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## The word σῶμα in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*<sup>1</sup>

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Why should we pay particular attention to the word σῶμα in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? There are, in fact, only eight occurrences of this word in the Homeric poems.<sup>2</sup> The reason why we should do so is that it has long been considered that σῶμα, which means body in Classical Greek, means corpse in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Consequently, it has even been argued that in the Homeric poems, as well as more generally among the Greeks of the Archaic period, there is no conception of the body which is at the very most perceived as an aggregate of limbs.

Such is Snell's thesis which, innovative as it was when the critic put it forward in 1946<sup>3</sup> (that is, when scholars were taking an interest in the soul in Homer after Rohde or, with the Analysts, in the psychology of the Homeric characters), simultaneously started and ended studies of the body. Moreover, this thesis had and still has a strong influence upon Homeric studies. Indeed, it has rarely been discussed and thus questioned – we can mention Herter, Renehan and Langholf who is the author of the article σῶμα in the *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos*. On the contrary, it has generally been either partly, as by Vivante or Harrison, or wholly, accepted. It has even been strengthened by Koller, Krafft and Adkins. Even now, the idea that in Homer there is no conception of the body is still commonly accepted. A legitimate criticism here might be to question the validity of a thesis in which the absence of a word is considered as implying the absence of the corresponding concept and in which the Homeric poems are considered as preserving the totality of vocabulary used by the Greeks, let us say, during the Archaic period. I would prefer, however, to go to the very core of Snell's thesis and, since the etymology of σῶμα is still obscure,<sup>4</sup> to remain as close as possible to the Homeric text. My point will thus

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<sup>1</sup> This study of the word σῶμα is part of my PhD dissertation which is entitled *The Body in the Odyssey*.

<sup>2</sup> These are few occurrences in comparison with the nearly twenty seven thousand five hundred lines which make up the two Homeric poems.

<sup>3</sup> Snell 1994<sup>4</sup>: 22.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Frisk 1954-1973: s.v. σῶμα.

be, first, to try to bring to light the meaning of the word in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a question which was discussed by ancient scholars and, secondly, to examine the way it is used in each poem.

There are, as was previously mentioned, eight occurrences of σῶμα in the Homeric poems, five in the *Iliad* and three in the *Odyssey*, and five of them unambiguously refer to the dead body.<sup>5</sup> The three other occurrences deserve examination.

One of these is found in the passage in book XII of the *Odyssey* where Circe mentions the dangers Odysseus will have to face while sailing through the Wandering Rocks where nobody has ever escaped death.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in this passage,<sup>7</sup> the phrases πίνακας... νεῶν and σώματα φωτῶν contribute to depict the consequences of the shipwreck that all sailors have experienced on this journey; but, strictly speaking, they describe nothing other than ships pulled to pieces and bodies, all of them being carried away by the waves. As such, scholars have wondered whether the bodies in question must be considered to be alive or dead. Renehan gives several arguments that lead to a different conclusion than that of Snell. First, he underlines the fact that all the members of a crew are not necessarily immediately killed during a shipwreck. Then he notes that the phrase πυρός τ'όλοοῖο θύελλαι, which is used in the passage to depict the raging sea,<sup>8</sup> does not clearly evoke a deadly phenomenon and that φορέω, whose direct object is πίνακας... νεῶν and σώματα φωτῶν, does not express the idea of destruction.<sup>9</sup> Third, he underlines the fact that this passage recalls the passage in book V of the *Odyssey* relating the storm that Odysseus effectively weathered and which, significantly, he eventually came through. To be as careful as Renehan,<sup>10</sup> we can say that the idea that in book XII of the *Odyssey* the word σῶμα refers to living bodies should not be dismissed.

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<sup>5</sup> *Il.* VII 79, XXII 342, XXIII 169, *Od.* XI 53, XXIV 187.

<sup>6</sup> *Od.* XII 66-68.

<sup>7</sup> *Od.* XII 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Od.* XII 68.

<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that the subject of the verb φορέω is not a human being so that the fact that this iterative form of φέρω was here preferred to the verb ἄγω is not a decisive argument in favour of the thesis of dead bodies.

<sup>10</sup> Even Koller (1958: 277) and Harrison (1960: 64), whose general theses are approximately the same as Snell's, are more assertive than Renehan, since they consider that in this passage the bodies are alive. On the contrary, Herter (1975: 95), whose general thesis is against Snell's, seems to consider that these bodies are dead.

