Response by the Honorand, Professor Gregory Nagy

Thinking About Heracles, 'Dactyl' On Mt. Ida

§0. My memory takes me back to a timeless moment I once experienced on the island of Crete. I am nearing the proud old city of Réthymno along a road leading there from Iráklio, when I see something. Relevant, I now think, to what I saw then is the name of Iráklio, capital city of Crete—a city renamed in relatively modern times after the hero Herakles. To say it more accurately, it was named in memory of a seaport, now lost, named Heracleum, which had once dominated the region in the era of the Roman Empire and which, perhaps more significantly, had been named after the hero Herakles. So, what did I see? In my memory, it is a timeless vision. I still see it. I see looming, ahead of me, the near-heavenly heights of Mount Ida, a vast mountain-range that is better known to speakers of Greek today as Psiloritis, which means 'land of the towering mountains'. Mount Ida, according to local myths, was the birthplace of Herakles, whose epithet there was *Dáktulos*, which means 'finger' in Greek. My thoughts now turn back to those myths about the native son of that mountain, Herakles the 'Dactyl'. And I ask myself a question: was this Herakles who was born on Mount Ida in Crete the same Herakles who died on top of another mountain, named Oitē, and who was then reborn after death on top of yet another mountain, named Olympus? In the essay I present here, I attempt an answer to this question, and the illustration that I show to lead off my essay (**fig. 1**) is relevant, as we will see, to my attempted answer.

Fig. 1 : Sketch, by Jill Robbins, based on a drawing of an impression (= imprint) made on a clay sealing found on the acropolis of Kastelli Hill in Chanià, Crete (Archaeological Museum of Chania, museum number KH 1563). The impression, known to archaeologists as "The Master Impression," was stamped by a signet ring that has not survived. Estimated dating of the original ring: Late Minoan I (1600–1450 BCE; the impression, however, is probably of a later date).

§1. Over the past few years, I have written many essays on Herakles, but I can sum up in only a few paragraphs, linked with a few bibliographical references, the essence of my answer to my own question. If I reconstruct the myths about this hero all the way back to the second millennium BCE, what I find is

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that there was more than one hero named Herakles—just as there was more than one mountain that was linked with his birth—or perhaps with his rebirth.

§2. To start with the mountains, I highlight the fact that there were many different mountains bearing the same name Olympus in many different locales in the second millennium BCE. In one of my essays (Nagy 2019.07.06), I have put together an inventory of examples. In the same essay, I noted that the practice of naming mountains as Olympus survived well into the first millennium, though many earlier examples could easily have disappeared by then. I also noted that some examples of Olympus, as still attested in the first millennium and even thereafter, were hardly as impressive in size as the one Olympus that ultimately prevailed, already in Homeric poetry, as the unique abode shared by the family of Olympian gods. This singled-out Olympus, an enormous mountain-range situated between the territories of Macedonia and Thessaly, far exceeds in size the other mountains that bear the same name. In fact, some of the other mountains named Olympus were by comparison downright insignificant in size. In the essay I just cited (Nagy 2019.07.06), I highlight a particularly striking example of such a miniature Mount Olympus. Our information comes from the geographer Strabo, whose lifetime straddles the first century BCE and the first century CE. According to Strabo (8.3.31 C356), the ancient city named Pisa, once the capital of a state named Pisatis, was situated between two mountains in a region near Olympia, sacred site of the ancient Olympics; and the names of the two mountains, Strabo continues, were Olympus and Ossa. I draw attention to the fact that the name of the twin mountain here, Ossa, matches the name of the mountain range in Thessaly that is situated next to the Homeric Mount Olympus. But we are faced with a vexing problem in the case of the Mount Olympus that is near the sacred site of Olympia: as I document in my essay, the political existence of Pisa as a city and of the Pisatis as a state was obliterated in the fifth century BCE by a deadly rival, the neighboring state of Elis, and this obliteration was linked with a takeover, by Elis, of the sacred site named Olympia, which had once been under the control of Pisa. But Olympia, unlike Pisa, must have been located farther away from the miniature mountain named Olympus, and there is no elevation near enough to Olympia that could pass for the twin mountains Olympus and Ossa that had framed Pisa. There is uncertainty today about the precise location of Pisa, and so the location of nearby elevations once named Olympus and Ossa is likewise an uncertainty. In the general area of Olympia, I can think of many elevations that could perhaps qualify as a miniaturized pair of Mount Olympus and Mount Ossa. In any case, though, the myth that is narrated by Diodorus of Sicily (4.39.2–3), who lived in the first century BCE, about the rebirth of Herakles on top of Mount Olympus—conventionally described as his apotheosis after his death on top of another mountain, Oitē—can be imagined, in classical and postclassical times, as taking place exclusively on top of a Homeric Olympus (Nagy 2019.07.12; on the antiquity of the myth as retold by Diodorus, I have more to say in Nagy 2013 Hour 1§§46–47).

