

## The East Slope of the Acropolis as a Mnemotopos of Mythical and Historical Wars

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**Abstract:** The Acropolis of Athens was indisputably the religious center of the city and played a pivotal role in shaping various aspects of Athenian identity. This study adopts a holistic approach—integrating literary, epigraphic, topographic and iconographic evidence, to examine the east slope of the Acropolis as a *mnemotopos* (place of memory) associated with war(s). The primary aim of my paper is to emphasize the significance of the east slope of the Acropolis as the *topos* and *lieu de mémoire par excellence*, both for mythical and historical wars.

### Introduction

The east slope of the Acropolis is the steepest and most inaccessible side of the Acropolis citadel. It is here that the sanctuary of Aglauros once stood.<sup>1</sup> Aglauros, a prominent Athenian heroine, was associated with two important mythological episodes: (a) the birth and nurture of the baby hero Erichthonios, during which she defied Athena's command by opening the chest containing the infant—an act that led to her death by leaping from the Acropolis and (b) the war between Athens and Eleusis, in which she voluntarily sacrificed herself for the salvation of the city, again by leaping from the Acropolis cliffs.<sup>2</sup> In light of the present study's objectives, particular emphasis will be placed on the latter aspect of Aglauros' mythology—her voluntary sacrifice

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<sup>1</sup> Most recently, on the Aglaureion, see: Dontas 1983; Kearns 1989, 139; Miller 1995, 211, 236 n. 83; Shapiro 1995, 41; 2008, 168; Hurwit 1999, 101, 136; Papadopoulos 2003, 282–285; Schmalz 2006, 35–41; Ficuciello 2008, 68; Lambert 2008, 22–26; Malouchou 2008, 103–115; Greco 2010, 159–160; Doronzio 2011, 18–21, 31–54, 61–69; 2012, 22–23; Sourvinou-Inwood 2011, 28, 220; Vollmer 2014, 436 n. 120; Meyer 2017, 284–288; Rookhuijzen 2017, 37–42; Mitsios 2018, 48–50; 2021, 327; 2022, 101–103; 2023a, 248–249; 2024a, 12–14; 2024b, 21; 2024c, 60; 2025, 24.

<sup>2</sup> For Aglauros, see Brulé 1987, 28–32; Parker 1987, 195–197; 2005, 52, 222, 270, 381, 434; Kearns 1989, 23–27; Oikonomides 1990, 11–17; Harding 2008, 27–29; Meyer 2017, 267–273; Mitsios 2018, 20–27; 2024a, 10–14; 2024b; 2024c; 2025, 21–25; 2026.

during the war with Eleusis—which served as the *aition* (founding myth) for the establishment of her sanctuary, the Aglaureion. Furthermore, the paper explores the broader significance of the east slope as a *mnemotopos* for both mythical and historical wars, suggesting its diachronic importance.

### **Literary Sources and the Location of the Aglaureion**

The literary evidence concerning the Aglaureion is preserved in the works of four ancient authors: Herodotus (8.53), Philochorus (*FGrH* 328 F 105), Pausanias (1.18.2) and Polyaeus (1.21.2). Prior to the 1980s—when the discovery of an inscribed stele enabled the secure identification of the sanctuary’s location—the precise site of the Aglaureion was the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Before turning to the recent archaeological evidence, it is essential to first examine the relevant literary testimonia.

The oldest account on the Aglaureion derives from Herodotus (8.53), who attests the following regarding the sanctuary:

In time a way out of their difficulties was revealed to the barbarians, since according to the oracle all the mainland of Attica had to become subject to the Persians. In front of the Acropolis, and behind the gates and the ascent, was a place where no one was on guard, since no one thought any man could go up that way. Here some men climbed up, near the sacred precinct of Kekrops' daughter Aglauros, although the place was a sheer cliff. When the Athenians saw that they had ascended to the Acropolis, some threw themselves off the wall and were killed and others fled into the chamber. The Persians who had come up first turned to the gates, opened them and murdered the suppliants. When they had levelled everything, they plundered the sacred precinct and set fire to the entire Acropolis.<sup>3</sup>

The next testimony comes from Philochorus (*FGrH* 328 F 105), who refers to the sanctuary, stating that: «ιερόν υπέρ τούτου εποιήσαντο αυτή περί τά προπύλαια της πόλεως».