The occurrence of σῶμα which has given rise to the most numerous discussions is that found at the beginning of book III of the *Iliad*, in a simile which is developed in the description of the two armies, the Achaean and the Trojan, marching one against the other. The simile compares Menelaus seeing Paris with a lion finding the σῶμα (μεγάλῳ ἐπὶ σώματι κύρσας) of an animal which is to be its prey.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, whereas Snell follows Aristarchus who observed that, although lions generally do not eat corpses, they might eat an animal that has just been killed, some scholars, mainly Herter and Renehan, point out different elements suggesting that σῶμα may not refer here to a corpse. One questionable element, since in Homeric similes there is not strict correspondence between tenor and vehicle, is the fact that in the structure of the simile, the μέγα σῶμα<sup>12</sup> corresponds to Paris. At this point in the narrative, just before the duel, Paris is necessarily alive; moreover he will finally remain alive.<sup>13</sup> Another element is the idea expressed in the AD scholion *ad Il.* III 23 that the body for which the lion is lusting is necessarily one of a living animal since, unlike Aristarchus' thesis; a lion would in no case eat a corpse.<sup>14</sup> Although it is based, as underlined by Herter,<sup>15</sup> on erroneous knowledge, such a comment makes it clear that the question of the meaning of σῶμα was open in Antiquity.

Above all, Herter adds, the simile would sound strange in the context, if built on the image of a lion which does not kill its prey by itself. Moreover, even if similes can be found in Homer in which the lion is eating an animal which, although not carrion, has unambiguously already been killed,<sup>16</sup> a simile in book XI of the *Iliad* and another one in the *Scutum*<sup>17</sup> prove that images of a lion attacking a living being are more common. Besides, our passage in book III recalls the lines in the *Scutum*, especially through the use at the same place in the line<sup>18</sup> of the same phrase σώματι κύρσας<sup>19</sup> in which, according to Herter, the presence of the verb κύρω<sup>20</sup> is in itself an

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<sup>11</sup> *Il.* XVIII 21-29.

<sup>12</sup> *Il.* XVIII 23.

<sup>13</sup> This argument is put forward by Renehan (1979: 273) and Herter (1975: 99).

<sup>14</sup> This argument is put forward by Renehan (1979: 273).

<sup>15</sup> Herter (1975: 97-98) gives well-documented comments on the alimentary behaviour of lions.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Il.* XI 473-484.

<sup>17</sup> *Sc.* 424-428.

<sup>18</sup> In the two cases, the phrase is found at the end of the line.

<sup>19</sup> *Il.* III 23 and *Sc.* 426.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed Herter (1975: 100) shows that in the Homeric poems, the object of the verb κύρω is generally a word referring to living beings. Krafft (1963: 27-29), who rejects Herter's demonstration as a whole, discusses even this argument.

argument. Such a repetition suggests that the author of the *Scutum* was inspired by the lines in book III, while, as Herter affirms, contrary to Russo, nothing in the passage in the *Scutum* supports the idea that the poet had misunderstood them or had awkwardly reworked them. Finally, whether or not one takes into account the argument, put forward by Herter,<sup>21</sup> of the visual arts of the Geometric period where numerous representations of the lion and its prey clearly show that this animal is still alive, it can be concluded at least that it is impossible to affirm that in book III of the *Iliad* σῶμα refers unambiguously to a dead body.

According to H. Herter, a third occurrence of σῶμα is problematic. It is found in a passage of the *Iliad* where, as Achaeans and Trojans are said to be fighting around Patroclus' corpse, Hector and the two Aiantes are compared, the former with a lion and the latter with shepherds struggling for the body of an animal named by the word σῶμα.<sup>22</sup> Herter's arguments on this very passage are neither convincing nor entirely clear<sup>23</sup> but the characteristics of the Iliadic lion similes he demonstrates while commenting upon the lines in book III of the *Iliad*, should lead us to consider it questionable whether σῶμα here refers to a dead body.

