

THE CULTS OF ACHILLES

Hildebrecht Hommel has performed a useful service in assembling and discussing the evidence for the cults of Achilles¹). It is interesting to note that, while Hommel has at his disposal little more material than was available to Farnell, he draws a radically different conclusion from it: he infers that there was a divine cult of Achilles, whereas Farnell reckoned with a hero-cult similar in kind to the cults of other warriors pre-eminent in the Iliad²). To help us in reaching a decision, a résumé of Hommel's argument is given here, together with comments on some of his conclusions.

Hommel first adduces, as Farnell did, the epigraphic evidence for the cults of Achilles from the Pontic region, some of it actually from Λεύκη Νήσος³). Achilles' name occurs in inscriptions from that area dating back to the sixth century B. C.; and inscriptions of the fifth century mention a dedication to him. The dedicatory formula Γλαῦκός με ἀνέθηκεν Ἀχιλλῆι Λεύκης μεδέοντι is, as Hommel observes, similar in formulation to that of Alcaeus (cf. fr. 354 Voigt): Ἀχιλλεύς ὁ γὰρ Σκυθίας μέδεις. Alcaeus' line is not, however, as Hommel states (p. 9) 'obviously the beginning of the hymn to a god'. If it were so 'obvious', no further discussion would be necessary; but it seems illegitimate to go beyond the non-committal statement that the verb μέδημι/μεδέω is in fact often employed in addresses to gods. It is unlikely that different formulae were used in invoking gods and in invoking heroes, when gods and heroes shared many elements of ritual. Hence, while Hommel may well be correct in assuming that the Alcaeus fragment forms the first line of a poem intended for a festival at Achilles' tomb at Sigeum, there is no justification for his further remark: 'It must have been easy for the hero buried there to enjoy the same *divine* honours as the one by the shores of Pontus' (p. 10; my emphasis). Moreover, it would be wrong to infer that there was anything unique about the cult of Achilles at Sigeum. Not only

1) Der Gott Achilleus, SB Heidelberg, Phil.-hist. Kl., 1980, 1. Abhandlung.

2) L. R. Farnell, Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality, Oxford 1921, pp. 285-289.

3) ἱερὰ τοῦ Ἀχιλλέως, as Strabo says (C 306).

Achilles but also Patroclus, Antilochus, and Ajax are credited by Strabo (C 596) with cults at Sigeum; and, whereas Patroclus and Antilochus certainly belonged in the orbit of Achilles, the same could not be said of Ajax. Are we to believe that the cults of these heroes, and especially that of Ajax, differed in some particular from the cult of the 'divine' Achilles? And, if they did, how was the difference manifested?

So far, then, we have found conclusive evidence for the transfer of a cult of Achilles from Aeolis to the shores of the Black Sea; it would be natural to associate that transfer with the Ionian colonization beginning in the seventh century. Nothing about the cult at Sigeum or the cult in Pontus suggests that divine honours were paid to Achilles⁴). But at this point Hommel inserts into the argument some literary allusions, which tend (in his opinion) to prove that Achilles was regarded as the lord of Leuce, the original centre of the cult. From this fact Hommel draws the further conclusion that, long before Achilles was incorporated into heroic saga, he received divine honours as the lord of the dead souls beyond the sea; and, according to Hommel, Achilles' status as lord of the dead is reflected in the *Odyssey*.

On enquiring into the literary sources which form the basis of Hommel's argument, we find them by no means to provide a compelling proof. The earliest relevant source is the allusion in the *Aethiopsis* to the removal of Achilles' body by Thetis to the White Island: καὶ Θέτις ἀφικομένη σὺν Μούσαις καὶ ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς θρηνεῖ τὸν παῖδα· καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐκ τῆς πυρᾶς ἢ Θέτις ἀναρπάσασα τὸν παῖδα εἰς τὴν Λευκὴν Νῆσον διακομίζει (Proclus, *Chrest.* 2). The rescue and removal of the corpse by Thetis are tantamount to her bestowing immortality on her son. Now, although (as I mentioned) the *Aethiopsis* provides the earliest testimony for an immortal Achilles, there is no telling how early in fact it is. When Hommel says (p. 13) that a number of scholars have seen the *Aethiopsis* as the source of the *Iliad*, he is of course correct. But what should interest us here is not how many writers have entertained this belief, but how plausible the belief itself may be. And the long discussion by Dihle shows that it has no plausibility

