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## **Ancient Pandemics in Mythical Athens: the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids**

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### **Abstract**

According to the literary tradition, when the city of Athens was threatened by plague and famine, the daughters of the Athenian king Leos and Hyakinthos sacrificed themselves for the salvation of the city. There is no denying that the brave and patriotic act of the daughters of Leos —also known as the Leokorai— and the daughters of Hyakinthos —also known as the Hyakinthids— made the Athenian heroines the ideal role models for every Athenian citizen. Demosthenes (60.29) attests that the self-sacrifice of the daughters of Leos, served as the mythological paradigm for the men of the tribe of Leontis fallen at war. The selection of these heroines to represent their tribe shows the power and extent of this mythological motif as a patriotic theme. Diodorus (17.15.2) tells us that the Athenian general and politician Phocion used the brave act of the self-sacrifice of the daughters of Hyakinthos urge rival politicians to do their patriotic duty and hand themselves over to Alexander in order to save the city.

In this paper the phenomenon, context and impact of the voluntary sacrifice of the mythical Athenian heroines during times of pandemics, plagues and famine will be examined, taking into consideration the literary, epigraphic and topographic evidence, in close relation to the historical and ideological context of the classical period. The ultimate aim of the study is to relate the brave sacrificial act of the mythical virgins during the mythical pandemics to the current historical pandemic and the plague of Athens during 430 B.C. and furthermore emphasize the importance of the brave act of women for issues of Gender and Identity, further extending the research scope to the Anthropological Studies.

*Keywords:* Heroines of Attica, Ancient Greek Mythology, Gender, Identity

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On March 11th 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic.<sup>1</sup> In his announcement, WHO's Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, stated that the WHO is "deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction," and he called on countries to take action to contain the virus. Since then, a lot has changed in our lives. The pandemic continues and we are dealing with a new and unprecedented reality, unknown before to the vast majority of the population. The use of masks, social distancing and the avoidance of close contact have become integral part of our lives and this way of living is considered the new normality. Governments have taken drastic measures in order to contain the virus, most importantly lockdowns, according to the pandemic wave and the recorded cases of infections. Vaccination has become mandatory in some countries —and for some specific age groups. Unvaccinated have been fired from their jobs and people who are opposed to the obligation of vaccination protested and rioted. The pandemic has caused incomparable and unprecedented chaos and although almost two years have passed, it still remains active. As of today (30<sup>rd</sup> of December) we have a total of 286.422.421 confirmed cases, 253.049.841 people have recovered and 5.444.315 people have died. Experts have clearly stated that the vaccination of the people will reduce the spreading of the disease —and transform it from pandemic to endemic. Science, vaccination and drugs are the answer of contemporary society to plagues and diseases. But what was the answer to plagues and diseases in the mythology of classical antiquity? In my paper I will examine how plagues and diseases were dealt in the mythology of ancient Athens. More specifically, I will

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Robin Osborne (Cambridge), Emily Kearns (Oxford) and Jenifer Larson (Kent) for providing valuable feedback on my paper.

examine the two known cases: the Leokorai (daughters of the mythical king of Athens Leos) and the Hyakinthids<sup>2</sup> (daughters of the mythical Spartan king Hyakinthos).

Comparing ancient and modern cases of several types of crisis of the city, we note that there are no major differences between them. War, plague, famine, natural disasters diachronically remain the most common causes of crisis. Given that, in terms of “polis-crisis” almost nothing has drastically changed between the mythical past and the historic (and current) present. The difference lies in how such crises are dealt with. Here I will examine the relevant literary, epigraphic and topographic evidence related to the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids and explore the historical implications and gender aspects and parameters.

I will first begin my examination with the Leokorai, daughters of king of Athens, Leos, who are connected with a mythical plague and diseases.

## **1 The Leokorai**

Literary sources on the Leokorai derive from several authors, ranging from the classical to the Roman period. The earliest testimony on the daughters of Leos comes from Demosthenes (60.29), who states that: “the Leontidai had heard the stories related of the daughters of Leos, how they offered themselves to the citizens as a sacrifice for their country’s sake”. Pausanias (1.5.2), referring to the Leokorai, mentions: “Leos, who is said to have given up his daughters at the command of the oracle, for the safety of the commonwealth”.

Neither Demosthenes nor Pausanias mention the reason why the daughters of Leos were sacrificed. It is simply stated that they were sacrificed for the commonwealth and the salvation of the community (meaning the city) of ancient Athens.

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<sup>2</sup> The Hyakinthids are also attested in literary sources as daughters of the Athenian king Erechtheus. On this paper I will examine the Hyakinthids, daughters of the Spartan king Hyakinthos. For the differentiation between two versions, see pages below.

