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Pre-Homeric Ajax

In this chapter, I will examine the way the traditional (or pre-Homeric) story of Telamonian Ajax has been received by the *Iliad*, and how it resurfaces through a conscious use of allusions and re-enactments of traditional material, thereby contributing to the poem's all-encompassing ambition.¹ I shall first establish what can be known about the pre-Homeric *story* of Ajax before contrasting it with the hero's treatment in the *Iliad* and, to a lesser extent, in the *Odyssey*. Lllll llll

1 Textual and visual evidence for Ajax in the Archaic period

It is clear that the Homeric poems were composed for an audience which was familiar with the Matter of Troy in which Ajax was a well-established hero. For instance, one needs knowledge external to the poem to understand Odysseus' encounter with the shade of Ajax fully.² It is impossible to know that Ajax committed suicide from that passage alone, since Odysseus only states that 'because of those arms, the earth covered such a man as Ajax'.³ Even the phrase 'such a man as Ajax' cannot be really understood, if one is unaware of the kind of hero Ajax traditionally was.

A. Visual evidence⁴

What makes visual evidence regarding Ajax so compelling is how extensive it is, how early, and how widely dispersed across the Greek world (e.g. in Magna Graecia, Olympia, Aegina, Lemnos, or Samos) on various kinds of objects (vases, seals, shield bands, etc.). From this, we can deduce that Ajax was, already by the early seventh century BCE, a popular hero of pan-Hellenic ambit. The two episodes which recurrently appear amongst early representations of Ajax are the rescue of Achilles' body and his suicide. There is a third recurring scene in archaic art, that of Ajax and Achilles playing a board game, but representations of this episode only start appearing c. 540, and are of exclusively Attic origin,⁵ and it is therefore very unlikely that they reflect traditional material. Consequently, visual evidence shows that Ajax was not known for his great valour during the battle of the ships or his duel against Hector before the *Iliad* became influential, but instead was remembered by tradition as the man who single-handedly carried the gigantic body of Achilles back to the Greek camp

¹ Finkelberg 2015

² Bocksberger 2021, 1-2.

³ *Od.* XI 549.

⁴ For a in-depth discussion of the figure of Ajax and its myth in Greek visual evidence see Anguissola in this volume.

⁵ Bocksberger 2021, 149-54.

following his death on the battlefield, and as the hero who impaled himself on his own sword. These two episodes were the defining elements of his *story* and must have been pre-Homeric.

B. Texts

The picture of Ajax we get by examining non-Homeric archaic textual evidence, although less conclusive, points in the same direction. Both the *Aethiopis* and the *Little Iliad* covered the *Hoplôn Krisis*, while Ajax is named in fragment 2 [w] of the *Iliou Persis*, in which the physical symptoms of his madness are alluded to. We can notice some differences between the accounts given by the *Aethiopis* and the *Little Iliad*,⁶ but essentially the sequence of events is the same: Ajax rescues Achilles' body, the arms of the dead hero are promised to 'the best after Achilles', Odysseus wins the competition with Athena's help, Ajax commits suicide. This suggests that the two main scenes we find in (early) archaic art – the rescue of Achilles' body and Ajax's suicide – belonged to the same sequence of events which formed the core of Ajax's traditional story. As a matter of fact, Ajax's rescue of Achilles' body is apparently the great feat for which the hero considered that he deserved to be awarded Achilles' arms. The connection is, at any rate, explicitly made by Quintus of Smyrna (V 123-7), who might be relying on earlier material.

As for the rest, Ajax features in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* as one of Helen's suitors, and is also mentioned by lyric poets such as Alcman, Alcaeus, and Ibycus. In the *Catalogue of Women*, as far as we can tell from the fragments, Ajax is given an especially long entry which stresses his martial prowess far more than it does for other suitors. In fr. 155.41 [w], he is introduced as Ajax from Salamis, the ἀλώμητος πολεμιστής. He is the only suitor who offers admirable deeds (l. 42: θαυματὰ ἔργα) as wedding gifts, and at the end of the passage we are told by the poet that he surpassed (others) with the long spear (l. 51: ἐκέκαστο ἔγχεϊ μακρῶι.). Moreover, most of the passage consists in listing the different places around Salamis that he is strong enough to coerce into giving him resources.

The mentions we find in lyric poetry are very brief and mainly out of context because of the fragmentary nature of the passages in which they are found. Alcman, in fr. 68, notes Ajax' fury on the battlefield and associates him, surprisingly, with Memnon:

δουρὶ δὲ ξυστῶι μέμμεν Αἴας αἰματῆι τε Μέμνων.

Ajax rages with his sharpened spear, while Memnon thirsts for blood.

The most natural context for this line would be some sort of duel between the two warriors, presented by the poet as a good match for one another.⁷ Of course, no early extant evidence suggests that such a

⁶ Bocksberger 2021, 64-71.

