THE DEATH OF HERACLES

Ev Cochrane

Sophocles' *Trachiniae* is conventionally dated to 440-430 BCE, and as such it represents the oldest extant tragedy dealing with the cycle of Heracles.[1] The play also forms the most complete account of the events leading up to the hero's death, and thus must figure prominently in any discussion of the hero's mythus.

Opinions of the play vary enormously. It has been called "one of the boldest and most powerful creations of Greek dramatic poetry."[2] Other critics, however, have not been so kind. Sorum called it "a troublesome play."[3] Its standard epithets, according to Segal, include "inferior, imperfect, very poor and insipid, gloomy, dark, puzzling, odd, nebulous, curious, bitter, difficult."[4]

The play takes its name from its setting, Trachis, a city in the Malian plain, close to the border of Aetolia and Thessaly, to whence the family of Heracles had been exiled because of his treacherous murder of Iphitus.[5] The entire region was distinguished by its rich supply of hot springs, and it was this circumstance—coupled with its proximity to Mt. Oeta—which inspired Sophocles to choose Trachis for the setting of the play, Heracles being the patron god of hot springs.[6]

The plot of *Trachiniae* is simple enough. As the play opens Deianeira, the ever-faithful wife, awaits with her children for Heracles to return from his forced servitude at the hands of the Lydian queen Omphale. Rumors abound that Heracles has fallen madly in love with one Iole, whom he kidnapped upon sacking the kingdom of her father Eurytus. Upon hearing these reports, Deianeira plots to regain the hero's love.

---

[1]On the date of the play see M. S. Silk, "Heracles and Greek Tragedy," *Greece and Rome* 32:1 (1985), p. 8. See also the discussion in P. E. Easterling, *Sophocles Trachiniae* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 19-23.

[2]Charles Segal, "Sophocles' Trachiniae: myth, poetry, and heroic values", *YCS* 25 (1977), p. 100.

[3]C. Sorum, "Monsters and the Family: The Exodos of Sophocles' Trachiniae," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 19:1 (1978), p. 59.

[4]Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[5]W. Oates & E. O'Neill, eds., *The Complete Greek Drama* (New York, 1938), p. 465.

[6]Indeed, Croon has observed that: "The entire scene of Sophocles' Trachiniae is dominated by these hot springs." See J.H. Croon, "Artemis Thermia and Apollo Thermios (With an excursus on the Oetean Heracles-Cult)", *Mnemosyne* 9 (1956), p. 210.

Remembering a love charm that had previously been given to her by Nessus—a centaur slain by a poisoned arrow from the bow of Heracles—Deianeira proceeds to apply it to a robe which she had been preparing for her husband. Upon hearing that Heracles is actually alive and well at Cape Caenaeum, Deianeira sends the royal messenger Lichas with the garment as a homecoming gift.

The truth is, of course, that Deianeira served as an unwitting dupe to Nessus in the latter's attempt to wreak vengeance upon the Greek strongman. And thus it is that Heracles—upon donning the robe in preparation for offering a sacrifice—finds that his body begins burning and corroding as if under the influence of a powerful acid. Sophocles describes the hero's undoing as follows:

> At first, hapless one, he prayed with serene soul, rejoicing in his comely garb. But when the blood-fed flame began to blaze from the holy offerings and from the resinous pine, a sweat broke forth upon his flesh, and the tunic clung to his sides, at every joint, close-glued, as if by a craftsman's hand; there came a biting pain that racked his bones; and then the venom, as of some deadly, cruel viper, began to devour him.[1]

The hydra's poison, in addition to inducing spasms of fiery pain, causes the hero's body to begin to waste away. As the horror of the scene builds to a fever pitch, Heracles is made to announce: "Glued to my sides, it [the garment] hath eaten my flesh to the inmost parts…already it hath drained my fresh life-blood, and my whole body is wasted."[2]

The proud hero who has emerged unscathed from countless struggles with monsters and brigands—whose singular trademark is his powerfully formed body, hitherto impervious to pain—finds himself undone by a woman. Death alone offers hope of relief from the excruciating pain and Heracles elects to commit suicide by submitting to immolation upon a great pyre atop Mt. Oeta. As the hero prepares to go to his death he laments his fallen state: "Behold! Look, all of you, on this miserable body; see how wretched, how piteous is my plight!"[3]

While there are numerous features of interest in this play, we would like to focus our attention on the peculiar imagery attending the hero's passion. It is noteworthy that despite its prominence in the play, the fiery death of Heracles—together with the mysterious disease which destroys his body—has received little discussion at the hands of commentators. In his long chapter on the tragic Heracles, for example, Galinsky offers nary a hint of the source of the imagery.[4]

Sophocles' depiction of Heracles as he lies writhing in agony, his body coming apart at the joints, is among the most disturbing and haunting in all of ancient Greek literature. Indeed several scholars have argued that the death-scene mars the play. The editors of *The Complete Greek Drama*, for example, observed:

> The closing scenes which present the sufferings of the dying Heracles constitute a serious defect of the play…Sophocles in the latter part of the play seems to have become so preoccupied with presenting Heracles' physical agony that he loses sight of

---

[1]764-771.

[2]1051-1057.

[3]1076-1080.

[4]G. Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 40-80.

> Deianeira, his truly great tragic creation, and the artistic integrity of the whole piece is correspondingly impaired.[1]

Linforth, similarly, suggested that the hero's death on the funeral pyre was appended at the end of the play in order to conform with the traditional account of the hero's death, much to the detriment of the unity of the play. Of Sophocles' deference to tradition this critic observed:

> He has written a play which is marked by the ingenuity of the plot and by the delicate art with which he has depicted the character and changing moods of Deianeira and the grim personality of Heracles. The motivation is sound throughout—until he comes to the final scene. The whole logic of the play demands that Heracles shall die from the effects of the poisoned robe. But instead of this he is sent to die on the pyre in a manner utterly unprepared for, and in a manner for which no cause or purpose is adduced. The play comes to an end with a scene which has no organic connection with what precedes.
>
> It is not difficult to explain this extraordinary circumstance. Heracles must die, but Sophocles cannot allow him to die of poison when it is an established fact that he died on the pyre. There is no legend telling of any form of death for Heracles other than that on Mount Oeta. He had no grave in the Greek world. The outcome which the audience has been led to anticipate as inevitable must give place to a conclusion which is fixed in legend as a historical fact.[2]

The obvious question which presents itself is what possessed a master like Sophocles to so dwell upon the agony of Heracles? And from whence did he get the inspiration for the bizarre imagery of the hero's "disease"?