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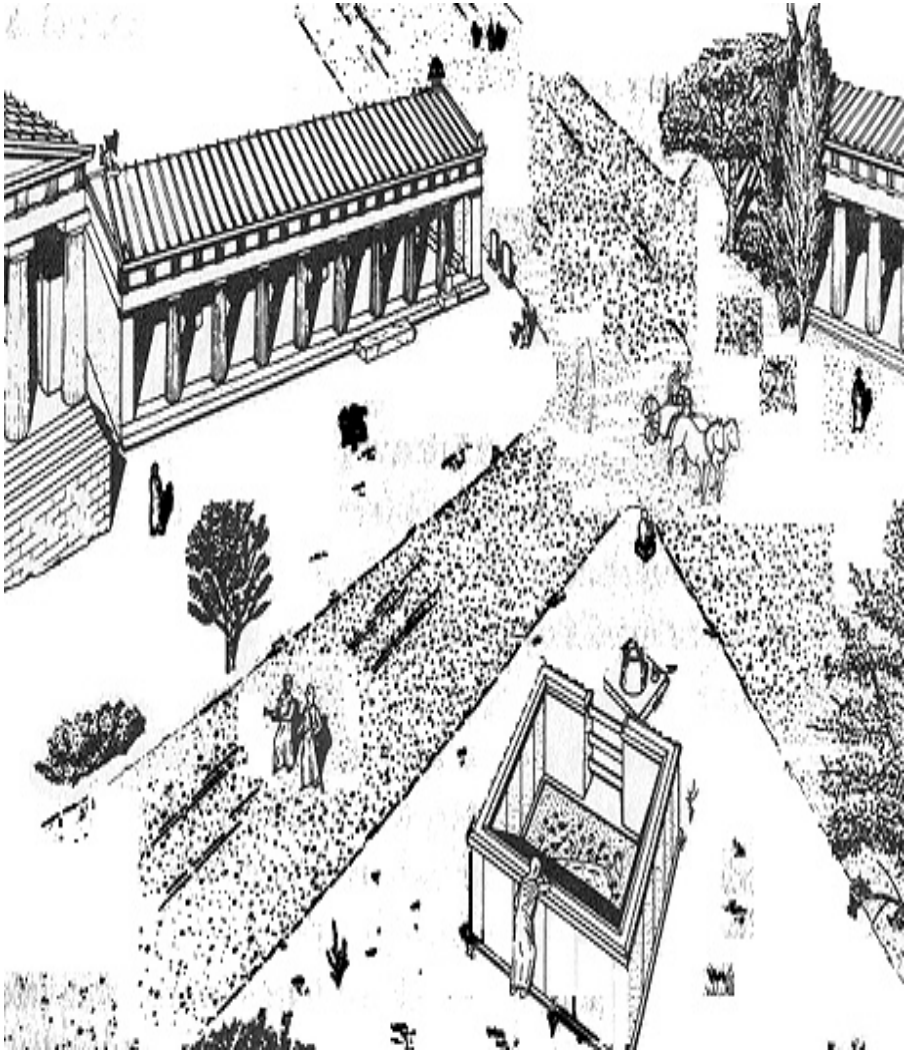
Aristides (*Panathenaicus*, 13. 119) is the earliest to attest to the reason for their sacrifice and additionally he provides information for their cult. He writes: “With similar intention Leos too is said to have given up his daughters in the plague. But it will be clear that the city surpassed even these in conferring benefits; to Codrus the city granted supreme power for his children and glorified the family both at Athens and abroad; as for the maidens the city established shrines for them and in honoring them considered them worthy of a divine instead of a mortal share”. This story appears also in a scholiast to Thucydides (1.20), who writes: “There was once a famine in Attica and to free the land from its troubles children had to be sacrificed. A certain Leos offered his daughters and rid the city of the famine. A shrine was established for them in Attica, the so-called Leokoreion”.

The only difference between these two testimonies is the description (and definition) of the disease: plague, according to Aristides and famine, according to the scholiast of Thucydides.

Aelian (*Varia Historia*, 12.28), also speaks of the shrine of the daughters of Leos and he is the first who gives their names, stating that the daughters of Leos were named Praxithea, Theope and Euboule. The names of the Leokorai (Prasithea, instead of Praxithea, Theope and Euboule), as well as the existence of their shrine are also given by other sources —such as a scholiast to Libanios (*Declamations* 27.605a) who also states that their sacrifice took place during times of plague.

In terms of their cult and shrine, the exact location of the Leokoreion is controversial and has caused great debate —and uncertainty— between scholars. Some scholars identify the Leokoreion with the so-called crossroads shrine in the Agora of Athens (Figure 1) (Thompson and Wycherley 1972, pp.121-123; Shear 1973a, pp.126-134; 1973b, pp.360-369; Thompson 1978, pp. 96-102; 1981, pp. 343-355). The identification is mostly based on the finds from the sanctuary. These objects include loomweights, perfume bottles, jewelry, astragaloi, feeding bottles and white ground lekythoi, all associated with female deities or in correspondence with female devotees. Others, identify the crossroads Agora

shrine as a sanctuary of *Nymphai kourotrophoi* (Camp 1986, pp. 78-79).



