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Why Styx? Some remarks on Statius's Achilleid*

Summary – Twice in the 'Achilleid' Thetis affirms that she made her son invulnerable on day of his birth by dipping him into the waters of Styx but omitted to immerse the heel by which she held him. This motif, very familiar to us, is neither found in literature before Statius nor in the art of archaic, classical and Hellenistic times. Therefore, one can assume that it was Statius who invented Achilles's imperfect invulnerability based on two pieces written (or considered to be written) by Hesiod, an author whose popularity among the Roman literates in Augustan and post-Augustan times is well known.

Statius finished the 'Thebaid' in about 92 AD. According to some passages in the 'Silvae', he had in mind to write on another subject of epic: a song about Achilles.[1] He started writing around about 95 after having sketched out a rough draft of its theme but he did not have the chance to finish it: he died in the winter 95 or spring of 96, certainly before Domitian's death in September 96. Thus, all that has been handed down to us of the Achilleid is one complete book and one hundred and sixty-seven lines of the second. There was already a poem about Achilles; this was Homer's 'Iliad', whose subject-matter was the wrath of Achilles. Statius, however, planned not to deal with the hero's career at Troy up to the

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1 Silv. 4, 4 (epist. ad Vitorium Marcellum), 87ff.: *Nunc si forte meis quae sint exordia Musis / scire petis* … (Statius continues that he just has finished the Thebaid) … (93ff.) *nunc vacuos crines alio subit infula nexu: / Troia quidem magnusque mihi temptatur Achilles, / sed vocat arcitenens alio pater armaque monstrat / Ausonii maiora ducis* (i.e. *Domitiani*) ("Now if perchance you would know what my Muse essays … [93ff.] now a different band comes to entwine my vacant locks: Troy I attempt and great Achilles, but the Father that bears the bow calls me elsewhere, pointing to the Ausonian leader's mightier arms"); 4, 7, 22ff.: *tardius sueto venit ipse Thymbrae / rector et primis meus ecce metis / haeret Achilles* ("Thymbra's ruler himself comes more slowly than is his wont and, see, my Achilles is stuck at the first turning point"; translations by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Cambridge, Mass. - London 2003; cf. 5, 2, 160 – 163; 5, 5, 36f.).

death of Hector, as Homer had done; as he says in the preface (vv. 3 – 7), he intended to depict the entire life of Achilles from his youth up to his death.[2]

The fragment of the 'Achilleid' is a very innovative piece, full of literary references;[3] it gives us the impression that the whole poem would have been equally enjoyable and interesting. But in fact the first book is the only one that may reasonably be studied.

In the beginning, Statius describes the anxiety of the sea-goddess Thetis for her son and her attempts to save the half-divine and half-mortal Achilles from his predestined death at Troy by concealing him on the island of Scyros disguised as a girl.[4] At first Achilles resists this plan, but having caught sight of Deidamia, the daughter of king Lycomedes, he submits to his mother. This first part has about 400 verses. Now the scene changes to Greece: in another 163 verses Statius reports on the mobilisation of the Greeks at the naval base at Aulis, the absence of Achilles, the divine ecstasy of Kalchas revealing Thetis's trickery and Scyros as the hiding-place, and finally, the offer of Diomedes and Ulysses to hunt down Achilles. The following 400 verses turn back to the events taking place at Scyros: There Achilles falls in love with Deidamia and seduces her before revealing his true self. When Ulysses arrives and during the welcome banquet tempts Achilles with a display of weapons of war, the hero's desire for battle awakens at once. At the beginning of book 2, Achilles, ashamed of the dishonour of acting as a girl, distances himself from his mother's anxieties while sailing to Troy with Diomedes and Ulysses. The latter calms him and explains of the reason for the impending war, whereupon Achilles tells them about his education by Chiron, to whom he was entrusted after his birth. There the poem breaks off.

In Book One, Thetis is doubtless the dominant character, not only of the first part, where she plays the most active role, but in the other two parts as well, so that some scholars called the first book a 'Theteid', or a 'Song of Thetis'. But

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2 Achill. 1,3 – 7: … *quamquam acta viri multum incluta cantu / Maeonio, sed plura vacant: nos ire per omnem / – sic amor est – heroa velis Scyroque latentem / Dulichia proferre tuba nec in Hectore tracto / sistere, sed tota iuvenem deducere Troia* ("… Highly renowned are the warrior's deeds in Maeonian song, but more remains untold: suffer me – for such is my desire – to recount the whole story of the hero, to summon him forth from his hiding-place in Scyros with the Dulichian trumpet, and not to stop short at the dragging of Hector, but to lead the youth through the whole tale of Troy"). – All translations of the 'Achilleid' by J. H. Mozley, Cambridge, Mass. - London 1969 (The Loeb classical library, 207).

