

Ritual Theory and the Funeral Games of *Iliad* 23
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Book 23 of the *Iliad* describes two important Greek religious events: the funeral of Patroclus and the games in his honor. The funeral games (*Il.* 23.257-897) have long served to construct persuasive theories of Greek religion and culture (e.g., Nagy 1979); but more recently, book 23 has been primarily used in examinations of the Greek *polis* (Brown 2003), sport (Kyle 2006), and cultic heroes (Currie 2005). While there has been continued interest in how the funeral games relate to cultural identity and cultic practice, few have examined the specific ritual aspect of the games themselves. This topic is interesting in light of recent work in ritual theory, which has begun to once again influence the field of classical studies (Kyriakidis 2007). The so-called “cognitive” school of religion, an amalgam of anthropologists and cognitive psychologists, has worked on building a theory of religious ritual strictly defined by counterintuitive agency and the linguistic structure of action (Lawson & McCauley 1990). Whereas the cognitivists have worked toward a stricter model for religious ritual, others have advocated a more fluid notion of ritual, which they term “ritualization,” stressing less the form of ritual but rather what ritual actually does (Bell 1992).

The heightened interest in ritual theory makes it a worthwhile endeavor to reexamine *Iliad* 23, questioning how the ritual aspects of the funeral games actually work. An objection could be raised: sport is not religious ritual, and should not be considered in the same terms; moreover, the variety of sports differs from documented practice. This may be solved in realizing that ritual is, generally, any action which pertains to the spirits or gods. Because the funeral games take place as part of a celebration for the dead hero Patroclus, all action taking place may rightfully be called ritual performance. And though the events differ from historical games, such as the Olympic ones, Humphrey and Laidlaw (2007) have shown how “moveable” ritual acts do not disrupt the overall ritualization process. By adopting this definition of ritual, the games may also be read through cognitivist models, especially when considering that Greek games closely mirror the combat actions of a Greek hero. One way in which cognitivists view ritual is as an imitation of a culturally-postulated superhuman agent, in this case the spirit of Patroclus. The performer adopts some of the “specialness,” often divinity, of that agent—in this case the ability of a Greek hero to have a share of *timê*, honor. After the ritual action is completed the participant is imagined to have a special connection with that particular superhuman agent. Using this model of ritual form fits neatly with other models of sport developed by classicists: the goal is to win *timê* and a share of the fallen hero’s *geras*, apportionment (c.f. Brown 2003). By appropriating the fallen cultic hero’s *timê*, the winner thus shares in the divinity and may be honored in similar ways, explaining the program of poets such as Pindar. Applying these theories thus allows for a thicker understanding of complex Greek funerary custom and cultic worship.

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