



# Kent Academic Repository

Zartaloudis, Thanos (2019) *Hieros Anthropos - An Inquiry Into The Practices Of Archaic Greek Supplication*. *Law and Humanities*, 13 (1). pp. 52-75. ISSN 1752-1483.

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/73986/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2019.1605962>

## This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

## Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

***Hieros Anthropos - An Inquiry Into The Practices Of Archaic Greek Supplication***

Thanos Zartaloudis

Reader in Legal History and Theory

University of Kent

School of Law

t.zartaloudis@kent.ac.uk

## **Abstract**

This article examines the earliest literary evidence of ancient supplication practices in the archaic Greek Homeric epic tradition. It does so from a philological, linguistic, ritualist and theoretical perspective without however separating these elements as distinct and it aims to articulate a non-legalistic approach to the earliest evidence, as well as a hypothesis with regard to the sacredness of suppliants in archaic Greece before supplication became juridically regulated in Classical Greece by certain forms of law.

## **Keywords**

Supplication, Homer, archaic Greece, homo sacer, Agamben, ancient law, ritual, hiketeia, hieros anthropos, suppliant, xenia, asylum

‘They become silent in the house at the sight of the man;  
and looking at him, they marvel.’<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

Most scholars agree that supplication in Archaic Greece is to a greater or lesser extent a ‘ritual act’.<sup>2</sup> But how and to what extent this is so remains a complex matter. Archaic supplication practices comprise verbal and non-verbal persuasive (gestural) acts. These appear to be based, on the perceived potency of what I call a formulaic (i.e. repetitive) enunciation-gesture; as it is misguided to separate the non-linguistic from the linguistic, or the non-ritual elements from the ritual act. Similarly the repetitive enunciation-gestures of supplication should not be compartmentalised into, say, supposed steps of a (juridicalised) process in a strict sense, but instead should be seen as a dynamic (and significantly variable in its detail) situation of crossing, a ‘threshold’ (*soglia*) experience, to use Giorgio Agamben’s term, between the linguistic and the non-linguistic, and between life and death.<sup>3</sup> We need to sustain the question

---

<sup>1</sup> *Od.* 7.144-5: *οἱ δ’ ἄνεω ἐγένοντο, δόμον κάτα φῶτα ἰδόντες: | θαύμαζον δ’ ὀρόωντες*. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated. Just before these verses, Odysseus, surrounded by Athena’s mist, has entered the palace and walked towards Arete. The very moment he places his hands on Arete’s knees, in order to supplicate, the mist disperses.

<sup>2</sup> John Gould, ‘HIKETEIA’ (1973) 93 *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 74-103, 75.

<sup>3</sup> For one of many articulations of the threshold manner of thought, see, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Kevin Attell, tr. Stanford University Press [2002] 2004). A threshold (*soglia*), here, is neither merely spatial nor linguistic, it is instead the experience of intimacy with our strangeness; which in a sense is our home.

of how to understand archaic supplication practices as an open one, if we are to appreciate their variety, strangeness and their ‘pre-legal’<sup>4</sup>, ‘quasi-legal’<sup>5</sup> or, in my view, non-legal forms; in other words, if we are to approach the whatever preceding ‘stuff’ of which the tradition we call law is, supposedly, also made.<sup>6</sup>

Early *hikesia/hiketeia* supplication practices<sup>7</sup> are observed extensively in the Homeric epics, while the descriptions in Homer most likely contain elements of a more ancient sacred practice of supplication.<sup>8</sup> Supplications were worship-related, warranted by a sacred norm or

---

<sup>4</sup> See Louis Gernet, ‘Droit et predroit en Grece ancienne’ (1948-49) 3:3 *Annee sociologique*, 21-119; and see also the extended discussion in Thanos Zartaloudis, *The Birth of Nomos* (Edinburgh University Press 2019), Preface. The key point is that we should not characterise what precedes the so-called proper legal formation as pre-legal or quasi-legal because in this way we conceal the creative uncertainty of observing difference, a difference (or relation) that legal form is ever-willing to colonize and forget.

<sup>5</sup> Fred S. Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (Oxford University Press 2006) 6; see also Rudolf Hirzel, *Agraphos Nomos* (Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der Königl, Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften 20, Leipzig Teubner 1900), esp. chs. 3 and 4.

<sup>6</sup> One has to avoid the frequent misunderstanding of the descriptor ‘non-legal’ here to mean ‘law-less’ in the sense that there is an absence of norms, traditions, customs, ordered ways of being to whatever extent.

<sup>7</sup> These should be kept fairly distinct from the later classical (‘juridical’) regulation of supplication; as well as from the varied practices of *asylia* and *asylum* met in the classical, and even more so in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

<sup>8</sup> Supplication practices are much later famously and extensively observed in the tragedies titled *Suppliants* (*Hiketides*) of Aeschylus and Euripides, while supplication is central in many

convention.<sup>9</sup> Zeus was the witness and protector of suppliants: [...] ἵνα καὶ Διὶ τερπικεραύνῳ σπείσομεν, ὅς θ' ἰκέτησιν ἄμ' αἰδοίοισιν ὀπηδεῖ, “[...] we pour a libation to the lightning Zeus who guards the revered [*aidoioisin*] suppliants [*hiketēs*]”.<sup>10</sup> This appears to be a strong tradition as we rarely find references to suppliants being ‘punished’ or maltreated. As Alkinoos says to the Phaeacians: “[...] both guest [*xeinos*] and suppliant [*hiketēs*] are considered as a brother” (Od. 8.546-47: ἀντὶ κασιγνήτου ξεῖνός θ' ἰκέτης τε τέτυκται). But as we shall see this is a tradition that already in the Homeric epics has to be, at times, remembered.

In early mythography there is a supposed origin-myth of supplication in *Ixiōn* (Ἰξίων), a fatherless king of Thessaly (or, possibly earlier, a sun-god), who ‘hypocritically’ supplicates Zeus after he murders a kinsman (possibly his father-in-law) becoming the first homicide and thus the first suppliant-*hiketēs*.<sup>11</sup> We have a patchwork of conflicting accounts, but all of the accounts describe *Ixiōn* as a kin-murderer (relative by marriage).<sup>12</sup> For his grievous crime no one wished to purify him, but when *Ixiōn* supplicated Zeus, Zeus accepted to do so. A maddened *Ixiōn*, however, betrays this new lease of life by molesting Hera, as a result of which

---

other tragedies, such as in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (39-80; 235-43), Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (1-5), and Euripides' *Medea* (324ff) and *Hippolytus* (313ff). See, Peter Burian, *Suppliant Drama: Studies in the Form and Interpretation of Five Greek Tragedies* (Princeton University Press 1971).

<sup>9</sup> See Kurt Latte, *Heiliges Recht. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der sakralen Rechtsformen in Griechenland* (J. C. B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], 1920) 107-8.

<sup>10</sup> Od. 7.165; See, also, Od. 9.270-1 where Odysseus uses similar words to describe Zeus *Xenios* as the avenger of suppliants to the Cyclops; and Hesiod, *Work and Days*, 327-32.

<sup>11</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 441.

<sup>12</sup> *Scholia* to Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* 3, 62.

he is punished on the ‘eternal wheel’.<sup>13</sup> The myth appears to be later standardised in Aeschylean dramas with mentions in the *Eumenides*,<sup>14</sup> but also in two of his lost plays centred on *Ixiōn* and *Perrhaibides*<sup>15</sup>, another by Euripides (fr. 424-7) and one by Timasitheus,<sup>16</sup> whereby *Ixiōn* becomes the ancestor of the uncivilized half-men Centaurs. If we set aside the later Olympian elements of this myth, it is perhaps possible to glimpse a most ancient transgression of customary, tribal -eternal- norms against the killing of a kin, and, for some, the ‘first trial’.<sup>17</sup> Though it ought to be noted that in the epics the variety of supplicatory requests can range significantly, from requesting a special armour, a golden fleece, a killing, hospitality (*xenia*) or begging to be spared and/or be protected (the latter two may be, in fact, paradigmatic).

Literary evidence of the earliest descriptions of *hiketeia* supplication-pleadings are observed as early as in the archaic epics (written sometime in the eighth century BC, thought to be formed on the basis of a more ancient plurivocal oral transmission).<sup>18</sup> Epic supplication

---

<sup>13</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 2.21 provides the oldest preserved version of the myth.

<sup>14</sup> 1.140 and 1.710

<sup>15</sup> Frr. 89-93, 184-6a.

<sup>16</sup> See Cecil Smith, ‘The Myth of Ixion’ (1895) 9:5 *The Classical Review*, 277-80; Aristotle, *Politics* 1456a1; Siehe E. Simon, ‘Ixion und die Schlangen’ (1955) 42 *Jahreshefte des Österr. Arch. Inst.*, 5-26.

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion in Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 3) 16-7 and fn. 67, where he lists the earlier ‘legalist’ readings of supplication practices.

<sup>18</sup> See the studies by Josef Kopperschmidt, *Die Hikesie als dramatische Form* (diss. Tübingen, R. Rodenbusch 1967); Victoria Pedrick, ‘Supplication in the Iliad and the Odyssey’ (1982) 112 *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 125-40; Agathe Thornton, *Homer’s Iliad: its composition and the motif of supplication* (Vandenhoeck und

is a frequent yet complex action (with 35 acts of supplication in total, the majority of which are accepted in the *Odyssey*, while not as much in the, generally considered to be earlier, *Iliad*); and I trace, in outline, the earliest clues for its practices and expressions in the lexical field of the epics below.<sup>19</sup> In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, suppliants can vary as wide as comprising a wandering beggar, a king, a witch (Circe), a man who has killed his cousin, a Trojan warrior

---

Ruprecht 1984); Christoph Auffarth, 'Protecting Strangers. Establishing a Fundamental Value in the Religions of Ancient Near East and Ancient Greece' (1992) *Numen* 39, 193-216; and Kevin Crotty, *The Poetics of Supplication* (Cornell University Press 1994).