⁷ Moreover, as Calame (1983, 487) notes, the verb μάλωμαι is also used in Homer (*Il.* VIII 111) in the context of a warrior fighting another with a spear.

story circulated, but it is worth noting that Dictys Cretensis stages a *monomachia* between Ajax and Memnon in his *Chronicle of the Trojan War* (IV 6). At any rate, here again Ajax stands out for his warlike qualities. A second fragment (fr. 69) by Alcman, irremediably corrupt, mentions Ajax. He is designated by the usual Homeric epithet φαίδιμος, and also probably by the adjective μέγας which is often used to qualify him in the *Iliad*, although it is also applied to many other heroes (e.g. Hector, Akamas, Nestor, Asios, or Iphidamas).⁸ This is also the case in Ibycus fr. 1, l.34 where Ajax is characterised by the adjective μέγας and ἄλκιμος.⁹ The part of the poem which is still extant contains a sophisticated response to the Matter of Troy aimed at granting Polycrates, the addressee, κλέος ἄφθιτον (l.47). Through his use of *paralepsis*, Ibycus evokes within the microcosm of his short poem the whole tradition of the Trojan War, as he lists the famous episodes he will not tell to his audience. It is therefore significant that amongst all the Homeric heroes, he mentions Ajax. Only three main heroes are named: Agamemnon (*Il.* 20-2), in his capacity as leader; and Achilles (*Il.* 32-3) and Ajax (*Il.* 34-5), in their capacity as warriors, in the following epode.¹⁰ The order in which Achilles and Ajax are named is probably playing on the idea that Ajax is the best after Achilles. Although this idea has been identified as Homeric by many scholars,¹¹ it seems more likely to be a traditional motif with which both Homer and Ibycus engage. This would explain why it is only used twice in the *Iliad* (2.768-70; 17.280),¹² where Ajax is the character who occupies the battlefield for the longest time, while the formula –with some small variation – recurs thrice in the *Odyssey*, where Ajax only features briefly as a shade, and does not even speak once.¹³ In fact, it is also found in Aeolic form, condensed into half a line, in a fragment of Alcaeus (fr.387 L/P) who is the last poet of our survey to name Ajax:

Κρονίδα βασίλῃος γένος Αἴαν τὸν ἄριστον πεδ' Ἀχιλλεα.

Ajax, the best after Achilles, on account of his descent from Cronus' son, the king.

Although the line is completely decontextualised, it does more than suggest the traditional character of the motif by attesting its popularity. The line also appears to explain the source of Ajax's excellence: he is the best on account of his descent from Zeus. This last information is particularly

⁸ Μέγας is used 17 times of Ajax. See Bissinger 1966, 15-7.

⁹ 'Ibycus has chosen the epithets carefully to recall a particular context or stress a characteristic' (Wilkinson 2012, 58). Judging from the similarities l. 34 shares with Alcman's fr. 69, one may suppose that Alcman also chose his epithets carefully, and that both passages aim at alluding through these epithets to the traditional characterisation of Ajax.

¹⁰ Line 35 is badly damaged. 'Grenfell and Hunt 1922, 82 suggest that the line should contain a reference to Teucer' (Wilkinson 2012, 78).

¹¹ See Barron 1969, 129; Hutchinson 2001:248-9; Hardie (2013, 21).

¹² The formulation in *Il.* 768-70 is different. To close the Catalogue of Ships, the poet asks the Muse to tell who was the best warrior: Ajax is said to be 'by far the best warrior, as long as Achilles was angry'.

¹³ Odysseus uses this traditional motif when he describes the arrival of Achilles' shade who is accompanied by Patroclus, Antilochus, and Ajax (*Od.* XI 469-70). In *Il.* 550-1, when explaining the circumstances of Ajax's death to the Phaeacians, he uses a variation of the formula before his address to Ajax. Finally, the formula is used a last time in the *Psychopompia* (24.17-8), when the suitors come across the shades of Achilles, Patroclus, Antilochus, and Ajax in the meadow of asphodel.

interesting because we may infer from it that Alcaeus considers Ajax to belong to the Aeacidae, and thus that Ajax's Aeacid lineage was well-established long before its attestation in Pindar's poems.¹⁴

Based on this short survey of archaic evidence about Ajax outside of the Homeric poems, the following picture emerges: Ajax was traditionally known as a great and tall warrior of Aeacid descent, second only to his cousin Achilles. The most memorable moments of his story were his rescue of Achilles' body and his suicide on account of the *Hoplôn Krisis*. As I have argued in my monograph dedicated to the hero, it is possible to reconstruct two other important elements belonging to the pre-Homeric myth of Ajax: his traditional invulnerability and his conflictual relationship with Athena.¹⁵ In the next section, I shall examine how the poet of the *Iliad* receives and incorporates the traditional myth of Ajax.

