Hour 07. The sign of the hero.

Key word for this dialogue: sēma, pl. sēmata ‘sign, signal, symbol; tomb, tomb of a hero’; sēmainein (verb) ‘indicate, use a sēma’.

07 A. Iliad XXIII 303-348

“Antilokhos,” said Nestor, “you are young, but Zeus and Poseidon have loved you well, and have made you an excellent charioteer. I need not therefore say much by way of instruction. You are skillful at wheeling your horses round the post, [310] but the horses themselves are very slow, and it is this that will, I fear, mar your chances. The other drivers know less than you do, but their horses are fleeter; therefore, my dear son, see if you cannot hit upon some artifice [mētis] whereby you may insure that the prize shall not slip through your fingers. [315] The woodsman does more by skill [mētis] than by brute force [biē]; by skill [mētis] the helmsman guides his storm-tossed ship over the sea [pontos], and so by skill [mētis] one driver can beat another. [320] If a man go wide in rounding this way and that, whereas a man of craft [kerdos] may have worse horses, but he will keep them well in hand when he sees the turning-post [terma]; he knows the precise moment [325] at which to pull the rein, and keeps his eye well on the man in front of him. I will give you this certain sign [sēma] which cannot escape your notice. There is a stump of a dead tree-oak or pine as it may be - some six feet above the ground, and not yet rotted away by rain; [330] it stands at the fork of the road; it has two white stones set one on each side, and there is a clear course all round it. It may have been a tomb [sēma] of someone who died long ago, or it may have been used as a turning-post in days gone by; now, however, it has been fixed on by swift-footed radiant Achilles as the mark [terma] round which the chariots shall turn; hug it as close as you can, [335] but as you stand in your chariot lean over a little to the left; urge on your right-hand horse with voice and lash, and give him a loose rein, but let the left-hand horse keep so close in, [340] that the nave of your wheel shall almost graze the post; but mind the stone, or you will wound your horses and break your chariot in pieces, which would be sport for others but confusion for yourself. Therefore, my dear son, mind well what you are about, for if you can be first to round the post [345] there is no chance of any one giving you the go-by later, not even though you had Arion the horse of Adrastos, a horse which is of divine race, or the horses of Laomedon, which are the noblest in this land.”

_Iliad_ XXIII 326 sēma 'sign'
_Iliad_ XXIII 331 sēma ‘tomb, grave-mark’; same line, 331: terma ‘turning point’, English borrowing _term_.

XXIII 326 sēma: I will tell you a clear sēma, and there will be no lēthē for you.
Antilochos is destined to die for his father: see the Aithiopis.

Another important word for this time around: psukhē, pl. psukhai: essence of life while one is alive; conveyor of identity while one is dead.

07 B. Iliad XXIII 57-92

As soon as they had had enough to eat and drink, the others went to their rest each in his own tent, [60] but the son of Peleus lay grieving among his Myrmidons by the shore of the sounding sea, in an open place where the waves came surging in one after another. Here a very deep slumber took hold upon him and eased the burden of his sorrows, for his limbs were weary with chasing Hector round windy Ilion. [65] Presently the sad spirit [psukhē] of unhappy Patroklos drew near him, like what he had been in stature, voice, and the light of his beaming eyes, clad, too, as he had been clad in life. The spirit hovered over his head and said - “You sleep, Achilles, and have forgotten me; [70] you loved me living, but now that I am dead you think for me no further. Bury me with all speed that I may pass the gates of Hades; the spirits [psukhai], vain shadows of men that can labor no more, drive me away from them; they will not yet permit me to join those that are beyond the river, [75] and I wander all desolate by the wide gates of the house of Hades. Give me now your hand I pray you, for when you have once given me my dues of fire, never shall I again come forth out of the house of Hades. Nevermore shall we sit apart and take sweet counsel among the living; the cruel fate which was my birthright has yawned its wide jaws around me – [80] I tell you, Achilles, you too, peer of gods, are doomed to die beneath the wall of the noble Trojans. One plea more will I make to you, if you will grant it; let not my bones be laid apart from yours, Achilles, but with them; even as we were brought up together in your own home, [85] what time Menoitios brought me to you as a child from Opoeis because by a sad spite I had killed the son of Amphidamas - not of set purpose, but in childish quarrel over the dice. The charioteer Peleus took me into his house, [90] entreated me kindly, and named me to be your attendant [therapōn]; therefore let our bones lie in but a single urn, the two-handled golden vase given to you by your mother.”

07 C. Iliad XXIV 486-512

“Think of your father, O Achilles like unto the gods, who is such even as I am, on the sad threshold of old age. It may be that those who dwell near him harass him, and there is none to keep war and ruin from him. [490] Yet when he hears of you being still alive, he is glad, and his days are full of hope that he shall see his dear son come home to him from Troy; but I, wretched man that I am, had the bravest in all Troy for my sons, and there is not one of them left. [495] I had fifty sons when the Achaeans came here; nineteen of them were from a single womb, and the others
were borne to me by the women of my household. The greater part of them has fierce Ares laid low, and Hector, [500] him who was alone left, him who was the guardian of the city and ourselves, him have you lately slain; therefore I am now come to the ships of the Achaeans to ransom his body from you with a great ransom. Have respect, O Achilles, for the gods; think on your own father and have compassion upon me, who am the more pitiable, [505] for I have steeled myself as no man yet has ever steeled himself before me, and have raised to my lips the hand of him who slew my son.” Thus spoke Priam, and the heart of Achilles yearned as he turned his thoughts to his father. He took the old man’s hand and moved him gently away. The two wept bitterly [510] - Priam, as he lay at Achilles’ feet, weeping for manslaughtering Hector, and Achilles now for his father and now for Patroklos, till the house was filled with their lamentation.

07 D. Hymn to Demeter 235-236, 237-241
She nurtured him in the palace, and he grew up like a daimôn, not eating food, not sucking from the breast ... She used to anoint him with ambrosia, as if he had been born of the goddess, and she would breathe down her sweet breath on him as she held him at her bosom. At nights she would conceal him in the menos of fire, as if he were a smoldering log, and her parents were kept unaware. But they marveled at how full in bloom he came to be, and to look at him was like looking at the god.

07 E. Homeric Hymn to Demeter 259-267
I swear by the Styx, the witness of oaths that gods make, as I say this: immortal and ageless for all days would I have made your philos little boy, and I would have given him timê that is unwilting [a-phthi-tos]. But now there is no way for him to avoid death and doom. Still, he will have a timê that is unwilting [a-phthi-tos], for all time, because he had once sat on my knees and slept in my arms. At the right hōra, every year, the sons of the Eleusinians will have a war, a terrible battle among each other. They will do so for all days to come.

07 F = 01 A. Iliad IX 410-416
My mother Thetis tells me that there are two ways in which I may meet my end [telos]. If I stay here and fight, I shall not have a return [nostos] alive but my glory [kleos] will be unwilting [aphthiton]: whereas if I go home my name [kleos] will perish, but it will be long before the end [telos] shall take me.