



Death of a ram, death of Patroklos

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2020.07.31. "Death of a ram, death of Patroklos." Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

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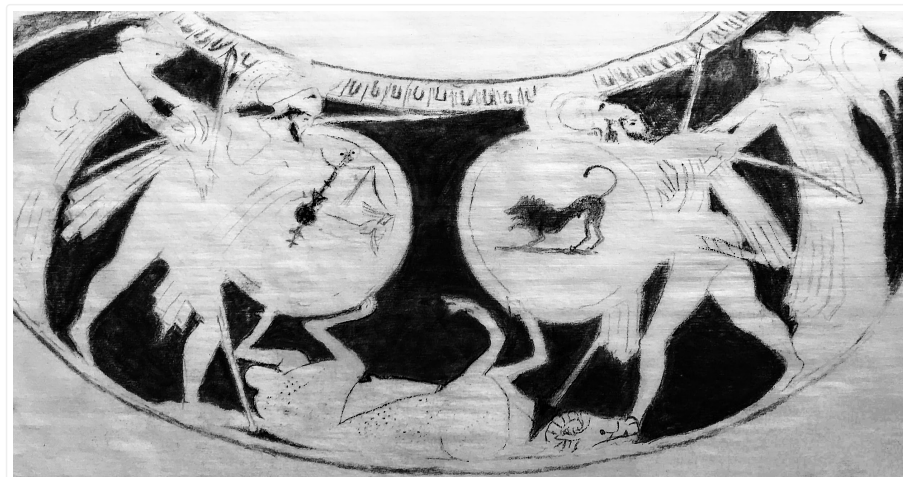
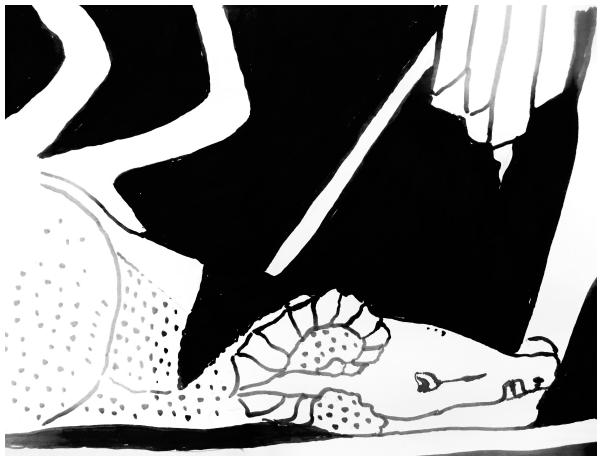
Death of a ram, death of Patroklos

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§0. A picture is worth a thousand words. That popular adage fits, to my mind, the picture I have chosen for the cover of my essay here—the word-count for which even exceeds a thousand, though not by much. The picture is a line drawing of an ancient vase-painting. The camera of the mind's eye is zooming in—on a sheep's head. It is the head of a ram, a dead ram. His throat has been slit, with blood flowing from the gaping wedge where the cut had been made, evidently by way of a sacrificial knife. The blood is not visible in the black-and-white line drawing, but it is clearly there in the original painting, which also shows—as we see even in the line drawing—how the left eye of the ram is looking directly into the eye of the viewer. It is the look of the dead, with eyeballs rolled up, as it were, in a death-stare. This sacrificial ram, as we will see, stands for Patroklos, who dies as a sacrificial body-double of Achilles in the Homeric *Iliad*.



Athenian red-figure stamnos attributed to Triptolemos Painter. ca. 500-450 BCE. Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig: BS477. Line drawings by Natasha Bershadsky and Jill Robbins.

§1. The camera of the mind's eye, having first zoomed in, showing the head of the dead ram, can now zoom out. I show here, under the zoom-in, a zoom-out. We are now looking at a line drawing of the whole picture painted on the vase, which is an Athenian stamnos dated to around 480 BCE. The dead ram is lying supine, full-body-length, with legs in the air. On each side of the ram are human figures. Two warriors are contending over the ram. One of the two—the one on our right—is labeled, with lettering, as Hector (the letters of the labels in this ancient painting are barely visible), while the other warrior is without a label. Two old men stand behind the two warriors. The one on our left is labeled, with lettering, as Phoenix, the old hero who presents himself as the mentor of Achilles in the "Embassy Scene" of *Iliad* 9, while the other old man, the one on our right, is labeled as Priam. Alan Griffiths (1985) has reconstructed the identity of