3 Cf. Statius, Achilleid, ed. with introduction and commentary by O. A. W. Dilke, Cambridge / England 1954 (repr. 2005).

4 Cf. esp. D. Mendelsohn, Empty Nest, Abandoned Cave: Maternal Anxiety in Achilleid 1, Classical Antiquity 9 (1990), 295 – 308.

let's have a more detailed look at the first part of Book One: From the very beginning, the poet confronts us with a problem which runs as a red thread throughout the entire first book: the goddess's deep-seated displeasure at her wedding with a mortal, who became the father of Achilles instead of a god. The opening lines of the proem allude to this topic just when Achilles, the theme of the whole epic, is mentioned:

Magnanimum Aeaciden formidatamque Tonanti
progeniem et patrio vetitam succedere caelo
diva, refer.

("Tell, o Muse, of the great-hearted Aeacides and of the progeny that the Thunderer feared and forbade to inherit his father's heaven.")

The reason for *Tonans*'s fear was commonly known: Zeus, the suitor of Thetis, was warned that any son born by her would be mightier than his father;[5] because of this prophecy, he forced her to marry the mortal Peleus. It seems odd that Statius chooses to use a patronymic that does not refer to Peleus but to Achilles's grandfather Aeacus.[6] Indeed, in the extant portion of Statius's poem, Peleus is practically absent.[7] Nevertheless, the mésalliance is ever at the forefront of Thetis's and Achilles's thought alike. At their arrival at Scyros, Thetis frankly complains to Achilles (252ff.):

"Si mihi, care puer, thalamos sors aequa tulisset,
quos dabat, aetheriis ego te complexa tenerem

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5 Cf. Pind., Isthm. 8, 26 – 31; Apoll. Rhod. 4, 800 – 802; Apollod. Bibl. 3 [168f.], 13, 5.

6 At the beginning of book 2 (verse 7) Achilles is called *Aeacides* again (and elsewhere in the 'Achilleid', ten times *in toto*). Even sagacious Odysseus hints at Achilles's descent from Aeacus (the son of Jove), when he, at the court of Lycomedes, one of the girls – rightly – suspects to be the disguised hero (1, 866ff.): *tunc acer Ulixes / admotus lateri summissa voce: 'quid haeres? / scimus', ait, 'tu semiferi Chironis alumnus, / t u c a e l i p e l a g i q u e n e p o s , te Dorica classis, / te tua suspensis exspectat Graecia signis, / ipsaque iam dubiis nutant tibi Pergama muris. / heia, abrumpe moras! sine perfida palleat Ide, / et iuvet haec audire patrem, pudeatque dolosam / sic pro te timuisse Thetin.'* ("Then quickly went Ulysses to his side and whispered: 'Why dost thou hesitate? We know thee, thou art the pupil of the half-beast Chiron, thou art the grandson of the sky and sea; thee the Dorian fleet, thee thy own Greece awaits with standards uplifted for the march, and the very walls of Pergamum totter and sway for thee to overturn. Up! delay no more! Let perfidious Ida grow pale, let thy father delight to hear these tidings, and guileful Thetis feel shame to have so feared for thee'.")

7 Thetis hints at him just in a complaining manner emphasising Achilles's inherited martial talent; being still a young boy in the care of Chiron he could not help fighting (1, 41f.): *illic, ni fallor, Lapitharum proelia ludit / improbus et patria iam se metitur in hasta* ("there, if I mistake not, he plays, the rogue, at the battle of the Lapiths, and already measures his strength with his father's spear.")

sidus grande plagis, magnique puerpera caeli
255 *nil humiles Parcas terrenaque fata vererer.*
nunc impar tibi, nate, genus …"

("If, dear lad, a kindly lot had brought me the wedlock that it offered, in the fields of heaven should I be holding thee, a glorious star, in my embrace, nor a celestial mother should I fear the lowly Fates or the destinies of earth. But now unequal is thy birth …")

And when Achilles reveals his true self and noble birth to Deidamia, he points to his would-be father, Zeus (650ff.):

"Ille ego – quid trepidas? –, genitum quem caerula mater
paene Iovi silvis nivibusque immisit alendum
Thessalicis …"

("I am he – why fearest thou? – whom my cerulean mother bore wellnigh to Jove, and sent to find my nurture in the woods and snows of Thessaly …")

The latter is a reference to Thetis's statement at the beginning of the story (38f.) that it was she who entrusted Achilles to Chiron – not Peleus, as it is told usually in literature as well as in art.

