

## The Epic Hero as Sacrificial Victim: Patroclus and Palinurus

Scholars have long noted that the two Homeric models of Virgil's Palinurus are Elpenor and Phrontis (Knauer 1964, Lossau 1980, Setaioli 1997, Ciccarelli 2005). Both Palinurus (*Aen.* 5.827-71) and Elpenor (*Od.* 10.550-60) perish as a result of a tragic fall and sleep is instrumental in their deaths. Moreover, Elpenor is the first shade Odysseus encounters in the underworld (*Od.* 11.51-80) and likewise, Palinurus' ghost is the first that Aeneas meets in his own *catabasis* (*Aen.* 6.337-83). The main affinity between Palinurus and Phrontis is that they are helmsmen, respectively of Aeneas and Menelaus, who meet their end by the direct agency of a divinity: Phrontis is slain by Apollo's arrows (*Od.* 3.278-83), while Palinurus is cast overboard by Somnus.

This paper argues that there is another Homeric predecessor of Palinurus who has not so far received any attention, namely Patroclus. Both characters are represented as sacrificial victims whose demise ensures the safety of their communities. In response to Achilles' prayer, Zeus grants that Patroclus rescue the Achaeans by driving the Trojans away from the Greek ships, but he refuses to fulfill the hero's second request that his companion return to him alive (*Il.* 16.249-52). Likewise, Neptune promises to Venus that the Trojan fleet will arrive safely in Italy on condition that Palinurus loses his life (*Aen.* 5.813-5). Furthermore, the scene of Palinurus' death is highly reminiscent of that of Patroclus. The god Somnus lulls Palinurus to sleep by besprinkling him with soporific water from his Stygian wand (*Aen.* 16.854-7). In an analogous fashion, Apollo causes Patroclus to fall into a helpless stupor by striking him on the back with his hand (*Il.* 16.791-2). The two victims display similar physical symptoms: their eyes whirl round and their limbs are loosened. Prior to employing his hypnotic powers, Somnus

attempts to trick Palinurus by taking on the guise of the Trojan Phorbas and suggesting to substitute him in his duty while he rests (*Aen.* 5.841-6). The name selected by Virgil for the god's mortal camouflage echoes verbally that of the Homeric Euphorbus who wounds Patroclus with his spear immediately after Apollo's intervention (*Il.* 16.806-9), in that both names derive from the verb *φέρβω*, 'to feed, nourish'. At the same time, Palinurus 'corrects' his Homeric antecedent. Whereas Patroclus is gradually stripped of his armor and weapons by Apollo (*Il.* 16.792-804), his Virgilian counterpart clings so tenaciously on his rudder that when Somnus flings him into the water he drags it down with him along with part of the stern (*Aen.* 5.858-60).

What is more, the last moments of Palinurus echo Patroclus' end. After his fall into the sea, the steersman swims for three days and almost manages to reach the shore, but a savage Italian tribe slays him mistaking him for prey (*Aen.* 6.355-61). Similarly, the injured Patroclus nearly succeeds in finding refuge among his companions when Hector notices him and transfixes him with his spear (*Il.* 16.816-21). The affinities between Patroclus and Palinurus extend even to the afterlife. In Book 23 of the *Iliad*, the ghost of Patroclus visits Achilles in his sleep and entreats him to inter his body so that he can enter the gates of Hades and traverse the Styx (*Il.* 23.69-76). Likewise, in *Aeneid* 6 Palinurus' shade meets Aeneas in the underworld and beseeches him to give him burial so that he may cross the Stygian river (*Aen.* 6.365-71). To conclude, Palinurus' evocation of Patroclus in the scene of his death helps explain a key element of his characterization which has no parallel in his other Homeric precursors, that is, his portrayal as a sacrificial victim whose death is vital for the salvation of his people.

## Bibliography

Ciccarelli, I. (2005), 'I modelli del Palinuro virgiliano', *BStudLat* 35: 479-94.

Knauer, G. (1964), *Die Aeneis Und Homer: Studien Zur Poetischen Technik Vergils, Mit Listen Der Homerzitate in Der Aeneis*, Göttingen.

Lossau, M. (1980), 'Elpenor und Palinurus', *WS* 14: 102-24.

Setaioli, A. (1997), 'Palinuro: genesi di un personaggio poetico', *BStudLat* 27: 56-81.