

Typical Heroic Careers and Large-Scale Design in the *Iliad*

The hundreds of battlefield deaths narrated in the *Iliad* often appear to accumulate piecemeal, almost haphazardly, creating an impression of the disordered havoc of war. But that impression is artfully contrived. Careful inspection will show that battlefield victories are distributed across the entire epic in methodic ways which have generally escaped notice, but ultimately reveal deliberate design extended to monumental proportions. For instance, *all the very best Iliadic fighters are typically made to kill by the nines or the dozens*—conventional quantities favored by the poet for their symbolic value and perhaps mnemonic utility. This predilection influences *not only explicit references* to the number of anonymous victims slain on specific occasions, *but also implicit tallies* of named men killed by leading heroes over a whole day's battle. The keen interest sometimes shown by narrator and characters in counting victories (e.g., *Il.* 8.297–98, 13.446–47) indicates the importance to the heroic mindset of recording quantified conquests, thereby authorizing the audience to pay attention to such matters. The quantities involved are far from random, since they reflect neither an accurate account of an actual battle nor an *ad hoc* assemblage of disparate episodes, but rather a unifying poetic conception.

As is widely recognized, the Homeric texts are largely composed of conventional elements which are skillfully repeated in varying forms and expanded or compressed to various dimensions. Within the battle narrative, scholars have identified an assortment of typical elements and repeated sequences of events (Kirk 1962: 72–80; Fenik 1968: 1–7 *et passim*; Kirk 1990: 15–27). They include among stock scenes and story patterns the *aristeia*, an extended episode where a particular warrior excels (Krischer 1971: 23–36; Niens 1987). But they have not

systematically studied the quantitative aspect of heroic conquests, which are also regularly governed by poetic conventions.

If we look beyond supposedly discrete episodes to view the narrative as a whole, and if we allow ourselves to count fatalities, then we shall observe certain remarkable coincidences which can hardly be attributed to chance. For example, a leading hero may slay a total of 12 named men on his best day, as does Diomedes over Battle Day One, and likewise Telamonian Ajax over Day Three. Or he may even slay 24, exactly twice as many, an accomplishment fittingly achieved on Day Four at the fighting's conclusion by the poem's principal hero, Achilles. (All counts can be verified against the accurate, independent list in Stoevesandt 2004: 388–412, cf. 8.) Such numeric correspondence reflects an over-arching artistic conception, since Diomedes and Ajax are the Iliadic heroes treated as closest to Achilles in battlefield prowess (*Il.* 6.98–99, cf. 5.103, 414, 839; 2.768–69, 17.279–80, cf. 7.289). These implicit tallies harmonize with the poet's overt fondness for making assorted victims associated with these three heroes, *and only these*, perish by the dozen (*Il.* 6.93–101; 10.488; 15.746; 18.230 *and* 23.175, cf. 9.328–29).

Alternatively, a somewhat less fortunate major hero may vanquish 9 men, often facing a critical contest at the end potentially resulting in injury or death. This quantity may also be doubled or even tripled, essentially repeating the typical pattern with variation. For instance, Odysseus kills 9 named Trojans on Battle Day One, and precisely 9 again on Day Three, when he must withdraw from battle due to injury inflicted by his last victim. Similarly, during his brief foray into battle, Patroclus kills 27 named victims, artfully arranged in three varied sets of 9. Moreover, just before Patroclus' death, the narrator emphatically observes that he made *three* final attacks, killing *thrice nine* unnamed men (*Il.* 16.784–85)—equaling exactly the number of

named victims felled by him in preceding action! Likewise, Hector slays 9 named Greeks before being knocked down by Ajax at the end of Day One (a variation on being wounded). Then on Day Three Hector slays a second round of 9 before being knocked out by Diomedes (a proleptic variation on his death at Achilles' hands). Later that day he slays a third round of 9 (or 10 including Patroclus, who denies Hector full credit, as being only his *third* killer [*Il.* 16.844–50]), before finally falling to Achilles to conclude Day Four. Seen as a kind of triple crescendo, Hector's Iliadic career exemplifies a stock situation coherently repeated with meaningful variation so as to expand the poem along the outlines of a comprehensive design.

Bibliography

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