

A God for Many Cities

Apollo Karneios and the Spartan ties with the Mediterranean

Nicola Nenci,
University of Perugia

Sparta, 12-09-2021

This text is for read-aloud purposes

Apollo Karneios [SLIDE 2] is a deity whose cult is attested in many *poleis* of the ancient Mediterranean in a time-span that goes from the 6th century BC to the Antonine Period. In the Peloponnese, the god received worship in:

[1] Argos,

[2] Sikyon,

[3] Messini (particularly Andania, in connection with important mystery cults), and, of course, Laconia.

[4] Spartans were devoted to Apollo Karneios, but the cult took place also in the Mani peninsula, in

[5] Gytheion,

[6] Las,

[7] Oitylos,

[8] Leuktras, and

[9] Kardamyli.

Outside mainland Greece, evidence attests to the cult in

[10] Thera and Cyrene, colony and sub-colony of Sparta, respectively, as well as in

[11] Knidos,

[12] Kos, and

[13] Rhodes

Despite the vast geographical and chronological diffusion of the cult, here I focus on how the cult had to do in terms of relations between Greek communities. In particular, I will discuss two problems:

1. [SLIDE 3] to whom the cult was believed to belong to in relation with Spartans and non-Spartans;
2. [SLIDE 4] The role of the cult in the relationships between Sparta and Thera and Cyrene

In order to discuss point 1, I will mention briefly the cult in Sparta to then move outside Sparta, and then I will get back to Sparta again. [SLIDE 5]

Sparta was certainly the focus of Apollo Karneios' worship, where the cult is attested since the 5th century BC.

A stele on display at the Sparta Museum, dated to 500-480 BC, bears a dedication to Karneios, and

Herodotus (7.206) attests to the cult in the city at about that time, in an account [SLIDE 6] involving the battle of the Thermopylae (480 BC): he describes how the city of Sparta did not send the force of its army at the Thermopylae, but Leonidas and the 300, for the very reason that Spartans were celebrating the Karneia.

But from the same author we learn that at that time the Karneia was not only a Spartan affair, and now we move a bit away from Sparta: [1] Herodotus (8.72) reports that close in time to the battle of Salamis (480 BC), Peloponnesians sent troops to build a defensive wall on the isthmus of Corinth, and lists the populations that took part in the venture. He specifies that only some attended, while "the rest of the Peloponnesians cared nothing, though the Olympian and Karneian festivals were now past".

Something similar we read in Thucydides (5.54). [SLIDE 7] He relates that Spartans and their allies moved against Leuktras in the thirteenth year of the Peloponnesian war (we are in 419/418 BC), and before crossing the borders of Lakonia they

performed sacrifices. After having obtained a bad omen, they decided to postpone the expedition after the following month, the month Karneios, which—Thucydides says—was “sacred for the Dorians”.

But the Peloponnesian / Dorian aspect of the cult does not only emerge in Herodotus and Thucydides, but it is in fact well represented in some of the several literary accounts narrating the origins of the cult of Apollo Karneios.

[SLIDE 8] A tradition attested for the first time in Theopompos of Chios, and therefore dating back to the 4th c. BC, narrates that the cult originated during the Heraklidai saga. While they were stationing their navy in present-day Naupaktos, getting ready to cross the Corinthian gulf and invade the Peloponnese through the sea, a seer of Apollo, named Karnos, made a prophecy to the Heraklidai, but they did not understand it and thought the seer was a spy of the enemies, so they killed him. The murder of the seer angered Apollo, who sent a plague. To appease the deity, the Heraklidai exiled the killer and established honours for Apollo, who received the epithet ‘Karneios’ in memory of the murdered seer.

Karnos’ story is an episode embedded in the Heraklidai saga, which involved the origin and formation of the Dorian ethnic group. Therefore, this origin of Karneios’ cult, is part of a tradition belonging to a common heritage of all Dorians. And in fact, the scholiast who reports Theopompos’ fragment also states that this story is the reason why “those Peloponnesians who live in the Peloponnese, as well as the ones who migrated towards other cities celebrate this festival”.

We will see later who some of these migrated Peloponnesians were, but for now we can observe that the tradition about Karnos is coherent with what reported by Herodotus and Thucydides.

Yet, things are not this simple because another tradition about the origins of Karneios’ cult brings us far away from Dorian horizons towards an earlier genuine Pan-Hellenic context, that of the Trojan war.