§3. I now shift from the idea of multiple mountains named Olympus to a corresponding idea, that is, multiple heroes named Herakles. Of particular interest here is the Herakles who was born on Mount Ida. As I argue in another essay (Nagy 2019.11.27), this version of Herakles, which I reconstruct as the earliest of all surviving versions, was viewed even in post-Classical times as different from another version, synthesized over time from multiple later versions, where Herakles is credited with a vast array of famous deeds that include not only the performing of Twelve Labors, as narrated, for example, by Diodorus (4.11.3–4.26.4), but also, as likewise narrated by Diodorus (4.14.2), the actual founding of the Olympics, that is, of the Panhellenic festival of athletic competitions held every four years at Olympia. Moreover, according to the narration of Diodorus (again, 4.14.2), Herakles not only established the athletic festival of the Olympics, but he also competed and won in every athletic event. By contrast, in the earliest of all versions, the Herakles who is founder of the Olympics is different from the Herakles who performed the Twelve Labors as reported by sources like Diodorus. So, who on earth was this earlier Herakles? In the relevant myth as reported by Pausanias, who lived in the second century CE, this very first Herakles is differentiated from the Herakles who performed the Labors. According to Pausanias (5.7.6–7), the very first hero ever to compete at the Olympics was a different Herakles, an earlier Herakles, who went to Olympia and competed there in a mode that can best be described as improvised athleticism. What he did was to improvise a race with his brothers in a primordial footrace—a race that he won. This earlier Herakles, as Pausanias adds (5.7.7), also improvised as a prize for such an athletic victory the awarding of an olive garland.

§4. I summarize here other details of this old myth as retold by Pausanias (again, 5.7.6–7):

- Our earlier Herakles and his brothers were five in number and were therefore called the Daktyloi or ‘Fingers’.
- Because Herakles and his brother ‘Dactyls’ were five in number, the Olympics are celebrated on every fifth year (‘fifth’ by way of inclusive counting, since the Greek language had no zero).
- Herakles and his fellow ‘Dactyls’ originated from Mount Ida in Crete. So also the next known president of the Olympics, Klymenos, was a Cretan by origin, as we see elsewhere in the reportage of Pausanias (5.8.1), who adds that Klymenos presided over the Olympics precisely because he claimed descent from the earlier Herakles.

§5. I think of the earlier Herakles as a Mycenaean or even Mycenaean-Minoan variation on the theme of Herakles—by contrast with the later Herakles. To illustrate such a contrast, I start with a mythological detail we find about the later Herakles in the *Library* of “Apollodorus,” dated to the second century CE, in the

course of an overall narrative about the Labors of this hero. According to this narrative by "Apollodorus" (2.5.5; 2.7.2 ed. Frazer 1921), the failure of Augeias, king of Elis, to compensate for the clearing of his stables by Herakles results in a war waged by our hero against that king, and this war is brought to an end only after Augeias is defeated and killed by Herakles, who then installs his own protégé, the former king's son Phyleus, as the new king of Elis. Further, Herakles then follows up by founding the athletic festival of the Olympics at Olympia ("Apollodorus" 2.7.2, pp. 249 and 251 ed. Frazer 1921). I find it most significant, as I emphasize in a relevant essay of mine (Nagy 2019.12.20, §1) that this Augeias has an essentially negative role in the twelfth of the Twelve Labors of Herakles—in terms of the politicized myths of Elis as displayed in the twelve metopes of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, created around the middle of the fifth century BCE. We see here, I argue, a post-Mycenaean version of Herakles. Further, in another myth about such a post-Mycenaean Herakles, this time as retold by Pausanias (5.8.4), this "second Herakles" competed in only two athletic events on the occasion of his presiding at the Olympics; and he emerged victorious in both competitions, which were the events of (A) wrestling and (B) *pankration*, a less regulated form of combat sport. But this "second Herakles," as we have already seen, was not the founder of the Olympics—from the standpoint of the overall myths about the Olympics as retold by Pausanias. According to those myths, it is an earlier Herakles, a "first Herakles," who qualifies as the true founder of the Olympics.

