

Historical Review

Achilles and Patroclus: Lesser known Physicians of Homer's Iliad

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During the Trojan War, aside from the renowned Greek physicians, Machaon and Podalirius, sons of Asclepius, another two heroes, Achilles and Patroclus, are reported to have been capable of providing medical care to the wounded in the Greek camp.

Keywords: Homeric Epics, Injury, Medicine, Trojan War, Iliad, Patroclus, Achilles

*Οὐκ ἔνι ἰατρικὴν εἰδέναι ὅστις μὴ οἶδεν ὅτι ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος
(One cannot claim to know/understand medicine, if one who
ignores what is man),*

Hippocrates of Kos (460-360 BC)

Medical care of Achaeans and Trojans warriors

According to the Homeric Epics, especially the Iliad, it appears that there was a major difference in available medical care and treatment between the warring Achaeans and Trojan factions. According to the descriptions, the Trojans had especially poor medical care, oftentimes calling on the Gods for help in the case of injury.

The only reported case of medical care in the Trojan camp is described as a result of the battle field duel between the Achaean Menelaos and the Trojan Helenus, during which Menelaos pierced Helenus's upper extremity with a spear. The medical intervention of the Trojan Agenor (son of Antenor) proved effective: "καὶ τὸ μὲν ἐκ χειρὸς ἔρυσεν μεγάλθυμος Ἀγήνωρ, αὐτὴν δὲ ξυνέδησεν ἐϋστρεφεῖ οἶδς ἄωτψ σφενδόνῃ, ἣν ἄρα οἱ θεράπων ἔχε ποιμένι λαῶν" (Agenor removed the broken spear from the upper extremity

and dressed it with a well-wrapped woolen bandage which his companion provided)¹.

We will also refer to the description of Hector's injury caused by the Achaean Ajax, son of Telamon: "Ἐκτορα δ' ἐν πεδίῳ ἴδε κείμενον, ἄμφι δ' ἑταῖροι εἶαθ', ὃ δ' ἀργαλέψ ἔχετ' ἄσθματι κῆρ ἀπινύσσων αἶμ' ἐμέων" (Hector lay on the field with his comrades around him. He had severe dyspnoea [ἀργαλέψ ἔχετ' ἄσθματι], was unconscious or fainted [κῆρ ἀπινύσσων], with blood running from his mouth [αἶμ' ἐμέων])².

And afterwards: "νέον δ' ἐσαγείρετο θυμόν, ἄμφι δ' ἐγινώσκων ἑτάρους· ἀτὰρ ἄσθμα καὶ ἰδρὼς παύετ', ἐπεὶ μιν ἔγειρε Διὸς νόος αἰγιόχοιο" (Hector had by now risen, recovered his senses [νέον δ' ἐσαγείρετο θυμόν] recognizing his comrades around him; the dyspnoea [ἄσθμα] and sweat [ἰδρὼς] stopped, because he had been resurrected by the will of Zeus)³.

The nearly complete absence of medical care in the Trojan camp is demonstrated by Hector's words after his miraculous recovery from his aforementioned serious injury.

"ὅς δέ κεν ὑμέων βλήμενος ἡδὲ τυπείς θάνατον καὶ πότμον ἐπίσπῃ τεθνάτω" (Whoever of you is injured [βλήμενος] or wounded in hand-to-hand combat will be abandoned to his fate [πότμον] even if it be death [τεθνάτω])⁴.

The medical knowledge of Patroclus and Achilles

Besides the sons of Asclepius, Machaon and Podalirius, who were prominent, capable Achaean physicians ("ἡτῆρ' ἀγαθὼ Ποδαλείριος ἡδὲ Μαχάων")⁵, Homer mentions two additional heroes, Achilles and Patroclus, who were capable of providing medical treatment to the wounded in the Achaean camp.

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Achilles was taught medicine by the Centaur Chiron, the eldest of the Centaurs. Chiron was the instructor in medicine for the God Asclepius⁶, Achilles⁷ and the mythical hero Jason⁸. The etymology of the name Chiron “Χείρων” comes from the Greek word “χείρ” which means hand and by extension he who teaches all the skills which are employed by its use (mixing plants for therapeutic purposes, music, archery, etc.)^{9,10}.

The parents of Achilles, Peleus and Thetis, placed their barely twelve-day old (“δωδεκαταίος”) son in the care of the Centaur Chiron. The boy, under the guardianship of Chiron, received in depth education in music, in medicine, in horse riding, in hunting and in the art of war, skills which proved valuable on his subsequent heroic path, including the Trojan War where he excelled in nearly every endeavour¹¹.

Chiron was the source of the spear that only Achilles was able to master and use in the battle with Hector^{12,13}. This spear was given to Peleus by Chiron on the occasion of his marriage to Thetis and it was then passed down to Achilles. The Gods, for a wedding present, offered the armour of Achilles which, during the Trojan War, Patroclus borrowed but which subsequently was removed by Hector after the death of Achilles' close friend¹⁴. On the red-figure vessels Chiron is represented as bearing a tree, probably an ash tree (of the Family Oleaceae and Genus Fraxinus) whose cut branches may be made into a spear¹⁵.

