**What Homer's *Iliad* Tells Us About the Islamic State**

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America's military castes love to call themselves *warriors*. Moreover, national security keyboard artists have found their true rhetorical love comparing ancient Greek hoplites to our own "warrior" panoplies of war, as though we share the same battle-mettle -- and the same frames of strategic choice and action -- *Would war with* [*China be like the Iliad*](http://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-homers-iliad-tells-about-us-china-war-11139)*? Or would it be like* [*the Peloponnesian War*](http://nationalinterest.org/feature/thucydides-trap-20-superpower-suicide-10352)*?*

This tendency is a mistake, for two reasons. The first is that *we do not resemble ancient Greeks* (and that should be cause for celebration). The second is that there are men today who do, completely ...

... and they are our sworn enemies, the enemies of civilization itself.

The beheading of James Foley is our warning that we face the forces of Homer -- real warriors from a heroic age -- and that is bad news. But the worse news will come if we persist in denying it.

No one will deny that we are the remote posterity of Bronze Age fighters. But it then took us 3000 years to rediscover writing, create philosophy and science and history, and also democracy. We still burned girls as witches 300 years ago, and 150 years ago millions of Americans were still no more than high-value chattel property.

We have emerged as better humans only very recently. Civilization is at last becoming a world where we all belong to each other, [like our ancestral DNA shows](http://www.kerchner.com/images/dna/ydna_migrationmap_(FTDNA2006).jpg).

But Homer's world was very different. It is a world defined by human difference. This is the world humans built for themselves for hundreds of thousands of years -- years in which humanity was all about the celebration of difference.

In this world all meaning flowed from being among "your own" (kinship) and those who might claim partial kinship (even as a guest) -- as opposed to those who were dangerously different, alien, and *other* -- and how we assigned varying status points to differentiation, all the way to where difference required bloody sanction.

Sanctioning difference became our sacred ritual: The very foundation of how we enshrined our own identity by killing the other. War itself became our ultimate ritual -- where togetherness could be made perfect and whole by collectively enshrining the ritual death of the other. Killing is our celebration of identity.

Homer caught this song and its irresistible chant in the *Iliad*. His poem is the oldest testament of celebratory killing. We call Homer's world *The Heroic Age*. We profess to love heroes, but ancient Greek ideal was very different from our cartoon banner of the Marvel Comic superhero. Theirs in contrast was sculpted into iron portraits of transcendent, sacred killers -- *where the greatest was always, always Achilles*.

Muslim warriors today unconsciously still strive to replicate the achievement of Achilles. They operate unashamedly in the reality-space of ancient concepts of kinship and the other, in which the hero serves as the instrument of shared identity celebrated and realized in battle.

Yet Muslims have a bigger identity too -- also rooted in classical antiquity -- the Universalist vision of Islam itself. Moreover Muslim warriors embrace what they believe is a pure vision of Islam because it is authentically original, meaning, unsullied by all corruption since the moment of origination.

We must never forget that Islam was the [very last act of classical antiquity](http://www.amazon.com/The-World-Late-Antiquity-Civilization/dp/0393958035), and that as the canonical child of Homer -- 1500 years downstream -- Islam too hearkens back to the passionate currents of the *Iliad*. Islam is thus the last great Greco-Roman story from antiquity. It is both the last take on the *Iliad* just as much as it is the last testament of the Christian and Jewish Bibles.

This is an apparent paradox until we understand two things.

First, [as John Lendon tells us](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnNH-DNeqhQ), Greco-Roman thought and belief was always in the end about the *Iliad*:

[The] congruence of Homeric and later Greek ethics ensured that the heroes were not only old, but also admirable, and so the past of the Greeks was not inert, but to be imitated by the men of the present. The heroes of epic always sat invisible upon the shoulders of the Greeks, whispering their counsel ... epic made the Greek past irreducibly past, and so rather than envisaging the past as the present, they tended rather to understand the present by means of the past.

