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Euripides' *Heracles* in Its Artistic and Cultic Environment: Autochthons and Newcomers*

Ποῖ γῆς; Does tragedy evoke specific places and/or buildings, sculptures, murals? If it does, can we pin them down, given the state of the surviving material evidence, the paucity of literary sources and a host of related difficulties? In the cases we can pin them down, does this knowledge contribute to a deeper understanding of a play and how? What if such evocations are unconscious or the similarities are accidental?¹ These are the questions I shall explore taking Euripides' *Heracles* as a case-study, a play that draws attention to its dialogue with its artistic and cultic environment and whose points of contact with the metopes of the Hephaesteion have long been identified and well discussed².

The present investigation broadens the frame of the intermedial dialogue by bringing into the picture (a) the entire decorative

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¹ I have tackled most of these methodological issues in ATHANASSAKI 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2022a. For an exploration of the relationship between space and memory see now the essays in PROIETTI, McINERNEY 2026, applying diverse methodological approaches. A month before the conference at Udine, Ewen and I had a comparable experience at a concert at the ΜΕΓΑΡΟΝ ΜΟΥΣΙΚΗΣ ΑΘΗΝΩΝ, starring mezzo soprano Joyce DiDonato and pianist Craig Terry (8 April 25). The programme included Jake Heggie's *Camille Claudel: into the fire* (libretto: Gene Scheer). During the applause and calls for encores, DiDonato urged her audience to read about Camille Claudel, in order to see how sculpture can inspire poetry and music. Up to that point I had enjoyed the song performance, without knowing about Camille Claudel and Auguste Rodin's stormy relationship, despite my familiarity with Rodin's work. However, after the concert, I read about that doomed relationship, and found that this knowledge enriched my experience. I felt it was a contemporary variant of the enriched experience of the viewer that Oliver Taplin argued for in TAPLIN 2007, 26.

² THOMPSON 1949, 247-55; MORGAN 1962; BOND 1981, 153-55 and *passim*; see also below, 150-2; most recently see FRADE 2023, 61-80 and *passim*.

programme of the temple, which was nearing its completion in the years following the peace of Nicias in 421; (b) the cult of Athena and Hephaestus which received a great boost after the reorganization of the *Hephaesteia* in 421; and (c) the cult of Heracles in Attica with emphasis on his cult at Melite, one of the most conspicuous sites of his worship in Athens³.

My discussion will be prefaced with some observations drawn from my earlier work on the *Ion* which showcases both Euripides' keen interest in monumental architecture and sculpture and the clever twists he gives his poetic monuments, twists resulting in a stimulating dialogue between his plays and their artistic and cultic environment⁴. In the final section, I bring together the strands of my argument by correlating the questions that Euripides poses in *Heracles* and *Ion* with the artistic and cult scenes, in order to shed light on the significance of the different perspectives the dramatist offers on contemporary monumental art and cult.

1. *Spaces, monuments, artifacts and their viewers in the Ion*

The *Ion* opens with the famous scene of the Athenian Chorus looking around at Apollo's sanctuary in Delphi and expressing their surprise at what they see: it is not only Athens that has sanctuaries, temples, and altars, they conclude (184-7). Then they focus on a specific building, Apollo's temple, and describe its sculptural décor in vivid detail (188-218). This is as specific a reference as it can get, but as has been pointed out time and again, Euripides reverses the pediments and has his Chorus describe the Gigantomachy on the West Pediment, which they cannot see from where

³ For the cult of Heracles in Attica see WOODFORD 1971 and KEARNS 1989, 18-19, 99, 166-67. For the conspicuousness of the shrine at Melite see *sch. vet.* at Aristophanes *Frogs* 501a, 4a, 5 Chantry: ἐπιφανέστατον ἱερόν Ἡρακλέους ἀλεξικάκου. The exact location of the shrine has been disputed. Hereafter I follow Pittakis's suggestion, taken up again by LALONDE 2006, who located the temenos of Herakles Alexikakos to the northeast of the hill of the Nymphs; see LALONDE 2006, 86-93 with references to earlier scholarship. For a discussion of the evidence and different proposals see GAGLIANO 2013, 36-39, who suggests that the exact location remains uncertain.

⁴ ATHANASSAKI 2010, 2012, 2022a.

they stand⁵. This observation presents us with the first *caveat*: we cannot take at face value even specific references such as these, because Euripides has his own agenda which is not accuracy – in this case his point is the inaccuracy of the Chorus' account⁶.

The effort to explore relations between plays and specific monuments is worthwhile, because it allows us to appreciate the dramatic agenda much more than we would have done, if we had looked at tragic buildings as simply fictional. Comparison of the dramatic version of the temple of Apollo with the Alcmaeonid temple has shown that the Chorus tend to single out for comment images such as the Gigantomachy, which one would also see in Athens, the Acropolis in particular. This observation has important implications for a number of issues, one of which is characterization. The Chorus' tendency to view Delphi through Athenian lenses squares with their general limited outlook on other issues as well. With the exception of Xuthus who is oblivious to art, as he is to everything else, the Chorus' Athenocentric perspective on art exemplifies their limited perspective in general, which they share with all other members of the Athenian *theoria*. All they can think of is Athenian art, places, customs, institutions and resources – including the poison with which Creusa will try to kill her son⁷.

In addition to the Chorus both the Messenger and Ion are also represented as engaged viewers⁸. In terms of characterization the manner in which the *dramatis personae* relate with art-works reflects their social class too and this, in turn, foreshadows the development of the plot. The Chorus and the messenger are overwhelmed by the sight of artworks, but they do not know much about art. Their appreciation of art stems not from training, but from osmosis – from living and working in artistic environments. In contrast Ion, who has been raised in order to become the treasurer and trusted steward of Apollo's possessions

⁵ See ATHANASSAKI 2010, 203 n. 5.

