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Repository Citation

Pache, C.O. (2009). The hero beyond himself: Heroic death in ancient Greek poetry and art. In S. Albersmeier (Ed.), *Heroes: Mortals and myths in ancient Greece* (pp. 88-107). Walters Art Museum.

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THE HERO BEYOND HIMSELF

HEROIC DEATH IN ANCIENT GREEK POETRY AND ART

Corinne Ondine Pache



In all those stories the hero
is beyond himself into the next
thing, be it those labors
of Hercules, or Aeneas going into death.

I thought the instant of the one humanness
in Virgil's plan of it
was that it was of course human enough to die,
yet to come back, as he said, *hoc opus, hic labor est*.

That was the Cumaean Sibyl speaking.
This is Robert Creeley, and Virgil
is dead now two thousand years, yet Hercules
and the Aeneid, yet all that industrious wis-

dom lives in the way the mountains
and the desert are waiting
for the heroes, and death also
can still propose the old labors.
—Robert Creeley, "Heroes"

HEROISM AND DEATH

The modern mind likes its heroism served with death. "They died heroes" begin news reports of death in battles and disasters, man-made or natural. Altruism, self-sacrifice, and disregard for danger define the modern hero, both in life and in death. Sometimes heroes are defined by the fact of their survival: war heroes return home after enduring the trauma of battle, captivity, or torture. Regardless of individual circumstances, to be a modern hero entails joining a community of individuals defined by the same essential qualities of selflessness and courage: to be a hero is to be willing to sacrifice oneself and risk one's life for a greater cause, and to be remembered as much for how one faced death as for what one accomplished in life.

Heroism and death are also closely linked in ancient Greece, but for a rather different reason. In contrast to their modern counterparts, Greek heroes are not defined by who they were or what they did during their lifetimes (indeed some heroes, as we will see below, are remarkable more for their failings than their virtues). In ancient Greece, mortals become heroes not because of selflessness or kindness, or as the culmination of a life well lived, but because, having experienced mortality, they are made to transcend it: to become a *hērōs*, in the Greek context, is to continue to exist beyond death.

Starting in the Archaic period, some individuals were posthumously honored as objects of worship and recipients of animal sacrifice. Traditionally, the connection between worshiper and hero was established through ritual, and the relationship between hero and worshiper was conceived as reciprocal, mediated by cult. The

reciprocal bond between the living and the dead was based on offerings and sacrifices: the hero was conceived as a “deceased person,” in Walter Burkert’s formulation, “who exerts from his grave a power for good or evil and who demands appropriate honour.”¹ Hero cult in the Archaic and Classical periods was thus a highly ritualized form of worshipping the dead, conceived as powerful beings who could, for good or ill, exert their influence in the world.

The ritualized aspect of the relationship between the living and the dead in heroic cult was central to the Greeks’ understanding of death and heroism. The classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant once described epic poetry not simply as a literary genre but as one of the institutions, alongside the funeral, developed by the Greeks “to give an answer to the problem of death in order to acculturate death and integrate it into social thought and life.”² This definition extends to the institution of hero cult, which responds to the problem of death and extinction by keeping the memory of specific mortals alive through art and ritual. Epic poetry and cult, however, differ fundamentally in that epic poetry strives for universal significance, while ritual tends to be localized and significant to a restricted community. Poets sought to present narratives that were pan-Hellenic, whose interest carried beyond the inhabitants of a local area. We know that Homeric heroes such as Odysseus and Achilles were the objects of localized cults: votive gifts were dedicated to Odysseus in a cave sacred to the Nymphs on the island of Ithaca, while Achilles was venerated at his burial mound near Troy as well as in other locations throughout the Greek world.³ Because of the local nature of most hero cults, which centered on the hero’s tomb, allusions to ritual practice tend to be implicit rather than explicit in early Greek poetry. While Homer is silent on the local cults honoring Achilles and Odysseus, Homeric heroes acquired a pan-Hellenic importance through poetry. This explains why allusions to hero cult per se are scarce in Greek poetry, although heroes themselves, their deeds, lives, and deaths, are central to Homeric epic and its successors.⁴

For all the differences among ancient heroes and heroines—their deeds and status, their choices, their manner of dying—all are alike in transcending death by becoming immortalized.⁵ “[Death] also can still propose the old labors,” writes the poet Robert Creeley: everybody dies, but what is it about the deaths of heroes that allows them to continue to intercede in the affairs of the living, and thus to transcend their own deaths and become the objects of cult and art? The answer must take into account the fact that the ancient Greeks made no distinction between the realm of the divine and the realm of the beautiful, the world of art and the world of the gods. The ancient Greeks had no word for “religion”; they conceived of religious activity in terms of ritual (*drōmena*, “things done”) and words (*legomena*, “things said”), and the boundaries between poetry and cult were fluid and indistinct. The historian Herodotos recounts that the poets Hesiod and Homer “taught the Greeks the births of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms” (*Histories* 2.53.2). Myths and rituals in honor of heroes thus not only fulfilled important religious functions; narratives of heroes’ deaths also provided a source of aesthetic pleasure derived from the literary and visual representations to which they

gave rise. Death, poetry, and heroism were thus inextricably intertwined in the ancient Greek imagination, and becoming a hero or a heroine meant to remain “alive” in cultural memory. Artistic representations and cultic gestures—vase-paintings and statues, poetry and inscriptions, sacrifice and libations—sustained the memory of the hero. As a consequence, heroes enjoyed an afterlife inaccessible to other mortals. The difference hinged on personality and individuality. When Odysseus travels to the land of the dead to question the departed seer Teiresias, most of the “shades” he encounters there are just that: mere shadows of their former selves, without self-consciousness and without memories. Yet when he encounters the great heroes of the Trojan War, Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax, he finds them with their personalities, and their memories, intact: Agamemnon is still an imperious leader, Achilles an impetuous warrior, and Ajax remains angry at Odysseus for their quarrel over which of the two would obtain the weapons of Achilles, a quarrel that ends in Ajax’s suicide. Poets describe heroes enjoying the afterlife in the paradisaical Elysian Fields or on the Isles of the Blessed.⁶ The fact of mortality thus links heroes and other mortals, yet heroic death by definition sets heroes apart. The difference between heroes and ordinary, nonheroic mortals is emphasized by, and is to some extent the consequence of, the moment and manner of the hero’s death. This emphasis can be seen in the fascination among poets, painters, and sculptors with the moment of the hero’s transition from the visible world into the realm of cultural memory.

HEROIC DEATH IN EPIC: ACHILLES AND ODYSSEUS

Heroic death comes in all forms, including battle, murder, suicide, sickness, accident, poison, fire, and old age. A particularly fruitful approach to defining the concept of the hero in antiquity is to take up particular cases. There is no better place to start than with one of the most ancient and greatest of all heroes, Achilles, hero of the *Iliad* and “the best of the Achaeans.” The *Iliad* tells of the hero’s wrath after the leader of the Greek army, Agamemnon, takes the captive Briseis from Achilles. It covers a period of some forty days of the ten-year war, during which Achilles withdraws from the fighting to spite Agamemnon but eventually returns to the battle to avenge the death of his closest friend, Patroklos, killed by the Trojan prince Hektor. In his grief and rage, Achilles kills Hektor and—shockingly, for his age as well as ours—mutilates his body. The *Iliad* ends with a truce between Achilles and Hektor’s father, Priam, in which Achilles movingly agrees to return Hektor’s body to his father. The last lines of the poem focus on the funeral in honor of Patroklos’s killer, Hektor, “breaker of horses.”

