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THE ABSENCE OF CHIRON

From the great complexity of Greek religious thought and practice there emerges a distinct group of cult figures whose unity has been revealed more and more clearly by recent scholarship. These are the heroes whose myths and worship were centred on the phenomenon of the underground chamber. Ustinova in particular has focused on what connects them and gives them coherence as a group.[1] Above all, she brings out two vital features: first, the fact that, despite undergoing some form of miraculous death-experience, the heroes in question do not follow the normal path to the underworld and to the impotence of its inhabitants; second, that instead, they enter the earth and there reside in a combination of death and immortality. In this state they wield special powers concerning prophecy and healing, and mortals consult them for these purposes.

Many of these underground heroes were Boeotian and form an important part of the work of Schachter;[2] more lately, however, other geographical areas have claimed attention, among them Thessaly. Among Thessalian adherents to the type are Asclepius, Aristaeus, and Caeneus.[3] This paper examines whether it is justifiable, and valuable, to add another significant name to the Thessalian list: the centaur Chiron. Chiron has strong mythical connections with Asclepius in particular. Like Asclepius, he was conceived in Laceria, by Lake Boibeis. He was Asclepius' tutor, and the relationship does not end there: one myth has Chiron being healed by the hero when wounded and unable to heal himself.[4] This version is late; but even in Pindar Chiron is perceived as potentially having the power to direct Asclepius where his healing skills are needed.[5] It is possible that connections on a cultic, as well as a mythical, level may once have existed between the two healing deities.[6]

There are other, deeper aspects of Chiron's divine character that appear on first sight amply to qualify him for inclusion into the group of the underground heroes. The first stage of this article will examine these aspects. Ultimately, however, it will be argued that it would be wrong to consign Chiron to the category of the underground hero without deeper thought; and that we might learn more about his divine persona from the ways in which he diverges from it.[7]

[1] Y. Ustinova, ' "Either a daimon, a hero or perhaps a god:" mythical residents of subterranean chambers', *Kernos* 15 (2002), 267–88.

[2] A. Schachter, *Cults of Boiotia* (London, 1981–94), esp. vol. 3, 69–71.

[3] Ustinova, (n. 1), 275–8; P. Bonnechère, *Trophonius de Lébadée: Cultes et mythes d'une cité béotienne au miroir de la mentalité antique* (Leiden, 2003), 106.

[4] Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* 3.102.

[5] Pind. *Pyth.* 3.63–7.

[6] It has even been claimed that Chiron was the original healing deity whose worship in Thessaly Asclepius usurped: see e.g. C. Kerenyi, *Asklepios: Archetypal Image of the Physician's Existence* (London, 1960), 98. This notion of succession is sadly impossible to substantiate, and is generally inadvisable, for reasons which are too complex to discuss here.

[7] For an effective recent summary of Chiron's representation in myth and art, see J. M. Padgett, *The Centaur's Smile: The Human Animal in Early Greek Art* (Princeton, 2003), 17–20.

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SIMILARITIES BETWEEN CHIRON AND THE UNDERGROUND HERO TYPE

Most obvious perhaps is the fact that Chiron, in common with the trend among underground heroes, had both healing and prophetic properties.[8] In addition, however, we may tabulate four principal points of convergence.

1. As I have argued in a previous article, location was of great importance in the worship of Asclepius, and the same could be said of the underground hero-type more widely.[9] Chiron's Thessalian location and identity are vital to his character. His mother Philyra, and also his (sometimes) grandson Peleus[10] and (sometimes) daughter Thetis,[11] all serve to tie him in with the Thessalian mythical—and natural—landscape.
2. In a related matter, it was important that the underground heroes were thought to reside in person in their subterranean chambers; in my previous article (see n. 9) I argued that Asclepius retained this emphasis on personal presence even when his cult spread to numerous locations. Chiron could be thought to have just such a residency in his famous cave on Mount Pelion, in which countless myths of his role as *kourotrophos* and educator of heroes are set, and which had a role in his cult.
3. Crucial to the theme of personal residency are the myths of the heroes' deaths. The experience of a miraculous death and disappearance places the hero in his chamber, fixes him there, and ensures his continued presence.[12] Chiron too, in most of our sources and certainly in the earlier ones, explicitly dies,[13] in a way that is in many respects strikingly similar to the death-experiences found in the hero-type. Variations of the story exist, and these will be discussed below, but they agree on the basic pattern: shot by Heracles, Chiron withdraws into a cave and eventually dies. The motif of retreat into cave followed by death is very reminiscent of the typical death-experience of the underground hero, a good example of which is the myth which has Amphiaraus swallowed up by the earth when fleeing from Thebes;[14] but within Thessaly one might think of Caeneus, who was also associated with healing or prophecy,[15] driven into the ground by the bludgeons of attacking centaurs. The cave is the place of Chiron's death, and also the place in which he was chiefly worshipped.
4. One could argue for a general similarity between the subterranean chamber of the underground hero and Chiron's cave. The two phenomena share some features in Greek thought. Both, for example, were associated with the dead and the underworld, with caves often functioning as portals between the upper and lower worlds, both in myth and necromantic practice.[16]

[8] Though his healing persona is more widely depicted. For Chiron as prophetic: Pind. *Pyth.* 9.52–3; Eur. *IA* 1064; Hor. *Epod.* 13.10–19.

[9] E. Aston, 'Asclepius and the legacy of Thessaly', *CQ* 54 (2004), 18–32.

[10] Schol. *Il.* 2.14 and Hyg. *Fab.* 14.

[11] Thetis as an earlier name of Chiron's daughter Hippe: Hyg. *Poet. astr.* 2.18.

[12] See e.g. Aston (n. 9), 26–8.

[13] In one alternative tradition he heals himself: Paus. 5.9.10, Plin. *HN* 25.30. Or he is healed by Asclepius: Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* 3.102.

[14] For the sources, see Ustinova (n. 1), 268, n. 6.

