

<i>ACTA CLASSICA</i> <i>UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.</i>	<i>LX.</i>	<i>2024.</i>	<i>pp. 5–18.</i>
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PELOPS: THE EMERGENCE OF A MYTHICAL PERSONALITY FROM FOLKTALE, RITUAL AND GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract: Heroes were generally imagined by the ancient Greeks as historical personalities from a distant past who were remembered even centuries later and whose deeds became legendary. Although this concept is occasionally found even today, it is much more probable and indeed it is generally agreed that mythical heroes were not created in this way, but myths somehow evolved from/in tandem with rituals and/or as aetiological tales. On the other hand, the close connections between folktales and myths were always acknowledged, even if the nature of their relationship remains controversial. In this paper, the mythical biography of Pelops is discussed because I think it offers an instructive case-study illustrating the complexities involved. All the episodes of Pelops' myths follow distinct folktale patterns and each of them was most probably inspired by different factors such as geography (strange rock formations around Mount Sipylus), popular etymology (the name of the Peloponnese) and ritual (some special cult practices in early Iron Age Olympia). The episodes of the hero's life (childhood, marriage, kingship) were only loosely connected to each other, and they were not amalgamated into a coherent biography until the end of the 19th century.

Keywords: Pelops, myths, folktales, Peloponnese, Olympia

Heroes were generally imagined by the ancient Greeks as historical personalities from a distant past who were remembered even centuries later and whose deeds became legendary. Although this concept is occasionally found even today, it is much more probable and indeed it is generally agreed that mythical heroes and myths did not emerge in this way but evolved from/in tandem with rituals and/or as aetiological tales. On the other hand, the close connections between folktales and myths were always acknowledged, even if the nature of their relationship remains controversial.¹

The mythical biography of Pelops offers an instructive case-study illustrating the complexities involved. All the episodes of Pelops' myths follow distinct

¹ Investigating the origins of a myth is not particularly fashionable today but the relations with ritual and folktale are often discussed, e.g. Burkert 1972, 1979; Versnel 1993; Hansen 2002, 289–300 and Buxton—Aguirre 2020, 8–14. The theory of historical roots is especially strong in the case of the Trojan War, but has duly been criticized. The psychological/psychoanalytical approach represented e.g. by Karl Kerényi does not find many supporters today.

folktale patterns and each of them was most probably inspired by different factors such as geography (strange rock formations around Mount Sipylos), popular etymology (the name of the Peloponnese) and ritual (some special cult practices in early Iron Age Olympia). The episodes of the hero's life (childhood, marriage, kingship) were only loosely connected to each other and they were not amalgamated into a coherent biography until the end of the 19th century. The tales about the young hero and those about the successful ruler and the miserable father have never been connected in antiquity. There were absolutely no tales about the death of the hero, but different traditions circulated concerning his burial place and even his bones were on public display for a long time.²

Scholars have focused on the childhood and marriage of Pelops for several reasons. The earliest, fullest and most famous (but also enigmatic and highly controversial, perhaps even misunderstood) literary treatment of Pelops' myth, i.e. Pindar's first Olympian ode concerns only his childhood and the famous chariot race against Oinomaos; all the ancient depictions show only the race and its preparations, sometimes its immediate aftermath, the assassination of Myrtilos and last but not least, there is but very scant evidence concerning the subsequent rule of Pelops.³

However, the earliest extant sources, Homer, Hesiodos, Tyrtaios and even Hekataios did not mention the famous banquet of Tantalos, where Pelops was supposed to have been served as a stew for the gods, nor the chariot race against Oinomaos when Pelops won either as a favourite of the gods or by some trick or cheating involving the help of Myrtilos. These popular episodes may have been generally known (as implied by Pindar) but were apparently not as important (at least not for the earliest authors) as other aspects of the hero's life. The earliest surviving written evidence suggests that Pelops was not primarily conceived as a young man, a heroic and ultimately successful suitor of a beautiful princess, but as a heroic ancestor, as a king *par excellence*.