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the unlabeled figure as the great hero Ajax, son of Telamon. What we see here is a fight between the heroes Hector and Ajax, fighting for the Trojans and the Achaeans sides in the Trojan War, and they are being restrained by two old father-figures, Priam and Phoenix, representing the same contending sides, that is, the Trojans and the Achaeans respectively. The two fighters Hector and Ajax are engaged in mortal combat, but what are they fighting over? If they are fighting over the dead ram, then the labeling of the ram becomes all-important: the lettering, which is fragmentary, reads ΠΑΤ[...], which can be read as the name of Patroklos, the body-double of Achilles, who dies a sacrificial death as the ritual substitute of the greatest hero of the Homeric *Iliad*.

§2. Going well beyond earlier explanations like those of Griffiths (1985, 1989) is the work of Victoria Tarenzi (2005), who recognizes the sacrificial role of Patroklos. She refers (at her p. 32) to my relevant work in *The Best of the Achaeans* (Nagy 1979), where I analyze the word *therapōn* in the sense of 'ritual substitute' as applied to Patroklos in the Homeric *Iliad*; she also refers (at her p. 33) to the relevant monograph of Steven Lowenstam (1981)—but not to another monograph, also relevant, this one by Dale Sinos (1980).

§3. In my book *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (Nagy 2013, = H24H), where I analyze further the role of Patroklos as the ritual substitute of Achilles (especially in Hour 6), I summarize the evidence of the vase painting that I am analyzing here: "In Greek visual art, [...] the dead hero Patroklos can be represented as a sacrificial ram, who is shown with his throat slit open and with blood streaming from the gaping wound: such a picture is painted on an Attic vase executed by the Triptolemos Painter (6§49, with reference to the article of Tarenzi 2005).

§4. But there is more to it. The visualization of Patroklos as a sacrificial animal can be connected with the idea that this hero is a cult hero, worshipped in hero cult. I start to make this connection already at the beginning of my book on ancient Greek heroes, and I quote here the relevant formulation (H24H 0§12):

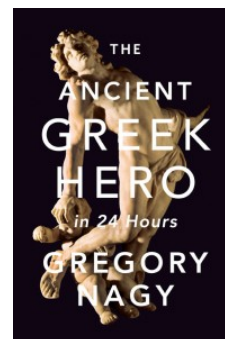
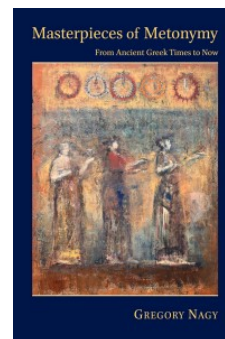
There is broad cultural evidence suggesting that hero worship in ancient Greece was not created out of stories like that of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but was in fact independent of them. The stories, on the other hand, were based on the religious practices, though not always directly. There are even myths that draw into an explicit parallel the violent death of a hero and the sacrificial slaughter of an animal.

In this general context as well, I should mention (as I do already in wording that follows what I quoted from H24H 0§12) not only the ritualized killing of Patroklos in *Iliad* 16 (as analyzed in Nagy 1979, Sinos 1980, Lowenstam 1981) but also the vase painting that I analyze here, which pictures Patroklos as a sacrificial ram lying supine with its throat slit open.

§5. And there is still more to it. The fact is, cult heroes who were worshipped in hero cult normally received as an offering the sacrifice of a ram if they were male and of a ewe if they were female. A striking example, which I mention at the start of my book on ancient Greek heroes (H24H 0§11), is the seasonally recurring sacrifice of a black ram at the precinct of the cult hero Pelops at the site of the Olympics (Pausanias 5.13.1-2).

§6. But the question remains: in the painting that I am analyzing here, why are Hector and Ajax engaged in mortal combat over a dead ram? The answer has to do with the hero for whom the dead ram is a stand-in, and that is Patroklos. If we consider *Iliad* 17, to cite the most glaring example, most of the narrative there is taken up with mortal combat over the possession of the corpse of Patroklos, who had been killed like a sacrificial animal in *Iliad* 16: as I point out already in H24H 0§12, the human victim in *Iliad* 16 is first stunned and disoriented by a fatal blow from behind (the agent is the god Apollo himself), then struck frontally by another fatal blow (the agent is the hero Euphorbos), and then finally administered the coup de grâce (the final agent is Hector himself). Just as the human victim is a stand-in here for an animal victim to be sacrificed, so also, conversely, the animal victim can be a stand-in for the human victim, who is in this case Patroklos. Correspondingly, there are vase paintings that show Hector and Ajax engaged in mortal combat over the dead body of Patroklos himself:

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Attic black figure calyx krater; in the manner of Exekias; Archaic Period, ca. 550 BCE. From Pharsalos, Thessaly. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, NM 26746. [Image](#) by Egisto Sani, under a [CC 2.0](#) license.

