peace. Apart from that, during procession (*ekfora*), which was actually the central part of the ritual, women were not allowed to go in front of the men, but behind them, while the right to attend the wake had only women older than sixty and the closest kin.<sup>6</sup> These laws also regulated the manner in which speaking about the dead was allowed and were aimed at forbidding the blood feud.<sup>7</sup> Newly required postulates of the funeral were general modesty in behavior and sacrifices, and as much quietness as possible. All pomp, luxury and wealth that was once characteristic for the dead cult, were transferred from the funeral rituals into the cult of the hero. Namely, as Emily Vermeule states for the pre-Solonian period "a good funeral has always been a lot of fun, a reunion stirring open emotions and bringing news to exchange, the periodic intersection to the family, the clan and the city."<sup>8</sup> The consequence of this change was reducing the impor-

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<sup>3</sup> Burkert 1985, 204.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Rowman&Littlefield, Oxford 2002, Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Lament and Greek Literature*, T J Press Ltd, Patsdow, Cornwall 1995. Nicole Loraux, *The Inventions of Athens, The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides, *Historiae* 2, 34.

<sup>6</sup> Demosthenes, *Against Macartatus* 43. 62. This is testified also by texts from Aeschylus's *Choephoroi* 430, 8; Diodorus 11,38; However, the word this word often refers to denote whole ceremony.

<sup>7</sup> Plut. *Solon* 21. 1; "Mourning leads to cursing", Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, translated in English by Corinne Pache, Cornell University Press 1998, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, University of California Press, Berkley 1979, 3.

tance of the private funerals and of the graveyard as a public space, where words said in the moments of crisis had very severe and penetrating influence on public and political decisions (after all, graveyards have always been the places where the decisions about the blood revenge were taken),<sup>9</sup> at the expense of raising the importance of the hero cult, which was a political invention that facilitated social transformation through the change and by the support of the religious cults.

One more evidence that point to the diminishing and the control over the dead cult and the rise of the hero cult, was a remarkable decrease in the number of individual tombstones of the fifth century Athens. The monumental tombstones were more frequently built by the city-state and their role was no longer to glorify an individual, but the collective; the same as the hero cult, public funerals praised and eulogized abstract and anonymous men (*Andre-*) collectively, becoming the means for manipulation and creation of the common political ideal.<sup>10</sup> But this is actually going to be the topic of my next chapter.

The question that imposes further is whether the hero cult developed from the cult of the dead, or not. One of the ways to answer this is to examine the parallels between those two cults that are numerous. Both cults have very similar ritual patterns: sacrificing of animals, food (crops), libation, but also weeping and lamentation.<sup>11</sup> Once a year, there was a festivity when a hero received offerings for the dead – *ejagismata*. The same case is with the feast that appears in identical form in the both contexts (although becoming more modest in the funerals and more and more luxurious in the context of the cult of the hero). Furthermore, there are some elements of ritual praxis that disappeared from the cult of the dead, becoming incorporated in the hero cult. Such is the case of *agones*, funeral contests (sports competitions), which used to be performed at the last stage of the funeral of noble men. *Agon*, as a part of the funeral praxis, appears all up to the Classical period. However, it is possible to notice its decline in the context of funerals from the seventh century onwards, which coincides with a time when it became common in the individual sanctuaries of heroes. Gradually becoming related exclusively to the hero cult, these games are usually associated in mythology with descriptions of the first occasion of celebration and competitions, which afterwards continued to be organized periodically. The local character of such games is not surprising, if we have in mind the great importance of the cohesive function of the hero cult in the political

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<sup>9</sup> Loraux 1998, 33. Unlike Greek lament that was restricted by the laws to the household, mourning of Roman women was incorporated in public display, but within and under the control of civic ideology. Unlike in the Roman time when family became essential basis of the civic life, the Greek city-states (polises) treated family as a nucleus of the clan (aristocratic) system that they were trying to reject and transform.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Morris, *Death Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, 131. Renewed, but not completely the same, the boom of the hero cult happened in the Hellenistic time. Unlike the formation of the hero cult in the eight ct. and onwards, which was invented and instrumentalized by the city-state, the spread of hero cults appeared as a popular praxis of mourners who presented ordinary dead as heroes, and impact of this was reducing the importance of many heroes who used to be important before. OCD s.v. hero

<sup>11</sup> Diodorus Siculus 16. 20. 6 cf. Burkert 1985, 205.

life of polis. Furthermore, the political organization of ancient Greece was such that all city-states were independent (though sometimes they were making political alliances), while the feeling of belonging to the Greek world (similar to some kind of notion of Greek nation in contemporary terms)<sup>12</sup> did not exist. Therefore, it is not surprising that only four of such *agones* were Pan-Hellenic: famous up till nowadays the Olympic, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean games.

