



A draft of an essay-in-progress about heroic beauty

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2020.09.11. "A draft of an essay-in-progress about heroic beauty." Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

Published Version

<https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/a-draft-of-an-essay-in-progress-about-heroic-beauty/>

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37366733>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins

Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

About

Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

While articles archived in DASH represent the original *Classical Inquiries* posts, CI is intended to be an evolving project, providing a platform for public dialogue between authors and readers. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries for the latest version of this article, which may include corrections, updates, or comments and author responses.

Additionally, many of the studies published in CI will be incorporated into future CHS publications. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing for a complete and continually expanding list of open access publications by CHS.

Classical Inquiries is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Every effort is made to use images that are in the public domain or shared under Creative Commons licenses. Copyright on some images may be owned by the Center for Hellenic Studies. Please refer to captions for information about copyright of individual images.

Citing Articles from *Classical Inquiries*

To cite an article from *Classical Inquiries*, use the author's name, the date, the title of the article, and the following persistent identifier:

http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

For example:

Nagy, G. 2019.01.31. "Homo Ludens at Play with the Songs of Sappho: Experiments in Comparative Reception Theory, Part Four." *Classical Inquiries*. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

A draft of an essay-in-progress about heroic beauty

 Gregory Nagy

SEPTEMBER 11, 2020 | By Gregory Nagy H24H

2020.09.11 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. I am putting together here a draft of some thoughts I have had lately about heroic beauty as expressed in the visual arts of ancient Greek material culture. My aim is to turn these thoughts, informal as they are for now, into a formal essay that I am preparing at the request of two dear colleagues who are organizing an art exhibit titled “Heroic *Kállōs*.” I am attracted to their use of the ancient Greek noun *kállōs* = κάλλος, meaning ‘beauty’, but my thoughts now turn to a Modern Greek adjective as well, *oréo-* = ὠραῖο-, meaning ‘beautiful’. I propose here to reconstruct an earlier meaning of this word in ancient Greek, and I will connect that meaning with the very idea of heroic beauty, male or female. Further, I will argue that the goddess Hera, endowed with her own personal beauty, was a model for picturing this idea.



The so-called Ludovisi Juno [= Hera], a colossal marble head modeled, it is thought, on Antonia Minor, first century CE. Palazzo Altemps, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome.



Hera in the background, in *Allegory of Sculpture*, by Gustav Klimt, 1889. MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna.

§1. As I pointed out in *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (Nagy 2013, hereafter abbreviated as H24H), Modern Greek *oréo-* = ὠραῖο-, meaning ‘beautiful’, is derived from ancient Greek *hōraîo-* = ὠραῖο-, meaning ‘seasonal’ in earlier texts but also meaning, in later texts, ‘beautiful’—which eventually becomes the sole meaning, as in Modern Greek (H24H Hour 14). Given such an eventuality, where the ancient idea of seasonality evolves into the modern idea of beauty, I ask myself: how to explain such an evolution in meaning? An answer, I think, can be found by considering the ancient Greek noun from which the

adjective *hōraîo-* = ὥραϊο-, meaning ‘seasonal’, is derived: the noun is *hōrā* = ὥρα, meaning ‘season, seasonality’. This form *hōrā* = ὥρα is etymologically related, I argue (H24H Hour 1), to the form *Hērā* = Ἥρα, which is the name of the goddess of seasonality, Hera. Whereas seasonality is a variable, as when we say that different fruits or vegetables are “in season” at different times of the year, Hera as the personification of seasonality is a cosmic absolute. Likewise absolute are the three attendants of the goddess Hera, who are the *Hōrai* or Seasons, goddesses in their own right. Each one of these three secondary goddesses is a personification of *hōrā* = ὥρα. Hera is attended by the personified *Hōrai* or Seasons in her role as controlling the natural *hōrai* or seasons. So, if natural seasonality is beautiful, then the cosmic seasonality of Hera and the *Hōrai* must be absolutely beautiful.

§2. But what about heroic beauty? Is it absolutely beautiful as well? My answer is yes, in the sense that the beauty of the hero is connected to the absolute beauty of seasonality as controlled by Hera. After all, the very idea of heroes, male or female, is formally connected to the idea of seasonality, as conveyed by the noun *hōrā* = ὥρα and by the name of Hera, *Hērā* = Ἥρα. The formal connection, as I argue (H24H Hour 1), is this: the forms *hōrā* = ὥρα and *Hērā* = Ἥρα are *etymologically related to*—or, to say it more succinctly, *cognate with*—the form *hērōs* = ἥρωσ, which means ‘hero’.

§3. To illustrate the connectivity of heroes with the beauty of seasonality, as expressed by the noun *hōrā* = ὥρα, I quote here the wording of a would-be initiand in the *Hērōikos* of Philostratus, a text dating from the early third century CE. The initiand is speaking to his would-be initiator, who tends the beautiful natural setting of a cult hero named Protesilaos:

Ὡς ποικίλη σοι ἡ ὥρα τοῦ χωρίου, καὶ ὡς ἐκδεδώκασιν ἴλαροὶ οἱ βότρυς, τὰ δένδρα τε ὡς διάκειται πάντα καὶ ὡς ἀμβροσία ἡ ὄσμη τοῦ χωρίου. τοὺς δρόμους δέ, οὓς ἀνήκας, χαρίεντας μὲν ἡγοῦμαι, τρυφᾶν δέ μοι δοκεῖς,

ἀμπελουργέ, τοσαύτη γῆ ἀργῶ χρώμενος. |_{3.6} {A.} Ἱεροί, ξένε, οἱ δρόμοι,
γυμνάζεται γὰρ ἐν αὐτοῖς ὁ ἥρως.