⁶ For the effect of the Chorus' inaccuracy see ATHANASSAKI 2010, 226–34.

⁷ Detailed discussion in ATHANASSAKI 2010.

⁸ I have discussed the concept of the engaged viewer in ATHANASSAKI 2017 and 2022a, 171–6.

in Delphi (χρυσοφύλαξ καὶ ταμίας πάντων πιστός, ll. 54-5), shows his familiarity with art early in the play. When he learns that Creusa is Athenian, he asks her whether Erichthonius sprang from the earth (l. 265). Once Creusa has verified this story, Ion probes the accuracy of a painting he has probably seen (ὥσπερ ἐν γραφῇ νομίζεται, l. 271); specifically, he asks Creusa, if Athena gave Erichthonius to the Cecropids in a covered basket. His artistic sophistication comes in full display when he chooses tapestries and sculpture with which he decorates his tent that will host his farewell party. Ion's choices point up his cosmopolitan perspective and foreshadow his future role as progenitor of the Ionians and half-brother of the Dorians and the Achaeans, a role predicted by Athena *ex machina*⁹.

In an earlier study I have argued that comparison of Ion's tent with literary depictions of Xerxes' and Alcibiades' famous tents brings to the surface Ion's adherence to 5th cent. Athenian *meg-aloprepeia*. Building on the suggestion that Pericles' *Odeion* was inspired by Xerxes' tent, left in Athens after the Persian defeat, I have reached the following conclusions:

This escapist play looks back at, distils, and recreates on stage an era of political experiment, intellectual ferment, cosmopolitanism and magnificence that had begun with Cleisthenes and flourished until it received a serious blow a century later, when the unbelievable news of the Sicilian disaster reached Athens. However one reads the play, the references or allusions to the Alcmaeonid temple of Apollo, the Persian wars, the tent of Xerxes, the *Odeion*, the lavish *theoriae* and banquets at Panhellenic sanctuaries construct military achievements and cultural accomplishments as a shared experience of the Athenians and their allies. Euripides' portrayal of the common ancestor of Athenians and Ionians and half-brother of Dorians and Achaeans as a cosmopolitan and trustworthy leader puts forward a positive model of leadership for the city and the empire, which Hermes' description (χρυσοφύλαξ and ταμίας πάντων πιστός) encapsulates. The

⁹ See ATHANASSAKI 2012.

choice as the setting of the play of Delphi, one of the richest sanctuaries thanks to the offerings of Greeks and barbarians, was not, of course, accidental. It was not accidental either that Euripides chose to portray Ion as a youth about to take up public office, but not yet actively involved in everyday politics and decision-making, a choice that adds an ironic dimension to the positive model, thus drawing attention to the distance between politics in an embattled city and theatrical experience¹⁰.

I shall come back to *Ion* after reading *Heracles* against its artistic and cultic environment with an eye to the politics of their dialogue.

2. Euripides' *Heracles* and its artistic and cultic environment

Heracles takes place in Thebes but evokes Athenian temples and sanctuaries from beginning to end. In this respect it is similar to the *Ion*. As in the *Ion*, the Chorus of Theban elders sing of Heracles' feats in the first stasimon in a manner that evokes the metopes of the East façade of the Hephaesteion in Athens¹¹. As already mentioned, the evocation has long been noted. Unlike the *Ion*, however, the Chorus in *Heracles* make no explicit references to Athenian temples and sanctuaries. It is Theseus, arriving at the end of the play, who makes explicit references to the Athenian artistic and cultic scene in his effort to convince Heracles to come with him to Athens.

The date of the play is not secure. It has been dated between 426 and 414 on the basis of metrical criteria, thematic choices and other considerations¹². Based on its points of contact with the *Ion*, I think the two plays were composed close to in time. Like others, who have dated *Heracles* to 416 or 414 and *Ion* to 413 or later on

¹⁰ ATHANASSAKI 2012, par. 4 § 17.

¹¹ Note the stylistic similarities between the Choral paratactic and self-contained narrative miniatures and the visual narratives of the metopes of Hephaesteion. For Bacchylides' evocation of the metopes of the Athenian treasury in Delphi in a very similar manner in *Ode* 18 see ATHANASSAKI 2016, 34. For the evocation of the Hephaesteion metopes see the discussion below, 150-2.

¹² See BOND 1981, xxx-xxxii.

formal criteria, I think they were both composed several years after the peace of Nicias for reasons that will become apparent in the course of my discussion¹³. However, an earlier date and even the reverse order of composition would not fundamentally affect my argument.

Before exploring the dialogue between the Choral song-dance in the first stasimon, the Hephaesteion, and other famous landmarks, a summary of the events leading to this Choral ode is in order. The play opens with the speech of Heracles' mortal father Amphitryon who informs the audience of Heracles' long absence in the Underworld, the murder of the legitimate ruler Creon by the usurper Lycus, and the mortal danger he as well as Heracles' wife Megara and their children face. Amphitryon ends his speech by mentioning that he and Megara are suppliants at the altar of Zeus Saviour, which Heracles *kallinikos* dedicated in Thebes after his victory over the Minyans (*HF* 1-59).