Numerous parallels with the cult of the dead thus point to the conclusion that the hero cult represents a continuation of the cult of the dead (although not ordinary ones, but those of appreciated and powerful noblemen), which was very energetically defended by Martin Nilsson.<sup>13</sup> The fact that supports this hypothesis is that before the heroization period, the dead used to be considered as divine. Even in tragedies we find the traces of the idea about this concept:

“For those who are not dead must revere the god below  
by paying honor to the dead.”<sup>14</sup>

However, Walter Burkert points out the differences between the ancestor and the hero cult, claiming that worship of heroes is directly derived from the influence of the epic poetry that flourished at a time.<sup>15</sup> Although relation between famous epic heroes and hero cult of the glorious mortals is essential, the hero cult might not be just a later invention, influenced exclusively by oral tradition. Even though the hero cult is not an ancestry cult in terms of the fact that it is not grounded on the chain of blood across generations, the social function of two cults is the same – the reinforcement of the social order and a religious justification of group solidarity guaranteed by the divinized dead. Exactly because the importance of blood ties is pushed into the background, another criterion turned out to be important for establishing relations with the common ancestor, and that are his merits for the foundation of the politically organized community. Thus, the fact that the city-state wanted to diminish the power and the influence of the private cults, and especially the cult of the dead in different ways (introducing e.g. All Souls day on a specific date for all the dead, instead of previous luxurious celebrations of the anniversary of the death celebrated as an individual holiday; the laws concerning limitation of the behavior at the funerals), as well as numerous similarities in the religious practice in the two cults, speak in favor of the argument that the cult of the hero did develop from the cult of dead and with the idea to replace it, at least partially.

So, heroes were mortals who became immortals after death, while their new home and their shrine was a tomb – the Earth’s womb. At the same time heroes are close to the dead and to the chthonic gods. Actually it is what they are – divinized dead. The specificity that is born out of this is the main difference between

<sup>12</sup> After all, the concept of nation did not appear in Europe before 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, Oxford 1952, 104.

<sup>14</sup> **toi- gar qanousi crh; ton ouj teqnhkota**

**tima- didonta cqonion eujsebein qeon.** Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 1321-2. Greek text ed. Gilbert Murray, English translation E. P. Coleridge, [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)

<sup>15</sup> Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Harvard University Press 1985, 204.

heroes and gods. Namely, Greeks believed that gods lived far from people, unlike heroes who were always close and therefore able to give support whenever it was necessary. They helped in healing or supporting the soldiers and cities in the critical moments during the battles; they were also famous as founders of city-states, they gave prophecies (the same as the souls of the dead) and they were responsible for the fertility of the soil. Very often the cult of Christian saints is, due to continuity and many structural parallels, related to the cult of heroes. The same as heroes, saints are mortals who gained their honor after their death due to some merits. Although neither heroes, nor saints are gods, they have some kind of divine power and may influence people lives.<sup>16</sup> The same as behind heroes, behind Christian saints often lay mythical figures that underwent the process of dethronement.<sup>17</sup>

## From Epic Hero to War Heroism

“Nay, but not without a struggle let me die, neither ingloriously, but in the working of some great deed for the hearing of men that are yet to be.”

(Homer, *Iliad*, 22, 304-305)<sup>18</sup>

This quotation from *Iliad* (Hector words immediately before his death) briefly summarizes the heroic death sung by the epic bards that, although in a slightly different form, continued to live as a narrative and ideal long through the ancient Greek history. However, in order to understand and interpret this ideal, it is necessary to turn to the way in which ancient Greeks perceived death. On one hand, death was understood as horrible and dreadful. The other concept of death that existed in Greek public discourse was the notion of beautiful, heroic death – the death of a warrior, preferably young one, on the battlefield. As I am going to show, these two concepts are intertwined.

The first concept of death was brilliantly interpreted by Jean-Pierre Vernant who approached Greek death through the concept of otherness, but not the one that refers to representations that the Greeks invented constructing themselves in relation to the others (barbarians, slaves, women, youth), but through the concept of “the other of the person”. Recognizing the absolute otherness in the mask of Gorgo<sup>19</sup>, Vernant interprets this mask as a non-mask – the face of the Other, which

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<sup>16</sup> However, in the Christian saint cult it is possible to recognize not only heroes, but also old pagan divinities and cults they had in pre-Christian time.

<sup>17</sup> Burkert 1985, 205.

