

THE MYSTERY OF ACHILLES' DEATH

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Abstract

This paper will seek to explore the problem of Achilles' death as foreshadowed in the *Iliad*. Through the works of authors ranging from Homer to John Tzetzes, associated with iconographic evidence, it will establish three potential versions of the episode and evaluate the extant evidence for a canonical "Achilles' heel" in ancient literature, in order to reveal what our extant sources do tell us about the hero's final moments in life.

Keywords: Death of Achilles, *Aethiopsis*, Trojan Cycle.

Achilles is undoubtedly one of the most famous heroes of Greek myth, perhaps only second to Heracles. And yet, if we are fully aware of the way the son of Alcmene died – that episode is still colourfully depicted in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* – the situation is a lot more complex for Thetis' own offspring. If, from a cultural standpoint, most people seem to "know" how this hero died, how Apollo and Paris shot the fatal arrow and hit him in the heel, in our extant literary and iconographic sources that information is not so clear. Is our idea of the proverbial "Achilles' heel" equally unsourced, or do we have any real evidence for this episode as most people in our day and age picture it?

In order to find the circumstances of this hero's death it makes perfect sense to resort, first and foremost, to the oldest source we still have, the *Iliad*¹.

¹ Although the *Odyssey* also mentions Achilles' death, particularly in *Od.* 24.35-84, it doesn't tell us how the hero died, instead focusing on this episode's aftermath.

It does provide us several leads on the episode, indicating this hero would never conquer Troy², his death would take place shortly after Hector's³ and it would come from the arrows shot by Apollo and Paris, taking place near the Scaean Gates⁴. Although these mentions do foreshadow an impending death, they also tell us very little about how the episode itself was going to unfold. Given the fact that another important source, the *Aethiopis*, is only extant in small fragments, none of which provide us any piece of relevant information, our hopes of reconstructing this episode must undeniably lead us to research other, more recent, sources. Following through their pathways we can find three different versions of the hero's death.

In the first one, which we could still call "Homeric", Achilles dies in combat, through an arrow with which Paris and Apollo hit him, the exact circumstances of that death being quite obscure. This tradition is also shared by Sophocles⁵, Ovid⁶ and Pseudo-Apollodorus⁷.

In the second version, Achilles is treacherously killed in a temple, when he was preparing to meet Polyxena, with whom he thought he was going to marry. To this version allude Hyginus⁸, Seneca⁹, Philostratus¹⁰, Dictys of Crete¹¹, Fulgentius¹², the *Excidium Troiae*¹³, the Vatican Mythographers¹⁴ and Tzetzes¹⁵.

As for the third one, Quintus of Smyrna's, it was Apollo himself, and only him, who killed the hero. The kernel of the episode places Apollo face to face with Achilles, and after a small dialogue¹⁶ the hero seems to challenge the god¹⁷. Shortly after, the god becomes invisible and shoots an arrow

² *Il.* 18.282-283.

³ *Il.* 18.96.

⁴ *Il.* 21.277-278, 22.359-360.

⁵ *Ph.* 332-341.

⁶ *Met.* 12.579-628.

⁷ *Epit.* 5.3.

⁸ *Fab.* 110.

⁹ *Tro.* 347, 360-370.

¹⁰ *Her.* 47.4.

¹¹ *Dict.* 4.10-11, with Achilles being grabbed by Deiphobus and stabbed by Paris.

¹² *Fulg.* 3.7.

¹³ *ET* 12.8-10, 12.12-18, 12.25-35.

¹⁴ *Anon. Vat.* 1.36, 2.248, 3.10.24.

¹⁵ *PH* 388-400.

¹⁶ *Q.S.* 3.26-44.

¹⁷ *Q.S.* 3.45-52.

which hits Achilles' ankle¹⁸; wounded, he remembers a prophecy which had been revealed by his own mother, according to which he would die near the Scaean Gates and by the action of Apollo's arrows¹⁹ – no reference to Paris being made here. The hero still fights for some time before dying²⁰. This last version, as unique as it may seem to us, is undeniably late and appeared from the author's intention of imitating several moments of the Homeric Poems²¹, which he does repeatedly in his work.

