AntonyMakrinosPodcast

Tue, 11/9 8:08PM • 30:12

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Achilles, hero, Homer, Iliad, war, story, happy ending, Superman, Hector, Homeric, ancient, modern, UCL, cares, killed, read, gods, superhero, relatable, human condition

00:15

All right welcome everybody to the podcast series ancient world new voices are each episode discusses a university research on an exciting aspect of the ancient world brought to you by Mateen Arghandehpour, Giovanna Di Martino, Sofia Bongiovanni, and Melissa Peres da Silva. Today I have a guest with me Antony Makrinos who received his PhD in classics from UCL in 2005. He has been a research and teaching fellow and a visiting lecturer at UCL, KCL, and Queen Mary College, and he's currently an associate professor in classics in the Greek and Latin department and UCL. He's also a senior teaching fellow at the Advanced HE his interests include Greek epic, especially Homer, Greek education, scholarship and Byzantium, reception studies, especially Homer on film on popular culture. And he's currently working on Eustathius’ commentary in Homer's Odyssey He is also director of the summer school in Homer or UCL, and he has contributed to many UCL and KCL courses in Classical Studies. Hey, Anthony, how are you? Hello.

01:23

Mateen Great to be with you. Lovely.

01:25

So Antony, I have with me today a picture. I know. On the right, I have Superman, who's the person on the left?

01:35

So the person of the left is my favorite hero of all times, that is Achilles, the main character of the Iliad of Homer's Iliad, the epic which was orally composed conventionally we think at 750 BC although this is these dates disputed by by some, but let's let's for our purposes, let's say eighth century BC, and he's my absolute hero, you know, is my favorite character is a is like a superhero. He's like an ancient superhero. Yes, exactly. That's why in this picture, I have put him opposite Superman, you know.

02:12

Yeah. So obviously putting Achilles next to Superman, as you have kind of inspires me to think. Do you think of Achilles in the same way as they you know, I would think of Superman?

02:26

Oh, absolutely. I think Achilles and Superman have got so many similarities. You know, Achilles is a kind of ancient superhero. He has got superpowers. He is very beautiful. He is swift footed. This is the, the typical formulaic epithets that Homer gives him, he has got an excellent physical condition, he can run faster than his horses, he has got divine lineage comes from the ancient goddess of the sea Thetis, and Peleus, the mortal Peleus, the hero Peleus, is he has got beauty and masculinity, he has got the ability to change politics, he either experiences violence or he uses violence. And other times he's lonely. He is the lonely kind of hero that we have in the Iliad. And he is also not invulnerable. We all know about Achilles Achilles’ heel, I know this kind of characteristics, you know, there are similarities with Superman. Superman is also super powerful. He has got some sort of divine lineage, and he's very beautiful and masculine. And he changes politics, and he uses violence. And sometimes he's a lonely hero. And he has got of course, kryptonite as a kind of the weak point. yeah, exactly as an Achilles heel. So I do find that, you know, they run in parallel, if you want. And we shouldn't be surprised by that. Because it is the same kind, I mean, the same kind of needs that ancient audiences had for a hero, more or less, we do have the same kind of needs as well, you know, they are all driven by the human condition. So yeah, I don't see why, why not? Achilles is an ancient Superman.

03:57

Yeah. So, you know, just to draw up on the story. Superman kind of discovers himself doesn't he, he's kind of saved from his home planet and is sent to Earth. And you know, he grows up thinking he's a normal person, and then finds out that I'm a super person. Does Achilles have a similar troubled upbringing? Like, does he have to discover himself in a kind of way?