In a subtle psychological manner Statius is working out the 'leitmotif' of the first book: Thetis feels cheated out of a marriage in accordance with her rank and she is not willing to accept the consequences: She wants to subvert the fate of her son in any way possible. From her glassy palace beneath the flood she catches sight of Paris sailing back from Sparta to Troy (20ff.). In her ensuing monologue (30 – 51), she explicitly identifies the danger to her son with a threat to her own life (31): *"me petit haec, mihi classis", ait, "funesta minatur"*. She knows that her son "soon will be sought for by land and sea, and himself will wish to follow" the Greeks (37f.: *iam pelago terrisque meus quaeretur Achilles / et volet ipse sequi*), and she regrets having sent him to Chiron. In her anxiety, she finally decides to ask Neptune for help: She begs him to destroy the Trojan fleet by sending a snow-storm.[8]

In 52 – 60 Statius describes Neptune's arrival. The sea god is coming from a banquet with Oceanus and is crossing the flood; this scene is modelled on Il. 13, 17 – 31 with its joyful welcome of Poseidon by the sea-monsters. Upon his arrival, however, Neptune rejects Thetis's request (61 – 78) to send a storm or to entrust the command of the sea to her (78 – 94): *"fata vetant"*, he emphasises (81), and he exhorts her to cease her complaining about her inferior wedlock. Achilles, he says, will be thought to be the son of Zeus, and this should be sufficient for her (90f.):

8 Obviously an allusion to the beginning of Vergil's Aeneid.

Pelea iam desiste queri thalamosque minores:
crederis peperisse Iovi.[9]

Neptune continues by saying that Thetis will not suffer her son's death unavenged, for he grants to her the ability to "raise the flood" (*dabo tollere fluctus*) when the Greek fleet returns from Troy, in order to cause their ships to be wrecked on Cape Caphareus. In this, Statius departs from the tradition that took the ship-wreck in the south of Euboea to be the vengeance of Nauplius on the Greeks for their murder of his son Palamedes. Thetis, however, who still intends to save her boy's life, is not comforted by this and devises another plan: In great sadness she proceeds to Mount Pelion to visit the aged Chiron, whose kind character is mirrored by the description of his cave. After he has joyfully welcomed her (95 – 125), she tricks him into releasing Achilles into her custody by telling him a fictitious dream. It is a nightmare that has announced *atra … / signa deum* (129f.): assaults by sword and by wild beasts that signify dangers to her son. She pretends that to banish her fears, Proteus, the *Carpathius vates*, has advised her to perform a certain magic rite, while purifying her son in secret waters on the farthest shore of the Ocean (135 – 141) – she is forbidden to tell of its details. Chiron, who does not see through the elaborate lie, submits to her request (143 – 158). It is within the fictitious story of the nightmare that Thetis first mentions dipping Achilles into the waters of Styx after his birth, for in her dream, she apparently re-enacts this (133f.):

saepe ipsa – nefas! – sub inania natum
Tartara et ad Stygios iterum fero mergere fontes.

Later, Thetis mentions the dipping again: Arriving at Scyros and waking Achilles, she attempts to persuade him to hide there disguised as a girl, and within this speech (the beginning is quoted above) she gives a fuller account of the dipping (267 – 271):

per ego hoc decus et ventura iuventae
gaudia, si terras humilemque experta maritum
te propter, si progenitum Stygos amne severo
270 *armavi – totumque utinam! –, cape tuta parumper*
tegmina nil nocitura animo.

("By this beauty of thine and the coming joys of youth I pray thee, if for thy sake I endured the earth and an inglorious mate, if at thy birth I fortified thee with the stern waters of Styx –

9 Cf. Mythogr. Vat. II 248, 14 – 17: *genuit autem Thetis ex Peleo Achillem, de cuius morte cum timeret eo quod a patre esset mortalis, et hoc quereretur apud Neptunum, refert Neptunus non esse timendum de eo quia talis futurus esset ut credatur deo genitus.*

ay, would I had wholly! – take these safe robes awhile, they will in no wise harm thy valour.")

On the day of his birth, Thetis rendered Achilles's body immune from harm by dipping his body in the waters of Styx; all his body, except the heel by which she held him. It is this story that has given rise to the proverbial reference to an 'Achilles heel'.[10]

The idea of invulnerability of a mortal is not very familiar to the Greeks: In order to adopt a lion's invulnerability, Heracles wore the skin of the lion he had strangled at Nemea. There was another well-known legend, which in some respects recalls our narrative:[11] When Aias, the son of Telamon, was born, Heracles wrapped him in the lion's skin, praying to the gods to render the child invulnerable like the skin. The gods granted it, but a part of the baby's body remained uncovered because of carelessness; it was just at this spot that Aias would later impale himself upon his sword.