[15] Ustinova (n. 1), 277.

[16] For example, the cave at Taenaron, on the central spur of the southern Peloponnese. In myth it serves as the fissure through which Heracles descended to Hades. In human life, it was used as a Nekyomanteion, for communicating with the dead. See Paus. 3.25; D. Ogden, *Greek and Roman*

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With the understanding that Chiron had a more than superficial connection with the underground hero type, it is necessary now to qualify this connection by examining the important ways in which he diverged from it.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHIRON AND THE UNDERGROUND HERO TYPE

1. Death

The main problem with aligning Chiron with the type of the underground hero lies in the nature of the centaur's death. It will be remembered that, for the heroes, death has the result of fixing them in their place of cult, where they exercise special powers and a special degree of personal residency and presence. When one looks at the death of Chiron, however, its consequences emerge as quite different.

The fullest accounts of the event are provided by Apollodorus and Ovid. It is important to note, however, that the myth of Chiron's death was current long before they took it up. In addition to the Ode of Pindar discussed below, Sophocles' *Trachiniai* (714–15) makes mention of the fact that Chiron, though a god, died from contact with the arrows of Heracles. So we are dealing with no late invention.

In the account of Apollodorus, the context is significant: Chiron's death occurs in the midst of the labours of Heracles and that hero's victorious struggles against a series of monsters and wild animals in the Peloponnese.[17] Heracles is entertained on Mount Pholoë by the native centaur Pholus, who is hospitable and non-violent; as soon as the wine is opened, however (at Heracles' insistence), the other centaurs of the area arrive on the scene. They reduce the quiet dinner-party to confusion, and Heracles chases them with flaming brands and arrows to Malea. Here they find Chiron, in exile from Magnesia, and cluster round him in their panic. An arrow shot by Heracles passes through the arm of one of them and accidentally lodges in Chiron's knee. Anguished, Heracles tries to heal the wound he has caused, but without success, and Chiron withdraws to his Malean cave in great pain.[18] So great is his discomfort that he wants to die; this is accomplished when Heracles arranges the transfer of his unwanted immortality to a new owner, Prometheus.[19] Ovid is less concerned with misguided aggression on the part of Heracles: in his version, Chiron brings about his own death when, visited by Heracles in Thessaly, he drops one of the hero's poisoned arrows on his own foot and wounds himself incurably.[20]

There are many points to note in the two accounts. First and most basically, Chiron's death is accidental, humiliating, far from glorious. The type of hero with which we are comparing him is distinguished by his miraculous and astonishing death, swallowed by a yawning cleft in the earth or vaporized by a thunderbolt from on high. There is nothing miraculous about Chiron's agonising and incurable wound, however it is described as being sustained.

The second significant aspect is what follows Chiron's death. In Apollodorus'

Necromancy (Princeton, 2001), 34–42. For an interesting theory about Chiron as a figure who moves between the upper and lower worlds, see Ch. Picard, 'Le culte et la légende du centaure Chiron dans l'occident Méditerranéen', *Revue des Études Anciennes* 53 (1951), 6–25.

[17] Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.4.

[18] *Χειρώνεια ἕλκη*: see Eustath. *Il.* 463.33–4.

[19] Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.4 and 2.5.11.

[20] Ov. *Fasti* 5.397–414. In Diodorus' account this is more or less what happens to Pholus: 4.12.8.

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version, this is in complete opposition to what results from the death of the underground hero. For the latter, death facilitates a transition from the status of mortal hero to that of divinity. But Chiron, according to Apollodorus, starts out immortal; a mortal hero wounds him, and his own divine healing-powers prove of no avail. He is forced to *discard his own divine status* because it has become insupportable. He undergoes a retrograde process away from godhead, through pain and humiliation, to mortality. The story is purely one of loss.

Ovid, by contrast, ends his version with Chiron becoming a famous constellation in the heavens. Unlike Apollodorus, he thus makes death result in a more exalted state; in this, he has much in common with the depiction of the story on the Chest of Cypselus, as described by Pausanias.[21] But this second version has an important feature in common with that of Apollodorus and in contrast with the pattern of the underground hero's death: the result is that Chiron is removed from his Pelion cave. He is made distant, remote, unlike the underground hero whose miraculous death causes, as has been said, a state of heightened presence in a single fixed location, and a state of special accessibility for humans.

Indeed, the death of Chiron has significant implications for mankind. This is expressed in Pindar's third *Pythian*, lines 1–5:

> ἤθελον Χίρωνά κε Φιλυρίδαν,
> εἰ χρεὼν τοῦθ' ἁμετέρας ἀπὸ γλώσσας
> κοινὸν εὔξασθαι ἔπος,
> ζώειν τὸν ἀποιχόμενον,
> Οὐρανίδα γόνον εὐρυμέδοντα Κρόνου, βάσ-
> σαισί τ' ἄρχειν Παλίου φῆρ' ἀγρότερον
> νόον ἔχοντ' ἀνδρῶν φίλον·

> I wish that Chiron son of Philyra
> (if it is right for me to give tongue
> to a common prayer)
> were alive, who is departed,
> the wide-ruling son of Cronus Ouranidas,
> and that he ruled in the glades of Pelion, he, the wild beast
> with a heart friendly to man.

The poet wishes that Chiron were alive on Pelion, but he most emphatically is not. He is departed (*ἀποιχόμενον*).[22] Of course, in the context of this poem, Pindar regrets his absence because he has specific need of his powers, to cure Hieron of Syracuse. All the same, his regret is couched in terms of universal human loss. Chiron had a 'mind friendly to man'; he was *σώφρων* (l. 63). He has lost his power and sway in Magnesia, and mankind has lost a valuable helper.[23] Whether one follows the tradition that saw him go to join the company of the immortals, or the one which saw him losing his godhead, the result is the same: he is removed from his previous haunt and from his state of accessibility.

