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Funerary ritual killing in Greek literature and history

THE FUNERAL OF PATROCLUS

It has sometimes been remarked that human sacrifices, which occur fairly frequently in Greek myth and early epic, are noticeably absent from the Homeric poems, an omission attributed to the humane sensibilities of the poet.¹ There is, however, one seeming exception: Achilles' slaughter of twelve Trojan captives before the pyre of Patroclus in the twenty-third book of the *Iliad*.² This incident so distressed Plato that he simply denied that Achilles had committed the deed, and the reactions of many modern Homeric scholars have been similar: shock and distaste (reactions sometimes projected back onto the psyche of Homer himself), a quick dismissal, or, more often than not, complete silence.³ Scholars of Greek religion and funeral practices, on the other hand, have shown great interest in the slaying of the captives, considering it valuable evidence for actual custom among the early Greeks. But the precise nature of the custom has been disputed.

In the eighteenth book of the *Iliad*, after Patroclus' body has been recovered and brought back to camp, Achilles vows to his fallen companion:

‘But now, Patroclus, since I go after you under the earth,
I shall not perform your funeral before bringing here
the armour and head of Hector; your great-hearted slayer.
And before the pyre I shall slash the throats of twelve
of the Trojans' splendid sons, enraged at your slaying.’
(*Il.* 18.333–7)

On the following day Achilles receives his new armour and

HUMAN SACRIFICE IN ANCIENT GREECE

returns at long last to battle. At one point he retires from his bloody rampage in the river in order to select the promised twelve Trojans:

. . . but when his arms had tired from killing,
alive from the river twelve young men he chose,
compensation for the dead Patroclus, Menoetius' son.
He drove them out to shore dazed like fawns
and bound their hands in back with well-cut straps,
which they themselves wore on their pliant coats,
and he gave them to comrades to take to the hollow ships.
But back he sped, eager to slaughter more.

(21.26–33)

When Achilles has killed Hector and returned to camp, he again calls out to the departed spirit of Patroclus:

'Rejoice, o Patroclus, even in Hades' halls,
for even now I fulfil for you all that I promised before:
to drag Hector here and give him to dogs to tear at raw
and before the pyre to slash the throats of twelve
of the Trojans' splendid sons, enraged at your slaying.'

(23.19–23)

On the following day a huge pyre is built for Patroclus. Sheep and cattle are flayed; Achilles wraps the corpse in their fat and piles the flayed bodies around Patroclus. Then, after leaning amphoras of honey and oil against the bier, Achilles slays four horses and two of his (or Patroclus') nine 'table dogs' and hurls them onto the pyre (23.163–74). The slaughter culminates with the twelve Trojan captives:

And twelve noble sons of the great-hearted Trojans
he slew with bronze. And grim deeds he devised in his heart,
and released the fire's iron might, that it consume all.
He then groaned aloud and called his dear friend by name:
'Rejoice, o Patroclus, even in Hades' halls,
for even now I fulfil for you all that I promised before:
twelve noble sons of the great-hearted Trojans
along with you the fire devours them all. But Priam's son
Hector
by no means will I give to fire to feed on, but to dogs.'

(23.175–83)

Finally, on the morning after the funeral Achilles orders his men to quench the smoking pyre with wine and gather up Patroclus' bones:

'. . . and these are easy to distinguish,
for he lay in the middle of the pyre, but the others apart
on the edge were burned, in a jumble, horses and men.'
(23.240-2)

The slaying of the twelve Trojan warriors at the pyre of Patroclus has been interpreted in three basic (if not always clearly distinct) ways: (1) that the killing was a sacrifice, fully equivalent to animal sacrifices performed for the dead, or in the cult of heroes and chthonic deities;⁴ (2) that the Trojan captives were meant to attend Patroclus as servants in the world below;⁵ or (3) that the killing was motivated, largely or solely, by anger and revenge.⁶ In the first two cases it is assumed that the incident derived from actual custom, but that the poet of the *Iliad* had 'forgotten' or misunderstood the true meaning of an obsolete practice preserved in the epic tradition.

Erwin Rohde argued most eloquently and at greatest length for the sacrificial character of the slaying:

what else but a sacrifice, i.e. a repast offered in satisfaction of the needs of the person honoured . . . can be intended by this stream of blood about the corpse; this slaughtering and burning of cattle and sheep, horses and dogs, and finally of twelve Trojan prisoners on or at the funeral pyre? . . . The whole procedure gives a picture of primitive sacrificial ritual in honour of the dead and differs in no particular from the ritual of sacrifice to the θεοὶ χθόνιοι.⁷

Rohde found these extravagant funeral proceedings inconsistent with the Homeric conception of the soul's miserable and shadowy existence after death and therefore felt that the description of Achilles' deeds before Patroclus' pyre derived from a time when the ghost of a dead man was considered powerful and dangerous, requiring propitiation, a period, moreover, of 'vigorous worship of the dead'. But the meaning of Achilles' actions, which 'cannot be made to fit in with the ordinary circle of Homeric ideas', was no longer understood by the time of the composition of the *Iliad*.⁸

Crucial to Rohde's interpretation is the assumption that all of the various victims – sheep and cattle, horses and dogs, and

Trojan captives – were equivalent and slain for the same purpose; but this assumption is questionable. Sheep and cattle are also killed at Achilles' funeral (*Od.* 24.64–5) and seem to be the usual victims of funerary sacrifices.⁹ But at the funeral of Patroclus the animals are also flayed and their fat wrapped around the corpse, a procedure which suggests a second (and apparently secondary) function – to supply fat to help the body to burn.¹⁰ The dogs and horses, however, are not flayed, and in any case they belong to an entirely different class of animal from sheep and cattle.¹¹ Homer gives no indication of the reasons for their killing, but the simplest and widely accepted interpretation is that they are to be counted among the possessions of Patroclus. The slaying of horses and dogs may thus be seen as an extension of the practice of providing the dead with weapons and other goods, well known to archaeology, which lies behind the Homeric phrase κτέρεα κτερεῖζειν and the like.¹²