In the often discussed Homeric scene (*Il.* 2. 99–109) where Pelops appears for the first time in our sources, it is only his scepter which is of importance. Deriving from Zeus, this object symbolizes and legitimates the supreme power of Agamemnon. The tragic story of the Pelopids is conspicuously avoided, and even if Tantalos is mentioned in the *Odyssey* (11.582–592), there seems to be no connection between the great sinner and the ancestor of the Atreids. There is no mention of the infamous curses haunting the dynasty in later sources and the adjective *plexippos* is not necessarily referring to the famous chariot race.⁴ Indeed, there are two different Hippodameias in the *Iliad* (2.742 and 13.429) and

² For details and references in general see Patay-Horváth 2023. For the famous shoulder blade see especially Parke 1932, Uhsadel-Gülke 1972, Griffith 2000, Zografou 2005.

³ Most convenient summaries are Howie 1983 and 1991 (both reprinted in Howie 2012), who also gives a comprehensive overview of the iconographical tradition. The most recent treatment is Cuvelier 2012.

there are also three different heroes (two Greeks and one Trojan) called Oino-maos (5.706, 12.140, 13.506) but those well-known ones connected to Pelops are clearly missing.

In the Homeric epic, Pelops is therefore a well-known and powerful ancestor. The same applies to Hesiodos (cat. fr. 190 and 193), who only mentions three daughters of Pelops married to three sons of Perseus. Finally, there is Tyrtaios, who is chronologically quite close to the epic poems and cites Pelops, son of Tantalos two times (fr. 2 and 12 West = 1a and 9 Gentili-Prato). Both fragments illustrate quite obviously that Pelops was a well-known figure and was known for two things: for his island, i.e. the Peloponnese and for his power as a king. The text of fr. 12 (West) deserves to be quoted, because it is barely mentioned in this context⁵ but is of vital importance:

I would never call a man to mind nor put him in my tale for prowess in the race or wrestling, not even had he the stature and strength of a Cyclops and surpassed in swift-ness the Thracian Northwind, nor were he comelier man than Tithonos and richer man than Midas or Kinyras, nor though he were greater king (βασιλεύτερος) than Pelops son of Tantalos, and had Adrastus' suaveness of tongue, nor yet though all fame were his save of warlike strength; for a man is not good in war if he had not endured of bloody slaughter and stood nigh and reached forth to strike the foe. (transl. J. M. Edmonds)

Pelops as a king or ruler is otherwise barely known from our sources⁶ but seems to have been familiar to the audience of Tyrtaios. Later on, Isokrates (5.144) refers to the rule of Pelops in a similar way, supposing general and widespread knowledge. But actually, the entire ancient tradition seems to be silent on the details of Pelops' rule except for the troubled relations with his wife and his sons. The reason for this strange fact is most probably that Pelops was originally conceived as the old king who has three beautiful daughters or three sons and occurs so often in folktales. He does not really take part in the action, but is merely there at the very beginning and at the end of the story by marrying or

4 The curses are discussed in detail by Fowler 2013, 432–434. *Plexippos* is usually translated as 'horse-striker'. A scholion (1.200.10 Erbse) explains that 'Pelops became striker of horses because he had to drive the horses himself' (after killing Myrtilos). For an alternative explanation see Patay-Horváth 2023, 137–138.

5 It is cited and discussed very briefly by Cuvelier 2012, 152–153 who does not cite any other discussion and I did not find any other either.

6 The alleged founding of some cities is attested only in relatively late sources and local traditions (Pomp. Mela 1.90 on Kyme and Servius in Verg. *Aen.* 10.179 on Pisa in Italy). Apart from some stories connecting king Pelops with Arkadia (Apoll. 3.12.6.), the only achievement attributed to the legendary king is the founding of the earliest temple for Hermes in the Peloponnese (Paus. 5.1.7) and the founding of the Olympic Games but this institution is not exclusively credited to him nor is it attested by many authors. Moreover, even those sources which attribute the founding of the Olympic Games somehow to Pelops are quite late and agree, except for Kas-tor of Rhodos (BNJ 250 fr. 3), that he was by no means the very first one to organize the famous contests.

punishing and rewarding his daughters or his sons. It might be objected that Pelops had many more sons than three, but the tradition is unanimous in maintaining that the three most important ones were Atreus, Thyestes and Chrysippos and the stories about them are remarkably close to folktales like 'The golden bird' (KHM 57 or ATU 550) or the 'Water of life' (KHM 97 or ATU 551).