[21] Paus. 5.19.9, in which Chiron is thus described: *ἀπηλλαγμένος ἤδη παρὰ ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἠξιωμένος εἶναι σύνοικος θεοῖς*.

[22] A word that contains both the sense of physical departure and of departure from life: 'dead and gone'. *LSJ* s.v. for examples of both shades of meaning, here most likely combined. The idea of absence is made even more explicit on line 63 (*εἰ δὲ σώφρων ἄντρον ἔναι' ἔτι Χίρων . . .*).

[23] Asclepius is also treated as a figure of the past, but significantly is accorded none of the regret and the expressions of absence that Pindar applies to Chiron.

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2. The Cave

The role of Chiron's cave differs with different versions of his death. Ovid places Chiron's death on Pelion, making him die in the cave in which he has lived. Apollodorus moves the scene to the Peloponnese: Chiron is already in exile from Pelion by the time he dies, and his death takes place in another cave, a replacement one, so to speak, on Cape Malea. The divergence between the Ovidian (and perhaps Pindaric) version and that of Apollodorus is significant. Apollodorus removes Chiron's death from his homeland and also from his chief place of worship. In Ovid's version, however, the implications are striking: the cave which formed the hub of Chiron's worship in Thessaly as well as of the myths of his life was also the site of his death.[24] Therefore by this reckoning the Thessalians of the area worshipped Chiron at the very place where their god had lost his immortality and ceased to be present. In either case, however (for it is both unwise and unnecessary to try to establish the relative authenticity of the two versions), the Pelion cave is a place from which Chiron was held to have departed.[25] It is the site of his absence rather than his presence, and as such diverges greatly from the underground hero's subterranean chamber. This divergence owes a great deal to the divergence between the broader conception of the two phenomena, cave and underground chamber, in Greek thought. They are in many ways similar, but should not be elided.

In myth, caves are on the one hand homes and lairs, places where creatures, especially monsters and wild beasts, hide out; this role would seem to bring them close to that of the underground space in which the dead-but-everliving hero resides. At the same time, however, as being places where creatures stay put, they are also places where movement takes place. A perfect illustration of this double quality is to be found in Apollodorus' account of Heracles' assault on the Nemean lion. Pursued by the hero, the lion quite naturally runs to take refuge in its cave. Caves are somewhere to hide. This cave, however, has a special feature:

> *συμφυγόντος δὲ εἰς ἀμφίστομον σπήλαιον αὐτοῦ τὴν ἑτέραν ἐνῳκοδόμησεν εἴσοδον διὰ δὲ τῆς ἑτέρας ἐπεισῆλθε τῷ θηρίῳ.*[26]
>
> The lion fled into *a cave with two entrances*, and Heracles, blocking up one, went in against the beast through the other.

[24] Diodorus does not help us here: his account, which is mainly concerned with Pholus rather than Chiron, does not mention the place of the latter's death.

[25] It is important to note that the story of Chiron's death may well not be a Thessalian myth in origin. The prevalence in all versions of Heracles (even when he is operating in Thessaly, as in Ovid's account), who is of course the Dorian hero *par excellence*, suggests Peloponnesian origins. In Apollodorus we have, as Padgett observes, a curious doublet between Chiron and Pholus—both Good Centaurs, both killed accidentally in the rout of their less civilized fellows. (J. M. Padgett, 'Horse men: centaurs and satyrs in early Greek art', in Padgett [n. 7], 21.) Pholus is native to the setting; if either is an import into the story, it is Chiron, though the reasons for his introduction are impossible to guess. In this case, crucially, we cannot know whether death was a feature of the Chiron-story *before* it was sucked into the Peloponnesian myth, or whether that element was grafted onto Chiron through his juxtaposition with Pholus, to whom it originally belonged. But wherever the myth began, it undeniably attained prevalence and must have fed into the general perception of the centaur; it is quite easy to imagine it influencing the perceptions of his cult as well. The stories of the deaths of Trophonius, Amphiaraus, and other such figures reach us through sources disparate in time and place; just because they are not all clear Boeotian cult *aitia* does not mean they were without significance to the Boeotian cults once formulated.

[26] Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.1.

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In other words, if Heracles had not taken special measures, the lion could have exited through one aperture as he was entering through the other. The cave allows for departure as well as—at the same time as—arrival. The cave itself does not allow Heracles to trap his lion until he has modified its design.[27]

To take a different and earlier example, one might think of the cave of the Nymphs described in Homer's *Odyssey*.[28] This cave also has two openings that are distinguished from each other by function: through one the nymphs come in and out, while the other is for humans. Once again, movement is regulated: mortals and divinities are kept apart, but the cave also allows them to communicate.[29] It is a junction between two states of being; and this role recalls the fact that caves were thought to be portals to the underworld. Through a cave, movement between the realms of living and dead can be effected.[30] Overall, whereas the underground chamber is a container that holds a being in place, the cave acts, or can act, as a meeting of the ways. *It does not guarantee presence.* It facilitates movement, both physical and in terms of states of being. It can cause absence just as easily as presence. All caves can have this quality, of which the double-opening is just the most graphic expression.

The underground space too has associations with movement and passage, at least on one plane. It connects the upper world, that of the living, with the lower world where the dead reside. In a way it is a staging-post between the two. Figures like Asclepius have experienced a form of death, followed by movement to the lower realm; but, unlike normal mortal dead, they do not vanish powerless into Hades; they retain special control over the upper realm and over the affairs of its inhabitants. They straddle the divide, and thus their position and that of the subterranean space that holds them could be seen as having a special sort of mobility. And yet there remains a crucial difference between the cave and the underground space. The event that places the god in the underground space is often a miraculous disappearance—in the midst of violent action, the hero suddenly *is no longer there*—and yet, from a cult point of view, the same phenomenon is a place where the god can always be sought and contacted, can always be 'reached'. His miraculous absence from the world of the living ensures his eternal presence in the underground space and provides a reliable connection between mortal and divinity. The cave, on the other hand, offers no such assurance. Caves provide the possibility of meeting a deity—that is part of their uncanny quality—but no guarantee.[31]

[27] Diodorus (4.11.3–4) provides an interesting variation: instead of a cave with two mouths, the lion's lair is a cleft running right through a mountain called 'Tretos' ('pierced'). The effect is the same, however: the cleft allows passage right through, and Heracles has to stop up one end.