*Figure 1:* The Leokoreion at the Agora of Athens

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Although we are not certain about the exact location of the Leokoreion, we know that this shrine was active and existed already from the Archaic period, being connected with important historical facts. Thucydides (1.20; 6.57) and Aristotle (*Athenian Constitution* 18.3) attest that it was at the sanctuary of the daughters of Leos that the tyrant-slayers, Harmodios and Aristogeiton, murdered the tyrant Hipparchos. Given that, the location of the Leokoreion was considered of major importance, since it was related with the establishment of the democracy and was situated at the Agora, the public center of the city of Athens.

Having examined the literary and topographic evidence on the daughters of Leos —also known as the Leokorai— who were sacrificed during times of plague (or famine) for the salvation of the city, let us now turn on the examination of the Hyakinthids.

### 2 The Hyakinthids

The Hyakinthids —like the Leokorai— were sacrificed during times of plague for the salvation of the city. Their case is more complex than the Leokorai. The literary sources on the Hyakinthids are, in fact, conflicting. The Hyakinthids are related and attributed to two different parents according to the literary sources and they are connected with different patterns and motifs.

Several literary sources, especially Euripides' fragmentary preserved tragedy "*Erechtheus*", as well as the Atthidographer Philochorus (*FGrH* 328 F 12) and the orator Lycurgus (*Against Leocrates*, 98), identify the Hyakinthids with the daughters of the Athenian king Erechtheus. According to the tradition and this version of the myth, the oracle of Delphi stated that the city of Athens would be saved during the war with Eleusis only if the daughters of Erechtheus were sacrificed for the salvation of the city. Another Atthidographer, Phanodemus (*FGrH* 325 F 4), relates the Hyakinthids —also attested as daughters of Erechtheus— to the war between Athens and Boeotia, instead of Eleusis. Given that on these versions of the myth the sacrifice of the Hyakinthids took place

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—and is related— during times of war, instead of plague (or famine), this version, context and relation of Hyakinthids with king Erechtheus will not be examined further.

The version that is of prime interest here is the relation of the Hyakinthids with mythological plagues (and famines) —I return later to the question of war.

Apollodorus (3.15.8) attests the following for the Hyakinthids, daughters of Hyakinthos: “When the war lingered on and he could not take Athens, he prayed to Zeus that he might be avenged on the Athenians. And the city being visited with a famine and a pestilence, the Athenians at first, in obedience to an ancient oracle, slaughtered the daughters of Hyakinthos, to wit, Antheis, Aegleis, Lytaea, and Orthaea, on the grave of Geraestus, the Cyclops; now Hyakinthos, the father of the damsels, had come from Lacedaemon and dwelt in Athens”. We note that in Apollodorus’ testimony, unlike those versions attested in Euripides and the Atthidographers, Hyakinthos —instead of Erechtheus— is named as the father of the Hyakinthids and their self-sacrifice takes place during times of plague (or famine), instead of war.

A similar account regarding the Hyakinthids is attested is Hyginus. Hyginus (*Fabula* 238) attests that a Spartan king, killed Antheis, his daughter, according to an oracle on behalf of the Athenians. Although he relates the Hyakinthids with Hyakinthos, a Spartan living in Athens, he does not mention the specific reason for their sacrifice and additionally he attests the sacrifice of only one of the daughters. As we can see, his testimony differs only slightly from that of Apollodorus, but in general he follows the same scheme and context of the Hyakinthids.

The most laconic testimony on the Hyakinthids derives from Harpocration. Harpocration —quoting the statement of Lykourgos in the speech *Against Lykophron*— attests that the Hyakinthids were daughters of Hyakinthos, the Lacedaemonian (Harpocration s.v. Hyakinthids).

Having examined the literary sources on the Hyakinthids, we note that



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there are conflicting testimonies on the paternity (Hyakinthos or Erechtheus) and the context of their sacrifice (plague, famine or war). It seems that already in ancient times there were conflicting versions about the Hyakinthids and authors were familiar with both versions.

Phanodemus (*FGrH 325 F4*) claims that the daughters of Erechtheus were called “Hyakinthid maidens” because they were sacrificed on the hill called Hyakinthos. This testimony has been interpreted by scholars as a proof of disjunction —already existing during antiquity— between the Hyakinthids as daughters of the Athenian king Erechtheus and the Hyakinthids as daughters of the Spartan king Hyakinthos (Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, p. 106).

