

## The Heroic Cult of Agamemnon

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### Abstract

The Atrid Agamemnon received cult in two Peloponnesian towns, Mycenae and Amyklai, both of which claimed to have his grave. The conflicting reports about the location of his grave correspond to early variations in the literary tradition about the location of the murder of the king and his consort Kassandra. The Lakonian version of the legend and the cult associated with it may have been promoted by the Spartans when they aspired to become the sovereigns of the Peloponnese.

Despite the heroic origins of Agamemnon, a persistent scholarly opinion assumes that the Spartans worshipped him as a manifestation of Zeus, a belief based on the reference of later literary sources to a cult of Zeus-Agamemnon. In this paper I aim to conclusively disprove the divine worship of Agamemnon in Lakonia and argue instead that he received heroic worship from the establishment of the sanctuary at Amyklai along with his consort Kassandra, known locally as Alexandra. The fusion of Zeus with Agamemnon was relatively late and probably the invention of the poet Lykophron.

**(Key words: Agamemnon, hero, Kassandra, Amyklai, Zeus)**

The Atrid Agamemnon, commander-in-chief of the Greeks during the Trojan War, received cult in two Peloponnesian towns, Mycenae and Amyklai, both of which claimed to have his grave.<sup>1</sup> Pausanias reported that Agamemnon was buried at Mycenae,<sup>2</sup> but in the

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<sup>1</sup> Claims by two or more communities to possess the grave of the same hero were not unusual; see e.g. Paus. 1.22.1 (dispute between Athens and Troizen over Hippolytos' tomb); Paus. 3.12.7 (grave of Talchibios shown both in Sparta and Aigion); and Plu. *De gen.* 5, Paus. 1.41.1, 9.2.1 (three graves claimed for Alkmene, at Haliartos, Athens and Megara). Such claims reflect the emphasis on the local character of hero cult and highlight the political importance of heroic relics. Similar disputes have arisen since Medieval times about graves and bones of Christian saints.

<sup>2</sup> Paus. 2.16.6-7: "There is the grave of Atreus, along with the graves of those who, having come back with Agamemnon from Ilion, were murdered by Aigisthos after having been entertained with a banquet. As for the mnema of Kassandra, it is claimed by the Lakedaimonians who dwell in the area of Amyklai. There is also another [mnema] of Agamemnon and that of Eurymedon ... Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos were buried a little

account of his visit to Amyklai (3.19.6) he recommended a visit to the sanctuary of Alexandra (a local variation of *Kassandra*),<sup>3</sup> which contained her image, a grave (μνῆμα),<sup>4</sup> which was regarded as that of Agamemnon, and a representation of Klytaimnestra. The report at the Mycenae passage that the Amyklaians claimed *Kassandra's* grave clearly implies that there was also an alleged grave of *Kassandra* at the Amyklai sanctuary, even though Pausanias does not refer to it in his description there.

It is very likely that when Pausanias referred to the graves of Agamemnon and his companions at Mycenae, he was looking at the shaft graves of Grave Circle A inside the fortification walls, an area associated with heroes since at least the Archaic period.<sup>5</sup> Under epic influence the graves could well have been assigned to the royal families of Mycenae and foremost to the mighty King Agamemnon. Furthermore, since some of the Mycenaean grave stelai were probably visible in Archaic times, the representations on some could have inspired the local legend not only of Agamemnon but also of those buried with him.<sup>6</sup> It is possible, therefore, that a heroic cult of Agamemnon on the akropolis of Mycenae existed at least since the Archaic period and was centered on his alleged grave.<sup>7</sup>

Another cult area, more securely associated with Agamemnon, occurs not far from the Mycenaean akropolis, on the left bank of the Chaos stream.<sup>8</sup> The shrine was founded around 700 BC and, following a break between 468 BC and the fourth century BC, the cult resumed with a refurbishment of the sanctuary in Hellenistic times. The cult recipient, however, is in doubt, with Agamemnon confirmed only during the second phase, through fourth-century BC dedicatory inscriptions.<sup>9</sup> While Cook, the excavator of the “Agamemnoneion,” assumed Agamemnon was worshipped there from the beginning, conforming to a well-known pattern of hero cults that flourished in the late Geometric period, recent scholars question the early origins of Agamemnon's cult. They assign its beginning either to the fifth or fourth century

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away from the fortification wall; they were regarded unworthy of burial inside, where both Agamemnon himself and those killed with him were lying buried”.

<sup>3</sup> Variations in mythical names, especially those of heroic females, were common: Salapata (2002b) 136.

<sup>4</sup> Although in classical Greek μνῆμα usually means memorial, in Pausanias it means an actual or believed place of burial: Dunn 1995; Larson (1995) 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> An early fifth-century BC sherd carries the inscription “I belong to the hero” (*IG* IV, 495): Jeffery (1990) 173, no. 6, pl. 31.6; Whitley (1988) 178.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. the chariot battle and the diminutive figures on one stele could have alluded respectively to Agamemnon's charioteer and children: Marinatos (1953) 79-81. The stelai were not visible in Pausanias' time, having been destroyed probably in 468 BC.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the cult of Menelaos at Therapne, another Mycenaean city (Paus. 3.19.9).

