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PYRRHUS' MIRACULOUS TOE*

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Abstract. Pyrrhus, the king of Epirus, was an extremely charismatic figure who was always striving to match the prestige of Achilles and of Alexander the Great. He thus established a cult of himself, and was also reputed to exercise thaumaturgical powers. In particular, there was a belief that Pyrrhus' right big toe could cure diseases of the spleen. According to Plutarch, Pyrrhus exercised this power during his lifetime, and the big toe was preserved even after his death because of the miraculous powers attributed to it. The cult of Pyrrhus' big toe was linked to the world of myth, in which healing heroes, such as Pyrrhus' presumed ancestor Achilles, also appear. Although this striking aspect of the cult of Pyrrhus is perhaps the only case of a thaumaturgic kingship in Antiquity, it never led to a systematic royal ideology centred on the figure of Pyrrhus. This failure to develop Pyrrhus' kingship into a programmatic "Hellenistic" kingship is, of course, due to the failure of Pyrrhus' military plans in the Balkans, and to his abrupt death. Moreover, Pyrrhus never exploited Alexander's legacy to legitimize his own existence as a charismatic king and as a living institution. Instead he focused on the legacy of the warring Alexander, since he wanted to appear unstoppable in his conquests, as Alexander had been.

* This article has greatly benefited from suggestions from its anonymous reviewers. All translations from Greek and Latin sources are mine.

A ROYAL RELIC

Pyrrhus' *post mortem* reception is almost as adventurous as his life. It is well known that he died in 272 B.C., during a violent battle in the streets of Argos between his army and that of Antigonus Gonatas. Pyrrhus' inglorious end is not presented uniformly in ancient sources. He was hit in the head either by a woman who threw a tile from a roof or by someone who threw a stone from the walls of the city. He either died instantly or was finished off and beheaded by one of Antigonus' soldiers.[1] It was an *ignobilis atque inhonesta mors*, according to Livy (29.18).

Sources also diverge from each other with regard to the fate of his body. According to Plutarch (*Pyrrh.* 34.9), his head and the rest of his body were brought to Antigonus, who had them cremated. According to Pompeius Trogus/Justin (*Epit.* 25.5.2), Pyrrhus' remains were transferred to his kingdom, Epirus. Valerius Maximus (5.1 *ext*. 4) argues that Pyrrhus' bones were closed in a golden urn and were conveyed by Pyrrhus' son Helenus to the kingdom of Epirus. According to Ovid (*Ib.* 303-304), Pyrrhus' remains were placed in Ambracia (the capital of the kingdom of Epirus), but his tomb was later defiled and his bones were scattered in the streets. According to Pausanias (1.13.8), the remains of Pyrrhus were kept in the sanctuary of Demeter in Argos, which was built on the spot where Pyrrhus died.[2]

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[1] For the different versions of the death of Pyrrhus, see Zodda 1997, 101, 105; Edwards 2011, 113-128; Scuderi 2017, 350-351 n. 350 (listing all the ancient literary testimonies of this episode); and Gorrini and Zizza 2018, 218-219 and 218 n. 108. The main versions are the following: Pompeius Trogus/Justin (*Epit.* 25.5.1): Pyrrhus was hit by a stone that was thrown from the walls of Argos while he was trying to seize that city, where Antigonus was barricaded. Plutarch (*Pyrrh.* 34.1-6): Pyrrhus was hit in the head by a tile that was thrown by a woman while he was fighting in the city and he was beheaded by a soldier of Antigonus. Pausanias (1.13.8): Pyrrhus was hit by a tile while fighting in Argos; this tile was thrown by a mortal woman, but the Argives say that it was thrown by Demeter.

[2] See Zodda 1997, 68; Edwards 2011, 124-127; and Gorrini and Zizza 2018, 218-219 for the fate of Pyrrhus' mortal remains. See also Lévêque 1957, 67-72 for Pausanias' passage on Pyrrhus' tomb. For the role of Ambracia as the political

Interestingly, Pyrrhus' "forerunner" in Italy, Alexander the Molossian, who also led a failed expedition to southern Italy, also had a tragic death (331/330 B.C.) and a cruel *post mortem* destiny.[3] In fact, Livy (8.24) claims that after Alexander was betrayed and killed by some Lucanian exiles, a *foeda laceratio* was made of his body. Alexander was cut in half: one half was sent to Consentia (the capital of the Bruttii), the other one was defiled. Then his remains were reunited and sent to Metapontum, and finally to Epirus.[4] Considering the similarity of this case to Pyrrhus' *ignobilis atque inhonesta mors*, there appears to be a recurrent narrative pattern about the kings of Epirus and their violent demises. Thus, behind both these narratives there may originally have been oral or written sources from Epirus recounting the lives and the tragic deaths of the two Epirote kings. In any case, there may have been biographies about them, which were perhaps written at the court of these rulers.

However, it is debated as to what sources the later, extant accounts on Pyrrhus' death and funeral directly hark back. There was probably an influence of Hieronymus of Cardia on Plutarch and Pompeius Trogus/Justin as far as the mention of Antigonus Gonatas' mild attitude and piety towards the mortal remains of Pyrrhus is concerned.[5] Essentially, Hieronymus did not have a favourable attitude towards Pyrrhus, and instead had a far more positive attitude towards the Antigonids such as Antigonus Gonatas, whose collaborator he was.[6] On the other hand, it is

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centre of Epirus, see Di Leo 2003, 231: Pyrrhus obtained Ambracia from the Macedonians in 295 B.C. and turned it into the capital of his kingdom.

[3] As recalled by Gagé (1954, 141), Alexander the Molossian suffered "une mort perfide et horrible."

[4] Pompeius Trogus/Justin (*Epit.* 12.2.15) recalls that the body of Alexander the Molossian was finally redeemed and buried. See Urso 1998, 39 and Gagé 1954, 141.