If the slaying of the Trojan captives in fact derived from an actual custom of sacrificing human victims to appease the ghost of the deceased, this original sacrificial character has left no discernible trace in the language of the poem.¹³ The word used to describe the killing at *Il.* 18.336 and 23.22, *apodeirotomein* ('cut the throat of'),¹⁴ appears only in these two places in the *Iliad*, although it occurs once in the *Odyssey* (11.35), where Odysseus slays sheep over the bothros to awaken the spirits of the dead. It is used by Hesiod (*Theog.* 280) of the beheading of Medusa. The simple form *deirotomein* is used of the two dogs killed at Patroclus' funeral (*Il.* 23.174), of cattle slaughtered by Hermes in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes (405), but also twice in the *Iliad* (21.89, 21.555) and once in the *Odyssey* (22.349) with human (but non-sacrificial) objects. Thus *deirotomein* and *apodeirotomein* seem to be purely neutral terms, applicable both to human and animal objects and without specifically sacrificial connotations. In this respect they may be contrasted with *sphazein*, which, while equivalent to (*apo*)*deirotomein* in basic meaning, is used in Homer only of animals killed in the act of sacrifice.¹⁵ And the other expression used to describe the killing of the Trojan captives, χαλκῷ δηϊόων (23.176), is a formula borrowed from the battlefield.¹⁶

The fact that the Trojan captives were twelve in number might be taken as an indication of the sacrificial nature of the killing, for sacrifices of twelve animal victims occur occasionally both in the

Homeric poems and in later Greek cult.¹⁷ But the number 'twelve' is used sixty times in the two poems, with a great variety of applications: men killed or wounded in battle, the amount of a leader's ships, the number of a person's children, etc.¹⁸ The ransom offered by Agamemnon to Achilles includes twelve horses (*Il.* 9.123, 9.265, 19.244); several items in Priam's ransom for Hector's body are in sets of twelve (24.229–31); and in the *Odyssey* Maron gives Odysseus, among other gifts, twelve amphoras of wine (*Od.* 9.204). Thus 'twelve' is a relatively large number, appropriate to gifts and offers of ransom as well as to offerings to the gods. Homer's fondness for the number may be due in part to its adaptability, in its various forms (δώδεκα, δωδέκα, δυοκαίδεκα), to the hexameter. But the occasional appearance of the number in sacrificial contexts is not sufficient grounds for attaching sacrificial significance to the slaying of the twelve captives.

More frequently it has been maintained that the slaughter of the captives preserves a memory of a prehistoric custom of killing servants or slaves at their masters' funerals in order that they might serve them in the life to come. It is true that such practices are known from other cultures,¹⁹ but there is no good evidence for Greece of any period. And as with the sacrificial interpretation, there is no indication of the supposed custom in the text of the poem, and again it must be assumed that the poet was unaware of the original sense of an obsolete practice. For if Homer fails to explain why Achilles slew sheep, cattle, dogs, and horses before Patroclus' pyre, he expresses very clearly Achilles' reasons for killing the Trojans. Achilles twice gives anger over Patroclus' death as his motivation (*Il.* 18.337, 23.23), in each case linking his promise to slay the captives to the mutilation of Hector's corpse. And the poet himself refers to the twelve Trojans as a *poinë* of Patroclus (21.28): compensation, requital, or payment for his death, a 'blood-price'.²⁰

There is no reason, I might add, to believe that Homer wished to 'downplay' the incident, as has sometimes been alleged. 'That the writer has certain qualms on the subject is indicated by the brevity – not at all like Homer – with which the most shocking part of the story, the slaughter of human beings . . . is hurried over', wrote Rohde, and Murray that the incident 'is crowded into a shame-faced line and a half . . . You could scarcely have a clearer case of a poet recording a fact against his will.'²¹ While it is

true that only one and a half lines are devoted to the actual killing, the act is mentioned a total of six times in the poem, including 23.181–2, where Achilles addresses Patroclus immediately following the killing, and 23.241–2, surely a gratuitous allusion if Homer truly had not wished to dwell on the episode. As early as the eighteenth book Achilles promises to slay the Trojans (18.336–7), and in the twenty-first seven lines are devoted to their capture (21.26–32). Together with the vengeful mutilation of Hector's corpse (the importance of which has been recognized),²² the slaughter of the captives is given great prominence in this section of the poem.²³ Furthermore, whatever we ourselves may think of the morality of the killing, there is little justification for the commonly held opinion that the poet meant to condemn Achilles' actions explicitly with the words κακὰ δὲ φρεσὶ μῆδετο ἔργα at 23.176.²⁴

Homer represents the killing of the Trojans as an act of anger and vengeance for Patroclus' death at the hands of Hector. But that it is precisely comparable to other acts of revenge in the poem, as has sometimes been stated,²⁵ is clearly not the case, for elsewhere acts of vengeance are carried out on the field of battle: it is rather the killing of Hector which is equivalent to these.²⁶ But in the case of the twelve Trojans, Achilles promises to kill a specific number of warriors, he captures them alive for the purpose, and on the next day he slaughters them before the pyre during an elaborate funeral ceremony. Surely this is vengeance of a very different order: it is a ritual act, which might be termed 'ritual revenge'. This is true not only in that Achilles' act is incorporated into the ritual sequence of the funeral ceremony; but the killing itself is an 'action redirected for demonstration', 'a spontaneous reaction artificially exaggerated for the purpose of demonstration'.²⁷ When Patroclus is killed, Achilles' grief is overwhelming, and from this grief stems an uncontrolled violence, directed not only towards Hector and all other Trojans, but even, it seems, towards himself (18.32–4). These are the spontaneous reactions to Patroclus' death: grief, anger, violence, the need for vengeance. Yet in the very midst of his indiscriminate slaughter in the river, Achilles calmly captures twelve Trojan warriors, binds their hands, and turns them over to his fellow soldiers for later execution at the funeral. This cool-headed, premeditated selection not only distinguishes the slaughter of the captives from actions committed in direct emotional response to

