

### HELEN'S DIVINE ORIGINS

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It is generally agreed that she must have been a goddess before she was a mortal heroine, but the connection between these two incarnations is obscure.

Andrew L. Brown 1996: 675

It often happens that an article follows up loose ends in another article, one's own or someone else's. This article is a case in point, returning rather shame-facedly to a too brief discussion of Helen's origins in an article published several years ago.<sup>1</sup> I was trying to make a critique of the consensus expressed in the epigraph on this page, that Helen was “a goddess before she was a mortal heroine.” Such a goddess would constitute a determinate origin of Helen's myth and her cults. Starting from a goddess origin, one would only have to explain, in order to explain the myth, how the goddess became the mortal heroine. “But the connection between these two incarnations is obscure.” Not only is the connection obscure, but more than one goddess is in question and more than one kind of goddess. Indo-European mythology offers a candidate or candidates; Greek cult seems to offer another. One has to pick and choose among origins, if an origin is what one wants. Having offered critiques of the Indo-European and the cultic origins of Helen that scholars have

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<sup>1</sup> Edmunds 2002-2003.

proposed, I address, in the final part of this article, the question why scholars wanted and continue to want origins.

### 1. Indo-European prototypes of Helen

Most modern scholars see ancient and prehistoric European culture not as the exclusive product of a mythical Indo-European tribe, but as the result of multi-cultural activity along land and sea trade routes (which, coincidentally, cover much the same region as the Indo-European descendants, but without the hole in the Middle East).

Christine Goldberg 1998: 251 n. 7

Dragons are by no means confined to the Indo-European world, needless to say, but it is possible to employ linguistic methods to determine some of the characteristics of specifically Indo-European monsters ....

Joshua T. Katz 2005: 28.

Cognates of Helen have been perceived in the mythologies of three other peoples speaking languages in the Indo-European family: the Indian Suryâ, the daughter of the Sun in the Rig Veda, the Lithuanian Saulės dukterys, and the Latvian Saules meita, in each case “Sun’s daughter.”<sup>2</sup> As Helen has twin brothers, the Dioscuri, who are associated with horses and are saviors, Suryâ has twin brothers, the Ashvins, who have more or less the same attributes as the Dioscuri.<sup>3</sup> The Lithuanian and Latvian daughters also have twin brothers, the Dievo sunėliai and the Dieva dēli. The latter rescue their sister.<sup>4</sup> In one of the Latvian folk songs which are the source for these twins and their doings,

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<sup>2</sup> Suryâ is the feminine form of Surya, “Sun.” For a survey of the evidence see Frame 1978: 139-40.

<sup>3</sup> The situation is complex, however. See Güntert 1924: 260-76; Nagy 1973: 172 n. 94; Frame 1978: 139-40.

<sup>4</sup> Ward 1968: 64-66; Puhvel 1987: 228-29.

Saule's daughter waded in the sea,  
they saw only her crown.  
Row the boat, sons of Dievs,  
save Saule's [= of Saules meita] soul!<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Helen's father is Zeus, the Ashvins' father has the cognate name Dyaus, and the name of the Latvian twins' father, Dievs, is another cognate. Helen and the Dioscuri are, M.L. West concluded, a "nugget of Indo-European mythology, preserved from a time long before the Hellenes came to Greece."<sup>6</sup>

Further comparison of the Dioscuri with the Ashvins, however, has proven to be difficult. While the latter are gods of dawn, and have an epithet which can be interpreted to mean "bringing back to light and life,"<sup>7</sup> their so-called "rescue" of their sister is a matter of their role in the setting and the rising of the sun. Compare the Latvian song just quoted. Vedic myth does not offer any story about the Ashvins and Suryâ that corresponds with the Dioscuri's rescue of their sister when she was abducted by Theseus and Peirithoüs. (The Dioscuri play no role in the Trojan War myth.) Indeed, the relations between the Ashvins and Suryâ in the *Rig Veda* are extremely various.<sup>8</sup> As for the Vedic Dyaus, he is not the personified sky-god that Zeus is but simply the sky.<sup>9</sup>

As Stephanie Jamison has remarked, "given its enigmatic style, the *Rig Veda* has very little direct evidence for *anything*."<sup>10</sup> But the main reason for the absence of an abduction story in the mine from which the "nugget" came is that the marriage of Suryâ is of the *svayamvara* type, in which the maiden chooses for herself.<sup>11</sup> The Ashvins, whatever their role, presumably cooperate. Suryâ could thus be considered in fact the anti-type of Helen. (Even if Helen leaves Sparta with Paris willingly, she is not, by this act, choosing him as a husband. She is deserting the husband she already has.)

The most promising *narrative* parallel between Vedic myth and the Greek myth of Helen was pointed out by Vittore Pisani. In 1928, he

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<sup>5</sup> Puhvel 1987: 228.

<sup>6</sup> West 1975: 8. For a good summary of the parallelisms, including the Latvian one, see Macdonell 1897: 53; Skutsch 1987: 189.

<sup>7</sup> Frame 1978: 134-40.

<sup>8</sup> See Macdonell 1897: 51.

<sup>9</sup> Macdonell 1897: 21-22.

<sup>10</sup> Jamison 2001: 303. Her emphasis. Cf. Thomson 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Jamison 2001: 304-309.

published an article in which he compared Saranyu (probably another dawn goddess) with Helen with respect to one of the most problematical aspects of her myth, the image that went to Troy with Paris while the real Helen stayed in Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Saranyu disappears at the time of her wedding to Vivasvant and the gods replace her with an image (*RV* 10.17.1-2), i.e., the husband here gets the image, whereas in the Greek myth the abductor gets it. Of the two stanzas in question, the second is more difficult. It appears to mean that, before she disappears, she gives birth to and immediately abandons the Ashvins.<sup>13</sup> In the Vedic myth, then, the woman replaced by an image is the mother of the twins, while in the Greek myth, she is their sister.

An Indo-European prototype has been proposed for Paris, too. Deborah Boedeker, in *Aphrodite's Entry into Greek Epic*, explores epithets and narrative functions common to Aphrodite, Eos, and the Vedic dawn goddess Ushas. Aphrodite's rescue of Paris in *Iliad* 3, she finds, belongs to a particular type of abduction-preservation narrative earlier defined by Gregory Nagy: a goddess (Eos or Aphrodite in Greek myth) falls in love with a beautiful young man, whom she abducts and upon whom she confers immortality.<sup>14</sup> Nagy's prime case in Greek myth was the story of Eos and Tithonus.<sup>15</sup> Boedeker finds that, in the abduction-preservation of Paris, too, which culminates in the union of Paris and Helen, the erotic impulse of the abducting goddess is latent.<sup>16</sup> The work of Linda Clader supported Boedeker's finding. Concentrating on the two women in the triangle Paris-Aphrodite-Helen, and beginning from Helen's epithets in Homer, Clader came to a conclusion that tended to confirm Helen's typological affinity with Aphrodite and the dawn goddess figure.<sup>17</sup> About a decade after the time of the studies just

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<sup>12</sup> [1928]1969: 323-45. Skutsch 1987: 190 says that the connection of Helen with Saranyu was first pointed out by J. Ehni in 1890 but does not give a reference. For discussion, see Grotanelli 1986: 127-30. For Saranyu as dawn goddess, see Macdonell 1897: 125. Doniger 1999: 41-55, speaking of Saranyu as "the key to the relationship between Sita and Helen," provides extensive discussion of the history and variants of the Saranyu myth.

<sup>13</sup> Pisani [1928]1969: 338. For instantaneous pregnancy and parturition, compare the alien woman played by Natasha Henstridge in the American science fiction movies "Species" (1995) and "Species 2" (1998).

<sup>14</sup> Nagy 1973.

<sup>15</sup> A story much on the minds of classicists because of the "new Sappho."

<sup>16</sup> Boedeker 1974: 40, 61-62.

<sup>17</sup> Clader 1976: 53-62.

mentioned, Ann Suter revisited Aphrodite's rescue of Paris, concentrating now on Paris and reinforcing Boedeker's perception of the myth of the dawn goddess as underlying the narrative of *Iliad* 3. Paris, Suter concluded, is "the analogue for the Dawn goddess' consort."<sup>18</sup>

The Rig Veda offers, then, three possible cognates of Helen: Suryâ, Saranyu, and Ushas. Because all three are dawn goddesses, the Indo-European comparatist will look for solar attributes of Helen. For example (and probably it is the best example), she once has the epithet *Dios thugatêr* (*Od.* 4.227), which is the exact cognate of Ushas' epithet, *divás duhitâr*.<sup>19</sup> But the non-solar virgins Artemis and Athena have this epithet, too, the former once (*Od.* 20.61), the latter several times (*Il.* 2.548, 4.128, etc.). The Greek epithet has obviously been loosed from any solar moorings it might once have had. Helen is even *compared* to Artemis.<sup>20</sup> As already indicated, the supposed resemblance of Helen's brothers, the Dioscuri, to the Ashvins does not produce a strong argument for her descent from the dawn goddess, and another pair of twins in Sanskrit literature have presented themselves as more likely cognates.<sup>21</sup>

The closest parallel to the Trojan War myth in Sanskrit literature remains the abduction of Sita, which is the central story of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, and the next-closest is the abduction of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* (3.248-83). In fact, the hermit Markandeya tells the story of Rama and Sita to one of Draupadi's husbands, who believes that he is the most unfortunate of men, in order to console him (*MBh* 3.257-276.1). The parallelism between Helen and Sita extends, in later versions of the story, even to the creation of a double of Sita, who has the same exculpatory function as the image which went to Troy in place of the real Helen. In one of these versions, the double of Sita in her third reincarnation becomes Draupadi. Though the earliest sources for the

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<sup>18</sup> Suter 1987: 56.

<sup>19</sup> Schmitt 1967: 169-73; Nagy 1973: 162.

<sup>20</sup> *Od.* 4.122. The line became the basis of the Pythagoreans' rehabilitation of Helen, who, they said, came from the moon (because Artemis was the moon) and returned there after the plan of Zeus was accomplished through her. See Detienne 1957.

