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MYTHOLOGY AND RITUALS AROUND THE STONE: APPLYING LOUIS GERNET'S *POLYVALENCE DES IMAGES* TO *GREEK DEATH*

1. The stone as 'image'

In archaic and classical Greece, stones play an important role, both as a material object around which we can observe a lot of ritual practices and as an 'image' in Greek mythology. Such ritual practices and such mythical images involving a stone are for the most part – but not only – connected with death and with the tomb as a place of cult and imagination.

The relationship between the stone, the tomb and the death among the Greeks is well illustrated, for example, by the idea of *sema* and that of *mnema*: the first (*sema*) stands for the tomb both as a material and as a symbolic place; the second (*mnema*) puts emphasis on the symbolic side of this relationship, considering the tomb, first of all, as a memory place. However, the symbolic and material link between stone, death, tomb and funeral practices is transmitted not only by notions like *sema* and *mnema*, but also by different means.

I would like to analyse one of these various means using the idea of *Polyvalence des images*, shaped by the founder of the Historical Anthropology of the Ancient World, Louis Gernet (1882-1962), whose intellectual biography and work have been reconstructed by R. Di Donato.[1] The Ger-

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1 See Di Donato R., Per una antropologia storica del mondo antico, Firenze 1990, 13-130.

net's wording *Polyvalence des images* means an original method to read Greek Myths based on the plastic and polysemic nature of mythical 'images'. 'Image' – we have to be more specific about that – is a kind of 'mental image' that can take a concrete form as an iconographical image, but also as a textual one.

In Louis Gernet's works the polysemic function of an 'image' can be described as a 'phenomenon of social memory'. The expression 'social memory' reveals an influence of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. I'm obviously thinking to M. Halbwachs' studies on memory (Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire, 1925 and La mémoire collective, posthumously published in 1950). As Di Donato has reconstructed, Halbwachs and Gernet shared the same experience – together with some important sociologists (M. Mauss, H. Lévy-Bruhl, F. Simiand, E. Lévy, A. Bianconi) – at the club of *Cahiers du socialiste*, a group that continued to exist until the war.[2]

'Ce que nous appelons polyvalence des images – in the words of L. Gernet – est donc un phénomène de mémoire sociale: elle consiste en ce que des représentations plus ou moins dominatrices et capables de servir de pôles d'attraction ont correspondu à des objets divers de préoccupation ou d'intérêt dans des milieux successifs.'[3]

Therefore, an image conserves the multiplicity of senses that it has been assuming during its history as an embedded part of mythological language: each time the same image recurs, in a mythical story, it takes and gives back this complexity of sense. This complexity, or more precisely, this 'polyvalence', can be observed on a synchronic level (that is, many senses for the same 'image' in a similar context) or on a diachronic one (that is, many senses for the same 'image' in different and also successive contexts).

According to this method, Greek myth bears a close resemblance to a real language. Consequently, reading the Greek mythology is similar to reading a language, in which the basic part (the 'image') is the issue of the fusion between a *signifier* and a *signified* – that is between *signifiant* and *signifié* in the words of Ferdinand de Saussure[4] - connected one another on

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[2] See Di Donato R., Une oeuvre, un itinéraire, in: L. Gernet, *Les Grecs sans miracle*, testes réunis et présentés par R. Di Donato, préface de J.-P. Vernant, postface de R. Di Donato, Paris 1983, 403-420.

[3] See Gernet L., Polyvalence des images. Testi e frammenti sulla leggenda greca, edited by A. Soldani, foreword by R. Di Donato.

[4] On the relationship with the chapter of the *Cours de linguistique générale* about syntagmatic and associative links, see Di Donato R., Per una antropologia, 126-127.

a basis which is *arbitrary* and that changes according to different contexts or different ages.

Occurring in different contexts, mythical images acquire their own polysemy: each mythical image is thus *polyvalente* on a synchronic level and on a diachronic one, according to its own way and to its own history. Moreover, the *polyvalence* of a certain image crosses the paths and histories of other images.

The analysis of the Greek myth is in fact based also on the multiplicity of mutual relationships among mythical images. We can see an *association* between an image and others recalled according to an analogical link (that is, the same image occurring in different histories); and we can see, at the same time, a *connection* between an image and other images connected according to a link of contiguity (that is, different images occurring in the same history). It is impossible to read a single and isolated image: synchronic and diachronic polysemy with associations and connections makes it possible to move on the only ground that can be travelled over: a real chain, a would be never-ending series of images.

