8 Theseus in Classical Athens

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BY THE TIME OF THE ATHENS OF THE PARTHENON, of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, of Cimon and Pericles, the legend of Theseus had become a part of the daily life of every Athenian. The most admired sculpture and painting of the day commemorated his exploits; the common utensils of the dining room and kitchen bore images of his great deeds. The politicians expounded his virtues and drew upon his life as an example. His festivals provided holidays and recreation. The tragedians found in his legends one of the most abundant sources for Greek drama. Theseus, more than any other man or demi-god, had become the hero of Classical Athens.

And yet this pre-eminence had not always been his. At the beginning of the sixth century BC, a century before the start of the extraordinary age of genius which we call Classical Athens, Theseus was a hero with little honour, even in his own country. To be sure his adventures in the Cretan Labyrinth were widely known and sometimes depicted with great beauty, as for example on the François *Ill. 29* Vase. But even on this extraordinary piece, Theseus has but a small part in the over-all composition of the work and it is mainly his exploits on the Cretan voyage which are portrayed, though he is also shown fighting the centaurs. Apart from this adventure he had as yet little place in poetry or art and was largely neglected and forgotten even in the city in which he was said to have been king, except perhaps by those Athenians whose family, cult or neighbourhood happened to make much of his saga. Veneration of him was particularly strongly rooted in Marathon and the hills that *Ill. 12* surrounded that plain; perhaps there his renown was always secure. But elsewhere his celebrity had not yet grown to its full stature.

The best indication of Theseus' relatively minor role in early Greek legend is provided by the Homeric poems. In the *Iliad* it is not Theseus' descendants who command the Athenian contingent at Troy, but Menestheus, the man who displaced him from his throne. Theseus is mentioned indeed only three times in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and some of these references have been suspected in ancient as well as in modern times as late additions by the ruler Pisistratus or by other Athenians. These suspicions may be groundless, but the comparative rarity of allusions to Theseus is itself striking and paralleled by the subordination of his position in early Greek art. Moreover, no one in Athens boasted that they were descendants of Theseus, though many of the most prominent citizens claimed Ajax or Nestor, Homeric heroes from other states, as their ancestors. Nor was his name ever adopted by any tribe or village of Attica, though lesser heroes were often so honoured.

Yet, gradually, as the sixth century progresses, Theseus' fame and honour grow. He becomes more frequently represented in Athenian art. Festivals become associated with his deeds and he takes on an added splendour in Attic cults. Before the century ends, a whole epic, the *Theseis*, has been composed about him and he has become the most famous of Attic heroes. To what can we attribute this change in Theseus' standing in a little over a century? To answer this question we will have to take a wide view of the role of myth and legend in Greek life and try to understand the tendency to incorporate them not just into art and entertainment but into religion and politics as well. To Greeks of this period what we would call the 'myths' of their past were not fictions but living realities. They could be sources of great pleasure, of laughter and merriment, but they were still profoundly serious, and often highly practical. Thus Pisistratus, driven out of the city after he had seized power, could conceive a plan for his restoration which included a carefully contrived spectacle in which a handsome tall girl named Phye pretended to be Athena escorting him back into Athens. Pisistratus' plan worked, though not solely because of the pageant, for he had already accumulated the power needed to overcome his opponents. Yet Phye's part was still important; she represented Athena and seemed to be a visible indication of the divine favour which Pisistratus enjoyed. Thus the spectacle helped to account for

and legitimize Pisistratus' control of Athens. Athena was backing Pisistratus. Who would wish to challenge a leader who had divine support? If we were to speculate about the attitude of many Athenians of this remote period, we would perhaps conclude that as they watched Phye and Pisistratus ride by, the girl was in some sense *identified* with Athena.

When we notice, then, that it is precisely during the rule of Pisistratus and his sons that the Theseus myth begins to grow in popularity and prominence in Athens, we naturally ask whether these rulers did not benefit from and perhaps encourage or even direct this development. Is this another case of Pisistratus' exploitation of the widespread belief in myth? This suspicion can be confirmed by some small but telling details. For example, we are told that Pisistratus had the line: 'The love of Panopeus' daughter, Aegle, tormented Theseus terribly' (fr. 298 Merkelbach and West) excised from one of Hesiod's poems, because it presented Theseus in a bad light. Further it is during the rule of the Pisistratids that we first hear of a special temple dedicated to Theseus. And Simonides, who was the guest of Hipparchus, the son of Pisistratus, was one of the first Greek poets we know to treat Theseus. His poem has perished except for the line, which describes the sail which Aegeus gave Theseus as he went off to Crete, 'Blood red sail dyed with elixir of blossoming ever-green' (Simonides fr. 45 Page), a description so rich in symbolism, so vivid in imagery, that it could not easily be forgotten. Finally, it seems likely that it was in the last years of the rule of the Pisistratids that the epic of Theseus was composed.

These indications of Pisistratid interest in the legends of Theseus are individually slight. But cumulatively they help to confirm our suspicion that Theseus' growth in popularity was encouraged by Pisistratus and the sons who followed him.

The reasons for such encouragement are easy to discern. Theseus was a hero who appealed to all citizens of Attica, had fought for Athens against an overseas despot, and was not tied to one region or one faction. Indeed his exploits were said to have included the creation of a unified Attic state:

> When Theseus became King he showed himself as intelligent as he was powerful. In his reorganization of the country one of the

most important things he did was to abolish the separate councils and governments of the small cities and to bring them all together into the present city of Athens, making one deliberative assembly and one seat of government for all. Individuals could look after their own property just as before, but Theseus compelled them to have only one centre for their political life—namely, Athens—and, as they all became Athenian citizens, it was a great city that Theseus handed down to those who came after him.

Thucydides II 15

Hence Theseus was a symbol of the unification of Attica into a single political unit. And therein lay his significance for the Pisistratids. Pisistratus himself had first risen to prominence by distinguishing himself in the cause of Attic nationalism—fighting to capture Salamis—and if he had exploited the regional rivalries of Attica in his climb to power, he had maintained himself in control partly by his ability to reconcile widely scattered and divergent segments of the Attic citizenry. He sent judges into the scattered villages and he himself made tours of the outlying districts to inspect everything and settle disputes (Aristotle *Constitution of Athens* 16. 5). He was, in short, like Theseus, a pan-Athenian leader.

As part of this policy of emphasizing and encouraging the unity of Attica, Pisistratus used, as any ancient leader would, myths, cults and festivals. It was under him that the Panathenaia, the annual festival of the union of Attica, was given a splendour which it had hitherto never attained. Every four years it was celebrated with special brilliance. Foreigners came from abroad to witness it and to compete in its contests. A special series of amphorae was produced as prizes, and as publicity for the flourishing Athenian pottery industry. And if in a quiet moment between processions, the all-night vigil, the athletic contests and the barbecue of sacrificial animals, some visitor asked what the origin of this splendid festival was, he would be told that Theseus founded it or at least improved and expanded it, just as Pisistratus had done quite recently.