Megara appears and addresses first Amphitryon and then the Chorus of old Thebans (ll. 60-106). After the parodos, Lycus and Amphitryon engage in an idiosyncratic *agon logon*. Lycus tries to minimize Heracles' achievements, whereas Amphitryon defends him in a speech twice as long. In the following exchange Megara succeeds in securing Lycus' permission to take her children into the palace and prepare them for their death. The scene concludes with Amphitryon's disappointment with Zeus whom he accuses of leaving Heracles' children unprotected (ll. 140-347).

The *dramatis personae* leave the stage and the Chorus perform their song-dance, the longest stasimon in the surviving Euripidean corpus¹⁴. The ode is a *threnos* for Heracles with a strong eulogistic component, consisting of descriptions of the twelve labours, which the Chorus sing in the following order: Lion (ll. 359-63), Centaurs (364-74), Hind (375-9), Thracian mares (380-8), Kyknos (389-93), Hesperides (394-9), Sea-clearing (400-2), Atlas (403-7), Amazons (408-18), Hydra (419-21), Geryon (422-4), and Hades (425-9).

¹³ For the date of *Heracles* see BOND 1981, previous note. For *Ion* see MARTIN 2018, 32 who dates the *Ion* after 412 on metrical and other criteria.

¹⁴ See BOND 1981, 146 and 348ff.



Figure 1: The Labours of Heracles
in the Metopes of the East Side of the Hephaesteion.

At the time of the play's production the labours of Heracles were the subject of the sculptural décor of several temples. From our point of view the most relevant are the metopes of the Hephaesteion, featuring nine labours in a series completed in the 450s if not earlier: Lion, Hydra, Hind, Boar, Thracian Mares, Cerberus, Amazons, Geryon I and II, Apples¹⁵. Heracles' labours were flanked by Theseus labours in the metopes of the North and South Side (fig. 1)¹⁶.

The sculptural décor of the Hephaesteion was modelled after the Athenian Treasury of Delphi both in theme and style¹⁷. As has been pointed out the juxtaposition of Heracles' with Theseus's labours first in the Athenian Treasury in the Panhellenic

¹⁵ For the dates of the several phases of the Hephaesteion see now STEWART 2018.

¹⁶ The photo is taken from Wikimedia Commons.

¹⁷ See BOARDMAN 1985, 146-8 and 170; VON DEN HOFF 2010, 172-7.

sanctuary and then in the Hephaesteion represented the Athenians' attempt to elevate Theseus to the Panhellenic level and recognition that Heracles had long enjoyed. Heracles' twelve labours also featured in the metopes of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, which was completed around 460¹⁸.

Of these three temples, the Hephaesteion was of course the one with which Euripides' Athenian audience would be most familiar. Many in Euripides' audience had seen the sculptures of their own city's treasury in Delphi on the occasion of theoric visits, while others had heard about them from those who had visited the sanctuary. The same is true for Zeus' temple at Olympia. A number of Athenians and non-Athenians would be familiar with the metopes of the temple of Zeus¹⁹.

Authorial intention and audience response are complicating factors when it comes to establishing a dialogue between tragedy and monumental sculpture. Both media often tell the same, very well-known story, each in its own manner. Can we know if Euripides evokes the sculptures of the Hephaesteion and not simply any of the many stories about Heracles' labours that had been in circulation since the 6th century? Similarly, would his spectators correlate what they saw on stage with specific artifacts, or stories, or both? All these alternatives were undoubtedly at play. We should also allow for spectators who did not bring in any prior knowledge. But there is ample evidence showing that Euripides expected those in this audience who had an eye for art to recall well-known artifacts and landmarks²⁰.

Euripidean plays depict temples, sculptures, statues, and all sorts of other artifacts as well viewers in action, who talk about their own or others' viewing experiences. We have already looked briefly at viewers and artifacts in the *Ion*, but a number of other plays bear witness to Euripides' keen interest in art and

¹⁸ See BOARDMAN 1964, 119–26.

¹⁹ For the representation of Heracles' labours on the metopes at the temple of Zeus see BARRINGER 2005, 236–8.

²⁰ ATHANASSAKI 2017 and 2022a.

cult. *Heracles* is one of these plays²¹. In the exodus Theseus' explicit reference to shrines and sculptures in honour of Heracles suggests that Euripides wished to orient mentally his audience towards the shrines and probably the sculptures of Heracles they knew and/or had heard of.

This is Theseus' promise to Heracles of the posthumous honours that lay in store for him (Eur. *HF* 1320-37):

Θήβας μὲν οὖν ἔκλειπε τοῦ νόμου χάριν, ἔπου δ' ἄμ' ἡμῖν πρὸς πόλισμα Παλλάδος. ἐκεῖ χέρας σὰς ἀγνίσας μιάσματος δόμους τε δώσω χρημάτων τ' ἐμῶν μέρους.	1325
ἃ δ' ἐκ πολιτῶν δῶρ' ἔχω σώσας κόρους δὶς ἑπτὰ, ταῦρον Κνώσιον κατακτανών, σοὶ ταῦτα δώσω. πανταχοῦ δέ μοι χθονὸς τεμένη δέδασται· ταῦτ' ἐπωνομασμένα σέθεν τὸ λοιπὸν ἐκ βροτῶν κεκληίσεται	1330
ζώντος· θανόντα δ', εὐτ' ἂν εἰς Αἴδου μόλης, θυσίαισι λαῖνοισί τ' ἐξογκώμασιν τίμιον ἀνάξει πᾶσ' Ἀθηναίων πόλις. καλὸς γὰρ ἀστοῖς στέφανος Ἑλλήνων ὑπο ἄνδρ' ἐσθλὸν ὠφελοῦντας εὐκλείας τυχεῖν.	1335
κἀγὼ χάριν σοὶ τῆς ἐμῆς σωτηρίας τήνδ' ἀντιδώσω· νῦν γὰρ εἰ χρεῖος φίλων.	