<sup>18</sup> This text is based on the following book(s): Homer. *The Iliad* with an English Translation by A.T. Murray, Ph.D. in two volumes. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1924. [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)

<sup>19</sup> Gorgo (Medusa) was a monstrous chthonic creature with the snakes on her head instead of hair, who turned into stone everyone who dared to look her directly. However, she was defeated by a hero – Perseus, who using an invisible helmet from Hades and keeping a brightly shining shield in his hand (that he received from Athene), managed to escape her glance and to decapitate her.

translates the killing gaze.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the face of Gorgo becomes one's double, the double in the world Beyond, the Other. "It is a strange response to your own face, like an image in the mirror (in which the Greeks could only see themselves frontally and in the form of a disembodied head), but at the same time, it is an image that is both less and more than yourself...A radical otherness with which you yourself will be identified as you are turned to stone."<sup>21</sup> Opposed to this is another, completely different concept of death, the one glorified in Greek epic poetry. Contrary to the perception of death that embodies horror and darkness, the unsaid, unbearable dreadfulness in the land of Oblivion, the other face of death is a glorious and magnificent ideal to which a true hero is committed. Although the concept of the beautiful death (*kalos qanato-*) was constructed in epic poetry, its continuation is likely to be recognized through history. The motif of such heroic commitment lies in regaining permanent life through the name and fame reached by heroic and brave death. So, the reason for and the nature of heroic death entail ambiguous motivation to die in order to live and to live in order to die. Actually, heroes who choose to die young, in the prime of their beauty, youth and strength, avoid growing old. Instead of going down slowly and dying gradually, they give their life in some heroic exploit, while still young. In a sense, they exchange their life for staying young and alive. Life in its climax turns into death to be saved that way. Of course, their life imperishably continues in the social sphere, in collective memory, through the *glory, fame, that which is heard (kleo-)*. Obviously, the beautiful death and the glory that it brings refer only to the death of men on the battlefield.<sup>22</sup> Two concepts of death – dreadful and heroic one – are not as contradictory as it might seem at first site. Namely, the heroic ideal is created on the grounds of the belief that death is monstrous and unbearable. "There would be no merit in the hero confronting death, choosing it and making it his own. There can be no heroes if there are no monsters to fight and overcome."<sup>23</sup>

So the ideal of heroic death was created in the epic poetry. After all, the purpose of epic poetry was to recall the great deeds. That is why poetry had an exceptional role in education of the classical Greece, in transmitting and creating not only knowledge, but also believes and values that create culture.<sup>24</sup> However, we should not forget that epic poetry in Greek culture was always a performance, not only due to the fact that epics was transmitted as an oral poetry from generation to

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<sup>20</sup> The mask is reduced individuality, it is like a shadow or reflection in the mirror and it is not alive. Thus, one who wears a mask during masquerade embodies the powers of beyond and these powers control and influence its mimic, gestures and voice.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Death in the Eyes: Gorgo, Figure of the Other*, in "Mortals and Immortals", collected Essays, trans. by Fromma Zeitlin, Princeton University Press 1992, 138.

<sup>22</sup> In her study on the issue of women's death in Greek tragedy, Loraux researched women's heroic death. She concludes that the fact that heroines in tragedies face often violent death, make these deaths similar to heroic deaths of men. However, the concept of women's heroic death (though not applicable in all cases) is that women in tragedies die usually from suicide, while men are murdered. More on the topic see Loraux 1987.

<sup>23</sup> Vernant 1981, 288.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 58.

generation, but also (and this is quite important for later periods) because of the nature of the Greek books and reading, which was exclusively aloud. So, if we try to transpose this mechanism of propaganda of the immortal spirit to some other, recent, period, we should find its models not only in literature, but in all other mass media production. Another ancient Greek “medium” through which heroic ideal was “propagated” was pottery. What is important to emphasize about the Greek pottery is that it comprises the objects from everyday usage, with various purposes – keeping or drinking wine, oil recipients, keeping corpses etc. All these vases were necessarily decorated with different images – either with the scenes from everyday life, or with different mythological scenes (often with the heroic thematic) that always formed a kind of story – one could keep a vase in hands and look at the story in the circle – from left to right, from bottom to up, from inside to outside, as a type of Greek television.<sup>25</sup>

