**UNDERSTANDING ACHILLES: A 21ST CENTURY READER CONFRONTS A BRONZE-AGE WARRIOR**

 *“I don’t understand Achilles. Sometimes he seems to act like a petulant spoiled teenager. He seems to lack all sense of proportion. What is it that makes this guy tick?”*

It is difficult to comprehend our Trojan War heroes’ motivations and actions without a basic understanding of the cultural differences between our 21st century, Western, liberal culture and Bronze Age Greek warrior culture.

Fortunately, the main cultural differences can be summed up in three ancient Greek concepts: **timê, geras, and kleos**. These three concepts can be loosely translated as **honour, prize of honour, and fame**. Unfortunately, simply translating these three concepts does not help our understanding of Achilles’ actions. Let’s look at these three concepts in detail in the next few paragraphs in order to fully understand the characters in *The Iliad*.

For a Homeric warrior, TIMÊ is external. It is what others confer upon you: what others say, think, feel, and perceive about you. By contrast, for most of us reading this, honour is largely internal. It is what we think, believe, or know about ourselves regardless of what anybody else might say. The classic children’s expression “sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me” makes sense to us because we have an internal sense of honour. Achilles would not understand the children’s rhyme. In a culture like Achilles’, what other people say about you matters deeply. In fact, it is the only thing that matters.

The second ancient Greek concept, GERAS, refers to “a particularly valuable token of distinction conferred on a warrior by his peers”. In war, the division of booty determined GERAS. Simply put, when Homer’s warriors sacked a city, they brought back gold, cattle, slaves, and women. The warriors then distributed their booty to their commanders and the other soldiers in the army. The more booty given to an ancient Greek warrior, the more honour was bestowed. It is important to note that the ancient Greek concept of GERAS was a zero-sum game. That is, if one warrior is given more GERAS, another warrior necessarily has less GERAS. GERAS matters deeply because GERAS is the outward manifestation and evidence of TIMÊ.

The third ancient Greek concept, KLEOS, has to do with what others say about another individual especially after that individual’s death. KLEOS was the only form of immortality available to a Homeric warrior. Achilles and his peers did not share any sense of a deity that would mete out appropriate eternal rewards and or punishments in an afterlife. Nor did Achilles and his peers have any sense of a deity squaring the ”eternal balance sheet” with some form of “proportional justice.” The phrase “his reward awaits him in heaven” would not have made any sense at all to an ancient Greek warrior. All a Homeric warrior had was his KLEOS (the glory or fame that he had acquired in this life and the things that other people would say about him after he was dead). Similarly to GERAS, KLEOS was also a zero-sum game. There was only room for one warrior at the top of the KLEOS podium. How did one earn KLEOS? KLEOS was earned by acquiring and holding on to as much TIMÊ and GERAS as possible!

Now that we have an understanding of the concepts of TIMÊ, GERAS, and KLEOS, let’s look at the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon in the opening scene of *The Iliad* with fresh eyes and (hopefully) new understanding. In short:

Agamemnon has a slave girl named Chrysies. She is Agamemnon’s GERAS and thus enhances his TIME and KLEOS. The god Apollo takes Chrysies away from Agamemnon. Agamemnon has now lost his GERAS so his TIMÊ and KLEOS have consequently been reduced. Agamemnon, in an effort to restore his TIMÊ and KLEOS, takes away Achilles’ slave girl, a woman named Briseis. Briseis is Achilles’ GERAS and thus the outward manifestation of Achilles’ TIMÊ and KLEOS. Consequently, when Agamemnon takes away Briseis, Agamemnon has reduced Achilles’ TIMÊ and threatened the future of Achilles’ KLEOS. Suffice to say, in the zero sum world of Homeric epic, **the transfer of Briseis from the tent of Achilles to the tent of Agamemnon has “raised up” Agamemnon at the cost of proportionally “lowering down” Achilles**.

Achilles is a Homeric warrior. His only motivations for fighting and dying are in order to increase his TIMÊ, GERAS and KLEOS. Agamemnon has arbitrarily taken all three away from Achilles.

So you see, Achilles has no possible way of responding (inside the confines of his culture) except to refuse to fight until such time as Agamemnon restores Achilles’ TIMÊ, GERAS, and KLEOS. But the only way Agamemnon can do so (inside the confines of his culture) is by reducing his own. And thus *The Iliad* begins…

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You can listen to the podcast episode where all of this “academic stuff” comes alive, at the following link: [Trojan War: The Podcast Episode 11 ACHILLES DISHONOURED](http://trojanwarpodcast.com/episode-11-achilles-dishonored/)

Sources:

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