

Achilles: The “Ideal” Hero

It’s a bird! It’s a plane! No, it’s a hero! They fly across the sky at mach speeds, fight bravely and courageously, they save the innocent, they fight against evil, and they’re mainly located within the New York Tri-State area. That’s what today’s idea of a hero is, but what might the idea of a hero been in the ancient Greek’s time? Achilles, for one, was a great hero. You may have heard the term “Achilles’s Heel” before, right? Well, that’s where it came from! And, just to let you know, that story just so happened to originate in Greece. It is about a great hero who fought his greatest enemy, was undefeatable, and who helped win the Trojan War. Achilles, like many other heroes, was born under at least one god or immortal. His parents were the Nymph Thetis, and a mortal king Peleus. Achilles was dipped into the Styx River when he was a baby to make him immortal, but his heel remained untouched by the death-defying waters. He entered the Trojan War at a late age, and soon quickly became a fierce warrior in command and combat. When his best friend, Patroclus, was killed by the Trojan prince Hector, he sought revenge. He dueled Hector and won, proceeding to desecrated Hector’s body and drag him around the walls of Troy for many days, thus angered the Gods. In the end, Apollo guided Paris (who started the war) to fire an arrow at Achilles’s heel, causing him to die a slow and painful death (“Achilles”). Ironically, many great heroes died, but was it their death that made them “heroes”? They fought bravely, killing many powerful enemies and winning many great battles, they did the impossible tasks set before them or from them, seeing as they were actually “heroes”, and they almost ALWAYS had gods/goddesses or immortals for parents. But was this the true idea of a Greek hero? They may not seem to heroes like us, seeing as we’ve got *super*heroes, *but*, for the Greeks, if they were undefeatable, had a god/goddess for a parent, or if they had completed an ultimately impossible heroic act, then they certainly were. Achilles is a good demonstration for the first, seeing as only a GOD should be able to kill a hero.

If you were a hero in ancient Greece, you’d better be absolutely undefeatable. You’d better be so fierce and swift that you could *not* be killed by either a mortal or a monster. Achilles was dipped into the Styx River, turning him into an immortal being (except for that little heel of his...), and thus he was the greatest and fiercest warrior ever known, helping to win the Trojan War. Perseus was aided by Hermes and Athena, who gave him their sword and shield as to be able to kill the powerful Medusa, which made him undefeatable even in the eyes of the Gorgons (Pontikis “Perseus”). Theseus killed many powerful foes, being so cunning and courageous as to kill them all with their OWN weapons (Skidmore “Theseus”)! Hercules killed extremely powerful enemies, being immortal and exceedingly strong, completing 12 excruciating labors to prove it! And Bellerophon was accompanied by the mighty winged horse Pegasus, allowing him to be so great and fierce that he was able to kill the Chimaera (Pontikis “Bellerophon”). All of these great heroes could not be defeated. They were strong, brave, smart, and many had the willing help of the almighty Greek gods. In Greek standards, you weren’t “worthy” to be written down in history if you *died*. On the same note, if you weren’t fierce, strong, brave, cunning, and nearly immortal, why on earth should *you* be so significant? The Greeks viewed heroes not as supernatural beings who could fly around and protect the city and its people, but as people who went out on quests and saved the people from unseen horrors without DYING. Otherwise, this “hero” was simply some super strong idiot who went out and got himself killed. As for the *qualifying* heroes, if they weren’t as strong or smart as the idiot before them and they still got the job done, then *they* were still a hero. You see, being a hero isn’t *always* about being undefeatable. If you’re powerful, but lazy (like a video-gaming couch potatoe), then you’re useless. But, if you can complete one of those “impossible” tasks set forth by the king, then you sure as heck can prove that you are a *true* Greek hero.

If you were a powerful Greek Hero of high standard, it’s because you proved yourself by completing an “impossible” feat. You killed the Chimaera. You went down to Hades and brought the 3-headed Cerebrus to the surface world (Pontikis “Hercules”). You battled the snake-haired gorgon Medusa and won. You survived against the song of the Sirens (Pontikis “Odysseus”). You killed the supposedly *immortal* Hydra. Whatever it was that you did, you did it, and *that’s* why you’re now sitting in the throne

of fame and power. Greek Heroes were heroes not only because they lived through an impossible ordeal, but what they did and accomplished *in* that ordeal. If you couldn't show that you were worth your salt, then what good were you? If you could do something, and you didn't, then the person who tried and died deserves more credit than you. This is what the Ancient Greeks believed, and that's part of what defined their heroes. Achilles was great because he defeated the Trojan enemy prince Hector and helped win the Trojan War. Yeah, he was strong and invincible, but the credit goes toward how he led his troops and what the results of his actions in war were. His choices and accomplishments led others to reward his tragic death (by the GODS mind you) with the title of "Greatest Warrior Hero". Heracles is Hercules because he completed so many impossible tasks, not because he was strong and could lift a 10 ton boulder above his head. It's the same with modern-day heroes. Superman is superman because he saves countless lives from danger, not because bullets bounce off of him like rain. Spiderman is Spiderman because he can stop evil villains from taking over the world, not because he can sling up a hammock whenever he gets tired. In Greek terms, if you were recognized as a "hero" status character, it's because you did the impossible. Of course, there *is* one more opinionated link to the ancient Greek's idea of a "hero". That link, by popular demand, is a hero's heritage. I.e. their mom and dad.