The folktales relate the story of three brothers sent by their father to catch a magic animal or to fetch the water of life. The two elder brothers do not succeed in this but they murder their youngest brother together, take the bird or the water from him and return to their father. According to the usual happy ending, the youngest brother is miraculously saved and when he reappears, the truth is revealed. His elder brothers are executed or they are simply banished from the court, like Atreus and Thyestes after murdering Chrysippos. There are many modern Greek versions of this tale about the treacherous brothers⁷ and there is also a biblical parallel (involving much more brothers): similarly to most folktale heroes, Joseph is thrown into a well by his malevolent brothers but in the end he is even more lenient with them than usual. The myth is more severe with Chrysippos, who is occasionally also said (Schol. Eur. *Orestes* 5 = 2.33.11–34.3 Dindorf) to have been thrown into a well, but he can never return and there is no trace of a quest for a golden animal either. But the name of this favourite son of Pelops may be important in this respect: it simply means golden horse. And there is also the golden lamb, which features so prominently in the later careers of Atreus and Thyestes.

The feud of the two treacherous brothers, Atreus and Thyestes, starts again in a similar way as the tale entitled 'The two brothers' (KHM 60): one of them is poor and pious (as the name Thyestes, i.e. 'the sacrificer' suggests) and catches a golden bird; he sells it to his brother, who is wealthy and evil-hearted (as suggested again by the name Atreus, i.e. 'dark, malevolent'). The latter organizes a fateful meal after which he succeeds in persuading his poor brother to bring his own sons into the forest, i.e. to kill them. This is only the first part of the tale-type and is called 'The magic bird-heart' (ATU 567A) because the greedy brother wants to eat the heart and liver of the animal but his nephews eat them earlier by chance and have to die for this. In the fairy tale they are saved by a hunter and one of them becomes a wealthy king, in the myth they actually die (but similarly to the tale, and in a much more cruel way, their father is involved in their dying) and it is only their name that indicates wealth (Tantalos⁸)

⁷ Dawkins 1953, 190–191 lists 13 examples.

⁸ The children of Thyestes served to their father are called Tantalos and Pleisthenes in Seneca's play and in Hyginus (*fab.* 88). Curiously enough, Seneca mentions even a third son (equally slaughtered by Atreus) without giving him a personal name. Apollodorus *Epitome* 2.13 names three other sons on this occasion. However, a few lines later (2.16) he mentions Tantalos, son of Thyestes as the first husband of Klytaimnestra. This second Tantalos (son of Thyestes or

and power (Pleisthenes, i.e. ‘the most powerful’). But the two sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaos, are also wealthy and powerful and help each other as the two brothers of the Grimm tale do in the second part of the tale (ATU 303 ‘The blood brothers’).

The similarities between the myth of the Pelopids and the folktales are therefore obvious. One of the main differences between folktales and myths in general is the use of proper names and one may reasonably ask, why the old king of the folktales was called Pelops. The reason is apparently quite simple: the name of the Peloponnese was thought to derive from Pelops and he was generally supposed to have ruled over the entire peninsula.⁹ It was quite natural to assume that Pelops ruled over the entire peninsula, because the toponym was easy to explain in this way and his sons or sons-in-law were thought, according to the usual pattern in folktales, to have received parts of his kingdom.¹⁰

The basic idea that there was a legendary ruler of the Peloponnese called Pelops essentially derives from popular etymology explaining the name of the peninsula. Similarly to Italos, the legendary ruler of Italy or to many other eponymous heroes like Ikaros, Ithakos, Aigina, etc., the name of the hero Pelops derives from the toponym and not *vice versa* as commonly assumed since antiquity.¹¹ Although the geographical term Peloponnesos does not feature in early Greek epic poetry, the eponymous hero seems to be very well-known already in the Iliad, so the name of the Peloponnese must have been much older. It may even date from the Bronze Age and because it was not comprehensible a few centuries later, a mythical eponymous hero was created to account for the name.¹²

son of Broteas as Paus. 2.22.3 informs us) is already mentioned by Euripides (*IA* 1150) without naming his father. This figure and the confusion surrounding him (for details see Gantz 1993, 548–550) may well result from a folktale version, which did not allow the children of the pious brother to die.