[5] Cf. Zodda 1997, 100. For the extent to which Plutarch used Hieronymus as a source in the *Life of Pyrrhus* and in other Lives, see Lévêque 1957, 64-65 and 64 n. 1; Hornblower 1981, 67-68, 70-71. For the use of Hieronymus as a source by Pompeius Trogus/Justin, see Lévêque 1957, 58-59.

[6] It is a common idea that Hieronymus was hostile to Pyrrhus: see Lévêque 1957, 22-26; however, Vattuone (1982, 248) plays down this idea. For Hieronymus in

probably to Proxenus, Pyrrhus' court biographer, that Plutarch owes the notion that Pyrrhus' corpse cannot have been burnt completely, as his right big toe, which had magic powers, survived the fire. It is likely that Proxenus stressed his royal biographee's miraculous aspects.[7]

Pyrrhus' miraculous toe merits our attention. The thaumaturgic quality attributed to his right big toe is probably the most interesting and complex aspect regarding the reception of Pyrrhus among his subjects after his death. However, the notion that Pyrrhus could heal diseases through his toe was not new, as Pyrrhus had been a healer during his lifetime as well, as recorded by Plutarch. There is one passage from Plutarch's *Life of Pyrrhus* that offers a remarkable testimony of Pyrrhus' charismatic kingship (3.6-9):

> Ἦν δ' ὁ Πύρρος τῇ μὲν ἰδέᾳ τοῦ προσώπου φοβερώτερον ἔχων ἢ σεμνότερον τὸ βασιλικόν, πολλοὺς δ' ὀδόντας οὐκ εἶχεν, ἀλλ' ἓν ὀστέον συνεχὲς ἦν ἄνωθεν, οἷον λεπταῖς ἀμυχαῖς τὰς διαφυὰς ὑπογεγραμμένον τῶν ὀδόντων. τοῖς δὲ σπληνιῶσιν ἐδόκει βοηθεῖν ἀλεκτρυόνα θύων λευκόν, ὑπτίων τε κατακειμένων τῷ δεξιῷ ποδὶ πιέζων ἀτρέμα τὸ σπλάγχνον. οὐδεὶς δ' ἦν πένης οὐδ' ἄδοξος οὕτως, ὥστε μὴ τυχεῖν τῆς ἰατρείας δεηθείς. ἐλάμβανε δὲ καὶ τὸν ἀλεκτρυόνα θύσας, καὶ τὸ γέρας τοῦθ' ἥδιστον ἦν αὐτῷ. λέγεται δὲ τοῦ ποδὸς ἐκείνου τὸν μείζονα δάκτυλον ἔχειν δύναμιν θείαν, ὥστε μετὰ τὴν τελευτὴν τοῦ λοιποῦ σώματος κατακαέντος ἀπαθῆ καὶ ἄθικτον ὑπὸ τοῦ πυρὸς εὑρεθῆναι. ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ὕστερον.
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> In his countenance, Pyrrhus had a royal character that was more unsettling than solemn. He had not many teeth, but instead he had a single continuous bone on his upper jaw. This bone appeared as if it was slightly marked by narrow incisions on the spots where teeth are [normally] separated. Apparently, he healed people who suffered from diseases of the spleen by sacrificing a white cock, and while they lay supine, by pressing lightly their belly with his right foot. Nobody was so poor or so obscure as not to receive this cure, after asking for it. He also took the cock after sacrificing it, and enjoyed this gift very much. The

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general, see Hornblower 1981. For his relations to Antigonus Gonatas, see Hornblower 1981, 14-15 and Zodda 1997, 81.

[7] See *infra* for further observations on Proxenus.

> big toe of that foot allegedly had a divine power; thus, after his death, after the rest of his body had been cremated, the toe was found untouched and unaltered by the fire. However, this happened later.

Thus, Pyrrhus had three key marks of kingship: 1. One continuous tooth instead of a series of teeth on his upper jaw. 2. The ability to heal people from diseases of the spleen. Sick individuals had a white rooster sacrificed for him, and he would heal them by touching their belly with his right foot. 3. After Pyrrhus died, his toe was not affected by the fire used to cremate his body, as it had exceptional powers.

There are other testimonies of the healing powers of Pyrrhus' toe, of the cult of this toe, and of the fire not affecting it during Pyrrhus' funeral pyre.[8] Pliny the Elder lists a series of *mirabilia*, including some notions regarding Pyrrhus' toe (*HN* 7.20):

> quorundam corpori partes nascuntur ad aliqua mirabiles, sicut Pyrrho regi pollex in dextro pede, cuius tactu lienosis medebatur. hunc cremari cum reliquo corpore non potuisse tradunt conditumque loculo in templo.
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> The parts of the body of some individuals are by their own nature miraculous for some effects they can provoke, like the big toe of the right foot of King Pyrrhus, by whose touch he healed people with diseases of the spleen. This toe allegedly could not be burnt with the rest of Pyrrhus' body and was placed in a chest in a temple.

Thus, Pyrrhus' big toe reportedly could heal people with diseases of the spleen (here called *lienosi*) and could not be burnt when Pyrrhus' body was cremated. However, Pliny's text also reports the notion that Pyrrhus' toe was kept in a casket located in a temple.[9]

Ianuarius Nepotianus (1.8 *ext*. 12-*nov.* 2), the epitomist of Valerius Maximus, provides us with additional information regarding the sanctuary this relic was kept in, in addition to recalling the notion of Pyrrhus' single continuous tooth that we found in Plutarch and ascribing this characteristic to another king besides Pyrrhus. The relic was placed

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[8] A list of these testimonies is provided by Scuderi 2017, 231 nn. 27-28.