Finally, it is only in *Works and Days*<sup>24</sup> when the harshness of winter is described, as well as the means available to men to protect themselves from the cold, that σῶμα unambiguously refers to a living body and the body's reaction to cold is then described. A question arises: is this use of σῶμα of no consequence for our understanding of the three Homeric occurrences on which we have just dwelt, or are we to think, on the contrary, that the Hesiodic poem attests that the use of σῶμα has undergone a significant change since the Homeric poems? Renehan is strongly opposed to the latter idea. Indeed, commenting upon the lines in the *Works and Days*, he writes, quite rightly I think:

No intellectual revolution lies concealed in those words; they are a plain and simple piece of old folk wisdom. That is, nothing whatsoever in this context suggests that σῶμα is being used in a conceptually new way.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Herter 1975: 103-105.

<sup>22</sup> *Il.* XVIII 161-164

<sup>23</sup> Herter 1975: 97.

<sup>24</sup> *Op.* 536-540.

<sup>25</sup> Renehan 1979: 276.

Furthermore, he adds that, even though one does not agree with West's view that the Hesiodic poems are earlier than the Homeric ones, they must hardly be much later.<sup>26</sup> Such a passage cannot but strengthen the doubts we have expressed about the meaning of σῶμα in three of its eight Homeric occurrences.<sup>27</sup>

However, to try to be more affirmative would be fruitless. A better solution would be to go beyond the usual discussion about the occurrences of the word σῶμα by distinguishing reference from denotation.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the fact that, in the Homeric poems, σῶμα does not always clearly refer to a dead body suggests that in these poems, it most probably does not denote corpse but something more general, that is the body, no matter if it is dead or alive, an idea which Herter<sup>29</sup> and Renehan<sup>30</sup> came very near to. In Homer, σῶμα at the very most refers more often to a dead rather than to a living body, and such a fact can be explained as it is by Renehan.<sup>31</sup> It is natural, when speaking about living beings, to pay special attention to the parts of the body which are active, in other words to the limbs, whereas the dead body is more naturally considered as a bulk, that is as a unit.

Another point which, as far as I know, has never been examined concerning the word σῶμα is what it refers to and where it appears in each of the two Homeric poems when considered separately.

In the two Iliadic occurrences where it refers to a human body,<sup>32</sup> σῶμα also unambiguously refers to a dead body. Moreover, in the two passages where it is found, the question raised is the question of the fate of the corpse after the warrior's death: Hector, who is in both cases the character involved, wants his adversary, to give his corpse back to his family so that it can be treated in conformity with the

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<sup>26</sup> According to Krafft (1963: 34-35), it is in the Homeric poems that the word σῶμα has come to denote a human, instead of an animal, corpse, and in the Hesiodic poems that it has come to denote the body of a living human being. As for Snell, it is in a note added in the fourth edition of his book *The Discovery of the Mind* (1994<sup>4</sup>: chap. 1 n. 13) that he mentions the line 540 of *Works and Days*, and he comments upon it very briefly.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noticing that West (1978: *ad Op.* 540), while commenting upon line 540 in the *Works and Days*, deeply questions Snell's and Krafft's theses.

<sup>28</sup> Here I use Lyons' linguistic concepts.

<sup>29</sup> Herter 1975: 105.

<sup>30</sup> Renehan 1979: 278.

<sup>31</sup> Renehan 1979: 278.

<sup>32</sup> *Il.* VII 79 and XXII 342.

funeral rites. The threat hanging over Hector is that his corpse could be abandoned or mutilated. In other words, in the *Iliad*, the human σῶμα seems to be related to situations in which the heroic code, even though characters may not act according to it, remains the norm.

What about the *Odyssey*? In only two<sup>33</sup> of the three occurrences where it refers to a human body σῶμα also unambiguously refers to a dead body, which is a noticeable difference from the *Iliad*.

The first occurrence refers to Elpenor's corpse, which was abandoned unburied after this companion of Odysseus died in an accident.<sup>34</sup> It is used by Odysseus when he relates what Elpenor asked him to do with respect to his corpse when they met in Hades. The passage involved in book XI of the *Odyssey* cannot but recall the one at the beginning of book XXIII of the *Iliad*, when Patroclus' ghost visits Achilles and, after rebuking his friend for forgetting him, delivers instructions for his funeral.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Elpenor and Patroclus are in the same situation since they both went to Hades but, as long as the funeral is not given to them, they are unable to enter Hades properly. Besides this, both characters ask for two things: cremation and burial. Concerning the burial, however, the Odyssean passage differs significantly from the Iliadic one. Indeed, whereas, in his instructions, Patroclus insists on his bones being buried with those of Achilles in a single urn, Elpenor pays remarkable attention to his future σῆμα which is the visible part of the grave. In other words, it is suggested that Elpenor wants to leave a trace for the generations that will follow him. He only thinks about his glory which usually is the crowning achievement of a hero's career. But Elpenor, unlike Patroclus, is far from having died a hero's death since he died in an accident that happened in Circe's palace, falling from the roof on which, as he was drunk, he had forgotten that he had lain down to sleep. Moreover, during his life, Elpenor had proved to be a very poor hero: he was 'the youngest of the party', says Odysseus, 'not much of a fighting man and not very clever'.<sup>36</sup> So, Elpenor, by showing a special concern for his σῆμα, misconceives his position.

