

## The Three-Horse Problem: Anachronism and Substitute-Killing (*Ersatztötung*) in the *Iliad*

The world of the Homeric epics is littered with anachronisms. In this paper I examine one such anachronism: the three-horse chariot, or *triga*. I argue that *triga* appear in the *Iliad* as an anachronistic contrivance, transposing the technology of Late Geometric chariot racing into combat scenes for the sake of instantiating the narratological trope of substitute-killing (*Ersatztötung*) in battles where the trope cannot otherwise be fulfilled. The fulfillment of *Ersatztötung* leads to linguistic discomfort within the poems as they struggle to accommodate the presence of the chariot's extra trace-horse. This study exemplifies how the Homeric poets took aspects of their own contemporary society for granted in the construction of the *Iliad*'s heroic past.

Whereas other Late Bronze Age societies featured combat from atop chariots, in Homer the exclusive function of chariots is to transport fighters into battle; all fighting occurs on the ground. In a Greek *triga*, for which our first evidence is from the Late Geometric period, the third horse is attached not to the yoke, but with traces (ergo "trace-horse") and does not add extra pulling power, but greater maneuverability. This is valuable for chariot-mounted archery, which the Greeks did not practice, and for *racing*—but not for the apobatic combat we see in the *Iliad*. Therefore, there is no reason for an Iliadic chariot to boast three horses; *triga* have no place on the Homeric battlefield.

Nevertheless, two chariots in the *Iliad* feature a third trace-horse: the chariot of Nestor, attacked by Paris in Book 7, and the chariot of Patroklos (owned by Akhilleus), attacked by Sarpedon in Book 16. The trace-horses of these chariots both die, and they are the *only* horses in the poem that die. Lossau (1991) has identified a narratological trope called *Ersatztötung*

(substitute-killing) whereby a hero casts his spear and kills a victim beside his intended target—often, the target's charioteer. *Ersatztötung* underscores the volatility of human life; even the most prestigious heroes of the *Iliad* are only one spear's toss away from death.

I argue that trace-horses appear in the *Iliad* for the sole purpose of instantiating *Ersatztötung* in situations where the charioteer cannot play the role of substitute victim because his survival is guaranteed. This explains why trace-horses are the only horses to die: there is no incentive to *deliberately* target a horse, since horses were valued by armies as loot. Moreover, the addition of the trace-horse creates linguistic discomfort within the poem.

Patroklos' charioteer is Automedon, who cannot perish in this combat because he must survive the battle with Sarpedon to take up the reins for Akhilleus, and eventually Neoptolemus. The solution is to kill Pedasos, the third (and conveniently the only *mortal*) of Akhilleus' horses. Pedasos is introduced to the poem only a few hundred lines before he dies, and in the intervening lines, the poem "forgets" about Pedasos. The chariot is referred to only by its immortal horses, and Pedasos does not reappear until his death.

In the case of Nestor, there is not explicitly anyone else in his chariot when he is attacked; accordingly, Stagakis (1980) has shown that Nestor must have been his *own* charioteer. Thus, while the poet seeks to create narrative tension by threatening Nestor, the only way to do this is by spawning and killing a trace-horse. However, this scene exhibits even more linguistic discomfort than the other. There is no indication that the struck horse was a trace-horse until we subsequently hear that two of his horses are still alive. Further discomfort with the very notion of the trace-horse arises when we realize that the word used to identify Pedasos as a trace-horse, *paréoros*, is a) not applied to Nestor's horse, and b) formulaically misapplied in other contexts.

There is also no clarification about where or what the “traces” of a chariot are. The poem does not know or reveal what a “trace-horse” really is.

Because trace-horses in the *Iliad* are not horses. They are anachronistic narratological contrivances whose sole purpose is to fit *Ersatztötung* into situations where there is no charioteer available to die as a vicarious substitute. And ideally, a rhapsodic audience would have never noticed. They would have been so ensnared by Nestor’s brush with death, by Patroklos’ duel with Sarpedon, as to have never realized that there should have been no trace-horse on the battlefield in the first place. The timelessness and placelessness of Homeric society often result from these such instances of poets bending the limits of Late Bronze Age war conventions to accommodate the narrative. In these battle scenes, the drama comes first.

#### Works Cited

- Lossau, Manfred. “Ersatztötung — Bauelemente in der Ilias.” *Winer Studien* 104 (1991): 5-21.
- Stagakis, George J. “Charioteers and Παραιβάται of the ‘Iliad.’” *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 29, no. 2 (1980): 142–64.