

The Liminality of *χρίω* in the *Iliad*

This paper explores synonymity and difference between *ἀλείφω* and *χρίω* in the *Iliad* in terms of liminality: the border between human and divine, between life and death (Clay 1981-82; Mackie 1998). It also explores the connection between the anointing of the body in bathing rituals and the anointing of the corpse in funerary rites in the *Iliad*, where a clear contrast is set up between the two (Grethlein 2007). In Book XXII Andromache prepares a bath for Hektor, in anticipation of his return from the battlefield, after which he will anoint himself (*ἀλείφω*) with oil. But he never has that bath for, at that moment, as told in Book XXIII, Aphrodite is anointing (*χρίω*) the corpse of Hektor with ambrosia. Textual analysis is complemented by considering how the art of classical antiquity represented the anointing of bodies versus corpses, particularly in these scenes from the *Iliad*.

χρίω (to touch on the surface; to rub over with color; to rub with scented unguents; to infect with poison; to anoint) occurs 79 times in the *Translation of the Seventy* (LXX—*Septuagint*). The Hellenized Hebrews of Alexandria from the 3rd century B.C.—Before *Χριστός*—chose this word from Greek to translate the Hebrew word typically rendered in English as anoint, as in: “Samuel took a vial of oil and poured [*ἐπέχεε(ν)*: aor. act. ind., 3rd sing.] it on his [Saul’s] head, and kissed him; he said, “The Lord has anointed [*κέχρικε(ν)*: perf. act. ind., 3rd sing.] you ruler over his people Israel...[English translation, NRSV; *1 Samuel* 10.1 (= *1 Kings* in LXX)].” Here the physical act of pouring [*ἐπιχέω*] oil on the head performed by one human on another, when done as part of a ritual and accompanied by the appropriate exclamation, translates into the Lord anointing [*χρίω*] the anointed one “ruler over his people Israel.” *χρίω*, then, compared to *ἐπιχέω*, has a *liminal* quality involving the border between the human and the

divine, and a transformation or transition of a human from one state to another through divine intervention or will. In the *New Testament* *χρίω* occurs only five times, but its derived adjectival form, *χριστός* [(of persons) anointed], occurs 528 times, usually substantively as the anointed one—the Christ—for the Hebrew, Messiah. In the Homeric corpus, *χρίω* occurs nineteen times, only four of which are in the *Iliad*. These four occurrences involve a mere three scenes, but they are important scenes, indeed. The first involves the removal of the corpse of Sarpedon—son of Zeus, killed by Patroklos while in the armor of Achilles—from the battlefield, and its preservation, effected by Apollo through anointing with ambrosia, for the return to his homeland of Lykia. The second occurs during the desecration of Hektor’s corpse by Achilles, where Aphrodite’s anointing of the corpse with ambrosia prevents its being deteriorated by the abuse. Finally comes the ransom of Hektor’s corpse. Achilles orders the serving maids to wash the corpse and anoint it with olive oil in preparation for its delivery to Priam. Achilles uses the word *ἀλείφω* for anoint, but, when the women carry out his order, the narrator uses *χρίω*.

Significantly, when Patroklos’s corpse is prepared for the mourning and lamentation ritual by Achilles and his comrades, by first washing and then anointing it, only the word *ἀλείφω* is used for anoint. Are *ἀλείφω* and *χρίω* synonyms? *ἀλείφω* is derived from *λίπος, εος, τό*: animal fat, lard, tallow. It can be translated as: to anoint with oil; to oil the skin, as after bathing, or before gymnastic exercises; middle (reflexive) to anoint oneself; often with *λίπα* added (*λίπα*, adv.: unctuously, richly, (“greasily”)). In addition to this use of *ἀλείφω*, there are four other occurrences in the *Iliad*. A comparison of these uses of *ἀλείφω*, on the one hand, with those of *χρίω*, on the other, suggests why the Hebrews chose *χρίω*.

Bibliography

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