The conclusion of the *Iliad* leaves both the sack of Troy and the death of Achilles untold. Yet the death of Achilles is, in a very real sense, the subject of the *Iliad*: the poet, the audience, and the characters in the poem all know that Achilles is “short-lived” and that his death is imminent. Achilles’ death is the poem’s absent center, and it is implicit in virtually every scene depicting the hero and present even in a number of scenes that pointedly do not represent the fair-haired, swift-footed Achilles. Far from recoiling from the carnage of war, Homer seems almost to revel in it; his is a poetry of

violence. His descriptions of suffering and death are unparalleled in their vivid, almost exultant imagery, yet he is always careful to emphasize the youth and beauty of the bodies he asks us to imagine being pierced by arrows, swords, or spears. Using one of those puns that work better in their language of origin than in translation, Vernant contrasts the “beautiful death” (“la belle mort”) and the “beautiful dead” (“le beau mort”).⁷ The *Iliad* provides numerous depictions of the “beautiful death” of the young warrior at his peak, whose lifeless body becomes the “beautiful dead,” an object of spectacle and admiration:

Gorgythion the blameless, hit in the chest by an arrow;
 Gorgythion whose mother was lovely Kastianeira,
 Priam’s bride from Aisyme, with the form of a goddess.
 He bent drooping his head to one side, as a garden poppy
 bends beneath the weight of its yield and the rains of springtime;
 so his head bent slack to one side beneath the helm’s weight.

—*Iliad* 8.303–8, trans. Lattimore

Gorgythion and other young warriors cut down in the prime of their youth are described in imagery that evokes vegetation and bloom. This comparison, which after Homer becomes a mandatory stopping point for war poets such as Virgil, pointedly evokes the absent center of the poem.⁸ Here is the goddess Thetis’s account of the childhood of her son, Achilles:

Ah me, my sorrow, the bitterness in this best of child-bearing,
 since I gave birth to a son who was without fault and powerful,
 conspicuous among heroes; and he shot up like a young tree,
 and I nurtured him, like a tree grown in the pride of the orchard.

—*Iliad* 18.54–57, trans. Lattimore

Even the “pride of the orchard,” we infer along with Thetis, must fall. The implication is further emphasized by its context: Thetis speaks these words at the moment her son learns of the death of his companion Patroklos and makes his fateful vow to avenge his friend, a decision that both Achilles and his mother know will lead to his eventual death. Earlier in the poem, in book 9, when the Greeks, pressed by the Trojans, go to Achilles’ tent to beg the hero to return to the battle, Achilles refuses and reveals the prophecy that causes his mother so much sorrow:

For my mother Thetis the goddess of the silver feet tells me
 that I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death. Either,
 if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,
 my return home is gone, but my glory [*kleos*] shall be everlasting;
 but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,
 the excellence of my glory [*kleos*] is gone, but there will be a long life
 left for me, and my end in death will not come to me quickly.

—*Iliad* 9.410–16, trans. Lattimore

The Greek term *kleos*, often translated as “glory,” has no exact equivalent in English. *Kleos* means both “glory, fame, that which is heard” and “a poem or song that conveys glory, fame, that which is heard.” *Kleos*, in other words, is a way of immortalizing heroes through epic poetry.⁹ At this point in the narrative, Achilles sees the choice as between two sorts of destiny, both of which end, of course, in death. Either he can die young and gain everlasting *kleos* in the form of epic glory, or he can go home and enjoy a long life. Achilles is impelled to return to battle by his grief at Patroklos’s death and by his desire for revenge, but as both Thetis and he himself know, his decision entails an earlier death and the compensation of the everlasting glory conferred by epic song.

I have referred to the death of Achilles as the absent center of the *Iliad*. Every member of the poem’s original audiences would have been as aware of Achilles’ eventual death as we are now of the eventual fate of John F. Kennedy. Yet within the *Iliad* proper, there seems to be a taboo against directly describing Achilles’ death; instead, the death of the hero is evoked, as it were, laterally—through the death of others (including those that he himself kills, foremost among them Hektor). But the best example of the displaced presence of Achilles’ death is to be found in the poem’s representation of the death of Patroklos, which comes about as a result of his resemblance to Achilles. When Achilles allows Patroklos to go into battle wearing his armor, he sets off the chain of events that will lead to his own death. Paradoxically, Patroklos dies from breaking the taboo against representing the death of Achilles and in so doing causes that death.

The death of Patroklos occurs in three distinct stages: first, the god Apollo, “shrouded in a deep mist,” stands behind the hero and strikes his back and his shoulders “with a flat stroke of the hand so that his eyes spun.” This direct intervention of a god in a mortal’s death is unprecedented in the *Iliad* and foreshadows the role played by the god in Achilles’ death as we know of it from other traditions, such as the *Aithiopsis*.¹⁰ Apollo’s blow causes Patroklos to lose both corselet and helmet:

Apollo now struck away from his head the helmet
four-horned and hollow-eyed, and under the feet of the horses
it rolled clattering, and the plumes above it were defiled
by blood and dust. Before this time it had not been permitted
to defile in the dust this great helmet crested in horse-hair;
rather it guarded the head and the gracious brow of a godlike
man, Achilleus; but now Zeus gave it over to Hektor
to wear on his head, Hektor whose own death was close to him.

—*Iliad* 16.793–800, trans. Lattimore

At the moment when Patroklos is shaken by Apollo’s blow, the poet evokes Achilles, whose armor Patroklos is wearing when he dies, another ominous sign. The helmet of Achilles is defiled, for the first time, by dust and blood.

In the second stage, a Trojan ally, Euphorbos, stands behind Patroklos and strikes him in the back, now unprotected because of Apollo’s intervention, with his spear.

