

Several of the ancient sources concerning Alexander mention the sacrifices and observances performed by the Macedonian king and his comrades when they arrived near ancient Troy. The most detailed of these accounts, Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, explains that Alexander and his companions poured libations to the heroes, anointed the grave-marker (στήλην) of Achilles, ran a race naked as is the custom, and then placed a wreath on the marker (Plut, *Alex.* 15.8). Pouring oil and placing a garland or wreath on a grave stele are typical of ancient Greek funerary practices, and Alexander's actions can be understood as the observances of an attentive descendant. On the other hand, the naked race and Plutarch's ordering of the events suggest a wholly conceived ritual intended to honor Achilles as a victorious athlete.

While modern scholarship on Alexander has not overlooked this episode, it usually interprets this series of rituals as typical funerary honors for the fallen Achilles. The use of oil and the adornment of grave-markers were indeed common funerary practices for the Greeks. The sequence of anointing, racing, and crowning, however, suggests an additional layer of meaning, where Alexander and his companions not only honored the dead hero through an athletic competition, but also invited him to participate. Before the race, Plutarch wrote that Alexander anointed the grave-marker, a typical observance for grave-markers and altars in the ancient Greek world, but also an important part of athletic practice. Before exercise or competition, Greek athletes anointed their bodies with oil, and afterwards scraped it off with a tool called a strigil. After anointing the tomb marker and, presumably, themselves, Alexander and his companions ran their race and crowned Achilles' stele with a wreath or garland. As with the anointing, this practice also resonated in both funerary and athletic contexts: ancient Greeks often garlanded tombs to honor and remember the deceased, and they awarded crowns for athletic victories in their most prestigious competitions. Plutarch's silence about the winner of the race implies that the competitors in fact awarded the crown of victory to "fleet-footed" Achilles when they placed the garland on his monument. As with a living athlete, the monument to Achilles was oiled before the race and crowned afterwards.

Walter Burkert has noted that funerary monuments and painted lekythoi indicate a belief among the Greeks that the presence of the deceased could visit the gravesite on occasion. Elizabeth McGowan has investigated the Archaic period practice of honoring the dead with free-standing columns near athletic racetracks as a means of perpetuating the kleos of the deceased and his family. In accordance with this custom, running a race near the grave-marker of Achilles honored the memory of the departed hero. By inviting Achilles to join the competition, and awarding him the victory prize, Alexander acknowledged the power of the hero with whom he had identified since boyhood, and from whom he claimed descent. Although Alexander ran this race with his companions, earlier in the text Plutarch relates that Alexander declined to compete as a runner at Olympia since he would not be competing against kings (Plut. *Alex.* 4.10). A race with Achilles would obviously satisfy Alexander's requirement that he run against nobility, and awarding the victory to Achilles commemorated the kleos that Alexander hoped to someday equal or surpass. Finally, the presence of a hero acted as a harbinger of victory in battle. At this beginning of Alexander's campaign against the Persian Empire, the presence of Achilles would bode well for its success.