If the second one is well attested, we should confront it with one of Euripides' tragedies, *Hecuba*, in which the homonym character wonders why Achilles' spectre asked for Polyxena's sacrifice²², showing us that, at least for this individual author, there had been no direct relationship between the two characters. So, this version may have been born out of the need to justify the sacrifice of Polyxena later demanded by Achilles' spectre²³. As for the first version, transmitted in older sources, it may have been the oldest version of the episode, because it is already evoked in the Homeric Poems and it is well attested in art, as we will see below, but the lack of conclusive information we have on it is also quite evident and problematic.

Nevertheless, several authors simply observe that Achilles was killed with an arrow thrown by Paris and Apollo, leading us to a major question – in what way did Apollo and Paris intervened in this episode, which the *Iliad*, as we saw above, already mentioned? They both shot the deadly arrow together²⁴ or the god shot it “taking the form of Alexander Paris”²⁵. In late sources the episode occurs in a temple of Apollo²⁶, with Paris shooting an arrow while hiding behind a statue of the god²⁷, or with Deiphobus holding the hero for time enough for the lover of Helen to strike him with a sword²⁸.

¹⁸ Q.S. 3.55-66.

¹⁹ Q.S. 3.78-84.

²⁰ Q.S. 3.138-185.

²¹ In particular *Il.* 5.440-442 and 16.789-793.

²² *Hec.* 251-271.

²³ Abrantes 2016: 86-87.

²⁴ E. *Andr.* 50-60 e 650-660, Verg. *Aen.* 6.56-58, Ov. *Met.* 12.579-628, Ps. *Apollod. Epit.* 5.3, Anon. Vat. 1.36, Anon. Vat. 3.10.24.

²⁵ This idea, mentioned in Hyg. *Fab.* 107, could seem quite unusual, but it is also attested in one of Pindar's paeans (*Pae.* 6.78-80 = fr. 52f Maehler).

²⁶ Fulg. 3.7, Hyg. *Fab.* 110, Philostr. *Her.* 47.4, Tz. *PH* 388-400.

²⁷ In *ET* 12.8-10 the arrow was poisoned, but not in Anon. Vat. 1.36, Anon. Vat. 2.248.

²⁸ Dict. 4.10-11, Tz. *PH* 388-400.

As it is easy to notice, Apollo and Paris always have the leading role in these versions, testifying the enormous fame of the lines evoked in the *Iliad*, but the same fact also makes it difficult for us to affirm, with absolute certainty, in what way the two figures participated in the episode as it took place in the older sources.

Concerning this same element we should also stress that art gives us little additional evidence. Even when the god Apollo is present in the scene, as we can see in an attic *pelike* dated from 460 AD (*LIMC* Achilleus 851 = Alexandros 92 = Apollon 882), nothing allows us to understand in what way he intervened in the action. Therefore, this is a point in which it is difficult to reach any convincing conclusion, and so we only know both figures had some important role in the death of the hero, but we can't affirm without any reasonable doubts that Apollo may have guided an arrow shot by Paris, an idea which West²⁹ argued for, based on the *Aeneid*³⁰ and in Pomponius Porphyryon commentary to Horace's odes³¹.

But what about our famous "Achilles' heel"? Is there any evidence showing the hero had such a physical weak point? Or was this, as mentioned by Burgess³², simply a literary misconception? We know that Thetis tried to make Achilles immortal³³, but Junker³⁴ states that around 500 BC the hero was still seen as entirely mortal, without any kind of particular weaknesses. The direct mention to a weak point in the hero, generated through a bath in the Styx in which his mother left a part of the body unwashed³⁵, only appears in literature of the first century of our era³⁶ and it is later repeated in many other works³⁷. Even at that time, if some authors do mention a wound in the heel, they don't tell us the point could have had anything of special vulnerability³⁸, with Hyginus being the first one doing so³⁹. However, the

²⁹ West 2013: 150.

³⁰ *Aen.* 6.56-8.

³¹ Pompon. 4.6.3.

³² Cf. Burgess 2009:11.

³³ Cf. Ferreira 2013: 95.

³⁴ Cf. Junker 2012: 7.

³⁵ Cf. Burgess 2009: 8-11, 15, Ferreira 2013: 95.

³⁶ Stat. *Ach.* 1.133-134, 1.268-270, 1.480-481.

³⁷ Hyg. *Fab.* 107, Fulg. 3.7, Anon. Vat. 1.36, Anon. Vat. 3.10.24.