This legend, which is already attested for Aeschylus,[12] may have been the model on which Statius based his account of Thetis's attempt to use the waters of Styx as a protecting cover, as a kind of second skin, as it were, for her newborn son. In literature, this scene is not found before Statius; in art, however, there are objects depicting it – two of them were thought until quite recently to date back to the Hellenistic period: a golden ring that has now been judged a forgery as well as a cameo about which there are serious doubts.[13] A relief fragment at Champlieu may be falsely dated to the first century A. D.[14] To sum up, we have no certain depictions of the dipping of Achilles into the Styx until after the time of Statius.

On the other hand, some vase images indicate that Achilles received a wound to his lower leg. Of these, one type depicts the fatal arrow in flight; it is either

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10 Besides Statius the 'Nachleben' of the 'Achilles heel' was most supported by Servius (Aen. 6, 57), Fulgentius (mith. 3, 7, p. 71, 9ff. Helm; allegorical interpretation), and the Vatican Mythographers (e.g. I 36; II, 248, 18 – 20).

11 The stories of Caenus, Cycnus and Talos with their imperfect invulnerability aim at another point.

12 Schol. Vet. in Soph. Ai. 833; Eustath. 995, 1 – 4.

13 Cf. A. Kossatz-Deissmann, LIMC I, s. v. Achilleus, p. 43 – 45: The ring (no. 12 in Kossatz-Deissmann) was still by her considered to be genuine, but the Curator of Ancient Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art informed J. Burgess (below note 15, 222, n. 19) about the inauthenticity of this artifact (no. 61.48.2); doubt about the cameo (Hannover, Kestermuseum K 640) in Kossatz-Deissmann, no. 18 b (with reference to E. Zwierlein-Diehl).

14 Kossatz-Deissmann, no. 5; discussion about the uncertainty of the fragment as to its date and its iconology already in: É. Espérandieu, Recueil général des bas-reliefs, statues et bustes de la Gaule Romaine, 5, Paris 1913, 94 – 98.

shown to be flying according to the aim of Paris alone (standing behind Achilles) or by the help of Apollo guiding the arrow. Another type of image even shows the arrow piercing the foot. It was thought that such artistic concepts presupposed Achilles's invulnerability except for a single spot on his leg. Many scholars pointed to the wounding of Diomedes in the foot by Paris at Iliad 11, 369–400; some of them even believed that this scene reflected the death of Achilles. This would mean that a story in which Achilles was wounded in the ankle or heel must have been current in the Archaic Age, perhaps originating in some pre-Homeric tradition. Jonathan Burgess, however, has submitted all evidence to a thorough examination.[15] He emphasises that the vase-paintings in question do not demonstrate that the death of Achilles was caused by a single arrow wound in the leg because the first type of image depicts Paris about to shoot another arrow, whereas the second type shows one or more arrows already sticking out of the dead Achilles's back. Burgess argues convincingly that the motif of invulnerability is not archaic, but instead is derived from the impenetrable armour Achilles wore according to early tradition. Burgess points to the fact that Homer did not portray Achilles as invulnerable[16] but gave him a remarkable advantage: "swiftness of foot", a well-known epithet. Burgess therefore supposes that the arrow shot directed at his leg (by or with assistance of Apollo) was originally meant to immobilise the hero: unable to escape, he could be killed easily. Accordingly, the motif of imperfect invulnerability cannot be shown to be present in earlier art or literature. This motif occurs only at a later period. Two reliefs from the later Roman Empire depict the scene of Achilles's death, and these show that the story had taken a new turn sometime during the Hellenistic period. At the temple of Thymbraean Apollo, Achilles, unarmed because of the rendezvous with Polyxena and thus completely unprotected, is ambushed by Paris, who aims an arrow at Achilles, while Apollo points to his lower leg. The other artifact, a sarcophagus, shows Achilles's marriage to Polyxena and his subsequent death; although he does not wear an armour he is nevertheless struck by an arrow in the foot, not in his breast or back.

In conclusion, despite the fact that imperfect invulnerability seems to have been present in Indo-European myth, the testimony for Achilles dying by a wound to a single vulnerable spot is late. There is no evidence either in literature or in art that proves that the story of Achilles's imperfect invulnerability originated in the course of archaic or classical times. The invention of his being dipped into Styx can, at the earliest, be fixed in Roman times.

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[15] J. Burgess, Achilles' heel: The Death of Achilles in Ancient Myth. Classical Antiquity 14 (1995), 217–243, with extensive discussion of the mentioned opinions.

