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The Chthonic and the Curated: Hero Cults of Thebes and Sparta

Heroes were a fundamental part of ancient Greek culture, from myths to religion. The concept of the hero in ancient Greek religion occupies a liminal and complex position that resists simple categorisation. Thebes and Sparta are two diverse examples of hero cult worship. Before examining the cases of Thebes and Sparta, it is necessary to establish a clear understanding of what hero cult entailed in the Greek world. According to Homer, the Greek word ἥρωες originally meant a warrior or a nobleman of the epic age. By the Archaic and Classical periods, the Greek word ἥρωες had taken on a specifically religious meaning: a dead mortal who received cultic honours at a fixed location, usually a tomb or shrine. Unlike the ordinary dead, whose commemoration was a private family matter, heroes attracted regular public worship from the wider community. Unlike the Olympian gods, whose immortality placed them beyond the human condition, heroes were mortals whose deaths marked the beginning rather than the end of their religious significance. As Ekroth argues in *The Sacrificial Rituals of Greek Hero-Cults* (2002, p. 21), heroes are best understood as dead mortals whose continued presence is localised, material, and dependent on ritual engagement, tied to specific places where offerings could be made and power negotiated. This spatial connection sets them apart from the Olympians, as Burkert notes in *Greek Religion* (1985, p. 203), and it made hero cult a remarkably adaptable institution, capable of reinforcing aristocratic lineage, backing territorial claims, or building social cohesion depending on local circumstances (Ekroth, 2002, p. 30).

The renewed engagement with Mycenaean remains in the eighth century BC created an environment in which the past became newly significant, as Antonaccio in *An Archaeology of Ancestors* (1995, p. 3) has shown. How different communities responded to that significance varied considerably, and Thebes and Sparta offer a particularly instructive contrast. I do not argue that the two cities represent mirror-opposite systems: both acquired relics for political purposes, both used hero cult to negotiate territorial claims, and both wove heroic commemoration into civic life. However, the differences that emerge are substantial and worth tracing carefully. Spartan hero cult tended toward centralisation, state direction and the construction of authoritative narratives about the past. Theban heroisation was more dispersed and locally embedded, structured around traumatic mythic memory in ways that proved resilient to historical disruption. My central argument is this: while Spartan cult tended to discipline the past into a linear resource for authority, Theban heroisation allowed a more cyclical temporality to accumulate commemorative depth through repeated crisis.

Literary sources for hero cult are not neutral records. As Flower argues, influenced by Assmann and Nora, in his article “Spartan Religion and Greek Religion” (2017), they actively participate in the construction of memory and must be read as interpretative frameworks that both reflect and shape the practices they describe. Hornblower develops it in *Thucydides and Pindar* (2004), drawing attention to the ways ancient authors mediate rather than simply transmit the traditions they record. Herodotus, Xenophon, Pausanias and Pindar each engage with the heroic past differently, and each carries a distinct interpretative agenda. What follows is my reading of how each author contributes to, rather than merely reflects, the commemorative cultures of their respective cities.

Herodotus' account of the translation of Orestes' bones (*Histories*, 1.67–68) moves through inquiry, discovery and acquisition. Acting on Delphic guidance, the Spartans locate Orestes' remains in Tegea and bring them home. The act is framed not as a simple recovery but as a deliberate, divinely sanctioned engagement with the past. The oracle does not only give

instructions; it legitimises the whole operation, reframing what might otherwise look like appropriation as religious necessity. Even the identification of the remains requires interpretation, making clear that access to the heroic past demands active institutional mediation rather than direct inheritance (Pavlidis, 2023). Flower reads the episode as a charter myth in (2017), converting military success into divinely authorised historical continuity, and I find this persuasive. Herodotus is not simply describing what Sparta did; he is participating in the very process by which Spartan power was narrativised. His account of Leonidas works the same way: Thermopylae transitions Leonidas from a historical figure into a heroic exemplar (Pavlidis, 2023, p. 144), showing how hero cult could serve as a tool of interstate competition in which heroic ancestry, publicly claimed and performed, conferred real political authority.