<sup>21</sup> The sons of the Ashvins, the twins Nakula and Sahadeva, two of the Pandavas and thus two of the husbands of Draupadi, in the *Mahabharata*, have been seen as parallel to Agamemnon and Menelaus: Wikander 1957: 66-96; Clader 1976: 50-53. For a rethinking of Wikander, see Frame 1978: 143-52, who demonstrates a parallelism between Nakula and Sahadeva and the Vedic twins.

abduction of an image of Sita come from the fifteenth century C.E., images of Sita serving other purposes are found already in Valmiki, and thus a capacity for doubling already belongs to this character.<sup>22</sup>

By the same kind of reasoning which infers a particular Indo-European “nugget” from cognate names in the *Rig Veda*, in Greek, Latvian, and Lithuanian myth, one could infer an Indo-European “Abduction of the Beautiful Wife” from the story-pattern common to the *Ramayana*, the abduction of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, the Trojan War myth, and the Old Irish antecedents of the Guinevere story. Furthermore, as Jamison has shown, the parallels between a scene in Homer’s *Iliad* (the Teichoscopia in 3.161-244) and one in the *Mahabharata* are so close that a prototype in Indo-European epic can be assumed.<sup>23</sup> She discusses abduction (Rakshasa marriage) as one of eight types of legal union in Sanskrit law codes; shows how, in this context, the abduction of Draupadi is illegal; how her recovery is a “re-abduction,” meeting the legal conditions of this kind of marriage; and how the narrative of *Iliad* 3 can be understood as a Greek version of parts of this kind of “re-abduction.”<sup>24</sup> The parallelism is so close that the “re-abduction” takes place only after Draupadi (~Helen) replies to questioning by her abductor, King Jayadratha (~Priam, instead of Paris), concerning her five Pandava brothers, her rescuers (~Menelaus and the Greeks). She has to identify each of them by name.<sup>25</sup>

One of the features of the Indo-European “Abduction of the Beautiful Wife” would have been the double nature of the abductor, human and superhuman. The abductor of Sita is the demon king Ravana. He carries her away in the Pushpaka Vimana, an airborne chariot. Despite the fact that he is a demon and a master of such devices as this chariot, he can be slain, and finally Sita’s husband, Rama, slays him. The superhuman side of the abductor is prominent in the Celtic prototype of the medieval romance about Lancelot and Guinevere, as reconstructed by

<sup>22</sup> *Ramayana* 6.68.1-28; 7.89.4. For discussion of the illusory Sita, see Doniger 1999: 12-23, 27-28.

<sup>23</sup> Jamison 1994: 5-16. For the evidence for Indo-European epic, see Katz 2005.

<sup>24</sup> For an extensive discussion of “marriage by capture,” see Jamison 1996: 218-35. Allen 2002 argues for a pentadic structure common to the Trojan (including episodes in Epic Cycle) and Kurukshetra Wars (*MBh*), with many common themes, e.g. “Ambiguous female (Athena, Sikhandin) collaborates in killing,” “Mutual affection between enemies (Achilles and Priam, Arjuna and Bhishma).”

<sup>25</sup> Cf. summary and discussion by Katz 2005: 27-28.

T. P. Cross and W. A. Nitze. He lives in a supernatural realm, from which the wronged husband is nevertheless ultimately able to recover his wife. As for the abductor of Helen, he has two names. One, Alexander belongs to Trojan tradition, indeed to Trojan history.<sup>26</sup> The other, less common name is Paris. Suter has studied this pair of names in relation to eight other pairs of names in the *Iliad* and has shown that Paris-Alexander “conforms to the demands of the [Iliadic] convention of ‘language of gods and language of men’.” Further, she has shown that “the introduction of *Paris* [in Book 3], the marked divine name, and the narrative pattern of the episode which follows the introduction, conform to the pattern established by names explicitly designated as divine, and *Paris*, when used thereafter, indicates connections of the character with the divine.”<sup>27</sup> Though the divine side of Paris is certainly in the background in the *Iliad*, his two names point to an ambiguity that links him to Ravana and to the Celtic abductor.

To return to Jamison’s account of Helen’s naming of the Greek heroes in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, it is worth pausing to notice how the Greek epic tradition has specialized the figure of Helen and has given a particular significance to the naming. Richard Martin has shown that this passage, even though it is not ostensibly a lament, contains the strategies and diction of the lament genre, and belongs to a consistent characterization of Helen as keening woman. He supports his finding by comparison with lament as practiced by the women of Inner Mani in Greece. He concludes: “Helen is so closely associated with lament in Greek tradition that she becomes its metonym.”<sup>28</sup> As lament is the foundational speech act of all poetry of commemoration, and Trojan War epic commemorates the heroes by preserving their kleos, so Helen figures the particular poetic tradition in which, at the narrative level, she is the cause of the action. This specialization of Helen amounts, then, to a self-consciousness on the part of Homeric epic concerning its narrative *raison d’être*, which one could call the myth of Helen. This myth is the notional whole to which every performance looks.<sup>29</sup> The Hesiodic tradition is consistent with the Homeric one. The *Catalogue of Women* culminates in the marriage of Helen and Menelaus, which marked the

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<sup>26</sup> Treaty between Alaksandu of Wilusa and the Hittite king Muwattalli II (ca. 1290-1272 B.C.E.): see most recently Latacz 2004: 105-110.

<sup>27</sup> Suter 1991: 25. For earlier discussion of pairs of names in Homer see 13 nn. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup> Martin 2003: 128.

<sup>29</sup> For the notional whole, see Nagy [1979]1999: xvii and 2003: 14-15.

beginning of the end of the age of heroes. Concluding the catalogue of her suitors, Hesiod immediately reports Zeus' plan to obliterate the race of men and the heroes in particular (fr. 204.96-101 M-W). The Trojan War, to be caused by Helen, is his means to this end (cf. *Cypria* fr. 1 Bernabé).<sup>30</sup> Martin's interpretation of the naming complements the interpretation of Helen's weaving, also in Book 3 (125-28), as a figure of poetic composition.<sup>31</sup>

To conclude on Sanskrit epic, viewed in a broader context, it seems to point to an Indo-European prototype different from the one discerned in the *Rig Veda*. In the former, a woman is abducted from her husband. He goes to the land of the abductor, kills him, and recovers his wife. In the latter, the woman is a dawn goddess and is associated with twins. The main (the only?) story about her concerns a mortal lover. It might, however, be wondered if these two prototypes are in fact two and distinct or if they can somehow be connected. Wendy Doniger has proposed a point of connection. Having discussed the similarity of Helen to Sita, especially with respect to the double of Sita in Tulsi (15th century C.E.) and in other later sources, she goes on to propose that Saranyu ("or the subject of another, now lost story on which Saranyu herself was modeled"<sup>32</sup>) might have served as a model for both Sita and Helen. She argues for this model with reference to features which link Saranyu, Sita and Helen—a connection with the sun; a relation to twins; a double.

As for a solar Helen, much doubt is necessary, as I have suggested, and, as for Sita, her name means "Furrow." Doniger herself concedes that the case for a solar Sita is weak. With twins, one is on firmer ground. Both Saranyu and Sita bears twins, Sita, however, after the time of her rescue. Helen is the sister of twins. One would not want to deny that the Dioscuri are an Indo-European reflex in the myth of Helen, though enthusiasts for this particular reflex have again and again been led by the Dioscuri's explicit rescue of their sister to read "rescues" back into the quite different relations between the other twins and their

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. West 1985: 43, 50, 114-15, 119-21.

<sup>31</sup> For a bibliography of this interpretation see Pantelia 2002: 25 n. 21. Helen, when she first appears in the *Il.*, is weaving a large purple cloth into which she works many scenes of the trials which Trojans and Achaeans suffered on her account. Kennedy 1986 shows the ways in which Helen cannot serve as the figure of the bard, with particular reference to the Teichoscopia and the gaps in her knowledge which emerge in that scene.

<sup>32</sup> Doniger 1999: 60.



sister. The episode in Helen's life in which the Dioscuri play a role, i.e., her abduction by Theseus, is a distinct kind of story, typologically different from the abduction by Paris.<sup>33</sup> These two abduction stories are independent, as is the story about the egg from which Helen was born. Homer draws a line between the two abduction stories when he says of the Dioscuri, "Already the life-bearing earth possessed them in Lacedaemon, in their own native land" (*Il.* 3.243-44). The Dioscuri belong to neither the temporal nor the geographical framework of the *Iliad*.

A double is also something which Saranyu, Sita and Helen have in common, provided that the late sources for Sita's are relevant. As for Saranyu's double, in the *Rig Veda*, it is an image which is left to console her husband. The shadow of Sita, however, is for the purpose of deluding Ravana and preserving her chastity. Doniger adduces a story about a double or doubles of Saranyu (here Samjna) from the *Harivamsha* (perhaps 600 C.E.), but this story is typologically quite different from the abduction stories in which the doubles of Sita and Helen play a role. Doniger's relentless (and hardly unproductive) concentration on the double causes her to construct a comparative circle admitting evidence that could not be admitted into mine, which is driven by the conjunction of the abduction and rescue motifs. For the double of Saranyu, I am afraid that the somewhat obscure evidence of the *Rig Veda*, presented above, is all that is available. It does not look like a parallel to the double in the abduction stories.

One is left with twins as the only feature securely linking Saranyu, Sita and Helen, and, as noted, the narrative function of the twins differs considerably from one source to another. If one sets typological narrative consistency as the standard (as distinguished from the principle that Lewis Richard Farnell called *noscitur a sociis*), then the various twins turn out to be rather weak links.<sup>34</sup> Although I am, with this conclusion, opposing Doniger, I am doing so in her spirit, in that I am offering, on the basis of a differently motivated comparative circle, "another, now lost story,"<sup>35</sup> i.e., the Indo-European abduction story,

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<sup>33</sup> Edmunds 2002-2003: 20.

<sup>34</sup> Farnell 1921: 199-200. He defines this principle as: "the significance of a person may be revealed by the significance of his associates." My doubts about the comparative value of the Vedic and other twins are hardly original with me but are already well articulated in Farnell's chapter on the Dioscuri (175-228).

<sup>35</sup> Doniger 1999: 60.

which I believe is the prototype for the stories of Helen and Sita. Whether or not also of Saranyu, I am unsure.

It remains to explain the relation of the folktale, "The Abduction of the Beautiful Wife," discussed in my earlier article on Helen, to the Indo-European prototype for the myth of Helen.<sup>36</sup> I spoke of the folktale as defining the conditions of possibility of the Greek myth, and I assumed contact between folktale and myth within a specifically Greek (though indeterminable) history. But if I posit an "Abduction of the Beautiful Wife" already in Indo-European myth and indeed in Indo-European epic, where does the folktale come in? I would say that the folktale must define the conditions of possibility for the Indo-European prototype, too, in addition to whatever influence it exercised later within a specifically Greek reception. Whether it was also an Indo-European folktale or came into the Indo-European domain through borrowing is impossible to say.

The historical precedence of folktale to Indo-European prototype takes further back in time a process of integration that is well attested for Greek hero myths or legends, many of which display more or less the same plots as international folktales. In his explanation of this phenomenon, William Hansen begins by asking:

Do the Greek hero legends derive from old, international folktales? Or have the old hero legends turned into the folktales of today, as the theory of ... devolution has it?