[16] Achilles is wounded in the arm at Il. 21, 166f.

But how could being dipped into the Styx, a river of death, ever be thought to lead to invulnerability? In traditional myth, Thetis wanted to render her semi-divine Achilles immortal by burning off his mortal nature; when a terrified Peleus interrupted the magic rite, she, enraged, left him and the child and returned to the waves of the sea. This and variant versions are modelled on Demeter's intention to transform her nursling Demophon, an attempt which likewise failed because of an interruption, as is told in the famous Homeric Hymn to Demeter (231ff.).

It seems odd that a story concerning the handling of fire was transferred to Thetis, the sea-maiden. And indeed, there was another story circulating in archaic times that associated the goddess with water. This story is told by a scholiast as a legend originating in the 'Aigimios', a lost epic poem considered to be written by Hesiod.[17] It runs as follows: Thetis wanted to prove the godliness of her children by putting them into boiling water, but when the children died one after another, Peleus strictly forbade the performing of the experiment on his last-born son Achilles. This old story vanished, probably because of the wide-spread myth about Medea boiling off Aeson or Pelias in order to rejuvenate them,[18] but apparently it influenced the choice of another kind of deadly water.

One may still wonder, however, why the choice of the Styx and not, for instance, Pyriphlegethon, whose name is associated with fire. According to Hesiod,[19] Styx is one of the daughters of Oceanus and Tethys, who in a famous passage of the Iliad, the so-called 'Dios apate', are called the first parents and the origin of the gods.[20] But Styx is not only of primeval and noble birth: Hesiod also gives her an outstanding rank in the catalogue of the Oceanids by mentioning her last and giving her the epithet "the most prominent" (προφερεστάτη, Th. 361). Again, in Theogony 776f., he calls her "the eldest, most venerable" daughter of Oceanus. Moreover, according to Theogony 383ff., she had four noble children: Zelos (i. e. "Lust for power"), Nike ("Confident of victory"), Kratos ("Succeeding in power") and Bie ("Holder of power").[21] On

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17 Schol. Ap. Rhod. 4, 816 = Hes., fr. 300.

18 Aeson: Nostoi fr. 6 EpGF (cf. Ov. Met. 7, 162 – 349); Pelias: e. g. Apollod. Bibl. 1 [144] 9, 27.

19 It is to be noticed that Statius hints at Hesiod in his 'Epicedion in patrem suum' twice and with elaborate verses (Silv. 5, 3, 24ff. and 146ff.) showing his – and his father's – great esteem for the *Ascraeus senex* just as well as for Homer.

20 Hom., Il. 14, 201 = 302 and 246.

21 On the contrary in 'Prometheus Bound' Kratos and Bia are the brutal ones, who execute all orders of young and hard-hearted Zeus, the new tyrant, against the philanthropist Prometheus. Besides that Zelos, Nike, Kratos and Bia were judged in a positive manner,

advice of her father Oceanus, Hesiod continues, Styx was the first who, together with her children, supported Zeus against the Titans, and Zeus repaid her in kind: Her children were allowed to sit near Zeus at all times to guarantee his kingship, and Styx received special notice as well, insofar as she was appointed as the 'Great Oath' of the gods. Later on, in the famous passage about Styx (Th. 775 – 806), Hesiod says that she – resp. her water – was given the power to put perjurers into a deathlike sleep during a 'Great Year' (according to Empedocles that is about 30.000 years[22]) and to banish them from the community of the gods for nine 'Great Years'. Her water is not only called "frequently celebrated" (πολυώνυμον ὕδωρ, Th. 785), but at the end of the passage, a water "very ancient" (ὠγύγιον) and even "everlasting" (ἄφθιτον, Th. 805f.). Thus, it can be seen how this water later came to be understood as a kind of elixir of life, though accompanied by extreme danger.[23]

Thus Styx was not only a river of death terrifying both humans and gods, but one of the most prominent goddesses in antiquity. Her children, on the other hand, Zelos, Nike, Kratos and Bie, when closely examined, can be seen to represent the fundamental aspects of Achilles's character – traits highly estimated throughout Antiquity. Being dipped into Styx therefore did not harm him, but fortified him to (although not perfect) invulnerability.

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unlike Eris ("Lust for conflict") who together with her brother Ponos ("Misery") descends from Nyx in Hesiod (Th. 226ff.).

22 Emped. B 115, 4 – 6 (D.-K.): the allusion to Hesiod is obvious.

23 In his commentary M. L. West (Hesiod, Theogony, Oxford 1966, 377f.) points to popular superstition in modern times about obtaining immortality by drinking the water of the Arcadian Styx.