

*This paper was delivered during the PIONEER OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: ATATÜRK
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Ataturk as a Homeric Hero



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Prologue: Character

Consider character, taken in the Greek sense as an interpenetrated set of inherited attributes like hair color, height, beauty, and the propensity to absorb and act on external influences and circumstances. Character is what one does and who one is with causation moving in both directions. Our protagonist is intelligent, handsome, robust, athletic, strong, courageous, resilient, willful, emotional, generous, boastful, sensitive, especially regarding his person and honor, sexually promiscuous, hard drinking, insubordinate, cruel, ruthless, unable to dissemble, and charismatic.

I am referring to the 'Best of the Achaians,' Achilles. Who else might be described by this kind of character I leave to your imagination. For now let us consider Homer's Achilles from an unusual perspective: his *dissatisfaction* with the heroic code. He is easily and pointedly contrasted by Homer from those for whom the heroic code sufficed: Heracles, Ajax, Sarpedon and countless others. It is not so much that Achilles is looking for more but that he knows he already is more than the code, without knowing exactly What. The *Iliad* can best be read as the story of Achilles as he struggles to find himself, to find the What.

The poem begins with Achilles's withdrawal from the war in its ninth year. After a series of Greek disasters, prayed for by Achilles and supported by his goddess mother, Thetis, he reenters the war, but for an intensely personal reason: the death of his friend and alter ego Patroclus. Patroclus is unfailingly gentle, kind, compassionate, and a valiant warrior. He often rebukes Achilles for being inhuman, iron-hearted, indifferent to the suffering of lesser human beings. How inhuman Achilles can act becomes manifest after Patroclus is killed and desecrated by Hector. Not only does Achilles reenter the war with unprecedented ferocity, he revels in the carnage, offending the normally callous gods. He exults in his efforts to desecrate Hector's body, prevented only by the intercession of Olympus. At Patroclus's funeral, he not only sacrifices countless animals, but twelve Trojan boys. He has descended into bestiality.

Although his bestiality is part of his journey to fulfilling his selfhood, his attempt to find the what, it should better be seen as a necessary transition toward the fulfillment of his character. The genius of Homer is no better revealed than when, near the end of the *Iliad*, he credibly portrays Achilles as forgiving and compassionate. He not only provides his Greek rivals with lavish funeral games in honor of Patroclus, he demonstrates tact and diplomacy by resolving many conflicts among the contestants. More remarkable, he surrenders Hector's corpse to Priam. In exchange for a ransom, which seems *pro forma* in the context, Achilles has Hector's body washed and dressed and carries it, wrapped in his own cloak, to

Priam's wagon, promising a truce so that the funeral rites can be performed in peace.

Of course the war will resume, Troy will fall, its men slaughtered, and its women and children thrown into slavery. The horror of existential reality remains in full force. And yet, and yet...

Ataturk: the Creation of Turkey

Now let us move forward from eleventh century Troy, poetically conceived, to twentieth century Turkey, from the mythological Achilles to the historical Ataturk. From the point of view of character, I believe, there are many similarities between Achilles and Ataturk, as the list of attributes sketched above shows. The differences too are telling. Achilles was not a patriot in the modern sense of the word, and he could not have been as the state, much less the nation-state did not exist. When insulted by Agamemnon, he not only withdrew his army from the war, he prayed for the defeat the Greeks. Ataturk, of course, was a patriot, an ardent Turkish nationalist, at least insofar as he was able to shape modern Turkey according to his own vision. Achilles was not a politician, nor a nation-builder. Ataturk was perhaps the greatest soldier/statesman of the twentieth century. In the American experience only George Washington comes to mind, and his difficulties were nothing compared to Ataturk's.

Against the odds, Washington won a war of independence against a great power. And upon assuming the presidency, he had to hold the thirteen states together, states which had competing interests, and vastly differing life styles and economies. To overcome these difficulties, Washington could rely on a well established rule of law, a brilliantly conceived constitution, and a vibrant middle-class. On none of these advantages could Ataturk rely. The American Revolution was a war for independence, not a social revolution. Ataturk, upon winning the war for independence, had to entirely reconceive the political and social structures he inherited. Not wanting to rule over a rump Ottoman Empire, much less an eviscerated Turkey, he needed to create a new polity. He did this on the lines of a secular republic, which sounds obvious now, but was anything but in the years immediately after the war of independence. And he knew that the new polity would require a new culture. And this new culture would require changes far more profound than those confronted by the architects of the American, or even the French, Revolution. Ataturk presided over a reformation *and* a revolution. Abandoning the sultanate and the caliphate were of course crucial changes, but compared to the other changes he made were both obvious and simple. He needed to change the mind-set and the world view of an impoverished, illiterate rural society that had been dominated and oppressed by urban elites as much as by