[28] 13.103–12.

[29] Compare Quintus Smyrnaeus' description of the Nekyomanteion at Heraclea Pontica (6.469–91). In this, there is one path for gods and another for mortals. And the two paths are differently orientated: one goes up and the other goes down; one faces north and the other south. Thus they suggest movement both on the vertical and the lateral plane, up and down and along.

[30] Ogden also points out (n. 16, 252) that a cave can itself represent the realm of the dead, not merely an entrance; 251–3 for discussion of the spatial complexities of the connections between living and dead. But a downward movement is usually required to reach the underworld, and if so, the underground chamber or the cave facilitates this.

[31] A phenomenon half-way between the cave and the underground chamber in associations is that of the various Charonea which existed in the Greek world, being sometimes caves, as at Acharaca, (Strabo 14.1.44), sometimes deep hollows in the ground, as at Hierapolis (13.4.14). They were thought to be entrances to the Underworld and—at Acharaca at least—provided a point of contact with Underworld deities via incubation: see Ogden (n. 16), 26; Bonnechère (n. 3), 225–8. But they were not the residences of any one particular god and did not allow the kind of direct consultation provided by such underground chambers as the shrine of Trophonius at Lebadea.

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With the exception of the nymphs, the deities associated with caves tend to be represented as animal-hybrid in form and/or prone to animal metamorphosis, and it is hardly revolutionary to suggest that the being in which two states are represented simultaneously is especially suited to the place where two states may meet. The gods and heroes of the underground chamber are also, it must be remembered, noteworthy for their strong association with a particular animal, the snake; snakes feature in their cults, and Asclepius in particular is often described as having performed metamorphosis into snake form when effecting an epiphany. The significance of snakes in Greek thought, however, as distinct from other animal species, can be seen to accord closely with that of the underground chamber. Both are especially strongly associated with movement on a particular plane: vertical rather than lateral, that is, between the upper and lower worlds.[32] The underground chamber and its denizen, the snake, provide a means of contact between the two levels of existence.[33] Caves and their associated hybrids *can* provide contact, but contact between far less clearly demarcated zones, and always in a state of high uncertainty.

Much cultic practice in ancient Greece had to do with ensuring that a deity's benevolent aspects were maintained and its malevolent ones avoided. In the case of a number of hybrid deities, however, there was an abnormally heightened sense that this delicate balance might fail to be maintained and the deity's beneficial powers lost. The cave was in many ways the expression of this fragility, with its associations of disappearances and presence–absence uncertainty. In the same way, one might say that the underground space of the Hero-type was an expression of the fact that there the balance was being successfully kept, the benevolence of the god managed and contained for human advantage.

THE CULT OF CHIRON

We have observed that the characterization of Chiron in myth is dogged by the idea of his absence, and by that of the cave as the site of absence. But are the sources completely detached from the reality of his Thessalian cult? Have they created a motif which suits their own literary ends, while ignoring Chiron's role as a potent, present deity in northern Greece? The ensuing section aims to show that if we turn from myth to cult the motif of absence is reinforced, rather than overturned.

Two sites in Thessaly concern us, both natural caves, one on Mount Pelion and the other to the south-west of Pharsalus, in the ancient *chôra* of that city. I shall begin with the Pelion cave, which features both in myth and in reality, in story and in cult.[34] The chief literary source for the site is the third-century author Heracleides,[35] who gives the following description:

'Επ' ἄκρας δὲ τῆς τοῦ ὄρους κορυφῆς σπήλαιόν ἐστι τὸ καλούμενον Χειρώνιον καὶ Διὸς Ἀκταίου ἱερὸν ἐφ' ὃ κατὰ κυνὸς ἀνατολὴν κατὰ τὸ ἀκμαιότατον καῦμα ἀναβαίνουσι τῶν

[32] Snakes are sometimes associated with particular kinds of lateral movement, e.g. through their habit of appearing at crossroads (see Nic. *Ther.* 98 and 128–9); but more frequent reference is made to their disappearing underground (e.g. the disappearance of Erichthonius in snake form: see Hyg. *Poet. astr.* 2.13, Paus. 1.24.7).

[33] Ustinova (n. 1), 286 on the role of such figures as mediators between the realms.

[34] It was discovered by Arvanitopoulos on the Plisiadi peak of Mount Pelion; see R. Capon, *Magnesia, a Story of a Civilisation* (Athens, 1982), 98

[35] The text in question was originally attributed to Dicaearchus, and appears under his name in *FHistGr* 2 F 60. For the attribution to Heracleides: F. Pfister, *Die Reisebilder des Heracleides* (Vienna, 1951).

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πολιτῶν οἱ ἐπιφανέστατοι καὶ ταῖς ἡλικίαις ἀκμάζοντες, ἐπιλεχθέντες ἐπὶ τοῦ ἱερέως, ἐνεζωσμένοι κῴδια τρίποκα καινά. τοιοῦτον συμβαίνει ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους τὸ ψῦχος εἶναι.

On the peaks of the mountain's top there is the cave called the Chironion and a *hieron* of Zeus Actaeus, to which, at the rising of the Dog Star, at the time of greatest heat, the most distinguished of the citizens and those in the prime of life ascend, having been chosen in the presence of the priest, wrapped in thick new fleeces. So great is the cold on the mountain.