<sup>8</sup> Cook 1953a; Cook (1953b) 112-118; Antonaccio (1995) 147-152; Boehringer (2001) 173-178.

<sup>9</sup> Cook (1953a) 64-66, fig. 38; Cook (1953b) 113.

BC, after the sack of the city, or to Hellenistic times.<sup>10</sup> The patron of the sanctuary during the early period remains unidentified, though Hera has been suggested.<sup>11</sup> Still, the lack of contemporary dedicatory inscriptions or a grave does not exclude Agamemnon as patron from the shrine's inception.<sup>12</sup>

Cook's discovery led him to strongly question the existence of an old tradition reported by Pausanias regarding Agamemnon's burial within the walls. He argued another "Agamemnoneion" just a short distance away would have been superfluous.<sup>13</sup> The sanctuary by the Chaos stream and the varying reports of the location of Agamemnon's grave led Cook to assume that in Greek times there was no unequivocal local tradition regarding the location of his grave. Thus, he concluded that it was unlikely the sanctuaries at Amyklai and Mycenae had developed around graves.<sup>14</sup> Cook's arguments are questionable. First, we cannot exclude there were two cult areas devoted to Agamemnon at Mycenae: one centered on his putative grave on the acropolis, and another established for another reason near the Chaos stream,<sup>15</sup> in much the same way as Aratos (Paus. 3.8.1; 9.4-6) and Pandion (Paus. 1.41.6) had shrines and tombs at different locations in Sikyon and Megara respectively. Second, information about a grave of Agamemnon in two separate locations (Mycenae and Amyklai) does not preclude – and in fact supports – two different traditions about the location of the hero's grave, as we will see in more detail below. The central position of the grave in a hero cult and in the extent of the hero's impact may explain the eagerness of several poleis to claim (or invent) a hero's burial in their territory in order to strengthen their position relative to that of neighboring communities.<sup>16</sup>

The conflicting reports about the location of the graves of Agamemnon and Kassandra at Mycenae and Amyklai correspond to early variations in the literary tradition about the

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<sup>10</sup> Fifth/fourth century BC: Antonaccio (1995) esp. 151; Hellenistic period: Morgan and Whitelaw (1991) 89-90. See also Alcock (1997) 23-25; Hall (1999) 55-59; Ratinaud-Lachkar (2000) 254-257; Boehringer (2001) 173-178.

<sup>11</sup> Marinatos (1953) 87-88; Hall (1995) 601-603; Ratinaud-Lachkar (2000) 260-262.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mazarakis Ainian (1999) 14; Boardman (2002) 65. See also n. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Cook (1953a) 33; Cook (1953b) 113.

<sup>14</sup> Cook (1953a) 33; Cook (1953b) 114-115.

<sup>15</sup> Abramson (1978) 117-118. The spot may have been chosen either as the site of his murder (Cook [1953b] 113-114), or because of its association with the Mycenaean causeway and waterworks nearby (Boehringer [2001] 174-175; Boardman [2002] 65), still visible in later times (Snodgrass [1982] 112), or in order to define Mycenae's territorial claims against Argos (Antonaccio [1995] 53, 151).

<sup>16</sup> However, a grave was not a prerequisite for hero cult: Kearns (1989) 3. Thus, Ratinaud-Lachkar's ([2000] 256) objection that the Agamemnoneion could not have belonged to Agamemnon from its establishment because it lacks a grave does not stand.

location of the murder of the king and his consort.<sup>17</sup> The canonical version is given by the tragedians, who placed the scene in the Argolid.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the lyric poets placed the palace of Agamemnon, and consequently the site of his murder, in Lakonia. This version first appeared explicitly in Stesichoros,<sup>19</sup> most likely in the *Oresteia* he composed in the first half of the sixth century BC,<sup>20</sup> and was repeated by Simonides who very likely also wrote an *Oresteia*.<sup>21</sup>

Following the same tradition, Pindar specified the place of the murder as Amyklai (*P.* 11.31-33).<sup>22</sup> Traces of this tradition are also found in Pindar's later odes: in *N.* 11.34 he implies Orestes' base was at Amyklai, which agrees with Orestes' epithet "Lakon" in *P.* 11.16; in *N.* 8.12 he refers to "the Pelopids in Sparta", a name that could have applied not only to Menelaos but also to Agamemnon and Orestes. Since Pindar had no particular reason to honor Sparta in his odes, these references indicate that by the fifth century BC the Lakonian version had gained acceptance abroad, running parallel to the expansion of the Peloponnesian League.<sup>23</sup>

The association of Agamemnon with Lakonia is implied in another fifth-century BC source referring to the embassy sent by the Greek alliance to Gelon of Syracuse to ask for help against the Persians. When the Spartan envoy Syagros heard that the tyrant demanded the war leadership in return, he exclaimed that "the Pelopid Agamemnon would groan greatly if he heard the hegemony was taken from the Spartans by Gelon and the Syracusans" (*Hdt.* 7.159). Syagros' reference to the heroic past aimed to legitimize his claims by showing that the old king, being a Spartan, would support the Spartan position even from his grave.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Not a surprising correlation since the grave of a person could be expected to be located at the place of death.