The third account derives from Pausanias (1.18.2), who attests that:

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<sup>3</sup> Χρόνω δ' εκ των απόρων εφάνη δὴ τις ἔξοδος τοισι βαρβάροισι· ἔδεε γὰρ κατὰ τὸ θεοπρόπιον πασαν τὴν Ἀττικὴν τὴν εν τῇ ηπειρῶ γενέσθαι υπό Πέρσησι. ἔμπροσθε ὧν πρὸ της ακροπόλιος, ὀπισθε δὲ των πυλέων καὶ της ἀνόδου, τῇ δὴ οὐτε τις φύλασσε οὐτ' ἄν ἤλιπε μή κοτέ τις κατὰ ταυτα αναβαίη ἀνθρώπων, ταύτη ἀνέβησαν τινές κατὰ τὸ ἱρόν της Κέκροπος θυγατρὸς Ἀγλαύρου, καίτοι περ ἀποκρίμνου εόντος του χώρου. ὡς δὲ εἶδον αὐτοὺς ἀναβεβηκότας οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι ἐπὶ τὴν ἀκρόπολιν, οἱ μὲν ἐρρίπτεον ἑωυτοὺς κατὰ τοῦ τείχεος κάτω καὶ διεφθείροντο, οἱ δὲ ἐς τὸ μέγαρον κατέφευγον. τῶν δὲ Περσέων οἱ ἀναβεβηκότες πρῶτον μὲν ἐτράποντο πρὸς τὰς πύλας, ταύτας δὲ ἀνοίξαντες τοὺς ἰκέτας ἐφόνευον· ἐπεὶ δὲ σφι πάντες κατέστρωντο, τὸ ἱρόν συλήσαντες ἐνέπρησαν πᾶσαν τὴν ἀκρόπολιν (trans. Godley 1920).



Above the sanctuary of the Dioskouroi is a sacred enclosure of Aglauros. It was to Aglauros and her sisters, Herse and Pandrosos, that they say Athena gave Erichthonios, whom she had hidden in a chest, forbidding them to pry curiously into what was entrusted to their charge. Pandrosos, they say, obeyed, but the other two (for they opened the chest) went mad when they saw Erichthonios, and threw themselves down the steepest part of the Acropolis. Here it was that the Persians climbed and killed the Athenians who thought that they understood the oracle better than did Themistocles and fortified the Acropolis with logs and stakes.<sup>4</sup>

The last testimony on the Aglaureion comes from Polyaeus (1.21.2), who states that:

When he intended to disarm the Athenians, Peisistratos commanded them all to appear at the Anakeion, in arms. When they were assembled, he stepped forth, as if to address them, but he began in so low a tone of voice, that, not being able to hear him, the people asked him to go to the Propylaeum, where they might all hear him more distinctly. And even then he did not raise his voice enough to be heard distinctly, so that the people were straining to listen to him. Meanwhile his associates went about and secretly carried off all the arms, putting them in the sanctuary of Aglauros. The Athenians, when they found themselves left defenceless, realised too late that Peisistratos' weak voice was only a stratagem to deprive them of their arms.<sup>5</sup>

The interpretation of the ancient literary references regarding the location of the sanctuary of Aglauros has long been a subject of scholarly debate. The key passage from Herodotus (8.53), which mentions “ἔμπροσθε ὧν πρὸς τῆς ἀκροπόλιος, ὀπίσθε δὲ τῶν πυλῶν καὶ τῆς ἀνόδου”, appears at first glance to refer to the west slope of the Acropolis and the Propylaea, traditionally understood as the main entrance to the sanctuary. Despite this, some scholars have proposed alternative interpretations. One view holds that the entrance mentioned by Herodotus may in fact refer to the northern slope, suggesting that “ἔμπροσθε” designates the north side of the Acropolis, while “ὀπίσθε” refers to the south.<sup>6</sup> Another interpretation suggests that “ὀπίσθε δὲ τῶν

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<sup>4</sup> ὑπὲρ δὲ τῶν Διοσκούρων τὸ ἱερὸν Ἀγλαύρου τέμενος ἐστίν. Ἀγλαύρω δὲ καὶ ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς Ἔρση καὶ Πανδρόσῳ δοῦναί φασίν Ἀθηναῖν Ἐριχθόνιον καταθεῖσαν ἐς κιβωτόν, ἀπειποῦσαν ἐς τὴν παρακαταθήκην μὴ πολυπραγμονεῖν: Πάνδρῳ μὲν δὴ λέγουσι πείθεσθαι, τὰς δὲ δύο—ἀνοιξαί γὰρ σφᾶς τὴν κιβωτόν—μαίνεσθαι τε, ὡς εἶδον τὸν Ἐριχθόνιον, καὶ κατὰ τῆς ἀκροπόλεως, ἔνθα ἦν μάλιστα ἀπτόμον, αὐτὰς ῥῖψαι. κατὰ τοῦτο ἐπαναβάντες Μῆδοι κατεφόνευσαν Ἀθηναίων τοὺς πλέον τι ἐς τὸν χρησμὸν ἢ Θεμιστοκλῆς εἰδέναί νομίζοντας καὶ τὴν ἀκρόπολιν ξύλοις καὶ σταυροῖς ἀποτείχισαντας (trans. Jones / Ormerod 1918).