Using such a method of analysis one can go back to the contexts in which these 'images' were born, reconstructing mental attitudes and social forms which are reflected by them. In this sense, the Greek myth, or rather 'the Greek legend', can be read – once more in the words of L. Gernet – 'as a document of archaic Greece's social proto-history'.[5]

Since we haven't any certainty about the contexts, we just can't start from the contexts to read an image. Conversely, we have to make the opposite effort: we must start from reading an image in order to reconstruct some aspects of its context, that is of the context that has produced such an image. So, just in order to try to reconstruct some contexts, it is useful to analyze and interpret their 'polyvalence' and the mechanism of associations and connections starting from them.

Accordingly, the method based on *polyvalence des images* can assist in the attempt to point out some aspects of the stone as a mythical image, and of its function and symbolic values with regard to the death.

2. Stone, tomb and death

With regard to the complex question of the close relationships between stone and tomb, Jean Pierre Vernant has investigated, in a famous essay first published in 1962 and then reprinted in *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*

[5] On Gernet's work on Greek legend as a document of archaic Greece's social proto-history, see Di Donato R., Per una antropologia, 119-130.

in 1965, the idea of *kolossos*[6]. Immovable by its very nature, the *kolossos* can be a standing erect stone, a kind of 'statue-menhir', driven into the ground, or a stone buried in the ground. Even though the *kolossos* replaces the dead in the tomb, it doesn't reproduce the dead's physical image, but it is, in a very specific sense, a 'double' of the deceased, 'just as the dead himself is a double of the living', to quote J.-P. Vernant; the *kolossos* represents the psychological idea of 'double'.

But the particular relationship between tomb, stone and dead illustrated by the *kolossos* is just a partial aspect of a bigger topic. In addiction, it is an aspect that quite soon exhausts his own productivity among the Greeks.[7] The Greeks have soon forgotten the immediate affinity between the gravestone and the dead, and the stone soon became a simple *mnema*: its first task was to recall the memory of the dead. Its first aim was to consolidate the collective identity of a social group – familial or connected with the *polis* in a different way – rather than to have a direct contact with the dead himself.

Similarly, proceeding from Vernant's remarks, we can indeed observe also a different Greek attitude toward the stone, consisting in the search for an immediate communication – and not a simple memory relationship – with the dead himself and with the afterworld.

The aspect I would like to focus on is not the symbolic, evocative, nor the remembering function of the gravestone. I'm rather trying to deepen our understanding of the role played by the stone as a real medium of communication with the afterworld. In such a communication, the stone plays indeed a very important role, both on the side of ritual practices and on the side of *mythopoiesis*.

Let's, then, see how the method based on *polyvalence des images* can help us to investigate on this particular symbolic meaning of the stone.

The image of the stone has a very rich – almost inexhaustible – *polyvalence*. Consequently, we face a wide range of connections and we must narrow down our field of enquiry, defining more accurately the kind of images we are interested to.

Using the idea of image in the sense described above, I'm not concentrating on the image of stone itself (as it were: 'of the stone, as a stone'), but on the images of some specific actions being performed around the stone:

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[6] See Vernant J.-P., Figuration de l'invisible et catégorie psychologique du double: le kolossos in Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs, Paris 1965, 165-78.

[7] See Vernant J.-P., Figuration de l'invisible, 173.

lifting up the stone and sitting on the stone.[8] I'll focus on both images, devoting a section of my paper to each one of these mythical and ritual actions, namely: lifting up the stone and sitting on the stone. In addiction, I'll then briefly dwell upon the image of somebody throwing a stone, not only in order to illustrate another value of the stone, but also – above all – to clearly demonstrate an aspect of the method of analysis described above.

Proceeding in this way, I aim to enlighten a specific aspect among those that characterize the relationship between the stone and the death: that is, the particular association between stone and communication with the underworld.

Such a special link starts, obviously, from the tomb and from the gravestone, where the contact with the dead is – in a sense – more direct, but we can find this association also in cases where there is not a specific tomb: also when the stone is physically far from a tomb, and not directly connected with a tomb. Furthermore, such an association is so strong that it occurs also within some contexts apparently having nothing to do with tomb and death: I'm thinking to some mythical episodes of taking power, when the power is based, as we will see, on a privileged relationship with the dead and the underworld.