<sup>19</sup> See Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 5) 14, and Appendix 1, 322-23. Whether the word *hiketēs* can be traced to the Mycenaean era, as it was proposed in early attempts to decipher tablet B799 of Knossos and tablet Aη 610 of Pylos, remains improbable; see Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (Cambridge University Press 1956/59), 186, 406 and 419; Michel Lejeune, *Mémoires de Philologie Mycénienne* (Ed. dell'Ateneo 1971) 213; and the Pylian tablets *o-ka* and PY 218.1-6. This derivation has been explored in relation to the Mycenaean adjective *eqesijo* as a derivation of *eqeta* (possibly: ἑκ<sup>w</sup>ἑτᾶς, *hek<sup>w</sup>etās*), a *nomen agentis* like *hiketēs*. Semantically, the sense of *e-qe-ta* as a military or religious (or both) follower or companion to the *wanax/basileus* (chief/king) has been speculated. It appears to be derived, however, from the different root *\*sek<sup>w</sup>* and to be linked to the Greek ἑπομαι (*epomai*; meaning 'to follow or accompany, attend'); see Anna M. Jasink, 'L'e-qe-ta nei testi micenei' (1976) 17 *SMEA*, 85-92; John T. Killen, 'Mycenaean *o-pa*' in Sigrid Deger-Jalkotzy, Stefan Hiller and Oswald Panagl (eds), *Florent Studia Mycenaea* (Akten des X. Int. Myk. Coll. Salzburg 1-5 May 1995, Wien, 1999) 325-41; and the recent analysis by Barbara Montecchi, 'E-qe-ta and e-mi-to on Linear B tablet KN Am(2) 821: military officials and soldiers?' (2014) 8 *Pasiphae - Rivista di Filologia e Antichità Egee*, 79-96.

begging for his life in the battlefield, one of Penelope's suitors begging for mercy, and a father who seeks to free a child from an enemy captor. Often, these are strangers or foreigners, but we also find pleas between acquaintances, friends, and gods.<sup>20</sup>

Let's look at an example of an act of supplication that provides an initial sense of the practice, though not its detail. The culminating scenes of Odysseus' vengeful return to Ithaca, where he slays the suitors who have been courting Penelope in *hubris* as well as abusing his *oikos*, contain a less noticed scene of supplication by Phemios (succeeding, in fact, another supplication to Odysseus by the seer and suitor Leodes). Phemios is the famous Ithacan, divinely inspired, poet-singer, who has been singing<sup>21</sup> with his lyre at the ritual feasts of the suitors in order to entertain as well as instruct them. Upon Odysseus' revelation, in fear for his life, he supplicates him, clasping his knees and begging to be spared. Phemios begs Odysseus not to kill him because as a singer-poet he benefits any *oikos*.<sup>22</sup> Phemios' importance in the *Odyssey* is evident from the start since it is he who sings the first *nostos* -return- song,<sup>23</sup> while by the end of the epic he claims that among the suitors he was singing under duress, singing thus by 'necessity' (*ἀνάγκη*, *anagkēi*).<sup>24</sup> Phemios states that he now wishes to sing the praises of (god-like) Odysseus and appeals to pity (*heleos*), in 22.344-50:

---

<sup>20</sup> See generally, Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 5); and Pedrick, *Supplication in the Iliad and the Odyssey* (n 18).

<sup>21</sup> On song in the poems, see Simonetta Grandolini, *Canti e aedi nei poemi omerici* (Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali 1995).

<sup>22</sup> *Od.* 22.344-49

<sup>23</sup> *Od.* 1.11-12. Note that the ancient biographical tradition describes Homer as the pupil of a musician called Phemios; and Ps.-Herodotus *Life (Vita)* 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Od.* 22.351-53.

γουννοῦμαι σ', Ὀδυσσεῦ· σὺ δέ μ' αἶδεο καί μ' ἐλέησον.

αὐτῷ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχος ἔσσεται, εἴ κεν ἀοιδὸν

πέφνης, ὅς τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀείδω.

αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἴμας

παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν· ἔοικα δέ τοι παραείδειν

ὥς τε θεῶ· τῷ μὴ με λιλαίεο δειροτομήσαι.

'By the knees I clasp you' [*gounoumai*], Odysseus, respect me [*aideo*]<sup>25</sup> and have pity [*heleēson*].

For you will have sorrow in the future if you slay a singer-poet,

I who sing for gods and human beings.

I am self-taught [*autodidaktos*] and the god has planted in me

all kinds of songs. It is fitting for me to sing for you

as to a god. Thus, be not eager to cut my throat.

With Telemachus' support, who calls him blameless (*ἀναίτιον, hanaition*),<sup>26</sup> Odysseus appears to agree to spare him and tells him to sit by the altar of Zeus.<sup>27</sup> We observe here a glimpse of

---

<sup>25</sup> The reaction that the suppliant appears to expect is *αἰδώς* (*aidōs*, 'respect'), which is frequently mentioned in a Homeric supplicatory request. For instance, *γουννοῦμαι σ' Ἀχιλλεῦ· σὺ δέ μ' αἶδεο [aideo] καί μ' ἐλέησον [...]*, 'I clasp your knees Achilles, respect [*aideo*] me and pity [*heleēson*] me'; *Il.* 21.74.

<sup>26</sup> *Od.* 22.356-60.

<sup>27</sup> *Od.* 22.378-80.

an act of supplication formed with the phrase '*gounoumai*,' which we need to examine in more detail, while noticing that the scene with Phemios indicates two 'types' of supplication: either supplicating Odysseus directly or sitting by the altar of Zeus in the courtyard. While these two types have often been seen as separate, a relation appears plausible, and Phemios upon being spared will go and sit at the altar while the massacre of the suitors ensues.

Because of Telemachus' swift intervention (who, notably, also took part in the suitors' feasts) we do not find out how Odysseus' immediate reaction would have been expressed (the seer and suitor Leodes, who supplicated earlier in very similar fashion to Phemios, was decapitated by Odysseus despite the pleading, his head dropping 'while still speaking').<sup>28</sup> It is plausible to presume that Odysseus would have assumed that Phemios was cursing him in his songs at the suitors' ritual-feasts, even though in the epic, as well as in later tradition, we find support for the idea that Phemios' innovative songs were offering advice to the suitors against their transgressions.<sup>29</sup> Why was Phemios spared and Leodes not despite the similarity in their supplicatory acts? Leodes was not just a soothsayer but also a suitor who did in fact try his hand at stringing the bow and shooting an arrow through the twelve axes in order to win Penelope, unaware that Odysseus was already present. It is also said that he had predicted Odysseus' return, and so his act of pollution (*miasma*) against Odysseus' household and the overseeing Zeus is further aggravated. Phemios is in a different position, though he could also have had the same fate with his singing head rolling down the altar's step, but there is also a well-observed claim to innocence (in contrast to Leodes) and, crucially, Telemachus' timely

---

<sup>28</sup> *Od.* 22.310-29.

<sup>29</sup> Athenaeus, *Epitome* 1.14b-d; see Krystyna Bartol 'The Voice of Tradition: Representations of Homeric Singers in Athenaeus 1.14a-d' (2007) 57:1 *Classical Quarterly*, 231-43.

intervention. This is remarkable since upon his return Odysseus is in a state of war-like rage, and we know that supplication is never as effective in the conditions of the battlefield. For my purposes, it is important not to take a side in the long-lasting debate between those who see a sacred, nearly-automatic ‘right’ enacted in supplication rites, and those who see a more complex, reasoned and multi-layered ‘process’ of adjudication, akin almost to a proto- or quasi-legal judgement.<sup>30</sup> What is of interest to me, in this attempt, is to examine what happens *to* the suppliant in such a ‘ritual’ act, which I propose is to be viewed as a ‘threshold’ experience.

## 2. The Lexical Field of Homeric Supplication

It is worth attempting to understand Homeric supplication acts by first observing the lexical field of supplication practices. The nouns *hiketēs/hiketis* and the verbs *hikō*, *hikanō*, *lissomai* indicate the first clues towards an understanding. However, these three verbs do not mean ‘to supplicate’ in any self-evident sense. It is, thus, worth paying attention to the linguistic clues without expecting a direct explication. The suffix *-tēs* of the noun *hiketēs*<sup>31</sup> (male: *hiketēs*; female: *hiketis*) is characteristic of the agent-noun in Greek.<sup>32</sup> From an external perspective, morphologically, the ancient relatively ‘technical’ term *hiketēs* (as ‘suppliant’; *ἰκετεύω*,

---

<sup>30</sup> See n 17 for examples.

<sup>31</sup> A suppliant (bearing a sacred character): *ἀντί τοί εἰμ’ ἰκέταο αἰδοίοιο* [*hiketao aidioio*]; *Il.* 21.75.

<sup>32</sup> See Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Éditions Klincksieck [1968] 2009) s.v. *ἰκω*; see also, generally, the analysis by Françoise Létoublon ‘Speech and Gesture in Ritual: The Rituals of Supplication and Prayer in Homer’ in Angelos Chaniotis (ed), *Ritual dynamics in the Ancient Mediterranean. Agency, emotion, gender, representation* (HABES 49, 2011), 291-311.

*hiketeuō*, ‘to come as a suppliant’), already frequent in the *Odyssey* but less so in the earlier *Iliad*, is etymologically linked to the verb *hikō* (ἵκω; ‘to go, to come, to arrive or reach, to make one’s way’) from which derive the verbs (in their present stems) *hikanō* (ἰκάνω) and *hikneomai* (ἰκνέομαι) that convey the notion of ‘arriving, coming, reaching’ (including also as a ‘mental state’). Phonetically and morphologically this is a regular derivation, but semantically the difference between *hikō*, *hikanō* and *hikneomai* has been subject to extensive speculative investigations.

The crucial starting point is offered to us by the French linguist Émile Benveniste in the second volume of his *Vocabulary of Indo-European Institutions*, in the last section that is devoted to religion.<sup>33</sup> In a brief but crucial chapter dedicated to prayer and supplication, Benveniste provides us with the, now conventional, etymology in the root *ik-* (*hik-*) = ‘reaching, gaining’.<sup>34</sup> The agent-noun *ikētēs* (*hiketēs*) ‘suppliant’ as phonetically and morphologically derived from the verb *ἵκω* (*hikō*) ‘to come, to arrive’, a verb that provides the present *ἰκάνω* (*hikanō*) and *ἰκνέομαι* (*hikneomai*), is unproblematic. But the semantic transition from a verb of ‘movement’ to one of ‘supplication’ (or a ‘rite’ of supplication) remains subject to debate.<sup>35</sup> For Benveniste, the noun *hiketēs* is not semantically (directly) related to the verbs *hikō* and

---

<sup>33</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, II, *Pouvoir, droit, religion* (Éditions de Minuit 1969), 245-54.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* 252-4.