<sup>5</sup> Πεισίστρατος Ἀθηναίων τὰ ὄπλα βουλόμενος παρελέσθαι παρήγγειλεν ἦκειν ἅπαντας εἰς τὸ Ἀνάκειον μετὰ τῶν ὄπλων. οἱ μὲν ἦγον· οὗ δὲ προηλθε βουλόμενος δημηγορησαὶ καὶ σμικρᾷ τῇ φωνῇ λέγειν ἤρχετο. οἱ δὲ εξακούειν μὴ δυνάμενοι προελθὲν αὐτὸν ἠξίωσαν εἰς τὸ προπύλαιον, ἵνα πάντες εξακούσειαν. ἐπεὶ δὲ οὗ μὲν ἡσυχῇ διελέγετο, οἱ δ' ἐντείναντες τὰς ἀκοὰς προσεῖχον, οἱ ἐπικούρου προελθόντες ἀράμενοι τὰ ὄπλα κατήνεγκαν εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν τῆς Ἀγραύλου (trans. Shepherd 1793).

<sup>6</sup> Leake 1821, 128–129; Wachsmuth 1874, 301–302; Müller 1987, 612; Doronzio 2011, 51.



πυλέων καὶ τῆς ἀνόδου” refers not to the rear of the Propylaia but rather to its opposite direction—that is, the east slope.<sup>7</sup> A further line of argument posits that Herodotus was not referring to topographical orientation *per se* but rather to the conventional orientation of Greek temples, where the main entrance is typically situated on the eastern side.<sup>8</sup> This interpretative diversity has fueled support for the east slope as the sanctuary’s location, particularly since the area is notably steep — described by Herodotus as “καίτοι περ ἀποκρήμνου εόντος του χώρου”— a detail consistent with the east slope, which is the most precipitous and difficult to access.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, proponents of a west slope location point to its greater accessibility, the presence of a staircase<sup>10</sup> and material evidence related to warfare, such as arrowheads<sup>11</sup> and a human skeleton.<sup>12</sup> In addition to Herodotus, the testimony of Philochorus has also proven problematic. His reference to the sanctuary being located “περὶ τὰ προπύλαια τῆς πόλεως” has led some scholars to associate the Aglaureion with the west slope and even to conflate it with the sanctuary of the Nymphs.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Polyaeus’ mention of “εἰς τὸ προπύλαιον” seems to reinforce the association with the west side of the Acropolis, as the Propylaia—in the context of Athens—unequivocally refers to the monumental western gateway.

The Aglaureion was initially thought to be located on the north slope of the Acropolis. The first scholar to propose this identification was Christopher Wordsworth, in 1837, who placed the sanctuary in that area.<sup>14</sup> The shrine was subsequently associated with a cave, although it is not mentioned as such in any ancient source. The area was first excavated by Kavvadias<sup>15</sup> and later by Broneer,<sup>16</sup> although neither excavation yielded substantial material evidence to confirm the identification.

The discovery of an inscribed stele from the 3rd century B.C.—dated to either 247/6 or 246/5 B.C.—dedicated to Timokrite, priestess of Aglauros, by Dontas on 16

<sup>7</sup> Dontas 1983; Miller 1995, 236 n. 83.

<sup>8</sup> Dontas 1983, 59; Miller 1995, 236 n.83; Robertson 1996, 159–160; Hurwit 1999, 136; Papadopoulos 2003, 302; 2008, 37–38.

<sup>9</sup> Dontas 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Leake 1821, 126–131; Macan 1908, 440; Judeich 1931, 303; Travlos 1971, 72–73.

<sup>11</sup> Broneer 1933, 342; 1935, 114–115.

<sup>12</sup> Broneer 1935, 117.

<sup>13</sup> Ervin 1958, proposed identifying the sanctuary of Aglauros with that of the Nymphs, excavated by Meliades between 1955 and 1959.

<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth 1837, 86–89.

<sup>15</sup> Kavvadias 1897, 28–32.

<sup>16</sup> Broneer 1933, 329–349; 1935.



April 1980, significantly altered previous assumptions regarding the location of the Aglaureion. (Fig. 1).<sup>17</sup>



**Fig. 1** *SEG XXXIII 115*. The inscribed stele discovered by Dontas, which securely identifies the Aglaureion on the east slope of the Acropolis of Athens.

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<sup>17</sup> *SEG XXXIII 115*. Dontas 1983.



The significance of the stele lies in the fact that the inscription explicitly states it was to be set up “ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τῆς Ἀγλαύρου,” thereby securely locating the sanctuary of Aglauros on the east slope of the Acropolis (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2** The location of the discovery of the inscribed stele, which was found *in situ*.

