The Name of Achilles: A Revised Etymology

By Gary B. Holland, Berkeley

The Iliad and the Odyssey are the oldest surviving Greek epics. They share a common mode of composition, a common poetic language (with local variants), and a common heroic ethos (again with local variants). Furthermore, some of the same characters appear in both poems. The Iliad and the Odyssey also share a negative feature: although many Greek heroic names are etymologically transparent, both in terms of inner-Greek developments and in terms of what is known about the formation of names in the Indo-European parent language, there is no universally accepted etymology either for Achilles or for Odysseus. The ancients accepted a connection of Ὀδυσσεύς with the verb ὀδύρομαι 'I lament, bewail', and a semantically comparable derivation of Ἀχιλλεύς from the noun ἄχος 'pain, distress' (meanings from Liddell-Scott-Jones). These etymologies were, it seems, based on Odysseus' long-suffering return home, and on the pain felt and caused by Achilles, in addition, I think, to the desire to have a parallel analysis of the names of the two principal characters in the surviving epic tradition.

Although the connection of Ἀχιλλεύς with the noun ἄχος and the related verb ἄχνυμαι ~ ἄχομαι 'I feel distress, grieve for' has a certain plausibility simply because no other words in Greek beginning with ἀχ- are even remotely defensible as possible first elements of the name, this etymology remained merely a suggestion recorded in the scholiasts until Paul Kretschmer revived it in 1913. Even Kretschmer's authority was insufficient, however, to outweigh the then-current belief that all the nouns in -εύς (both common and proper) were of pre-Greek or Asianic provenance. Of course, this belief led to the anomalous conclusion that an uncomfortably large number of the earliest and most prominent Greek heroes had non-Greek and even non-Indo-European names. All the same, during this period (ca. 1900–1955) no comparable pre-Greek or Asianic names of the requisite shape were adduced: it appears that a substantial body of scholarly opinion was based on very little fact.

The discovery that the language of the Linear B tablets was Greek cleared the air of much of this nebulous pre-Greek or Asianic prejudice and made it possible for scholars to seek an inner-Greek solution to at least some of these onomastic puzzles. Before turning to this

scholarship, let us review quickly some of the major patterns for the
formation of names, by and large noble names, in Indo-European. The
basic process involved is compounding:

Greek	Ἱππομέδων	'ruling horses'
	Ξανθίππη	'having yellow horses'
	Ἱππῶναξ	'lord of horses'
Sanskrit	Aśvamedhaḥ	'having a horse-sacrifice
Gaulish	Epopennus	'having a horse's head'
Old English	Eomœr	'famed by his horses'
Old Persian	Aspacanah-	'desiring horses'

(Examples from Meillet 1937 [1964]: 291)

These compounds are of various shapes. They may contain a prepo
sitional first member, as in Περικλῆς 'having exceeding fame', 'Αμ
φιμέδων 'ruling about'; they may contain a verbal first member, as ii
'Ορτίλοχος 'who incites the detachment', 'Ορτίλαος 'who incites th
body of fighting men'; they may contain a verbal final member, as i:
Λαέρτης 'who incites the body of fighting men'; they may consist of
sequence of adjective and noun, in which case the compound itself i
further treated as a nominalized adjective, as in Ξανθίππη from ξανθ
'yellow, bay' and ἵππος 'horse', literally 'yellow-horse', but meanin
'having yellow (or bay) horses' when applied to a person. The fin
possibility is the compounding of noun and noun, as in Ξενόλαος 'th
guest-friend of the λαός, or Ἱππῶναξ 'lord of horses'. There is bas
cally no restriction on the case relations between the two nouns i
these compounds, and either order, governed noun + base nou
or base noun + governed noun, is possible, as in the two exampl
just cited.

   The number of nouns that enter into these compound names
restricted, and the restrictions are such that one of the standard worl
on the subject, Felix Solmsen and Ernst Fraenkel's *Indogermanisc.
Eigennamen als Spiegel der Kulturgeschichte* (Heidelberg 1922), maii
tains through its very title that these names mirror the cultural co1
cerns of the societies whose members bore them. It is not only in su‹
ancient languages as Sanskrit and Greek (and Gaulish for that matte
that such names are prominent – even English contains many: Robe1
Walter, Harold, Edward, Edwin, etc. all fit one or the other of tl
compounding patterns mentioned above, and exemplify the same lir
ited social concerns, centering on prowess in battle, and horses. Wo1
en are typically given the same sorts of names as are the men frc
the corresponding social class.