§6. I have already described such an earlier Herakles as a Mycenaean or even Mycenaean-Minoan version of the hero. But how to visualize him? Here is where I look back at the picture that I have used as the illustration that leads off my essay. I have in the past written an extensive essay about this picture (Nagy 2020.05.15), which now becomes relevant to the question I asked at the beginning of my essay here: was the hero Herakles who was born on Mount Ida in Crete the same Herakles who died on top of another mountain, named Oitē, and who was then reborn after death on top of yet another mountain, named Olympus? My answer to this question has been "no" so far, in that I have highlighted the fact that a source like Pausanias differentiates the Herakles who first competed in the Olympics at Olympia from a later Herakles who also competed there—generations later—and who, as we read in other sources, died on top of Mount Oitē but was then reborn on Mount Olympus. But now I will modify my answer by arguing that we see here an evolution of a convergent heroic figure who was eventually known as Herakles—an evolution that extends from the Minoan-Mycenaean era of the second millennium BCE all the way into the Classical and post-Classical era of the succeeding first millennium. As I have already shown, the location, in later times, of the mountain named Olympus where such a Herakles was reborn—where he experienced his apotheosis—could in earlier times be identified with a miniature mountain, next to the city of Pisa, which gave its name 'Olympus' to nearby 'Olympia', the sacred site of the 'Olympics'.

§7. In what follows, then, I epitomize the relevant parts of the essay I just cited (Nagy 2020.05.15 ¶¶1–10) about the picture I showed at the beginning.

§8 (¶1). As I say more fully in the caption for the picture I showed above (**fig. 1**), we see here a sketch based on a drawing of an impression made on a clay sealing, stamped by a magnificent signet ring that has not survived. The original picture that had once been carved into that signet ring must have been a wonder, since even the impression that it made on the clay sealing is a wonder in its own right. This Minoan sealing, reverently described by archaeologists as "The Master Impression," bears the image of a heroic figure who is, I think, comparable to the classical and post-classical Herakles. There he is, standing proudly on top of a palace, with a commanding view of the landscape that surrounds him. This landscape—a composite of sea, land, and sky—is personified, I also think, by a goddess comparable to Athena, who figures prominently in later myths as the vigilant patroness of Herakles. But how can such a personification be imagined, when there is no goddess to be seen in the Minoan picture? I offer a tentative answer to this question at §16 (¶10) below.

§9 (¶2). In developing my answer, I first have to review some details we see pictured in "The Master Impression." My review follows closely some relevant observations made by a most perceptive archaeologist, Erik Hallager (1985), who thinks, I should note in passing, that the clay sealing stamped with the signet ring bearing the picture of "The Master Impression" had been attached to a text written on parchment (p. 14). Viewing the overall scene as pictured in "The Master Impression," Hallager starts from down below and then moves from there to higher and higher zones in the picture. Down below, in the lowest zone, we can see a rocky shore next to the sea (p. 16). Further up, there is a likewise rocky and mountainous "landscape," with "a clearly marked summit, near to the sea," and with "a building complex placed upon it" (p. 17). Standing on top of the "building complex" is "a male figure surrounded by four objects which it has not been possible to identify." […] Hallager goes on to describe this male figure (p. 22), and I now quote him without further interruption (though I do not include his parenthetical references to illustrations that accompany his statements): "Compared with other representations in Minoan art, this male figure is unusually sturdy and strongly built, with large thighs and upper arms, although he has been rendered with the typical, Minoan wasp-waist. The impression is not clear in respect of the face and hair treatment, but he does have long hair, which falls down behind his back and flares out on each side of his body in four tresses. He wears a necklace, has a ring on his upper, left arm and apparently also a ring on his left wrist, indicated by a small projection. He is dressed in a typical, short kilt with a belt around the waist and the codpiece in front. His footwear is of a type well known in Minoan art. The whole pose of the figure gives *an immediate impression of strength*." [The italics here are mine.]

