

## Chapter 2

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### **The Universe in a Nutshell: The Theban Herakleia**

#### **Festivals and Identity: An Introduction\***

“This Ancient Greece related article is a stub. You can help Wikipedia by expanding it”, is what we find on Wikipedia for “Heracleia festival”.<sup>1</sup> This is far from astonishing because the evidence on the Herakleia requires a decipherment that combines fragmentary information with debates on historical circumstances. When the editor of this volume asked me to contribute a chapter on the Theban Herakleia, my spontaneous answer was that I did not believe there was enough material to write a substantial chapter on the subject, even less so when attempting to create a picture “In the Shadow of the ‘Big Four’”. The ancient sources are far from being abundant. Yet, this is everyday reality for ancient historians. Historiography begins when relating evidence to information stemming from other contexts, and when framing it within the wider context of questions concerning the subject. From this point of view, the Theban Herakleia evoke the universe in a nutshell. Their evolution over the centuries invites us to discuss the importance of local festivals for the expression and development of identity on several levels. First, there is the question of elite interaction and their relation to the institutions of poleis and koina. Second, the interrelations between local, regional, and Panhellenic expressions of belonging come into play.

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\* The manuscript was written in 2018 and could only moderately be updated in 2023. I am grateful to Paul Ganter and to Sebastian Scharff for instructive comments.

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heracleia\\_\(festival\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heracleia_(festival)), 18.04.2018.

The discussion of Boiotian cults and festivals will always rely on the work of Albert Schachter.<sup>2</sup> However, a lot of work remains to be done to relate the information provided by his corpus to various questions arising when discussing Boiotian cults. Only recently, a much needed monograph on Boiotian *agōnes* as carriers of identity and creators of community from the Archaic period to the fourth century AD was written by Paul Grigsby.<sup>3</sup> He is certainly right that the games provided a “more nuanced and complex picture than the rather one-sided accounts which stress the commonality of cults and rituals which led to the creation of a unified *ethnos*.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, ethnogenesis in the sense of steadily changing identities that define an *ethnos* should not be told as a teleological tale.<sup>5</sup> We cannot understand the characteristics of regional belonging without elucidating the contribution of all the involved local entities. Grigsby is right that festivals “offer a window onto aspects of the complex amalgam that was Boiotian identity which would otherwise remain invisible.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, this is also true for the rich mythical tales related to Boiotia and to Thebes especially. Though inscriptions provide information on cult and agency in practice, they do not explain the wider cultural meaning of the details mentioned there. If an honorary inscription mentions a victory at the Theban Herakleia and some further details of this success, we can infer that a festival named Herakleia existed at this time. The origin of the victor tells us something about the catchment area of the games, and we might get some information on the cult personal involved, on the periodicity of the games, and on the time of the year the *agōnes* took place. But why were the games called ‘Herakleia’? What did Herakles mean to the community hosting the festival? This is where myth comes into play. Although it is quite difficult to link the versions of mythical tales to concrete places and situations, myths also have a history that opens a window to examine cultural meaning in the flow of time. In conjunction with cults, myths offer insights into ancient identity.

This chapter cannot describe the Theban or the Boiotian universe. By revisiting the evidence of the Theban Herakleia across the centuries, it is meant as a contribution to the vivid debates on the “uneasy amalgam”<sup>7</sup> of Boiotian identity hovering between affiliations to the *ethnos* and local entities, usually *poleis*. It was an “uneasy amalgam”, because the *poleis* of Boiotia never commonly subscribed to a long-lasting political unit that would have ended the quarrels among them. In the Archaic and Classical periods, Thebes was the driving force behind the construction of a Boiotian *koinon* dominated by

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<sup>2</sup> His seminal contribution is *Cults of Boeotia, I-IV*. London 1981–1994.

<sup>3</sup> Grigsby 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Grigsby 2017: 11.

<sup>5</sup> Recent research is far from doing so, cf. only Kühr 2006: 259–308, especially 258; Ganter 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Grigsby 2017: 9.

<sup>7</sup> Grigsby 2017: 11, 18, 20, 27, 36, 38, 200, 239–240, 244–245, 261, 263, 269.

the Thebans. This claim was embodied by the Theban hero par excellence, Herakles *prómachos*. Accordingly, the Theban Herakleia should be read under this premise. In contrast to the Theban hegemony over Boiotia, however, the Herakleia survived the struggles resulting from the battle of Chaironeia in 338 BC and the destruction of the Theban citadel by Alexander in 335 BC for centuries to come. What did the festival stand for, when Theban glory belonged to a foregone past?

The Wikipedia article quoted above refers to Thebes by commenting:

In Thebes, the center of the cult of Herakles, the festivities lasted a number of days, and consisted of various athletic and musical contests (*agónes*), as well as sacrifices. They were celebrated in the gymnasium of Iolaos, the nephew and *erómenos* of Herakles, and were known as the Iolaeia. The winners were awarded brass tripods.<sup>8</sup>

Where does this information stem from and to which epochs does it refer? Let us have a closer look at the ancient sources mentioning the festival by exploring them in chronological order. That way it might become possible to get a glimpse into the festival's profile and to lighten its contours beyond a shadowy dark grey.

### **Herakleia or Iolaeia? Myth and Cult**

The games at Thebes took place in early winter<sup>9</sup> and were called 'Herakleia' or 'Iolaeia' respectively. What's in a name? The double assignation is revealing because it refers to Herakles and Iolaos, two heroes who were closely interconnected at Thebes. What did the heroes stand for, and how can we describe their relation? Did the denomination of the festival change over the centuries, and does it hint at a changing significance for the Thebans over the intervening years?

The earliest sources alluding to *agónes* at Thebes do not denominate them.<sup>10</sup> This is partly due to the poetic character of the texts mentioning them, but should also be read as a sign for the fact that there was only one sort of *agónes* at Thebes and that these *agónes* were

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heracleia\\_\(festival\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heracleia_(festival)), 18.04.2018.

<sup>9</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 587d is the only evidence for the time of the year when the Herakleia took place: at the turning of the Boiotian year, that is to say in early winter; cf. Schachter 1986: 30.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the following verses: καὶ δεῦτερον ἄμαρ ἐτείων τέρμ' ἀέθλων γίνεται, ἰσχύος ἔργον; "And on the second day is the conclusion of the annual games, the labor of strength" (Pind. *Isthm.* 4.68–69; transl. W. H. Race). In *Ol.* 7.83–84, the prizes metonymically stand for the games: ὃ τ' ἐν Ἄργει χαλκὸς ἔγνω νιν, τὰ τ' ἐν Ἀρκαδίᾳ ἔργα καὶ Θήβαις; "The bronze in Argos came to know him, as did the works of art in Arcadia and Thebes" (transl. W. H. Race). Cf. also Pind. *Ol.* 9.98–99; *Pyth.* 9.79–80; *Isthm.* 5.32–33; Bacchyl. 10.30. The earliest epigraphic attestation also refers only to Thebes: IG IV 801.

well-known to Pindar’s audience. Our first firm evidence for ‘Herakleia’ properly designated as such is provided by an inscription from the second half of the fourth century BC.<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, the earliest literary source that calls them ‘Herakleia’, also refers to games taking place in the fourth century BC, more precisely: the games of 380/79 BC.<sup>12</sup> This might lead to the assumption that the name ‘Herakleia’ was introduced and promoted in the fourth century when Thebes was at the height of her hegemonic aspirations within and beyond Boiotia. Did the games have a name at all before that, or were they called ‘Iolaeia’? Pindar speaks of games taking place at “Iolaos’ tomb” (Ἰολάου τύμβος).<sup>13</sup> Were the ‘Iolaeia’ the pre-runner of the ‘Herakleia’?<sup>14</sup> Scholiasts commenting on the problem apparently did not know.<sup>15</sup> As Pindar’s *Fourth Isthmian* undoubtedly puts the games into the context of Herakles’ cult, it is unlikely that Iolaos played a predominant role for the festival at this time. In sum, the evidence gives no direct solution to the question, perhaps the general significance of the eponymic heroes for the Thebans does.<sup>16</sup>

Thebes is mentioned as the birthplace of Herakles already in the *Iliad*.<sup>17</sup> But Herakles did not belong to one city alone. This is why we find him commenting on his own origins with the words: “Am I Argive or Theban? I don’t pride myself on only one city. In every fortress of the Greeks I am at home.”<sup>18</sup> From a Panhellenic point of view, especially his youth was linked to Thebes,<sup>19</sup> but his mother Alkmene and his stepfather Amphitryon came from Argos.<sup>20</sup> The Thebans integrated the two into their own cultic world by

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11 IG VII 2532; Schachter 1986: 28n1 dates the epigram to 338–335 BC.

12 Plut. *Mor.* 587d with Schachter 1986: 26.

13 Pind. *Ol.* 9.98–99.

14 This is the assumption by West 2009: 569.

15 Polemon *FHG* 3 p. 123 F 26 and Schol. Pind. *Ol.* 7.153e: “Herakleia” also called “Iolaeia;” Didymos F 47 (= Schol. Pind. *Nem.* 4.32 and Schol. Pind. *Ol.* 9.148d); “Herakleia” only; Schol. Pind. *Ol.* 9.148e and i: “Iolaeia.” – Ziehen 1934: 1518–1520 and Symeonoglou 1985: 109. 137 think that the names were used alternatively. Schachter 1986: 26–27; cf. 1981: 30 implicitly states that the confusion was produced by the fact that the *agōnes* were first celebrated at the Herakleion and later at the Iolaeion north of the Kadmeia (cf. Didymos F 47 = Schol. Pind. *Nem.* 4.32).

