

Achilles in The Iliad as an Ancient Hero

Posted on January 10, 2025

Introduction

Achilles is the central heroic figure in Homer's *Iliad* and the most formidable warrior in the Achaean army during the Trojan War. He possesses extraordinary physical strength, exceptional fighting ability, divine ancestry, and command over the loyal Myrmidons. Nevertheless, Homer does not present Achilles as a morally perfect individual. His pride, anger, desire for revenge, and mistreatment of enemies cause suffering for both the Trojans and his own companions. Achilles is therefore heroic according to the values of the ancient Greek warrior culture, but he frequently fails to meet modern expectations that a hero should always act selflessly, mercifully, and ethically.

Understanding Achilles requires a distinction between an ancient Greek hero and the modern popular image of heroism. A modern hero is often admired for protecting vulnerable people, sacrificing personal interests, and acting with moral integrity. A Homeric hero, by contrast, is primarily distinguished by exceptional ability, noble ancestry, courage in battle, public honor, and the pursuit of lasting fame. Such a hero may possess serious moral weaknesses and can even become dangerous to the community he is expected to defend.

The *Iliad* announces Achilles's central flaw in its opening appeal to the Muse: "Sing, goddess, the anger of Achilles" (Homer, trans. 1924, 1.1). His anger is not a minor characteristic but the force that organizes the entire poem. When Agamemnon dishonors him, Achilles withdraws from battle and allows the Achaeans to suffer. When Patroclus is killed, Achilles returns to combat in a state of grief and destructive fury. After killing Hector, he abuses the Trojan prince's body. Only in the final book, when King Priam appeals to his compassion, does Achilles temporarily overcome his rage and recognize the shared suffering that unites enemies.

Achilles is thus an ancient hero not because he is consistently virtuous but because he represents heroic excellence in its most powerful and dangerous form. His courage, strength, loyalty to Patroclus, closeness to the gods, acceptance of death, and pursuit of immortal fame establish his heroic status. At the same time, his anger, pride, and cruelty reveal the limitations of a heroic culture based on personal honor and revenge. Achilles becomes most fully human when he moves beyond battlefield glory and responds compassionately to Priam's grief.

The Ancient Greek Meaning of a Hero

The ancient Greek understanding of a hero differs significantly from the modern moral definition. In Homeric society, heroic identity is connected to *aretē*, *timē*, and *kleos*. These terms may be

translated approximately as excellence, honor, and fame, although each has a broader cultural meaning.

Aretē refers to excellence or the fulfillment of a person's highest abilities. In a warrior such as Achilles, it includes courage, strength, speed, military skill, leadership, and effectiveness in battle. A warrior demonstrates *aretē* by performing extraordinary deeds that separate him from ordinary people.

Timē refers to publicly recognized honor. A hero's social position must be acknowledged by other members of the community through respect, authority, prizes, and material rewards. In the *Iliad*, war prizes are not merely personal possessions. They provide visible evidence of a warrior's status. When Agamemnon takes Briseis from Achilles, he does more than deprive Achilles of a captive woman. He publicly diminishes the honor of the army's greatest fighter.

Kleos refers to fame or glory preserved through storytelling. Because every warrior must eventually die, heroic achievement offers a form of symbolic immortality. A warrior's body perishes, but his name and deeds may survive through epic poetry. Nagy (1979) explains that the Homeric hero achieves enduring significance through the poetic preservation of his glory. Achilles's desire for imperishable fame is therefore directly connected to his awareness of mortality.

This cultural framework explains why Achilles can remain a hero despite behavior that appears selfish or cruel. Ancient heroism does not necessarily imply moral perfection. It identifies an exceptional person whose actions, suffering, and death possess significance for the community. Clarke (2004) observes that Homeric heroism contains intense contradictions: the hero may display greatness, loyalty, violence, madness, and vulnerability simultaneously. Achilles embodies these contradictions more completely than any other figure in the poem.

Achilles as the Greatest Achaean Warrior

Achilles's heroic reputation begins with his unmatched military ability. He leads the Myrmidons, a disciplined group of warriors from Phthia, and inspires fear throughout the Trojan forces. Before the action narrated in the *Iliad*, Achilles has already captured numerous cities and accumulated considerable wealth through military campaigns. In Book 9, he states that he has destroyed 12 cities by sea and 11 by land (Homer, trans. 1924, 9.328-329). These victories establish him as more than an ordinary soldier. He is a conqueror whose presence determines the direction of the war.