How diverse [*poikilē*] is the beauty [*hōrā*] of this place you have here, and how lush have the clusters of grapes grown! How well-arranged are all the trees, and how ambrosial [*ambrosiā*] is the fragrance of the place!

Philostratus *Hērōikos* 3.5

I have written a commentary (H24H 15§43) on the context of this passage, and I will now epitomize those aspects of my comments that are relevant here. I start with details about the overall setting. A gentle breeze is carrying the sweet aroma of flowers in bloom, and the initiand is feeling refreshed. He remarks that the plant-life literally ‘breathes out’, *ana-pneî*, a sweetness of its own (*Hērōikos* 3.3). It is the right season, the exact time, the perfect moment: it is the *hōrā* (3.5; also earlier at 3.2). The initiand can begin to sense the hero’s sacred presence. Through a kind of sacred *metonymy* (H24H 14§16), the breath of the hero himself now begins to animate the atmosphere: Protesilaos is now revealing, *apo-phainōn*, the scent of the blossoms at their sweetest (11.3). The hero’s presence smells sweeter than myrtles in autumn (10.2). The perfect moment or *hōrā*, in all its natural beauty, becomes the ultimate epiphany of the cult hero.

§4. The concept of *hōrā* as the ‘right season’ (Philostratus *Hērōikos* 3.2, 3.5) conveys the context of ritual perfection and correctness; in that sense, *hōrā* is conceived as the perfect moment of beauty (H24H 15§44). It is relevant to recall here the Modern Greek adjective *oréo-*, which as we saw means ‘beautiful’ and which corresponds to ancient Greek *hōraîos*, ‘seasonal’, And the meaning of *hōraîo-*, as we also saw, is ultimately derived from *hōrā*.

§5. This inherited link in meaning between the beauty and the seasonality of *hōrā* is captured in a poem of Giorgos Seferis, where the sensuous experience of

marveling at natural beauty is expressed by way of the Modern Greek adverb *oréa*, corresponding to the neuter plural of the ancient Greek adjective, *hōraîa* (ώραῖα):

Στὸ περιγιάλι τὸ κρυφὸ | κι' ἄσπρο σὰν περιστέρι | διψάσαμε τὸ
μεσημέρι· μὰ τὸ νερὸ γλυφό. || Πάνω στὴν ἄμμο τὴν ξανθὴ | γράψαμε τ'
ὄνομά της· | ὠραῖα που φύσηξεν ὁ μπάτης | καὶ σβήστηκε ἡ γραφή. || Μὲ τί
καρδιά, μὲ τί πνοή, | τί πόθους καὶ τί πάθος, | πήραμε τὴ ζωὴ μας· λάθος! |
κι' ἀλλάξαμε ζωὴ.

Giorgos Seferis, ' *Arnisi* ('Αρνηση, from the collection *Στροφή*, 1931)

At the shoreline the secret one | and white like a dove | we thirsted at noon. |
But the water was salty. || On the sand, golden-blond, | we wrote down her
name. | Beautiful [ὠραῖα < *hōraîa*], the way the sea breeze exhaled, | and the
writing was wiped out. || With what heart, with what breath [πνοή < *pnoē*], |
what longings [πόθους < *pothous*] and what passion [πάθος < *pathos*], | we
seized our life [ζωή < *zōē*] – no, wrong [λάθος] ! | and we changed life [ζωή
< *zōē*].

§6. In my translation here, I have inserted some of the original Modern Greek words, along with their ancient Greek counterparts (each ancient Greek word is transliterated, and preceded by the sign “<” to indicate that the corresponding Modern Greek word is actually descended from the ancient counterpart). I forgo here some further comments I have made about this poem (H24H 14§§18–20).

§7. Having recalled the relevance of the Modern Greek adjective *oréo-*, which means ‘beautiful’ and which corresponds to ancient Greek *hōraîo-*, ‘seasonal’, I find it also relevant to recall here once again the formal and semantic connections of *hōrā* and *Hērā* with *hērōs*, ‘hero’.

§8. I should add that heroes become ‘seasonal’ only after they die and achieve mystical immortalization. That is why the death of a hero is a beautiful death, *une*

belle mort, and that is also why the hero in death can be seen as a beautiful corpse, *un beau mort* (H24H 5§108). And even the unseasonality of the hero in life can be seen as beautiful, because it will lead to the seasonality of life after death. That is the beauty and the sorrow of an epithet we find toward the end of the *Iliad* (24.540), where Achilles while he is still alive in his own epic narrative is described as *pan-a-hōrios*, ‘the most unseasonal of them all’.

§9. I show here two pictures of *la belle mort*: in one case, the hero is a man, and, in the other case, the hero is a woman:



“The Dying Achilles” by Christophe Veyrier (1637–1689). Image © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Illustration used in *Classical Inquiries* 2020.07.17.



Amazonomachy: close up of an Athenian pursuing an Amazon. 2nd c. CE. Image via. Image used in *Classical Inquiries* 2018.01.12.

§10. And I close by showing a picture reconstructing a colossal statue of Hera as described by the traveler Pausanias (2.17.4–7), who lived in the second century CE. He saw the statue when he visited the temple of “Argive” Hera during his travels in the territory of Argos.



Polychrome reconstruction of the lost chryselephantine (“gold-ivory”) statue of Hera by Polyclitus (Polykleitos), based largely on the eyewitness description of Pausanias (2.17.4–7). From Antoine Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy, *Le Jupiter olympien* (Paris 1814).

Bibliography

H24H. See Nagy 2013.

Nagy, G. 2013. *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Cambridge, MA. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_NagyG.The_Ancient_Greek_Hero_in_24_Hours.2013.

By Gregory Nagy, H24H

Beauty, Hera, Seasonal