

# Swift-footed Achilles and the founding of dissent

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## **Abstract**

Achilles is known in the tradition of epic song as “swift-footed”, while visual depictions of this hero emphasise his military prowess and menace. In Homer’s *Iliad*, however, the initial use of the epithet “swift-footed” for Achilles comes when the hero is first introduced—when, paradoxically, he is standing still. The disconnect between this lack of movement and the inherent mobility implied by his epithet provides not only a glimpse into Homer’s innovatory practice within a traditional referential system, but also draws attention to the act that Achilles is about to perform: to speak in the assembly.

This paper will use a framework of oral traditional theory combined with contemporary notions about power to read Homer’s representation of the Achaean assembly. It explores the ways in which the Achaean assembly, from its very origins in Achilles’s institutionalising act, is as much about the performance of debate—specifically the idea of dissent from authority—as it is about any particular issue. Achilles’s act of calling an assembly, then, sets in motion a political epic as much about valorising internal conflict as it is about re-telling the traditional story of the war with the Trojans.

By establishing an assembly and setting the terms for debate, the epic Achilles affords a glimpse of a later world—the world of Homer’s early Greek audience—in which political institutions exist to put a check on absolute power being held by one man and to ensure the cultivation of the public good. In fact, through its representation of Achilles setting up the assembly and defending the right to speak within it, the *Iliad* projects into an epic past the foundation of this institution. Through their own agonistic engagements with the *Iliad*’s assembly, Homer’s audience realise this institution’s capacity for promoting informed dissent even as they seek their own political settlements across the Greek world.