

## Achilles' heel: (Im)mortality in the *Iliad*

Today, Achilles is associated above all with his heel: the story is that his mother Thetis dipped him into the River Styx to make his body immune to injury – except for the heel by which she held onto him. Years later at Troy, Achilles is supposed to have been killed by a fatal arrow shot to this very heel by the Trojan prince Paris. The lasting influence of this story is visible in many spheres, from popular culture to medicine (think of the so-called 'Achilles tendon', bane of so many athletes!). And the story features repeatedly in classically inspired films and books. In Rick Riordan's *The Last Olympian* (2009), Achilles' ghost warns Percy Jackson against bathing in the river Styx; in the movie *Troy* (2004), Paris kills Achilles by first shooting him in his heel; and in Disney's *Hercules* (1997), the hero-trainer 'Phil' complains about Achilles' fatal flaw: 'He barely gets nicked there once and kaboom! He's history.'

Given the dominance of the heel myth in modern culture, it might come as a surprise to learn that it doesn't feature at all in the *Iliad* or in any other surviving Greek text of the archaic or classical periods. Of course, the *Iliad* doesn't actually narrate Achilles' death – it goes no further than the death and burial of Hector. But multiple characters still predict Achilles' fate with increasing specificity over the course of the poem, culminating with Hector's prophetic dying words in Book 22:

*But take care now, in case I become a cause of divine wrath against you on the day when Paris and Phoebus Apollo destroy you at the Scaean gates, despite your bravery.*

Yet neither here nor anywhere else do we hear about Achilles' heel or any special invulnerability. Homer's Achilles seems to be a straightforwardly mortal hero. His divine mother Thetis may offer him some advantages (not least a direct line of complaint to Zeus in Book 1), but this doesn't extend to any kind of life-jacket or immortality. In fact, the Styx-dipping tradition is first attested in the late first century CE in a poem on Achilles' early life by the Roman poet Statius – some 700 years after the composition of the *Iliad*. That's a longer gap of time than between Henry VIII's reign and the present day!

### Homer and the heel

So were Homer and his audiences unfamiliar with the heel story? Not necessarily. One of the major challenges of studying antiquity is our extremely limited access to the range of stories and materials that once existed; we glimpse only the tiniest fraction of what was out there, making arguments from silence particularly precarious. This is especially true when it comes to the *Iliad*, our oldest surviving Greek text. The poem presumes knowledge of a pre-existing tradition of poetry and myth well-known to Homer's audiences, but we can only access this indirectly through internal clues from the poem itself, as well as the evidence of later literature and art. Even so, despite our partial view, we can detect hints of narrative details or alternatives that Homer seems to have adapted or suppressed.

Such is the case with the tradition of Achilles' heel. Statius might be our earliest explicit testimony, but the brevity with which he mentions the episode suggests that his audience was already familiar with it. And we can in fact identify various other hints that the story – and associated traditions of Achillean immortality – may have existed at a far earlier date, even possibly in the time of Homer.

According to one ancient commentator, Thetis' concern for her children's immortality already featured in the *Aegimius*, a fragmentary poem attributed to Hesiod who flourished c. 700 BC. She apparently dipped them into a cauldron of water to test whether they were mortal or not (presumably

by seeing whether they drowned – a particularly gruesome vignette of divine indifference towards humans!). This isn't exactly the same as the Styx story, but it shares a thematic similarity with it: Thetis' desire for superhuman offspring, achieved through a similar dipping process. The presence of this theme already in the *Aegimius* hints at its antiquity, rooting it in the same general time period as the *Iliad*.

In addition, epics more or less contemporary with the *Iliad* seem to have credited Achilles with a more superhuman existence. Take, for example, the *Aethiopis*, a poem that belonged to the Epic Cycle (a collection of epics that treated other parts of the Trojan war story). Today it is largely only known from a summary by a later author. But according to this summary, Thetis snatched Achilles away on his 'death' and took him to the paradisaical 'White Island', where he lived a blessed afterlife – a version that is picked up by many later writers, including the archaic lyric poets Alcaeus and Pindar, as well as by Euripides. From an early date, other traditions clearly circulated in which death at Troy was not the end of Achilles' existence or story. Elsewhere, he was far less 'mortal' than he appears in the *Iliad*.

