Historical Review

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

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Abstract

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 ἐξ ἰατρικὴν εἰδέναι ὡστε μὴ οἶδεν ὃτι 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 καλὸς Ἀγήνωρ, αὐτὴν δὲ ξυνέδησεν ἐὑστρεφεῖ οἴστῳ σφενδόνῃ, ἣν ὁ ἄρνητος ἄρχει ἡ 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.

And afterwards: “νέον δ’ ἐσαγείρετο θυμόν, ἀμφὶ ἓ γιγνώσκων ἑτάρους· ἀτὰρ ἄσθμα καὶ ἱδρὼς παύετ᾽, ἐπεὶ μιν ἔγειρε Διὸς νόος αἰγιόχοι” (Hector had by now risen, recovered his senses [νέον δ’ ἐσαγείρετο θυμόν] recognizing his comrades around him; the dyspnoea [ἄσθμα] and sweat [ἱδρὼς] stopped, because he had been resurrected by the will of Zeus)².

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. “ὁς δέ κεν ὑμέων βλήμενος ἢ τυπεὶς θάνατον καὶ πότμον ἑπίστη 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])³.

The medical knowledge of Patroclus and Achilles

Besides the sons of Asclepius, Machaon and Podalirius, who were prominent, capable Achaean physicians (“ἰητῆρ’ ἄγαθω Ποδαλείριος ἢδε Μαχάων”)⁴, Homer mentions two additional heroes, Achilles and Patroclus, who were capable of providing medical treatment to the wounded in the Achaean camp.
Achilles was taught medicine by the Centaur Chiron, the eldest of the Centaurs. Chiron was the instructor in medicine for the God Asclepius, Achilles and the mythical hero Jason. 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.).

The parents of Achilles, Peleus and Thetis, placed their barely twelve-year-old ("δωδεκαεταί") 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 endeavour.

Chiron was the source of the spear that only Achilles was able to master and use in the battle with Hector. 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 friend. 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 spear.

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 Pandaros. Actually, Machaon used medicines from the legacy that Chiron had given to Asclepius. Achilles and Asclepius learned medicine from Chiron and during the Trojan War used Chiron's medical knowledge jointly. When Machaon was wounded, 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 family. 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: "ἀλλὰ ἔμε μὲν σὺ σάωσον ἄγων ἐπὶ νήα μέλαιναν, μηροῦ δ᾽ ἐκταμ᾽ ὀϊστόν, ἀπ᾽ αὐτοῦ δ᾽ αἷμα κελαινὸν νίζ᾽ ὑδατί λαρφ, ἐπὶ δ᾽ ἠδὲ Μαχάων τὸν μὲν ἐνὶ κλισίῃσιν ὀΐομαι ἕλκοντα ἄγων ἄκεσματ᾽ ἔπασσε μελαιῶν ὀδυνάων ἥ̣στό τε καὶ τὸν ἔτερπε λόγοις, ἐπὶ δ᾽ ἕλκεϊ λυγρῷ φάρμακ᾽ ἥ οἱ ἁπάσας ἔσχ᾽ ὀδύνας ὑπέχευε βοείας. ἔνθά μιν τὸν ἔτερπε λόγος ἀγαπήνορος Εὐρυπύλοιο ἠδὲ Μαχάων τὸν μὲν ἐνὶ κλισίῃσιν ὀΐομαι ἕλκοντα ἄγων ἄκεσματ᾽ ἔπασσε μελαιῶν ὀδυνάων ἥ̣στό τε καὶ τὸν ἔτερπε λόγος, ἐπὶ δ᾽ ἕλκεϊ λυγρῷ φάρμακ᾽ ἥ οἱ ἁπάσας ἔσχ᾽ ὀδύνας ὑπέχευε βοείας.

But the medical care of Eurypylus continued in the patient's tent: "τόφρ᾽ ὅ γ᾽ ἐνὶ κλισίῃ ἀγαπήνορος Εὐρυπύλοιο ἠδὲ Μαχάων τὸν μὲν ἐνὶ κλισίῃσιν ὀϊομαί ἕλκοντα ἄγων ἄκεσματ᾽ ἔπασσε μελαιῶν ὀδυνάων ἥ̣στό τε καὶ τὸν ἔτερπε λόγος, ἐπὶ δ᾽ ἕλκεϊ λυγρῷ φάρμακ᾽ ἥ οἱ ἁπάσας ἔσχ᾽ ὀδύνας ὑπέχευε βοείας.

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): "Οὕτος δοκεῖ Χείρων εἶναι ὁ ἐν τῷ Πηλίῳ ὁμήρης, δικαιοσύνη δε ὑπερενεγκάς πάντας ἀνθρώπους καὶ παιδεύσας Ἀσκληπίου τε καὶ Ἀχιλλέα" (it is widely believed that Chiron, who lived in Plyôn, 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 Chiron.

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 Myisia. In the ensuing battle there, specifically on the plain of the Caicus river, Telephos, the king of Myisia, was wounded by Achilles. 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...
he, who had injured him, would be able to heal him: “ὁ τρῶσας 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: “πριστοῖσι λόχης θέλγεται ρινήμασι” 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, healing16,30 and wounds13,31 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 δικαιότατος Κενταύρων”30 and more extensively by Pindar and Euripides.

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