The perceptive visitor to Athens in this period might hear other stories about the city that implicitly linked the Pisistratids to Theseus. Some he might dismiss as pure coincidence—Theseus' victory over the bull of Marathon had been won in the same area

Ill. 153. Coinage in Pisistrati times bore the ox-head symbo traditionally ascribed to the myth ical coins of Theseus. The legen that Theseus introduced coinag has no historical basis, but ma have been developed to supply 'historical' precedent for the be ginning of coinage.

Ill. 154. Women with offerings surround a youthful, garlanded Theseus, to whom Athena is holding out her hand. Pisistratus exploited the myths of both Theseus and Athena.

that Pisistratus had chosen for his return from exile, around 545 BC. Shortly after that date, Theseus' struggle with the bull of Marathon begins to appear on Attic vases. The victory that Pisistratus and the supporters who had flocked to him at Marathon won over his opponents at Pallene had its ancient exemplar in Theseus' triumph over the mythic heroes of that village, the Pallantids. One wonders, too, whether our hypothetical visitor to Athens would have heard the story about Theseus' coinage which Plutarch later recorded: that Theseus struck coins which bore the image of an ox (Plutarch *Theseus* 25). If so, it would appear that the introduction of coinage *Ill. 153* which came about in Pisistratus' day was represented as a revival of a practice of Theseus' day rather than as one of the most radical departures in the economic life of the city. The convergence of these stories about Theseus and the practices of Pisistratus was striking, for Theseus seemed to emerge as a mythic model for Pisistratus' rule: a strong, bold and successful ruler of a vigorous Athens, acting with the approval and support of Athens' patron *Ill. 154* goddess, Athena.

Theseus' exploits abroad were no less congenial to the rulers of sixth-century Athens. A vigorous Athenian foreign policy, aimed at maintaining Athens' power in the Saronic Gulf without excessively

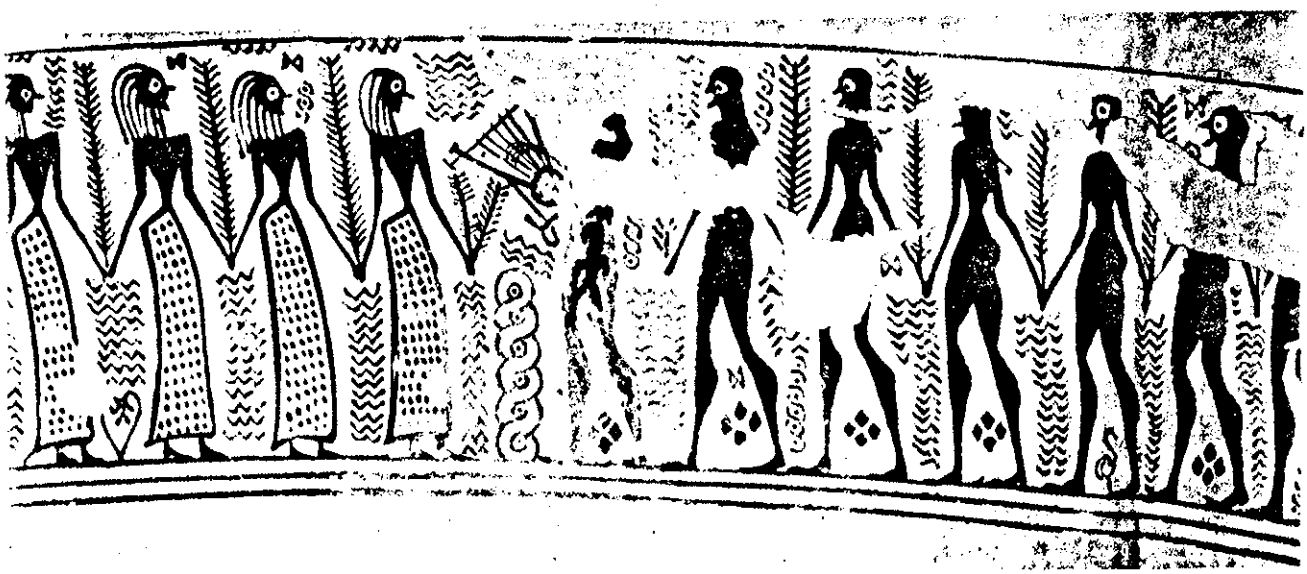
antagonizing the other states which bordered on it and at encouraging trade and diplomatic influence throughout Ionia and even beyond, welcomed the precedent of a hero who had destroyed Knossos and Minos' oppressive thalassocracy. Since Theseus was a figure widely admired for this and other exploits, especially among the Greeks of Ionia, his glorification as an Athenian hero could not help but reflect favourably on Athens and its energetic leaders. His exploits, moreover, could provide a mythic tie between Athens and strategic spots in which the city was anxious to increase its influence. The island of Delos is a good example. It was an important religious centre for the Ionian Greeks and the worship of Apollo, and located strategically in the centre of the islands that lay between mainland Greece and the settlements on the coast of what is now Turkey. It was greatly to Athens' advantage to emphasize that Theseus had stopped there on his way back from Crete and had originated a ritual dance called the 'Crane' and instituted games there. A great deal was made of this connection and it was said in the Athens of Socrates' day that when Theseus and his fourteen companions went off to Crete:

