

BOOK REVIEW

Excavations at Nemea IV. The Shrine of Opheltes. By JORGE J. BRAVO, III, with a contribution by MICHAEL MACKINNON. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. xlv + 550. Hardback, \$250.00. ISBN: 978-0-52-029492-9.

This splendid volume is a Joan Palevsky Imprint in Classical Literature from the University of California Press, and from its 12 tables, its 550 pages, its 5 fold-out maps and its nearly 600 B&W images is clearly meant to impress. It grew out of work begun in the mid-1990s when Stephen G. Miller, (1941-2021), University of California- Berkeley's Director of Excavations at Ancient Nemea, gave his student Jorge Bravo the chance to explore his interest in the hero cult of Opheltes in the 45-acre site in Nemea. Under the guidance of Professor Miller, who served as Bravo's dissertation advisor with other committee members, Ronald S. Stroud (1933-2021), Anthony W. Bulloch (1942-2014) and Andrew F. Stewart, Bravo completed his study, *The Hero Shrine of Opheltes/Archemoros at Nemea. A Case Study of Ancient Greek Hero Cult*, after five years of work in 2006.

Carefully restructured for publication as a book, the volume has been divided into the following five chapters: "The Physical Remains," "The Faunal Remains from the Hero Shrine," a chapter concerning the bones of sacrificed animals found at the site contributed by the Canadian zooarchaeologist and bioanthropologist Michael MacKinnon, "The Myth of Opheltes and the Origin of the Nemean Games," "Representations of the Hero Opheltes in Art" and "The Shrine of Opheltes in the Context of Greek Hero Cult." Various appendices such as a detailed and well-illustrated catalogue of art and artifacts and a census of the curse tablets found at the site have been added to assist the reader. One of the most useful of these is the collection of testimonia from Simonides, Bacchylides, Pindar, Euripides, Hyginus, Ovid, Statius, Pausanias, Apollodorus et al. concerning the myth and cult of Opheltes from antiquity, which brings together in one place every available source in both its original language and in translation.

Opheltes was the infant son of Lycurgus, a priest and/or king of Nemea, who was killed by a serpent when his enslaved nurse Hypsipyle, formerly queen of Lemnos, put him down for a few moments to help seven Argive champions on

their way to attack Thebes get some water. Although the warriors succeed in killing the snake, the boy perishes and the men hold funeral games in his honor. The seer Amphiaraus then renames the child Archemoros, “the beginning of doom,” which to some readers foreshadows the fate of the seven warriors at Thebes.

The volume concerns itself with the sacred landscape of the Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea where for nearly one thousand years one of the four great Panhellenic athletic festivals took place as well as religious worship in the Herōon and the ritual for the dead baby hero Opheltes, who had been suffocated by the coils of a snake before living any kind of life. As such, Opheltes figures into a mysterious aspect of Greek hero cult, namely the adoration of a baby who dies before living any kind of life, heroic or otherwise. The “Opheltes’ story,” as Bravo tells us “takes us into the mythic landscape of Nemea, one tinged with danger and sadness. It is the story of a helpless baby who falls prey to a deadly snake, an event witnessed by the Seven against Thebes, who have paused at Nemea on their way to wage a war and meet their own fate” (1). Occupying “a position of prominence” inside the Sanctuary of Zeus, Opheltes’s shrine “solemnly reminded spectators of the origin of the festival” by the “poignant juxtaposition of the exhilarating celebration of life with the scrupulous commemoration of death” (2).

Opheltes’s short life continues to fascinate us, and Bravo’s book is palpably charged with the synergy of various persons, some dead and others alive, who have faithfully advocated for the study and preservation of the site as well as the revival of its ancient rituals and games for modern times. The volume’s dedicatee, Theodoros Papalexopoulos (1926-2020), a business magnate who oversaw the Titan Cement Company for many years, was the founder and first president of an association called “Ophletes, Friend of Nemea,” whose goal is “to promote the cultural heritage of the archaeological site at Nemea.”

<https://www.snf.org/en/grants/grantees/o/opheltes-the-friend-of-nemea>

“The Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games,” established in 1994, has set up a series athletic events, one of which was held in June of 2020 with the support of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and it is planning to hold its “Seventh Nemea” in the summer of 2022.

<https://nemeangames.org/en/about-us/>

“Bravo to Bravo!” His work is bound to hold the field for many years to come.

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