For the law's sake, then, leave Thebes and come with me to the citadel of Pallas Athena. There I shall cleanse your hands from this taint and give you a home and a portion of my wealth. I shall give you the gifts I received from my fellow citizens for killing the bull of Knossos and saving the lives of the fourteen children. All about the country allotments of land have been given to me. Mortals will henceforth call these yours for as long as you live. And when you die and go to the Underworld, the whole city of Athens will honor you with sacrifices and with massive temples of stone. For it will be a glorious achievement for the citizens in the eyes of Greece to win fair renown by doing good service to a noble hero. And this will also be my repayment to you for saving my life: for at present you stand in need of friends.²²

²¹ To mention some, *Andromache*, *Erechtheus*, *Suppliants*, *Troades* with ATHANASSAKI 2018, 2022a, and 2022b.

²² Text and translation are taken from D. Kovacs' Loeb edition (1998).

As Godfrey Bond has observed, the phrase λαῖνοισι... ἐξογκώμασι evokes the sculptures of the Hephaesteion:

λαῖνοισι ἐξογκώμασι could refer to a simple tomb ... But in fact it includes such memorials as the metopes of the Athenian treasury at Delphi and in particular the sculptures of the Hephestaeum ('The-seum') in the agora of Athens, dated 450-40 BC. Here the deeds of Heracles and Theseus are exhibited in parallel, as at Delphi; but Heracles has the place of honour on the East façade.²³

I shall come back to the λάϊνα ἐξογκώματα. For the moment I add Pausanias' testimony that Heracles featured with the hero Marathon, Theseus and Athena in a painting in the Stoa Poikile. According to the periegete, the Marathonians were the first to worship Heracles as a god (Paus. 1.15.3).

Unlike the metopes and the friezes of the Hephaesteion, which are very well preserved, the pedimental representations have been severely damaged and variously reconstructed. In an early synthesis Homer Thompson proposed that the East Pediment represented the presentation of the apples of the Hesperids to Hera and Zeus by Heracles and his subsequent apotheosis²⁴. Thompson's reconstruction did not find favour with archaeologists on archaeological and cultic grounds, but his discussion is still useful, because it draws attention to the deep roots of Heracles' cult in Attica²⁵. As a *comparandum* for his reconstruction Thompson adduced an old poros pediment from the Acropolis, dated to 570-50, which depicts the apotheosis of Heracles in the presence of Zeus, Hera, and other deities.

²³ BOND 1981, 396. In the light of the ubiquitous sculptural representations of the Labours of Heracles, it is only natural to ask how we can be sure that Euripides was engaging with the façade of the Hephaesteion and not, for example, the metopes of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. One of the anonymous readers of this paper, for instance, observes that, in order to be certain that Euripides referred to the metopes of the Hephaesteion, there would need to be a reference to the metope depicting Cerberus, which there is not. While this is a valid point, I would argue that, given the greater similarities than differences between the Choral song and the metopes, Euripides would have expected his audience to evoke the Hephaesteion metopes. See also section 1 above and *passim*.

²⁴ THOMPSON 1949. For an overview of the visual and literary evidence of Heracles' apotheosis see SHAPIRO 1983.

²⁵ For the reception of Thompson's reconstruction see STEWART 2018.

As already mentioned, the metopes of the Hephaesteion were completed probably in the 450s. The pediments were finished in the early 420s. Much had changed in the intervening years. Of the various reconstructions of the pedimental scenes, I mention only Andrew Stewart's recent reconstruction²⁶. Through assemblage and reallocation of a number of finds, Stewart argued convincingly that the East Pediment depicted the birth of Athena from Zeus' head with the help of Hephaestus; for the West Pediment he proposed the return of Hephaestus to Olympus; he allocated the two female figures to the acroterion above this pediment and identified them as Thetis and Eurynome, whose role in saving and raising the god was crucial²⁷. I shall explore further this reconstruction in the next section. For the moment, suffice it to note that if Stewart is right, in the intervening decades between the inception and the completion of the temple there is a remarkable shift from Panhellenic to Athenocentric themes, as we will see in the next section.

Going back to the *Heracles*, Theseus' promise to give all his shrines to his friend in return for his salvation is striking, but rooted in cultic reality. Almost one and a half centuries later, Philochorus, cited by Plutarch, tells the same story in a matter-of-fact manner (Plutarch, *Theseus* 35.1-2):

τὸν δὲ Θησέα παρητεῖτο καὶ χάριν ἡξίου ταύτην αὐτῷ δοθῆναι. συγχωρήσαντος δὲ τοῦ Αἰδωνέως, λυθείς ὁ Θησεὺς ἐπανῆλθε μὲν εἰς τὰς Ἀθήνας, οὐδέπω παντάπασι τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ κεκρατημένων, καὶ ὅσα ὑπῆρχε τεμένη πρότερον αὐτῷ τῆς πόλεως ἐξελοῦσης ἅπαντα καθιέρωσε τῷ Ἡρακλεῖ καὶ προσηγόρευσεν ἀντὶ Θησειῶν Ἡρακλεῖα, πλὴν τεσσάρων, ὡς Φιλόχορος ἰστόρηκεν.

But he [i.e. Heracles] begged for the release of Theseus, and demanded that this favour be granted him. Aïdoneus yielded to his prayers, Theseus was set free, and returned to Athens, where his friends were not yet altogether overwhelmed. All the sacred precincts which the city had previously set apart for himself, he now dedicated to Heracles, and called them Heracleia instead of Theseia, four only excepted, as Philochorus writes²⁸.

