CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EPIC KNEES / EP’ ICKNEES
ΓΝΥ- / ΙΓΝΥ-

The common Greek word for ‘knee,’ γόνυ, γόνατος, τό, has sterling Indo-European credentials: cognates in other Indo-European languages abound—Latin genu; Gothic kniu; Hittite genu; Sanskrit jānu, etc.—all pointing back to PIE *gonu-. The word appears thousands of times in extant Greek texts, in many different forms and in various dialects. It is ubiquitous in Homer (122 times), where it occurs in the following third-declension neuter forms:

(absent in nominative singular) γοῦνα and γούνατα
(γονώς) and γούνατος
(absent in dative singular) γούνασι (ν)/γούνεσσι (ν)
γόνυ

In addition to these forms, a zero-grade form appears three times in Homer in the adverb πρόχνυ ‘with the knee(s) forward’ (literally) and six times in the adverb γνύξ ‘on the knee(s),’ both of which are probably fossilized forms of what was in origin a nominal form γνυ-.

In the Homeric epics it is a word pregnant with meaning and rich in resonance. Destiny is said to lie on the knees of the gods (θεῶν ἐν γούνασι κεῖσθαι), and it is on the gods’ knees that offerings are placed (θείναι ἐπὶ γούνασι). Among both gods and mortals the knees are the objects to be clasped by a suppliant (λαβεῖν γούνων), whereby arise the denominatives γουνάζομαι and γουνοῦμαι. In the knees reside the special strength (μένος/βίη) and swiftness (λαιψηρὰ γούνατα) of the warrior; hence a wound to the knees (γούνατα λύειν) often entails death, or at least a great loss of strength and ability. Finally, parents are ideally portrayed setting their dear children on their knees (ἐπὶ γούνεσσι).

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2 On the special sanctity attached to the knees in ancient Greek culture, see R.B. Onians (1951) 174–186; J.P. Gould (1973).
But this tidy lexical picture is blurred by the single appearance in Homer of another, rather strange-looking, reflex of the word: ἱγνύη, -ης, ἥ. An anonymous comrade of Idomeneus is described as having just returned from battle, carried by his comrades because he has been ‘struck on the ἱγνύη by the sharp bronze’ (II. 13.212):

ἲδομενεὺς δ᾿ ἀρα οἱ δωρικλυτὸς ἀντεβόλησεν ἐρχόμενος παρ’ ἑταίρου, ὡς οἱ νέοι ἐκ πολέμου ἠλθε κατ’ ἱγνύην βεβλημένος ὀξέι χαλκῷ. τὸν μὲν ἑταίροι ἐνεῖκαν.

Such a wound to the knee is thought of in Homer as particularly debilitating, as it deprives the warrior of his mobility. A similar circumstance is described later in the Iliad when Achilles stops the charging Trojan Demouchos in his tracks by ‘striking him on the knee with a spear,’ a wound that is a prelude to his death (II. 20.458).

Δημοῦχον δὲ Φιλητορίδην ἠὔν τε μέγαν τε καὶ γόνυ δουρὶ βαλὼν ἠρύκακε. τὸν μὲν ἐπείτα οὐτάζων ξίφεῖ μεγάλῳ ἐξαίνυτο θυμόν.

The similar phrases κατ’ ἱγνύην βεβλημένος ὀξέι χαλκῷ and καὶ γόνυ δουρὶ βαλὼν seem to describe the same type of wound, and had the form ἱγνύη occurred only here in all of Greek we could still have been confident on morphological and semantic grounds that ἱγνύη and γόνυ were cognates.

In reality various forms of ἱγνύη appear some four-hundred times in Greek texts from the Archaic period to the Byzantine, a handful or two of times in poetry but mostly in prose, where it is often to be found in medical treatises (Hippocrates, Galen, Oribasius, etc.) in describing the area behind the knee, i.e., the hollow of the knee, or, in medical jargon, the popliteal space. Yet there appears to have remained some confusion throughout these texts about the semantic range of ἱγνύη: some sources use the term more broadly to designate the general area around the knee, some more narrowly to designate the front of the knee, inside the knee, below the knee, the calf, the thigh, or the groin.

The word ἱγνύη appears from the earliest period in both first and third declension forms, and often even a single author will alternate back and forth between declensions without any apparent design:3

3 R.J. Durling (1993) 182 defines ἱγνύα, ἥ as ‘the part behind the thigh and knee, ham,’ but ἱγνύς, ἥ simply as ‘knee.’ However this differentiation is not consistently maintained in Galen, the subject of his study, and even less so in the earlier authors.