MENTALITIES OF ANCIENT GREECE: HEROES

Mădălina STRECHIE
University of Craiova

Abstract: *Ancient Greek city-states have given the hero prototype to human civilization. Almost all of these Greek city-states had their heroes, and each hero of ancient Greeks was a foundation of their common consciousness, his civilizing deeds passing the city state borders to which he belonged. Each of the heroes was a son of a god or goddess revealing an archaic mentality and namely that of a man of exceptional features coming from among gods, a mentality generalized in almost all cultures. The heroes of ancient Greece have masterly faced gods, death, the unforeseen, danger, life, time. Heroes became heroes through education and actions.*

Greek heroes were those who fought the monsters, they were the ones who colonized for the Greeks, they were the ones who crossed the seas and conquered them, fought in wars (the Trojan War is full of heroes), brought to Greece the wealth and technology of the neighboring peoples (the Argonauts' expedition is an expedition of many ancient Greek heroes), they were the ones who innovated and improved new techniques for easing human life, they were the founders of dynasties, and so on.

Their mentality impact on the ancient Greeks was overwhelming, with them becoming social and political models, and, at the same time, a bridge between the often competing Greek city-states. The Olympic Games, the Trojan War, the Medic Wars have fully proven the success of the heroes in ancient Greece, and at the same time their mythisation.

These mentality models of ancient Greece have exceeded the land and temporal borders, being contemporary even nowadays, of course adapted to new realities, the hero representing today the daring, fighting, pioneer, exceptional man.

Key words: *ancient Greece, heroes, myth, mentality, model.*

Ancient Greece was established as a foundation of European civilization, especially by politics, drama and philosophy, along which we can add the mentality traditions of heroism and Olympic Games.

Heroes have first developed as human models in the Greek city-states, being not only values worth following, but also unifying elements of the Greeks by their existence in the collective mind. Almost every ancient Greek city-state had its hero who, in most cases, had exceeded the boundaries of the affiliation city, becoming national. The Greek heroes have strengthened the spiritual unity of all Greeks and their consciousness of people, because in many legends, Greek heroes work together for the good of all people, removing any existing border between the various Greek city-states. Their deeds made them true super stars among the Greeks, so everyone could claim it, such as *Heracles*, the universal hero type, who exceeded not only the boundaries of the native city-state, but also of Greece, being also adopted by the Romans under the name of *Hercules*, becoming the eponym of many Roman cities (including those in the provinces of the Roman Empire).

What was a hero in the Greek mentality? According to the definition of the *Greek-French dictionary* of Anatol Bailly *heros =I. Master, chief, nobleman (In the* ***Iliad****, the heroes were the military leaders), then refer to any fighter; another sense is that of nobility by birth, but also the courage, talent (as in the Odyssey); II. Demigod refers especially to Heracles, or is added to teos (god) when they talk also about*

BDD-A5859 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:04 UTC)

***Heracles**; also it is placed after the god and demon, or between gods and men; III. Any man ranked as a demigod, a lower local deity, patron of the tribe, the city, the association ... has an unclear etymology, it may be of a religious nature, reported to Hera, is related to the Sanskrit word viras and the Latin **vir** = man ...* (BAILLY, 1963: 909)

From the mythological point of view, ***heroes*** has the same meanings. Thus, for Homer, the heroes are the people who are superior by power, beauty, courage; they are mortal, but they go to the Elysian Fields, where they enjoy happiness. For Hesiod, heroes are considered as a distinct species, consisting of the Metis people of gods with human, and after death they go into an area of their own, far both from gods and from men, to an island of happiness. The heroes are warriors in *Heracles* opinion. *Heracles* is the only hero, in his opinion, who won the divine immortality, having the right to live in Olimp, along with gods. The cult of the heroes was very important for Greeks, especially during the Greco-Persian Wars, when heroes were considered spiritual patrons of the Greek city-states of residence. This cult was, at the same Aeschylus time, a legacy of the prehistoric of the cult of the dead and the common ancestor (VILLE DE MIRMONT, 1900:179-180).

Certainly, there is a link between heroes and religious cult, especially because in Eleusis there was a great priest of mysteries called hierophant. From the moment he received his position, this high priest lost his name, being identified only by the priestly title, and the role of this priestly position was that to reveal the sacred mysteries (RACHET, 1998:151).

In the explanatory dictionary, the definition of the term *hero* recovers the Greek definitions: *hero, heroes, masculine noun = 1. A character which distinguished by bravery and exceptional courage in wars, by special devotion in other circumstances or by work ... 3. In Greco-Roman mythology, demigod, a person born of a goddess and earthly being, endowed with super-powers or who became famous by its special deeds* (DEX, 1998:347).