04:21

Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think I think this is a very good observation. I think Achilles at the beginning of the Iliad is a very different person than Achilles in the end of the Iliad, you know, and he does go, even if it even even if the Iliad and the plot of the Iliad narrates what has happened, you know, within the within, let's say, 50 days of the 10th year of the war of the Trojan War, we find the case of the beginning and in the end of the Iliad, and mainly this is because he's going on a personal journey. You know, Achilles comes from a sea goddess and his psyche is very much like the sea. So he has got those changes, changes of moods, you know, You can find him. Yeah, I mean, you can find you can find him sometimes being, you know, very calm and playing the lyre to his friend Patroclus. And then in the next books, you will find him killing 100 men, you know. So he’s a bit like the sea, I think he's a bit like the sea, one one time, you know, it's very calm and, and soothing. And then next in the next minute, you have got a tempest. So I think that is Achilles for you. But at the same time, I think he's a very complex character, a character who has got a lot of positive features, but also a lot of negative features. And he's, he's a very tragic hero. He's trying to struggling to find his way through a war, and at the same time to achieve what every Homeric hero wants to achieve, which is glory, and his name being immortal. So, you know, he's finding some, just like every tragic hero, he's finding himself in front of very difficult decisions. And that's why I love him, you know, so much I love I love all, you know, this, this kind of impossibility that he has to deal with.

06:03

So So you mentioned that Homeric heroes are looking after glory. How does that compare to you know, Superman? Because Superman, I would never even think if he was looking for glory, he's very modest. He's Yes, in my opinion, you know, he's a hero, because he always saves the day. He's the deus ex machina. Of course. Yes,

06:26

Yes, of course. I mean, so what I think is that we have got two different models of heroism here. So if we want to talk about the Homeric heroism, or you know, what we call a Homeric hero, I mean, even within Homer, there are differences. So for example, if you take Achilles, Achilles, as I said, is a very individual or individualistic, if you want, hero, he cares for his own glory, He cares for his own brother, he wants to achieve these, he cares for Patroklos, you know, the people who are close to him, as opposed and he doesn't, it's not that he doesn't care about the Greeks, he does care about the Greeks, but they are not his number one priority, his number one priority is actually to achieve glory and honor and to live forever, he's made to live forever, which is, if you compare this to Hector, for example, Hector is a different kind of hero. You know, he Hector cares about his family, he cares about his country, he defends his country, he's a patriot, he cares for the common good, you know, etc, etc. And this is not to say that Achilles is bad, and Hector is good, or the other way around. Because this is another another thing, which I find is a kind of difference with modern heroes. But in the earlier you don't have very much this sense of good and evil, you can easily say Achilles is good, and Hector is bad, or the other way around, there are just different kinds of heroes, and they accomplish heroism in different ways. Now, if you compare this to modern heroes, like Superman, or Batman, or you know, Wonder woman, or whatever, they all those superheroes, they are all closer to Hector, because I think they perhaps even because we live in, you know, in post Christian times, you know, all these heroes, they want to achieve something good, they want to protect the community, they want to offer to the community, they self-sacrifice sometimes, and as you said, Mateen they don't seem to care about themselves so much, you know, they're more, they're more they're thinking about the other, which is something very Christian, isn't it? Now, of course, this is something that you and there is also the sharp distinction between good and evil, right. So for our heroes, you can easily say that, you know, Batman is against Joker, and you can easily say Batman is good, Joker is bad, or Superman is good and Lex Luthor is bad witch in the Homeric times you can, it's easier to do it with the Odyssey rather than the Iliad. So in the Odyssey, you can perhaps say that, you know, there's a clear distinction between all these on the one hand, who is trying to achieve something glorious and heroic, and come back and to reconstruct if you want his family and his world, as opposed to the suitors those who are actually violating the xenia. And they are, it is very obvious that they are doing something wrong, and they should be punished because of that. So I would say that this is this is closer to our ideas of how the heroes should behave. And of course, it's something that also happens with any of us. But I think with Achilles, it doesn't happen, you know, you don't have such a clear, sharp distinction between good and evil and the thing Yeah, you know, Achilles is a very specific kind of hero, who, as I said, is trying to accomplish the heroic ideal for himself. And this is totally fine.