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<sup>33</sup> *Od.* XI 53 and XXIV 187.

<sup>34</sup> *Od.* XI 53.

<sup>35</sup> *Il.* XXIII 69-92.

<sup>36</sup> *Od.* X 552-3.

What is more there is also something incongruous in Elpenor's instructions: whereas the σῆμα is usually to proclaim the warriors' bravery and fame, the σῆμα that Elpenor asks for should remind the living that he was a rower since he wants the τύμβος to be surmounted by the oar which he wielded in life.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, Elpenor's episode, when compared to heroic ones, shows a third discrepancy, which is of even greater importance than the first two. Elpenor's corpse was effectively abandoned unburied by his companions, and the justification Odysseus gives for this consists in saying not that he was unaware of Elpenor's death,<sup>38</sup> but that a more urgent task called him away, to undertake the visit to the Underworld. As observed by Page,<sup>39</sup> Iliadic heroes would never have made such a choice.<sup>40</sup> So, the context in which one of the three Odyssean occurrences of σῶμα is used describes a situation which is clearly incompatible with the heroic code.

There are, moreover, distinct similarities to the context in which a second occurrence is found, that is in book XXIV, when Amphimedon, on his arrival in Hades, tells Agamemnon's ghost that his corpse, as well as those of his companions, remains abandoned in Odysseus' palace.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, exactly like Elpenor, the suitors did not die a hero's death since they were killed by Odysseus whose real aim in doing so was to punish them. Moreover, in the account that Amphimedon gives of the fight between Odysseus and the suitors, the suitors can in no way be compared to Iliadic heroes.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, Amphimedon, unlike Elpenor, does not show a special concern for his σῆμα and has no incongruous wish for his funeral. This passage,

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<sup>37</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1995: 115 ff.) considers as widespread the practice consisting in placing on the grave something revealing the social status of the deceased. But Elpenor's case is the only example she gives from a literary source.

<sup>38</sup> Heubeck reads this way Elpenor's episode (1989: *ad Od.* X 551-60).

<sup>39</sup> Page 1955: 45.

<sup>40</sup> Indeed we ought to notice that in book XXIII of the *Iliad*, even though Patroclus is shown rebuking his friend for forgetting him, Achilles has nonetheless previously been said to be firmly intending to give funeral rites to his friend (43-47). Nonetheless it is quite difficult to agree with Page (1955: 44-46) when he asserts that the abandonment of Elpenor's corpse is sufficient proof to consider the episode as a later addition to the *nekylia* which, by itself, gave rise to many discussions and which the critic reads as a later addition to the *Odyssey*. Indeed, Elpenor's episode since it contains, as we said, three elements which are totally incompatible with the heroic code, seems perfectly consistent in this respect. Moreover, through its discrepancy from the heroic code, it echoes the well known dialogue, related a few lines afterwards, during which Odysseus and Achilles, who are in Hades, discuss the value of life and fame respectively.

<sup>41</sup> *Od.* XXIV 176-190.