Where Herodotus narrates particular acts of memory-making, Xenophon reveals the institutional framework sustaining them. In the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* (Lac. 15.9), Sparta appears as a society in which ritualised behaviour and collective discipline ensure continuity across generations. The ἀγωγή is a clear example of this. Through years of physical training and collective hardship, the young Spartiate did not just learn about heroic values like courage, self-denial and loyalty to the group; he internalised them in his habits and reflexes, making the heroic past available through embodied routine rather than deliberate thought. The συσσίτια and local shrines reinforced this daily, so that devotional acts also rehearsed social hierarchy (Hodkinson, 1983). Xenophon also records the elaborate posthumous rituals through which Spartan kings were heroised, embedding cult directly within political structures (*Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, Lac. 15.9). It should be noted that Xenophon's admiration for Sparta inevitably shapes what he emphasises, and his account cannot be treated as a disinterested description. The laws attributed to Lycurgus add a further layer: tradition codified as law, giving customary practice the force of a legal norm, as Flower explains in “Spartan Religion and Greek Religion” (2017).

Pausanias' *Description of Greece* (9.5–25) is a different kind of source. Writing in the second century AD, he is several centuries removed from the cults he describes, and his topographical approach reflects his own literary purposes as much as historical reality. With that in mind, his account of Theban hero cults stands out for its fragmentation and resistance to easy summary. He records localised traditions around the Cadmeia, the Ampheion and the sanctuary of Amphiaraus, describing them in terms of physical presence and historical layering rather than building toward a coherent narrative.

The heroes he describes do not resolve neatly. Oedipus is both a source of pollution and a protective force. The Seven Against Thebes are honoured and mourned simultaneously. Amphiaraus is a defeated general who is also a functioning oracle. Their cults, as Schachter shows in *Cults of Boiotia* (1981) and as Berman develops in *Myth, Literature, and the Creation of the Topography of Thebes* (2015), are defined by ongoing negotiation rather than settled meaning. The practices Pausanias records, chthonic libations, nocturnal rites, and votive deposits at tombs, consistently treat the heroic dead as potent and potentially dangerous rather than safely historical. His account of Sparta is more organised by contrast, its sanctuaries tied to civic institutions and social order (Flower, 2017, p. 427). I take the contrast as indicative, even if Pausanias cannot be read as straightforwardly transparent.

Pindar (c. 518–438 BC) represents a different kind of source again. As a Theban composing epinician odes for victorious athletes, he is writing from inside the culture of hero cult, not observing it from outside. Currie argues in *Pindar and the Cult of Heroes* (2005, p. 12) that epinician poetry is a fundamentally religious genre: the heroic status of the patron is not just described but actively constituted through the ode itself. He challenges the traditional scholarly divide between secular and religious poetry, noting that these odes were often performed at festivals or sanctuaries and used formal features, such as the address *chaire* ("hail"), taken directly from hymns to the gods (18). On this reading, the hero cult could be anticipated during a person's lifetime, and the victory ode helped bring it about. Kurke offers a different view in *The Traffic in Praise* (1991), reading epinician primarily as a negotiation of social capital between

aristocratic patrons and their communities, with less emphasis on its religious dimension.

Eisenfeld in *Pindar and Greek Religion* (2022, p. 12) is closer to Currie, arguing that Pindar does not separate heroes in active cultic worship from heroes in mythological narrative. I find Eisenfeld's position the most convincing: the distinction between mythological and cultic heroism seems largely modern, and Pindar's odes make most sense when read as religious performances that helped constitute the very tradition they drew on.

In *Isthmian* 7, Pindar places the contemporary casualty Strepsiades alongside Meleagros, Hektor, and Amphiaraos, arguing that recent loss will eventually become 'ancient service,' sanctified by its association with the heroic past. Currie discusses this passage in *Pindar and the Cult of Heroes* (2005, p. 217), and I think it is one of the most revealing moments in the entire epinician corpus: the process of accumulating meaning through catastrophe was still actively happening in the fifth century, not a Bronze Age relic. His treatment of Amphiaraus in *Nemean* 9.24–7 gets at something central to Theban cult: the seer is already liminal between mortal and divine while alive, so his engulfment by the earth is a culmination rather than a rupture, as Eisenfeld shows in *Pindar and Greek Religion* (2022, p.158). From underground, Amphiaraus continues to praise his son Alkmaion, inverting the usual relationship between the living and the dead in a way that mirrors exactly the oracular logic of the Theban sanctuary. Assmann describes cultural memory as something that animates the past rather than archiving it in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (2011, p. 38). That is precisely what Pindar's odes do, keeping the layered commemorative landscape of Thebes alive across generations (Currie, 2005).