16 Pind. *Isthm.* 4.55–68.

17 Hom. *Il.* 19.98–119. Cf. Hom. *Il.* 5.392; 14.323–324; *Od.* 11.266–268; *Hymn Dem.* 15.2–3; Hes. *Theog.* 314–318. 526–531. 950–951. F 193,19–20 M.–W.; [*Sc.*] 11–13. 35–56. 48–56. 416. 433. 459; Pind. *Pyth.* 9.84–86; *Isthm.* 4.55; Eur. *Heracl.* 1–3; Pherekydes *FGrH* 3 F 13c; Herodoros *FGrH* 31 F 16 *et passim*.

18 Ἀργεῖος ἢ Θηβαῖος· οὐ γὰρ εὔχομαι μᾶς· ἅπας μοι πύργος Ἑλλήνων πατρίς (*TrGF* II, adesp. 392 = Plut. *Mor.* 600F). Angeli Bernardini 2010: 397 is of the opinion that the local traditions including Herakles developed with the rise of the polis. Herakles was rooted almost everywhere in Boiotia, see Schachter 1986: 1–37.

19 Theban coinage celebrates baby Herakles suffocating the snakes or has him beardless: Head 1891/1974: 30–42 and pl. II. 11–12; III. 10–11. 14–15; Babelon II.3: 227–230. 245–246, no. 229–231. 259–264; BMC Central Greece, 70–72, no. 29–30. 33–34. 36–39, pl. XII. 1–2. 4–8.

20 Herakles is the son by Zeus and Alkmene (Hom. *Il.* 14.323–324; *Od.* 11.266–268), or Amphitryon’s son, read: stepson (Hom. *Il.* 5.392). Alkmene, Perseus’ granddaughter, is said to have fled from Argos to Thebes (Hes. F 193,19–20 M.–W.; Hes. [*Sc.*] 1–3. 11–13. 80–85; Pherekydes *FGrH* 3 F 13c; the genealogy is discussed by Gantz 1993: 374; Dale Trendall 1981: 552; cf. also Prinz 1974). She is accompanied by Amphitryon, who mostly is considered to be of

honoring Amphitryon at a hero grave, by designating the place of his house, and by remembering Alkmene's chamber where she had given birth to her famous son.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Pindar celebrates Alkmene among the most prominent Theban heroines and calls Amphitryon a guest of the Spartoi, the earthgrown first citizens of Thebes (Σπαρτῶν ξένος).<sup>22</sup> What is more, Amphitryon was said to have dedicated a tripod at the most famous Theban temple, the precinct of Apollo Ismenios southeast of the Kadmeia in the neighborhood of the Herakleion.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Herakles' pedigree makes it clear that his birth at Thebes was not enough to transform him, whose deeds were spread all over the Greek world, into an exclusively Theban hero.<sup>24</sup> His qualities as a local hero depended heavily on the loyal comrade at his side, a typically Theban figure.<sup>25</sup>

Iolaos was his name. He also was a young man.<sup>26</sup> From the earliest written sources<sup>27</sup> and images, he helps Herakles in the fulfillment of his deeds, especially in the killing of the Hydra. Already on a bronze fibula from Boiotia of about 700 BC, Herakles is supported by Iolaos who seizes all Hydra's heads,<sup>28</sup> a motif that should become prominent all over the Greek world in the early sixth century.<sup>29</sup> At this time, Iolaos reached the peak of his

Argive origin also (Eur. *Heracl.* 2–3. 17–21; Apollod. 2.4.6). Hdt. 2.43, in contrast, places Alkmene and Amphitryon in Egypt.

21 Hero grave: Pind. *Pyth.* 9.0–83; *Nem.* 4.20; – house of Amphitryon and Alkmene's chamber: Paus. 9.11.1.

22 Pind. *Pyth.* 11.3; 9.82; *Isthm.* 7.5–8.

23 In Hdt. 5.59, Amphitryon is meant to have dedicated the tripod after having defeated the Teleboans. In Paus. 9.10.4, in contrast, the dedication is linked to the honor for young boys of noble families to serve Apollon as a *daphnēphoros* for a year. Accordingly, the tripod was given by Amphitryon when the boy Herakles had been chosen to be *daphnēphoros* at the Ismenion. – Amphitryon is also said to have dedicated two stone images of Athena Zosteria in the precinct of Artemis Eukleia at Thebes (Paus. 9.17.3).

24 This is stressed e.g. by Friedländer 1914: 341n1; Kirk 1974: 183; Schachter 1986: 16; López Saco 1997.

25 Apart from Thebes, her smaller Boiotian neighboring polis Thespiiai is the place where the veneration of Herakles is attested best in Boiotia. Inscriptions prove that a cult for Herakles existed from the first half of the fifth century onwards (*SEG* 30.541; for further details Schachter 1986: 34–35), and artefacts demonstrate that Herakles was important for Thespiiai indeed. Cf. for example a black-figure column crater from Thespiiai dating to 550–540 BC showing Herakles who fights the lion (*LIMC* s.v. Heracles 1787\*. Cf. *LIMC* s.v. Heracles 3178; 3202; 3459a). In Pausanias' time, the deflowering of king Thespius' daughters by Herakles had been explicitly linked with Thespian cult: the myth served as a cult *aition* to explain the virginity of Herakles' Thespian priestess (Paus. 9.27.6). Iolaos was said to have led the Thespiadai, the children by Herakles and the kings' daughters, to Sardinia to found a colony later (Diod. Sic. 4.29.2–4; for a detailed discussion of the topic see Kühr 2011). However, there is no evidence for a cult of Iolaos in Thespiiai, cf. Schachter 1986: 65.

26 Cf. only the depiction of Iolaos as a beardless youngster in a short chiton on a Corinthian aryballos from 610–600 BC (*LIMC* Iolaos 24\*).

27 Hes. *theog.* 314–318; [*Sc.*] 74–114. 323–324. 340–342. 467–470; F 230 M.–W.

28 *LIMC* Heracles 2019\*.

29 A Corinthian black-figure aryballos from 610–600 BC, for instance, depicts a beardless Iolaos in short chiton (inscribed FIOAAFOΣ) attacking the Hydra with a harpe from the right (*LIMC* Iolaos 24\*). Produced about 560, a Laconian black-figure cup from Samos has Herakles on the left (only his left arm is preserved) grasping the snake body; the beardless Iolaos, inscribed FIOAAΣ, is seen on the right (*LIMC* Iolaos 27\*). Stemming from 560–550, an Attic black-figure neck-amphora shows Herakles and Iolaos (helmet, corselet) attacking the Hydra with sword and torch respectively (*LIMC* Iolaos 20 = Heracles 1998\*). Iolaos gets especially famous for being Herakles' charioteer as depicted on a hydria from 560–500 (*LIMC* Heracles 2878\*). See the overview by Pipili 1990.

prominence, but in contrast to the myriad versions of Herakles' myth, dynamic tales flourishing in the Mediterranean world for more than a millennium, Iolaos remains a pale, ultimately locally rooted figure. The Pindaric odes convey an idea of his local importance, as their Theban creator holds Iolaos in high esteem, avoids portraying him as an appendage of Herakles and emphasizes deeds that Iolaos alone accomplished, for instance the protection of the Herakleidai and the killing of Eurystheus.<sup>30</sup>

Compared to Iolaos' quickly told story, Herakles' Theban career accelerated in the sixth century BC and needs more exemplification. The pseudo-Hesiodic *Aspis* characterizes Herakles as the prototype of the Theban *prómachos*.<sup>31</sup> He is applauded by people from Arne, the mythical homeland of the Boiotians, thus by the Boiotians themselves.<sup>32</sup> What is more, his stepfather Amphitryon is said to have fought with the Boiotians, and Herakles is protected by Poseidon, the god residing at the *témenos* of Onchestos, which was to become one of the most important pan-Boiotian sanctuaries.<sup>33</sup> Though the authorship of the *Aspis* is much debated,<sup>34</sup> the poem undoubtedly promotes an image of Thebes the polis must have welcomed in the sixth century BC. Janko reckoned that the poem was presented at the creation of a new festival at Thebes commemorating the victory at the battle of Keressos, a new festival which was named 'Herakleia'.<sup>35</sup> This hypothesis could be rejected due to the fact that the Herakleia probably did not include musical contests before 315 BC.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the Archaic games might have provided the setting for bards singing their songs, and the *Aspis* might have been one of these songs.<sup>37</sup> However, whether the games were installed as an answer to the victory at the ominous battle of Keressos against the Thessalians, usually dated to 571 BC and considered to be an important incident that tied the Boiotians together in reaction to enemies from abroad, we do not know.<sup>38</sup>

Equally uncertain is the assumption that the *Aspis* emblemizing the shield of Herakles was symbolically repeated on the very first coins the Boiotians minted. These coins were

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30 Pind. *Isthm.* 1.15–32. 5.32–33. 7.9; *Ol.* 9.98–99; *Pyth.* 9.79–82 with commentaries by Angeli Bernardini 1990; West 2009. Cf. Eur. *Heracl.* 793–796; Pherekydes *FGrH* 3 F 84; Strab. 5.2.7 (C225). 8.6.19 (C377); Diod. Sic. 4.57; Apollod. 2.8.1; Paus. 1.32.6.; 44.8.

31 According to Paus. 9.11.4, the the cult image of Herakles in the Herakleion was adorned by the epithet *prómachos*.

32 Hes. [*Sc.*] 380–382; 474–475.

33 Hes. [*Sc.*] 23–26; 103–105.

34 For the possible authorship and the political implications of the poem, see Janko 1986: 38n1; Kühn 2006: 174–183.

35 Janko 1986: 48n62, who stresses though that this is a hypothesis he hardly dares to utter. Cf. Mackil 2013: 24 and Grigsby 2017: 67. 86, who both find the hypothesis attractive.