GREEK EPIC, RITUAL, AND THE ORIGINS OF TRAGEDY

It is well-known, of course, that the various tragedians chose their subject matter from the vast corpus of epic myths, which they then selectively molded to suit their particular purposes.[3] In the present play, for example, Sophocles adapts the traditional tale of Heracles' winning of Deianeira via his conquest of Acheloos. To this episode Sophocles has wedded incidents from Heracles' conflict with Iphitus and Eurytus, although these events were originally unconnected with the myth of Acheloos.

There are several additional innovations which we may credit to Sophocles. He has made Deianeira an older woman, for example, in contrast to her status as virginal ingenue in the original myth.[4] It would also appear that Sophocles has invented the death of Nessus through poisonous arrows (the older monuments depicting this scene show Heracles with a sword or club) in order to provide an aetiology for the poison which stained Heracles' robe.[5] For the poisonous garment itself there is a prior reference, in the Hesiodean catalogue.[6] In summary, most of the central motives of *Trachiniae* can be shown to have been in existence in one form or another as early as

---

[1]W. Oates & E. O'Neill, *op. cit.*, pp. 463-464.

[2]I. Linforth, "The Pyre on Mount Oeta," *University of California Publications in Classical Philology* 14 (1950-52), p. 261.

[3]J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Trachiniae* (Leiden, 1970), p. 7.

[4]Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

[5]O. Gruppe, "Herakles," *RE Supplement* III (Stuttgart, 1918), p. 1086.

[6]Fragment 25:20-33. See also Kamerbeek, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

the seventh century BCE, and Sophocles' play can thus be seen as an attempt to integrate the independent mythical traditions into a coherent whole.

From this brief sketch of the primary elements of Sophocles' play it can be seen that he combined different myths from the cycle of Heracles, altering them in various significant ways. The death of Heracles by fire, however, was traditional and was presumably altered but little. This said, it must be admitted that there is very little evidence for the hero's immolation prior to Sophocles.[1] Some obscure fragments ascribed to Aeschylus' *Herakleidai* seem to describe the building of the pyre by the hero's children.[2] Herodotus had alluded to the tradition of Heracles' immolation in his *History*.[3] Sophocles himself would later refer to the hero's fiery death in *Philoctetes*.[4] Nothing in these accounts, however, hints at the source of the tradition.

A decisive clue, perhaps, is to be sought in early ritual, for, in addition to its debt to epic tradition, it has long been known that Greek drama originally commemorated actual religious practices of early Greece. Here Murray observed:

> Greek tragedy, strictly speaking, was a peculiar form of art with narrow limits, both local and temporary. It was, in literal meaning, a 'goat song,' i.e. a molpe (dance and song combined), performed at the altar of Dionysus over the sacrifice of a dismembered goat, which, by a form of symbolism common in ancient religion, represented the god himself…Its subjects might be taken from any part of the Greek heroic tradition; but normally the play portrayed some traditional story which was treated as the Aition or origin of some existing religious practice. For example, if it was the custom on a certain day to carry the coffin of Ajax to burial…Sophocles would write a tragedy representing the madness, crime, and death of Ajax, and the great discussion about the heroic criminal's dead body, in which by the pleading of his old enemy Odysseus he is at last granted the rites of honorable burial. That would explain the origin of the custom.[5]

That there was, in fact, a cult celebrating the ritual immolation of Heracles has only recently been confirmed. In 1920 archaeologists working at a site upon Mt. Oeta discovered effigy-like figurines of the great hero which had apparently been subjected to repeated firings.[6] Judging from the artifacts found at the site, the cult persisted from at least the 6th century BCE well into Roman times.[7] Upon the discovery of the Oetean cult, Nilsson drew the now generally accepted conclusion that the rite had given rise to the myth of the hero's immolation:

> Such a bonfire was kindled on the top of Mount Oeta and the figure burned on the pyre was called Heracles. This is proved by early inscriptions and statuettes of

---

[1]See the discussion in Linforth, *op. cit.*, pp. 261-262. Heracles' pyre first appears in art around 460 BCE. See J. Boardman, "Heracles in Extremis," in K. Schauenberg, *Studien sur Mythologie und Vasenmalerei* (Berlin, 1986), p. 129.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 127.

[3]7:198

[4]728-729

[5]G. Murray, *Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1940), pp. 1-2.

[6]H. Shapiro, "*Heros Theos*: The Death and Apotheosis of Herakles," *Classical World* 77:1 (1983), p. 15.

[7]Croon, *op. cit.*, p. 212. Boardman would place the origin of the local cult at Oeta "long before the sixth century." See Boardman, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

Heracles. So the myth of Heracles' death in the flames of the pyre on Mount Oeta was created and connected with the magnificent but late myth of Deianeira.[1]

Nilsson's thesis, unfortunately, leaves unanswered the origin of the ritual itself, or why it was connected to Heracles, and thus only removes the mystery one step back. This said, there can be little doubt that there was some relation between the cult upon Oeta and the tragedy of Sophocles.

MELQART

Here it is interesting to note that prior to the discovery of the cult upon Mt. Oeta several scholars—James Frazer being perhaps the best known—had deduced the existence of rites in which the burning of Heracles constituted the central performance, citing parallels from the ancient Near East.[2] Rites of immolation are alluded to in the cult of Melqart, for example, commonly called the Tyrian Heracles.[3] Of this god, Burkert observed: "Since Herodotus, the equation of Heracles with the Phoenician god Melqart has been beyond question."[4]

Given the extent of Phoenician colonization, the cult of Melqart eventually became disseminated throughout the Mediterranean from Cyprus to Sardinia (Italy) to Utica (N. Africa) to Gades/Tartessos (Spain). The fact that Melqart is mentioned on an Aramaen stele of the ninth century BCE suggests that his cult was not confined to Phoenician colonies, but enjoyed a wider province than hitherto recognized.[5]

Of Melqart's cult and rites precious little is known.[6] The vast majority of our information comes from Greek and Roman sources. According to pseudo-Clementines, people used to speak of a place near Tyre where Heracles/Melqart had been consumed in flames.[7] Dion Chrysostom, similarly, writes of the beautiful pyre which the Tarsians were wont to build for their Heracles (Sandon).[8] From Menander by way of Josephus we learn that in the spring the Tyrians typically celebrated the "awakening" of Heracles/Melqart.[9] Although the nature of the latter rite remains obscure, it appears to have involved a periodic rejuvenation of the god—witness the reference "having lost his old age in fire [the god] obtains in exchange his youth."