Patroclus' death and indicates its essentially ritual character, but also it provides the best argument that the passage is based upon actual practice: the slaying of captives cannot be explained solely in the context of Achilles' psychological state and is thus less likely to have been purely a product of the Homeric imagination.

But what is the purpose of this special, ritualized act of vengeance? From Achilles' perspective, the slaying is clearly perceived to be in Patroclus' interest: 'Now I fulfil for you', says Achilles, twice (23.20 and 23.180). The repeated invocation of Patroclus and the exaction of a 'blood-price' before the pyre – like the stretching of Hector's corpse next to the bier of Patroclus before the funeral (23.25–6) and the later dragging of the corpse around the burial mound (24.15–18) – must have been meant to render the action perceptible to Patroclus' spirit. And yet a funeral is a communal act, and its rituals are directed as much towards the living as the dead, if not more so. Achilles takes his revenge on the battlefield, but his vengeance is recreated and put on display, as it were, during the funeral, thus reinforcing the solidarity of the army after the loss of one of its members. When the act is seen in this light, the funeral seems a natural and suitable occasion for the exaction of vengeance.²⁸

Is there any relationship between what I call 'ritual revenge' and funerary sacrifice, the killing of animal victims which are burned whole or abandoned at the grave? Or to sacrifices to heroes, generally thought to have developed from funerary sacrifice? Meuli derived funerary sacrifices from the grief and rage felt upon the death of a loved one: weeping, the tearing of hair and clothing, the destruction of property, and the killing of animals and humans are all expressions, sincere or merely ceremonial, of these natural emotions. And thus in Meuli's view we should understand Achilles' slaughter of men and animals before Patroclus' pyre.²⁹ But even if Meuli's derivation is correct, I should think that the killing of members of the opposing army after the death of a warrior in battle constitutes a special case; and there is no certain evidence of such 'destructive sacrifices' of human victims in Greece at the funerals of persons who had died non-violently. On the surface there is an undeniable similarity between vengeance carried out at funerals – at least as represented by Homer – and the act of 'funerary sacrifice'. But there are also important differences: the performance of funerary sacrifices is not confined to cases where the deceased died by violence; the element

of vengeance is (seemingly) absent; and the victims are animals. One might speculate on possible prehistoric or 'original' relationships between funerary sacrifice and the sort of ritualized vengeance killing found in Homer: the exaction of vengeance even in the case of non-violent death,³⁰ the development of funerary sacrifice from a custom of avenging murder at the grave, the substitution of animals for human victims, etc. But it is quite possible, and in my view more probable, that the sacrifice of animals and the exaction of vengeance at the tomb were two independent rituals, in origin and in their subsequent development.

Even if 'ritual vengeance' carried out at funerals is distinct in origin and function from other forms of funerary ritual killing, it remains possible that such an act could be 'over-determined', i.e. that it could be viewed by the participants as performing additional functions, beyond the primary purpose of exacting vengeance. It would not be surprising if an act of ritual vengeance should also be considered a kind of sacrifice offered to honour or appease the dead or if it should be accompanied by a belief that those killed would thereafter serve the deceased in the world below.³¹ Still, there is no evidence in the text of Homer of such beliefs; the 'over-determination' of Achilles' action has rather been a product of modern times. And scholars have all too readily dismissed the poet's own representation of the slaughter of the Trojans, without adequately addressing the question why Homer should have understood it as he did. At least we should expect his characterization of the act to have been intelligible and acceptable to his audience, and it is plausible that actual ritual practice lay behind the 'blood-price' exacted by Achilles at Patroclus' pyre. This is imaginative literature, of course, and Homer's picture of the funeral proceedings may be highly exaggerated and inaccurate from a historical point of view. Still, it does not seem likely that he would simply invent a ritual detail such as this from thin air.³² And the existence of such a custom is supported by the sporadic occurrence of similar ritual killings even in the historical period.

FUNERARY RITUAL KILLING IN GREEK HISTORY

According to Justinus, Alexander had the accomplices in the assassination of Philip II killed at his father's tomb: *Prima illi cura paternarum exequiarum fuit, in quibus ante omnia caedis conscios ad*

tumulum patris occidi iussit (Just. *Epit.* 11.2.1). Justinus' *Epitome* of Pompeius Trogus may not be our most reliable source for Alexander's history, but I can see no decisive reason to reject his testimony here. Other writers speak of the punishment of conspirators (Plut. *Alex.* 10.4, Diod. Sic. 17.2.1, Arr. *Anab.* 1.25.1), but it is not said how or where. Diodorus, it is true, treats the punishment of the assassins and the burial of Philip as two distinct events, and in that order. But it is possible that the execution took place at the tomb but before the funeral ceremony itself (for so we may read Justinus' sentence, understanding the execution as only the first act in a lengthy process of *exequiae*); or that Diodorus, who disposes of the punishment of the conspirators and Philip's funeral in a single sentence, in the process of abridging his source obscured the relationship between the punishment and the burial.³³ In addition, a papyrus fragment concerning the death of Philip contains, in two successive lines, references to execution by *apotympanismos* (apparently a method of execution whereby criminals were shackled to boards and left to die)³⁴ and to Philip's corpse; but the fragment, which has defied certain interpretation, may not refer to an execution at the funeral itself.³⁵ In any case, Justinus' statement is not directly contradicted by any extant account, and, *faute de mieux*, we seem to have a historical example of execution at the tomb, and possibly during the funeral, of a murdered man.

