

A Short Gobbet on Homer's Iliad (24.776-803)

*AI has been used in this work for organising grammar and bibliography entries
(It has not been used for any other purpose)*

Within this extract is Priam (The king of Troy in the Iliad), who begins it by talking to the “men of troy” who are overseeing his son Hector's burial procession, who was previously killed by Achilles and whose body was desecrated by him and later ransomed off back to Priam for this burial. Priam is essentially just reassuring his men who are preparing to bury Hector that they will not be under attack and Achilles had given his word not to. The rest of the extract follows the details of Hector's funeral and the burial practices that take place during it. Homer describes specific burial practices that take place such as: “The bones they took and placed in a golden urn, covering them over with soft purple robes”. Prior to this Homer describes additionally a funeral pyre taking place in the funeral ritual with “on the topmost pyre they laid the dead man and cast fire to it”. Homer follows the pyre burning and post pyre preparations with more description of the actual burial process: “and quickly laid the urn in a hollow grave and covered it over with great close-set stones”.

The extract is significant because of these details Homer gives to burial practices where he essentially uses his own early iron age knowledge and understanding of burials and applies them to these great heroes he writes about in the Iliad. In addition to this it is also notable that the extract is significant also because it exhibits one of the more identifiable fascinations and themes that Homer includes in the poem, the hero burial. Hector is one of the many heroes in the Iliad whose deaths, instead of being the end of the character in the poem, persist in the narrative through their own burial. Homer goes into great length to detail these burials through the story as being major points in the story usually centering on the desperate battle to preserve a warrior's ‘Kleos’, which is their immortal fame and glory, the dead heroes cannot pass to the underworld and spirits rest if their body is not preserved and given proper funeral rights according to Homer's own iron age form of them. Furthermore, the Homeric epic ends with this burial of Hector which clearly highlights the extent to which seeing the full burial practice of a key character in the book was important to Homer for his audience to know. The extract reveals a lot about the importance the Greek world at the time of Homer had in burial practice, for them it was a crucial part of these epics and this was seen in how many of the large events in his epics feature death or recovery of bodies for burials as crucial points in the story like Hector's burial and Patroclus funeral games (at a prior point in the Iliad, not a part of extract given).

Burial practice and the treatment of a hero's body is of course very crucial to understanding the themes Homer establishes in his epics, and prominently in the Iliad itself. But how useful is the exact description of Homer's hero's burial of Hector in the Iliad as to understanding exact burial practices that took place in Homer's time period (Early Iron Age)? It turns out, actually quite accurate, was Homer's description of burial practice in relation to his own time period (not to Bronze Age Greek culture). In fact Mycenaean Greek warriors were usually

buried in inhumations and not on great funeral pyres as Homer suggests in his epics. Rather this detail is interesting as it was a practice among the Early Iron Age Aegeans to perform burials almost exactly to Hector's burial when it came to a "heroes burial". Essentially the body was very important to them and needed to be buried with proper rites otherwise your body could not be granted passage in the underworld and all of the warriors "Kleos" would be worth naught in the afterlife. A similar sort of "hero's burial" was actually documented in Iron Age Greece. Though two centuries before Homer, Lefkandi is as close to a real world "hero burial" site as to those described by the Iliad. The warrior found at Lefkandi had his very own Hector style burial, with his remains being placed in a large bronze "krater" and wrapped in rare linen cloth. This is almost exactly like the burial of Hector in the extract who, like this real-world warrior, was buried in an urn and covered with a cloth or "purple robes". Furthermore a more specific ritual which is echoed in the Iliad in a different funeral practice is the ritual slaughter of horses for a hero's grave. This does not take place in the extract but in the Iliad itself when Patroclus is killed by Hector, during his funeral Achilles kills prize horses on his funeral pyre as a showing of intense grief and a desire to show the status of the deceased. This exact method of funeral ritual is shown to the point in the Lefkandi burial site with the warrior being buried in his krater surrounded by pits containing the burial of horses. It clearly shows the way Homer designed the key funeral practices in the epics like the Iliad to be closely following ritual practices he was familiar with at the time. They therefore give unique insights into the real-life burial treatment of heroes/warriors in Archaic Greece even if the story is meant to take place in the Bronze Age.

Overall the extract is very valuable and besides being significant to the story of the Iliad itself, is also significant to us in the present day beside that. This is because this extract is a very useful example of one of Homer's key themes in the Iliad and wider epics of a hero's death and burial. In addition to this its focus on burial is key to our studies on death and burial because it tells us a lot about Iron Age hero burial from a key narrator of the time period directly through the pages of the Iliad (a story set in the Bronze Age).

Short Bibliography Section:

- lefkandi.classics.ox.ac.uk. (2009). *Early excavations at Lefkandi: The protogeometric building and the cemetery of Tomba*. Available at: <https://lefkandi.classics.ox.ac.uk/Tomba.html>
- National Archaeological Museum. (2025). "The urn krater of the lefkandi lord" - national archaeological museum. Available at: https://www.namuseum.gr/en/hidden_museum/the-urn-krater-of-the-lefkandi-lord/
- The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2018). Achilles | myth, significance, & trojan war. In: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Achilles-Greek-mythology>