<sup>18</sup> Sophokles at Mycenae, Aischylos at Argos and Euripides varyingly at either place: Ferrari (1938) 10. Aischylos assumes a double kingdom of Menelaos and Agamemnon at Argos: Kullmann (1999) 106.

<sup>19</sup> Sch. E. *Oresteia* 46 (fr. 216 *PMGF*). On Stesichoros, see Segal (1985) 186-201.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell (1991) 3-4; see pp. 126-32 for all the surviving fragments of Stesichoros' *Oresteia*. According to Davies ([1969] 248), Stesichoros' *Oresteia* was composed in the very late seventh or early sixth century BC.

<sup>21</sup> Fr. 549 *PMG*: March (1987) 93-98. *POxy* 2735 fr. 1 reports that Stesichoros' work inspired a number of other poets: Prag (1985) 73.

<sup>22</sup> The exact date of this ode is disputed (474 or 454 BC): Prag (1985) 78-79. Bowra ([1934] 117) maintained that Stesichoros' use of the wider district, Lakodaimon, compared with Pindar's later localization at Amyklai, shows that the tradition had not yet crystallized. According to Prag ([1985] 77), Pindar's setting could reflect a formalization of the Lakonian version by that time.

<sup>23</sup> Phillips (2003) 314-315.

<sup>24</sup> See most recently Grethlein (2006), who argues that Syagros' lines are a quotation from the *Iliad* (7.125) but the discrepancies arising from the intertextual links end up undermining his claim.

All these references clearly indicate that from the time of Stesichoros there was a literary tradition differing from the standard one put forth by Homer and the Attic tragedians. This alternative located the murder of Agamemnon in Lakonia. The question remains which was the earliest version.

Most scholars follow Kunst in considering the original version to be that which placed the murder at Mycenae and made Aigisthos the protagonist. The later version would have moved the murder to Amyklai and made Klytaimnestra assume the leading role.<sup>25</sup> However, Hall more recently argued that the Lakonian tradition was the earlier one because Agamemnon's lineage is not easily accommodated in the local tradition of Mycenae, which favored the descendants of Perseus. In that case, the association of Agamemnon with the Argolid would have been a later development caused by the spread of the Homeric epic, with the cult at Mycenae established in the early seventh century BC.<sup>26</sup>

Pausanias' account of the grave of Agamemnon and the cult of Alexandra/Kassandra seems another vestige of the tradition of the death of Agamemnon in Lakonia. If so, this raises the question of which preceded the other: the grave or the tradition?<sup>27</sup> The identification of an ancient grave with that of King Agamemnon was possibly made under the influence of the old local tradition regarding the location of the murder in Lakonia. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the reverse, that a grave, later identified with the μνῆμα of Agamemnon at Amyklai, existed before the tradition and thus contributed significantly to its development.<sup>28</sup>

In any case, this version of the legend and the cult associated with it may have been promoted by the Spartans when they aspired to become the sovereigns of the Peloponnese: by appropriating the most famous epic king, traditionally affiliated with Argos, they could have placed a claim on the hegemony of the Peloponnese and appeared superior to their rival city.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kunst (1924-25) 32, 154; cf. Harrie (1925) 368.

<sup>26</sup> Hall (1999) 55-59; Hall (2007) 333-338; cf. Kullmann (1999) 106.

<sup>27</sup> Ferrari (1938) 8-9; Garvie (1986) xix; Prag (1985) 77 remarks that, although the grave attributed to Agamemnon might have been of the Hellenistic period, the cult began already in the sixth century BC.

<sup>28</sup> Harrie (1925) 366-368; Nilsson (1932) 72-73; Farnell (1921) 331.

<sup>29</sup> Hall 2007. Boedeker (1993) argued that the worship of Agamemnon and the appropriation of Orestes' bones had domestic benefits for the Spartans, aimed at restoring unity.

Despite the obvious heroic origins of Agamemnon, a persistent scholarly opinion assumes that the Spartans bestowed him a divine cult, at least for a certain time and perhaps throughout the existence of the sanctuary. The epic king was supposedly worshipped as a manifestation of Zeus or Zeus Chthonios, a belief based on the reference of certain later literary sources to a cult of Zeus-Agamemnon.<sup>30</sup> For example, as recently as 2009, Ekroth states that Agamemnon was worshipped at Sparta “where he took on the guise of Zeus-Agamemnon”.<sup>31</sup> Bringing forward additional evidence, I aim to conclusively disprove the divine worship of Agamemnon in Lakonia (and elsewhere) and argue instead that he received heroic worship from the establishment of the sanctuary at Amyklai along with his consort Alexandra/Kassandra.