3. Lifting up the stone

The first example that I analyze is an image not strictly connected with tombs or death, but – focussing on the stone – it can draw our attention to the relationship with the underworld.

My first issue concerns with the act of lifting up the stone, and I am going to talk about an episode of the well known Athenian myth of Theseus. In particular, I'm referring to the first moments of this saga that takes place at Troezen in Argolis.[9]

In the troezenian section of this myth, when the king Aegeus suspects that Aethra is going to bear his child Theseus, he puts a sword and a pair of sandals hidden under a stone, and he says that if his future son – once become adult – would be able to lift up this stone and take up these to-

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[8] Some of these images belong also to different literatures: see Thompson S., Motif Index of Folk Literature, Helsinki 1936 (= MIFL, see below).

[9] L. Gernet focuses on the troezenian part of the Theseus' myth in some inedited writings (see now Gernet L., Polyvalence des images, 102-111) included in *Archives Louis Gernet*, set up and organised by R. Di Donato. The *Archives Louis Gernet* are nowadays maintained in Pisa at the Dipartimento di Filologia Classica (on Archives Louis Gernet see Di Donato R., per una antropologia, 79-130).

kens, then he should go to Athens, bringing to him these specific tokens. At the age of sixteen, Theseus, following his mother's instructions, easily raises up the stone, takes the sword and the sandals (that is the identification marks to be recognized by his father Aegeus) and, after being recognized, succeed him in the throne.

The myth of Theseus is extensively narrated by Plutarch (Plutarchus, *Theseus,* 3, 6-7; 6, 2-3), Pausanias (I 27, 8; II 32, 7; II 34, 6), Apollodorus (*Bibliotheca,* III 15, 7; III 16, 1) and in some fragments of Callimachus' *Hecale* (235-6). It is remarkable that these four authors isolate this image (that is the image of Theseus lifting up the stone and taking sword and sandals) as a very important turning point in the story. Moreover, they use very similar expressions in describing such image. There are some expressions indicating the specific act of lifting up (*anisthemi*, *anairo*, *anotheo*) or indicating, in any case, the presence of some objects hidden under a stone that must be lifted up (*hypo petran megalen*, *hypo petrai*, *hypo tina petran*, and so on).

A first image has been isolated.[10] Now, we can try to follow the connections involving this image according to a contiguity link within the same story, in order to see how this image works in Theseus' myth. Which is, then, the image preceding the image of Theseus lifting up the stone? And which image follows it? In this sense, we can see an interesting analogy between the different sources attesting such an image. In every source, the image at issue follows the adulthood achievement by Theseus and it precedes, at the same time, the image of the recognition by Aegeus, and the ensuing succession to the throne.

The fact that the image of somebody lifting up the stone is the link between the adulthood achievement and the change of social position is not an accidental connection. The close analogy between Apollodorus, Plutarchus and Pausanias texts proves that it is not an accident. Each author seems in fact to be 'forced', as it were, to specify the age of Theseus at the moment in which he raises the stone (*labon andros helikian*; *epei de meirakion on*; *hos hekton kai dekaton etos egegonei*; *hos egeneto teleios*). In addiction, in the same authors, the frequent references to the ability requested to Theseus, goes in the very same direction: one can find in the texts some expressions like *dynatos ei*; *hama tei tou somatos rhomei diephainen alken kai phronema meta nou kai syneseos bebaion*; *dynetai*; *arkios ei*; and see also in Pausanias, II 32, 7 and in Pausanias, II 34, 6 the reference to the *bomos* of *Zeus Sthenios*. Such expressions show that the act performed by Theseus is a test that he has to

[10] This image has been isolated by L. Gernet himself in his analysis of Theseus' myth (see Gernet L., Polyvalence des images, 102-111).

overcome using specific abilities, according to specific instructions and in a specific moment; it is a real 'initiation' that marks the passage from a status to another.

Lifting up the stone has therefore a quite clear link with an initiation[11] and with a succession or a power taking.

Therefore, the image of a stone is involved in a mythical tale, when somebody has to take the power. This remark gives us the opportunity to further clarify not only the rich *polyvalence* of such an image, but also how the method I have been describing works.

