

The Strength of Heroes in the *Iliad*

The heroes in the *Iliad* are certainly strong. Homer depicts them as performing great feats of strength on several occasions throughout the course of the poem. The most well-known motif concerning heroic strength in the *Iliad* is probably that in which characters lift massive stones. At *Il.* 5.302–4 Diomedes shows his strength by lifting a rock that two men could not lift, “such as mortals now are.” Hector, not wishing to be outdone, does roughly the same thing at *Il.* 12.445–49, and Aeneas follows suit at *Il.* 20.285–87. Related to this trope is the passage at *Il.* 24.453–56, where it is said that the bar on Achilles’ hut is so weighty that it normally takes three Achaeans to raise, although Achilles is able to do it all on his own.

These passages are all undoubtedly meant to emphasize the great strength of Homeric heroes. However, many scholars have argued that Homer tends to downplay the fantastic, whether the fantastic elements derive from folktales (Glenn 1971; Page 1973; Hansen 1997, 2002), the Epic Cycle (Griffin 1977; Davies 2003), or the Near East (West 1997). Martin West argues in his 2007 book *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* that Homer’s passages on heroic strength downplay analogous Indo-European hyperbole found in Irish epics. Comparing these Iliadic passages to two similar ones in Irish saga (in which Irish heroes are said to have the strength of six or nine men), West (2007: 426) argues that Homeric poetry rationalizes such inherited Indo-European hyperbole.

My paper will argue that, although it is correct that Homer downplays inherited Indo-European hyperbole, West’s treatment of this motif is cursory and misleading. I will show that this motif occurs not just in Greek and Irish epic, but in a number of other cognate Indo-European epic traditions as well, including Indian, Persian, Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Middle Welsh, Middle High German, Russian, Armenian, and Albanian. I will demonstrate that this

motif is not just Indo-European, but that its typical form is far more hyperbolic than that found in the *Iliad*, thus making West's claim of rationalization more plausible and informative. The Irish passages he adduces as *comparanda*, for example, are but two of many instances of the motif in which heroes in Irish tales are described as having the strength of multiple men. Moreover, medieval Irish saga regularly features far more fantastic versions of the trope; many heroes have the strength of a hundred men, and some are even stronger than that.

Having provided reason to think that the Iliadic passages represent rationalized Indo-European hyperbole, I will examine the likely nature of this Homeric rationalization. I will argue that the motif probably took a number of different forms in non-Homeric archaic Greek epic. I will use *comparanda* to show values the motif probably took in archaic Greek epic. I will argue that there likely was a tradition of Achilles feasting on living animals while under Cheiron's tutelage, a story often attributed to the Cyclic *Cypria*. The logic of the motif is that those who eat such animals gain their qualities including strength; Achilles would thus have likely been described as having the strength of multiple animals. This would have analogues in a number of Indo-European epics, including the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Shahnama*, and *David of Sasun*, in all of which heroes are said to have the strength of multiple animals. Finally, I will argue that the motif was also likely applied to women (i.e., Amazons) in non-Homeric archaic Greek epic, basing my argument on the Iliadic description of Amazons as *antianeiras*, "the equal of men," at *Il.* 6.186. Homer famously suppresses such women warriors in his poems, but other (Irish and Middle High German, among others) epic storytellers were happy to include women with the strength of several men.

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