[1] According to Pausanias (3.13.5) and to a scholiast of Theocritus (Id. 5.83c), the Karneian festival derives its name from the word *krania* (κρανεῖα), namely “cornel trees”, because the Greeks used cornel-tree wood, taken from a grove sacred to Apollo, to build the Trojan horse. The deity was furious for the damage to his *àlsoi* (ἄλσος), and, to appease the god’s anger, Greeks established *thisiai* (θυσίαι), sacrifices, in his honour. The Pan-Hellenic scale here is remarked by the fact that Pausanias points to “I *Hèllines*” (οἱ Ἕλληνες) as the agents in the story of Apollo “The Cornel”, and the scholiast specifies that it is from this story that the Karneia festival is called so by the *Hèllines*, by “all” Greeks.

So here the belonging of the cult is extended not only to Dorians, but to all Greek peoples.

To summarise, so far, we have identified two ethnic belongings of the same cult: [2] one is Dorian (Karnos and the Heraklidai) and the other Pan-Hellenic (the Trojan horse).

But what was the Spartan response to all this? Or, rather, the Spartan view about Apollo Karneios?

And here we come to a third level of belonging: Spartan, because there is evidence pointing towards a cult of Apollo Karneios that was understood as a genuine Spartan divine entity. [3] Our main source for this is Demetrios of Skepsis (second c. BC), who also sets the origin of the cult at Troy, but reports a story other than the horse. Demetrios describes that was the Spartan king Menèlaos who promised to honour Apollo if the deity brought the Trojan war to a good end [for the Greeks]. Here, like in the story of the *krania*, the cornels, we have an the *aition*: the verb used to express “to come to a good end” is κρᾶνω, or κρᾶϊνω. But differently from before:

1. Apollo is not “the cornel”, but “the fulfiller”
2. Mostly relevant to us, the agent are not the *Hèllines*, the Greeks, but Menèlaos, who is the lord of Sparta, and therefore Sparta is here the main focus in the origin of the cult.

This tradition preserves the Trojan origin but reverts it from a Pan-Hellenic to a Spartan scale.

We will briefly get back to this point later on, but now I would like to argue that this passage of Demetrios can be used for the exegesis of one other passage from the same author, this time quoted by Athenaeus of Naukratis. [4]:

~~“Demetrios of Skepsis in Book I of his Trojan Catalogue~~ says that the Spartans’ Carneia festival imitates their military way of life. For there are a total of nine places, referred to as “canopies” because they contain something that resembles tents. Nine men eat at each of these; everything is done in response to a herald’s order; each canopy contains three *phratries*; and the Carneia festival lasts for nine days.”

This is the only extant substantial description of the Spartan Carneia, and modern scholars interpreted this fragment variously giving it agricultural, educational, or expiatory value. But I think that by combining the two passages by Demetrios, that about Menèlaos, and this one about the of the festival, it is possible to argue that Spartans, during the Carneia, aimed at imitating the Achaeans fighting at Troy where and when their king Menèlaos established the cult. But what did they imitate exactly? We know that Demetrios’ fragments belong to his commentary to Iliad Book 2, and if we look at the Iliad’s Book 2 [5], we can find a reference to the *phratries*.

It is when the Trojan war is at a critical phase: the Greeks are in assembly to decide what to do to improve the situation because the war is in neat favour of the Trojans; the Achaeans threaten to leave Troy; Tersites has just spoken—and we all know what happened with Odiseus—but at some point, the wise Nestor takes his word and suggests Agamemnon on how to call and assemble the army to fight:

Range your men by *phylai*, even by *phraties*, Agamemnon,

κρῖν' ἄνδρας κατὰ φύλα, κατὰ φρήτρας

so *phyle* fights by the side of *phyle*, *phratry* by *phratry*.

ὥς φρήτρη φρήτρηφιν ἀρήγη, φύλα δὲ φύλοις

To summarise so far, I argue that Demetrios' passage about the Karneia festival should be read as a commentary of the Iliad, where probably Demetrios explains the Spartan custom of dining in tents during the Karneia, divided by *phraties*, as an imitation of the Greeks fighting at Troy according to the configuration of the army that Nestor suggests to Agamemnon: this is what I suppose Demetrios' statement "imitation of military life" may mean.

But I think that these two passages by Demetrios can be even more explanatory in light of a third one [6] about Karneios, attested anywhere else but in Pausanias, who reports that

"Karneios, whom they surname Oiketas (of the House) had honours in Sparta even before the return of the Heraklidai, his seat being in the house of a seer, Krios (Ram) the son of Theokles. The daughter of this Krios was met as she was filling her pitcher by spies of the Dorians, who entered into conversation with her, visited Krios and learned from him how to capture Sparta."

This tale does not say where the cult originated but rather that the cult was already in Sparta before the return of the Heraklidai. So, Spartans claimed that their own cult was in the city even before the return of the Heraklidai, so to say: "'yes, the cult is Dorian, but the priority goes to Sparta'".

