

Notes on the Pre-Greek Amyklaean God Hyakinthos

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Abstract

Originally the beautiful youth Hyakinthos, whom Apollo loved, was not a young consort of Apollo. As the non-Greek suffix *-nth* indicates, Hyakinthos was an indigenous deity at Amyklæ in Laconia. Before the coming of the Indo-Europeans, a matriarchal civilization flourished in the Aegean basin, and the main feature of the civilization was the predominance of the Great Goddess who ruled the nature's life, that is, the growth, death and regeneration of vegetation and animals. As the name Hyakinthos signifies a flower, he seems to have been closely associated with vegetation reflecting the pre-Greek Aegean civilization on the Greek mainland. When Apollo came to Amyklæ, Hyakinthos, the predominant indigenous god, was superseded; this fact is attested by the fact that Hyakinthos was accidentally killed by Apollo as told in Greek myth. Though the original name of the festival survived, the Hyakinthia, which must have been a vegetation cult commemorating the vegetation deity Hyakinthos, was transformed into a joint festival representing the predominance of Apollo and the subjugation of Hyakinthos.

Introduction

In Greek mythology, Hyakinthos, son of Amyklas who founded a city in Laconia, was a beautiful youth whom Apollo loved (Fig. 1 a, b¹⁾), and the god killed Hyakinthos accidentally by a discus; in another legend the jealous Zephyros blew the discus thrown by Apollo so that it struck the beautiful youth on the head. From the youth's blood, a flower marked with the letters AI AI (alas, alas!) sprang, and the flower was called hyacinth commemorating the tragic death of Hyakinthos. This well-known fancy story mentioned above is considered to be a rather late version, and Apollo is regarded as a late-comer²⁾ and foreigner on the Greek soil, while Hyakinthos as an indigenous deity at Amyklæ in Laconia. In addition, unlike the fancy myth, it is said that the statue of Hyakinthos was not a beautiful youth but of a bearded man³⁾, which signifies that Hyakinthos was regarded not as a young consort of Apollo, but as a dominant local deity in Laconia. The background of this myth seems to show interesting features of the original relation with Apollo and Hyakinthos.

1. Hyakinthos, Apollo, and Python

The name Hyakinthos represents as pre-Greek by the suffix *-nth*, which is considered to belong to the language used by the indigenous people of the Greek mainland, the Aegean islands, and Asia Minor. The same examples are seen as Corinthos and Olynthos in Greece,



Fig. 1-a, b. Hyakinthos.

the Island of Zakynthos, the Labyrinthos and Pyranthos in Crete, Perinthos on the coast of the Sea of Marmara, etc. The suffix *-ssos*, which is also considered to have been used by the pre-Greek people, is also attached to place names likewise: the Tiassos River in Laconia, Mt. Parnassos in Phocis, Mt. Hymettos and the Ilissos River in Attica, Amnisos, Tyliissos, and Knossos in Crete, Halikarnassos, Ephesos, and Parnassos in Asia Minor, and Ialyssos on the Island of Rhodes (Fig. 2)⁴⁾. The same suffixes *-nth* and *-ssos* survived in plant names such as erebinthos (the pea), kissos (ivy), and the narcissos. As we have seen, the etymology of Hyakinthos signifies the pre-Greek (i.e. the pre-Indo-European), and the pre-Greek civilization enjoyed in the Aegean region was quite different from the one brought into Greece by the Greek-speaking people around 2500 to 2200 B.C.⁵⁾ The characteristic aspect of this civilization is the predominance of the Great Goddess⁶⁾ who ruled the animal and vegetable life of the earth. The image of the Great Goddess emerged as figurines or idols found throughout the Balkan Peninsula, the Greek mainland, Asia Minor and the Aegean islands including Crete⁷⁾. The typical type of the Great Goddess is shown by horizontal forearms on breasts, massive arms and broad shoulders, huge abdomen, and massive thighs. The physical