What is interesting in the usage of heroic ideal in the context of public discourse of the Greek city-states is that it covers rather ambiguous ideas. On one hand, epic heroic ideal focuses on individual exploits and the estimation of virtue that distinguishes heroes among the others. After all the Achilles was “the best of the Achaeans” (**aristo- jcaiw**).<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, new principles of civic ideology and participation in the political life of all citizens equally, slightly changes the heroic ideal based on human excellence (**ajreth**) that started to require the feeling of belonging to the group, and contributing to the common victory.<sup>27</sup> The required heroic virtues can be viewed in Pericles’ speech on the public funeral of the Athenian soldiers, after the failure of the Sicilian expedition during the Peloponnesian war:

“So died these men as became Athenians. You, their survivors, must determine to have as unaltering a resolution in the field, though you may pray that it may have a happier issue. And not contented with ideas derived only from words of the advantages which are bound up with the defense of your country, though these would furnish a valuable text to a speaker even before an audience so alive to them as the present, you must yourselves realize the power of Athens, and feed your eyes upon her from day to day, till love of her fills your hearts; and then when all her greatness shall break upon you, you must reflect that it was by courage, sense of duty, and a keen feeling of honor in action that men were enabled to win all this, and that no personal failure in an enterprise could make them consent to deprive their country of their valor, but they laid it at her feet as the most glorious contribution that they could offer.”

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<sup>25</sup> Sveltana Slapšak, *Ženske ikone antičkog sveta*, Beograd 2006, 12-13.

<sup>26</sup> Hom, *Il.* 1, 242.

<sup>27</sup> J.-P. Vernant, *Between Shame and Glory: The Identity of the young Spartan Warrior*, in “Mortals and Immortals”, collected Essays, trans. by Fromma Zeitlin, Princeton University Press 1992, 220.

(Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2, 43, 1)<sup>28</sup>

Thus, individualism that was the main heroic virtue in epic poetry, was not desirable in democracy – it actually contradicted its concept – isonomy (the equal distribution of political rights and duties). No matter how illogical this might seem, all heroic virtues (“courage”, “sense of duty”, “keen feeling of honor”) became incorporated in the norms of civic morality and collectivistic feeling of equality, while heroism and virtue were subjugated to the “power of Athens”, not of the individual.

But let me, for a moment turn further to Pericles’ speech in order to discuss the “promise” of heroic ideal of death, and the way in which it appears in the context of the fifth century Athens, becoming a narrative many times exploited by patriarchal societies, especially in the periods of crises and wars when it was necessary to mobilize people and make them eager both to die and to kill. The main prize of the heroic death is promise of the eternal glory:

“For this offering of their lives made in common by them all, that each of them individually received that renown which never grows old, and for a sepulcher, not so much that in which their bones have been deposited, but that noblest of shrines wherein their glory is laid up to be eternally remembered upon every occasion on which deed or story shall fall for its commemoration. For heroes have the whole earth for their tomb; and in lands far from their own, where the column with its epitaph declares it, there is enshrined in every breast a record unwritten with no tablet to preserve it, except that of the heart. These take as your model, and judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom and freedom of valor, never decline the dangers of war.”

(Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2, 43, 2)<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> kai; oil j de mey proshkontw- th/ polei toioide egenonto: tou- de; loipu- crh; aj- falesteran men eufesqai, ajtolmoteran de; mhden ajxioun thn ej- tou- polemion- dianoian ekein, skopounta- mh; logw/ monw/ thn wifelian, hh aj ti- pro- oujden ceiron aujtou- uma- polew- dunamin kaq j hmeran efgw/ qew, enou- kai; ejrasta- gignomenou- aujth-, kai oitan umin megaleh doxh/ eihai, ejqumenou- oti tolmwntes kaiw gignwskonte- ta; deonta kai; ejh toi- efgoi- ajsxunomenoi ajdre- aujta; ejkthsanto, thn polin ge th- setera- ajreth- ajxiounte- steriskein, kalliston de; ejanon aujth/ proiemenoi. Greek text based on Thucydides, *Historiae in two volumes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1942, English translation by J. M. Dent www.perseus.tufts.edu

<sup>29</sup> koinh; gar ta; swmata didontes idia/ ton aghrwn epainon ejambanon kai; ton tarfon epishemotaton. ouk ejh w/ keintai mallon. ajll j ejh w/ hl doka aujtw/ para; tw/ ejtucontio aijsi; kai; logou kai; efgou kairw/ aijsimnhesto- kataleipetai. ajdrwn gar epifanwn pasa gh gafo-, kai ouj sthlwn monon ejh th/ mh; proshkoush/ agrafomnhmh par j ekastw/ th- gnwmh- mallon hl tou efgou ejdiaitatai. ou- nun umei- zhwsante- kai; to; eulyucon krinante- mh; periorasqe tou- polemikou- kindunou-. Greek text based on Thucydides, *Historiae in two volumes*.