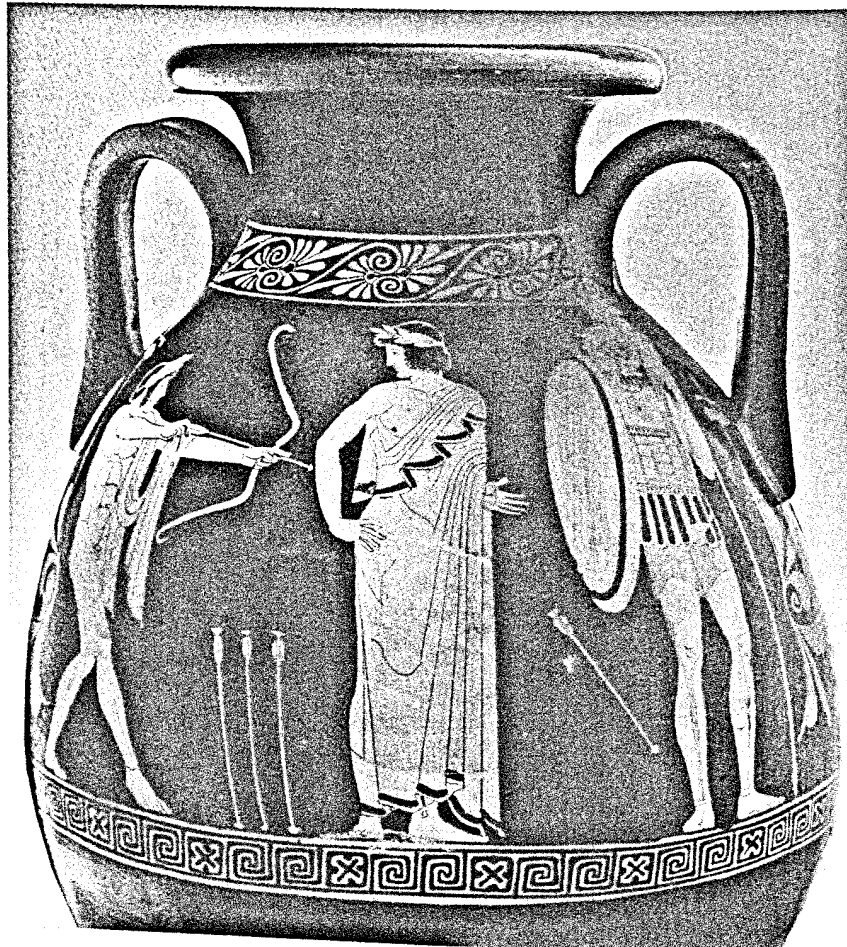
Euphorbos, however, is too cowardly to fight Patroklos, and snatching his spear from the wounded man's body, he runs away, hiding in the crowd of soldiers. When Hektor arrives on the scene, he thus is the third character to strike Patroklos, but he gives the fatal blow, and Patroklos falls "thunderously, to the horror of all the Achaean people." With his last breath, he prophesizes that Hektor will encounter his own death shortly at the hands of Achilles:

and the soul fluttering free of his limbs went down into Death's house
mourning her destiny, leaving youth and manhood behind her.

—*Iliad* 16.856–57, trans. Lattimore

As several scholars have observed, the death of Patroklos is depicted as the killing of an animal in sacrificial ritual: the victim is first stunned by a blow, then struck a second time, and finally killed and dedicated to a god. Patroklos's funeral in book 23 of the *Iliad* also evokes sacrificial ritual. Here we see Achilles wrap the body of his companion in the fat of animals he has just sacrificed and arranged on the funeral pyre. The fat around Patroklos's body may have a practical purpose in helping the fire to consume it, but it also strikingly evokes the archetypal animal sacrifice described in Hesiod's *Theogony*, in which the Titan Prometheus convinces Zeus to choose the portion of sacrifice that consists of bones wrapped in layers of fat, while mortals are allotted the flesh of the sacrificed animal. Patroklos's body is thus cremated on a funeral pyre in the same way that animal sacrifices are burnt as offerings to gods. That the Greeks

FIG 54 The death of Achilles. Attic red-figure pelike attributed to the Niobid Painter, ca. 460 BCE. Kunstsammlungen, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, S 1060



themselves read the tripartite death of Patroklos as evocative of an animal sacrifice is also attested by a vase-painting depicting two warriors fighting over a dead ram labeled Patroklos.¹¹ Structurally, Patroklos's death also prefigures that of Achilles: Achilles, like his friend, is killed through Apollo's intervention.

Just as Homer is reluctant to recount the death of Achilles directly, vase-painters seem reluctant to depict it. One exception is a fifth-century BCE pelike attributed to the Niobid Painter depicting Paris, on the left, aiming his arrow at Achilles, on the right (fig. 54). In the center stands Apollo, who directs one of the arrows toward Achilles' heel, according to some traditions the only vulnerable part of the hero's body. (Homer, however, is completely silent on this topic.) There is no physical contact in this scene between god and mortal, yet Apollo's action is nonetheless depicted as essential to the result. Moreover, Achilles is killed by Paris's arrows, just as Euphorbos's wounding of Patroklos is part of a sequence of events that ends in the death of Achilles' comrade. The killers of Patroklos and Achilles are depicted as essentially deluded: Hektor and Paris kill their antagonists, but, in both cases, they are able to do so—though they may not realize it—only because of a god's direct intervention.

The death of Patroklos is also causally linked to the death of Achilles: it is because of the death of his comrade that Achilles goes back into battle, knowing that this action will entail his own death. The poet emphasizes this connection by portraying Achilles as if he were already a dead man when he learns of his friend's death:

In both hands he caught up the grimy dust, and poured it
over his head and face, and fouled his handsome countenance,
and the black ashes were scattered over his immortal tunic.
And he himself, mightily in his might, in the dust lay
at length, and took and tore at his hair with his hands, and defiled it.

—*Iliad* 18.23–27, trans. Lattimore

Achilles reacts with a series of gestures typical of mourning: strewing dust over his head and tearing his hair. But when the poet describes the hero lying on the ground as *meḡas meḡalōsti*, “mightily in his might,” he uses language that conventionally describes the body of a dead warrior. Earlier, indeed, the phrase arises in just such a context, recounting the death of Patroklos's last victim: Hektor's charioteer, Kebriones (*Iliad* 16.775–76). Even more important, Agamemnon uses the same words in a passage in the *Odyssey* to describe Achilles' death. The scene takes place in the underworld, where Agamemnon addresses Achilles and describes how he and the other Achaeans fought over the hero's dead body at Troy: “and you in the turning dust lay/mightily in your might, your horsemanship all forgotten” (*Odyssey* 24.39–40, trans. Lattimore). This sense of the body of Achilles being, as it were, not alive but rather not-as-yet dead, is reinforced by the description in the same scene in the *Iliad* of Thetis and the Nereids. Having heard, from the depths of the sea, Achilles crying, Thetis leads the Nereids in a dirge that resembles nothing so much as a lament for her son, although he is not of course yet dead. Driven by her proleptic grief, Thetis eventually leaves her sea cave and, accompanied by the other Nereids, goes ashore



FIG 55 The Nereids bewailing the body of Achilles. Corinthian black-figure hydria attributed to the Damon Painter, ca. 560–550 BCE. Paris, Musée du Louvre, E 643

to her son. In another moment that unmistakably evokes a funeral, Thetis stands by the body of her son, and “[cries] out shrill and aloud, and [takes] her son’s head in her arms” (*Iliad* 18.70–71). These Iliadic scenes also echo the description of Achilles’ funeral in the underworld scene in the last book of the *Odyssey*, an episode depicted on a sixth-century BCE hydria (fig. 55). The image on the vase, in which Thetis, surrounded by the Nereids, cradles her son’s head, resembles the scene as described by Agamemnon in the underworld:

your mother, hearing the news, came out of the sea, with immortal sea girls beside her. Immortal crying arose and spread over the great sea, and trembling seized hold of all the Achaians.

...