36 Strictly speaking, there were no musical contests at Thebes before 315 BC, cf. Manieri 2009: 284.

37 Cf. Farnell 1961 comm. *ad* Pind. *Isthm.* 4.61–68 and Olivieri 2011, 114, who reckon that Pindar's *Fourth Isthmian* was performed at the Herakleia.

38 Kühn 2006: 300n1 with further references and Mackil 2013: 24.

recognizable by the shield on the reverse that stood for the Boiotians.<sup>39</sup> Was there a direct connection to the shield of Herakles? If so, the first economic association of Boiotian poleis institutionalized by a common coinage was clearly dominated by the Thebans who presented themselves as the leading military force to drive out the enemy. The *Aspis* expresses a Theban-friendly position that Boiotian concerns were considered to be Theban ones – or vice versa. From the sixth century onwards at the latest, Thebes defined her claims via Herakles: he was the Theban *prómachos*. Expansion was his message.

Significantly, his *témenos* lay just outside the city walls. Topography further enhances the meaning Herakles had for Thebes. He was the *prómachos* protecting the wall that at least in the eighth and seventh centuries BC metonymically stood for the polis itself.<sup>40</sup> From there, he could easily start his engagement to expand Theban influence.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the cult history of the place presumably goes back to the veneration of hero graves attributed to warriors called Alkaidai, who were still honored in the Classical age when they had been integrated into the cult of Theban Herakles.<sup>42</sup>

The recently excavated sanctuary south of the Theban citadel in vicinity of the Elektran Gate and of the important precinct of Apollon Ismenios proves that Herakles' cult at Thebes goes back at least to the Geometric period.<sup>43</sup> But the increase in votive dedications during the sixth century<sup>44</sup> suggests that the importance of the cult rose during this period. Among the sherds found at the site, we have the very first evidence for the term boiotarch.<sup>45</sup> Whoever dedicated the object, the dedication illustrates that the Boiotians were present as an active ethnos at the Theban sanctuary,<sup>46</sup> or that the Thebans used the sanctuary of Herakles *prómachos* on their behalf to provide a cultic background

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39 For the discussion of the coin emissions that bear the Boiotian shield on the obverse and monograms with the initial of the minting polis on the reverse, see Head 1887/1963: 295–296; Kraay 1976: 109–10; Ducat 1973: 61–62; and now the detailed analysis by Mackil and van Alfen 2006: 226–231; Larson 2007: 67–109. – In the *Aspis*, the Kadmeioi (Hes. [Sc.] 13: φερεσσακέας Καδμείους) and Boiotoi (Hes. [Sc.] 24: Βοιωτοὶ πλήξιπποι, ὑπὲρ σακέων πνεῖοντες) are characterized as shield-bearers. For the equation of the Boiotian shield with the shield of Herakles, see e.g. Head 1891/1974: 10; Grigsby 2017: 64–65 with further references.

40 For a detailed discussion of the interrelation between topography and myth, topography and cult at Thebes, see Kühr 2006: 199–256.

41 Cf. also stories of Herakles the ephebe, who freed his hometown from the tributes the Orchomenians had imposed on the Thebans: Diod. Sic. 4.10.3–5; Apollod. 2.4.11.

42 See the discussion below.

43 Aravantinos 2014 gives an overview on the inscriptions found at the place, accompanied by nice photographs. Cf. also SEG 60.512, that enlists the graffiti and dipinti on vases referring to Herakles found at the Herakleion (seventh to sixth century BC); in addition, Aravantinos 2017. Bonanno Aravantinos 2012 discusses the sculptures.

44 Aravantinos 2014.

45 Museum of Thebes inv. no. 41063 (= Aravantinos 2014: 199–202 = SEG 60.509): dating to the first half of the fifth century BC, the boiotarch is mentioned in l. 8. The content, a grant of privileges, hints at the fact that the Theban Herakleion was the place to store such documents at the time.

46 Cf. Grigsby 2017: 86, who classifies the dedication as “a nod to the pan-Boiotian nature of the shrine and its associated festival.”

for their leadership. Thus the archaeological evidence is consistent with the picture we have gained from the literary sources.

According to Pindar, the Theban festival including the *agōnes* took place at the Herakleion:

In his honor, above the Elektran Gates  
 We citizens prepare a feast  
 And a newly built circle of altars and multiply  
 Burnt offerings for the eight bronze-clad men who died,  
 The sons that Megara, Kreon's daughter, bore to him.  
 For them at sunset the flame rises  
 And burns all night long,  
 Kicking heaven with its savor of smoke.  
 And on the second day is the conclusion  
 Of the annual games, the labor of strength.<sup>47</sup>

The altars and burnt offerings for the Alkaidai, the sons by Herakles and king Kreon's daughter Megara, form part of a Theban-bound cult of Herakles. The heroes linked Herakles to the Theban royal dynasty.<sup>48</sup> When Pausanias visited the place in the second century AD, his local informants told him that the ruins near the Elektran Gate, the site where recent excavations have uncovered the Herakleion, were the remains of Amphitryon's house. They even read out an inscription designating the ruins as such and stressed that Alkmene's chamber could still be recognized in the ruins. What is more, the tomb of the Alkaidai was located there. Herakles in his madness was said to have attacked them as well as Amphitryon. The latter, however, was saved by Athena, who made

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47 τῶ μὲν Ἠλεκτρᾶν ὑπερθεὺς δαίτῃ πορῶντες ἀστοὶ  
 καὶ νεόδματα στεφανώματα βωμῶν αὔξομεν  
 ἔμπυρα χαλκοαρᾶν ὀκτὼ θανόντων,  
 τοὺς Μεγάρᾳ τέκε οἱ Κρειοντίς υἱούς·  
 τοῖσιν ἐν δυθμαῖσιν αὐγᾶν φλόξ ἀνατελλομένα συνεχῆς παννυχιζεῖ  
 αἰθέρα κνισάεντι λακτίζοισα καπνῶ,  
 καὶ δεῦτερον ἄμαρ ἐτείων τέρμι' ἀέθλων  
 γίνεταί, ἰσχύος ἔργον.

(Pind. *Isthm.* 4.61–68, transl. W. H. Race).

Farnell 1961 comm. *ad loc.* thinks that the emphasis on the cult is due to the fact that the ode was sung at the proper festival of the Herakleia.

48 The wedding between Herakles and Megara is attested in Hom. *Od.* 11.269–270; Diod. Sic. 4.10.6; Apollod. 2.4.11, the slaying of the offspring in Stesichoros F 230 *PMG* and Panyasis F 1 *PEG* = Paus. 9.11.2; Pherekydes *FGrH* 3 F 14; Eur. *Heracl.* 977–1008; Asklepiades *FGrH* 12 F 27. Assumably, the story of Herakles Mainomenos was of younger origin than that of the Alkaidai in order to integrate the Alkaidai and their heroon into the widening web of myth on Theban Herakles; cf. Schachter 1986: 16n1 and Kühr 2006: 170–172 with a more detailed discussion and further references. – Schachter 1986: 11; 19–20; 32–33 is convinced that the relation between Herakles and the Alkaidai is analogue to similar cults in Boiotia that were centered around a group of warriors worshipped at a hero grave. Like him, Ziehen 1934: 1494–1495 was equally sure that this cult was of very old origins.



Herakles unconscious by throwing a stone at him that was still seen in Pausanias' time.<sup>49</sup> Then, the Herakleion had partly fallen to ruins, but his Theban contemporaries remembered the place as the one to venerate Herakles' Theban family. Places of memory and veneration had twice emerged from the ruins of an unknown past. In the Archaic age, graves stemming from the Mycenaean period seem to have been the focal point of a hero cult dedicated to eight warriors later identified with the Alkaidai, the heroes who were worshipped at the site in Pindar's time and declared to be the sons by Herakles and Megara.<sup>50</sup> Centuries later, when Pausanias visited the place, the Herakleion had partly turned into a museum inviting visitors to think about Theban identity by remembering stories attached to landmarks, or to refine old stories and invent new ones when trying to explain otherwise unexplainable objects.<sup>51</sup>

As elsewhere in the city, the Thebans used the graves remaining from an unknown period to venerate the forefathers of a seemingly glorious past. By giving the inhabitants of the graves a name, the past was given a face. The heroes venerated there were the founding fathers of Theban identity. Through Iolaos and the Alkaidai, Herakles became a specifically Theban hero.

But what was the relation between Herakles and his comrade? Scholars assume that Iolaos was a long-established hero in the region, who was firstly doubled, finally overtaken, but never fully substituted by Herakles.<sup>52</sup> As it is evident in Pindar, the Thebans were celebrating a much older hero cult at his tomb in the fifth century, and the games were held at his grave (Ἰολάου τύμβος)<sup>53</sup> that was the joint tomb of Iolaos and Amphitryon.<sup>54</sup> Later, members of the Theban Sacred Band, the elite force of the Theban army in the fourth century that consisted of male lovers, used to pledge loyalty at Iolaos' grave, and lovers met there to affirm their eternal bonds.<sup>55</sup> In sum, Iolaos, Herakles' comrade and *erómenos*, seems to have developed into a role model for young men standing loyally at

49 Paus. 9.11.1–2.

50 Cf. Keramopoulos 1917: 127. 133. 325–326; Ziehen 1934: 1494–1495; Schachter 1981: 11; Kühr 2006: 192; Aravantinos 2014: 152 with further references.