²⁶ STEWART 2018.

²⁷ STEWART 2018.

²⁸ Text and translation are taken from B. PERRIN'S Loeb edition (1914).

Does Philochorus draw on Euripides or do they both draw on a common source? The attribution of the initiative to Theseus suggests that Philochorus knew Euripides' play. Regardless of their relationship, both accounts offer an explanation for the extensive Heracles cult in Attica.

The small poros pediment from the second quarter of 6th century, found in the Acropolis, that has already been mentioned, offers precious testimony that Heracles' worship was not only old, but very prominent, too²⁹. After their victory in Marathon the Athenians either instituted the *Herakleia* for the first time or elevated an older local festival in honour of Heracles to a pan-Attic contest³⁰. We have also seen that his contribution was also commemorated in the Stoa Poikile (Paus. 1.15.3). It is therefore not surprising that his labours were awarded place of honour in the East façade of the Hephaesteion.

It is now time to revisit the *λάϊνα ἐξογκώματα* that Theseus promises. In *Heracles* Theseus calls Heracles a benefactor of mankind and great friend (l. 1252, εὐεργέτης βροτοῖσι καὶ μέγας φίλος). This designation is probably an evocation of Heracles' famous shrine at the foot of the hill of the Nymphs in the deme of Melite, where Heracles was worshipped as *alexikakos*. This sanctuary is mentioned in Aristophanes' *Frogs* by Dionysus (l. 501). An ancient *scholium ad loc.* reports that the statue of Heracles by Ageladas, which I have already mentioned, was placed in his shrine at Melite.

Euripides could therefore expect his audience to evoke Heracles' cult in the famous neighbouring shrine in the same deme as the Hephaesteion, Melite³¹. The Hephaesteion is only 350 meters away from the Herakleion, from which it is visible. The two shrines are less than a 20-minute walk away from the theatre of

²⁹ For other pedimental representations of Heracles in the Acropolis belonging to the Peisistratean period see BOARDMAN 1972, 70-2 and 1989, 158.

³⁰ See PARKER 1996, 153.

³¹ As the anonymous reader points out to me, it is the play's emphasis on Heracles as an εὐεργέτης (see ll. 877, 1252 and 1309) that invites his association with *alexikakos* and makes the shrine of Heracles in Melite the most likely point of reference among all the hero's shrines in Attica.

Dionysus, an easy stroll for theatregoers, many of whom would be curious to see the brilliant ongoing works. Euripides' gesture towards the Hephaesteion hardly needs an explanation, because the temple had been at the centre of people's attention for a couple of decades. The question is why Euripides wished to draw his audience's attention to Heracles' shrine in Melite³².

It seems that in the beginning of the 5th century the Athenians commissioned a statue of Heracles from the famous sculptor Ageladas, teacher of Pheidias, for the hero's shrine in Melite. The scholiast's mangled report concerning the occasion of this commission, if properly unpacked, may ultimately explain Euripides' interest. According to this *scholium*, the Athenians commissioned the statue after the great plague. This date, however, is incompatible with the date of the famous Ageladas, who was active in the late 6th and early 5th century. One of the arguments against a younger and less famous Ageladas is that there were many talented Athenian sculptors to undertake the task in the last decades of the 5th century and, therefore, no need to commission an Argive sculptor with no particular claims to fame³³. Whatever the details of the commission, there can be little doubt that the Athenians placed great hope in Heracles *Alexikakos* during the great plague in the early 420s, and offered him appropriate honours when it ended. In the light of the introduction of new cults and the reorganization of old ones in the late 420s and early 410s it is possible that these honours included a redisplay of the statue on a grander scale, which could explain the confusion surrounding the date of the commission. But as we shall see, the evocation of the cult of Heracles at Melite has a much broader scope than the Athenian interest in the hero as *alexikakos*.

³² If the ancient scholiast's attribution of the statue of Heracles to Ageladas, teacher of Phidias, is right, by the time of the production of *Heracles* the statue must have been a familiar sight. The same is true for the metopes of the Hephaesteion, which belonged to the early phase of the temple, some three decades earlier.

³³ For the statue of Heracles by Ageladas see WOODFORD 1976.

3. *Euripidean perspectives on art, cult, and Athenian identity*

We have seen that the Chorus' enumeration of Heracles' labours evokes Athens early in the play, before the appearance of Heracles and his murders first of Lycus and then, in a state of godsent madness, Megara and his children. With Theseus' arrival the focus shifts from Thebes as a place of murder to Athens as a place of redemption, posthumous honours, and artistic commemoration³⁴. Theseus emphasizes the benefits Heracles will derive from Athens, but his earlier recognition of Heracles' benefactions to him and mankind in general suggests that he thinks in terms of reciprocity. Theseus makes these promises at a time of need and desperation, which adds a touch of warmth and humanity to his portrayal. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, however, Euripides shows a different path and invites his audience to ponder how Theseus' speech goes far beyond human tragedy and is ultimately a meditation on heroism and immortality on the one hand, Athenian art and cult on the other.