Frazer, summarizing the available evidence, offered the following opinion about the relationship of the cult of Melqart to Heracles:

---

[1]M. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (New York, 1963), p. 205.

[2]J. Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* (London, 1919), pp. 110-187. Frazer's discussion of Melqart's cult remains the best available in English. See also Gruppe, *op. cit.*, p. 1089.

[3]This identification goes back to Herodotus 2:44. See also Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, I:10:27. There is also a bilingual inscription in Malta which refers to Heracles/Melqart as the founder—archegetes—of Tyre. See R. de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Garden City, 1971), p. 244.

[4]W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 210.

[5]W. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, 1953), p. 196; R. de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

[6]For a summary of the available evidence see W. Kroll, "Melkart," *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), pp. 293-297.

[7]de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

[8]G. Rachel Levy, "The Oriental Origin of Heracles," *JHS* 54 (1934), p. 47.

[9]Josephus, *Antiquities* 8:5:3

> The foregoing evidence, taken together, raises a strong presumption, though it cannot be said to amount to a proof, that a practice of burning a deity and especially Melqarth, in effigy or in the person of a human representative, was observed at an annual festival in Tyre and its colonies. We can understand how Hercules in so far as he represented the Tyrian god, was believed to have perished by a voluntary death on a pyre. For on many a beach and headland of the Aegean, where the Phoenicians had their trading factories, the Greeks may have watched the bale-fires of Melqarth blazing in the darkness of night, and have learned with wonder that the strange folk were burning their god. In this way the legend of the voyages of Hercules and his death in the flames may be supposed to have originated. Yet with the legend the Greeks borrowed the custom of burning the god; for at festivals of Hercules a pyre used to be kindled in memory of the hero's fiery death on Mount Oeta. We may surmise, though we are not expressly told, that an effigy of Hercules was regularly burned on the pyre.[1]

Frazer's argument, as always, is documented with a wealth of evidence. Nonetheless it is doubtful that mere imitation of the rites of Melqart can account for the grand myth of Heracles' immolation. I would also question Frazer's attempt to group Melqart with the cults of the great dying gods such as Adonis, Attis, and Osiris. Melqart's true affinity lies with the war-gods of the ancient Near East, and it is this lead, I would suggest, which offers the best chance of reconstructing the original significance of Heracles' "death". For example, Melqart is explicitly identified with the Akkadian Nergal. This is confirmed by the fact that Assyrian scribes used the same ideogram to designate both gods.[2] The identification of Melqart and Nergal would appear perfectly logical, Nergal himself being elsewhere identified with Heracles.[3]

In addition to his role as a god of war, Nergal was also invoked as the King of the Underworld, his very name signifying as much: "Lord of the Big City".[4] Inasmuch as the name Melqart signifies "King of the City", Albright was led to suggest that Melqart too was a god of the Underworld.[5] Other scholars, however, maintain that Melqart's name signifies merely "King of Tyre."[6]

In the astronomical system of ancient Babylon, Nergal was identified with the planet Mars. This identification extends back to Old Babylonian times and is apparent throughout the vast period encompassed by the god's worship.[7] That the same planetary identification was widely attested for Heracles in Hellenistic times suggests its relevance for our study.[8] The same planet, moreover, appears to have been associated

---

[1]Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

[2]H. Seyrig, "Antiquites Syriennes," *SYRIA* 64 (1944-1945), p. 70; S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1989), p. 164.

[3]Seyrig calls the identification of Heracles and Nergal an ancient and widely held doctrine. Seyrig, *op. cit.*, p. 71. See also E. Cochrane, "Heracles and the Planet Mars," *AEON* I:4 (1988), pp. 100-101.

[4]E. Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 4. On the meaning of Nergal's name see also W.G. Lambert, "Studies in Nergal," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 30:5/6 (1973), p. 356; and P. Steinkeller, "The Name of Nergal," *Zeitschrift fur Assyriologie* 77 (1987), p. 167.

[5]W. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, 1953), pp. 81, 196. See also de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

[6]For the arguments bearing on this question see Bonnet, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21; G. Heider, *The Cult of Molek* (Trowbridge, 1985), pp. 175-179.

[7]Weiher, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 73.

[8]W. Roscher, "Planeten," *Ausfuhrliches Lexikon der griechischen und romischen Mythologie* (Hildesheim, 1965), p. 2527; Macrobius, *The Saturnalia* 3:12:6.

with Melqart, Arab authors speaking of the sanctuary at Tyre as being specially consecrated to the planet Mars.[1]

MELIKERTES

The Tyrian god Melqart has often been recognized in the Greek hero Melikertes.[2] The latter figure is best known, perhaps, from the peculiar myth of his "boiling" at the hands of his mother. Here Apollodorus reports that Ino, upon being stricken with a great madness, plunged Melikertes into a seething kettle of water, afterwhich she leapt into the sea together with the infant.[3] Although little else remains of this curious myth, it is known that it formed a prominent theme in several tragedies no longer extant.[4]

Melikertes was elsewhere linked with the foundation legend of the Isthmian games.[5] This cultic association, according to most scholars, accounts for the otherwise mysterious epithet Palaimon, signifying the "wrestler," given to Melikertes.[6]

Upon the Greek island of Tenedos there was a cult of Palaimon "the child-killer," involving, it would appear, the sacrifice of children.[7] This fact, if nothing else, should convince us that Melikertes was not the innocent babe that Apollodorus presents. One is naturally reminded here of the Biblical injunctions against the rites of Moloch (the latter name being cognate with Melqart, and thus, presumably, with Melikertes) and/or Chemosh, both of whom were propitiated with rites of child sacrifice.[8] To be more precise, both of these gods were offered children as burnt offerings.

Here it is significant to find that Moloch and Chemosh both appear as epithets of Nergal.[9] This would appear to offer further support for understanding the hero Melikertes as but a pale reflection of Melqart/Nergal, and suggests the possibility that the boiling infant was himself offered infants as burnt offerings.

Now it can hardly be a coincidence that Heracles also bore the name Palaimon, nor that he, too, became associated with the founding of various athletic contests such as the Olympic games.[10] It is also intriguing to note that Heracles is said to have murdered

---

[1]Seyrig, *op. cit.*, p. 70. Note here that ancient representations of Melqart frequently include a star set next to the god. See W. Culican, "Melqart Representations on Phoenician Seals," *Abr-Nahrain* 2 (1960/61), p. 48.