In terms of their name, the fact that they are named patronymically has been explained as a connection with the Spartan (and not the Athenian metic) hero Hyakinthos, who is attested as a pre-Dorian god at Amyklai (Kron 1999, p.79). Likewise, the name of one of his daughters, (Ortheia), reminds the epithet of Artemis (Ortheia), who was venerated at Sparta, further suggesting the connection with Sparta (Kron 1999, p.79). In a hypothetical reconstruction of the original myth, it has been suggested that the Hyakinthids had a pre-existing cult in Attica and died in order to save Athens; to this mythical core were added the two variant and alternative versions on the Hyakinthids: a) being daughters of the Athenian king Erechtheus and b) the Spartan king Hyakinthos (Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, p.107).

The daughters of Hyakinthos received cult and had a shrine in Athens, known as the Hyakintheion, as attested through an inscription (IG I<sup>2</sup> 1035.52) and some ancient sources. Just like the case of the shrine of the daughters of Leos (the Leokoreion), the exact location of the shrine of the daughters of Hyakinthos (the Hyakintheion) remains uncertain and has caused great debate between scholars.

Photius, s.v.Parthenoi —talking on the tragic fate of the Hyakinthids— states that: «ἐσφαγιάσθησαν δὲ ἐν τῷ Ἰακίνθῳ καλουμένῳ πάγῳ ὑπὲρ τῶν Σφενδονίων». Stephanos Byzantine states that: «τῶν Ἰακίνθου



*θυγατέρων ἢ Λουσία ἦν, ἀφ'ἧς ὁ δῆμος τῆς Οἰνηίδος φυλῆς*», connecting the Hyakintheion with the deme of Lousia. The existence of Hyakintheion in the deme of Lousia has received mixed feedback by scholars. Jacoby accepts the existence of Hyakinthion at the deme of Lousia (Jacoby schol. in Phanodemus *FGrH* 325 *F4*, p. 178). Others —such as Kearns (1989, p. 102)— do not accept the relation, while others —such as Frame (2009, p.449)— remain neutral, stating that the Hyakintheion may have existed on the west part of the city of Athens.

Having examined the literary, epigraphic and topographic evidence on the daughters of Leos and the daughters of Hyakinthos, we will now turn to examine the similar motifs and context of the myth, as well as the historical and gender aspects of their sacrifice for the salvation of the city.

We note that in both cases, the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids are named patronymically and form a part of a group. Of course, the most important fact —by far— remains their sacrificial context for the salvation of the city. These virgins give their own lives for the commonwealth and protection of the city of Athens. Such groups of young girls are normally triadic, just like the Aglaurids (also called Kekropids), heroines who received cult on the Acropolis of Athens.<sup>3</sup> By far the most important aspects of both the Leokorai and Hyakinthids are: a) their young age and virgin status and b) their actions as “*soteirai*”- saviors of the city.

### 3 Virginity, young age and city salvation

We have already stated that there are no major differences between the nature of *polis crises* during ancient (and mythical) times and the current (historic) present. The major difference lies in the way these crises are dealt with. In modern times during plagues, pandemics and diseases *soteria*-salvation of the city is achieved through the results of science. More specifically, in terms of COVID-19 pandemic, the safety of the city and the commonwealth is gained through the following factors: a) the

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3 For the Aglaurids, see Mitsios 2018, pp. 8-97.

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vaccination of the population (especially the ones of older age), b) the use of drugs and c) hygiene protocols (the often and punctilious washing of hands, the use of masks, social distancing etc). In contrast to this, we observe that in mythical antiquity the *soteria*-salvation of the city comes through the sacrifice of one (or in our cases three or four) for the many: a motif known as *pro multis dabitur caput*.

We note that both the Leokorai and Hyakinthids are young, virgin and unmarried women, daughters of a mythical king. It has been noted by scholars that their context of sacrifice for the salvation of the city is reminiscent of the scapegoats of Athenian rituals, known as *pharmakoi*.<sup>4</sup> In the scapegoat rituals, the sacrifice of a person who comes from marginal groups —such as a criminal, a beggar, a destitute or a disreputable— guarantees the well-being of the city. The expulsion of such dangerous, unclean and “inferior” elements of the society —deriving from the outermost reaches of the polis —was considered a purification act for the city (Kearns, 1990, p. 335). A mythical example of this may be the case of the Attic king Codrus. Several ancient authors —such as Pherekydes (*FGrH 3 F 154*), Hellanikos (*FGrH 323a F 23*), Lycurgus, (*Against Leocrates* 86) and Pausanias (1.19.5)— attest the tradition according to which when the city of Athens was sieged by the Dorians, the Delphic oracle made it clear that the city of Athens would be saved only if a king sacrificed himself; then, king Codrus, got dressed as a beggar wood-cutter and challenged the Dorians (who killed him), thus voluntarily sacrificing himself for the salvation of the city. According to an inscription (*IG F 84*) a sanctuary of Codrus, Neleus and Basile existed, possibly in the Ilissos area, south of the Acropolis; it is likely that the tomb of Codrus was located in the sanctuary. It is worth mentioning that king Codrus got dressed like a poor wood-cutter in order to get killed by the Dorians —stuming himself into an “inferior”, belonging to a marginal group, and so reminiscent of the scapegoat and *pharmakos* rituals.