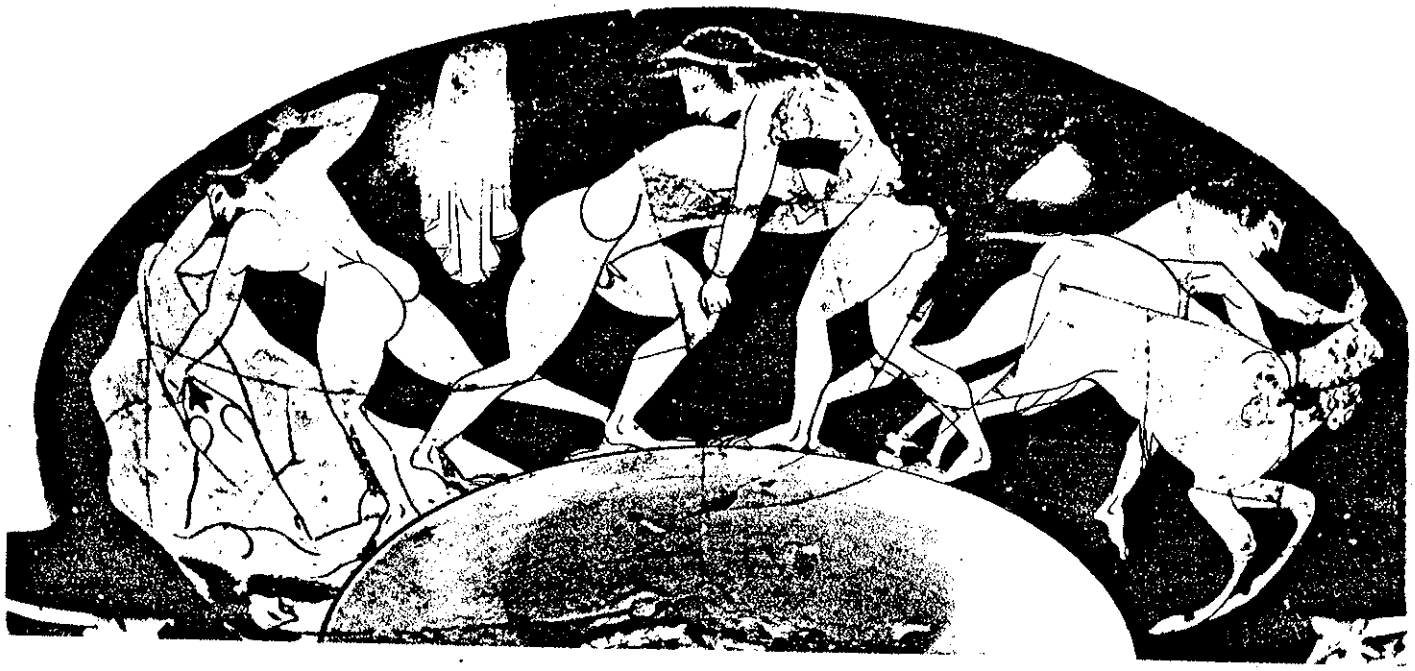
Ill. 106
Ills. 16, 146

Ill. 155

> The Athenians vowed to Apollo then that if the lives of these were saved, they would send a sacred mission every year to Delos; and they do it still, every year ever since that, to honour

Ill. 155. A Geometric hydria fr Analatos shows an early versi of the 'Crane Dance', a the which was frequently used stress the connections betw Athens and Delos.





Ill. 156. An early red-figure kylix shows the Chachrylion Potter's interpretation of the exploits of Theseus. Left to right: Sciron, Cercyon and the Marathon bull.

the god. As soon as the mission has begun, then, it is their law to keep the city pure during that time and to put no one to death before the ship arrives in Delos and comes back again.

Plato *Phaedo* 58a and b

Indeed this was the embassy which delayed Socrates' execution so long after he was condemned to death. And even after Socrates' time the Athenians showed a thirty-oared galley which was said to have been the boat which Theseus sailed to and from Crete. Scholars have long suspected that the origin of these practices goes back not to the Bronze Age but to a much closer past, for many of them the days of the Pisistratids. In any event, there is an indisputable sign of the influence which Pisistratus exerted in Delos in the reliably attested story that he conducted an elaborate ritual purification of the island by exhuming all bodies buried within sight of the main shrine and reburying them elsewhere.

Likewise Athens' long struggle for security in and around the Saronic Gulf continued during the sixth century, and myth, as we might expect, reflected it. The operations against piracy, for example, of which Hippias, one of Pisistratus' sons, was in charge (Polyaenus V 14), have a mythological counterpart in Theseus' journey from Troezen to Athens during which he destroyed the monsters and

Ills. 5—9, 111, 156

robbers along the way—Sinis, Sciron, the Crommyonian sow, Cercyon and Procrustes. The correspondence is not likely to be entirely accidental for the stories of Theseus' exploits during this journey appear in Greek art and literature late in the sixth century, perhaps just at the time of Hippias' operations. Once again we have reasons to suspect that myth was being exploited—even fabricated—for the glorification of the ruling dynasty, and for propaganda among Athens' neighbours.

In the time of the Pisistratids we find some of the earliest examples of the Greek technique of using myth and religion for political purposes. The legends of the past, true or false, ancient or newly invented, performed for the Greeks many of the functions which spectacular feats of technology—Aswan dams and moon flights—fulfil in modern politics: assertions of national pride, and impressive demonstrations of power without excessively blatant intimidation.

But if it is correct that the Pisistratids deliberately utilized the Theseus myth, how did the legends of Theseus retain their influence after their rule had collapsed? The family's hold on power was never quite secure after Pisistratus' death in 528. Unrest became increasingly obvious as the rule of his sons turned gradually from benevolent paternalism to undisguised despotism. And when at the Panathenaic festival of 514 one brother, Hipparchus, was slain by two young nobles, Harmodius and Aristogiton, the rule of the other brother, Hippias, became a hated tyranny. A few years later the Athenian opposition and Spartan intervention brought the dynasty to an end and Hippias fled ignominiously to Persia. The decline in Pisistratid fortunes was rapid and decisive; could we not expect a similar deflation of the Theseus legend?

At first glance it seems there are some signs of just such a process. Theseus' name is not among the heroes after whom the new tribes were named in the reorganization that followed the tyranny. A surprising omission. But the fact that one tribe was named after his son Acamas shows that his exclusion from the list was not due to any feeling against Theseus. On the contrary, it may have been because Theseus' reputation as a pan-Athenian figure was too firmly established and too useful to allow him to be tied to any one tribe or section. Whatever the explanation the fact is clear: Theseus' hold on the imagination of the Athenians continued unabated.

Ill. 157

Ill. 157. The two sons of Theseus, Demophon and Acamas, are shown escorting their aged grandmother Aethra on a red-figure crater.

Indeed it is only in the very late sixth and early fifth century that the full cycle of Theseus' stories becomes truly popular in Athens. Now (as has been pointed out in Chapter 2), his image constantly appears on Athenian vases and the range of exploits depicted widens. In addition, it was probably in this period that honours to Theseus were introduced into a far earlier fertility cult which invoked the help of the goddess Athena. This festival, the Oschophoria, originally an agricultural rite, now became a national festival commemorating Theseus' departure for and return from Crete. In it two youths carrying branches (a survival of the old fertility rite) headed a procession and played the parts of companions of Theseus, while women brought bread and meat to the port of Phalerum and acted as the parents of the children sent off on the gruesome expedition.

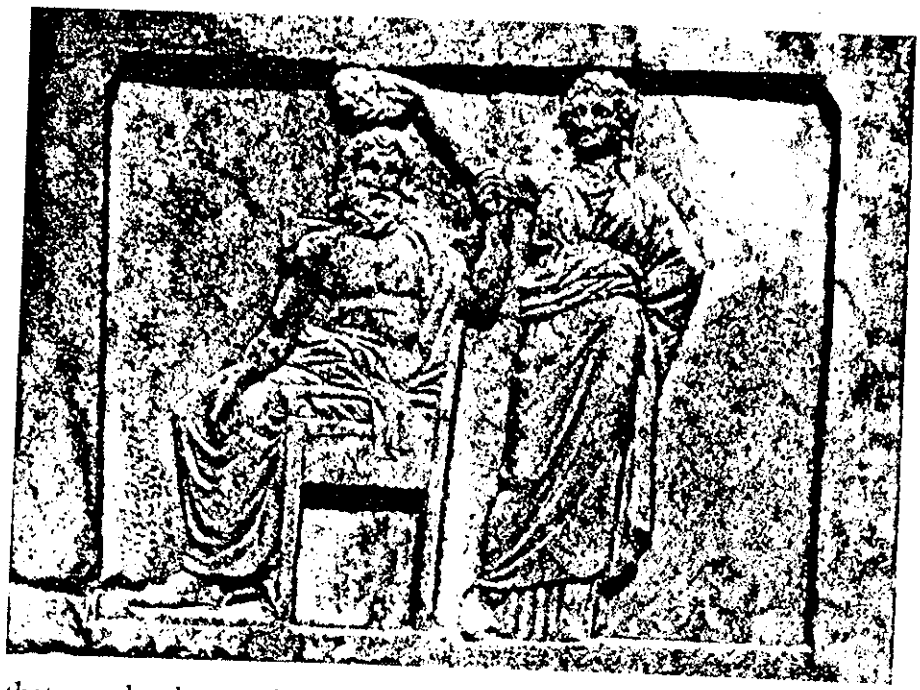
Shortly after the fall of the Pisistratids, then, Theseus is made the centre of a dramatic and popular festival, a role which he could only have attained if the previous exploitation of his legend had not tarnished his appeal. A further indication points to the same conclusion, or rather helps explain Theseus' sustained popularity. He becomes a democratic hero. The figure who a few years before had been a prototype of the dynamic autocracy of Pisistratus and his