Although the general outlines of these compounding procedures are well known, in fact common knowledge, the formation of hypocoristics, or shortened familiar forms, is much less well understood. These names are subject to shortening in familiar or hypocoristic usage: Meillet's examples Ἱππίας / Ἵππυς / Ἵππυλλος can come from any of the compounds containing the word for 'horse'; similarly, Old High German *Sicco* is the hypocoristic form of *Sigbert* 'victory bright, having a bright victory', *Sigfrīd* 'having joy in victory', or any compound name containing the word for 'victory'. In Greek, this shortening seems to follow one of two major patterns: the name is reduced to only one of the two constituent elements, either the first or the second, as in Μέννει (Boeot.) from Μενεκράτης or Τήλων, Τῆλυς, and Τῆλος from Τηλέμαχος or Τηλεκράτης, Αἵμων from Εὐαίμων, Δίκᾱ from Μνᾱσιδίκᾱ, Κράτης from any of the names ending in -κρατης; or the name is reduced to the first element and a small part of the second, as in Κλέομμις from Κλεομένης, Κάλλιτος from Καλότιμος, Ἄλκιμος from Ἀλκιμέδων, Λάοτος from Λαότιμος. The gemination or doubling of one of the consonants, or a special suffix (or both), often appears, as in the preceding examples. The shortened names are then often used as independent names, in much the same way as nicknames are used as full given names in Modern English or Dutch.

The discovery of Mycenaean Greek in the 1950's added a massive number of names to the early Greek vocabulary – at least 75% of the lexical items in Mycenaean Greek are personal names. The interpretation of these names has constituted one of the major areas of study in Mycenaean Greek since the inception of the field. A surprising early discovery was the name transcribed following the syllabic convention of the writing system as *a-ki-re-u* (nominative) and *a-ki-re-we* (dative) at Knossos (Vc 106) and Pylos (Fn 06) respectively, the former without context and the latter as one of a group of names in a tablet describing grain allotments. The most natural, and in fact universally accepted, interpretation of these names is that they represent Ἀχιλλεύς and Ἀχιλλῆϝει respectively. These two attestations must refer to two different individuals, demonstrating at least a certain popularity of the name in the 14th–12th centuries BCE, and demonstrating also that the name was not invented for the Homeric hero.

The standard etymological dictionaries of Greek by Hjalmar Frisk and by Pierre Chantraine do not offer original hypotheses to account for Ἀχιλλεύς. Frisk, the earlier of the two (1954–1972), mentions Kretschmer's revival of the ancient connection with ἄχος 'pain, grief'

but rejects it in favor of a pre-Greek origin. Frisk characteristical[l]
ignores, or is extremely cautious in his handling of, the Mycenaea[n]
data. Chantraine, writing approximately 14 years after Frisk (1968–
1980), states that this etymology is 'inconnue', although he does men[-]
tion the pre-Greek hypothesis and Kretschmer's derivation. A grea[t]
merit of Chantraine's dictionary is that Mycenaean data are full[y]
utilized, as is the secondary literature on this subject. Hence, Chan[-]
traine is able to present another etymology of Ἀχιλλεύς that connect[s]
it with ἄχος, first offered by Leonard R. Palmer in a discussion c[f]
Mycenaean names (1963).

Palmer etymologizes Ἀχιλλεύς as well as a number of other name[s]
attested in Mycenaean Greek, noting that for the interpretation c[f]
these names there are only two paths to be taken: either the name i[n]
question can be identified with a classically attested (and presumabl[y]
understood) name, or the name must be analyzed solely throug[h]
(root) etymological procedures.