Achilles's importance becomes most obvious when he refuses to fight. His physical absence from the battlefield creates a military crisis for the Achaeans. Hector and the Trojans advance toward the Greek ships, break through defensive positions, and nearly destroy the invading army. The Achaeans possess other respected heroes, including Ajax, Diomedes, Odysseus, and Agamemnon, but none can replace Achilles completely.

This dependence demonstrates that Achilles's heroic authority rests on proven ability rather than title alone. Agamemnon is the commander of the Greek expedition, but Achilles is its most effective warrior. Their conflict therefore brings two forms of power into opposition. Agamemnon possesses political authority, while Achilles possesses military excellence.

Achilles's withdrawal also exposes the dangerous individualism within the heroic code. He knows that his companions are dying, yet he refuses to return because his honor has not been restored. His response is understandable within the values of *timē*, but it is destructive from the perspective of collective responsibility. The hero who is most capable of saving the army becomes the person whose absence threatens to destroy it.

The Myrmidons further reinforce Achilles's exceptional position. They are fiercely loyal to him and do not return to battle until he permits it. The later myth that the Myrmidons originated as ants transformed into human beings does not appear as such in Homer's *Iliad*. It belongs to other mythological traditions, including the account in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Homer, the Myrmidons are already an established warrior community under Achilles's leadership. Their obedience demonstrates his authority, but it should not be used as direct evidence of his superhuman strength.

Divine Ancestry and the Intervention of Thetis

Achilles is the son of Peleus, a mortal king, and Thetis, a sea goddess. His parentage places him between the human and divine worlds. He receives divine assistance, communicates with his mother, and possesses armor made by the god Hephaestus. Yet he remains mortal and is repeatedly reminded that he is destined to die young.

Thetis's relationship with Achilles provides him with privileges unavailable to ordinary warriors. In Book 1, after Agamemnon takes Briseis, Achilles appeals to his mother. Thetis then approaches Zeus and asks him to support the Trojans temporarily so that the Achaeans will recognize the value of her dishonored son.

Thetis is not angry with Achilles when she makes this request. She is grieving because Agamemnon has insulted him and because she knows that Achilles has been allotted a short life. Her request is intended to restore his honor. Zeus's assistance to the Trojans therefore becomes part of the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon.

This divine intervention benefits Achilles personally but causes enormous suffering among the Achaean forces. Zeus permits the Trojans to gain the advantage, and many Greek warriors die while Achilles remains outside the battle. The episode illustrates the morally ambiguous nature of divine support in the poem. The gods do not always intervene according to universal justice. They frequently act because of personal relationships, promises, rivalries, and competing loyalties.

Achilles's connection with Thetis is also a burden. Because she is divine, she understands the fate

awaiting him but cannot prevent it. She can comfort him, obtain assistance from Zeus, and secure new armor from Hephaestus, but she cannot make her son permanently immortal. Their relationship emphasizes the tragedy of Achilles's condition: he is close enough to the gods to understand what he will lose but too human to escape death.

The Conflict with Agamemnon

The quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon in Book 1 begins after Agamemnon is forced to return Chryseis, the daughter of Apollo's priest. Because he does not want to lose his visible sign of honor, Agamemnon takes Briseis from Achilles.

From a modern perspective, the treatment of Briseis and Chryseis reveals the violence and inequality of the warrior culture. Both women are treated as prizes controlled by powerful men. The conflict is often described as a disagreement "over a woman," but that description can obscure both the women's lack of freedom and the symbolic meaning assigned to them by the warriors.

For Achilles, the seizure of Briseis represents public humiliation. He has risked his life in battle, yet Agamemnon claims the authority to take the reward that signifies his achievement. Achilles believes that the commander benefits from the sacrifices of other warriors while failing to respect their contributions.

Achilles's anger is therefore not entirely unreasonable. Agamemnon behaves arrogantly and abuses his authority. The problem lies in the scale and consequences of Achilles's response. Rather than challenging Agamemnon while continuing to protect his companions, Achilles withdraws himself and the Myrmidons from battle. He also asks Thetis to persuade Zeus to give the Trojans military success.