But unlike *pharmakos* and scapegoat rituals, the sacrifice of the daughters of Leos and Hyakinthos, seem to belong to a different context.

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4 For *pharmakoi*-scapegoat rituals, see Bremmer 1983, pp. 299-320; Parker 1983, pp. 257-271.

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The Leokorai and the Hyakinthids are virgin, young and unmarried children. Unlike the persons sacrificed at the scapegoat rituals and pharmakoi, they are not criminals, beggars or disreputable and they do not belong to marginal groups, deriving from the outskirts of the society. Instead, they are daughters of kings, belonging to the higher status and elite parts of the society and polis, because of their father and royal status; but still, they are females of young age.

Hippocrates (*Peri Parthenon*) attests that: “a woman’s nature is more depressed and sorrowful; and that young women, when they are at the age of marriage and without a husband, suffer terribly at the time of their menstruation...and madness overtakes them”.

It has been pointed out by scholars that the transitional point in women’s lives —when they are ready to give birth to children and become wives— is of special interest and importance, given that this was considered the main role of women in ancient society (Lefkowitz 1995 p. 32). Sophocles (*Antigone* 876) presents Antigone as miserable, because she is going to die without being able to give birth to children. Similar evidence —pointing to the importance of virginity and the role of women as mothers— comes from archaeological and epigraphic evidence. On the statue base of the well-known statue of Phrasikleia it is stated that “kore (maiden) I must be called evermore; instead of marriage, by the Gods, this name became my fate” (Figure 2). The inscription indicates the important role of the marital status of the women, as well as their capacity to give birth (and bear) children.

In the case of the sacrificial daughters, the virgins who are being sacrificed have not reached the “telos” (destination) of their lives, which is to get married and give birth to legitimate children, guaranteeing the continued existence of the society (Kron 1999, p. 83). It has been pointed out that children are not born for their parents and kin groups but for the city as a whole and are necessary to the well-being of the city; their birth and nurture (growth) are like the growth of crops, essential for the existence of the city (Kearns 1989, p. 62). The virginity and young age are of major importance for the women and because of



*Figure 2:* . The statue (and the statue base) of Phrasikleia

these they are considered pure and untouched. It has been pointed out that the virginity is important in a girl as it is not in a boy; unlike the boy —whose virginity is a matter of little concern— the virginity for the girl is a precious possession required by her husband and while she is still a virgin she remains unfulfilled (Kearns 1989, p. 57). After all,

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in ancient Greek myth we never hear of a sacrifice of a married woman or a man of past fighting age.

Beside virginity, the young age is also important, valuable and precious for the young females and in fact, it has been paralleled with the sacrificial cultic practices for animals. In the case of animals, the younger and the more unsullied is considered the better and that's the reason why lambs are preferable to ewes and calves to cows, when it comes to sacrifice in order to please the gods (Connelly 2014, p. 394 n. 74). Just like the case of the sacrifice of the animals is the case of the virgin sacrifice. The younger the age, the better and more valuable, especially if we take into consideration the importance of their virgin status.

Having examined the virginity and young age parameters of the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids, let us now turn on the examination of the other two aspects: the historical and the gender ones. More specifically, I will examine the cases where the Leokorai and Hyakinthids were considered as city saviors and ideal patriotic examples for the Athenians of the classical period, as well as their gender aspects.

### **4 Historical aspects: city saviors**

In 430-429 B.C. the city of Athens was devastated by a plague and pandemic, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths, almost one third of the Athenian population. In the following years, most of the population of Athens was infected, including Pericles' himself, who died from the plague. Given the ongoing war with Sparta, the plague and pandemic had horrific and disastrous results in the population of Athens.

Thucydides (2.49-50) —who also suffered from it— records with clinical detail the symptoms of the catastrophic plague of Athens. According to his testimony, “people suddenly felt their heads begin to burn, their eyes redden, their tongues and mouths bleed. Next came coughing, stomach pain, diarrhea, and vomiting of every kind of bile that has been given a name by the medical profession. The skin turned reddish

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with pustules and ulcers, while the stricken plunged into the city's water tanks trying to slake an unquenchable thirst —possibly contaminating the water supply. Most died after about a week. The city was blanketed with corpses”.