And we have seen who was the Spartan who established the cut in a horizon prior to the Heraklidai: it was Menelaos at Troy.

And here I would read a sort of confrontational attitude of Spartans in relations to both the rest of the Dorians and the other Hèllines, which implies that Sparta claimed the cult of Karneios for itself by putting itself in relation with other communities worshipping the same deity. And this is done with a certain degree of complexity, namely without denying that the cult originated at Troy, nor excluding the Heraklidaí, because Krios helps them to capture Sparta.

So far, we have seen that Apollo Karneios was a deity worshipped in many *poleis*, and, as such, deeply entangled in a mass of complex identity issues between ancient Greek communities at various scales: local, Dorian, and even Pan-Hellenic.

[SLIDE 9] By cutting a long story short, let us now see more closely how these relations may have worked, for some of those Peloponnesians outside Peloponnese by looking at the cult of Apollo Karneios [1] in Thera and Cyrene, colony and sub-colony of Sparta, respectively, by starting from Thera [2].

Literary evidence for the cult of Apollo Karneios in Thera [SLIDE 10] is scarce and consists mainly in Pindar and Callimachus, who however do not provide much information for Thera because as we will see, they are somehow “Cyrenocentric”.

Modern scholars claim to have identified a temple of Apollo Karneios in a building [SLIDE 11] located at the entrance of the sanctuary known as the “Agora of the Gods” at the far East of the mighty mount of Mèsa Vuonò. Yet, I think that this identification should be carefully pondered, but I pass on this problem now.

Relevant evidence for Thera is mainly, if not only, epigraphical.

[SLIDE 12] One inscription attests to the cult in the island since the 6th century BC. It is carved on the natural bedrock outside the ancient site, on a rock-face along a path that from the Zoodòchos spring leads to the necropolis of Plagàdes. [1]

The text mentions a Karneian banquet offered by one Aglotèles during the Agoraia festival. Unfortunately, we do not have many more information to elaborate on this text, and no other strong evidence is available for this cult in the island, up until the Hellenistic period.

For that period, we have [SLIDE 13] two inscriptions (IG XII 3, 336 and 1302) bearing the same text dated to the second half of the third century BC, and found reused in a latrine between the *agorà* and the theatre. The text reports that during a Karneian *agon*, slaves were freed. We don't know what the *agon* was: perhaps a music competition, but the relevant aspect is that the practice of manumitting slaves was often made during major public and religious occasions, such as, for instance, the Pythian games at Delphi, so that the largest number of people could witness the proclamation of the freed slaves. So, if manumissions were held at the Theraean Karneia, it suggests that during the Hellenistic period this was probably one of the main festivals in the city.

But the largest amount of evidence (still epigraphical) in Thera belongs to the Roman period, and I am going to focus on a couple of inscribed epigrams, dated to the 1st c. AD, which stones are now lost:

[SLIDE 14] It is a couple of dedications to Admetos son of Theokleidas, to whom the *demos* bestowed hero cult after he died.

The two texts have quite remarkably complex construction, with allusion to symbolic meanings of mythical episodes, aimed at showing how Admetos was suitable for heroic honours.

But I want to focus here on two things:

1. Admetos is hereditary priest of Apollo Karneios, and we have other inscriptions mentioning members of the same Tehran family in charge of the

same office, and therefore it is something not involving Admetos himself only, but all his family.

2. Admetos claims Spartan ancestors, and of course this does involve his *genos*. Both epigrams point to Sparta: one by stating his pride for descending from Lakedaimonian kings; and the other by establishing a direct connection between the heroic honours that the Dioskouroi (Oebalids) received in Sparta (Eurotas), and those honours that Admetos received in Thera.

And I think that the priesthood of Apollo Karneios by family, and the references to Sparta as the mother city of Admetos' *genos*, are not together by chance: I find meaningful that a priest of Apollo Karneios BY *GENOS* claims Spartan origins, and to me it suggests a link between the local Theraean aristocracy with Sparta by means of Apollo Karneios cult.

But if I may spend 1 minute to speculate a bit further on this topic, the name of Admetos' father is striking. Theokleidas is a name, but in the fashion of a patronymic, meaning "son of Theokles". And we have found a Theokles before: he was the father of Krios, in whose mansion Apollo Karneios' cult was housed before the return of the Heraklidae. And if there is an intentional reference to the father of Krios, the connection here is to the genuine Spartan cult of Karneios, coherently with Admetos' claims towards his Spartan origins.

So the relation in which the cult Apollo Karneios is involved, here, is between an aristocratic family of a colony of Sparta and the mother-city. And as we are going to see next, something similar may have happened in Cyrene.