4) I mean, of course, in Archaic and Classical times. Dio Chrysostom 36. 9 mentions temples to Achilles as existing by the Borysthenes in his time. Inscriptions attest a divine cult at Olbia in the Roman period: J. N. Treščeva, *Das Altertum* 32, 1986, pp. 186–189.

whatever⁵). In particular, any attempt to connect the theme of the grant of immortality to Achilles (Dihle's 'Third Motif') with Homeric poetry is unlikely to prove successful, since both the Iliad and the Odyssey depict Achilles as a mortal man⁶). With regard to this motif at least, it is Homer who has influenced the Cyclic poet, not the other way about. The prophecy of a blissful after-life which is ordained for Menelaus in the Odyssey (δ 561–589) is actually brought about for Achilles in the Aethiopis. Menelaus will meet this exceptional destiny because he is a son-in-law of Zeus (δ 569); and a similar destiny is marked out for the greatest of the heroes – but only in post-Homeric poetry, beginning with the Aethiopis.

The next author to be invoked by Hommel (p. 18) is Pindar. Two passages are in point. In the first, a number of heroes from the Trojan War, together with Thetis, are associated with their respective cult-places. Among them is Achilles: ἐν δ' Εὐξείνῳ πελάγει φαεινὰν Ἀχιλεὺς νᾶσον (sc. ἔχει) (Nem. 4. 49–50). No one will doubt that Pindar's φαεινὰ νᾶσος is the island elsewhere called Leuce.

According to the second Pindaric passage, virtuous souls inhabit the Island of the Blest: these include Peleus, Cadmus, and also Achilles, who was taken there by his mother when she had prevailed upon Zeus to grant him this exceptional privilege (Ol. 2. 78–80). Hommel does not hesitate to connect these two passages and to conclude that, so far as Pindar was concerned, the White Island and the Island of the Blest were the same place. This seems to me a most hazardous proceeding. Pindar followed, and taught,

5) A. Dihle, *Homer-Probleme*, Opladen 1970, pp. 9–44.

6) Dihle, pp. 17–20. I may mention here Hommel's reference (pp. 25–26) to the Nekyia. He believes that Achilles' words to Odysseus provide unambiguous testimony that Achilles was an ancient god of the dead. The crucial passage is:

βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάροχος εἶν θητευέμεν ἄλλῳ,
ἀνδρῶ παρ' ἀκλήρω, ᾧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἴη,
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν. (λ. 489–491)

I think this passage has been misunderstood by Hommel. Achilles does not mean that he is in fact the lord of all the dead (a manifestly untrue statement) but that, even if he were, he would prefer to be alive, whatever his circumstances. This view is not made untenable by Odysseus' words shortly before: νῦν αὖτε μέγα κρατέεις νεκύεσσιν (λ. 485). M. van der Valk, *Beiträge zur Nekyia*, Kampen 1935, p. 96, takes together lines 485 and 491 and concludes that Achilles was lord over the dead; but Odysseus means merely 'you are a person of consequence among the dead (just as you were among the living)'. Achilles is no more 'lord of all the dead' than he had been lord of all the living, but whether living or dead he is a greatly distinguished man.

no one system of belief; and, in particular, the doctrines (if they are doctrines) expressed in Ol. 2 are notoriously at variance with those which he sets forth in other odes. Even though only a short time separates the composition of Ol. 2 from that of Nem. 4, the beliefs they enshrine respectively have to be dissociated from each other, unless identity can be proved. As one would expect, it is the allusion in Ol. 2 which turns out to be surprising and to call for special explanation⁷). Since by Pindar's time the cult of Achilles at Leuce had existed for many years (perhaps for two centuries), it was only natural for Pindar to refer to it in the context of the sequence Teucer-Ajax-Achilles-Thetis-Neoptolemus. But the transference of Achilles' soul to the Island of the Blest (whose location is not specified by Pindar) is quite a different matter; Pindar mentions specifically that this privilege was out of the common and had to be secured by the intervention of Thetis. In this way Pindar makes it plain that he is not conforming to established belief but is deliberately contradicting the Homeric account, according to which (as we have seen) Achilles was a mortal man whose ψυχή dwelt in Hades along with the other ψυχαί⁸). For these reasons, it is wrong to argue from Pindar's account that Achilles had a well-recognized divine cult in the Black Sea (or in any other region).