The Theseus' history is just an example: in a lot of different myths, the stone actually occurs in contexts of taking power, and, more precisely, in contexts of contesting power[12]. Consider, for example, the image of somebody throwing a stone. In several Greek texts, a stone that is thrown against someone becomes a real instrument of contesting power. This is a case in which we can observe many associations starting from this mythical image.

Let's have a quick look to some examples:

In Hesiod' *Theogony* the stones are the weapon used by the Centaurs in their fight against the Titans: one upon another, they launch three hundred *petrai* with their strong hands and overshadowed their enemies.[13]

In Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, Perieres – Menoeceus' charioteer – struck Clymenus, king of the Minyans, with a stone (*lithoi balon*) in a sacred grove of Poseidon at Onchestus.[14]

In Plutarchus' *Quaestiones Graecae,* 13, Phemios kills Hyperochos with a stone, and the Greek expression is exactly the same: *lithoi ballein*. We have a *lithobolia*, as it were, deciding the *monomachia* between the two kings: throwing a stone Phemios kills Hyperochos, the Ainians conquer the region and they begin to honour (and sacrifice to) that specific stone.

The term *lithobolia* has a number of senses. It suggests different practices in different contexts: from the simple and concrete act of throwing a stone (as it literally means) to the festival (*Lithobolia*) celebrated at Troezen in honour of Lamia and Auxesia. In epic poems, throwing a stone (*ballein petroi* or *lithoi*) is a frequent way of killing the enemy[15]; Furthermore, it is

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[11] See MIFL H ('Tests') n. 1562.2: stone as a test to overcome (test of strength).

[12] See MIFL K ('Deceptions') n. 18.3: Throwing contest: bird substituted for stone: the ogre throws a stone; the hero a bird which flies out of sight.

[13] Hesiodus, *Theogonia*, 713-717.

[14] Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca,* II 4, 11.

[15] *Ilias*, VII 263-272; XXI 400-406; XVI 410-414; XX 288-291; VIII 324-329.

the way Periclymenus killed Parthenopaeus[16], or Achilleus killed Cycnus[17]. But a *lithobolia* is also a re-generation process: I'm thinking to the well-known Deucalion and Phyrra's story. In this case, the *lithobolia* has a link with the re-generation of human beings, and with the autochthony problem: Deucalion and Phyrra repopulate the earth by casting stones over their shoulders (*hyper kephales eballen airon lithous*) from which people springs[18]. Then, at Troezen *Lithobolia* becomes a real ritual and festival, an *heorte*, as Pausanias says[19], and in classical Athens the *lithobolia* is a ritual of purification almost 'institutionalised': all magistrates (*archai*) have to *ballein* a *lithos* on the victims of certain murders, in the name of the *polis* and according to the *nomos*, in order to purify the whole city.[20]

But it is impossible – and it is not my aim – to investigate the whole *polyvalence* of the stone. Which then is the sense of this digression?

Our attention is turned in fact only to a specific aspect of the *lithobolia*, in order to tackle a little question of method.

In the *lithoboliai* I have been mentioning above (the exemples of Centaurs against Titans and the *monomachia* between the two kings) as well as in Theseus myth, the stone plays an essential role in taking power. However, we have to specify that, for the reading based on *polyvalence*, this kind of analogy is not enough to work, because the action involving the stone is different in different cases, and the image is different, too. Such a specification clarifies an essential aspect: the *polyvalence*, with its associations and connections doesn't work whatever direction it takes.

According to Gernet's method, I am working on textual images, not on iconographical sources (that would however be very fruitful and, first of all, much less problematic to be clearly and distinctly isolated). But also when the image, as an embedded part of mythological language, takes a concrete form as a textual image rather than as an iconological one, it has to be rigorously and distinctly defined, in order to be properly isolated as 'image'.

Thus, we are isolating, as 'image' in such a sense, the image of a stone lifted up, only in the event that a substantive indicating the stone is near a verb signifying the act of lifting up, or the event that we find a clear expression representing something hidden under a stone, which can be tak-

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16 Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 1156-1162.

17 Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca, Ep*., 3, 31. See also Poimandros that rushed to cast at Polykrithos a big stone (Plutarchus, *Questiones convivales*, 37).

18 Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca,* I 7, 2.