2 Ajax in the *Iliad*

In the *Iliad*, Ajax is one of the main heroes on the Achaean side, although he remains somehow peripheral to the plot of the poem. His character is progressively introduced by the poet, before we are able to witness him directly in book IV. He is first named at I 138, as one of the three heroes, alongside Achilles and Odysseus, whose *geras*, Agamemnon claims, could compensate his loss. Given that in the partition of booty one's *geras* is meant to reflect one's contribution to the war effort, we may conclude that the first mention that is made of Ajax stresses his importance to the Greek army. He is then mentioned in the Catalogue of Ships but his entry is suspiciously short.¹⁶ At the end of the catalogue, though, as mentioned previously, long before we see Ajax in action on the battlefield, the poet characterises him as the best after Achilles, as if to remind the audience how to situate him within the Trojan War tradition. After this, we finally have our first encounter with Ajax in book III, although only from afar and through the eyes of other characters. In book III 225-9, during the *Teichoscopia*, Priam notices, amongst the ranks of the Greeks, someone who stands out because he looks like a noble and tall man (l. 226 ἀνὴρ ἤϋς τε μέγας τε). Although the expression is formulaic and not particularly associated with Ajax,¹⁷ the hero's height is meant to be a characterising feature, since Priam stresses in the next line how significantly taller than all the other men he is (except Achilles who is not present). Helen, who represents the voice of tradition here, picks up on it and subsumes the identity of the hero into one of his distinctive formulae: πελώριος ἔρκος Ἀχαιῶν.¹⁸ Finally, before Ajax truly makes his entrance as a character in book IV, he appears alongside the other Ajax during Agamemnon's *Epipoleis* (IV 272-92) in a section which can still be viewed as introductory, and is in fact the last one before battle begins. The heroes reviewed are Idomeneus, the

¹⁴ Bocksberger 2021, 27-34.

¹⁵ Bocksberger 2021, 34-47, 56-63.

¹⁶ Bocksberger 2021, 143-7.

¹⁷ It appears eight times, of which only one occurrence refers to Ajax. Only about a hundred lines earlier, at l. 167, it is used by Priam to refer to Menelaus, also in combination with the adjective πελώριος.

¹⁸ The formula is used thrice in the poem (III 229; VI 5; VII 211), each time referring to Ajax.

two Ajaxes, Nestor, Odysseus (who happens to be with Menestheus), and Diomedes. The Ajaxes, who, with their men, are likened to a brooding tempest by the poet, stand out in this review because, unlike anyone else, they only receive praises from Agamemnon, in particular for their exceptional readiness to fight and their courage (θυμός). This means that they are also the only ones who do not need to respond to Agamemnon, perhaps contributing to Ajax's characterisation as a man of few (but excellent) words.

From the end of book IV onwards, Ajax becomes an active participant in the story. He occupies the battlefield longer than anyone else in the poem: we see him fight from book IV (when fighting on the battlefield starts for the first time in the poem) up until the retrieval of Patroclus' body in XVII, after which Achilles returns to battle. He distinguishes himself during the battle of the ships and the fight over Patroclus' body, and is remarkable among all other Greek heroes for never being wounded or defeated.¹⁹ It is also noticeable that, unlike other major Greek heroes, he is never helped by Athena. Apart from joining the melee on the battlefield, Ajax plays a role in the embassy to Achilles and the Funeral Games in honour of Patroclus. He also has a duel with Hector in book VII.

As we can see, before Ajax appears as a character in the poem, and thus before we are, as audience, able to form our own impression of the hero, the poet has carefully characterised him through indirect means in book I to IV. This has the effect of shaping the response of the audience by creating a horizon of expectations, or perhaps more accurately, by invoking what would be the traditional horizon of expectations concerning Ajax. The picture that emerges from this indirect introduction appears to be very much in line with his traditional characterisation, judging from the extant evidence we reviewed in the previous part: Ajax is a keen fighter, tall, blameless, and second only to Achilles. But what about the rest of the poem? The *Iliad* focuses on what seem to have been untraditional episodes within the Matter of Troy, given that no representation or reference to an Iliadic scene is found in art or literature before the sixth century.²⁰ If none of the episodes Ajax was known for features in the poem, how then does his role in the *Iliad* compare to his traditional story? How is the poet playing with the audience's horizon of expectations regarding Ajax?

3 The *Iliad* and the pre-Iliadic Ajax

Let us assume that the poet of the *Iliad* created a whole new plot with the ambition of subsuming the entire story of the war (except for the material of the Nostoi), and that he proceeded by recycling traditional episodes from the Matter of Troy and turning them into one big poem that only focuses on one action (the anger of Achilles). If this were the case, it would mean that Ajax's actions in the poem should reflect, or at least hint in some ways at, his accomplishments and traditional role in the Trojan War, even if only to distance itself from them. This should especially be the case for the one fundamental episode of the story in which he traditionally played a crucial and unique role: his

¹⁹ On Ajax's invulnerability, see Bocksberger 2021, 34-47.

²⁰ Lowenstam 1992, 1997, 2008; Snodgrass 1998.

retrieval of Achilles' body. The *Iliad*, though, does far more than replay major events of the war which take place outside of the narrow timeline of its plot. As we shall see, it also creatively receives established characters of the Trojan War, thereby testifying to the poet's self-conscious and innovative engagement with traditional material.