So we have two features on the site: the cave, which is called 'the Chironion' and a shrine of Zeus Actaeus, as Heracleides calls him.[36] The problem is that whereas a *hieron* would seem to indicate worship in the strict sense of practice, being something that humans construct and then most probably maintain, the same assumption cannot necessarily be made of the cave, with its vague name. 'Chironion' of course reveals an association with the centaur-god, that much is undeniable; but could this association have rested solely upon the myths, the cave simply being regarded as the mythical haunt of Chiron without any suggestion of actual observance or the mechanics of cult?

As for the ritual described, *ἐφ' ὅ* in the second line clearly relates it to the shrine of Zeus. None the less, several scholars have tried to suggest that the Chironion also played a part in the proccedings, even if on a fairly nebulous level. This would be important for our understanding of the cave, implying as it would that it continued to contribute to religious practice and observance. Burkert sees the rite as part of a huge complex of mythology and ritual exploring sacrifice and the guilt of killing.[37] For him, the sheepskins worn by the men who climb the mountain come from the victims of a sacrifice just performed. The trek thus garbed is an act of expiation, which he compares with the story of Actaeon's grief-stricken dogs, who have unwittingly torn their master apart, approaching Chiron in his Pelion cave and being consoled by an image of their master fashioned by the clever centaur.[38] 'The sacrificer identifies with his victim to the point of wearing its skin, tries in effect to undo his own deed; yet he remains a wolf in sheep's clothing.'[39] An alternative interpretation is put forward by Buxton, who argues that the primary association of sheepskins is with herdsmen and with the life of transhumance.[40] Both theories manage to find a place for Chiron, Burkert's through the Actaeon-motif, Buxton's through the identification of Chiron's cave with 'Outside and Before', the mountain world which the young men temporarily inhabit. So Chiron and his cave are of significance as part of the inherent resonances of the site—they contribute to its freight of symbolic associations—without being directly involved in anything which could be thought to constitute worship of Chiron himself (though the implication of Burkert's remark about Actaeon may be that Chiron, rather than Zeus, was the ultimate destination of those seeking absolution, just as it was to him that the dead hunter's dogs repaired).

Archaeologically, the Pelion cave itself has yielded little in the way of ancient

[36] This spelling of the title is generally thought to be a mistake on the part of Heracleides: inscriptions from the area (e.g. *IG* IX^2 1103, 1105, 1108, 1109.54, 1110 and 1128) support the variant *Akraios*, which is, besides, known in connection with other deities such as Apollo and Dionysus. See W. Burkert, *Homo Necans* (California, 1983), 113, and Pfister (n. 35), 209.

[37] Burkert (n. 36), 109–16.

[38] Ibid. 112–13. See Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.4.4 .

[39] Ibid. 113.

[40] R. Buxton, *Imaginary Greece: The Contexts of Mythology* (Cambridge, 1994), 94. No theory that I have encountered remarks on the fact that fleeces are also prominent in the practice of incubation to obtain prophecy, a fact which may perhaps suggest another connection between the rite and the mantic Chiron. Incubation on fleeces: Ogden (n. 16), 86–92.

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material, but in its vicinity have been discovered the foundations of a small shrine and of a slightly larger building.[41] These have been confidently identified as part of the joint cult of Zeus and Chiron;[42] but in truth this is not a safe assumption to make. From the Heracleides passage it would seem that only Zeus had an actual *hieron*. Perhaps one of the buildings near the cave was this *hieron.* To say that much seems reasonable; we should, however, study our own possible motives before we accord Chiron his own cult buildings like those of Zeus. It is tempting to augment the simple cave, to graft on evidence of human contrivance; but the purpose of this discussion is to suggest that to yield to that temptation would be to misread the nature of the Chironion and its eponym.

One or two literary references tell us more about how Chiron was regarded as a deity in Magnesia. Sadly, one author is very late: Plutarch, who says that the Magnetes brought offerings to Chiron as a healer.[43] Heracleides tells us that a dynasty of physicians living at the foot of Mount Pelion, who practised their craft strictly free of charge, traced their line back to the centaur himself, though no worship is actually mentioned.[44] To these two literary mentions may be added the fact that in the Hellenistic period Magnesian coinage sometimes showed Chiron on the reverse and Zeus Acraeus on the obverse.[45] This, again, does not necessarily indicate active cult observance; but it does, like the testimonies of Plutarch and Heracleides, go some way towards suggesting that Chiron was a significant divinity in the Magnesian area on and around Pelion, rather than simply a figure in folktales.

Let us summarize what we have gathered so far. We have a cave that bears Chiron's name; a possible association with Zeus and the fleece-ritual, and a concrete association with Zeus on coins; a late reference to worship of Chiron as a healer-god; and a family's claim to have him as their ancestor and the founder of their craft. I believe that little more, if anything, can be said about the Zeus–Chiron relationship without the appearance of new evidence, and I shall not discuss that element, focusing instead on two things: the use of Chiron's name, and his role as ancestor of local healers.

The cave itself is just one of several features of the Magnesian landscape that bore the centaur's name in some form. There were *Χειρωνίδες ἄκραι* and a *Χειρώνειος ἄκρα* on the Sepias coast.[46] He gave his name to a root that could cure snakebite,[47] and to a herb with the same property,[48] both of which grew on Pelion. His mother Philyra's identity also connects him with the botanical persona of the land: her name means 'lime-tree', and she was a dryad and a daughter of Ocean.[49] Pelion was

[41] Pfister (n. 35) 209, relates the other structures whose vestiges were discovered in the area to the fleece-ritual discussed below, suggesting that 'Die dabei gelegenen Gebäude dienten vielleicht der Unterkunft der Prozessionsteilnehmer.'

[42] For example by F. Stählin, *Das hellenische Thessalien* (Stuttgart, 1924), 43: 'Beide [Gebäude] . . . werden zum Kulte Chirons gedient haben. So entspricht die Zweiteilung des Bezirkes dem Doppelkult des Chiron und des Zeus.' Stählin in fact believes (on the basis of no evidence) that Zeus was a relative newcomer into the partnership.