He answers:

Close comparison of ancient and modern variants of the same story leads me regularly to the conclusion that when a Greek legend and an international folktale share a similar plot, the legend derives from the folktale rather than the other way around, for it is almost invariably easier to understand how an individual Greek legend might have developed as a special adaptation of a more general story than to understand how the folktale might have developed

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<sup>36</sup> Edmunds 2002-2003.

from the particularized and highly adapted story that a legend is.<sup>37</sup>

This same reasoning I would apply to the historical relation of "Abduction of the Beautiful Wife" to the Indo-European story-pattern common to the *Ramayana*, etc. The Indo-European "Helen" occupies the same position as the Indo-European dragon in the epigraph from Joshua Katz, and, as in the epigraph from Christine Goldberg, one tends to think of her not as an Indo-European creation, certainly not in W.R. Halliday's sense, but as a multi-cultural product.<sup>38</sup>

As for the early date which my account presupposes for this international story, there is of course no direct evidence, and one final comparison may help, this time with the better-documented ancient Near East. The folklorist Heda Jason states: "As for literate cultures, the maximal depth reached is four and a half millennia of written documentation in the ancient Near East. This documentation does not show any change in the qualities of the genres, down to details of tale types. Already the earliest specimens preserved show exactly the same literary qualities of form and content as modern oral tradition."<sup>39</sup>

## 2. Greek cults of Helen

Of the various cults of Helen in ancient Greece, one in or near Sparta and one on Rhodes have had the most importance for the myth-ritual interpretation of the origin of her myth, i.e., the interpretation according to which a ritual generated the myth.<sup>40</sup> In these cults, Helen is

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<sup>37</sup> Hansen 2002: 15-16. Cf. West 1985: 30: "Much of the legendary matter which the poet [of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*] incorporated must have come to him in epic guise; some of it was pure folk-tale, but we can see from the *Odyssey* that such material was readily drawn into the ambit of epic poetry, indeed may have existed in no other poetic form."

<sup>38</sup> Halliday 1933: 13, for example: "If the fairy stories of the world are considered, it can hardly be questioned that the Indo-European *märchen* fall into a single group. In general character they are recognizably different from the tales of the Lower Culture in other parts of the world. ... Indeed, it is noticeable how rapidly Indo-European stories become distorted where they have been diffused outside the main area to which they belong. This may be observed, for example, in the variants which have been thrown off southwards along the line of Arabic influence in Africa, e.g. in Zanzibar or among the Ba Ronga."

<sup>39</sup> 2000: 35. Cf. Burkert 1992: 120-24 on the animal fable.

<sup>40</sup> In arguing against this interpretation I am not presupposing that myth-ritual interpretations are always wrong. Cf. the balanced account of Bremmer 1994:

associated with trees, and thus she comes to be interpreted as a fertility goddess who somehow turns into a figure in myth (cf. the epigraph from Andrew L. Brown with which this article began). On Rhodes, there was an apparently related sanctuary of Helen Dendritis, "Helen of the Tree."<sup>41</sup> At Sparta, Helen had a sanctuary (*hieron*) at Platanistas, "Plane-tree Grove."<sup>42</sup> This place lay in Pitanê, the most famous quarter of Sparta, where Pausanias saw twenty temples, eleven hero shrines, five graves, and five statues, amongst other things.<sup>43</sup> Helen was, then, hardly the only object of cult in this quarter, though, when she is discussed apart from the rest of the landscape, her unique prominence tends to be assumed.

#### a. Platanistas and Rhodes

Theocritus is the source for a plane-tree and its ritual,<sup>44</sup> in honor of Helen, plausibly assumed to have taken place in the sanctuary at Plane-tree Grove (*Id.* 18.43-48). He conjures up the epithalamion sung by young women of Sparta at the marriage of Helen and Menelaus. The lines suggesting the cult, otherwise unknown, run:

We first a crown of low-growing lotus<sup>45</sup>  
 having woven will place it on a shady plane-tree.  
 First from a silver oil-flask soft oil  
 drawing we will let it drip beneath the shady plane-tree.  
 Letters will be carved in the bark, so that someone passing by  
 may read in Doric: "Reverence me. I am Helen's tree."

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61-64. (He does not discuss Helen.) The myth-ritual approach is often associated with the "Cambridge ritualists," on whom see Versnel 1989.

<sup>41</sup> Paus. 3.19.9-10. For a survey of this and other evidence for the cults of Helen, see Wide 1893: 340-46.

<sup>42</sup> Paus. 3.15.3. For the geography, see Calame 1997: 193-94. He cites an edition of Pausanias by Musti and Torelli which I have not seen. (I cite Calame 1997 because it "is the equivalent of a second edition" [vi] of Calame 1977.) On the supposed representation of Helen as a tree, standing between the Dioscuri, on a coin from Gythion, see Chapouthier [1935]1984: 90 and 149. Despite his assertion, it is far from certain that the object between the Dioscuri is a tree.

<sup>43</sup> I take these numbers from Stibbe 1989: 81. Stibbe 1989: 80-83 is a survey of Pitanê.

<sup>44</sup> By "ritual," I mean a repeated, codified action in the worship of a hero or a god. On the difficulties of the term see Bremmer 1994: 38-39.

<sup>45</sup> This word was applied to several different plants. It is not certain which one Theocritus had in mind.

The young women are instituting the cult, which would have included the footrace they describe at the beginning of the *Idyll* (22), at the moment of Helen's marriage.<sup>46</sup> In the lines immediately following those just quoted, they return to the epithalamion which frames the poem. Their self-description matches, in general, the evocations in Aristophanes and Euripides of young women dancing at Sparta.<sup>47</sup> Helen leads the chorus (*Lys.* 1314-15) or dances in the festival of Hyacinthus (*Hel.* 1465-70).<sup>48</sup> But the songs in question cover a range of Spartan deities, and the dramatists were not thinking of the plane-tree cult.

Historians of religion and scholars focusing on Helen take *Idyll* 18 as documentary evidence of a historical cult. In the past two decades, however, literary scholars have stressed the playfulness and irony of this *Idyll*.<sup>49</sup> In lines 52-53, the young women, praying to Zeus for undying wealth that will pass from fathers to sons, call attention to Helen's failure, known to all readers of the *Idyll*, to produce male offspring.<sup>50</sup> It seems to be impossible to proceed to a documentary level of this poem without negotiating the self-consciousness mannerism of Theocritus, an example of which appears in the lines concerning the cult. The obvious interpretation of the adverb translated "in Doric" (Doric because the young women speak and write Doric) is, as A.S.F. Gow said, absurd. "The adverb ... is superfluous to the context and really represents a comment

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<sup>46</sup> On the footrace as part of the ritual see Calame *ibid.* Brillante 2003 argues that lines 9-21 and 49-58 constitute the epithalamion and refer to the Platanistas cult, while lines 22-48 are a separate section, which refers to the Therapnê cult.

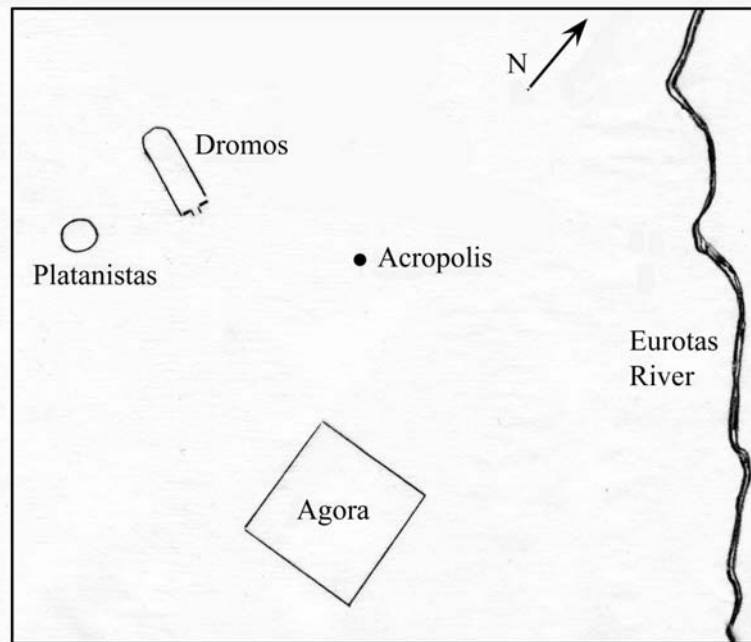
<sup>47</sup> Aristoph. *Lys.* 1296-1321 (exodos); Eur. *Hel.* 1465-78 (first antistrophe of third stasimon). For discussion of these passages in relation to Theocr. *Id.* 18, see Calame 1997: 192-93; Brillante 2002: 48-49. In Alc. fr. 1 Page reference to the cult at Platanistas has long been detected. See the bibliography in Brillante 2003: 184 n. 13. Nagy 1990: 345-47 takes Agido and Hagesikhora, the two choral leaders of the Alc. fr., to refer to the Leucippides.

<sup>48</sup> See Calame 1997: 175 and n. 266 on the procession of young women at the Hyacinthia and 195-96 and n. 329 for the association of Helen with this festival. The place in Hesychius which he cites in n. 266 connects the carriages with an otherwise unattested festival of Helen, the Heleneia (cf. Nilsson 1932: 73, cited again below).

<sup>49</sup> For a bibliography see Brillante 2003: 179 n. 1. Comparison with the "New Sappho" reveals another dimension of the literariness of *Id.* 18: Acosta-Hughes 2006.

<sup>50</sup> A weakly attested son, Aganus, by Paris (schol. Eur. *Andr.* 898 = *Cypria* fr. 12 Bernabé) plays no role in any known version of her myth.

by the learned poet."<sup>51</sup> The point of the comment remains unexplained, and leaves the reader with the uneasy question of how literally any of the description can be taken.



Map 1. Helen in Sparta. After Stibbe 1989.

The very notion of a tree cult is puzzling. Ancient Greek comparanda for such a cult are lacking (see the next paragraph for clarification of this point). A fortiori, a comparandum for a libation of oil in a tree cult is lacking. Nevertheless, the ritual use of oil is amply attested, and might be a clue. One looks in vain, in the literal, documentary readings of *Idyll* 18, for an explanation of the libation which the young women are instituting. It is, in fact, hard to explain. Clotilde Mayer, in her study of oil in Greek cult, strangely puts the libation under the heading "anointing of the fetish," sub-heading "the

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<sup>51</sup> Gow 1952.2: 360. I do not think that the explanation of Dover 1985: 236 removes the absurdity. "Since the tree is in Lakonia, most passers-by will be Doric-speakers and will therefore read the inscription (aloud, as they decipher the letters) with a Doric accent."

aniconic fetish."<sup>52</sup> Pouring is not anointing, however, not to mention the fact that the oil is poured *beneath* the plane-tree (46). The libation in Theocritus surely belongs to "oil as an offering libation" (*Opferspende*).<sup>53</sup> This kind of offering is, not surprisingly, well-attested as part of the pankarpia, the offering of a variety of agricultural products which several deities received. By itself, or along with animal sacrifice, it is quite poorly attested. Aphrodite's myrrh and frankincense, even in the medium of oil, are another matter (Emped. B128.6 D-K). The best approach to the libation in Theocritus is contextual. The two observances specified by the young women are the placing of a garland on the tree and the pouring of oil on the ground beneath it. These observances correspond exactly to the only two activities referred to in connection with their communal running, anointing themselves with oil (33) and gathering flowers for garlands (39-40). The garland for the plane-tree is made from a particular flower amongst those that they gather (43-44). The ceremony at the tree thus will commemorate the Helen whom they have described as the paragon of their cohort (26-37), which Helen is now leaving for marriage. The flowers are the flowers she once gathered with her friends. The oil is the oil with which she, along with them, anointed herself, when they prepared for the communal gallop.

