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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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Agamemnon's version

Giovanna Baldassarre

Center for Public Archaeology Studies 'Archeostorie'

 g.baldassarre@archeostoriejpa.eu**Keywords** Agamemnon, Iliad, Giulio Guidorizzi

All that is left of him is his proud, regal face forever stuck in gold, and the epithet “wide-ruling,” that Homer used to define the man’s haughty, proud spirit. Yet, for his latest book published by Einaudi, Giulio Guidorizzi has chosen Agamemnon’s ‘case’, as the lens through which he describes the Homeric world, its heroes and its values.

The funeral of an Achaean king was performed according to a ritual sequence: immediately after death, before postmortem changes started to affect the features of the deceased, a goldsmith molded a gold funerary mask over his face. Relatives offered sacrifices, women sang mournful songs and the widow slit her throat to follow her husband into death. Then the bards (*oidoi*), the memory specialists of that culture, performed the delicate task of connecting past and present, restoring hearing and sight to things that had gone deaf and blind. Yet, memory is too precious to be locked up in writing, and so these singing poets passed down orally the stories of ancient myths and heroes, perpetuating the vocal memory and thus everybody’s existence.

Agamemnon, Menelaus, Achilles, Diomedes, Odysseus, Hector and Paris are the protagonists of such stories, immortalized in the Homeric poems and revisited by Giulio Guidorizzi in his latest book *I, Agamemnon*. Here, the stories Homer tells in the Iliad are reassessed from the perspective of the “wide-ruling” Agamemnon, perhaps the least captivating of Homer’s characters, but definitely the most lucid.

Guidorizzi’s book is a real page-turner, a hook that sets in the cheek of the reader and drags him/her along in a whirlpool of emotions, well beyond the factual narrative accounts of the Trojan war and down into the deep complex psyche of its heroes. Aside from the well-known facts – the abduction of beautiful Helen of Troy, the ten-year war, the duels and the atrocious deaths of the bravest fighters among both the Achaians and the Trojans – what matters most is the warriors’ determination to leave a trace:

“Going back to nothingness after a very short, bright life, is like never having been born at all.”

Homer’s heroes are obsessed with *aidós* - shame – a fear of disgrace. It is a sentiment that, far from paralyzing them, prompts them to engage in a battle against their own fate, although no weapon can defeat destiny. Death will be welcomed, then, as long as the narrative it produces will

result in eternal glory.

The main topic of the book is, indeed, memory: Guidorizzi chooses Agamemnon's memory to shed a new light on the war. It is a peculiar choice, since Agamemnon is probably the least liked character in Homer's epic. After all, how can anyone sympathize with a man who, just before leaving for Troy, did not hesitate to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia to gain the gods' favor, and then, on a simple whim, took for himself the slave Briseis in spite of Achilles, and finally chose as his prey of war the Trojan princess Cassandra, dragging her to the dreadful death she had predicted and desperately tried to prevent?

And yet, Guidorizzi could not have chosen a more objective standpoint to review the main events of the Trojan War in retrospect. Agamemnon's bossy arrogance does not prevent Guidorizzi's readers from discovering that at the heart of the king's soul lies a surprising tenderness: this disposition prompts his tears in front of his injured brother Menelaus, and, on a different occasion, makes him admit – although not effortlessly – that he wronged Achilles because he was blinded with rage.

From the first chapter focused on Agamemnon's ancestors Pelops, Oenomaus and Hippodamia, to Achilles' decision to go back to the battlefield with the purpose of avenging Patroclus' death, Guidorizzi's narrative proceeds with unrelenting energy and at breathtaking speed. It is an uninterrupted sequence of attacks and duels, heroes facing one another on opposing fronts, ceaseless bloodbaths unleashed by men apparently driven only by blind rage and boundless hate. The primordial, ferine side of Achilles is not satisfied with killing Hector: the enemy's naked body must be abused, tied to Achille's chariot and dragged around Patroclus' funeral pyre. An aberration that even Agamemnon refuses to

attend, because such a behavior "does not suit a man of firm mind."

There is more than just *polemos*, though. Homeric heroes are also capable of positive feelings, such as love, eroticism, *philia*. With a rich, almost lyrical writing style, Guidorizzi delves into the emotional resilience of Homer's characters and the expressive strength of the events they experience. When Priam enters Achilles' tent, throws himself at the warrior's feet and kisses his hands – the hands that slew his own son – begging to be given Hector's body for burial, we readers are there, stuck in an unreal silence, speechless spectators of a scene that leaves us amazed. . Two men, separated by a war and so many deaths, staring at each other and eventually acknowledging each other's grief until all barriers drop, wiped away by an overwhelming need to share in the sorrow:

"He sees Priam weeping at his feet, and feels an irresistible desire to mourn his own father. He kindly raises the old man by his hand, then embraces him, strokes his face and their teardrops fall and mingle on their vests."

The war is finally over, but the Trojan saga is still ongoing. Ships are ready to sail off to the ports where they set sails years before. Agamemnon is heading back to Mycenae, unaware of his own imminent death at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Because no one can really escape their own fate, and the gods will do nothing to avert it. All we can do is accept our destiny without meekly giving in to it, fight not to avoid it but to welcome it, stop wondering and instead look for the right answers.

Today, with the distance of many centuries, these stories may still teach us something. After all, everyone is a hero in their own way.