The heroes were the first individuals who set themselves in Greek society, proving the moral features in which the ancient Greeks believed: virtue, commitment, responsibility and courage. They were born with a provision to make good deeds, as Aristotle said, and most of them travel to initiate and experiment. They are ethical character, they know how to discern, to act, to be cautious, to use nature or their genetic endowment. (*cf.* GONTIER, 1999:27-31)

These extraordinary people became models worth following, a kind of emblematic figure for Greeks, therefore, not incidentally, they were praised in many literary creations. *Iliad and Odyssey,* but also some ancient Greek tragedies of Pericles' time, have as subjects the Greek heroes. Moreover, some characters of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are in fact the Greek national heroes. (*cf.* MAFFRE, 2004:99)

The heroism through its warrior quality represented a part of the ideology or propaganda of the Greeks, Sparta's case was the most obvious. (PETRE, 2000: 162-171) The hero was not only the model of a warrior, but also the model of the best political leader for the city-state. (*Ibidem:* 88) Therefore, in the *Iliad, Achilles* is the commander of an elite troop, the myrmidons, which is a kind of an assault troop, commando, but also of quick intervention. Also, to the Trojan War participated the kings of the Greek city-states of the belligerent coalition such as Agamemnon, Menelaus, Ulysses, and so on. Thus, the war was the best opportunity of heroizing not only for demigods, but also for ordinary mortals.

BDD-A5859 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:04 UTC)

What characterizes the Greek heroes in general is the fight for the triumph of the idea of good. It is known that during the Ancient Greek period, the idea of freedom was also considered a "supreme good". (LÉVÉQUE, 1987: 366)

By their deeds, the ancient Greek heroes are true prototypes of the pioneers venturing where no one has ever been before them, they are the ones that break the patterns of their time, they colonize and they are the ones fighting for the people, even against gods. The condition of these Metis people, half gods, half human, is a human one, but designated for immortality, as they transcend the world by will and defying gods, to which they are also related. (*cf.* VERNER, 2006: 32-33)

Divine and human descendants at the same time, the heroes were real characters for the Greeks, and the stories around them actually explain their reputation, they are more real than in the period described by legends, man fought with nature, but he was also fighting for progress, for civilization. They all have as dominant features: courage, resolution, love of people and spirit of sacrifice, they being only "models of courage and love of man." (*Apud* BARBU, "Studiu" din MITRU, 1983: 290-295)

A genuine culture for heroes exists also due to the institutional implication which the heroes represented in terms of the "legitimation of authority relations", and also because the heroes offered "early elements of institutional structures" (*cf.* DINU, 2005:141)

Not only the heroes who distinguished by their deeds were honored by Greeks, but also their descendants were still considered as heroes. Thus, in Greece there was a cult for *Ilos*, son of *Heracles,* considered the eponym ancestor of *Ilion*, often the Senate meeting to his grave. Not by accident, Homer in his epics considered the heroes "of the divine stripe of heroes" or the "generation of men demigods", and Hesiod places them as intermediaries between the two worlds, on the one hand, and on the other hand the world of gods and men, even if fate of the heroes was also decided by gods (VERNANT, 1995: 128-131).

The heroization was a continuous process within the Greek city-states of Antiquity, especially by the Olympics Games. Thus, the regeneration of the heroes was made by introducing evidences to demonstrate the extraordinary capabilities and the daring spirit of some athletes. The marathon race was introduced to honor the Greek soldier, considered a true hero, he running to announce the Greeks of their victory against the Persians at the Marathon (MARTIN, 1997: 18).

At these Panhellenic Games the host city sent heraclides, crowned with flowers and leaves, to announce in each polis the start of the competitions. The winners were considered heroes and rewarded with crowns of laurels and the appreciation of all Greeks. There were also the nemean games held at Nemea to honor the hero *Heracles*. (DINU, *op. cit.*:153)

The Greek athletes had as a model, very often, the twin heroes *Castor* and *Polux,* one a horse tamer, and the other an accomplished boxer. The heroes were also means of propaganda among the Greeks, such as Homer, who makes of *Achilles* a true example. Even if Homer only gave them the meaning of super-human beings, nobles or invincible warriors. (BUFFIERE, 1987: 269, 455)

Achilles fought with the weapons made by gods for the victory of the Greeks, being a model for the Hellenic leaders who invented the military unit of the phalanx, unit which took Alexander where only heroes could reach.