[9] Pliny (*HN* 28.34) also mentions that some parts of the body of some individuals were said to have healing virtues, and briefly recalls his own passage on Pyrrhus' toe: *sicuti diximus de Pyrrhi regis police,* "as we said about Pyrrhus' big toe."

in the sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona, which was the main one in the kingdom of Epirus:

> Pyrrhi regis Epirotarum pollex e dextro pede remedio erat, si cuius renes tumentes eo tetigisset. idem Pyrrhus, cum ab Antigono victore iussus esset exuri, sic arsit ut pollex igni inveniretur intactus. qui digitus aureo loculo inclusus est et in antiquissimo templo Dodonaei Iovis conditus. praedictus Pyrrhus et Pausanias unum os pro dentibus habuerunt, sed districtum at dentium similitudinem.
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> The right big toe of Pyrrhus, the king of Epirus, could heal kidneys affected by tumours if Pyrrhus touched them with it. Pyrrhus' body, when Antigonus, who vanquished him, ordered it to be cremated, burnt in such a way that the same big toe was found untouched by the fire. This toe was placed in a golden casket and was kept in the very ancient temple of Jupiter in Dodona. The same Pyrrhus and Pausanias had a single bone instead of the teeth, but it was divided like a series of teeth.

Ianuarius Nepotianus is mistaken in referring to "kidneys" instead of spleens, and in mentioning a certain Pausanias instead of Prusias II, the King of Bithynia, whose teeth apparently also had the peculiar conformation of Pyrrhus' teeth; the latter mistake, however, may be due to an error in the manuscripts.[10] It has been correctly observed that the passage from Pliny that we have quoted (*HN* 7.20) presents an abridged version of the same account as that reported by Nepotianus, with greater precision only in relation to the definition of the individuals cured by the miraculous toe, who are described as *lienosi*. It therefore seems unlikely that Nepotianus depends on Pliny's less detailed text, and we should instead suppose the existence of a common source that has not been preserved. Considering that Valerius Maximus is mentioned among Pliny's sources for the seventh and thirty-third books of the *Naturalis historia* (1) and Pyrrhus' miraculous toe is mentioned in book seven, both Pliny and Nepotianus are likely to be drawing on a lost pas-

[10] See Raschieri 2020, 163 n. 46. See also *infra* for Prusias II's remarkable teeth in Valerius Maximus' *Facta et dicta memorabilia*.

sage from the *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, originally narrated after Val. Max. 1.8 *ext*. 12.[11]

Plutarch may have also used this written account by Valerius Maximus; however, it is equally possible that Plutarch used oral sources or other lost written sources in relation to this piece of information.[12]

The presence of Pyrrhus' big toe in the temple of Zeus at Dodona might allude to an anatomical votive that might have been kept there. Body part votives are more or less naturalistic representations of limbs, genitalia, and viscera, and were found in sacral contexts.[13] Votives representing feet are particularly interesting for our case. This kind of votive can be explained through a long tradition according to which feet or footprints were a distinctive sign of an individual, a tradition that is widely attested in Greek literary sources, and in the archaeological record from all periods beginning in Pharaonic Egypt until Late Antiquity.[14] We cannot rule out that Pyrrhus dedicated to the temple of Dodona

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[11] Raschieri 2020, 163. See Raschieri 2020, 163 n. 49 for the possibility that different editions of Valerius Maximus existed and for the existence of *lacunae* in the preserved text of Valerius Maximus.

[12] For Plutarch's use of Valerius Maximus as a source in the *Quaestiones Romanae*, see Van der Stockt 1987, 283, 285-287.

[13] Schörner 2015, 397-400, with information on anatomical votives, which were widespread in the Hellenistic and the Roman Imperial Era. For body part votives and their function, see Hughes 2017; Graham and Draycott 2017.

[14] See Chiarini 2017, 147-155: in the ancient world, an individual's feet were one of her/his most important marks of recognition and symbolic representation. Large amounts of votive feet were found in sanctuaries as votive dedications made after the healing of mobility impairment or other types of sicknesses. As a marker (γνώρισμα) of their presence, Greeks and Romans frequently left sculpted feet and, more frequently, footprints. Footprints or feet might be used as a sign of a god's presence, whether in a temple or as a personal amulet. Thus, feet were the anatomical element chosen to represent identity as well as to ensure the god's presence and protection. See also Hughes 2017, 26, 33, 37-39, 67, 71, 73-74, 79-81, 109-110, 118, 120-123, 125, 141, 145, 158, 164-167, 169-170 for anatomical votives representing legs and feet, and 190-191 for a modern example of relics of feet: in the sanctuary of the Madonna dell'Arco at Sant'Anastasia near Naples, there is an iron cage containing the remains of the feet of a local woman of the 16th century.

a votive representing his big toe, or that there was a votive representing a big toe in Dodona, which was *a posteriori* interpreted as Pyrrhus' toe. Afterwards, the notion of Pyrrhus' big toe being kept in Dodona may have ended up in literary sources.

With regard to the fact that Pyrrhus' big toe could not be cremated, there are interesting parallels in Latin literature. The impossibility to cremate it recalls Pliny's description of the remains of Germanicus after his cremation (*HN* 11.187):

> negatur cremari posse in iis qui cardiaco morbo obierint, negatur et veneno interemptis. certe exstat oratio Vitelli, qua Gnaeum Pisonem eius sceleris coarguit, hoc usus argumento palamque testatus non potuisse ob venenum cor Germanici Caesaris cremari. contra genere morbi defensus est Piso.
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> Apparently, [the heart of] those who die of cardialgia cannot be cremated, as well as [the heart of] those who die of poisoning. Of course, there is an oration by Vitellius, in which he accuses Gnaeus Piso of that crime, by using this argument and openly demonstrating that the Caesar Germanicus' heart could not be cremated because of the poisoning. On the other hand, Piso was defended by attributing this fact to a particular kind of disease.