To speak of worship, either of Helen or of the plane-tree, is to exaggerate. It is not even clear that a hero cult is what Theocritus has in mind. How then did Martin Nilsson build the myth of Helen on the plane-tree at Sparta? It is worth reviewing his reasoning, because most scholars of Helen, consciously or not, still rely on it. He held that there was a Minoan cult of dying and regenerated vegetation, which "left a deposit (*Niederschlag*) in mythological figures who are originally vegetation goddesses, Ariadne, who is abducted and dies, and Helen, who is likewise carried off, and, according to one version of the saga, is hanged. Helen is connected with tree cult. She is carried off not only by Paris but also by Theseus."<sup>54</sup> As I said earlier, Helen's abductions by

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<sup>52</sup> Mayer 1917: 35-36.

<sup>53</sup> Mayer 1917: 55-71.

<sup>54</sup> Nilsson 1967: 475-76, citing Nilsson 1950: 451-59 (page numbers of first edition, in left margin) for the Minoan cult. Here he was a bit more cautious: "... [I]t is clear that Helen is an old goddess associated with the tree cult. Although the tree cult is very prominent in the Minoan-Mycenaean age, this is no decisive proof that she was of Minoan origin, for the tree cult occurs almost everywhere. But if in addition to this peculiarity we recall that some features connect her with Ariadne and that her temple at Therapnê was built upon a

Paris and by Theseus are typologically different (and iconographically different in vase painting). They do not constitute a doublet. But the difficulties in Nilsson's account are much deeper. He is talking about two cults. As for the one in Sparta, if the myth derives from the cult, Helen ought in the cult to be closer to her origin as a vegetation goddess than she is in the myth. The tree cult in Sparta, however, has something to do with a rite of passage and nothing to do with death. Further, Helen is not in this cult hypostatized as a tree nor is there any evidence of worship of the tree in question (see p.18 below). As for the cult on Rhodes, its aition comes from Trojan War myth. Nilsson must, then, be thinking that the Ur-vegetation goddess generated the myth, which then caused a local vegetation divinity to be identified as Helen. His dubious premise is that all abducted women are originally vegetation goddesses.<sup>55</sup> But as Farnell said: "we need be no more surprised by the transformation of a heroine of saga [i.e., Helen] into a tree-daimon than by the fact that Christian madonnas and Christian saints have been employed as guardians of vineyards."<sup>56</sup>

Nilsson, calling Helen a Minoan, i.e., pre-Greek, vegetation goddess, did not even hesitate to explain a plane-tree in Arcadia called "Menelaïs" as a transference to Menelaus of her "starke Beziehungen zum Baumkulte," though Pausanias heard only that Menelaus planted the tree beside a beautiful spring when he was gathering his army for the expedition against Troy.<sup>57</sup> This tree was of interest to Pausanias because of its great age (Paus. 8.23.4-5). Nilsson believed, however, that Helen as vegetation goddess was also the one honored at the Menelaion. "A plant was called *helenion*, *helenê* means a woven basket, in which *arrêta hiera* were carried in a festival called *Helenêphoria*. Her temple was the so-called Menelaion in Therapnê ... ; the site has yielded Mycenaean

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Mycenaean site, there seems to be some probability that the Minoan tree cult survives in the cult of Helen" (1950: 459). This probability has evolved into a certainty in Nilsson 1967.

<sup>55</sup> Edmunds 2002-2003: 16-17. For the premise, cf. Mannhardt 1905: 444-45: "Die Entfernung des Gatten oder Bräutigams von der mit einem andern buhlenden, verlobten oder vermählten Gattin oder Braut, sein vermeintlich Tod, sein Verweilen in entlegener Ferne (die sich durch verschiedene symbolische Züge al das Todtenreich charakterisiert) und seine wunderbare Rückkehr und Wiedervermählung ... sind ... ein der germanischen Mythe und Sage ganz geläufiges Bild, um den Wechsel der Jahreszeiten zu bezeichnen."

<sup>56</sup> Farnell 1921: 325.

<sup>57</sup> Nilsson 1967: 211; cf. Nilsson 1971: 528-32.



finds.”<sup>58</sup> One notices first of all the suggestive detail about Mycenaean finds. In fact, there is no sign of continuous cult activity from the Late Helladic to the time of the founding of the cult in question. The site was abandoned for many centuries.<sup>59</sup> Nilsson’s etymologizing is of more interest. While the name “Helen” might be related to the name of a plant and of a reed basket,<sup>60</sup> the fact remains that Hesychius, Nilsson’s source for *helenion*, says: “a plant which they say Helen sowed (or scattered) against snakes, in order that they might eat it and die.” Pollux, Nilsson’s source for the *Helenêphoria*, does not say where this festival, “Basket Carrying,” took place. Nilsson locates it in Therapnê, where evidence of a connection of the Menelaion with trees or vegetation is completely lacking.<sup>61</sup> In any case, a plant or a reed is not a plane-tree.

But how does such a Helen become the cause of the Trojan War? Nilsson admitted the difficulty: “That the rape of Helen is a Minoan *hieros logos* seems to contradict the universally known saga, according to which the abductor was a prince from Asia Minor, whose deed gave rise to the Trojan War.” Nilsson proceeds to explain: “the Greek newcomers (i.e., the Greeks at the time they enter Greece), who hear the story of the rape of Helen, seem not to have grasped its deep meaning but to have understood it according to their own preconceptions, by which the theft of a woman, or of cattle, provided the usual occasion for battle and war. So the woman, whose abduction provoked the Trojan War, received the name of the Minoan vegetation goddess.”<sup>62</sup> Nilsson’s views

<sup>58</sup> Nilsson 1967: 315. The evidence for the *Helenêphoria* is Pollux 10.191.

<sup>59</sup> In the same paratactic style, Nilsson 1967: 340 again refers to Mycenaean remains at the Menelaion, and, this time, says that “in reality it is a matter of a temple of Helen.” Nilsson, it must be admitted, was aware of the extraordinary weakness of his reasoning. See the place just cited.

<sup>60</sup> If from the root \*wel- “to turn, roll; with derivatives referring to curved, enclosing objects”: Watkins 1996: 2132. On the etymology, see Clader 1976: 63-68, 79-80.

<sup>61</sup> But at Nilsson 1932: 73 he says: “with the Helen of this temple tree-cult rites were connected. It is, however, not known to which of these two temples the festival of the *Heleneia* ... belonged.” In other words, he sees the Helen’s of the two Sparta cults as the same, even though they are obviously functionally different. See Nilsson 1950: 457 (old numbering): “the different locality does not affect the association of the goddess with the tree cult.”

<sup>62</sup> Nilsson 1967: 476, citing and repeating (though not verbatim and not completely) Nilsson 1932: 73-76, 172-73. In the earlier work, Nilsson also asserted, more fully, his idea that the name Helen came from the supposed Minoan cult (75).

on the cult of Helen, except perhaps for the Minoan dating, were already established in the nineteenth century. One finds them repeated, with only slight differences, by M.L. West.<sup>63</sup> One finds them repeated again by Walter Burkert in his *Greek Religion*: "in Sparta Helen was clearly a goddess," i.e. one who predates the emergence of hero cult in Greece toward the end of the eighth century B.C.E.<sup>64</sup> It is no surprise that the most recent edition of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* continues these views (cf. the epigraph at the beginning of this article.)

Unless one accepts an explanation like Nilsson's, the evolution of goddess into epic heroine remains nothing but a postulate.<sup>65</sup> To make matters worse for the myth-ritual view, it is far from certain that the Helen of these cults was a vegetation goddess in the first place. A cult *at* a tree is not necessarily a cult *of* a tree. "I am Helen's tree" does not necessarily mean "I am Helen." It might mean simply "I commemorate Helen and mark the place where appropriate observances take place." It is unclear, in fact, what an ancient Greek tree cult might be. Besides the one attributed to Helen, there is only one other example, and that one is doubtful.<sup>66</sup> One has to look outside Greece proper for comparisons. Reinhold Merkelbach, in the course of interpreting a modern Turkish folktale, surveys a great many ancient chained goddesses (especially Artemis) in Asia Minor who were also tree goddesses.<sup>67</sup> One of their standard characteristics is that they reside in, and appear from, their tree. They are, for long periods, identical with their tree, though they can emerge from it in anthropomorphic form. In neither the Platanistas nor the Rhodian tree cult is there any suggestion that Helen has this kind of arboreal identity.

The Helen of both of these cults, on the most plausible explanation, acquired her identity from Trojan War myth. So I would conclude, but the eminence of Sir James George Frazer hangs over the

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<sup>63</sup> West 1975. I discuss his views in the final section of this article.

<sup>64</sup> 1985: 205. (I cite the English translation because it is, in effect, a second edition.) Burkert cites West 1975 and Bethe 1912.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Brillante 2002: 44-47.

<sup>66</sup> The oracle ordered the Corinthians to honor the tree which served the voyeurism of Pentheus "equally to the god" (Paus. 2.2.7). This command seems to refer to the form of worship and not to the hypostasis of Pentheus as a tree. Cf. Nilsson 1967: 209-12 for a survey of trees in Greek myth and belief. He states (211): "Tatsächlich gibt es nur zwei Beispiele, die von eines Baumes sprechen." These two are the one in Corinth just mentioned and Helen's tree.

<sup>67</sup> Merkelbach 1978: 9 (summary).

cults in question. In the longest book on a tree ever written, he discussed a great variety of "tree-spirits," to use his expression, and Nilsson's Helen would have to belong to the kind for which "the tree is not the body, but merely the abode of the tree-spirit, which can quit it and return to it at pleasure."<sup>68</sup> In Frazer's many ethnographical examples, however, the peoples who believe in tree-spirits believe that all trees or all trees of a particular species have them. These peoples do not individuate the spirits with names. Frazer's examples take one farther from, not closer to, the supposed tree cult of Helen, and the great myth-ritualist offers no comfort to the myth-ritual interpretation of Helen's tree.

