

Reconsidering the Epic *Aristeia* in Light of the Cycle

It has long been recognized that the *aristeia* (a narrative sequence in which a single hero excels on the battlefield) is a fundamental compositional element of the Homeric battle-narrative (Schröter, Krischer 13-89, Thornton 74-82, Edwards 78-81). Krischer (13-36) brilliantly analyzed the Homeric *aristeia* as a “motif-sequence” consisting ideally of the following elements: The hero arms himself, routs the enemy, is wounded but then healed by a god, conquers a major adversary, and engages in a battle over the corpse of this victim. Krischer’s typology remains convincing but presents some problems as a tool of analysis. First, no single *aristeia* completely conforms to it: All feature omissions or substitutions, and some would appear to have a significantly truncated form. Second, Krischer argues less convincingly that Hector has an *aristeia* in which the elements are widely separated and scattered over several books. Hector’s *aristeia* is, in turn, intertwined with the *aristeia* of Patroclus: Patroclus’s death must be viewed as standing outside the formal structure of Patroclus’s own *aristeia*, since it ought to serve as the pinnacle of Hector’s (Krischer 30-34).

The summaries of Proclus, combined with other sources, reveal that several lost Greek epics belonging to the so-called “Epic Cycle” (specifically the *Cypria*, *Aethiopis* and *Little Iliad*) featured *aristeiai*. I argue that these examples, examined together, reveal a simpler pattern consisting of the following elements: A hero routs the enemy forces, defeats a significant foe on the opposing side, and then meets an even greater adversary who wounds or kills him. So in the *Cypria*, Telephus routs the Achaeans in Mysia and kills the Boeotian leader Thersandros before being wounded by Achilles (Proclus, *Cyp.* arg. 35-37 Bernabé). In the *Aethiopis*, Penthesileia routs the Achaeans and probably kills Machaon before being killed by Achilles (Procl., *Aeth.* arg. 4-7; Apoll. *Epit.* 5.1). In the same poem Memnon kills Antilochus in his *aristeia* before being

killed by Achilles (Procl., arg. 10-15). Finally, in the *Little Iliad*, Eurypylus enjoys an *aristeia* before being killed by Neoptolemus (Procl., arg. 12-14); later sources (Hyg. *Fab.* 113, Dictys 4.17) may reflect this poem in crediting Eurypylus with defeat of Machaon, Nireus or Peneleus.

This simpler form of the *aristeia* can shed light both on the Cyclic epics and the *Iliad*. It is notable that in all or most *aristeiai* in Homer the champion is Achaean, while in all the Cyclic examples the champion is an adversary of the Achaeans (although interestingly always an ally of the Trojans, never actually a Trojan). In the Homeric examples (on Krischer's analysis) the *aristeia* ends with a major victory, whereas in the Cyclic examples the *aristeia* ends with the champion's death or wounding. Due to the survival of the champion, the Homeric *aristeia* has a more open structure that allows for a sequel in which the champion will play a different role, whereas this is seen in the Cycle only in the example from the *Cypria* (where Telephus goes on to be healed by Achilles and leads the Achaeans to Troy). In the other Cyclic epics the *aristeia* looks more like a self-enclosed narrative episode with a clear ending, functioning within the larger work as a kind of digression or *peripeteia*. Indeed, most of the differences between the Homeric and the Cyclic *aristeia* seem to reflect the different narrative and thematic requirements of the poems themselves, particularly as regards the shorter length and simpler organization of the Cyclic epics; it is therefore unsurprising that the one Cyclic example that best conforms to the more open Homeric format is that from the *Cypria*, which was itself the longest and most complex of the Cyclic epics.

I will conclude by pointing out that the simpler, "Cyclic" format of the *aristeia* can be seen to underlie some Homeric examples that are less well explained in Krischer's analysis. In particular it makes better sense of the *aristeiai* of Agamemnon and Patroclus (since each ends with the champion's wounding or death), but it can also explain much about the great *aristeiai* of

Diomedes and Achilles, which show significant elaborations but are arguably built upon this same simple framework.

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