The result is a contradiction at the center of Achilles's heroic identity. He demands recognition as the best defender of the Achaeans while allowing those same Achaeans to die in order to prove how much they need him. His concern for honor becomes more powerful than his obligation to the wider community.

Muellner (1996) argues that Achilles's *mēnis*, or wrath, is not ordinary irritation. It is a destructive form of anger with consequences that affect the entire social order. The poem's focus is therefore not simply on whether Achilles has been insulted. It examines what happens when a powerful individual treats personal injury as justification for unlimited retaliation.

Achilles and the Choice Between Life and Glory

Achilles's awareness of his fate is one of the most important features of his heroism. In Book 9, he explains that two possible destinies lie before him. If he remains at Troy, he will die young but gain imperishable fame. If he returns home, he will live a long life, but his heroic glory will disappear.

This choice distinguishes Achilles from warriors who enter battle without certain knowledge of their deaths. Achilles understands the cost of heroic fame. His decision to remain at Troy is therefore courageous, but it also reveals the power of the heroic code over his imagination. A long private life appears less meaningful to him than a brief life remembered through poetry.

The tension between life and glory becomes more complicated after Patroclus dies. Before this loss, Achilles considers returning home. Afterward, he accepts that returning to battle against Hector will lead to his own early death. His pursuit of glory can no longer be separated from grief, guilt, and revenge.

Achilles does not return primarily because Agamemnon has apologized or restored his prizes. He returns because the death of Patroclus has changed the meaning of his life. He can no longer imagine a peaceful return home while Hector, the man who killed Patroclus, remains alive.

The Cambridge Guide to Homer notes that the greatest heroes of the *Iliad*, including Patroclus, Hector, and Achilles, do not achieve a successful homecoming. Their heroic identity is inseparable from death and remembrance. Achilles gains *kleos*, but the cost is the ordinary human future he might have experienced as a son, husband, father, and king.

Patroclus and the Human Side of Achilles

Patroclus is Achilles's closest companion and the person who most effectively appeals to his emotional loyalty. While Achilles resists Agamemnon, Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix, he eventually allows Patroclus to enter battle wearing his armor.

In Book 16, Patroclus sees the suffering of the Achaean army and pleads for permission to lead the Myrmidons. Achilles agrees but instructs him to drive the Trojans away from the ships and then return. He does not want Patroclus to pursue the enemy to the walls of Troy.

Patroclus's appearance in Achilles's armor causes the Trojans to believe that Achilles has returned. This reaction demonstrates the psychological power of Achilles's heroic identity. His armor alone changes the behavior of the battlefield. Patroclus and the Myrmidons push the Trojans back, but Patroclus exceeds Achilles's instructions. He continues the pursuit and is eventually killed after divine and human intervention.

The death of Patroclus destroys Achilles emotionally. He falls to the ground, covers himself with dust, tears his hair, and laments with such intensity that Thetis hears him beneath the sea. His reaction reveals a depth of love and vulnerability that contrasts sharply with his earlier pride.

Rousseau explains that the scene creates a symbolic connection between the two companions. Patroclus had previously become a substitute for Achilles by wearing his armor. After Patroclus dies, Achilles covers himself in dust and symbolically resembles his companion's unburied body. Patroclus's

death also anticipates Achilles's own approaching death.

Achilles's grief complicates the claim that he fights only for personal glory. His attachment to Patroclus is genuine, and his return to combat is motivated by loyalty as well as vengeance. Nevertheless, his love becomes destructive because he believes that honoring Patroclus requires killing Hector and desecrating his corpse.

Rage, Revenge, and the Death of Hector

When Achilles returns to battle, he does so with a level of violence that exceeds ordinary military necessity. He kills numerous Trojans and rejects appeals for mercy. His grief has not restored his concern for the community; it has transformed his wounded pride into a nearly uncontrollable desire for revenge.

Hector eventually faces Achilles outside the walls of Troy. Hector initially runs, but he later stops and fights after Athena deceives him. Achilles kills him and refuses his request that his body be returned to his family for burial.

Instead, Achilles attaches Hector's corpse to his chariot and drags it through the dust. He later continues dragging the body around Patroclus's tomb. This treatment violates the respect normally owed to the dead and shocks both human observers and several gods.

The gods protect Hector's body from permanent damage, but Achilles's intention remains cruel. Apollo condemns him for having lost pity and shame. The poem therefore does not celebrate every action of its greatest warrior. It openly exposes the point at which heroic revenge becomes inhuman.