In what follows I shall focus on the dialogue of the play with contemporary art and cult, taking into account Andrew Stewart's recent reconstruction and interpretation of the pedimental sculptures and Jeremy McNerney's new interpretation of the East Frieze of the Hephaesteion. These studies, taken together, show the Athenians' concerted efforts to monumentalize the myth of autochthony beyond the Acropolis. I shall argue that in *Heracles* Euripides (a) draws attention to the spectacular integration of Heracles in Athenian art and cult, thus providing a counterbalance to the growing emphasis on the myth of autochthony, as evidenced in the Hephaesteion and (b) through the evocation of Heracles' labours in the metopes of the Hephaesteion and his cult as *alexikakos* in Melite he reminds his audience of the introduction of new cults in Athens and their impact on Athenian identity; in the case of Heracles his integration in Attica is a reminder of the Panhellenic aspirations of the city and its citizens.

³⁴ For the prominence of Athens in the last part of the play see REHM 1999-2000, esp. 371-4.

Regarding the iconography of the Hephaesteion it is worth remembering that Euripides had already had a go in *Supplikes*. In that play Theseus was portrayed as a *prima facie* democrat, thus creating links between the play and the West Frieze of the Hephaesteion, where Theseus was depicted as a tyrannicide. I have argued elsewhere that on closer inspection Theseus' lip service to democracy in *Supplikes* is his way to manipulate the *demos* and achieve their consensus³⁵. In *Heracles*, on the other hand, produced a decade or so later, Theseus' adherence to democratic form and etiquette is conveniently forgotten³⁶. As is clear from his dispensation of cultic honours, he is a monarch and behaves as a monarch. This representation is consistent with Euripides' skepticism concerning the promotion of Theseus as a paragon of democracy by Athenian monumental discourse. Yet in this play Euripides goes far beyond questioning Athenian identifications of Theseus with democracy. He broadens his scope and reflects on art and cult, local and imported, and their significance for Athenian identity.

In the last two decades of the 5th century the Hephaesteion became a perfect visual instantiation of the integration of foreign and local heroes and gods. The long period between its inception and completion suggests that decisions regarding its sculptural décor were made by successive generations, rather than by any single person or group. The political intent of visual representations has long been debated. For the purposes of the present reading, I adopt John Boardman's broad definition of visual representations of all sorts as reflections of social beliefs that are shaped by individual and collective choices:

They [vase representations] mirrored, through their own conventions, views of myth expressed more explicitly in literature, song or narration, inspired by the needs of society, its leaders and its cults. That Greeks used their myth-history as a mirror to their life, and one which they could readily distort to suit their needs and circumstances is a common place³⁷.

³⁵ See ATHANASSAKI 2022, 184-7 with references to earlier scholarship.

³⁶ See ATHANASSAKI 2022, 188-9.

³⁷ BOARDMAN 1989, 159, discussed also by McINERNEY 2021, 159. In the quoted passage Boardman refers specifically to vase representations, but it is clear from the rest of his article that he thinks of monumental representations as well.

Heracles' and Theseus' deeds in the metopes of the temple belong to the Cimonian period and it is well established that Cimon sought to identify himself with Theseus more than any other Athenian leader³⁸. The undiminished Athenian interest in Theseus, as demonstrated in the Hephaesteion, shows that the traits and deeds of mythical heroes could easily be adapted to different sociohistorical circumstances. The late 430s saw the completion of the Ionic friezes featuring the 'tyrannicide' Theseus fighting with Peirithous against the Centaurs in the West Frieze³⁹.

The subject of the East frieze has been variously identified. A battle scene from the Trojan war or Theseus' battle with the Pallantids have been top candidates until 2014⁴⁰, when Jeremy McInerney aired the view that the East Frieze depicted the battle of the Athenians with the Pelasgians which resulted in the latter's defeat and expulsion to Lemnos⁴¹. McInerney's interpretation was enthusiastically embraced by Andrew Stewart who, as we have seen, reconstructed the scene of the East pediment as the birth of Athena from Zeus' head with the aid of Hephaestus and that of the West Pediment as Hephaestus' return to Olympus. In two subsequent articles McInerney offered convincing explanations both for the choice of Agoraios Kolonos as the site of a temple in honour of Hephaestus and of the battle of the Athenians with the Pelasgians for the East Frieze long after Cimon's death.⁴²

Newer excavations have shown that the inception of the Hephaesteion goes back to the early 5th century after Miltiades' annexation of Lemnos, which provided the motivation to build a temple for Hephaestus whose ties with the island were famous. The construction of the temple was interrupted by the Persian invasion. After his victory at Eurymedon, Cimon, eager to beau-

³⁸ SHAPIRO 1989, 143-9 argues that more important than the identification of individual leaders with Theseus is the growing popularity of Theseus in Athens. For Cimon's concerted efforts to identify with Theseus see ATHANASSAKI 2016 with references to the extensive scholarship.

³⁹ See STEWART 2018, 686.

⁴⁰ For the various reconstructions see STEWART 2018, 686.

⁴¹ MCINERNEY 2014.

⁴² MCINERNEY 2019 and 2021.

tify the city and commemorate his father's achievements and of course his own, took on the project. The decoration of the metopes with scenes of the labours of Theseus is yet another example of his efforts to associate himself closely with Theseus. Cimon's ostracism and his death about a decade later as well as the different priorities of the Periclean building programme caused yet another interruption. When work on the Hephaesteion resumed, Cimon was no longer alive, but as McInerney convincingly argued Lemnos was still important to the Athenians; this is why the Athenians chose their battle against the Pelasgians as the subject of the East frieze.