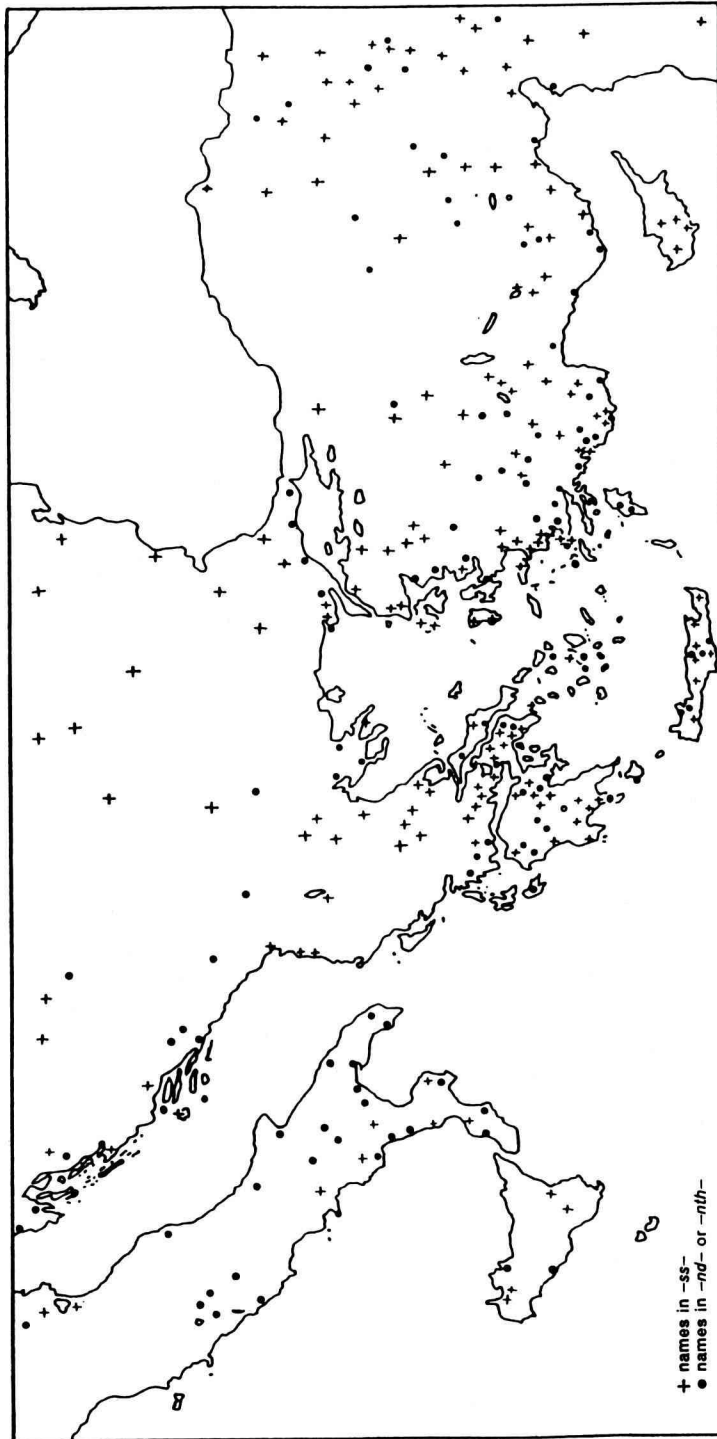


Fig. 2. Distribution of place-names with -ss- and -nth- suffixes in the Aegean region.

strength of the Great Goddess is thus clearly represented with her massive and powerful body. As we have seen, Hyakinthos was a pre-Greek god, and he reflects the characteristic features of the matriarchal society. His accidental death indicates the death and regeneration of a vegetation spirit; this fact is attested by the fact that the name Hyakinthos designates a flower. Though there was a cultural and racial break when the Greek-speaking people invaded into the Greek mainland, the indigenous people certainly survived; at the same time, their cultures (religion, language, custom, etc.) must have been preserved, and as seen at Delos, the famous sanctuary at Apollo, where habitation is said to have continued since the Early Cycladic period⁸⁾. Consequently, since a number of Bronze Age sites roughly coincide with the Neolithic sites⁹⁾ and numerous pre-Greek words (place names, plant names, etc.) were preserved, it seems highly possible that the pre-Greek worship of Amyklaean Hyakinthos was already established in the Neolithic period in Laconia.