Beside the analytical description of the symptoms, Thucydides (2.51.5) further comments on the response of the Athenian citizens to the plague, their ethos and their expected behavior during this period of plague and phenomenal crisis. During the catastrophic and disastrous plague, Thucydides drew attention to the brave Athenian citizens who stayed in the city of Athens in order to nurse the sick, and pointed out the feeling of shame for those who were thinking of their own good, instead of the communal one. The literary evidence on the situation of the plague and the pandemic in Athens, as well as on the (expected) behavior and ethos of the Athenian citizens, seem to recall the actions of the mythical heroines, who voluntarily sacrificed themselves for the salvation of the city during similar times of plague and famine.

The cultic evidence point in the same direction as the literary sources. It has been noted that many offerings at the shrine that might be the Leokoreion are dating from that period of the Peloponnesian war, during the time of plague of Athens (Larson 1995, p. 103). It seems no coincidence that these offerings were made at this specific shrine, at that specific time and under the specific circumstances.

During historical times of plague and pandemic the Athenians recalled the myth and made offerings to the Leokoreion, the shrine of the daughters of Leos, who voluntarily sacrificed themselves for the salvation of the city during times of mythical plague and famine. Given that, the daughters of Leos were seen as protectresses of the city during times of plague and pandemic and the Athenians were seeking their help, invoking their names and making offerings to their shrine, during their own historical plague and pandemic.

Besides the case of the classical Athens, the daughters of Leos were recalled and invoked in later periods, indicating their diachronic im-

portance as protectresses and city saviours during times of plague and pandemic.

Aelius Aristides (*Panathenaic Oration*, 13. 119) —writing during times of pandemic in the Roman period, a disease known as the “Antonine plague”, when the plague had catastrophic results in the Roman Empire— states that: “...Λεὼς δὲ ὅμοια τούτῳ βουλεύσας, ἐκστῆναι τῶν θυγατέρων καὶ οὗτος ἐν τῷ λοιμῶ: Κόδρος δ’ἐντῷ πρὸς Δωριέας πολέμῳ καὶ Πελοποννησίους αὐτὸς ἐβελοντῆς ὑπὲρ τῆς χώρας ἀποθανεῖν.” The mention of the heroic act of the self-sacrifice of the daughters of Leos (and king Codrus) and the resulting salvation of the city of Athens during times of mythical plague and pandemic, aims to point to a positive outcome for the city of Rome, at the end of the pandemic and to the salvation of the empire. Just as the ancient city of Athens was saved during times of mythical plague and pandemic, the Roman empire will be saved from the historical plague and pandemic it was currently dealing with. Of course, there were no heroines to be recalled and evoked more suitable, rather than the daughters of Leos, as well as the mythical Codrus, whose self-sacrifice in identical times of plague and pandemic, resulted in the salvation of the city.

Having examined the cases where the daughters of Leos were used, recalled and evoked as city saviours in historical plagues and pandemics, let us now examine their relation to the Funerary Orations and their gender aspects.

## 5 Gender aspects: patriotic heroines

The Funeral Orations —spoken for the war dead at the area of Kerameikos of Athens— mention the heroic and brave act of self-sacrifice of the Leokorai and Hyakinthids, locating them in the central sphere of the activities of the city.

Demosthenes (60.29) —in his funeral oration for the Athenian war dead at the battle of Chaironeia— states the following about the daughters



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of Leos: “The Leontidae had heard the stories related of the daughters of Leos, how they offered themselves to the citizens as a sacrifice for their country’s sake. When, therefore, such courage was displayed by those women, they looked upon it as a heinous thing if they, being men, should have proved to possess less of manhood”. The daughters of Leos —instead of Leos himself— were used as the heroic and patriotic examples for the men of the Leontis tribe. It was the brave act of the self-sacrifice of the female daughters —instead of their father— that was mentioned and praised at the Funerary Orations. I believe that there is no doubt that the men of Leontis tribe were taking pride in themselves —because of the brave act of self-sacrifice of their mythical ancestors, the Leokorai— when they were present at the audience of the Funerary Orations, at Kerameikos. After all, the mention of the brave act of Leokorai in public —spoken at the Funerary Orations— was set in parallel with the historical present, more specifically the current war dead of the battle of Chaironeia.

But the mentions of the brave and patriotic acts of the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids are not limited and restricted to the classical period. Diodorus (17.15.2) states that Phokion suggested in the 320s that: “the men should remember the daughters of Leos and Hyacinthus and gladly endure death, so that their country would suffer no irremediable disaster, and he inveighed against the faint-heartedness and cowardice of those who would not lay down their lives for their city”. Similarly, Cicero (*De Natura Deorum* 3.15.9), attests that most states have deified the brave for the purpose or promoting valor, giving as examples the daughters of Leos and Erechtheus.