Hephaestus was also the progenitor of the autochthonous Athenians through his failed effort to rape Athena, a failure that led to the birth of Erichthonius from the earth. According to Eratosthenes, who draws on a lost play of Euripides, Hephaestus' semen fell at the place where the Hephaesteion was later erected (Euripides fr. 925 Nauck = [Eratosthenes] 13):

λέγει δὲ καὶ Εὐριπίδης περὶ τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον· Ἥφαιστον ἐρασθέντα Ἀθηνᾶς βούλεσθαι αὐτῇ μιγῆναι, τῆς δὲ ἀποστρεφομένης καὶ τὴν παρθενίαν μᾶλλον αἰρουμένης ἔν τινι τόπῳ τῆς Ἀττικῆς κρύπτεσθαι, ὃν λέγουσι καὶ ἀπ' ἐκείνου προσαγορευθῆναι Ἥφαιστεϊον· ὃς δόξας αὐτὴν κρατήσειν καὶ ἐπιθέμενος πληγεῖς ὑπ' αὐτῆς τῷ δόρατι ἀφῆκε τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν, φερομένης εἰς τὴν γῆν τῆς σπορᾶς· ἐξ ἧς γεγενῆσθαι λέγουσι παῖδα, ὃς ἐκ τούτου Ἐριχθόνιος ἐκλήθη.

Euripides too speaks of his (i.e., Erichthonios's) birth in this way: Hephaistos lusted for Athena and wanted to have intercourse with her, but she turned away, preferring to keep her virginity, and hid in a place in Attica which they say is named 'Hephaisteion' after him. He attacked her, expecting to subdue her, but was struck by her with her spear and released his lust, his seed being spent on the ground. From it, they say, a child was born who because of this was called Erichthonios⁴³.

McInerney argues that in this play Euripides offered an *ai-tion* of the choice of Agoraios Kolonos as the site of the temple in

⁴³ Text and translation are taken from Chris Collard's and Martin Cropp's Loeb edition (COLLARD, CROPP 2009).

honour of Hephaestus⁴⁴. We cannot know if the *aition* represents an old tradition or if it is Euripides' innovation, but for our purposes this fragment is a precious piece of evidence that in a now lost play Euripides associated the Hephaesteion with Athenian autochthony⁴⁵.

After the peace of Nicias the Athenians commissioned Pheidias' pupil, Alcamenes of Lemnos, to sculpt the cult statues of Hephaestus and Athena which were installed in 416/5.⁴⁶ With regard to these two statues are lucky to have Pausanias' testimony (1.14.6):

ὑπὲρ δὲ τὸν Κεραμεικὸν καὶ στοὰν τὴν καλουμένην Βασίλειον
ναὸς ἔστιν Ἥφαίστου. καὶ ὅτι μὲν ἄγαλμά οἱ παρέστηκεν Ἀθηνᾶς,
οὐδὲν θαῦμα ἐποιοῦμην τὸν ἐπὶ Ἐριχθονίῳ ἐπιστάμενος λόγον.

Above the Cerameicus and the stoa called Royal Stoa is a temple of Hephaestus. That by him stands a statue of Athena did not surprise me at all, because I knew the story about Erichthonius⁴⁷.

Unfortunately Pausanias, interested in the origin of Athena's blue eyes, does not elaborate on other features of the sculptural complex. Yet it is clear that something in the statue complex triggered the memory of the birth of Erichthonius. Although the size of the statues and their features have been debated, the various reconstructions include Erichthonius either as part of the sculptural complex, e.g. sitting in Athena's lap, or alternatively featuring in the décor of the statues' base⁴⁸.

421, the year of the commission of the statue complex, saw a major and extravagant reorganization of the *Hephaesteia* that in-

⁴⁴ McINNERNEY 2019, 238: «In any scenario, Euripides relays a story that was never contradicted or corrected. The childhood of Erichthonios is inseparable from the Acropolis, but his conception occurred on Kolonos Agoraios». For the birth of Erichthonius in Kolonos Agoraios also PALAGIA 2000, 68-9.

⁴⁵ See McINNERNEY 2019.

⁴⁶ For the inscriptional and literary evidence see STEWART 2018, 682 n. 4.

⁴⁷ The text is taken from Domenico Musti's translation (in BESCHI, MUSTI 1982); the translation is my own.

⁴⁸ See PALAGIA 2000, 68-74 with references to earlier scholarship; BARRINGER 2009, 109; STEWART 2018; most recently MILES, LYNCH 2024.

cluded a torch-race, large sacrifices, a procession and in all likelihood a musical contest⁴⁹. As Robert Parker notes, «a distinction for the limping god for which one in vain seeks a parallel»⁵⁰. Alcamenes, who was commissioned the same year, took some five years to complete the statues of Hephaestus and Athena.

On Plutarch's testimony, 422 is a plausible date for Euripides' *Erechtheus*⁵¹. We do not know the date of the lost play mentioned by Eratosthenes, but we know that it provided the *aition* for the erection of the Hephaesteion. Evidently, Euripides felt the need to respond to the artistic and cultic avalanche of autochthony. This need is made abundantly clear in the *Ion*, the only play concerning autochthony that survives in its entirety.

The *Heracles*, seen as a response to the escalating emphasis on Athenian autochthony in art and cult, offers a counterbalance. Even to this day a visitor to the Herakleion in Melite can see the Hephaesteion down the hill and the Erechtheion straight across the valley. At the time of the production of *Heracles* the Erechtheion was either completed or well underway. Given the prominent location of the three shrines, their cultic importance, and their proximity, a large proportion of Euripides' audience could easily make connections between the three shrines and see what Euripides was getting at.