A second inscription (*IG II<sup>2</sup> 663*), dated to around 283/2 B.C., likely reinforces this placement; it includes a fragmentary reference suggesting the stele was to be set up in the sanctuary of Aglauros: “ἐ-[ν στήλιτι λιθί]νει καὶ στήσαι ἐν Ἀγλ[αύ]-[ρου, εἰς δὲ τῆ]ν ἀναγραφὴν τῆς στήλ[ης μ]-”, further supporting the discovery of Dontas.<sup>18</sup> It should be noted, however, that most inscriptions mentioning Aglauros do not explicitly state that they were set up within the sanctuary (the Aglaureion) and their findspots are in fact topographically dispersed across the city. Nonetheless, since the discovery of the stele by Dontas—especially given its directive for *in situ* placement within the sanctuary—the majority of scholars now accept the identification of the Aglaureion on the east slope of the Acropolis.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars have tried to disassociate the stele from

<sup>18</sup> The stele was found by Kavvadias and Kawerau 1906, during the dismantling of a medieval wall located to the east of the Pinakothek and was hypothetically interpreted by Johnson 1914, 180, as belonging to the west slope of the Acropolis. On the issue, see also Doronzio 2011, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Kearns 1989, 139; Shear 1994, 226–227; Miller 1995, 236 n.83; Robertson 1996, 159–160; Harris-Cline 1999, 311; Hurwit 1999, 136; Papadopoulos 2003, 302; 2008, 37–38; Lippolis 2006, 52–54; Schmalz 2006, 35–37; Meyer 2017, 284; Mitsios 2018, 48–50; 2021, 327; 2022, 101–103; 2023, 248–249; 2024a,12–14; 2024b, 21; 2024c, 60; 2025, 24. The only scholar who does not accept this identification – since Dontas’ discovery of the stele – is Doronzio 2011;2012, who situates the sanctuary of Aglauros



the place of its discovery, noting that it was not found inside the cave.<sup>20</sup> However, the fact that the stele was still leaved in its base and their failure to present parallels – where complete stelai and bases were moved together from their original locations – weakens their doubts and claims.<sup>21</sup> The cave associated with the cult of Aglauros, where the heroine is believed to have received worship, is one of the largest known caves in the city of Athens. It measures approximately 22 meters from east to west and 14 meters from the entrance inward (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3** The sanctuary/cave of Aglauros on the east slope of the Acropolis of Athens.

The cave was first excavated by Oscar Broneer, who remarked that: “it seems highly improbable that a cave of such dimensions below the very wall of the Acropolis should have remained unoccupied in ancient times, while the smaller grottoes on the south and north slopes all came to be devoted to the use of religion”.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, relatively few finds have come to light from the cave that conclusively confirm cultic activity. However, the discovery of pottery sherds – ranging in date from the

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on the north slope of the Acropolis, linking it to the literary sources of Euripides (*Ion* 11; 283; 494; 937; 1400) and questioning the exact findspot of Dantas’ stele. Vollmer 2014, 436 n. 120, also endorses Doronzio’s position.

<sup>20</sup> Doronzio 2011, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Miller 1995, 236 n. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Broneer 1936, 247.



Mycenaean to the Classical period – suggests a diachronic use of the site, corresponding to its function as a *mnemotops* of mythical and historical wars, a topic to be discussed below.<sup>23</sup>

Having examined the Aglaureion and established its secure location on the east slope of the Acropolis, the following section will explore the broader significance of this area in relation to historical periods of warfare.

### **Aglauros, the Athenian Ephebes and the Impact/Connection of the Aglaureion in Historical Times**

As previously noted, the self-sacrifice of Aglauros for the salvation of the city functioned as the *aition* for the establishment of her cult. Her voluntary and courageous act was instrumental in securing Athenian victory in the war against Eleusis and firmly established her as a figure of martial significance. Although this association is most explicitly attested in the account of Philochorus, other ancient authors also emphasize the warlike character of Aglauros within the broader mythological tradition.

Hellanicus (*FGrH* 323 A F 1) and Apollodorus (3.14.2), attest that Aglauros was wife of Ares, the god of war *par excellence* and mother of Alcippe. Porphyry (*De Abstinencia* 2.54) attests that Aglauros was worshipped in Cyprus along with Diomedes, who was Ares' opponent in the Trojan war.

The martial associations of Aglauros are further reinforced by several decrees linked to the Athenian ephebes and the military oath they swore at her sanctuary. Multiple ancient sources—including Demosthenes (19.303), Philochorus (*FGrH* 328 F 105) and Plutarch (*Alcibiades* 15.7–8)—confirm that the ephebes took their oath at the Aglaureion, invoking the name of Aglauros alongside other deities associated with warfare. The inscription discovered by Dontas in 1980 not only contributed crucial evidence for securely locating the Aglaureion but also offered insights into the warlike dimension of Aglauros' cult. This stele honors the priestess of Aglauros in conjunction with deities such as Ares, Helios, the Horai, Apollo and unnamed others.<sup>24</sup> Significantly, a decree linking Aglauros to martial ideology dates to the third quarter of the fourth century B.C. and was dedicated by Dion of Acharnae (Fig. 4).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Broneer 1936.