Having examined the references on the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids in the Funerary Orations —as well as the testimonies of Diodorus and Cicero— we note that their mention as the ideal examples of bravery and patriotism endures through time. Just like the case of their mention (and praise) as city saviours examined above —ranging from the classical to the Roman period— their sacrificial context, their brave and patriotic act for the salvation of the city, remains diachronic over the centuries.

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As we have already stated, the mention of the names of the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids in the Funerary Orations —spoken for the war dead at the area of Kerameikos of Athens— situated them in the most public sphere of the city.

In the mythology of ancient Athens, there are further examples of virgins who voluntarily sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the city. The pattern is identical and the only difference with Leokorai and Hyakinthids is that their self-sacrifice takes place during times of war —instead of plague (or famine).

Philochoros(FGrH 328 F105) attests that when the Eleusinian king Eumolpos attacked Athens —during the kingship of Erechtheus— the Delphic oracle commanded that the city of Athens will be saved only if someone sacrificed himself. Then, the heroine Aglauros threw herself by the walls of the Acropolis, heroically sacrificing herself for the salvation of the city. Just like the previous cases of the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids her brave and patriotic act was rewarded with a shrine, where she was receiving cult. The location of the shrine has been securely identified on the east slope of the Acropolis —thanks to the discovery of an inscription found in situ by Dontas— and is associated with a cave (Figure 3) (Dontas 1983). Several literary sources (Demosthenes 19.303; Philochorus FGrH 328 F 105; Plutarch, Alcibiades 15.7-8) attest that the Athenian ephebes took their oath at the sanctuary of Aglauros, invoking her name as a witness for their oath.<sup>5</sup> Given the brave act of her self-sacrifice and heroic status, Aglauros was the chief patroness of the ephebes and formed the ideal heroine, a role model for the Athenian ephebes.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the daughters of Erechtheus —also called the Hyakinthids, as we have already noted —sacrificed themselves for the salvation of the city during times of war between Athens and Eleusis (or Boeotia).<sup>7</sup> A scholion to Aratus (*Phaen.* 172) attests that the daughters of Erechtheus became Hyades. The identification of the Hyades with the daughters of

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5 For the ephebic oath, see Merkelbach 1972; Siewert 1977.

6 For Aglauros as the chief patroness of the ephebes, see Mitsios 2018, pp. 20-27.

7 See previous pages.



*Figure 3:* The shrine of Aglauros on the east slope of the Acropolis

Erechtheus has caused debate between scholars and has received mixed feedback, with some accepting (Kearns 1989, pp. 57-63; Kron 1999, pp. 78-79; Connelly 2014, pp. 147-148) and some rejecting (Gantz 1993, p. 218; Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, pp. 123-134) the identification. The Hyades did not simply receive cult as divinities but were transformed into stars by Athena herself. Catasterism is considered the greatest honor of all, given that the shining star becomes one with the cosmos (Connelly 2014, p. 147).

Just like the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids, the self-sacrifice for the salvation of the city of Aglauros and the daughters of Erechtheus was

of major importance and their brave acts were praised in Funerary Oration, locating them in the very central sphere of city.

In Euripides' work "Erechtheus" (lines 71-3), in terms of the self-sacrifice of the daughters, it is stated that: "their souls have gone to Hades but I myself have brought their spirit (pneuma) to the upper most reaches of heaven". It is very likely that this passage of Euripides—that mentions the daughters of Erechtheus—was paralleled in the epitaph for those who died in the battle of Poteidaia in 432 B.C. (*CEG 10*) where it is stated that: "the aether took the soul of the war dead, while the Earth took their bodies". This parallelism indicates that the fallen men of the battle of Poteidaia gained some kind of immortality, similar to the one of Erechtheids, daughters of king Erechtheus, their mythical prototypes (Sourvinou-Inwood, 2011, p. 79). The problem of the heroization of the 5<sup>th</sup> century war dead is complex but there can be no doubt that 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens did confer heroization upon the men killed in battle (Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, p.194).

Lycurgus (*Against Leocrates* 100) attests that the Athenians owe a debt to Euripides for passing this story (meaning the self-sacrifice of the daughter of Erechtheus) down to them, providing an example (paradigma) and he further claims that the oath of Erechtheus' daughters was invoked alongside the oath of the ephebes and that of the Greeks at Plataia (Connelly 2014, p 124). We have already noted that the Athenian ephebes were taking their ephebic oath at the sanctuary of Aglauros, daughter of Kekrops, on the east slope of the Acropolis and that Aglauros was considered the chief patroness of the ephebes.<sup>8</sup>

The orator Demades (*Hyper tes dodeketoias* 37) —talking on the self-sacrifice of the daughters of Erechtheus— attests that: "they triumphed over their feminine in their souls and that the weakness of their nature was made virile by devotion to the soil that reared them". Similarly, Lycurgus (*Against Leocrates* 101) attests that "if woman can bring themselves to act like this, then men should show toward their country a devotion which cannot be surpassed".