One should, then, be willing to rest content with an explanation of these cults in terms of their social function. The ritual celebrated at the tree in Platanistas marked the transition from adolescence to womanhood, as Claude Calame and Carlo Brillante have shown.<sup>69</sup> As for the Rhodian cult, with its aition of the hanging of Helen, Brillante has pursued its affinities in several cult myths and practices involving hanging and swinging and has concluded that the significance of Helen's hanging is again initiatory. Her "death" is symbolic of the end of a phase of a young woman's life.<sup>70</sup>

The Dioscuri were not Helen's only neighbors. Earlier, I pointed out the religious density of the Pitanê quarter, and, if cult is going to be explained at the level of Spartan society, one has to begin in this landscape. (For that matter, one has to begin with the Pausanias' walks in Sparta and with his mind-set, though this problem is a somewhat different one.<sup>71</sup>) Of the many shrines in the vicinity of Plane-tree Grove, the two adjacent to Helen's are those of the poet Alcman and of Heracles. The latter is there, according to Pausanias (3.15.3-5), because of an episode in Spartan history (or myth, as we would say). This grouping of Helen with Alcman, if not fortuitous, must also, like that of Heracles, owe something to the traditions of Spartan choral poetry.

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<sup>68</sup> Frazer 1911, Part 1, Ch. 2: 33; cf. 40, and 45 for the place of this kind of tree-spirit in his evolutionary history of religion.

<sup>69</sup> Calame 1997: 192-93 194-96; Brillante 2002: 43-55. Zweig 1999: 165-71 points out allusions in Eur. *Hel.* to Spartan initiatory ritual. I am in disagreement with one of the main premises of this article: "fundamental to ancient portrayals of Helen are her goddess attributes" (161).

<sup>70</sup> Brillante 2002: 58-63. Cf. Nilsson's handling of the same evidence: 1950: 458-59 (old numbering). There is another version of Helen at Rhodes, Polyaeus', in which she escapes and does not become "Helen of the Tree" (*Strat.* 1.13).

<sup>71</sup> For the wanderings at Sparta, see the detailed map in Stibbe 1989.

Alcman told of the abduction of Helen by Theseus and her recovery by her brothers, the Dioscuri (Alc. fr. 21 Page [from schol. A *Il.* 3.242]). Alcman also told of the episode just mentioned, in which Heracles was wounded by the sons of Hippocoön (schol. Clem. Alex. *Protrep.* 2.36, p. 308 Staehlin). Presumably, contemporary choral performances afforded, for many centuries, a mental framework for the perception of these three shrines as a group—the great national poet and his two most famous subjects.<sup>72</sup>

#### b. Therapnê

Beside the cult at Platanistas, Helen, with Menelaus, had another cult, at Therapnê (in modern Aphyssou), beyond the Eurotas, a short distance from Sparta. The site, called the “Menelaion,” was originally a Middle and Late Helladic settlement. After five centuries of desolation, it saw the establishment of the cult (eighth century B.C.E.). With the discovery in 1975 of two inscribed bronze dedications, it was at last possible to confirm the long-standing identification of this place as Therapnê.<sup>73</sup> Herodotus says there was a shrine to Helen there (6.61.3), for some reason omitting Menelaus, though one of the objects (second quarter of the seventh century B.C.E.) shows that Menelaus was worshipped there, too, and the rest of the literary testimonia confirm this point. Herodotus refers to Helen at Therapnê as “the goddess,” apparently having in mind his own erroneous speculation that a sanctuary of “the foreign Aphrodite” in the temenos of Proteus in Egypt was Helen’s (2.112.2).<sup>74</sup>

Scholars wishing to call Helen a “goddess” are regularly misled also by Isocrates’ reference to the Therapnê cult. According to him,

<sup>72</sup> For other speculations on the groupings of shrines in this district of Sparta see Wide 1893: 46.

<sup>73</sup> For the bronzes see Catling and Cavanagh 1976. Overview of the archaeological record: Antonaccio 1995: 155-66. Unless I have misread her account, her notion of the “precedence of Helen” at the shrine (165) derives from literary sources.

<sup>74</sup> It is difficult to go along with Herodotus’ reasoning. How and Wells 1912.1: 223: “H. is probably wrong in identifying her [the foreign Aphrodite] with Helen.” How and Wells 1912.2: 89 (on 6.61.3), more confidently: “The view that Helen was a goddess of beauty, and the identification of her with” the foreign Aphrodite (2.112) “seem to be H.’s own conjecture, and erroneous. The foreign Aphrodite must be Astarte, while Helen was a native heroine more akin to Artemis ... .” For Aphrodite = Astarte see Lloyd 1976-1988 ad loc.

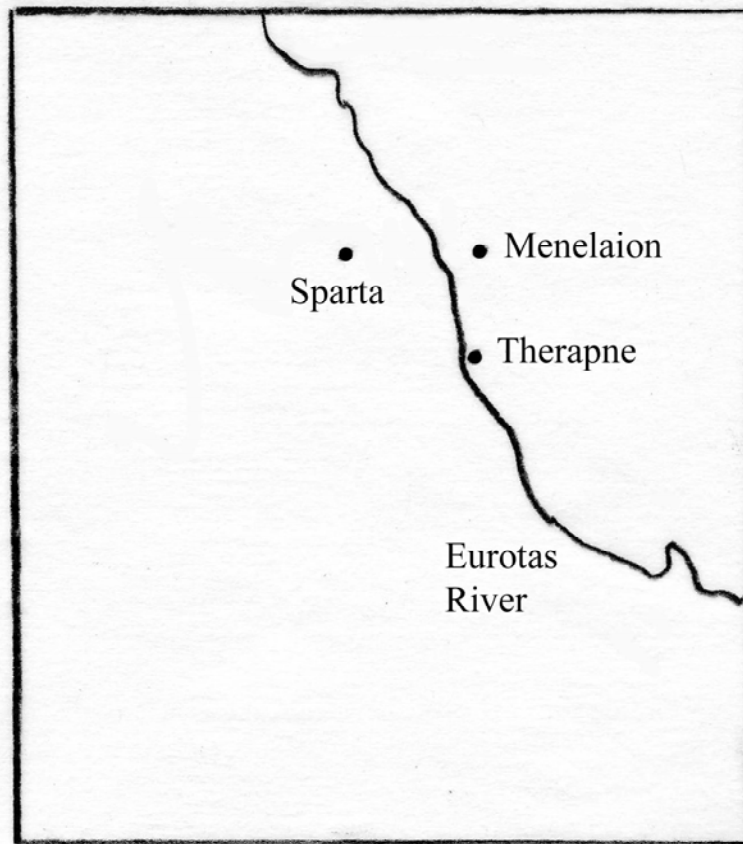
sacrifices were made to Helen and Menelaus “not as to heroes but as to gods” (10.63). Isocrates' statement is anything but self-explanatory and cannot be lifted from the page as a fact about Helen. The body of the work in which the statement occurs consists of epideictic praise of Helen.<sup>75</sup> In concluding this praise, Isocrates speaks of the power of Helen, as the most beautiful of all of those made immortal for their beauty, to reward and to punish. He gives two examples of a reward and one of a punishment coming from Helen. Helen's immortality is itself a premise: Isocrates says nothing about when or how she was immortalized. He must have in mind her association in cult with the Dioscuri, first heard of in Euripides, in prophecies delivered at the conclusions of *Orestes* (1629-37) and of *Helen* (1666-69). Concerning the former, where Apollo refers to “bright stars,” C.W. Willink observes: “There can be little doubt that E. had ‘stellification’ in mind.... But no particular star was available or worthy to be associated with this transcendent Helen, and the carefully phrased new mythological formulation is appropriately imprecise.”<sup>76</sup> Aside from these places, no fifth-century or earlier source speaks explicitly of an immortality of Helen.<sup>77</sup> Pindar refers in the first two lines of *Olympian* 3 (476 B.C.E.) to a common cult of the Dioscuri and Helen, maintained by Theron in Acragas (36-40), and thus, in the tragedies just cited, it is to such a cult, location unspecified, to which Euripides is referring.

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<sup>75</sup> For the structure and goal of the work as a whole see Papillon 1996, with thorough reference to previous scholarship.

<sup>76</sup> Willink 1986: 360. Cf. Farnell 1921: 185.

<sup>77</sup> Her immortality is implicit in *Od.* 4.561-69, the prophecy received by Menelaus from Proteus that Menelaus would not die in Argos but the gods would send him to Elysium Plain at the ends of the earth. She will be there, too. But immortality is not in itself divinity. On Elysium and the Isles of the Blest see Stephanie West in Heubeck, West and Hainsworth, eds. 1988: 227.



Map 2. After Welwei 2001: 788.

As it happens, Isocrates' first example of Helen's power to reward is that she made her brothers gods and, to confirm their transformation, gave them the office of aiding sailors in distress (10.61). Isocrates thus, in relation to Euripides, reverses the agency of immortality. In Euripides' *Helen*, the Dioscuri tell their sister, "You will be called a goddess, and, with us, you will ... " (1667-69). They are already immortal and she will become immortal, because Zeus wills it. Isocrates' version, assigning a prior immortality to Helen, is completely idiosyncratic. His second example, introduced as chronologically following the first (*meta de tauta*, 10.62 init.), is Helen's immortalization of Menelaus, as recompense for all that she had made him suffer. Isocrates states that she made him a "god instead of a mortal and her housemate (noun *sunoikos*) and consort (noun *parhedros*) forever"

(10.62). The divinity of Menelaus was unknown to Isocrates' audience (his immortality in Elysium as in *Od.* 4.561-69 was another matter). Proof was needed, or at least something to serve as proof within the generous conventions of epideictic oratory. It was the Therapnê cult. As witness to what he has said about Menelaus "I can," Isocrates says, "offer for the fact the city of the Spartiates, one which especially preserves ancient traditions (*ta palaia*)."<sup>78</sup> Isocrates thus immediately claims antiquity for his novelty, the divinity of Menelaus. He continues: "For even still now in Therapnae (he uses the plural) in Laconia they offer holy and ancestral (*patrios*; cf. *ta palaia*) sacrifices to them (Helen and Menelaus) not as to heroes but as to both as gods" (10.63). By Isocrates' premise, Helen is a goddess in the first place. The fact that *both* she and Menelaus receive sacrifices which set them apart from heroes (this point had to be made because Isocrates' audience might have thought that it was in fact a hero cult) means that Helen has made Menelaus immortal, too. This time, Helen's agency is inferred from a combination of the premise with a supposed fact concerning the kind of sacrifice performed at Therapnê. To repeat, the Spartans "offer holy (adj. *hagios*) and ancestral (adj. *patrios*) sacrifices (noun *thusia*) to both of them." For the modern reader, neither the word for sacrifice nor its two modifiers do anything to specify the kind of sacrifice, and one wonders if even Isocrates' audience knew exactly what he was talking about.<sup>78</sup>

Isocrates' example of Helen's power to punish is the blindness of Stesichorus. "For when, beginning the ode he defamed her, he arose deprived of his eyesight, but when he grasped the cause of his misfortune and composed the so-called 'Palinode', she restored him again to his

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<sup>78</sup> The adj. *hagios* is unexpected of a sacrifice. If it only means "sacred," then it adds nothing to the noun which it modifies. With *thusia*, Isocrates may intend a distinction between the kind of sacrifice offered to Helen and Menelaus, on the one hand, and sacrifices offered to heroes, on the other, but the word is very general and is used of sacrifices to both gods and heroes. See Casabona 1966: 126-39. On the verb, *apotelein*, of which *thusia* is the object, see Casabona 1966: 135. It does nothing to specify the sacrifice. As regards the kinds of sacrifice which took place at the Menelaion, Carla Antonaccio has kindly informed me by e-mail (July 3 and 8, 2006) that "it is not unreasonable to assume there was animal sacrifice for the simple reason that the ramp ascending the Menelaion led to something, and I assume that something is an altar of some kind." She sees the meat hook (cf. n.101 below) as indirect evidence. The absence of animal bones at the site does not, in her view, mean that animal sacrifices did not take place there.

former health" (10.64). Isocrates' strategy is this time to combine his premise with a well-known story about Stesichorus and to make Helen more explicitly the agent than in the only previous version of the story known to us, though note that even in Isocrates she is explicitly the agent only of the restoration of the poet's sight. Plato, the only other classical source for this incident, says that Stesichorus was "deprived of his eyesight on account of his slander of Helen," i.e., not by Helen because of the slander (*Phaedr.* 243A5-6). The anecdote about Leonymus of Croton told by Pausanias (3.19.11-13) is consistent with Plato as regards Helen's agency or lack thereof: Leonymus was to tell Stesichorus that the loss of his eyesight arose from the wrath (*mênima*) of Helen.

