

Καίριος: Openings in Homer

A cursory glance at the four instances of the adjective *καίριος* in Homer (*Il.* 4.185, 8.84; 238, 11.439) generally confirms what has traditionally been taken to be the term's simple reference there to "un lieu critique" (Trédé 1992), a site or place on the body especially vulnerable "ad un colpo ben assestato" (Arrighetti 2006) that more often than not proves fatal. Most scholarship agrees in acknowledging what I will call this *static* reference as original and also fundamental to the term's meaning. It allegedly underwrites a subsequent, Classical development in the direction of the eventual reference of the related noun *καιρός* (absent from Homer) to a "proper occasion" or "ripe moment" to initiate some action (Levi 1923, Kerkhoff 1973, Race 1981, Dickson 1982, Moutsopoulos 1991, Nickel 2005).

At the same time, closer examination suggests that even within that limited range, Homeric *καίριος* already and implicitly incorporates connotations that expressly emerge only later in the term's developmental history. That observation is supported by the clear presence of the sense of "opening" or "aperture" rather than just "place" or "site" in most instances of Homeric *καίριος*. The sense of "opening" in turn recalls the *dynamic* reference that Onians (1988) and Gallet (1990) argue is basic to the meaning of *καιρός*, although their claims have not won much support. The passage at *Iliad* 8.320-29 is especially suggestive in this context. There the archer Teukros' failed attempt to strike Hektor opens the Bowman himself to a counterstrike in the same gesture by which he emerges from hiding and opens his bow. The "lieu" (designated *καίριος*) where Hektor strikes him becomes visible through a series of no less than three imbricating apertures. Other passages show similar structures.

Such passages in turn reveal a set of connotations for *καίριος* that includes temporal, situational, and intentional elements along with simple, spatial ones. A hit on the Homeric

battlefield depends not simply on the static presence of “critical sites” but instead on a *dynamic* nexus of correlative positions in space, coigns of vantage, movements and aims that unfold over a brief course of time to culminate in a commitment to strike. Those elements together trace the outlines of an implicit praxology in Homer, a network of “walls and ways” (Ricoeur 1966) that disclose the shape of successful action in the epic.

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