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.

Bibliography