Palmer explains Ἀχιλλεύς as follows: the first element ἀχι- is th[e]
compounding form of the neuter *es*-stem ἄχος (this alternation [is]
regular and constitutes part of the set of phenomena known as C[al]-
land's Law), cf. κυδιάνειρα, whose first element κυδι- is the compoun[d]-
ing form of the neuter *es*-stem κῦδος 'fame, glory', or καλλιάνασσ[α]
whose first element καλλι- is the compounding form of καλλός 'beaut[y]
'Ἀχιλλεύς' optional double -λλ- is characteristic of shortened forms [of]
hypocoristics; -λ- comes in the first instance from λαός (< λᾱϝός), th[e]
word for 'folk, army', and a very common element in Greek onoma[s]-
tics. Compounds with λαός as second member are regularly shorten[ed]
to the first member of the compound plus -λ- plus the thematic vow[el]
Thus, to take a parallel example, Ἔχελος is the short form [of]
Ἐχέλᾱϝος 'who supports the λᾱϝός' in accordance with one of th[e]
patterns presented above, that represented also by Τήλεμος, fro[m]
Τηλέμαχος, and by Πάτροκλος, from Πατροκλέϝης. Finally, the suff[ix]
-ευς seems to be especially frequent with hypocoristics, both in M[y]-
cenaean and in Classical Greek.

Palmer's etymology is the most elaborate and detailed that has be[en]
offered. It differs from Kretschmer's in that Kretschmer simply a[s]-
sumes that there was an unattested intermediary form *ἀχίλος betwe[en]
ἄχος and Ἀχιλλεύς. This intermediate form was built on the root
ἄχος by means of a suffix -ιλο- which is also seen in such words
ὀργίλος 'inclined to anger', from ὀργή 'anger'. In summary, the[n,]
Palmer wants to derive Ἀχιλλεύς from an old compound of ἄχ
and λᾱϝός, while Kretschmer sees Ἀχιλλεύς as a suffixal derivati[on]

from the root of ἄχος. From a formal point of view both explanations are possible, and Kretschmer's derivational process could easily lead to the formation of names; not all Greek heroic names are compounds.

The semantics of the rival explanations are somewhat different. Kretschmer's would lead to a meaning such as 'prone to ἄχος, characterized by ἄχος'(recall that ἄχος means 'pain, distress, grief'), while Palmer's has been labeled a possessive adjective compound, 'whose λαός has ἄχος' (so Nagy, see below). Palmer himself made no pronouncement on the semantics of the name; he simply offered a formal analysis. Although it may appear strange to have such a seemingly inauspicious first element in a heroic name, one of the names cited by Palmer as a formal parallel seems at first sight to offer a semantic parallel as well: Πένθιλος from Πενθίλαϝος, built on πένθος 'grief, sorrow'. πένθος is also a neuter es- stem noun. I will return to this issue below.

Palmer's etymology has recently been taken up again and exploited for literary purposes by Gregory Nagy, first in his contribution to the Palmer Festschrift (1976) and then in Ch. 5 of his book *The Best of the Achaeans* (1979). Nagy attempts to demonstrate that Palmer's proposed etymology provides support for the thesis 'that the thematic germ of the Achilles figure entails *pêma* for the Trojans when the hero is at war and a *pêma* for the Achaeans both when he withdraws from war and when he dies' (1979: 69). Although his thesis is not dependent on the etymology of the name Ἀχιλλεύς, Nagy believes that 'we stand to gain additional perspectives on Achilles in the course of examining the constituent themes associated with his name. Two key words will be involved: *ákhos* and *pénthos*, both meaning "grief".' Nagy makes an excellent case for the thematic association ἄχος and πένθος with Achilles on the basis of such lines as the following:

αἰνὸν ἄχος τό μοί ἐστιν, ἐπεὶ πάθον ἄλγεα θυμῷ (XVI 55)

'the terrible ἄχος which I have, since I suffered pains in my heart'.

Achilles is speaking to Patroklos, describing his feelings about the loss of τιμή 'honor' brought about by the taking of Briseis by Agamemnon. Or after the death of Patroklos, when Achilles states to Agamemnon:

... ἐπεὶ οὐ μ' ἔτι δεύτερον ὧδε
ἵξετ' ἄχος κραδίην, ὄφρα ζωοῖσι μετείω (XXIII 46–47),

'... since never again will a second ἄχος like this come to my
heart, while I am among the living',

Odysseus' words to Achilles during the Embassy may further be
compared:

αὐτῷ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχος ἔσσεται, οὐδέ τι μῆχος
ῥεχθέντος κακοῦ ἔστ' ἄκος εὑρεῖν (IX 249–250)

'you yourself will have ἄχος in the future, and there will be no
way to find a remedy for the bad thing once done'.