The archaeology of Spartan hero cults reveals a system that was, on the whole, more centrally co-ordinated and ideologically purposeful than anything comparable elsewhere in Greece. The heroic dead were put to work: legitimising the dual kingship, marking territorial boundaries, and reinforcing the values of the *homoioi*, as Golino documents in *Heroic Cults at Sparta Between Mythological Past* (2021, p. 114). These cults developed alongside the city's emergence as a major power in the late eighth century BC and the synoecism of its central villages, Limnai, Pitane, Kynosoura, Mesoia, and Amyklai, as Cartledge outlines in *Sparta and*

Lakonia (2002, p. 97). Antonaccio in *An Archaeology of Ancestors* (1995, p. 267) and Alcock in *Archaeologies of the Greek Past Landscapes* (2002, p. 13) rightly caution against reading explicit political intention into every hero cult, since the line between deliberate institution and organic development is often hard to draw. I accept that caution, but maintain that the overall pattern at Sparta is hard to explain without some degree of centralised coordination.

The Menelaion at Therapne is often cited as an example of the “Achaean policy,” though Flower urges caution with the term in ‘Spartan Religion and Greek Religion’ (2017, p. 426), since the evidence for a deliberate, coordinated strategy varies across cases. The quality of finds at the site, bronzes, ivories, and silver, suggests veneration much closer to divine worship than typical hero cult (Flower, 2017, p. 427), linking the Spartan dyarchy to the Homeric dynasties and providing a genealogical basis for authority. This stands in deliberate contrast to the mass-produced lead figurines found at ordinary village shrines, over 100,000 recovered from the sanctuary of Orthia alone (Flower, 2017, p. 428). The plain hero-reliefs with their drinking-snake iconography expressed communal norms (Golino, 2021, p. 112); the ivories at Therapne expressed the authority of the royal house. Whether this hierarchy was a conscious design or an organic product of different dedicatory contexts is debatable, but its effect was a layered system in which broad devotional participation coexisted with elite proximity to the most prestigious heroic ancestors. In my view, this dual structure was one of the most effective features of the Spartan system.

At Amyklai, the integration of Agamemnon’s cult alongside Hyakinthos shows how Spartan heroic topography developed through absorption and reorientation rather than imposition alone. The Hyakinthia combined mournful ἐναγισμός at the tomb with the joyful celebration of apotheosis, and Pettersson notes its role in bringing perioikoi and, to some extent, helots into a shared ritual calendar in *Cults of Apollo at Sparta* (1992, p. 76). Whether that amounted to genuine social inclusion or mainly served as a mechanism of symbolic subordination is contested: Hodkinson in *Property and Wealth in Classical Sparta* (2000, p. 212) emphasises the instrumental function of such festivals in managing social hierarchy, while others read them as

evidence of something closer to a shared civic identity. I think Hodkinson's reading is more persuasive: the compulsory character of participation suggests control as much as community. The most explicitly political act of cult manipulation was the mid-sixth-century translation of Orestes' bones to the agora, which physically grounded a claim to heroic authority in the civic centre itself (Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.67–68; Pavlides, *The Hero Cults of Sparta*, 2023, p. 5). Hero shrines for Leonidas in the same space reinforced the same logic (Pavlides, 2023, p. 152).

Across Laconia, the spatial distribution of cults suggests coordination that functioned, at least in part, as territorial marking. The Menelaion, the Eleusinion, and the sanctuary of Zeus Messapeus at Tsakona were positioned at prominent points across Spartan territory, and Pavlides argues in *The Hero Cults of Sparta* (2023, p. 5) that they formed a 'sacred cordon' making encroachment a religious transgression as well as a military one. In a state without city walls, I think this is a plausible and important function (Flower, 2017, p. 280). Hundreds of neighbourhood shrines over Geometric-era burials complemented this, weaving heroic commemoration into daily life (Golino, 2021, p. 100). Communal feasting at these sites, as attested by drinking vessels and animal bone fragments, embedded memory in shared bodily practice, as Connerton describes in *How Societies Remember* (1989). Sparta was also unusual in extending heroic honours to historical individuals: kings were honoured not as men but as heroes posthumously (Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, Lac. 15.9); Leonidas' remains were repatriated and commemorated through annual games (Pavlides, 2023, p. 146); and Lycurgus was worshipped as a god (Flower, 2017, p. 442). This gave Sparta's constitutional order a religious legitimacy that few other poleis could match.

