

MYTH, FESTIVAL, AND POET: THE *HOMERIC HYMN TO HERMES* AND ITS PERFORMATIVE CONTEXT

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THROUGHOUT ANTIQUITY, Hermes served as a guide for the perplexed. The traveler who found himself in unfamiliar territory, the soul making its way to the Underworld, and the mystic who wanted to understand the nature of the gods all turned to Hermes for help in their confusion.

The divine exegete has failed, however, where it ought to have mattered to him most. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*—which is our earliest extant composition devoted to this god¹—has proven to be one of the most interpretatively difficult of all Greek poems. For most of its modern history, it has been regarded as erratic or even pointless in its narrative. Having concluded that the *Hymn* had no central theme, for instance, Allen, Halliday, and Sikes described its subject as just “a day in the life of Hermes.”² Textual critics have run wild, excising or rearranging portions in attempts to impose thematic unity. If we follow Robert’s suggestions, we are left with less than half of our existing text.³ Scholars who view the *Hymn* as erratic have often also dismissed it as having no serious purpose because it is humorous⁴—we are to presume, apparently, that Greek worship was a joyless business.

Perhaps because of the difficulty of identifying a central theme or unified plot, few recent scholars have even attempted a comprehensive reading of the *Hymn*; the tendency has been to focus instead on its individual episodes.

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1. Most scholars place the *Hymn to Hermes* in the late sixth or the fifth century: e.g., Kirk (1985, 74) suggests some point between late sixth and early fourth; Janko (1982, 133–50) some time in the late sixth; Radermacher (1931, 216 and 222) and Eitrem (1906, 282) sometime in the early fifth. Allen, Halliday, and Sikes (1936, 275–76) argued for the seventh century on the dubious grounds that the *Hymn* would refer only to places that still existed at the poet’s time.

2. Allen, Halliday, and Sikes 1936, 268. Most recently, Penglase (1994, 174) described it as “rambling” and “haphazard.” For further examples see Clay (1989, 95–96 and 102), who collects the earlier opinions in her notes; she agrees that the narrative is erratic but suggests that this is intentional, a method the poet uses to convey the restless nature of the god; also supporting the unity of the hymn are Janko (1982, 133) and Kahn (1978).

3. On the proposal of Robert 1906, see also Herwerden 1907, 181–91; Robert was refuted by Kuiper 1910; see also Cassola 1975, 171.

4. E.g., Schmid and Stählin 1929, 1.1:236; Herwerden 1907, 181; and cf. Baumeister 1860, 185.

Walter Burkert and Jennifer Larson, for example, have discussed the ways in which passages within the *Hymn* provide etiologies for sacrificial practices and the cult of the bee maidens at Delphi.⁵ The exception to this rule is Jenny Strauss Clay, who suggests that the overarching purpose of the *Hymn to Hermes*—the overarching purpose of each of the major *Hymns*, in fact—is to document one stage in the progressive solidification of Zeus' rule of the cosmos and the construction of a panhellenic pantheon, in which each divinity possesses his or her proper prerogatives and responsibilities.⁶ Underlying Clay's approach is the assumption that the primary intention of the Homeric *Hymns*' composers was to develop a view of the gods and the world that would be acceptable to all Greeks, everywhere. The *Hymns* thus function as propaganda, advancing both the alleged desire of the Greeks to coalesce into a single political and cultural body during the late archaic period, and the desire of the poets themselves, whom this homogeneous, panhellenic system would allow to create poems that could easily be reused in more than one locale.⁷

In this article, I will respond to each of the approaches I have just reviewed. Regarding the first, which dismisses the *Hymn to Hermes* as pointless and narratively disorganized, I will argue that, once it is set within its proper performative context—that is, within the specific type of festival for which it was composed—the *Hymn*'s narrative forms a cohesive whole.⁸ A central theme emerges, resurfacing in individual episodes of the story in such a way as to enable us to interpret them consistently.

I will be extending the second, etiological approach, proposing that the *Hymn* not only offers specific aitia for specific phenomena, as Burkert, Larson, and others have shown, but also that its storyline thematically corresponds to, and thus narratively expresses, some of the concerns addressed through the festivals at which it was performed. By focusing on this function of the *Hymn*, I also will demonstrate anew how versatile a tool myth could be in the late archaic period. I will suggest that the connection between a myth and a ritual or festival sometimes was neither directly etiological, in the sense that the last part of the *Hymn* “explains” the cult of the bee maidens, nor even mirrorlike, in the sense that the myth of Perseus and Medusa, for example, reflects a Spartan ritual in which adolescents combat older men wearing frightening female masks.⁹ A myth narrated in a ritual setting might express the same tensions that the ritual does, but through a different set of codes; there need not be exact parallels between the plot and characters of a myth and the sequence of actions and participants in a ritual for the two to convey the same messages. In fact, by rephrasing,

5. Burkert 1984; and Larson 1995.

6. Clay 1989, passim. Many recent scholars of the *Hymns* have followed Clay's lead, e.g., Stehle 1997, 177–98. Clay herself followed Nagy 1982, 41–46 and 55–56, in understanding the *Hymns* as panhellenizing documents; she also builds on Kahn 1978.

7. Clay 1989, passim but esp. 9–16; cf. Stehle 1997, 174–78; Nagy 1990, 41–56; 1982, 47–49.

8. There is still debate about whether the *Homeric Hymns* were composed for performance in cult or were, rather, strictly literary creations. I will discuss my reasons for accepting the former in a forthcoming publication; for the moment, the reader may refer to the recent analyses of Depew 2000 and Calame 1995. Stehle (1997, 174–212) bases her analysis on the presumption that they were performed as well.

9. As proposed by Jameson 1990.

rather than simply repeating, the messages that a ritual conveys, a myth may help to ensure that they are delivered in their full complexity; what the ritual cannot express, the myth may.

Which brings us to the third approach, that of Clay. I have no argument with the presumption that the poets of some of the *Hymns*, including the *Hymn to Hermes*, composed with the intention of presenting their songs at several festivals of similar focus; in fact, this presumption helps to explain why certain *Hymns* became widely known. *Hymns* that became widely known, in turn, would have incidentally contributed to what eventually became a homogenized literary picture of Olympus' citizens, their roles and relationships. But such homogenization, I would insist, was a by-product of the *Hymns'* fame, rather than the immediate intention of their composers. I will start from the premise that the poet's primary task was to craft a hymn that articulated the concerns expressed by the festival at which he performed and the functions of the god whom that festival honored.

The remainder of this article falls into three parts. In the first I will discuss the main theme of the *Hymn's* myth, suggesting that it expressed concerns that were most immediately relevant to young males, whom Hermes was expected to protect and guide during their maturation. In the second, I will examine our evidence for cults and festivals in which Hermes played a part during the late archaic and early classical periods, and I will propose that the likeliest performative occasion for the *Hymn* was one of the athletic festivals that were celebrated all over Greece by at least the time to which most scholars date the *Hymn*, the late sixth or fifth century (see n. 1 above). Finally, I will bring all of this together to discuss how the poet of the *Hymn* chose his mythic topic and then crafted it to suit the occasion at which he performed.

THE MYTH

The *Hymn* tells the story of an infant who ventures out into the world and performs several impressive feats.¹⁰ He finds a tortoise, kills it, and from its shell creates the first lyre. Then, having developed a craving for meat, he raids the cattle that his older brother Apollo has been herding.¹¹ He invents fire sticks and sacrifices two of the cattle to twelve gods, hiding the rest of them. When finally discovered by Apollo, he feigns innocence but is forced to defend himself in front of Zeus and the other gods. Eventually, Apollo befriends his younger brother and exchanges gifts with him: Apollo receives the remaining cattle and the newly invented lyre and in return gives

10. *Hymn. Hom. Merc.*'s version of the myth aligns by and large with other surviving versions so far as the major plot elements are concerned: see the surveys in Nisbet and Hubbard 1970, 125–28, and Allen, Halliday, and Sikes 1936, 267–74. The earliest versions, of which we have only traces, are those of Hes. frag. 256 M-W and Alc. frags. 306Ca, 308a–d Campbell, thus giving the myth a *terminus ante quem* of the late seventh or early sixth century and making it almost certain that *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* was not the earliest composition on the topic; variations of detail among later versions indicate that *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* was not a particularly authoritative version. We can make a guess as to what the basic elements of the myth were if we identify the most common features of surviving versions: (1) Hermes is usually a youth or boy (in *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* and Soph. *Ichneutai* he is an infant); (2) he invents the lyre from a tortoise shell; (3) he steals cattle that belong to or are tended by Apollo; (4) he uses subterfuge to drive away and/or conceal them; (5) he propitiates Apollo with gifts and receives gifts in return.

11. *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* refers to the cattle both as belonging to the gods (72) and to Apollo himself (18, 22).