So, according to this speech, the fallen soldiers are heroes, who achieve immortality through the fame that “never grows old” and glory that is going to be “eternally remembered”; the tombs where they lie are the “noblest shrines”, actually “the whole earth is their tomb”. Even the monument is not necessary to be built because the dead will be remembered in the hearts of their descendants. It is obvious that Pericles addresses not the dead, as it is usual in the traditional lament, but the audience (as it is appropriate for a rhetorical genre such as funeral oration), in particular those men, citizens, who are advised to bravely approach death whenever the country needs this. It is the happiness to fight and die for freedom, claims Pericles.

Quoting Pericles’ speech written down by historian Thucydides, inserts another “puzzle” into the picture of ancient Greek civic ideology based on the control over death and the dead. Namely, Athenians invented a new rhetorical genre – with a literary origin (not oral, as lamentation) in which they praised and commemorated those who died for the glory of their homeland. Thucydides mentions that Athenians were the only one who gave such funeral orations.<sup>30</sup> These orations were held usually in the time of crisis or wartime, when the polis decided to take care of the funeral of its soldiers, and deprive families from their exclusive right to take care of their dead and to accompany them to the Other world. According to the so-called ancestral law (**patrio- nomo-**), introduced by the city-state, the corpses of fallen soldiers were returned to Athens and buried together.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to point out that already in the ancient Greek we come across such type of manipulation that was also usual for Serbian nationalistic discourse during the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> ct. So, the title of this law points to the conclusion that the law has existed from time immemorial, although it was introduced by Athenian city-state in the 5<sup>th</sup> ct. Exactly such a claim that it was something that even “our ancestors” used to do, had the purpose of providing it with legitimacy and power.

Thus, in the periods critical for the polis, families (women) were deprived of their right to organize and perform the whole funeral ritual. More precisely, women could participate and mourn their dead who died as soldiers, but only in the frame of public ritual organized by the city-state. The voices of mothers, wives and sisters were smothered in the mass, so as not to be heard. Intimate, personal lamentation was replaced by official elevated funeral oration. The main differences between *epitafio- log-* (funeral oration) and *qrhno-* (lamentation) is that the later is characterized with emotional intensity, focusing on the negative aspects of the separation of the dead from the kin group, while *epitafio- log-* represents an official speech of some political representative, praising the dead and death as *beautiful* and desirable.

A very important aspect of the heroic death is related to impersonalization of death. This is something that had been already mentioned, though in slightly different context – one that belongs to the hero cult. At that point, I turned to the de-

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<sup>30</sup> Dhemostenes, *Against Leptines*, 141.

<sup>31</sup> The corpses, or all bones dead that were found, used to be grouped by tribe in common coffins and interred together. Thucydides 2.34.

crease of the importance of individual monuments and legislation related to the abating funerals, and now I would like to recall another part from Pericles' speech, where he invites mothers who are still young enough, to give birth to more children, not only because newborn children would bring them forgetfulness, but also for the sake of their country:

“Yet you who are still of an age to beget children must bear up in the hope of having others in their stead; not only will they help you to forget those whom you have lost, but will be to the state at once a reinforcement and a security; for never can a fair or just policy be expected of the citizen who does not, like his fellows, bring to the decision the interests and apprehensions of a father.”

(Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2, 44)<sup>32</sup>

The idea that a dead child can be replaced with another one is, on one hand indicating the absence of the idea that each individual is unique. Furthermore, this passage reveals one more aspect of the war narrative that is possible to trace also in modern times – that war is, according to words of Goebbels, the most elementary form of love towards life, which does not decrease, but regenerates population. A similarly similar morbid idea, according to which the war has regenerative power, might be also recognized in the speech of Nikolaj Velimirović: “We see that the war is a poison which poisons, but also cures and rejuvenates.”<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that both types of heroes (those from the hero cult and heroes as brave soldiers) were very important in the city-state formation and the politics that it used to pursue. But let me, for a moment, turn to the concept of hero(s) from a slightly different perspective, taking into account not civic religion, but rather early religious concepts on the grounds of which the ideas of hero(e)s could have been developed. Crucial for this perspective is the theory of Olga Freidenberg. According to her interpretation, the divinization of the dead should be understood through the concept of the divine that existed in the pre-religious period. Freidenberg, namely, argues that this was the period when the idea of god existed,

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<sup>32</sup> karaterein de; crh; kai; a] lwn paidwn e]pidi, oi]s e]ti h]likia teknwsin poieisqai: i]dia/ te gar tw]n ou]k o]twn lh]qh oi] e]pignomenoi]v tisin e]sontai, kai; th/ poliei di-  
corqen, e]k te tou mh; e]rhmousqai kai; a]sfaleia/ xunoisei: ou] gar oi]p]n te i]son ti h] dikaion bouleuesqai oi] a]h mh; kai; paيدا- e]k tou o]moiou parabolomenoi kinduneu-  
wsin. Greek text based on Thucydides, *Historiae in two volumes*.

