

Homeric Parapsychology: The *Psuchē* of Patroklos and Near-Death Precognition

In the *Iliad*, both Patroklos and Hektor predict the imminent deaths of their killers, Hektor and Achilles respectively, as they lie weak, wounded, and on the verge of death (*Il.* 16.851-854, 22.358-360). Some have suggested that this is merely a threat (Johnston 1999: 16n.40), but others see it as a prophecy in line with later sources that claim people gain prophetic powers in death-like states (e.g. Pl. *Apol.* 39c; Brügger 2018: 370 at 16.851-854). In this paper, I support the latter interpretation, but focus on the Homeric psychological concepts underlying such prophetic powers. I argue that the *psuchē* can indeed gain precognitive capacities and a wider perspective on the worlds of both the living and the dead despite normally being represented as completely lacking cognitive capacities. First, I survey some Homeric representations of the psychology of death-like states. Then I situate this evidence with modern discussions of altered states and the apparent insights associated with them. Finally, I suggest that early Pythagoreans were especially interested in the *psuchē* of Patroklos and its exceptional access to supernormal knowledge.

In Homer, the *psuchē* is famously not involved in everyday waking consciousness. Instead, embodied life is associated with *thumos*, *phrenes*, and other “body souls” while *psuchē* is a “free soul” that remains in the afterlife (Bremmer 1983). The *psuchai* in the underworld are typically weak and witless (ἀμενηνὰ κάρηνα, e.g. *Il.* 15.251, *Od.* 11.29) unless they drink blood. Teiresias is an exception and retains his *noos* and *phrenes* thanks to Persephone (*Od.* 10.490-495). Thus, it is not clear how a death-like state would provide Patroklos or Hektor with any psychological capacities at all. Yet, there are some hints that the *psuchē* could have what might be called “parapsychological” abilities. Achilles himself encounters the *psuchē* of Patroklos in a

dream and gains new insight into the beyond (*Il.* 23.54-107). Although Homer never explicitly says the *psuchē* is involved in dreams, this dream is marked as a death-like state, since Achilles falls asleep on the shore and “sleep overtakes him and loosens the cares of the *thumos*” (τὸν ὕπνος ἔμαρπτε λύων μελεδήματα θυμοῦ, *Il.* 23.62) just as others are overtaken by death (Clarke 1999: 231-263). This moment of exceptional contact with the world of the dead brings exceptional insight. The *psuchē* of Patroklos knows that his body needs to be buried before he can enter the underworld (*Il.* 23.71-74) and that Achilles will die at Troy (*Il.* 23.80-81). Indeed, George Gazis (2018) argues that a “poetics of Hades” provides opportunities for alternative, more personal reflections on the epic tradition. I argue that near-death precognition draws on psychological ideas outside the epic tradition where the *psuchē* can similarly access other perspectives beyond embodied life.

I suggest that one fact underlying these Homeric representations of near-death precognition is the connection of wartime trauma and altered states (Ustinova 2018: 217-244). Altered states and the insights they seem to offer are inherently difficult to conceptualize and study and wildly at odds with the reductive materialism that has become the dominant worldview (Kripal 2024). While Homer is by no means a reductive materialist in the modern sense, the Homeric worldview does display a bias towards embodied life, but other ideas that seem to contradict that worldview find their way into the narrative. These alternative views are later associated with “Orphism,” but are not purely later developments (Edmonds 2013: 248-295). These views develop in conversation with Homer. For instance, Pythagoras is said to have remembered a past life as Euphorbos, the first to injure Patroklos after Apollo disarms him and before Hektor kills him (DK 14 A8). Pythagoras’ exceptional insight into his previous lives

parallels the near-death precognition of Patroklos and suggests that early Pythagoreans may have had this very scene in mind as they developed alternative theories about the soul and the afterlife.

Works Cited

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