Islam never fully escaped the iron vision and vise of Greco-Roman reality -- always looking back to be the heroes of origination. 1400 years after, Muslims still yearn to renew Islam as though they were riding with Muhammad and his band of brothers -- like Emperors Trajan or Julian desperately reaching for the brass ring of Achilles.

Moreover, we can say that what goes for classical antiquity not only goes for Islam, but that Islam in its deepest currents passionately follows its Greek fathers. Like it or not, Islam grew up within, and then grew out from, the greater heart of the Roman Empire in the 7th century -- and Islam's inner heart remained "Byzantine," in its deeper framing of narrative, virtue, and piety, until the fall of the Ottomans.

So we are dealing with the last living remnants of classical antiquity, still hearkening backwards to Homer's "Age of Heroes."

Latter-day Brothers of Muhammad (al Ansar) are literally -- and literarily -- living the dream -- as Alastair Crooke [describes so eloquently](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html). Yet their highly stylized behavior, quite unconsciously, hews to archaic Iliadic archtypes. These Achilles wannabes evoke five tropes central to the *Iliad*. Think of these as five anchors to life defining their heroic identity -- not consciously, but deeply.

**- Heroic death**. The warrior's death is central to all heroic societies, but why does one seek to die on the battlefield? Some heroic modes celebrate self-sacrifice for the community, like *Beowulf*. In Takfiri Islam it is martyrdom for God. But Achilles stands out by reminding us that the ultimate fulfillment in heroic society is killing -- and his abiding song of wrath spells this out how if there is joy in delivering death, there must also be joy in at last embracing it.

**- Blood sacrifice** (Dennis Hughes, [*Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*](http://books.google.com/books/about/Human_Sacrifice_in_Ancient_Greece.html?id=f52yGxXJy14C)). In one of the most chilling passages of Homer's heroic, Achilles slits the throats of twelve noble Trojan boys, to honor the burial pyre of Patroclus. Plato was so distressed at this passage that he simply denied Achilles' act. What if Homer created a dispensation for human sacrifice after battle through antiquity and its Muslim inheritors? Blood sacrifice of prisoners is hallowed in [Muslim lore](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html).

**- Supplication** (Gordon Kelley, [*Battlefield Supplication in the Iliad*](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/classical_world/v107/107.2.kelly.pdf)). The ritual death of James Foley has perhaps its most moving counterpart in the *Iliad*, in Achilles' killing of Lykaon. James Foley made only indirect supplication, but his "I wish I had more time to see my family" still fit heroic age poetic venues in which the plea of the person to be executed can be dismissed in the context of the greater wrong and rage that the killer must exorcize. Lykaon might so easily, like Foley, be spared, yet he is complicit in deeper ways:

*So, friend, you die also. Why all this clamor about it?  
  
Patroklos also is dead, who was better by far than you are.  
  
Do you not see what a man I am, how huge, how splendid  
  
and born of a great father, and the mother who bore me immortal?*

Execution thus demonstrates how the enemy is all one, to be destroyed (no exceptions), but also that each ritual slaying enhances dominance (today, of Islam) over the apostates and unbelievers. Yet, like ancient Greeks, we are buying into the atavistic frames of heroic age society: Witness [Shirley Sotloff](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/middleeast/steven-sotloff-isis-hostage.html?_r=0).

**- Compensation** (Donna Wilson, [*Ransom and Revenge in Heroic Identity*](http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam033/2001035612.pdf)) Private monetary compensation for wrong and ransom is just as embedded in the Muslim world today as it was in the Heroic Age. The key dynamic in the *Iliad* is that Achilles rejects former norms of reciprocity -- indeed all forms of compensation -- after the death of Patroklos. The wrong is too great to be assuaged by money. We see this counterpointed in the $130 million ransom demanded for James Foley -- itself an enunciation of how the wrongs done Islam are too great for America ever to pay off.