To be sure, several allusions of the association of Agamemnon with Zeus are found in Lykophron’s *Alexandra* and its scholia.<sup>32</sup> At 1123-1125 the seeress Kassandra (named here Alexandra) announces that Agamemnon after his death will be called Zeus by “the creeping Spartans” and will be honored by the sons of Oibalos.<sup>33</sup> The scholiast Tzetzes (l. 1123) comments that the Lakedaimonians founded a sanctuary of Agamemnon Zeus in honor of the epic king. Tzetzes’ note on l. 335 also equates Zeus with Agamemnon in Lakonia. Alexandra here declares that Priam was killed at Agamemnon’s tumulus. According to the traditional legend, however, Priam was killed at the altar of Zeus Herkeios, not the tomb of Agamemnon; therefore, the scholiast’s remark must have been an attempt to explain the situation in Troy by drawing on the Zeus-Agamemnon identification in Lakonia.<sup>34</sup>

In another Lykophronian passage (1369-1370) Agamemnon is introduced as “Zeus of Lapersai,” with Tzetzes *ad loc.* referring to the location of this sanctuary as Λαπέρσαι δήμος τῆς Ἀττικῆς (emended by Wilamowitz-Moellendorf to Λακωνικῆς)<sup>35</sup> ἔνθα Ἀγαμέμνονος Διὸς ἱερὸν ἔστιν· ὁ ὁμώνυμος οὖν τῷ Λαπερσίῳ Διὶ ὁ Ἀγαμέμνων. The toponym Lapersai is otherwise unknown and cannot be associated with any place in Lakonian topography.<sup>36</sup> It

<sup>30</sup> E.g. Wide (1893) 338; Usener (1897); Cook (1925) 1070; Momigliano (1930) 505.

<sup>31</sup> Ekroth (2009) 125; see also Flower (2009) 221, n. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Malkin (1994) 31-32.

<sup>33</sup> Ζεὺς Σπαρτιάταις αἰμύλοις κληθήσεται, τιμὰς μεγίστας Οἰβάλου τεκνοῖς λαχόν.

<sup>34</sup> In Alexandra’s statement Lykophron may also have made a reference to the Lakonian situation: Nilsson (1932) 46, n. 29; Harrie (1925) 364. Mazzoldi ([2001] 86, n. 238) argues that Lykophron followed the Argive tradition.

<sup>35</sup> Such an emendation is supported by other ancient sources, for which see Cook (1925) 1069.

<sup>36</sup> Harrie (1925) 360. According to Hesychios, Laperse was a town in Lakonia; Stephanos of Byzantion mentions a note, presumably of Rhianos, regarding a mountain in Lakonia with the same name. Wide’s

seems reasonable to conclude that such a place never existed and was simply inferred by the scholiast from the epithet *Lapersios* attributed to Zeus by Lykophron.<sup>37</sup> As this title was in fact associated with the Dioskouroi,<sup>38</sup> the conquerors of the Lakonian city of Las, Lykophron might have attributed this name to the equivalent of Agamemnon, Zeus, who was the father of the Dioskouroi.<sup>39</sup>

Short notes by two writers of the second century AD may have followed Lykophron's text.<sup>40</sup> Athenagoras, in *Legatio pro Christianis* 1.1, lists those people who worship heroes as gods, among whom he includes the Lakedaimonians who revere Agamemnon Zeus. Similarly, Clement of Alexandria, citing Staphylos of Naukratis (*FGrH* 269 F8; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.38.2), reports that "a certain Agamemnon Zeus is honored in Sparta".

Modern scholars have interpreted this evidence very differently. Years ago, Wide concluded not only that an early cult of Zeus-Agamemnon existed in Lakonia but that it was an important one, in contrast to the cult of Agamemnon at Mycenae and the cult of his sceptre in Chaironeia (see below). Harrie, on the other hand, rejected the existence of such a cult. He rightly objected that, although Pausanias described the cults of Agamemnon elsewhere and mentioned the graves at Mycenae and Amyklai, he did not refer to a cult of Zeus-Agamemnon in his detailed account of the Lakonian cults. He appropriately concluded that there is no definite evidence for the existence of a Lakonian sanctuary dedicated to Agamemnon as Zeus at the unknown place of Lapersai or anywhere else. Moreover, the credibility of the Christian writers' reports is weakened by their primary intention to undermine belief in the ancient gods. For that purpose they chose references from the euhemeristic literature and tried to present Zeus in an unfavorable light by equating him with a mortal.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the only reliable reference that remains is the earliest one, of Lykophron, who identified Zeus with Agamemnon.

Support for a divine worship of Agamemnon has been sought in cults practiced in other areas of the Greek world. An unusual cult in Chaironeia centered on Agamemnon's

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hypothesis ([1893] 337-338) that Lapersai was located somewhere on the east coast of the Taygetos peninsula, "where several traces of cult and legend associated with great Homeric persons are found," is totally unfounded.

<sup>37</sup> Harrie (1925) 360-361.

<sup>38</sup> Lyc. *Alex.* 511: *Lapersioi*; Str. 8.5.3.

<sup>39</sup> On Lykophron's use of Agamemnon and Zeus as interchangeable terms, see West (1984) 152.