3A. The motif of Ajax's conflict with Athena and the *monomachia* with Hector

Although Ajax distinguishes himself in the first engagements of the battle – by killing Simoeisus (IV 473-89), and then, right after Diomedes' *aristeia* in book V, by being the first Achaean to break a Trojan battalion (VI 5-11) – the *monomachia* is the first episode in which he plays a major part. The episode, which concludes the first day of fighting in the poem, seems slightly gratuitous.²¹ It is only motivated by Athena's and Apollo's sudden (and seemingly arbitrary) wish to put an end to the battle for the day, and somewhat reduplicates the formal duel between Menelaus and Paris that took place in book III, 'but without stated or accomplished purpose'.²² Even the duel itself is strange, and it ends in a puzzling way. When Ajax takes the upper hand, Apollo intervenes to save Hector, but nothing is said about Athena, who must also be watching the duel from an oak-tree,²³ and should be keen to see her side win. Then, the fight is strangely interrupted by the heralds Talthibius and Idaeus. This could be understandable in the case of Idaeus, since he is a Trojan, but it is difficult to find a reasonable motivation to explain Talthibius's actions, given that he is Greek and that Ajax is winning. The match officially ends in a draw, even though it seems that Ajax should have won.²⁴ The main questions, therefore, are the following: what is the purpose of the episode, and why does the poet want his audience to feel that Ajax should have won,²⁵ while at the same time not granting him the victory?

Some of these oddities can be better understood once one realises that the poet has been stressing Athena's traditional role as victory-bringing goddess from book IV onwards,²⁶ and that

²¹ On the peculiarities of book VII, see Scafoglio 2017 and his chapter 1 in this volume.

²² Kirk 1990, 230. Athena's and Apollo's plan is also strangely put into execution. It is spontaneously intuited by Helenos (*Il.* 44-5) who then convinces Hector to adopt the plan, although Hector has just rejoined the battle at the start of book VII where we were told that he was keen to fight (*Il.* 3), and doing well (*Il.* 8-15).

²³ See VII 58-61

²⁴ These difficulties are often solved by making the hypothesis that the episode is inorganic to the *Iliad*, but it could also be the reworking of a traditional episode from the Matter of Troy. Dictys' account of a *monomachia* between Ajax and Memnon could be based on lost sources.

²⁵ Even the poet suggests that Ajax won at l. 312. The reason why the duel should be considered as Ajax's victory is explained in Σ (bT) H 312b: τέτρωται γὰρ καὶ πέπτωκεν Ἐκτώρ καὶ ἀπηγόρευσε τῇ μάχῃ. On the outcome of the duel as related to the peculiar status of Ajax's identity – which is constantly defined 'by comparison' though unavoidable relations with Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses – see the valuable contribution by Most and Morosi in this volume. On how the discrepancy between expectations and results in the Homeric duel were potentially perceived and developed in the Roman literary reception of the episode, see Speriani in this volume.

²⁶ The formal epithet referring to this function of Athena is ἀγελείη (Bocksberger 2021, 69-70). It could also be Ἀλαλκομενηΐς if one follows Aristarchus, who derives the epithet from ἀλαλκεῖν (to ward off). The epithet νικηφόρος is well-attested, but outside the Homeric poems (Tsagarakis 1977, 52-3).

he uses the duel in book VII to draw attention to the traditional motif of Athena's hostility towards Ajax.²⁷

From books four to seven, the role of Athena as helper on the battlefield and victory-bringer is greatly stressed by the poet. In IV 516, we are told that she encourages warriors, as she walks through the crowd, looking for those who may need her help, while in 539-44, it is her capacity to protect men on the battlefield that is noted by the poet. It is on this last note that book IV ends, but the two passages serve to introduce the events of book V: Diomedes' *aristeia* enabled by Athena's continuous support of the hero. The theme of Athena's support is central to the book,²⁸ as its *incipit* reveals (IX.1-3):

Ἐνθ' αὖ Τυδεΐδῃ Διομήδεϊ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη
δῶκε μένος καὶ θάρσος, ἵν' ἔκδηλος μετὰ πᾶσιν
Ἀργείοισι γένοιτο ἰδὲ κλέος ἔσθλόν ἄροιο.

Then indeed Pallas ~~Athene~~ Athena gave anew strength and courage
To Diomedes son of Tydeus, so that he might become
Conspicuous amongst all the Argives, and win fine fame.