Achilles's treatment of Hector shows why physical courage alone cannot provide a complete definition of heroism. Achilles has the strength to defeat Hector, but victory does not satisfy him. His rage drives him to continue attacking a body that can no longer resist. His military excellence remains unquestioned, yet his moral judgment has collapsed.

The scene also illustrates the self-perpetuating nature of revenge. Hector kills Patroclus while Patroclus is wearing Achilles's armor. Achilles kills Hector to avenge Patroclus. The Trojan War itself has already produced countless cycles of retaliation. Each warrior believes that violence will restore honor, but each act creates additional grief and demands for vengeance.

Priam and the Recovery of Achilles's Humanity

The most significant development in Achilles's character occurs in Book 24. Priam, the elderly king of Troy and father of Hector, enters the Achaean camp to recover his son's body. With divine assistance, he reaches Achilles's shelter, kneels before the warrior who killed his son, and appeals to him by

asking him to remember his own father, Peleus.

Priam's request transforms the emotional situation. Until this point, Achilles has viewed Hector primarily as the enemy who killed Patroclus. Priam forces him to see Hector as a son whose father is suffering. At the same time, Achilles imagines Peleus grieving for him after his own expected death.

Priam's courage is different from battlefield courage. He enters the enemy camp unarmed and makes himself completely vulnerable. He performs an almost unbearable act of supplication by touching the hands of his son's killer. His strength lies not in physical force but in his willingness to endure humiliation for the sake of his child.

Achilles responds by weeping with Priam. Their grief is not identical: Priam mourns Hector, while Achilles mourns Patroclus and thinks about Peleus. Nevertheless, their shared tears briefly overcome the divisions between Greek and Trojan, killer and victim, victor and defeated father.

The scene does not erase Achilles's earlier cruelty, but it reveals that he remains capable of compassion. He returns Hector's body, provides time for the funeral, and offers Priam food and protection. The rage announced in the first line of the poem finally loosens its hold.

The *Iliad* thus ends not with the fall of Troy, the death of Achilles, or a celebration of Greek victory, but with Hector's funeral. This ending shifts attention away from military triumph and toward mourning, mortality, family, and dignity. Achilles's greatest human achievement is not killing Hector. It is recognizing the suffering of Hector's father.

The Benefits and Burdens of Achilles's Heroic Status

Achilles's heroic position brings both advantages and suffering.

Aspect of heroic status	Benefit to Achilles	Burden or consequence
Extraordinary military ability	Makes him the greatest Achaean warrior	Turns him into an instrument of extreme violence
Divine mother	Gives him access to Zeus and divine armor	Makes him aware that even divine love cannot prevent his death
Public honor	Gives him status, prizes, and authority	Makes humiliation almost impossible for him to tolerate

Aspect of heroic status	Benefit to Achilles	Burden or consequence
Command of the Myrmidons	Provides loyal and effective warriors	Allows his personal anger to remove an entire force from battle
Love for Patroclus	Reveals loyalty and emotional depth	Produces overwhelming grief and revenge
Knowledge of fate	Allows him to choose his destiny consciously	Forces him to live with the certainty of an early death
Pursuit of <i>kleos</i>	Preserves his name through epic poetry	Requires the sacrifice of homecoming and long life
Victory over Hector	Confirms his superiority in battle	Leads to cruelty and the desecration of Hector's body
Encounter with Priam	Restores compassion and self-awareness	Confronts him directly with his own mortality

The table demonstrates that Achilles's strengths and weaknesses cannot be separated easily. The same concern for honor that inspires courageous achievement also produces destructive pride. The same loyalty that connects him deeply to Patroclus leads to uncontrolled vengeance. The same acceptance of death that makes him heroic also prevents him from choosing a peaceful life.

Is Achilles a Noble Hero?

If heroism is defined as flawless moral behavior, Achilles cannot be considered an ideal hero. He allows fellow soldiers to die, asks Zeus to assist the enemy, rejects reconciliation, kills without mercy, and desecrates Hector's body. His anger repeatedly overwhelms his judgment.

However, judging Achilles only according to modern expectations would overlook the poem's historical and literary context. He fulfills the central requirements of the Homeric hero: noble ancestry, exceptional *aretē*, courage, leadership, public honor, loyalty to a companion, willingness to confront death, and achievement of lasting *kleos*.