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8 See previous pages.

## I N T E R F A C E

We note that the orators repeatedly point out the examples of sacrificial heroines for the salvation of the city and often parallel their acts with the current soldiers, indicating that if women were capable of showing such bravery, at least the same is expected from men. In some cases—especially in the last two testimonies—they clearly attest the gender aspects of the self-sacrifice of the virgins for the salvation of the city, emphasizing the impact of their brave act in relation to the males.

Dying a glorious death in combat is one of the main routes to heroization for men. Achilles in his characteristic monologue in the *Iliad* (9.410-6) chooses a *short* but *glorious* life, instead of a long inglorious one, gaining *kleos* and *hysterophemia* by dying in the battlefield. But for the case of women—given that they are excluded from war—*kleos* and *hysterophemia* can be gained by their voluntary sacrifice for the salvation of the city. In ancient Greek myth, *kleos* and *hysterophemia* is gained in the battlefield for men and in the altar of sacrifice for the women. The role of the female sacrificial heroines is a “passive” one—in contrast with the “active” role of the male, who dies in the battlefield. It has been noted that this not a “do and die” act but one of “dying for doing” (Kearns 1990, p. 329). No matter the passive context, the brave and patriotic act of women is as important as that of men. We have already noted that this heroic act resulted in the establishment of their shrine and the receipt of cult and sacrifices for the heroines. Additionally, the brave act was used as historical example—and their names were invoked—during current plagues and pandemics and most, importantly, their acts were spoken at the Funerary Orations at the Kerameikos.

.Euripides (*Iphigenia at Aulis*, 1394) has Iphigeneia observe that “one man’s life is worth more than that of thousands of women”. Similarly, Aristotle (*Athenian Constitution*, 1269b18; 1275b23; 1275a22-3) treats women and slaves as parallels. Women—of whatever social rank—stand partly outside the male-dominated structures of polis society, and while their presence is biologically essential for the existence of the city, they are excluded from citizenship (Kearns 1990 p. 336). Loraux states that there were no true “feminine Athenaioi” but merely “Attikai gynaikeis” (Loraux 1981 pp. 124-125). Women are examples of people



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living in the city, who lack the fullness of belonging (Kearns 1990, p. 334). Given that, they are expected to contribute less to the society.

In total contrast to this, stand the female heroines who voluntarily sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the city. Their heroic and brave act of self-sacrifice, serves as a paradigm both for the males and the females, making them the ideal heroines and role-models for all the Athenian citizens.

The masculinization of the heroines assimilated their actions to those of warriors and made their myth a more palatable example for men (Larson 1995, p. 104). Even though female and male heroes are guided by the same ideal to give their lives of their own free will in order to save their community, the female heroic behavior was perhaps considered much more amazing, since women's nature was considered to be much weaker than men's (Kron 1999, p.83).

The story of the heroic and brave self-sacrifice of the Leokorai and the Hyakinthids during mythical times of plague and famine —and the resulted salvation of the city— was recalled (and their names were invoked) during the period of historical plagues and pandemics. The Athenian heroines formed the ideal “soteirai”-saviours for the Athenians of the classical period, who were making offerings at the shrine, the Leokoreion, in the Agora of Athens, the civic center of the city. Additionally, their names were spoken at the Funerary Orations at Kerameikos, honoring the Athenian war dead and the brave act of the virgins was used as an example for the male soldiers, who were expected to show similar courage during the battlefield. In some cases —such as Euripides' Erechtheus— their story was performed at the theater of Dionysus, on the south slope of the Acropolis of Athens, and their heroic and brave act was viewed by five or six thousands of Athenians during the annual city Dionysia (Connelly 2014, p. 146). Given that the shrine of some of the sacrificial virgins (Leokorai) existed in the Agora of Athens —the civic center of the city— and the acts of some of the sacrificial virgins were performed at the Acropolis —the religious center of the city —their brave act was rewarded both in civic and religious context.

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The mention of the sacrificial virgins in Funerary Orations, spoken at the Kerameikos, located the act of these heroic virgins in every single “topos” where the Athenian identity was shaped: at the Agora, at the Acropolis and at the Kerameikos.

The acts mentioned above situated the virgin females as the ideal examples and paradigms of bravery. The males—given their elevated and superior status, compared to the females—were expected to act with the same—if not with more—courage and bravery during the battle. Given that, and by concluding, it seems that the self-sacrifice of the women for the salvation of the city, besides being a heroic act, also offered models for Athenian gender and identity roles, since—on a symbolic level—women and men were equated. Females were situated in the very public sphere, central to the polis and the commonwealth, ideal examples of brave and patriotic citizens.



## Abbreviations

FGrH = Jacoby, F. 1923. *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. (FGrHist) Weidmann, Berlin.

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