None of the evidence adduced by Hommel justifies him in suggesting that 'Achilles was originally the lord of the dead souls who lived on the Meadows of the Blest far beyond the sea, and became the hero of Trojan saga first of all in the rhapsodic tradition' (p. 24)⁹). Nor, I believe, is it right to call in aid the very name Ἀχιλλεύς to support the theory of a divine personage. Although various attempts have been made to establish the etymology of the word, none of them is convincing, partly because the Ἀχ- element is susceptible of more than one explanation, partly because the -ιλ- element is not susceptible of any explanation. Hommel is unduly optimistic, and unduly confident that he has arrived at the correct answer, when he claims to know for certain that the name Ἀχιλ-

7) J. van Leeuwen, *Pindarus' tweede Olympische Ode I*, Assen 1964, pp. 215-220.

8) Pindar's procedure is discussed by F. Solmsen, *Achilles on the Islands of the Blest*, *AJPh* 103, 1982, pp. 19-24.

9) In any case, we cannot rule out the possibility that Achilles played a role in epic poetry as early as the Mycenaean period. The reasons are stated (perhaps somewhat over-stated) by D. L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad*, California 1959, p. 254.

λεύς had a pre-Greek origin, 'so that old explanations involving ἄχος no longer concern us' (p. 38). As a matter of fact, it is quite well known that Palmer revived the 'old explanation involving ἄχος', suggesting that Ἀχιλλεύς was a shortened form of Ἀχιλλῆος¹⁰). Hommel himself would like to connect the Ἀχ- of Ἀχιλλεύς with the element found in Ἀχελῷος and Ἀχέρων. Even if such a connexion could be proved (and, needless to say, no such proof has been forthcoming), it would do little more than hint at the possibility that 'water' played some part in the meaning of Achilles' name. To see in 'water' a reference to 'the lord of the realm of the dead, a realm thought to lie beyond distant waters' (Hommel, p. 38) is to resort to special pleading so unabashed as to render the whole case suspect. Hommel finds support for his notion of Achilles as lord of the dead in Kretschmer's speculation (for Kretschmer himself did not claim it was more than speculation) that two names closely connected with Achilles in the saga, namely Φθίη and Μυρμιδόνες, refer to the after-life¹¹). It remains a bare possibility that Φθίη has some connexion with φθίω; but the interpretation of Μυρμιδόνες as 'bugbears' on the basis of Hesychius' gloss μύρμος; φόβος was hardly worth putting forward in the first place, and should not now be revived¹²).

The time has come to exclude from the discussion three types of irrelevant matter:

1. The early dedicatory inscriptions from the Black Sea, which attest merely the existence of a cult of Achilles in that area, and make no reference to a *divine* cult.
2. The allusions to the conferment of immortality on Achilles, which are literary inventions of the post-Homeric age;

10) L. R. Palmer, *The Interpretation of Mycenaean Greek Texts*, Oxford 1963, p. 79. G. Nagy rightly observes that Palmer's analysis will carry conviction only if the notion 'grief for the host' is intrinsic to the function of Achilles in myth and epic. Nagy's paper, *The Name of Achilles*, in: *Studies in Greek, Italic, and Indo-European Linguistics offered to Leonard R. Palmer*, Innsbruck 1976, pp. 209–237, certainly shows how often the Achilles of *our Iliad* is associated with ἄχος, but fails to demonstrate that such an association is intrinsic to the function of Achilles. Nor should the meaning of ἄχος be restricted to 'grief'; at A 188, and in some other Homeric passages, the sense is rather 'uncontrollable rage', cf. *LfgGE*, s. v.

11) P. Kretschmer, *Mythische Namen*: 1. Achill, *Glotta* 4, 1913, pp. 305–308.

12) A. Nehring justifiably asks whether some modern etymologies of Greek words sound any less amusing than those held up to ridicule in the *Cratylus*: *Traditio* 3, 1945, p. 17.

they have no connexion with any specific place, and are not reflected in cult.