The choice of Diomedes rather than Ajax as the beneficiary of the goddess' support is however surprising. Until this point, Diomedes has only been mentioned in the Catalogue of Ships and has briefly appeared in Agamemnon's review of the troops where he does not appear particularly remarkable. Moreover, the choice of Diomedes defies the expectations the poet created at the end of the Catalogue of Ships where Ajax was presented as the best warrior on the Achaean side as long as Achilles' wrath lasted. The oddity of the choice is no accident, though. It is meant to draw attention to the lack of interaction between Ajax and Athena. The poet continues to develop this theme in book VII, but this time from the point of view of Ajax. Before the duel, Nestor tells a long story about his own duel against Ereuthalion which he concludes by stating that he won thanks to Athena (l. 154). Nestor's account is meant to provide a parallel for the actual duel that will take place, and the fact that he ends it by mentioning the role Athena played in his success makes the goddess' absence and lack of concern for Ajax all the more conspicuous. The poet does not make Ajax lose his duel, though, even if Hector benefits from Apollo's help, but he replays in his own way the motif of Athena's hostility towards Ajax by indirectly showing that Ajax, no matter how great a fighter he is, cannot win without the goddess.

3B. Ajax's Aeacid descent and affinity with Achilles in the Embassy Scene

²⁷ Bocksberger 2021, 56-63.

²⁸ The book division of the Homeric poems, however, is not likely to be original.

The Embassy (IX 169-713) is the next episode in which Ajax plays a leading role²⁹. He is chosen by Nestor alongside Phoenix and Odysseus to intercede with Achilles. If Phoenix and Odysseus are obvious choices – the first because of his closeness to Achilles, and the other because of the role he often plays as right-hand man of Agamemnon – the presence of Ajax is harder to justify. It makes more sense, however, if we accept that the poet and his intended audience were aware of the fact that Ajax traditionally belonged to the Aeacidae, and as such was Achilles’ cousin.³⁰ Indeed, Ajax does not speak as a member of the Achaean expedition, like Odysseus, nor as someone with whom Achilles has a deep emotional tie, like Phoenix, but rather from the perspective of kin, that is of a *philos*. This kinship between Achilles and Ajax is signalled by their common use of vocabulary which indicates a shared set of values and a relationship between equals.

The first words uttered by Achilles when he welcomes the embassy are revealing:

χαίρετον· ἤ-ἤ φίλοι ἄνδρες ἰκάνετον ἤ-ἤ τι μάλα χρεώ,
οἷ μοι σκυζομένῳ περ Ἀχαιῶν φίλτατοὶ ἔστων.

Greetings>Welcome:- – either that indeed you two have come as men who are my friends when or that there need is great need,

Both of you Who who are the dearest to me of the Argives despite my anger.

IX 197-8

Although three men have arrived alongside the heralds, Achilles uses the dual three times in these two lines (χαίρετον; ἰκάνετον; ἔστων), which suggests that he is blatantly ignoring one of the envoys who have come to see him. Even though the use of the dual is problematic earlier in book IX,³¹ it is probably meaningful in this passage because of the number of forms used, and also because Achilles qualifies the two people he is saluting by saying that they are φίλτατοὶ to him, which should exclude Odysseus whom Achilles even calls ἐχθρός at l. 312.³² In any case, Achilles’ insistence on *philia* is crucial. While he openly states that Phoenix and Ajax are φίλτατοὶ to him, he wonders whether this is the case for them. Have they come as φίλοι ἄνδρες to him, and thus as people who should have his own interest at heart, or are they only trying to obtain something from him, because they are in a situation of need?

The importance of *philia* is further stressed by Achilles a few lines later. He enjoins Patroclus to put on a great spread for the guests he is welcoming under his roof (μελάθρῳ l. 204), since they

²⁹ On this episode see also Scafoglio in this volume.

³⁰ Bocksberger 2021, 27-34.

³¹ See l. 182 where it is apparently used by the poet to refer to the whole embassy.

³² This solution does not explain the use of the dual at ll. 182-3, 185, and 192. However, if one explains the use of the dual at ll. 196-8 in the way I do, the argument according to which the dual in book IX could be used for the two heralds (as is the case with Talthymbius and Eurybates in book I 322, 327-8) becomes more compelling. ‘There is a recurrence of certain formulas: 1.322 = 9.166, 1.327 = 9.182, 1.328 = 9.185’ (Hainsworth 1993: 86). This is noted by Segal (1968: 108), who then tries to explain the duals at ll. 196-8, by having Achilles only address the two messengers. It seems odd though that Achilles would call the heralds Ἀχαιῶν φίλτατοὶ.

are φίλτατοι ἄνδρες to him (*Il.*202-4). Despite Achilles' overt preoccupation with *philia*, Odysseus and Phoenix fail to pick up the cue, or if they do, they do not grasp fully the implications. This is made clear by the way in which Achilles responds to both speeches. He essentially tells Odysseus (and by proxy Agamemnon) that he is a hypocrite, a *philos* only in words, and thus an *echthros* in disguise (*Il.* 312-3). As for Phoenix, Achilles does not doubt the sincerity of his attachment to him, but he reproaches him for acting in a manner that is beneficial to Agamemnon, and thus in a way that is incompatible with the imperatives of *philia*:

οὐδέ τί σε χρῆ
τὸν φιλέειν, ἵνα μή μοι ἀπέχθῃαι φιλέοντι.
καλὸν τοι σὺν ἐμοὶ τὸν κήδειν ὅς κ' ἐμὲ κήδη·
And you should have no affection at all for him,
So that you are not hated by me who loves you.
For it is noble to harmcare with me for the one-man who cares for
harms me.