09:31

Yeah, let me let me dig a bit deeper here. So you mentioned Hector and him being a bit closer to what we think of as a hero because he's serving family and community and you know, he has, he has a wife and a child waiting for him back home. There's a whole theme of that, right. It's very emotional. So you know, I'm just saying that I can relate very clearly to Hector, what does Achilles do? You know, besides being strong, that makes him a hero? Why do you route for Achilles?

10:01

yes, yes. So I think, Achilles, as I said, he's he's trying, I mean that the values that define, you know, a typical Homeric hero. So if we go back to the definition of the Homeric hero, you know, as I said, it is someone who is not like the common soldier, obviously, this person, whoever that Homeric hero is, has got physical and intellectual superpowers, beauty, strength, speed, high intelligence, rhetorical skills, you know, military excellence, leadership, the ability to lead people, he's wealthy, he comes from an aristocratic background. In fact, he actually comes from the gods themselves, you know, he's got divine lineage, most of the if not all, of the Homeric heroes, they are directly linked or indirectly linked to the gods. And he achieves honor and glory, and it's very difficult to to defeat them. So Achilles actually ticks all these boxes, so he's the best of the Achaeans. And he is a very special kind of person in the Iliad , you can, you can sense that with, even with the relationship with his weapons, you know, his spear, nobody else can lift up, he's the only one who can lift it in fact, Patroclus, who is the closest person to Achilles leaves, Achilles is spear behind, he has got these amazing horses, that can that are immortal, two out of three are immortal, and they are a gift of Zeus to his father, and they can actually talk and he has got, of course, the very special shields, which, you know, Homer spends almost a whole a whole book on it, which is given to him by Hephaestus. So another god, another gift from God. So it is it's very obvious, and this kind of relationship with the weapons is also quite interesting. 19 I wanted to say, because it's something that passes into Western literature. Remember, for example, the Excalibur that Arthur has, or if you see more than films, you know, all the more than superheroes in films, they have got this special relationship with their weapons, or they have got these always the preparation scene, where our character is preparing to fight, etc, etc.

12:04

Like Iron Man in his suit. Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah. And

12:07

even in modern Greek literature, we have got heroes who even talk to their weapons, you know, so you know, it is it is a very character, a very characteristic thing, but he is not I think Achilles is not only special because of that, I think, the most special if you want power that Achilles has, is to show us what human on the one hand what human nature and human condition is. And on the other hand, what war does to people, you know, so these are too central, you know, I think the too central themes, or two central aspects of Achilles is life in the Iliad. So on the one hand, the humans can take the wrong decision, even the best of humans can take the wrong decision. It's the famous hamartia hamartia. So the misjudgment of the heroes so the heroes can mis misjudge. And in our case, in Achilles is case, Achilles misjudges what Patroclus is going to do, you know, in war. So Well, first, the first thing misjudgment is what is going to happen with the quarrel and after he his removal, and how he's going to react to that, because initially, he's like, Okay, I'm not going to fight for you, I'm going back home, but then when the Trojans win, and you know, Hector puts fire on the, on the ships, she sort of he's thinking, okay, maybe that was a bit too much. So I'll send Patroclus to fix that in wants to go, of course, but they're the misjudgment is the second misjudgement is that Patroclus is going to come back safe, which is not happening, you know, Patroclus is killed in the end in this has got devastating effects in the humanity of Achilles. So yeah, he's, he's transformed into a beast after that, who just wants to kill and take revenge. And I think, you know, this is this is also particularly important, the fact that war can do that to someone. But then at the same time, at the end of the year, we have got the restoration of humanity with with the supplication by King Priam when he wants to take the body of his son back one of the most moving scenes in Western literature, and there, he reminds Achilles of his own father. And you know, they both actually they both come together to eat, which is extremely important. You know, the food food for Greeks, you know, is super important. And that particular Yeah, that particular moment, you have got two enemies who share the same food, you know, yeah. On the same table. Yeah, exactly. So, so, you know, this shows that, you know, yes, on the one hand, you have got war, and some people have argued that Homer glorifies war, through the idea that the heroes achieved glorious deeds in war, and they can immortalize themselves through war. But on the other hand, you also have the very anti militaristic if you want message, that war can dehumanize people and can have the results or the consequences that has on Achilles he like he lists his character and you know Achilles after I think after the killing of Patroclus realizes that there is no second choice anymore, he cannot go back, he cannot live a happy life or a family life, the only road there for him is to take revenge for his friend, because that's the only thing that would actually restore the balance, you know, of emotions and, of what has happened.