Scholars quoting Isocrates 10.63 ("not as to heroes but as to gods") out of context fail to understand the extravagant nature of his epideictic claims. It is time to return to earth. If Helen and Menelaus were gods at Therapnê, they would not be buried there, as Pausanias said they were (3.19.9).<sup>79</sup> Helen and Menelaus at the Menelaion come under a standard definition of hero: "a deceased person who exerts from his grave a power for good or evil and who demands appropriate honors."<sup>80</sup> As for the aspect(s) in which they were honored, uncertainty remains, and comparable husband and wife couples are not many. Emily Kearns, surveying the "couple acting together," refers to Metaneira and Keleos at Eleusis; Pelarge and Isthmiades at the Theban Kabeirion; and Klymene and Dictys. "Such heroines," Kearns says, "are significant for their particular role as part of a cult complex, but also conform to the pattern of the heroic couple, where the female is clearly the lesser partner."<sup>81</sup> If Brillante is right that lines 22-48 of Theocritus *Idyll* 18 refer to the Therapnê cult, then *oiketis* "housewife" (38) might indicate the aspect in which Helen was honored.

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<sup>79</sup> For the status of Helen and Menelaus, see Larson 1995: 81.

<sup>80</sup> Burkert 1985: 203. I see no evidence that Helen belongs to Lyons' cross-over category of mortal heroines who *become* divinities (Lyons 1997). The question with which I am dealing is: did a goddess become the heroine (in cult and in epic) whom we call Helen?

<sup>81</sup> Kearns 1998: 108. Kearns does not refer to the Menelaion. Her "heroic couple" refers to her earlier discussion of "Totenmahl" reliefs, in which she interprets the two figures as hero and heroine, "with the heroine occupying a subordinate position and playing the role of a woman in the hero's household" (99).



## c. Springs

Two springs named after Helen, whether or not they were the centers of cult, probably had a function related to the initiatory one just discussed. Stephanus of Byzantium (s.v. Helenê 265.5) says that there was a spring called Helen on Chios in which Helen bathed. At Corinth, “Right opposite Cenchreae is Helen’s Bath (*loutron*). A large stream of salt water, at a temperature approaching warm, flows from a rock into the sea” (Paus. 2.2.3). These two springs have recently been brought into relation with a red-figure lekythos from the workshop of the Meidias Painter.<sup>82</sup> On this lekythos, Eros pours water from a hydria on a naked Helen who crouches beside a tree. The scene includes Pothos and Eukleia and these two figures along with Eros point to an interpretation. The woman who takes “Helen’s bath” will be known as desirable and thus well-prepared for the passage to marriage.<sup>83</sup> A story attaching to the cult at Therapnê is relevant. The nurse of an ugly child took her to the temple, stood before the cult image, and prayed to Helen to remove the girl’s ugliness. When she left the temple, she met a woman who demanded to see the child, touched its head, and said that it would be the most beautiful woman in Sparta. From that day, the child’s looks began to change, and when she reached the age of marriage....<sup>84</sup> For present purposes, the rest of the story does not matter. The particular efficacy of Helen of Therapnê is to confer upon the child the qualities that will make her eligible for marriage.<sup>85</sup> In this sense, Helen of Therapnê has the same function as Helen of the Planes and the same function as the one represented on the lekythos.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Shapiro 2005: 55-56

<sup>83</sup> Shapiro, *ibid.*, focusing on Eukleia, and taking the scene to represent an episode in Helen’s life, has suggested that Helen’s bath “restores her ... her reputation.” For a bibliography on this personification, and also Eunomia, see Knittlmayer 1999: 12 n. 58.

<sup>84</sup> Hdt. 6.61; summary in Paus. 3.7.7.

<sup>85</sup> I am following the interpretation of Brillante 2002: 51-52, 54-55.

<sup>86</sup> In an astute reading of Eur. *Hel.*, with particular reference to lines 1465-78, Voelke 1996 shows how in the terms of this play to be beautiful is for the parthenos is to be marriageable; that, once married, the now mature woman no longer has need of, should in effect cancel out, the attribute of beauty, which now sends the wrong signal; that Helen’s misfortune was to continue to send this signal.

d. Conclusion on cults at Sparta

Looking at all the evidence for the cults of Helen in Sparta, it is hard to see the palimpsest of a goddess or why Occam's razor does not require Trojan War myth and/or epic as the source of Helen in these Spartan institutions. Given the Indo-European credentials of the divine twins, a myth-ritual interpretation of a cult of Helen and the Dioscuri would have more plausibility. Such a cult is not found in Sparta until the first century B.C.E.<sup>87</sup> The Dioscuri had a cult in the vicinity of Plane-tree Grove, and their function in the lives of young men was, Carlo Brillante observes, parallel to Helen's in the lives of young women.<sup>88</sup> Pindar in fact names Therapnê as the location of this cult and says that on alternate days one of them lives there and the other one on Olympus (*P.* 11.61-64).<sup>89</sup>

e. Attica

A shared cult of Helen and her brothers is alluded to in Euripides' *Helen* (412 B.C.E.) and in his *Orestes* (408 B.C.E.). In the former, in their epiphany at the end of the play, the Dioscuri prophecy that Helen, who will be called a goddess after her death, will share in libations (*spondai*) and hospitable observances (*xenia*) with them (1666-69). In the latter, Apollo prophesies Olympian status, implying catasterism, and libations (*spondai*) which she, along with the Tyndarids, will receive from mortals. Certainly in the first of these passages, probably in the second, the particular ritual which is meant is the theoxenia, the entertainment of gods by mortals at a meal.<sup>90</sup> The point of the prophecies is that Helen will be entertained along with her brothers, who were favorite guests at this ritual meal, which they received in many places in Greece (cf. Pindar cited above). Perhaps Euripides' Dioscuri make a prophecy for Attica. Libations, however, if meant literally in these prophecies, and not as a metonym for cult, are not expected in

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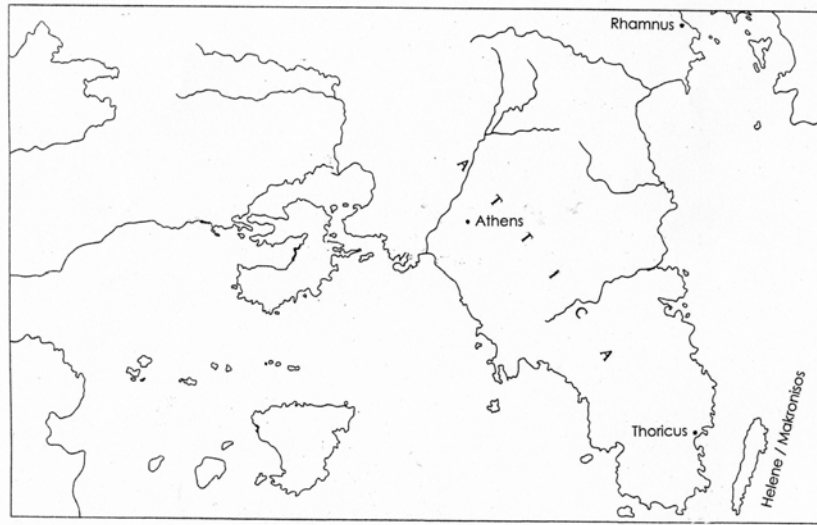
<sup>87</sup> See Larsen 1995: 69 for references. In this connection, Chapouthier [1935]1984: 127-51 is regularly cited. Alcman fr. 7 Page = 19 Calame, from a fragmentary commentary on Alcman, seems to be referring to Menelaus, Helen, and the Dioscuri as worshipped at Therapnê. See Calame 1997: 200 for the presumed removal of the Dioscuri to another place in Sparta.

<sup>88</sup> Brillante 2002: 52-55.

<sup>89</sup> For a survey of the Dioscuri in Pindar see Robbins 1994: 41-45.

<sup>90</sup> Kearns 1996, with bibliography.

Athens.<sup>91</sup> For Attica, animal sacrifice to the Dioscuri and Helen at a festival called Anakeia, otherwise unknown and undatable, is attested in Pausanias Atticus (111 Erbse) (three victims) and in a fourth-century cult calendar from Thorikos (see Map 3) (one full-grown victim for the Anakes, i.e., Dioscuri, and one for Helen, if the restoration of her name is correct<sup>92</sup>).



Map 3. Helen in Attica

Helen was probably best-known elsewhere in Attica, whether or not she received separate worship as a heroine in the cult in question. It was that of Nemesis at Rhamnus (see Map 3).<sup>93</sup> Pausanias reports on the sanctuary in this place, a town to the north of Marathon, on the coast, and tells a story about its cult statue. When the Persians came to Marathon, they arrogantly brought with them Parian marble to make a trophy that would memorialize their victory. After their defeat, Pausanias says,

<sup>91</sup> West 1987: 294 on line 1688: "It is hard to believe that anyone at Athens poured libations to Helen; at Sparta perhaps."

<sup>92</sup> *SEG* 33.147 col. I.37-38. Lines 37-38 in the text of Daux 1983.

<sup>93</sup> The interpretation of Alan Shapiro, according to whom "the Nemesis worshipped at Rhamnous was best known to Athenians as the mother of Helen, who was thus co-opted as an Athenian heroine," perhaps goes too far: Shapiro 2005: 53-54.