<sup>40</sup> Harrie (1925) 361. Cf. Eust. *Il.* 2.25 who states that he follows Lykophron in saying that in Lakonia Zeus has the epithet Agamemnon.

<sup>41</sup> Harrie (1925) 360-365; Nilsson (1932) 46-47.

sceptre.<sup>42</sup> This sceptre, of which Homer (*Il.* 2.101f) speaks, was made by Hephaistos at the order of Zeus for Pelops and passed successively to Atreus, Thyestes and Agamemnon; it was the token of legitimate kingship bestowed by the highest god upon the Pelopids. Pausanias (9.40.11-12; 9.41.1) relates that the people worshiped this sceptre above all other gods and with a daily cult in the yearly priest's house, where it was kept.<sup>43</sup> He also reports that the sceptre was indeed a *doru*, a spear that had been discovered between Chaironeia and Panopeus, together with gold objects. The story suggests the finds came from a Bronze Age tomb, with the cult of the spear arising from superstitious feelings of awe and a common custom of attributing old and strange things to Homeric heroes. Since Agamemnon as a person is not part of this cult, nothing suggests he was considered a god.<sup>44</sup>

The cult offered to the Agamemnonids at Taras (Ps. Aristotle [840a], *De Mir. Ausc.* 106) does not seem like an offshoot of the Lakonian cult of Agamemnon but might have been instituted independently, probably after the colony's foundation.<sup>45</sup> According to Nafissi, this cult, along with that to other heroic families, was instituted in the fourth century at the time of the Molossian king Alexander, when Taras used Homeric heroes as symbolic references to its relations with the king.<sup>46</sup>

Agamemnon and his descendants were associated with several places in Ionia.<sup>47</sup> He appears as founder of Pygela, a city supposedly inhabited later by some of his soldiers who suffered from pain of the *πυγή* (buttocks).<sup>48</sup> His descendants are said to have survived in

<sup>42</sup> Wide (1893) 338.

<sup>43</sup> Higbie (1995) 195-197. In Homer the king holds the scepter, a sacred object, which gives him legal and divine authority (*Il.* 2.46, 2.100-108, 23.566-569), and hands it to whomever he authorizes to act in his place: Alföldi (1959) 15-16; Palaima (1995) 135. Other persons possessing divine power, such as judges, priests, heralds and prophets, also bear the scepter. On the symbolic value of the scepter, see van Wees 1992, 276-80, who argues that only princely families owned scepters.

<sup>44</sup> Nilsson (1932) 47. The institution of a real cult for a spear as the supreme god is bizarre. The scepter/spear may have been a traditional emblem of local authority that changed hands every year: cf. the "sacred spear" borne by the Theban archons: Plut. *De gen.* 5 [578B-C], 31 [597B-C]); Bérard (1972) 225 n. 36; Schachter (1981) 199.

<sup>45</sup> Giannelli (1963) 42; Farnell (1921) 328, 341, who assigns an important role to epic influence.

<sup>46</sup> Nafissi (1999) 249. By contrast, Zunino ([1997] 264) suggests that the cult may reflect the Mycenaean presence or colonization attributed by later Greeks to the period of the *nostoi*. On rituals associated with the Atreids, Tyndarids and Agamemnonids at Taras, see Ekroth (2002) 85, 171, 180, 241.

<sup>47</sup> Sakellariou (1958) 116-123; Graf (1985) 395-396.

<sup>48</sup> This accords well with Agamemnon's association with baths and therapeutic thermal springs (see below): Sakellariou (1958) 117.



Lesbos and Kyme.<sup>49</sup> The ancestor of a Tenedian athlete emigrated from Amyklai with Orestes (Pind. *Nem.* 11.34) and the son of Orestes, Penthilos, went to Lesbos where he was considered ancestor of the aristocratic Penthelids (Arist. *Pol.* 5.1311B; Paus. 2.18.6). Although in none of these cases is a cult to Agamemnon clearly mentioned, it is possible that noble families of Ionia intending to promote their heroic origins sought to trace their pedigrees back to Agamemnon and stress a dignifying connection.

A specific cult of Agamemnon is mentioned by Pausanias (7.5.11) at the baths of Klazomenai, with the scholiast clarifying they are most likely those found in the territory of Smyrna. These baths have indeed been identified with those located at Inciraltı, a site closer to Smyrna than Klazomenai.<sup>50</sup> They are almost certainly the same as the hot springs mentioned by Strabo (14.1.36) between Klazomenai and Smyrna, and those specifically called “of Agamemnon” in other sources.<sup>51</sup> A proverbial expression, ἀγαμεμνόνεια φρέατα, was explained by later writers as wells dug out by Agamemnon in several places of Greece.<sup>52</sup> On the basis of these references, Sakellariou concluded Agamemnon was originally an old deity associated with water, which sometimes—especially in Asia Minor—had therapeutic qualities.<sup>53</sup> A much simpler explanation, however, could be that old wells, baths and fountain buildings were routinely credited to personalities of the bygone era, especially the most famous epic king.<sup>54</sup>

Agamemnon’s great fame as the mightiest king in epic poetry might have been the motive behind the association of his name with all the aforementioned cults in so many different areas of the Greek world, especially in Ionia, where Dark Age epic poetry apparently developed;<sup>55</sup> on the other hand, since epic poetry and hero cult were parallel phenomena, poetry might have drawn upon a preexisting mythical figure.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Poll. 9.83. According to Nilsson ([1932] 48), this could have been a coincidence of names, taken advantage of by the family to claim descent from the famous hero.

