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Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology I, Hēraklēs as athlete

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2019.07.26 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. There is no single way to think comparatively about mythology—or about anything else. And Greek mythology is surely no exception. In my own work on mythology in general and on Greek mythology in particular, I have found it useful to apply—and to integrate—three different comparative methods: (1) typological, (2) genealogical, and (3) historical. For definitions and explanations of these terms, I cite §§3–6 of my article "The Epic Hero" (Nagy 2006). In my comparative essay here on Hēraklēs as an athlete, which extends from a previous essay posted in Classical Inquiries 2019.07.19 on Hēraklēs in the specific role of a wrestler, I concentrate on the second of these three methods, geneaological comparison. What I will argue is that the Greek hero Hēraklēs, as an athlete—specifically, in his role as a fist-fighter or boxer—is comparable to a Norse hero named Starkaðr. Relevant is the image I show here: it is a close-up of an illustration featured on a map produced by Olaus Magnus, Carta marina et descriptio septentrionalium terrarum, first published in 1539, picturing our Norseman holding two rune staffs: as we can see, the staff in his right hand reads, in runic letters, STARCATERVS (Starcatherus), and the staff in his left hand reads PVGIL SVETICVS (pugil Sueticus), to be translated as 'fist-fighter of Sweden'.

Detail of Carta marina et descriptio septentrionalium terrarum (1539). Olaus Magnus (1490–1557). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. Before we consider the mythological traditions that generated the role of the Norse hero Starkaðr as 'fist-fighter of Sweden' and the genealogically comparable role of the Greek hero Hēraklēs as both boxer and wrestler, I need to make three introductory comments on methodology. These comments are meant to introduce not only the present essay but also the whole series of subsequent essays under the general title "Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology."

§1a. First, I comment on the actual term geneaological comparison. Here is an epitome of what I say about this term in §5 of the article (Nagy 2006) that I already cited in my general introduction:

> The method I call genealogical comparison involves finding parallels between structures related to each other by way of a common source. I describe this comparative method as genealogical because it applies to parallelisms between cognate structures—that is, structures that derive from a common source, which would be an earlier structure. In the field of linguistics, such a genealogical method used to be called simply "la méthode comparative," as we see in the title of a most influential book by Antoine Meillet, La

méthode comparative en linguistique historique (1925). What is really meant by this title, however, is something more specific than just any kind of comparative method. That something is a structuralist method of comparison that depends on both synchronic and diachronic analysis of cognate structures being compared. While synchronic analysis views language as it exists at a given time and place, diachronic analysis views language as it evolves through time. (Saussure 1916:117)

§1b. Second, I comment on the general title for the series I am launching here, "thinking comparatively about Greek mythology." In most of the essays in this series, my mode of comparison will be primarily "genealogical," based in part on findings I once gathered together in a single book, Greek Mythology and Poetics (Nagy 1990b). There I say at the very beginning that I accept in general the methods of comparative mythology as demonstrated perhaps most clearly in a three-volume series, Mythe et épopée, by Georges Dumézil (the original years of publication were 1968, 1971, 1973). The general approach of Dumézil is to take the comparative methodology of Indo-European linguistics beyond the level of pure language and to apply it on the level of myth as expressed by language. In this sense, it is appropriate to think of comparative mythology, more broadly, as comparative philology:

> One of the services that "comparative philology" can render the "separate philologies" [as, for example, Classical philology] is to protect them against their own unchecked attitudes concerning "origins," to orient them toward the kind of empirical process, positive or negative, that goes beyond the uncertainty and consequent arbitrariness that can result from evaluating facts purely from a Greek or Roman or Indic or Scandinavian point of view. (Dumézil 1985:15; my translation)

§1c. Third, I comment on the value of "comparative philology" in the study of Greek mythology. I epitomize here what I already said in Greek Mythology and Poetics (Nagy 1990b:7–8), though I have slightly adjusted my formulation to fit more closely the comparative evidence that we are about to consider:

> Just as the Greek language is cognate with other Indo-European languages, including Latin, Indic, and Old Norse, so also various Greek institutions are cognate with the corresponding institutions of other peoples speaking other Indo-European languages. In other words, such diverse societies as represented by the ancient Greek and Roman and Indic and Scandinavian peoples have a common Indo-European heritage not only on the level of language but also on the level of society. To appreciate the breadth and the depth of this Indo-European heritage in Greek institutions, one has only to read through the prodigious collection of detailed evidence assembled by Émile Benveniste in Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes (1969). For now, however, I focus on Dumézil's argument that one such Indo-European "institution" is the tradition of myth in general—and of epic in particular.