Achilles is also a moral character, not because he is a military machine, a true perfect soldier, but because he is honest with himself and does not agree to be involved in the political intrigues of Agamemnon, as Euripides presents him in Iphigenia in

BDD-A5859 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:04 UTC)

Aulis, but also because he fights for the victory of the Greeks. The hero comes against the political plans of Agamemnon, who intends to have him as his son in law by his marriage to his daughter, Iphigenia. Although deeply offended, *Achilles* wants to help Iphigenia, doomed to perdition for the sake of her father's expedition. Therefore, Achilles is more man than god, and the most convincing symbol of his humanity is the heel that has remained untouched by the waters of Styx, "*Achilles* heel" becoming a phrase that has won time, demonstrating human frailty, but also the mixture of the two worlds, regarding the heroes, on one hand the celestial world, and on the other hand the terrestrial world. (*cf.* DĂRĂMUŞ, 2008:53-54)

By his daring spirit, *Achilles* faced the men, but also the gods, making him an European and a contemporary of ours, as Dominique Verner called him. (VERNER, *op. cit*.:33)

Heracles is by far the Greek hero who enjoyed the greatest glory. His works are all good deeds, he is the one who saved the Greeks of the lion escaped from Nemea, of the hydra from Lemnos, of the wild boar in Erymanthos, of the stymphalian birds, of the cerberus from Hell, who brought the mares of Diomedes, tamed the bull of Crete, got back the oxen of Georyon, captured the deer with golden horns, brought the belt of the *Amazons* and the Golden Apples of the Garden of the Hesperides, cleaned the Augean stables. (NOIVILLE, 2004: 32) He was the hero who has shown the best that man can win if fights, works and dares.

Heracles is also linked to the main Greek tribes, the *heraclides* being considered the founders of Dorian tribes. (LÉVÉQUE, *op. cit*.:117)

The Greek heroes were in all Greek city-states, thus we encounter heroes in Attica, Thebes, Aetolia, Thessaly, Thrace, Corinth, Argos, Sparta, Crete, and so on.

These supermen had a model, the titan *Prometheus*, the nephew of *Gaea* (Earth) and of *Uranus* (Sky) who was among the first Metis of both worlds. He was considered wise and prudent (wherefrom, apparently, it derives its name) and had the desire of building a superior being, full of qualities that would submit nature, so he created man (man) of dust which he wet with water, modeling him according to the image of the gods. For the human conception, *Prometheus* was helped by gods, by his grandmother who gave her body, Athens gave her thinking, Zeus submitted the new being created by him. Titanium posed as lawyer of people in order to defend him against the gods. (To balance the situation, the gods created the woman of the same material as the man, only that they endowed her with more qualities: Athens offered her clothing, Charites and Horae gave their grace, Aphrodite gave her beauty and Hermes his voice and mysteries of the eyes). Moreover, *Prometheus* stole the fire from the gods and gifted it to people, incurring upon himself the punishment of Zeus who bound him and doomed him to terrible torments. However, Prometheus defied Zeus, foreseeing the human survival and gods' death. (*cf.* MITRU, 1968)

Kiron has a special status within the heroes, the centaur, half man and half horse, the teacher of most heroes. He was the son of *Cronos,* being the wisest, good and famous of the centaurs. He was also a medicine man, teacher and musician. A good friend of people he educated and grew the heroes *Achilles, Jason, Asclepius.* He proved to have an extraordinary generosity transferring his immortality to *Prometheus.* (BALACI, 1992:99-100)

Among the Greek heroes there is a special heroine, *Helen,* daughter of Zeus and Leda, who caused the Trojan War. She was considered the most beautiful mortal. She had a connection with the heroes *Theseus* and *Achilles,* according to some legends. She was married to Menelaos and was kidnapped by Paris, which led to the intervention of the Greeks in Troy, the land of Paris. (*Ibidem*: 174-175)

BDD-A5859 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:04 UTC)

The Greek heroes, the subject of our study, were the children of some important gods of the Greek pantheon; many of them had Zeus as a parent or the people close to him. In what follows, we will present the main Greek heroes with all their achievements, for a better illustration of the above. It will be noticed that the heroes came from all corners of ancient Hellas, the name of some of the heroes being preserved until today in the European mind, even if it is about constellations, cultural and scientific projects, literary terms, and so on.

Perseus was of Argos, being the son of Zeus and Danae. He was the one who slew the Medusa and petrified Atlas. He had winged sandals which helped him go very easy, after death he was transformed into a constellation.