<sup>50</sup> Cook (1958-1959), 4, 18, n. 35; Bean (1966) 52, pl. 4, fig. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Philostr. *Heroic.* 23.30; Agathias, *AnthPal* 9.631; Keil (1926) 86-87.

<sup>52</sup> Sakellariou (1958) 117, n. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Sakellariou (1958) 118-119, 122-123.

<sup>54</sup> Graf (1985) 396. Hot springs, not necessarily with a cultic connection, were also attributed to Herakles: Nilsson (1932) 47-48.

<sup>55</sup> Farnell (1921) 280-342 esp. 284, 340-342; Coldstream (1976) esp. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Snodgrass (1982) 116.

To return to Lakonia, the modern view associating Agamemnon with Zeus should be placed in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarly literature, which assumed all epic heroes were originally divinities who had been demoted to heroes.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, this theory was founded precisely on the case of Agamemnon, mainly on the basis of Lykophron. Agamemnon was supposedly an old local god of Lakonia;<sup>58</sup> after the Olympian religion prevailed, the local god would have been displaced by and identified with Zeus, who kept the old name, Agamemnon, as his divine epithet. Zeus' epithet would later have been assigned to a hero, a powerful king, and found its way into legend; consequently, people could have easily identified the two figures and have located the seat of the hero Agamemnon in Lakonia.<sup>59</sup>

Agamemnon's consort, Cassandra, has similarly been delegated to a supposed "old gods" realm. The assumption has long been that two originally distinct figures – a local Lakonian goddess Alexandra and the epic heroine Cassandra – were eventually merged, or that a local goddess was demoted to the rank of a famous epic heroine.<sup>60</sup> As in the case of Zeus-Agamemnon, this theory retains an unfounded hold in recent scholarly literature.<sup>61</sup> I have argued elsewhere that nothing indicates the status of Alexandra at Amyklai was ever higher than heroic.<sup>62</sup> On the contrary, strong literary, iconographical and archaeological evidence indicates that Alexandra, along with Agamemnon, received a heroic cult from the beginning, when the legend involving their murders was founded. Alexandra was simply a local alternative name for Cassandra, as Pausanias clearly reports.<sup>63</sup>

The theory of the "faded gods" has been largely abandoned.<sup>64</sup> It is accepted today that most heroes were believed to have been mortals, worshipped after their death (or symbolic death, such as disappearance) because of their exceptional achievements or experiences. However, even though heroes belong to the class of the dead, they transcended mortality and

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<sup>57</sup> Deneken (1886-90) esp. 2449; Wide (1893) 12-13, 333-339, 345; Pfister (1912) esp. 377-397; Küster (1913) 73, 79-80; Harrie (1925) 365-367; Momigliano (1930) 505; Usener (1948) 171, 248-273.

<sup>58</sup> A chthonic or aquatic god (Cook [1925] 1070; Sakellariou [1958] 117-118, 123) or specifically the underworld god of Lakonia (Papachatzis [1976] 389; Fitzhardinge [1980] 51-52, 81).

<sup>59</sup> Momigliano (1930) 505.

<sup>60</sup> E.g. Wide (1893) 12, 336; Farnell (1921) 321, 330-332; Davreux (1942) 89-92.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. Larson (1995) 79, 83-84, 147; Antonaccio (1995) 165-166, 182; Mazzoldi (2001) 14, 84-86; Ekroth (2007) 104; Hall (2007) 334.

<sup>62</sup> Salapata (2002b).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Lyons (1998). See Habicht (1985) for Pausanias as a reliable reporter on local traditions.

<sup>64</sup> E.g. Farnell (1921) 280-283, 321-332; Harrie (1925); Nilsson (1955) 171-172, 184-191; Brelich (1958) esp. 13-14; Hooker (1980) 67-68; Malkin (1994) 31.

enjoyed a prolonged and more lavish veneration of a communal character. Moreover, although their role was similar to that of the gods, most heroes did not achieve panhellenic prominence.<sup>65</sup>

Agamemnon then need not be regarded as an old god transformed into the mere human protagonist of a great epic. A more natural explanation would be that Agamemnon, a great king of the past, was worshipped after death as a hero, according to a well attested Greek practice.<sup>66</sup> Two more reasons make it improbable for Agamemnon to have been an early god: his name, which is clearly Greek,<sup>67</sup> and the lack of a specific rite connected with his worship, in contrast, for example, to the case of Hyakinthos.<sup>68</sup>

There is more evidence to support the “heroic-only” associations of the king. The existence of the graves (whether real or fictional) of Cassandra and Agamemnon at the Amyklai sanctuary implies that the cult practised at that sanctuary had a heroic character. Furthermore, the couple’s cult, like most heroic cults, is locally confined (the localization at Mycenae was only a disputed alternative). The heroic nature of the cult is also supported by Pausanias’ introduction of other Amyklaian cults immediately after he had mentioned the sanctuary of Alexandra (3.19.6): his “θεῶν δὲ σέβουσιν οἱ ταύτῃ τὸν τε Ἀμυκλαῖον καὶ Διόνυσον...” implies that the previously mentioned figures were heroes.