51 Cf. the full description of the Herakleion in Paus. 9.11.1–6 with Schachter 1986: 22–25.

52 Kroll 1916: 1843; Schachter 1986: 16–20; 31–36. – Genealogically, Iolaos was linked to Herakles by designating him to be the latter's nephew: Hes. [Sc.] 86–88. 111; Pind. *Pyth.* 11.59–60; *Isthm.* 1,30; Apollod. 2.4.11; Diod. Sic. 5.15.2; Paus. 8.14.9.

53 Pind. *Ol.* 9.98–99.

54 The tomb where the *agónes* took place is designated as a joint tomb (Pind. *Pyth.* 9.80–83). Alternatively, it refers to Iolaos (Pind. *Ol.* 9.98–99; cf. F 169a,47–48 Maehler) or to Amphitryon (Pind. *Nem.* 4.20) respectively.

Schachter 1986: 18 is convinced that Iolaos as the local predecessor of Herakles originally was the head of a warrior group, the later Alkaidai, venerated southeast of the Kadmeia. Symeonoglou 1985: 136–137 (site 24 – H 13–H 16) is convinced that the two heroes first shared a tomb and a common cult close to the Herakleion on the Kolonaki hill, before Iolaos got his own *témenos* probably after 446 BC when the new stadion and gymnasium were erected.

55 Lovers: Arist. F 83 Rose = Plut. *Mor.* 761d–e; – the Theban Sacred Band: Arist. F 82 Rose = Plut. *Pel.* 18.5 (287d); – cf. Ar. *Ach.* 867 (a Theban swears on Iolaos' name).

the side of their older comrades. Iolaos appears as an ephebic icon<sup>56</sup> presiding over the games which were held partly in his honor.

Probably during the time of Thebes' prosperity in the fourth century BC,<sup>57</sup> a gymnasium with a stadium and a racecourse for horses called the Iolaeion was erected north of the Theban citadel, close to the Proitidan Gate.<sup>58</sup> Pausanias also mentions a hero shrine (ἥρῶον) of Iolaos at the site. Schachter proposed that the Thebans built the new sanctuary because the area southeast of the Kadmeia where the Herakleion with its proper gymnasium and stadion was situated had become too small to host the games.<sup>59</sup> In order to distinguish the new sanctuary from the old one, it was called Iolaeion, and scholars of later times got confused by speaking of Iolaeia accordingly, although there is no *agón* of this name attested epigraphically.<sup>60</sup> This is a reasonable explanation, but of course not a compelling one. What about the doubling of Iolaos' heroon? Thebes hosted enough cemeteries along the arterial roads used by Pausanias since the Bronze Age. When the gymnasium and the stadion moved, another place of veneration could be found easily. Taking tradition literally, Iolaos finally left Thebes to lead the Thespiadai to Sardinia and died there.<sup>61</sup> Strictly speaking, the grave must have been a cenotaph anyway. But this is not how myths work. What really mattered was to have a place of commemoration.

Is there a solution to the problem of the two names? In my opinion, there is not enough evidence to get a clear answer. In order to understand what significance the festival had against the mythical background, the answer is perhaps not so important. Herakles and Iolaos stood side by side as protectors of the games, both alluding to youth and military strength. From the sixth century onwards, Herakles was the incarnation of the Theban *prómachos*, and he was a Theban one because he had a local hero at his side. At the games, the two merged into one representing a military potent polis with ambitions in and outside Boiotia. If one assumes that the Theban games were intended to promote the self-

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56 West 2009: 574.

57 This is the convincing assumption of Schachter 1981: 30–31; 1986: 66. It is confirmed by the description in Arr. *An.* 1.7.7, where Alexander reaches Thebes in 335 BC coming from Onchestos, thus from the north, and encamps close to the *témenos* of Iolaos. From the description in Arr. *An.* 1.8.3 it is clear that the Herakleion was somewhere else than this *témenos*. – Another document testifying to the thesis that the games took place north of the Kadmeia in later times is a now lost stele with the beginning of a victors' list that Karouzos compiled for the Museum of Thebes between 1936 and 1938. Only the first three lines of the inscription mentioning the agonothete were still visible (Roesch 1975: 3 no. 1 with the comments *ad loc.*). The interesting thing here is that none of the inscriptions mentioning the Theban Herakleia have been found at Thebes apart from the stele in question here, dated by Roesch 1975: 3 to 172 BC as a *terminus post quem*, and another fragment at the Museum roughly dating to the same period (Roesch 1975: 3 no. 2 with the comments *ad loc.*). The first inscription is of interest here because it was found in 1935 in the Theban suburb Pyri, thus in the vicinity of the place where the Iolaeion was located.

58 Paus. 9.23.1.

59 Paus. 9.11.7.

60 Schachter 1986: 27; 65.

61 Diod. Sic. 4.29–30; Paus. 9.23.1; 10.17.5 with Schachter 1981: 30; 1994: 56–58; Kühr 2011.

image of the Thebans in the Greek world, the name “Herakleia” was better suited for this, because Herakles was much more prominent than Iolaos was ever to become. After all, the alternative name did not matter that much. The games at Thebes were the games taking place at the Herakleion, close to the tomb of Iolaos. They were celebrated in the name of a hero who, by myth and cult, was locally rooted but became the most famous Greek hero of all at the same time. We will see how this changed over the centuries when we take a closer look at the material that directly concerns the games.

### The Theban Herakleia: A Chronological Survey

Games at Thebes, which attracted competitors from far and wide, are epigraphically attested as early as the third quarter of the sixth century BC. Their establishment thus fits in perfectly with the first wave of the foundation of athletic festivals, which also included the ‘Big Four’.<sup>62</sup> A funerary inscription from Troizen mentions a tripod that the young athlete Damotimos had won in Thebes and which now commemorates the prematurely deceased.<sup>63</sup> The epigram itself was probably inscribed on the tripod-base.<sup>64</sup> Although the games are not named, the Herakleia are the likely candidate.<sup>65</sup> In accordance with the evidence we have from myth, the cult complex and the historical context, we can agree with the assumption that the Herakleia were the best established games in Boiotia at the time, attracting participants from beyond the region as early as 550 BC. Regardless of whether we believe that the *agōnes* were introduced after the battle of Keressos in 571 BC, when the Thessalians were supposedly defeated by a Theban-led Boiotian coalition, the festival certainly served the Thebans to present themselves to the wider world and

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<sup>62</sup> Scharff 2024: 29.

<sup>63</sup> *JG* IV 801:

Δαμοτίμοι : τὸδε σᾶμα : φίλα φεργάσ(σ)ατο μάτερ

Ἀμφιδάμα : οὐ γὰρ παῖδες ἐνὶ μεγάροις ἐγένοντο.

καὶ τρίπος, ἣν Θέβασσι θεὸν ἔνικε[ν ὄδ' ἐστι].

[νῦν μὲν τι]μᾶ[ν] ἐστ' ἀπαθές : ἐπέθεκε δὲ παιδί.

“(His) dear mother, Amphidama, made this tomb for Damotimos because no children were born in his megaron. And the tripod that he won running at Thebes ... unharmed, she set up over (her) son.”

(transl. McGowan 1995: 621; cf. Thomas 2007: 162).

Jeffery 1990: 176 dates the inscription to 550–525 BC; cf. Janko 1986: 48 and Grigsby 2017: 67, who stresses that this inscription is the oldest inscriptional attestation for any *agōn* within Boiotia. Jeffery 1990: 176, however, attributes it to a festival at the Theban Ismenion. Did she believe so due to the tripod given as a prize at the festival? Though the Ismenion was well-known as a treasury of tripods that also played an important cultic role at the site, it is unlikely that Thebes hosted two *agōnes* attached to sanctuaries in close vicinity to each other that attracted participants from far away. After all, the earliest sources do not mention the name of the festival, and we may deduce that there was only one.

<sup>64</sup> Janko 1986: 48.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Grigsby 2017: 67–68, who identifies the oldest festival at Thebes with the Herakleia.

within Boiotia as the *prómachoi* of the Boiotians, led and legitimized by Herakles himself, the locally rooted Panhellenic hero.<sup>66</sup>

Epiničan odes from Bacchylides and Pindar present victories in Thebes in close connection with the famous Big Four. In his tenth victory ode, Bacchylides praises an unknown Athenian athlete by celebrating two successes in footraces at Isthmia and two at Nemea, before mentioning similar victories in Thebes, Argos and Sikyon, Pellene, Euboia, and Aigina.<sup>67</sup> If order matters, the games at Thebes might be seen next in importance to the *agónes* at the Isthmos and at Nemea, immediately followed by Argos, before other local festivals are referred to.

As discussed above, in *Isthmian Four* (ca. 470 BC), Pindar gives details on the cultic framework of the games by describing the burnt offerings for the eight Alkaidai taking place at the Herakleion close to the Elektran Gate at sunset.<sup>68</sup> Pindar may have stressed the importance of Herakles for his hometown because, after the Persian Wars, Thebes was struggling with the image of having committed *mēdismós*. Again, Herakles in his capacity as an ambiguous hero was the right figure for the Thebans to identify with. The seemingly weak child who defeated the snakes represented someone who is underestimated by others, and the hero who in his confusion slew his own children with Megara made just as much of a mistake as the Thebans had done. Like them, he had to atone for a mistake for which he did not really feel responsible.<sup>69</sup>

We learn that the games ended on the second day of the Herakleia, i.e. they lasted at least two days, and that they were celebrated annually.<sup>70</sup> Melissos of Thebes, to whom the ode is dedicated, won the “labor of strength” (ισχύος ἔργον).<sup>71</sup> According to the headline of the ode, which designates Melissos as a victor *pankratíō*, we can understand this expression as a description of the *pankrátion*.<sup>72</sup> He won the event twice, and a third time previously in a competition for boys.<sup>73</sup> As his head was “white with myrtle” (λευκωθεὶς κάρα μύρτοις), the *agón* was a ‘crown game.’<sup>74</sup> Evidence from the Archaic period suggests

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66 Agreed, e.g., by Mackil 2013: 24. Cf. Grigsby 2017: 68: “If correct, this would be the first example of the use of an agonistic festival as a promotion of a collective Boiotian identity into the wider world.” That agonistic festivals do promote collective identity is one of the main arguments of his thesis, cf. Grigsby 2017: 9 *passim*. The argument is as convincing in the sense of a shared conviction in research as ultimately hypothetical because there are no hard facts to prove it.