As Nagy establishes beyond all doubt, there is 'a pervasive nexus
between ἄχος and 'Ἀχιλλεύς, which is 'integrated in the inherited
formulaic system and hence deeply rooted in the epic tradition' (1979
79). It also seems clear that Achilles' actions (or lack of action) lead
to ἄχος for the host of fighting men. In Nagy's formula, Achilles' ἄχο
leads to Achilles' μῆνις leads to ἄχος of the Achaeans. Furthermore
while the Trojans appear to be winning, that is, while they have th
κράτος 'power', the Achaeans have ἄχος. This state of affairs is a direc
result of Zeus responding to Achilles' entreaties, mediated by hi
mother Thetis, and is overtly recognized in Achilles' words to Zeus i
XVI 237:

τίμησας μὲν ἐμέ, μέγα δ' ἴψαο λαὸν Ἀχαιῶν

'having honored me, you harmed greatly the λαός of th
Achaeans'.

Thus, the thematic associations of ἄχος and λαός with the name c
Achilles provide further corroboration for the etymology proposed b
Palmer.

There are, however, two possible flaws in these arguments. The fir:
concerns the ever-present danger of establishing folk-etymologica
rather than etymological, connections with the name by using this typ
of thematic evidence. That is, the poem is about war; the fortunes c
war change; one side has victory, the other defeat. Within the hero
ethos exemplified by the Iliad, the winning side or hero receives 'fam
glory' and has κράτος 'power', while the losing side suffers, has πῆμ
ἄλγος, or ἄχος, all frequent epic words meaning 'pain' (see Mawet 197
on this semantic field). The relative frequencies of these words ar
πῆμα 18 attestations, ἄλγος 41 attestations, ἄχος 32 attestations. Th
scales tilt in favor of ἄχος if its derivatives are taken into accoun
they supply a further 32 attestations of this root. The preponderan

of ἄχος and its derivatives may simply be due to a folk-etymological association of the word with the name of Achilles on the part of the epic poet(s), and not to an actual etymological connection. The epic poets regularly exploit such similarities, witness the play on ἄχος and ἄκος 'remedy' in the example cited above (IX 249–250).

Another possible flaw is that the meaning assigned to Ἀχίλαϝος and hence to Ἀχιλλεύς by Nagy cannot easily be accounted for by the form of the compound. That is, if Ἀχίλαϝος is formed in the manner Palmer says it is, then it should be a possessive adjective compound or bahuvrīhi. The translation offered by Nagy, 'whose lāwós has ákhos', seems wrong for this compound type. In the first place, dependent noun compounds are used very infrequently as the basis for bahuvrīhi or possessive adjective compounds. The usual formation of this compound type follows the pattern adjective plus noun, e.g. πόλυ plus οἶνος yields πολύοινος 'much wine', ξανθός plus ἵππος yields ξάνθιππος 'bay horse'. The resulting descriptive compounds can then be transformed into possessive compounds (originally often through an accent shift), yielding such examples as πολύοινος 'having much wine' and ξάνθιππος 'having bay horses'. When noun plus noun compounds are used as the basis for the bahuvrīhi type they are usually appositional or in a predicative relationship to each other, as in ῥοδο-δάκτυλος 'having fingers like roses', or in χρυσοκόμης 'having hair like gold, having gold hair'. When an oblique case relationship holds between the nouns in a noun plus noun compound used as the basis for a bahuvrīhi, the pattern in Greek is usually that represented by ὀρε-σίτροφος 'having nourishment in the mountains'. This type is usually reinterpreted as having a verbal final member (cf. Schwyzer, *Gr. Gr.* I.454). The governed noun in this type is the first element of the compound. Even in Sanskrit, a language in which there appear to be very few restrictions on compounding, bahuvrīhi compounds built on oblique noun plus noun compounds are limited by and large to the type represented by *sūryatejas* 'having the brilliance of the sun', from *sūrya-* 'sun' and *téjas-* 'splendor, brilliance'.