<sup>24</sup> *SEG* XXXIII 115.

<sup>25</sup> *SEG* XVI 140.





Fig. 4 *SEG XVI 140*. Decree, dating from the third quarter of the fourth century B.C., dedicated by Dion of Acharnae, highlighting the warlike context of Aglauros.



The decree records that Aglauros was invoked alongside a range of deities, including Ares, Hestia, Enyo, Enyalios, Athena Areia, Zeus, Thallo, Auxo, Hegemone and Herakles. The inclusion of prominently warlike divinities—such as Ares, Enyo, Enyalios and Athena Areia—provides unequivocal evidence for the martial context of both Aglauros' cult and the ephebic oath. At the same time, the presence of Thallo, Auxo and Hegemone – goddesses associated with vegetation and growth – suggests an added concern for the prosperity and flourishing of the polis. This dual emphasis highlights the ideological connection between military readiness and civic well-being in Classical Athens.

The warlike associations of Aglauros are further reflected in the etymology and variation of her name, which appears in ancient sources both as Aglauros and Agrauros. The name Aglauros (Ἀγλαυρός) is somewhat debated in etymology but scholars generally connect it to two elements: a) ἀγλαός (aglaós), meaning “bright, splendid, shining, famous” (a common poetic epithet, often applied to gods or heroes) and b) ἄρα/ἀῦρα, meaning “breeze, air”.<sup>26</sup> Less likely is the connection with ἄρουρα (aroura), meaning “field, cultivated land” and ὄρος (oros), meaning “mountain”. The *opinio communis* interprets the name Aglauros as “bright water,” while Agrauros has been understood as “she who dwells in the field.”<sup>27</sup> The term Agraulia is attested as referring to military service, further reinforcing the martial associations of the name. Additionally, the variant Agrauros has been linked to a passage in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (559–562), where the poet describes those “who guard the city, sleeping under the open sky and exposed to the dew”, thereby underscoring the heroine's symbolic association with military vigilance and the defense of the city.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, the ephebes' entrance into the cave of Aglauros to swear their oath has been interpreted as a symbolic act of autochthony, marking a metaphorical rebirth as citizens and defenders of the polis.<sup>29</sup> In this framework, Aglauros and the location of her sanctuary functioned as both a spatial and ideological model for the ephebes, reinforcing the virtues of loyalty, sacrifice and civic duty. Moreover, this ritual act carried significant gender implications, as it equated a female mythological figure—Aglauros—with the male sphere of warfare and public service.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> For the etymology of Aglauros' name, see *LSJ* 1940, s.v. ἀγλαός, Ἀγλαυρός; Frisk 1954–1972, s.v. ἀγλαός, Ἀγλαυρός; Chantraine 1968–1980, s.v. ἀγλαός, Ἀγλαυρός; Beekes 2009, s.v. ἀγλαός, Ἀγλαυρός.

<sup>27</sup> Boedeker 1984, 104.

<sup>28</sup> Boedeker 1984, 105–108, 108–109.

<sup>29</sup> Boedeker 1984, 112.

<sup>30</sup> For the gender aspects of the self-sacrifice of Aglauros for the salvation of the city, see Larson 1995, 104; Kron 1999, 83; Mitsios 2024a, 21.



Evidence for the cultic and martial representation of Aglauros—particularly in connection with Ares and the presence of an Athenian ephebe — may be found in three Attic votive reliefs.<sup>31</sup> Although they bear no inscriptions and their findspot remains unknown, recent research based on iconographic parallels, provides grounds to identify the figures as Aglauros and Ares in the presence of an Athenian ephebe. The reliefs, dated to ca. 420–410 B.C. (the first two) and ca. 400–375 B.C. (the third), are currently housed in Venice (Fig. 5),<sup>32</sup> Palermo (Fig. 6)<sup>33</sup> and Paris (Fig. 7).<sup>34</sup> All three reliefs are remarkably well-preserved and share a common iconographic scheme: a male warrior, typically identified as Ares, appears alongside a female figure — interpreted as Aglauros — who performs a libation, accompanied by one or two additional male figures, generally understood as Athenian ephebes and possibly votive donors or worshippers. The combination of these figures reinforces the religious and ideological framework of Aglauros’ cult, linking her not only with martial valor but also with civic rites and ephebic identity.



**Fig. 5** Venice, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 126. Votive relief from Venice, possibly depicting Aglauros and Ares in the presence of an Athenian ephebe.

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<sup>31</sup> Most recently, on the examination of the reliefs and their identification with Aglauros and Ares in the presence of Athenian ephebe, see Stewart (2016) and Mitsios (2024c).

<sup>32</sup> Venice, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 126.

<sup>33</sup> Palermo, Museo Archeologico Regionale ‘Antonino Salinas’ 768.

<sup>34</sup> Paris, Musée du Louvre Ma 742.