That final step in becoming a "true" hero, to the Ancient Greeks, was who your parents were. Achilles' mother was a sea nymph and his father a great king, Hercules's dad was the all powerful Zeus, and Odysseus, who was considered the most "mortal" of all of the ancient heroes, was believed to have the god of the sea Poseidon to call "papa". Basically, if you were a hero in Greece, it was because your parents literally *made you* a hero. Thus, to be such a great hero, it was because your parents were great gods/goddesses or immortal creatures. A man whose father was a farmer and his mother a maid would not ever be accepted as a hero. Their heritage just isn't *good* enough. To the Greeks, the idea of having a weak *mortal* parent was nearly *impossible*. There was no way that someone like Perseus's father could have been a lowly servant. Servants were servants. There was nothing special about what they did, who they were, or what they could do. If a servant bore a son, then his son was a servant, *not* a potential hero who could destroy great and powerful enemies like Medusa. However, since Perseus's father was ZEUS, he most definitely *could* kill Medusa. Zeus was powerful, so when he bore a son, so was his son. It's the same with Achilles. Who wouldn't expect someone born under a sea nymph and a king to help win something as big as the Trojan War? Come on. To the Greeks that was just pure sense. Achilles was a fierce warrior, as was a king, and he was nearly immortal and very powerful, just like a sea nymph. So, with Achilles as a good example, to have strong parentage, was to *be* strong yourself. That's just the way that the ancient Greeks decided their "heroes". Just like today: if your dad is the president, then you sure as heck are going to get a lot more out of it than most other kids.

So, in conclusion, to be an ancient Greek hero was to be undefeatable, to be able to complete impossible tasks, and to have good strong heritage. That's how the ancient Greeks saw their heroes, and we're STILL learning about them today. If we're still studying death-defying myths such as Achilles and Hector, then that means the ancient Greeks must have done a dang good job of picking out their incredible heroes. Their ideal hero was strong, powerful, could do the inconceivable, and had powerful Greek gods/goddesses and creatures to back up their every move. Ironman was nothing more than a genius who almost died in a cave, while Achilles was a fierce and near-immortal warrior who had a king and a sea nymph to back up his every move. In a much greater perspective, Achilles, being one of the greatest of the few Greek heroes, is the perfect ancient Greek ideal of that bird... no, that plane... no, that magnificent hero, flying up so high in that ever eternal sky that passes through space and time, riding down the path of ancient history.

Works Cited

- "Achilles." Encyclopedia Mythica. 2008. Encyclopedia Mythica Online. 15 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/achilles.html>>.
- "Afghanistan." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2008. 13 Nov 2008 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghanistan>>.
- Hamilton, Edith. Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes. New York: Penguin Books USA, 1969.
- Cotterell, Arthur. The Encyclopedia of Mythology. London: Anness Publishing Ltd., 2008.
- "FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives." Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. 2008. 17 Nov 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FBI_Ten_Most_Wanted_Fugitives>.
- Pontikis, Nick. "Myth Man's Homework Help Center: Achilles." Myth Man. 2003. Thanasi's Olympus Greek Restaurant. 15 Oct 2008 <<http://mythman.com/>>.
- Pontikis, Nick. "Myth Man's Homework Help Center: Heracles." Myth Man. 2003. Thanasi's Olympus Greek Restaurant. 13 Nov 2008 <<http://mythman.com/>>.
- Pontikis, Nick. "Myth Man's Homework Help Center: Theseus." Myth Man. 2003. Thanasi's Olympus Greek Restaurant. 13 Nov 2008 <<http://mythman.com/>>.
- Pontikis, Nick. "Myth Man's Homework Help Center: Mighty Zeus." Myth Man. 2003. Thanasi's Olympus Greek Restaurant. 13 Nov 2008 <<http://mythman.com/>>.
- Thompson, Wolfman Michael. "Greek and Roman Mythology." Thompson. 19 Nov 2008. Fairfield Junior High. <<http://ffjh.davis.k12.ut.us/thompson/heroes.pps>>.
- Zimmerman, J. E.. Dictionary of Classical Mythology. New York: Bantam Books, 1964.