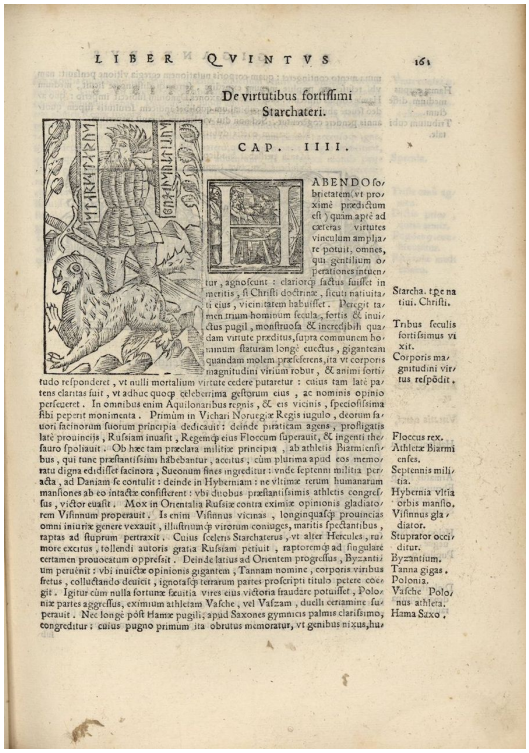
§2. That said, I now turn to comparative evidence, assembled by Dumézil (1971:25–124), connecting the hero Hēraklēs in Greek myths and the hero Starkaðr in the myths of Scandinavian peoples. In the second case, the evidence comes from Old Norse texts, often mediated by medieval Latin paraphrases. With regard to the Greek and the Old Norse evidence, Dumézil has succeeded in proving that the myths about these two heroes Hēraklēs and Starkaðr are cognate in a vast variety of details. These details have been analyzed further in an article by Olga M. Davidson (1980) and in the book Comparative Mythology by Jaan Puhvel (1989, especially pp. 249–255). Limitations of time and space prevent me from including here a third comparandum analyzed by Dumézil, Davidson, and Puhvel: this is the Indic hero Śiśupāla.

§3. For now I concentrate on only one detail that shows the cognate heritage of myths about Hēraklēs and Starkaðr—a detail that has I think not been noticed before. It has to do with the athleticism, as it were, of both these heroes.

§3a. In the previous posting, Classical Inquiries 2019.07.19, I had already considered a myth centering on the athleticism of Hēraklēs in the role of a wrestler, but now I turn to his parallel role as a boxer. In the scholia for Plato's Phaedo 89c we read about a myth, mediated by Duris of Samos (DFGH F 76; also to be considered is Pherecydes DFGH F 368), telling how Hēraklēs, after having founded the athletic contests at the festival of the Olympics at Olympia and having won in every one of these athletic contests on the first occasion of the festival, failed to win on the occasion of the second Olympics, four years later, in the athletic event of boxing, since his opponents at this event were now two athletes rather than one. For the record: the names given for the two victorious athletes in this report are Elatos and Pherandros. So the story goes. Thus even Hēraklēs, as the saying has it, cannot win when the contest is two-against-one. That saying is what we read in Plato's Phaedo 89c, where the relevant myth about the boxing match between Hēraklēs on one side and, on the other side, Elatos and Pherandros, is not even retold.