**Fig. 6** Palermo, Museo Archeologico Regionale 'Antonio Salinas' 768. Votive relief from Palermo, possibly depicting Aglauros, Ares in the presence of an Athenian ephebe.



**Fig. 7** Paris, Musée du Louvre Ma 74. Votive relief from Paris, possibly depicting Aglauros and Ares in the presence of an Athenian ephebe.



Taken together, the literary, epigraphic, iconographic and topographic evidence clearly demonstrate the close association between Aglauros and the Athenian ephebes. This multifaceted connection underscores her importance as both a cultic figure and a symbol of martial virtue. With this context in mind, we now turn to the literary testimonies concerning the Aglaureion itself. As will become evident, the sanctuary of Aglauros—securely located on the east slope of the Acropolis—was not only embedded in myth but also played a role in historical events, particularly those connected with periods of war. This historical dimension aligns seamlessly with the warlike character attributed to the heroine in the mythological tradition.

Of the four ancient authors who mention the Aglaureion, three explicitly connect the sanctuary to events of historical significance. Herodotus (8.53), in his account of the Persian Wars, states that: “Here [at the Aglaureion] some men climbed up, near the sacred precinct of Kekrops' daughter Aglauros, although the place was a sheer cliff” and that “When the Athenians saw that they had ascended to the Acropolis, some threw themselves off the wall and were killed and others fled into the chamber”. Similarly, Pausanias (1.18.2) – also referring to the Persian invasion – notes that “Here [at the Aglaureion] it was that the Persians climbed and killed the Athenians”. Finally, Polyaeus (1.21.2), in reference to the tyrant Peisistratos and the disarmament of the Athenians that occurred on the Acropolis, notes that: “Meanwhile, his [Peisistratos'] associates went about and secretly carried off all the arms, putting them in the sanctuary of Aglauros”.

A close examination of the literary sources concerning the Aglaureion reveals that three out of the four ancient testimonies—those of Herodotus, Pausanias and Polyaeus—associate the shrine of the heroine, located on the east slope of the Acropolis, with historical events tied to a warlike context. Herodotus (8.53) and Pausanias (1.18.2) both link the site directly to the Persian sack of the Acropolis, describing how the Persians scaled the cliffs near the sanctuary of Aglauros to launch their attack. Although Polyaeus (1.21.2) does not refer to the Persian Wars specifically, he still situates the Aglaureion within a martial context by stating that Peisistratos' followers secretly stored confiscated arms there during his seizure of power. These accounts collectively underscore the Aglaureion's function as a *mnemotopos* of war and the site of Aglauros' mythical self-sacrifice became the very locus of historical memory related to the defense of the city.<sup>35</sup> Given this, the sanctuary embodies a continuity of martial importance, bridging mythological origins and historical realities. Scholars have noted that “if the facts do not fit the Persian Wars,

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<sup>35</sup> On the terminology of *mnemotopos*, as a place that combines memory with the use of space, see Assmann 1992, 59–60. Most recently on the examination of *mnemotopoi*, see Rookhuijzen 2017; Mitsios 2023b.



then the Persian Wars have to fit the facts” and it has been suggested that the sanctuary’s location— on the steepest slope of the Acropolis— explains how the Persian attackers initially went undetected.<sup>36</sup> On top of that, it has been argued that the foundation of the Aglaureion itself confirms the testimony of Herodotus.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, the heroine Aglauros is even more closely associated with mythical warfare through her connection to the foundation myth of the Areopagos—specifically via her daughter Alcippe and the episode involving Halirrhothios (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8** The Areopagos hill on the northwest of the Acropolis of Athens.

Although her association with the Areopagos is not directly related to her voluntary self-sacrifice from the east slope of the Acropolis, it nevertheless underscores Aglauros’ connection to a warlike context—one tied to specific *topoi*, places and myths. Several ancient sources, including Hellanicus (*FGrH* 323 A F1), Euripides (*El.* 1258–1268; *IT* 945–948; *Or.* 1648–1651), Demosthenes (23.66), Apollodorus (3.14.2) and Pausanias (1.21.4), recount that Halirrhothios, son of Poseidon, raped Alcippe, the daughter of Aglauros and Ares. In response, Ares killed Halirrhothios and was subsequently tried by the other gods on the Areopagos hill, adjacent to the Acropolis—an event regarded as the foundation of the Areopagos court.

<sup>36</sup> Müller 1987, 614.

<sup>37</sup> Kousser 2009, 279 n. 25.



It has to be noted that the same hill, the Areopagos, plays a significant role in Herodotus' account (8.52) of the Persian sack of the Acropolis, where the historian states that: "The Persians took up a position on the hill opposite the Acropolis, which the Athenians call the Areopagos and from there launched their attack". Given this, the Areopagos, as both a mythical and historical space tied to warfare and justice, further reinforces Aglauros' association with martial identity and the defense of the city.