sons now emerges as the mythic founder of the democratic institutions of Athens. The orator, Isocrates, and other writers of the fourth century BC, believed that Theseus established a democratic form of government which lasted down to the time of Pisistratus. As historical fact such a story has little to commend it—Athens was no democracy before Pisistratus. But the tradition is a revealing one, for it is likely to contain a clue to the attitudes of the Athenians at the time when they were first developing a democracy; that is, in the years following the overthrow of the Pisistratid tyranny. Surely the practice of representing Theseus as a democratic leader goes back to the fifth century, for Euripides in his *Suppliant Women* had made him a constitutional monarch in a city with a strong assembly. In that play Theseus rebukes a Theban herald who has made the mistake of asking, 'Who's the ruler of this land?' as his first question. Theseus explains to him:

> This city is not ruled by a single man, but is quite free. The people are in power taking turns in holding annual offices, and I might add the rich are not given preferential treatment and even the poor man has a fair and equal chance.

These are the clichés of the Athenian fifth-century democracy, of which Theseus by Euripides' day had become the symbol and the representative. Moreover, nothing in the play suggests that presenting Theseus as a democratic politician was a particularly radical innovation by Euripides; rather he seems to be working within an already established tradition that held that Theseus' actions were a precedent for the democratic changes of the fifth century. Thus Theseus, probably quite soon after the end of the tyranny, came to be represented as a democratic leader and institutions were ascribed to him which were in fact sharp departures from preceding Athenian practice.

We can now begin to see more clearly a pattern of political and mythic thinking among the Greeks. Innovations, especially important or radical ones, are frequently represented as reversions to past procedures. Someone 'discovers' that Theseus had instituted coinage or that he had renounced absolute power to become leader of a democracy. The effect of these discoveries is to make acceptable and legitimize new practices and to invest them with the venerable dignity of the past. Later in the century we find a reform movement



Ill. 158. To emphasize the concept of popular support, the personifications of the people (*Demos*) and democracy (*Democratia*) were sculpted on the top of a stele publishing a decree. The sculptor Euphranor, in his version of this scene, added Theseus, perhaps thereby attesting Theseus' legendary role as the founder of Athenian democracy.

that sought changes in the constitution arguing about what was the ancestral form of government, as if its discovery would solve the problems of contemporary democracy.

Not only Classical literature but also Classical art attests the democratization of Theseus. The fourth-century sculptor Euphranor *Ill. 158* portrayed him beside a man, Demos (the people) and a woman, Democracy, a sort of father of the bride at the wedding of the people of Athens to their cherished constitution. Even more interesting in their iconography are the earlier sculptures which *Ill. 159* adorned the temple of Hephaestus overlooking the Agora in Athens. This temple was for long misidentified as the Theseum, Theseus' shrine, but although that label was quite incorrect Theseus does figure prominently on the friezes of this attractive temple of the second half of the fifth century. On the west side Theseus is shown *Ill. 160* combatting the centaurs, a favourite theme in Athenian art. The east frieze is more difficult to interpret but it probably shows Theseus *Ill. 161* struggling against the Pallantids, the chief opponents of his rule. But these friezes contain an added iconographical nicety, which reminds the spectator of Theseus' democratic disposition and his opposition to tyranny. The figure that must be identified as Theseus on the east frieze bears a striking remseblance to the tyrannicide Aristogiton

Ills. 159—161. The temple of Hephaestus on the east of the Athenian Agora is still popularly (though erroneously known as the Theseum because of the frieze showing the exploits of Theseus, who is tacitly identified with th overthrow of tyranny. The west frieze (below) shows the battle with the centaurs (Theseus is the figure at the extrem left) and on the east frieze (opposite) Theseus, on the left, is fighting the fifty sons of Pallas for the crown of Athens

and that on the west to Aristogiton's companion, Harmodius, as the two were depicted in a famous group that stood in the Agora of Athens. Thus Theseus, as C. H. Morgan who first noted this similarity remarked, 'appropriates the guise of the historic foes of tyranny' (*Hesperia* 31 [1962] 226). He becomes in posture and in deed the archetypal enemy of despotic rule.

The process by which Theseus came to be a hero of the Athenian democracy was accelerated by a story told about the Battle of Marathon (490 BC). Disagreement with Persia, and then war, followed soon after the overthrow of the Pisistratid tyranny. The invading armies of Darius were eventually forced back, but only after a badly outnumbered Athenian army commanded by Callimachus and Miltiades had stood up against what seemed overwhelming odds. The Greeks fought with passionate frenzy—the brother of the poet Aeschylus had his hand chopped off by a Persian axe when he refused to let go of the prow of a Persian ship that was attempting to escape—and when the battle was over the Greek victory seemed as miraculous as it was joyous. Stories of divine assistance began to circulate and were believed and regarded as signs of the greatness of the Athenian success—for the Greeks never felt that the assistance of a hero or god belittled human accomplishment. The excitement and confusion of a hard-fought battle, moreover, were perfect for the growth of conjecture and legend. Pan was said to have appeared, and a strange rustic figure was said to have slaughtered many of the

Ill. 162. To the Classical G the Amazons represented barl invaders from the east, and seus' victory recalled their defeat of the Persians.

invaders with a plough. The Athenians concluded he must have been a divinity and accorded him appropriate worship. And 'many of those who fought at Marathon against the Medes thought they saw a vision of Theseus in arms rushing on in front of them against the barbarians' (Plutarch *Theseus* 35). The story that Theseus had once again appeared on the plain where long before he had fought the Marathonian bull and where he had for long been venerated very quickly spread and with it Theseus' reputation as a protector of his city.

The story of his appearance at Marathon, his appeal as a pan-Athenian figure, his utility as a mythic precedent for the innovations of an emerging democracy combined in the first decades of the fifth century to ensure for Theseus a continued prominence in the legends of his city.