<sup>35</sup> See Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique...* (n 32), s.v. *hiketēs*, deriving *hiketēs* directly from *hikō*; and Hjalmar Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg [1960-1972] 1973) 717. The derivation of *hiketēs* is disputed by Kopperschmidt, *Die Hikesie...* (n 18) 5, fn.1, who considers a root *hik-* meaning ‘to beseech, plead’, as in, for e.g., ἱκμενος οὐρός, *hikmenos ouros*; see, further, Gould, *HIKETEIA* (n 2) 84, fn.51.

*hikanō*, but to the ‘formula’ used by the subject who performs it when stating: *ta sa gounath’ hikanō* (*I touch/reach your knees*), from *hikneomai* (‘to come, to reach, to encounter, to walk about’).<sup>36</sup> The primary variety in meaning is wider, forming the gestural expression as one that follows perhaps the semantic relation between ‘coming-to-touch-to beg/supplicate’.

The etymology is already attempted in the Homeric text when it is directly referred to in *Od.* 5.445-60, where Odysseus supplicates the river god ‘figuratively’<sup>37</sup> given that he is swimming, following his escape from (the death-goddess<sup>38</sup>) Calypso’s island:

κλύθι, ἄναξ, ὅτις ἐσσι· πολύλλιστον δέ σ’ ἰκάνω  
φεύγων ἐκ πόντοιο Ποσειδάωνος ἐνιπάς.  
αἰδοῖος μὲν τ’ ἐστὶ καὶ ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσιν,  
ἀνδρῶν ὅς τις ἴκηται ἀλώμενος, ὡς καὶ ἐγὼ νῦν  
σὸν τε ῥόον σά τε γούναθ’ ἰκάνω πολλὰ μογήσας.  
ἀλλ’ ἐλέαιρε, ἄναξ· ἰκέτης δέ τοι εὐχομαι εἶναι.

Hear me, *anax*, whoever you might be. I come [*hikanō*] to you

who is greatly longed for, as I try to escape the sea and Poseidon’s menace.

To the eyes of the immortal gods a mortal deserves [sacred] respect

---

<sup>36</sup> Françoise Létoublon, ‘Le vocabulaire de la supplication en grec: performatif et dérivation délocutive (*Hikētēs* et *hikanō*, *litē* et *lissomai*)’ (1980) 52 *Lingua*, 325-336, at 329.

<sup>37</sup> Gould’s term, in *HIKETEIA* (n 2) 77.

<sup>38</sup> See Hermann Güntert, *Kalypso. Bedeutungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiet der indogermanischen Sprachen* (Niemeyer 1919) 28-36 and 164-72. The Homeric relation between supplication and near-death situations may not be accidental.

when coming as a wanderer [*hikētai alōmenos*], as I come  
to your stream, to your knees [*gounath' hikanō*] after much hardship.  
Pity me, *anax*, I pray that I am your suppliant [*hiketēs*].

Notice the triple repetition of the verb *hikanō* and the formulaic *gounath' hikanō/hikesthai* ('coming [to touch] or clasping the knees').<sup>39</sup> This passage shows that despite the 'technical' use of the noun *hiketēs*, the 'etymological' relations remained sufficiently present so that Homer could interplay the verb *hikanō* and the agent noun (*hiketēs*). Benveniste notes that the most frequent use is not necessarily the decisive element in a derivation, and through a review of some (though not all) of the Homeric uses he attributes to the verb *hikō* the extensive meaning of 'reaching (perhaps touching) the knees' via the expression *γούναθ' ikēsθai* (*gounath' hikesthai*), rather than directly.<sup>40</sup> For Benveniste, this is indicated by a variety of uses of the present stems that confirm the sense of 'reaching' (*hikētai*) as in 'reaching a chariot',<sup>41</sup> 'the sacrificial smoke' or '*kleos* (fame) reaching (*hike*) the sky',<sup>42</sup> as well as the sense of a strong emotion like anger 'reaching (*hikō*) the "heart" of a hero', or the sense of 'fatigue reaching the knees'.<sup>43</sup> Benveniste's suggestion that the sense of supplication is not to be found exclusively in the isolated radical *hik-* but in its connection with the sacred sense of *gounata* (accusative plural epic *gonu*, knee), means that the act of supplication derives its form in the gesture of 'coming-reaching the knees of someone to beg for pity' (whether by adopting

---

<sup>39</sup> See also *Il.* 21.65; and *Od.* 9.267-9.

<sup>40</sup> Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire...* (n 33) 245-54.

<sup>41</sup> *Il.* 4.303.

<sup>42</sup> *Il.* 1.317 and 8.192, respectively.

<sup>43</sup> *Il.* 13.711.

a posture or touching the knees or both).<sup>44</sup> Hence, the name of the agent of such an act is an *hiketēs* (a suppliant). Benveniste notes the similarity in the Latin root *\*plek-*, whereby *supplex* signifies the gesture of ‘bending the legs’, from which is derived the English term supplication (*supplicatio, supplicationem*).<sup>45</sup>

A possible linguistic exegesis of the arguable semantic ‘transition’ (between, say, ‘arriving’ and ‘supplicating’ or ‘touching the knee,’ as a frequent element in the act of supplication) may lie in the syntactic use of the verbs *hikō* and *hikanō* since they feature along with an accusative of direction (‘coming, or to come to somewhere or do something’) indicating the ‘coming as a suppliant’.<sup>46</sup> The French linguist and classicist Françoise Létoublon, has furthered the investigation initiated by Benveniste in the late 1960s, and has argued in a syntactic mode that the primary sense of *hikanō* is that of ‘touching’ (rather than indirectly via the gesture) linking it to *hikō* and more so to *hikanō*, in a dynamic relation between movement (‘arriving, reaching’) and ‘touching’.<sup>47</sup> Létoublon’s critical observation is that the substantive *hiketēs* (‘suppliant’) implies a formal derivative relation to the verbal root of *hikanō* or *hikanomai* (‘to come’), ‘though this verb by itself does not mean “to supplicate”; instead, the verb usually applied for this meaning in this phase of Greek language -but later as well- is *lissomai*’ (*λίσσομαι*, ‘beg, pray, entreat, implore, supplicate’).<sup>48</sup> Hence, the lexical field of

---

<sup>44</sup> Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire...* (n 33) 254.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> See Paola Cassella D’Amore, ‘La denominazione di Zeus Ἰκέσιος con particolare riferimento alla tragedia’ in Nicole Belayche, Pierre Brulé, Gérard Freyburger, and others (eds), *Nommer les dieux. Théonymes, épithètes, épiclèses dans l’Antiquité* (Brepols 2005) 121-8, at 122.

<sup>47</sup> Létoublon, *Le vocabulaire...* (n 36) 330.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid* 325-36.

‘supplication’ appears to combine a verb (*lissomai*) denoting the act of supplication and a noun deriving from a different root (*hik-*) showing syntactically a direct contact with an object; for Létoublon, to ‘touch’ (the ‘sacred’ knees or the chin, or both). This combination of words and actions means that ‘to supplicate’ is indicated by *lissomai*, *lissesthai* (λίσσεσθαι) and the actor is called an *hiketēs*. I return to *lissomai/lissesthai* below.

For ‘touch’ to be considered the primary ‘meaning’, Létoublon relies on the syntactical delocutive function, whereby the frequent use of the direct accusative in the verbs in question (*hikō* and its derivatives) points to their sense, not as verbs of ‘a coming or of movement’, but as verbs of ‘touching’; while arguing also that, in Homer, the direct accusative is not common in verbs of movement and yet it is common with *hikanō*, even outside the context of gestural-ritual action.<sup>49</sup> For Létoublon, stating ‘*ta sa gounath’ hikanō*’ (τὰ σὰ γούναθ’ ἰκάνω, ‘I clasp your knees’) is, thus, equivalent to the physical performance of (ritual) supplication in the literal sense of a language-act. The *hiketēs* is the one who pronounces (and experiences) the act of supplication by saying ‘I come to touch or I am touching the knees’.<sup>50</sup>

In Homer, but also in post-Homeric uses, as Manuela Giordano has shown, the use of the direct accusative is normal, rather than exceptional, when it comes to the use of ‘movement verbs’,<sup>51</sup> which may to an extent weaken the syntactical (delocutive) argument.<sup>52</sup> Giordano has,

---

<sup>49</sup> *ibid* 327-8; in the Austinian sense, see John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford University Press 1962).

<sup>50</sup> Létoublon, *Le vocabulaire...* (n 36) 329ff.

<sup>51</sup> See Pierre Chantraine, *Grammaire Homérique* (Éditions Klincksieck 1953) II, 45.

<sup>52</sup> Manuela Giordano, *La Supplica. Rituale, Istituzione Sociale e Tema Epico In Omero* (Annali dell’ Istituto Universitario Orientale Sezione filologico-letteraria, Quaderni III 1999) 198; see,

thus, argued that Létoublon's derivation is to an extent stretched not only because she presupposed a core 'original' meaning as that of 'touching', but also because the 'transition', at the semantic level, is explained through almost supplanting the uses of the verb.<sup>53</sup> In the Homeric, we observe the synchronic, concrete, uses of the senses of 'touching' and 'reaching' or 'arriving, coming'. For Giordano, the sense of 'coming to touch' appears to be a derivation from the more general sense of wandering movement ('to arrive or reach') which, I would add, could entail a 'sacred' manner of approach, as well as contact.