19 Pausanias, II 32, 2.

20 Plato, *Leges*, IX 873a4-c2.

en only if that specific stone is lifted up. All in all, we can talk of an 'image' whenever there is such a complex but specific nexus, rather then when we can see a generic presence of a stone.

Let's now go back to the image of Theseus' stone. We have seen the *connections* related to this image, according to *contiguity* links in the same story. Let's now see the *associations*, according to *analogy* links in different stories. Following this way, we'll be able to see that the image of somebody lifting up the stone is associated to a quite special power taking, not to a generic one. But, in order to observe such a privileged relationship, we have to read a lot of stories, in searching for other stones lifted up.

As I have already pointed out, in Theseus' initiation and in the process to take the power, the stone is lifted up, because it hides the tokens about which we have been talking.[21] But this is not an isolated case.

We can read, for example, another story about the Naiad Nymph Hercyna, a childhood companion of Kore and a daughter of Trophonius, who used to live underground as an oracular god. The Hercyna's story, narrated by Pausanias (IX 39, 2-3), takes place at Lebadeia, in Boeotia, in the grove of Trophonius.

Playing with Kore, Hercyna let loose a goose that she held in her hand. The bird flew into a hollow cave and hid under a stone (*hypo lithoi apokrypsantos*), producing for us in this way the same image of something hidden under a stone (see in the text the expression: *hypo toi lithoi katakeimenon*). At this point, Kore entered the hollow and took the bird.

According to Pausanias, the inhabitants of Lebadeia used to say that the water flowed from the place where Kore (the daughter of Demeter) took up the stone[22], and that the river thereby received the name of Hercyna. The Greek text says, at the line 7: '*hothen aneileto he Kore ton lithon*', where we can observe the same verb *anairo* that we have found in the text about Theseus.

But let's go further on with the associations.

There is another association that is still more meaningful. This new association directly concerns the cult of Demeter, or more precisely, Demeter Kidaria, a cult – as Pausanias reports – of a sanctuary at Pheneos in Arcadia. Here, Demeter has not only a minor role, subordinated to her daughter Kore, as she has in the myth mentioned above.

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[21] The stone was great and it had a hollow just large enough to receive these objects. See Plutarchus, *Theseus,* 3, 6-7.

[22] See MIFL F ('Marvels') 933.2: dry spring restored by removal of certain stones.

Let's read and comment this important text (Pausanias, VIII 15, 1-3): 'beside the sanctuary of Demeter Eleusinian has been set up *Petroma*, as it is called, consisting of two large stones (*lithoi dyo … megaloi*) fitted one to the other. When every other year they (the Pheneatians) celebrate what they call the Greater Rites (*teleten meizona*), they open these stones (*tous lithous … anoigousi*). They take from out them writings that refer to the rites (*es ten teleten*), read them in the hearing of the initiated (*es epekoon ton myston*), and return them on the same night. Most Pheneatians, too, I know, take an oath by the *Petroma* in the most important affairs. On the top is a sphere, with a mask inside (*echon entos*) of Demeter Kidaria' (see in Plutarchus, *Theseus,* 3, 6-7 the similar expression *entos echousan* about the Theseus' stone). Let's now go back to the Pausanias' text: 'This mask is put on by the priest (*ho hiereus*) at the Greater Rites (*en tei meizoni…teletei*), who for some reason or other beats with rods the Folk Underground (*tous hypochthonious*).'

In this case, the Demeter Kidaria's priest, like Theseus, must lift up a stone to take some instruments: a mask to celebrate a kind of mystery cult and some rods to smite the underground folk. We can point out two analogies between the Demeter Kidaria's priest and Theseus: first, both of them must lift a stone to take some objects, and, second, these objects hidden under the stone are, in both cases, the instruments of their power.

So, from the level of a formal analogy, we can now move to the content. In the case of Demeter Kidaria's priest is remarkably clear that the image of somebody lifting up the stone marks, of course, the passage to a prestigious and power position, but not in a generic sense.

In fact, under the stone, the priest finds the instruments to beat the folk underground. The act of lifting up a stone takes him to a special position that owes its prestige to playing a special role in the communication between the living and the dead. In the context of a cult of Demeter, and hence somehow connected with the underworld, by lifting up a stone and taking in this way his instruments, he can establish a direct contact with *hoi hypochthonioi*.

