



Iliad 13.202-5: Aias Sfairisths

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ILIAS 13.202–5: *ΑΙΑΣ ΣΦΑΙΡΙΣΤΗΣ*

H. A. Harris, in the course of his excellent discussion of ancient ball games, remarks that the famous seashore scene in *Odyssey* 6 includes the first appearance of ball-play in Western literature¹ and, on the strength of the wording of lines 115ff., conjectures that the specific game is very like one still commonly played by modern schoolchildren and known in England as “Kingy”: “the fundamental aim of the game is to throw the ball at another player and hit him.”² In the *Odyssey* 6. passage,

the language is strangely vigorous. . . . Homer does not use the simple dative, “to the girl,” but a preposition (*μετὰ*) which has the fundamental force of “in pursuit of.” The girl did not miss the ball; the ball missed her. It did not simply fall into the pool; the picture of Nausicaa throwing it is repeated. All this would be explained if we could believe that Homer had at some time seen girls playing Kingy—or as it would be in this case, Queenie.³

Harris then notes that “the only other ball-play in Homer” occurs during the exhibition of Phaiakian dancing in *Odyssey* 8.370ff.

But we can find evidence of ball-play, indeed of Kingy itself, in *Iliad* 13.202–5, a description of the mutilation of the corpse of Imbrios on the battlefield by Aias, son of Oïleus:

*κεφαλὴν δ' ἀπαλῆς ἀπὸ δειρῆς
κόψεν Ὀιλιάδης κεχολωμένος Ἀμφιμάχοιο,*

¹ *Sport in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca 1972) 81.

² *Ibid.*, 77. In America, the same game is, I believe, sometimes called “Dodge-Ball” or “Battle-Ball.”

³ *Ibid.* 82.

ἢκε δέ μιν σφαιρηδὸν ἐλιξάμενος δι' ὁμίλου·
 "Ἐκτορὶ δὲ προπάροιθε ποδῶν πέσεν ἐν κονίῃσι.

Aias hurls the head *like a ball* (*σφαιρηδὸν*) *through the crowd* (*δι' ὁμίλου*), which presumably parts to avoid the grisly missile, just as players would move to avoid a ball thrown at them in a game of Kingy. Homer thus heightens our sense of the exceptional ferocity of Aias' action⁴ by likening it to a child's game. One thinks of the grim witticism of Patroklos at the expense of the dead "acrobat" (*κυβιστητήρ*) Kebriones in *Iliad* 16.745–50. In both places, the juxtaposition of an innocent leisure pastime and the bloody and feral pursuits of warriors is arrestingly macabre.

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⁴ Decapitation is among the *δεικέα ἔργα* that Gilbert Murray argued had been almost entirely expurgated from Homeric epic—see *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, 4th ed. (Oxford 1934) 128–29. M. M. Willcock, in his recent *Companion to the Iliad* (Chicago 1976), ad loc., maintains that the barbarity is appropriate to the lesser Aias, who "is a mean and brutal man. The greater Telamonian Aias would not treat a dead enemy in this way." So too, Charles Segal finds "a special degree of violence and emotionality" about the scene, *The Theme of the Mutilation of the Corpse in the Iliad*, Mnem. Suppl. 17 (Leiden 1971) 23, n. 1.