9 Most explicit is in this respect Isokrates, who says that ‘Pelops, son of Tantalos, became master of all the Peloponnese’ (10.68) and that ‘Pelops seized the entire Peloponnese’ (12.80). For the alternative view (represented mainly by Thucydides 1.9) see below.

10 Historical rulers may have divided their territory as well, especially if it grew unusually large but political rule over the entire Peloponnese especially in the earliest times seemed to be inconceivable for Thucydides (1.9) and as he regarded Pelops as a real historical ruler, he replaced his direct rule with influence based on his exceptional wealth and assumed that it was only his sons and grandsons who actually achieved political power over most of the peninsula. This ‘historical’ reconstruction seemed, of course, more realistic than the folk-tale which simply postulated the rule of Pelops over the entire Peloponnese, since in Homeric epic, the grandsons of Pelops, Agamemnon and Menelaos are in general much more prominent and appear to have much more power than their grandfather had (the scepter discussed above occurring only once).

11 Locus classicus is of course Thuc. 1.9, but the same idea is already found in Hekataios fr. 119 (= Strabo 7.7.1).

12 For details see Patay-Horváth 2017 and 2023, 154–173. The case of Csepel island on the Danube (to the south of Budapest) seems to be a very close parallel: as early as the Middle Ages

In popular legends a king usually has a palace or something symbolizing his power and indeed the first thing mentioned in connection with Pelops is his scepter. Even if his palace is not mentioned explicitly, Pausanias refers to his throne, a huge rock on Mount Sipylos. It is perhaps surprising that it was not located in the Peloponnese but in Asia Minor. According to Pausanias (5.13.7) it was close to or above a well-known sanctuary at the feet of Mount Sipylos, and has been identified with a magnificent cleft in the mountainside called Yarık Kaya (meaning 'split rock') emerging steeply from the surrounding area. 'At the very top, in a steeply sloping rock, there is a cutting resembling a large seat which was perhaps originally an altar, but in view of its shape and size it may well have passed in antiquity under the name of the Throne of Pelops.'¹³ When the identification has been made, we cannot know, but it was certainly a strictly local (and therefore oral) tradition, mentioned only once in ancient literature and only by a man who came from this particular region.

One can reasonably ask why the ruler of the Peloponnese was credited with a throne in Asia Minor. Most probably the Greek settlers arriving here populated the newly acquired landscape with heroes familiar to them. They heard here some tales connected to special geological features which impressed them, but the names were presumably alien, so they replaced them with their own ones or added some Greek names to the native stories. In this way, some local tales came into being: in the immediate vicinity of the throne a rock was identified with the weeping Niobe and a marsh which was said to cover the submerged city of an impious king was called Tantalos. For the marsh, the native designation has also survived (Saloe or Sale mentioned by Paus. 7.24.13 and Pliny HN 5.117) and the local legend of the disguised gods visiting (and rewarding or punishing) human hosts has also been preserved in the story of Philemon and Baucis.¹⁴ We cannot know, if Tantalos, Pelops and Niobe were already regarded as family members previously or became relatives in mythology because of the geographical proximity of the legends here. Perhaps the first possibility was true for Tantalos and Pelops and Niobe were added here to the family. A third sibling was certainly created in this environment: he was called Broteas, son of Tantalos and was thought to have carved the large Bronze Age rock relief next to the throne and the marsh (Paus. 3.22.4).¹⁵

(not more than 300 years after the arrival of the Hungarians) the unusually large island was reported to be named after a certain man of this name, and this explanation was generally accepted for centuries; even though the word is very likely to derive from a common Hungarian noun meaning 'bush'. For details see Benkő 1966.