67 Bacchyl. 10.19–30; 32; 34–35.

68 Pind. *Isthm.* 4.61–70.

69 Cf. Demand 1982: 2–3; Schachter 1986: 18; Kühr 2006: 187–188.

70 Pind. *Isthm.* 4.68.

71 Pind. *Isthm.* 4.69.

72 As do e.g. Roesch 1975: 6; Grigsby 2017: 85.

73 Pind. *Isthm.* 4.70–72.

74 Cf. also Pind. *Isthm.* 4.21.

that tripods were used as prizes in the earliest days of the festival.<sup>75</sup> In the first half of the fifth century BC, both types of prizes seem to be attested.<sup>76</sup> Be that as it may, the Herakleia apparently stood out among the mass of local festivals and closely followed the Big Four in prestige and importance.

This is also evident from the joint reading of the data provided by the Pindaric odes. Among the disciplines victors were praised for, appear wrestling for men (πάλη)<sup>77</sup> and probably also for boys<sup>78</sup>, boxing (πυγμή)<sup>79</sup>, the *pankrátion* (παγκράτιον)<sup>80</sup> and the boys' *pankrátion*<sup>81</sup>, unspecified footraces (δρόμοι)<sup>82</sup>, the stade race (σταδιοδρόμος) and the *péntathlon* (πένταθλον)<sup>83</sup>, the race in armor (όπλατοδρόμος)<sup>84</sup> and chariot races (άρματοδρομία)<sup>85</sup>.

We also learn that the victors came from Thebes<sup>86</sup>, Opous<sup>87</sup>, Corinth<sup>88</sup>, Kyrene<sup>89</sup>, Aigina<sup>90</sup>, and Rhodes<sup>91</sup>. They included Diagoras of Rhodes, a *periodoníkēs* and clearly one of the most distinguished boxers of Antiquity. Three of his sons and two of his grandsons were Olympic champions, whose statues were erected in Olympia.<sup>92</sup> Another *periodoníkēs* is attested as a winner at Thebes.<sup>93</sup> What is more, the victories at Thebes usually closely

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75 Cf. IG IV 801, l. 3, cited and discussed above.

76 Cf. Pind. *Ol.* 7.84, where ἔργα are mentioned.

77 Pind. *Ol.* 9.98–99.

78 Pind. *Nem.* 4.19–22. It is not clear from the context, whether the victory at the Herakleia refers to the youths' victories alluded to in the poem or to the men's contests.

79 Pind. *Ol.* 7.84.

80 Pind. *Isthm.* 4.70–71.

81 Pind. *Isthm.* 4.71.

82 Bacchyl. 10.30.

83 Pind. *Ol.* 13.106–107.

84 Pind. *Pyth.* 9.79–80.

85 Pind. *Isthm.* 1 praises the charioteer Herodotos of Thebes by comparing him to one of the most well-known charioteers of all, Iolaos (*Isthm.* 1.16–32). The “sons of Amphitryon” in *Isthm.* 1.55 designate Herakles and Iolaos, cf. Schol. *Isthm.* 1.79a; Roesch 1975: 6.

86 Pind. *Isthm.* 4.61–70; 1.55. – Melissos of Thebes praised in *Isthm.* 3 for his victories in chariot races, in *Isthm.* 4 for his victories in the *pankrátion*, is said to have inherited his ability from famous ancestors on both sides, the Kleonymidai and the Labdakidai, who were devoted to chariot racing (*Isthm.* 3.13–17b) and had been successful at Athens and Sikyon (*Isthm.* 4.18–27) but were unsuccessful at the crown games (*Isthm.* 4.28–33).

87 Pind. *Ol.* 9.98–99.

88 Pind. *Ol.* 13.106–107.

89 Pind. *Pyth.* 9.79–80.

90 Pind. *Nem.* 4.19–22; Pind. *Isthm.* 5.32–33.

91 Pind. *Ol.* 7.84.

92 Paus. 6.7.1–2.

93 Epharmostos of Opous, a wrestler (*Ol.* 9). Cf. also Xenophon of Corinth with his unprecedented double victory at Olympia in the *stádion* race and the *péntathlon* (*Ol.* 13.24–31), whose victories are as numerous as the ones of his family that Pindar refrains from naming all of them (*Ol.* 13.46. 113).

follow the ones at the Big Four.<sup>94</sup>

In sum, at the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth century BC, the games consisted of many disciplines comparable to those at Olympia and Nemea because, in contrast to the Pythian and Isthmian Games, there were no musical *agōnes*. The games constituted the only Boiotian festival with a Panhellenic scope<sup>95</sup> attracting competitors from all over the western Greek world, including the African coast and the islands of Asia Minor. Obviously, the Herakleia directly followed the Big Four in prestige and importance. With games such as those in Athens and Argos, they form the “second league” of Greek *agōnes*.

After the late Archaic and early Classical periods, there is a gap of around 150 years that provides no information on the Theban Herakleia at all. The next testimony that sheds light on them are two joint inscriptions probably dating to 338–335 BC.<sup>96</sup> The first inscription is an honorific epigram that was placed below a statue of the prematurely deceased athlete Timokles of Thebes who had been victorious three times in equestrian events at the Basileia of Zeus and at the Herakleia.<sup>97</sup> On the right side of the same base, we find another inscription for the athlete Korbeidas that celebrates his victory in the boys’ *pankrátion* at Delphi. As in the first case, the inscription accompanied a statue of the athlete.<sup>98</sup> Composed in Boiotian dialect,<sup>99</sup> the inscription emphasized local identity, as did the whole ensemble. Albert Schachter may be right that the two young athletes were members of the Theban Sacred Band.<sup>100</sup> Standing side by side, they may have been reminiscent of their mythical role models Herakles and Iolaos.

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94 Cf. the sequence in e.g. *Nem.* 4.17–24: Nemea, Athens, Thebes. – *Ol.* 7: Olympia and Delphi (l. 10 *passim*), Tiryns (l. 77–81), Corinth (l. 82), Nemea and Athens (l. 82), Argos and Arkadia (l. 83), Thebes (l. 84), *agōnes* ordered by the Boiotians (l. 84–85), Pellana (l. 86), Aigina (l. 86), Megara (l. 86). – *Ol.* 9, however, celebrates victories at Olympia and Delphi (l. 1–20), followed by Corinth (l. 83–87), Nemea (l. 88), Argos and Athens (l. 89), and Marathon (l. 89–94), while Thebes (l. 98–99) is hidden between Parrhasia in Arkadia (l. 96–97), Pellana in Achaia (l. 98), and Eleusis (l. 99). – *Ol.* 13 (Xenophon of Corinth, winner of the *stádion* race and the *péntathlon*; not all the victories are listed, cf. *Ol.* 13.46.113): Olympia (l. 1 *passim*), Corinth (l. 33), Nemea (l. 34), Delphi (l. 37), Athens (l. 38), the Hellotian games at Corinth (l. 40), Delphi (l. 43), Nemea (l. 44), Delphi (l. 106b–107), Argos (l. 107), Thebes (l. 108), Arkadia (l. 108–109), Pellana and Sikyon (l. 109a), Megara and Aigina (l. 109b), Eleusis and Marathon (l. 110), Aitna and Syracuse (l. 111), Euboia (l. 112). – *Pyth.* 9 (Telesikrates of Kyrene, race in armor): Delphi (l. 1 *passim*), Thebes (l. 79–89), Aigina (l. 90), Megara (l. 91), Kyrene (l. 97–103). – I. 1 (Herodotos of Thebes, chariot race): Corinth (*passim*), Onchestos (l. 52–54), Thebes (l. 55), Orchomenos (l. 56), Eleusis (l. 57), Euboia (l. 57b), Phylaka in Achaia (l. 58–59), and others not named here (l. 60–63). – I. 4 (Melissos of Thebes, *pankrátion*): Onchestos (l. 19), Corinth (l. 20), Thebes (l. 61–72b).

95 Grigsby 2017: 83.

96 IG VII 2532 and 2533. – Arguments for the dating are convincingly provided by Schachter 1986: 28n1.

97 ὃς Βασίλεια Διὸς καὶ ἐν Ἡρακλέους τρισ[ί]ν ἄθλοις

ἵπποις νικήσας δώματ’ ἐπηγάλασεν (IG VII 2523, l. 5–6).

98 IG VII 2533.

99 Cf. the comments IG VII 2533, l. 1–2 *ad loc.*

100 Schachter 1986: 28n1.

Thebes was undoubtedly the Boiotian superpower at the time, before Alexander razed her walls to the ground in 335 BC and initiated a new phase of Boiotian history in which Thebes interacted with the other Boiotian poleis on a more or less equal footing.<sup>101</sup> Significantly, there was only one other festival in Boiotia at the time in question: the Basileia for Zeus at Lebadeia, which had been established by the Thebans after their epoch-making victory over the Spartans at Leuktra in 371 BC.<sup>102</sup> Legend has it that Herakles himself led the Thebans into the battle. The Herakleion housed weapons that were supposedly Herakles' own and which are said to have disappeared before the battle of Leuktra. Epaminondas might have had the sacred weapons disappear in order to overcome the reluctance of his soldiers and to encourage them at the thought of Herakles as their leader.<sup>103</sup>

While at Lebadeia, the Thebans used the integrative force of the ethnos-god Zeus for celebrating Boiotian supremacy under Theban leadership,<sup>104</sup> at home they continued to venerate Herakles *prómachos*, the locally bound Panhellenic hero who embodied Theban expansion, predominance, and hegemony.

