# **Personal Statement**

# **‘“Death’s Grey Land?” A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Death in Battle in Graeco-Roman Literature and Culture’**

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In recent years, the topic of death, and especially death in battle, has become a central part of my research. My Master’s thesis deals with the way the figure of Herakles and his unique fate is presented in the Homeric myths, and a recent paper of mine examines the relationship between Akhilles and Patroklos through the lens of self-sacrifice. While working on these projects, I could not help but notice that the ultimate will of the *Iliad’*s heroes is to earn the ‘beautiful death’ by dying on the battlefield, which is a death that will promise them immortality through literature and art. This belief shaped the tradition of the hero cult, which was a widespread phenomenon throughout the Greek (and later, the Roman) world.[[1]](#footnote-1) For instance, the well-known hero Akhilles embodied the ideal warrior, since his glorious death was his fate (*moira*). Nonetheless, the Homeric poet mentions a few times that Akhilles knows his time on earth is short. The protagonist of the *Iliad* was told, for example, that he was given the choice between earning a warrior’s everlasting glory at the cost a short life and enjoying a long life without martial glory (*kleos*) [*Il*. 9.910-6].[[2]](#footnote-2)

The project ‘“Death’s Grey Land?” A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Death in Battle in Graeco-Roman Literature and Culture’ would allow me to develop two issues that relate to the significance and meaning of being killed on the battlefield in Archaic and Classical Greek culture. First, I would like to explore and possibly expand way we think about the concept of *moira* in the Greek world. So far, most of the research on the subject of *moira* tends to focus on its philosophical or theological dimensions.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, I would like to consider *moira* as a literary and poetic tool. During my thesis research, I observed the correlation between the concept of *moira* in its meaning as ‘destined by fate’[[4]](#footnote-4) and the concept of *moira* as the warrior’s desire to earn eternal memory through poetry. This literary tool could, as I would like to suggest, help the poet console heroes, whose fate (*moira*) is to live a short life, by promising them everlasting life in the memories of their descendants. My argument will be that the aspirations of Homeric heroes to be remembered through poetry required them not only to show their martial prowess on the battlefield, but also to die there while doing so.

I would like to argue that staying top of mind in the collective memory through oral poetry (and through hero-cult traditions and rituals), be this the memory of the *polis* or the community, places ancient Greek heroes in an *undying* position; the poetry keeps the heroes’ memory alive in perpetuity. In doing so, oral poetry subverts the fundamental notion of *moira* – every mortal will die in the end, because a warrior’s death on the battlefield does not mean that the warrior’s *arête* and *kleos* will die with him. And this is why I would like to examine more closely the notion of *moira*, as it is presented in the *Iliad*, as a literary tool that promises the warriors who are sent to die on the battlefield that their memory and their glorious actions (*kleos*) – and inglorious actions for that matter – will stay alive long after their death.[[5]](#footnote-5)

While the common descriptions in the *Iliad* focus on the single warrior who seeks to earn *kleos* on the battlefield for his everlasting memory, the second issue I would like to address in my project has to do with Homeric heroes who died on the battlefield for something or someone other than their own *kleos*. My principal case study so far features the inventible death of Patroklos, who entered the battlefield dressed in Akhilles’ armour and was later killed by Hektor (the Trojan warrior who thought he had killed Akhilles, his sworn enemy who was equal to him in power and status). By examining the unique roles that Patroklos plays in the *Iliad*, as Akhilles’ best friend and henchman, I would like to argue that Patroklos, by taking Akhilles’ position in the battlefield, self-sacrifices himself and sacrifices his *kleos* for Akhilles. By doing so, Patroklos becomes a ritual substitute in as much as the battlefield was a sacred space, a space sacred to Ares, the god of war.

This unique position Patroklos stems, as I will argue in the project, from his role as a henchman. Etymologically, the Greek word for henchman is *therapōn* and denotes a servant or a companion.[[6]](#footnote-6) The primary use of the word *therapōn* in the *Iliad* is as a reference to young boys, servants, that accompany the Homeric heroes to the battlefield (and who, among other things, care for the Heroes’ horses). However, if we look at other ancient Near-Eastern civilisations, it soon becomes apparent that the role of the henchman is also imbued with ritualistic significance. In ancient Near-Eastern sacrificial ceremonies, the henchman (Hittite *tarpanalli-/tarpalli-/tarpasšša*) could serve as a ritual substitute for his king.[[7]](#footnote-7)

According to the Hittite tradition, the king soaks up the sin and impurity of his city during his reign. In order to prevent the damnation of the entire city, he must eventually be sent to his death.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, because executing a king is a problematic matter, the Hittites found a more palatable solution in the form of a person close to the king – most often his henchman – taking his place as the sacrifice. The king’s henchman, who was dressed in the polluted ‘image’ of the king, was sacrificed, purifying both the city and the king, who would then be able to go on ruling his domain.[[9]](#footnote-9) Hence, by examining Patroklos’ actions in the *Iliad* through this interdisciplinary lens, I will be able to investigate and understand the multiple functions of the henchman in Homeric epic and ancient Near Eastern society and the complex notion of the battlefield as a sacred space for ritual sacrifice.