Apollo, closely associated with Hyakinthos is described as the most characteristically Greek of all the gods. In classical Greece, he was regarded as an ideal deity; he was a god of music, poetry, prophecy, archery, medicine and herds (Fig. 3)¹⁰⁾. However as Guthrie mentions¹¹⁾, Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto, has a complex character reflecting his complex origin, and multiplicity of etymologies shows that his name is not Greek, and in the Homeric poems he is on the side of the Trojans. In the *Iliad*, Apollo appears as the dreadful archer-god who caused the plague among the Achaeans. Apollo has multiple aspects, and this fact implies that the god absorbed and assimilated the cults and features of other deities when he



Fig. 3. Apollo (left), Artemis and Poseidon.



Fig. 4. Apollo (left, with a bow) and Python (right).

entered into Greece. Actually, at Delphi he was remembered by the Greeks as a late-comer¹²⁾, who had superseded older deities of the temple; in addition, Apollo took over the worship of Hyakinthos at Amyklæ, and the older local deity became subordinate to the new god. The displacement of other local deity by Apollo in Greece also appears in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (*Hom. Hymn.* 3. 182-387; 298). The story tells that Apollo fought a she-dragon beside a spring and killed her with an arrow. In widespread Greek myth, Apollo came to Delphi (Pytho) while Ge (of Themis) ruled the shrine, and a dragon named Python guarded the sanctuary. On Apollo's arrival, Python fought against the intruder, but Apollo killed the guardian dragon shooting many arrows (Fig. 4)¹³⁾. After killing Python, Apollo went to Tempe to be purified, and returned to Delphi. The god founded the Pythian games to commemorate the victory over the dragon (*Apollod.* 1. 4. 1; *Metam.* 1. 379), though the dragon Python is occasionally represented as a human (male or sometimes female)¹⁴⁾. This fact clearly indicates that Apollo came to Delphi, and conquered the indigenous deity or power, then he ruled Delphi as the predominant god¹⁵⁾. Also the Stepteria festival, which was held every eight years, represented a pantomime in which they burnt down a lightly built house; the house was called the 'palace of Python'¹⁶⁾. This suggests that Apollo came to Pytho (Delphi) and he defeated the eponymous Python, then Apollo took over the worship paid to Python. As we have seen, the same instance is also seen at Amyklæ where Apollo was occasionally called Apollo Hyakinthos showing the subjugation of the indigenous god. However, some of the local deities such as Acheloos, the river god, might have escaped this kind of assimilation, and survived within a small group of worshippers¹⁷⁾.

2. The Hyakinthia and Daphnephoria

At Amyklæ in Laconia, where the close association with Hyakinthos and Apollo is observed, the Hyakinthia festival was held in the month of Hekatombaion, which was in early summer and roughly fits to the last half of May and first half of June. According to Farnell, the *Lakonica* of Polykrates described the festival as the following:

"The Laconians celebrate the festival of Hyakinthia for three days: and owing to the sorrow for Hyakinthos they neither wear crowns at the evening banquets nor bring in bread or cakes to the meal. . . . and they do not sing the pæan to the god, but having dined with great decorum they depart. But on the middle of the three days there is a varied show and a great and remarkable gathering. . . . Others in gay apparel ride through the theatre on horseback, and youth formed into very large choruses enter and sing some of their native songs. . . . the whole city is in movement and festal rejoicing, and on that day they sacrifice a large number of victims, and all the citizens invite their friends to dinner and even their own slaves."¹⁸⁾