Although the dictum of the agonistic explosion of the third century BC needs to be put into perspective,<sup>105</sup> Boiotia undoubtedly witnessed the emergence of several *agónes* in the Hellenistic age that are not attested before.<sup>106</sup> In contrast to this general development, one festival is absent from the epigraphic record in the third century BC: the Theban Herakleia. They only reappear in the sources towards the end of the second century BC. This might be due to coincidence. Given the epigraphic evidence in other fields, however, another explanation is more probable. Just as Thebes, which had recently been destroyed by Alexander's army, had to find a new position among the other Boiotian poleis that had previously been dominated or even subjugated by Thebes, the old *agónes* in honor of Herakles *prómachos* ceased to exist, and with them the Theban hegemonic aspirations. As can be seen from several agonistic epigrams on successful young athletes of the time,<sup>107</sup> athletics played a central role in the external representation and internal self-assurance of the Thebans shortly after the reconstruction of the city. This is indeed

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101 A recent overview on the political background is provided by Beck and Ganter 2015: 151–156; for the wider context Mackil 2013: 85–156.

102 See the contribution by Salvatore Tufano in this volume.

103 Cf. Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.7; Kallisthenes *FGrH* 124 F 22a; Diod. Sic. 15.53.4; Polyaeus, *Strat.* 2.3.8 with Stafford 2012: 183.

104 Cf. Ganter 2013: 94.

105 Nielsen 2016 with Mann 2016: 20; Scharff 2024: 18–29. Cf. Grigsby 2017: 107, who speculates that a change in the epigraphic habit may be responsible for the “suddenness of this explosion.”

106 See the discussion in Feyel 1942: 251–261; Grigsby 2017: 107–159.

107 *IG VII* 2470 = Ebert 1972: no. 56; *IG VII* 2538 = Ebert 1972: no. 57.

striking, because we miss any reference to Herakles as the prototype of the Theban youngster, the Theban athlete and *prómachos*.<sup>108</sup>

Instead, Thebes focused on the Agrionia, a trieteric musical *agón* in honor of Dionysos Kadmeios that is attested from the third century BC onwards and that might have been inaugurated to commemorate the re-foundation of Thebes by Kassandros in 315 BC. By the end of the second century BC, the festival was of pan-Boiotian or even Panhellenic importance and was organized jointly by the polis of Thebes and the Dionysian *technítai*.<sup>109</sup> Like other Boiotian sanctuaries, the Theban precinct of Dionysos was granted *asylía* in the first half of the 220s BC, and the competitions associated with it may have been reorganized at this time.<sup>110</sup> Boiotian inter-polis rivalry stimulated attempts to enhance the status of their local festivals to make them formally equal to the games of the *períodos*.<sup>111</sup>

Interestingly, there were close links between Dionysos Kadmeios and the Theban Herakles: both were said to have been born in Thebes, and their cults were associated with the chambers of their human mothers Semele, the daughter of Kadmos and mother of Dionysos, and Alkmene.<sup>112</sup> By shifting attention from Herakles to Kadmos, the Thebans continued to present their identity to the Boiotian and wider Greek world. By focusing on Kadmos, however, the emphasis was not on the Theban *prómachos* anymore but on the *ktístēs* instead, the founding father of the Theban polity and of Greek civilization at the same time.<sup>113</sup> Obviously, the Theban strategy was successful. Perhaps we can even grasp a spatially distant reflex to these attempts in our sources: in the 240s BC, the athlete Diotimos of Sidon was celebrated in an epigram that referred to Kadmeian Thebes.<sup>114</sup> Of course, Sidon was one of the Phoenician cities Kadmos was said to have stemmed from. However, the evidence could also confirm the idea formulated

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108 Cf. Scharff 2024: 98–112, especially 107–109. 111.

109 On the Agrionia see Schachter 1981: 189–191; Manieri 2009: 283–289; Grigsby 2017: 110–111. 122–124. Manieri 2009: 141 enlists the Dionysia Kadmeia among other festivals that were organized by the koinon. As far as I can see, there is no direct evidence for this.

110 *FD* III 1.351 = Manieri 2009, *Theb.* 5 with comments on this Amphiktyonic decree by Manieri 2009 *ad loc.* and Grigsby 2017: 123. The first sanctuary in Boiotia that was granted *asylía* was the sanctuary of Athena Itonia that hosted the Pamboiotia: If an inscription set up in the 260s BC refers to the sanctuary of Athena at Koroneia, as many scholars assume, the Itoneion was declared *ásylon* by an Amphiktyonic decree already at this point of time, thus thirty years earlier than the Ptoion and the sanctuary of Zeus Basileus at Lebadeia, see *SEG* 18.240 with Schachter 1980: 81; 1981: 123–124; Rigsby 1996: 55; Mackil 2013: 224; Grigsby 2017: 132.

111 Grigsby 2017: 132.

112 Eur. *Bacchyl.* 1–12 and Paus. 9.12.3–4 with Schachter 1981: 187–188; Kühr 2006: 194. 220–223.

113 On Kadmos see Kühr 2006: 83–133.

114 *LAG* 41 = *SGO* IV 20/14/01 = Ebert 1972: no. 64, l. 7. I am grateful to Sebastian Scharff for drawing my attention to the passage.



above that Kadmos stood at the center of the interest in Theban self-presentation, which extended far beyond the city, and that Heracles was pushed into the background.

The Herakleia only reappear in our sources in the second century BC. The few surviving inscriptions indicate that the *agōnes* continued to include established disciplines reaching from running events over combat sports to equestrian competitions.<sup>115</sup> What is more, herald and trumpet contests are attested for the first time.<sup>116</sup> In this way, an element was added to the festival that had been introduced in Olympia in 396 BC, which was soon followed by the other three major festivals. By imitating these festivals, the Thebans signaled to the Greek world that they wanted their games to be at the level of the Big Four. Accordingly, the trieteric or penteteric festival<sup>117</sup> was elevated to the status of an *agōn stephanitēs* in the middle of the second century BC, perhaps even earlier.<sup>118</sup> Obviously, the Theban games became attractive again, even for the most successful athletes of the time. The catalogue of victories of the Athenian *periodonikēs* Menodoros, for instance, mentions no less than six victories at the Herakleia for his career, four in the *pankrátion* and two in wrestling, thus in at least four separate celebrations of the Herakleia.<sup>119</sup> Apart from the Herakleia, the designated *periodonikēs* was victorious at Olympia, at the Nemea and the Heraia in Argos, at the Eleusinia, the Panathenaia, at the Soteria in Delphi, at the Delia in Delos, the Rhomaia of Chalkis, the Lykaia of Megalopolis, the Nymphaia of Apollonia, the Naia of Dodona, and the Trophonia of Lebadeia, usually several times at each of them.<sup>120</sup> The focus of this festival landscape is on Central Greece including old religious centers such as Dodona and Delos. Although

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115 Attested are the men's δίαυλος (*SEG* 11.338, 200–180 BC), the men's παγκράτιον (Moretti 51: *IG* II/III<sup>2</sup> 3149a and *Hesperia* 4 [1935] 81.38 = *IDelos* 1957 no. 51 = *SEG* 19.199, 150–130 BC), the men's wrestling (πάλη: Moretti 51: *Hesperia* 4 [1935] 81.38 = *IDelos* 1957 no. 51 = *SEG* 19.199, 150–130 BC; VII. Bericht Olympia [1961] p. 218, l. 45 = *SEG* 22.350 = 25.467, 189/8 –146 BC), boxing (πυγμαύ: *IG* VII 48, end of the second, beginnings of first century BC), and a hippic *agōn* (κέλητι πωλικῶι, Heberdey and Wilhelm, *Reisen in Kilikien*, p. 81 no. 17 [*non vidi*] = Roesch 1975: 1 no. 5, second or first century BC). Roesch 1975 enlists all the inscriptions dating from the Hellenistic period down to the third century AD in chronological order and discusses two inscriptions from the Museum of Thebes relating to the Herakleia not registered elsewhere before. Cf. also *IG* VII 1765 with the comments by Schachter 1981: 219n1 and 1986: 29n2, a victors' list found at Thebes that might refer to the Herakleia or to the Thespian Erotideia.

116 Roesch 1975: 3 no. 1, dated by Roesch *ad loc.* to 172 BC as *terminus post quem*, and *ibid.* 5 no. 2, dated by Roesch *ad loc.* to 170–150 BC.

117 *SEG* 11.338 (200–180 BC): The mentioned victory at the Herakleia belongs to a list of games that Robert 1977 (1979): 201n1 qualifies as trieteric or penteteric; cf. Schachter 1986: 29n1; Grigsby 2017: 143.

118 Cf. *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 971 (dating to 140/39 BC) with Robert 1935: 194n4; Schachter 1986: 29; Grigsby 2017: 143. Cf. also, e.g., *IDelos* 1937 no. 2552B l. 13, dating to the second century AD (Roesch 1975: 2n13; cf. Knoepfler 2008: 1456). According to Roesch 1975: 6 and Grigsby 2017: 110, this seems to have lasted until the very end of the Herakleia. For a résumé on the conditions of how to get stephanitic status in the Hellenistic era, see Grigsby 2017: 109.