If we view Euripides' *Heracles* as a response to the increasingly Athenocentric character of the Hephaesteion, an interesting intermedial dialogue begins to emerge between play and temple. The play's emphasis on the synergy of Heracles and Theseus is a reminder of the benefactions to the city by two exogenous heroes⁵². The dialogue of the play with the representation of the labours of Heracles on the East Side metopes inevitably evokes Theseus' feats too on his way from Troezen to Athens depicted on

⁴⁹ PARKER 1996, 154 with n. 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ See ATHANASSAKI 2023, 177 with the references in n. 23 and 24.

⁵² Euripides dramatizes Theseus' anxiety about his divine parentage in *Hippolytus*, where Theseus rejoices at the fulfillment of the curse he casts against Hippolytus, because he considers it confirmation of his belief that Poseidon is his father.

the North and South flanks; in this respect it serves as a reminder that the emblematic Athenian king came from elsewhere too.

In this connection the *Ion* offers a useful *comparandum*. The play offers a tragicomic panorama of the havoc the autochthonous Creusa and her retinue cause in Apollo's serene sanctuary. In the end it is Apollo, operating behind the scenes, and Athena *ex machina* who save the day. Ion's parentage and trajectory are not as complicated as those of Theseus, but it is worth noting that neither of them is raised in Athens where they go later to claim their rightful position, after they have proven themselves elsewhere⁵³. Theseus proves his valour in the long journey from Troezen to Athens. Ion shows himself to be a natural leader in Delphi, a quality that enables him to survive the plot that Creusa and her pedagogue had hatched with the tacit compliance of the Chorus. Despite Euripides' light touch, the play brings out Athenian suspicion of foreigners and their fixation with autochthony. By contrast, Ion himself is portrayed positively as a decent young man with broad horizons and a cosmopolitan flair, fostered by his upbringing in Apollo's Panhellenic sanctuary⁵⁴.

To go back to *Heracles*, Theseus represents on the stage those who were making decisions about monumental art and cult in real life. The evocation of the cult of Heracles *alexikakos* in Melite echoes the introduction of the cult of another healer in Athens, Asclepius, and the dedication of his shrine in the South slope of the Acropolis in 420/419, at a prime spot west of the theatre of Dionysus and visible to the theatre's audience. There is an obvious overlap between Heracles' power to avert evils and Asclepius' power to heal disease. Still more important, in my view, is the reminder of the welcome reception and integration of exogenous heroes. Euripides plays are full of such heroes, but *Heracles* is unique among the surviving plays, because it dramatizes Theseus, the emblematic Athenian leader, whose claims to autochthony were

⁵³ Pace LORAUX 1992, *Ion* is as much a Delphic play as it is an Athenian play. Neglect of the importance of Delphi, reduces the play to a manifesto of Athenian autochthony, which in my view Euripides undermines.

⁵⁴ Detailed discussion in ATHANASSAKI 2012.

tenuous, persuading the Panhellenic hero *par excellence* to come to Athens and accept all his cults and sanctuaries. The reciprocal benefits that Heracles and Athens will grant and receive are, at first glance, a compliment to the city for its openness, and, on further consideration, a tacit encouragement of such openness. The play's evocation of the Cimonian metopes of the Hephaesteion and the Herakleion at Melite points in the same direction.

Euripides seems to have grown weary of the avalanche of autochthony. Adopting the persona of Theseus, he chose to offset verbal and visual discourses of autochthony by highlighting the issue of new cults. Some in his audience would still have remembered Hephaestus' grand entrance to Athens after the annexation of Lemnos. The reminder was equally powerful, regardless of whether *Heracles* was produced slightly before or slightly after the cult statues of Athena and Hephaestus were installed in the Hephaesteion. The statue complex was the final essential component for completing the temple, which was dedicated some six decades earlier as the first instalment of the great honours that would be offered to the god. If we look at the *Heracles* against this artistic and cultic background, Theseus' invitation and generous offers to his friend and benefactor, and notably Athena's favourite hero, is an unmistakable gesture away from emphasis on autochthony and towards a return to Panhellenic aspirations and concerns.

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ABSTRACT

Ποῖ γῆς; Does tragedy evoke specific places and/or buildings, sculptures, murals? If it does, can we pin them down, given the state of the surviving material evidence, the paucity of literary sources and a host of related difficulties? In the cases we can pin them down, does this knowledge contribute to a deeper understanding of a play and how? What if such evocations are unconscious or the similarities are accidental? These are the questions this paper explores taking Euripides'

Heracles as a case-study, a play that draws attention to its dialogue with its artistic and cultic environment and whose points of contact with the metopes of the Hephaesteion have long been identified and well discussed. My reading broadens the frame of the intermedial dialogue by bringing into the picture (a) the entire decorative programme of the temple, which was nearing its completion in the years following the peace of Nicias in 421; (b) the cult of Athena and Hephaestus which received a great boost after the reorganization of the Hephaesteia in 421; and (c) the cult of Heracles in Attica with emphasis on his cult at Melite, one of the most conspicuous sites of his worship in Athens. It argues that through the persona of Theseus, Euripides offsets verbal and visual discourses of autochthony by highlighting the issue of new cults. Some in his audience would still have remembered Hephaestus' grand entrance to Athens after the annexation of Lemnos; the reminder was equally powerful, regardless of whether *Heracles* was produced slightly before or slightly after the cult statues of Athena and Hephaestus were installed in the Hephaesteion – the statue complex being the final essential component for completing the temple; seen against this artistic and cultic background, Theseus' invitation and generous cultic and artistic offers to Heracles, notably Athena's favourite hero, is an unmistakable gesture away from emphasis on autochthony and towards a return to Panhellenic aspirations and concerns.

KEYWORDS

Euripides — *Heracles* — Hephaestus — Hephaesteion — Herakleion — Intermediality — Autochthony

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