Pheidias made from this marble a statue of Nemesis (1.33.2-3). (The statue, of which fragments remain, is now assigned to Agoracritus.<sup>94</sup>)

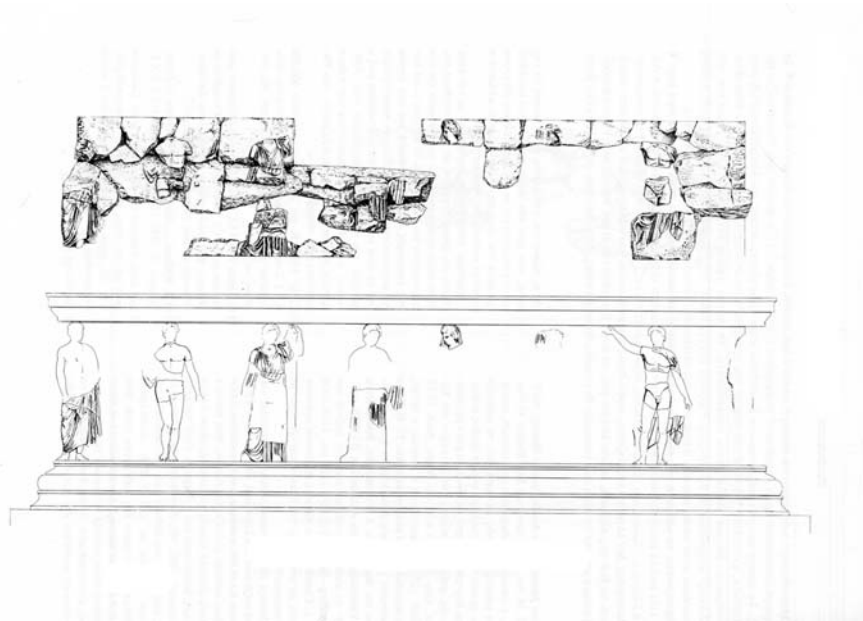


Fig. 1. Base of the statue of Nemesis, front side. From Petrakos 1986 :96.

On the pedestal of the statue, the sculptor carved Helen being led to Nemesis by Leda. The scene is obviously not mythical but symbolic, not an episode in Helen's life, but a statement about the cult. Other panels showed Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Pyrrhus, whom Pausanias refers to as the first husband of Hermione (7-8). Fragments of the rectangular base survive, and various reconstructions have been proposed. That of Vassilios Petrakos, with eight figures for the front side, is seen in Fig. 1. The statue stood in the temple of Nemesis built in Rhamnus at some time in the last three decades of the fifth century.<sup>95</sup> The mythical aition of the cult is Zeus' union with Nemesis at Rhamnus. Eratosthenes, citing the

<sup>94</sup> Stewart 1996. For discussion and bibliography see Linant de Bellefonds 1992: 733-34, 754 (#210); Shapiro 1993: 174-77.

<sup>95</sup> Miles 1989: 221-35 for the date and the historical context, including the significance of Nemesis in this cult. Petrakos 1986 downdates the statue to the time of the building of the temple.

fifth-century comic poet Cratinus as his source, says of the constellation he calls the “Bird”:

This is the one they call the great Bird, which they liken to a swan. It is said that Zeus, making himself like this creature, fell in love with Nemesis, because she had completely changed her shape in order to preserve her virginity and thereupon became a swan. So he, too, in the form of this bird flew to Rhamnus in Attica and there seduced Nemesis. She bore an egg, from which was hatched and born Helen, as Cratinus says.<sup>96</sup>

The play, *Nemesis*, is undatable but doubtless related to the building of the temple at Rhamnus, and it can be added to other evidence for recognition of the cult in the city of Athens.<sup>97</sup> Note that Cratinus, in relation to the version of the *Cypria*, preserves Nemesis as the mother, but changes the avian form of Zeus from gander to swan (cf. Eur. *Hel.* 17-21).

By means of the cult statue, Rhamnus is asserting that it is the place where Helen was conceived and that Nemesis was her mother. Leda is voluntarily performing the reassignment of maternal claims to Nemesis. So Helen ultimately becomes “Helen the Rhamnusian” (Callimachus *Hymn to Artemis* 232). The presence of Agamemnon and Menelaus on the base of the statue expands the frame of reference to the Trojan War, of which Helen is a secondary cause. The version of the Trojan War story in which Helen is the daughter of Nemesis is of course that of the *Cypria*. The presence of Pyrrhus might be due not to the fact, or not only to the fact, that he married Hermione (Paus. 1.11.1; 1.33.8) but to the fact that he fought at Troy (*Cypria* fr. 19 Bernabé). A larger message would then emerge. Helen was the human cause of the destruction which Zeus had malevolently planned (again, as in the *Cypria*), and Nemesis destroyed the Persian invaders, as before, through her daughter, she destroyed the Trojans.<sup>98</sup> The vase painting in which Nemesis points accusingly at Helen comes to mind.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>96</sup> I have translated the text of Eratosth. [*Cat.*] 25 Pàmias; cf. Cratinus *Nemesis* epit. ii K-A (PMG 4.179).

<sup>97</sup> See Miles 1989: 138 n. 4 for a list of references, not including Cratinus.

<sup>98</sup> Knittlmayer 1999: 3-4, 9-11.

<sup>99</sup> Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz 30036. Cf. Shapiro 2005: 51.

f. Conclusions

The first part of this article concluded with the proposal that a particular narrative, an Indo-European prototype of the Helen myth could better explain this myth than an Indo-European dawn goddess. Once again, in the case of the Greek cults of Helen, a narrative, this time the Helen myth itself, will better explain the cults of Helen than some goddess who becomes a heroine who becomes a myth.

3. The fallacy of origins and belief in belief

I came to learn of Helen as the goddess worshipped in Sparta who oversaw the maturation rites of women into adulthood, a deity whom the mythology had demoted to the restricted boundaries of human status. I learned of Helen, the vegetative deity whose name in modern Greek means "comfrey," a powerful healing plant. I learned of Helen, daughter of the Indo-European sun deity, whose stories of abduction and rescue by her twin brothers are related in myths from ancient India to the central Russian steppes to the Baltic sea.  
Bella (Zweig) Vivante 2001: 142

This article has offered critiques of the two divine origins which are appealed to again and again in scholarship on Helen. The persistence, as in the epigraph to this article, of the opinion concerning an originally divine Helen and its sometimes dogmatic repetition, even on the part of excellent and esteemed scholars, make it impossible to end this article with the critiques. One has to try to explain or at least describe the kind of thinking which forms this opinion and to make a critique of it, too. This critique will be in two parts, as indicated in the heading of this section.

The expression “fallacy of origins” has several quite different senses. In the field of Classics, scholars have used it polemically in the field of Greek religion, in particular, with reference to the explanation of cult.<sup>100</sup> The determination or positing of the particular origin of a complex phenomenon fails, it is said, to explain either its development or its synchronic complexity, let alone the relation of the phenomenon to its social-historical context. If I know that Helen was originally a goddess, this knowledge does not help me to understand why someone in the seventh century B.C.E. dedicated a meat-hook to her in the Menelaion.<sup>101</sup>

The classic critique of origins as a mode of explanation is Friedrich Nietzsche's. His critique is worth reviewing, because it not only well characterizes a habit of thought, the one which I see in much scholarship on Helen, but also bears on religious origins in particular and thus leads on to the second part of this conclusion, on belief in belief. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Michel Foucault divided Nietzsche's challenge to the pursuit of origins into three parts, with a brief survey of Nietzsche's various words for “origin.”<sup>102</sup> I follow Foucault's division but with a set of references to Nietzsche different from his, as indicated in my notes. Foucault's larger purpose in this essay, to reinvigorate Nietzsche's opposition of genealogy to history or to “the historian's history” (supra-historical perspective, teleology, etc.), in favor of the former, is of the utmost importance for the kind of historical research which Foucault himself would undertake. This larger purpose and the larger issues it entails are not directly relevant to the project of this conclusion.

First, the origin is the essence. In the third entry in “The Wanderer and His Shadow,” which is the second sequel to *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche wrote:

“In the beginning was.” To honor the emergence (*Entstehung*)—that is the metaphysical retropulsion which turns up again in reflection on history and makes one

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<sup>100</sup> Millet 2004: “[Robert] Connor discussed the ideological framework of the Panathenaic procession in a paper on ‘Civic Representation in the Panathenaia’. He argued that it is necessary to avoid the ‘fallacy of origins’, the belief that if the origin of a ritual is found, its meaning will become clear; the accretive tendency of ritual is too strong for origin to provide a useful interpretative basis.”

<sup>101</sup> Catling and Cavanagh 1976: 157.

<sup>102</sup> Foucault 1984 (Eng. trans.); Foucault 1971 (French original).

positively suppose that at the beginning of all things stands the most valuable and the most essential.<sup>103</sup>

The anti-essentialism of Nietzsche expressed here is an anti-metaphysics and a far cry from the common political use of "essentialism" to brand an opponent's views.<sup>104</sup> In feminist theory, for its part, "essentialism" refers to the notion of an essential female nature, of "the eternal feminine." Feminists in Classics have participated in the critique of this notion.<sup>105</sup> So far as I know, essentialism has not served as a critical concept in the fields of Greek myth and religion. It has certainly not served in the case of the origins of Helen, where the reconstructions and evocations of the "goddess" (again cf. the epigraph) strongly invite it.

For the butt of the second part of Nietzsche's challenge, Foucault uses several terms, of which, in English translation, "solemnity" is one. The origin has the highest solemnity. In *Dawn* 1.44, Nietzsche wrote:

*Origin and meaning.*—Why does this thought always come back to me and shine in ever brighter colors?—that *once upon a time* the researchers, when they were on the path to the origin (*Ursprung*) of things, always thought that they were finding something which was of inestimable value for all action and judgment, indeed, that one always

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<sup>103</sup> Schlechta 1966.1: 873. Cited by Foucault for the second of his three divisions. Its relevance to the first is obvious. His three citations for the first are not for metaphysics of essence but for the history of reason (his demonstration combines epistemology and metaphysics). "Im Anfang war." Die Entstehung verherrlichen - das ist der metaphysische Nachtrieb [a play on Antrieb; I translated by "retropulsion"], welcher bei der Betrachtung der Historie wieder ausschlägt und durchaus meinen macht, am Anfang aller Dinge stehe das Wertvollste und *Wesentlichste* [my emphasis].

<sup>104</sup> Spinoza and Dreyfus 1996: "The term *essentialism* is used today as a charge against any thinker's work whenever the thinker takes his or her categories to be more stable than the imposition of temporary political tactics. And since acts of essentialist thinking are taken to be blind to difference, the 'essentialist' behind the essentializing act of thought is criticized not only for faulty reasoning but also for the ethical lapse of becoming complicit in the exclusion of others. Such charges ought to be taken seriously, but, with *essentialism* used against any stable set of distinctions, the charge of essentialism seems more like a political smear than a cognitive claim."