Hermes a cow whip, a caduceus, and oversight of prophetic bee maidens. Apollo also promises to make sure that Zeus bestows other responsibilities and honors on Hermes.

The narrative of the *Hymn* pivots around the cattle raid. Most of the *Hymn* (lines 65–end) discusses the raid itself, Apollo's discovery of the raid, or repercussions that directly result from Apollo's discovery, including Hermes' and Apollo's argument in front of Zeus, their reconciliation, and their eventual exchange of gifts. In contrast to all other versions of the story, which either omit the invention of the lyre or situate it after the theft of the cattle, the *Hymn* places the invention of the lyre and Hermes' first song before the raid (lines 24–64).¹² As I will show below, this sequence of events allowed the poet to draw a contrast between Hermes' first song and another, later, song that Hermes performs to the lyre after having raided the cattle (423–33), and thereby to emphasize the important changes in Hermes' nature and status that the raid has brought about. Thus, in the *Hymn*, the invention of the lyre is brought closely into connection with the raid despite the fact that it precedes it.

Cattle raids and their aftermath are well-known subjects not only in Greek myth but also in the myths of other Indo-European peoples. Bruce Lincoln, Françoise Bader, and P. C. Walcot have discussed the close association between cattle raids, either real or narrated, and young men's initiation rituals or coming-of-age ceremonies in Indo-European cultures.¹³ They have shown that cattle raiding was understood to demonstrate a young man's ability both to provide wealth for his family and to defend that wealth, insofar as cattle raids often take the form of retrieving cattle that an outsider has stolen. They have also demonstrated the close connection in Indo-European cultures between cattle raiding and war: cattle raiding was understood to prepare a young man for life as a warrior, a role that every adult male was expected to assume; by raiding cattle, a young man proved that he was capable of becoming a warrior and thus a man. Once he had become a warrior, he continued to take part in raids. In fact, considering that many wars were motivated by the desire for cattle, cattle raiding could be considered the defining activity of the warrior in some cultures, as Lincoln has noted.¹⁴

Most importantly, the possession of cattle, and therefore the ability to raid and to protect or recover them, determined the amount of honor that a man held within his group.¹⁵ This connection between cattle raiding and honor reflects not only the fact that raiding demonstrated a man's fitness as a provider or a warrior, but also, and more importantly, the fact that successful raiding or recovery of cattle demonstrated the individual's physical

12. Hes. frag. 256 M-W and Alc. frags. 306Ca, 308a–d Campbell omit the lyre; Soph. frag. 314.284–31 Radt and Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.10.2 place it after the raid; cf. Shelmerdine 1984.

13. Lincoln 1981; Bader 1980; Walcot 1979; and Lincoln 1976; cf. Burkert 1979, 78–98.

14. Lincoln (1981, 102–3), who also has noted that so strongly linked were cattle raiding and war in ancient India, that in the *Rg Veda* the term for “cattle raid” is used as a synonym for “war.” Hesiod (*Op.* 161–65) reflects something like this idea when he notes that one of the two reasons for the end of the heroic age was the quarreling of heroes over the cattle of Oedipus (the other was the quarreling of heroes over Helen).

15. Thuc. 1.5, cf. 1.11; and Walcot 1979, 330. Even Greek gods seem to have subscribed to this, as Walcot (1979, 328) points out: at *Od.* 12.382–83 we learn that if Helios had allowed the slaughter of his cattle to go unavenged, he would have been compelled to sink into Hades for shame, shining thereafter not among gods and mortals but among the dead.

strength, daring, resourcefulness, and initiative—qualities considered intrinsic to manhood. Michael Herzfeld has shown that in contemporary Crete, animal raiding is still a means of proving manhood but, in a modification of the Indo-European paradigm, it also serves to forge a “spiritual kinship” (*sindeknia*) between a young man who raids cattle and the older man from whom he raids them, once the cattle have been returned. This *sindeknia* is crucial to establishing a young man within his society.¹⁶

Maturation was a matter of great concern to the ancient Greeks, just as it is to most peoples, and Greek myth correspondingly presented young men as undergoing a variety of trials and tests as they moved towards honorable inclusion in the adult community. One of these was cattle raiding, which, just as in other cultures, often was associated with either the young man's display of his ability as a warrior or his receipt of a warrior's arms upon completion of the raid: Nestor's raid is a well-known example.¹⁷ Greek mythic examples of cattle raids align in many details with the Indo-European paradigm that scholars have described: the raid is often preceded by combat against a monstrous or especially daunting foe (for example, against Geryon in the case of Heracles);¹⁸ the raid is often followed by the acquisition of arms (Nestor, again, although with a twist of the paradigm that delays the acquisition);¹⁹ and the raid is sometimes also followed by the kidnapping of women or winning of brides (for example, the case of Melampus, although he ends up giving the woman to his brother).²⁰ In sum, there is little doubt that ancient Greek cattle raid myths derive from Indo-European models and reflect the same general ideologies.

The cattle-raid myth in which Hermes stars follows the Indo-European paradigm insofar as Hermes' raid wins him honor, particularly in the eyes of his older brother and father, and ultimately gains him admission into the “adult community”—that is, the Olympians, in front of whom the details of the raid are narrated.²¹ The connection between raiding and maturation is further emphasized in our *Hymn* by Apollo's comment upon seeing the flayed hides of the two sacrificed cows: “you don't need to grow up much more, Cyllenian One, Son of Maia” (407–8). Hermes' raid also fits the paradigm insofar as it allows him to provide for his family, in this case his mother. The poet puts words into Hermes' mouth that virtually tell us this: when Maia chastizes him for stealing the cattle, Hermes replies that she ought not to treat him like a child, and then tells her that he will become master of whatever art will best provide sustenance for her and himself. They will not continue to suffer sitting alone in their cave, he says, deprived

16. Herzfeld 1985, chap. 8; Campbell 1964. Haft (1996) compares Hermes' raid as narrated in the *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* to the raids that Herzfeld discusses; she makes points that are similar to some that I make here, although we develop them differently.

17. *Il.* 11.670–761; see Hainsworth 1993, ad loc. For further examples and discussion, see Bader 1980 and Walcot 1979; for discussion, also Haft 1996.

18. First mentioned at Hes. *Theog.* 287–94, 981–83; cf. Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.10; see further Gantz 1993, 402–3.

19. On Nestor's acquisition of arms see especially Bader 1980; also Walcot 1979.

20. *Od.* 15.223–38; see Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989, ad loc.

21. *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 325–26 describes all the gods as sitting in assembly when Apollo and Hermes arrive to argue their cases (reading συλλαλή in line 325). At 332, Zeus explicitly refers the matter to the entire divine assembly; 366–67 describe Hermes as addressing his arguments to both Zeus and the other gods.

of prayers and gifts; he will ensure that they grow rich in offerings and that he wins honor—he has already begun to do this by stealing Apollo's cattle (163–72). The sharply dismissive tone in which Hermes rejects his mother's scoldings, emphasizing that he is in charge of her welfare, makes another point abundantly clear as well: he is leaving the world of women. We are reminded of Telemachus' similarly assertive words to Penelope immediately after he has decided to leave her side and search for his father (Hom. *Od.* 1.346–59). As Adele Haft has noted, this conflict between mother and son, which is prominent in our *Hymn*, is completely absent from other versions of the story, suggesting that the author of our *Hymn* particularly wanted to emphasize Hermes' departure from childhood.²²

Thus, Hermes' myth, especially as it is narrated in the *Hymn*, can be grouped with other cattle-raid myths as a “coming-of-age” tale. But Hermes' raid also differs from the older Indo-European paradigm in two ways. The first is that in some versions, Hermes is an infant rather than an adolescent on the brink of manhood. Yet, his precocious leap ahead to the activities of adolescents conforms to the way that Greek gods typically behave as infants, as Càssola has noted.²³ Apollo, according to his *Homeric Hymn*, is so strong at birth that he immediately bursts his golden swaddling bands and announces to his nurses that his proper concerns are the lyre, the bow, and the prophetic arts (*Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 127–32). Athena, in one of her *Homeric Hymns*, jumps from her father's head fully armed, ready to assume her military duties (*Hymn. Hom.* 28.7–9).²⁴ Analogously, Hermes' infant cattle raid signifies that his proper concerns are the care of cattle²⁵ and the care of adolescent males, with whom cattle raids are associated—I will return to the latter topic below.²⁶

The second difference between other Indo-European cattle-raid tales and the story told in the *Hymn to Hermes* is that, rather than becoming enemies, the cattle raider and his victim become friends, as several passages from the *Hymn* make clear.²⁷ Haft has interpreted this friendship with reference to Herzfeld's Cretan material and suggested that in ancient Greece, raids similarly were undertaken for the purpose of forging bonds between a raider and his victim. Haft's suggestion can be supported by a story that Plutarch tells in his biography of Theseus: Pirithous drove Theseus' cattle away from Marathon and, when he knew that Theseus was pursuing him, turned around

22. Haft (1996, 33–34) compares Maia's reaction to Hermes' raid to that of contemporary Cretan mothers who express anxiety about their sons' raiding, or ridicule them. She also observes that Maia is far more prominent in *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* than in other versions of the story and suggests that the poet uses her to represent the “constraints against which Hermes rebels in his bid for symbolic manhood.”