4. Sitting on the stone

Leaving aside this issue, it is appropriate, at this point, to recall that Theseus himself has his own relationship with the afterworld, and that also the image of a stone occurs once more in his story. What is quite interesting to be noted is that the relationship with the afterworld and the image of the stone that I have mentioned above are both connected with an image of a real descent to the underworld.

Like many other heroes and mythical kings, e.g. Odysseus and Heracles, Theseus descends into the kingdom of Hades. Owing to his friend-

ship with Pirithous, Theseus attempts to carry off Kore, the Demeter's daughter, from the underworld, in order to give her to his friend as a wife, in return for his service in the matter of Helen. They had in fact made an agreement: the one of them who, drawing lots, would have Helen, should be obliged to assist his friend in procuring another wife.

The lot fell upon Theseus and consequently he helped Pirithous in the descent to the underworld in order to get Kore.[23] What is surprisingly important for us is the image that precedes the Theseus and Pirithous' descent to the underworld: the image of Theseus sitting on a stone. A *scholium* in Aristophanes' *Knights* (Schol. Aristophanes, *Equites,* 785) makes an explicit reference to this image: there is a stone called *Agelastos* by the Athenians (*Agelastos petra*) on which they say that Theseus was sitting (*hopou kathisai*) just before descending to Hade with Pirithous (*Thesea mellonta katabainein eis Aidou meta Peirithou*).

In addiction, the same *scholium* gives also another explication for the name of this stone. And also this second explication concerns another episode of somebody sitting on a stone: it is Demeter, in this case, who is sitting on the stone (*en tautei kathisai ten Demetran*), crying and searching for her daughter Kore who had disappeared in Hades (*hote ten Koren ezetei*).[24]

As it seems, when somebody attempts to descent or to have some contacts with the afterworld he has to sit on a stone[25]. In other words, such a mythical image has an absolutely special link with the communication between the world of the living and the afterworld. But the associations starting from the image of somebody sitting on a stone don't stop. We find the same stone in another story narrated, once again, by Pausanias.

In the first book of the *Periegesis* (Pausanias, I 43, 2), he reports an episode of Demeter's myth in order to explain a ritual practised by the megarian women. The episode has to do, again, with the rape and Demeteres's quest of Kore. When Demeter is searching for her daughter, she attempts to call her near a *petra.* Consequently, at Megara, 'near the Town-hall is a stone named *Anaclethris* (*Anaklethrida ten petran onomazousin*), because Demeter (if the story is credible – Pausanias cautiously specifies -) here too called her daughter back (*entautha anekalesen auten*) when she was wandering in search of her (*hote ten paida zetousa*).' And the megarian women, in

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[23] Plutarchus, *Theseus,* 31.

[24] For another image of a sitting Demeter, see also *Hymn. Dem.* 184-201, where the goddess' sitting position is related, again, with mystery cults and with the mother's attempt to recall her daughter Kore from the underworld.

[25] See MIFL G ('Ogres') 303.9.9.1 Devil prevents moving of little stones by sitting on it.

the age of Pausanias, perform a ritual repeating the Demeter's lament in the same place, characterized by the presence of a stone. Very often in the *aitiologiai* – the accounts whose aim is to explain the origin of a ritual practice – the stones play a central role. But, in the case of the Pausanias' tale, the *aitiologia* concerning the stone doesn't exhaust its function once the origin of the megarian ritual has been clarified. If we read the same tale following the ways of the mythological language, according to the associations pointed out above, the sense of the *Anaklethris petra* of Megara becomes more complex. According to this viewpoint, the image of the *Anaklethris petra* shows in fact that Demeter needs a stone just when she tries to communicate with her daughter in the afterworld. *Anaklethris petra* is a special name: *Anaklethris,* that is 'recall' (*anakaleo*), immediately clarifies the function of the stone, that is to establish a contact so direct and so strong with the afterworld that the search for a simple contact becomes a real attempt to recall someone from the underworld.

In the path drawn by the associations concerning the image examined above, there is a recurring feature, an analogy that we can't just neglect. All tales have to do with Demeter, and, more precisely, with a specific episode of her myth: the rape of Kore, the pain of the goddess for her daughter's descent to Hades and the attempts of the mother to communicate with Kore and to recall her back from the underworld. As the previous images, also the last image of the chthonian Goddess near the *Anaklethris petra* clearly illustrates the tenacity of a special relationship between the stone, as a privileged medium of communication with the underworld, on the one hand, and Demeter – the mystery cults' Demeter in the first place – on the other hand.