3. Etymological speculations.

Ridding ourselves of these extraneous elements, we can see Achilles for what he really is: a mortal man like the other epic heroes, only credited with deeper knowledge and more splendid exploits than they are. He is like the other epic heroes, again, in that he becomes the object of cult in various parts of the Greek world. The *occasion* for the rise of the hero-cults was, presumably, the rapid diffusion of the Homeric epics in Greek-speaking lands. The *reason* for their rise cannot be expressed according to a simple formula, but is probably associated with the growth of the city-states and their need of powerful tutelary figures, gods and heroes, to guarantee them prosperity and victory.

Nilsson's well-known arguments in favour of a continuous tradition of hero-cult from the Mycenaean age down to classical times¹³⁾ fall short of establishing his case, because it is far from certain that the Mycenaean made offerings to the dead at all. Furthermore, there are very few sites at which any sort of cult is continuously attested. Some hero-cults must have arisen (in haphazard fashion, for all we know) during the so-called Dark Age: so much is clear from the discoveries at Lefkandi. But, generally speaking, such cults seem to have been established for the first time in the eighth and seventh centuries¹⁴⁾. In time, naturally enough, these cults were transferred to the colonies, where they took on a new life and were bound up with the well-being of the community as closely as they had been in the mother-cities: hence such dedicatory inscriptions as those of Leuce.

So the general pattern may be expressed as follows. A hero achieves great renown through the medium of epic poetry, and the emerging¹⁵⁾ city-states acquire the potent help brought by his cult. The wide diffusion of some cults reflects the esteem in which the greatest heroes were held; it does not imply that they became

13) M. P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, 2nd ed., Lund 1950, pp. 584–619.

14) W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche*, Stuttgart 1977, pp. 312–319. Add the references of B. C. Dietrich in *The Greek Renaissance of the Eighth Century B. C.*, Stockholm 1983, pp. 85–86.

15) Or, we should rather say, 're-emerging' if we accept the case for continuity of *political* institutions made in H. van Effenterre's book *La Cité Grecque*, Paris 1985.

gods, or had ever been gods. But, without prejudice to the validity of this general pattern, there was sometimes present a literary (not popular) instinct that certain outstanding figures of epic deserved immortality. And Achilles, who is revered as a mortal man in the cults and upon whom (according to a few sources) his mother bestows immortality, is closely paralleled by another great hero: Diomedes.

This 'Abbild bzw. Gegenbild zu Achilleus'¹⁶⁾ is triumphantly successful on the battlefield, just as Achilles is; like Achilles, he is treated in the epic as purely mortal; his cults are, if anything, more widely dispersed than those of Achilles¹⁷⁾; and in post-epic sources there grows up a tradition that he was granted the gift of immortality, a tradition which (as with Achilles) receives its clearest expression in Pindar. The terse and astonishing statement in *Nem.* 10. 7, Διομήδεα δ' ἀμβροτον ξανθά ποτε Γλαυκῶπις ἔθηκε θεόν, would leave us bewildered, were we not informed by the scholia that Athene had intended the gift of immortality for Diomedes' father Tydeus, but when Tydeus ate the flesh of his enemy Melanippus she made Diomedes immortal instead¹⁸⁾. Although a more specific motive is here advanced for the apotheosis of Diomedes than is given for Thetis' gift to Achilles, the careers of the two heroes in general are strikingly similar; and, in the cults at least, they remain heroes, without ever gaining, as Heracles does, a place among the gods¹⁹⁾.

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16) To use the expression of Øivind Andersen, *Die Diomedesgestalt in der Ilias*, Oslo 1978, p. 11.

17) *RE* V 1, 1903, coll. 815–823.

18) Cf. P. Friedländer, *Studien zur antiken Literatur und Kunst*, Berlin 1969, p. 42. When the scholiast refers to an island sacred to Diomedes, ἐν ἧ τιμάται ὡς θεός, he does not mean that Diomedes actually is a god, any more than Agamemnon's words in the *Iliad* imply that Achilles will become divine:

ἐν δ' ἄνδρες ναίουσι πολύρρηγες πολυβοῦται,
οἱ κέ ἐ δωτίνησι θεὸν ὡς τιμήσουσι. (I 154–155)

19) Further comments on the matters discussed here will be found in Gloria Ferrari Pinney's contribution to *Ancient Greek Art and Iconography*, ed. Warren G. Moon, Wisconsin 1983, pp. 133–139.