¹³ Bean 1979, 40 with a sketch showing the 'throne'. The first published photograph of this rock is Patay-Horváth 2023, 30 Fig. 1.14 (provided generously by Prof. E. T. Tulunay).

¹⁴ For the localization of Philemon and Baucis see Jones 1994, for the lake or marsh Patay-Horváth 2022.

Even if the banquet of Tantalos involving the cooking and resurrection of Pelops was exclusively located on Mount Sipylus, Tantalos himself was located in various other places as well and there was even a mountain called Tantalos on the island of Lesbos.¹⁶ Because the most famous part of Pelops' mythical career, the chariot race against Oinomaos has also been transferred to Lesbos at a very early stage, it was supposed that this island was the real cradle of the myth. The mythical tales did not, however, originate from this Aeolic island, nor from the NE part of the Peloponnese as various scholars assumed; instead, the stories either came from Arkadia, the central mountain region of the Peloponnese, and spread from there to various regions like Elis, Asia Minor or Boiotia or (more plausibly) the tale types were simply well-known almost everywhere in the Aegean (or all over the world, as the parallels suggest) at a very early date and were told with different names in different localities.¹⁷

As for the cultic origins of the hero and his myths, we have a large body of evidence from Olympia, the only place where Pelops was worshipped in Antiquity and can be quite sure that cult practice played a decisive role in the making of this character. But in order to understand the process, it is worth returning to the name of the Peloponnese and to realize that the first part of the compound most probably denoted originally, i.e. before the folk-etymological interpretation as a ruler, an animal which the peninsula was thought to resemble somehow. I think this animal species was a wild or feral bovid with two large horns used to denote the peninsula with its two large promontories pointing to the south. This idea is corroborated by a series of linguistic observations and is also supported by the analysis of the mythical tales and last but not least by the archaeological material found at Olympia. It is impossible and also unnecessary to go into details here,¹⁸ I just give a short summary concentrating on the process of anthropomorphisation.

Starting from the name of Pelops itself, one has to admit that we do not know anything about its meaning or origins. It might be Pre-Greek with a totally unknown meaning but it is also possible that it is essentially Indo-European in origin and means something like 'dark-faced'. Applied to humans, this meaning has caused some perplexity, but it would perfectly fit the animal

15 For Broteas see also Apollod. *Epit.* 2.2 and Ovid. *Ibis* 517 with Patay-Horváth 2023, 32–33, for the rock relief (usually dated to the 14th–13th century BC and called today Akpınar relief, Sipylus monument or Taş Suret i.e. 'Stone figure') see e.g. Bean 1979, 31; Salvini 1996 and 2011 and most recently Rojas and Sergueenkova 2014, 153–154.

16 Hylén 1896 with full references.

17 For Lesbos see Schol. Eur. Or. 990 (2.248. 14–16 and 249. 11–20.6 Dindorf) with Robert 1881, 187, for the questions related to the localizations in general see Patay-Horváth 2023, 28–40.

18 For details see Patay-Horváth 2023, 116–173.

species suggested here.¹⁹ It is also an established fact that animal names were often given to real people as well and after a few generations, it is often forgotten that someone was called after an animal even if the species did not become extinct nor was an especially rare one. Aeropos, a legendary ancestor of the Macedonians (Hdt. 8.137) or the equally legendary Eeropos of Tegea (Hdt. 9.27) both deriving from the name of the bee-eater (*aerops*) or the names Epops, Karnops, Konops, Myops clearly show that there are many cases where the names end in -ops like Pelops. And as the case of Kypselos clearly shows, aitiological tales can be decisive in obliterating the original meaning of the word.²⁰

It was often observed that the cooking and resurrection of Pelops is best paralleled by similar stories concerning animals.²¹ And Pelops as an animal in connection with Hippodameia can also make sense. First of all, it is worth noting that the rape of a human bride by an animal is a widely attested motif in fairy tales (e.g. Hans my hedgehog KHM no. 108 or ATU 441) and is nothing exceptional in itself.²² The assumption that animals and humans were not strictly divided in early human thought is clearly reflected by many tales in which humans and animals confront each other as equals (i.e. they understand each other and can marry and have children). The best known example from Greek mythology is the abduction of Europe by Zeus, who changed himself into a bull.²³

There is also another observation of fundamental importance. While the myth of Pelops and Hippodameia appears at first glance to be about the abduc-

19 The Indo-European etymology was suggested by Kretschmer 1940, 236–237 and was accepted afterwards e.g. by Burkert 1972, 112, Robertson 2010, 74–75 and Janda 2010, 105–106 (assuming different meanings thus showing the perplexity).