<sup>42</sup> Significantly they are not presented as so poor heroes in the narrator's version of the fight given in book XXII.

however, when compared to heroic ones, shows a discrepancy which is more marked than in Elpenor's episode.<sup>43</sup> The suitors are said to enter Hades properly, although no funeral has been given to them, and to have been led by Hermes who is assigned the role of ψυχοπομπός, which is clearly out of keeping with Homeric ideas on the fate of the soul after death.<sup>44</sup> In particular, there are conflicting views concerning the souls themselves, as noticed by Sourvinou-Inwood.<sup>45</sup> But there are no conflicting views about entering Hades. According to the critic, the oddities we have just pointed out thus prove to be elements of post-Homeric beliefs.<sup>46</sup> However, several phrases in the words that Amphimedon utters recall quite precisely the case of Patroclus in the *Iliad*.<sup>47</sup> Should we consider it accidental that a poet introducing a new idea about entering Hades should have alluded to Patroclus, who is precisely the only character in connection to whom conditions on entering Hades are explicitly expressed?<sup>48</sup> I think, on the contrary, that the episode of the suitors was deliberately conceived to be out of keeping with ideas which are otherwise valid for heroes, since it is in the same *nekylia* that we are presented with a detailed account of Achilles' funeral. In the suitors' case, the funeral which is of such great importance in the hero's career is not deprived of its meaning as it is in Elpenor's case but is purely and simply made non-existent.

The two Odyssean occurrences where σῶμα is used for an unambiguously dead human being are found in comparable passages, both questioning the heroic code. What about the Odyssean occurrence which, as we said before, cannot be said to refer to dead bodies?<sup>49</sup> Σῶμα appears, as we saw, in a passage that does not refer to a funeral but describes a shipwreck which takes place in an environment where

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<sup>43</sup> This discrepancy is even so marked that ancient scholars considered it as one of the clearest proofs that the second *nekylia*, which indeed still gives rise to many discussions, was not authentic so that, within the end of the *Odyssey*, it should be especially athetised.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. schol. A *ad Il.* XXIII 73.

<sup>45</sup> As observed by Sourvinou-Inwood (1995: 103-106), the souls are depicted as shades sometimes lacking strength, sometimes not.

<sup>46</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood 1995: 94 ff.

<sup>47</sup> Line 189 echoes the lines in book XVIII of the *Iliad* (344-345) which describe the washing of Patroclus' corpse and the phrase ὃ γὰρ γέρας ἐστὶ θανάτων (190) is the very one Achilles uses while talking about Patroclus at the beginning of book XXIII of the *Iliad* (9). As for the adjective ἀκηδής (187), it is the corresponding verb that Patroclus utters in the first words he addresses to Achilles while visiting him once again in book XXIII.

<sup>48</sup> Contrary to Sourvinou-Inwood, Page (1955: 117) asserts, after Rohde in particular, that the role of psychopompos which is assigned to Hermes is an element of old belief. But even in this case, it is difficult to consider the contradiction as an accident.

<sup>49</sup> *Od.* XII 67.

heroes are entirely out of place, that is the sea. Indeed, at sea, heroes cannot act as heroes and, in case of death, no funeral can be given to them so that they cannot win any fame. The funeral, here, is not deprived of its meaning nor made non-existent. It is impossible, which is even worse. In the *Odyssey*, the use of σῶμα for a possibly living human being seems to be reserved to bodies in situations where the heroic code has the least validity.

As a conclusion, it appears that this study finally turns out to be more fruitful than we might have expected. Indeed, we first observed that, in the Homeric poems as well as in the Hesiodic ones, σῶμα denotes the body in general, no matter if it is dead or alive. Other Homeric words should be studied, such as δέμας which, according to Snell, only denotes an aspect of the body, that is its stature (δέμας is cognate with δέμω), or μέλα and γυῖα, which originally mean limbs and which, in the scholar's opinion, are the only means of naming the body. But in itself the way the word σῶμα is used in Homeric poems makes it quite difficult to agree with Snell's thesis that in Homer there is no conception of the body. Secondly, it becomes possible to understand why Snell's thesis was so widely accepted: σῶμα does often refer to a dead body, particularly in the *Iliad* to which scholars generally pay more attention than to the *Odyssey*. Last but not least, we noticed that the conception of the body as a unit and the heroic code are linked. This link explains, in my opinion, a specificity that the *Odyssey* shows, as regards the way the body is conceived, and that has never been noted before. The fact that, in the *Odyssey*, unlike the *Iliad*, σῶμα may refer to a living human being, but in no way to a body in a situation where the heroic code is valid, suggests that the weakening undergone by heroic values in the *Odyssey* allows the living human body to be grasped as a unit in this poem. It is effectively grasped as a unit not only through the few occurrences of the word σῶμα but in many other ways too, for instance in the representation of the injured body, of the body as a medium of sensation, in the description of postures, and even in the image of the protean and enigmatic body of Odysseus.

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