§3b. At this point, I refer again to the image I showed at the beginning of this essay: as I already noted back then, this image is featured on a map produced by Olaus Magnus, first published in 1539, where we see Starkaðr holding two rune staffs—and where the staff in his right hand reads, in runic letters, STARCATERVS (Starcatherus), while the staff in his left hand reads PVGIL SVETICVS (pugil Sueticus), to be translated as 'fist-fighter of Sweden'. Thanks to the expert guidance of my colleague and dear friend Stephen Mitchell, I can now add that this picture, and the description of Starkaðr as a 'fist-fighter of Sweden', matches a narrative found in another work of Olaus Magnus, Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus, published in 1555. The text of this narrative starts off at p. 161 with an illustration in the form of a woodcut that reproduces the picture of 'Starcatherus' as found in the map of Olaus Magnus, and the narrative that follows actually explains at pp. 161–162 why Starkaðr gets to be described as a boxer. This narrative at pp. 161–162 corresponds to an earlier narrative recorded by Saxo Grammaticus, who lived

in the late 12th and early 13th centuries CE, in his Gesta Danorum, first printed in 1514. This corresponding narrative of Saxo Grammaticus, to be found in Gesta Danorum 6.5.17–18, is probably at least in part the source for the later narrative of Olaus. We read in these two narratives that the Danes were once upon a time at war with the Saxons, who persuaded a youthful champion named Hama to fight in a one-on-one duel with an aging Starcatherus, who would be representing all by himself the king of the Danes together with the king's entire army. The Saxon Hama, showing his overconfidence, preferred to start fighting with his hands, not with weapons, and, in this context, he is actually described by Olaus at p. 161 as a pugilis 'fist-fighter'. Then, true to form, Hama fist-punches Starcatherus so violently that the old man gets floored. But Starcatherus picks himself up and now gains the upper hand. In the end, Starcatherus kills Hama by cleaving the young champion in half with a blow of the sword. Thus the Saxons are defeated, and they are now subjugated en masse by the Danes. So goes the story.



LIBER QVINTVS 161

De virtutibus fortissimi Starchateri.

CAP. IIII.

ABENDO so/ brietatem, vt pro/ ximè prædictum est) quam aptè ad cæteras virtutes vinculum amplia/ re potuit, omnes, qui gentilium o/ perationes intuen/ tur, agnoscunt: clariorq; factus fuisset in meritis, si Christi doctrinæ, sicuti natiuita/ ti eius, vicinitatem habuisset. Peregit ta/ men trium hominum secula, fortis & inui/ ctus pugil, monstruosa & incredibili qua/ dam virtute præditus, supra communem ho/ minum staturam longè eminens, gigantem quandam molem præferens, ita vt corporis magnitudini virium robur, & animi forti/ tudo respōderet, vt nulli mortalium virtute cedere putaretur: cuius tam latè pa/ tens claritas fuit, vt adhuc quoq; celeberrima gestorum eius, ac nominis opinio perficeret. In omnibus enim Aquilonaribus regnis, & eis vicinis, speciosissima sibi peperit monimenta. Primùm in Vichari Norvegiæ Regis iugulo, deorum fa/ uori sacinorum suorum principia dedicauit: deinde piraticam agens, profligatis latè prouincijs, Russiam inuasit, Regemq; eius Flocorum superauit, & ingenti the/ sauro spoliauit. Ob hæc tam præclara militiæ principia, ab athletis Biarmicenſi/ bus, qui tunc præstantissimi habebantur, accitus; cùm plurima apud eos memo/ ratu digna edidisset facinora, Sueonum fines ingreditur: vnde septennii militia per/ acta, ad Daniam se contulit: deinde in Hyberniam: ne vltimæ rerum humanarum mansiones ab eo intactæ consisterent: vbi duobus præstantissimis athletis congref/ sus, victor euasit. Mox in Orientalia Russiæ contra eximiæ opinionis gladiato/ rem Visinum properauit. Is enim Visinus vicinas, longinquasq; prouincias omni iniuriæ genere vexauit, illustriumq; virorum coniuges, maritis spectantibus, raptas ad stuprum pertraxit. Cuius scelera Starchaterus, vt alter Hercules, ra/ more excitus, tollendi autoris gratia Russiam petiuit, raptoremq; ad singulare certamen prouocatum oppressit. Deinde latius ad Orientem progressus, Byzantij/ um peruenit: vbi inuictæ opinionis gigantem, Tannam nomine, corporis viribus fretus, colluctando deiecit, ignorasq; terrarum partes proscripti titulo petere coe/ git. Igitur cùm nulla fortunæ fœuitia vires eius victoria fraudare potuisset, Polo/ niæ partes aggressus, eximium athletam Vasche, vel Vasæam, duelli certamine fu/ perauit. Nec longè post Hamæ pugili, apud Saxones gymnicis palmis clarissimo, congreditur: cuius pugno primùm ita obrutus memoratur, vt genibus nixus, hu/

Starcha. tgenatiui. Christi.