[2]Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 113. A more recent discussion of the evidence bearing on this issue is offered in M. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1967), pp. 209-212. For dissenting opinions see Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921), p. 41; C. Bonnet, *Melqart* (Leuven, 1988), p. 390.

[3]Apollodorus 3:4:3 For other references see Lesky, "Melikertes," *RE* 15:1 (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), p. 515.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 518.

[5]Pausanias I:44:8

[6]Apollodorus 3:4:3; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4:520, 13:919. See also L. Farnell, *op. cit.,* p. 41.

[7]Lycophron 229, with scholiast. See also the discussion in Farnell, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

[8]*Leviticus* 18:21, 20:2; *I Kings* 11:7; *2 Kings* 13:10; *Jeremiah* 32:35

[9]On the relation of Nergal to these two gods see J. Curtis, "An Investigation of the Mount of Olives in the Judeo-Christian Tradition," *HUCA* 28 (1957), pp. 142-150.

[10]On the epithet see Lykophon 663; on Heracles' association with the founding of the Olympic games see Pausanias 5:7:4ff. See also W. Ensslin, "Palaimon," *RE* 18:2 (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), p. 2447.

his children and cast them into a fire, a veiled reference, quite possibly, to Molochian rites.[1] However we answer this question, there can be no doubt that Heracles, like Melikertes, was a "child-killer." Such considerations attest to the fundamental affinity of Heracles and Melikertes, otherwise likely due to their mutual identity with Melqart, and lead inevitably to the question as to whether Melikertes' "boiling" is but a mythical variation upon the burning of Heracles atop Mt. Oeta?[2]

That such is indeed the case is supported by the fact that several other heroes with a Heracles-like reputation endure a "boiling" after the fashion of Melikertes. Perhaps the most famous account is that involving Pelops, who was offered up by his father Tantalus in a stew at a banquet for the gods (notice again the possible veiled reference to Molochian rites).[3] Upon finding out the horrible truth of Tantalus' offering, Zeus immediately ordered that Pelops be revived by boiling him in a magical cauldron.

A similar tale was elsewhere reported of Jason, whose resemblance to Heracles is commonly acknowledged.[4] According to the various scholiasts' accounts, Jason was once rejuvenated by means of a dip in a fiery cauldron at the hands of Medea.[5]

Of decisive importance for the interpretation of Melikertes' "boiling" is a famous cista from Praeneste, in which the Latin god Mars is depicted as an infant emerging from a vat of boiling water.[6] This scene, which dates to the fourth century BCE and has close parallels in Etruscan mirrors of the third century BCE, has typically been interpreted as either a fiery baptism ala that of Demophoon at the hands of Demeter, or as a magical resuscitation ala those of Jason and Pelops.[7] The Praenesten cista would appear to raise the possibility of a relationship between the boiling child and the planet Mars, provided, that is, that one can accept the identity of the Latin god with the planet of that name.[8]

That the Latin god Mars was identified with the red planet is well-known, of course, although few scholars have been willing to consider the possibility of a celestial dimension to the god's cult.[9] Nonetheless it must be admitted that Mars—as a god of

---

[1]Apollodorus II:4:12; Diodorus 4:11:1. See also the discussion in F. Prinz, "Herakles," *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), pp. 186-193. The evidence presented above, taken together, suggests the possibility that the name Palaimon traces to Baal Hammon, the leading god of Carthage famous for his Molochian rites. This suggestion appears to go back to R. Eisler, and finds support in the fact that Heracles was identified with Baal Hammon. Polybius 7:9:2. On this question see the discussion in Astour, *op. cit.*, p. 210; and S. Langdon, *Semitic Mythology* (New York, 1964), p. 53.

[2]U. von Wilamowitz long ago called attention to the assimilation of Heracles to Melikertes. See Gruppe, *op. cit.*, p. 1003.

[3]Pindar, *Olympian Odes* I:37-40. See also the discussion of Lesky, *op. cit.*, p. 515.

[4]R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1982), p. 240.

[5]Scholiast to Aristophanes' *Equites* 1321; scholiast to Lycophron 1315. See also the discussion in J. Frazer, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

[6]See the discussion of H. Wagenvoort, "The Origin of the Ludi Saeculares," in *Studies in Roman Literature, Culture and Religion* (New York, 1978), pp. 212-232.

[7]On the baptism of Demophoon see the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 239ff. See also W. Roscher, "Mars," *RML* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), p. 2408.

[8]On this issue see E. Cochrane, "Apollo and the Planet Mars," *AEON* I:1 (1988), pp. 55-62.

[9]In fact, I know of none. Velikovsky appears to have been the first to raise this possibility. See I. Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (New York, 1950), pp. 236-239.

war symbolized by an upright lance, with implicit associations with pestilence and the underworld—offers a close parallel to the Akkadian Nergal, about whose celestial dimension there can be no doubt.[1]

Recalling the identification of Nergal and Heracles, it will come as no surprise to find that the Latin god Mars was likewise identified with the Greek hero.[2] The basis for this identification, unfortunately, is not reported in the extant sources, nor, at first sight, do the two figures appear to share much in common. Aside from their traditional roles as defenders of borders and averters of evil, their mutual association with the dancing Salii and the healing properties of hot springs is all that comes to mind. How then are we to account for their identification? The ultimate basis of the identification of Heracles and Mars, in our opinion, is their common identification with the planet Mars.

The mutual identification of Heracles and Mars with the red planet would appear to bring our argument full circle. Whether one considers the immolation of Heracles from the vantage-point offered by the burning of Melqart/Nergal, or from that offered by the burning infants—Melikertes and Mars—a common denominator persists: the same explicit association of the burning figure with the red planet.[3] In short, all of our available evidence suggests the rather improbable conclusion that the myth of Heracles' immolation traces directly to ancient beliefs associated with the planet Mars—the fiery planet *par excellence*. Readers of this journal will no doubt recognize that this conclusion finds ready accord with the author's thesis that the mythology of the Greek strongman traces to events involving the red planet.[4]

THE DISEASE OF HERACLES

If indeed the grand myth of Heracles' immolation refers to events associated with the planet Mars, the question arises as to whether primeval events involving the red planet are alluded to in other scenes in Sophocles' play? For example, how are we to interpret the curious scene in which the hitherto impervious body of the Greek strongman becomes deformed and wastes away under the influence of the hydra's poison? I have yet to encounter a detailed discussion of this imagery—much less one from the perspective of comparative mythology—but if one exists it is almost certain to include the obligatory deference to Sophocles' creative imagination.[5]

It is our opinion that creative imagination is much overrated as a source of the imagery of the Attic poets. Rather, I am more inclined to suggest that in presenting an image like that of the "diseased" Heracles, Sophocles was drawing upon sacred traditions long since lost to the common lot. (That the great poets of Attic theater

---

[1]See the forthcoming "Origins of the Latin God Mars" in *AEON*.