Suetonius also recalls this episode (*Calig.* 1.2):

> Consul deinde iterum creatus ac prius quam honorem iniret ad componendum Orientis statum expulsus, cum Armeniae regem devicisset, Cappadociam in provinciae formam redegisset, annum agens aetatis quartum et tricensimum diuturno morbo Antiochiae obiit, non sine veneni suspicione. nam praeter livores, qui toto corpore erant, et spumas, quae per os fluebant, cremati quoque cor inter ossa incorruptum repertum est, cuius ea natura existimatur, ut tinctum veneno igne confici nequeat.
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> After [Germanicus] was made consul for the second time and before he took office, he was sent to restore order in the East. After he defeated the king of Armenia and turned Cappadocia into a province, at the age of thirty-four he died of a long sickness in Antioch, not without suspicion of poisoning. Indeed, apart from the bruises that Germanicus had over all his body, and apart from the foam that he expelled from his

> mouth, his heart, after he was cremated, was also found unaltered [by the fire] among his bones. In fact, opinion has it that by its own nature, a heart that is soaked in poison cannot be destroyed by fire.

Thus, according to Pliny and Suetonius, one testimony to the poisoning of Germanicus by Piso was that Germanicus' heart could not be burnt, as it was made incombustible by poison.[15] The belief that the body of someone who had been poisoned was impossible to cremate completely is also mentioned by Plutarch (*Ti. Gracch.* 13.4-5), who narrates that when a friend of Tiberius Gracchus was apparently poisoned, cremating his body proved to be a difficult task. In other cases, the impossibility of burning a particular part of a body under normal circumstances was considered to be something miraculous. Pyrrhus' big toe falls into this category.[16]

It has been claimed that Pyrrhus was the first thaumaturge king in Greek history,[17] and according to Pierre Lévêque, who refers to Marc Bloch's seminal monograph on the "Royal Touch," this was the only case of a thaumaturge king in classical antiquity.[18] The evidence regarding Pyrrhus' healing powers is, indeed, exceptional. We can only find parallels for individual aspects of the narrative regarding his charismatic kingship, but there is no other case of Hellenistic kingship presenting all these aspects together.

Valerius Maximus (1.8 *ext*. 12), as well as Ianuarius Nepotianus (1.8 *ext*. 12-*nov.* 2), also attribute the characteristic of the single continuous tooth to King Prusias II of Bithynia.[19] As T. C. Allbutt recalls, according to Pliny (*HN* 28.43), attacks of epilepsy could be stopped if the big toes of the sick individuals were stung and drops of blood deriving from that sting were sprinkled on their faces, or if a virgin girl touched them with her right thumb – or big toe (*si pollices pedum pungantur eaeque gut-*

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[15] Noy 2000, 188.

[16] All these cases of failed cremations are collected by Noy 2000, 188.

[17] Nenci 1963, 9; Virgilio ²2003, 130.

[18] Lévêque 1957, 217-218. Cf. Bloch 1924, 59 n. 2: as far as we know, no other king of Epirus had that supernatural gift.

[19] As seen *supra*, Prusias II is mistakenly called Pausanias in Nepotianus' text.

tae referantur in faciem, aut si virgo dextro pollice attingat). In addition, Alexander of Tralles (6th century A.D.) mentioned some fingers that had healing virtues (ἰατρικοὶ δάκτυλοι). Allbutt explains these passages by stating that big toes and thumbs could refer to a phallic sphere and hence to the powers allegedly connected to it. There were also cases of healings obtained by kissing feet, especially in the Middle Ages.[20]

The Emperor Vespasian was reputed to have healed diseases through his saliva, and by pressing his foot on the sick part of the bodies of some individuals in A.D. 69/70 at the Serapeum of Alexandria:

> Tac. *Hist.* 4.81: precabaturque principem ut genas et oculorum orbis dignaretur respergere oris excremento. alius manum aeger eodem deo auctore ut pede ac vestigio Caesaris calcaretur orabat.
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> He begged the ruler [sc. Vespasian] to be so generous as to cover his [sc. the patient's] cheeks and eyes with his own saliva. Another one, who had a sick hand, at the suggestion of the same god [sc. Serapis] begged the Caesar that he would tread on his hand with his foot.
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> Suet. *Vesp.* 7.2: restituturum oculos, si inspuisset; confirmaturum crus, si dignaretur calce contingere.
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> [Vespasian] would heal his eyes by spitting on them; he would strengthen his leg by deigning to touch it with his heel.

While Suetonius (*Vesp*. 7) seems to accept that this event was true, Tacitus (*Hist*. 4.81) takes a sceptical stance with regard to Vespasian's healing powers. The second procedure mentioned by both authors (healing with the foot) is the same as the one that Pyrrhus followed with regard to the individuals affected by diseases of the spleen. On the other hand, the differences between the two cases have been stressed by scholars: Pyrrhus' healings share the use of the foot with those made by Vespasian, but they lack the individualised treatment provided by Vespasian (an individual's sickness is healed by the emperor's saliva, while another individual's sickness is healed by the emperor's foot). The best parallels for Vespasian's healings are not found in the case of Pyrrhus

[20] Allbutt 1909, 1601. For the reference to Alexander of Tralles, see Alex. Trall. *Therap.* (ed. Puschmann 1879, vol. II: 475, 585).

but in the corpus of inscriptions concerning healings by Asclepius.[21] The notion that Pyrrhus' toe could heal diseases of the spleen reflects the original belief that a person's strengths were concentrated especially in the extremities of the body: in the head, the hands, the feet (as in the case of Vespasian), the ears, and the toes.[22]