20 Animal names as personal names were systematically collected by Fick—Bechtel 1894, 314–325 (historical persons) and 417–418 (heroes). Of course, in many cases it is obvious that the name is that of an animal, e.g. Krios, Tauros, Leon, Kyknos, Kyniska or Lykaon. But Penelope ('wild duck'), Pittakos ('parrot'), Kastor (i.e. beaver, Castor fiber, Hdt. 4.109) and Keleos (i.e. green woodpecker, *Picus viridis*, Arist.*Hist. an.* 593a8) are not easily recognisable and the famous Spartan diplomat Syagros whose name simply means wild boar (Hdt. 7.159) is not even listed by Fick—Bechtel, although he mentions Kapros with the same meaning. The legendary story about the saving of infant Kypselos in a *kypsele*, i.e. a chest (Hdt. 5.92) has obscured the fact, given by Fick—Bechtel but almost never mentioned anywhere else, that the name derived from the name of a bird, *kypselos*, i.e. sand-martin or *Hirundo riparia* mentioned by Arist. *Hist. an.* 618a31.

21 Schmidt 1963, 145–155; Uhsadel-Gülke 1972; Meuli 1975, 1111–13; Tuite 1997. For a summary see Puchner 2002.

22 KHM no. 108 is just one of the many tales about animal bridegrooms, where the ugly animal is always saved, i.e. transformed to a beautiful young man by the kiss/love of the princess. In general see also KHM 1, 88, 127, 144 (with Uther 2013, 242–244) and Thompson 1958 B 600–699.

23 For a collection of Greek mythological examples see Robson 2002.

tion of a bride, it actually was a chase or magic flight (ATU 313)²⁴ primarily concerned with hunting and seems to have been transformed into a bridal race or contest only secondarily. At Olympia, Pelops was apparently not the main cult recipient but became a human figure and protagonist of the tale due to his close connection with Hippodameia. The transition from animal to human character is very easy in folktales about animal bridegrooms: it usually turns out that the strange animal was originally a human figure who finally returns to his human form.

It has also been observed long ago that human actors in folktales can be paralleled by animals in similar stories and it has also been argued, convincingly in my opinion, that the animals were the original ones replaced later on by human characters.²⁵ The main hero can be accompanied and aided by animals with superhuman abilities in KHM 17, 62 (ATU 554), and in other tales (KHM 71/ATU 513A or KHM 129/ATU 653) they become friends or even the brothers of the hero.²⁶ But Pelops does not have such helpers or friends/brothers, except perhaps for Myrtilos, and it is also a considerable problem that he appears as the main hero, the future bridegroom in the tale, although this role is never taken by an animal in such stories. However, there were the numerous unsuccessful suitors preceding him, who are usually neglected but deserve to be taken more seriously. Even if 'as unsuccessful and therefore dead suitors, these are by definition nobodies, bearing arbitrarily invented names',²⁷ they can be interpreted, precisely because of their characteristic failure as compared to the hero, as fulfilling the same role as the animals/helpers/brothers in folktales. All these figures share the common trait that they are typically losers regardless whether they aid the main hero or are just defeated or outdone by him. Compared to them, Pelops is of course successful, but he was not necessarily the

24 The type is also referred to as 'Girl the helper' (cf. in general Hansen 2002, 151–160). The return of Iason and Medeia with the Golden Fleece, or the tales about Idas and Marpessa or Theseus and Ariadne all belong to the same category. In all these cases there is no real race or contest, only a chase, in which the father of the bride (Minos, Euenos, Oinomaos or Aietes) tries but finally fails to catch the couple. This observation may also clarify the connection to the other part of the myth, the banquet of Tantalos since the cooking in a cauldron is closely connected to the magic flight and is a prelude to it. This was surely the case with Pelops as well. In the myth of the Argonauts, the episode is placed after the magic flight, but this seems to be a later development, as the cooking is not applied to the hero nor to the helping girl, but to Pelias, a relatively unimportant person in the tale. It shows, however, that the cauldron episode can be separated from the magic flight in order to form the nucleus of another tale in a different setting.