119 *IG* II/III<sup>2</sup> 3147 and 3150 with the later added fragments *IG* II/III<sup>2</sup> 3149a and *Hesperia* 4 (1935) 81.38 = *IDelos* 1957 no. 51 = *Hesperia* 29 (1960) 56.81 = *SEG* 19.199, cf. the comments by Moretti no. 51; Badoud et al. 2016; see also Roesch 1975: 1 no. 3 and 4. Cf. Schachter 1986: 29.

120 Apart from the cited inscriptions (note above), see <http://mafas.geschichte.uni-mannheim.de/athletes/index.php?page=list&action=search>, 25.05.2018.

we must be cautious about taking one victor as an example for an entire era, other inscriptions confirm that the Herakleia were attended in the second century BC by participants who came from the adjacent areas of Central Greece and the Peloponnese.<sup>121</sup> But there are also other examples that contradict this generalization: Kallikles' victory at the Herakleia is commemorated in an inscription from Antiochia on the Pyramus in Cilicia.<sup>122</sup> Due to his home region, the *periodonikēs* Leon Myonides, a boxer from Rhodes, has Tralleis in Caria, Knidos, Chios, and Lykia among victories at Argos and Thebes.<sup>123</sup> We may conclude that the Herakleia were integrated into a primarily pan-regional festival circuit, but also attracted competitors from Asia Minor. Apparently, they were considered attractive games for gaining honor and prestige. This is not only true for the athletes themselves, but also for officials such as *agōnothétai* or *archithéōroi* who took part in the festival. In the second century BC, they began to display their participation, a merit worth to be fixed in stone for eternity.<sup>124</sup>

Given the fact that literary works such as Polemon's *Περὶ τῶν Θήβησιν Ἡρακλείων*<sup>125</sup> were written about the festival, Schachter may be right that there was "a conscious effort to re-organize both the religious and the secular parts of the Herakleia."<sup>126</sup> In view of the political situation in Boiotia at the time, the dissolution of the *koinon* in 172 BC obviously paved the way for the re-emergence for the Herakleia that joined the musical *agōn* of the Agrionia. We do not know whether the Herakleia were as strongly linked to Theban preeminence in Boiotia as before, but the leading families were certainly very interested in promoting these games, as a prosopographical detail illustrates: an inscription dating to 170–150 BC mentions a certain Brakchyles as *agōnothētēs*, whom Roesch connects with the famous man of the same name. In his position as boiotarch, the highest official of the Boiotian *koinon*, the latter had opposed the Romans, who wanted

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121 *SEG* 11.338 (200–180 BC): a victor from Argos with victories spreading from the Peloponnese to Boiotia, Attica, and Aitolia; *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 971 (140/39 BC): an inscription at Athens honours Telesias from Troizen, who was *archithéōros* at the Herakleia; *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 3154: a victor from Athens. *IG* VII 48: a boxer from Megara, whose victories spread from the Peloponnese over Boiotia to Thessaly.

122 Heberdey and Wilhelm, *Reisen in Kilikien*, p. 81 no. 17 [*non vidi*] = Roesch 1975: 1 no. 5: second or first century BC.

123 VII. *Bericht Olympia* [1961] p. 218, l. 45 = *SEG* 22.350 = 25.467, 189/88–146 BC; cf. <http://mafas.geschichte.uni-mannheim.de/athletes/index.php?page=detailsperson&id=635>.

124 *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 971, l. 29–30 from Athens, dating to 140/139 BC, honours Telesias from Troizen, who had been sent to the Herakleia as ἀρχιθέωρος; cf. Roesch 1975, 1 no. 2.– *Agōnothétai*: Roesch 1975: 3 no. 1, dating to 172 BC as *terminus post quem*; *ibid.* 5, no. II, dating to 170–150 BC.

125 *FHG* 3 p. 123 F 26 = Schol. *Pind. Ol.* 8,153.

126 Cf. especially Matris of Thebes *FGrH* 39 F 1 = *BNJ* 39 F 1 = Athen. 10.412B, who wrote an *enkómion* on Herakles. Schachter 1986: 28 with further references. The sacrifice of Galinthias, a friend of Alkmene's said to have helped her to give birth to Herakles, before the festival may also have been instituted at this time, cf. von Gaertringen 1910; Schachter 1981: 225; 1986: 28n5; Heinze 1998; Rocchi 2000.

to make the Boiotians their *socii* in 197 BC.<sup>127</sup> This Brakchyles was killed, but his family will have survived the struggles leading to the dissolution of the koinon in 172 BC.<sup>128</sup> Thereafter, the aristocrats behaved as they always had: they promoted themselves and the community they represented at the games, which provided the forum for this display of prestige and identity, and merely adapted their forms of competition to the changing political circumstances. The Herakleia could have been a suitable setting for the Thebans to re-invent themselves, when the koinon had lost its political significance.

As Thebes suffered greatly from the Mithridatic Wars, the festivals of the polis appear to have ceased or at least to have been reduced to a minimum of activities in the post-war period.<sup>129</sup> A last revival and re-organization of the Theban Herakleia can be observed in the second and third centuries AD. In contrast to former times, the once strictly athletic and hippic *agón* was now combined with musical and dramatic components.<sup>130</sup> Called “Dionyseia Herakleia”, or simply: “Herakleia”, the festival was a fusion of two formerly separate *agónes*, the Herakleia and the Agrionia.<sup>131</sup>

After the end of federalism in the true sense of the word, the elites did what they had always done: they competed in order to promote themselves. A victory at the Herakleia did matter as ever, and victors are attested from as far away as from Nikomedeia in Asia Minor.<sup>132</sup> Perhaps we may say that the geographical scope of the festival landscape was wider than it had ever been.<sup>133</sup>

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127 Roesch 1975: 4–6, followed by Grigsby 2017: 144: “The interest of this important family, so prominent in the funding of the Basileia, may suggest a similar role at Thebes with the organization of the Herakleia.”

128 For the historical background, see the short overview in Beck and Ganter 2015: 156 with further references.

129 Thebes suffered to „a greater degree than any other Boiotian poleis under Sulla (...). Such a poor epigraphic record, in contrast to the evidence at Thespiiai and Oropos, suggests a dramatic and negative effect on Theban agonistic expression in this post-war period” (Grigsby 2017: 183). In contrast to Roesch 1975: 1 no. 6, who dates *IG VII 48* to the end of the second or the beginnings of the first century BC, Knoepfler 1997: 35–36 (*non vidi*, reference by Grigsby 2017: 166) places it to the period after the Mithridatic Wars. If he was right, this would be our sole piece of evidence for the Herakleia at this period, as Grigsby 2017: 183 states.

130 Overviews are provided by Schachter 1986: 29, and Grigsby 2017: 235–236.

131 Sometimes, epithets referring to an emperor like “Dionyseia Herakleia Antoneineia” (Robert 1970: 20, l. 10–11 = Manieri 2009, *Theb.* 16) or “Kommodeia” (*IEph* 2071 = Manieri 2009, *Theb.* 14 B) were added. According to Schachter 1986: 30n1, the epithet Olympia (“Herakleia Olympia”: *FD III* 1.555) was used to elevate the status of the *agón*. “Herakleia” only: e.g. *IG II<sup>2</sup>* 3162; *IG II/III<sup>2</sup>* 3169/3170 = Manieri 2009, *Leb.* 16 = Manieri 2009, *Theb.* 17; *IG VII* 49.

132 *IG VII* 2518: If the inscription mentioning an *agónothete* does not refer to Dionyseia at Thespiiai, as Schachter 1981: 195 suggests, but to the Theban Dionyseia, as Grigsby 2017: 222–223. 236 argues, this would be the earliest evidence for the *agónes* usually thought to have existed only in the second and third centuries AD – *IG II/III<sup>2</sup>* 3158: an epigram dedicated by Onetor from Athens records his victory at Plataiai and at Thebes, the *agón* is not specified; first century AD, cf. Roesch 1975: 2 no. 9. – *IDelos* 1937 no. 2552B l. 13: the victory of a herald at the Herakleia, second century AD (Roesch 1975: 2 no. 13). The victories to be recognized in the inscription are the Eleutheria of Plataiai, the Lykaia, probably the Pythia at Delphi, the Olympic Games, probably the Trophoneia at Lebadeia, the Herakleia, three victories in Attika, the Eleusinia, festivals of Dionysos and the Muses, probably of the Helikon, and also at Tanagra, perhaps games at Delos, and the Panathenaia. The festival landscape thus concentrates on Central Greece. – *IG VII* 1856–1857 =

Now Herakles was less a Theban *prómachos* than a pan-Boiotian hero who became a reminder of a shared glorious past, and interest in a shared past was certainly more than antiquarian in this era.<sup>134</sup> On the contrary, *agónes* such as the Dionyseia Herakleia showed that the connection to the past was a living need for contemporaries, not least for the elites who took part in these festivals. When festivals that promoted regional identity such as the Basileia and the Pamboiotia had ceased to exist, the Herakleia reemerged as one of the most important *agónes* in Boiotia.<sup>135</sup> The polis was once again the central point of reference for expressing local and regional identity. By combining two formerly separate contests, the Thebans may have escaped financial problems because it was easier to maintain one *agón* instead of two.<sup>136</sup> But this is not the only reason for the success of the

