



Summary :

The hero Achilles was worshipped since the 6th century BC in many areas of Greece and beyond, particularly on the shores of the Black Sea. The cult was more widespread in the region of Olbia Pontica and on the small island of Leuke. The religious practices are not known in detail. Inscriptions refer to games in honour of Achilles, as well as to the relationship between the cult and the sea travellers.

Date

6th c. BC-3rd c. AD

Geographical Location

Olbia Pontica, Leuke Nisos

1. Written sources

In [Homer's *Odyssey*](#) we find the first testimony about a tomb erected by the Achaeans in honour of the warrior Achilles, on a nameless peninsula of the [Hellespont](#). The tomb was constructed in such a way so that it would be visible even at a great distance.¹ [Herodotus](#), the historian of the 5th century BC (5.94), refers to the city of Achilleios in his description of the battle between Athens and [Mytilene](#), whereas historical sources of a later date refer to Achilleios as the burial site of Achilles.² If the reference by Philostratos³ to the annual pilgrimage of the Thessalians to the tomb of Achilles is correct, then the cult activity started earlier than the 5th century BC. Despite the extensive, although fragmented, evidence in the historical sources about the cult of Achilles, the tomb of the hero has not been located so far.⁴

2. Location of the cult

Achilles was worshipped as a hero in various parts of the ancient world, such as Laconia and Elis in the Peloponnese, Croton in south Italy, [Erythrae](#) in Asia Minor and [Astypalea](#) in the Cyclades.

The cult was extremely widespread in [Olbia Pontica](#), the Black Sea colony of [Miletus](#), which was situated on the delta of the Dnieper River at the NW coast of the Black Sea, to the south of modern Ukraine.

The wider region of Olbia, in [Berezan](#) and Beikush, about 40 km to the west, has yielded archaeological finds such as wall paintings, inscriptions and pottery sherds that are apparently associated with the cult of Achilles. Moreover, while the finds from Olbia Pontica date the earlier phase of the cult in the Classical period, some inscribed tablets from Beikush prove an even earlier date for the cult in that region, in the first half of the 6th century BC until the 3rd century AD. Thirty-nine inscribed disks from that site bear Achilles' name or types of abbreviations (A, AXI, AXIΛΛ, AXIΛΛΕ or AXIΛΛΕΙ) and decoration including humans, snakes, swords and boats.⁵

From the Classical period onwards, the cult of Achilles spread to the southeastern Olbia, especially at Tendra, where a small tumulus was excavated and yielded coins and fragments of inscriptions with dedications to the hero.⁶ In antiquity, Tendra was known as the 'Achilles' route', a term which also appears in written sources.⁷

The hero cult was even more widespread on the small [island of Leuke](#), on the north coast of the Black Sea. Leuke, of only 2 km circumference, is situated ca. 45 km northeast of the Danubian delta. Unfortunately, architectural remains are scarce and in poor condition, but excavations on the island have revealed many inscriptions, decorated pottery, amphorae, coins and metal artifacts.

One of the most important finds from Leuke is a black-glazed [lykethos](#) of the 5th century BC, which is inscribed (in translation): Glaucos, son of Posideios, has offered me to Achilles, lord of Leuke.



Unfortunately there are not extensive historical references to Leuke. Its name derives either from the colour of the rocks or from the snakes and birds of the island.⁸ The birds were allegedly considered to serve Achilles, as they were clearing the area with their wings.⁹

3. The Cult

Unfortunately, the information available on the nature and practices of the cult is scanty. The inscribed clay disks found in the wider area of Olbia Pontica might have been board games, especially made as funerary offerings. According to ancient tradition, heroes liked playing such games, as seen on several representations.

Moreover, the inscription on ‘the route of Achilles’, which probably refers to a stadium, might be related to athletic games in honour of the hero. Indeed, an inscription of the 1st century BC¹⁰ mentions games in honor of Achilles, which probably took place outside the town of Olbia. The games may have started since the time of Herodotus, who mentions the ‘the route of Achilles’,¹¹ whereas epigraphic evidence indicates the names of the winners.¹²

According to another version, Achilles was worshipped by sailors in Leuke together with his mother Thetis and the Nereids. The sanctuary of Achilles was apparently of pan-Hellenic importance.

1. Hom., *Od.* 24.80-84.

2. Pl., *NH* 5.125; Strabo 13.1.32; Diog. L. 1.74.

3. Phil., *Her.* 53.8-18.

4. Cook, J.M., *The Troad. An Archaeological and Topographical Study* (Oxford 1973), pp. 159-164, 173-174 and 185-186.

5. The finds are unpublished. Hedreen, G., “The Cult of Achilles in the Euxine”, *Hesperia* 60 (1991), pp. 315-316.

6. Hedreen, G., “The Cult of Achilles in the Euxine”, *Hesperia* 60 (1991), p. 318; Zograf, A.N., “Nakhodki monet v mestakh predpolagaemykh antichnykh sviatilishch na Chernom More”, *SovArch* 7 (1941), pp. 152-161.

7. Hdt. 4.55, 4.76; Strabo 7.3.19.

8. Arr., *Peripl.* 21; Scholia Pind., *Nem.* 4.79; Dion. Per. 541-545.

9. Phil., *Her.* 54.9; Arr., *Peripl.* 24.

10. The inscription is unpublished. Hedreen, G., “The Cult of Achilles in the Euxine”, *Hesperia* 60 (1991), p. 319.

11. Hdt. 4.55.

12. The inscriptions are unpublished. Hedreen, G., “The Cult of Achilles in the Euxine”, *Hesperia* 60 (1991), p. 319.



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Glossary :

	lekythos, the
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A perfumed oil container with a narrow mouth and one vertical handle. There are lots of variants of this shape. They are predominant during the 5th c. BC. A common find is also the aryballoid lekythos with a globular and squat body. White lekythoi were used solely as votive offerings in burials.

Sources

Homer, *Odyssey* 24.80-84.

Plinius, *Historia Naturalis* 5.125.

Strabo 7.3.19, 13.1.32.

Diogenes Laertius 1.74.

Philostratus, *Heroicus* 53.8-18, 54.9.

Herodotus 4.55, 4.76, 5.94.

Arrianus, *Periplus masis Euxini* 24.