But moving to Cyrene implies also switching to an earlier chronological horizon. This back and forth in time is due to chronology of the available evidence, which is something unavoidable when having to do with Apollo Karneios.

That this cult held a special space in the religious hearth of Cyrene is clear by reading Pindar and Callimachus.

[SLIDE 15] Pindar mentions the cult of Apollo Karneios in his Pythian 5, that he composed for the victory of the last ruler of Cyrene, Arkesilaos IV, who won the chariot race at the *Pythian* games in 462 BC. Pindar's celebratory ode [1] emphasises Arkesilaos' eminent lineage, and glorifies his noteworthy ancestors, [2] and in particular Battos, the progenitor of the Battiad lineage. The Spartan origins of Arkesilaos' bloodline are skilfully highlighted by the poet, [3] who states that the Battiads' glory is based on their Spartan origins (ll. 73-76), and Pindar stresses the connection between Arkesilaos and Sparta by pointing to the noteworthy family of the Aegeïds (l. 75), a *phylè* named after Aigeus, son of Oiolykos son of Theras, the founder of the colony of Thera (630 BC), [4] from where Battos brought to the land of Libya the cult of Apollo Karneios and the custom of banqueting during the Karneia.

That the cult of Apollo Karneios, according to the Pithyan 5, is related to Thera AND to the foundation of Cyrene is undeniable, but:

1. Not much in the ode suggests that Apollo Karneios had some sort of role in the foundation of Thera, and
2. the cult is linked to the foundation of Cyrene through Battos.

[5] Battos is the link between Cyrene and Karneios, and the foundation of Cyrene is only indirectly connected with the deity by the fact that Apollo Karneios is dear to Battos, founder and first ruler of the city.

[6] What emerges from the ode, I think, is

- the will of highlighting the Spartan origins of Arkesilaos, and
- that rather than to the city of Cyrene itself, the cult of Apollo Karneios is dear to the Battiads, to which household Arkesilaos belonged.

But the Battiads household fell not long after the composition of Pythian 5. Arkesilaos is overthrown and shortly after killed in 440 BC (we know this from Herodotus Book 4), and from this period on, to my knowledge, in Cyrene is no evidence for the cult of Apollo Karneios: no texts, no inscriptions, nothing.

This is true until the Ptolemaic period, when we again have evidence attesting to Apollo Karneios' cult.

[SLIDE 16] Two inscriptions dating third-century BC mention *telesphoroi*, who officiated during the Karneia festival, and, of course, the most important evidence for this cult of Hellenistic period in Cyrene is [1] Callimachus' *Hymn* 2, dedicated to Apollo.

The poet reprises and enriches the themes mentioned by Pindar: Callimachus closely associates [2] Apollo Karneios with the foundation of Cyrene but in particular with Battos (vv. 75-77), who shares qualities and talents of the god. As *Archigètis* (Ἀρχηγέτης), Apollo leads Battos to found the city, [3] and grants the rule over Cyrene to the Battiads (vv. 57-68): Apollo is the god of Cyrene, and Apollo Karneios is the favourite deity of the Battiads.

The similarities between Hymn 2 and Pythian 5 are probably due to a political situation radically different from that of the so-called "Republican" period: Callimachus lives at a time when the Ptolemaic dynasty rules over Cyrene, and royal traditions are probably welcome again, but it is perhaps also due to the origin of the family of Callimachus, who himself is a descendant from the Cyrenaic Battiads, as we know from Strabo (17.3.21), who says that "Cyrene is said to have been founded by Battos, whom Callimachus claims to have been his *progonos* (ancestor)".

In conclusion, I propose to ponder the role of *Archigètis* that modern scholars often attribute to Apollo Karneios: he was not a god involved in colonisations, but served a

specific ideological choice of the Cyrenaean ruling aristocracy—that of the Battiads—to define itself as a Spartan component and, as such, to justify its status of reigning dynasty.

The cult was perceived as a linking device between the rulers of Cyrene and Sparta, and therefore it was a mean to establish a relation between the ruling aristocracy of the sub-colony with the primary metropolis. And it is curious to note the Thera is a necessary intermediate point, but the relevant link they were looking for was with Sparta.

[SLIDE 17] To conclude, I would propose that in addition to the Pan-Hellenic, Dorian, and Spartan, in the case of Thera and Cyrene we have a fourth degree of belonging, that is social groups.

As we have seen, in both these two cases, the cult is used to establish a direct relation between Sparta and the noteworthy ruling aristocracies of its colony and sub-colony of Thera and Cyrene, respectively.

[SLIDE 18]