

Classical Mythology and Legends in Roman and Medieval Times : Herakles, Achilles and Alexander



Herakles

NB long-standing myth figure (early Greek hexameter epic tradition about katabasis of Herakles)

- Herakles references in *Iliad* (sacking of Troy: *Il.* 5.642; 14.251); in Book 5 his son Tleoplemus comes against Sarpedon and dies. At *Iliad* 5.639 Herakles given epithet "with the heart of lion" (θυμολέοντα), like Achilles; example in *Iliad* shows flexibility of myth

(tradition of Herakles' immortality is rejected: he is paradigm of suffering: cf. Achilles)

Claimed as forefather (father's side)

Herakles/Alexander: see Heckel



Alexander and Achilles



For connection with Achilles, see Heckel.

How much of it is down to later writers?

Choerilus of Iasus = (bad) epic poet, who wrote for Alexander and seems to have figured him as an Achilles figure.

“He was pleasing to the great king Alexander, that Choerilus who carried away royal coin, philippi, which he received for his badly formed and ill-conceived verse; but just as black ink when handled, leaves a mark and blot,, so generally writers blemish bright deeds by their unseemly poems” (Horace *Epistles* 2.1.232-37) (cf. *Ars Poetica* 357-60)



Achilles



- genealogical links with Achilles claimed on Alexander's mother's (Olympias) side (Arr. *Anab.* 1.11.7, 4.11.6; Curt. 4.6.29, 8.4.26; Diod. 17.1.5; Just. 11.3.1, 12.15.1; Plut. *Alex.* 2.1): Molossian royal house claimed descent from Neoptolemus.
- Alexander's love for Homer: "And since he thought and called the *Iliad* a viaticum of the military art, he took with him Aristotle's recension of the poem, called the *Iliad of the Casket* and always kept it lying with his dagger under his pillow, as Onesicritus informs us" (Plut. *Alex.* 8.2)



Achilles

- “In the work of caring for him, then, many persons, as was natural, were appointed to be his nurturers, tutors, and teachers, but over them all stood Leonidas, a man of stern temperament and a kinsman of Olympias. Although he did not himself shun the title of tutor, since the office afforded an honourable and brilliant occupation, yet by other people, owing to his dignity and his relationship, he was called Alexander's foster-father and preceptor. The man, however, who assumed the character and the title of tutor was **Lysimachus**, a native of Acarnania, who had no general refinement, but because he **called himself Phoenix, Alexander Achilles**, and Philip Peleus, was highly regarded and held a second place.” (Plutarch *Parallel lives* 5.7)
- Homeric heroic ethos alive in Macedon

Achilles



- 334 BC Alexander went on pilgrimage to Troy, including visiting Achilles' tomb where he paid tribute: crowning Achilles' tomb (Arr. *Anab.* 1.12.1; Plut. *Alex.* 15.8; Ael. *V.H.* 12.7); Hephaestion crowning Patroclus' tomb (Arr. *Anab.* 1.12.1; Ael. *V.H.* 12.7); Alexander saying Achilles blessed (Arr. *Anab.* 1.12.1; Plut. *Alex.* 15.8; Cic. *Pro Arch.* 24)
- extensive grief over death of Hephaestion: like Achilles, allegedly placed locks of hair over his friend's corpse (Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.4; Ael. *V.H.* 7.8; cf. Hom. *Il.* 23.141-153). Allegedly wept over his friend's corpse (Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.3-4; cf. Hom. *Il.* 19.4-5); abstained from food and drink (Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.8; cf. Hom. *Il.* 19.344-346); built big funeral pyre (Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.8; Diod. 17.110.8; Just. 12.12.12; Plut. *Alex.* 72.5; cf. Hom. *Il.* 23.154-225)



Achilles

- sulking in tent x 3 (cf. Achilles in the *Iliad*):

after murder of Cleitus (Arr. *Anab.* 4.9.3-4; Curt. 8.2.11; Plut. *Alex.* 51.10-52.1; cf. Just. 12.6.15-16); during Macedonian mutiny at the Hyphasis River (Arr. *Anab.* 5.28.3; Curt. 9.3.18-19; Plut. *Alex.* 62.5); during Macedonian mutiny at Opis (Arr. *Anab.* 7.11.1; Curt. 10.3.5; Plut. *Alex.* 71.6-8; cf. Diod. 17.109.2-3 and Just. 12.11.4-12.9).

NB Alexander did engage in brave fighting, including single combat e.g. at battle of the Granicus, personally helped the Macedonian victory, killing at least one Persian general in single combat and almost killed by another (Arr. *Anab.* 1.15.7-8; Diod. 17.20-21.3; Plut. *Alex.* 16.8-12; cf. Curt. 8.1.20). Into fame/reputation.

Achilles



- Did the court-historian Callisthenes implicitly compare the two in his *Deeds of Alexander*?
- NB Made-up episode of Amazonian (e.g in Cleitarchus): cf. Achilles and Penthesileia (though nb Heracles and Theseus)
- Quintus Curtius Rufus: on Alexander's marriage to Roxane, apparently in a feast in Bactria, Alexander cites Achilles' marriage to Briseis, a barbarian slave-girl, as justification for his decision to marry Roxane, the daughter of a barbarian chieftain: "Achilles, too, from whom he himself traced his descent, had married a captive woman" (Curt. 8.4.26) (comment only here)



Herakles/Achilles: analysing sources



- Vorhis diss (UCLA, 2017): ‘The Best of the Macedonians: Alexander as Achilles in Arrian, Curtius, and Plutarch’: looks at how the historians used analogy for their own literary ends. Sees allusions to general mythological figure Achilles and to Homeric Achilles.
- Maitland argues Curtius used Achilles motif to bring out Alexander’s dark side, esp. his anger. (‘Alexander the Great and the anger of Achilles’ in *East and West in the World Empire of Alexander: Essays in Honour of Brian Bosworth*, edited by P. V. Wheatley and Elizabeth Baynham. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-20)



Herakles/Achilles



Iconography: e.g. coins

Conscious propaganda