Heracles, as we said before, was considered the "incomparable hero." He was also the son of Zeus, being related to *Perseus* by his mother Alcmena, the Queen of Thebes. Although he was hated and persecuted by Hera, he was helped by Athens. It seems that he established the Olympic Games and planted 300 olive-trees (the symbol of the Olympics) after defeating Augias. He is the one who freed *Prometheus*; he was the ally of Zeus in fighting between the gods, being killed by the centaur Nessus by a poisoned coat. After death he was made divine and raised to Olympus.

Theseus is another very important hero in the collective mentality of the Greeks, being the son of Poseidon and Etra, princess in Crete. He was very brave, like *Heracles,* whom he had known since he was a slave. He fought with Periphetes, the son of god Hephaestus, whom he defeated. Also, he defeated the monster Sinis, which killed the travelers, Sciron which killed the people by throwing them into the sea at the turtles; he killed Procrustes in his copper bed where he killed the people, also killed the monster Minotaur. *Theseus* descended into Hell, helped *Heracles* and married Antiope, the daughter of Ares. He was made divine on his death. He is the one who secured the land routes between the Greek city-states.

Castor and *Pollux* are considered twin heroes, although only *Pollux* was, according to the legend, the son of Zeus and Leda, *Castor* being the son of Leda with her husband Tyndareus, king of Sparta. Both are considered *dioscuri* = sons of gods. They received education from Hermes, the god of commerce and messenger of the gods. They participated to the expedition of the *Argonauts*, when they fought many monsters. They were highly close, which made Zeus to also bestow immortality to *Castor*. He transformed them into stars, representing references for the Greek seafarers for a long time, even today considered among the patrons and guides of the seafarers.

Bellerophon was born in Corinth, he is the one that killed the chimera and captured Pegasus, the winged horse, son of Poseidon and Medusa. He fought with the robbers of Licia and the *Amazons*. He died because of the cunning of Hermes.

Asclepius was the son of god Apollo and Coronis, the princess of the Lapiths. He was educated by *Kiron*, being the greatest healer. He was killed by Zeus upon the demand of the gods of Hell because he cured the people who did not die anymore.

Meleager, born in Aetolia, son of Ares and Althaea, the Queen of Calydon. She participated with others in the expedition of killing the boar of Artemis, which damaged the crops; she saved Aetolia of the attacks of the neighbors, the Curetes, and killed her uncle. She died because of Apollo and Artemis.

Orpheus was the son of Apollo and Calliope, born in Thrace. He was the greatest musician who persuaded the gods of Hell, whom he asked back for Eurydice, his girlfriend. He participated in the expedition of the *Argonauts.* He was killed by Bacchante, his lyre becoming a constellation.

BDD-A5859 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:04 UTC)

Zethus and *Amphion* were the sons of Zeus who founded the city of Thebes, after the model of *Orpheus*'lyre.

Jason was the grandson of Poseidon. Born in Iolcos, a city-state in Thessaly, he was educated by *Kiron*. He set up the *Argonauts* expedition in Colchis to bring the Golden Fleece from a ram, regarded the son of Poseidon. *Argo* was the name of the ship of which he traveled, which had as a divine sign a twig of Zeus'oak. Many other heroes also left with him, of which the most famous were *Heracles*, *Orpheus, Castor* and *Pollux.* Like all the other heroes, *Jason* also fights with the monsters with six arms of the Propontis Sea, defeated the Berbice tribes in Pergamum, led by a son of Poseidon, he fought with the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece, tamed the bulls with brass feet and muzzle flares of which he plowed the field of Ares, fought with a brass monster when coming back from the expedition. (*cf.* MITRU, 2004).

Achilles was the son of the goddess Thetis (of the sea) and the king Peleus of Thessaly. Perhaps he is the greatest Greek warrior hero. His courage was foreshadowed by *Prometheus*. He was also educated by the centaur *Kiron*, who initiated him in the warrior art. Homer calls his tribes *Achilles* - *Achaeans*. He lived a little, but to a maximum intensity. He killed Hector (whom he dragged behind his carriage, around the city of Troy as a punishment for killing his cousin Patroclus) and the Queen of the *Amazons* Pentesilea (allied with the Trojans) of whom he also fell in love. He died because of the arrow drew by Paris, helped by the god Apollo. On his death he was mourned for a long time by his mother, being designated to the island of the lucky in Hell. (HOUTZAGER, 2008:24-29)

The *Amazons* are also heroines; they are considered the daughters of Ares, the god of war, who had many conflicts with the Greek heroes, especially with *Theseus*, *Heracles*, *Bellerophon* and *Achilles*. They were also involved in the Trojan War on behalf of the Trojans. The most important queens of the Amazons were *Hippolyta* and *Pentiselea*. Their country was near Pont Euxinus. (BALACI, *op. cit*.:41-42)