23. Càssola 1975, ad lines 17–18.

24. Artemis, according to a story that Apollodorus relates (*Bibl.* 1.4.1), assists her mother Leto at the birth of her brother Apollo as soon as she herself has emerged from the womb, thus foreshadowing her role as a goddess who helps parturient women.

25. See, for example, Hom. *Il.* 14.490–91 and *Od.* 14.435; Hes. *Theog.* 444; Semon. frag. 20 West; Paus. 2.3.4, 9.22.1–2; and cf. Baudy 1998, 427.

26. In contrast to Haft (1996, 28), who cites the fact that boys in contemporary Crete begin raiding cattle at a very young age; on p. 32 she comes closer to the analysis I offer here.

27. *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 436–end, esp. 460–62 (reading ἡγεμὸν ἔσσω in line 461), 503–10, 514–20, and 574–75.

to meet him. Praising Theseus, Pirithous returned the cattle and won his friendship (*Thes.* 30.1–2). Nonetheless, the fact that all other ancient Greek cattle-raid stories present a situation in which the raider and his victim are enemies—a situation, in fact, in which the raider usually ends up killing his victim—is puzzling, and requires further comment.

I would begin by stressing the distinction between myth and real life. The primary purpose of cattle-raid *myths* is to demonstrate that young men win admission to the adult community by displaying certain qualities: bravery, initiative, and physical strength being among the most obvious. Most myths therefore exaggerate the monstrousness of the victim from whom the young man raids cattle so as to magnify the dangers he confronts and thus glorify his bravery, initiative, and strength. In narrations of *real* raids that take place within the confines of a small community, there is no point in pretending that the victim is anything but an ordinary man—both because every listener knows him as a neighbor and because such pretense would undercut one of the purposes of raids, namely, the establishment of *sindeknia* between a raider and a victim who are by definition similar to one another, insofar as they belong to the same group. This does not mean that the story cannot glorify the raider—judging from Herzfeld's transcripts, modern raiders do brag about the bravery, initiative, and strength they used to steal animals—but the exercise of these qualities stops short of killing the victim.

We might guess, then, that unlike other ancient Greek cattle-raid myths of the "Nestor" type, which follow the Indo-European paradigm closely, the stories of both Hermes' and Pirithous' raids represent a variation of the paradigm more in line with a form of animal raiding actually practiced in historical Greece that was similar in nature to those Herzfeld has studied. But why would it be in only these two stories, out of all Greek cattle-raid myths, that we find such a variation? In the case of Theseus and Pirithous, I would suggest it is because they are figures who, in the biographical tradition on which Plutarch drew, had been assimilated as much as possible to real men in order to support Athenian claims of Theseus' historicity. If we had a similar biography of, for example, Heracles, which drew on traditions supporting Argive claims of his historicity, we might find him participating in a similar sort of raid. In the case of Hermes, as will become clearer in later portions of this article, I would suggest it is because the myth served as a model for male behavior in contexts that facilitated passage into a larger community of men—that is, contexts that fostered the forging of bonds. This will also help to explain why it is Apollo, rather than a monstrous foe, who plays the victim.

To sum up the argument so far: myths of cattle raiding sent a message to young men who were on the brink of adulthood: namely, that to win honor and acceptance among other men, one must develop and display certain qualities that society expects from men. Even in groups where boys did not practice cattle raiding as part of their maturation process—say, among aristocratic Greek families of the classical period—the *myth* of the cattle raid would have remained meaningful so long as the qualities the raiders demonstrated continued to be among those that constituted manliness.

THE FESTIVAL

Given the thematic focus of its myth, the *Hymn to Hermes* would most appropriately have been performed during a festival of Hermes that encouraged or celebrated the maturation of males. And in fact, Hermes was charged with just such concerns.²⁸ Most importantly for the purposes of this article, from the late archaic age onwards, Hermes patronized the athletic *agones* in which aristocratic males began to compete during childhood. Simonides, Aeschylus, and Pindar refer to Hermes as “Enagonios” and “Agonios,” titles that he continued to receive throughout antiquity.²⁹ Athletic festivals called Hermaia, which eventually were celebrated all over the Greek world,³⁰ particularly stress Hermes’ connection to maturing males in this setting, for in cases where we have more than a passing reference to Hermaia, it becomes clear that they focused on παῖδες, νεανίσκοι, νέοι, and ἑφ-ῆβοι. Plato and Aeschines, for example, mention only παῖδες and νεανίσκοι participating at the Hermaia in Athens, and the latter refers to laws restricting even the presence of older males during the competitions. In some inscriptions concerning Hermaia, care is taken to specify the point at which individual competitors pass from one age category to another and rules are laid down to protect and discipline the younger participants.³¹

28. Hermes’ interest in the maturation of younger boys is manifested through his kourotrophic and pedophoric roles in various myths, which were represented on Attic vases as early as the sixth century; e.g., he conveys the infant Asclepius to Chiron (Paus. 2.26.7), the infant Dionysus to Olympus (Paus. 3.18.11), the infant Heracles to Olympus so that he may nurse at Hera’s breast (Hyg. *Poet. astr.* 2.43), and the young Dioscuri from Thalamae, where they were said to have been born, to Pellene, where they were raised (Paus. 3.26.2); for the vases and some later sculptures: Siebert 1990, nos. 358–401. He was invoked at the Thesmophoria—a festival that promoted the birth and care of children—in the company of the Thesmophoroi (Demeter and Kore), Plutus, Kalligeneia, Kourotrophos, and the Charites (Ar. *Thesm.* 295). A Tanagran legend expresses his association with older youths: Hermes once averted a plague from Tanagra by carrying a ram on his shoulders around the city’s walls; every year thereafter, the most beautiful Tanagran ephebe had to repeat this act, symbolizing the ephebes’ protection and regeneration of the city (Paus. 9.22.1 and cf. Siebert 1990, nos. 855–57 for possible artistic representations). In vase paintings from the late sixth and mid-fifth centuries, Hermes is often shown in the company of adolescent males: Siebert 1990, nos. 863–66, 881–82, 909–10. Generally on Hermes and the maturation of males, see also Baudy 1998, 428–29; and Costa 1982.

29. Simon. 555.1 Campbell; Aesch. frag. 384; Pind. *Pyth.* 2.10 and *Isthm.* 1.60, and cf. *Ol.* 6.77 and *Nem.* 10.53; cf. Ar. *Plut.* 1.161; *IG* 1².5 (early fifth century). Hermes also patronized the training that began to prepare boys for these contests as soon as they had left the care of women; statues of Hermes or altars dedicated to him were erected in gymnasia, palaestrae, and stadia throughout the Greek world: Delorme 1960, *passim* (see index under “Hermès,” “Hermès et Héraklès,” and “pilier hermaïque”); Siska 1933 (*non vidit*); and Michalowski 1930. Although most of our evidence for these statues and altars comes from the Hellenistic period, vase paintings that show ephebes in front of herms in settings that suggest palaestrae and gymnasia imply that such statues and altars appeared in some areas, including Attica, at least as early as the late sixth century (Siebert 1990, nos. 143 and 144). Pausanias mentions statues of Hermes in the gymnasium at Laconian Las and Messenia that he regarded as extremely old (3.24.7, 4.32.1). On another black-figure vase, Hermes crowns a youth after an athletic victory. On other vases, racehorses are marked with caducei, which again connects Hermes to athletic *agones*. The opposite side of one such vase shows Hermes and Heracles (the other great patron of athletics) standing together at an offering table: *ABV* 307.59 and 315.3; on this topic and more generally on Hermes as a god of horse races see Haspels 1936, p. 62, n. 2, and, especially in Ionia, Graf 1985, 270–72.

30. Apamea: *MAMA* 6, 173; Beroea: *SEG* Macedonia 27 (1977), 261 and cf. Gauthier and Hatzopoulos 1993, which includes useful discussion of Hermaia in general, especially at 95–123; Chalcis: *SEG* 29 (1979), 806; Delos: *IDélos* (1947–49), 2595, and see Mikalson 1998, 227; Istrus: *SEG* 25 (1975), 790; Lesbos: *IG* 12 *Suppl.* 122; Mylasa: *IK* 34.1 (1987), 421; Pergamon: *Inscr. Perg.* 252 and 256; Pheneos: Paus. 8.14.10–11; Sestos: *OGI* 339; Tanagra: *IG* 7².971–73.