Archaeological evidence corroborates that the cult practiced at the Amyklai sanctuary was heroic. Two votive deposits have been discovered near the church of Ayia Paraskevi situated in the town of Amyklai, a short distance southwest of the famous sanctuary of Apollo Amyklaios.<sup>69</sup> They comprised thousands of offerings, primarily in terracotta, ranging in date from the early seventh to the late fourth century BC. Dedicatory vase inscriptions to Agamemnon and Alexandra<sup>70</sup> conclusively associate the finds with the sanctuary mentioned by Pausanias, which was most likely located in the vicinity of the church. Further support for the identification of the sanctuary is provided by two sculptural works, both found in the same general area: a Hellenistic decree of the Amyklaian *oba* with a depiction of Alexandra

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<sup>65</sup> On the nature and origins of hero cults, see most recently Van Wees (2006); Ekroth (2007 and 2009); Bravo (2009).

<sup>66</sup> Farnell (1921) 283, 321-322; Cook (1903) 277-278, 405, 409.

<sup>67</sup> On the etymology of Agamemnon’s name, see Cook (1925) 1069-1070.

<sup>68</sup> Hooker (1980) 67-68.

<sup>69</sup> Stibbe (1991); Salapata (1993) 189; Zavvou et al. (1998) 173.

<sup>70</sup> Christou (1960a) 230, pl. 171β-γ; Christou (1960b) 102, pl. 81β. The earliest date to *ca.* 525 BC.

and the provision to be erected at her sanctuary;<sup>71</sup> and a marble throne bearing a dedicatory inscription to Alexandra.<sup>72</sup>

Of the hundreds of Archaic and Classical terracotta relief plaques discovered in the two deposits, many appear to represent the honoured figures and are iconographically and stylistically related to the Lakonian stone reliefs,<sup>73</sup> which are now considered dedications to various local heroes.<sup>74</sup> Several Amyklai plaques depict a seated bearded man holding a drinking cup and occasionally a staff, with a snake often found in the field (Figure 1).<sup>75</sup>



Figure 1: Plaque with seated man from Amyklai. Sparta Museum no. 6231/2. Photo: author.

<sup>71</sup> SM no. 441 (*IG* V.1,26; *SIG*<sup>3</sup> 932); Salapata (2002b) 131-133, fig. 1 with previous bibliography.

<sup>72</sup> Salapata (2002b) 143, fig. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Andronikos (1956); Stibbe (1991); Hibler (1993); Salapata (1993). The best-known example was found near Chrysapha: Berlin, Staat. Mus. 731: Salapata (1993) fig. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Hibler (1993) 201-203; Salapata (2006) 552. The iconography was an original creation of Lakonian workshops that persisted with few variations for more than five centuries.

<sup>75</sup> Stibbe (1991) fig. 41; Salapata (2006) figs 2a-b. The same iconographic formula is repeated on other artefacts from the deposits; e.g. Stibbe (1976) 13, 16, n. 58 and pl. 5.1.

The man is sometimes accompanied by his consort who holds a sceptre (Figure 2) and can also appear on her own.<sup>76</sup>



Figure 2: Plaque with seated couple and attending woman. Sparta Museum no. 6230/1. Photo: author.

The scene is frequently expanded through the addition of adorants or attendants, a serving boy (Figure 3) or woman (Figure 2).<sup>77</sup>



Figure 3: Plaque with seated man and serving boy. Sparta Museum no. 6229/9. Photo: author

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<sup>76</sup> Salapata (2002b) figs 3-4.

<sup>77</sup> Salapata (2006) figs 2c, 10; the rendering of these scenes varies from naturalistic to quite schematic, almost abstract: Stibbe (1991) figs 33, 35.

The imagery of the plaques<sup>78</sup> fits well with the identification of the recipients as the hero Agamemnon and his consort Alexandra/Kassandra. The bearded man depicted in a dignified seated pose and holding a drinking cup and staff conforms well to the image of the hero-king of epic, and a shield hanging in the background on some plaques fits his important military role in the legend.<sup>79</sup> The woman, seated by herself or next to him, assumes the role of his consort Kassandra, with the sceptre alluding to her priestly status and especially her prophetic abilities.<sup>80</sup> The often-depicted snake referred to and emphasized the heroic status of the couple.<sup>81</sup>

The heroic character of the votives is corroborated by other plaques, depicting reclining men, riders and warriors.<sup>82</sup> Such images, found in numerous areas of the Greek world, represent typical aristocratic and heroic activities – banqueting, hunting and war –<sup>83</sup> which allowed them to be dedicated to different heroes as an expression of their heroic status.