In fact, there are additional examples of heroines whose self-sacrifice for the salvation of the city in mythical times served as a model for later historical periods and who were invoked during times of crisis as protectors of the polis. Although they are not directly related to Aglauros' voluntary self-sacrifice from the east slope of the Acropolis, they suggest the diachronic importance of specific locations-*topoi* from mythical to historical times.

According to several ancient authors – including Demosthenes (60.29), Aristides (*Panathenaicus* 13.119) and Pausanias (1.5.2) – the daughters of King Leos, known as the Leokorai, sacrificed themselves for the communal good when Athens was afflicted by famine or plague. As in the case of Aglauros, their voluntary self-sacrifice served as the *aition* for their cult and a sanctuary dedicated to them, the Leokoreion, existed in Athens, although its exact location remains uncertain and debated (Fig. 9).<sup>38</sup>

In 430–429 B.C., Athens was struck by a devastating plague, described in detail by Thucydides (2.49–51), which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of citizens – nearly one-third of the population – including Pericles himself.<sup>39</sup> Thucydides (2.51.5) praises those Athenians who remained in the city to tend to the sick and criticizes those who fled, prioritizing their own safety over the communal good. The literary evidence concerning the plague and the expectations placed upon Athenian citizens during this crisis seem to echo the *ethos* of the mythical heroines, who willingly gave their lives to save the city in earlier times of plague and famine. It is worth noting that numerous offerings found at a shrine, identified with the Leokoreion, date to the beginning of the Peloponnesian War and specifically to the time of the Athenian plague.<sup>40</sup> Given this, it can hardly be considered coincidental that such dedications were made at this sanctuary during a time of great public crisis.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Most scholars identify the Leokoreion with the so-called "Crossroads shrine" in the Agora of Athens: Thompson and Wycherley 1972, 121–123; Shear 1973a, 126–134; 1973b, 360–369; Thompson 1978, 96–102; 1981, 343–355. Contra Camp 1986, 78–79, who identifies the Agora sanctuary as that of the Nymphai Kourotrophoi.

<sup>39</sup> Most recently on the plague, see Mitsios 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Larson 1995, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Larson 1995, 103; Mitsios 2022, 98.



During times of plague and pandemic in historical Athens, the Athenians recalled mythical precedents and made offerings at the Leokoreion, the shrine of the daughters of Leo, who had voluntarily sacrificed themselves to save the city during a legendary plague and famine.