31. Aeschin. 1.10; Pl. *Lys.* 206d. Cf. *IG* 2².895, 1227, 2971, 2980; and Mikalson 1998, p. 195 with notes. The best example of Hellenistic restrictions comes from the Beroean inscription cited in the previous

Although our richest record of Hermaia (like our richest records of most festivals) comes from the wealth of inscriptions produced during the Hellenistic and imperial periods, and although the earliest explicit uses of the term Hermaia that we have are found in Plato and Aeschines, the tone of Aeschines' comments, and particularly his invocation of established laws concerning the Hermaia to support his arguments, implies that at least in Athens, this festival was quite a bit older. Scholiasts to Pindar, following local historians, tell us that Hermaia were already being held in Achaean Pellene during Pindar's time; these were famous for the warm cloaks given as prizes, to which Pindar himself refers at *Nemean* 10.44 and *Olympian* 9.97–98.³² The ability of the Pellenian Hermaia to attract competitors from as far away as Rhodes and Locrian Opous (Pind. *Ol.* 7 and 9) already in the 460s suggests that they had been established at least several decades earlier.

Organized athletics, especially agonistic athletics, perform some of the same functions that traditional coming-of-age procedures do in other cultures.³³ Most obviously, athletics help to develop a young body through physical exercise and then provide a stage on which that body and its skills can be displayed; Hellenistic inscriptions indicate that some athletic festivals, including Hermaia, awarded prizes not only to those who won athletic

note, which explicitly extends the right of participation all the way up to age thirty, but strictly prohibits anyone older than that and subdivides the participants into smaller age groups including παῖδες and νεανίσκοι. Most of the other inscriptions cited in the previous note mention παῖδες, νεανίσκοι, νέοι, and/or ἐφηβοί as well. It is impossible to be sure that fully mature males (ἄνδρες) never competed in any city's Hermaia at any time, but the absence of reference to them in even the lengthier inscriptions suggests that Hermaia were viewed as special opportunities for younger males to display their skills.

32. On the Pellenian Hermaia, Pind. *Ol.* 9.98 with schol. (146c Drachmann); cf. Phot. *Bibl.*, s.v. Πελληνικά χαῖται. Pellenian games are mentioned also in *Ol.* 13.109 and *Nem.* 10.44, but their scholia (155 and 82b Drachmann) identify the games in question as Theoxenia in honor of Apollo (or, in the case of schol. *Ol.* 13.109 [155 Drachmann], as "Philoxenia," almost surely an error for Theoxenia). They are mentioned as well in *Ol.* 7.86, where a scholium (156c Drachmann) says that "Theoxenia" and "Hermaia" were names for the same Pellenian games. Another scholium to *Ol.* 9.98 (146h Drachmann) says that the Theoxenia and Hermaia were both Pellenian games but implies their independence from one another. The confusion among scholiasts and lexicographers as to which games Pindar means when he mentions Pellenian contests is most likely due to games called Theoxenia being added at some point to existing Hermaia, either by appending them to the end of the Hermaia, in the same way that Heraia were added to the end of the Olympic Games, or by celebrating them simultaneously; the Pellenian Theoxenia probably were instituted in imitation of the more famous Delphic Theoxenia, the only other festival called Theoxenia that was in honor of Apollo as opposed to the Dioscuri. Adding Theoxenia to Hermaia would particularly make sense if only non-adults were allowed to compete at the Hermaia; the Theoxenia could provide opportunities for men. Pausanias (7.27.4–6) mentions Theoxenia in Pellene in which men competed, but says that silver coins were given as prizes and that only men competed. This may reflect changes that had been made by his day, or may suggest that the scholiasts' connection of the Theoxenia with cloaks was mistaken. One further scholium, ad *Nem.* 10.44 (82a Drachmann), refers to Pellenian games called Diia at which cloaks were awarded, but these games are otherwise unknown. On the Pellenian Hermaia, the Theoxenia, and their confusion, see also Nilsson 1906, p. 160, n. 4, cf. 394. Specifically on the "warm cloaks" given at the Hermaia see (in addition to Pind. *Ol.* 7.86, *Ol.* 9.98, and *Nem.* 10.44, with their schol.; and Phot. [all cited above]) Strab. 8.7.5; Poll. *Onom.* 7.67; Hesych., s.v. Πελληνικά χαῖται (which does not specify at which Pellenian games the cloaks were awarded); *Suda*, s.v. Πελληνικά χαῖται (which says that the cloaks were given at the Pellenian Heraia, which looks like an error for Hermaia); and the schol. ad Ar. *Av.* 1421 (which mentions them in connection with both Hermaia and Heraia).

33. There are many treatments of the connection between athletics and maturation that go into more depth than I will here: Brelich 1959, esp. 450–56, and Jeanmaire 1939, 413–18, are among the earliest. Later scholars usually take up particular aspects, e.g., the nudity shared by both athletics and some rituals that celebrate maturation (Bonfante 1989 and cf. Sansone 1988, 110–12) or the expression of "initiatory" motifs in epinician poetry (Crotty 1982, 114–16, and cf. Kurke 1991, 71). Dickie 1984 focuses in the latter part of his essay on the connection as it is expressed in the Phaeacian episode of the *Odyssey*, but also gives an excellent overview of the question as a whole, citing evidence from the post-Homeric period as well.

events but also to those who best exemplified εὐανδρία and εὐεξία (manliness and vigor). Behavioral *desiderata* also can be developed and displayed through athletics: at some games, including some Hermaia, prizes were given to participants who exemplified εὐταξία (orderly behavior) and φιλοπονία (industriousness).³⁴ If a young man were skillful and lucky enough to win the athletic contests themselves, all the better—he was welcomed back into his community with the fanfare due a victor and started his career as an adult with τιμή that helped to ensure his success among other men. Athletics also shared with other coming-of-age procedures, including cattle raids, the charge of preparing young men to become warriors, as a number of ancient authors tell us.³⁵ A Tanagran legend makes this particularly clear: when the town was attacked by the Eretrians, Hermes led the young men into battle brandishing not a spear but a strigil, and after the Eretrians were averted, Hermes received cult under the epithet of Promachos and was portrayed on the city's coins under that title with his strigil in hand.³⁶ Hellenistic inscriptions indicate that at some athletic contests, older youths received arms as their prizes, which underscores the connection between games and war—and also provides another parallel between athletics and cattle raids, as raids often culminate in the raider receiving his first arms.³⁷

Both athletics and cattle raiding, then, mark progress towards maturation and honorable incorporation into adult male society. Many of the specific qualities or skills they inculcate are identical: each prepares young men to become warriors, each requires and develops physical stamina and skill, each demands initiative. There are also differences: cattle raiding requires a cunning and resourcefulness that athletics usually do not,³⁸ for example, and athletics require physical σωφροσύνη to a degree that is not usually required by raiding. But overriding these differences is the implication that, among other things, cattle raids and athletics are viewed as the stuff from which manhood is constructed.

The thematic and functional links between athletics and cattle raiding suggest that the *Hymn to Hermes* appropriately could have been performed at one or more of the athletic contests focusing on younger males at which

34. See Gauthier and Hatzopoulos 1993, 101–6; Crowther 1991 and 1985, which discuss the evidence for these awards at certain games and for the value placed on these qualities in male society more broadly. They are also discussed briefly at Dickie 1984, 238–39.

35. Ancient passages expressing this idea include Xen. *Hell.* 5.5.23 and *Mem.* 3.12.5; Pl. *Resp.* 404a–b, 423c and *Leg.* 832e; Diod. Sic. 17.11.4; Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 639d–640a; and Lucian *Anach.* 25. For discussion of various aspects of the topic, see Golden 1998, especially 23–28; Gauthier and Hatzopoulos 1993, 102–4; Evjen 1992, 103–4; Papalas 1991, especially 167; Perysinakis 1990; Krummen 1990, 33–97, especially 52; Scanlon 1988.

36. Paus. 9.22.1–2; cf. Siebert 1990, nos. 855–57 for possible artistic representations and see discussion in Baudy 1998, 429.

37. See Gauthier and Hatzopoulos 1993, 99–102. Note also that the στρατηγοί at Athens sacrificed to Hermes under the title of Hegemonios (Ar. *Plut.* 1159, with scholia; *JG* 2².1496.85 and 2873) and that his title at Megalopolis was Agetor (Paus. 8.31.7); both bespeak his role as a leader of warriors. For representations of Hermes with warriors from the mid-sixth through mid-fifth centuries, see Siebert 1990, nos. 858–62.