[2]Macrobius 3:12:6; Servius *Aen*. 8:275. See also O. Gruppe, "Herakles," *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), p. 1096; Haug, "Hercules," *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), p. 590.

[3]The cults of Heracles, Mars, and Melqart share another important feature in common—namely, a prohibition of females. This is reported for the cult of Heracles in general, see Farnell, *op. cit*., p. 162; for Mars Silvanus in Italy see G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion,* Vol. I (Chicago, 1970), p. 235; and for Melqart upon Gades see Frazer, *op. cit*., p. 112. Significantly, the same prohibition was also reported of the Hindu god identified with the planet Mars—Karttikeya. See A. Chatterjee, *The Cult of Skanda-Karttikeya in Ancient India* (Calcutta, 1970), p. 103 .

[4]E. Cochrane, "Heracles and the Planet Mars," *AEON* I:4 (1988), pp. 89-105.

[5]P. Biggs, "The Disease Theme in Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Philoctetes* and *Trachiniae*," *Classical Philology*, 61:4 (1966), pp. 223-235.

frequently drew upon such traditions—presumably oral—in composing their plays is made probable by the common complaint that they were wont to disclose secrets of the great mystery cults.) This thesis is supported by the finding that similar episodes distinguish the careers of numerous other warrior-heroes. Consider, for example, the mysterious metamorphosis undergone by Nergal in the Assyrian poem *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. There the Babylonian war-god is said to have become withered or otherwise misshapen as a result of his ascending the heavenly stairway to the assembly of the gods.[1] Nergal's form is said to have degenerated to such an extent that his fellow gods failed to recognize him.

Certainly it must be admitted that the degenerative metamorphosis of Nergal offers an intriguing parallel to that of Heracles whilst under the influence of the hydra's poison. In each case the hitherto beautifully formed *heros theos* is transformed into something grotesque and misshapen. It is the explicit reference to the withering of Nergal's body which strikes our attention, calling to mind the "wasting disease" which ravaged the body of the Greek strongman.

Had we the necessary space it could be demonstrated that this motive of corporeal "withering" is an archetypal theme in the mythology of the warrior-hero.[2] Throughout the Americas, for example, there can be found traditions of a hero who, upon ascent of a giant tree spanning the heavens, becomes stranded there for one reason or another, whereupon he suffers a withering in form, ostensibly from lack of food and water. Levi-Strauss has traced this tradition in dozens of different cultures in North and South America, concluding that the hero represents a celestial body.[3]

A final example of this motive is of interest here. The Norse hero Thorkill, an avatar of Thor—whose affinity to Heracles is commonly acknowledged—once suffered from a mysterious affliction whereby a withering or emaciation affected the features of his face and body. As was the case with Heracles, Thorkill's disfigurement was caused by the poisonous venom of a being from the netherworld. And as was the case with Nergal, the Norse hero was said to have been rendered unrecognizable by his affliction.[4]

It is at this point, perhaps, that philology can be brought to bear in support of our thesis that the reference point for the withering affliction associated with the various warrior-heroes was actually a visual phenomenon associated with the planet Mars. Note the apparent relationship between Mars and the Latin word *marceo*, signifying "to wither, shrink, shrivel, droop."[5] This latter word, significantly, was that used by Saxo to describe the affliction which struck Thorkill.[6]

If we were to identify these respective heroes with the planet Mars, how then are we to understand the report of the planet-god's withering? A decisive clue can be

---

[1]O. Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets," *Anatolian Studies,* 10 (1960), pp. 125, 130. See also the commentary by Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 52; J. V. Wilson, *The Rebel Lands* (London, 1979) p. 98.

[2]We intend to return to this motive in a future essay.

[3]C. Levi-Strauss, *The Naked Man* (New York, 1981), pp. 31-36, 45-46, 232-235.

[4]Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish History* (Wiesbaden, 1967), p. 355.

[5]D. Simpson, *Cassell's New Latin Dictionary* (New York, 1960), p. 362. This word is certainly related to the Greek *maraino*, "waste away, decay". H. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1951), p. 885.

[6]See the discussion in V. Rydberg, *Teutonic Mythology* (New York, 1907), p. 715.

gleaned from the circumstance that the respective afflictions of Nergal and Heracles are both linked to an ascension to heaven (much as the hero of the New World traditions becomes emaciated upon ascending a giant tree). In the case of Nergal it is only upon ascending to heaven that the god becomes transfigured. Heracles' immolation upon Oeta, similarly, is said to have precipitated the hero's ascension to heaven whereupon he was granted immortality.[1] Central to the Greek tradition of Heracles' apotheosis is the belief that the hero ascended to heaven and forthwith joined his fellow Olympians, a picture not unlike Nergal's ascension of the heavenly "stairway" to the assembly of the gods.

It is probable that such traditions have a deeper significance than hitherto realized. If we view the career of the warrior-hero from the perspective provided by the thesis of the polar configuration, it can be deduced that the ascension of Nergal/Heracles refers to the movement of the planet Mars away from the Earth towards the assembly of the gods, literally the enclosure associated with Saturn. Such a movement would result in a gradual diminishment in the apparent size of the planet-god, contributing, no doubt, to traditions of the warrior-hero's withering.[2]

Traditions of Heracles' having experienced a "rebirth" or rejuvenation in the wake of his apotheosis lead to a similar conclusion.[3] Here it should be obvious that as Mars receded from the Earth it would appear to resume its former position as a child or "infant" of the much larger Venus and/or Saturn.[4] Indeed, it is quite possible that Mars appeared to visually enter the orb of Venus, thereby reentering the Venusian "womb" as it were. It is thus that we would account for the curious tradition whereby Heracles, upon ascending to heaven, was greeted by Hera (Venus) who forthwith made a show of "redelivering" her hated youngster.[5] Etruscan vases, with apparent reference to this tradition, depict the hero as an infant nursing at the breast of the Queen of Heaven. Heracles' "rejuvenation" shortly after his immolation, needless to say, offers a remarkable parallel to the traditions associated with Pelops, Jason, and Mars, each of whom experienced a rejuvenating metamorphosis upon being boiled.