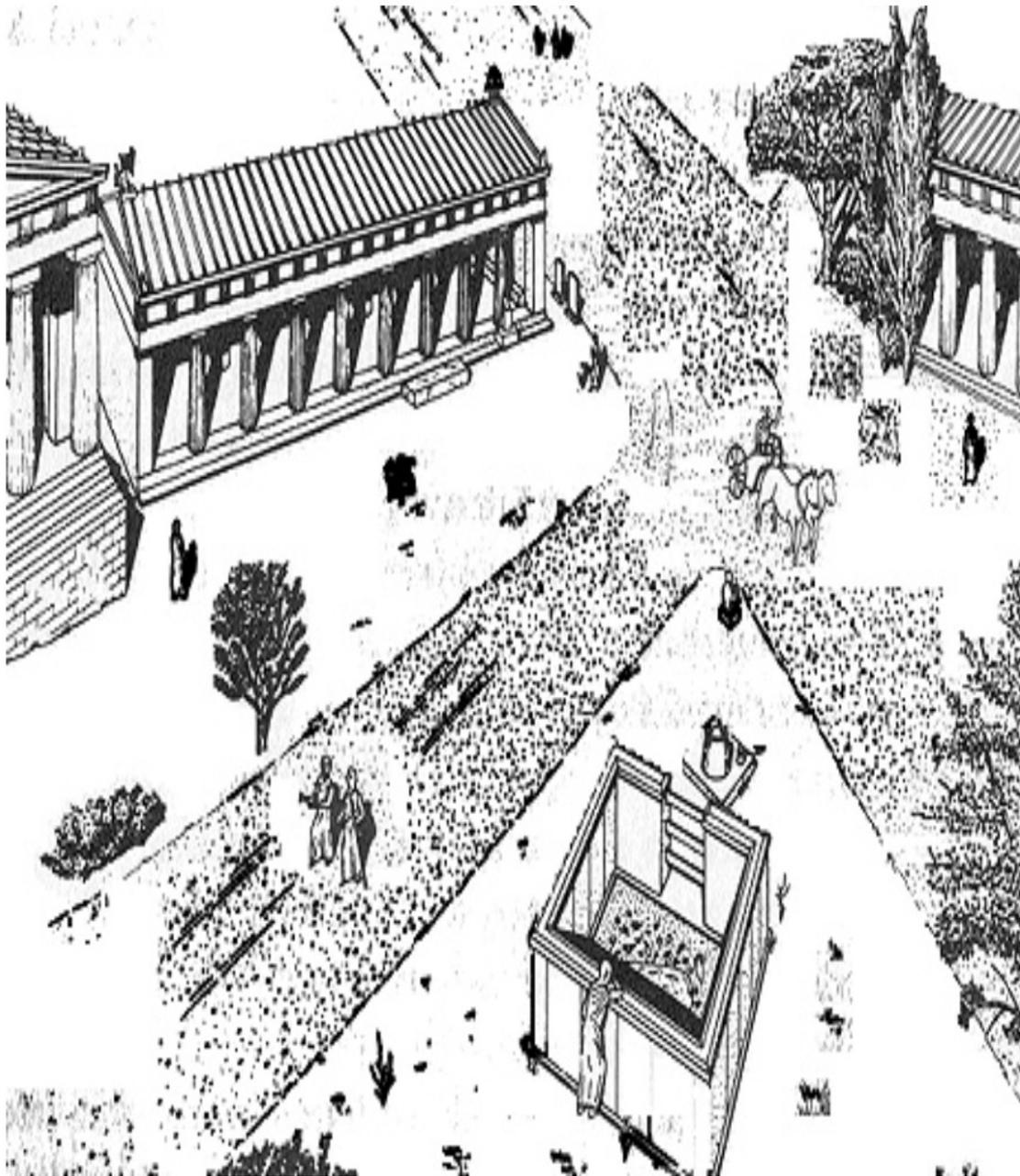


Fig. 9 The Leokoreion at the Agora of Athens.

Returning to the examination of the east slope of the Acropolis as a *mnemotopos* of war, we find in Herodotus' account that the voluntary self-sacrifice of Aglauros—who leapt from the cliffs of the Acropolis to save her city—served as a paradigm for the Athenians of the Classical period. When the Persians were ascending



the Acropolis, some Athenians are said to have followed the heroine's example by jumping from the very site of her sanctuary on the east slope. It was not any random location on the Acropolis, but precisely the shrine of Aglauros, that became the stage for this act of ultimate devotion. In this moment, the Athenians of the Classical era reenacted the mythic model of their heroine's sacrifice, transforming her symbolic act into a lived expression of civic heroism. Given that, this pattern of emulation underscores the lasting significance of the sanctuary of Aglauros and the east slope more broadly and the site emerges as a diachronic locus of heroic self-sacrifice—a sacred topography of memory and war that continued to hold symbolic resonance even beyond antiquity.

According to some unverified accounts—more legendary than historically documented—on 27 April 1941, as German forces entered Athens during World War II, Konstantinos Koukidis, a Greek *Evzonos* serving as flag guard on the Acropolis, is said to have performed an act of defiance and sacrifice.<sup>42</sup> Rather than surrender the Greek flag to the invading forces, who intended to replace it with the Nazi swastika, Koukidis reportedly wrapped the flag around his body and leapt to his death from the cliffs near the sanctuary of Aglauros on the east slope.

Although the historicity of this event is highly contested and lacks corroborating documentation, the story gained symbolic traction in modern Greek memory. In October 2000, the mayor of Athens installed a commemorative plaque on the east slope near the purported site of the event, explicitly acknowledging the absence of definitive historical evidence (Fig. 10). Regardless of the factual accuracy of Koukidis' sacrifice, it is telling that the act—real or imagined—was associated with the sanctuary of Aglauros. This specific site, once again, emerges as a powerful locus of patriotic martyrdom and diachronic memory, reinforcing its status as a *mnemotopos* of war and heroic self-sacrifice.

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<sup>42</sup> Fleischer 2006.





Fig. 10 The decree installed by the mayor of Athens, in 2000, on the east slope of the Acropolis, commemorating the (hypothetical) self-sacrifice of Konstantinos Koukidis during World War II.

## Concluding Remarks

Having examined the literary, epigraphic and topographic evidence, it becomes clear that the east slope of the Acropolis functioned as a *mnemotopos* of both mythical and historical wars, spanning from prehistoric legend to modern Greek history.

It was here, according to tradition, that the heroine Aglauros sacrificed herself during the mythical conflict between Athens and Eleusis, leaping from the cliff to save her city. In the Classical period, this same location—the sanctuary of Aglauros—was associated with the Athenians' defense against the invading Persians, an event that was remembered as a re-enactment of her paradigmatic act of self-sacrifice.



Moreover, despite the questionable historicity of the event, the modern legend of Konstantinos Koukidis—who is said to have leapt from the same spot during the German occupation in World War II—further underscores the enduring symbolic resonance of the east slope. The creation and perpetuation of this narrative, irrespective of its factual basis, reveal the site's deeply rooted association with patriotic martyrdom.

In conclusion, the east slope of the Acropolis, and the sanctuary of Aglauros in particular, emerges as a powerful locus of memory: a *mnemotopos* and *lieu de mémoire* of self-sacrifice in war, whose resonance extends from mythic prehistory through Classical antiquity and into the modern era.

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