Tribus seculis fortissimus vixit.

Corporis magnitudini viritus respōdit,

Flocrus rex.

Athletæ Biarmicenſes.

Septennis militia.

Hyberniæ vltima orbis mansio.

Visinus gladiator.

Stuprator occiditur.

Byzantium.

Tanna gigas.

Polonia.

Vasche Polonus athleta.

Hama Saxo.

Page 161 of Olaus Magnus, Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus (1555), with woodcut illustration of Starkaðr.

3c. Here is the relevant text in the Gesta Danorum of Saxo Grammaticus (5.16–17, ed. Friis-Jensen 2015):

> 5.16. Interea Saxones defectionem moliri idque maxime in animo habere coeperunt, qualiter inuictum bello Frothonem preter publici conflictus morem opprimerent. Quod optime duello gerendum rati mittunt, qui regem ex prouocatione lacesserent, scientes eum discrimen omne prompta semper mente complecti, animique eius magnitudinem nulli prorsus exhortationi cessuram. Quem tunc temporis maxime adoriendum putabant, cum Starcatherum, cuius plerisque formidolosa uirtus extabat, negotiosum abesse cognoscerent. Cunctante uero Frothone seque cum amicis super dando responso collocuturum dicente superuenit Starcatherus piratica iam regresssus, qui ex hoc maxime prouocationis habitum reprehendit, quod diceret regibus non nisi in compares arma congruere eademque aduersum populares capienda non esse: per se uero tamquam obscuriore loco natum pugnam rectius amministrandam existere.
>
> 5.17. Igitur Saxones Hamam, qui apud eos gymnicis palmis clarissimus habebatur, multis aggressi pollicitationibus, si duello operam commodaret, molem corporis eius auro se repensuros esse promittunt illectumque pecunia pugilem ad campum confluctui deputatum militaris pompe tripudio prosequuntur. Hinc Dani Starcatherum regis sui partes exequuturum ad certaminis locum militie insignibus ornati perducunt. Quem Hama etate marcidum iuuente fidutia despicatus defunctum uiribus senem lucta quam armis excipere preoptauit. Eundem adortus terre nutabundum adegerat, ni fortuna, que uinci uetulum non sinebat, iniurie restitisset. Ita enim impellentis Hame pugno obrutus memoratur, ut genibus nixus humum mento contingeret. Quam corporis nutationem egregia ultione pensauit. Nam ubi resuscitato poplite manum expedire ferrumque distringere licuit, medium Hame corpus dissecuit. Complures agri sexagenaque mancipia uictorie premium extitere.

3d. Here is my translation (guided by the earlier translation of Fisher 2015, which I have modified here and there):