... Around you stood the daughters of the Sea’s Ancient, mourning piteously, with immortal clothing upon them. And all the nine Muses in sweet antiphonal singing mourned you, nor would you then have seen any one of the Argives not in tears, so much did the singing Muse stir them. For ten and seven days, alike in the day and the night time, we wailed for you, both mortal people and the immortal.

—*Odyssey* 24.47–49 and 58–64, trans. Lattimore

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* circle around the unrepresented event of Achilles’ death: it is always about to happen or already past. Although the *Odyssey* lovingly portrays the funeral rites for Achilles, here too the narrative stops short of depicting the moment of his death: Agamemnon describes the dead body of Achilles, “mightily in his might,” but not the circumstances of the hero’s death. In many ways, the *Iliad* can be understood as an extended mourning song in honor of the dead hero, echoing the themes we find in Thetis’s lament for her living, yet doomed, son:

Hear me, Nereids, my sisters; so you may all know
 well all the sorrows that are in my heart, when you hear of them from me.
 Ah me, my sorrow, the bitterness in this best of child-bearing,
 since I gave birth to a son who was without fault and powerful,
 conspicuous among heroes; and he shot up like a young tree,
 and I nurtured him, like a tree grown in the pride of the orchard.
 I sent him away with the curved ships into the land of Ilion
 to fight with the Trojans; but I shall never again receive him
 won home again to his country and into the house of Peleus.

—*Iliad* 18.52–60, trans. Lattimore

The *Odyssey*, by contrast, playfully redefines heroism in a way that makes an unheroic death a precondition of its hero achieving epic glory: to achieve *kleos*, Odysseus must return home, live a long life, and die in his own bed.¹² Odysseus is an atypical hero in many ways, but particularly so in his unheroic death. While neither narrative depicts its hero's death, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* emphasize the heroes' foreknowledge of how their lives will end. Achilles learns of his two destinies from the prophecy given to him by Thetis; in the *Odyssey*, the dead seer Teiresias prophesies in the underworld that death will come to Odysseus in his old age:

. . . Death will come to you from the sea, in
 some altogether unwarlike way, and it will end you
 in the ebbing time of a sleek old age. Your people
 about you will be prosperous. All this is true that I tell you.

—*Odyssey* 11.134–37, trans. Lattimore

The death of Odysseus lies well beyond the confines of the narrative that tells the story of his homecoming from Troy to Ithaca, but Teiresias's prophecy, which Odysseus repeats in the first person to Penelope after their reunion (23.282), points to an unusual heroic death. It is not by chance that so many of the passages we have been examining evoke the underworld scene in the *Odyssey*. Death is of the essence. Just as the *Odyssey* radically redefines epic glory and heroism, it also redefines the hero's death. While the mystery of precisely how Odysseus's death comes "from the sea" is never fully explained, Odysseus is the exceptional hero in that his death is perfectly ordinary and in many ways enviable: having lived a long life, he dies gently, surrounded by friends and family.¹³

Neither the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey* depicts the death of its respective hero, yet both Achilles and Odysseus know a great deal about their own deaths. Achilles is given a prophecy by his mother, while Odysseus learns of his own death through Teiresias. In both cases, death can also be understood as the direct result of a god's antagonism toward the hero, a common pattern in heroic death. Apollo sets Achilles' death into motion, while the death that comes from the sea for Odysseus can be read as a consequence of Poseidon's enmity toward Odysseus, caused by the blinding of his son, Polyphemos.

THE MYSTERY OF HEROIC DEATH: OEDIPUS

The mortality of heroes is often presented as a mystery, in the sense either of being beyond normal understanding or, more literally, requiring initiation into the mysteries of the hero in order to be understood. Heroes, as we have seen in the cases of Achilles and Odysseus, are often given signs (*sēmata*) warning them of their impending deaths, and the living who survive them are similarly given clear indications that they have witnessed an event of extraordinary and abiding significance. Oedipus, in our post-Freudian age, does not strike the modern reader as particularly heroic. Yet he was a hero to the Greeks.¹⁴ Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, written shortly before the playwright's own death, focuses on the mystery of Oedipus's death. Unlike Achilles and Odysseus, Oedipus is known not for his skills in battle or his cunning; his fame is due to the (unwitting) crime of killing his father and marrying his mother and to his mysterious death. Sophocles' earlier play *Oedipus the King* tells the story of how Oedipus discovers the meaning of his past actions. While attempting to evade Apollo's prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother by leaving those he believes to be his parents behind, Oedipus commits the very wrongs the prophecy has foretold: the stranger he kills in self-defense is his father, and Jokasta, the Theban queen whom he marries as a reward for solving the Sphinx's riddle, is his mother. Yet the play itself, which is more often alluded to than read, focuses not on the events themselves but on Oedipus's discovery of their significance. Intent on finding the cause of the plague suffered by the people of the land he rules, Oedipus discovers that he himself is the source of the pollution. By the end of the play, his mother/wife has committed suicide, and Oedipus himself, the solver of riddles and truth seeker, has understood the danger that attends an excess of knowledge and plucks his eyes from their sockets with the golden brooch that held the dead Jokasta's garment together. Although Oedipus's crimes are committed unconsciously, his actions are nevertheless the source of pollution and horror, both personal and political. Nonetheless Oedipus becomes a hero and the object of worship after his death.

Oedipus at Colonus focuses on the death of Oedipus. Sophocles' play is unique in representing Oedipus as already a powerful figure of cult during his lifetime. In contrast to the heroes of Homeric epic, Oedipus is a mortal who already exerts supernatural powers before his death. Yet, tragedy is as reluctant as epic to depict the actual moment of death. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, we find Oedipus, sometime after the events depicted in *Oedipus the King*, being led by his daughter Antigone as they arrive at a sacred shrine dedicated to the Furies—the goddesses of vengeance, nicknamed the Eumenides, literally the “kind ones”—near Athens. Oedipus remembers a prophecy of Apollo that he will die in a place sacred to the Eumenides and become a blessing to the land that receives his body for burial. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Colonus are understandably troubled to find the elderly man there and even more so when they discover his identity: to them, Oedipus is a murderer, a cursed figure to be shunned or driven away. Oedipus defends his innocence: he is morally innocent, he tells them, since he did not know the identity of his parents and acted in self-defense against his father. Moreover, he adds, he has come as a holy (*hieros*) and pious man, who will

bring great benefit to Colonus; Oedipus convinces the Colonians to allow him to stay and to summon the king of Athens, Theseus. Theseus recognizes the benefits brought by Oedipus, as does the new king of Thebes, Kreon, who subsequently attempts to take Oedipus back to Thebes by force. Whichever city gets the body of Oedipus after his death, the kings both recognize, will be protected by his spirit. In the event, Oedipus, with Theseus's help, remains at Colonus.