Giordano notes, in her reexamination of the Homeric instances, that the suppliant 'always finds himself "having arrived at" the supplicated'<sup>54</sup> subject. That is, to a significant and terrifying situation of 'crossing' the space that separates the suppliant and the supplicated (*supplicandus*), which is presupposed and 'performed' in the uses of the verb *hikanō*. What is crucial, for an understanding of the archaic act of supplication, is what happens to the subject itself. Whether one can point to an 'original' sense of 'touching the knees' or not, the point of the arrival or the reaching is often to ritually touch the knees (or the altar), and it could be said, with Giordano, that obviously there is a dual, dynamic, perspective to be kept in mind: the specific purpose of the action of the coming of the suppliant (*hiketēs*) may be that of, at times, clasping the knees in order to advance the ritual character of the act, yet for the supplicandus (Naiden; including the Gods) this would be witnessed as a wider gesture within the sacred 'coming or arriving' of the subject of supplication as that of a crossing of a threshold, which it could be said remains the *topos* of the supplicatory act. Giordano's constructive elaboration,

---

also, Jean Humbert, *Syntaxe Grecque* (Éditions Klincksieck 1960), 253f, 260f, 263; and Chantraine, *Grammaire Homérique* (n 51) 45f.

<sup>53</sup> See Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n 52) 192-93.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid* 199.

between Benveniste and Létoublon, is useful: ‘touching’ (whether physically or not) is, indeed, central to the formulaic (ritualized ‘performative’ touching) act in ‘the context’ of supplication, possibly as the coeval result of the ‘reaching or coming’ (*hikō*) of a wanderer (the importance of which should not be underestimated for the archaic Greeks), rather than in a more or less ‘primary’ or ‘core’ sense of ‘touching’. In addition, certain uses, as in Odysseus’ prayer-supplication to the river,<sup>55</sup> suggest that the figure of the *hiketēs* is directly linked to the still performative-ritualised sense of reaching without any necessary present act of touching (the knees).<sup>56</sup> What remains crucial, either way, however is the ‘having arrived’.

In this sense, the so-called performative uses of the ‘coming to touch’ in relation to the verb *hikō* is enlarged when revisiting the majority of the instances of the common expression: *domon hikesthai* (δόμον ἰκέσθαι).<sup>57</sup> The verbs *hikneomai* and *hikanō* are used in union with *δῶμα* (*dōma*) to signify ‘arriving at home’ or ‘reaching the house’. What is key is that, in these instances, one always speaks of the arrival and reception of a foreigner or stranger, both as a guest and suppliant.<sup>58</sup> For Giordano, the thing to note in particular is that these uses indicate not just the spatial action of movement, but also the appearance and arrival of the sacred figure of the stranger, the foreigner or, more generally, an ‘other’, at the threshold (*pro-thura*) of a household. Giordano notices that in the Homeric the syntactic complexity and elaboration of these uses indicates also the antiquity (and relation) of the already established ‘institutions’ of

---

<sup>55</sup> *Od.* 5.445-50.

<sup>56</sup> Naiden counts that in 45 acts of supplication, 14 expressly entailing a clasping of the knees, with 8 in the *Odyssey* and 6 in the *Iliad*, while 12 other instances remain ‘figurative’, and 19 instances remain without a ‘touching’; see Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 5) 45, fn.88.

<sup>57</sup> Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n 52) 194-211.

<sup>58</sup> See, for e.g., *Od.* 3.355; 14.153; and 7.46.

hospitality (*xenia*) and supplication.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the everyday expression of ‘arriving at home’ or ‘reaching the house’ attains already a concrete, typical ‘ritualized’ sense of a situation of crossing a threshold. In perhaps an early, if not the earliest, indication of performative ritualization the phrase *domon hikesthai* appears, in the Homeric, as an articulation of ritual threshold-crossing, where what is at stake is what happens *to* the subject who ‘crosses’.

### 3. *Xeinia/Xenia*

While the occasions of supplication are not exclusive to the situation of a foreigner arriving in a country or an *oikos*, it is important to briefly note that the long-established traditions of *xeinia* in the Homeric world were of such sacred importance that on the ‘ground’ of *heleos* (pity) every outsider who ‘comes’ would have at least an expectation to be pitied and be received as a *philos* (friend)-guest or kin, or as an equally respected, though less reciprocal by necessity, ‘beggar’ (*heleinos*). This is useful to my reading because I wish to understand the ‘coming’ of the suppliant in archaic concrete experience. The sacredness of the reverence towards wanderers, foreigners, strangers and beggars is encountered in crucial references to Zeus *Xenios* (‘Hospitality’)<sup>60</sup> and Zeus *Hiketēsios*,<sup>61</sup> who attends to guests and punishes those who violate *xenia*.<sup>62</sup> The word \*ζένφοϛ > ζεῖνοϛ (*xeinos*, in the early Homeric; ζένοϛ, *xenos*, in the later Attic dialect), is usually translated as ‘guest’, or, somewhat awkwardly as ‘guest-friend’ and ‘stranger’; and this is notable, most often, in the cultic context of ‘mutuality’, ‘reciprocity’ and in what is possibly a protean form of ‘commensal exchange’ with an honoured, ‘coming’

---

<sup>59</sup> Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n 52) 201.

<sup>60</sup> *Od.* 9.271; *Il.* 13.624f.

<sup>61</sup> *Od.* 13.213f.

<sup>62</sup> See Naoko Yamagata, *Homeric Morality* (Mnemosyne Supp., 131, E. J. Brill 1994), 4-13.

and ‘received’, estranged-guest.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, in the Homeric scenes of supplication one always speaks of the arrival and reception of a ‘foreigner’ or ‘stranger’, both as a guest and/or suppliant.<sup>64</sup> These instances indicate not just the concretely ‘spatial’ action of the coming of the suppliant (or, for that matter, the beggar or stranger), but also the appearance and arrival of the sacred figure of the stranger or foreigner as one that is subject to gestures of a radical ritual

---

<sup>63</sup> The etymological derivation is treated with some reservation by Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* 1 (A. Francke 1959), s.v. *ghosti-s*; and Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches...* (n 35) 2, s.v. *ξέϊνος*; though it is now largely accepted as a working hypothesis; see Benveniste, *La vocabulaire...* (n 33) 87-101; George J. Pinault, ‘Le nom indo-iranien de l’hôte’ (1998) in Wolfgang Meid, *Sprache und Kultur der Indogermanen: Akten der X. Fachtagung der Indogermanischen Gesellschaft* (Innsbruck, 22-28. Sept. 1996, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck) 451-77. For the Latin, see the *hospes/hostis* in Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.12.37; and Varro, *Lingua Latina*, 5.3.

<sup>64</sup> See, for e.g., *Od.* 3.355, 368; 7.46; and 15.509.

relationality (of *xenia*). Thus, *xenia* is a reciprocal<sup>65</sup> and inheritable relation in Homer<sup>66</sup> and it is embedded in ritualized conventions (it is, notably, *themis*; an ancient divine norm).

Let's take the arrival scene of Nestor and Peleus in *Il.* 11.765-80 as a paradigm of the ritualized, sacred, nature of such an 'arrival' (*ἰκόμεσθα δόμους*, *hikomestha domous*). They arrive to Phthia and stand, not accidentally, by the *prothura* (*προθύροισι*), the threshold-gate/space between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the *oikos*.<sup>67</sup> The domestic porch (*foyer*), a physical threshold, is no mere architectural structure, but the very sacred place of passage for the Greeks. It is thus perfectly essential to the understanding of supplication (*hiketeia*) to remind one that a synonym for the *hiketēs* is *ephestios* (*ἐφέστιος*) who is literally the one who is *at* the threshold.<sup>68</sup> Achilles is preparing the meat for a sacrifice and astonished, almost immediately, responds to their approach, takes them by the hand and asks them to be seated.

---

<sup>65</sup> How 'reciprocity' is to be understood in the archaic era is an open matter; see, for a good overview, Christopher Gill, Norman Postlethwaite and Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece* (Oxford University Press 1998). For the further development of *xenia* in the classical period, through practices of institutional *proxenia* (where a citizen of a polis undertook the role of seeing to the interests of foreigners in his polis), see Michael B. Walbank, 'Proxeny and Proxenos in 5<sup>th</sup> Century Athens' in Polly Low (ed), *Athenian Empire* (Edinburgh University Press 2007), 132-9; and William Mack, *Proxeny and Polis. Institutional Networks in the Ancient Greek World* (Oxford University Press 2015).

<sup>66</sup> For e.g., *Od.* 9.16-18; and *Il.* 6.215.

<sup>67</sup> This is not always observed, see, for e.g., *Od.* 1.103-19, where Athena is disguised as *xeinos* but is ignored at the *prothura*. I return to this episode later on.

<sup>68</sup> See Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n. 52) 26.

Achilles proceeds to offer them *ξείνια* (*xeinia*: food and drink)<sup>69</sup> and it is only after these offerings, which are *themis*, and possibly libations, that questions are asked as to the purpose of their arrival.<sup>70</sup> It has been argued that the early roots of the hospitality-relatedness and its expectations may lie in early forms of commensality in feasting at the common table (*xenia trapeza*)<sup>71</sup>, which has led some linguists to speculate a zero-grade root *\*g<sup>h</sup>s-* in Greek *ξένφος*, as cognate of Vedic *ghas-* ‘eat’ and compared to the suffixed *\*g<sup>h</sup>os-ti-* ‘guest’ with the zero-grade *\*sm-g<sup>h</sup>s-ti-* in Vedic *ságdhi-* ‘eating together, communal meal’.<sup>72</sup> John Gould lucidly noted in a characteristic earlier example of *xeinia* also initiated at the *prothura* in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, the linen cloth (*lita*, from *lis*, which is linked to *λίτ-σομαι*, *lit-somai*, *lissomai* meaning to ‘supplicate’ on which more in the next section) that is placed on the chair and the footstool<sup>73</sup> upon Athena’s arrival when she appears disguised as a *xeinos* (1.130; compare to the linen cloth placed over Patroclus’ body when awaiting burial in *Il.* 18.352; noting also that burial, is

---

<sup>69</sup> *Il.* 11.779: *ξείνιά τ’ εἶ παρέθηκεν, ἃ τε ξείνοις θέμις ἐστίν*. [*xeinois themis estin*].

<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in *Od.* 3.31ff; and 4.20ff.