Once again Classical Athenian art responded to political and historical events in the world around it. Old legends were remodelled and given new significance. In the aftermath of the Persian invasion this happens to the tale of Theseus' battle with the Amazons. His exploits with these barbarian women warriors had long been sung—a fine story of exciting adventures with a dash of romance, especially in the episode in which Theseus carried off one of the Amazons, *Ills. 18, 47*

Antiope, with whom he had fallen in love. But now, after the Persian attacks, the Amazon myth was seen in a new light. It appeared as a prototype of the more recent barbarian attack which the Athenians had just warded off. The legend metamorphoses. No longer is the stress on Theseus' invasion of the Amazons' country, but on the Amazons' incursion into Attica. And Theseus is no longer a swashbuckling adventurer but the defender of his beleaguered city. Tourist guides in ancient Athens pointed out in the centre of the city spots where he was alleged to have driven back the invaders:

> the left wing of the Amazons extended to what is now called the Amazoneum and . . . with their right they touched the Pnyx . . . with this left wing the Athenians fought, engaging the Amazons from the Museum . . . the graves of those who fell are on either side of the street which leads to . . . the Peiraic gate . . .
>
> Cleidemus in Plutarch *Theseus* 27

Ills. 162, 173 In art Theseus is frequently the protector of the city battling off barbarian Amazons.

One of the principal contributors to the Athenian victory over the Persians was Miltiades; his son, Cimon, came to be one of the chief architects of the Theseus myth for subsequent generations of Athenians. Like his father, Cimon was a brilliant general and a clever politician. He rose rapidly to prominence in the first years of the operation of the league which many Greek cities set up after the Persian Wars to harass the Persians and ward off the threat of further invasions. Since many of the members of the league were Ionians, it was natural that it should have its headquarters in the religious centre of Ionia, the island of Delos. Since Athens was the principal military power in the league, it was equally natural that it should take on a great role in its affairs. Its generals, among them Cimon, helped shape this Delian league and soon won for it a spectacular series of successes—the enemy was driven back, subject cities were freed, and as useful by-products of its expeditions captives for slaves and booty for the treasury were won. No less important, the league encouraged trade by suppressing piracy in the Aegean and by ensuring fair treatment of commercial disputes among its members.

It was after an outbreak of piracy in the northern Aegean that Cimon moved to eliminate the pirates on the island of Scyros. Once this was accomplished he remembered a legend that Theseus had ended his days on that island. It was said that he was driven out of Athens by the usurper Menestheus and later murdered by the king of Scyros. The Athenians, moreover, had received an oracular response from Delphi bidding them to bring home the bones of Theseus and to honour him with splendour befitting a hero. To Cimon it must have seemed that nothing could be more appropriate than for the son of the victor of Marathon to bring back the relics of the hero who had helped Athens win that victory. Always sure of his cleverness, Cimon began the search for the bones.

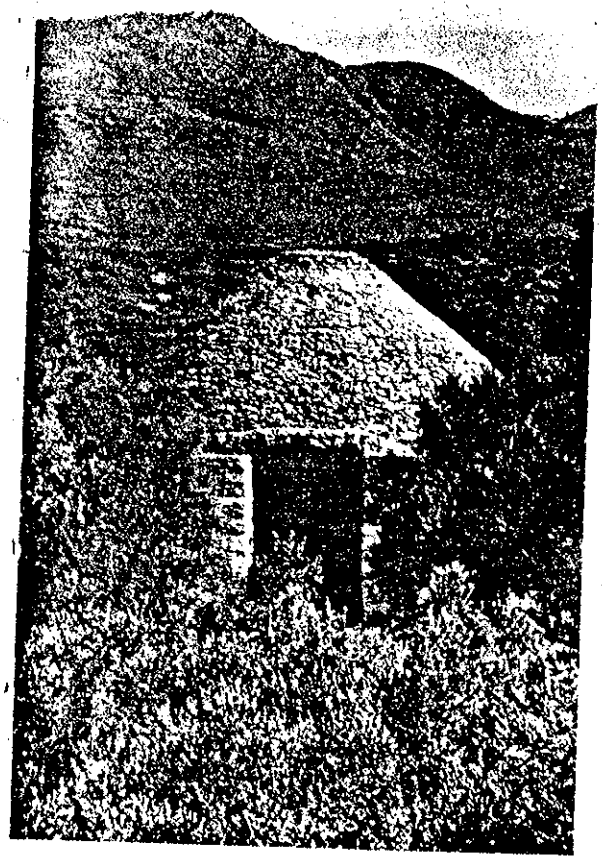
He had good luck, or perhaps he would have said he had the cleverness to recognize and take advantage of divine assistance. When one day he saw an eagle clawing at a mound of earth he moved quickly to excavate. The mound turned out to be a tomb—perhaps a Mycenaean tholos tomb—which contained a skeleton of extraordinary size with bronze spear and sword. Under such circumstances who would wish to be sceptical? Clearly Theseus' bones had been found and the oracle could now be obeyed.

Ill. 163

Ill. 164

The sequel to Cimon's archaeological foray on Scyros is highly revealing about both Greek religious practice and ancient politics. When the remains were brought back to Athens, the citizens were, predictably, enthusiastic and received them 'with splendid processions and sacrifices, as though Theseus himself were returning to his city' (Plutarch *Theseus* 36). But the enthusiasm of the Athenians did not stop there. The celebration was institutionalized and an annual feast, the Theseia, added to the state festival calendar. The feast was to be celebrated immediately after the Oschophoria, a rite into which as we have seen honours for Theseus had already been introduced. A great series of Theseus celebrations thus filled the calendar in the early autumn of every Athenian year.

Several inscriptions that once were set up around the ancient temple of Theseus and, although broken, have survived to modern times tell us a good deal about the form this festival ultimately took. We know, for example, that in the second century BC it included a tattoo in which Athenian soldiers, trumpeters and heralds demonstrated their expertise, as well as wrestling and boxing



Ills. 163, 164. Cimon's expedition to Scyros may well have found one of the many surviving Bronze Age tombs, perhaps a tholos (left). These tombs often contained skeletons, with weapons and armour by them (right).

matches, horse races, torch races, long-distance races, shorter races, races in heavy armour, and a special race for the commanders of the various divisions of the army.

We also have on these stones records of the expenses that the wealthy citizens assigned to finance the festival had to pay out. These expenses often totalled two or three thousand drachmae, a very considerable sum.* To be sure the fifth-century festival may have been less elaborate than these later extravaganzas, but it was surely a splendid and popular affair: a holiday, a chance to eat free meat from public sacrifices, a fiesta, and, not least, an annual reminder of Cimon's great success and good service to the city.

It was only appropriate, of course, that the relics which Cimon brought back should be preserved in a shrine of appropriate beauty and dignity. Hence shortly after his triumphal return a new Theseum rose near the centre of Athens to house the bones and serve as a public building for a multitude of purposes—a council chamber, a meeting place for boards and casual gossipers, an armoury for troops mustering for expedition, and a refuge for slaves and the poor. It

* The exact monetary equivalent of the drachma in Classical Athens is difficult to determine but an idea of its value can be deduced from the fact that in the fifth century BC the standard pay for jury duty was a third of a drachma a day. This was probably a subsistence allowance.

was decorated with three paintings by Micon commemorating three great deeds of Theseus: first his battle with the Amazons, then the fight between the Lapiths and centaurs in which Theseus assisted the Lapiths and finally Theseus' dive into the palace of his father Poseidon to recover a ring which Minos threw into the sea. *Ill. 165* *Ill. 166*

The building and decorating of the Theseum, his fame in poetry and the plastic arts, and the annual festival in his honour all brought Theseus to a pre-eminence among Athenian heroes. And much of the splendour which surrounded him reflected back on Cimon. For just as Edward I found, in 1278, that the bones discovered in Glastonbury Abbey in 1190 could, when identified as King Arthur's, be used to support his claims to Scottish and Welsh overlordship, so Cimon found that the Theseus myth could contribute to his political success. 'This was the chief reason the people took kindly to him' says Plutarch (*Cimon* 8).