IX *Il.* 613-5

Phoenix's behaviour is problematic because if two people are truly *philo*i, the enemy of one should be the enemy of the other. According to Achilles, by beseeching him and using his closeness to him to convince him to act as Agamemnon wishes to, Phoenix acts in a way that is beneficial to Agamemnon, and so as a *philos* to him. This is unacceptable for Achilles because Phoenix should seek to harm Agamemnon instead, since he is the *echthros* of his *philos*. Achilles' reasoning here is perfectly in line with the expectations of reciprocal *philia* which was pervasive in Greek popular thought.³³

Ajax's speech is the only one of the three which is well received by Achilles. Ajax's success is not only due to his mirroring Achilles' use of the language of *philia*, but also to his behaving in accordance with its rules. Essentially, the main difference between his and Phoenix's approach is that he does not try to coax Achilles or to convince him with an elaborate *mythos*. He does not seem to speak in order to obtain something from the hero, nor is he resorting to arguments relating to Achilles' self-interest, when it is a matter of principles for the hero. Instead, Ajax speaks his mind and does not hesitate to be critical of Achilles' behaviour. Moreover, he formulates his criticism in terms of *philia*, thereby showing a preoccupation for the same set of values that are important to Achilles, as the latter made clear when he welcomed the embassy. At *Il.* 630-2, Ajax tells Achilles how his behaviour is harming those who are closest to him:

Il. 630-1

³³ On *philia*, see Blundell 1989, 26-59 and van Berkel 2019, 1-32.

[...]

σκέτλιος, οὐδὲ μετατρέπεται φιλότητος ἑταίρων (630)
τῆς ἧ μιν παρὰ νηυσὶν ἐτίομεν ἔξοχον ἄλλων.

[...]

~~He is a wretch~~ the cruel man, ~~and nor he~~ does ~~he have~~ not have any
care for the friendship of his companions,
the friendship ~~Which for which we drank~~ ~~honoured him~~ ~~to~~ **above all**
others beside the ships.

What Ajax suggests here is that Achilles himself is disregarding the principles of *philia* by refusing the compensation Agamemnon is offering him. As a matter of fact, he is failing to respect the obligations he has towards his ἑταῖροι with whom he is linked by a relationship of *philia* by refusing to return to battle after action has been taken to repair the slight he has suffered, for this relationship involves mutual assistance and reciprocal duty towards one another.

But who are the ἑταῖροι Ajax is speaking of? Is he referring to the Achaeans in general, or only to a few selected men? Ajax leaves it open, as he remains ambiguous regarding whom he includes when he uses the first person plural.³⁴ There is no doubt, however, that he also speaks for himself, and perhaps even only for himself in places such as the end of the speech, if one interprets the use of the first person plural as a majestic plural:

σὺ δ' ἴλαον ἔνθεο θυμόν,
αἰδεσσαι δὲ μέλαθρον· ὑπώροφιοι δέ τοί εἰμεν 640
πληθῆος ἐκ Δαναῶν, μέμαμεν δέ τοι ἔξοχον ἄλλων
κήδιστοί τ' ἔμεναι καὶ φίλτατοι ὅσσοι Ἄχαιοί.

And you, set a gentle spirit within you,
And respect this your house: for ~~we are~~ I am under your roof,
Coming from the host of the Danaans, and ~~we~~ I desire above all
To be the most caring and friendly to you of all the men who are
Achaeans.

Here Ajax expresses his special affinity with Achilles by mirroring his language. The word μέλαθρον is used by Achilles at line 204, φίλτατοι ὅσσοι Ἄχαιοί at l. 198, and κήδιστοί echoes Achilles' emphatic use of the verb κήδω in his response to Phoenix at l. 615, although the verb has a different

³⁴ He uses the first person plural throughout his speech apart from a μοι at the very start, when he starts addressing Odysseus (l. 625). Who is included when Ajax says 'we' is ambiguous, because it cannot consistently apply to the same set of people. For instance, the ἐτίομεν at l. 631 surely cannot include Agamemnon, while the παρίσχομεν of l. 638 ought to include him, since it refers to the presents he is offering Achilles.

meaning in the active. It is almost as if Ajax's choice of words, because of its similarity to that of Achilles, embodies the relation of reciprocity that underpins *philia*. In doing so, his behaviour is perfectly in line with what one would expect of a *philos*, and thus he is the only one among the three envoys to address satisfactorily the concern Achilles voices when he welcomes the embassy: are you here as my dearest *philoï* or because you need something from me? (*Il.* 197-8).

We never see Ajax and Achilles interact in the poem apart from this scene, and so his closeness with the hero in book 9 could seem odd, or at best gratuitous, especially since no background information about their relationship is revealed, unlike his relationship with Phoenix. However, it would make far more sense if the poet and his audience knew that they were cousins in pre-Homeric traditions.