<sup>71</sup> See the analysis in Peter Jackson, ‘Themes of Commensality in Indo-European Lore: Greek *ξένος* and Proto-Germanic *\*etuna-*’ in H. Craig Melchert, Elisabeth Rieken, and Thomas Steer (eds) *Munus amicitiae: Norbert Oettinger a collegis et amicis dicatum* (Beech Stave Press 2014) 92-100.

<sup>72</sup> Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford University Press 1995) 246; on feasts, see also Zartaloudis, *The Birth of Nomos* (n 4), ch.1.

<sup>73</sup> The footstool is normally a ‘symbol and instrument of coercion’ so the covering with a cloth may add a symbolic layer here on how the protection of *xeinoi* and suppliants is *themis*; see Donald Lateiner, ‘The Suitors’ Take: Manners and Power in Ithaka’ (1993) 29 *Colby Quarterly*, 173-196 at 10.

linked in the burial-rite word *τάφος*, *taphos* to *τέθηπα*, *tethēpa*, with a sense of ‘wondering astonishment’; this is, in fact, the word that describes Achilles’ astonishment when he sees Nestor and Peleus in the previously discussed passage).

There is a certain proximity between the *xeinoi* and the *hiketai*, the strangers from a foreign land and the suppliants, while they should not be collapsed into a single class. For example, a *xeinos* might also be a suppliant, even though suppliants and *xeinoi* do not behave in exactly the same manner.<sup>74</sup> Gould in his seminal study writes as to what may be at stake in both hospitality and supplication rites:

the solidarity of the group is all-important, it is membership of and place within the group which confers and determines status and position on the scale of honour, and which in so doing defines the role of the individual in society. [...] Hence the *ξένος*, the outsider who does not belong, is a man without a role, that is without both rights and obligations -one who, in a fundamental sense, does not know how to behave and to whom the members of the group do not know how to behave either: from his point of view, everything is at risk and nothing can be taken for granted; from the point of view of the members of the group he constitutes an unsettling threat who cannot be ‘placed’ and whose behaviour, therefore, cannot be predicted. Or rather, all these things would be so if it were not for the ‘institutionalising’ of behaviour, of the role of the *ξένος* both as ‘guest’ and ‘host’, by the operation of what we awkwardly translate as ‘guest-friendship’.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> See Christian Traulsen, *Das sakrale Asyl in der alten Welt* (Mohr Siebeck Verlag 2004) 107-13.

<sup>75</sup> *HIKETEIA* (n 2) 90-1.

Equally, Moses Finley, in his classic account of Homeric institutions and society, writes that ‘Guest-friend and guest-friendship were far more than sentimental terms of human affection. In the world of Odysseus they were technical names for very concrete relationships, as formal and as evocative of rights and duties as marriage.’<sup>76</sup> In the *Odyssey*, after all, Odysseus is a destitute *xenos*, while the *Iliad* stipulates the beginning of the Trojan war, which marks its narrative, on the breach of Menelaos’ *xenia* by Paris. The *hiketēs/hiketis* is not to be necessarily received as a friend-guest or a beggar, but the sense I derive from practices of *xenia* could add to the sense of sacred (though different to an extent) expectations a suppliant would have upon coming to the threshold of the supplicandus.

#### 4. *Lissomai*

It is worth adding to the lexical observations by briefly considering the verbal expression of supplication in, the potentially older verb, *lissomai*.<sup>77</sup> In the complex vocabulary of supplication in the archaic and later periods I noted that the verb *lissomai* (λίσσομαι, *lit-somai*, often as in ‘I pray’) is used so that, in fact, *hikesiai* (supplications) can still be called in the classical period: *litai*.<sup>78</sup> The rite of supplication appears to resemble the ritual of prayer, but the crucial difference is the physical presence of an addressee whether directly (person) or indirectly (altar of a god).<sup>79</sup> In Homer, we find the word *litai* used directly only twice: once,

---

<sup>76</sup> Moses I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (Penguin 1962) 115.

<sup>77</sup> See André Corlu, *Recherches sur les mots relatifs à l'idée de prière d'Homère aux tragiques*, (Éditions Klincksieck 1966) 291-325; and Létoublon, *Le vocabulaire...* (n 36) 334-35.

<sup>78</sup> See Aeschylus, *Suppliants* 378.

<sup>79</sup> See Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 5) 8f.

significantly, personified in *Il.* 9.502: *καὶ γὰρ τε Λιταί εἶσι, Διὸς κοῦραι μέγалоιο* (for there are the Prayers [*Litai*], the daughters [*kourai*] of mighty Zeus); and in *Od.* 11.34: *τοὺς δ' ἐπεὶ εὐχολῆσι λιτῆσί τε, ἔθνεα νεκρῶν*; here *litēsi* appears next to *euchōlēsi*, indicating perhaps a relation between *eukhōlē* (a prayer or vow) and *litē* (a prayer). For Benveniste, the recipient of a *litē* (from the denominative verb *lissomai*) is a god, and the term indicates ‘a prayer to obtain restitution, or an agreement on compensation’. In this sense, it is distinguished from *eukholē* in that the latter is a ‘prayer of devotion’.<sup>80</sup>

The verb *lissomai* is often met, as in the infinitive *litesthai* (*λιτέσθαι*), in the sense of ‘to petition’ and in some association to supplication and ‘to beg or pray’ (for e.g., *Il.* 1.283 and 9.499-501). While the verb in itself is not sufficient to indicate a link to the gesture of supplication, as Benveniste cautions, we do meet the use of the verb in relation to the knees in *Il.* 6.45: *labōn ellisseto gounōn*, *Od.* 6.142; *ellisseto gounōn*, *Il.* 21.71; *hēpteto cheiresi gounōn hiemenos lissesth'* and *Il.* 20.469, where the formulaic description of the act occurs next to *lissonto/lissontai*. Létoublon observes this proximity in the use of *gounoumai* (‘touching the knee’) and *lissomai* in *Il.* 22.239-41: *ἠθεῖ', ἧ μὲν πολλὰ πατῆρ καὶ πότνια μήτηρ | λίσσονθ' ἐξείης γουνοῦμενοι* [*lissonth' hexeiēs gounoumenoi*], *ἀμφὶ δ' ἑταῖροι | αὔθι μένειν* (my brother, it is so, our father and our lady mother, taking my knees (*gounoumenoi*) in turn and my companions, entreated that I stay). As noted earlier, it is noteworthy that we encounter the use of *liti* (for e.g., *Il.* 8. 441: *ἐν λεχέεσσι δὲ θέντες ἑανῶι λιτὶ* [*liti*] *κάλυψαν*) to indicate a cloth that is used to cover a corpse that is, at a threshold, awaiting a funeral rite.

It appears that the Homeric *lissomai* is a verb associated with the prayer to receive approval or ‘grace’ and thus we could say that it falls within the realm of propitiation, rather than directly supplication; and yet it perhaps points to the possibility of an earlier custom of

---

<sup>80</sup> Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire...* (n 33) ch.5.

understanding supplication as akin to a prayer or worship rite (which is already being forgotten in Homer). For Létoublon, *lissomai* indicates an already forgotten form of supplication, even though the etymology is uncertain and evidence in the Homeric remains remote. To suggest this, as we saw earlier, she speculates that the lexical field of supplication combines a verb (*lissomai*) and a noun (*hiketeia*) from different roots: the verb *lissomai* appears in a narrative, while noun form is used in direct discourse. In this manner, while the use of *lissomai* in supplication remains optional in Homer, Létoublon senses a remnant proximity to supplication, at a different level, so that *lissomai* could have a root in cultic worship that is later ‘secularised’. Leaving aside whether one can speak here of it being ‘secularised’ later, it is notable that in the Homeric uses the particular prayer expressed with *lissomai* is one that initially takes place between either gods or mortals (and it is later extended between mortals and gods). When Benveniste analyses the scene where the Prayers are personified as the daughters of Zeus (*Il.* 9.500ff), he explains that mortals are able to ‘supplicate’ (*lissomenoi*) the gods when they have transgressed or erred in order to achieve reparation for a wrong done to the gods themselves or mortals or a people (as in the Achaeans as a whole, in *Il.* 1.15: *καὶ λίσσεται πάντα Ἀχαιοῦς; καὶ λίσσεται πάντας Ἀχαιούς*); though a wrong is not always mentioned or identified and the uses of the word are not always ‘religious’.<sup>81</sup> It is worth remembering that these supplicatory words open the *Iliad* and are those of Chryses; a memory of which was still significant to Plato in the

---

<sup>81</sup> On the verb *lissomai* and its derivatives, see also Corlu, *Recherches...* (n 77) 291-325; and Danièle Aubriot-Sévin, ‘*Prière et rhétorique en Grèce ancienne*’ (1991) 6 Mètis, 147-65, who in a narrower interpretation, has argued for the semantic antithesis between prayer and supplication, though the verb *lissomai* may be entirely independent to supplication. This is doubted by other scholars and in particular Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 5); see, further, the discussion in Giordano, *La Supplica....* (n 52) 212ff.

*Republic* 3.393-94 who describes Chryses as an *hiketēs*.<sup>82</sup> *Lissomai* in its early uses appears to be mostly characterised, as Giordano notes, by the sense of ‘the internal pressure with which an action is carried out, to be contextualised in the general situation of the request. Under the great group of pressing demands we find both the exhortation in battle and the invitation or entreaty, or supplication’.<sup>83</sup> How are the so-called ‘internal’ and ‘external’ elements of an act of supplication to be understood?

### 5. The ‘ritual’ act of supplication

Without entering the long debate as to how to define a ‘ritual act’, suffice it to suggest that certain aspects of this scholarship can help us appreciate certain, further, elements of archaic supplication practices. Many approaches to ritual acts appreciate rituals as entailing a certain degree of automatism or proceduralism, so that certain actions in a certain sequence and form, lead to certain results and consequences (most likely with a divine addressee). But we have to note that there is no equivalent ancient Greek word for ‘ritual’ and the closest words are *ta nomizomena* (customary things)<sup>84</sup> and *ta patria* (ancestral customs) both of which are intimately related to worship practices, not as mere formal processes but as ways of (being and) acting which I would venture to say are reliant on repetition. It is helpful to appreciate, as Jonathan Z. Smith has consistently suggested, that a ritual act is neither a response to the so-called ‘sacred’, nor a mere repetition of acts that become fixed categories of tradition or custom

---

<sup>82</sup> See Crotty, *The Poetics...* (n 18) 21-2.

