

## AN APOBATIC MOMENT FOR ACHILLES AS ATHLETE AT THE FESTIVAL OF THE PANATHENAIA

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This presentation focuses on two Black Figure paintings, both dated around 510 BCE, that depict the athletic event of the *apobaton agon*, which means ‘contest of the *apobatai*’ or ‘*apobatic contest*’.<sup>1</sup> These paintings are found on vases to which I will refer simply as the Boston Hydria<sup>2</sup> and the Münster Hydria.<sup>3</sup> The event that is being depicted, which was part of the athletic program of the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens, featured a spectacular "sudden-death" moment of athletic bravura. We can imagine all eyes focused on the action that leads up to that moment as the competing athlete, riding on the platform of a four-horse chariot driven at full gallop by his charioteer, suddenly leaps to the ground from the speeding chariot. The term for such an athlete is *apobates*, meaning literally ‘he who steps off’.<sup>4</sup> At the death-defying



1. Photius *Lexicon* alpha 2450; see also alpha 2449, *Suda Lexicon* alpha 3250.

2. The *editio princeps* is Vermeule 1965.

3. The *editio princeps* is Stähler 1967.

4. Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Roman Antiquities* 7.73.3; Harpocration s.v. In Eratosthenes *Catasterismi* chapter 1, section 13, lines 19-22, we read that the *apobates* is a re-enactment of the prototypical chariot-fighter (carrying a spear and wearing a three-plumed helmet) who rode next to Erikhthonios as chariot-driver when Erikhthonios founded the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens.

moment when he literally steps off the platform of the speeding chariot, the *apobates* is fully armed in the armor of a warrior. The various attested representations in the visual arts show the *apobates* armed with helmet, breastplate, shinguards, spear, sword, and shield.<sup>5</sup> Weighed down by all this armor, the *apobates* must hit the ground running as he lands on his feet from his high-speed leap from the platform of his chariot. If his run is not broken by a fall, he continues to run down the length of the stadium in competition with the other running *apobatai* who have made their own simultaneous leaps from their own chariots.<sup>6</sup> In one of the two paintings that I will be considering, as well as in other paintings, the athletic event of this apobatic contest is correlated with an epic event that takes place in the Homeric *Iliad*. The hero Achilles, infuriated over the killing of his dearest friend Patroclus by Hector, tries to avenge this death by dragging behind his speeding chariot the corpse of Hector (XXII 395-405, XXIV 14-22).<sup>7</sup> In the painting on the Boston Hydria, we see Achilles at the precise moment when he cuts himself off from the act of dragging the corpse of Hector. This moment is synchronized with the precise moment when he leaps off, in the mode of an *apobates*, from the platform of the chariot that is dragging the corpse. The leap of Achilles here is the leap of the *apobates*. This moment, captured in the painting we see on the Boston Hydria, is what I am calling the apobatic moment. I will argue that this moment can be understood only in the context of the poetic as well as athletic program of the Panathenaia.

The first time that the *Iliad* pictures Achilles dragging the corpse of Hector, the event is witnessed by the dead hero's mother, father, and wife: Hecuba, Priam, and Andromache all lament the terror and the pity of it all (XXII 405-407, 430-436; 408-429; 437-515).

As in the *Iliad*, the lamenting figures of Hecuba and Priam are pictured on one of the two Black Figure vases that presently concern me, the Boston Hydria. This vase, like the *Iliad*, pictures Achilles dragging the corpse of Hector – while the lamenting figures of Hecuba and Priam view this scene of terror and pity from a portico.

The next time the *Iliad* pictures Achilles dragging the corpse of Hector behind his chariot, we see that chariot being driven three times

5. Stähler 1967 gives a survey.

6. Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Roman Antiquities* 7.73.3. According to other sources, the *apobates* can leap on as well as off the platform of a racing chariot: see *Etymologicum magnum* ed. Kallierges p. 124 lines 31-34 and Photius *Lexicon* alpha 2450. Paintings of mythological scenes showing a warrior mounting his chariot may correspond to athletic scenes where the *apobates* mounts his chariot: see Vermeule p. 44 on the Amphiaros crater.

7. Vermeule and Stähler survey a wide variety of relevant pictures besides the two that concern me primarily here, that is, the pictures painted on the Boston Hydria and the Münster Hydria.

around the *sema* 'tomb' of Patroclus (XXIV 14-18). At an earlier point in the narrative of the *Iliad*, this tomb is described as incomplete: it will not be complete until Achilles himself is buried there together with his friend Patroclus (XXIII 83-84, 91-92, 245-248).

As in the *Iliad*, this tomb of Patroclus is pictured on the Boston Hydria. The chariot of Achilles is shown furiously circling around the tomb, with the corpse of Hector in tow, and we see the hero at the very moment when he leaps off the speeding chariot, with his fierce gaze fixed on the portico where Priam and Hecuba lament the cruel fate of their son. Every time we look through the painted window that frames this painted moment, we return to this same precise moment. As Emily Vermeule says, "The technique gives the impression that the myth is circling around in another world, outside the window frame through which the spectator views it, in endless motion which is somehow always arrested at the same place whenever we return to the window."<sup>8</sup> This moment is the critical moment of the *apobates*, the apobatic moment.