Most suggestive of all, however, is a scene within the *Iliad* itself. In Book 11, the tide of the battle turns as one Greek hero after another is injured and forced to retreat. As part of this sequence, Paris disables the Greek hero Diomedes by shooting him – you've guessed it – in the foot. At first sight, this might seem a trivial detail. But it is likely that this episode presupposes and foreshadows the story of Paris' shooting of Achilles. For a start, Diomedes has already emerged as a direct substitute for Achilles in the opening books of the *Iliad*. Not only has he been the most successful warrior during Achilles' wrathful absence, but a whole string of parallels sets him up as a proto-Achilles: he wields armour crafted by Hephaestus, just like Achilles; a supernatural flame surrounds his head in Book 5, as it later does Achilles' on his return in Book 18; and he is the only other Greek who dares to fight a god directly (again in Book 5), as Achilles does in the river battle of Book 21. Within this wider context, it is particularly poignant that Diomedes suffers the *same* injury (a foot wound) from the *same* Trojan (Paris) that would eventually prove Achilles' undoing. The scene clearly builds on, and reinforces, Diomedes' earlier Achillean roleplaying. But what truly clinches this parallel is the fact that this is the only foot wound narrated in the whole of the *Iliad*; its very uniqueness makes it a significant and loaded moment. It thus seems best to read this episode as a veiled allusion to a pre-existing tradition of Achilles' death by a heel wound. Homer exhibits his familiarity with the tale, but avoids treating it directly. He flirts with the tradition of a superhuman Achilles, but elides it from his main narrative.

Given all these hints, we might also suspect one final allusion to the heel story a little later in the *Iliad*. When the Trojan leader Aeneas musters his courage to face Achilles in Book 21, he reflects:

*His flesh, too, I suspect, may be pierced with sharp iron. In him is but one life, and men say he is mortal.*

On the face of it, Aeneas is simply trying to persuade himself that Achilles is not invincible, and so he might stand a chance against him. But his words are particularly evocative of the stories of Achilles' invulnerability and immortality. Thetis' concern in the Styx tradition is precisely to make Achilles' 'flesh' impenetrable, so that it cannot 'be pierced with sharp iron', while his relocation to the White Island *after death* suggests that he did in fact have more than 'one life' and was not simply 'mortal'. In this light, Aeneas' notes of hesitation (the 'I suspect', and his dependence on what 'men say') may even serve as a kind of authorial wink, a recognition of the alternative stories which Homer has here effaced. As in Book 11, Homer appears to acknowledge, but simultaneously reject, an alternative tradition in which Achilles was more than mortal. If so, it's worth asking: why does he do this?

## Poetic immortality

These are not the only occasions where the *Iliad* seems to downplay stories of heroic invulnerability or immortality. In Book 1, for example, Nestor refers to the Lapith hero Caineus and his battle with the Centaurs. But we hear nothing there of Caineus' impenetrable body (already attested in Hesiod), or the unusual way in which he dies: unable to pierce his skin, his opponents hammered him into the ground with tree trunks and boulders! Homer avoids mentioning any of this; from his account, we'd be forgiven for thinking that Caineus was a bog-standard mortal hero.

Similarly, the *Iliad* insists on the mortality of many heroes who elsewhere enjoyed an immortal afterlife. In Book 18, Achilles cites Heracles as a precedent for the inevitability of death: 'even though he was most dear to lord Zeus, son of Cronus, he was still conquered by fate'. Yet in most other sources, Heracles won immortality – a fate already found in the *Odyssey* and in Hesiod. So too with Helen's brothers, Castor and Polydeuces: Homer insists in *Iliad* Book 3 that they are both already dead, but in the *Odyssey* and the *Cypria* (another poem of the Epic Cycle), we hear of a different version in which the brothers enjoyed a quasi-immortality, with alternating days of life and death. The *Iliad* seems at pains to deny the possibility of immortality for its heroes.

Crucially, this appears to be a specifically *Iliadic* phenomenon. The *Odyssey*, by contrast, allows far more permeability between the mortal and divine worlds: besides the cases of Heracles and Helen's brothers above, we could also note how Calypso offers to make Odysseus immortal if he stays with her in Book 5; how Menelaus is promised an afterlife in the Elysian plain because he is the son-in-law of Zeus (Book 4); and how the goddess Leucothea (who saves the shipwrecked Odysseus in Book 5) is an immortalised version of the mortal queen of Boeotia, Ino. When set against these Odyssean examples, it is clear that the *Iliad's* suppression of immortality was not an inevitable feature of archaic epic. Rather, it seems to be a deliberate and pointed choice by the poet of the *Iliad*.

Ultimately, this choice is essential for the tragic intensity of the *Iliad*. By denying the possibility of heroic invulnerability or immortality, Homer foregrounds the fragility of life and the finality of death, which is the major motivator for heroic action. As the Trojan ally Sarpedon tells Glaucus in Book 12, if he were able to live forever, 'ageless and immortal', he would not fight in the front ranks to win glory; it's the inescapability of death that urges him to battle and to seek renown. This stark division between mortal and divine also adds poignancy to Achilles' choice as articulated in *Iliad* 9: either to live a long but inconspicuous life back home, or win great glory at Troy but die young. If Homer's Achilles were invulnerable or immortal, this would negate the tragic pathos which overshadows his character.

The *Iliad's* suppression of the heel tradition is, therefore, part of a far wider pattern that is crucial to its construction of a tragic world. In this poem, the only way to achieve immortality is through the fame and glory provided by Homer.

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