<sup>83</sup> Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n 52) 217 and her excellent extensive analysis.

<sup>84</sup> See, generally, Zartaloudis, *The Birth of Nomos* (n 4).

or law. For Smith, a ritual act is an act that ‘produces’ the so-called ‘sacred’ as such.<sup>85</sup> To this sense of production or performance in what I would call with Agamben the threshold experience of a crossing, Smith adds, beautifully, the concrete sense of ‘ritual’ as ‘first and foremost, a mode of paying attention’.<sup>86</sup> Many elements of the supplicatory act are precisely acts that aim to attract, intensify and institute attention as a form of relationality, as a way of paying attention to what happens to a subject at a crossing or threshold experience.

Another key approach to understanding ‘ritual action’ is the one that, predominantly through the work of linguists, emphasizes the so-called sacred word-formula as an effective or performative formula, a ‘doing something’ rather than a merely ‘saying something’. This is indicated by verbal as well as non-verbal elements, and it can be said to partly characterise the archaic supplication act as a speech-act, while it should be stressed of course that the archaic Greeks did not distinguish linguistic acts from non-linguistic acts in this way and that the repetition of formulas was essential to an oral culture (and very much so in the epic tradition). It is quite remarkable (though indeed entirely obvious to an oral culture) that the expression *ta sa gounath’ hikanō* (τὰ σὰ γούναθ’ ἰκάνω, ‘I clasp your knees’; or just a solitary ‘*gounoumai*’) had the effect of an early linguistic device (an ‘illocutionary speech act’), whereby the ritual gesture once attached to the utterance may disappear, or conversely the linguistic device may be later silenced by the gesture itself. Archaic supplication acts are, in this sense, a threshold experience of linguistic and gestural (non-linguistic) devices, at least in terms of our understanding. Agamben has observed that what is crucial to appreciate and think about in the

---

<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism, University of Chicago Press 1987) 26 and 114-7.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid* 103.

so-called ‘performative utterances’<sup>87</sup> or gestures is that it is the subject or person that is ‘put at stake’, ‘one’s life as a whole’, so that, here, I would add, the act of supplication could be seen, at least to an extent, as an ordeal, a peripeteia, an experience ‘on the limit’ for the wavering agent of supplication who comes to cross a threshold (often) between life and death. This is not to ignore the forms of supplicatory acts, but precisely to attempt to understand them for what they may be: a threshold-experience between language and ritual (action), or, perhaps, language ‘as’ ritual.

The rite(s) of *hiketeia* in the epics, is relatively fixed around, among else, particular acts, enunciations, or gestures.<sup>88</sup> Two general forms of supplication are observed in the archaic and later periods, but I am only focusing on the first: (a) supplication face to face (man to man, god to god, man to god or other deity); and (b) supplication at an altar or other sacred location/place. When Thetis asks Hephaistos to make new armour for Achilles (*Il.* 18.457-59), no gesture is explicitly described. However, in the rather long discourse between Thetis and Hephaistos the poet uses the vocabulary of supplication and applies an oral ‘formula’ that seems to ‘perform’ the supplication with words. This approaches John Austin’s classic definition of the performative speech-act whereby the linguistic act takes the place of the physical act<sup>89</sup>: ‘Therefore now I come to your knees (*gounath’ hikanomai*); so might you be willing to give me for my short-lived son a shield and a helmet [...]’ (*Τούνεκα νῦν τὰ σὰ γούναθ’ ἰκάνομαι, αἴ κ’ ἐθέλησθα νιεῖ ἐμῶ ὠκυμόρω δόμεν ἄσπίδα καὶ τρυφάλειαν [...]*). The rite(s) of the *hikesiai*, or supplications, were concrete ritual acts, but they also clearly had immortal

---

<sup>87</sup> John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Clarendon Press 1962).

<sup>88</sup> See Karl Sittl, *Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer* (Teubner 1870) 163-99.

<sup>89</sup> See n 87.

addressees, and in particular Zeus *Hikesios*. This is to say that there is something more than a mere ‘petition’, or ‘speech-act’, taking place.

In Homer, Zeus *Hikesios*, Zeus *Hiketēsios*, or Zeus *Hiktēr* (*Ἰκέσιος, Ἰκτήρ*), is the ever-present witness/guardian of the suppliants *οἷσιν ἄρα Ζεὺς μάρτυρος*; [*Zeus marturos*] (*Od.* 16. 423-24); and the protector of the *hiketai* and the *xeinoi*: *Ζεὺς δ’ ἐπιτιμήτωρ ἱκετάων τε ξείνων τε* (*Od.* 9.270). Zeus *Hikesios* is feared the most for his ‘wrath’ (*kotos*) and is said to punish those that dishonour suppliants (*Od.* 5.213).<sup>90</sup> In some examples an incomplete act of supplication leads to a suppliant not receiving protection, but it is fair to suggest that Zeus’s oversight as to strangers/foreigners not protected by *xeinia*, in his *Hikesios* worship, is still present, or is remembered, in the *Odyssey*. The *Hikesios* epiclesis is not as such present, but in the *Odyssey* we find the equivalent *hiketēsios* as invoked by Odysseus on his return to Ithaca when he thinks he has arrived on the shores of a foreign country (13. 213-14); and, further, when he addresses Polyphemus, he invokes Zeus (possibly without an epithet) as the guarantor of the respect due to *xeinoi* and *hiketai*. Early on, it is possible that the cult worship of Zeus *Hikesios* is linked to foreigners who ‘come’ and lack any protection given their strangeness (i.e. they do not fall under *xeinia*), whether they become suppliants or not.<sup>91</sup> It is significant, too, to note that Zeus *Hikesios* is, here, a chthonic god, i.e. he has particular care for the dead and the underworld, he is thus present when homicide (and as a result pollution)<sup>92</sup> takes place

---

<sup>90</sup> Otto Jessen, ‘Hikesios, Hikesia’ (193) 8:2 *RE*, 1592-3; Otto Waser, ‘Zeus’, in Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher (ed) *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, 6, (Teubner 1924-37) 631-2.

<sup>91</sup> See D’Amore, *La denominazione...* (n 46) 121-4.

<sup>92</sup> See Robert Parker, *Miasma* (Clarendon Press 1983) 181-6; and Jon D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods. Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy* (University of N. Carolina Press 1991) 69-77.

and in related purification rituals; and his worship as *Hikesios* for the *hiketēs* ('the one who comes' and who was often in need of such purification) is invoked very early on by clan inscriptions on rocks in, for instance, the archaeological excavations of Thera and Kyrene.<sup>93</sup> Zeus' worship changes, of course, through time<sup>94</sup> and it is worth noting that we later find Zeus *Hikesios* become the god to whom judges in classical Athens will swear an oath (*horkos*), under Solon's famous instruction.<sup>95</sup>

It has been a characteristic of earlier work on supplication rites to speak of magical means, contact or taboo. Thus, it is worth briefly commenting on the characters of 'automatism or efficient repetition' in such rites. For Gould, the most recent proponent of magical contact<sup>96</sup> as key to the supplication rites, this means that a ritual 'has' to have an 'inherent' power, whereby it can 'force' acceptance of a suppliant's plea. Repetition of gestures, and predictability through formulaic acts is, in fact, very common in the epics for a large variety of specific everyday acts or gestures (as commonplace as in putting on one's armour or having a

---

<sup>93</sup> See *IG XII.3.402-4* [*h*]ικετιος, 403 *hike*(τιος), 404 *hike*[τιος], cfr. *TherA*: 136-140; 199-205; on the Thera inscriptions and recent archaeological work, see the discussion in D'Amore, *La denominazione...* (n 46).

<sup>94</sup> See some characteristic appearances in tragedy in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* 347; Sophocles' *Philoctetes* 484; and Euripides' *Hecuba* 345.

<sup>95</sup> *Poll.* 8.142. The Solonic oath may have its roots at what Naiden describes as the 'fourth step' in supplicatory acts, the pledge or oath, whose archaic roots need to be further examined in a separate work. See Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 5) 122-36.

<sup>96</sup> See, also, Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (C. H. Beck 1967-74), I 51 and 77f.; and Louis Gernet, 'Quelques rapports entre la pénalité and la religion dans la Grece ancienne' (1936) 5 *L'Antiquité Classique*, 2: 325-39, at 332-7.

meal). It would in fact be a mistake, at one level, to suggest that the so-called rite of supplication is entirely distinct in nature from the practices of ‘formally’ receiving a guest or honouring his departure, feasting or arming. These are all acts that provide for the reproduction of, to a certain degree, a ‘coded’ behaviour in a society that was highly honour-bound. I believe Gould has this in mind when he observes magical contact<sup>97</sup> in the gestures of supplication and I return to this below. What is perhaps crucial is that ‘magic’ ritual and forms of relationality over sacred expectations are inseparable to such a degree that it is to their intersection that we must pay attention. Let’s examine briefly what some of these elements of the rite(s) of supplication entailed.

It is pertinent, first, to consider what perhaps is the effect of thinking with archaic physical gestures on the understanding of what is called ‘the body’.<sup>98</sup> This is particularly so when it comes to supplication given that the first indication of an act of supplication is usually the adoption of a particular bodily posture.<sup>99</sup> Posture is not a mere physical attribute for the Greeks. In a sense, a particular posture is the initial element of the rite of supplication in the archaic period (and beyond) and it is certainly a gesture that forms one of the most important

---

<sup>97</sup> A term (*kontakmagie*) that Gould borrows from Kopperschmidt, *Die Hikesie* (n 18) 11-2; the early intersection of juridical acts and religious practices was earlier suggested by Gérard Freyburger, ‘Supplication grecque et supplication romaine’ (1988) 47 *Latomus*, 501-25.