Alexander's campaign against the Cossaeans has also been cited in this connection. According to Plutarch, after the death of Hephaestion Alexander received an oracle from Ammon instructing him to sacrifice to Hephaestion as a hero. He proceeded to hunt down and massacre the Cossaeans, 'and this was called', concludes Plutarch, 'the *enagismos* ['hero-sacrifice'] of Hephaestion' (*Alex.* 72.2–3). It has been suggested that Alexander was imitating Achilles here,³⁶ but if so, he was imitating Achilles' deeds on the battlefield, not the ritual killing of the twelve Trojans. This surely is not a case of human sacrifice but rather of sacrificial metaphor applied (it is not said by whom) to a military campaign, undertaken to assuage Alexander's grief. In fact, we find the same metaphor in Plutarch's account of the military exploits with which Pyrrhus consoled himself for the loss of his son (*Pyrrh.* 31.1). And Plutarch's version of the events is highly suspect, for he is the only source to connect Alexander's campaign against the Cossaeans with the oracle from Ammon. Indeed Arrian places the

campaign well after Hephaestion's death, when Alexander was already recovering from his grief (*Anab.* 7.15.2), but well before the arrival of the oracle enjoining hero-sacrifices to his friend (7.23.6; cf. Diod. Sic. 17.111.4–6 and 115.6).

Another of Achilles' deeds finds a parallel in fourth-century history. According to a number of accounts, all probably deriving ultimately from Aristotle, Simus of Larissa, the tyrant of the mid-fourth century, dragged Eurydamas son of Meidius around the tomb of his (Simus') brother Thrasyllus, whom Eurydamas had murdered.³⁷ Aristotle will have adduced the contemporary example in defence of Achilles' dragging of Hector's body around the burial mound of Patroclus, an action to which Plato had raised objections (*Resp.* 3, 391B); but Achilles, Aristotle argued, was only following a custom of his native Thessaly. One source states, on the authority of Callimachus, that Simus killed Eurydamas before dragging his body (Schol. Bb Ov. *Ib.* 331), so it is possible that the execution took place at the tomb also. Still, it seems doubtful that this was a Thessalian custom, as is alleged in the sources, rather than an individual act of Simus. Still less credible is the contention that the Homeric description of Achilles' dragging of Hector was based upon Thessalian custom: the reverse, that Simus consciously imitated the passage from the *Iliad*, is much more plausible.³⁸

In 182 BC the Achaean general Philopoemen was taken captive and later (it was said) forced to drink poison in his cell at Messene. When Messene fell, the Messenian commander Deinocrates committed suicide, those who had voted for Philopoemen's death were killed immediately, and those who had voted to have him tortured were arrested, to die themselves by torture (Plut. *Phil.* 18.4–21.2). The Achaean army then marched to Megalopolis with Philopoemen's cremated remains, and according to Plutarch a group of Messenian prisoners of unspecified number was stoned to death around the tomb (*Phil.* 21.5). The stoning of the prisoners, though not mentioned in other sources (Livy 39.50.9; Paus. 8.51.8), is historical, for the young Polybius, from whom Plutarch will have derived his information,³⁹ was present at the funeral (*Phil.* 21.3).

In addition to these historical examples, in Plato's *Laws* the Athenian recommends that a slave who has killed or plotted the death of a free man be taken by the public executioner to within sight of the dead man's tomb to be flogged, the number of stripes

being determined by his accuser. If he survives the flogging, he is to be put to death (Pl. *Leg.* 9, 872B–C). Plato's insistence that the slave be brought to a point where he can see the tomb suggests another motive for execution at the grave: to impress upon the killer, as he is executed facing the tomb, the reason for his punishment and the magnitude of his crime.

The killing of conspirators at Philip's tomb was an execution, as were Simus' killing of Eurydamas and Plato's recommended punishment of a slave. The stoning of the Messenian prisoners, on the other hand, was an additional act of retribution, and of the historical cases it is most closely comparable to the slaying of the Trojans in the *Iliad*. But all of the killings may be classed together as acts of vengeance carried out, if not during the funeral itself, then at the tomb of a murdered man. And it may be, as scholars have suggested, that these scattered instances reflect an earlier, more widespread practice. If so, then the custom will have existed in pre-legal society, before legal process and public execution took the place of private vengeance by the clan.⁴⁰ But it is possible that the custom was from the beginning a military practice, occasionally adopted also by absolute rulers. For such it was both in the *Iliad* and in the historical period. Finally, it seems possible that Achilles' slaughter of Trojan captives was partly responsible for the survival, or revival, of such customs: this at least is likely in the case of Alexander, who claimed ancestry from Achilles and for whom according to tradition Achilles was something of a role model.⁴¹

Whatever the prehistory of these practices, there is no justification for considering the execution of Messenian captives a sacrifice to the heroized Philopoemen (as did Rohde), much less a survival, perhaps no longer understood, of a custom of providing the dead with servitors (Schwenn).⁴² It was clearly an act of vengeance, even if the reprisal extended well beyond the actual perpetrator, as it had in Homer. And it is worth noting that the authors who reported these ritual killings do not seem to have regarded them as sacrifices of any kind. Had the killing of the Messenians been so regarded, we should have expected a word of protest from that staunch opponent of human sacrifice, Plutarch.⁴³ But, on the contrary, Plutarch wrote that Philopoemen was buried *ὡς εἰχός, ἐνδόξως* (*Phil.* 21.5), and he seems to have considered the stoning as the last of a series of acts of vengeance (*τιμωρία*: *Phil.* 21.1) exacted for Philopoemen's

death. Plato surely was not advocating human sacrifice, and I see no essential difference between his suggested manner of execution and the historical cases. As in the *Iliad*, sacrificial vocabulary is lacking in all of the accounts, and, more significantly, the reported means of killing – flogging, stoning, and possibly apotympanismos (? at Philip's tomb) – are all methods of punishment and execution, not of sacrifice.⁴⁴

EVIDENCE OF 'SUTTEE' IN GREEK MYTH?

