

How did Achilles die?

Miguel Carvalho Abrantes

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The problem - “Don’t we all know the answer?”

The episode of Achilles’ death is extremely famous in popular culture. We’ve all heard how the hero was invulnerable except for his heel, and how he was hit with an arrow in that single vulnerable spot. Then, he died.

But, if you think about it, that story does not make a lot of sense. An arrow, or even a modern bullet, directed towards your heel won’t kill you. It could be very painful, of course, but it would hardly be a deadly wound. Even if we want to consider it a wound “magical” in nature, it still wouldn’t explain how such a mighty hero, second only to the famous Hercules, could be killed so easily and effortlessly.

At the same time, how could this hero be invulnerable? With the sole exception of Caeneus, a woman-turned-man who requested that unique gift from the god Poseidon, invulnerable figures are very uncommon in Greek and Latin myths – even Hercules, who accomplished the famous twelve labors, was a mere man, as vulnerable and mortal as each one of us.

Movies as famous as *Troy* (2004), where Brad Pitt played this hero, claimed to be inspired by the Homeric Poems (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*), but none of those two works tell us precisely how, or under what circumstances, the event took place. In fact, although we are perfectly familiarized with Hercules’ own death, for over 500 years no literary works seem to tell us exactly how Achilles died. Inspired by that lack of information, while investigating the subject of the Trojan War we decided to pay special attention to this episode in particular.

Our approach to the problem

Starting with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the oldest sources we have, we decided to approach the problem by investigating what each author tells us about it. From a practical standpoint, this would be as if, for example, all *Superman* comics suddenly disappeared from the world, and then we tried to reconstruct his adventures based on what everyone wrote about him – someone would tell us his name was Clark Kent, another would point out his passion for Lois Lane, a third author could perhaps stress that hero was weak to kryptonite, and so on. Ultimately, we hoped this would allow us access to Achilles as he was known among all the authors who were familiarized with his original adventures. Since the Homeric Poems were undoubtedly the two most famous works in the Antiquity, ones that everyone knew about from school, this approach made perfect sense.

So, starting with the written version of the *Iliad*, while researching on the subject of the Trojan War we managed to find over 40 literary works which were specially important for this subject. These included fragmentary works such as the *Little Iliad* and the *Aethiopis*; tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; the obscure poem *Alexandra* attributed to Lycophron; Virgil’s famous *Aeneid*; mythological works such as Hyginus’ and Conon’s; the works of Ovid; some of Seneca’s tragedies; Philostratus’ *On Heroes*; Quintus of Smyrna’s *Posthomerica*; just to name a few of the most important ones.

Our sequential research stopped with Benoît de Saint-Maure’s *Roman de Troie*, produced in the 12th century AD, because most medieval accounts of the Trojan War either included entirely new elements, which did not come from the Antiquity (such as the love story of Troilus and Cressida, which inspired the famous tragedy by William Shakespeare), or were in turn based almost directly on this French work; for these two reasons, they would contain no elements which would be able to help us reconstruct the story of Achilles (or any other from the Trojan War), as it occurred in the original works produced in the Antiquity.

While comparing and contrasting the episodes of the Trojan War contained, or alluded to, in those works, we were able to find out more information about many scenes and sequences that aren’t very well known nowadays, such as the battles with Penthesilea and Memnon, the death of Paris, the construction of the Trojan Horse, or the beautiful reunion of Helen with her husband Menelaus. Among those episodes was, obviously, the one of the death of Achilles, and his subsequent funeral.

Then, we contrasted these findings with evidence from ancient art, particularly vases and tombs, and we investigated whether literary evidence confirmed or denied the scenes we were spotting in those paintings. In general, we ended up realizing that most pieces of evidence could be interlinked to form a uniform and common picture of most of the events from the Trojan War, as if all those authors were getting their information from the same common sources.

When it came to the episode of the death of Achilles, evidence led us to reconstruct three different potential versions, each of them with their own particular strengths and weaknesses. Overall, they do explain many elements of how we imagine the death of the hero to have occurred, but, unexpectedly, none of the three tell us everything about how we imagine this mythical event to have taken place. The death of the hero, as we imagine it today, is composed of an amalgam of information coming from these three versions.

The death of Achilles in art



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As seen in this drawing, from a Corinthian *lekythos* from around 680-670 BC, the tradition of Achilles being targeted with an arrow in the lower part of his leg was extensively represented in art.

Our findings

In the first version of the episode, which we could call “Homeric”, Achilles dies in combat, through an arrow with which Paris and Apollo hit him, the exact specifics of that death never being made completely clear in any extant sources. He undoubtedly was not invulnerable. In the second version Achilles is killed treacherously in a temple of Apollo, when he was preparing to meet Polyxena, with whom he thought he was going to marry. According to the third version, Quintus of Smyrna’s (but possibly supported by older lost sources), it was Apollo himself, and only him, who killed the hero with an arrow.

As it is easy to notice, Apollo and Paris have the leading roles in all these versions, testifying the enormous fame of the episode as alluded to in the *Iliad*, but the same fact also makes it difficult for us to affirm, with absolute certainty, in what way the two figures participated in the episode as it took place in the older sources.

Regarding the point of the body in which Achilles was hit, it appears frequently in art but the first direct mention to a weak point in a potentially invulnerable hero, generated through a bath in the Styx in which his mother left a part of the body unwashed, only appears in literature of the first century of our era, and it is later repeated in many other works. Was the arrow poisoned, as the *Excidium Troiae* registers, or was Apollo, through his divine character, informed a singular weakness of Achilles which the *Iliad* did not preserve us? Could we, in the pathway of Nagy (2013: 146-168), see in the death of Achilles a potential duplicate of the death of some other figure, such as Patroclus? Or, like argued by Burgess (2009: 13), maybe an initial arrow was used to immobilize the hero, taking away the capacities of his famous “fleet foot” and leading him to the more direct circumstances of his death? We currently don’t know.

Summarizing this information, what can we know about the death of Achilles, as it took place in the older sources? It would be difficult to deny that Paris and Apollo were involved in the hero’s death, and that he died, at least, with an arrow directed towards the foot, but these are the only elements which we can affirm with an absolute certainty. The homeric hero was not initially invulnerable, a famous arrow certainly led to his death, but it may not have killed him in itself.

References

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