<sup>98</sup> See Jan Bremmer, ‘Walking, Standing and Sitting in Ancient Greek Culture’ in Jan Bremmer and Herman Rodenburg (eds), *A Cultural History of Gesture From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge University Press 1991) 23-6.

<sup>99</sup> See Louis Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (F. Maspéro 1968) 229-33.

non-verbal signs of the ‘situation’ of supplication as a crossing.<sup>100</sup> The *hiketēs* prostrates himself/herself at the knees of the benefactor, launches towards him/her lowering his/her stature, curling up, crouching down indicating inferiority, debasement but also a chthonic state of (near-) death. Giordano, following Luis Gernet, writes: ‘the posture constitutes the first ritual signal: crouched, curled up or seated, he assimilates himself to the earth. [...]. His body is bent over himself.’<sup>101</sup> The assimilation of the one supplicating to the earth is not a minor detail, it is key to the understanding of the gesture of supplication in its relation and assimilation to the chthonic (divine) earth.<sup>102</sup> It is a gesture of a threshold-experience whereby the suppliant’s posture indicates marginalization, abasement, and even a negation of ‘individuality’, a ‘coming to’ or ‘from’ another sphere, a being ‘without qualities’, a *becoming-stranger*. That its significance is not minor we learn also from the fact that such posture-gesturability is similar to the subject position in the processes of purification and initiation in archaic worship; while the negation of the self is akin to that of the frequent depiction of the destitute beggar as the one who ‘has nothing anymore’.<sup>103</sup>

It is worth adding a further observation as to the archaic sense of ‘the body’. In the archaic, *sōma* is not understood in some kind of supposed ‘binary structure’ of *sōma and psuchē* (body and soul); nor was there a term to designate the ‘body’ as, say, an ‘organic

---

<sup>100</sup> See Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n 52) 21ff; and Donald Lateiner, *Sardonic Smile, Nonverbal Behavior in Homeric Epic* (University of Michigan Press 1995) 93-103.

<sup>101</sup> Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n 52) 12.

<sup>102</sup> See *ibid* (n 52) 21; and Gernet, *Anthropologie...* (n 99) 232.

<sup>103</sup> see Lateiner, *Sardonic Smile* (n 92) 100 and 119-129; and Gernet, *Anthropologie...* (n 99) 232.

unity'.<sup>104</sup> It is revealing that *sōma* and *psuchē* in the Homeric refer not to the sphere of the living but the dead: where the word *sōma* signifies a corpse. When the corpse of an enemy in the Iliadic battlefield is deprived of proper funerary rites, the corpse cannot continue to 'exist' in the sphere of the mortals, and so this abandoned or unattended body will be referred to as *sōma* (and that applies to animals' bodies too).<sup>105</sup> It is a shapeless body, a terrifying experience for the archaic Greeks. For Ceyte, Homeric 'corporeality' is inscribed in the continuity of the cosmos: 'Man as a whole participates in the same energy as that of the powers - the sky, the sea, the wind, the sun, the earth. Hector is "like the gusting blast"'.<sup>106</sup> Mortal existence is a vector of cosmic powers, so that the various bodily gestures of the suppliant are an appeal to and in contact with the divine forces of the earth.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the potential threat of contamination (pollution, *miasma*) emanating from maltreating or ignoring such pleas was something that was felt to a terrifying degree.<sup>108</sup>

Paying attention to the gestures that relate to the knees in particular, which in Homer occur in at least a third of the supplicatory occasions, is quite revealing of the archaic sense of

---

<sup>104</sup> Jacqueline Ceyte, 'La corporéité en Grèce archaïque. Un réseau socio-cosmique' (2003/1) 6 Hypothèses, 49-58, at 49f; see, also, Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'Mortals and immortals: the divine body' in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Froma I. Zeitlin (ed) *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* (Princeton University Press 1991) 27-49.

<sup>105</sup> See *Il.* 3.22; 18.161; and *Od.* 11.51-53; 12.67.

<sup>106</sup> *Il.* 11.297; see Ceyte, *La corporéité...* (n 104) 55.

<sup>107</sup> See Gould, *HIKETEIA* (n 2) 95.

<sup>108</sup> Gernet noted the illustration of the related fear of pollution in the mythical narrative of Carila, see Gernet, *Anthropologie...* (n 99) 229-33; for the myth, see Plutarch *Quaestiones Graecae* 293d.1-293f.5.

the body and by extension of ‘acting’ as such. We have already seen that the word *hiketēs* relates (and, for some, derives) from the expression *gounath’ hiesthai* (γούναθ’ ἰκέσθαι). The antiquity of this gesture is evident in the use of the denominative verb *gounoumai* (γουνούμαι), ‘pleading by touching the knees’.<sup>109</sup> The gesture of touching or embracing the knees is described in the poems either literally or figuratively: γούνων λαβεῖν (*gounōn labein*) ἐλεῖν (*helein*) and ἄψασθαι (*apsasthai*) are commonly used. Pedrick notes that γουνάζεσθαι (*gounazesthai*) and γουνεῖσθαι (*gouneisthai*) ‘are used in both descriptions and in the suppliant’s address, sometimes when the physical act is impossible’.<sup>110</sup> Take the example of Priam’s supplication of Achilles (*Il.* 24. 468-517): Priam kneels before Achilles, kissing the hands of the man who has murdered so many of his sons. He bends, curls up in front of Achilles who expresses amazement (*thambos*) seeing, as it is astonishingly stated, Priam supplicating ‘like the gods’. In supplication, perhaps, what takes place is a threshold crossing as an act of coming, or passing oneself, to/as the gods: the suppliant ‘gives himself’ to the god and it is this that arouses ‘terror’ as much as ‘pity’ and ‘honour’ (*timē*). Achilles responds by lifting the aged king.<sup>111</sup> Gould crucially notes that the Greek noun that is used to signify the knee, γόνυ (*gonu*), shares the same root as the word γένος (*genos*), understood as ‘generation’ (or ‘family’, or ‘race’, or ‘birth’; *gignomai*, *gignesthai*). Gould, in fact, follows Richard Onians who on this basis and the similar kinship in other Indo-European languages (as in the Latin *genu*), argued

---

<sup>109</sup> See Benveniste, *La vocabulaire* (n 33) 254; and Létoublon, *Le vocabulaire...* (n 36) 325-36.

<sup>110</sup> See Pedrick, *Supplication...* (n 18) 126.

<sup>111</sup> See also *Od.* 7.133-206, Odysseus’ supplication to Arete, which contains the most detailed account of the ritual of *hiketeia*; see, generally, the discussion in Pedrick, *Supplication...* (n 18).

that the knee is the seat of life and generative power; and that, in particular, it symbolizes the once considered source of the ‘male seed’ which was the ‘seat of vital power’ or life.<sup>112</sup>

Hence, in this sense, in *Il.* 5.176 (πολλῶν τε καὶ ἐσθλῶν γούνατ’ ἔλυσεν [*gounat’ elusen*]) we encounter the knee as the place of the indication of the waning of a dying warrior’s vital power. Odysseus himself, who is a foreigner, a stranger and a beggar seeking protection and hospitality throughout most of the journey to Ithaca, supplicates Queen Nausicaa (in *Od.* 6.141-185) following a prayer to the river (6.141-7). Odysseus is depicted as being ‘at the knees’ (6.149: Γουνοῦμαί σε, ἄνασσα), and the act of touching [*gounoumai se*] Nausicaa’s knees appears as an alternative that he considers (γούνων ... λαβῶν, *gounōn ... labōn*, 6.142), but ultimately rejects out of ‘mournful fear’ (6.147) and instead he supplicates by uttering words. It is notable that the verbal form (*lissoito*, λίσσοιτο) is used repeatedly in these verses. The act of touching the knees appears so terrifying (and sacred) that when it is implied by the use of words, it appears that the sense is clearly pointing to the act of supplication in the expression *gounōn labōn*. For Ribeiro de Oliveira,

---

<sup>112</sup> See *Od.* 18.133; the classic discussion of this is in Richard B. Onians, *Origins Of European Thought. About the Body, The Mind, The Soul, The World, Time and Fate* (Cambridge University Press 1951) 175-186; note, however, that earlier William Robertson Smith in his *Lectures On The Religion Of Semites* (Adam & Charles Black 1927) 148-9 had indicated the importance of the act of clasping the knees; see, further, Waldemar Déonna, ‘Le genou, siège de force et de vie et sa protection magique’ (1939) 13 *Revue Archéologique*, 22-35; Burkhard Gladigow, ‘Zwei frühe Zeugungslehren zu γόνυ, γένυς und γένος’ (1968) 112 *Rheinisches Museum*, 357-74; and the recent analysis in Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n 52) 23, who explains the importance of the knees as the centre of movement, of dynamism, that is, of vitality and potentiality.

in this passage the verb *gounoumai* loses its concrete reference, it becomes abstract: it designates an idea of supplication that no longer includes the concrete gesture of touching the suppliant's knees. [...] the word is no longer the representation of a concrete action: the reflection and the words of Ulysses show us the very moment when the performative formula replaces the part of the rite it describes.<sup>113</sup>

Either way, the gesture was an essential part to the act of supplication, more so indicated by the way in which, already in Homer, the physical act and the linguistic utterance of supplication take place in what we could call a threshold *topos* between the linguistic and the non-linguistic. This is perhaps the better sense of how Homeric language is 'concrete': it is concrete in the sense that its physical and linguistic gesturality and expression form a zone of indistinction (an indistinction marked also by the historical and poetic passage from an oral culture to one of writing, also evident in the form in which we receive the epic poems).