THE DAKTYL

The same celestial scenario will also resolve a long-standing mystery surrounding the mythus of Heracles; namely, his appearance as a Dactyl-like dwarf. This tradition—so difficult to reconcile with the gigantic form elsewhere attributed to the Greek strongman—inspired Diodorus, among others, to distinguish between the Daktyl

---

[1]Gruppe, *op. cit.*, p. 1090.

[2]The full story of the Martian hero's ascension cannot be told in the limited space available here. In the original draft of this monograph I had originally included a discussion of several other relevant motives accompanying the hero's ascension, including a disturbance of the eyes and baldness. Both motives are present in accounts of Nergal's ascension, and both have close parallels in the career of Heracles and countless other heroes. For a variety of reasons, however, it was decided to return to these intriguing motives in a future monograph in this series.

[3]See the discussion in C. Kerenyi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (New York, 1959), pp. 203-204.

[4]On this aspect of Mars' history see D. Talbott, "Mother Goddess and Warrior-Hero," *AEON* I:5 (1988), pp. 48-59; E. Cochrane, "Indra: A Case Study in Comparative Mythology," *AEON* II:4 (1991), pp. 64-76.

[5]Diodorus Siculus 4:39:2

Heracles and the son of Zeus/Alcmene.[1] Modern scholars have likewise questioned the authenticity of this tradition, some explaining it as a pious fraud,[2] others as a contamination from the East.[3]

However, the truth is that Heracles' status as a Daktyl is well-attested in Greek cult. It was in this form that the hero founded the Olympic games.[4] Heracles as Daktyl is elsewhere found in close association with the cult of the mother goddess. In Mykalessos, for example, Heracles served as the doorkeeper to Demeter.[5] In Arcadia, similarly, Heracles was represented in cult by a diminutive statue (one cubit high) set next to a colossal statue of Demeter.[6]

It is significant to note, moreover, that the Daktyl Heracles was specifically identified with Melqart by the ancient Greeks themselves.[7] The iconography of the two figures converges on at least one point as well, both gods being represented sailing across the seas in a vessel of some sort.[8]

The archetypal significance of Heracles' Daktyl-form is further supported by his early assimilation to Bes, a god of unknown origin who is abundantly attested in Egyptian art as a dwarf with bandy legs and wrinkled face.[9] (Bonnet, in her detailed examination of the Daktyl's relationship to Melqart, suggests that the cult of Bes mediated the confusion between the two figures, presumably on Cyprus, a well-known melting pot of oriental and Greek ideas.[10]) The cults of Heracles and Bes share several significant points in common. Egyptian illustrations of the dwarf-god show him with a lion-skin draped about his shoulders, its tail extending down along the god's back and protruding between his legs, much as Heracles was depicted in Greek art.[11] Bes was elsewhere represented with arms outstretched strangling serpents, as was the infant Heracles.[12] On other monuments, however, Bes could be seen replacing Shu as the upholder of heaven, much as Heracles replaced Atlas.[13] Bes, finally, like Heracles, was a popular figure upon amulets and was invoked as the "averter of evil."[14]

---

[1]*Ibid*., 3:73

[2]Farnell, *op. cit*., p. 129.

[3]See the valuable discussion by Bonnet, *op. cit*., pp. 380-390.

[4]Diodorus III:74:4; Pausanias V:7:7

[5]Pausanias IX:19:5. This motive, as we have pointed out elsewhere, finds close parallels in the cults of other gods identifiable with Mars. See E. Cochrane, "Apollo and the Planet Mars," *AEON* I:1 (1988), p. 60.

[6]*Ibid*., VIII:31:3

[7]IX:27:6-8.

[8]Bonnet, *op. cit*., pp. 385-390. Melqart is elsewhere represented riding a flying horse, as was Heracles in Etruscan art. See Bonnet, *op. cit*., p. 390.

[9]The assimilation of Heracles and Bes has long drawn the attention of scholars. See, for example, the discussion in A. Palmer, *The Samson-Saga* (New York, 1977), pp. 227-230.

[10]Bonnet, *op. cit*., pp. 387-388.

[11]On the iconography of the god see V. Wilson, "The Iconography of Bes with Particular Reference to the Cypriot Evidence," *Levant* 7 (1975), pp. 77-103.

[12]H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der agyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), p. 103.

[13]*Ibid*., p. 108. Shu, of course, was elsewhere identified with Heracles.

[14]Palmer, *op. cit*., p. 230.

Several other features of Bes' cult are of interest here. Intimately associated with dance, music, and mirth, Bes frequently appears as a merry-making attendant of the mother goddess, not unlike the Daktyls in Greek tradition.[1] As his function of averter of evil and protector of the household would imply, however, Bes could also take on a war-like aspect and was frequently depicted brandishing a sword. Indeed Bes was elsewhere identified with Horus, especially in the form of Horus as child (the Greek Harpocrates), the Egyptian war-god likewise being depicted as a dwarf with twisted limbs.[2]

Significantly, Bes was addressed as "the rejuvenated one," and described as "the old man who renews his youth and the Aged One who maketh himself a boy again."[3] This report, needless to say, offers a remarkable parallel to the Phoenician rite of Melqart/Heracles, whereby it was reported that the god "having lost his old age in fire obtains in exchange his youth." Nor can we overlook the parallel with Heracles' rejuvenation upon his apotheosis.[4] Indeed it was because of his rejuvanation as a result of immolation that Nonnus compared the Greek hero to the Phoenix.[5]

While it would be impossible to do justice to the Bes traditions with this brief survey of his place in Egyptian religion, our survey does raise the possibility of resolving the hitherto obscure basis of this god's relationship to Heracles. Both gods were represented as dwarves and said to be capable of rejuvenation for the simple reason that both originated as personifications of the planet Mars, which—in a spectacular series of events witnessed by prehistoric man the world over—appeared to shrink in size and become metamorphosized into an infant as it ascended the polar column.[6]

The Daktyls' customary status as daemon-like attendants of the great mother goddess—like Heracles'/Bes' intimate association with the goddess—is best explained as reflecting the close proximity of the diminutive Mars to Venus when at the apex of its movement along the polar axis. If one interpretation saw the hero as experiencing a rejuvenation at the breast of Hera, another regarded him as the dwarf-like special attendant of Demeter. This latter image—based as it was on a celestial prototype—was aptly commemorated in the aforementioned Arcadian cult whereby a diminutive statue of Heracles was placed next to a colossal statue of Demeter.