To what political ends did the cult of Pyrrhus' toe aim? Pyrrhus' royal ideology has been defined as "eastern and absolute"; he dreamed of establishing a great empire like Alexander the Great had, but in the West instead of the East.[23] According to Giuseppe Nenci, in order to place himself above ethnic and nationalistic disputes, Pyrrhus appealed to his thaumaturgical virtues as well as to the divine character of his persona, a prerequisite for the creation of a supranational personal monarchy.[24] According to P. Lévêque, he appealed to his exceptional strength, and the passages on Pyrrhus' physical virtues in Plutarch's *Life of Pyrrhus* seem to hark back to Proxenus.[25] However, according to Lévêque, Pyrrhus' kingship had a national character, as suggested by the belief that he could heal diseases with the big toe of his right foot, a belief that had an "ethnic" flavour. Pyrrhus had, in fact, a close connection with the temple of Zeus at Dodona in Epirus, and his miraculous toe was kept in a casket in that temple after his death. Furthermore, Lévêque assumes archaic magical origins of the national kingship in Epirus.[26]

As shown by G. Nenci and B. Virgilio, there were distinctive dynastic symbols in the Hellenistic world. The anchor was the emblem of the Seleucid kings, traced back to the birthmark on the body of Seleucus I,

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[21] Luke 2010, 92.

[22] Pfister 1928, 187. The similarity of the case of Pyrrhus to the case of Vespasian is also stressed by Gagé 1954, 146 and Henrichs 1968, 68-69. Finally, see Cracco Ruggini 1979, 587-589 for Pyrrhus' and Vespasian's healing powers.

[23] Santagati Ruggeri 1997, 72, 85-86.

[24] Nenci 1953, 73.

[25] Lévêque 1957, 29.

[26] Lévêque 1957, 217-218, 270-271. According to Gagé (1954, 144-150), who researched the deep religious connections of the cult of Pyrrhus' big toe with cults of the Earth, Pyrrhus' healings are also reminiscent of the healings at Epidaurus. Gorrini and Zizza (2018, 218 n. 106) assume that Pyrrhus used Asclepius as a model.

which had the shape of an anchor. Pyrrhus, on the other hand, was characterized by the particular conformation of his teeth. Pyrrhus' *signum regalitatis* (his teeth), mentioned by Plutarch and Ianuarius Nepotianus, also inspired Prusias II of Bithynia.[27]

What is the source of the information on Pyrrhus' royal touch and the destiny of his toe? Proxenus, who was the interpreter of Pyrrhus' ideology, and according to some scholars also composed Pyrrhus' Memoirs, conferred an epic atmosphere to Pyrrhus' heroic deeds, and underscored his connections to his ancestor Achilles.[28] He also highlighted the "miracles," dreams, and premonitory signs sent to Pyrrhus by the gods, as well as the solemn consecrations celebrating his victories over the Galatians and Macedonians. Proxenus also helped create the aura of a thaumaturgic king around Pyrrhus.[29] G. Nenci also felt that the information about Pyrrhus' toe came from Proxenus and that these pieces of information were linked to each other by royal propaganda.[30] Proxenus, as a member of Pyrrhus' court, must have had easy access to his memoirs, and Hieronymus, it has been suggested, consulted them with Antigonus Gonatas when, after Pyrrhus' death, Pyrrhus' baggage train fell into the hands of Antigonus.[31]

The idea of Pyrrhus as a thaumaturgic king was consistent with the view of a ruler as a "philanthropist" which was typical of the Hellenistic age. Thus, Pyrrhus was a representation of Asclepius, the god of

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[27] Nenci 1963, 7-8; Virgilio (²2003, 130), also focuses on Pyrrhus' ability to heal people affected by spleen diseases. According to Virgilio, Pyrrhus thus falls into the category of the "wizard kings." However, as shown by Muccioli (2018, 132), when the cult of kings is mentioned in ancient literature, it is generally criticised or ridiculed. For the anchor as the symbol of the Seleucids, see also Just. *Epit*. 15.4.4-5, 9; App. *Syr*. 287 (ed. Gabba, Roos, and Viereck 1962).

[28] Zodda 1997, 76, 81-83; cf. Timpe 2017, 177. Primo (2011) argues instead that there was no connection between the extant fragments of Pyrrhus' *Hypomnemata* (Memoirs) and the fragments of Proxenus. Proxenus, according to him, was above all an erudite and antiquarian author.

[29] Zodda 1997, 82.

[30] Nenci 1963, 5, 7.

[31] Lévêque 1957, 20-22.

medicine and healing – which is also consistent with the fact that healing diseases with the right part of the healer's body was typical of ancient healings.[32] Lucian of Samosata (*Pro laps.* 11) also presents a pious Pyrrhus, who makes sacrifices to the gods, consecrates gifts to temples, and asks nothing of the gods except for his own physical health.[33]

PYRRHUS IN THE WORLD OF MYTH

It was not easy to be the cousin of Alexander the Great. Throughout his life, Pyrrhus, the king of Epirus, tried to match the glory of his celebrated relative, as well as trying to match the fame of Achilles, Pyrrhus' mythical ancestor.[34] There was a strong mythological and genealogical interest around Pyrrhus, as he was said to be connected to Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, and to Lanassa, the granddaughter of Heracles.[35] Pyrrhus' connections to Alexander were essentially not much different from his relations to Achilles and Heracles, as the Greeks did not separate history from what we perceive as myth.[36] Through these connections, through his exceptional strength and military abilities, and

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[32] Nenci 1963, 10-12.

[33] Nenci 1953, 48.