In the *Iliad*, a council of the gods is convened, which expresses its moral disapproval of Achilles for his attempt to mutilate the corpse of Hector by dragging it behind his chariot (XXIV 22-76). Earlier in the narrative of the *Iliad*, we see that the god Apollo had miraculously prevented the actual mutilation of the corpse (18-21). But now the council of the gods, headed by Zeus, decides to go one step further: the dragging of the corpse by Achilles must stop altogether. The divine course of action in stopping Achilles is explicitly said to be indirect: Iris as messenger of the gods is sent off to summon Thetis (74-75), who will be asked by Zeus to persuade her son to return the corpse of Hector to Priam (75-76); then Iris is sent off to Priam, who will receive from the goddess a divine plan designed to make it possible for him to persuade Achilles to return the corpse of his son (143-158).

By contrast with the narration of the *Iliad*, the divine course of action narrated by the painting on the Boston Hydria is explicitly direct: the goddess sent from on high will personally stop the dragging of the corpse of Hector by Achilles. The painting shows the goddess at the moment of her landing: she touches ground at the center of the picture, with feet gracefully poised as if in a dance, and her gesture of lament evokes pity as she looks toward the lamenting Priam and Hecuba, whose own gesture of lament evokes pity as they look toward Achilles. The fierce gaze of the furious hero is at this point redirected at Priam and Hecuba, who take their cue, as it were, from the gesture of lament shown

by the goddess. The gaze of Achilles is thus directed away from the figure of Patroclus, who is shown hovering over a tomb that for now belongs only to him but will soon belong to Achilles as well. The charioteer of Achilles, oblivious to the intervention of the goddess, continues to drive the speeding chariot around the tomb, but, meanwhile, we find Achilles in the act of stepping off the platform. And he steps off at the precise moment when he redirects his gaze from his own past and future agony to the present agony of Hector's lamenting father and mother. Here is the hero's apobatic moment.

The pity of Achilles for the parents of Hector in the painting of the Boston Hydria is achieved by way of a direct divine intervention that takes place while the dragging of the corpse is in progress. Once Achilles steps off his furiously speeding chariot, the fury that fueled that speed must be left behind as he hits the ground running and keeps on running until the fury is spent.

To be contrasted is the pity of Achilles for the father of Hector in the *Iliad* as we have it. This pity cannot be achieved with any direct divine intervention while the dragging of the corpse is in progress. In this case, the divine intervention is indirect: it is only after the gods guide Priam behind enemy lines to the tent of Achilles that the lamenting father succeeds in evoking the pity that the *Iliadic* hero will ultimately feel in *Iliad* XXIV.

Aside from this divergence between the painted and the poetic versions of the narrative, the convergences far outweigh the divergences, and I infer that the internal logic of the *Iliadic* narrative that we see at work in the visual medium of the Boston Hydria is morphologically parallel to the internal logic of the *Iliadic* narrative that we see at work in the verbal medium of the Homeric *Iliad* as we know it. It does not follow, however, that the narrative of the painting must be derived from the narrative of the *Iliad* as we know it. Such a further inference is unjustified. It would be simplistic to think that a narrative inherent in a painting that dates from around 510 BCE must be derived from the narrative of an epic tradition that happens to be current in the same era. The visual medium of heroic narrative by way of painting is not dependent on the verbal medium of heroic narrative by way of poetry. Rather, both media of heroic narrative are dependent on the more basic principle of making contact with the traditional world of heroes – who are honored by way of ritual as well as myth. As I have argued extensively elsewhere, the rules of heroic narrative in the archaic period of Greek

civilization were governed by the myths and rituals linked with the cult of heroes.<sup>9</sup> And what applies to the medium of poetry applies also to the medium of painting.

In the case of the Black Figure painting that we see on the Boston Hydria, the medium of the painting is evidently referring to a specific context, that is, to the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens around 510 BCE, featuring the athletic event of the apobatic contest. The same can be said about the Black Figure painting we see on the Münster Hydria. In this second painting, Achilles is represented as engaging in a personalized apobatic race with himself. In the narrative of the Münster Hydria, Achilles is seen running alongside the speeding chariot. He has already leapt off its platform. Meanwhile, the *psukhe* of Patroclus is shown hovering over his tomb or *sema*, which occupies the dead center of the picture. He is running in the air – a miniature version of the running Achilles who is racing at ground zero with his other self.

In the Münster Hydria, as in the Boston Hydria, a goddess directly intervenes. The figure of this goddess, just barely visible on the fragmentary right side of the picture, is standing in the way of the onrushing chariot. Meanwhile, a council of the gods is in session on high – in a picture framed on the shoulder of the vase, situated above the main picture framed along the body of the vase.