Thebes: Preservation, Chthonic Memory, and the Palimpsest Landscape

Theban hero cult looks quite different, and I want to argue that its differences are as analytically significant as its similarities with Sparta. It is more locally embedded, more topographically specific, and organised around a different relationship with the past: less concerned with constructing authoritative narratives than with preserving and ritually engaging

with catastrophic memory. Berman has shown how thoroughly the physical terrain of Thebes was saturated with stories of divine transgression, family violence, and civic destruction in *Myth, Literature, and the Creation of the Topography of Thebes* (2015, p. 7). After the Mycenaean settlement was destroyed in the thirteenth century BC, the ruins were not cleared but preserved and later identified as the remains of the house of Cadmus (Symeonoglou, 1985, p. 26). That retention of catastrophic material shaped everything that followed. Dual foundation myths deepened the layering further, the Phoenician οἰκιστής Cadmus on one hand, the twins Amphion and Zethus on the other, giving the city what Manolova in *The Mytho-Historical Topography of Thebes* (1974, p. 85) calls a near-unparalleled ‘historical depth.’

The sanctuary of Apollo Ismenios, southeast of the Cadmeia, shows how this tradition accumulated rather than was constructed. Three phases of building, beginning with a Geometric temple destroyed by fire around 700 BC, have been identified (Manolova, 1974, p. 88). The site absorbed several distinct cults, including those of Melia and Teneros, whose rural origins suggest peripheral traditions drawn in during synoecism. Golden tripods dedicated by the Thebageneis were used to negotiate political relationships within Boeotia, as Schachter documents in ‘The Theban Amphiaraia’ (2016, p. 368), making the Ismenion a venue for political mediation as much as religious observance. This is worth noting because it complicates any simple picture of Theban cult as purely informal: the Theban commemorative landscape, though more dispersed than Sparta’s, was not without formally organised institutional sites.

At the centre of the Cadmeia was the σηκός of Semele (Schachter, *Cults of Boiotia*, 1981, p. 187), identified with the spot where, according to Euripides (*Bacchae*, 1–3), she was incinerated by Zeus’ lightning. Preserved as an ἄβατον until the Byzantine period (Symeonoglou, 1985, p. 186), the ruins were not replaced by a monument. The Thebans maintained the absence. Nora’s concept of lieux de mémoire in ‘Between Memory and History’ (1989, p. 12) describes sites constructed to compensate for the loss of living memory, substitutes for an organic connection that has already broken down. Jones has questioned whether that

model can be applied to ancient communities without significant rethinking in ‘A Note on Nora’s Lieux de Mémoire’ (2007, p. 143), and I think he is right. The Cadmeia is a useful test case: it is not a reconstructed or institutionalised memory but a site whose authority comes from its direct material connection to the events it commemorates. I prefer to call it a *milieu de mémoire*, a living environment of memory sustained by material continuity, not deliberate reconstruction, though I acknowledge this term is my own extension of the theoretical vocabulary rather than an established category.

Because Heracles ascended to Olympus rather than dying in the ordinary way, his cult in Thebes lacked the tomb-focus typical of hero worship. Cultic attention fell instead on the Alkaidai, his eight sons by Megara, whom he killed in a fit of madness. Their cenotaph received nightly burnt offerings (ἔμπυρα) and funerary games (Schachter, 1981, p. 10; Pindar, *Isthmian* 4.61–4). What was being commemorated was not triumph but domestic horror. The cult did not resolve what Heracles had done; it ritualised it, bringing the community back to that scene night after night. Demand suggests this cyclical return may have helped the community process loss rather than suppress it in *Thebes in the Fifth Century* (2014, p. 3), and while I think that reading is speculative, it points toward something important: this was a community that returned to its worst memories rather than constructing better ones. The Ampheion, an Early Helladic tumulus identified as the tomb of Amphion and Zethus (Antonaccio, 1995, p. 139), reinforced this chthonic emphasis: Pausanias (*Description of Greece*, 9.17.4) records that people from Tithorea tried to steal soil from the mound to guarantee their own agricultural fertility, treating the site as a concentration of the heroic dead’s productive power in the earth itself (Ekroth, *The Sacrificial Rituals*, 2002, p. 225). Iolaos, Heracles’ nephew, occupied a different position: his heroon was where the Sacred Band swore its oaths of fidelity (Aristotle, fr. 98 Rose; Symeonoglou, 1985, p. 136), connecting heroic cult directly to military organisation. Pindar’s description of Iolaos as ὁμόδαμος (of the same *demos* or “of the same people,”) in *Isthmian* 1.14–32 places his significance in civic membership rather than mythological lineage, as Currie notes in *Pindar and the Cult of Heroes* (2005, p. 217).