In Euripides' *Suppliants* (980–1071) Evadne leaps from a cliff onto the pyre of Campaneus, a dramatic suicide which Nilsson called 'precious testimony as to Mycenaean funeral customs'. But the view that this story derives from a prehistoric custom of 'suttee', voiced also by others,⁴⁵ is open to a number of objections. For one thing, Evadne's leap appears for the first time in this play and may well have been the invention of Euripides, who was fond of the themes of noble suicide and willing self-sacrifice.⁴⁶ Also, suicide from grief in Greek literature is not limited to the suicide of widows: Jocasta slays herself over the bodies of Polynices and Eteocles (Eur. *Phoen.* 1455–9 and 1282), and Haemon commits suicide over the body of Antigone (Soph. *Ant.* 1231–43). And when Plato wrote that many people have gone willingly to Hades to be with their dead boyfriends, wives, and sons, he spoke largely from the point of view of the adult male – and he may not have been thinking solely of mythical examples (*Phd.* 68A).⁴⁷ Thus, in real life apparently as on the stage, people – lovers, wives and husbands, mothers and fathers – occasionally took their own lives in grief over the loss of loved ones or in the hope of rejoining them after death.

Nilsson also wrote of Evadne's suicide that 'it is absolutely inconceivable that such a myth was invented under the conditions which we know to have existed in Greece from Homer onward'.⁴⁸ But the fact is that such stories continued to be invented, told, and retold throughout antiquity. The earliest known example is the suicide of the wife of Protesilaus, the first of the Greeks to perish at Troy: in the *Cypria* she was called Polydora, but she appears with the more familiar name Laodameia in numerous, and increasingly lurid, later versions.⁴⁹ Indeed it is in the Hellenistic period that such stories begin to enjoy their greatest popularity. In the *Argonautica* Cleite hangs herself after

the death of Cyzicus (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.1063–5), and Lycophron has the earliest extant version of Oinone's leap onto the corpse of Paris (*Alex.* 61–8). Hero's leap from her tower to the body of Leander, most familiar from the sixth-century poem of Musaeus (338–43), had a Hellenistic model.⁵⁰ And, not surprisingly, Parthenius' collection of erotic tales, culled from a variety of Hellenistic sources, contains its share of suicides, including the suicides of grieving men: of Cyanippus, who slays himself at the pyre of Leucone, and of the necrophilic Dimoetes (Parth. *Amat. Narr.* 10.4 and 31.2).⁵¹ In still later antiquity Quintus of Smyrna will imitate the *Suppliants* in his description of Oinone's suicide (Quint. Smyrn. 10.411–89), explicitly comparing her with Evadne at 10.479–81.

Thus, stories of the suicides of wives and lovers could indeed be invented and admired in an age when such suicide was not sanctioned by custom, and rather than preserving 'precious testimony as to Mycenaean funeral customs', their popularity may say more about male attitudes of Classical and Hellenistic times. Suicide from grief – no doubt an occasional reality – provided moving and sensational material for poets and playwrights, but the study of their creations belongs to the history of literature rather than the history of Greek religion and funeral customs. The most that we can say on the basis of the literary evidence is that a culture which showed admiration for the suicide of widows in its literature may at an earlier stage have encouraged such suicide by custom. But simple human motives, adequate to explain the suicides of grieving wives in literature, are not in themselves sufficient to account for the existence of such a custom, which would involve such factors as the social and legal status of women.⁵²

The slaying of Polyxena on Achilles' tomb has also been thought to preserve a memory of an early Greek custom of 'suttee',⁵³ but this again is improbable. The story was told first in the *Ilioupersis*, but almost nothing is known for certain of the motives and circumstances of the killing.⁵⁴ The earliest extant versions are found in Euripides. In the *Trojan Women*, Polyxena is slain at Achilles' tomb as a funerary sacrifice.⁵⁵ In the fuller treatment in the *Hecuba*, Achilles' ghost appears above his grave to demand Polyxena's sacrifice before he will grant fair winds for the Greeks' journey home, and Polyxena bravely submits to sacrifice by Neoptolemus on Achilles' grave (*Hec.* 1–628). Polyxena is also

called an honour or prize (*geras*) for Achilles (41; cf. 94, 114–15, and 309), and her blood a drink-offering to his shade (536–8; cf. 392–3). And Hecuba herself wonders if vengeance may be Achilles' motive for demanding the sacrifice (263–70). Many of the details (including Polyxena's courageous deportment in the face of death) may be Euripidean embellishments, but in want of other evidence it seems likely that the story in the *Ilioupersis* was told essentially as it is here, a human sacrifice demanded by Achilles' ghost and carried out by his son. An influence of the Iphigeneia myth on this version is quite probable (just as the Greeks must sacrifice a virgin to obtain fair winds for their departure for Troy, so too must they sacrifice a virgin on their return), and thus the inspiration for the story might better be traced to the epic tradition than to customs of the Bronze Age.⁵⁶ In fact, there was a variant in which Polyxena was not sacrificed but rather buried by Neoptolemus, after dying of wounds inflicted by Odysseus and Diomedes. It is possible that this was the earlier version.⁵⁷