[34] For the ideological use of the mythical figure of Achilles by Pyrrhus, see Schettino 2009, 173, 178 n. 23, and *infra* in my text. For Pyrrhus' *imitatio Alexandri*, see Plut. *Pyrrh.* 8.2; 11.4-5; Just. *Epit*. 18.1.2; Mossman 1992; Edwards 2011, 119; Romero-González 2019, 160-161, and *infra* in my text. For Pyrrhus and Alexander's family relations, see Buszard 2008, 199 and Schettino 2015, 95. For Pyrrhus' connection to his two main models, Alexander and Achilles, see Lévêque 1957, 31-32, 88.

[35] Plut. *Pyrrh*. 1.1-2; 7.7; Just. *Epit*. 17.3.3-4; Zodda 1997, 82. Pyrrhus also established *ludi* in honour of Heracles in Sicily: see Plut. *Pyrrh.* 22.8-12; Santagati Ruggeri 1997, 55-56. When Pyrrhus was a child, his life was saved by a man named Achilles: see Plut. *Pyrrh.* 2.8. Alexander the Great had also had a connection and a devotion to Heracles and Achilles: see Plut. *Alex*. 2.1, 5.8, 15.7-9, 24.5, 75.5; Just. *Epit*. 11.4.5, 12.7.13; Boardman 2004, 74-75.

[36] Higbie 2003, 207; Boardman 2004, xiii; Ampolo 2014, 297-298 n. 7. Plutarch (*Thes*. 1.5) highlights that there are differences between myth and history, but ultimately shows that there can be continuity between them, as early history can be reconstructed through myth, although with several difficulties. For this passage, see Tatum 1996, 143.

through his alleged thaumaturgical powers, Pyrrhus built a myth around himself and a cult of his own charismatic persona.[37]

Pyrrhus' function as a healer seems to be especially connected to the myth of Pyrrhus as a persona, which was built both by himself and by the individuals who surrounded him. As Pyrrhus had Achilles as a model for his own life, it seems probable that the thaumaturgic virtues of Pyrrhus were also connected to Achilles. In fact, Achilles too was a healer. With his spear, Achilles healed Telephus from a wound, a wound that Achilles himself had provoked with the same spear. Achilles' spear had the double quality of hurting and healing the same wounds it had caused, through a mechanism that can be explained by the magical notion of *similia similibus* – the very cause of a disease can become the means of healing.[38] It is possible that, as a kind of sympathetic magic, therapeutic virtues were extended to other military "relics," as some weapons apparently could both hurt and heal.[39]

The genealogy of Pyrrhus and the idea that he descended from Achilles were his own work allied with court historiography.[40] P. Lévêque claims that the comparison between Achilles and Pyrrhus derived from Proxenus.[41] However, it is probable that Pyrrhus, as portrayed by Plutarch, was not born as the legitimate heir of Achilles. Rather, he attempted to follow his model by force and by subverting previously existing genealogies.[42]

Pyrrhus' connection with the Aeacidae and especially with Achilles as the hero *par excellence* of Phthiotis, in the southern part of Thessaly,

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[37] For Pyrrhus' extraordinary strength and military virtues, see Plut. *Pyrrh.* 15.7-8; 16.11; 24.5-6; 26.1; 30.8-10; Just. *Epit*. 25.5.3-6.

[38] Allbutt 1909, 1604; Boardman 2004, 75-76. There was also at least one "relic" from Greek temples representing Achilles' spear: see Boardman 2004, 75-76.

[39] Boardman 2004, 75-76.

[40] According to Nenci (1953, 49, 65), these themes are also attested by coin types. For the coins, see also Gorrini and Zizza 2018, 216.

[41] Lévêque 1957, 31-32.

[42] Edwards 2011, 118-119. In addition, according to Edwards (2011, 123), the idea that Pyrrhus' big toe survived cremation was a grotesque parody of the story of Achilles' heel.

was confirmed by Pyrrhus' donation of shields taken from conquered Galatians in the Thessalian sanctuary of Athena Itonia.[43]

Pyrrhus thus had a strong connection to some temples. In the Lindian Chronicle (99 B.C.) there is a mention of a donation of weapons to the sanctuary of Athena in Lindos made by Pyrrhus at the suggestion of the oracle of Dodona.[44] Pyrrhus donated to the temple of Athena in Lindos, among other weapons, the same kind of military gear (caltrops) that Alexander the Great had donated to the same temple, which is an example of *imitatio Alexandri* by Pyrrhus.[45] According to J. Gagé, Pyrrhus was a sort of "sacred king" in Dodona; the vocation of Pyrrhus as the new Achilles, too, was suggested to him by the oracle of Dodona.[46] It should be stressed that Dodona was an extremely important religious centre during Pyrrhus' rule over Epirus.[47]

Plutarch's focus on Pyrrhus' toe seems to derive from Plutarch's interest in ancient, hallowed objects, i.e., "relics." Such relics, which were often connected to sanctuaries, appear here and there in Plutarch's works.[48] Plutarch's interest in these objects reflects his wider interest in *mirabilia*, which also includes objects and places recalling the death of famous individuals (especially their tombs), and objects that had belonged to these individuals. In addition, the funerals of the biographees

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[43] Plut. *Pyrrh*. 26.9-10; Paus. 1.13.2-3; Gorrini and Zizza 2018, 202-206. In addition, Pyrrhus' mother, Phthia, was the daughter of a Thessalian leader (named Menon): Plut. *Pyrrh.* 1.6-7. Thessaly was associated with the Kingdom of Macedon at the time of Pyrrhus; thus, rulers of Macedon were also rulers of Thessaly: see Plut. *Demetr*. 39.1.

[44] *Lind. Temp. Chron.* XL (ed. Blinkenberg 1941). See Gagé 1954, 145; Lévêque 1957, 16, 400; Higbie 2003, 3, 138-139; Boardman 2004, 15, 115-117; Ampolo 2014, 310; Gorrini and Zizza 2018, 214.