Toward the end of the play, Oedipus hears thunder and recognizes it as a sign of his impending death. Oedipus tells Theseus he will initiate him into mysteries (*exagista*, "holy things," 1526) that he alone will know until the approach of his own death, at which time Theseus must initiate his son, as his son will in turn initiate his own son.¹⁵ Oedipus, his daughters, and Theseus walk offstage, and the chorus of old men from Colonus sings a hymn to Hades, the god of the underworld. The play continues with a messenger's account of the death of Oedipus, although he did not witness it directly: according to the messenger, a mysterious voice called to him, "Oedipus, why do you delay us from going?" and Oedipus asked his daughters and the messenger to leave. When the messenger looked back a moment later, all he saw was Theseus:

. . . and from afar we saw
 that man no longer present anywhere, but just
 our lord, and he was holding up a hand before
 his face to shade his eyes, as if some dread and fearful
 thing had been revealed, unbearable to see.
 But then, a little later and without a word,
 we saw him bowing down in worship to the earth
 and at the same time to Olympus of the gods.
 But by what doom he perished, there's no mortal man
 can tell, except Theseus. For no fiery bolt
 of thunder from the god destroyed him, nor a tempest
 stirred up from the sea at just that moment; no,
 the gods sent him some escort, or the underworld,
 the earth's unlit foundation, being well-disposed
 to him, gaped open. For the man was not sent off
 with weeping, or distressed by sickness, but in some
 amazing way if ever any mortal was.

—Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1648–64, trans. Blondell

The death of Oedipus is presented as a mystery, something full of wonder (literally "to be wondered at," *thaumastos*, 1665), and only the man who is initiated—in this case, Theseus—can witness it. The messenger does not see what happens, but he depicts the disappearance of Oedipus in terms of its effects on Theseus: something at once dreadful and miraculous, which causes Theseus to cover his eyes and immediately offer a prayer to both the gods below the earth and the Olympian gods above. While the messenger is unable to describe Oedipus's death in detail, a reluctance,

as we have seen, that is typical of literary sources, he offers a taxonomy of typical wondrous heroic deaths: thunderbolts, storms that snatch people away, and mystical disappearances.

DEATH IN SACRED SPACE: OPHELTES/ARCHEMOROS AND THE SERPENT

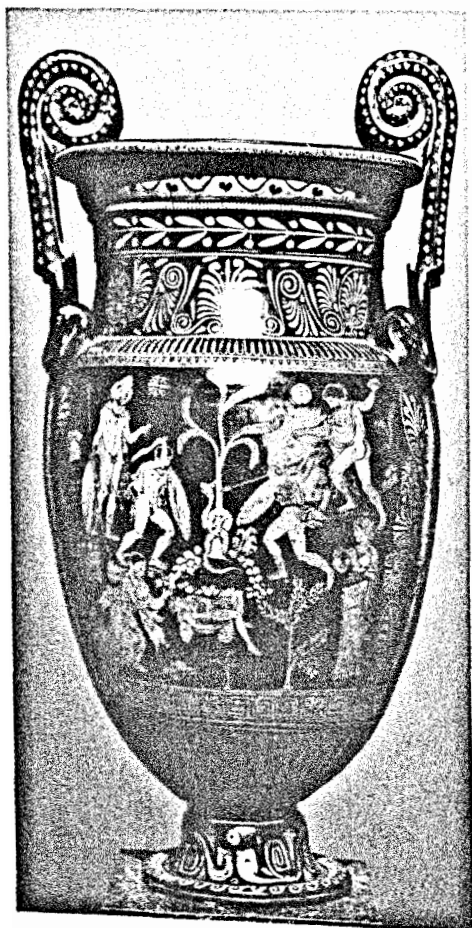
While Oedipus is aware of his own status as hero, and indeed seems already to exercise heroic powers in life, many heroes do not have foreknowledge of their deaths. Let me turn to another death that happens in sacred space but one that is depicted as purely accidental. One of the foundation myths for the Nemean Games, a pan-Hellenic festival on the model of the athletic competitions held every four years at Olympia, tells the story of the death of the infant Opheltes, who enters sacred space with fatal consequences: left on the ground by his nurse, Hypsipyle, so that she can find water for the Seven against Thebes, who happen to pass by Nemea, the baby is attacked by the serpent guarding the spot. An Apulian volute-krater depicts the moment immediately following the discovery of Opheltes' dead body (fig. 56). The child lies on the ground, while Hypsipyle runs toward him from the left. A female figure, perhaps the eponymous nymph of Nemea, stands on the right. On the upper register, the serpent coils around a tree in the center, as two warriors attack it from the right side, one with a rock, the other with a javelin that is about to pierce the serpent's throat. On the left side, another warrior approaches holding a short sword. A fourth man, perhaps Amphiaraos, stands on the upper left, looking toward the center. The scene depicted on the amphora encapsulates both the story of the death of Opheltes and his future as an object of cult. The story was also told in the epinician poetry of Bacchylides, who described how the first Nemean Games came to be held after the child's death:

There, the demigods with the red shields,
the choicest of the Argives, were the first
to compete in the athletic games in honor of Archemoros,
who was killed while sleeping by a monstrous yellow-eyed serpent,
a sign of the ruin to come.

—Bacchylides 9.10–14, author's translation

Bacchylides glosses the child's posthumous name, Archemoros, "the beginning of doom," as referring to the fate of the Seven against Thebes: Amphiaraos will later experience his own form of heroic death when he and his horses are swallowed by the earth after Zeus strikes the ground with this thunderbolt (his companions, for their part, all die in battle, a story dramatized in Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes*).¹⁶ But Archemoros also alludes to the child's own death and his new status as a hero. The cultic status of the child is evoked on the Hermitage amphora by the triangular perimeter that surrounds the space guarded by the snake, denoting not only the sacred space guarded by the serpent and transgressed by the child, but also the sacred space of hero shrines such as the sacred perimeter for Pelops at Olympia, which Pausanias describes

FIG 56 The death of Opheltes. Apulian red-figure volute-krater attributed to the Lykourgos Painter, ca. 350 BCE. Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, 61714 (St. 523)



as a triangular perimeter. While Opheltes' death, like that of Oedipus, takes place in sacred space, Opheltes does not disappear as Oedipus does. The Seven institute the Nemean Games as funeral games in his honor, and the body of the child hero is thus central to his cult at Nemea.¹⁷

THE DISAPPEARING ATHLETE

Whether the hero's body is present or absent, heroic death is always understood as a transformation. Let us turn to a tale of a heroic disappearance, which we find in Pausanias's *Periēgēsis*, a second-century CE guide to Greece. In an aside to a passage describing the votive offerings made by victors at Olympia, Pausanias tells the story of a certain Kleomedes, from the island of Astypalaia, who killed his opponent in the boxing competition at Olympia in 484 BCE. Kleomedes was denied his victory because of the accident. Driven out of his mind by the loss, the athlete went home to Astypalaia and attacked a school in which sixty boys were studying. Inside the school, Kleomedes overturned a pillar that held the roof, and the building caved in, killing all the boys. Kleomedes escaped and, when the people of the city pursued and attempted to stone him, took refuge in a sanctuary of Athena, where he hid inside a chest, pulling the lid down on himself. The Astypalaians tried to open the chest without success and, in frustration, broke open the wood only to find the chest empty: "not finding Kleomedes either living or dead." Puzzled by the disappearance of the body, the townsmen sent an envoy to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi to ask what had happened to Kleomedes and received the following oracle:

Astypalaian Kleomedes is the last hero,
honor him with sacrifices: he is no longer mortal.

—Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* 6.9.8, *author's translation*

And from this time forward, Pausanias concludes, the Astypalaians have honored Kleomedes as a hero. By any measure, Kleomedes is not a good person, yet he becomes a cult hero, one of the many vengeful hero-athletes who become objects of worship and recipients of cult.¹⁸ Kleomedes' crimes, like those of Oedipus, make him an object of fear and revulsion among his townsmen. While the circumstances of Kleomedes' crime are of course very different from Oedipus's situation, and there are no redeeming or exculpatory factors in Kleomedes' behavior, both men are seen as potential sources of pollution but ultimately find refuge in sacred space, bringing a cult and commensurate benefits to the places in which they disappear. The reluctance to depict heroic death that we saw earlier in epic poetry is echoed in the narratives of Oedipus and Kleomedes. In both cases, the disappearance of the heroes' mortal bodies remains a mystery at the core of the cults in their honor. In the case of Kleomedes, it is precisely the disappearance of his body that is a sign of Athena's favor, a divine sign confirmed when the oracle calls Kleomedes "the last hero."

SNATCHED AWAY: KEPHALOS

Another typically heroic way of dying, also mentioned by the messenger in *Oedipus at Colonus*, involves disappearance caused by tempests or storms. The term used by the messenger, *thuella* (“storm, hurricane”), is often used in describing supernatural abductions, and more specifically abductions of mortals by gods. In the *Odyssey*, storms are personified by the Harpies, by whom Telemachos fears his absent father, Odysseus, has been snatched.¹⁹ Semantically, to be snatched away by a storm (*thuella* or *Harpuiiai*) is thus equivalent to being abducted by a god, as is Ganymedes by Zeus, for example, or Oreithyia by Boreas, and the many beautiful youths snatched up by the goddess of dawn, Eos. As Gregory Nagy has shown, the abduction of mortals alludes to patterns of immortalization: mortals are “snatched up” (by the gods or by gusts of wind) as a prelude to death and immortalization through heroization.²⁰

Such abductions are usually caused by the mortal’s irresistible beauty, and Eos seems to be particularly susceptible to the good looks of certain young mortals. The tale of her abduction of the young hunter Kephalos, for example, was extremely popular in Attica, where Kephalos was a cult figure. A number of Attic vases from the fifth century BCE depict Eos’s abduction of Kephalos.²¹ For purposes of classification, the scenes portrayed on the vases can be divided into three broad categories, each of which focuses on a different moment: pursuit, contact, and abduction.²² The first category depicts the goddess pursuing a young man. A red-figure stamnos with Eos and two youths, 480–450 BCE, in the collection of the Walters Art Museum (fig. 57) exemplifies the contact motif, in which Eos touches the object of her desire. The third category, abduction, is the most relevant for our present purposes.

On the tondo of a fifth-century kylix (fig. 58), Eos cradles a youth’s body in her arms and rushes to the right; both Eos and the young man, identified by an inscription

FIG 57 Eos and two youths. Attic red-figure stamnos attributed to the Painter of the Florence Stamnoi, active ca. 480–450 BCE. Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, 48.2034

FIG 58 Eos stealing Kephalos. Attic red-figure kylix attributed to the Kodros Painter, ca. 440–430 BCE. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, F 2537



as Kephalos, look to the left, toward what they are leaving behind. Kephalos looks small and young, and wears a laurel crown over long hair. The goddess and her mortal prey seem suspended between different realms. Images of Eos and Kephalos stress not only the goddess's desire and predatory power but also the extraordinary beauty and special status of her lover. In pursuit and contact scenes, the young man is a mortal who is singled out by the goddess's desire. He usually reacts to the encounter with fear and reluctance, sometimes fighting the goddess off with a rock or with his lyre. The young man's fear of the goddess in these images can be better understood in light of the complete transformation brought about by abduction, which is a prelude to death and heroization. On the Berlin vase, the young man no longer attempts to resist but embraces the goddess by wrapping his arm around her neck. There is no return from being abducted by a goddess or a god: when Eos takes the mortal in her arms and transports him into her divine domain, the man leaves the mortal realm to become a hero. Death, the precondition of heroization, is depicted as disappearance rather than as physical process.

As the goddess of dawn, Eos is also connected with the transition from life to death in the context of funeral rituals for ordinary mortals. For Emily Vermeule, "Eos the Dawn is the end of normal sleep, and in many myths she signals not just a new day but the beginning of a new life with the gods." The apparition of Eos completes the process of death and marks the end of funerals, both in epic and in classical Athens. In later periods, accounts of the death of a young man are often cloaked in a vocabulary that verges on the erotic. Whenever a well-born and beautiful young man dies, his death and dawn funeral procession are often described as an abduction resulting from Eos's desire.²³ These funerary associations are also found in the myth of the death of Eos's own son, Memnon, who is killed by Achilles toward the end of the Trojan War.²⁴ Vase paintings depicting Eos carrying off the dead body of her son (fig. 59) are remarkably similar to those showing her abducting young men. Just as abducting a mortal lover points to an essential transformation from mortal to hero, carrying off the body of Memnon signifies the transition from life to death. The scene resembles depictions of Eos abducting mortal lovers, yet there can be no question of mistaking one scene for the other: the body of Memnon lies on a horizontal plane, lifeless, with limbs and head slumping down. Memnon is also portrayed as bearded, and therefore older than the smooth-faced young men who typically are captured by Eos.

THE HERO AMONG THE GODS: THE CASE OF HERAKLES

By way of conclusion, I turn to the death and apotheosis of Herakles. Herakles differs from other heroes insofar as he is both heroized and deified after death. When Odysseus meets Herakles in the underworld, he observes the hero's unique standing:

After him I was aware of powerful Herakles;
his image, that is, but he himself among the immortal
gods enjoys their festivals, married to sweet-stepping
Hebe, child of great Zeus and Hera of the golden sandals.