In fact, the presence of Demeter is not merely the recurrence of the same mythical character from a narrative viewpoint; our attention is turned to the contexts and the ways of thinking (and the ways of thinking the death, first of all) that the presence of Demeter implies. We can't summarize here the aspects of the complex and heterogeneous kind of personal religion denoted by the term 'mystery religion', but we can make reference to the individual aspiration to an intense relationship with the divinity and to an afterworld life; and we can try to understand some aspects of these contexts by reading the 'image' of the stone.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I'd like to point out that we find such a role of the stone as a real medium – symbolic as well as material – with the afterworld throughout Greek literature, starting from Homer.

In fact, the stone as a privileged medium between the world of the living and the afterworld doesn't start with the mystery religion; rather, by the cult of Demeter, more ancient ideas, and consequently images, are refunctionalised.

Some Homeric passages, for example, give already evidence to the role played by stone as an entrance, as a fixed route to the underworld. In the *Odyssey* book Circe gives to Odysseus specific instructions about what must be done at the entrance to Hades. Just in the context of these instructions, given to establish a real contact with the underworld, describing the immediate surroundings of the entrance to Hades (*Odyssey*, X, 508-520), Circe makes reference to a stone and to the confluence of the two rivers (Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus) probably converging shortly before they discharge into Acheron as a waterfall over the stone (v. 515, *petre te xynesis te dyo potamon eridoupon*).

Moreover, the stone mentioned by the magician is probably the same stone occurring in the *Odyssey* (XXIV, 9-14). I'm referring to the second *Nekyia*, in which we have to do with a real descent to Hades, this time: the communication with the underworld is, therefore, more direct. What is remarkable is that, among the details of the route to Hades, we find here – again – a stone, the *Leukas petre* (v. 11, *par d'isan Okeanou te rhoas kai Leukada petren*).

To summarize, the relationship between stone, tomb and death is extremely complex. It involves several aspects, each one of them has a different value according to different contexts or different phases in Greek history.

As we have observed above (quoting J.-P. Vernant), the gravestone gradually weakens his immediate and almost identifying link with the dead, and became, first of all, a *sema* or a *mnema*.

On the other hand, the stone's peculiarity as special medium of communication between the world of the living and the afterworld results quite steady and fruitful, also in relatively late sources and, chiefly, in a very special kind of sources.

Reading some mythical images, we have examined, in particular, this last aspect of the stone that is the stone like a link between the living and the afterworld.

We have analysed more accurately the chains of associations and connections starting from two specific images: the image of somebody lifting up a stone and that of somebody sitting on a stone. By reading these 'chains' of images, we have reached the same result. Both practices, (1)

lifting up the stone, by its relationship with an initiation finalized to interact with *hypochthonioi*, and (2) sitting on the stone, by its special link with communication or descent to Hades, seem to have to do with Demeter and Demeter's mystery.

For the most part, as it seems, when the image of a stone playing a central role in the communication with the underworld occurs, we can note at the same time the presence of demetriac contexts or, more precisely, of mysteric contexts.

The centrality of the idea and practice of initiation in mystery religion and cults, as well as their interest toward the afterworld's life, are well-known, and the results of our enquiry about the stone is not in contrast to this important fact; on the contrary, these results contribute, by a different way, to point out the great interest – almost an urgent need – of Demeter's mystery in afterworld life.

The *polyvalence* of the image of the stone is still more rich and complex, and the associations and connections could obviously go further on, through different sources, establishing much more analogy and contiguity links. For example, the image of the stone plays an important role in several kingship myths, and its link with the underworld and with a religious prestige is strictly connected with a social power. Besides, it would be fruitful to focus on the role played by the stone into the *polis* and on the place – symbolic or concrete – that it takes in the institutional, social or religious contexts in classical Athens. But with regard to the tomb like place of cult and imagination other features symbolised by the stone, as we have seen, are perhaps more useful to understand some aspects of the Greek attitude toward the death.

Features and functions of the stone as mythical 'image' change according to different ages and contexts, and such a plasticity is nonetheless its force. Following this plasticity, we can try to understand some aspects of the Greek attitude to death.