It is reported that Chiron taught medicine to Asclepius, the father of Machaon. Asclepius passed his skills as healer on to his son who treated Menelaos after his wounding by Pandarus. Actually, Machaon used medicines from the legacy that Chiron had given to Asclepius¹⁶. Achilles and Asclepius learned medicine from Chiron and during the Trojan War used Chiron's medical knowledge jointly. When Machaon was wounded¹⁷, Achilles sent Patroclus to learn details. Achilles' special concern for Machaon's health appears to be the result of the close relationship of Achilles with Asclepius and his family¹⁸. When Patroclus had completed his task, Eurypylus, who was wounded, asked him for treatment. Patroclus wanted to return to Achilles but was unable to refuse a comrade's plea for help.

In Rhapsody XI, Eurypylus, wounded in the thigh, calls upon Patroclus and says: “ἀλλ' ἐμὲ μὲν σὺ σώσον ἄγων ἐπὶ νῆα μέλαιναν, μηροῦ δ' ἔκταμ' ὁϊστόν, ἀπ' αὐτοῦ δ' αἶμα κελαινὸν νίζ' ὕδατι λιαρῶ, ἐπὶ δ' ἦπα φάρμακα πάσσε ἐσθλά, τά σε προτί φασιν Ἀχιλλῆος δεδιδάχθαι, ὃν Χείρων ἐδίδαξε δικαιοτάτος Κενταύρων. ἡτροὶ μὲν γὰρ Ποδαλείριος ἡδὲ Μαχάων τὸν μὲν ἐνὶ κλισίῃσιν οἶομαι ἔλκος ἔχοντα χρῆζοντα καὶ αὐτὸν ἀμύμονος ἡτήρος κεῖσθαι· ὃ δ' ἐν πεδίῳ Τρώων μένει ὁξύν Ἀρηα” (but take me to the ship in order to save my life, remove the spear head from my thigh, wash from it the dark blood [αἶμα κελαινὸν] with lukewarm water and apply analgesics and effective/beneficial medications [ἦπα φάρμακα πάσσε ἐσθλά], which Chiron, the most just of the race of Centaurs, from whom Achilles learned and you were also taught because of our two physicians, Machaon was wounded, lies in his tent and has need of an excellent physician, and the other, Podalirius, fights the Trojans, and is

unfaltering in battle)¹⁹.

And returning to Eurypylus and his thigh wound. Patroclus did not let him suffer: “ὑπὸ στέρνοιο λαβὼν ἄγε ποιμένα λαὼν ἐς κλισίην· θεράπων δὲ ἰδὼν ὑπέχευε βοείας· ἐνθά μιν ἐκτανύσας ἐκ μηροῦ τάμνε μαχαίρῃ ὁξὺ βέλος περιπευκές, ἀπ' αὐτοῦ δ' αἶμα κελαινὸν νίζ' ὕδατι λιαρῶ, ἐπὶ δὲ ρίζαν βάλε πικρὴν χερσὶ διατρίψας ὀδυνήφατον, ἧ οἱ ἀπάσας ἔσχ' ὀδύνας· τὸ μὲν ἔλκος ἐτέρσσετο, παύσατο δ' αἶμα” (inside the tent he grasped him below the sternum and moved him and laid him on ox hides that had been spread by an attendant. With a knife he incised [τάμνε] the thigh and removed the painful, sharp [περιπευκές] spear head, washed the dark blood [αἶμα κελαινὸν] from the wound with lukewarm water, placed bitter root [ρίζαν βάλε πικρὴν] on the wound, rubbing it with his hands, as a pain killer [ὀδυνήφατον] to stop the pain [ὀδύνας], to dry the wound and to stop the haemorrhage)²⁰. The bitter root yarrow was *Achillea millefolium*, a plant with haemostatic and analgesic effects²¹. The process of healing reveals knowledge of fundamental surgical procedure, the use of therapeutic substances and the care of wounds, knowledge that was used later by the physicians of Hippocrates. The pharmaceutical plants of Chiron were able to heal the wound of Eurypylus, which suggests that specific procedures were followed for treatment of wounds. Although Patroclus was the one who cared for the wound, Achilles had passed on to him the skill that Chiron had taught him (Figure 1). And as it is then reported “ὥς ὁ μὲν ἐν κλισίῃσι Μενoitίου ἄλκιμος υἱὸς ἱάτ' Εὐρύπυλον βεβλημένον” (The brilliant son of Menoetius [i.e. Patroclus] healed [ἱάτο] the wound of Eurypylus)²².

But the medical care of Eurypylus continued in the patient's tent: “τόφρ' ὃ γ' ἐνὶ κλισίῃ ἀγαπήνορος Εὐρυπύλοιο ἦστό τε καὶ τὸν ἔτερπε λόγοις, ἐπὶ δ' ἔλκεϊ λυγρῶ φάρμακ' ἀκέσματ' ἔπασσε μελαινῶν ὀδυνῶν” (Patroclus sat in Eurypylus's tent and comforted him with words [Note: exactly as the relatives of the patients do today] and tended his serious wound with medicines [φάρμακα] in order to assuage the pain)²³.