Even though the earliest votives are of the early seventh century BC, the cult of Agamemnon and Kassandra may have started a little earlier, as part of a wider tendency to worship heroes of the past that occurred throughout Greece from the late eighth century BC onward. Originally probably only of local Amyklaian significance, the cult was soon promoted and formalized by the Spartan state. Like other hero cults used to convey messages about political relationships and aspirations, the Amyklai cult was promoted in the framework of a policy to use the epic tradition to advance Spartan territorial ambitions. For the Spartans, Agamemnon, as a warrior hero, personified the glorious past and symbolized local history and identity.<sup>84</sup>

The heroic cult of Agamemnon and Kassandra continued uninterrupted until the Roman period, as the inscriptional evidence and Pausanias' report indicate. The cult was of considerable civic importance for the Amyklaians, since the sanctuary was used as a repository of public documents, and must have occupied a central position in the town of

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<sup>78</sup> Plaques with seated figures are a local variety found exclusively at Lakonian and Messenian sanctuaries. In each location the figures would have been identified with the locally honoured heroes.

<sup>79</sup> Salapata (1993) 194 and fig. 5.

<sup>80</sup> Salapata (2002b) 142-143; cf. Le Roy (1982) 285. For the sceptre as priestly attribute, see Connelly (2007) 87-88; cf. a Hellenistic funerary stele of a priestess from Argos showing, next to a key, a sceptre with a mushroom-shaped top, similar to that on the plaques: Vollgraff (1951) 4 and pl. Ib.

<sup>81</sup> Salapata (1997) 250-252; Salapata (2006) 552-553.

<sup>82</sup> Stibbe (1991) figs 36-38; 43-44; Salapata (2002a) fig. 1; Salapata (1997).

<sup>83</sup> Dentzer (1982) 480, 503.

<sup>84</sup> See e.g. Prag (1985) 74; Malkin (1994) 28-29, 32-33, 46-47; Hall (1999).

Amyklai. Pausanias' recommendation for visiting the sanctuary may have been on account of its size or decoration.

Interestingly, rather than Agamemnon becoming more important in later times, as the late authors' reports suggest, the focus of the joint cult shifted in favor of the heroine Cassandra. By the late Hellenistic period at the latest, she assumed a more prominent role and was considered the main owner of the sanctuary; this is shown by the consistent attribution of the sanctuary to Alexandra (with no mention of Agamemnon) and the major dedications, the decree and the throne, which referred to her alone.<sup>85</sup>

In conclusion, Agamemnon and Alexandra/Cassandra received a joint cult at Amyklai. As the literary and iconographical evidence suggests, the cult was of a heroic nature, centred on their alleged graves and based on a local version of the legend placing their murders at Amyklai.

The fusion or identification of Zeus with Agamemnon was relatively late, maybe coined on other compounds of Zeus,<sup>86</sup> and probably Lykophron's invention. Indeed, it has recently been argued that the renaming of Agamemnon as Zeus was one of Lykophron's naming strategies of his characters, suggesting an analogy between the hero and the god.<sup>87</sup> The merging can be understood in the cultural milieu of the early Hellenistic period, when many persons after death were raised to the rank of heroes<sup>88</sup> and when it was customary to assimilate deceased rulers, like Alexander, Demetrios Poliorketes and Ptolemaios Soter, to the most venerable divine figures. Lykophron probably viewed the heroic honors already granted to Agamemnon as an *apotheosis* in the Hellenistic manner, and the renewed popularity of epic poetry at that time<sup>89</sup> meant that the ruler of the gods could be easily identified with King Agamemnon, the ruler of men.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Salapata (2002b) 148-150.

<sup>86</sup> Such as Zeus Trophonios, a merging that took place during the Hellenistic period: *IG* VII. 3090, 3098, 3077; Küster (1913) 105. On Trophonios see Brelich (1958) 46-59, 64-65. Cf. the case of Diktynna: by Pausanias' time she had been assimilated with a goddess (Artemis-Diktynna) but in an early Hellenistic inscription she was known only as Diktynna: Steinhauer (1993) 80. Hadzisteliou-Price ([1973] 131) argued that the hero cult always precedes the association of gods with heroes.

<sup>87</sup> Sistakou (2009) 243-244.

<sup>88</sup> Dentzer (1982) 565-566; Alcock (1991) 456-458.

<sup>89</sup> The Hellenistic period's interest in epic is shown not only by Apollonius' *Argonautika* but also by creative experimentation in the invention of short epics. I thank Graham Zanker for his advice on this issue.

<sup>90</sup> Harrie (1925) 364-365; Nilsson (1932) 46-48; Hooker (1980) 68. Sakellariou ([1958] 121) argued for an early fusion on the basis of Sappho fr. 157 *PLG*, assimilating Hektor with Zeus, and Lykophron's passage predicting

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a cult in Lakonia and thus alluding to an already existing cult. However, Sappho's assimilations could have been just a poetic analogy, as Harrie ([1925] 364) suggested, and the pre-existing cult need not have been a divine one; instead, as argued here, it was a hero cult.



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