The project ‘“Death’s Grey Land?” A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Death in Battle in Graeco-Roman Literature and Culture’ appeals to me because it will allow me to approach antiquity from an interdisciplinary perspective. During my studies at Tel Aviv University, I learnt the importance of critical thinking and how examining the art, literature and history of contemporary societies can help me contextualise ancient Greek poetry can reveal its multiple layers of meaning. In addition, I believe that interdisciplinary work is best accomplished through critical interactions with scholars (students and professor alike) in other academic fields. XXX

In terms of my contribution to the project, I believe that my background in critical and literary theory would allow me to participate fully in seminars, classes, and other academic activities. During my studies at Tel Aviv University, I also took courses in ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture and history, which triggered my desire to explore other Mediterranean cultures in order to acquire a more complete picture of life – and more specifically death – in antiquity. My interest in death includes its cultural meanings and significance, burial methods, beliefs in the afterlife, death in battle, and the intersection of death and war.

It is my intention while at St. Andrew’s to have fruitful interactions with faculty and students in the both the project and the wider university in order to receive feedback on my ideas and to provide feedback on theirs. I am quite eager as well to take part in collaborative activities (conferences, papers, articles, workshops) that will foster my and my colleagues’ creativity. During my studies in Israel, after feeling the need to create a place for students of ancient history and classical studies to talk and share their ideas, I organized various activities for students, including a conference for young historians, an academic workshop designed to help students improve their writing and speaking skills, and an informal classical literature reading group. I am keen to do the same at St. Andrew’s in hopes of making a contribution to both research on ancient Greek culture and literature and to academic life more broadly at the university.

1. Carla M. Antonaccio, “Hero-Cult,” in *The Homer Encyclopedia*, ed. Margalit Finkelberg (Wiley: Blackwell, 2011) 350-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jean-Pierre Vernant, “‘A Beautiful Death’ and the disfigured corpse in Homeric epic,” in *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, edited by Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 50-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example: William Chase Greene, *Moira: Fate, Good, and Evil, in Greek Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944); A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960); Bernard C. Dietrich, *Death, Fate, and the Gods; the Development of a Religious Idea in Greek Popular Belief and in Homer* (London: University of London, Athlone, 1965); Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Esther Eidinow, *Luck, Fate and Fortune: Antiquity and its Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Robert Beekes, “μείρομαι,” in *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009), 922-3; Franco Montanari, “μοῖρα, -ας,” *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015), 1356-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An example for remembering Homeric hero, not for his strength on the battlefield is Elpenor (Ἐλπήνωρ), who found his death after getting drunk and spend the night from the roof, as he fell from the roof, broke his neck and died [*Od*. 10. 551-60].

Bruce Louden, “Elpenor,” in *The* *Homer Encyclopaedia*, ed. Margalit Finkelberg (Wiley: Blackwell, 2011), 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Beekes, “θεράπων, -οντος,” in *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 541; Claude Brügger, *Homer’s Iliad: The Basel Commentary, Book XVI*, eds. Anton Bierl and Joachim Latacz, trans. Benjamin W. Millis and Sara Strack (Boston/ Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In his article, Gregory Nagy quotes from Hittite dialogue, that one of its characters is the king, who states: “And for you, here are these ritual substitutes [tarpalliuš]/ And may they die, but I will not die.”

Gregory Nagy, “Achilles and Patroklos as models for the twinning of identity,” in *Short Writings* Vol. IV, Web. <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/49>; Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 292-3; Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi XXIV 5 I 15-16 [15]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For comparison between human substitutes rituals of Hittite traditions and Anatolian traditions, see: Nadia van Brock, “Substitution Rituelle,” *Revue Hittite et Asianique* 65, no. 19 (1959): 125-6; For further reading on other words that had been borrowed from the Hittite traditions, see: Ian Rutherford, “Substitute, Sacrifice and Sidekick: A Note on the Comparative method and Homer,” in *Text and Intertext in Greek Epic and Drama: Essays in Honor of Margalit Finkelberg*, eds. Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz and Johnathan Price (Routledge, forthcoming; cited with permission of the author). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Hittite civilization is not the only one to attribute ritualistic potential to henchmen. For instance, pharaohs’ burial sites, which date to the First Dynasty (3,000 BCE), reveal that the pharaohs were buried with their henchmen and other slaves alongside them. In later dynasties, the ritual of buried servants with people of high social status disappeared almost entirely due to the creation of Ushabti figurines, that embodied human servants and were meant to do labors in the land of the dead, on behalf of their master.

Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*, 292; A. J. Spencer, *Death in Ancient Egypt* (Great Britain: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982), 68, 139; Ellen F. Morris, “Sacrifice for the State: First Dynasty Royal Funerals and the Rites at Macramallah's Rectangle,” in *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007) 15-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)