25 Meuli 1975, 599–600 citing among others Jacob Grimm.

26 The motif of the helping animals is well-known worldwide: see e.g. Uther 2013, 40 comments on KHM 17. The tale KHM 71 ('Sechse kommen durch die ganze Welt') has been compared to the magic flight (ATU 313) and especially to the legend of the Argonauts: Meuli 1975, 594–598, Anderson 2000, 78–80.

27 Fowler 2013, 429 adding that the total number ranges from 6 to 18 and few of the names appear on more than one list.

main hero of the tale. If we abandon the idea that the whole story is about marriage and accept the notion that the race is basically a chase or hunt, the following observation emerges: it was not Pelops but Oinomaos who was the main hero of the tale. He was the representative of mankind (i.e. the hunters), and Hippodameia was a divinity (the Mistress of the animals) granting success either for the hunter or for the game animal. As long as the tale was about hunting, Oinomaos the hunter was extraordinarily successful and the divinity granted him success (i.e. he was able to catch the fleeing animals). The only thing he had to do was to observe the divine rules and to offer appropriate sacrifices before the hunt. Failure in the hunt was due to some neglect on the hunter's part which caused the escape of the animal (aided by the divinity) and meant at the same time the hunter's death. The point of the story was precisely to call everyone's attention to the correct observation of the sacred rules and perhaps also to explain the unpredictable outcome of hunting.²⁸

The cooking of Pelops in the cauldron was in this hypothetical early version not a cruel act but a magical process necessary to revive the animal. If performed appropriately (i.e. if the bones are preserved and collected for the gods, who were imagined to be invited by the successful hunter) the gods rewarded the hunter with new game animals and success in subsequent hunting. It is not by chance that Oinomaos was said to be successful in so many cases: the game animals whose heads were displayed on stakes were most probably meant to express that this cycle of hunting and reviving the animals from their bones is likely to go on forever.

Following the anthropomorphisation of the tale, however, the cooking of Pelops immediately became a horrific deed, but was nonetheless retained, similarly to many folktales which also preserve this detail obviously because it can considerably enhance the thrill of the story and can also be used to enhance the strength and beauty of the hero.²⁹ The person performing this task naturally became an ogre or malevolent king and the episode was eventually even separated in time and place from the main story.

The anthropomorphization of the main hero is not entirely accomplished in many folktales about animal bridegrooms and therefore one might suspect that there was also a version of Pelops' myth when he was originally born as an animal and became a beautiful human person in some spectacular way, most probably by being cooked in a cauldron. The transformation may have been a reward to his parents who offered hospitality to the gods and were rewarded by the birth of a son. When the animal character was fully anthropomorphised, the

²⁸ For the connection of folktales and hunting see especially Röhrich 1964, 1993.

²⁹ The parallel with the Hungarian folktale about Vas Laci has already been noted almost a century ago: Cook 1925, 224 n.1. The tale belongs to type ATU 552; a similar chopping up and resuscitation (usually without the missing member) is also found in other types, e.g. ATU 302C, 318 (=AT 590A), 400 etc. (Köhler-Zülch 2012, 741).

cooking of the hero was reinterpreted and the chase was also converted to a bridal race; the tale was split up in two distinct episodes, the main hero was relegated to the role of the father and the father-in-law of the new anthropomorphized protagonist and this gave the opportunity or even necessitated the separation of the two episodes in space and time. This might have already taken place at a very early date, during or even before the Bronze Age simply because hunting lost its importance as a means of subsistence.