The story of Achilles' love for Polyxena and the representation of the sacrifice as a 'funerary wedding' or 'nuptial sacrifice' seem to date only from Hellenistic times.⁵⁸ And still later is the version in which Polyxena, herself in love with Achilles, commits suttee-like suicide over his grave (Philostr. *VA* 4.16 and *Her.* 19.11). Thus arguments for an early Greek custom of suttee or a custom of 'Totenhochzeit' (the 'marriage' of a virgin bride to a man who has died unwed), based as they are on late romantic reworkings of the legend, seem to be without foundation. If anything, the original myth would seem to represent a custom of sacrificing female war-captives over the graves of fallen warriors, but I would agree with Schwenn that no secure conclusions about actual practice can be drawn from the story.⁵⁹

LUCIAN *DE LUCTU* 14

In the *De luctu* (Περὶ πένθους), Lucian rails against funeral customs, mourning, and the belief that the dead have any feelings or wants beyond the grave. Among the targets of his attack (inspired by the Cynics' standard criticisms of burial customs)⁶⁰ are the practice of placing an obol in the mouth of the deceased (*Luct.* 10), the bathing and dressing of corpses (11), the tearing of hair and clothing (12), and the erection of tombstones (22–3). But

at *Luct.* 14 the satirist gives an extreme example of human folly in the treatment of the dead:

But why am I saying these things? For how many people have slain over their dead both horses and concubines, how many have slain even cupbearers and burned or buried clothing and other ornaments with the dead, as if they could use them there and enjoy them in the world below?

To whose customs was Lucian referring here? Of those few scholars who have mentioned the passage,⁶¹ most have cited it together with Achilles' slaying of Trojan captives in the *Iliad* as evidence for an early Greek custom of providing the dead with servants in the world below.⁶² Rohde, however, seems to have believed that Lucian alluded to practices in Greece of his own time, the second century after Christ.⁶³ More recently, Kurtz and Boardman, in a chapter of *Greek Burial Customs* devoted to funerary rites in the Classical and Hellenistic periods, write as follows:

There is no clear evidence for human sacrifice, although Lucian's account (*de Luctu* 14) of the way folk killed horses, concubines and cup-boys to serve them in the after life is not specifically referred to heroic antiquity.⁶⁴

Thus it is suggested that while it is probable that Lucian *was* referring to heroic antiquity, it remains possible that he was thinking of later Greece as well.

If Lucian was referring solely to 'heroic antiquity', his source will have been Greek legend. Yet, as we have seen, the material is meagre. Possibly Lucian was thinking of the four horses slain at Patroclus' funeral (*Il.* 23.171–2), but clearly the Trojan captives also slain on this occasion – however their killing has been interpreted by modern scholars – could hardly have been models for Lucian's cupbearers. Likewise, the reference to the killing of concubines could not have been based on the suicides of Evadne and other legendary wives (for they were wives, not concubines, and they took their own lives), although it is worth noting that the verb employed here by Lucian, *epikatasphazein*, was – with the reflexive pronoun – a common term for this sort of suicide in erotic literature.⁶⁵ The slaying of Polyxena seems to have been simply a funerary sacrifice in the earliest versions (pp. 61–2), but that her sacrifice could be understood in later antiquity as a

means of providing Achilles with female companionship in the world below is indicated by a passage of Dio Chrysostom, which (though appearing in a very different context) bears a marked similarity to Lucian's Cynical argumentation in the *De luctu*. Dio (*Or.* 6.18) puts the following words in the mouth of Diogenes the Cynic: 'And the Achaeans were so foolish as to think that even the dead have need of women and to slay Polyxena on the tomb of Achilles.'

Polyxena and the horses slain before Patroclus' pyre offer two possible models from 'heroic antiquity' for *Luct.* 14. But I know of no legend in which a cupbearer is killed at a funeral. Besides, to all appearances Lucian alludes to *actual* practices here, as he does throughout the diatribe. But there is no good evidence, literary or archaeological, for such customs in Greece of Classical, Hellenistic, or later times. Furthermore, the construction πόσοι . . . οἱ δέ and the plurals 'horses', 'concubines', and 'cupbearers' clearly imply that the killing of horses, concubines, and cupbearers at funerals was a quite common practice. Thus, given the paucity of evidence for such practices in Greece of any period, another possibility should be considered: that Lucian alluded, at least largely, to *non-Greek* customs. It is true that Lucian is concerned primarily with Greek burial practices, but in *Luct.* 21 Lucian will refer also to Persian, Indian, Scythian, and Egyptian customs; and his point will be that although these peoples dispose of their dead in different manners, they all mourn the dead, sharing with the Greeks the same foolish notion that the dead continue to be sentient beyond the grave. And to reach beyond the Greek world for an extreme example of human behaviour is quite in Lucian's manner: in the companion piece to the *De luctu*, for example, Lucian's criticism of Greek animal sacrifice culminates with a mention of the Tauri, who scorn the use of animal victims in favour of human sacrifices to their 'Artemis'; and he will go on to ridicule Assyrian, Phrygian, Lydian, and Egyptian beliefs (*Sacr.* 13–15).

For the killing of concubines, Lucian may have been thinking of the Indian custom of suttee, well known to the Greek world since the expedition of Alexander, and certainly known to Lucian.⁶⁶ And Herodotus (5.5) had described a similar custom in Thrace, where there was a fierce competition among the wives of a dead chieftain to be chosen to accompany him in the world beyond. But there is another passage of Herodotus which I believe Lucian

certainly had in mind when he wrote *Luct.* 14: at the sumptuous funeral of a Scythian king, a concubine, a cupbearer, a cook, a groom, a servingman, a courier, and horses were all killed to accompany their king after death (Hdt. 4.71.4). All three of Lucian's victims – horses, concubines, and cupbearers – appear here also, and to my knowledge these are the only two places in ancient Greek literature where they do appear together as victims slain at a funeral ceremony.