§10 (¶3). I now propose to compare the details reported in Erik Hallager's description of this Minoan picture carved into a signet ring and impressed on a clay sealing dated to the fifteenth century BCE with some details I happened to find while reading Pausanias. Before I start the comparison, however, I find it essential to note a further detail about "The Master Impression": it was found on the acropolis known today as Kastelli Hill in the city of Chanià in western Crete—and the ancient name of this city was *Kudōníā*. That said, I am ready to quote and to translate what Pausanias says about his visit to a place called Phrixa in the region of Triphylia, a territory dominated by the state of Elis (6.21.6):

> ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ χώρᾳ λόφος ἐστὶν ἀνήκων ἐς ὀξύ, ἐπὶ δὲ αὐτῷ πόλεως Φρίξας ἐρείπια καὶ Ἀθηνᾶς ἐστιν ἐπίκλησιν Κυδωνίας ναός. οὗτος μὲν οὐ τὰ πάντα ἐστὶ σῶς, βωμὸς δὲ καὶ ἐς ἐμὲ ἔτι· ἱδρύσασθαι δὲ τῇ θεῷ τὸ ἱερὸν Κλύμενόν φασιν ἀπόγονον Ἡρακλέους τοῦ Ἰδαίου, παραγενέσθαι δὲ αὐτὸν ἀπὸ Κυδωνίας τῆς Κρητικῆς καὶ τοῦ Ἰαρδάνου ποταμοῦ. λέγουσι δὲ καὶ Πέλοπα οἱ Ἠλεῖοι τῇ Ἀθηνᾷ θῦσαι τῇ Κυδωνίᾳ πρὶν ἢ ἐς τὸν ἀγῶνα αὐτὸν τῷ Οἰνομάῳ καθίστασθαι.

> In this region there is an elevation [*lóphos*] culminating in a sharp peak, and on top of that elevation are the ruins of an acropolis [*pólis*] called Phrixa and a temple [*nāós*] of Athena, whose name-of-invocation [*epíklēsis*] is *Kudōníā*. This temple is not completely preserved, but it still has an altar [*bōmós*], even in my time. And the people say that this sacred-space [*hierón*] was founded in honor of the goddess [*theós* (feminine)] by Klymenos, descendant of Herakles, the-one-from-Mount-Ida [*Idaîos*], and that he [Klymenos] came on the scene from the city of Kudōníā-in-Crete and from the river Iardanos. And the people of Elis say that Pelops sacrificed [*thúein*] to Athena *Kudōníā* before he entered the contest [*agōn*] [of a race-to-the-death in chariots] with Oinomaos.

§11 (¶4). Pausanias is speaking here about an ancient *nāós* 'temple' of Athena, situated on top of a steep elevation, and he says that this temple, in ruins, is the centerpiece of a whole complex of ancient ruins that he found there—ruins that he describes as the *pólis* of Phrixa. In situations where our traveler is describing a living city, he will of course refer to such a city as a *pólis*, but in situations where he is reconstructing in his mind the distant past, he uses this same word *pólis* to mean 'acropolis' or 'citadel'. The best example of such usage is a reference made by Pausanias himself (1.26.6) to the acropolis of Athens. (In ¶4, I quote the text, with translation, followed by commentary in ¶5.)

§12 (¶6). If we compare the acropolis at Phrixa, which was for Pausanias a city in ruins, with the acropolis at Athens, which remained a living city, could there be something that is missing in the picture that our traveler gives us in describing what he actually saw when he visited the acropolis at Phrixa? I think that there was in fact something that was very much missing in this picture, and this something,

I also think, can best be described as an *absent signifier*. Here is what I mean: *at Phrixa, there was no statue of the goddess for Pausanias to see*.

§13 (¶7). In terms of Greek mythological traditions, however, such a situation does not rule out the idea that the goddess Athena is nevertheless ever present, ever ready to be worshipped by the local population that venerates her sacred space on high. In the case of the acropolis at Phrixa, for example, Pausanias goes out of his way to note that the altar for worshipping the goddess on high is still functional, even if her temple is in ruins. It is the sacred space of the goddess that remains essential, not the statue that marks the space.