As quoted above, the Laconian Hyakinthia festival consists of two quite different cults; the festival begins with a lamentation for Hyakinthos, and the people of Amyklæ arranged offerings in the tomb of Hyakinthos, which was under the statue of Apollo (Paus. 3. 1. 3.), after that, sacrifice was offered to Apollo. The Hyakinthia ended in the beginning of June, and this fact indicates that it is associated with the harvest of this season. This fact also implies that Hyakinthos was worshipped as a vegetation deity at Amyklæ¹⁹⁾. Originally the Hyakinthia festival must have been held only for the vegetation god Hyakinthos²⁰⁾, but when Apollo intruded into the region and took over the worship previously paid to Hyakinthos, the festival was forced to change its original form and had to celebrate the new god Apollo. As a result, a joint festival was held, though the original name of the festival was preserved in honor of the dominant local god Hyakinthos. Apollo seems to have appeared as an intruder on the Greek mainland; moreover, his festivals are said to have been relatively rare in Greece but they were held much more frequently on the Aegean islands and in Asia Minor²¹⁾. This fact clearly indicates that Apollo was not an indigenous god in Greece. Superseding and assimilating local deities such as Hyakinthos and Python, Apollo established his own worship in place of the older gods as we have seen at Amyklæ and Delphi.

The Daphnephoria festival implies the close association with Apollo and the laurel. It is the festival of "carrying a laurel branch"; this festival celebrates the arrival of Apollo though it does not represent the god²²⁾. Greek myth tells that Apollo, who was called *Daphnephoros*. (laurel bearer), carried the sacred laurel branch from Tempe in Thessaly to Delphi to begin the Pythian games. The Theban Daphnephoria is described by Pindar as follows:

"They wreath a piece of olive wood with bay springs and flowers of many colours; at the top of a bronze globe is fixed at the centre of the piece of wood and purple ribbons hang from it; the lower part of the wood is wrapped about with a saffron-coloured

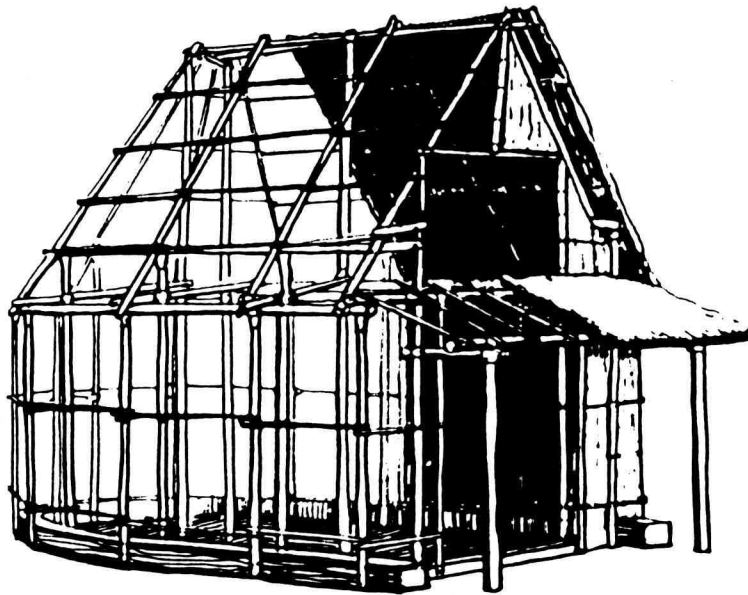


Fig. 5. Sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros, Eretria.

cloth.... At the head of *daphnephoria* goes a boy whose parents are still living ; the bay bearer himself follows behind and touches the laurel branch.... he is followed by a chorus of maidens with twigs in their hands."²³⁾