[43] Plut. *Mor.* 647a.

[44] *FHistGr* 2 F 60; 2.12 Pfister.

[45] A. Moustaka, *Kulte und Mythen auf thessalischen Münzen* (Wurzburg, 1983), 73, Taf. VI.20.

[46] Schol. Hom. *Il.* 16.144; Call. *Hymn.* 4.150.

[47] Nic. *Ther.* 500.

[48] Heracleides 2.3 Pfister; Theophr. *H. Pl.* 9.11.

[49] Philyra as marine nymph: Xen. *Cyn.* 1.3. G. Guillaume-Coirier ('Chiron Phillyride', *Kernos* 8 [1995], 113–22, at 120) argues for her importance to Chiron's medical wisdom, especially his knowledge of medicinal plants. See also J. Larson, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore* (Oxford, 2001), 164.

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regarded in antiquity as a place of abundant vegetation (Homer calls it *Πήλιον εἰνοσίφυλλον*),[50] and indeed it retains that quality today, for as Janssens remarks, it 'se distingue par une exuberance végétale exceptionelle'.[51] With that natural richness Chiron was undoubtedly associated. So through his name, his powers, and his mother's nature, Chiron was woven into the natural fabric of the land and commemorated in its attributes.

There is a close parallel to this state in the case of another Thessalian deity, Thetis. She, like Chiron, exercised some form of special connection with a tract of land, in her case the Sepias promontory; and, as in the case of Chiron, that connection was expressed through myth, Sepias being where she emerged from the sea and went through her shape-changing process in a vain attempt to avoid the erotic advances of Peleus. That this area was also considered to be sacred to her, however, is revealed in a passage of Herodotus,[52] which describes how the Persian fleet, stranded by unfavourable weather conditions on the Sepias coast, find a religious solution: sacrificing to Thetis and the Nereids (among other devotional acts).

τῇ δὲ Θέτι ἔθυον πυθόμενοι παρὰ τῶν Ἰώνων τὸν λόγον ὡς ἐκ τοῦ χώρου τούτου ἁρπασθείη ὑπὸ Πηλέος, εἴη τε ἅπασα ἡ ἀκτὴ ἡ Σηπιὰς ἐκείνης τε καὶ τῶν ἀλλέων Νηρηίδων.

They sacrificed to Thetis because they had learned from the Ionians the story of how she was carried off from this region by Peleus, and that the *whole promontory of Sepias* was sacred to her and to the other Nereids.

So the Persians learn of and exploit an existing phenomenon: the sacrosanctity of the Sepias promontory to Thetis and her Nereid companions.[53] Attempts have been made to narrow down the Thetis-connection of Sepias, and to prove that the area hosted a specific cult—rather than the more general sacrosanctity suggested by Herodotus' account—by unearthing material remains; but they have not met with success.[54] Far more likely is that the whole area was associated with and sacred to Thetis—as Herodotus indeed says—and that this general sacrosanctity precluded the necessity of a specific cult site with man-made trappings of worship. Communication with the goddess could, most likely, take place anywhere on the promontory as long as the appropriate rites were performed.[55]

So with Chiron, as with Thetis, what we tend to find is not the firm structures and practices of many other cults but a vague and general sacrosanctity covering a broad area, which in Chiron's case especially is reflected in names of botanical and geographical features. This quality does not preclude acts of worship—Thetis can receive offerings from mariners, Chiron from healers, each being the chosen recipient

[50] *Il.* 2.757.

[51] E. Janssens, 'Le Pélion, le Centaure Chiron et la sagesse archaïque,' in J. Bingen, G. Cambien, and G. Nachtergael (edd.), *Le monde grec, pensée, littérature, histoire, documents: Hommages à Claire Préaux* (Brussels, 1975), 325–37, at 325.

[52] 7.191.

[53] Their informants are given as 'the Ionians'; we are not treated to a direct view of Thessalian belief. Still, there is plenty of other evidence for Thetis as a Thessalian deity and no reason not to believe that the area of her mythical metamorphosis did not have a privileged share of her divinity.

[54] See e.g. A. J. B. Wace and J. B. Droop, 'Excavations at Theotokou, Thessaly', *ABSA* 13 (1906–7), 309–27 and pls. X and XI.

[55] For some rather more concrete aspects of Thetis' cult outside Thessaly, see Paus. 3.14.4 and 22.2. In Ionia her worship was mostly in conjunction with that of Achilles as her son; see F. Graf, *Nordionische Kulte* (Zurich, 1985), 351–3.

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for a specific group with a specific need. In the case of Chiron, worship was repeated and must surely have taken place on a fixed spot, most probably the cave. At the same time, however, the cave was only part of the wider landscape infused with his persona. This is very different from the *adyton* of Asclepius at Tricca, or Trophonius' subterranean shrine at Lebadea, where a single location provided intense, focused contact with the deity.

It is significant, also, that Chiron received worship on Pelion as the ancestor of a line of healers. A similar status was of course elsewhere accorded to Asclepius. In the case of Chiron, however, the combination of the originator-role with the motif of banishment and death is highly reminiscent of a pattern discernible in the presentation of a number of animal-hybrid figures in Greek mythology. These figures, for example the Telchines and Marsyas, invent or discover some *techne* or *technai*, but subsequently suffer expulsion and/or death, generally at the hands of a god, generally as punishment for misuse of their special skills.[56] There is a strong sense that these primordial figures associated with the birth or the early stages of a *techne* have to be disposed of and superseded, their craft appropriated. In a similar way, Chiron stands at the start of a schema of succession which inevitably consigns him to a past age. It was in such a capacity, I suggest, that he was worshipped by the healers on Pelion: as an original, but not a lasting, power.