§14 (¶8). That said, I now return to the text that I translated from Pausanias (6.21.6) about the sacred space of Athena at Phrixa. As we see from the wording of our traveler, the clearest indication that the goddess was still being worshipped in that space by the local population is this detail: the people of this city in ruins had an *epíklēsis* for their goddess, that is, they had a special 'name-of-invocation' for Athena when they were praying to her, worshipping her, and, presumably, sacrificing at her altar. The epiclesis or 'name-of-invocation' for Athena, Pausanias goes out of his way to say, was *Kudōníā*. Thus the name that the people of Phrixa gave to the goddess Athena when they worshipped her is identical to the ancient place-name *Kudōníā*—which was once the name of the place in Crete where archaeologists found "The Master Impression."

§15 (¶9). There is much more to be said about the convergences in the details given so far. But I must note already now that there was a river by the name of Iardanos not only in north-west Crete (*Odyssey* 3.293) but also in the region called Elis (*Iliad* 7.135). Further, the region of *Kudōníā* in north-west Crete is not far from the heights of Mount Ida, the place of origin for Herakles, the-one-from-Mount-Ida [*Idaîos*]. On this Minoan-Mycenaean version of Herakles, stemming from Mount Ida in Crete, I refer again to my earlier essay (Nagy 2019.11.27, §§2–5), where I comment on the relevant references made by Pausanias (5.7.6–7).

§16 (¶10). I return to the idea (¶1) that "The Master Impression" pictures a landscape—a composite of sea, land, and sky—that is personified by a goddess comparable to Athena, who figures prominently in later myths as the vigilant patroness of Herakles. But how, as I asked myself from the start (¶1), can such a personification be imagined, when there is no goddess to be seen in the Minoan picture? The answer, I propose, has to do with mythological thinking about a sacred wooden statue that drops out of the sky and falls to the earth, landing on top of an acropolis where the local population is worshipping a goddess who personifies their landscape as viewed from the vantage point of the heights looming over their locale. We can see such thinking come to life in the myth reported by Pausanias (1.26.6) about a wooden statue of Athena *Poliás* that fell out of the sky once upon a

time and landed on top of the Acropolis of Athens, thus marking the personification of that Acropolis as the goddess herself. In terms of this myth about the statue of Athena *Poliás*, the Acropolis of Athens is already protected by an invisible goddess even before she makes herself visible in the form of a statue that descends from the heavens. But then, once she arrives at her acropolis in person, as a wooden statue, she can personally claim this sacred space as a personification of her divine self. In another essay (Nagy 2020.05.22), I analyze Minoan-Mycenaean pictorial representations of such a goddess at the moment of her arrival, fully personified and taking her rightful place as the patroness of the hero who guards her sacred space (**fig. 2**).

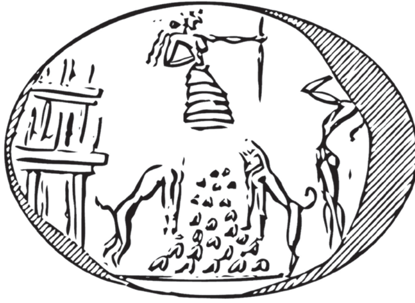

Fig. 2 : Sketch, by Jill Robbins, based on a drawing of impressions (= imprints) made on a number of clay sealings found at Knossos ("Central Shrine" and chamber to west, CMS II.8 no. 256, HMs 141/1-2, 166/1-3, 168/3). All these impressions were stamped by the same signet ring, which has not survived. Estimated dating of the original ring: Late Minoan I (1600–1450 BCE).

§17 (¶10 continued). The goddess who is pictured here, conventionally known as "The Mother of the Mountain" by archaeologists, is invisible in some Minoan-Mycenaean picturings, as in "The Master Impression," but her presence is there, ready to be made manifestly visible by the arrival of her statue on top of the commanding heights that she already personifies.

§18. I have by now reached a potential ending for a potentially endless inquiry. Whether my argumentation so far has succeeded or failed, the effort that went into it is dedicated to my dear friends in Réthymno. The fond memory of that timeless moment when I caught sight of Mount Ida on my way to Réthymno is linked with these same friends. When I saw the mountain, I happened to be on my way to join them in a colloquium held at their University. I am grateful to them for having shared with me, as their enchanted guest, their own privileged view of Mount Ida. That view is imprinted in my memory as a vision that I only wish could last for all time.

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