15:24

Yeah. So just to track back to Petropolis, the Yes, man who died, who was Patroclus, to Achilles, that, you know, as you said, Achilles becomes a beast of finding out that this man is who was.

15:39

So a tradition that is the way they are presented in Homer, they have been brought up together, so they know each other from childhood. And, you know, Patroclus has acquired, you know, huge importance, he was the closest, the closest hero to Achilles. And as we can see in the Iliad, he's always with Achilles, wherever he goes. So there is obviously a very strong bond between Achilles and Patroclus. And I would say that Patroclus is a brother figure for Achilles, you know, he sees him as his own brother. And I think that's why the killing of Patroclus has got this devastating effect on again, is so much so that, you know, turns him into into someone inhuman, you know, into into a beast really, of war.

16:25

Yeah. There's also a controversy, I've heard about Achilles and Patroclus, having a kind of relationship, a kind of loving relationship. What's your take on that?

16:35

I think that you're right about that. I think this is not in Homer, in Homer Patroclus and Achilles are not presented as lovers. I think this is that came from a later interpretation of the means, possibly from Aeschylus in in a lost work called Myrmidons. But it's definitely something that has been, you know, discussed and presented by many different authors and artists. And it is definitely something that comes back in modern novelizations of the story, which not only novelizations, but also visualizations, you know, in both film and TV series. Now, I think, I think it is it is presented in this way, because because of the fact that this bond is so special in the end, and you know, because of the fact that so, you know, I think artists and authors and directors have been very eager to explore this kind of relationship, which is, I think it's totally fine. The only thing that I would like to say about that is that there's there's always have to be a distinction when we talk about these, between what is presented, you know, the kind of universe that is presented by modern authors, or even later ancient authors, in terms of these relationships when compared to Homer. Yeah. So I think that is that is crucial. Yes.

17:52

So following on from that, when thinking about a modern superhero, there's oftentimes a an element of a damsel in distress, or, you know, a love story that somehow finds a good ending. How does that figure for Achilles his story? What's, what's the Achilles story Like?

18:11

Yeah, I think, again, I think there's a difference if you want focus. Nowadays, I'm not sure whether this is because of the fact that the whole Love Story motif has been, has acquired more dominant space in these kinds of stories. For sure, I think Hollywood has played has played the role in this or in cinema in general, you know, the fact that we always have in our mind that there needs to be a love story. And there also needs to be a happy ending, you know, to this love story. So you know, the happy ending is also another feature that we should discuss because the Iliad is not is not an epic, where you can say you have a happy ending, you know, you have any ending. Yeah, I mean, or any ending, you're right. But, you know, I think in the Iliad, the focus is not on the even even if in modern visualizations or in modern cinema and modern novelizations the focus sometimes falls on love stories, whether this is the love story between Paris and Helen, or the love story between you know, Achilles and Patroclus. Or yeah, you know, different different other, you know, Hector and Andromache, you've got many Odysseus and Penelope, you know, you have got many love stories happening. But I think, I think, again, I think that we should come back to the fact that the megatheme, if you want of the Iliad is not a love story. The Iliad is about firstly, I think about emotions and about the wrath of Achilles and secondly, about what what war does.