The next few years bear testimony to the measure of Cimon's success. He was frequently returned to the generalship, an elective

Ill. 165. The central med of a kylix by the Foundry P from Vulci shows a heavily-a Theseus killing a centaur d the battle at Pirithous' we feast. This subject was illus by Micon in one of the paintings which decorated Theseum.

Ill. 166. Theseus' connection with the gods helped to enhance his popular prestige and that of the statesmen who hoped to be associated with him. A red-figure kylix shows him visiting the undersea palace of his divine father Poseidon (with the trident). This was another of the scenes depicted by Micon on the Theseum.

office in Athens, and justified his elections with steady and sometimes spectacular victories. Moreover a rivalry with Themistocles, his most prominent competitor, was resolved by another success for him—the ostracism of his rival for ten years. One clue exists which suggests that even in this contest the Theseus myth played some part. Admittedly, the chronology is disputed and the evidence is not as full as one might hope, but there is a highly suggestive detail. In one version of the story of the last years of his life, Theseus is made a victim of the democratic institutions which he founded. He is said to have been attacked by a demagogic politician named Lycus who was largely responsible for his expulsion and Menestheus' usurpation. This version cannot be traced with certainty back before the fourth century BC but one detail points to an earlier date and to an association with this ostracism of Themistocles. That is the name Lycus. The mythical Lycus was presumably a member of the royal family which was displaced when Aegeus came to the throne. He was therefore someone who had strong reasons for wishing Theseus out of Athens. An Attic drinking bowl painted in the red-figure style and datable not far from the ostracism of Themistocles shows on one side Theseus slaying the Minotaur and on the other Lycus and some of his brothers complacently chatting. As so often on Greek vases the two sides are closely related; in this case the

one side, Theseus' victory over the Minotaur, is an ironic comment on the other, the insouciance of Lycus and his brothers. Like the suitors in the *Odyssey* they misjudge their young opponent and find out too late what sort of a man he is. But the most interesting point about the name Lycus is not its appearance on this vase, but its occurrence as the name of the founder of one of Athens' most prestigious and powerful clans, the Lycomidae. And the best known member of that clan in the fifth century was Themistocles. It is difficult to know the extent to which mythological propaganda affected the political decisions of Athenian citizens, but it is clear that it often played a role in their thinking. A mythological reminder that Themistocles belonged to a group whose founder was a self-seeking opponent to a benign and devoted leader may have had a place in anti-Themistoclean propaganda.

A decade after this ostracism Cimon himself was to find his policies becoming unpopular and then watch the potsherds with his name inscribed on them accumulate against him in another ostracism. But Cimon was recalled from exile after only a few years and reassumed a respectable place in the city. Shortly after his return two major artistic projects were undertaken which reflect a continued interest in Theseus and perhaps also a sustained effort to use his myth for political purposes. Both works—the decoration of the Stoa Poikile in Athens and a group of statues sent by the Athenians to Delphi—depict the Battle of Marathon and Cimon's father, Miltiades. In each Miltiades is given full, perhaps even excessive, credit for his role in the battle. Further, both depict Theseus and in both iconographical clues suggest that Cimon's hand was behind them.

Ill. 167

Let us consider each work separately. The Stoa Poikile received its name from the four paintings within it: (1) the Battle of Marathon, including Miltiades and Theseus; (2) Polygnotus' portrayal of the Greeks after the capture of Troy; (3) the Athenians led by Theseus fighting the Amazons; and finally (4) a battle between Athenians and Spartan troops at Oinoe near Argos. The back wall of the stoa held the two mythological scenes, Troy and the Amazons, and the two fifth-century battles, Marathon and Oinoe. The prominence given to Miltiades in the former battle was surely congenial to Cimon and his supporters. In addition one detail hints that Cimon's

Ill. 167. A potsherd (*ostrak*
bearing the name of Cimon, s
of Miltiades, as a candidate
ten years political exile: ostracis

Ill. 168. An amphora by Exekias shows Acamas and Demophon, the sons of Theseus, with the names of popular favourites inscribed about them.

interest in this stoa was far more specific. When Polygnotus painted the Greek leaders after the victory at Troy he worked into his picture the likeness of Cimon's sister Elpinice. The Hellenic princes were surrounded by captive Trojan women, one of whom, Laodice, resembled Elpinice (Plutarch *Cimon* 4). Thus like, Benozzo Gozzoli painting the likenesses of the Medici into the *Procession of the Magi* for the Palazzo Medici in Florence, Polygnotus paid a compliment and acknowledged the connection between his work and the house of Cimon, a powerful and generous patron. Nor was his choice of Laodice as the woman who should be made to resemble Elpinice entirely random. For Laodice, a daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, had had a love affair during the long siege of the city with one of the Greeks, a son of Theseus. She had indeed borne him a son, named Mounitos. Considering the *Ill. 168* frequent allusions to the Theseus legend by the house of Cimon such a selection was clever and appropriate.

The second project in which Cimonid utilization of the Theseus myth can be detected is a dedication of statues which the Athenians sent to Delphi. The date is uncertain but it was perhaps not long after the completion of the paintings of the Stoa Poikile, that is, in the 450s BC. The statues, which commemorated the victory at Marathon, were by a relatively young man who was to become the most famous sculptor of his day, Phidias. The tendency we have

seen in earlier treatments of the battle, to laud and exalt Miltiades, is now complete. He stands apart from all other mortals with only gods and heroes for company. He was grouped with Athena and Apollo at one side of the monument. The middle section consisted of statues of the heroes after whom the Athenian tribes were named, and at the far end another group of three figures balanced Miltiades and his divine friends. This triumvirate consisted of Theseus, and a later king, Codrus, whose descendants were the legendary founders of many of the Ionian cities that belonged to the Delian league. In our only description of the monument (Pausanias X, 10), the name of the third figure in this group is corrupt, but an easy and convincing emendation is almost surely correct, Philaios. This name, too, ties this project to Cimon, for Cimon was connected to a clan which was named after and allegedly founded by Philaios, some fifteen generations before. At almost the same time that Phidias was working on these statues, Pherecydes of Athens was publishing a work that traced Cimon's family connections back to Philaios, and then ultimately to Zeus, for Philaios was a son of the Homeric hero Ajax, hence a great-grandson of Zeus. The inclusion of Philaios in the monument, like Polygnotus' introduction of Elpinice's features into the mural in the Stoa Poikile, tells us much about the origin and intention of the work. The statues are in honour not just of a great Athenian triumph, but more specifically in praise of the clan to whom that victory was largely due. The earliest and the most recent leaders of that clan, the Philaids, were represented at opposite sides of the monument, Miltiades and Philaios. Cimon himself is missing, as good taste would dictate, but the monument is no less eloquent an advertisement of his claims to leadership for being discreet.