As the geometric animal figurines found at Olympia clearly show, the tradition that Pelops originally was an animal seems, however, to have survived at least in this region until the Early Iron Age. The reason for this was probably the importance of hunt and related rituals practiced by visiting aristocrats here. Due to the rising popularity of this hunting ground, the large game animals gradually became extinct, and aristocratic sports-hunting had to be replaced by other sports such as athletic and equestrian contests. In this way, the cult and myth of Pelops and Artemis/Hippodameia may have arisen together with the Olympic Games,³⁰ and the myths accompanying the rituals were soon transformed into a fairy tale: Oinomaos the hunter remained basically unchanged, it was only the chase that was superficially disguised as a chariot race; Hippodameia, the Mistress of the wild animals, became a princess; the game animals, meanwhile, were converted to suitors. Pelops was singled out among them as the final and successful of these. The animal which escaped the hunter by the favor of the goddess was turned into the young hero who won a chariot race aided by some divine favor, i.e. the winged horses given by Poseidon. This element is likely to be a substitute for the favor of the goddess necessitated by the transformation of Hippodameia. The divine character of the helper was thus retained and the assistance was adapted to the context of the new tale, i.e. the contest. But there was another possibility as well, to retain Hippodameia as the helper and to give up in this way the divine character of her assistance. This resulted in a fully rationalized version, where Hippodameia fell in love with Pelops (who had to be very handsome precisely for this reason) and made use of an intermediary to help him in winning the impossible race. According to the character of the contest, this assistant became Myrtilos who remained a servant of Oinomaos but was transformed into a treacherous charioteer.

30 Patay-Horváth 2015 and 2020. It may be added that the Irish festival called the *Tailteann Games* or *Lughnasa* (held approximately at the same time as the Olympic Games, i.e. halfway between the summer solstice and autumn equinox) is also accompanied by legends of St. Patrick which are strongly reminiscent of Pelops' myths: the most important one is about the revival of a fierce bull; another one tells about the winning of a pagan ruler's daughter (naturally not as a bride but for Christianity). The legend has been termed as 'perhaps the most interesting in the Lughnasa collection' and in some versions the pagan ruler is explicitly identified as Greek or is even taking his daughter 'out in a chariot to show her his possessions'. (MacNeill 1962, 403, 553–559)

Pelops was therefore originally the name of an animal and the Peloponnese was named not after the hero, but the hero was created directly (most probably already during the Bronze Age) from the animal and afterwards, secondarily (during the Early Iron Age) from the name of the peninsula. In a similar way, animal names were often turned into a toponym (e.g. Italia, Sauros, Ortygia, Meropis) and afterwards by folk-etymology into a mythical personality.³¹ The motifs contained in the mythical tales about the hero are found in various kinds of international folktales and are likely to have originated from a single story concerning hunting, where Hippodameia was the Mistress of the animals and the chariot race was a chase or the actual hunt in which game animals were pursued and usually caught by the hunter called Oinomaos in this specific case. The heads of the unsuccessful suitors were then exhibited like trophies of game animals, a practice already attested in prehistoric times and deriving most probably from the concept of regeneration from the bones. The same idea underlies the tale of Tantalos and Pelops: if the bones are preserved intact, the gods can revive the consumed (game) animal, and it will be available again for human hunters. The myths of Pelops derive therefore from age-old ritual, are closely connected to geographical reality and they are almost inseparable from folktales. Even if this is not necessarily true for every myth, it might be valid in many other cases as well.

Abbreviations

ATU = Uther, Hans-Jörg. 2004. *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the system of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*. (Folklore Fellows Communications no. 284–286). Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.

EM = *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*. Edited by R. W. Brednich, I. Köhler et al., Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999–2015.

KHM = Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Berlin 1819 (and many later editions all available online)

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³¹ Thuc. 6.2.4 (Italos); Paus. 6.21.3 (Sauros); Strabo 14. 1. 20 (Ortygia); Steph. Byz. *Ethn.* s.v. Kos (Merops).

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DOI 10.22315/ACD/2024/1
ISSN 0418-453X (print)
ISSN 2732-3390 (online)
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