**- Mourning and funerary rites** ([*Robin Norris, Mourning Rites: Beowulf, the Iliad, and the War in Iraq*](https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal_of_narrative_theory/v037/37.2norris.html)). Elaborate funeral rites and extended lamentation mark the passing of the hero -- Patroklos, Beowulf, or the pious Muslim warrior today. Yet with remembrance, not all the dead of battle share the hero's fate. Essential to Achilles' killing of say, Lykaon, or Da'ish's ritual beheadings is a desire to tell us that such men did not die as heroes but as sacrificial animals:

After flinging Lykaon's body by the foot into the River Skamandros, Achilleus bids the fish to feed upon it. The image that Achilleus evokes -- of fish nibbling on the "shining fat" of the corpse -- also deny the possibility of funeral rites for Lykaon's body [(Kelley)](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/classical_world/v107/107.2.kelly.pdf).

So the Islamic State would take from us the chance to mourn our own: Just as we have -- perhaps unwittingly -- stripped honorable grief from them. "In the world of the *Iliad,* funeral interruption is the ultimate insult to one's enemy." How about a Mk. 81 JDAM Predator "interruption"?

What do Muslim warriors of this new Heroic Age seek to achieve against us? Just this: ***Dominance***. We, progeny of civilization, have no idea what that word really means. As reified a commentator as Robert Kaplan -- once-anointed of the Imperial Palace -- can only come up with this little nugget to imagine the enemy describing themselves: ["We will triumph because we observe absolutely no constraints."](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2014/08/28/terrorism_as_theater.html)

How Kaplan showcases our foolish ways. When the Islamic state executes and takes a head, its message is really this: *You are weak. You are no more than women. With your drones, you are worse than women. You will fall before us. You will beseech our mercy and then prostrate yourselves before the truth of God, before you die.*

The wrath of the Islamic State, like Achilles, is fueled by the pain of loss -- *a century of shame and degradation* -- but just as fully by the social need to create rites that overturn this impossible iron vise. The humiliation of Arab Sunni Islam is today one of the most compelling dynamics of all human history.

We are fools to be surprised by this, or by the brutal truth that so many have turned on us. Nor should it surprise us that the still living grand community of Islam has turned instinctively at last to rites of resistance and deliverance; nor that, forced to pursue of what such rites offer, that old rules, especially rules we imposed, are literally to be thrown away.

How did the magisterial world of Islam -- like the [heavenly](http://static.panoramio.com/photos/large/43842168.jpg) [Alhambra](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a7/Spain_granada_alhambra_at_night.jpg), a last holdout in [Western romance](https://archive.org/details/talesfromalhambr00irvi) -- become lost? How have Achilles' "Heroic Age" rules come to demand payment now only through our own blood, shame, and humiliation?

The truth is that we created them. Stripping people of Modernity through prolonged tyranny will force them on passages to original constructs of identity -- *even before civilization*. These past decades the United States has unconsciously helped reposition Muslim Sunni Arab identity, both through our unthinking support of corrupt Saudi Takfiri missionary enterprises, but also through our brutalization -- both subtle and head slamming -- of their world. As we talked democracy we also simultaneously withheld it. We gave no way out save the way they have taken now.

Hence only blood can cleanse and purify Islam now: And for all Muslims -- *more of them than you could ever imagine* -- such cleansing must be our blood.

This is the bad news: This is what it means to face a consciousness from [before civilization](http://www.amazon.com/Before-Philosophy-Intellectual-Adventure-Ancient/dp/014020198X/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1409336504&sr=1-3&keywords=henri+frankfort). Today we confront the consequences of a century of casual cruelty. So poetry and heroes we once cherished emerge as if from ancient prism, to kill us all.

I have one word: *Do not fight them on their terms*. They are our Achilles-Nemesis. They seek the arena of [single combat](http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/08/26/what-the-islamic-state-learned-from-the-u-s-about-fighting-a-war/), of mano-a-mano, of sacrifice and supplication. Do not let them dictate to us their passionate Homeric battlefield, for these reasons:

We will lose that battle, in the act of losing ourselves.

We are civilization, which is a precious creation only ours to lose.

Let us not go into battle against Achilles then, as "Hector slayer of men" -- but rather as the true sons and daughters of Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt.