

Sympathy with the Spear: Iliadic Tree Similes and Achilles' Entanglement with the Pelian Spear

The Pelian spear, which no warrior other than Achilles can lift (*Il.* 16.140-4 = 19.387-91), has attracted much scholarly interest as an exclusive symbol of Achilles' heroic identity (Zeitlin 1995, Grethlein 2008) and an object with a rich mythological significance (Shannon 1975, Nagy 1979, Janko 1994). In this paper, I will suggest that Achilles' exceptional relationship with the spear proves to be more complex than his unique ability to manage its heft or indeed its status as the souvenir of a great warrior. I will argue that Homer reveals the complexity of Achilles' relationship with his characteristic weapon by focusing on the materiality of the spear and its past life as a tree. I will make this argument by reading Achilles' spear in juxtaposition with other instances of dead or dying trees in the poem and then focusing on the associations created by wordplay in the description of the spear. My conclusion will be that Achilles, symbolically a "dead" object himself, removed not only from his home but also the rest of Achaean society, identifies more with the trees-turned-objects than the heroes he slaughters on the battlefield.

Other instances of tree death in the *Iliad* will provide important context for interpreting the spear. On one hand, the tree similes in the deaths of Simoeisios (*Il.* 4.473-89) and Sarpedon (*Il.* 16.482-6) soften the poignancy of tree death by including the tree's ultimately productive fate in the hands of craftsman. On the other hand, in his oath at *Il.* 1.233-46, Achilles looks backwards through the wooden scepter to see the once living tree and remind the Achaeans of the cost of kingly power.

I will argue that like the scepter, Homer invites the audience to view the Pelian spear not as just an object without a past or future—that is, not as a "dead" or "simple" object—but rather a thing inextricable from its material history. Homer highlights the spear's former state of

existence by calling it an ash-tree (μελίη, *Il.* 16.143) and specifies in a relative clause that “Cheiron cut it from the peak of Mount Pelion for his dear father” (τὴν πατρὶ φίλῳ πόρε Χείρων / Πηλίου ἐκ κορυφῆς, 16.143-4). Thus, the spear itself evokes the memory of its previous environment. Moreover, the emergence of the spear’s previous environment in the object itself is reminiscent of Patroclus’ rebuke about Achilles’ parentage, how his harshness proves that he was not born of anthropomorphic parents but of sea and stone (16.33-35). Achilles’ supposed non-human origins are remarkably similar to the coastal slopes of Mt. Pelion, the source of Achilles’ spear.

I will explore further how the vignette of the spear speaks to a multifaceted relationship between Achilles and his weapon, best described following Hodder 2012 as “entanglement.” For instance, Homer’s punning on *πάλλειν/πῆλαι* ‘to wield’ (16.142), *Πηλιάδα* ‘Pelian’ (16.143), *Πηλίου* ‘Mount Pelion’ (16.144), and the echoed but not fully present name of Achilles father Peleus creates a tangle of associations. Drawing on recent scholarship on both Homeric objects (Purves 2015, Grethlein 2018) and Homer’s treatment of the nonhuman (Holmes 2015), I will offer a reading of the Pelian spear that shows another aspect to Achilles’ heroic exceptionalism: his unique sympathy for some of the *Iliad*’s most important wooden objects.

Bibliography

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