CONCLUSION

An underlying theme of this series of essays upon Heracles is that the Greek strongman can serve as a prototype for reconstructing the myth of the warrior-hero. Nearly every fundamental motive belonging to the mythological dossier of the warrior-hero is attested in the cult of Heracles. Nearly every significant episode in Heracles' career, in turn, receives illumination by comparison with analogous episodes from the careers of other prominent warrior-heroes, particularly Nergal, Indra, and Thor.

---

[1]On the cult of Bes see H. Bonnet, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-109. See also E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol. II. (New York, 1969), pp. 284-288.

[2]E. Budge, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

[3]Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 228. See also H. Bonnet, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

[4]On the iconography of Heracles' rejuventation see Boardman, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

[5]*Dionysiaca*, XL: 394-398.

[6]Compare here the tradition of Indra's running away and assuming a minute form.

In the present monograph we have focused our attention upon the peculiar circumstances attending the hero's immolation upon Mt. Oeta. It has been demonstrated, I trust, that this tradition is inexplicable apart from the hero's identification with the planet Mars. The ramifications of this finding range far beyond a critical analysis of Sophocles' great play. Indeed, at the risk of sounding ridiculous, it is safe to say that the present thesis, if proved correct, will forever modify the way we view the recent history of the solar system, not to mention the archaic mythic heritage bequethed to us by our ancestors.

APPENDIX:

THE BURNING HERO IN COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY

Having concluded that the myth of Heracles' immolation traces to a cataclysmic spectacle associated with the planet Mars, it is to be expected that other cultures, witnessing the same celestial panorama, might preserve similar traditions. The myth of the burning hero, in fact, can be found around the globe. The following examples form but a small sampling of this mythic pool.

We have elsewhere had reason to allude to the Heracles-like hero of Ossetic Russia.[1] There the strong-armed hero, able to uproot stout trees with his bare hands, is known by the name of Batraz. The immolation of Batraz occurs early in his career; indeed several traditions report that the hero was born enveloped in fire. In obvious torment, the incandescent-babe implores:

> "Faster, faster! Fetch me water! I feel a flame of fire in me, an inextinguishable conflagration which devours me…"[2]

To alleviate the child's suffering his elders attempt to dunk him in vats of water: "Like a spout filling everything with flame, the child—a child of blazing steel—drops headlong to the seven cauldrons below; but they are unable to cool him." It is only with great difficulty that the hero's aunt eventually succeeds in cooling him. Thereafter the hero assumes a steel-like form, his body having been tempered by the waters.

It can hardly be denied that the tradition of Batraz being consumed by an "inextinguishable conflagration" bears a remarkable parallel to the torment suffered by Heracles, in which his body was consumed by the venomous poison of the hydra, the latter's venom being explicitly described by Sophocles as a plague of fire. Indeed the parallels do not stop there. Note that in an attempt to extinguish the corrosive effects of the hydra's poison, Heracles likewise sought relief from water, leaping into a nearby stream:

> "His blood hissed and bubbled like spring water when red-hot metal is tempered. He plunged headlong into the nearest stream, but the poison only burned fiercer; these waters have been scalding hot ever since."[3]

The comparison of Heracles' incandescent dive to the tempering of metal is most significant in light of the report that Batraz is likewise said to have been tempered into a steel-like form via fire and water.[1]

---

[1]E. Cochrane, "Indra," *AEON* II:4 (1991), pp. 75-76.

[2]G. Dumezil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 138.

[3]Graves, *op. cit.*, p. 201. This legend is often cited as an aetiology for the widespread association of Heracles with sacred hot springs. As noted earlier, the same association with hot springs is also found in the cult of the Latin Mars. See E. Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

The fundamental affinity of Heracles and Batraz is confirmed by several other points. Ossetic myth relates that Batraz was repulsive to look at.[2] While this is certainly a surprising statement to find recorded about one's national hero, it accords precisely with the horrible spectacle offered by the diseased Heracles, his body corroding away as if from an attack of leprosy. Finally, there is the report that the Ossetic hero likewise was fated to be immolated upon a great funeral pyre.[3] Here, as so often in ancient myth, a significant episode—the hero's burning—is doubled as if to emphasize its archetypal significance.

It is commonly acknowledged that the Ossettes, as a result of the their relative isolation in the Caucasus mountains, have managed to preserve a wealth of archaic traditions. One of the leading experts on Ossetic myth and tradition was Georges Dumezil, whose extensive researches have generated a new school of comparative mythology. Dumezil prefaced his analysis of the Batraz myth with the following observation: "This hero of the Nart legends, if one may rely on certain strong indications, has taken upon himself and thereby conserved a part of the mythology of the 'Scythian Ares,' the latter, in the last analysis, an heir of the Indo-Iranian Indra."[4]

Overlooked by Dumezil, however, is the explicit placement of Batraz in the sky. Thus it is said of Batraz: "The child will henceforth live in the sky, from which he will descend in a burst, incandescent as at his birth, whenever some danger or scandal threatens his kin."[5] Significantly, Ossetic myth records that when Batraz became furious and descended from the sky he assumed a red form.[6] As the Ossetic counterpart of the Greek Ares and Indian Indra, Batraz is properly identified with the planet Mars.

An intriguing parallel to the Greek tradition of Heracles' immolation upon Mt. Oeta comes from Mesoamerica. There a dwarf-god by the name of Nanahuatl offers himself as a martyr in order to resuscitate the missing sun:

> It is said that in the absence of the sun all mankind lingered in darkness. Nothing but a human sacrifice could hasten his arrival. Then Metztli…led forth one Nanahuatl, the leprous, and building a pyre, the victim threw himself in its midst.[7]

Nanahuatl, whose name signifies "pustule or ulcer," was the patron god of people afflicted with diseases of the skin.[8] Of this god Brundage remarks: "He was distinguished by his poverty and his hideous deformities—his whole body was covered with running sores."[9]

Nanahuatl's pathetic appearance mirrors that accorded Heracles prior to his immolation upon Mt. Oeta. Heracles' reason for submitting to his fiery fate, it will be

---

[1]G. Dumezil, *Legendes sur Les Nartes* (Paris, 1930), p. 54.

[2]*Ibid*., p. 59.

[3]*Ibid*., p. 73.

[4]Dumezil, *The Destiny of the Warrior*, *op. cit*., p. 137.

[5]*Ibid*., pp. 137-138.

[6]G. Dumezil, *Legendes sur Les Nartes* (Paris, 1930), p. 58.

[7]D. Brinton, *The Myths of the New World* (New York, 1968), p. 158. Here Brinton identifies Metztli with the Moon. It is the planet Venus, however, which appears to be the subject of the myth.