3C. Ajax's invulnerability: the battle of the ships and the battle around Patroclus' body

The motif of Ajax's invulnerability not only appears to be pre-Homeric, but also one that the poet of the *Iliad* adapted so as to avoid adding a supernatural element to the narrative.³⁵ He does so by making Ajax the only major hero who is never wounded even while he is the character in the poem who occupies the battlefield for the longest time. The motif manifests itself in the battle of the ships episode, since Hector remains unable to wound Ajax even with the support of Zeus or Apollo's help. Hector is only able to set fire to Protesilaus' ship after Zeus breaks Ajax's spear in order to force the hero to leave the battlefield. Moreover, it also resurfaces in the language that is used to talk about Ajax, such as the donkey simile in 11.545-74 or the words Idomeneus and Meriones exchange regarding the hero in 13.321-5. The motif of invulnerability might also be connected to Ajax's famous epithet ἔρκος Ἀχαιῶν, and may explain Ajax's role as *Leichenkämpfer* (warrior fighting over corpses) in the tradition(s) of the Trojan War.

The episode of the fight around Patroclus' body has long been recognised by Neo-analysts as modelled on that around Achilles' body,³⁶ and is thus the most obvious part of the *Iliad* in which a key episode in Ajax's traditional story is reworked. The poet of the *Iliad* made two crucial and meaningful changes. First, Ajax does not himself bring the body back to the Greek camp, but instead leads the fight until Achilles' intervention in book XVIII disperses the Trojans. Second, the poet has two characters bring back Patroclus' body rather than one, while Achilles' body is rescued by Ajax alone. These choices are meaningful,³⁷ as they aim at engaging with the issue of Ajax's worth which is at the

³⁵ On the tendency of the Homeric poet(s) to sanitise traditions that are fantastical, see Griffin 1977.

³⁶ See Burgess 2001, 74; Currie 2006 23-45. Willcock (1973, 5-9) gives a good overview of the debate, although he mainly focuses on the relationship between the Memnon/Hector and Antilochus /Patroclus parallels.

³⁷ Bocksberger 2021, 47-56.

core of the *Hoplôn Krisis*, and is linked, in many versions of the myth,³⁸ to the exceptional day of relentless fighting that took place when Achilles died.³⁹

In the *Little Iliad*, Ajax loses Achilles' arms to Odysseus after a Trojan woman (under Athena's influence), while debating the respective merits of Ajax and Odysseus, claims that carrying Achilles' body cannot be an act of bravery, since any woman could carry a heavy load, while none can fight.⁴⁰ By making Ajax remain until the end of the fight on the battlefield, the poet (s) of the *Iliad* appear(s) to respond to this kind of criticism. He has Ajax fight prominently to protect Patroclus' body, while showing that carrying a body alone, as Ajax traditionally does, is no simple feat, since two people are required in the Iliadic version to bring Patroclus' body back to the Greek camp. In this way, the poet reflects and take his own stance on the traditional material he is receiving through his reworking of a well-known scene.

3D. The *Hoplôn Krisis*: the funeral games for Patroclus

The funeral games in honour of Patroclus is the last episode in which Ajax features in the *Iliad*. The whole scene is usually considered to be 'a final curtain call for its major figures'.⁴¹ It also offers a last characterising touch to the portrayal of the main heroes in the Achaean camp, thereby imbuing the episode with the quality of an epilogue.⁴² However, the poet does not confine himself to looking back at the whole poem, he also looks forward to subsequent events that are not covered by the *Iliad*, but which were traditional episodes from the Trojan War story, and thus well-known to the audience.⁴³ The resonance of the various contests taking place with ulterior events is obvious in the case of Ajax, since he was famous for the tragic consequences of his loss against Odysseus in the *Hoplôn Krisis*, another contest (agôn) which also took place during funeral games.⁴⁴ However, if the connection between book 23 and the *Hoplôn Krisis* is easy to establish, the re-deployment of the traditional episode in the *Iliad* is complex and multi-faceted, as the poet exploits the number of contests taking place during Patroclus' funeral games to engage with the famous episode by means of repetition and subtle variations.

The games consist of eight contests in total. Ajax participates in three of them: wrestling (*Il.* 700-39), armed combat (*Il.* 798-825), and weight-throwing (*Il.* 826-49). The first two competitions, both of which are a one-on-one match, end in a draw: Ajax faces first Odysseus (wrestling), and then

³⁸ The *Hoplôn Krisis* usually takes place during the funeral games in honour of Achilles. The judgement is often made on the basis of merit earned in the fight over Achilles' body. This is the case in the *Little Iliad* as well as in Quintus of Smyrna, for instance.

³⁹ The extraordinariness of the day is made clear by the shade of Agamemnon in *Od.* XXIV 36-42.

⁴⁰ *Little Iliad*, fr. 2 [West].

⁴¹ Macleod 1982: 30-1; Taplin 1992: 253; Kelly 2017, 87.