[45] *Lind. Temp. Chron.* XXXVIII.

[46] Gagé 1954, 145, 149-150. Pyrrhus also dedicated shields taken from Antigonus Gonatas' troops to the temple of Zeus at Dodona: see Paus. 1.13.3.

[47] Di Leo 2003, 228.

[48] A list of "Plutarchan relics," as well as similar objects mentioned in other Greek texts, has been collected by Boardman 2004, 239-275.

are always narrated in Plutarch's *Lives*, and the honours to their memory are also mentioned.[49]

Plutarch may thus have focused on Pyrrhus' toe because of his wider interest in *mirabilia* and relics. There are several examples of Plutarch's interest in objects left by famous individuals or connected to them. Some of them are objects that had belonged to ancient heroes, such as Paris' lyre (*Alex*. 15.9), or Odysseus' spear and helmet (*Marc*. 20.3).[50] Some examples are from recent history, like a dagger that had been taken in battle from Caesar and that was kept in a temple in Gaul (*Caes*. 26.8). Plutarch also mentions dedications to temples, such as Marcellus' donations to sanctuaries in Rome, in Sicily and in the Greek world (*Marc.* 30.4-5); Pyrrhus' donation of shields to Athena Itonia, which is also reported by Plutarch, has already been mentioned.

Besides Plutarch, the general Greek interest in relics, including parts of the bodies of heroes is well known.[51] The Greeks of the Hellenistic and Imperial age were especially interested in the relics of heroes, but the existence of objects left by historical figures is also recorded. As for historical characters, the most important source is probably the Lindian Chronicle, listing not only objects reportedly dedicated to Athena Lindia during the mythical era, but also in more recent times, up to the donations, mostly represented by weapons, made by Alexander the Great

[49] See Muccioli 2018, 137. For Plutarch's interest in the funerals and burials of the biographees, see also La Penna 1987, 278-279. Some examples follow. Plut. *Alex*. 15.8: Alexander's visit to the grave of Achilles in Ilion; *Alex*. 69.3-4: Cyrus' grave; *Alex* 72.4-7: Hephaestion's funeral and the plans for his funerary monument; *Ant*. 84.3-85.1: Antony's grave; *Ant*. 86.7: Cleopatra's burial; *Arist*. 27.1: Aristides' grave; *Cim*. 4.2: Thucydides' grave; *Cim*. 8.5-6: transfer of the remains of Theseus from Skyros to Athens by Cimon; *Cim*. 19.4: Cimon's grave; *Lys*. 30.4-5: Lysander's burial. See also *infra* for the episode involving the remains of Theseus. I am grateful to Dr Eva Falaschi for providing me with this list.

[50] See Boardman 2004, 268-269.

[51] This kind of interest has been systematically studied by Pfister (1909-1912) and Boardman (2004).

and some Hellenistic kings such as one of the Ptolemies, Pyrrhus, and Philip V.[52]

Interestingly, with regard to heroes, there were also fingers that had belonged to heroes and that were kept as relics. One was mentioned by Ptolomaeus Chennus and had belonged to Heracles. The other one was mentioned by Pausanias and had belonged to Orestes. Ptolomaeus Chennus (in Phot. *Bibl.* 147a-b) tells that the Nemean lion had torn off a finger of Heracles, who, according to legend, buried his finger in Sparta in a tomb marked by the statue of a lion. Pausanias (8.34.2-3), on the other hand, recounts that Orestes, in a fit of madness, bit off one of his own fingers; this finger was then commemorated by a monument.[53] Orestes' bones, which were apparently found in Tegea, are mentioned by Herodotus in a famous passage (1.67-68).[54]

Given that the Greeks did not make a clear separation between history and myth,[55] relics from the heroic age were considered as real and concrete testimonies of the Greek past, and often had a strong political value. Plutarch reports a story that recalls the tale of Orestes' bones, which had been told by Herodotus. According to Plutarch's biographies of Cimon and of Theseus, Cimon carried out an oracular instruction to collect Theseus' bones from the pirate-infested Skyros (*Cim*. 8.5). An omen on the island revealed the site of Theseus' tomb (*Thes*. 36.1-2), and Cimon discovered a skeleton of amazing size within it. He then transported the skeleton to Athens, where he built a temple to Theseus.[56] Similar incidents can be found in Plutarch as well as in other sources. According to Plutarch, King Agesilaus moved Alcmene's bones from Haliartus in Boeotia to Sparta in *ca.* 382 B.C., despite the Haliartans' complaints (*De gen.* 577e).

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[52] *Lind. Temp. Chron.* XXXVIII-XLII. For bibliography on the Lindian Chronicle, see *supra*, n. 44.

[53] Boardman 2004, 22.

[54] Giroux 2020, 542: Hdt. 1.67-68 and Paus. 3.3.6-7 narrate that the Spartans were advised by an oracle to bring the bones of Orestes to Sparta. After the bones were transferred from Tegea to Sparta, the Spartans managed to defeat the Tegeans.

[55] See *supra*.

[56] Giroux 2020, 539. See also Zaccarini 2015.

According to Polyaenus, Rhesus' bones were transferred from Troy to Amphipolis (*Strat.* 6.53).[57]

As mentioned above, many of these relics were preserved in sanctuaries. In fact, temples and the memories conserved by them play a key role in the story of Pyrrhus' toe, which was apparently kept as a relic in the temple of Zeus in Dodona. As mentioned, Pyrrhus had a connection to the temple of Dodona, to that of Athena Itonia, and to that of Athena Lindia.