Another difficulty consists in the fact that none of the other Homeric compounds in -λαος appears to have a meaning comparable to that posited for Ἀχιλλεύς. These other compounds are of the types represented by Ἀγέλαος 'he leads the λαός', Μενέλαος 'he awaits (the enemy) λαός', Ἀρκεσίλαος 'he wards off/protects the λαός', Ἐρύλαος 'he protects the λαός'. Σθενέλαος seems to be an imitation of Μενέλαος, wrongly interpreted as containing a first element based on μένος rather than on μένω; while Πρωτεσίλαος seems to be patterned on Ἀρκεσίλαος

in much the same manner (so Hans von Kamptz, *Homerische Personen-namen*, 68–69). Σθενέλαος is especially interesting in that it has a short-ened form Σθένελος, which also occurs in the Iliad.

Πένθιλος, the formal parallel cited by Palmer for the formation of 'Αχιλλεύς, is not unambiguous. Although πένθος is a neuter *es*-stem. and thus at first sight Πένθιλος (and Πενθεύς) could be an abbreviated form of *Πενθίλαϝος with a Caland form as first member of the compound, the name Πενθεσίλεια also exists. Here the first member is either a verbal form or is patterned on one. Thus, Πένθιλος could easily be a hypocoristic from the masculine name corresponding to Πενθεσίλεια. One does not have to insist on the productivity of the Caland system here, nor is it necessary to view first elements of com-pounds ending in -*i* as deriving from nominal forms, even if there is a coexisting neuter *es*-stem noun. These after all are derived from verbal roots. Note further such sets of names as (non-Homeric) Χαιρεσίλαος Χαιρέλαος Χαρίλας, Χάριλλος all from various stems of χαίρω. Nagy insists on the semantic, as well as the formal, parallel to 'Αχιλλεύς presented by Πένθιλος. Although πένθος means 'pain' synchronically in Greek, further connections within Indo-European are semantically dif-ficult. The words that appear to be related in form have quite disparate meanings, centering on the notion 'bind', and extending to such notions as 'kinsman'. Greek πενθερός 'relative by marriage' and πεῖσμα 'rope derive from this root. 'Binding the λαός' seems a more appropriate translation for Πενθεσίλεια (and for Πένθιλος) than does 'paining the λαός'. Thus, the details of the etymology offered by Palmer and Nagy are difficult from the point of view of the semantics of heroic names as well as from that of the morphological formation of the compound Hence we are free to seek an alternative interpretation.

Greek ἄχος has excellent formal correspondents in other Indo-European languages, primarily Germanic and Celtic. We find, for instance, Gothic *agis* 'fear, terror', Old High German *egis-lih* 'fright-ening, terrible', Old English *ege* 'fear'. These Germanic forms all con-tinue more or less directly a neuter *es*-stem noun. There exists further a thematic verb Gothic *us-agjan* 'to frighten someone', a preterite present Gothic *og* 'I am afraid', Old Norse *óask* 'to be afraid', and the parallel transitive forms Old Norse *œgja* 'to frighten someone' Gothic *ogjan*. We also find the nouns Old Norse *ótti*, *ógn* 'fear', Old English *ōga* 'fear, terror'. Finally, Old Irish has a verb *ad-āgor* 'I fear' Julius Pokorny in his *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (7–8 glosses the basic meaning of the root as 'seelisch bedrückt sein, sich fürchten'. Pokorny includes without question the Greek forms ἄχο