At this point we should mention that the teaching of the practice of medicine to Achilles by the centaur Chiron is confirmed not only in the Homeric epics but by Eratosthenes of Cyrene (276–195/194 BC): “Οὗτος δοκεῖ Χείρων εἶναι ὁ ἐν τῷ Πηλίῳ οἰκῆσαι, δικαιοσύνη δὲ ὑπερενέγκας πάντας ἀνθρώπους καὶ παιδεύσας Ἀσκληπιὸν τε καὶ Ἀχιλλέα” (it is widely believed that Chiron, who lived in Pylion, was the most just of all humans, and taught [παιδεύσας] Asclepius and Achilles). In the text of Eratosthenes, he provides another remarkable piece of information that even the God Asclepius had been taught by the Centaur Chiron²⁴.

Regarding Achilles spear, its properties were described characteristically in the myth of Telephos. The Achaeans, in their first expedition against Troy, because they did not know the way, reached Mysia. In the ensuing battle there, specifically on the plain of the Caicus river, Telephos, the king of Mysia, was wounded by Achilles²⁵.

Achilles, as well as Odysseus, played a major role with regard to the healing of Telephos. When Telephos' wound did not heal, he sought out an oracle of Apollo who prophesied that



Figure 1. Red-figure Kylix (Kylix or Cylix: one of the most popular wine-drinking vessels, used mainly at symposia and many times the hosts ordered these vessels from the potters and the vessel painters with specific artistic decoration. These drinking vessels were spread beyond the Greek borders and were exported to other peoples, mainly to the Etruscans), circa 500 B.C., Berlin, Antikenmuseen. The vessel carries the inscription "made by the Sosias" (Σωσίας ἐποίησε) and is considered one of the finest works of the great painter Euphronius. On the exterior of the Kylix, Hercules is led to Olympus. On the interior, Achilles tends to Patroclus' wound. Patroclus sits cross-legged on his shield with his left leg stretched out to the edge of the picture showing in this way uneasiness and pain. He has removed his helmet and unfastened his breastplate though he continues to wear a light cap which was worn for protection under the helmet. Next to his right leg an arrow is seen, obviously the one that caused the wound. His open mouth reveals his teeth, indicative of pain. Both men are concentrated on what they are doing. Achilles, who was taught the art of medicine by the wise centaur Chiron, with skilled hands and great care, tends the wounded hand of his friend. The painter insisted on the finest anatomical detail. The painter used white for the dressing and the teeth of Patroclus.

he, who had injured him, would be able to heal him: "ὁ τρώας καὶ ἰάσεται" (your assailant will heal you)²⁶. Then Telephos found the Achaean's camp and asked Achilles to heal him and in return he would show them the way to Troy. Achilles, using the excuse that he didn't know how to heal Telephos, refused. Then Odysseus interpreted the oracle saying that the weapon itself, the spear of Achilles, was that which could heal the wound. In an excerpt which has been saved from the tragedy *Telephos* by Euripides²⁷ the prophesy of the oracle is stated: "τριστοῖσι λόγχης θέλγεται ῥινήμασιν" and bronze filings from the head of the spear, which are known today for their broad spectrum of antimicrobial effects²⁸, are presented as therapeutic agents, in combination with dressings using the bitter root yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) that Achilles placed on Telephos' wound²⁹. The method of therapy was an uncommon

homeopathic procedure representing the culmination of a primitive therapeutic ritual. What is certain is that the spear is symbolic of the double legacy of Achilles, that of a healer and that of a warrior, his inheritance from Chiron.

In the *Iliad*, four reports relative to Chiron, healing^{16,30} and wounds^{13,31} are related to the homeopathic medical tradition. These reports maintain two of Chiron's legacies, which are passed on to future generations. The first is the medicines that Chiron gave to Asclepius, which subsequently became the specialty of Machaon as well as the medicines that Achilles taught to Patroclus. The second is the spear that was given to Peleus, Achilles' father, and passed into the possession of Achilles' son, Neoptolemus. This spear had supernatural properties³² not only to cause wounds but also in healing, a characteristic which becomes apparent in post-Homeric

literature. The narration that develops in later texts clearly shows Achilles' ability as a healer while his spear is a symbol of mysterious homeopathic wound healing and therapy³³.

Conclusion

In the Homeric Epics the training of the "warrior" physicians in surgery, in the use of medicines and in the treatment of wounds is clearly described³⁴. Achilles was one of the lesser known physician-healers of the Trojan War. His medical knowledge and use of therapeutic agents came from training he received from the Centaur Chiron. He, in turn, passed his knowledge on to Patroclus. Chiron's encouragement and guidance of Achilles in therapeutics is reported in Homer: "τά σε προτί φασιν Ἀχιλλῆος δεδιδάχθαι, ὃν Χείρων ἐδίδαξε δικαιοτάτος Κενταύρων"³⁰ and more extensively by Pindar and Euripides.

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