The poem itself does not require readers to approve of everything he does. Homer presents Achilles's greatness and destructiveness together. Schein (1984) argues that the *Iliad* is deeply concerned with the tragic limitations of heroic values. Martial excellence gives warriors meaning and status, yet it

also traps them in cycles of competition, violence, and early death.

Achilles becomes more admirable when he begins to understand the limitations of revenge. The meeting with Priam does not turn him into a modern humanitarian figure, but it allows him to recognize a bond deeper than military identity: all human beings are vulnerable to suffering and death.

His heroism is therefore dynamic rather than fixed. At the beginning of the poem, he identifies honor primarily with status and recognition. After Patroclus's death, he identifies it with revenge. By the end, he has briefly learned that respect for another person's grief can coexist with loyalty to the dead.

Achilles and David as Ancient Warrior Heroes

Achilles can be compared with David from the Hebrew Bible because both are exceptional warriors whose abilities change the fate of their people. Achilles is the greatest Achaean fighter, while David becomes famous after defeating Goliath and later leads Israel in war.

Both heroes confront enemies who inspire fear in other soldiers. The Trojans fear Achilles, while the Israelites fear Goliath. Both men also possess qualities that distinguish them from established rulers. Achilles surpasses Agamemnon in military excellence, while David's success eventually exceeds that of King Saul.

However, they belong to different religious and ethical traditions. Achilles fights within a heroic culture centered on honor, status, revenge, and lasting fame. David presents his conflict with Goliath as a defense of Israel and the honor of God. Before the battle, he declares that the conflict belongs to the Lord rather than to human weapons alone (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible, 2021, 1 Samuel 17:45-47). The biblical narrative therefore places divine purpose above the warrior's personal strength.

Their equipment also produces an interesting contrast. Achilles's divine armor visually expresses his heroic identity. When Patroclus wears it, the Trojans initially believe Achilles has returned. David, in contrast, rejects Saul's armor because he is not accustomed to it. He defeats Goliath with a sling and stones, emphasizing trust, skill, and divine assistance rather than magnificent military equipment.

The contrast should not be simplified into the claim that Achilles is entirely selfish while David is entirely selfless. David also seeks recognition, becomes angry, participates in violence, and displays serious moral failures elsewhere in the biblical narrative. Achilles, likewise, is capable of love, loyalty, grief, generosity, and compassion.

The central difference lies in the frameworks through which their heroism is interpreted. Achilles's greatness is measured largely through *aretē*, *timē*, and *kleos*. David's success is presented within a covenantal history in which kingship and military ability remain accountable to God. Achilles pursues

a name that will survive his death, while David's authority is linked to a divine calling that extends beyond personal battlefield fame.

Conclusion

Achilles is an ancient hero because he possesses extraordinary strength, courage, military excellence, noble ancestry, divine connections, loyal followers, and the willingness to sacrifice a long life for imperishable glory. He is the greatest warrior among the Achaeans, and his absence or presence determines the course of the Trojan War.

Nevertheless, Achilles is not a morally perfect hero. His conflict with Agamemnon causes him to place personal honor above the lives of his companions. His grief for Patroclus reveals deep loyalty and emotional vulnerability, but it also produces a violent desire for revenge. His killing of Hector confirms his martial superiority, while his desecration of the body reveals the corruption caused by uncontrolled rage.

The encounter with Priam provides the clearest evidence of Achilles's development. By remembering his own father and sharing the grief of an enemy, he temporarily moves beyond the narrow demands of heroic honor. He returns Hector's body and acknowledges that suffering is common to all people, regardless of which side they occupy in war.

Achilles should therefore be understood as both an embodiment and a criticism of ancient heroic values. His *aretē* makes him magnificent, his pursuit of *kleos* makes him memorable, and his anger makes him destructive. His character demonstrates that power without restraint can endanger the community, while grief without wisdom can become cruelty.

Homer does not ask the audience to choose between viewing Achilles as a great warrior or a deeply flawed person. He is both. That contradiction is precisely what makes him one of literature's most compelling heroes. Achilles's final act of mercy does not eliminate his earlier wrongdoing, but it shows that his humanity is greater than his anger. His most meaningful victory is therefore not his triumph over Hector but his recovery of compassion in the presence of Priam.

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