38. Although, as W. Race reminds me, we have Pindar's mention of Epharmostos in *Ol.* 9.88–94, who, when forced to compete as a παῖς against men, managed to win by trickery or perhaps “feinting” moves (δόλοι).

Hermes was honored—that is to say, for one or more of the Hermaia.³⁹ Although we cannot prove that Hermaia existed in Greek cities by the time our *Hymn* was composed, the fact that (1) we can date Hermes' role as a god of competitive athletics as early as the late sixth century (Simon. frag. 555); (2) there is good reason to suppose Hermaia were held in at least Pellene by the early fifth century; and (3) the *Hymn* is dated to the late sixth or fifth century should encourage us to pursue the idea at least as a working hypothesis. In the climate of boys' and young men's festivals such as the Hermaia, a story about maturation would have rung true in the same way that stories about mythical and historical heroes rang true when sung by young men at symposia, as Jan Bremmer has discussed:⁴⁰ the protagonists' actions, even if they could not or would not be imitated by the listeners, exemplified qualities that the listeners were meant to develop and deploy in situations they encountered in their own lives. The narration of these stories within the symposium, a setting that itself fostered maturation, further underscored the centrality of these qualities to manhood.⁴¹

THE POET

Using the performative setting that I have proposed for the *Hymn* as a working hypothesis, I now will explore the *Hymn* and the way that it adapts its myth to its occasion. I will focus on two issues: the manner in which the poet develops Apollo's role, and the ways in which he tailors the myth so as to draw its protagonist and his audience together.

Apollo

Apollo plays some part in almost all versions of the story of Hermes' cattle raid,⁴² but the poet of our *Hymn* has given Apollo a role that virtually equals that of Hermes. Apollo enters the *Hymn* at line 185 and from there until the end—that is, for seventy percent of the *Hymn*—he is either on stage alone or shares the limelight with Hermes. Apollo has several speeches of considerable length; indeed, his speaking lines in the *Hymn* outnumber those of Hermes. The *Hymn* ends with an exaltation of the Delphic Oracle, one of Apollo's most famous shrines.

Within the context of a festival celebrating male maturation that I have proposed as a performative setting for the *Hymn*, Apollo's prominence makes sense for several reasons. First, throughout Greece, Apollo was the god most closely and frequently associated with aspects of male maturation (including, at times, athletics); thus, even in settings dedicated to other deities

39. See further the appendix to this article.

40. On the symposium as a site of maturation, see Murray 1983a, 1983b, 1982; and Bremmer 1990. On the role of heroic myth, see in particular Bremmer and also further discussion below in the final section of this article.

41. It is worth noting, too, that Hermaia are among the very few major festivals in honor of Hermes for which we have evidence; he was a god more frequently worshiped alongside other gods at their own festivals, or in smaller ways by private individuals.

42. The exception is the account of Dionysius Thrax in the second century B.C.E. (ap. *Anecd. Bekk.* 2.752.10), which says Hermes stole the cattle of the Sun; by this time, however, we often find Apollo being identified with Helios.

who patronized particular aspects of male maturation, such as Hermes, we should not be surprised to find Apollo present.⁴³

My second point brings us back to cattle raids. As I discussed earlier, the myth of Hermes' raid departs from the standard Indo-European paradigm in uniting raider and victim and in doing so resembles cattle-raid stories in which the establishment of *sindeknia* (if I may borrow the modern term) between a male outside the group and a male inside the group is the aim. Our *Hymn* develops this theme particularly well. Apollo is presented as an older male, already rich in honor and responsibilities within his group, the Olympians, and thus exemplifies the goal towards which Hermes is striving. Notably, following the two gods' conciliation, some of Hermes' new duties and rights even mirror those of Apollo: he becomes a cattle herder like Apollo, for example, and indeed, at the end of the poem, the two gods herd the recovered cattle away in tandem as if to emphasize their unity (503–4).⁴⁴

But as much as the final section of the *Hymn* develops the gods' similarities to one another, it also reminds us that Apollo, the older male, will remain Hermes' superior. In offering the new lyre to Apollo as a gift of reconciliation, Hermes emphasizes its appropriateness to a god who is already known for his vocal skills: "Sing well with this clear-voiced companion in your arms, for you understand how to speak beautifully" (κατὰ κόσμον ἐπιστάμενος ἀγορεύειν, 478–79). He goes on to describe the lyre itself as capable of teaching all manner of things to those who know how to consult it with skill and wisdom, but as babbling in vain to those who use it ignorantly or rudely (482–89). The lyre, then, is an instrument associated with speech, and for those who know how to play it properly, with significant speech. In contrast, the new instrument that Hermes invents to replace his lyre, the syrinx, not only is not credited with the power to "speak" itself, but by its very nature as a wind instrument also prevents the man who plays it from speaking. Hermes acquiesces in taking the back seat to Apollo not only in music, then, but in speech—a striking fate for a god who has demonstrated his own skill in speaking several times in this *Hymn* and who was, in the world outside of the *Hymn*, well known as the patron of rhetoric and other forms of persuasive speech.

Among the gifts that Apollo bestows on Hermes in return for the lyre is the promise that he will become the patron of a form of divination practiced on Apollo's home turf of Delphi. In receiving this charge, as in herding cattle, Hermes is assimilated to his older brother, but just as the syrinx is vocally subordinated to the lyre, this form of divination will be inferior to that of Apollo's great oracle itself. At his oracle, Apollo transmits the divine voice (ὁμῆ, 532) of Zeus to mortals by means of his own divine voice

43. Apollo's role as a patron of youths, particularly in rituals of social transformation, has frequently been discussed; see, e.g., Graf 1993, 866–67; Versnel 1993, chap. 5; Pettersson 1992; Graf 1979; Burkert 1975. *Hymn. Hom. Merc.* itself reminds us of Apollo's association with the latter role, when Hermes describes Apollo at line 375 as being in the "tender bloom of glorious youth."

44. This mirroring also reflects broader cultic reality: in different parts of Greece, now Hermes and now Apollo was the preeminent patron of herdsmen. On Apollo and herds, see *Il.* 21.446; *Eur. Alc.* 8; *Calim. Hymn* 2.47; *Ap. Rhod. Argon.* 4.1218; Apollod. *FGrH* 244.96; *Paus.* 7.20.3–4; cf. Jost 1985, 480–82; and Cassola 1975, 82–83.

(ὁμφή, 543 and 545). The role of the Pythia, human transmitter of Apollo's divine voice, is elided here, as if to emphasize the directness with which Zeus' voice, through Apollo's voice, is conveyed to mortals. Non-divine speech does enter into the process—humans must observe the voice (φωνή) and motions of meaningful birds and be careful to ignore birds who speak in vain (543–46)—but only at a preliminary stage, when they are deciding whether to consult Apollo's oracle at all. Hermes' divinatory art, in contrast, will depend closely on the voices of animals: he will be in charge of bees who rage about, eager to speak the truth after they have eaten honey, and buzz about lying when they have not eaten it (552–63). Hermes' role will be to question the bees and then use his divine voice (ὁμφή, 566) to teach mortals what he has learned from them (564–66). At Apollo's oracle, the most authoritative voice in the cosmos is mediated to mortals by the voice of the god who knows how to speak κατὰ κόσμον; Hermes can mediate for mortals only the inarticulate voices of animals. As if to underline the subordination of the latter to the former, our poet has Apollo explain to Hermes that he himself had divined with the bees when he was a younger god (556–58). Here, too, Hermes will follow in his brother's path, but a few steps behind.

Thus the poet of the *Hymn* portrays the relationship between an older male and a younger male exactly as we would expect in a “coming-of-age” tale: the older male will accept, support, and even train the younger male in skills that he himself has mastered, so long as the younger male acquiesces in his proper, subordinate role. But the poet of the *Hymn* goes even further: Apollo is portrayed not only as a model, sponsor, and teacher for Hermes, but also as a figure who personally can either facilitate or prevent Hermes' entry into the Olympian family and thus into his own, mature identity. Earlier in the *Hymn*, before he recovers the cattle, Apollo threatens to throw Hermes into Tartarus,⁴⁵ where he would “wander forever as a ruler over tiny men” (ὀλίγοισι ἀνδράσιν, 256–59). The word ὀλίγος is used only fifteen lines earlier to describe Hermes' identity as an infant (παῖδ' ὀλίγον, 245) and it is used five lines before that to describe Hermes curling up in a ball in his cradle, just before Apollo enters Maia's cave. The only other time that any form of ὀλίγος is used anywhere in the *Hymn* is when Apollo later describes Hermes' identity as an infant (456). Thus, in this *Hymn* and particularly in the scene in question, ὀλίγος suggests extreme youth or the tiny size that accompanies it.⁴⁶ The phrase ὀλίγοισι ἀνδράσιν therefore should be translated as “immature males” or “boys.” Apollo's threat implies that Hermes' failure to learn his place will condemn him to wander in Tartarus as a leader of other boys who died before adulthood—that is, that Apollo can truncate Hermes' maturation at a stage that keeps him a child forever.