> 5.16. Meanwhile the Saxons were mounting rebellion [against the Danes] and giving particular thought to how they could eliminate [king] Frotho, so far undefeated, in a way that would bypass a mass conflict. Thinking that the best way to do it would be individual combat, they sent emissaries to issue a challenge to the king, aware that he always embraced every danger eagerly and that his high spirit would certainly never give way to any admonition. Once they knew that Starcatherus, whose bravery intimidated most men, was occupied elsewhere, they reckoned that this was the time to accost Frotho. But while the king was hesitating and saying that he would have to consult his friends about a reply, Starcatherus appeared on the scene, back from his sea-roving [= Viking activities]; he most strongly objected to the idea of the challenge, because, as he pointed out, such fights were not appropriate for kings except against their equals and certainly they should not be undertaken against men of the people; more properly it was up to him [= Starcatherus], as one born in a less luminous situation, to handle this fight.
>
> 5.17. So, the Saxons approached Hama, famous among them for his athletic victories, with many assurances that if he would throw his energies into a single combat, they would repay him with the weight, in gold, of his mountainous bulk; attracted by the prize money, the champion [pugilis 'fist-fighter] was accompanied by a jubilant procession of warriors to the field marked for the combat. On their side the Danes, all decked out in their war gear, led Starcatherus to the place of combat, so that he could fulfill the role [partes] of his king. Hama, exulting in his youth, was scornful of an opponent feeble with age and chose rather to engage hand-to-hand with this worn-out old man than encounter him with weapons. He went at Starcatherus and would have sent him reeling to the earth, had not Fortune, who would not allow the veteran to be overcome, stopped him from being harmed. It is recorded in memory that he was struck down with such force by Hama's driving fist that he was brought to his knees and touched the ground with his chin. Starcatherus took fine compensation for being thrown off balance: as soon as he regained his feet and had a hand free to draw his sword, he cut Hama's body in half. A large portion of land and sixty slaves were the price of his victory.

§4. This Old Norse myth about an uneven boxing match between the old Starkaðr and a youthful Saxon hero called Hama, who is actually described as a pugilis 'fist-fighter' in the Gesta Danorum of Saxo Grammaticus as also in the Historia of Olaus Magnus, helps us see how the old hero may have earned the title pugil 'fist-fighter' in his own right. In the myth we have just considered, the hero Starkaðr is engaging in single combat on behalf of the Danes, but in other myths, he could have been fighting in single combat on behalf of the Swedes—hence his full title pugil Sueticus 'fist-fighter of Sweden' in the illustration found on the Carta of Olaus as also in the woodcut for the story about Starkaðr as reported by the same Olaus in that author's Historia. Also, as Stephen Mitchell points out to me, there were other Norse heroes who received the title pugil Sueticus 'fist-fighter of Sweden' in other stories, as we see from the application of this same title to the hero Arngrim at 5.13.1 in the Gesta Danorum by Saxo Grammaticus. In that narrative of Saxo about victories won by Arngrim in battles on behalf of the Swedes, however, we find no retelling of any story about any one-on-one boxing match. Similarly, we find no retelling of any story about a one-on-one boxing match involving Starkaðr in battles where this hero fights on behalf of the Swedes instead of the Danes. In any case, the old hero Starkaðr is a pugil for the Danes, not for the Swedes, in the story about the killing of the Saxon boxer called Hama, and I am arguing that this particular story is cognate with the little-known Greek story about another uneven boxing match—this one between Hēraklēs and the two rival athletes who actually defeated him on the occasion of the second Olympics ever held. If the Greek story had been well known in medieval times, we might have suspected that such a story about Hēraklēs had served as a model for the Old Norse story about Starkaðr. After all, the similarities between 'Hercules' and Starcatherus were recognized by the learned Scandinavian transmitters of stories about Starkaðr—so much so that the narrative of Olaus Magnus about Starkaðr actually refers to him at one point as an alter Hercules, 'another Hēraklēs': this happens at p. 161 of the Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus by Olaus Magnus—though not in the context of the ensuing story about the uneven boxing match between Hama and Starcatherus. That said, I must nevertheless insist that the similarities between the Old Norse and the ancient Greek boxing matches are not at all close enough to justify our supposing that the Scandinavian transmitters of the Starkaðr myths—no matter how learned they may have been in the Greco-Roman classical tradition—would have somehow modeled the myth about the duel of Starkaðr with Hama on a barely-known myth about a loss by Hēraklēs in a boxing match—a myth that remains most opaque to this day.

§5. I grant that other features of the Starkaðr story, like the positioning of a ferocious lion that we see in the foreground of that picture that labels this hero as a boxer, may possibly be a matter of borrowing from a cognate figure of Hēraklēs, since the linking of the Greek hero with the lionskin that he wears is so ubiquitous in the classical tradition. The same can be said, perhaps, about the club that we see positioned next to the hero's sword in the same picture.

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A Mycenaean background for Hēraklēs as a model for athletes »