Lucian, in fact, frequently draws upon Herodotus, and often for ethnographic material.⁶⁷ In *Luct.* 21, Herodotus seems to have been a source of his knowledge of Egyptian embalming (Hdt. 2.86–90) and the 'Scythian' custom of eating the dead (1.216.2, actually a practice of the Massegetae). And he appears to have been particularly fascinated with the Scythians and their customs: his description of Scythian oath-taking in *Tox.* 37 was apparently based on Hdt. 4.70, and at the opening of the *Scytha* (1) he jokingly alludes to the 'Scythian' custom of sending messengers to the god Zamolxis (Salmoxis), actually a practice of the Thracian Getae described by the historian (4.94). I do not mean to suggest that Lucian alluded exclusively to Scythian burial customs here. Rather I think that he looked to a number of societies – Indian, Thracian, Scythian, and possibly Greek (at least as represented by Polyxena and the horses slain for Patroclus); and he may have known other examples from other cultures.⁶⁸ Indeed the phrasing of the passage suggests that he had more than one people in mind and that the killing of horses and concubines was more common than the practice of killing cupbearers. But Herodotus' description of the Scythian royal funeral was certainly a major inspiration for his statement, and the assumption that he alluded exclusively to Greek customs is surely incorrect: *De luctu* 14 should not be considered valuable evidence for Greek funerary practices of any period.

HOMER AND THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The relationship between 'Homeric' burial practices, preserved chiefly in the lengthy description of Patroclus' funeral in the *Iliad*, and actual practices, represented by archaeological finds, is a complex issue and well beyond the scope of my interests here, which are confined to a single aspect of Patroclus' elaborate

funeral ceremony. Also, as in any discussion of Homeric funeral customs, it should be borne in mind that the *Iliad* is poetry: Homer, Andronikos has done well to remind us, is neither historian nor archaeologist.⁶⁹ It is true that every element of the Homeric funeral has found some parallel in an archaeological find.⁷⁰ But as no one burial containing all of the elements or on anywhere near the scale of Patroclus' funeral has been discovered, it is likely that the Homeric description is a composite of various practices 'remembered' or known from various places and times, whether from the late Bronze Age or a period closer to the poet's own day. And even where there is a similarity between an archaeological find and an element of the Homeric funeral, an actual, historical relationship cannot be taken for granted; this is perhaps nowhere so true as in the area under consideration here. With these cautions in mind, let us look briefly at possible relationships between the slaughter of the Trojan captives and the archaeological evidence for funerary ritual killing described in chapter 2.

Archaeologists have often mentioned the twelve Trojan captives in connection with their discoveries.⁷¹ And yet it has been nearly universally held by these archaeologists that their finds represent a custom of killing servants or slaves that they attend their masters in the afterlife; thus they seem to follow religious historians in assuming that Homer misunderstood the meaning of the practice he described in the poem. But such reasoning is methodologically suspect. If excavated skeletons indeed represent a custom of killing slaves as postmortem attendants of their masters, it would be simpler, and, I think, much sounder to conclude that there is no connection whatsoever between the killing of Trojans (who were prisoners of war, slain, it is expressly stated, for the sake of vengeance) and the archaeological remains. On the other hand, if we wish to explore possible connections between the Homeric incident and archaeology, we should ask whether Homer's representation of Achilles' actions might shed some light on our interpretation of the archaeological finds. If the Homeric description was based upon an actual custom of exacting vengeance at funerals (a custom for which there is later historical evidence also), it is worth considering the possibility that some of the dromos burials represent remains of such a practice as well.

One aspect of the Mycenaean and Cypriot 'slave burials' cannot be overemphasized: their extreme rarity. At Salamis, some 150

tombs have been excavated, but only in the dromoi of two tombs (and these by no means the largest or richest) has any evidence suggesting ritual killing been found. And even if we accept the excavator's interpretation for all of the alleged 'slave burials' from the Kastros cemetery at Lapithos, there were only four cases in twenty-nine tombs, which were frequently reused; and as many as 300 years separate the earliest of these dromos burials from the latest.⁷² As for the Bronze Age mainland, in only four instances have dromos burials been interpreted as representing 'human sacrifices', while thousands of chamber tombs have been excavated. Only very infrequently, it seems, were people killed at funerals in these places for any reason, and this infrequency suggests that the killings were prompted by some extraordinary circumstance. Could this extraordinary circumstance have been the murder of the main occupant of the tomb, or his death in battle? Might the skeletons found in the dromoi of these tombs represent, not slaves or servants of the deceased, but rather his killers, or members of a military enemy slain in retaliation for his death?

Also to be considered is the fact that the alleged victims were in most cases treated with very little respect. They were provided with few if any funeral gifts and apparently wore little in the way of clothing; in only one case is jewelry (a ring) reported (Salamis Tomb 83). Two of the Cypriot victims seem to have been bound (Lapithos Tomb 422 and Salamis Tomb 2); a third was reportedly buried 'in a mutilated condition' (Lapithos Tomb 422); and two bodies were thrown unceremoniously face down upon the corpse below (Lapithos Tombs 412 and 422). Also, with the exception of the 'slave burials' found in the Dendra and Kazarma tholoi (and in the one case the interpretation is extremely doubtful, in the other the material is inadequately published), the victims were buried outside of the tomb: they lie, like the Trojan captives, ἄνευθεν, apart (*Il.* 23.241–2). Would this have been the case if the intention had been to provide the deceased with servitors in the afterlife?⁷³