The second cave is not the home of Chiron in any surviving myths, but that does not mean that it could not claim his cult presence; the case of Asclepius shows that divine presence is a flexible, or rather divisible, thing. And the Pharsalus cave reveals its very different nature from that on Pelion at once: here, Chiron receives mention in a dedicatory inscription in verse (from the fourth century): just the kind of physical evidence of human regard that was missing from the other site. However, we shall see that once again the position and status of Chiron are not straightforward.

The text of the inscription is as follows:

χαίρετε τοὶ προσιόντες, ἅπας θῆλύς τε καὶ ἄρσην,
ἄνδρες τ' ἠδὲ γυναῖκες ὁμῶς παῖδές τε κόραι τε·
χῶρον δ' εἰς ἱερὸν Νύμφαις καὶ Πανὶ καὶ Ἑρμῆι,
Ἀπόλλωνι ἄνακτι, Ἡρακλεῖ καὶ ἑταίραις·
Χίρωνος τ' ἄντρον καὶ Ἀσκλαπίου ἠδ' Ὑγιείας·
τούτων ἐστὶ τὸ χωρίον ἅπαν ἱαρωτά τ' ἐν αὐτῶι
ἔμφυτα καὶ πίνακες καὶ ἀγάλματα δῶρά τε πολλά·
ἄνδρα δ' ἐποίησαντ' ἀγαθὸν Παντάλκεα Νύμφαι
τῶνδ' ἐπιβαινέμεναι χώρων καὶ ἐπίσκοπον εἶναι,
ὅσπερ ταῦτ' ἐφύτευσε καὶ ἐξεπονήσατο χερσίν,
ἀντίδοσαν, δ' αὐτῶι βίον ἄφθονον ἤματα πάντα·
Ἡρακλέης μὲν ἔδωκ' ἰσχὺν ἀρετήν τε κράτος τε,
ὤιπερ τούσδε λίθους τύπτων ἐπόησ' ἀναβαίνειν,
Ἀπόλλων δὲ δίδωσι καὶ υἱὸς τοῦδε καὶ Ἑρμῆς
αἰῶν' εἰς τὸν ἅπαντα ὑγίειαν καὶ βίον ἐσθλόν,
Πὰν δὲ γέλωτα καὶ εὐφροσύνην ὕβριν τε δικαίαν,

[56] The satyr Marsyas, original *auletes*, and his fate: Hdt. 7.26, Diod. 3.59.5. Telchines, shape-changing inventors of metallurgy: Diod. 5.55.3–56.1, Eustath. *Il.* 771.63–4, Strabo 14.2.7. For discussion of hybrid and shape-changing deities in Greek myth, see M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. J. Lloyd (Brighton, 1978), 140–1 and 259–75. For the relationship between hybridism, deformity and special powers, see D. Ogden, *The Crooked Kings of Ancient Greece* (Duckworth, 1997), 29–37.

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Χίρων δ' αὐτῶι δῶκε σοφόν τ' ἦμεν καὶ ἀοιδόν,
ἀλλὰ τύχαις ἀγαθαῖς ἀναβαίνετε, θύετε πάντες,
εὔχεσθε, εὐφραίνεσθε· κακῶν δ' ἐπίλησις ἁπάντων
ἐνθάδ' ἔνεστ', ἀγαθῶν δὲ . . . ρη πολέμοιο τε ν[ι]κη.

Welcome visitors, every male and female,
men and women, boys and girls,
to a place holy to the nymphs and Pan and Hermes,
Lord Apollo and Heracles and his companions [fem.],
the cave of Chiron and of Asclepius and Hygieia.
Theirs is the place and all the sacred things in it,
growing things and tablets and dedications and many gifts.
The Nymphs made Pantalces a gentleman,
they who walk these places, and made him overseer.
He tended these plants and shaped things with his hands,
and in return they gave him abundance for all his days.
Heracles gave him strength, excellence and power
with which he smote the stones and made a way up.
Apollo and his son Hermes give
health and prosperous living forever;
Pan gave laughter and good cheer and righteous unrestraint;
Chiron gave him to be wise and a poet.
But go up with good fortunes. Let all sacrifice,
pray and enjoy yourselves. Forgetfulness of all cares
is here, and a share of good things, and victory in strife.[57]

This piece presents us with a bewildering array of deities: the nymphs, Pan, Hermes, Apollo, Heracles and his companions (whoever they are), Chiron, Asclepius and Hygieia. Can we tell anything from the inscription itself about Chiron's position *vis-à-vis* the other divinities mentioned? Is he just one member of an unvarying list, or can we isolate anything that distinguishes him? It is risky drawing such conclusions from verse: perhaps the changes of emphasis that mark the piece have as much to do with style and metre as with the subject matter. All the same, it is interesting to note how the various deities are presented as one moves through the piece. Lines 3–4 tell us whom the area—the *chôrion*—is sacred to: the nymphs, Pan, and Hermes. On line 5, however, there is a change of case—dative to genitive—and a break in sense, as we are told that the cave is 'of' Chiron, Asclepius, and Asclepius' daughter Hygieia. At this stage, it seems plausible to suggest that a distinction is being revealed, with the nymphs, Pan, and Hermes having a general authority in the area, and the cave itself being especially the territory of Chiron, Asclepius, and Hygieia. As the text proceeds, however, any difference which might be thought to have emerged is immediately diminished: *τούτων ἐστὶ τὸ χωρίον* on line 6 makes no distinction between deities or indeed between *chora* and cave proper. None the less, the groups into which the deities are not random: Chiron is teamed with his pupil Asclepius, as one might expect.[58]

To summarize our observations about the Pharsalus cave, it is impossible to claim any particular status for Chiron among the other deities: rather, the site was home to a kind of divine collective, a group of gods and goddesses who for the most part had strong ties with caves and cave worship. In this group Chiron has the added qualification of being a purely Thessalian deity, as well as being universally regarded as a

[57] I use both the text and the translation employed by Larson (n. 49), 17, and 16–18 for discussion of the dedication of Pantalces.