⁴² Whitman 1958: 262-4; Willcock 1973 3. Hickley (1986, 221) shows it well in the case of Ajax, although I do not share the conclusions she draws from her observation.

⁴³ Willcock (1973, 4-5).

⁴⁴ The fact that most of the prizes are pieces of the armour of dead heroes strengthens the parallel with the *Hoplôn Krisis* (Hinckley 1986, 210).

Diomedes (armed combat). In the third contest (weight-throwing), Ajax comes second after Polypoites, and before Leonteus and Epeius. In the case of the first two contests, particular details strengthen the parallelism: both of them are duels; Ajax faces Odysseus, his traditional competitor, in the first, while the second is meant to be a fight between the two men who are the best (l.802), which should therefore determine who ‘the best after Achilles’ is, just as is the case in the *Hoplôn Krisis* episode.⁴⁵ Finally, the third contest, even though it is not one-on-one, also resonates with the Judgement of the Arms because Ajax actually loses this one.

It seems clear that the poet does not want Ajax to be seen winning. Indeed, the number of instances in which Ajax’s inability to win is thematised suggests that particular attention is drawn to this fact. However, if the poet’s intention was only to remind his audience of Ajax’s defeat during the Judgement of the Arms, did he really need to repeat the scene thrice to achieve his goal? Why do the first two competitions end in a draw rather than a defeat? And why is the distribution of the prizes afterwards in Ajax’s disfavour?

Any answer to these questions will necessarily be tentative. I would like to suggest nonetheless that the poet’s use of repetition is best understood as part of his effort to rehabilitate Ajax by erasing (or at least concealing) problematic aspects of the hero: his anger and madness that lead to his suicide, (and perhaps, in some traditions, to his slaughtering of the Greeks’ cattle).⁴⁶ As a matter of fact, what is striking throughout the *Iliad* is the fact that Ajax never seems to resent his inability to seize a definite victory, be it in book VII after his fight against Hector that formally ends in a draw, or after the three contests in book XXIII. In fact, he is consistently characterised in the poem as a hero who accepts with equanimity and in a spirit of fair play whatever Zeus has in store for him.⁴⁷ It is also striking that no mention is made of Ajax’s madness and suicide in the Homeric poems, which is another argument in favour of the view that the *Iliad* poet is actively and purposefully trying to present an unproblematic Ajax.⁴⁸ In book XI of the *Odyssey*, Ajax shows *resentment* towards Odysseus rather than a fair-play sense of acceptance of the outcome of the *Hoplôn Krisis*, by turning his back on the hero. However, the episode is narrated by Odysseus himself rather than by the poet.

Therefore, book XXIII is another place in the poem in which the poet creatively engages with traditional episodes and perhaps even offers an entirely novel stance on them. Ajax’s performances at the games can be interpreted as coherent with his characterisation in the whole poem as well as a

⁴⁵ The choice of Diomedes makes sense, since he is closest to Odysseus in the poem, as is made clear in the Dolonia.

⁴⁶ Bocksberger 2021, 66-7.

⁴⁷ See book VII 191–9, book XVII 645–7, and book XXIII 724. These features of Ajax’s characterisation are salient in the *agones* against Odysseus and Diomedes. He remains calm even though neither hero seem to be playing fair: Odysseus uses tricks, and Diomedes is unnecessarily aggressive (so much so that the fight has to be stopped). Moreover, in each case, Ajax receives the smaller prize. These details have probably been added by the poet on purpose to characterise Ajax as prone to equanimity and fair play.

⁴⁸ This is something that seems to have been picked up by Pindar in *Isthmian* 4, as he states that Homer ‘redressed the whole of [Ajax’s] excellence’ (ll. 37-9).

response to tradition. The key point is that the poet breaks expectations regarding Ajax by distancing himself from the traditional narrative of the *Hoplôn Krisis*.

4 Conclusion

The *Iliad* not only alludes to and/or replays the episodes in which Ajax played a big part in the Matter of Troy, but also acknowledges traditional features of Ajax's characterisation. However, it often distances itself from them in order to recast the hero as a non-problematic figure. This knowledge enhances our appreciation of the *Iliad*. It sheds light on the manner in which Ajax's myth has been adapted. Therefore, it appears that the Ajax presented in the *Iliad*, and to a certain extent in the *Odyssey*, is in many regards innovative and untraditional, although very much in line with essential aspects of his pre-Homeric characterisation.

Although the main episodes of the Trojan War story traditionally connected to Ajax lie outside the scope of the poem, the poet managed to incorporate them into the *Iliad* by alluding to them indirectly through the reworking and replaying of important moments in his story. As we have seen, this is achieved by a complex network of thematic and structural allusions which would have been readily recognisable by an audience familiar with the traditions of the Trojan War.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ Interestingly, Hector, with whom Ajax fights often in the *Iliad*, is not well attested in archaic art and literature outside of the *Iliad*, notably not as a particularly outstanding warrior.

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