45. For an excellent literary analysis of lines 256–59 and their significance for the rest of the *Hymn*, see Harrell (1991), who identifies them as one variation of a formula used in other epic poetry to mark threats against the established order.

46. In agreement with Allen, Halliday, and Sikes (1936, 318–19) and contra Radermacher (1931, 126), who suggests “schwach” for a translation of ὀλίγος in line 256 or, alternatively, suggests that it refers to the portrayal of souls as small anthropomorphic creatures. Càssola (1975, 531) leans towards the former of Radermacher's suggestions.

After their differences have been settled, the poet describes at length how the now beneficent Apollo sponsors Hermes' entrance into the divine community, endowing him not only with the right to divine by bees, but also, as in most versions of the myth, with the cow whip and caduceus (497 and 529) by which Hermes will ply his new trade of cowherding (gifts that functionally approach, therefore, the weapons traditionally given to newly minted warriors in other cattle-raid myths). Apollo further promises to make him a "glorious and thriving leader among the gods," to make sure that there is "κλέος among the immortal gods" for both Hermes and Maia (458–61), and to convince Zeus to bestow other prerogatives that will give Hermes his proper τιμαί and thus his place among the gods. The length at which our poet treats Apollo and Hermes' conciliation reveals what a neat and useful twist of the older cattle-raid paradigm this ending really is, for it lays bare one of the implicit realities of coming-of-age in virtually any culture: until he has raided cattle or accomplished whatever other task his society requires of him, a boy is, for all practical purposes, shut out of his own group. It is to the males of his own group that he must prove himself and from whom he will receive his responsibilities and rights.⁴⁷

By emphasizing all of this, the poet thus problematizes Hermes' coming-of-age, and by extension, that of the boys who, I have conjectured, made up the poet's audience. Implicitly the poet suggests that, to join the adults, a boy must simultaneously challenge and placate them; the adults, for their part, must simultaneously keep the young reasonably within the bounds of discipline and yet allow them enough freedom to demonstrate their worthiness. It is the ability to express just these tensions and contradictions, in part, that again makes Hermes' raid a better model for youths than the myths of Nestor's raid or Heracles' raid, for example, in both of which the hero raids cattle from enemies. Notably, in some societies where formal initiation rituals exist, the older men not only organize and administer the rites, but engage in mock battles with the initiates, sometimes disguised as monsters or demons. The Spartan ritual to which I referred at the beginning of this article, where older men donned gorgonlike masks to fight with younger men, plays a similar game.⁴⁸ As in the case of Hermes, the boy is aware that the "outsiders" against whom he proves his mettle are really the "insiders" to whose company he wants to be admitted. On a less ritually dramatized

47. Cf. Haft (1996, *passim*), who emphasizes the general reciprocity that exchange of gifts between raider and victim implies and its ability to forge bonds, rather than the significance of the particular gifts themselves. This emphasis leads her to suggest further (p. 36), building on Herzfeld's 1985 analysis of contemporary Cretan animal raids, that Hermes chose to steal from Apollo (as opposed to any other god) because Apollo, as a cowherd and thus a potential cow thief himself, alone among the gods was capable of reciprocating by stealing cows from Hermes; this provided Hermes with a moral justification for his theft. I do not find anything in either the *Hymn to Hermes* or other ancient cattle-raid myths that supports this interpretation. For other analyses of the conflicted relationship between the two gods, see Clay 1989, 100–102; Kahn 1978, 159–64; Càssola 1975, 153; Graefe 1973, 515–26; Duchemin 1960, *passim*; Brown 1947, *passim*; and Eitrem 1906, 248.

48. Brelich 1969, 30–35; 1959; Eliade 1958, 22–24, 29, 35; van Gennep 1960, 82. See also the photographs of a Bassari initiation ceremony in which each initiate must do battle with an elder wearing a *Lukutu* mask (Beckwith and Fisher 1999, 1:109–15).

level, the fact that contemporary Cretan youths raid cattle from men of their own group expresses this as well. There is some risk involved in such thefts—at times, Herzfeld notes, third parties must even be called in to mediate—but it is risk that is likely to result in the raider's inclusion in a group represented by his victim.

Audience and Poem

Anyone who makes a living by conveying ideas to an audience, whether they do so in the role of an entertainer, a teacher, or (sometimes) both, must make those ideas seem relevant to their listeners. For archaic poets, who used myth as a means to convey ideas, this meant collapsing the distance between the “here and now” in which their audiences existed and the “there and then” in which the myths took place. Notably, none of the strategies by which archaic poets typically did this in hymns, including those that recently have been discussed in detail by Mary Depew, can be found in the *Hymn to Hermes*.⁴⁹ There are no deictic words or references to visible features of the cult whose festival is in progress, for example, which other poets use to remind their audiences that hymns are gifts to the gods who are being worshiped and thus forge links between human and divine worlds. Nor does the *Hymn* narrate aitia that remind the audience of the origin of the cult in which they are participating. I propose that the poet of the *Hymn* used a different strategy, collapsing the distance between his audience and the myth by bringing the theme of the myth up-to-date: that is, by drawing the actions performed by Hermes and those of his audience closer together. To demonstrate this, I will focus on Hermes' invention and use of the lyre and Hermes' sacrifice.

Early in the poem, Hermes sings to the new lyre “beautifully, trying things out extemporaneously like young men at feasts, who tease each other boldly” (54–56). Later, when Apollo first hears Hermes play, he says: “I never cared for clever musical works at the feasts of young men as much as I care for your lyre playing” (453–54), and declares that his brother is to be a δαῖτὸς ἑταῖρος (a “companion of the feast,” 436–37). Hermes, giving the lyre to his brother, tells Apollo, “from now on, confidently take it to the blooming feast and the lovely dance and the glorious κῶμος, a joy both night and day” (475–82). These descriptions are proleptic; the poet reminds his audience of how the lyre is used at contemporary symposia.

As Oswyn Murray and Jan Bremmer have shown, the Greek symposium was the “historical successor of the common meal of archaic warrior clubs.” Bremmer has particularly emphasized the social functions served by the participation of aristocratic adolescent males, suggesting that although initiation rituals per se no longer existed in Greece, the symposia accomplished many of their purposes. The lyre, he notes, played an essential part in this process, for young men accompanied themselves on it while singing

49. Depew 2000.

songs that “glorified the deeds of mythical and historical heroes, examples that they should look up to in their own life.”⁵⁰

Thus, when the *Hymn*’s poet likens the young god’s use of the lyre to that of youths at feasts, he reminds the boys and youths in his audience of experiences that they have had or are soon to have as part of their maturation process. Generally, then, the allusion serves to strengthen their identification with Hermes, but the poet goes even further than this. In the *Hymn*, we hear Hermes sing to the lyre twice (57–62, 427–33). Hermes could not use the same themes for his songs as young men of historical Greece did because the deeds of mortal heroes would not have been appropriate material for a young immortal.

But the poet was a skillful adapter. In Hermes’ first song, which he performs alone before he sets out on his raid, he extols the tale of his own begetting by Zeus, his birth, and the splendors of his mother’s home, and thus he establishes, at least to his own satisfaction, his rightful claim to τιμή equal to that of other gods. In his second song, performed in front of Apollo, Hermes recites the birth and τιμή of each of his divine relatives in turn. By praising the gods just as mortal boys praise the heroes, Hermes signals that the gods are the exemplars he wishes to follow; theirs is the group with which he identifies. Thus, the poet uses Hermes’ singing subtly to suggest that an individual’s maturation depends upon his own initiative as well as external factors.

He also uses it to mark the distance towards maturity that Hermes has traveled in the course of his experiences. I noted earlier that the *Hymn* uniquely situates the invention of the lyre before Hermes’ cattle raid, in contrast to all other versions of the myth, which either omit its invention altogether or situate it after the raid. This sequence of events enabled the poet of the *Hymn* to draw a contrast between Hermes’ status among the Olympians before and after the raid. The god’s first song, performed before he raids the cattle, exalts his mother and her home—these are, after all, the only things that he knows well enough to describe at this point in his life. His second song, performed after the raid, is quite different: it takes in the entire cosmos and all of its divine inhabitants, the maturing god’s proper *milieu*.⁵¹ It is the raid, and its consequent effects, that have enabled Hermes to move from the small domestic sphere of his birth into the larger social sphere of the gods, where he is determined to make his career.

