

The list of Greek athletes known to have received cultic honors as heroes or gods consists of approximately a dozen individuals. The purpose of this paper is to argue that the seventh-century Olympic victor Chionis of Sparta should be added to that list and that Chionis was heroized sometime around 470 BCE at the behest of members of the Agiad royal family in order to help restore their standing in Spartan society. These conclusions are of considerable import for three reasons. First, they offer a rare glimpse into political activity within Spartan society in the fifth century and, more specifically, into how status competition between elite Spartan families was played out. Chionis' heroization shows the Agiads displaying a perhaps surprising ingenuity in their rivalry with their peers. Second, they demonstrate that the granting of cultic honors to athletes could serve the interests of sub-*polis* groups, rather than the *polis* as a whole, and thus had the potential to exacerbate intra-communal tensions. Third, they suggest that the number of heroized athletes has been considerably underestimated.

This paper contributes to the relevant scholarship in a number of different ways. None of the previous scholarship on the heroization of athletes, which includes Fontenrose (1968), Bohringer (1979), Kurke (1993), Boehringer (1996), Bentz and Mann (2001), and Currie (2005), identifies Chionis as the object of heroic cult. Moreover, the views of Bohringer and Boehringer, that the establishment of cults for athletes helped resolve intra-communal tensions, have been widely accepted. In demonstrating that the Agiads were the driving force behind Chionis' heroization, this paper contributes to a growing body of work (e.g., Hodkinson 1983, 2000) that seeks to show that underneath a veneer of egalitarianism, elite families always competed for power and prestige in Sparta. The addition of Chionis to the roster of athletes known to have been heroized is an indication that that roster is far from complete.

The key piece of evidence for Chionis' heroization is a passage from Pausanias' description of Sparta (3.14.2-3), which states that a stele commemorating Chionis' Olympic victories stood very close (ἐγγυτάτω) to the tombs of the Agiad kings. Pausanias adds that Chionis helped found the colony of Cyrene. In his description of Olympia, Pausanias notes that a similar stele stood alongside a statue of Chionis by the sculptor Myron (6.13.1-2); the contents of the stele at Olympia make it clear that it and the accompanying statue were erected c. 470. A number of factors, including the placement of the stele in Sparta, the facts that Chionis received stelai and a statue long after his death and in the early fifth century (when most other cults for athletes were established), and his role as an oikist, all indicate that Chionis was the object of heroic cult. The erection of the stele immediately next to the tombs of the Agiad kings indicates that the Agiads actively sought to have Chionis heroized.

The years around 470 were a particularly difficult time for the Agiads, and they had good reason to promote Chionis' heroization in the belief that it would be advantageous to them. During this period the Agiad king, Pleistarchos, was a minor and a ward of Pausanias, who was under suspicion of Medism and of fomenting helot rebellion in Laconia. The heroization of Chionis benefited the Agiads because their social status was enhanced by their close association with a figure whose deeds as athlete and oikist and whose suprahuman station made him both figuratively and literally heroic. Another consideration was that the characterization of Chionis as an oikist of Cyrene facilitated the renewal or establishment of close ties with the Battiad monarchs of Cyrene. Those ties added significantly to the power and prestige of the Agiads in Sparta while legitimizing the Battiads' position in Cyrene.

Kings Playing Politics: The Heroization of Chionis of Sparta: Select Bibliography

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