<sup>105</sup> Lyons 1997: 3-4 and n. 1 for bibliography.



*presupposed* that, on the *insight into the origin of things*,  
human *salvation* must depend ...<sup>106</sup>

Nietzsche is obviously thinking of cosmogony and theogony, and, as for the salvational claims for the origin, no scholar makes them in the case of Helen. It would be absurd to do so. "Make me immortal with a kiss"? And yet, as I will suggest later, the divine origin of Helen, Helen as a divinity, is making a claim not unrelated to the one that Nietzsche is talking about here.

The third butt is truth. In *Beyond Good and Evil* 1.2 Nietzsche begins by stating the position which he will challenge:

... Things of the highest worth must have another origin (*Ursprung*), their *own*—from this transitory ... world, from this disorder of delusion and desire they are underivable! Rather in the bosom of being, in the intransitory, in the hidden god, in "the thing in itself"—there must their ground (*Grund*) lie—and nowhere else!

His riposte:

This kind of reasoning expresses the typical prejudice by which the metaphysicians of all ages can be recognized; this kind of estimation stands in the background of all their logical procedures; starting from this "belief" of theirs they apply themselves to their "knowledge," to something which in the end is solemnly christened "the truth."<sup>107</sup>

Again, Nietzsche might seem to be attacking claims that no classicist would make. The truth of the classicist is historical, arrived at by strict methods, on the basis of textual and material evidence. It might well be asked what metaphysics has to do with the divine origin of Helen on which the field of Classics has reached a consensus. To that question I now turn.

In his inaugural lecture at Bedford College, University of London (30 April 1975), published as *Immortal Helen*, M.L. West begins

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<sup>106</sup> Schlechta 1966.1: 1044. Nietzsche's emphases. Foucault did not cite this passage.

<sup>107</sup> Schlechta 1966.2: 567-68. Nietzsche's emphases. Foucault did not cite this passage.

by asking about the tradition that Helen went to Egypt. "What lies behind this persistent tradition, which seems to have no organic connection with the saga of Troy?"<sup>108</sup> Already, in the relative clause in this question, one detects the hermeneutic desideratum: coherence of all the evidence. The basis of this coherence is implicit in the statement that opens West's answer to the question which he has posed:

In Greece generally, Helen belonged to mythology as an early queen of Sparta. But at Sparta itself she belonged to religion. She was worshipped there as a goddess. She had two shrines, the chief of which stood on the site of a Mycenaean palace shrine. She was associated with trees, in particular the plane-tree. There is reason to believe that her wedding, which in the general tradition appears as a historical event, was a recurring festival at Sparta, celebrated in spring or early summer by a company of girls who hung garlands on her holy tree and poured oil on the ground at its foot. She was also worshipped on the island of Rhodes, under the title 'Helen of the Tree', Helena Dendritis.<sup>109</sup>

All but one of these sentences has "she" or "Helen" as the subject. It is implicit that in each of these sentences, in each of these items of evidence, in each of her instantiations, Helen is the same. There is, then, a Helen who is the first principle and cause of all the various Helen's one finds in the ancient Greek evidence. It ought to be possible, then, to organize this evidence in such a way that it can all be referred to the first principle, the essentialized Helen, as West proceeds to do.

One can see already the metaphysical habit of thought at work, the dismay at the disorder of the historical evidence, the search for a transcendent ordering principle, for that which is, in Nietzsche's words, "the most valuable and the most essential." To jump ahead to West's conclusion, it turns out that Helen, as the Daughter of the Sun (for this Helen, cf. Part 1 of this article), goes in the winter where the sun goes, which, in the Greek mind, is Egypt. Thus the tradition about Helen in Egypt was "simply another version of the myth of the Disappearing Goddess."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> West 1975: 5.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.* I have not included West's endnotes.

<sup>110</sup> West 1975: 7.

The symptoms of this habit of thought appear especially in the treatment of the evidence for Spartan cult, in which, as an abducted woman, Helen can be perceived as a vegetation goddess.

How, then, does West connect this local Spartan vegetation goddess with the Sun's daughter? Having surveyed the evidence for the Indo-European dawn goddess—it is the bulk of his lecture—, West proceeds to make the connection: it is between the Latvian Sun's daughter's marriage at the beginning of summer and Helen's marriage at the same time (again Theocritus 18.43-48 is the evidence). "Not only does the myth of Helen go back to the Indo-European myth of the Daughter of the Sun: her ritual [in Sparta] is revealed as part and parcel of the same tradition."<sup>111</sup> Such is the power of origins that it can unite a local heroine (who, Nilsson thought, was originally Minoan, i.e., pre-Greek!) with an Indo-European prototype. West's combinations are not over. I shall discuss the rest of them below.

The essential, the solemn, the true—not the Helen of Gorgias, or of Euripides, or even of Homer, no matter what distant Indo-European echoes sensitive ears think they hear in her Homeric epithets. But the original Helen, yes, stripped of the accidents of history and restored to her pristine majesty—here we have the one who transcends the vexatious variations and contradictions of our sources. To understand the amazing (after one has looked at the evidence) persistence of classicists in their opinion about the origin of Helen, it is not enough to review some of Nietzsche's challenges to the metaphysical habit of thought. It is necessary to think more about her origin as divine ("It is generally agreed that she must have been a goddess ... "), though Nietzsche's "inestimable value," the salvational promise of the origin was pointing in the right direction. The authorities for the divine Helen, Mannhardt, Bethe, Nilsson, West, and Burkert and those who repeat their opinions, citing again some or all of the evidence for the Helen of cult and/or her supposed Indo-European prototype(s), are acting on, or at least presupposing in their readers, the state of mind which Daniel C. Dennet in *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* has called "belief in belief."

Denet introduces this phenomenon as follows:

Much has been written over the centuries about the historic processes by which polytheisms turned into

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<sup>111</sup> West 1975: 11-12.

monotheism—belief in gods being replaced by belief in God. What is less often stressed is how this belief in God joined forces with *belief in belief* in God to motivate the migration of the concept of God in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) away from concrete anthropomorphism to ever more abstract and depersonalized concepts.

He continues:

For a thousand years, roughly, we've entertained a throng of variously deanthropomorphized, intellectualized concepts of God, all more or less peacefully coexisting in the minds of "believers." Since everybody calls his or her version "God," there is something "we can all agree about"  
...<sup>112</sup>

This concept of belief in belief, as I shall apply it to the two scholars, Nilsson and West, on whose views I have been concentrating, does not entail any presuppositions about their personal beliefs or about their motives in appealing to belief in belief. It helps to explain their rhetorical strategies and, I think, the reason for the success of these strategies. I do not mean that they or their readers believe in any sense in an ancient goddess called Helen. Rather, the adherence to belief in belief can be mobilized in support of demonstrations that begin in the customary discourse of philology and ancient history and apply in the first place to antiquity. At a certain point, however, as I will show, the point at which the rational methods of this discourse can go no further, a realm beyond reason can be appealed to and, thanks to belief in belief, assent can be expected.

Nilsson's fullest statement on Helen, quoted above, occurs in a section of his history of Greek religion called "Eleusinian Cult and Mystery." Having concluded on Helen, he proceeds to assimilate her to Persephone, a goddess brought by the Greek new-comers along with her mother Demeter. The daughter was identified, he says, with a pre-Greek vegetation goddess worshipped at Eleusis, who was celebrated at sowing time. Her anodos was the removal of the grain seeds from the storage jars (of which Bronze Age archaeology has produced many examples) buried

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<sup>112</sup> Denet 2006: 205, 209. His emphasis.

in the ground. The new grain maiden's, Persephone's, anodos was, says Nilsson, the sprouting of the seeds. The new mystery cult at Eleusis embodied two ideas which derived from the older Minoan cult. One was the connection of the cult to the hereafter, in which the initiates hoped for a happier after-life. "The second idea arose from the identity of the younger of the two newer goddesses with the abducted vegetation goddess. The mother, whose daughter had been abducted, remained behind, the old mater dolorosa, with her pain and sorrow. In this way, something deeply human of great emotional meaning was added. The two ideas together imparted to the Mysteries their religious depth and their power over persons, which lasted throughout antiquity."<sup>113</sup>

Here, in the adequation of Demeter to the Christian mater dolorosa, one can see how belief in belief is invited to expand anachronistically from the twentieth century (when Nilsson was writing) and from a religion which did not exist in the time to which Nilsson is referring, to take in the mystery cult at Eleusis. Helen has already been included in this strategy through her link with Persephone. In this way, the argument concerning Helen, consisting of highly dubious combinations of evidence, inferences from these combinations, and speculations, is ultimately sanctioned, as Nilsson conjures up the vision of a divine origin.

To return now to West, having put the myth of Helen and her ritual in Plane-tree Grove in a single tradition, one that goes back to an Indo-European goddess, he proceeds to show five parallels between modern May Day celebrations and "either the myth or cult of Helen."<sup>114</sup> (Recall that it was a spring-time marriage which was the basis of the argument concerning the single tradition.) The fifth of his parallels is especially relevant to belief in belief as a strategy of argument:

Eggs play a conspicuous part in springtime festivities. In particular, they are collected from householders by a begging procession, and painted eggshells are commonly used to decorate the May-tree, May-branch, or May-pole. The fragile glass globes which we hang on our Christmas trees are a modern substitute for these painted eggshells, just as the fairy at the top corresponds to those effigies of which the hanging Helen [i.e. in the Rhodes cult] is another reflection.

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<sup>113</sup> Nilsson 1967: 476-77.

<sup>114</sup> West 1975: 12-13.

The Christmas tree which is set up for the Yule festival when the days begin to grow longer [i.e. in northern Europe] is the twin of the May-tree which marks the start of summer. ... Helen, ... the goddess of the Greek festival, is born from an egg.<sup>115</sup>

Once again, Helen is brought into the sphere of Christian belief and, this time, also custom. In this way, West's audience is invited to extend its belief in belief to ancient belief concerning Helen. The Christian analogies are not innocently illustrative, any more than in the case of Nilsson's *mater dolorosa*, but give West's argument about Helen's divine origin a plausibility that it would otherwise lack. After all, it depended not on a typological feature of the Indo-European comparanda but on a detail in one of them, the Latvian one, combined with an inference from the name of a plant in Theocritus.<sup>116</sup> One would not want to say that for West, especially considering the elegance and the sometimes jocular tone of his lecture, that "on the *insight into the origin of things*, human *salvation* must depend" (cf. the second of Nietzsche's butts), but one is prompted to say that the salvation of the philologist, the historian of literature, and historian of religion depends on this insight. If he could not end by asserting something of "inestimable value," in short a divine origin, his reasoning would look too human.

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<sup>115</sup> West 1975: 13. I have omitted his footnotes.

<sup>116</sup> West 1975: 5 n. 5.

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