The possibility that the dromos burials represent victims of ritual execution or vengeance killing merits serious consideration, at least in some of the cases. The apparent lack of regard shown to the victims, their occasional binding, and their exclusion from the tomb all argue against the common view that these are burials of slaves meant to serve their master after death. And the rarity of such burials suggests that some unusual circumstance lay behind

the killings – a rarity, at any rate, which seems difficult to explain if it was in fact the *custom* of wealthy Mycenacans and their descendants in Cyprus to require the company of slaves in the world below. Furthermore, while there is no good written evidence for a practice of killing servants to attend their masters after death, we do have a few accounts of vengeance killing or execution carried out at the grave. And the remains of such a custom would look, I think, very much like most of the ‘slave burials’ which have thus far been uncovered. Imagine if a large Hellenistic tomb should be found in the area of Megalopolis with a mass burial of human skeletons (showing fractures on the skulls and other bones) at its entrance: we would probably hear again of ‘human sacrifices’ or of attendants slain at their master’s funeral (though perhaps there would also be some surprise expressed at finding evidence of such practices at so late a date). But if the tomb could be dated to the 180s BC and its occupant identified accordingly as Philopoemen, then we should know the circumstances and the true nature of the ritual killing.

The funeral of Patroclus has been cited by Alexandrescu and Eftimie in connection with their remarkable discoveries at Istria on the Black Sea. Here three Archaic tumuli, built over central pyres, contained peripheral burials of humans and horses. Two skeletons from Tumulus XVII had been bound, and pits dug beneath Tumulus XII held two mass burials, containing between them thirty-five human skeletons, mixed in with the remains of at least eleven dismembered horses (cf. *Il.* 23.242: ἐπιμῖξ ἵπποι τε καὶ ἄνδρες). Although the pottery was almost exclusively Greek and although no separate Greek cemetery has been found, it has been concluded from the manner of burial that the tumuli belonged to the indigenous Thracian population. And chiefly on the grounds of the violent treatment of the bodies, the excavators argue convincingly that the persons found on the edges of these truly Homeric tumuli were not servants slain to attend their masters after death. Rather, they compare the slaughter of the Trojan captives and suggest that these burials may represent cases of vendetta, vengeance killings for the murders of the persons cremated on the central pyres; but they suggest further that these ‘sacrifices expiatoires’ may not have been restricted to funerals of persons who had themselves died by violence.⁷⁴ Certainly these burials differ in character and scale from those under consideration here, but I feel that most of the observations of the Romanian

archaeologists hold good for the less spectacular Greek burials as well.

The soil of Cyprus has been particularly rich in yielding parallels to Homeric burial customs, and J. N. Coldstream has argued that the circulation of the epic had a direct influence on Cypriot funerary practices.⁷⁵ Coldstream notes the following similarities between the archaeological finds and the funeral of Patroclus: amphorae are often found in the dromoi of tombs at Salamis (cf. *Il.* 23.170); a cattle bone was found in the dromos of Tomb 2, and sheep bones in the dromos of a tomb at Palaioaphos (cf. 23.166); horse (or donkey) burials are common at Salamis (cf. 23.171);⁷⁶ Salamis Tomb 1 contained a cremation, and above the pyre were found 'six unburnt and unbroken pots . . . which had evidently been used for putting out the flames' (cf. 23.250);⁷⁷ the remains of the cremation were placed in a bronze cauldron (a step down from the epic gold) with traces of cloth (cf. 23.252-4); a large tumulus was built over Salamis Tomb 3 (cf. 23.255-7); and finally, a human skeleton, apparently bound, and the remains of two others were found in the dromos of Salamis Tomb 2 (cf. 23.175).

Coldstream continues: 'For most of these practices, if taken singly, the hardened sceptic could adduce parallels from pre-Homeric Cyprus or from other lands not too far distant from the Greeks', and he himself provides some examples.⁷⁸ Perhaps I am Coldstream's hardened sceptic, but in the area under consideration here four of the nine alleged instances of funerary ritual killing date to Cypro-Geometric I and II, i.e. to pre-Homeric Cyprus.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Coldstream's typical Cypriot royal burial is actually made up of features taken from various tombs at Salamis, and in one case from elsewhere (Palaioaphos) in Cyprus. The 'combination of so many features' which Coldstream finds so striking does not occur in any single burial.⁸⁰ Of the Homeric features, Salamis Tomb 2 offers amphorae, asses, the human skeletons, and a cattle bone (although this seems to belong to the first burial period in the eighth century, not to the period of the 'human sacrifices').⁸¹ But there is no evidence that the deceased from either burial period was cremated;⁸² the asses and humans in the dromos were not. Thus, if the burial in Tomb 2 (and other tombs at Salamis show even fewer Homeric features) was influenced by the Homeric description of Patroclus' funeral (or anything like it), the imitation was not very close or thorough, and any influence was

slight. It seems possible that descriptions of elaborate heroic burials in epic poetry inspired among these wealthy Cypriots a desire for lavish funeral ceremonies, but certainly none of the material from the royal tombs justifies the conclusion that the 'burials were conducted with strict attention to Mycenaean precedent as described by Homer'.⁸³

Homer represents the killing of the twelve Trojan captives as an act of vengeance, and it is possible that some of the archaeological evidence should be interpreted in this way also. It may be that the incident derives from Mycenaean practices, but it is also possible that the poet, or one of his predecessors, knew of a custom of vengeance killing at the tomb from some place in the Greek world of his own time. On the strength of the present evidence I would not go so far as to suggest that this place was Cyprus, although one prominent Homeric scholar has done so.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the possibility that the Homeric funeral description exerted a direct influence on Cypriot burial procedure seems, in this respect especially, rather remote.