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§7. There are also other ancient pictures showing mortal combat over the corpse of a dead hero. Here, for example, is a picturing of the freshly-killed hero Euphorbos, clearly labeled, and the warriors fighting over his body are Hector and Menelaos, also clearly labeled:



Plate, from Rhodes, showing Menelaos and Hector fighting over the body of Euphorbos. Dated around 600 BCE. The lettering of the labels for the heroes suggests that this plate may be the work of Argives resident in Rhodes. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Museum number 1860,0404.1. [Image](#) appears under a [CC 4.0](#) license.



Line drawing of the plate from Rhodes. [Image](#) by Foto Thomas, appearing under [CC 4.0](#) license.

§8. In *Iliad* 16, we witness the death scene of this same hero Euphorbos, now shown as already dead in the picture. According to the narrative of the *Iliad*, Euphorbos was killed while engaged in combat over the corpse of Patroklos, but now, in the picture we just saw, other heroes are engaged in combat over his own corpse. So, there can be a chain of substitutions: one moment, you are engaged in combat over the corpse of another hero, but then, the next moment, it may be your turn, and now it will be your corpse that becomes the prize to be won by other combatants.

§9. And why is the corpse of the hero considered to be a prize in the first place? The answer, as I argue in my book on ancient Greek heroes (H24H 11§9), is that the possession of the corpse of a cult hero is essential for the fertility and prosperity of the community that worships that hero.

§10. So, all this fighting over corpses can be seen as a metaphor for fighting over the control of hero cults by way of possessing the bodies of cult heroes. And, as I argue at length in my book about ancient Greek heroes (H24H 8§41; also in Nagy 2012:54), the role of Patroklos as a cult hero functions as a substitute for the corresponding role of Achilles. A case in point is the narration in *Iliad* 17 of the fighting between the Achaeans and the Trojans over the possession of the corpse of Patroklos after he is killed in *Iliad* 16. Directly comparable is the fighting over the corpse of Achilles as we see it described in *Odyssey* 24.37–39. I should add that the role of Patroklos, surrogate of Achilles, as the central cult hero of the Homeric *Iliad* is also pictured in vase-paintings that show Patroklos hovering over the tomb he will share with his body double (the paintings are surveyed in H24H Hour 8).

§11. I conclude, then, that the painting of the Triptolemos Painter is true to an epic tradition about fighting over the bodies of heroes. It does not follow, however, that this painting is true to the Homeric *Iliad* as we have it. As Leonard Muellner (2012) has shown convincingly, with reference to the earlier work of Steven Lowenstam (1992, 1997, 2008), Athenian vase paintings in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE that pictured epic scenes were true not to the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* specifically but to epic poetry generally, which in that era still abounded in multiforms. The combat over the corpse of Patroklos as pictured by the Triptolemos Painter is based not on the text of the Homeric *Iliad* as we have it but on some variation on epic themes that have not survived in our received text. In the case of the painting on the vase painted by the Triptolemos Painter, we find proof on the other side of this same vase, where we see an “Embassy Scene” featuring the heroes Diomedes, Phoenix, and Odysseus—all three are clearly labeled—as the ambassadors approaching an aggrieved Achilles, who has withdrawn from the Trojan War. As Muellner shows, this scene does not correspond directly to the “Embassy Scene” of *Iliad* 9, featuring Ajax, Phoenix, and Odysseus as the ambassadors. And, as Muellner also shows, the stance of Achilles in the picture is different from his stance in *Iliad* 9. His dominant emotion in the picture is grief, not anger, which is his dominant emotion in *Iliad* 9. Grief over what? Clearly, the withdrawn Achilles, veiling himself sadly within a cloak that covers him almost completely, is grieving for the dead Patroklos painted on the other side of the vase. Achilles mourns Patroklos, the sacrificial victim who has just died for him. The grief of the grieving Achilles is even built into his name (Nagy 1976, as cited by Muellner 2012).



Athenian red-figure stamnos attributed to Triptolemos Painter. ca. 500-450 BCE. Basel, Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig: BS477. Line drawings by Jill Robbins.

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