Amphiaraus, swallowed by the earth as he fled the Seven Against Thebes (Pindar, *Nemean* 9.24–7; Schachter, *Boiotia in Antiquity*, 2013, p. 15), is the clearest example of the oracular dimension of Theban hero cult. His sanctuary functioned as one of the city's five oracles, channelling prophetic knowledge from the chthonic realm (Symeonoglou, 1985, p. 108). Eisenfeld argues in *Pindar and Greek Religion* (2022, p. 163) that in Pindar's treatment, Amphiaraus is already liminal between mortal and divine while alive, so his engulfment is a completion rather than a break. I find this reading persuasive, and it helps explain why the sanctuary retained its oracular function long after the mythic events it commemorated: the hero was not absent but present in a different form. Theban cult rituals typically combined *θυσία* with *ἐναγισμός*, reflecting the dual nature of figures who were both dead and divinely active (Ekroth, 'Heroes and Hero-Cults', 2007, pp. 103-104). Seven pyres near the Ismenos marked the deaths of the Argive leaders (Pindar, *Olympian* 6.15) and Thebes also claimed the bones of Hector, brought from the Troad under oracular instruction (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 9.18.5). Theban relic-acquisition was less systematically documented than Sparta's, but it was not absent, and it served recognisable purposes of political legitimisation.

The spatial organisation of the two cities reflects their broader commemorative orientations, and I think the contrast here is among the most telling in the whole comparison. Spartan sanctuaries clustered at territorial boundaries and civic centres in patterns consistent with deliberate spatial strategy. The Theban heroic landscape was more scattered and topographically shaped. Berman's concept of the 'mythic *χω:ρα*' in *Myth, Literature, and the Creation of the Topography of Thebes* (2015, p. 27), Mount Cithaeron, the Asopus river, the plains of the siege, captures how inherited myth structured the perception of the landscape without requiring the institutional upkeep of the Spartan cordon. These were spaces whose heroic meaning was encoded in tradition, though formal cult was not entirely absent. The contrast is real, but it marks a difference in mode, between zones of inherited meaning and institutionally maintained markers, rather than a simple opposition between organised and unorganised religion.

The frameworks of Assmann, Nora, Halbwachs, and Connerton offer useful, if imperfect, tools for thinking through the differences I have identified above. It is worth acknowledging upfront that these frameworks were developed for modern or early historical contexts, and applying them to ancient Greece requires care. Alcock in *Archaeologies of the Greek Past* (2002, p. 3) has warned against uncritical transfers of modern memory theory to ancient material, pointing out that institutional structures, literate culture and concepts of historical time differ substantially between periods. I use these frameworks as heuristics rather than blueprints, and where they do not fit I have tried to say so clearly.

Assmann's distinction between communicative memory, informal, short-term, socially transmitted, and cultural memory, formalised, institutionalised, transmitted across generations, is laid out in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (2011, p. 36) and maps well onto the Spartan model. State-sponsored relic translations, formalised royal funeral rites, regularised territorial sanctuaries: these all exhibit the features Assmann (2011, p. 40) associates with cultural memory, deliberate formalisation, symbolic restructuring of the past, and deployment as a resource for authority. Theban hero cult fits less neatly. Its traditions were dispersed across multiple loosely connected sites and sustained by local communities rather than central institutions. Assmann's concept of polycentric memory, in which traditions exist across multiple sites without a single organising authority (Assmann, 2011, p. 53), gets at something here, though it is not a perfect fit. Pindar's odes suggest a mode of transmission that is neither purely informal nor fully institutionalised, performative and contextually specific, yet drawing on a shared inherited tradition (Currie, 2005, p. 194).

Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, developed in 'Between Memory and History' (1989, p. 12), applies more readily to the Spartan evidence. The Menelaion and the translated bones are recognisably sites of memory in his sense: deliberate acts of preservation designed to maintain a connection with an otherwise inaccessible past. The Cadmeia does not fit this model defined by material continuity with catastrophe representing a category Nora's framework cannot

adequately describe. I argued above that the Cadmeia is better understood as a milieu de mémoire, and the theoretical divergence from Nora is part of what makes the Theban case interesting: it shows that not all ancient commemoration worked through reconstruction, and that some communities preserved the past precisely by refusing to rebuild it.