³⁸ Ps. Apollod. *Epit.* 5.3, Q.S. 3.62.

³⁹ Hyg. *Fab.* 107, cf. Gantz 1993: 626.

extant iconographic sources allow us to realize this element could have been much older than Statius' lines, as a few relevant examples can show us:

1 – Corinthian *lekythos* (680-670 BC), *LIMC* Achilleus 848 = Alexandros 93: battle scene, with one of the figures placed on the left side shooting an arrow which hits another in the lower part of his leg. These two unidentified figures may be Achilles and Paris.

2 – Chalcidian amphora (550-540 BC), *LIMC* Achilleus 850: recovery of Achilles' body, who was hit with two arrows, one in the stomach and another in his left foot. We should also note the presence of Glaucus, who is pulling the deceased hero with a rope and about to get struck with Ajax's spear. All heroes are identified by their names.

3 – Attic *kyathos* of red figures (500-490 BC), *LIMC* Achilleus 852 = Alexandros 91: an arrow shot by Paris is heading towards Achilles, and it seems to be moving towards his stomach, but that contact point is not yet certain. This second hero later appears to be falling, but the arrow is not seen in any of his feet, leading us to believe this scene may either represent other tradition (where the hero may have been initially hit in the stomach), or include two warriors who are not Achilles and Paris.

4 – Attic *pelike* of red figures (460 BC), *LIMC* Achilleus 851 = Alexandros 92 = Apollon 882: Paris, on the left, is about to shoot an arrow while Apollo, in the center of the scene, looks at him. Achilles, on the right, is still standing but a previous arrow is about to hit his right foot.

5 – Cornelian with engraving, of Roman origin (300-1 BC), *LIMC* Achilleus 891a: Ajax carrying the body of the deceased Achilles, in which can still be seen an arrow hanging from the right foot.

6 – Cornelian with engraving (200-100 BC), *LIMC* Achilleus 853a: Achilles still armed but already kneeling, with an arrow in the back of his left foot.

Through these elements we can conclude that the part of the body in which Achilles was wounded⁴⁰ was always very famous, but we don't

⁴⁰ Although one of the examples above undeniably presents us a second arrow near Achilles' stomach, this was not always associated with the hero, as the remaining references show.

have information to conclude whether there was, originally, any special vulnerability in the hero or if there was something unusual in the projectile he was hit with. We know that in the *Iliad* this hero was not invulnerable, since he was wounded by an opponent and shed some blood⁴¹. So, was the arrow poisoned, as the *Excidium Troiae* registers⁴², or was Apollo, through his divine character, informed of a singular weakness of Achilles which the *Iliad* did not mention? Is it possible that this god, and him alone, killed the son of Thetis, as an aeschylean fragment implies⁴³? Could we, in the pathway of Nagy⁴⁴ and Rabel⁴⁵, see in the death of Achilles a potential duplicate of the death of some other figure, such as Patroclus or Hippothous? Or, like argued by Burgess⁴⁶, maybe an initial arrow was used to immobilize the hero, taking away the capacities of his famous “fleet feet” and leading him to the more direct circumstances of his death? We don’t know, and the sources we still have make it impossible for us to conclude anything with absolute certainty about the way in which a single arrow, so repeated in the literature as in the moments the episode is depicted in the art, could have led to the death of the hero immortalized in the *Iliad*.

Summarizing all this information, what can we know about the death of Achilles, as it took place in the older sources? The references from the Homeric Poems can never be forgotten, given their context and age, but, outside of them and even with the additional sources analysed here, we can only know very little about this episode. It would be difficult to deny that Paris and Apollo were, in some way, involved in that death, and that the hero died, at least, with an arrow directed to area of his foot, but these are the only elements which, according to the information collected, we can affirm with an absolute certainty. Our contemporary ideas of the episode seem to have merely connected the dots between this stable information, leading to a vision of Achilles’ death that is not fully supported in most of our extant sources.

⁴¹ Cf. *Il.* 21.166-167.

⁴² *ET* 12.8-10.

⁴³ Aesch. fr. 350 (Radt), cf. Hadjicosti 2006: 16

⁴⁴ Nagy 2013: 146-168.

⁴⁵ Rabel 1991: 129-130.

⁴⁶ Burgess 2009: 13.

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