Finally, it is worth noting that in many, though not all, supplicatory acts the hands are grasped, touched and at times kissed as an act of 'submission' but the hands are also, as an initial element of the act of supplication (and other rites like hospitality), symbols of peace as much as blood, vitality and craftiness. Similarly, of the initial gestures in supplication the role of the head is also evident. The head as the seat of life and power, is of course well known in

---

<sup>113</sup> Flavio Ribeiro de Oliveira, 'La supplication chez Homère: geste concret et abstraction' (2011) 14 *Gaia: revue interdisciplinaire sur la Grèce Archaique*, 67-72, at 71; see also Flavio Ribeiro de Oliveira, 'Gesto e abstração: usos do verbo *gounoûmai* em Homero' (2006) 29:1 *Trans/Form/Ação*, 63-8.

both epic and myth.<sup>114</sup> One of the other supplicatory ritual acts associated with the hand is the, as cordial as fragile, touching of the chin and beard.<sup>115</sup> In one of the famous imagined supplications in the first book of the *Iliad*, that of Thetis, the mother of Achilles, Achilles asks his mother to supplicate Zeus on his behalf (1.497-512) in a familiar manner (500-2): *καὶ λάβε γούνων | σκαίῃ, δεξιτερῇ δ' ἄρ' ὑπ' ἀνθρεῶνος ἐλοῦσα | λισσομένη προσέειπε Δία Κρονίωνα ἄνακτα*. ‘She came and sat beside him with her left hand embracing his knees [*labe gounōn*], but took him underneath the chin with her right hand and spoke in supplication [*lissomenē*] to lord Zeus son of Kronos’. Her supplicatory words do not persuade Zeus, so Thetis, a goddess herself, proceeds to further press on (1.513-16), initially angering Zeus, but then succeeding at obtaining his agreement.<sup>116</sup> The chin is not only a part of the vital centre of the head<sup>117</sup> but also a sexual or generational characteristic (proximate to that of the knees; note the very proximity of the words themselves: *γένειον*, *geneion* and *γένος*, *genus*) and a center of strength, especially when associated with a vigorous beard or hair.<sup>118</sup> Hair is even seen as having vegetal dynamism

---

<sup>114</sup> The scholiast Eustathius on *Il.* 1.427 suggests that the importance of the head lies in its representation of the *hēgemonikon* (ἡγεμονικόν), decisiveness, to which the suppliant appeals; see Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 5) 47 who notes that the head is also known for its use in nodding to indicate agreement or approval and as a seat of generation.

<sup>115</sup> Various rituals relate to the treatment or cutting of the hair in mourning, for e.g., *Il.* 23.135-41; 151; and *Od.* 4.198.

<sup>116</sup> In the eighth book, Athena describes this earlier scene giving us more detail at 8.370-2; this is repeated by Zeus in 15.76f.

<sup>117</sup> Goddess Athena, in a variation of her birth-myth, does not get born out of Zeus’ head but his beard.

<sup>118</sup> See Ceyte, *La corporité...* (n 104) 10; *Il.* 2.198 and 219.

(as with the hair of Zeus in *Il.* 1.529-30)<sup>119</sup> itself possibly linked to the male beard as a symbol of virility and potency.<sup>120</sup>

## **6. *Hieros anthrōpos***

There appears to be a dynamic relationship between the linguistic expression of supplicatory acts and the ritualized gestures (and ‘justifications’) that appear to be required for a ‘complete’ formulaic act of supplication. Such an act, in Homer, does not guarantee acceptance by the supplicandus (though it remains possible that it earlier did so) and it could be that precisely because of this risk (and the unequal experience between suppliant and patron) it appears cunningly to internalize its terrifying fragility through the combination of linguistic and non-linguistic elements as rendered sacred means to communicate with the Gods and other humans in a time of exceptional need (often a matter of life and death).<sup>121</sup> Supplicatory acts, one could say, could be thought as exposing the ‘place’ of supplication as that of the glosso-somatic terror of a threshold-experience between life and death or as the exception of a living-death, the uncanny dread one feels when experiencing the unknown as one’s own.

---

<sup>119</sup> On the significance of the hair as generative and uncorrupted, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, Jean-Pierre, *L'individu. La mort, l'amour* (Folio Histoire, Gallimard 1999) 66; note the act of cutting the hair in homage to the dead in, for e.g., *Il.* 23.135-41; see, further, the discussion in Ceyte, *La corporéité...* (n 104) 56-7.

<sup>120</sup> See further references in Euripides’ *Hecuba* 342-45, *Iphigeneia in Tauris* 362-63; see also the description in Pliny, *Natural History* 11.251.

<sup>121</sup> On communication, see Oddone Longo, *Tecniche della comunicazione nella Grecia antica* (Liguori 1981).

In other words, exposing the visibility of this ‘place’, in the experience of supplication (by both suppliant and supplicandus; though in Homer in presumably increasingly different ways) as the *place* of a threshold-relation between terror and norm- (or *bios*-) granting, fear and peace, *zōē* and *bios*. It is this threshold that is the *topos* of the sacred (its taking place) for mortals (and gods) and it is at that place that mortals can communicate with the gods (and each other). It is possible to consider then, in this speculative sense, the act of supplication as one that leads to a subtraction from the *bios* of the one supplicating, a threatening debasement or disfiguring of one’s life in order to petition for a chance at a new life, one that brings the suppliant terrifyingly close to the life of a banished animal (*zōē*) or corpse, the *xeinon* (strangeness) that is the most common (*xunon*).

Hence my hypothesis that one of the things that are taking place in an act of supplication is a threshold-experience, a crossing or coming of the *hiketēs*, a petition to be given ‘another chance’, another life in a dynamic and relational manner to others. It is not accidental that the suppliant is often described in terms that are akin to a person without qualities and honour (*timē*; or conversely one in need of it), one who is experiencing and acting out a self-abasement, through assimilation to the dead, or carrying a look of bereavement (note the evidence of prostration and mourning clothes).<sup>122</sup> The suppliant is, in this sense, a ‘figure of distance’,<sup>123</sup> a *xeinon*, a foreign element *on* the limit. The petition of supplication is never some impersonal or formal act, but the utmost intimate experience, which indicates the sphere of ‘pure praxis’ as the sphere of acts, a sphere we rather misleadingly appear to understand as religion. As Agamben has written: ‘*Gesture* is the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the

---

<sup>122</sup> See Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (n 5) 282.

<sup>123</sup> Giordano, *La Supplica...* (n 52) 17; and, see further, section 5.4.

context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis.<sup>124</sup> If we learn to see the supplicatory act as a gesture in this manner of ‘pure praxis’, rather than as a merely pre-legal (or equally problematically alegal) ritual process or a proto-juridical function, we could repose the supplicatory act (or, today, the act of the asylum seeker or the street beggar) as belonging to the realm that Kommerell named “pure gesture”<sup>125</sup> and that, in this case, indicate the ‘pure possibility’ of the ethical dimension of living. Could we think of the act of supplication as a ‘pure praxis’? What would that mean? It could mean, perhaps, imagining the possibility that for the archaic Greeks (and beyond) the supplicatory act indicated (linguistically and gesturally) the *topos* of the ethical dimension for mortals as such (the place of a terrifying, life-giving, threshold experience).

The threshold-experience of the suppliant leaves the realm of everyday life and enters the realm of a real exception or emergency to use the modern trope, but what is found in that realm is the *topos* of the common sacred realm (the source of *ethos*). For mortals (in need) there is only ethics, as a being-in-the-medium of language, as well as being-in-the-gestural, non-linguistic devices. In situations of extremity the place of ethics (*ethos*) can be shown to be the place of a threshold where the gods forbid equally the killing or ritual sacrifice of the suppliant. Could it be, in this sense, that the archaic suppliant is the Greek figure of the (pre-) *homo sacer*? This is an obvious allusion to Agamben’s work on the exceptional Roman legal

---

<sup>124</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End. Notes on Politics* (Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino trs, University of Minnesota Press [1996] 2000) 79.

<sup>125</sup> The expression ‘pure gesture’ is borrowed from Max Kommerell’s *Geist und Buchstabe der Dichtung. Goethe-Schiller-Kleist-Hölderlin* (Klostermann RoteReihe 31 1940); see Giorgio Agamben, ‘Kommerell, or On Gesture’ in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Daniel Heller-Roazen, tr, Stanford University Press 1999) 77-85.

paradigm of *homo sacer* (who could not be sacrificed in a religious ritual, but who could be killed with impunity). In a sense though, the archaic Greek pre-*homo sacer*, the, let's name it, *hieros anthrōpos*, is not derived by a juridical paradigm and it is not identical to the Roman paradigm. The *hieros anthrōpos*, the suppliant, can neither be killed, nor ritually sacrificed without punishment. In Homer, this tradition is possibly already being forgotten, but its traces remain and the epics could be said to aim to remind them to its audience.

It would be a good thing, if we could still hear this nearly impossible echo today anew when considering 'what to do' with the suppliants at our door, remembering like the ancients did far better than us, that we are all, in a way, existing every day at the terrifying limits of the human and the known as ever-strangers to ourselves. While it is reliably feared that there is no longer any pre-*homo sacer* possibility for us, it remains possible that we be reminded (suppliants and supplicandi alike) of our everyday threshold-exposure to the *topos* of our ethical, political and juridical living.

Living as this ever-reaching out, ex-posure (ex-perience) and intimate strangeness may provide us with a fresh understanding of Aristotle's famous phrasing: Πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται [*oregontai*] φύσει.<sup>126</sup> The Aristotelian sentence is usually translated through what became a usual pairing of reaching out and desiring (*orexis*) as: 'all human beings desire to see' (or, less correctly, 'to know'). Ὀρέγονται [*oregontai*] from ὀρέγω, ὀρέγνυμι [*oregō, oregnumi*], notably, means to reach, to reach out, to stretch out one's limbs, to give as well as to make a lunge or thrust.<sup>127</sup> In Homer we find the uses of *oregontai* often in scenes of supplication, prayer and in battle, as well as in the embrace of friends or kin. Perhaps this iconic

---

<sup>126</sup> *Metaphysics* A 980a21. See also the detailed analysis of 'reaching out' by Alex C. Purves, *Homer and The Poetics of Gesture* (Oxford University Press 2019) 160-80.

<sup>127</sup> See Richard J. Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* (Blackie and Son Limited 1924).

line would be better understood as ‘all human beings reach out to see’ and as entailing, perhaps, the sense that human beings who bear (*gerere*) the reach, see (the threshold of their existence).<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>128</sup> It ought to be noted that Aristotle’s famous opening line in *Metaphysics* (*meta ta phusika*) aims towards the definition of what is the meaning of *empeiria* (ἐμπειρία, experience; from ἐμ-πεῖρα, *em-peira* to [be at/come to the] cross, to pass).