The poet similarly adapts the story of Hermes’ sacrifice to remind his audience of experiences they have had or hope to have. After raiding the cattle, Hermes stops on the banks of the Alpheus and sacrifices two of them, offering their meat to twelve gods (*Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 112–37);⁵² no other

50. Murray 1983a, 1983b, 1982; Bremmer 1990, esp. 136–38. The quotations in this paragraph are from Bremmer 1990, 138.

51. Cf. Haft 1996, 43; and Clay 1989, 109 and 138. The former’s interpretation is similar to mine.

52. In contrast to Kahn 1978, 53–55, I do not attach any importance to the fact that Hermes sacrifices on top of a fire built in a pit (βόθρος, 112) rather than on top of an altar. The scene is rustic; Hermes improvises as best he can; cf. Burkert (1984), who warns that sacrifices do not always play by the “rules” that scholars have constructed for them, and Clay (1989, 118), who reminds us that “a mythological hymn does not resemble the text of a sacred law.”

ancient author sets the sacrifice here. This detail, as other scholars have noted, probably refers to the famous cult of the Twelve Gods at the sanctuary of Zeus in Elis, where the Olympic Games were held.⁵³ Thus, the poet situates Hermes' mythic act within the world of athletic *agones*—indeed, he locates it at the site of the greatest athletic contest, where any young athlete would aspire to win one day, or at least to compete, and where Hermes himself was worshiped, as I shall discuss shortly below.

In contrast to the only other detailed version of the sacrifice, that of Apollodorus, in our *Hymn* Hermes does not eat any of the sacrificial meat, although he sorely longs to (*Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 130–33; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.10.2). Gods, of course, were supposed to enjoy only the smell of meat's smoke; had he eaten of it, Hermes would have marked himself as a non-god and excluded himself from the group he wished to join.⁵⁴ Here, then, it is his own *σωφροσύνη* that enables Hermes to progress towards inclusion in the group that he desires to join—again, a relevant message for any young athlete who was listening. But the poet's choice of locale makes Hermes' actions even more relevant, for two reasons. First, at least until the 480s, and perhaps longer, athletes planning to compete in the Olympics were required to abstain from meat for thirty days—thus, by abstaining from meat on the banks of the Alpheus, Hermes is following not only the rules of behavior required of gods, but the rules required of the athletes who are meant to identify with and emulate him.⁵⁵

Second, it may have been traditional for Olympic victors to sacrifice to the Twelve Gods to whom the poet alludes—Pindar describes Psauimis of Camarina, winner of the mule race in 448, as doing so in a manner that suggests it was a regular custom (*Ol.* 5.1–7). If so, then Hermes' sacrifice can also be interpreted to mark him as a “victor”; that is, his cattle raid, now completed, has been crowned by his act of sacrifice.⁵⁶ The two interpretations I am suggesting are not compatible with one another in terms of real-world logic (we would expect that once an athlete had won, he would leave

53. Long 1987, 58–62 and 154–59; Burkert 1984; Cassola 1975, 526; and Radermacher 1931, 98. Clay (1989, 119–27) takes a different approach, starting from the assumption that the scene represents a *δαίς* rather than a sacrifice in the strict sense. Authors who mention the Twelve Gods at Olympia include Pind. *Ol.* 5.1–7, with scholia (some of which cite the late-fifth-century historian Herodorus). Cf. Pind. *Ol.* 10.43–50; Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.7.5; and Paus. 5.14.4–10.

54. Cf. Clay (1989, 117–23), who develops from this observation a different interpretation, however; cf. also Haft (1996, 38–39), who stresses not so much Hermes' resistance to his desire to eat but rather the desire to eat itself. She interprets this in light of the contemporary Cretan use of the phrase “desire to eat meat” as a synonym for “desire to steal livestock” and from this suggests that his desire for meat is yet another signal that he has separated himself from Maia; in my opinion, this places too much emphasis—and too positive an emphasis—on the very desire that Hermes rejects. Kahn (1978, 41–73) simultaneously emphasizes the nature of sacrifice as a means of moving Hermes into the divine realm and (because she interprets it as an inverted sacrifice) as a practice that breaches divisions between mortals and gods and thus exemplifies Hermes' role as mediator between realms; cf. Burkert (1984, 842), who rejects Kahn's idea of the inverted sacrifice.

55. Paus. 6.7.10, who says this custom ended after a victor from Stymphalus named Dromeus (“The Runner”) introduced a diet of meat. For the date (484 B.C.E.), see Moretti 1953, no. 188; cf. Burkert 1983, 101–2.

56. Contra Haft (1996, 39–40), who suggests that the offering to the gods mimics a practice attested in contemporary Crete, where a thief sometimes disguises his deed by serving the meat of the stolen cattle to the police or even to the man from whom he stole them.

his vegetarian diet behind and partake of the meat he sacrificed) but that is not the point. Hermes' actions would have brought to mind a complex of associations concerning both what it meant to compete at the grandest of all athletic games and what it meant to win there.

We need to consider these Twelve Gods further. They were not those that we are wrongly conditioned to view as canonical by introductory mythology books. Rather, like all divine groups worshiped in real cults, alongside familiar deities such as Zeus and Hera this group included a mix of local gods such as the river Alpheus and gods who were fairly uncommon in cult, such as Cronus and Rhea.⁵⁷ Notably, however, Hermes was one of the Twelve Gods worshipped at Olympia; thus, by refusing the meat in the *Hymn* and enjoying only the smell of its smoke, he claims what the audience already knew to be his rightful place not only among gods in general but specifically among the gods whom the most successful of athletes would worship. Even more important is the particular company Hermes keeps here. The Twelve Gods at Olympia shared six "twin" altars. Each god, in other words, had an altar mate—and the god with whom Hermes shared his double altar at Olympia was Apollo. Thus, Hermes' actions not only emphatically mark him as worthy to become a god, but specifically a god equal to the one whose superiority he had already challenged by his cattle raid.

Thanks to the poet's deft adaptations that drew Hermes' cattle raid and the experiences of contemporary boys together, as members of the audience listened to the story of Hermes' maturation, through proxy they negotiated the same tensions as he did, despite the fact that there was no direct correspondence between Hermes' actions and any that they were likely to perform—aristocratic boys of historical Greece did not raid cattle. This identification of mythic subject and listeners is very different from what happens when, for instance, the *Hymn to Demeter* describes the goddess drinking a *κυκεών*, an action that the listeners may have imitated during the Eleusinian Mysteries; or from what happens in hymns that invite the audience to witness the foundation of a cult site at which they will worship—as in the *Hymn to Apollo*, for example. In both those cases, the audience remains an audience, separated from the action narrated in the myth even if they imitate it or enjoy its long-term results. Indeed, to go a little further with an idea that Depew has emphasized recently, everything that underscores the fact that hymns are gifts to the gods and as such are vital links between the human and divine spheres, simultaneously builds a heightened awareness of the essential separation between the two spheres.⁵⁸ In the *Hymn to Hermes*, in

57. Contra Clay (1989, 118), who presumes the twelve are the twelve "Olympians" familiar from mythology handbooks. Radermacher (1931, 98) recognized the likelihood that they were the group I identify here, although he was troubled by the fact that Hermes thereby was including himself in the group. Allen, Halliday, and Sikes (1936, 305) accept Radermacher's surmise without further comment; Burkert (1984) agrees and Cassola (1975, 526) accepts that it was a local group. A complete list of the gods sharing the six altars at Olympia (in the order listed in ancient sources) includes: Zeus and Poseidon, Hera and Athena, Hermes and Apollo, the Charites and Dionysus, Artemis and Alpheus, Cronus and Rhea. Sources for the twin altars and their gods are given in n. 53 above.

58. Depew 2000.

contrast, rather than using internal markers such as deixis and aitia to stress the *Hymn's* nature as a gift passing between disparate realms, the poet endeavors to transform the listeners into virtual participants in the mythic drama that he narrates, virtual doublets of Hermes. Public recitation of myth, then, almost functions as a ritual itself, as listeners negotiate the tensions that the myth expresses.

Why did the poet choose this strategy? The answer brings us back to the fact that adolescent initiation rites *per se* did not exist in historical Greece—if they ever existed in Greece at all. In initiation rites as we know them from other cultures, a participant's status is changed forever—immediately and irreversibly—as soon as the rite is completed, in the same way that baptism immediately and irreversibly changes the spiritual status of the baby whose head is sprinkled at the font. There were Greek rites and practices that facilitated or acknowledged young men's progress towards adulthood, such as athletic *agones*, for example, or a sacrifice to Demeter in which Athenian ephebes carried an ox on their shoulders,⁵⁹ but the Greeks never explicitly stated that these brought about a change in the participants—nor did they bring about changes, in and of themselves alone. Rather, the Greek phenomena honed and demonstrated young men's abilities to function as adult males. For instance, the ox-lifting ritual showcased the ephebes' strength, their ability to cooperate as a group, and their support of the polis' cults.

