Achilles’ heel

Have you heard of your Achilles tendon?

Or your Achilles heel?

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Student: Another ancient Greek myth?

*Tutor: Well, I think they’re interesting.*

Some of them.

*Yes, some of them.*

What’s the one you’re reading now?

*I’m not reading the story itself.*

Oh?

*It’s in Greek.*

Oh.

*I can’t read Greek.*

Me neither.

*I’m reading about it.*

Oh.

*In English.*

Right.

*It’s the Iliad.*

It’s the story of Achilles, isn’t it?

*Well, the Trojan War.*

Achilles was a hero of the Trojan War.

*He was.*

He was killed.

*Yes.*

Outside Troy.

*Yes. By an arrow.*

It hit him in the heel.

*Perhaps.*

We don’t really know.

*No. We don’t.*

The Iliad is an ancient story.

*Yes. It’s an old, old story.*

Really old.

*About 3,000 years old.*

One of the oldest stories there is.

*Yes.*

About the Trojan War.

*Yes*.

When the Greeks tried to rescue Helen of Troy.

*I remember that bit.*

Rescue her from the Trojans.

*Yes.*

She ran away with a prince from Troy.

*Or perhaps he kidnapped her.*

Did she run away or was she kidnapped?

*Nobody really knows.*

No. Apparently not.

*Different people told different stories.*

As they do.

*Yes!*

She was married to a Greek king.

*Before she ran away to Troy.*

And the Greek king was angry when she left.

*Of course!*

So the Greeks laid seige to Troy.

*According to the Iliad, anyway.*

And they got into Troy by using a wooden horse.

*Yes. Eventually.*

The Trojan Horse.

*Which is also in the Iliad.*

A wooden horse in which 30 men were hidden.

*An idea thought up by Ullyses*.

So the story goes.

*But that’s another story, for another day.*

What about Achilles?

*What do you mean?*

Who was he?

*Well, his Mum was a nymph.*

And someone told her that Achilles would die young.

*Which he did, of course.*

But she wasn’t to know that, was she?

*No, of course not.*

She was worried, I expect.

*Being told he would die young.*

Yes, of course she was.

*But then someone told her she could stop that.*

Stop it from coming true?

*Stop him from dying young*

Maybe stop him from dying at all, actually.

*They told her that she must dip baby Achilles in a river.*

Dip him in any old river?

*No. She had to dip him in the river Styx.*

Why would she do that?

*Because then he would never come to any harm.*

But why this particular river?

*The river Styx was very important to the Ancient Greeks.*

Why?

*Because it ran between the real world and Hades.*

That’s the old Greek name for the underworld, isn’t it?

*Yes. Hades is where the souls of the dead lived.*

When you died, you had to be ferried there in a boat.

*Across the river styx.*

That’s what the ancient Geeks thought.

*There was a boat on the river Styx.*

And a ferryman rowed it.

*Across the Styx to Hades.*

Taking the dead to Hades.

*Spooky!*

 When you died, they used to put a coin in your mouth.

*That’s right!*

It was so you could pay the ferryman.

*You had to give the ferryman a coin.*

Yes. You had to pay to cross the Styx.

*If you had no money, you couldn’t get across.*

And your soul would have to wander for ever.

*So the Styx was a very scary river.*

But Achilles’ Mum was worried about Achilles.

*Yes.*

She’d been told he would die young.

*Unless she dipped him in the Styx.*

So, of course, she was worried.

*And she did find the river Styx.*

She did.

*And she did dip Achilles into it.*

She did.

*But what she didn’t notice, was his heel.*

That’s right.

*Because she held onto it.*

So it never got wet.

*One of his heels didn’t touch the water.*

It never got wet at all.

*She had to hold onto him, of course.*

Otherwise he might have been washed away.

*Maybe across the river, into Hades.*

Exactly! So she hung on very tight.

*And she held him by one foot.*

Where you would hold a baby.

*If you dipped him into a river.*

Exactly.

*You’d grab his foot.*

Which she did.

*With one hand round his ankle and heel.*

So her hand covered the heel of one foot.

