

Corpse Abuse in Homer: The Anomalous Case of Imbrios

Homer's interest in the related themes of corpse abuse and burial rites has been examined in detail by numerous scholars with particular reference to the *Iliad* (e.g., Segal, 1971; Redfield, 1975; Vermeule, 1979; Griffin, 1980; Vernant, 1991). While their approaches are different, their analyses yield similar conclusions, which have largely become canonical. In sum, Homer introduces themes of corpse abuse and denial of burial rites only to snatch the *execution* of that abuse away as something ultimately outside the rational and humane order of his epic cosmos. To take the most detailed example, Achilles threatens to decapitate Hektor after killing him (*Il.* 18.333-5), to hand his corpse over for dogs to devour (22.335-6), and to eat him raw (22.345-7). He even attempts to mutilate his flesh by dragging him in the dirt, roped to the back of his chariot (22.397-403; 23.187; 24.21). Despite his threats and efforts, everywhere the gods intervene, driving scavengers away and shielding his body from decay (23.184-91, 24.20-1). Hermes reassures Priam that his son's corpse is unspoiled and that he is under the protection of the gods (24.411-23). His body is eventually returned intact for burial (24.599-601). The same trend follows for the corpses of Sarpedon, Patroklos, and unnamed or minor characters who are granted funeral rites during the cease-fire in Book 7; even the soldiers slain during Achilles' rampage along the banks of the Skamander are essentially "cremated" when Hephaistos torches the river and plain in Book 21. Whatever uneasiness we as an audience and the characters within the text feel at the accumulation of threats of corpse abuse and the withholding of burial rites, ultimately the poet and his heroes learn to respect the bodies of the dead. Homer appears to restore a proper moral code.

My paper aims to problematize this picture of Homer's mode of handling corpse abuse by examining one overlooked scene from Book 13 that portrays the death of the Trojan fighter Imbrios and his subsequent mutilation by Oilean Aias. That Imbrios' corpse is mutilated is

patently clear. He is killed by Teukros, and in retaliation Hektor returns a spear cast which misses its intended mark and instead kills Amphimachos. The Achaian contingent recover the corpses of both Imbrios and Amphimachos, driving off Hektor, and in response to Hektor's slaying of Amphimachos, Oïlean Aias chops off Imbrios' head and sends it rolling "like a ball" to Hektor's feet (13.201-05). The scene is striking for its singular brutality in a poem that everywhere else relegates corpse abuse to an unfulfilled imaginary. It is no wonder the scholars I cite above avoid any detailed discussion of the scene, or pass it over altogether in silence: it disrupts assumptions that the poem is morally above this sort of grotesque aesthetic.

I argue that the scene is meant to be horrifying, and that it functions as a nightmarish prolepsis of the potential for Hektor's near-death in Book 14, and his eventual death in Book 22 and attempted corpse abuse by Achilles. Through an examination of lexical ties and thematic cues, I show that Imbrios functions as a surrogate for Hektor, whose "deathlike" injury and fall in Book 14 at the hands of (Telamonian) Aias mirror the death of Imbrios in Book 13. Further, Imbrios' *post mortem* decapitation actualizes the abuse with which Achilles will threaten Hektor, in retaliation for his slaying of Patroklos (18.333-5). While Homer does not allow Achilles to actually decapitate Hektor, he will direct his anger at Hektor's head, which becomes the focus of his rage as he grinds it into the dust while dragging Hektor behind his chariot (22.397-403). Oïlean Aias embodies the "worst of the Achaians," and stands as a frightening anticipation for the dark side of Achilles' character in the final books of the *Iliad*. Hektor escapes the fate of Imbrios thanks to the gods and Achilles' return to humanity, but the fear that he too might lose his head has its resonating origins here, making the only clear scene of corpse abuse in the poem all the more significant.

Bibliography

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