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*I.Thesp* 210–211: perhaps dating to the first (Strasser 2003: 270) or second century AD (cf. Grigsby 2017: 235), the monument for a Thespian having celebrated victories at the Isthmos and at Nemeia, at several festivals in Boiotia like the Eleuthereia of Plataiai, the Kaisareia of Tanagra, at Lebadeia and four times at the Herakleia at Thebes, but also e.g. at the Kaisareia of Korinth, at Thessaloniki, Larisa and Chalkis. The festival circuit the athlete was involved in concentrates on Boiotia and Central Greece. – Robert 1966: 102, l. 13–14: the Cilician P. Aelius Heliodorus is prized as a winner of the wrestling and the *pankrátion* at Thebes. The victory list has a clear focus on Asia Minor. In Central Greece, the *agónes* of the Lakedaimonians, followed by the Olympieia at Athens, are mentioned in the first place. After various victories in Asia Minor, the Aspida of Argos, the Kaisareia at the Isthmos, again games of the Lakedaimonians, Thebes, the Isthmia and the Nemeia are mentioned. The inscription dates to ca. AD 140 (cf. Roesch 1975: 2 no. 11; Grigsby 2017: 236). – *IG II<sup>2</sup>* 3162: an inscription from Athens commemorating a victory at the Herakleia; name and speciality of the contest are unknown, dated to the end of the second century AD (Roesch 1975: 2 no. 12). Apart from Thebes, Plataiai, Athens and Argos, Smyrna and Ephesos are among the poleis where the athlete went for games. – *IEph* 2070–2071 and *FD III* 1.551 = *SEG* 45.1578: honorary inscription from Ephesos for a victory of Tiberius Iulius Apolaustus, a pantomime and actor, at the Theban Herakleia, AD 180–192. The *periodonikēs* looks back at victories in various poleis of Asia Minor, but also at Cumae. The games in Central Greece include the ones of “Seven-gated Thebes” (*l.* 17–18), Chaironeia, Plataiai, and Messene; later, Corinth and Patras (*l.* 22–23) are mentioned. According to Grigsby 2017, 236, the refashioning of the games under Commodus by including pantomimes may be interpreted as Romanization. – Robert 1970: 18–27 no. 2 = Manieri 2009, *Theb.* 16, found at Delphi: a catalogue of the victories by the herald or trumpet player Septimios Aurelianos from Nikomedeia, who also was citizen at Athens, ca. AD 220. The games listed according to “ordre de dignité” (Robert 1970, 20), spread from the *períodos* to various festivals in Italy, Central Greece, and Asia Minor. After the ‘Big Four,’ games in Rome, Potioli and Naples are mentioned, directly followed by several festivals at Athens; next come the Theban Herakleia, last the various games in Asia Minor. *FD III* 1.550 = Manieri 2009, *Theb.* 15 = Manieri 2009, *Leb.* 15: an impressive catalogue of the victories by an *aulētēs* from the end of the second or the beginnings of the third century AD, beginning with the *períodos* and registering games from Central Greece, among them the Herakleia of Thebes, over Asia Minor to Rome and Naples (cf. Robert 1935: 195n4; Roesch 1975: 2 no. 15). – *IG II/III<sup>2</sup>* 3169/3170 = Manieri 2009, *Leb.* 16 = Manieri 2009, *Theb.* 17: honorary inscription from Athens for the various victories of Valerius Eklektos of Sinope, including three victories as a herald at the Herakleia, dating to AD 235–257. The games he attended spread from Asia Minor over Central Greece to Italy, cf. Roesch 1975: 2 no. 17; Manieri 2009: 160–171; Grigsby 2017: 236n1065. *IG VII* 49: Victories of an unnamed athlete from Megara from the middle of the third century AD, speciality unknown. Again, the games the *periodonikēs* attended include cities from Central Greece over Asia Minor to Italy. Also from the middle of the third century mentioning three successive victories at the Theban Herakleia: *FD III* 1.555 (Robert 1935: 195n4; Roesch 1975: 3 no. 18). – The Rendel Harris Papyri, ed. J. E. Powell, Cambridge 1936, 35 no. 49 = Manieri 2009, *Theb.* 18: dated to the third or fourth century AD, with a reference to Dionysia Herakleia, though no city is named. Cf. Schachter 1986: 30n1 with further possible references to the Herakleia although they are not named as such.

133 Cf. Grigsby 2017: 236 and also Mann 2016: 21, who stresses that, in contrast to athletes in the Roman Empire, so far, no Hellenistic athlete is known who had been victorious equally at games in the West and in the East.

134 Cf. Schachter 1981: 29, who speaks of “a renewal of interest, largely antiquarian, in the customs of the past.”

135 For the context in Boiotia see Grigsby 2017: 237. 247–249.

136 Cf. Grigsby 2017: 236.

festival. The merger also promoted a milder form of Theban identity that was more readily accepted than the Theban identity centered on Herakles *prómachos*. “Dionysos joining – Herakleia beyond local rivalries” we might call this last phase of the Herakleia which had integrated the Agrionia as the festival that emphasized the connections to Kadmos, the Theban *ktístēs* and civilization hero, who was ultimately as well-known in the wider Greek world as Herakles.

Generally speaking, regional cohesion was expressed in common festivals and cults in this period. Although the local and the regional had always been an “uneasy amalgam” in Boiotia, the military and cultural success of the Thebans centuries after the heavy quarrels of the Archaic and Classical periods was the outstanding phenomenon remembered when thinking about the history of Boiotia, at least when facing the Roman superpower. The *koinon* in the political sense of the word had gone, but the *poleis* were still there. If Boiotia was to be more than a country where to raise flocks, if Thebes was to be more than a settlement that looked less like a town than a village,<sup>137</sup> then a glorious past had to be remembered. Herakles was known everywhere. In his capacity as a Theban hero, he had once pervaded Boiotia. Now the hegemonic aspirations of the Thebans were over forever, but the successful hero was a reminder of a glorious past that other Boiotians could join in. As can be seen from Pausanias’ description of the region in his book on Boiotia, Boiotia was pervaded by Thebes, by her famous heroes and histories in the eyes of foreign visitors. From the outside, the history of Boiotia was equated with Theban history.<sup>138</sup> Within Boiotia, local rivalries no longer played as great a role as before.

“Am I Argive or Theban? I don’t pride myself on only one city. In every fortress of the Greeks I am at home,”<sup>139</sup> Herakles himself is said to have responded to Greek localism. This is not only true with regard to different *poleis* claiming the hero, but also for a region like Boiotia, which identified with Theban glory when the glory of the region’s most prominent polis had died out in the political sphere. The festivals, however, survived. Although their character had changed over the ages, religion and religious institutions proved to be the most stable phenomena that survived the political upheavals before the Herakleia in Thebes disappeared at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century AD, along with other games throughout the Greek world.<sup>140</sup>

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137 Cf. Strab. 9.2.5 (C403).

138 Kühn 2006: 75–82.

139 Ἀργεῖος ἢ Θηβαῖος· οὐ γὰρ εὐχομαι μιᾶς· ἅπας μοι πύργος Ἑλλήνων πατρίς (*TiGF* II, adesp. 392 = Plut. *Mor.* 600f).

140 Cf. Grigsby 2017: 249.

## Conclusion

The Theban Herakleia can evoke the universe in a nutshell. Spanning almost a millennium between the earliest evidence around 550 BC and the last in the third century AD, their history is closely linked to the history of Thebes as the most prominent polis in Boiotia. In the Archaic and Classical periods, the Herakleia were closely associated with the cult of Herakles *prómachos* and his predecessor or comrade Iolaos, both of whom stood for young men fighting side by side. This is why the games were called “Herakleia” or “Iolaeia”.

Military strength embodied by the heroes was at the same time a Theban military strength that was geared towards a hegemonic position within Boiotia and even transcended the borders of the region in the fourth century. Consequently, the games ceased to exist when the Theban empire collapsed after the invasion of Alexander in 335 BC. As Thebes had to find a new role in Boiotia, the city initially focused on the Agrionia with its musical *agōnes* dedicated to Dionysos and Kadmos, the founder of Thebes and civilizing hero, who was also important on a Panhellenic level but was not associated with Theban expansionism. It was only in the second century BC that the Herakleia reappeared; the dissolution of the Hellenistic koinon in 172 BC might have paved the way for a renewed focus on the polis’ own identity. After another phase of decline provoked by the Mithridatic Wars, a last revival can be observed in the second and third centuries AD. Musical and dramatic elements were added to the once strictly athletic and equestrian events. In fact, the “Dionyseia Herakleia” became a merger of two formerly separated festivals: the Herakleia and the Agrionia. By evoking the glorious past shaped equally by Kadmos and Herakles, the mythic and cultic background of the games offered a milder form of Theban identity that could be accepted or even shared more easily by her neighbors. The festival demonstrated that in the long run Theban and Boiotian identity converged. From the outside and during the games, this amalgamation was a response to the “uneasy amalgam” that the Boiotian identity had been for many centuries.

From their beginning in the sixth century BC to their end in the third century AD, the games attracted competitors from all over the Greek world, and they were undoubtedly in the “second league” of games after the Big Four. Their official status as crown games from at least the middle of the second century BC as well as the fact that the Thebans were keen to incorporate innovations from the Olympic Games such as herald and trumpet competitions into their own games, shows that they were trying to get as close as possible to the Big Four. Although the character of the Herakleia changed over the centuries, they were one of the most stable institutions in Boiotia surviving the political

upheavals in this “orchestra of war.”<sup>141</sup> When a new religious world spread in the fourth century AD and, after almost a millennium, games such as the Herakleia became part of history forever, they shared their fate with that of the Big Four.<sup>142</sup>

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141 Plut. *Mor.* 193e: πολέμου ὀρχήστρα; Plut. *Marcellus* 21 (310): Ἄρεως ὀρχήστρα.

142 Cf. Remijsen 2015.

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