ἄχνυμαι, ἄχομαι in his lemma. The Greek etymological dictionaries are more conservative, maintaining that the shift in meaning from 'frighten, fear' to 'distress' has not been well explained, if indeed these words are all related (see Frisk 1954–1972: s.v., Chantraine 1968–1980: s.v.). At this point we might pose the question: Is there any evidence outside of Greek for the use of this root in onomastics? The answer is yes – in Germanic, where the root is most strongly attested, and where names of the following types are found: Old English *Ohthere*, Old Norse *Óttar* (if the Old English is not borrowed from the Old Norse). This name can be etymologized as containing both words for 'fear, frighten' and 'army, body of fighting men', and translated as 'he frightens the army'. The second element of the compound is the etymon of Modern German *Heer* 'army'. A further name containing this root is Old Norse *Egill,* a straightforward descendent of Proto-Germanic **Agilaz.* This name must mean something like 'characterized by terror or fear' (see de Vries 1962: s.v. for the form and for an inventory of the two semantic possibilities; the other entails connection with the IE root represented by Gk. ἄκος [cf. the play on words noted above p. 23], but must surely be rejected), and given Germanic naming conventions, the bearer should incite terror in others. *Egill* is a fairly common name, but one bearer of the name stands out in medieval Germanic literature, namely the protagonist of *Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar,* and ensures the interpretation of the name just mentioned. Although this Egill was nominally a 10th-century historical personage, his character as presented in the saga shows many mythic traits, to the extent that Georges Dumézil regularly cites Egill as preserving very archaic features of the mythological system he reconstructs for Proto-Indo-European (1948: 172–173). In brief, Dumézil's system posits a threefold division of early Indo-European society with priests and kings at the top, warriors in the middle, and peasants at the bottom. These social divisions are reflected in the mythology, with fertility gods at the bottom, a warrior god (Thor in Scandinavia, Indra in India) in the middle, and a dual divinity at the top (Mitra-Varuna in India, Tyr and Odin in Scandinavia). The salient feature of the gods at the highest level is that one of them gets what he wants by means of treaties (not ruling out verbal trickery), while the other gets what he wants by violence. The violent ones are Varuna and Odin. Egill Skallagrímsson is an Odin devotee.

In any event, the formation of the name Egill is virtually identical to that of **Ἀχιλος,* the intermediate form underlying Ἀχιλλεύς posited by Kretschmer. Palmer's hypocoristic formation cannot be

ruled out, however, but its meaning and formation must be different from that defended by Palmer and Nagy. If Ἀχίλᾱϝος existed, it should have had a verbal first element and meant something like 'he frightens the λαός'. Note that this name and Old Norse *Óttar* along with Old English *Ohthere* contain precisely comparable elements, namely words for 'fear, frighten' and 'body of fighting men', and should have comparable meanings. Although there is no unambiguous synchronic evidence in Greek that the root of ἄχνυμαι and ἄχος meant 'fear' or 'frighten', there are contexts in the Iliad in which 'fear' or the like is a possible translation, e. g. XIII 86–87:

> καί σφιν ἄχος κατὰ θυμὸν ἐγίγνετο δερκομένοισι
> Τρῶας, τοὶ μέγα τεῖχος ὑπερκατέβησαν ὁμίλῳ,

'and there was ἄχος (fear) in their hearts as they saw the Trojans, who came over the great wall in a crowd',

or XIII 417–420:

> Ὣς ἔφατ', Ἀργείοισι δ' ἄχος γένετ' εὐξαμένοιο,
> Ἀντιλόχῳ δὲ μάλιστα δαΐφρονι θυμὸν ὄρινεν,
> ἀλλ' οὐδ' ἀχνύμενός περ ἑοῦ ἀμέλησεν ἑταίρου
> ἀλλὰ θέων περίβη καί οἱ σάκος ἀμφεκάλυψε

'Thus he spoke, and there was ἄχος (fear?) for the Argives as he was boasting,
but he most agitated the heart of battle-minded Antilokhos,
but although he was ἀχνύμενος (frightened?) he did not neglect his companion,
but running up protected him and covered him with his shield.'

There is no need to multiply these citations or to insist on the semi-divine nature of Achilles. Even the word used to describe Achilles' anger, μῆνις, has been shown by Calvert Watkins to be the marked word for anger, ordinarily used only of gods (1977). The ordinary words for anger are χόλος and κότος (see Walsh 1990 on all these anger words in Homer). The use of μῆνις to denote Achilles' anger emphasizes his divine status in the Iliad, and the poem as a whole is about the μῆνις, the divine anger, of Achilles and about the terror this anger strikes into the hearts of all those he encounters. Thus, it is fitting that Achilles' name should consist of a root meaning 'fear' and the word for the 'body of fighting men': Achilles is characterized as the 'most terrifying of all men', πάντων ἐκπαγλότατ' ἀνδρῶν (XVIII 170), immediately before his epiphany.

It is altogether reasonable that a very archaic meaning should be kept in a proper name and be lost in other forms. I cite in my defense a sentence from Leonard Palmer, with whose work we began: 'We may recall further that the onomatology often preserves linguistic elements which became obsolete in the ordinary vocabulary of the language' (1963: 78).

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