[8]B. Brundage, *The Fifth Sun* (Norman, 1983), p. 44.

[9]*Ibid*., p. 41.

recalled, was that the hero suffered horribly from a mysterious wasting disease, brought on by the robe provided to him by Deianeira. It is because Heracles himself is said to have suffered from a hideous skin-disease that he too, like Nanahuatl, became the patron of people so afflicted.[1]

The national epic of Finland, the *Kalevala*, offers yet another example of the burning hero. There the infant strongman is known by the name of Kullervo, "the battle hero," a fitting name for the warrior-hero indeed. Fearing the child's wrath should he be allowed to grow to maturity a figure named Untamo tries to kill him, first by exposing him in the sea, then via the medium of fire:

> So they gathered and collected a large supply of dry birch-wood, the hundred-needled pine oozing with resin, a thousand sleighfuls of bark, and a hundred rods of dry ash. Having set fire to the woodpile, they cast the boy into the middle of the blaze. The pyre burnt all that day and the next, and was still burning on the third day. Then they went to look. The boy was sitting up to his knees in ashes, up to his arms in embers, with a rake in his hand. He was stirring up the fire, raking the coals together. Not a hair was singed, not a lock displaced.[2]

This tradition, which can be compared to countless others around the world, finds a close parallel in the cycle of Batraz. Batraz, too, is said to have been delivered as a youth into a flaming fire, and he, too, is found alive and well days later, playing joyously. In order to cool the youthful hero he is thrown into the sea.[3]

The myth of the burning hero is also discernable in Egyptian tradition, where a magical text against snake bites has preserved the following story about Horus. Upon being born, the infant was laid in a thicket by his mother Isis in order to conceal him from the evil Seth. Upon her return from foraging for food, Isis finds the child near death from the poison of a serpent. As was the case with regard to Heracles' affliction, Horus' illness is described as being of a fiery nature. The spell for it is as follows:

> Ah, baby boy! Ah, my son! Are you burning, O my nestling? Are you over-hot, there in the bush? Your mother cannot be by you, nor is a sister there to fan you, nor a nurse to give you succor.
>
> Ah, Horus, my son! Lying in fever in a lonely place! There is no water there, nor am I there. May there be brought me water from between the banks of a stream to quench the fire.[4]

Following her examination of the infant, Isis becomes hysterical:

> She examined the disease of the divine heir and found that he had been poisoned. She seized him in her embrace, leaping about with him like fishes that have been put on a fire.[5]

The image of the goddess Isis leaping about with the burning Horus forms a close analogue to the leaping Ino and burning Melikertes.[1] Horus' burning fever,

---

[1]Gruppe, *op. cit.*, p. 1014.

[2]Quoted from C. Kerenyi, "The Primordial Child in Primordial Times," in C. Jung & C. Kerenyi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (Princeton, 1973), p. 35.

[3]Dumezil, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 195.

[5]Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

meanwhile, recalls the "plague of fire" which ravaged Heracles, and the resuscitation of the Egyptian god after his "death" from snake-bite mirrors the rejuvenation of the Greek strongman in the wake of his death from immolation.

Polynesian tradition offers yet another variation upon this motive. There it is the hero Maui who is burned while pursuing fire:

> But the flames gave him no pause, and it seemed as if they would envelop him. He was angry with pain and mortification; by his magic he changed himself into a hawk, and flew high into the air; but the flames leaped higher, and burned his feathers, and the feathers of the hawk are to this day brown as with fire. In desperation he changed himself into a fish and plunged headlong into the sea. No better! For the sea was almost boiling with the heat; and Maui leaped upward to regain the land, and brought with him the island Whakaari, which smoulders with fire till this day.[2]

Although the original context has been lost, the burning of the hero is once again followed by the latter's flight (or ascent) to heaven. Also apparent in this myth of Maui, as in the traditions surrounding the burning of Horus and Heracles, is the emphasis upon the hero's capacity for leaping. Here, it will be remembered, the fiery spasms induced by the venomous garment caused the hero to "leap into the air, with yells and shrieks, till the cliffs rang around."[3]

The same capacity, significantly, formed a prominent feature of the sacred rites of the Tyrian Melqart. Thus the whirling dervish-like dances which Tyrian sailors performed at the god's rites were described as follows by the Greek novelist Heliodorus: "Now they leap spiritedly into the air, now they bend their knees to the ground and revolve on them like persons possessed."[4]

Such traditions are a reference, it would appear, to the frenetic behavior of the planet Mars as it bobbed up and down the polar column under the tremendous forces of the giant planet Saturn. This phenomenon contributed greatly, no doubt, to the red planet's reputation for volatility, whether reflected in its "fits" of ardor or madness, or in its fickleness and unpredictability in battle, leaping from one side to another.[5]

We would like to conclude this essay with an intriguing myth from Australia.[6] There the hero Waijungari finds himself the victim of an arsonist, who sets fire to the hero's tent in revenge for one of his many indiscretions. In an attempt to escape the raging fire, the hero plunges into a nearby river, and later, upon exiting the river, he casts a spear to the heavens, which he then ascends to safety.

---

[1]The Egyptian tradition has preserved the original cosmological significance of the war-god's debilitation. During Horus' sickness all nature comes to a halt. The sun is blackened, the solar boat fails to move, wells dry up, and vegetation withers. *Ibid*., p. 192.

[2]J. Andersen, *Myths and Legends of the Polynesians* (Rutland, Vermont, 1969), p. 206.

[3]Euripedes, *The Trachiniae*, 786-789.

[4]Vaux, *op. cit*., p. 241.

[5]See, for example, Ares' epithet *alloprosallos*, derived from the root *allomai*, signifying "to spring, leap, or bound."*Iliad* 5:831, 889. See also Liddell, *op cit*., p. 66. Note here also that Babylonian astronomers referred to Mars as the "erratic star." See Weiher, *op. cit*., p. 77.

[6]W. Tinsdale, "The Legend of Waijungari…," *Records of the South Australian Museum* 5:3 (1935), pp. 261-274. I am indebted to David Talbott for this reference. See Talbott's discussion of this myth in "Servant of the Sun-God," *AEON* II:1 (1990), pp. 47-48.

Here again the burning of the hero is followed by his ascension to heaven. Although it would be rash to conclude from this brief account that the Australian myth offers an exact parallel of Heracles' immolation, it does contain a motive of the utmost significance to our thesis. Thus it is reported that upon ascending to heaven Waijungari became the planet Mars.[1]

---

[1]*Ibid*., p. 274.