All this seems to highlight the "mythical" quality of Pyrrhus' toe. Pyrrhus' toe was preserved by the following generations, in the same way as the fingers of heroes of the mythical age, Heracles and Orestes, were allegedly preserved. The existence of Pyrrhus' miraculous toe thus served to build a mythical discourse on the King of Epirus. He either built this myth himself, or men of his court (including Proxenus) built it, or both – he may have started this discourse, and men at court and other inhabitants of Epirus perhaps continued it. It was a strongly mythical discourse as it particularly recalled Pyrrhus' own use of the model provided by Achilles, who was his presumed ancestor, and was also a healing hero, through his magical spear.

However, Pyrrhus was ultimately more concerned about his own military campaigns than about establishing rituals in honour of himself. Plutarch wrote that Pyrrhus did not imitate Alexander the Great by rituals and by his own appearance, but by his very military activity (*Pyrrh.* 8.2).[58]

> καὶ γὰρ ὄψιν ᾤοντο καὶ τάχος ἐοικέναι καὶ κίνημα τοῖς Ἀλεξάνδρου, καὶ τῆς φορᾶς ἐκείνου καὶ βίας παρὰ τοὺς ἀγῶνας ἐν τούτῳ σκιάς τινας ὁρᾶσθαι καὶ μιμήματα, τῶν μὲν ἄλλων βασιλέων ἐν πορφύραις καὶ δορυφόροις καὶ κλίσει τραχήλου καὶ τῷ μεῖζον διαλέγεσθαι, μόνου δὲ Πύρρου τοῖς ὅπλοις καὶ ταῖς χερσὶν ἐπιδεικνυμένου τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον.
>
> For they found his appearance and rapidity and movements to be similar to those of Alexander, and that in him shadows and imitations could be seen of Alexander's impulse and strength in battle. While other kings

[57] Giroux 2020, 541. Plutarch thought that bone transfer could be a useful strategy, especially in political negotiations, see Giroux 2020, 545.

[58] For this passage, see Durán Mañas 2005, 50; Gorrini and Zizza 2018, 216.

> showed signs of [being the heirs of] Alexander by means of cloths of purple, spear-bearers, the inclination of their necks, and in speaking with grandeur, only Pyrrhus did that by means of weapons and warfare.

Plutarch also says (*Pyrrh.* 3.6) that "in his countenance, Pyrrhus had a royal character that was more unsettling than solemn" (Ἦν δ' ὁ Πύρρος τῇ μὲν ἰδέᾳ τοῦ προσώπου φοβερώτερον ἔχων ἢ σεμνότερον τὸ βασιλικόν). Pyrrhus thus inspired no veneration for the very fact that he was a king, but through his own actions, especially his military operations. Very similar considerations are made on Pyrrhus by Plutarch in the *Life of Demetrius*.[59] Thus, for Plutarch, Pyrrhus was indeed the strongest military leader among the Diadochi, and the only one who could be compared to Alexander the Great from a military point of view.[60]

According to P. Lévêque, there is no literary or epigraphic testimony of a dynastic cult in Epirus.[61] We should consider that Pyrrhus represented himself mainly as a warrior king, while other Hellenistic kings such as the Ptolemies, starting from Ptolemy I, used the cult of Alexander in order to create a cult of their own dynasty.[62] In the Hellenistic world, there were cults established spontaneously by individual city communities, as well as dynastic cults promoted and controlled directly by the rulers. In Egypt, the Ptolemies inaugurated the cult of deceased rulers, and later promoted the cult of living rulers.[63]

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[59] Plut. *Demetr.* 41.5: καὶ πολλοῖς ἐπήει λέγειν τῶν Μακεδόνων, ὡς ἐν μόνῳ τούτῳ τῶν βασιλέων εἴδωλον ἐνορῷτο τῆς Ἀλεξάνδρου τόλμης, οἱ δ' ἄλλοι, καὶ μάλιστα Δημήτριος, ὡς ἐπὶ σκηνῆς τὸ βάρος ὑποκρίνοιντο καὶ τὸν ὄγκον τοῦ ἀνδρός ("Many of the Macedonians, indeed, happened to say that of all the kings only in him [sc. Pyrrhus] an image could be seen of Alexander's bravery, while the others, and Demetrius in particular, portrayed Alexander's majesty and pomp as if they were on a stage"). For this passage of the *Life of Demetrius*, see Tatum 1996, 143. For the importance of the appearance and bearing of a Hellenistic king according to Plutarch, see Tatum 1996, 140-141.

[60] See Martínez Lacy 1995, 224.

[61] Lévêque 1957, 217.

[62] Virgilio ²2003, 52, 110.

[63] Letta 2020, 6.

In my opinion, Pyrrhus did not use the model of Alexander systematically in order to build a royal cult of himself or of his dynasty, unlike what other Hellenistic kings did. The story of his miraculous toe is thus not the sign of a systematic cult in Epirus. Aspects of the cult of Pyrrhus rather appear to be random and do not seem to have been channelled into a fixed ritual. There was no clear plan to create a royal ideology around Pyrrhus. Even if Pyrrhus himself made some sporadic attempts, they did not lead to the successful establishment of a dynasty of kings in Epirus. In addition, the kingdom of Epirus became very weak after Pyrrhus' death,[64] so there was no further occasion for building a dynastic cult in that kingdom.

Pyrrhus' healings through his toe highlight Pyrrhus' connection to the world of mythical ancestors and heroes. The sudden death of Pyrrhus during his campaign against Antigonus Gonatas, and the interruption of the expansion of Epirus it provoked, means that we cannot know whether he had intended to establish a "Hellenistic" dynastic cult after his potential victory.

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[64] Gagé 1954, 137. Timpe (2017, 168) argues that Pyrrhus' royal power, which depended completely on Pyrrhus himself, ended with him; however, the Molossian royal dynasty, of which he had been part, did not cease to exist, and the stability of the kingdom of his son, Alexander II, is remarkable.

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