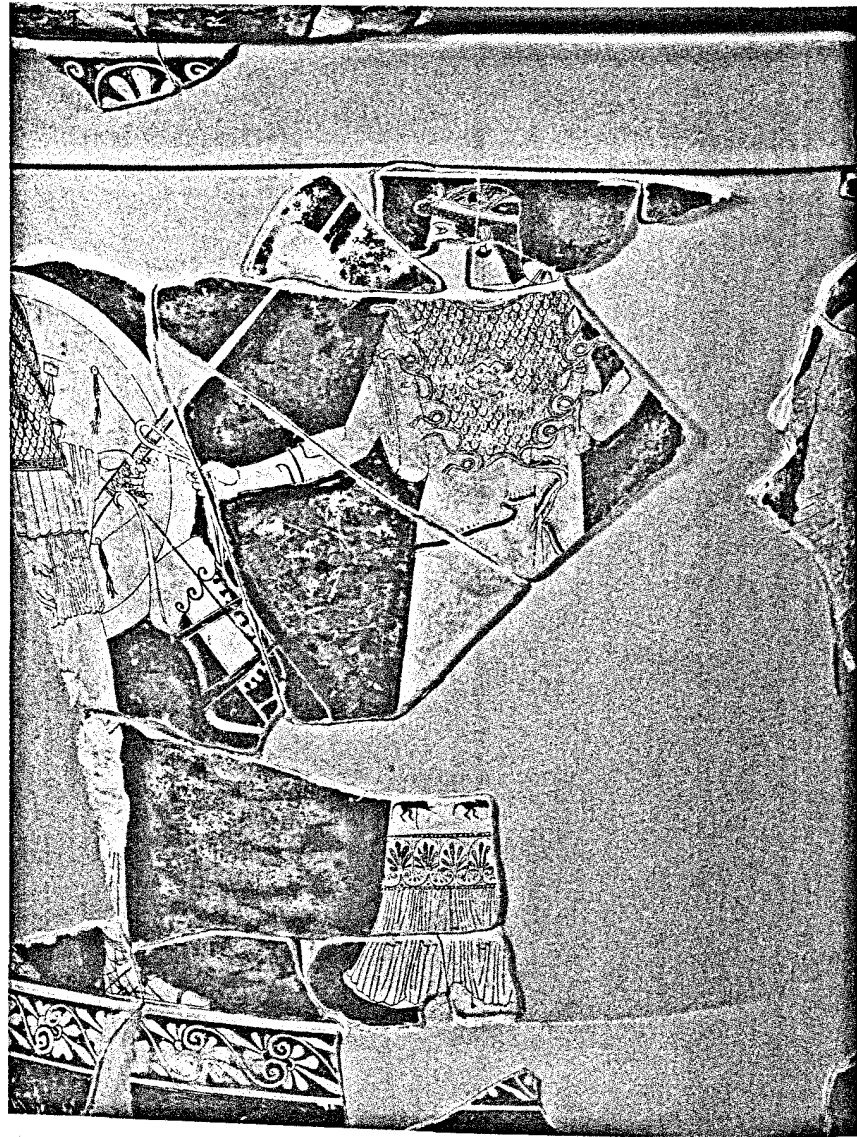
—*Odyssey* 11.601–4, trans. Lattimore



FIG 59 Eos with the body of her son, Memnon. Attic red-figure kylix attributed to Douris, ca. 490–480 BCE. Paris, Musée du Louvre, G 115

Herakles' image (*eidolon*) is present in Hades, but his true self enjoys a divine existence on Olympos with the other gods. Herodotos, writing in the fifth century BCE, notes the paradox of Herakles' ambivalent character, devoting a section of his *Histories* to his status as *herōs kai theos* ("both hero and god," 2.43–45). Associated with the foundation myths of three of the pan-Hellenic competitions—at Isthmia, Nemea, and Olympia—Herakles is also a model for aspiring athletes. Young men competing in these contests think of themselves as undergoing trials, which they describe with the same Greek word, *athloi*, used to describe Herakles' labors; what Herakles experiences in myth, the athletes, as they perform in the contests at the sacred festivals, experience on the level of ritual. While it may be tempting from a modern vantage point to see Herakles' special status as a compensation for his extraordinary sufferings, Herakles in many ways encapsulates the paradoxical nature of ancient heroes: a natural leader, who brings civilization to his people, he is also an Everyman who endures the greatest humiliations and the most painful ordeals during his lifetime. He is at once a savior and an enraged killer who slaughters his own children, an ideal ruler as well as a drunken reveler.

FIG 60 Philoktetes, Athena, and Herakles. Fragmentary red-figure calyx-krater attributed to the Achilles Painter, 450–445 BCE. Malibu, Calif., The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, 77.AE.44.1



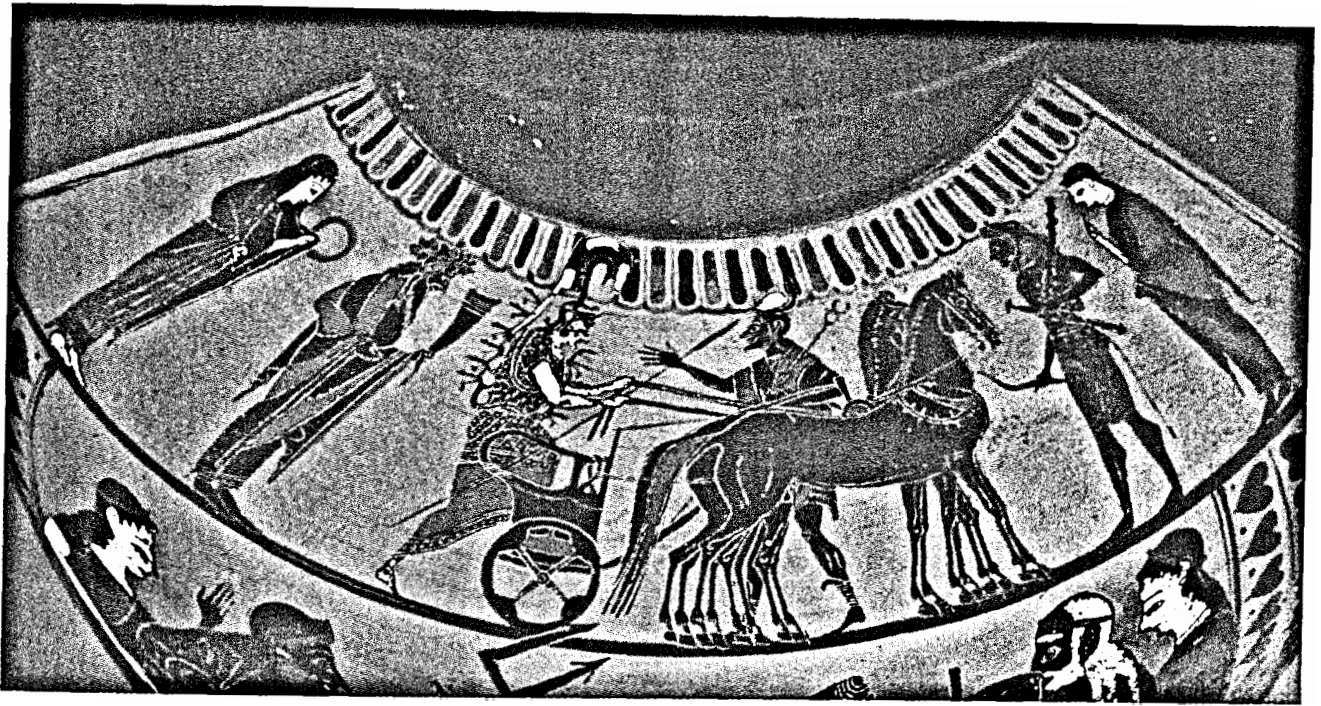


FIG 61 The apotheosis of Herakles. Detail of an Attic black-figure hydria attributed to the Painter of Vatican G 43 or the Lysippides Painter, ca. 540–530 BCE. Toledo Museum of Art, 1956.69

Herakles' greatest *athlos* is his death, the fatal result of a chain of events that starts when the Centaur Nessos attempts to rape Herakles' second wife, Deianeira. Herakles shoots him, but before dying, the Centaur has time to give Deianeira some of his blood, telling her that it is a powerful love philter. When Deianeira ("man destroyer") later learns that her husband is infatuated with another woman, she decides to use Nessos's love charm on a shirt she sends to Herakles as a gift. Nessos's blood is, of course, no aphrodisiac, but instead a powerful poison that causes Herakles such unbearable pain that the hero immolates himself on a pyre. A life of bravery, sufferings, and violence thus ends in a funerary conflagration.

