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Heracles at the Hot Springs

by

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The awareness of the consecration to Heracles of the hot springs at the Pass of *Thermopylae* appears deeply rooted in the region of the Malian Gulf (*Phthiotis*), where local communities dedicated to Alcmena's son a *bomos*, built, according to Herodotus (Hdt.7.176), right next to the thermal springs. The altar, in a sacred grove, stood near the village of Anthela and seems to have been part of the Amphictyonic Sanctuary, dedicated to Demeter *Pylaia* («of the Gates») and possibly to Kore. Soothing, but 'infernal' at the same time, the hot springs at the *Thermopylae* were flowing next to a shrine of the Great Goddesses and gathered in deep natural basins, called *Chytroi* in the local toponomastic, because of their similarity with large pots full of boiling water. The *Chytroi* have always been a distinctive feature of the area, constantly maintained by the Delphic Amphictyony, and, in the 5th c. BCE, represented in the collective imagination the «thermà loutrà Heraklèous» («Hot Baths of Heracles»). It is reasonable to consider that of Heracles ἐμ Πύλαις («at the Gates») a Chthonian cult, as the topographical connection with a Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone seems to suggest as well. Manifestation of divine favor, the hot springs on the slopes of Mt. *Kallidromos* represented the antechamber of the ascent of Heracles to the realm of the Olympians, recorded and celebrated in the nearby sanctuary 'of the Pyre' close to the peak of Mount Oeta.