*And Achilles got wet from head to foot.*

Except for that one heel.

*Because his Mum had hold of it.*

Which meant that Achilles still had one weak point.

*Most of him could come to no harm.*

Because it had been in the waters of the Styx.

*Apart from his heel.*

Which hadn’t.

*No. It was completely covered by his mum’s hand.*

So he had one weak point.

*Which is something we still talk about today!*

Yes, it is. We still talk about Achilles’ heel.

*It’s what we call someone’s weak point.*

We say it’s their “Achilles heel”.

*Yes. Amazing that we still do that!*

Nice!

*After 3,000 years.*

Yes*.*

*Very nice.*

So what happened in the end?

*Pardon?*

To Achilles, I mean.

*Well, the Greeks were fighting the Trojans.*

Who lived in Troy.

*And Troy had high stone walls and huge gates.*

The Greeks couldn’t fight their way in.

*No.*

Nor could they starve the Trojans out.

*No. It was a stalemate.*

Yes. It was a stalemate.

*Neither side could win.*

A complete stalemate.

*For ten years, in fact.*

Ten whole years!

*Every now and then there was fighting.*

Yes.

*Sometimes the Greeks would attack the city walls.*

But it was no use.

*The Trojans always fought them off.*

They shot arrows from the walls.

*And they threw spears.*

The Greeks had no chance.

*The walls and gates were high, and strong.*

So they couldn’t get into the city.

*No.*

And the Trojans sometimes came out to attack the Greeks.

*They hoped to drive them away.*

But the Greek army was large.

*So that was no use.*

So there was a stalemate.

*A complete stalemate.*

The Greeks couldn’t take the city.

*And the Trojans couldn’t drive them away.*

But there was hand to hand fighting.

*From time to time.*

Yes.

*Very nasty it was too.*

It’s a blood-stained story.

*A gory story!*

A gory story! That’s a good one!

*Thank you.*

And Achilles was hit, in one of these battles.

*By an arrow.*

They say he was trying to climb the walls.

Yes.

*And an arrow hit him.*

In the heel.

*Yes.*

And it killed him.

*It might have been poisoned.*

The arrow?

*Or he might have bled to death.*

Yes*.*

*There’s another funny thing.*

Another funny thing?

*Yes.*

Even more funny than bleeding to death, you mean?

*No!*

Right.

*I mean there’s another funny thing about Achilles and his heel.*

Is there?

*Yes.*

What is it?

*Well, feel your heel.*

Mmmm…

*Just above your heel.*

OK.

*At the back.*

Yes…

*Just where Achilles’ Mum held on to him.*

When she dipped him in the Styx.

*Yes.*

OK.

*You can feel like a thick tendon.*

Running up from the heel?

*Yes.*

From the heel to the muscle?

*That’s it.*

Yes, I can feel it.

*You can almost get your fingers in behind it.*

Yes, almost.

*It’s very strong.*

Its very thick.

*Exactly.*

It must do a lot of work when we walk.

*Or run.*

But what does this have to do with Achilles?

*Well, this tendon is called the Achilles tendon.*

Is it?

*Yes.*

The Achilles tendon?

*That’s right. It’s your Achilles tendon.*

After Achilles?

*Yes. After Achilles.*

That’s amazing!

*And it is a bit of a weak point.*

A weak point?

*Your Achilles tendon is a bit of a weak point.*

How do you mean?

*Well, it’s one of the points where sports people can suffer an injury.*

I suppose they must put a lot of strain on it.

*Yes, they do.*

Oh.

*And it is easily injured.*

I’ve heard about people injuring their Achilles tendon.

*It’s quite a common injury.*

But it’s interesting that it’s called the Achilles tendon.

*Yes, it is.*

And it’s nice to know why!

*Yes. It is.*

Very interesting.

*I think so.*

And if the Achilles tendon is a weak point…

*Which it does seem to be.*

Then your Achilles tendon can also be your Achilles heel.

*Yes. I suppose so!*

And all because it never got wet in the river styx.

*Or so the Iliad says, anyway!*