19:39

Interesting, because what I expected is a love story, but what I get is really an anger story that's so out of the box there really

19:48

, it is out of the box, but you see anger is is I think anger is something very, very, very important for all of us. I mean, we are constantly as humans at war, you can define war in many different ways can’t you, you know, in our everyday life, we constantly fight with demons and things and situations and things go wrong, and you have to fix them. And then you know, it's, it's a constant, you know, our existence, you know, is war and struggle,. Yeah, and sometimes we are, we are angry because things don't go in our way. And this is a driving force that makes us actually do better, you know, if you want or try, or it's a driving force for us to to achieve better things, or for us to become better and better. And, you know, Achilles is a person who wants to excel. I mean, that was the advice of Peleus when he his father, when he left for war, always to excel, you know, and then be better than others, you know, so he's someone who wants to excel, and he's a perfectionist, if you want, and sometimes things don't go the way he wants them to go. And partly, the reason for that might also be the gods and the and the fates. So yeah, the intervention by by the gods and fates, and it's a, it's an interesting, I think, discussion that one can have about what is the relationship between fates bettween the gods and the heroes, and you know, how they interact with each other. So, you know, in my view, if we have to talk about fates and heroes, in my view, there is a kind of simplified way to explain this. And perhaps it doesn't explain everything, because it's really complex. But I think that depends on the viewpoint that we have when we read the Iliad. So if our viewpoint is the viewpoint of the fates, and gods, then we already know what will happen in the future. So you know, if you're reading Zeus’ mind, in other words, you know that Achilles is going to die in the future, or you know that Patroclus is going to die, and you know, that Hector will die, Troy will fall, etc, etc. But if you're actually reading, Achilles, his words, and you are in Achilles’ mind as an external audience, you don't know that Patroclus will die. You don't know, you know, that Troy will fall you know, and this kind of different knowledge makes the hero the Homeric heroes think that they take that they have free will, and they take decisions, which if you see from the points from the viewpoint of the gods or fate, it doesn't happen. It's all predestined, predestined. Yeah. It's all it's all predestined by the fates. So you know, I think there's this if you if you keep this sort of differentiation in your mind, as you're going through the Iliad, that explains why sometimes it feels that the heroes have got free will, and sometimes it feels that they don't.

22:42

So that's really interesting, because that makes me think, when I'm watching, you know, a Hollywood superhero film, once, I think is, what was going to be fine. In the end.

22:52

Yes,

22:53

it's gonna be fine, happy ending. That's what I expect. And that's what I'm gonna get. Let's face it, yes. Unless I'm watching Game of Thrones. Yes. With say, I mean, you know, the Iliad is a classic. But as a person who grew up with the stories of the Iliad, did you expect Achilles to die when you heard the story? Like he's the strongest of them? Did you expect him to die like he did? And could you talk about his death as well?

23:17

Yes. So I, you know, I don't know whether you know about this. But in Greece, those stories are material for grandmothers, you know, to narrate to their to their grandchildren. So, I came in contact with the story when I was very, very young, like, you know, five years old or something like that. And all, you know, and everyone, you know, know, learns about Greek mythology in those stories, so, I can't really remember whether I expected the happy ending, but yeah, I think I did. I do remember that. I was feeling as a child and as a teenager, I was feeling this kind of satisfaction that justice was served when Achilles you know, killed the murderer of his best friend or his brother. But I think you're right that for the modern heroes, we are expecting happy endings. And sometimes it really shocks us like, you know, in the in the latest episode of I don't know, the Superman story when Superman dies. It's a big shock for everyone or, you know, in the Dark Knight, by the way, Oh, yeah. Christopher Nolan story when we had you know, the Dark Knight when in the end, the Dark Knight was not getting what what he wanted, you know, his girlfriend's was killed. Yeah. And you know, the you didn't have a happy ending there as you expected you would. So I think more than you know, more than tellers of the story are slowly finding out that yes, we all expect a happy ending, but maybe we could play with something different.