When we read today of these transparent efforts to use myth and religion for the purposes of individual, group or national aggrandizement we are often surprised, incredulous and sometimes mildly shocked. The deliberate exploitation of myths and religion seems deplorable even to us who are not committed to belief in them. Is this really the way the Golden Age of Greece treated its legends? Was cynicism so rampant?

Cicero's famous comment that he was always surprised that two Roman soothsayers did not burst out laughing when they passed

each other on the street reminds us that some ancients were well aware that popular belief and piety could be crassly manipulated. And no doubt deliberate falsifications and flagrant distortions did take place. But we must also remember that the Greeks (and Romans) did not draw the sharp distinctions between the sacred and the secular which we do and that many of them had rather less rigorous conceptions than we about the criteria for determining the truth or falsity of legends. As Thomas Mann pointed out in his essay 'Freud and the Future':

> The ego of antiquity and its consciousness of itself was different from our own, less exclusive, less sharply defined . . . The Spanish scholar Ortega y Gasset puts it that the man of antiquity, before he did anything, took a step backward, like the bull-fighter who leaps back to deliver his mortal thrust. He searched the past for a diving bell, and being thus at once disguised and protected might rush upon his present problem . . . Alexander walked in the footsteps of Miltiades; the ancient biographers of Caesar were convinced, rightly or wrongly, that he took Alexander for his prototype. But such 'imitation' meant far more than we mean by the word today. It was a mythical identification, peculiarly familiar to antiquity, but in operation far into modern times . . .
>
> Thomas Mann

Cimon, like Pisistratus before him, understood mythic identification in a way that is often hard for us to comprehend. Theseus, to use Mann's metaphor, was his diving bell, his step back before the thrust. In this respect he was not so much cynic as man of his age, for in Greece, especially down to the time of Socrates, myth was the language of domestic and international politics and a living reality which affected all aspects of life. The past, however remote, was not dusty remnants of value and interest only to antiquarians; rather, as Pindar's poetry shows, it was a storehouse of patterns, individual and national, desirable and undesirable. And it would appear that in the formation of individual character the exploration and selection of a model, real or mythic, contemporary or historic, played at least as important a role as the characteristically Hellenic

gnomic injunctions of didactic poetry or any more abstractly intellectual activity. When we find a figure in ancient history emphasizing one myth, then, it is likely that he is affirming thereby something fundamental about the patterns of behaviour and even the policies which he intends to follow. Cimon's frequent utilization of the Theseus myth is, I believe, of this sort. The legends of Theseus symbolized his policy—Athenian prowess on the sea, opposition to marauders and robbers, and obstinate hostility to the barbarian invaders. And Cimon, whatever vanity or silliness we may find in him, lived this policy and died following it, in 451 on a naval expedition against the Persians.

In the years following his death, Persia moved gradually to the periphery of Athens' concerns in foreign policy and Sparta came increasingly closer to the centre. This Dorian city in the southern Peloponnese felt itself threatened by Athens' growing power, especially by the ever-tightening grip which was moulding the Delian league into an Athenian empire. Rivalry between the two cities intensified until eventually in 431 the long, exhausting Peloponnesian War broke out. One might contend that this rivalry between Athens and Sparta found its mythological reflection in the tendency to assimilate the myths of Theseus and the Dorian Heracles or indeed to assert, as Isocrates does, that the Athenian hero was no inferior of the Dorian:

> The fairest praise that I can award to Theseus is this—that he, a contemporary of Heracles, won a fame which rivalled his. For they . . . followed the same pursuits, . . . they cherished also kindred ambitions; for they alone of all who have lived before our time made themselves champions of human life. It came to pass that Heracles undertook perilous labours more celebrated and more severe, Theseus those more useful, and to the Greeks of more vital importance.
>
> Isocrates *Helen* (X) 23—24

It was a very old tendency in Greek art and thought to juxtapose the two heroes. On a Corinthian bowl, for example, dated early in the seventh century BC, Theseus and Heracles are set together, *Ill. 169*

Ill. 169. Theseus slaying the Minotaur appears alongside Heracles wrestling with Achelous on a faded seventh-century Corinthian bowl. (The Athenians were anxious to use Theseus to displace Heracles as a popular hero.)

Ills. 170—173

Heracles struggling with the river deity Achelous, Theseus with the Minotaur. The parallelism between their legends continues as time goes on; both heroes fight the Amazons, both capture rampaging bulls. And as might be expected in Athenian art during the fifth century there is a tendency for the exploits of Theseus to displace those of Heracles, as Athenian national pride asserted itself.

Yet Theseus' growth, sometimes at Heracles' expense, is not the most interesting development in the years near the start of the Peloponnesian War. Rather it is his apparent absence in a work where he might be very much expected. Not long after Cimon's death, Athens, at Pericles' instigation, began a huge building programme, financed largely with funds drawn from the treasury of the Delian league. Much of what we see on the Acropolis of Athens today was part of that programme: the monumental gateway, some of the smaller temples, and the Parthenon itself. For the interior of the Parthenon Phidias was commissioned to build a gold and ivory statue of Athena. The result must have been one of his greatest masterpieces, an awesome, overpowering figure according to the ancient writers who describe it. The gilded silver shield which leaned beside the great goddess Athena had embossed on it the representation of the battle with the Amazons which Plutarch describes in this fashion:

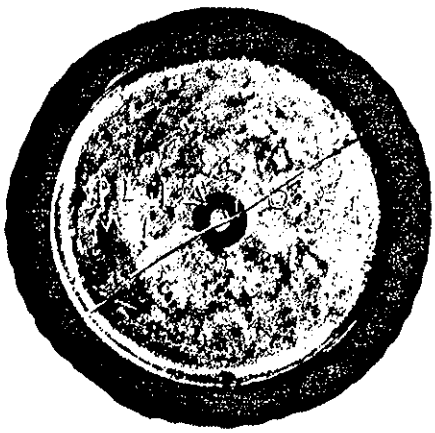
> When he [Phidias] wrought the battle of the Amazons on the shield of the goddess, he carved out a figure that suggested

Ills. 170—173. progressed, the Theseus which those of Hera increasingly stre acles is said fought the Cr (above left) whi ed the Minotau some versions the very same l Theseus mast Marathon (abo In the black-fig trayal of Heracl with the Amaz low left) the aspect of the in not so strongly e ed as it is in the encounter (belo

modern times, but there is a possibility that we will be able to form some adequate impression of it not only from ancient descriptions and copies but also from some extraordinary finds made by the excavators of Olympia. A sculptor's workshop of the last third of the fifth century has turned up, and with it a goldsmith's hammer, bits of bone and ivory, a smelting furnace and a cup bearing the inscription, 'I am Phidias's'. Recent reports indicate that within this workshop moulds have been found that look as if they might have been used for pounding and shaping sheets of gold. Thus, though the statue has disappeared, the workshop and some of the tools may have survived and may yet tell us more about this extraordinary statue. *Ill. 177* *Ill. 178* *Ill. 176*