The *hero* is therefore a "special, exceptional, super-human individual, the hero must take on him also the human condition...What defines him, even in his human destiny, are the deeds that he dared and managed to meet...The heroic deed,...creates, inaugurates, initiates....the deed by which the hero transcends the human condition... " (VERNANT, *op.cit.:*434-435)

The Greeks invented democracy, they have colonized, conquered, civilized and ruled the seas and a part of the world, especially due to their heroes. What did their heroes do if they did not colonize, bring progress, innovate, civilize, dare? The human models have social, cultural, military, political multivalues. It is no accident that the heroic spirit has survived until today, showing once again the immortality of heroes. "They were heroes, they are still heroes" is the line of a Romanian song, they will be heroes, regenerating over millenia the myth of the heroes of ancient Hellas. Even nowadays, our imagination is fervoured by the adventure story of *Jason, Heracles'* bravery, the military perfection of *Achilles, Orpheus'* sensitivity, *Perseus'* battle with the Medusa, and so on. The adventure, conquering the unknown, overcoming the human borders, the fight for the good would not have been possible in human history without daring souls who would dare, precisely their daring made the heroes to be people-gods. *Prometheus* was truly prophetic, the gods of Olympus have not survived the heroes in the European mentality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bailly, A., *Dictionaire grec-français,* Paris, Hachette, 1963.

BDD-A5859 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:04 UTC)

Balaci, A., *Mic dicţionar de mitologie greacă şi romană,* Ediția a II-a, Bucureşti, Editura Mondero, 1992.
Barbu, N., I., Prof. Dr. Docent, „Studiu" în Alexandru Mitru, *Legendele Olimpului, vol II. Eroii,* Bucureşti, Editura Ion Creangă, 1983.
Buffiere, F., *Miturile lui Homer şi gândirea greacă,* traducere şi prefață de Gh. Ceauşescu, Bucureşti, Editura Univers, 1987.
Dărămuş, L., *Mituri şi legende ale Antichității,* Bucureşti, Editura Ideea Europeană, 2008.
DEX.***Dicționar explicativ al limbii române,* coordonatori acad. Ion Coteanu, dr. Luiza Seche, dr. Mircea Seche, Ediția a II-a, Bucureşti, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 1998.
Dinu, Dana, *Introducere în istoria şi civilizația Greciei Antice,* Craiova, Editura Universitaria, 2005.
Gontier, T., *Marile opere ale filosofiei antice,* traducere de Ioana Drăgan, Iaşi, Institutul European, 1999.
Houtzager, G., *Mitologia greacă. Enciclopedie completă,* Traducere: Lia Decei, Bucureşti, Editura Corint, 2008.
Lévéque, P., *Aventura greacă,* vol. I, traducere de Constanța Tănăsescu, Bucureşti, Editura Meridiane, 1987.
Maffre, J., J., *Secolul lui Pericles,* prefață de Zoe Petre, Traducere de Gheorghe Țițeica, Bucureşti, Editura Corint, 2004.
Martin, C., *Grecia Partenonului,* Traducere şi note Lydia Constanța Ciucă, Constantin Ionescu Boeru, Bucureşti, Prietenii cărții, 1997.
Mitru, A., *Din legendele Olimpului,* Bucureşti, Editura Tineretului, 1968.
Mitru, A., *Legendele Olimpului, vol II. Eroii,* Bucureşti, Editura Ion Creangă, 1983.
Mitru, A., *Legendele Olimpului. Eroii,* volumul II, Bucureşti, Editura Vox, 2004.
Noiville, F., *Mitologia greacă,* Prefață de Costa Gavras, Traducere Rodica Chiriacescu, Bucureşti, Meteor Press, 2004.
Petre, Z., *Cetatea greacă între real şi imaginar,* Bucureşti, Editura Nemira, 2000.
Rachet, G., *Larousse. Dicționar de civilizație greacă,* Traducerea: C. Litman, Bucureşti, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 1998.
Vernant, J., P., *Mit şi gândire în Grecia Antică. Studii de psihologie istorică,* Traducere de Zoe Petre şi Andrei Niculescu, Cuvânt înainte de Zoe Petre, Bucureşti, Editura Meridiane, 1995.
Verner, D., *Istorie şi tradiție la europeni,* Traducere de Aurelia Ulici, Bucureşti, Editura Lider, 2006.
Ville de Mirmont, H. de la, *Mythologie élémentaire des Grecs et des Romans,* cinquième édition, Paris, Librairie Hachette, 1900.

BDD-A5859 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:55:04 UTC)