Halbwachs' emphasis on collective frameworks as the structures through which memory is sustained, developed in *On Collective Memory* (1992), fits Sparta better than Thebes. The ἀγωγή, the συσσίτια and compulsory royal mourning all provided tightly regulated frameworks for heroic memory. Theban frameworks were more dispersed and variable, as Berman shows in *Myth, Literature, and the Creation of the Topography of Thebes* (2015, p. 89). Connerton's analysis of incorporating practices in *How Societies Remember* (1989, p. 19) bridges the literary and archaeological evidence usefully. His argument that values are transmitted through bodily routines, not just explicit instruction, illuminates both the ἀγωγή and the neighbourhood shrines: each made the heroic past available through habit rather than deliberate recollection. Theban chthonic ritual, ἐναγισμός, nocturnal offerings, oath-taking at a heroon, involved a different bodily relationship, oriented toward reactivating and confronting the past rather than reinforcing it through routine (Ekroth, 'Heroes and Hero-Cults', 2007).

The contrast between linear and cyclical temporal orientations comes through most clearly when specific practices are placed side by side. The translation of Orestes' bones was a one-time act; its political effects were secured by its permanence: once done, it fixed a claim to heroic authority in the civic landscape that could not be undone (Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.67–68). The nightly ἔμπυρα for the Alkaidai had no such endpoint. Returning to the same site each night, re-enacting the same grief, the ritual had no terminus. Demand suggests in *Thebes in the Fifth Century* (2014, pp. 50–65) that this cyclical return may have built the community's capacity to face loss rather than repress it. I think this reading is plausible, and it aligns with the broader pattern I have traced throughout this essay: Theban heroisation worked by returning to catastrophe rather than moving past it. Spartan cult accumulated authority through completion

and permanence; Theban ritual accumulated meaning through repetition and return. The fact that Thebes survived the Spartan occupation of the Cadmeia and the Macedonian erasure of 335 BC is at least consistent with the view that this orientation provided a form of cultural resilience, even if a direct causal link cannot be demonstrated (Berman, 2015, p. 102).

Comparing hero cults in Thebes and Sparta does not produce a clean opposition between two fully formed systems. Both cities acquired relics for political purposes, both used heroic commemoration to negotiate territorial claims, and both integrated the heroic dead into civic life. What the comparison does reveal, and what I have tried to show throughout this essay, is a difference in orientation that was systematic and consequential. Spartan hero cult tended toward centralisation, institutional reinforcement and the construction of linear narratives grounding present authority in a fixed and completed past. Theban heroisation tended toward dispersal, local embeddedness, and a cyclical engagement with catastrophic memory that prioritised depth over coherence.

For Thebes, this produced a commemorative culture in which the heroic dead, Oedipus, Amphiaraus, the Alkaidai, the Seven Against Thebes, remained present as figures of ongoing, unresolved significance. Their cults kept a conversation going between the living and the dead, maintained through ritual repetition rather than institutional upkeep (Currie, 2005, pp. 40-1). Pindar's poetry contributed to this from within, adding new layers to a commemorative landscape whose depth was itself a resource for communal identity (Manolova, 1974, p. 91). Whether this fully explains the city's capacity to reconstitute itself after successive destructions is a causal claim the evidence cannot fully support, but it is the most coherent explanation available, and I find it compelling.

For Sparta, centralisation and institutional reinforcement produced a commemorative culture of considerable coherence and political effectiveness. Through the appropriation of Achaean heroes, strategic shrine placement across Laconia, the heroisation of kings and lawgivers, and the somatic inscription of heroic values through the ἀγωγή, Sparta built a

relationship with the heroic past that consistently served to legitimise present authority (Pavrides, 2023, p. 152). That coherence was also a vulnerability: the system depended on the continued functioning of the institutions that maintained it.

Both cases make the same broader point, and it is one I want to end on. The relationship between a community and its heroic dead was never simply inherited; it was always, to some degree, actively constructed and maintained. The form that construction took, centralised or dispersed, linear or cyclical, institutionalised or embedded in landscape, shaped what the past could be made to mean, and what resources it could provide in times of crisis. Thebes and Sparta do not tell us which approach was better. But they do illustrate, more clearly than almost any other comparison in the ancient world, the full range of possibilities that hero cult, as an institution, was capable of accommodating.

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