<sup>33</sup> Ivan Čolović, *Bordel Ratnika*, Beograd 2000, 77. For Nikolaj Velimirović see also “Nove ideje”, Beograd, decembar 1991. Nikolaj Velimirović used to be a theologian and an episcopus of the Serbian Orthodox Church who lived from the end of the nineteenth until the half of the twentieth ct. In the period of ex-Yugoslavia wars, he became popular for his nationalistic and anti-Semitic ideas. Furthermore, in the same war and nationalistic atmosphere, the Serbian Orthodox Church proclaimed him a saint.

but before the notion of the divine. “It is wrong to think that people used to believe in totems and that afterwards, they exchanged totems with the gods. The same as the image of tsar existed before the social institution of the power of tsar, the idea of god existed before religion..... and the dead were considered to be deities.”<sup>34</sup> This is also confirmed by the fact that *hgaqo;- daimwn* used to be a family genius and its eponym.<sup>35</sup> So Freidenberg’s position about the hero cult is related to her idea of the early concept of the grave (the house and the shrine of the dead and hero) as a womb that brings rebirth. The aspect of hero as a brave warrior is, according to Freidenberg, directly related to the concept of *agon*, which is understood as a confrontation with death that brings rebirth and renewal. As I have already mentioned, *agones* were competitions that used to be organized as the final stage of the funeral ritual or in the hero cult, and the whole competition was about the concept of dying and being born anew. The opponents are symbolizing life and death, and the winner is the one who stays alive. Exactly from defeat that is equaled with death develops an image of the enemy.<sup>36</sup> The main motive in the life of the hero is a fight that represents a metaphor of death, which brings rebirth.<sup>37</sup> That is how two concepts of heroes overlap, being grounded on the belief that death and dying bring new life. This is the Greek earliest fixed mythical traditional cliché on the grounds of which it was possible to construct and develop desirable patriarchal and political values, in a sense in which Ivan Čolović has brilliantly interpreted the usage of Serbian traditional clichés for the purposes of nationalistic and war ideology in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> ct in his work “Bordel Ratnika”.

Let me, just for a moment, turn to possible comparison between the two models of promotion and their relation to traditional mythology. Similarly, but not completely the same concept of “beautiful death” might be recognized in the context of wars in ex-Yugoslavia and spreading of war propaganda. As Ivan Čolović points, the powerful mechanism of this national ideology was that all political leaders, political programs and conflicts were presented through fixed traditional clichés and formulas in the same way in which values, persons and antagonisms were presented in the folklore and mythical tale. Exactly this is the force from which political formulas obtain enormous power. Exceeding political domain and entering mythical, they evoke antagonism between absolute values, such as good/evil, life/death, human/inhuman.<sup>38</sup> According to Čolović, the power of folklore and folk culture as means of manipulation is grounded in presentation and perception of it as something natural that is related to the native soil (sic!), as something original that precedes arrogance and decline of civilization. Of course, the folkloristic material

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<sup>34</sup> Olga Mihailovna Freidenberg, *Mit i antička književnost*, translated into Serbian by Radmila Mečanin, Prosveta, Beograd 1987, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 525.

<sup>36</sup> The concept of the contest with the death is still alive in the contemporary times. Very famous symbolical representation of a duel with Death is a chess play in Bergman’s film *The Seventh Seal*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Čolović 2002, 38.

for political purpose had to be reshaped and rearranged. Čolović also emphasizes that people are often ignorant of their folk tradition, which actually makes them more inclined to adopt such a pattern.<sup>39</sup> Concerning the construction of the Serbian ideal, important in this political/mythical machinery, a paradigm was made around the construct of the “nation elected by God” and particularly on the grounds of the Kosovo myth. Ideal Serbs became imagined as warriors, brave and courageous, but at the same time innocent and pure like virgins. This purity defines the position of the victim, while innocence leads directly to death. Thus the “beauty” of these heroic deaths lies, not in the youngness, and the attempt to gain immortality through heroic deeds as in ancient Greece, but in innocence. Innocence with weapons and death decorum invokes a special type of death and violent erotics, which adds attraction to the nationalist narrative. Death becomes ideal itself, being equated with all forces of good confronted to the powers of evil, according to the pattern of mythical binaries.