Since Phidias was in the employment of the enemies of Athens it could not be expected that an Athenian hero would have a very prominent place in his work. Yet Theseus *is* present, much in the same way he was present in the work on the Acropolis at Athens. He is not, to be sure, the central figure, but he has an important role in the work none the less. On one of the wide panels that ran between the legs of the huge throne of Zeus, Phidias contrived an elaborate Battle of the Amazons in which Theseus and Heracles fought as allies (Pausanias V, xi, 4). Although some precedent for this juxtaposition could be found in early Greek epic, it was a bold choice for an Athenian artist at work in Peloponnesian territory during wartime, and a highly expressive one as well. It symbolized the hope for reconciliation between the divided factions of Greece and expressed a message not unlike that which the sophist Gorgias is said to have articulated in a speech at Olympia given at approximately this time, that Greek cities should turn their weapons not against one another but against the barbarians in Persia.

This portion of the throne can be seen then as a call for unity and concord among all Greeks. The statue of itself conveyed the same feeling, it would seem, for the divinity was not the thunderbolt wielding warrior but a lofty and reconciling father. This aspect of the statue still impressed the preacher and rhetorician of the early second century AD, Dio Chrysostom. In his 'Olympian Oration' he conjectured what Phidias would have said about his own work and concluded that it would be this eagerness for reconciliation which Phidias would emphasize:



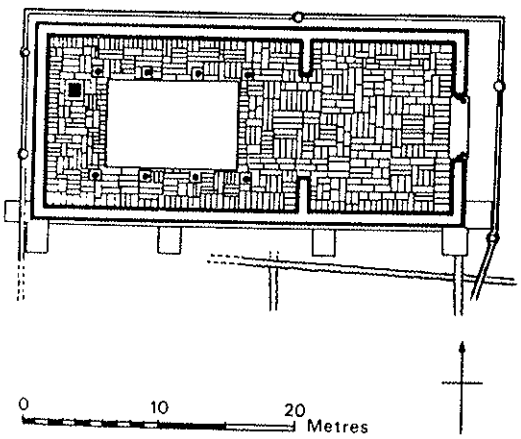
But our Zeus is a god of peace and universal compassion, *guardian of a Greece that is united in concord.* The intelligent and noble city of Elis and my own skill have depicted the god, gentle and yet awesome, whose presence is blessedness, the giver of all good things, father, saviour and protector of all men.

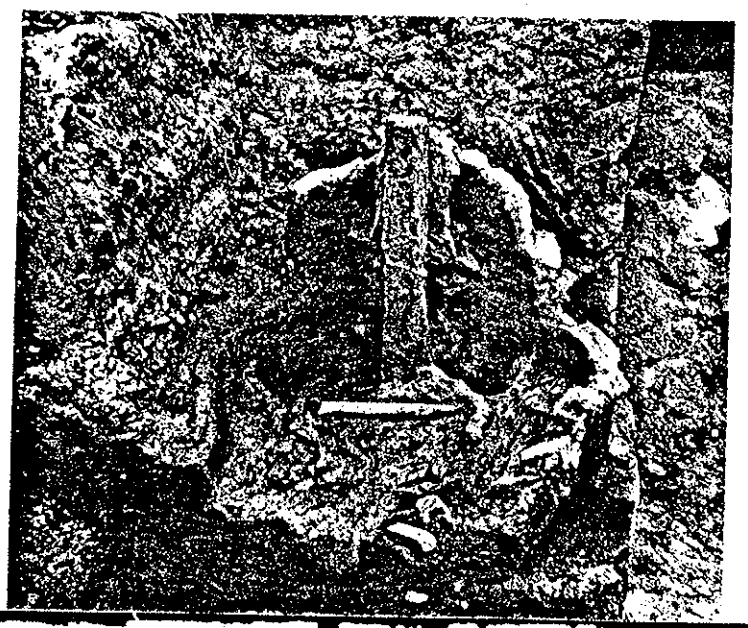
Dio Chrysostom XII 74f.

Dio has perhaps universalized Zeus' compassion beyond the limits that men of the fifth century might have imposed when he makes him the protector of *all* men, not just of Greeks. But his conception of the statue accords fundamentally with Phidias' decision to bring together the two great heroes, Theseus and Heracles, in a work that implicitly appealed for peace and reconciliation between the opponents in a brutal and senseless conflict.

That same theme is made explicit in a work of Euripides which was also approximately contemporary with Phidias' statue. The *Heracles Driven Mad* is a play of violence and of revenge gone wrong, and ultimately of reconciliation and humanity. Heracles at the opening of the play is off on his labours, having left his wife, father and children in Thebes where, in his absence, a usurper named Lycus has seized the throne. The opening scenes are pure melodrama, as a villainous Lycus threatens to kill the innocent children of Heracles. Just in the nick of time Heracles appears, learns of Lycus' plan and goes off stage to kill the villain. But here the action takes a strange turn. Iris and Madness appear on stage and announce Hera's intention to drive Heracles insane and force

Ills. 176—178. The great gold and ivory statue of Zeus at Olympia, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was made by Phidias in Olympia after his banishment from Athens. Striking evidence of his presence has been found during the excavation of a workshop of the period (below centre). A cup bearing the name of Phidias (below left) identifies the complex, where tools, a furnace (below right), moulds and left-over scraps of ivory shed light on the sculptor's working methods and on the appearance of the vanished statue.





him to kill his own sons. The killing he has begun with Lycus cannot be stopped until he has slain his own children. Then a dazed Heracles slowly learns from his father what he has done, turns from exultation to despair and contemplates his own destruction. This is the second moment of desperation in the play, and once again it is followed by the arrival of a new character, this time Theseus. The two heroes are presented as friends and allies, as they were on the Olympia throne, and Theseus predictably tries to console the mighty hero who has fallen so low. But the means which he adopts are surprising and unconventional, for he violates some of the strongest religious scruples of the Greeks as he uncovers Heracles to the bright rays of the sun and, despising all the taboos of ritual purity, takes him by the hand:

> Heracles: Why have you exposed me to the sun?
> Theseus: Why? You're human; you can't pollute the gods.
> Heracles: Leave me, you fool, I am a blasphemous contagion.
> Theseus: No harm can come to friends from friends.
>
> *Heracles Driven Mad* 1231—1234

At last Theseus persuades Heracles to come and be honoured in Athens and to live there as his friend, and the two men quietly, sadly, walk off stage. There is no apotheosis of Heracles or of Theseus, no ranting against the gods or the violent folly of men, no trite resolution of the conflicts of the dramatic action. But there is in this simple act of friendship between two fallible men something profoundly human, and hence profoundly Greek. Heracles, who knows what sort of man he has met, says all that can be said as he turns to leave the scene of his sufferings:

> Oh father, choose a man like this for friend.
>
> *Heracles Driven Mad* 1404