As Pausanias tells (Paus. 9. 10. 4), at Thebes even in his days, a strong and beautiful boy was chosen from one of the distinguished families to be the yearly priest of Ismenian Apollo, and the boy was called the laurel bearer. As mentioned in the songs of Pindar, the boy seems to embody the god²⁴⁾. In the Daphnephoria the ritualistic laurel branch seems to have been treated as the cult image of Apollo²⁵⁾, and this clearly indicates that the Daphnephoria was originally held in honor of a tree god. This also implies that Apollo himself was worshipped as a vegetation god. Moreover, we notice many instances of the Apollo-vegetation relation ; for example, as mentioned, the boy of the yearly priest of Apollo was called the laurel bearer, and similarly in the Pythian games, the victor was celebrated with a laurel wreath²⁶⁾. The legend tells that the earliest temple of Delphi was built of laurel-wood from Tempe, and was constructed by the legendary Hyperborean architects Pegasos and Agyieus²⁷⁾. Servius mentions an anonymous story : "after the death of Python it was a wolf that first brought Apollo the laurel from that place which is called Tempe"²⁸⁾. In this story again, the close association with Apollo and the laurel is represented. This is also indicated by an eighth-century sanctuary for Apollo Daphnephoros at Eretria (Fig. 5)²⁹⁾. The shrine was considered to have been a laurel hut³⁰⁾. As mentioned, various tales and legends signify the close relation with Apollo and the laurel ; in addition, the plane-tree is related to Apollo as indicated by a shrine of Apollo of the Plane Trees (Paus. 2. 34. 6). These facts seem to represent that Apollo was worshipped as a deity concerning the growth and harvest of

vegetation along with as a pastoral god. Apollo owns various aspects reflecting his complex origin; however, as mentioned, it is certain that the god was closely associated with vegetation, especially with the laurel³¹⁾. At the same time, this appears to be certain that Apollo was a vegetation god as implied by the Daphnephoria.

Conclusion

Hyakinthos was originally a predominant indigenous deity at Amyklæ in Laconia. When Apollo came to Amyklæ, Hyakinthos was subdued and assimilated by the new god. Apollo took over the worship previously paid to the indigenous god, though Greek myth tells us rather a fancy story. Similarly at Delphi, Apollo killed Python, the eponymous deity at Pytho (Delphi); subsequently, he established his own worship there. Apollo was described as a late-comer by the Greeks, and his cult was rare on the Greek mainland but more frequently in Asia Minor and the Aegean islands; moreover, etymologically the name Apollo can not be explained as Greek. These facts evidently suggest that Apollo was a foreign god in Greece, and the god seems to have superseded many indigenous deities in Greece. This clearly explains why Apollo has various aspects such as a vegetation deity, a pastoral god, an archer-god, and so on. The Hyakinthia festival suggests that originally the festival was held to celebrate the local god Hyakinthos, but by the arrival of Apollo, the Hyakinthia became a joint festival showing two different cults: mourning for the defeated Hyakinthos and celebration for Apollo. Similarly at Delphi, the Daphnephoria festival denotes that Apollo came to Pytho (Delpheii), and he demolished the eponymous god Python establishing his own cult there. This is attested by the fact that in the Stepteria festival, the 'palace of Python' was burnt down, which clearly indicates that Apollo demolished the predominant local god and took the predominance of the region. As the *-nth* suffix implies, Hyakinthos is considered to be a pre-Greek god. Before the coming of the Greeks, the Aegean region enjoyed a civilization which was a matriarchal agrarian society dominated by the powerful Great Goddess, who was associated with the growth, death and regeneration of nature's life together with fertility. As the name of Hyakinthos signifies a flower, Hyakinthos must have been associated with vegetation, and his death evidently represents the vegetation cult originated in the matriarchal Aegean basin; at the same time, his death denotes that his cult was superseded by the foreign god Apollo who dominated Amyklæ in place of the indigenous god Hyakinthos.