24:41

Yeah. Wow. Okay. That's that's something to think about, for me at least because it is just a different type of storytelling to what I'd expect. And I feel like just just as ironic as it is the novelty of it is something that really appeals to me.

25:00

But I think also the failure appeals to us because we don't want heroes who never fail, I think because, you know, then they are gods, you know, and you don't identify or you don't identify with them, it is failure is part of the human condition. And you know, in a society where everyone is talking about success and happiness, and so on and so forth, we sometimes forget that we are humans, and we do fail. And, you know, the important thing is how we deal with this with with failure, you know, so I think they are does teach teach us about how to deal with failure and how to deal with the tragic nature of human condition if you want. And I think that's, that's why we love those heroes, because they're so close to us, you know, it could have been us, the feelings that they feel in the emotions, they have separation, you know, death, wrath, grief, all these kinds of things is something that we have in our own lives. And I think if they didn't have those will just be very far from us.

25:57

So you think you think that the the Homeric heroes are relatable? Like, say, the Marvel Heroes? Uh,

26:05

oh, totally, I think, Oh, totally. I think if they were, if they were not relatable, the Iliad would not have been the second most well read book in the world. You know, it's, I think that is why they have got, that's why they are classics. And that's why they have got this kind of diachronic you know, influence that that they do, as long as we have got the, the, you know, the patience to read them. And to understand, you know, to understand what is what is going on in those epics, I think they can be very instructive, and they can be very educational for us, and we can learn ourselves better,

26:41

Okay, so approaching my final question, and I'm quite lucky that you answered my last question yourself. How you said that, if people have the patience to read Homer, is, is Homer easy to read for a modern audience? Do you think? Or are representations of Homer easy to consume?

27:01

I think it's not very easy to read, because Homer assumes a lot of knowledge from the beginning. So you know, when he talks about the wrath of Achilles, the son of Peleus he is not going to explain to you who Peleus is the same happens with a number of other characters, and there are a lot of them, and modern audiences would not have, you know, the background to know all these. So, you know, it can be difficult, it's also a long episode. So, you know, it's almost 15,000 lines, but you know, it is, it is something that would require, you know, some patience, let's say, but I think it's a very nice story. And I think, as I said, it, I think it is a very relatable story, he has got a lot of things that, you know, he teaches us, it's very educational, it's not by chance that, you know, Homer's epics have been part of education for, you know, since the beginning until now, you know, they have power, they have passed from so many different kinds of stages, and they have been used for so many different kinds of educational materials. But I think that part of their charm is that you can very easily narrate the story to a five year old child or to an adult, you know, it's because of the fact that it relates to the human condition so much. And you know, both if you do that, and also the adaptability of the story, and the fact that you know, many different people can tell it in different ways and in different modes of representation. So, you know, you can have painting, you can have cinema, you can have poetry, you can have whatever you want. So, I think because of all these, this is the, the main reason why they are so relatable to audiences.

28:38

Okay, as as a kind of final point. Could you give me a reason why I should go right now and start reading the Iliad?

28:49

Yes, I think the main reason is that you are going to become a better a better person, and you are going to know yourself better if you do, if I can put it in a in a short way, the Iliad and the Odyssey, both of the Homeric epics because of the fact that they, they, they narrate the beauty of the human condition in such a detailed way. I think that's why they are so attractive to us. And that's why we should all, we should all read them.

29:14

Right. Well, thanks so much, Antony. It's been a pleasure having you as a guest here.

29:19

Thank you, Mateen, for having me.

29:22

It's been fascinating talking about Homer. I've really enjoyed it. And I really hope everyone at home or on the other side has as well.

29:31

Absolutely. Thank you very much. Mateen.

29:33

Thank you, everyone, for listening to this episode of ancient world new voices. You can drop your comments in the feedback form on the podcast webpage, and we look forward to welcoming you back for the next episode in a month's time. You can find more information about this podcast guest speakers, hosts and materials on the UCL department of Greek and Latin websites, which you can find on the description below.