No extant vase depicts the moment of Herakles' death on the pyre, but a fifth-century example shows him lying on the pyre just before it is lit, handing over his quiver to Philoktetes, who, in some traditions, lights the fire. In another version of the story, the goddess Athena hands over Herakles' weapons to Philoktetes (fig. 60). The literary sources often stress the events preceding Herakles' death. Sophocles' *Trachinian Women*, for example, describes Herakles' sufferings and his plea that his son, Hyllos, build and light his funeral pyre, but Sophocles ends his play before Herakles' death. Vase-painters often combine two different scenes: the funeral pyre, on which lies Herakles' breastplate, and another scene depicting Herakles himself being welcomed by the gods. Sometimes the latter scene appears alone.²⁵

A vase in the Toledo Museum of Art depicts Herakles' apotheosis (fig. 61). On the right stands a woman, with her hand raised, behind Herakles, who wears his lion skin and holds his club and bow, facing the horses leading the chariot driven by Athena. Behind the horses, between Athena and Herakles, stands Hermes, who seems to be guiding the hero. On the other side, behind the goddess, stands Dionysos, wearing a wreath of ivy and holding a horn-shaped vessel. Another woman stands on the far left, holding a wreath in her left hand. While the pyre is not depicted on this vase, the arrival of Herakles on Olympus is clearly shorthand for both his death and his subsequent deification.

The complete consumption of Herakles' body by the funeral pyre partly explains why, unlike the deaths of other heroes, that of Herakles results in his apotheosis and deification. The Herakles myth emphasizes the importance of the gods' intervention,

and some versions explain it as a reward for his help in the fight between the gods and the giants. Another way to look at it is that Herakles is such an influential figure throughout the Greek world that he transcends his local heroic status to become a god, a transformation represented as being brought about by the gods themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

Death's "old labors," the ability to defy death, distinguishes heroes from other mortals. The supernatural powers posthumously attributed to heroes are thus directly linked to the mystery of their deaths. The moment of death itself is often taboo and therefore unrepresented: the *Iliad* stops before Achilles' death; the *Odyssey* alludes to Odysseus's eventual death but far into the future, well beyond the bounds of its narrative; Oedipus mysteriously disappears from the gaze of witnesses who, because they are uninitiated, can neither express nor understand what they see; Kephalos is snatched away by a goddess; and Herakles emerges from the funeral pyre as a god. Poets and artists allude to the mystery of heroic death but do not represent it directly. Ancient heroes cannot be consistently defined by their actions during their lifetimes: a few may be admirable, but some are undeniably monstrous or morally corrupt, and others are too young to have ever accomplished anything. Unlike their modern counterparts, most ancient heroes do not necessarily offer models of behavior. Ancient heroes instead are understood as heroic in terms of their death and subsequent transformation into objects of cult. Their deaths remain a mystery that cannot be fully described, understood, or represented. We encounter heroes either before their deaths, as mere mortals with all their foibles, or after, as figures who have transcended mortality. As the worshiped object of cultic practice and the abiding subject of poetry and the visual arts, the hero remains mysteriously yet vividly alive: worshipers, poets, and artists keep alive the memory of heroes who have transcended mortality and come back from death, beyond themselves.

NOTES

"Heroes," from *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1945–1975*, by Robert Creeley, is quoted by permission of the University of California Press. © 1982, 2006 Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press.

- 1 Burkert 1985.
- 2 Vernant 1991.
- 3 On the cult of Odysseus on Ithaca, see Malkin 1998; on the cults of Achilles, see Hedreen 1991 and herein, 39–48.
- 4 On the implicitness of hero cults in epic and the pan-Hellenism of Homeric poetry, see Nagy 1999 and "The Sign of the Hero: A Prologue" in Maclean and Aitken 2001; on the implicitness of hero cult in drama, see Henrichs 1993.
- 5 On heroine cults, see Larson 1995 and Lyons 1997; on baby and child heroes, see Pache 2004.
- 6 On how poets imagine the afterlife of heroes, see Nagy 1999.
- 7 On the notion of "la belle mort" and "le beau mort," see Vernant 1991.
- 8 For Virgil's use of this simile, see *Aeneid* 9.436.
- 9 On the notion of epic *kleos* as a mode of heroization, see Nagy 1999.
- 10 The *Aithiopsis* survives only in summary form. For more on the relationship between the death of Achilles in the *Aithiopsis* and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, see Edwards 1985b.
- 11 For the death of Patroklos as an animal sacrifice, see Lowenstam 1981. For the story of Prometheus deceiving Zeus, see Hesiod, *Theogony* 535–57. For the vase, Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig, inv. BS 477 (ARV² 361.7), see Griffiths 1985 and Griffiths 1989.
- 12 On the definition of *kleos* in the *Odyssey*, see Segal 1994.
- 13 The *Telegony*, which survives only as a summary, records a tradition of Odysseus's being killed by his son by Kirke, Telegonos, who comes to Ithaca in search of his father and unwittingly kills Odysseus.
- 14 For the cult of Oedipus, see Edmunds 1981.
- 15 The play alludes frequently to the Eleusinian Mysteries and consistently depicts Oedipus as if he were an initiate in the mysteries; see Calame 1998.
- 16 For the story of Amphiaraios's engulfment, see, e.g., Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 9.24–25.
- 17 For more on Opheltes and other child heroes, see Pache 2004.
- 18 For more on stories of vengeful hero-athletes, see Fontenrose 1968; see also Ekroth herein, 120–43.
- 19 *Odyssey* 1.241. On this passage and on the iconography of Harpies, see E. Vermeule 1981.
- 20 On the link between being snatched up by the gods and by gusts of winds, see Nagy 1990.
- 21 See Stewart 1995, table 1, "Divine pursuits and abductions," which catalogues vases depicting abductions of mortals by gods. See also the discussion "Eos and Kephalos, Eos and Tithonos" in Reeder 1995. In a forthcoming book on nympholepsy in ancient Greece,

I examine in more detail the motif of Eos and her lovers. Allusions in tragedies (e.g., Euripides, *Hippolytos* 451–58) suggest that the story of Eos and Kephalos was already well known in the fifth century BCE.

22 My categories are similar to those in Lefkowitz 2002: "(1) approaching the mortal, (2) catching hold of him by his hand or arm, or (3) carrying him away." For a catalogue of representations of Eos and her lovers, see Kaempf-Dimitriadou 1979.

23 See E. Vermeule 1981; see *Iliad* 23.226–27 (funeral of Patroklos) and 24.788 (funeral of Hektor). For the attribution of beautiful young men's deaths to Eos, see Herakleitos, *Homeric Problems* 68 (first century CE), rationalizing the myth of Eos and Orion in terms of funeral practices.

24 The death of Memnon, like that of Achilles, was included in the *Aithiopsis*.

25 For the iconography of the death of Herakles, see Carpenter 1991, and especially fig. 229 for Herakles on the pyre handing over his quiver to Philoktetes.