Just as participation in athletics (which developed during the historical period in Greece, long after any erstwhile initiation rites that we might imagine once existed had disappeared) did not change a boy's status definitively in the way that a traditional initiation ritual did, so neither did there develop any myths for athletic festivals that made an explicit connection between athletics and maturation. Myths associated with athletic festivals do play with the idea, insofar as some of them present young men engaging in activities associated with heroic adolescence. For example, Pelops gains a bride and a kingdom by winning a chariot race at Olympia and the Delphic story of Apollo killing the Python fits into the "dragon-killing" theme that is associated with young heroes all over the world. The Nemean foundation myth focuses on Opheltes, a male infant who miraculously brings aid to warriors even as he dies. Most tantalizingly, Melicertes, in whose honor the Isthmian games were founded, dies at the hands of Ino, a goddess associated with cults of social transition in various parts of Greece. But none of these stories ever quite makes the leap into an aition that straightforwardly connects athletics with maturation. The connection is intimated, rather than spelled out.

This pattern suggests that if a poet wished to express the association between athletics and maturation, he had to be inventive. He had to start with a myth that traditionally was associated with maturation, such as a myth of cattle raiding, and then adapt it so as to ensure that the listeners to whom it most directly applied—aristocratic boys and young men—would identify with its protagonist. Performing the myth within the proper context then

59. Graf 1993, 113–14; 1979.

would heighten the socially transformative effects of both the myth and the festival itself. Or in other words, to return to the image I used in the introductory section of this article, the poet needed to convey the messages of the festival through a different code—through a myth that offered thematic parallels to the festival. In a culture such as that of ancient Greece, sensing the parallels between cattle raiding and athletics would not have required as much imagination as it might now require of us. For, not only was the way for making this particular link paved by Hermes himself, who had been established as both the star of a cattle-raid myth and a patron of athletics before the *Hymn* was composed, but myth and ritual were still living languages in Greece, possessed of all the communicative fluidity of which we sometimes forget they are capable, seeing only their petrified remains as we do. The brilliance of our poet lay in modifying the myth to fit the occasion at hand so well, in making the parallels work to convey the message so elegantly.

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APPENDIX: WHICH HERMAIA?

Given the peripatetic way in which poets earned their livings in archaic and early classical Greece, it is likely that the poet of the *Hymn to Hermes* composed it with the intention of performing it, with whatever adaptations might have been necessary, at more than one festival. The *Hymn* might even have been performed at athletic festivals other than Hermaia that included boys and young men, for as I noted earlier, Hermes was invoked quite widely as Agonios and Enagonios; Pindar calls upon him thus when honoring victors in the Pythian and Isthmian Games (as does an early-fifth-century inscription from the Eleusinian Games) and he uses similar phrases when honoring those in the Olympic and Nemean Games (see n. 29). Here I will briefly examine a few locales where the *Hymn* could have been performed, not with the intention of pinpointing a single site as “the” site of “original” performance, but to explore further how the *Hymn* would have worked within some performative contexts.

Pheneus: Pausanias reports that the Pheneatians esteemed Hermes most highly of all the gods, and hosted Hermaia in his honor. His traditional birthplace, Mt. Cylene, lay within Pheneus’ borders and a local spot called Three Springs (Tricrena) was identified as the place where the nymphs had washed him after birth. Behind Hermes’ temple in Pheneus was the grave of the charioteer Myrtilus, whom local legend made Hermes’ son and whose body was said to have washed ashore nearby after Pelops murdered him at the site of the future Olympic Games; the Pheneatians buried the body and sacrificed to Myrtilus every year as a hero. This looks like an attempt to connect the local god of athletics and his cult to the Olympic Games and one of its heroic figures.⁶⁰ In such an environment, the *Hymn*’s proposed allusion to the Olympic Games would resonate particularly well.

60. Paus. 8.14.9–12, 8.16.1; cf. Cic. *Nat. D.* 3.22.56; further on Hermes in Pheneus and in Arcadia more generally: Jost 1985, 28–35, 440–56.

Apollo was present in Pheneus as well; the *Etymologicum Magnum*, in fact, claims that Mt. Cyllene was sacred to both Hermes and Apollo. Delphic Apollo was especially important: on a road leading north out of Pheneus was an old sanctuary to Apollo Pythios that, although in ruins by Pausanias' time, still served as a site of worship for Apollo and Artemis. Continuing on this road, one reached the northern coast of the Peloponnesus; almost directly across the Bay of Corinth was Cirrha, Delphi's port, which suggests that the Pheneatians had easy access to the sanctuary lauded at the end of the *Hymn*.⁶¹

Thus, Pheneus not only had strong connections to Hermes and Apollo and a tradition of sponsoring Hermaia, but connections to Olympia and Delphi as well. The *Hymn*, especially given its early, prominent mention of Arcadia and Mt. Cyllene (line 2) would be well suited for performance here. Unfortunately, until Pausanias we hear nothing about Hermaia or any other games at Pheneus. A scholiast to Pindar who offers a list of various Arcadian games includes Hermaia, but does not specify in which Arcadian city they were held (schol. ad *Ol.* 7.83 [153a Drachmann]).

Pellene: As I noted earlier, Pellene hosted Hermaia that attracted competitors from outside the local area by at least the early classical period. Its sponsorship of Theoxenia, which were tied both to the Pellenian Hermaia and to the Delphic Theoxenia (see n. 32), not only attests to the importance there of Apollo in general⁶² but also suggests that Pellene wished to strengthen its connection to Delphi, which, as in the case of Pheneus, was within easy reach across the Bay of Corinth. Although Mt. Cyllene, Hermes' birthplace, officially belonged to Arcadian Pheneus, Pellene lay in its shadow and controlled Mt. Chelydorea, reputedly the place where Hermes had found and hollowed out the tortoise he made into a lyre.

The main problem with imagining the *Hymn*, at least as we now have it, being performed in Pellene is that the poet makes no obvious reference to Pellene or its immediate environment; in fact, in the *Hymn*, Hermes finds the tortoise immediately outside of Maia's cave, and thus on Mt. Cyllene rather than Mt. Chelydorea. This would jar against the ears of Pellenian listeners. Therefore, although the *Hymn* generally would work well at Pellenian Hermaia, we have to hypothesize that some adaptations were made to accommodate local feelings.

Delphi and Delos: The *Hymn*'s final section makes Delphi a very appealing site for performance of the *Hymn*, although, as I discussed earlier, there are thematic reasons for the focus on Apollo's and Hermes' roles at Delphi as well. Perhaps the *Hymn* would have been offered to Hermes at some point during the Pythian Games; we know from Pindar that here, as elsewhere, Hermes was charged with watching over the athletes. We have no information on whether Hermaia as such were celebrated at Delphi, although their great popularity throughout the rest of the Greek world makes it a good possibility.

By the Hellenistic period at the latest, Delos sponsored Hermaia that attracted competitors from all over Greece (see n. 30). The *Homer Hymn to Apollo* already alludes to games at Delos that drew Ionians and their children from far and wide

61. *Etym. Magn.*, s.v. Κυλλήνιος; Paus. 8.15.5; cf. Plut. *De sera* 12 (557c). Jost (1985, 33, 489–91) dates the foundation of this cult to early times, certainly by the late sixth century, and notes that worship of Apollo Pythios was rare in Arcadia (found elsewhere only at Tegea and on Mt. Lycaeus).

62. In Pellene there was also a sanctuary dedicated to Apollo, where the Theoxenia were celebrated: Paus. 7.27.4–6; and see further n. 32 above.

(147–50); we cannot say whether they were strictly in honor of Apollo or, perhaps, included honors for Hermes Agonios as well. Certainly, Delos was a place where Apollo's role as a god of male maturation was in play from an early period.⁶³ As we know from the *Hymn to Apollo*, the god's Delian and Delphic interests could be combined, which would make even the final portion of the hymn appropriate for performance in Delos, especially in front of a panhellenic audience. As in the case of Pellene, the problem is that the existing *Hymn* makes no reference to anything Delian; again, we have to imagine that some modification in that direction would have been made before it was presented to a Delian audience.

Olympia: The *Hymn*'s allusion to Olympia's cult of Twelve Gods, although appropriate within any agonistic context, makes Olympia itself a candidate for its performance. As in the case of Delphi, we know from Pindar that Hermes Agonios was expected to help athletes competing in the Olympic Games. (As with Delphi, we have no knowledge of Hermaia per se being held here, however.) The competition between the two brothers would have struck a particularly nice note at Olympia where they shared an altar and where, according to another legend, they had competed against each other in the first Olympic footrace (Paus. 5.7.10). The only argument against Olympia as a site for performance of the *Hymn* in its current form is the same as that for several of the other possible sites: its failure to mention Olympia overtly.

63. Graf 1993, 104–8.

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