Notes

- 1) Karl Schefold, *Götter und Heldensagen der Griechen in Der Spätarchaischen Kunst* (Munich: Hirmer, 1978), p. 50, Figs. 52, 53.
- 2) W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Beacon Press, 1955), p. 73.
- 3) Pausanias, 3. 19. 4
- 4) R.A. Crossland and Ann Birchall, eds. *Bronze Age Migrations in the Aegean* (London: Duck-

- worth, 1973), p. 268, Fig. 26.1. See also F. Schachermeyr, *Die Minoische Kultur des alten Kreta* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, Mainz : Kohlhammer, 1979), pp. 230-233, Figs. 122-125.
- 5) M. Gimbutas, "Old Europe C. 7000-3500B.C.: The Earliest European Civilization before the Infiltration of the Indo-European Peoples," *JIES*, 1 (1973), p. 16; M. Gimbutas, "Proto-Indo-European Culture: The Kurgan Culture during the Fifth, Fourth, and Third Millennia B.C., "in *Indo-European and Indo-Europeans*, G. Cardona, ed. (Philadelphia : Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p. 191; Homer L. Thomas, "New Evidence for Dating the Indo-European Dispersal in Europe," in *Indo-European and Indo-Europeans*, p. 212.
 - 6) W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 41; W.K.C. Guthrie, "The Religion and Mythology of the Greeks," *Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge : Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), vol. 2-2, p. 871; See also S. Hood, *The Minoans* (London : Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 131.
 - 7) M. Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 153; p. 154, Figs. 138, 140, 141, 142, 144; p. 156, Eigs. 98, 99; See also N.K. Sandars. *Prehistoric Art in Europe*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1985), p. 190, Fig. 160.
 - 8) E. Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age* (Chicago : Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 287.
 - 9) Edwards, I.E.S. et al., ed. *The Cambridge Ancient History* Vol. 1-1 (Cambridge : Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 798-799, Map. 17; Vermeule, *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3, Fig. 1; pp. 68, 69, Fig. 12.
 - 10) Karl Schefold, *Ibid.*, p. 41, Fig. 40.
 - 11) W.K.C. Guthrie, *Ibid.*, p. 901, L.R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States* (New Rochelle : Caratzas Brothers, 1977), Vol. 4, p. 98.
 - 12) Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, p. 73.
 - 13) J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Longon : Univ. of California Press, paperback ed. 1980), p. 17, Fig. 1.
 - 14) *Ibid.*, p. 22.
 - 15) Pytho (i.e. Delphi) appeared in the *Iliad* as Apollo's shrine (*Ili.* 9. 404-405) and in the *Odyssey* as the Seat of Apollo's Oracle (*Od.* 8.80).
 - 16) H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (New York : E.P. Dutton, 1959), p. 137; G.S. Kirk mentions that the burnt house seems to represent a king's dwelling rather than a dragon's lair. See G.S. Kirk, *Myth Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : Univ. of California Press, 1970), p. 16.
 - 17) M. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion* (W.W. Norton : New York, 1964), p. 116.
 - 18) Farnell, *Ibid.*, p. 264.
 - 19) *Ibid.*, p. 267; Rose, *Ibid.*, p. 142.
 - 20) Farnell points out (*Ibid.*, p. 267) the predominance of women in the Hyakinthia festival. This indicates that the Hyakinthia was the ritual of fertility associated with the vegetation cult.
 - 21) Guthrie, *Greeks and Their Gods*, p. 84.
 - 22) W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London : Univ. of California Press, paperback ed., 1982), p. 135.
 - 23) W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 100.
 - 24) *Ibid.*
 - 25) Farnell mentions (*Ibid.*, p. 125) that the laurel branch was regarded as "a fructifying charm".
 - 26) Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 147.
 - 27) Farnell, *Ibid.*, p. 103.
 - 28) *Ibid.*, p. 116.
 - 29) A.W. Lawrence, *Greek Architecture* rev. ed. (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1983), p. 117, Fig. 81.

- 30) Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, p. 208, n. 4.
- 31) Farnell points out (Ibid., p. 124) that together with the laurel, the tamarisk and the apple-tree are sacred to Apollo. Cook thinks that the name Apollo derives from *apellon* 'a black poplar tree'. See A.B. Cook, *Zeus A Study in Ancient Religion* (New York : Biblo and Tannen, 1964-1965), vol. 2, pp. 484-485.

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