[58] The votives found on the site bear no relevance to Chiron: they include certain representations only of Pan and the Nymphs. See the report of D. Levi: 'L'antro delle ninfe e di Pan a Farsalo in Tessaglia: Topographia e scavi', *ASAA* 6–7 (1923), 27–42.

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cave-dweller. His connections with the nymphs may also have fitted him for inclusion, but do not give him ascendancy.[59] He is distinguished in that he is said to have given Pantalces a share in some of his special properties, as all the deities did: in his case, wisdom and musical ability. On the whole, however, he is simply one of an assortment of gods, most of which are typical countryside powers and strongly associated with the natural landscape. The cave is sacred to him, but not to him alone; he does not dominate. This seems in a way to reinforce our observations about his links with Pelion: the general, the plural, the non-specific, raise their heads again. Once more, a far cry from the strong sway of Trophonius at Lebadea and Asclepius at Tricca.[60]

So, for all the patchy evidence, one can form an impression of the patterns in Chiron's cult personality. We may regard him as a deity whose imprint and influence are widely discernible in certain parts of Thessaly, especially on and around Pelion, but who has no single site of strong personal residency. In the cave near Pharsalus, his presence is diffuse, diluted by numerous other deities. On Pelion, his residence in the area of his chief worship belongs to a past age; his cult there commemorates an erstwhile presence rather than reinforcing a current one. In both sites, his situation is in very striking contrast with that of Asclepius, whose worship never lost that vital central feature of personal residency and the importance of establishing his precise and current location(s). It is at variance with the wider pattern of the underground hero, whose *continued presence* was ensured by his containment in the underground chamber.

CONCLUSION: THE ABSENCE OF CHIRON

In a broader view, the theme of absence emerges as a consistent trait of the animal-hybrid god, and Chiron's position as not unusual but as one of many examples of the expression of the motif. However, Chiron is, in one respect, unique. He is the only case in which the potential, the threatened, absence became, in thought, actual. Not only was he gone, he was long gone: by the time Pindar was writing in the early Classical period, his departure was seen as something that took place in the distant age of the heroes—a regrettable *faît accompli.* As for the Chironion on Mount Pelion, it was a highly unusual religious site. Its role was as the place where Chiron *was no longer.*[61] It was simply one of the many traces of his lost presence left on the Thessalian landscape. The cave had to be ἄφθιτον—'undying', Pindar's word[62]—precisely because its erstwhile inhabitant was not.[63] One might compare an aspect of Diodorus' account of the death of Pholus in Arcadia: Heracles buries him at the foot of Mount Pholoë, which thereafter bears his name. As Diodorus says, the landscape-name commemorates the centaur, and makes unnecessary any man-made marker: [τὸ ὄρος] στήλης ἐνδόξου γέγονε κρεῖττον· Φολόη γὰρ ὀνομαζόμενον διὰ τῆς ἐπωνυμίας μηνύει τὸν ταφέντα καὶ οὐ δι' ἐπιγραφῆς.[64] In Chiron's case, there is not

[59] Chiron was both son and father of nymphs. Philyra: above, n. 49; Thetis: n. 11; *kourai hagnai*, Chiron's daughters: Pind. *Pyth.* 4.103.

[60] This is not to say that these two gods did not share their 'quarters' with others; Triccaean Asclepius, for instance, was in particularly close conjunction with Apollo Maleatas. But devotees would come to each shrine with a very clear idea as to the identity of its chief resident and what they wanted from him.

[61] See e.g. Ov. *Fasti* 5.383–4, talking about Pelion: *Phillyrides tenuit. saxo stant antra vetusto, / quae iustum memorant incoluisse senem.*

[62] *Isth.* 8.46.

[63] Pindar also calls Chiron's cave σεμνόν: *Pyth.* 9.30. Thus the cave has a share in its owner's sacrosanctity.

[64] Diod. 4.12.8.

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even a burial mentioned, thus setting it apart from the phenomenon of the tomb of the dead hero. The cave was a stand-in for the missing god. It was a cenotaph.

Why was Chiron regarded as a *absent* god, when other hybrid figures merely have questionable or unreliable presence? The reasons must be multiple, extremely complex, and impossible to reach in their entirety; here, in sum, are a few aspects of Chiron's character which may be relevant. The first concerns his kourotrophic role. This may have been, at some stage, a feature of his cult persona: like the nymphs, he may have been a god who gave life to the young and protection to infants. From this, however, developed an extensive myth-structure of nurture and education which wove Chiron into the childhoods of heroes. The main focus of myth, of course, was on those heroes' later lives, their conquests and trials; Chiron was largely a figure from their past, someone who contributed ingredients to their later greatness and then tended to slip from the story.[65] I would suggest that this could have contributed to the idea of Chiron as belonging to past time. This would tie in with the remarks already made about Chiron as originator and thus superseded, an inhabitant of an earlier age.

Another, more profound insight is offered by the manner of his death. The versions differ, with that of Apollodorus providing perhaps the most vivid illustration. In his account, Chiron is accidentally shot by Heracles because the violent centaurs at which the hero is aiming cluster round him, and Heracles cannot distinguish sufficiently between good and bad. Chiron dies because he is too close to his wild cousins. The other version, in which he drops one of the hero's arrows on his foot, carries the same implication: the arrow is not meant for him, but for one of his bad relatives; in Diodorus' account it has already been employed thus. Therefore Chiron's fatal flaw is that he is not sufficiently different from the non-divine monsters whose form he shares. He is not a monster, but he resembles one. I think this tells us a great deal about the perceived reason for his departure and absence: despite being a god, he is not enough of a god, at least in appearance, to be preserved.

None the less, it is important that his absence is caused accidentally. He is not a part of the deliberate Heraclean purge. The manner of his death does, finally, set him apart from the monsters, as does the regret and the sense of loss that follow it.

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[65] Chiron is always old: see e.g. Theoc. 7.150, Nonn. *Dion.* 35.61.

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