It has been argued that the main picture on the Münster Hydria represents the notional beginnings of a hero cult shared by Achilles with his other self Patroclus.<sup>10</sup> The two of them preside as cult heroes of the athletic event of the *apobatai* at the festival of the Panathenaia. The death of Patroclus, which is the prototype for the death of Achilles himself, is figured as the aetiology of this athletic event, which shows the ritual dimension of the cult hero as a complement to the mythical dimension that we see played out in narratives conveyed by painting as well as by poetry.<sup>11</sup> The painting on the Münster Hydria shows Achilles as a prototypical participant in this hero cult by way of participating in this athletic event. Through his prototypical participation, Achilles shows the way for future athletes to participate in this athletic event of the *apobatai* at the seasonally recurring festival of the Panathenaia for all time to come.

9. Nagy 1999.

10. Stähler 1967, especially p. 32.

11. In Nagy 1999.279, I offer this working definition of *aetiology*: it is a myth that motivates an institutional reality, especially a ritual

A parallel argument can be made about the Funeral Games of Patroclus in *Iliad* XXIII.<sup>12</sup> Here too Achilles is shown as a prototypical participant in the hero cult of his other self, Patroclus. Here too he shows the way for future athletes to participate in his own hero cult by way of participating in the athletic events we see described in *Iliad* XXIII, especially in the chariot race. In this case, however, Achilles himself does not participate in the athletic events of the Funeral Games for Patroclus: it is the other surviving Achaean heroes of the *Iliad* who serve as prototypical participants in the athletic events, while Achilles himself simply presides over these events as if he were already dead, having already achieved the status of the cult hero who will be buried in the *s\_ma* to be shared with his other self, Patroclus.<sup>13</sup>

So we have seen that the Black Figure paintings on the Boston Hydria and on the Münster Hydria are both referring to a specific context, that is, to the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens around 510 BCE, featuring the athletic event of the apobatic contest. But we must not forget that this festival also featured an all-important poetic event, that is, competitive rhapsodic recitations of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.<sup>14</sup> Just as the Black Figure paintings focus on one single moment in the athletic program of the Panathenaia, so they also focus on one single moment in the poetic program of the same festival. That moment is what I have been calling the apobatic moment. At the quadrennial Panathenaic festival held in, say, the year 510 BCE (and the same could be said about the earlier festivals of 514 BCE and before, or about the later festivals of 508 BCE and thereafter), the version of the *Iliad* that was performed in that era must have featured the same apobatic moment that was featured in the Black Figure paintings that art historians date around 510 BCE. It is the moment when the *apobates* steps off his chariot and runs the rest of the course on foot. The killer instinct of the fired-up athlete may now run itself out in the full course of his run.

This is also the apobatic moment in the *Iliad* when Achilles steps off his chariot and keeps on running until his fury finally runs out. Then he may finally engage with the feeling of pity - and re-engage with his own humanity.

Such a version of the *Iliad*, I argue, was current in the era when the Boston Hydria and the Münster Hydria were painted. It was in this era when the poetic program of the Panathenaia was being reformed by the

12. Nagy 1990b.88, 94, 217, 220.

13. Nagy 1990a.208-214.

14. In Nagy 2002, I study the shaping power of this poetic event.

tyrant Hipparkhos, son of Peisistratos. This Athenian tyrant played a major role in shaping the ultimate form of the Panathenaic Homer, that is, of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we know them. Hipparkhos is credited with having established an Athenian institution we know today as the Panathenaic Regulation, which concerns the performing of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* at the festival of the Panathenaia. In terms of the Panathenaic Regulation, the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* became the standard epic repertoire of the quadrennial Panathenaic festival. The key passage is to be found in "Plato" *Hipparkhos* (228b-c), where we read what amounts to an aetiology of the Panathenaic Regulation. As I have argued elsewhere, the custom of relay-performing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in sequence at the festival of the Panathenaia is a ritual in and of itself.<sup>15</sup>

*Hipparkhos* left his mark in defining the festival of the Panathenaia in Athens not only by way of instituting the Panathenaic Regulation. He actually died at the Panathenaia. He was assassinated on the festive quadrennial occasion of the Great Panathenaia that was held in the year 514 BCE, and his spectacular death is vividly memorialized by both Thucydides (1.20.2 and 6.54-59) and Herodotus (5.55-61). Despite the assassination, however, the older brother of Hipparkhos, Hippias, maintained his family's political control of Athens. Then, in the year 510, he was finally overthrown, and this date marks the end of the "tyranny" of the Peisistratidai, which then gave way to the "democracy" initiated in 508 by Cleisthenes, head of the rival lineage of the Alkmaionidai.

The apobatic moment for Achilles as athlete goes back to this era in the evolution of Homeric poetry as performed at the Panathenaia.

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15. Nagy 2002