corrupt rulers and their bureaucratic henchmen. And he had at the same time to change the mind-set and world view of the privileged elites of the Ottoman regime. He had more difficulty with the latter, not surprisingly. While it is true that some of the groundwork of reform was in place, it is difficult to see how a secular republic could have been erected without a charismatic leader.

This difficulty is compounded when the devastation of Turkey is understood:

There was indeed little room for hope. Exhausted by eight years of almost continuous warfare, the once great Ottoman Empire lay supine in defeat, its capital occupied, its leaders in flight. The country was shattered, impoverished, depopulated and demoralized. The Turkish people, beaten and dispirited, seemed ready to accept almost anything that the victors chose to impose on them [Lewis, p.241].

'The Turks had won their independence, but a decade of war and revolution, massacre and counter massacre, banditry, blockade, and foreign occupation had decimated the population and shattered the economy of the lands that composed the new Turkey' [Shaw & Shaw, p.373]. Facing much less devastation, post-war Germans turned to Hitler and other Europeans installed fascist governments. My point is not how difficult this transformation would prove. Indeed it is still in progress. Rather I wish to suggest that a less heroic figure than Ataturk not only could not have succeeded, he would not even have conceived it. The conception of a secular, western oriented republic was truly a heroic vision in 1922-3. Yet Ataturk proceeded as if this had been the meaning of his life from his birth in Salonika. Heroes don't strictly have visions in the ordinary sense of the word; they have 'realities' that they expect the world to actualize. And Ataturk was not shy about applying the whip to the recalcitrant, the sluggish or the slow. No more than Achilles was he a god. Consider perhaps his most famous speech to the National Assembly in 1922, which in a few sentences captures both of these ideas:

The question is not whether or not we should leave Sultanate and sovereignty to the nation. This is already an accomplished fact—the question is merely how to give expression to it. This will happen in any case. If those gathered here, the Assembly, and everyone else could look at this question in a natural way, I think they would agree. Even if they do not, the truth will find expression, but some heads may roll in the process [Lewis, p.258].

He was a charismatic leader with a mission and he would ride over anything, person or institution, that obstructed him. He did not sacrifice twelve boys to achieve his goals, however, who can doubt he would have done so, if such a sacrifice proved necessary. Remember his famous charge to his troops at Gallipoli: 'You are not

here to fight; you are here to die!' Later he exiled or otherwise punished many of his closest associates for what he conceived as interfering with the evolution of the Turkish Republic. And yet, and yet...

Of all the world leaders about whom I know, with the possible exception of Lincoln, who else could have written to the Australian and New Zealand mothers of children he killed the following?

There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehments to us when they lie side by side in this country of ours. You, the mothers, who sent sons from a faraway country, wipe away your tears. Your sons are now lying in our bosom...and are at peace. Having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well.

Who can hear these words, while envisioning the honor Achilles afforded Hector's body, in the presence of his father, and not feel their greatness? Who can doubt that in the person of Ataturk, Achilles would have recognized a brother?

Without diminishing the vast differences in their circumstances, I would like to conclude by suggesting that Achilles and Ataturk had similar, if not identical, journeys. And this similarity, underlying all the differences of time, cultures, events, and experiences, transcends them. Achilles in the last year of the Trojan War, upon the death of a beloved friend, found a way to redeem the insufficiency of the heroic code he embodied. He absorbed his other self, Patroclus's virtues, making them his own. He pulled himself out of the pit of bestial despair by recognizing himself in his enemy, realizing that by honoring Hector, he was honoring Priam and his father. And in the process, he honored himself. In a different way, I believe that Ataturk also honored himself. He achieved this not by embodying the virtues of a friend but by the creation of a nation, a nation that he expected to embody virtues he did not have but whose virtues would not have had a chance of expression without him. Heroes are necessarily solitary figures; they escape loneliness only if in their solitude they find an 'other' worthy of themselves. Achilles found Patroclus. Ataturk found Turkey.

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