What is obvious is that heroic (warrior) ideals in ancient Greek and Serbian culture, during the end of the twentieth century are not constructed completely the same, but their function completely coincides. In both cases this ideal appears as a narrative of war propaganda, it is based on what is claimed to be traditional values,<sup>40</sup> necessarily through traditional clichés, praising death as something desirable and beautiful. The fact that the ideal warrior in ancient Greece was not imagined the same as the Serbian one is based exactly on the fact that traditional models that are used for manipulation and more successful implementation of this ideal, are different. The final result is quite the same and fits to the country in war or/and the political ideal of Greek democracy that required active political participation of all its citizens regarding that “the warrior and the man of politics are completely identified”.<sup>41</sup>

After the short excursion for searching analogies between an ancient Greek and Serbian paradigm of heroic ideal, I would like to return to the comparison I have started – between two types of Greek heroes – cultic figures and warriors. Apart from the agonic concept that is related to them both, two heroic concepts possess the component of eternal glory. Both concepts are about immortality that is achieved, not inborn (which, after all, serves as a good model). Even the epic hero, such is Achilles, bears the condition of becoming a hero because he has a mortal father and immortal mother, but he becomes one, only after choosing to have a short and glorious life, not endless and boring one:

“For my mother the goddess, silver-footed Thetis, telleth me that two-fold fates are bearing me toward the doom of death: if I abide here and war about the city of the Trojans, then lost is my home-return, but my renown shall be imperishable; but if I return home to my dear native

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 87-89.

<sup>40</sup> The aristocratic ideal of “human excellence” *aretē*, recognizable in epic poetry, was replaced by spirit of collectivity, essential ideal of human formation in the city-state democracy.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, New York 1990, 137.

land, lost then is my glorious renown, yet shall my life long endure,  
neither shall the doom of death come soon upon me.”

(Homer, *Iliad*, 9, 410-417)<sup>42</sup>

Although the word *hero* stands for two different meanings, both enter similar domains of social, religious, mythological and public life. Namely the cult of hero is a religious cult in a sense of the definition by Emile Durkheim as “not a simple group of ritual precautions which a man is held to take in certain circumstances; it is a system of diverse rites, festivals, and ceremonies which all have this characteristic, that they reappear periodically”.<sup>43</sup> Religious practice and importance of this cult were always supported by rich mythological content and material. On the other hand, heroic war ideal did not possess cultic dimension in Durkheimian sense of meaning, but it included rich mythological material and important mythological matrix that turned out to be successful and efficient in the situations critical for the states, when it was necessary to mobilize citizens for war, against the common enemy. Thus, both concepts of hero are closely related to death and to the manipulation in its domain, and both heroes, despite differences, were used for the needs of the state (polis) and the politics lead by it. This analysis represent just a part of the complex relations in the domain of ritualization of death, one of the biggest taboos of life, which, as it has been obvious through ancient Greek history (as well as other histories), has been, and still is, the field of various manipulations.

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<sup>42</sup> mh̄ter gar tev mev fhsi qea; Qeti- arguropeza  
dicqdia- khra- feremen qanatoio telo- dev  
eij men k j auqi menwn Trwn pol in ajnfimacwmai,  
w̄l̄eto men moi nōsto-, ajtar kleo- alfqiton ēstai:  
eij dev ken oīkad j īkwmi filhn ej- patrīda gaian,  
w̄l̄etov moi kleo- ēsq̄lon, epi; dhron dev moi ailw̄n  
ēsseta, oūp̄tev kev m j w̄ka telo- qanatoio kiceih.

Greek text This text is based on the following book(s): *Homeri Opera in five volumes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1920. English translation based on the following book(s): Homer. *The Iliad with an English Translation* by A.T. Murray, Ph.D. in two volumes. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1924. [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)

<sup>43</sup> Jack Goody, *Death, Property and the Ancestors*. Stanford. Calif.: Stanford University Press 1962, 18.

**Лада Стевановић**

## **Човек или натчовек: концепт хероја у античкој грчкој религији и/или политици**

*Кључне речи:*

херој, полис, религија,  
арустократија, демократија,  
опска поезија

Реч *херој* пољављује се у старогрчком у два значења. У једном значењу користи се за означавање дивинизованог бића које је живело животом смртника, али је, због заслуга или неког значајног дела, након смрти заслужило божански статус. Према археолошким изворима, трагови овог култа појављују се од постхомерског доба, тј. од X пре н. е, с тим да херојски култ постаје нарочито популаран од последње четвртине VIII века. Бум откривања херојских гробница и њихово претварање у светилишта коинцидирају са појавом и развојем полиса (држава-градова) у VIII пре н. е. То наводи на закључак да увођење овог култа стоји у вези са променама у домену друштвеног живота и стварањем нове политичке организације. Аргумент у прилог овој тези препознатљив је у природи и функцији хероја, који су статус бесмртника стицали управо захваљујући заслугама за оснивање градова и доношење закона. У том смислу, ови култови су служили као оправдање и подршка за успостављање нове друштвене организације, која се од тог тренутка више није заснивала на крвном и племенском сродству.

Једно од питања којима се у раду бавим јесте и то да ли се херојски култ развио из култа предака. Наиме, не ради се само о томе да постоје бројне паралеле између погребних ритуала, култа предака и култа хероја, већ је дошло и до преношења делова ритуалне праксе из једног култа у други. Реч је о *агонима*, надгробним надметањима која су се одржавала као последња ритуална етапа на сахранама племства. Дакле, паралелно са законима који су рестриктивно утицали на раскош и изразито јавни карактер традиционалних сахрана (прописи су налагали одржавање процесације у рану зору, ограничен број нарикача, умереније приношење жртава), неке су етапе погребног обреда пренете у култ хероја. Како показују истраживања погребних ритуала у античкој Грчкој, контрола над мртвима и ритуалим који су њим посвећени, заправо увек представља и контролу над живима. Оно што је важно нагласити као разлику између култа предака и хероја, то је да се први култ заснива на крвном сродству и вери у божанску моћ предака, а да је други директно повезан са политичким променама, са опадањем моћи породичних кланова и са новом државном организацијом, којој је овај култ и требало да послужи као

подршка у сфери религије. Иако култ хероја није заснован на крвним везама, социјална функција оба култа је идентична – оснаживање друштвеног поретка и религијско оправдање солидарности групе која је загарантована подршком дивинизованих покојника.

Друго значење речи херој односи се на чувеног и храброг ратника, који је спреман да положи живот како би стекао бесмртну славу и наставио да живи у социјалној сфери, у сећању својих потомака. Овај епски наратив био је експлоатисан много пута у току грчке историје, послуживши као прикладна матрица за конструисање идеала храброг ратника, спремног да погине за своју отаџбину кад год је то неопходно. Овај наратив је повезан са једним од два концепта смрти која су постојала у античкој Грчкој. Наиме, насупрот идеји да је смрт ужасна и страшна, постојало је и схватање да постоји смрт која је лепа. Управо је то смрт хероја, војника и ратника, по могућству – младог, који, уместо да стари и умире полако, полаже свој живот на олтар отаџбине док је још у пуној снази, стичући на тај начин бесмртност.

Нимало не изненађује што је овај идеал настао у епској поезији, која – уосталом – и слави велике подвиге. Не треба заборавити колико је значајна улога била епске поезије у образовању у античкој Грчкој, и то не само због преношења знања, већ пре свега због вредности које је славила, а које су учествовале у обликовању културе и јавног, дакле – политичког живота.

Осим у епској поезији слављење херојског идеала може се пронаћи у надгробним беседама на јавним сахранама атинских војника. Чувени пример једне такве беседе је Периклов говор након неуспеле Сицилијанске експедиције у којој је изгинуо велики број Атињана. Ово сухрану је атински државник искористио за мобилизацију нових војних снага и промовисање рата, не жалећи толико за покојницима, колико славећи смрт ратника. Иначе, реторски жанр надгробне беседе се појавио управо у Атини у доба полиса и представља књижевну инвенцију насупрот народној традицији тужбалица. Према атинском предању које је креирано истовремено када и ова врста беседе, одржавањем оваквих говора поштован је „закон предака“, премда се потпуно поуздано зна да се радило о иновацији и да је ова флоскула требало да послужи само да би обезбедила кредибилитет новој врсти обраћања на јавним сахранама.

Упркос очитој разлици између два значења која је покривала реч *херој*, несумњиво је да су од доба оснивања полиса, оба хероја била коришћена од стране државе (полиса) и употребљена за политику која је вођена. Анализа представља само део комплексних односа у сфери ритуализације смрти (у историјски омеђеном и у том смислу специфичном културном контексту), једног од највећих табуа живота, који је, као што је то очито у античкој грчкој историји, још од античког доба, као и данас (наравно коришћење механизам и митолошких матрица у ратничкој идеологији, како су то показале извршене анализе Ивана Чоловића, разликују се у зависности од конкретног културног и историјског контекста) отварао простор за бројне манипулације.